

Preface

The talk about globalization is omnipresent today. The topic has also been eagerly taken up and discussed in the art world in recent years. The discourse turns primarily upon the global expansion of the production, distribution and reception of contemporary art on the world map of art. Regions which have until quite recently only enjoyed a peripheral existence are advancing more strongly onto the international stage and are thus moving into the center of attention. The focus is on the question of the emergence of these local and regional art markets and art forums, which are situated so far away from the established centers of art in the USA and Europe.

But the overall effects of the phenomenon of globalization on art, the art market and the art world have hitherto remained largely unexplained. Depending on the perspective adopted globalization is understood to be a hegemonic form of “territorial occupation”, the conquest of new art markets by the powerful actors on the market from the Western art metropolises, the assertion of the economic and cultural “mainstream” which evolved historically in these centers, or a leveling down and “homogenization” of cultural goods tailored to meet this “dominant taste”. Or, from the perspective of the periphery, it is seen as a locally developed, more or less autonomous, egalitarian participation in art production, in reciprocal, transnational artistic exchange processes and a consequent diversification and, ultimately, enrichment of contemporary art as global art.

Without doubt, the growing transnationalization, above all since the end of the East-West confrontations in the year 1989, has led to a pluralization of the art world, a process which can be differentiated in terms of geographical area and content. The art field has not only expanded massively in volume; it has become noticeably more international in regard to the actors and the institutions involved and to contemporary visual art

itself. We should not, however, overlook the fact that we are dealing with a very hierarchically structured sphere whose center of gravity is still to be found in the Western art centers, whereas in the peripheral areas only few regions have been included within the framework of globalization. In this connection the attention of Western actors is today drawn particularly to Asia, and especially to China, whose rapidly growing economic power has been accompanied for a decade by a strongly expanding art market.

A report published in May 2011 caused a great stir in the art world. The Swiss MCH Group, the organizer of probably the most important international art fair, the Art Basel, acquired 60 per cent of the shares in the Asian Art Fairs Ltd., the operator of the Hong Kong International Art Fair. Two years later, at the end of May 2013, the fair, now renamed Art Basel Hong Kong, took place for the first time under the management of the Art Basel with the Swiss big bank UBS as its main sponsor.

And thus a hitherto largely unknown white spot on the map of the art world suddenly stepped into the international limelight. On account of the special social, political and artistic conditions prevailing in the former British crown colony, it had in the past already become a central hub of the East Asian art market. But with the expansion of the Art Basel to Hong Kong, characterized by the management as “business as usual”, the Chinese metropolis now presented itself as a new nodal point of the international art market and art field. “In Hong Kong, we want to create a fair that shows the different cultural influences. Geographic diversity has been one of our core values from the outset”, the Art Basel director Marc Spiegel announced on the occasion of the takeover.

In the meantime Hong Kong has not only become one of the largest trading centers for art in the world alongside New York, London and Beijing but has also achieved the status of a central hub in the Asian region. The metropolis is, therefore, an ideal-typical setting for a case study in which the specific national and international conditions, structures and processes of the artistic field can be examined in an exemplary fashion. As a privileged location, at which Chinese and Western culture meet, the world city also offers an opportunity to describe and analyze mechanisms of transnationalization and regionalization in the art market and the transcultural interdependencies. This process has already been sketched and commented upon in part in the media and the relevant publications, but it has to date scarcely been the object of scientific studies and empirical analysis.

At the time the expansion of the Art Basel to the Asian area was made public our small research team was engaged in field research on the other two locations of the art fair in Basel and Miami Beach. We therefore wished to take the opportunity of examining the processes of transformation at this other central hub at close range by means of explorative field research, and in this way to attempt to identify and analyze the dynamics of globalization where the action was taking place. The study focused on the positions and perspectives of the actors of the art world on the spot, their view of what was going on, and the concrete practices of the local and regional art markets, art scene and art world in their specific socio-historical form as “being historically so and not otherwise” (Max Weber), and in their interweavement with the Western art world. How do the local actors depict their own art world, its institutions, rules and practices? What has changed in their opinion? How do they experience and interpret these changes?

This publication is based on the results of a research project which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The basis of the methodologically multidimensional field study, which was carried out in the years 2013 and 2014, is provided by over 60 detailed interviews with important actors in the art world, predominantly gallerists, collectors, curators and artists. Excerpts from the talks, which have been authorized by the interview partners, make up the major part of the present book. The interviews are supplemented by two written questionnaires presented to gallerists and visitors to the Art Basel Hong Kong, which were evaluated with the help of multivariate procedures. In addition, explorative short interviews were carried out with visitors from the East Asian cultural area, which give an insight into the different ways of using and perceiving art. And although the present volume concentrates primarily on the presentation of the positions and perspectives expressed by selected actors in the in-depth interviews, insights gathered from the use of other methods of ethnographic field research also find their place in the study.

Of course the 16 interviews presented in the book cannot and do not claim to be representative. Nonetheless they reflect a variety of relevant and striking positions in the Asian art field and can therefore certainly claim exemplary status. In the choice of the excerpts preference was given to those actors who live and work in China and so perceive and can mediate the Chinese art world from a local point of view and from a bottom up perspective. An exception is consciously made for some representatives of

the Western art world who can be considered to be important go between the Eastern and Western spheres of art. We are dealing overall with reports by persons who stand in the center of the stage but have hitherto attracted little attention in discourse in the West.

The book is addressed less to the social scientific community than to the actors in the art field and to a wider public interested in art. It invites them to take part in a tour d'horizon and to reflect on the question as to how the narrations on the globalization of the art market and the art world widely and constantly recurring in many variations in the West are seen, experienced, interpreted and judged by the actors these narrations report on, although their voices are so seldom heard – as if there exist, as in the time of the colonial occupations, active participants in globalization on the one side and more or less passive observers of the process on the other.

We hope that we have thus made a small contribution to a better understanding of the processes of transformation subsumed under the phenomenon of globalization. Our thanks are due particularly to all the interview partners for their willingness to answer our questions in detail and so to make an active contribution to this study.

仇晓飞
QIU XIAOFE

南柯解醒
APOLLO
BANGS
DIONYSUS

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