

Globalization and Cultural Identity – The Perspective of Contemporary Art

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I Introduction

This paper focuses on contemporary art as an indicator and avant-garde of global developments in general.

Globalization has been the dominant force in shaping the arts since 1989. A lot of the problems that globalization urgently presses upon us have been already discussed and experimented with in the arts.

Contemporary visual arts have been at the forefront of the new relationship between culture and global markets. In the last decades, contemporary art has also become an open space where other artistic and social fields meet and interfere – dance, theatre, cinema, poetry, music, architecture, political debate, activism.

Historically, in times of crisis and human tragedy artists have searched to give expression to the nameless suffering and to open up new perspectives for the future. Today, when communities strive to find meaning and dignity in the face of conflict, displacement and deep social, economic and technological changes, art again can help us imagine a common future.

Each aspect of art's production, circulation and consumption has been affected by globalization. The domination of the market and the demand for performativity and efficiency have been some of the negative effects. It is precisely from the position of being fully inscribed in the contradictions of globalization that art has been able to address the tensions of contemporary society earlier and with a more acute sensibility than any other field.

II The Question of Cultural Identity

One of the biggest fears related to globalization is that it creates uniformity and erases cultural identities. However, globalization also produces the counter-demand for authenticity, which is a valuable currency on the global market. Cultural identities are entangled in this intersection of the local and global, authentic and universal. A focus on local specificity and traditional cultural identities is often the immediate response to the sweeping forces of globalization. The example of art shows that local art scenes strive for inclusion and recognition, and global art is a network of local contexts and particularities. Thus the perspective of art reformulates the question of cultural identity. It is not whether universality is better than local specificity and vice versa. The most important question in regards to cultural identity is if and how it contributes to social resilience in the face of the massive challenges confronting contemporary societies. Is resilience a function of a strong identity or rather of a flexible identity? Or is it that identities should be mobilized towards a sense of community, purpose and future?

III Why Art?

1. Art as a Witness

There is a lot of information about what is happening in the world today, but it comes from limited channels, often following very specific agendas. Many pressing problems do not gain sufficient media attention or are treated from a limited perspective. Art offers alternative informational channels, and bears witness to events and their consequences that otherwise remain hidden. The testimonies of art might not be as clear-cut and easy to understand as the one-dimensional messages of mass media. Nevertheless this is precisely the kind of witness we need today – one that accounts for the human dimensions of the changes we experience and grasps their contradictory, often irreconcilable causes.

2. Working with the Contradictions

Art and culture have been entangled in the same flaws that globalization has brought elsewhere – joining an expanding global market and mainstream culture, profiteering from local specificities and exoticizing local communities, and creating new global elites, to name but a few. Critical avant-garde art has always been located within a fragile equilibrium between autonomy and dependence on forces outside of art. A fully independent art would be purely elitist and cut off from the problems of society. Art that is too dependent on politics, market or other social pressures would be a pure instrument of power, or entertainment. Contemporary art is the product of the very conflicting social reality it seeks to overcome. It offers models for future society from within the current contradictions.

3. Future Communities

There are two main aspects that characterize art's importance for society: communities and future. From modernism's idea of a universal language that unites all, to contemporary global art's giving voice to under-represented communities, art has always strived to unite. These ideals have never been without problems, but they underline the human desire to establish communities across borders, where everybody can participate and be heard with their own voice. Art is ultimately a laboratory for the future, where even the most difficult problems are confronted and tested through methods no other field possesses – the personal and the collective experience, perception, human response, affects.

IV Globalization and Art

The year 1989 is considered by historians as the beginning of the “global turn” in art. “[T]he global events of 1989 and after—the reunification of Germany, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the rise of global trade agreements, the consolidation of trading blocks, and the transformation of China into a partially capitalist economy—changed the character of the art world profoundly.” “The art world swiftly reconfigured itself. A rash of art events peppered the globe, while artists of many nations, ethnicities, and cultures long ignored in the West were born to critical and commercial success.”¹

¹ Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated. The Story of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 1.

1. Cultural Aspects

“The terrible nearness of distant places.”²

The main consequence of globalization for the arts was the bringing of different experiences coming from various geopolitical contexts into one common world. If distant cultures were previously regarded only as “anthropological” phenomena, globalization brought them to the forefront of the most avant-garde art practices. Cultural diversity became the most sought after currency in the arts. In global market terms it meant exoticism, but within art it was a tool for challenging hegemonic views.

The dynamic between local and global

The dynamic between local and global in art manifests along two seemingly contradictory lines. On the one hand, art has always strived to reach beyond borders. Globalization offered the possibility of inclusion and sharing, which art embraced. On the other hand, globalization put art right at the center of global market forces and new hegemonies and inequalities. Globalization in the negative sense was seen as a new colonial force, and art developed its critique of globalization borrowing heavily from the apparatus of postcolonial discourse with its focus on difference and local identity.

Today, the desire to create a global community, while remaining sensitive to differences and conflicting visions of the world, is still the positive, creative contradiction at the heart of global art.

Contemporary art = global art

Contemporary art in its current form emerged as a reaction to and a product of the forces of globalization. Contemporary art is global art, and vice versa – truly global art can only be contemporary.³

Globalization brought into the art world practices from various regions, with diverse cultural-heritage, political and social contexts. This made it difficult to sustain the Western modernist notions of art based on ideas of art history and universal formal language. Artists had to find a new common ground. Formally one such ground was the **language of mass media** (video, documentary photography), which was shared and understood by all. Another element was the sense of participation in a common “**contemporary**” time, marked by cultural diversity, migration, information flows and local conflicts. The engagement with the problems of its time became the definition of the contemporaneity of art.

2. Economic and Political Factors

Politics, market and symbolic capital

Important political and economic decisions, like the Maastricht Treaty from 1992, gave particular importance to art and culture and turned them into a symbol of global free trade. The art market gained a new, unprecedented power and is one of the main institutions of contemporary art at the forefront of globalization. The financial dependencies of global art are not limited to the market itself. Major banks have become important partners for big international events, from art fairs to

² Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box”, in Catalogue, Documenta11_Platform5: Exhibition, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al., Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002, p. 44.

³ Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art – A Critical Estimate,” in Hans Belting and Andrea Buddenseig (eds.): The Global Art World, Ostfildern 2009: http://rae.com.pt/Belting__Contemporary_Art_as_Global_Art.pdf, accessed June 12, 2017.

artist prizes, influencing the success of artists. Multinational corporations join artistic causes or build their own exhibition spaces.⁴

Art as resource

A new understanding of the political and economic expediency of art and culture put them on the agenda of transnational organizations, national governments, municipalities and businesses alike. While culture has been used in modernity for national politics (“national treasures”) or as an ideological tool (during the Cold War), globalization brought about a more general perception of culture as resource. The arts are used for everything from promoting education and social consciousness and proposing positive models for solving social conflicts to stimulating tourism and the creative economy.⁵ Art’s dependencies today go far beyond the market.

3. Global Art – Myth and Reality

Just like in the economy in general, in the sphere of art, too, globalization is uneven and access to it is not the same everywhere. While globalization is the major tendency and theme in the arts, truly globalized art (in terms of structure and functioning) represents only one part of the arts system.

This is also the case in the art market, which we tend to perceive as the ultimate manifestation of globalization in the visual arts. Globalization is strongest at the top segment of the market, and even there only three countries dominate. According to the reports of TEFAF, these are the US, UK and China (about 80% of the total market). Artists and collectors also come from only a few countries, predominantly from North America and Europe (about 60%).⁶ Collectors often prefer to collect art locally (the American art market for example is largely driven by its national artists⁷), and museums and galleries tend to represent artists on a local basis. Artists are still predominantly supported on a national, or at best regional principle (grants).

V Structural Changes in Global Art

The three main structural elements of globalized art became the **art market**, the **biennials** and the **migration** of artists in relationship to **cities**.⁸ Museums remain important, but are somewhere in the middle. In their traditional role of conservation and rarefication, they create value based on exclusivity, similarly to the market. At the same time, in order to justify funding, they need to attract large publics, which they do by creating events and a fast turnover of artists and themes, like the biennials.

⁴ Artprice, “Financialisation of the Art Market”:
<https://www.artprice.com/artprice-reports/the-art-market-in-2016/financialisation-of-the-art-market/>, accessed June 12, 2017.

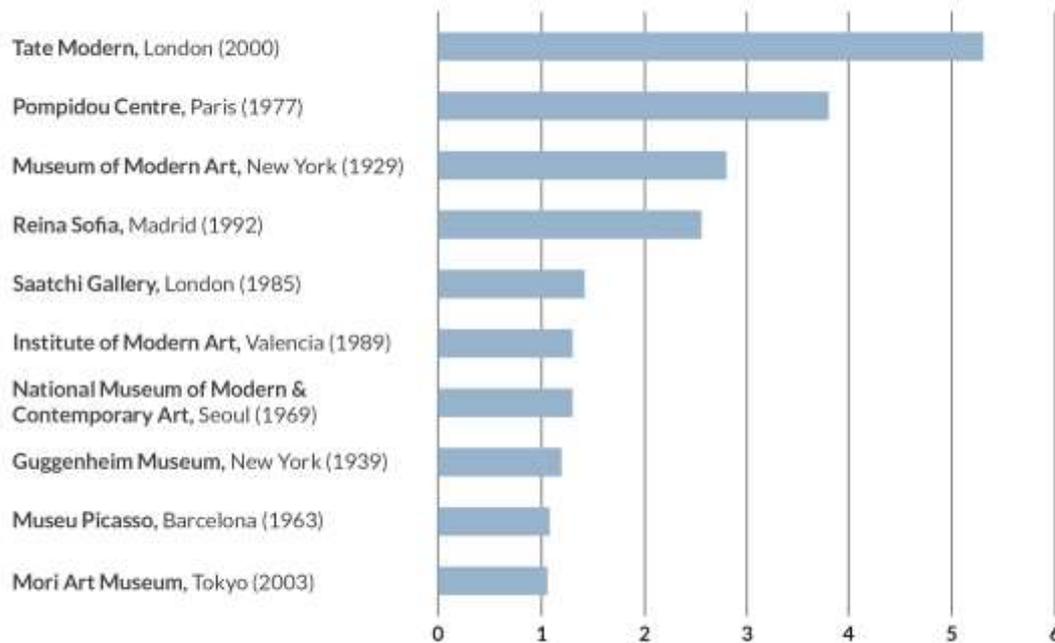
⁵ George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Art in the Global Era*, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁶ Olav Velthuis, “There Is No Single, Global Art Market,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 22, 2015:
<http://theartnewspaper.com/market/art-market-comment/there-is-no-single-global-art-market/>, accessed June 12, 2017.

⁷ Artprice, “Top Price American Art”:
<https://www.artprice.com/artprice-reports/the-art-market-in-2016/top-price-american-art/>, accessed 12.06.2017

⁸ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013, p. 162.

Ten most popular modern art museum*, by 2012 visitors, annually in Millionen
(Opening year)



* Holding mainly 20th-century and later

Source: The Art Newspaper, individual museums, available: The Economist <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21591705-why-so-many-museums-are-venturing-new-works-wing-and-prayer>

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The **art market** is currently the dominant logic behind the developments in art and its structures. It is one of the strongest global markets (\$45 billion in 2016 according to TEFAF and \$56.6 billion according to Art Basel/USB).⁹ The market competes with the museums and other institutions in the creation of value in the arts. Today more and more collectors are building their own museums, while public museums are increasingly dependent on private funding. Art fairs have their own exhibition and discussion programs, assuming functions of public institutions.

A word of caution: “the art market” as a term is often used very generally, referring to a larger tendency of financialization and privatization of interests in the arts.¹⁰ Financial speculation, for example, happens as a rule on the secondary market (auctions) and does not have a substantial effect on current production. The prices at art auctions have little relation to the quality and the relevance of the artworks.¹¹

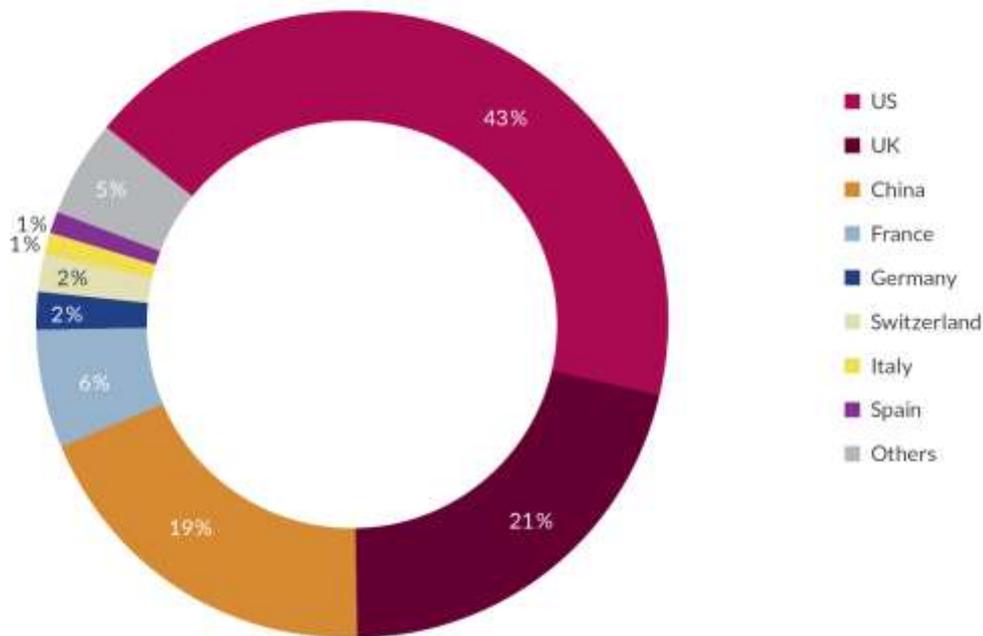
⁹ Scott Reyburn, “What’s the Global Market Really Worth? Depends Who You Ask,” The New York Times, March 23, 2017:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/23/arts/global-art-market.html>, accessed June 12, 2017.

¹⁰ Other, more appropriate terms are necessary here; philosopher Peter Osborne, for example, proposes “art industry,” which refers to the overall domination of rules of efficiency and profit – a new kind of coexistence between the art and culture industry.

¹¹ Wolfgang Ullrich, *Siegerkunst. Neuer Adel, teure Lust*, Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 2016.

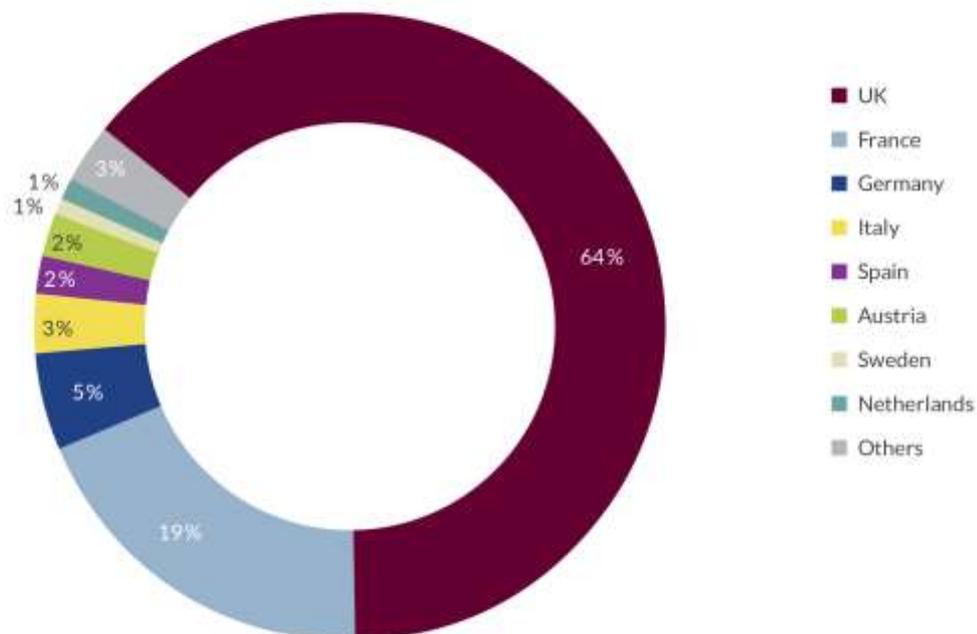
Global art market share by value in 2015



Source: Arts Economics (2016).

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EU art market share by value in 2015



Source: Arts Economics (2016).

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Biennials (and large-scale international events and exhibitions in general) have arguably more importance on creative trends in the arts. They claim to provide an alternative to the art market, focusing on events and practices that are not immediately commodifiable. However they participate in the larger political and economic instrumentalization of art as resource.¹² Biennials embody the new global situation by creating a flexible, moving system, which mimics the market’s capacity to cross borders and appropriate cultural difference, but at the same time challenges the old cultural

¹² “[Biennials] are the Research and Development of the transnationalisation of the culture industry,” in Osborne, 2013, p. 164.

centers and creates new ones. Biennials often function as temporary institutions in places where there is little support for contemporary art and bring international attention to their local contexts. The temporary structure of the event and its spectacularity has brought unprecedented numbers of people to contemporary art, which stimulates local developments like cultural tourism.

Artists embody global **migration** in its different forms – from the free movement of the elites to the pure necessity to move in order to be part of the art scene, in which the old Western centers still hold primacy. Most artists' biographies situate them in at least two cities (usually one of origin and one Western artistic center) between which they navigate their personal lives and careers. This is also one of the reasons for contemporary's art interest and identification with **cities**. Global art and culture are urban phenomena; the tensions of diversity are felt most acutely in urban areas. Art mirrors the metropolis as a global constellation of multiple places and flows – information, people, and products ("art as displaced urbanism"¹³).

The 2015 Venice Biennale in Numbers

Artist Birthplace vs. Home Base



Artists born in Europe and North America dominated the Biennale's main exhibition in 2013, representing over 80 % of those on view.

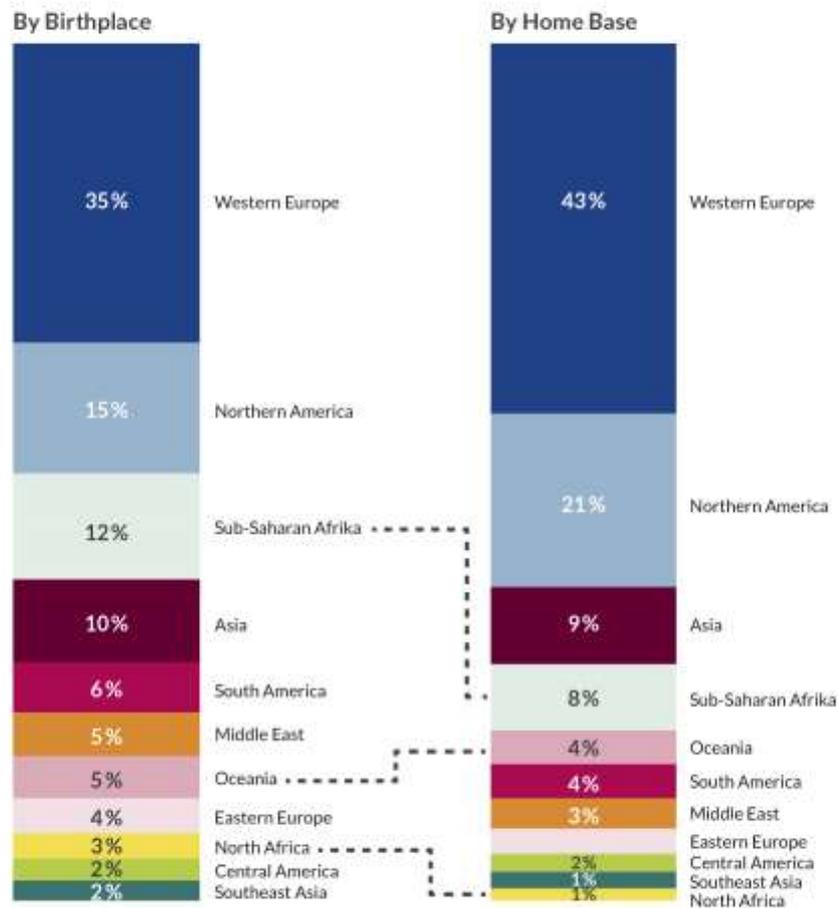
In 2015, that figure has dropped by some 30 %, with more artists coming from the Asian continent than from North America, and major increases in the representation of Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.

Source: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-the-2015-venice-biennale-in-numbers>.

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¹³ Osborne, 2013, p. 158.

Artsy 2015 Venice Biennale Statistics



Source: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-the-2015-venice-biennale-in-numbers>.

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VI The Case of Europe

Europe is a particular example when we speak of globalization and culture. The Union itself represents a transnational community of local cultures and contexts. There often seems to be a conflation between the negative perception of globalization and the project of Europe. Europe represents cultural hegemony for both the non-European world, and the European countries themselves.

Even core countries like Germany can feel threatened by global cultural developments. An example is the current backlash against Chris Dercon's appointment as the new director of the Volksbühne in Berlin. His international program is seen as an aggression of globalization against local culture.¹⁴ A different problem, yet with similar response, is currently being debated in Belgium. The impending establishment of a branch of the French Centre Pompidou in Brussels is seen as a hegemonic takeover, especially in light of the lack of art institutions and museums in the capital.

However, in the course of the last year, with the threat of the disintegration of the European Union, it was precisely artists who stood up to defend the idea of a united Europe. Wolfgang Tillmans created posters to plead against Brexit. Anish Kapoor, together with a large group of artists, initiated

¹⁴ Guy Chazan, "Backlash in Berlin," Financial Times, May 26, 2017: <https://www.ft.com/content/0d3bff86-3ee6-11e7-9d56-25f963e998b2>, accessed June 12, 2017.

the platform “Hands off our revolution,” which aims to support the European project in various artistic ways.¹⁵ In the same vein, and to counterbalance the lack of cultural issues on the agenda of global and European summits, Bozar in Brussels is currently organizing the initiative “Cultural workers for Europe.”¹⁶

VII History and Recent Developments in the Global Art World

Exhibitions (with their specific temporality and focus on geopolitics) rather than individual artworks have been the distinctive form of globalization in arts and culture.

It is commonly accepted that the first instance to mark a decisive change in attitudes was the exhibition “Magiciens de la terre,” curated by Jean-Hubert Martin for Beaubourg in Paris in 1989. For the first time, non-Western artists were represented not in an anthropological context but together with Western artists. There were multiple earlier efforts in this direction of inclusion of the peripheries, drawing the first lines of a globalist approach. The Havana biennials, for instance, famously proclaimed alternative internationalism without the dictate of Euro-centrism (1984, 1986, 1989).¹⁷

Documenta X (1997), curated by Catherine David, marked art’s decisive turn towards the political, social, economic and cultural issues of the contemporary globalized world. David also mapped the three most important lines of art’s engagement with globalization: postcolonial discourse, urbanism, and new communicational technologies. The next Documenta 11 (2002), curated by Okwi Enwezor, took a more postcolonial perspective and was critical of global trends, revealing persisting hegemonies. To counter that, the exhibition was divided into five platforms, spread across five locations around the world: Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia and Lagos. This delocalizing trend has been continued by most subsequent Documentas, with the current one being shared between Kassel and Athens.

The dominant art discourses today continue to be developed by biennials and similar large-scale art events. According to data by the Biennial Foundation, there are currently more than 200 contemporary art biennials operating all over the world.¹⁸ Some of them are old structures, which are constantly trying to respond to global challenges. The Venice Biennale – the oldest (1895) – is based on national pavilions but each year includes new, formerly unrepresented countries. The last several editions of Documenta (since 1955) in Kassel have tried to spread to other locations. Among the biennials that have been in the forefront of globalization are those in Istanbul, Sharja, Taipei, Gwangju, Berlin, Sydney, Shanghai, Lyon, Havana, Moscow, Bucharest and Dakar. Some have their beginnings in the 1980s and 1990s, others are fairly recent like that of Marrakesh, which was founded in 2005. Manifesta (1996) is a European travelling biennial, which changes city with every edition.

In Asia hundreds of museums and centers for contemporary art have been created in the last decade. In Japan, department stores have opened their own galleries. In China, a museum is a symbol of civility and modernity and it corresponds better to the state authority’s control over culture than an art fair or a biennial.

¹⁵ <http://handsoffourrevolution.com/>

¹⁶ <http://culturalworkersfor.eu/>

¹⁷ Belting, 2009.

¹⁸ <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/home/biennial-map/>, accessed June 12, 2017.

The Gulf is taking a slightly different path with the creation of the Sharja biennial and the Dubai Art Fair. The Global Art Forum of Dubai Art Fair began in 2007 and until this day brings together important art practitioners from all over the world to discuss the future of culture and the effects of globalization. The forum is symptomatic of the uses of contemporary art not only as an economic project, but as a message of globalization, liberalism and inclusiveness.

The courteous symbiosis between critical contemporary art and political and economic power is not always without conflicts. This was the case of Manifesta 6, planned to happen in 2006 in Nicosia, which became the first biennial to be cancelled because of conflict with local political authorities. In 2014, many artists invited to participate in the Sydney biennial decided to boycott it. The reason was that one of the companies supporting the biennial has been administering questionable immigrant detention centers on behalf of the government.

The 2015 Venice Biennale in Numbers

5 of the artists have been arrested for political reasons relating to their work



Inji Efflatoun

Arrested in 1959 for her anti-Egyptian-establishment position, Afflatoun spent four years moving between women's prisons – an experience that radically impacted her practice as a painter.



Kutluğ Ataman

Ataman was arrested and tortured in 1980 after Turkish authorities found his films documenting the protests surrounding that year's military coup; he was released after 28 days.



Osama Al-Habaly
(Abounaddara Collective)

Al-Habaly, a member of the filmmaking collective Abounaddara – whose associates retain anonymity to avoid persecution for conducting journalism in the volatile region – disappeared in 2012 after being arrested at the border crossing into Syria from Lebanon, and remains unaccounted for.



Invisible Borders:
Trans-African Photographers

Three members of the group were arrested in N'Djamena, Chad, in 2011 for taking photographs in a city market. They were released after a local businessman vouched for their good intentions.



Tania Bruguera

Bruguera underwent a series of highly visible detentions earlier this year after attempting a performance piece in a public square in Havana, Cuba, in which she granted anyone in attendance one minute of free speech on a soapbox.

VIII Conclusions and Recommendations

What we can learn from art's relationship to globalization is that there are no static communities, no fixed identities and no "authentic" cultures. Art promotes new forms of cultural identities on the basis of cultural specificities and history, but with a focus on flexibility in view of bigger, common goals.

In the last years, with the cuts in public support for art and the pressures of its increasing dependence on private funding, there has been a greater conceptual (if not yet actual) disengagement of the arts from market forces. This tendency has opened up a new space for redefining public engagement with art and culture and the social role they could take today.

- There is a lack of an open and public debate between art and policy makers. Art and culture are currently the most dynamic space where new forms of communities and of European identity are debated and tested. Despite that fact, art and culture are excluded from major discussions on the future of Europe. Recommendation: Creating possibilities for art and culture to interact with decision makers; a better, more sensitive representation of the interests of culture in European politics.
- Art works with and not against the tensions at the heart of globalization: on the one hand, the desire for free movement of ideas and people; on the other, the necessity to represent local realities and engage with publics locally. Recommendation: Promoting strong and confident local cultures in view of their contribution to the world cultural heritage; looking for historical and contemporary connections and shared ideas.
- The role of art is not to appease conflicts and dissent, but to make them visible and offer alternative horizons for creating new alliances. Art's lesson is that tensions and disagreement are not to be avoided, but to be voiced and used for productive change. Recommendation: Stimulating art's role as a public sphere and supporting art as a channel for communication and debate.
- Recent budget cuts make art institutions and practices vulnerable to private interests. Variety, risk-taking and public awareness are threatened to be replaced by a very limited, market-sanctioned version of art. Recommendation: Given the power of the market and other external pressures, it is crucial that art have more alternative support if it is to maintain its critical public function.
- Today's culture and communities are essentially urban phenomena, less and less formed by traditional local identities. Cities are the place where global trends find local meaning. Art imagines and encourages new types of communities based on shared ideas of a common future and new forms of collectivity that follow urban developments. Recommendation: Supporting and creating spaces for art and culture in cities, where new types of communities could be debated and practiced through open discussion and cultural activities.

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