Art Theory for a Global Pluralistic Age

The Glocal Artist

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Cover illustration: Odyssey, installation by Ai Weiwei. Courtesy of: MARKA / Alamy Stock Photo.

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Introduction

Today's refugee crisis has overstepped the national landscape and become a global issue. At least this is the position of dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, the artist behind the 2017 exhibition *Odyssey. Odyssey* consists of a wallpaper installation that has been set up at various locations around the world. The cover of this book depicts the 2017 installation at the Zisa Contemporary Arts Zone in Palermo, Italy. Here the wallpaper was spread across the entire surface of the space, propelling people to both tower over and tread on the imagery they came to observe. The content of the wallpaper depicts a fusion of texts and Greco-Roman frieze-style illustrations, spotlighting the historical, political, and social conditions that generate the plight of refugees around the world.[1]

Concurrent with this and other installations of *Odyssey*, Ai published two limited-edition prints of the wallpaper for the Public Art Fund, and made them vendible exclusively through eBay. Of these proceeds 100% went to offset the costs of his 2017–2018 citywide public art exhibition *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*, which was sponsored by the Public Art Fund and opened across New York City.[2] This exhibition consisted of over

[1] "Ai Weiwei. Odyssey," FPmag NEWS (2017), https://www.fpmagazine.eu/eng/news/Ai_Weiwei._Odyssey-1306/ (accessed July 20, 2019).
[2] "Ai Weiwei Creates Special Edition Artworks for Public Art Fund, Exclusively Available on eBay," Hyperallergic (2017), https://hyperallergic.com/405080/ai-weiwei-creates-special-edition-artworks-for-public-art-fund-exclusively-available-on-ebay/ (accessed July 20, 2019).

300 installations all around the city that dealt with themes of immigration through symbolic displays of fencing and borders. While matters of immigration occupy Ai's artistic practice, immigration was also a prevalent political issue in the USA at the time. Through Ai's efforts, New York City became a locus for a rich transnational dialogue regarding a global crisis.

I chose to discuss these works and exhibitions to demonstrate the state of contemporary art in our global age. Ai was able to raise awareness of a growing global issue by utilizing global networks (eBay) and local, independent resources (Public Art Fund) to give voice to a pertinent issue affecting millions of people worldwide. He utilized local, transnational, and global means to tell a story to the widest audience possible. All of this transpired in our age of globalization, and was only possible because of the cultural and technological innovations of our present condition.

Today we live in an interconnected world that weaves together cultural elements including customs, traditions, languages, ethics, religions, economic systems, governments, and the arts into an intricate, global, ever-expanding, cultural tapestry, and our understanding of the world is profoundly shaped by the interlaced, sometimes divergent, relations between social systems. Sometimes the tapestry (to carry on the metaphor) gets so complex that it loses its sense of balance, creating either knots or holes, but if one goes just a few inches in any direction, the interlacing resumes unbroken. The cultural tapestry is thus unavoidable, and the social interactions that transpire in this complex global milieu demark the new collective condition that we have entered—that of a global pluralistic age. This new condition affects every aspect of worldmaking, including the way distinct perceptions of reality are cultivated. This book focuses on the way globalization has affected the ways we understand art today.

In recent years, an abundance of literature has confronted the multifaceted effects of globalization to local and traditional locales.[3] Many of these studies, however, focus on the economic side of globalization, addressing

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[3] Manfred Steger, *Globalisms: The Great Ideological Struggle of the Twenty-First Century* (Plymouth: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008); Manfred Steger, *The Rise of the Global Imaginary: Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Victor Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2016); Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017); JoAnn Chirico, *Globalization: Prospects and Problems* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014); Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016); and so on.

the cultural upheavals that emerge out of a new global economy. And although money drives the preponderance of what is affected, scholarship has begun to address globalization's effects on art criticism and history.[4] Among the more influential leaders of this endeavor are critic/historians James Elkins, Hans Belting, and Caroline Jones. Another great driver for much of the discussion surrounding contemporary art, globalization, and postcolonial studies is the journal *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*. *Third Text* was founded and established as an international journal in 1987 by artist, writer, and critic Rasheed Araeen, as a journal that would deal with the art, ethnicity, and social matters of the "third world."[5] But even while great strides are being made in art history and criticism, what is still lacking is scholarship speaking to the manner in which globalization has forced philosophies of art to refocus.[6] The purpose of this book is to offer a theory of art that adequately addresses the present era's shift toward global pluralism.

Today's condition of global pluralism can be understood sociologically as a network of worlds. Hans Belting writes that "the global is no longer

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[4] James Elkins, Ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2006); James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, Eds., *Art and Globalization* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Hans Belting, Ed., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013); Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, Eds., *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Berlin: Hantje Cantz, 2007); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, Eds., *The Global Artworld: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Berlin: Hantje Cantz, 2009); Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel, Eds., *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berlin: Hantje Cantz, 2011); Aruna D'Sousa, *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2014); Jonathan Harris, Ed. *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Thierry de Duve, "The Glocal and the Singuniversal: Reflection on Art and Culture in the Global World," *Third Text*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (2007), pp. 681–688; George Marcus and Fred Myers, Eds. *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Caroline Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and so on.

[5] Initially this journal was titled *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, but as critical studies began moving away from the term "third world." The subtitle of the journal changed.

[6] A few notable exceptions include Susan Feagin, Ed., *Global Theories of the Arts and Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Tommaso Durante, "On the Global Imaginary: Visualizing and Interpreting Aesthetics of Global Change in Melbourne, Australia and Shanghai, People's Republic of China," *The Global Studies Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2015), pp. 19–33; Kathleen Marie Higgins, "Global Aesthetics – What Can We Do?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (2017), pp. 339–349.

synonymous with the totalizing term *world*. It denotes the space of a 'multiplicity of worlds' in societies and cultures at large."[7] In other words, there is no global, unified system that governs all other systems. Rather, smaller systems cohabit a wider global context. Art also exists as a system; so, to follow suit, in a global pluralistic condition one must think of a multiplicity of artworlds that cohabit a global context. Complications often arise when one tries to navigate the spaces between systems.[8] Because cultural boundaries delimit a person's range of comprehension, understanding and evaluating cultural products (like art) can become rather difficult. This book does not seek merely to win a philosophical argument concerning the nature of today's global condition, but also to equip readers to classify, evaluate, and judge art across cultures in a globalized world.

This book's essential argument is that a focus on the extrinsic rather than intrinsic qualities of art will help us evaluate art across cultural boundaries, as intrinsic qualities shift according to the values of the viewing public. The theory of art portrayed in this book seeks to address both the classification and evaluation of art around the world. Art can be universally classified by an evaluation of its guiding narrative, and can be understood and judged through hermeneutical methods. Since artists engage culture through various local, transnational, and emerging global narratives, it is difficult to decipher what standards are used for evaluation, and which authoritative body evaluates the work. I suggest implementing a narrative-hermeneutical approach to properly classify an artwork and establish its meaning and value.

This book puts forth a modest proposal for an important issue. At best this book offers a fresh and useful approach for engaging art in a global pluralistic age, and at worst it merely raises awareness of the seismic shift in art theory due to the effects of globalization. Either way, this book is, I believe, a needed addition to the philosophical study of art. The world is increasingly globalized, and if we cannot find an appropriate way to engage art in today's global pluralistic age, then collectively we will never be able to share our cultural riches for the betterment of humanity.

[7] Hans Belting, "The Plurality of Art Worlds and the New Museum," in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, Eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 247.

[8] Positively, great discoveries can also emerge from this liminal space.

The Approach and Limitations of This Study

Later in this book (Chap. 5), we will discuss an idea posited by philosopher Nöel Carroll of a "narrative connection." A narrative connection is a series of at least two logically ordered events.[9] To form a connection the events must be causally linked and in sequence,[10] but they do not need to trace the entire chronological lineage of an event. Carroll argues that only a short connection is necessary to establish a sense of narrative, which is sufficient for understanding how an artwork fits into its guiding narrative. One can view the argument of this book as utilizing narrative connections. We will consider interconnected ideas that emerge from the thought of certain prevalent philosophers and theorists (Taylor, Danto, Bourriaud, Carroll, Ricoeur, et al.), but we will not hash out entire histories of analytic or pragmatist aesthetics, or the phenomenologies and historical philosophies that have influenced these interlocutors. Instead, we will make narrative connections with their thought, tracing back only to antecedent ideas that prove relevant for the course of this study. Similarly, we will focus on contemporary artists around the world, and only reference their predecessors as they prove pivotal for understanding the present.

In order to offer a clear and concise study on the effects of globalization on art and the philosophy of art, some necessary boundaries had to be set. First, this book, while generally applicable across artistic disciplines, zeroes in on contemporary visual art. While music, film, dance, literature, and the dramatic arts are all integrally valuable and deserving of their own philosophical treatments, they all have long bibliographies containing their own critical methodologies, and there's not enough space to adequately tread these paths. A survey of every art form would make this book's illustrations surface-level and insubstantial. So, while the visual arts reflect my own training as an artist,[11] they are also an excellent representative avenue for discussing globalization's effects on the arts. With relational and post-produced forms gaining popularity since the 1990s, the visual arts have grown increasingly interdisciplinary, engaging multisensory experiences. Engaging the "visual arts," therefore, does not preclude relational, performance-based, film-based, auditory, new media, or socially organized

[9] Nöel Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)*,* 119.

[10] Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics,* 125.

[11] See www.StevenFelixJagerArt.com

art. It is an umbrella term that discusses the wide range of visuality taken by the many variations of contemporary art.

Furthermore, this book does not take a global approach to discuss the global character of art today; that would require multiple comparative volumes. Instead, this book takes a Western approach in order to trace how Western art has opened up to the global, and how globalization has affected the old institutions of Western art. This boundary is necessary because I am a Westerner acknowledging the fact that I am writing philosophy from *within* a cultural-linguistic tradition. No one can stand outside his or her own cultural-linguistic tradition and should not pretend to posit a totally decontextualized assessment of any cultural concept. As Hyungmin Pai writes, "[o]ne must at once acknowledge its objectified structure and its different historicities as it unfolds within specific places and communities."[12] The best we can do is to find a method that seeks to assess cultural artifacts on their own terms and make judgments therein. Any assessment will always emerge from a confined cultural vantage point, but at least we are acknowledging our limitations as we seek to appreciate artwork around the world in an equitable fashion.

Furthermore, while the book hints at the historiographical paths of non-Western regions, it is not itself a work of history. We are not offering new historical methods for understanding culture; nor are we uncovering any previously untraced histories. Instead, this study is philosophically answering the big question: how has globalization affected the way we make and understand art? Having said this, this book is both descriptive and constructive as it identifies an issue and works toward a possible solution. The first part of the book identifies the issue through an ethnographical study influenced by philosophers Charles Taylor, Arthur Danto, and Nicolas Bourriaud. The second part of the book offers a possible solution to the problem by constructing a narrative-hermeneutical theory of art that primarily engages the work of Nöel Carroll, George Dickie, and Paul Ricoeur. As such, the first part sets up the second, which is the heart of this study.

While this book is interdisciplinary, bringing together the thought of art theorists, art historians, art critics, curators, phenomenologists, and cultural theorists from different philosophical traditions, it does favor an

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[12] Hyungmin Pai, "In and Out of the Local," in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, Eds., *Art and Globalization* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 220.

analytic philosophical approach. Analytical philosophers have endeavored to produce inclusive, non-aesthetic theories of art since the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and their exchanges inspired the narrative-hermeneutical theory of art posited in this book. That being said, the so-called split between analytic and continental philosophy in the twentieth century came about from confused comparisons of methodology and geography.[13] Analytic philosophy is often differentiated from continental philosophy because of the method of analysis that is consistently used within the tradition. The analytic method starts with the proposition as not being proven and works back by analyzing its first principles from which it can be derived as a theorem.[14] According to Danto, there are two distinctive streams within analytic philosophy that both derived from Wittgenstein.[15] The first stream is philosophically rooted in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which inspired the logical positivists, and the second is rooted in Wittgenstein's later work *Philosophical Investigations,* which inspired the analytic stream of aesthetics and pragmatism. While Wittgenstein consistently asserts the idea that misconceptions of language

[13] Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33. Continental philosophy has been traditionally seen as deriving geographically from continental Europe (specifically from France and Germany). Analytic philosophy has usually been set as having Anglophone roots (specifically from the UK and the USA). While it is true that continental philosophy is typically associated with philosophers such as Heidegger, Husserl, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, and analytic philosophy is associated with Russell, Moore, Ryle, and Searle, these geographical distinctions do not account for the Germanophone thinkers Frege and Wittgenstein, who are two of the most influential philosophers of the analytic stream. Furthermore, some philosophers trained in the analytic stream, such as Danto, look to bridge the gap between the analytic and continental divide by assessing philosophers such as Nietzsche and Sartre, and treating them as if they were Anglo-American analytic philosophers. All things considered, the geographical differences between the two schools are not enough to cogently set the two apart. For more on this, see Hans-Johann Glock, *What Is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[14] Hans-Johann Glock, *What Is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22. This analytic method, while widely used by analytic philosophers, is not exclusive to the tradition, however, as continentalists can utilize similar methods. Glock proposes that there is no hardline definition for analytic philosophy. Instead, the philosophical concepts of analytic philosophy are unified by family resemblances (following Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*). Among these concepts are its Anglophone dominance, analytic methodology, rebellion against metaphysics and idealism, and focus on logic and linguistics (42).

[15] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 129.

cause the problems of philosophy in both his *Tractatus* and *Investigations*, he initially relies on logic to expose the maladies of philosophy. This book can be seen as a continued exploration within Wittgenstein's latter analytic stream. The theories of Danto, Dickie, and Carroll can be seen as direct predecessors to the narrative-hermeneutical theory advanced in this book.

This book, following Carroll and Danto, argues for the necessity of historicity when understanding an artworld's guiding narrative. This seems to fly in the face of the many dehistoricized approaches of analytic philosophy, but it also stems from Wittgenstein's notion that context determines the meaning of a text. A text's history helps to establish its context, so it is necessary to know. The approach of this book is narrative-hermeneutical rather than strictly historical. History is used here only as a means for better understanding a narrative. The analytical aversion to historical philosophy is to avoid the supralogical implications that earlier continental philosophies posit. Analytical philosophers believe that one can navigate through philosophical problems by logic, and that philosophical solutions can emerge without engaging previously touted theories. Analytic philosophy sought to detach itself from the confines of continental theories and looked to navigate problems through the power of reason alone. Philosophers such as Carroll, Danto, Levinson, and Margolis all see history as important for understanding the context of narrative, but not as a restrictive parameter that is tied to older philosophies. This book follows suit, recognizing the importance of history for establishing context, but ultimately extends a narrative-hermeneutical theory of art.

Structure of the Book

To approach the broad topic of globalization and art, this book is split into two parts. *Part I: A Global Pluralistic Age* is descriptive and ethnographical, tracing the effects of globalization on society, art, and the artist, respectively. *Part II: A Narrative-Hermeneutical Theory of Art* is constructive and philosophical, supporting an anti-essentialist theory of art that is robust and inclusive. The three chapters of Part I trace the development of the current global condition, and define the boundaries surrounding a global philosophy of art. The three chapters of Part II philosophically engage the classification and evaluation of art, offering clear ways that one can identify and evaluate the success of art as a cultural artifact, and the artistic practices of artists. This part lays out the terms and criteria for what a global theory of art entails.