



FOA-FLUX

Research venture and publisher on art in global contexts.
Artistic, scientific and applied projects.

Dominique Lämmli (2012) *Globalist or Glocalist View? Taking Preliminary Assumptions Seriously*. Zurich: FOA-FLUX.
ISBN 978-3-906126-03-6 (e-article)
Downloadable from www.foa-flux.net

GLOBALIST OR GLOCALIST VIEWS? TAKING PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS SERIOUSLY

Dominique Lämmli

There is no contextless art and there are no concepts without preliminary assumptions. In times when prevailing ideas meet general approval or mirror seemingly undisputed power relations, their visibility may be neglected and treated as a consensus. But our times are different. Changes in various domains are exerting pressure on existing frames of reference, including conceptions of art. Several attempts are currently underway to define new foundations or criteria for art theory. However, the preliminary assumptions underlying such attempts are rarely taken into consideration. This paper considers DAK'ART, the Biennale of Contemporary African Art, as an exemplary way of both displaying and fostering diversity. Further it highlights the necessity of making explicit and of examining the existing preliminary assumptions about art concepts. It concludes that a useful and promising mode of analysis is to explore such assumptions against the background of globalistic or glocalistic views.

One of the most significant current discussions in the discourse on art problematizes art concepts themselves. There is a consensus that existing art criteria fall short of discussing new art phenomena in a productive way. The current state of affairs is deplorable: a conceptual destabilization of the discourse of art (Enwezor in Questionnaire 2009), an arbitrariness of art criteria (Foster in Questionnaire 2009), a tendency toward satisfying market needs and institutional exhibition politics, the cutting off of relevant art history (Elkins in Questionnaire 2009), the expanding of contemporary art practice around the globe (which threatens the survival of any safe notion of art; Belting 2009), and

so on. Recent publications set out to formulate new or revised criteria for in- and exclusion practices for contemporary art (Amirsadeghi & Mikdadi 2011; Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009; Smith 2011); in addition, they provide up-to-date information on the latest research findings on art in global contexts (Summers 2003, Zijlmans & van Damme 2008, Belting & Buddensieg 2011).

One of the early voices pointing in this direction is John Onians. In the early 1990s, he proposed a widening of art research to include global and interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as a questioning of the existing division in “high” and “low” art.

Various key figures within the discourse on art suggest a range of possible solutions to overcome its current disarray. However, what is lacking in the present debate on destabilized art concepts is the making explicit of the preliminary assumptions underpinning and also inspiring these various formulations and suggestions.

Against this background, this paper first discusses the DAK'ART Biennale as a persuasive example of presenting art works based on various art concepts and of opening this multitude up for discussion. Second, it considers the ongoing problematization of modern and postmodern art concepts. Third, it argues that preliminary assumptions should be made visible. And finally, it proposes that these assumptions should be examined in relation to globalistic or glocalistic views.

As I argue that artistic practice is always context-based, however multilayered this context may be, I cannot avoid providing a biographical sketch. Born in the sixties and brought up in Switzerland, I studied fine arts and philosophy in Zurich. Due to my studies, art practice, and personal life, I have lived in a number of places — Australia, South Africa, New York, Cape Verde, Great Britain, Germany — for shorter or longer periods. I am currently professor of drawing/ painting at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). In my work, I have been focusing on multiplicity within unity, and using drawing and painting strategies in various media and with poetic means. Recently, my art and research have begun to concentrate on the ongoing changes affecting formerly well-established frames of references. Together with Annemarie Bucher, I run the independent research platform FOA-FLUX (www.foa-flux.net), which is dedicated to examining the functions of art in global and glocal contexts with artistic, scientific, and practical means. Hence, I wear various hats and adopt various perspectives depending on the specific task in hand.

Within this complex debate on art and within my multilayered interests, I have focused specifically on contemporary art biennials as one of many art contexts.

To illustrate the exemplary nature of DAK'ART 2012, let me begin with a brief overview of the event's structure and setting. Particularly its combination of the so-called "in"- and "off"-exhibitions and events needs some attention. Held in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, 2012 marked the tenth anniversary of the DAK'ART Biennale. It brought together exhibitions featuring various art concepts, including street art, contemporary art, folk art, modern art, and conceptual art. There is an official programme, labeled "in," which is accompanied by over 140 parallel exhibition and events held all over the city, labeled "off."

This particular structure results from a twenty-year development, whose roots lie even further back in the past (for detailed information on the history of DAK'ART, see Yacouba Konaté 2009). The first official DAK'ART Biennale for the visual arts took place in 1992. The first parallel exhibitions accompanying DAK'ART started in 1998. They were presented under the title "Manifestation d'Environnement."

Since the year 2000, these parallel exhibitions have been listed in an official Biennale folder. They are labeled "in" and "off." They are highly visible throughout the city, since all exhibition locations use the same signage flags—bearing either the word "in" or "off." They are located all over Dakar. A total of 143 locations are listed, plus 40 in Saint-Louis. The locations are museums, galleries, monuments, cultural centers, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, banks etc. (Programme DAK'ART 2012; Wade 2012).

The "in"-part of DAK'ART 2012 was divided into five parts: an international group exhibition at the Théodore Monod Museum, two separate homages (Joe Ouakam, Papa Ibra Tall), an invited guest artists exhibition at the Galerie Nationale, an exhibition highlighting the creativity of women at the Maison de la Culture Douda Seck, and numerous texts and events dedicated to the theme of contemporary creation and social dynamics.

The Biennale committee, consisting of an orientation and an organizing committee, invited an additional international committee to select the international group exhibition and to choose the artists featured in the guest artists exhibition. The members of the invited international committee are the curators and art critics Christine Eyene, Nadira Aklouche-Laggoune, and Riason Naidoo. All three have an African background and belong to different generations. For the international group exhibition, they screened the applications following the call for submissions for the international exhibition at the Théodore Monod Museum. The call was open to all artists of the African continent and diaspora. Riason Naidoo therefore describes the selection procedure as "promoting African artists via competition" and calls DAK'ART a "democratic biennale" (Naidoo 2012: 23). Besides selecting the artists and artworks for DAK'ART 2012, the members of the international committee each nominated "two African artists of their choice that had not presented works for

consideration for the main international exhibition." For the guest artists exhibition at the National Gallery, the three curators chose Goddy Leye, Berni Searle, and Peter Clarke.

The above structural overview of DAK'ART 2012 brings me to the event's main goals and contents. The DAK'ART is a biennale for contemporary African art. It focuses on the works of artists living on the African continent and in the African diaspora. Works are not selected to constitute any kind of homogenous display but instead to produce explicit diversity. The artists' horizons of experience and their embeddedness in their traditional and particular contexts seem to be the key influences on their art practices and aesthetic strategies. My notion of tradition here is an open one, in that I see art practices and strategies as embedded in a series of contexts that form a particular tradition. By "traditional," I therefore do not mean "traditional" as opposed to "modern" or "postmodern."

Rather, the term implies that art practices and strategies are also part of a tradition. That is to say, all art practices have their tradition.

Moreover, all frames of references are currently subject to dispute, or are being altered or proven inadequate. This means that artists' horizons of experience and their embeddedness in specific contexts more often than not are multilayered and blend various traditional traits. Thus, the range of artistic practices displayed at DAK'ART 2012, devoted to contemporary African art, covers many artistic practices at stake on a global scale. The crucial point being that while there is no contextless art, contexts may vary immensely from one person to another. These various contexts call for versatile criticism, perception, and evaluation. Seen thus, it is questionable whether particular art practices should be contextualized as "African," "European," "South American," and so on. Rather, we need to ask how a particular art strategy is embedded in a specific and blended context.

Furthermore, the understanding of our cultural realities as socially and economically constructed entities is especially important in our times of immense change. It is precisely in such historical periods such as ours that boundaries are disputed and new ones constructed (Nederveen Pieterse 2009). Since the 1970s, we can identify an increasing intensification of social, cultural, economic, and political change. Such thoroughgoing transformation affects the everyday lives of more and more people and influences our self-perception. An increasing number of people share the sense of living in a single world. Global theorists argue that the aspects structuring today's phenomena are their processuality, conceptual complexity, homogenization, but also hybridization tendencies (Albrow 1996; Robertson 1992; Tomlinson 1999). These manifold processes make evident a pressure for change, which in turn influences our frames of reference. Thus, the aforementioned destabilization of the frames of reference of art is also noticeable in other areas of life. The pressure for change influences our life styles and

knowledge, and problematizes our frames of reference in general. In this context, Ulrich Beck diagnoses a meta-change (Beck 2007). The understanding of our cultural realities as socially constructed is especially important if we additionally understand our actions as constructing our future. The kind of visibility we produce with our discourses and art practices is part of the above restructuring process, and as such it may influence our cultural realities (Rehbein & Schwengel 2008).

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the preliminary assumptions underlying our concept(s) and criteria of art are crucial. Special attention therefore needs to be paid to the effects of these preliminary assumptions. What do they in- and exclude? This question becomes tantamount if we accept that there is always a setting of boundaries. One key question in this respect is: where do we want them set?

As mentioned, my purpose here is to examine the preliminary assumptions underpinning globalistic or glocalistic views of art. I consider this approach fruitful for initiating a discussion on art concepts that doesn't remain confined to a modern/postmodern versus non-modern/postmodern dichotomy.

What are globalistic and glocalistic views? The former term refers to Ulrich Beck's definition of globalism. Beck distinguishes between globalism (Globalismus), globality (Globalität), and globalisation (Globalisierung). He introduces this set of distinctive terms to point to a powerful and governing principle at work today: the "world-powerful world market." Beck maintains that this idea governs European thinking, and therefore paralyzes our actions. He sees his tripartite differentiation as a catapult against this "mega-ghost" (Beck 2007). For Beck, globalism captures the sense of that the world market suppressing or replacing political action. In this view, the multi-dimensionality of globalization is reduced to one—the economic—dimension. Thus, globalism presupposes that a nation has to be run like a business. Alongside a positive globalism, Beck detects various negative globalisms, which support different forms of protectionism. Further, Beck distinguishes between globalism and globality; the latter means that we are living in a world society. Here the focus lies on our perceptions of this world society. Finally, his notion of globalization denotes the processes engaged in by transnational players, who thereby evade nation-states and their sovereignty.

The term "glocal" indicates that local and global considerations are reflected or characterized (OED). The term was first introduced in the 1980s in the business context. In relation to products and commodities, for example, a "glocal" car is a universal vehicle, distributed worldwide, and featuring "local" adaptations designed to meet the needs of particular "local" markets. A glocally structured worldwide enterprise means that while country CEOs are autonomous in their

(country) subsidiary, they also take responsibility on the company's international committee. In the 1990s, the sociologist and global theorist Roland Robertson introduced into theoretical discourse the term "glocal" to reflect ongoing shifts in global cultural dynamics (Robertson 1992). Robertson emphasized that the "local" does not conflict with the "global," or vice versa. Rather, the "local" should be seen as "an aspect of globalization" and, as such, as constitutive of the global.

The concept of "glocalisation" therefore focuses on the simultaneity and mutual interpenetration of what has traditionally been characterized as the global and the local, or, phrased in a different nomenclature, as the universal and the particular. Glocalisation in this sense doesn't necessarily assume a tension between globalisation and localisation. Quite on the contrary, Robertson emphasises that "globalisation" always already factors in the production and inclusion of locality. Developed in the early 1990s, Robertson's concept of glocalisation therefore specifically brings into view the relation and interplay between macro- and micro-levels of social and cultural processes (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009), without, however, predetermining specific differences and tensions.

Let me return to my proposal to take seriously our preliminary assumptions about our concept(s) and criteria of art. There is a need to lead the current discussion on contemporary art and the problematization of art criteria out of its impasse. One possible and promising way of doing this is to take globalistic and glocalistic views as analytical points of reference, in order to render visible our preliminary assumptions about art concepts. Basically, such analysis focuses on the current state of reflection on art concepts. Importantly, as I have suggested, the reach of particular art concepts is determined already at a preliminary, assumptive stage.

We therefore need to start thinking on comparative levels, as Okeke-Agulu has already explicitly suggested (Okeke-Agulu 2009). Further, we have to include meta-theoretical analyses of preliminary assumptions, in order to render visible what is at stake. Doing so will help us clarify the effects, the reach, and the possibilities that art concepts bring with them. And we can thereby establish a basis for arguments that may lead to fruitful discussions. Therefore, to overcome the current art-theoretical impasse, we need to turn around, open up our horizons and perspectives, and pursue new avenues while openly declaring why we are heading in a particular direction.

Our FOA-FLUX research does this by taking a step back and by examining the functions of art in global and glocal contexts without, however favoring a particular art concept from the start. Doing so has required us to develop a methodological cluster that allows scientific comparison. This methodological set

will be published elsewhere later this year. In this paper, I have focused on the problem of implicit preliminary assumptions. As I hope to have shown, such assumptions are problematic because all too often they are not taken into serious enough consideration.

Rendering visible the preliminary assumptions about art concepts will help us clarify how we want to talk about art in the future, as well as what art should or could be. Analyzing the preliminary assumptions against the background of globalistic or glocalistic views will hopefully help us identify more clearly which undertakings have homogenizing effects and which ones are capable of mirroring diversity. The reach, effects, and implicit aim of such art concepts will then be displayed more openly than they are now.

This paper has set out to show the exemplary significance of DAK'ART for the current discussions on what contemporary art is and how we might imagine art to be. It has pointed out the significance of taking preliminary assumptions about art concepts seriously. It has proposed a methodological approach for analyzing these preliminary assumptions, consisting of two distinct views on current change processes and pressure: globalism and glocalism. I have argued that applying these two distinct views, based on the theoretical work of Beck and Robertson, will help clarify the reach and effects of art concepts. Together, globalism and glocalism enable a comparative analysis of the processes currently shaping the world we live in and the art produced in that world. I have also suggested that applying this methodological approach will lead us out of the impasse currently stifling art theory. I am convinced that it is high time that we dredge the prevailing ideological swamp. Let us leave the paradigmatic understanding of art concepts behind us, in order to perceive art concepts as formulations possessing no more than a limited scope. We need to lay bare these formulations so as to explore, compare, and relate them in new and more productive ways.

Dominique Lämmli

Artist, professor of drawing and painting at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), researcher at the Institute for Contemporary Art Research (IFCAR). Co-founder and –manager of FOA-FLUX, an independent research organisation dedicated to examining the functions of art in global and glocal contexts with artistic, scientific, and practical means. www.foa-flux.net, dl@foa-flux.net

Bibliographie

Albrow, Martin (1996) *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Amirsadeghi, Hossein, Mikdadi, Salwa, eds. (2011) *New Vision. Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Beck, Ulrich (2007) *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus – Antworten auf Globalisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Belting, Hans, Birken, Jacob, Buddensieg, Andrea, Weibel, Peter (2011) *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*. Osterfildern: Hatje Cantz.

Belting, Hans (2009) Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate. In: Belting, Hans, Buddensieg, Andrea (eds.) *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*. Osterfildern: Hatje Cantz.

Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain (2012) *Guide des Exposants + programme du "in"*. DAK'ART 2012

Enwezor, Okwui, Okeke-Agulu, Chika (2009) *Contemporary African Art since 1980*. Bologna: Damiani.

Konaté, Yacouba (2009) *La Biennale de Dakar. Pour une esthétique de la création africaine contemporaine – tête à tête avec Adorno*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Naidoo, Riason (2012) Not by coincidence ! In: Ministère de la Culture et du Tourisme DAK'ART 2012. *Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain*. République du Sénégal. 22-23

Nederveen Pieterse, Jan (2009) *Globalization & Culture. Global Mélange*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Questionnaire on "The Contemporary" (2009) *OCTOBER*, 130. Cambridge: MIT Press

Rehbein, Boike, Schwengel, Hermann (2008) *Theorien der Globalisierung*. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.

Robertson, Roland (2000/1992) *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.

Smith, Terry (2011) *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. London: Prentice Hall.

Summers, David (2003) *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London: Phaidon.

Tomlinson, John (1999) *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: The University of Chicago Press.

Wade, Ousseynou (2012) *Sécretaire Générale de la Biennale des Arts de Dakar*, Interviewed by FOA-FLUX (Dominique Lämmli).

Zijlmans, Kitty, van Damme, Wilfried (eds.) *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*. Amsterdam: Valiz.