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# ***ART IN ACTION: MAKE PEOPLE THINK!*** ***Reflections on Current Developments in Art***

*Make People Think!*

*Instead of Implementing Ideas*

*Construct & Learn from One Another's Proximity*

*Be & Make Aware*

*Influence & Empower Each Other*

*Dominique Lämmli*

## ***The Paradigmatic Shift in Art Discourse & the Rapidly Expanding Range of Art Practice***

We are currently witnessing profound shifts in how art is understood, discussed, and practised. The effects of these shifts create an antagonistic image if art practice and art discourse are considered. Whereas art discourse has been driven into a state of disarray, art practice has rapidly expanded its importance, capacity, and possibilities. Art practice now co-inhabits an increasing number of other disciplinary and social domains. Its purpose—to inform and enrich everyday life, social processes, and scientific fields—has become enormous and is still growing. Accordingly, art may have reached a rarely seen significance (Khan 2009). On the other hand, the much-lamented fuzziness and imprecision of art discourse is closely linked with the problematisation of the underlying notions of art (October 2009; Field Notes 01, 2012). This, in turn, is understood as an effect of the ongoing accelerated globalisation processes.

## ***Art in Action—Working Reality!***

This text is written from the perspective of an art practitioner and philosopher, and in connection with the exhibition "Art in Action."<sup>1</sup> It is striking that nowadays art groups, networks, and movements worldwide are increasingly fostering involvement in and direct relationships with their surroundings, and as such play an active part in the ongoing transformation processes. Whereas some understand these activities as contemporary art practice, others still question whether this practice should be discussed as art (Finkelpearl 2013). "Art in Action" is based on the assumption that whereas these direct involvements in social contexts may shift the materialisation of art, they should nevertheless be understood and reflected on as current art practice: The artists WORKING REALITY! This wider concept of art may be understood as a subsequent development of art strategies developed in Euro-American art contexts—and/or as a continuation of other traditions, such as the Indonesian philosophical concept of Gotong Royong, the „joint bearing of burdens“ (Geertz 1983). Much writing is still to be done to increase our understanding of these processes and expansions of art practice. "Art in Action" had the modest goal to draw attention to some particularly interesting networks from various geographical contexts and to open up their particular engagements for comparative discussions.

## ***Central Aspects of Current Developments in Art***

This text aims to draw attention to some central aspects of the current developments in art. The present disarray in art discourse makes discussions in art contexts often unsatisfyingly fuzzy. My teaching experience at art universities has made me aware of a need for short introductory texts that may serve as entry points to understanding the ongoing paradigmatic shifts. Especially in the European contexts long-established beliefs and superiority claims are still perpetuated—much to the disadvantage of students, who in effect are hampered from understanding situated knowledge and art production and from positioning themselves accordingly.

1 The exhibition "Art in Action" is a co-production by FOA-FLUX ([foa-flux.net](http://foa-flux.net)) and Connecting Spaces Hong Kong—Zurich, Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK ([www.connectingspaces.ch](http://www.connectingspaces.ch)). The exhibition has been shown in two different formats at Museum Bärengasse Zurich, July 2014 and at Connecting Space Hong Kong, November 2014.

Seeking to raise awareness of some central aspects of these current developments in art, I adopt a multi-perspective approach, which builds on findings in various disciplines. Instead of detailed accounts, I look at key facets of the ongoing change processes to draw attention to interdependencies, complexities, and the need to question and debate one's preliminary assumptions. It is high time that we productively compare the presumptions informing various understandings of art. On this basis, we need to critically engage with how we can come up with a more inclusive framework, one capable of revealing the many views on art within global contexts and that helps us to reflect on the interconnections between these positions.

Therefore, what we need to establish is an increased awareness and visibility of the motives and objectives informing the various notions of art. Doing so will lead to a re-setting of art categories. This re-setting is necessary if we want to describe ongoing art processes in a multi-centred, pluralistic world without key aspects being screened out by methodologically installed blind spots.

The ideas gathered here build on research on art in global contexts that I have undertaken with Annemarie Bucher and in changing teams since 2008.<sup>2</sup> These findings have been substantially informed by formal and by countless informal discussions with artists, theorists, and art stakeholders working within global and local artistic contexts, among others, in Switzerland, Bhutan, Germany, India, Hong Kong, and Malawi.

I first briefly describe global transformation processes and how global theory approaches these developments (*Globalisation Processes & Meta-Change*). Second, I argue that preliminary assumptions in art discourse should be identified to enable comparative discussion (*Taking Preliminary Assumptions Seriously*). In a third step, I draw attention to two fundamental needs: first, to re-formulate art categories; second, to adopt transdisciplinary methods for studying ongoing change processes (*Re-Setting Art Categories*). Specifically, I draw on Ulrich Beck's concept of cosmopolitan realism, Roland Robertson's concept of glocalisation, and Katani Kojin's concept of modes of exchange. In a fourth step, I question the prevailing art discourse and its dominant narrative,

2 For further details, see [foa-flux.net](http://foa-flux.net)

established in the so-called West, and argue that we need a multi-centred perspective (*Varieties of Globalisation & Methodological Consequences, Problematised Art Discourses*). The following section (*Some Facts and Figures*) highlights differences in academic discourse and art practice, the tensions between “local” and “blue-chip” artists, and the manifold (and conflicting) ways of considering global, economic, and financial processes, art market developments, and exhibition histories. The examples given are by no means exhaustive, but serve as indications of disputed and changing realities. The final sections (*Culture and Art—An Ongoing Process: “Doing Culture”, Conclusion. Art in Action: Make People Think!*) focus on an altered understanding of culture as research: from a concept of culture as an objective and given entity to an understanding of culture as process and practice: “doing culture.”

### ***Globalisation Processes & Meta-Change***

The vast effects of ongoing globalisation processes are obviously not unique to the arts. Since the 1970s, we have been witnessing a rapidly growing worldwide chain of economic, social, financial, and political activities. These are continuously increasing and even accelerating in numbers and complexity. Their interdependencies prevail over earlier conditions. Such a thoroughgoing transformation is affecting 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. Theoretical descriptions of these ongoing processes come up with contradictory prognoses, depending on their thematic focus and methodology. Global theorists argue that the aspects structuring today’s phenomena are their processuality, conceptual complexity, homogenisation, but also hybridisation tendencies. Therefore, the issues discussed within cultural global theory range from a threat of de-cultivating homogenisation to increased differentiation and diversity (see Albrow 1996; Robertson 1992; Tomlinson 1999; Schönhut 2005; Rehbein/Schwengel 2008).

Global theory is already looking back at its third wave of comprehensive discussion on globalisation processes. In contrast, contemporary art discourse still has great difficulties in addressing the complex constellations that we are facing today when investigating art in global contexts. We are just about to overcome an obsolete master discourse still resting firmly on art categories that have

ceased to be relevant for contemporary art practice. Moreover, comparative research on various traditions and notions of art has only just started. This situation becomes extremely puzzling if we think about the potential of art practice to visualise highly complex issues. This is exactly why such practice is momentarily such a success story. Why—one may ask—are artistic strategies so useful to ecologists, climate researchers, social agents and others, whereas art theory does not seem to benefit – and is caught up in its parasitic attitude and stands out in the cold?

According to their prevailing perspectives, the three waves in global theory have been labelled globalist, scepticist, and transformationalist (see, for instance, Held et al 1999; Martell 2007). Whereas the globalist wave thematised culture in relation to homogenisation tendencies, the scepticist wave offered a differentiated discussion of the clashes between culture, nationalism, Americanisation, and globalisation. The transformationalist wave investigated a globally transformed hybridisation and took into account a highly complex and differentiated globalisation. Concerning normative politics, the first wave addressed global governance or neoliberalism, as well as the end of the social-democratic welfare state. The second wave focused on reformist social democracy and international regulation possibilities whereas the third wave explored cosmopolitan democracy (Martell 2007).

Art history has fallen behind in the debate on how to best overcome its contextual and ideologically limiting narratives. Questions such as “What becomes of art history when the world shrinks into a planet?” (Dave-Mukherji 2014) are among the most exciting—and pressing—concerns in art theory today. The production and reception of artistic and cultural production are increasingly involving overlapping, hybridisation, and creolisation tendencies. There are, however, dissociation efforts. Various life-forms, styles, and understandings of art are now interrelated (Welsch 1994). This also means that artists’ horizons of experience and their embeddedness in specific contexts are multilayered and blend various traditional traits more often than not (Appadurai 1996). Crucially, whereas no such thing as contextless art exists, the contexts of art and their associated communities may vary immensely (Lämmli 2012). These various contexts call for the versatile criticism, perception, and evaluation of art.

### ***Taking Preliminary Assumptions Seriously***

Despite the above reflections, I have nevertheless been listening to many art historians, some well-established within their discipline, and their attempts to remedy the current randomness of art criteria – without, however, being aware of their underlying assumptions. Such blind spots seem difficult to resolve. Thus, art historians often advance “new” guiding criteria, themes, and strategies for evaluating art. Astonishingly, most art historians in my experience are unaware of their own premises and, when asked, are unable to explain them. Instead, they apply their well-rehearsed scholarly methods without considering their suitability for discussing current art phenomena. Which is even more astonishing if we consider the highly ideological assumptions underlying modern and post-modern concepts of art. For any art practitioner, these shortcomings must be most puzzling. As a practising contemporary artist used to formulating and reflecting on my position within the tradition(s) of artistic practice, I am utterly baffled when art historians lack any awareness of their underlying assumptions. The discussion on these paradigmatic shifts in the (visual) arts has gathered momentum only in the last few years, whereas global theory has already entered a third wave of theoretical analyses.

### ***Re-Setting Art Categories***

We have to keep in mind that these manifold globalisation processes are effective in a paradigmatic sense: they affect our reference systems and put them under pressure for change. Ulrich Beck (2002) has drawn special attention to these fundamental changes, which are setting new paradigmatic agendas. He refers to the process now ongoing as “meta-change.” Consequently, the social sciences and the humanities are also proving increasingly inadequate both for productively describing the world’s conditions in relation to our experiences and for accounting for these paradigmatic shifts. Established frames of reference are now disputed, criticised, altered, or proven inadequate.

Among the earlier voices calling for a re-formulation of existing art theories are John Onians and Geeta Kapur. In the early 1990s, Onians suggested widening art research and including global and interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as questioning the existing division of art into “high” and “low.” In one of her

lectures, Kapur suggested that the “efficacy of an artwork” should be judged on the basis of its specific place and time of production, its conditions and mode of production, its forms of address, and the extent to which this has a democratic bearing. Kapur proposed situating high art in the larger domain of “visual culture” and seeing “the practice of art as one among the dialectically posed individual/collective activities and interventions in the public space.” (Kapur 2001:4)

Art history has been blocking substantial change for some time now. Only the protection of established privileges may legitimise such otherwise overdue adjustments to living up to the real dynamics currently underway. Recent publications are pointing out the failures of art history, such as not providing analytical tools to access the increasing complexity of reality and artistic strategies (Finkelpearl 2013). It also has been argued that it is a sheer lack of desire to imagine change as a real possibility. The discrepancy between discourse and practice has never been greater (Vanhaesebrouck 2011). The self-centred discussions on art are a bore. Luckily, some critics are embracing Dewey’s “notion that democracy is not only a governmental form but also a mode of living and communicated experience” and are starting to discuss art from this perspective (Finkelpearl 2013).

We need methods and categories capable of revealing the ongoing change processes in an intellectually engaging way. We do not have to agree with Arthur I. Miller’s (2014) forecast that “art, science, and technology as we know them today will disappear” to realise that, unlike art history or art scholarship, other disciplines are devising robust analytical tools for investigating current developments that would also be useful for investigating art in global contexts. However, a transdisciplinary set of tools needs to be epistemologically grounded to withstand the accusation of eclecticism and relativism.

Let me briefly mention three productive analytical tools: first, Ulrich Beck’s (2002) concept of cosmopolitan realism; second, Karatani Kojin’s (2014) concept of modes of exchange; third, Roland Robertson’s (1992) concept of glocalisation. Below, I discuss the first two concepts merely in passing before describing in greater detail glocalisation, which is already used in art discourse, albeit somewhat misleadingly at times.

Beck and Karatani assess the national perspective as being too limited to produce descriptions able to open up new insights and possibilities for thinking about the world. Globalisation processes are not structured according to national borders. Nor do they render obsolete the concept of nationhood. Quite on the contrary, the problematic relational dynamics have to be accessed to reveal current developments and processes.

In *Power in the Global Age*, Beck (2002) therefore argues for a cosmopolitan realism, which he sees as essential for political agency and the political sciences. Otherwise, if we continue to rely on a national perspective, we will miss out on ways and means of grasping the ongoing paradigmatic changes. Only a cosmopolitan perspective – not a national one – will serve to adequately describe the central aspects of the ongoing changes.

In "The Structure of World History," Karatani<sup>3</sup> (2014) suggests that we move from Marxist "modes of production" to "modes of exchange." Karatani observes that nowadays people are trapped in a vicious circle of capitalism and protectionist regulations, due to the firm threeway constellation of "capital," "nation," and "state." If one of these constituents goes missing, everything risks falling apart. Furthermore, Karatani points out that movements to "transcend capitalism ended up strengthening them to an unprecedented degree." (3) We therefore need to "rethink the economic base from the perspective of exchange." (xix)

Both Beck's cosmopolitan realism and Karatani's mode of exchange provide analytical tools for discussing art production, reception, and market relations without relying on ideologically compromised and limiting art notions.

The term glocalisation was introduced into the social sciences by Roland Robertson (1992), who was convinced that comparing globalisation and localisation falls short of adequately describing their interdependence and interaction. Glocalisation is borrowed from Japanese "dochakuka," which translates as "global localisation" or "local globalisation." In this sense, "glocal" brings into focus local and global considerations (OED).

3 Lee Chun Fung, artist and core member of Wooferten, an art collective in Hong Kong, recently drew my attention to Karatani's writings.



In the late 1980s, glocalisation was used in the context of micro-marketing techniques of global ventures. To increase sales and supply for specific regional markets, mass production was partly adjusted to suit local conditions. In relation to products and commodities, for example, a “glocal” car is a universal vehicle, distributed worldwide, that features “local” adaptations designed to meet the needs of particular “local” markets. A glocally structured worldwide enterprise means that whereas country CEOs are autonomous in their (country) subsidiary, they also take responsibility on the company’s international committee.

In the 1990s, sociologist and global theorist Roland Robertson (1992) introduced the term “glocal” to reflect ongoing shifts in global cultural dynamics. Robertson emphasised that the “local” does not conflict with the “global,” or vice versa. Rather, the “local” should be seen as “an aspect of globalisation” 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 characterised as the global and the local, or, phrased differently, as the universal and the particular. Glocalisation in this sense does not 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 brings into view specifically the relation and interplay between macro- and micro-levels of social and cultural processes (Giulianotti/Robertson 2009), without, however, predetermining specific differences and tensions.

### ***Varieties of Globalisation & Methodological Consequences***

It seems advisable to also take into account “varieties of globalisation” when discussing the possible outcomes and alternatives of globalisation processes. This implies a strong awareness of the chosen methods and categories. Furthermore, within the current science of history – according to Rehbein and Schwengel (2008)—a relational and configurational approach is fostered. Without losing sight of the overall picture, research may be said to be concentrating on

relations and interconnections. In "Kaleidoscopic Dialectic," Rehbein (2013) supports and further develops this approach through the philosophy of science while considering the social sciences.

Rehbein places the kaleidoscopic dialectic at the epistemological centre of a critical theory that takes into account the rise of the global south. First, he draws on Adorno's notions of the "constellation" or "configuration." The analytical advantage of this approach is that it is neither universalistic nor deductive. To counteract Adorno's problematic teleological and rationalizing aspects, Rehbein then parallels the "configuration" with the following assumptions: i) The social sciences are not relative, but relational; ii) the social sciences are not normative, but involved and entangled in a normative world; iii) the social sciences are not random, but have a limited reach (here, he follows Galtung); iv) the social sciences are not anarchic, but multi-lingual (Rehbein 2013:114). This is not the place to discuss Rehbein's kaleidoscopic dialectic in more detail. What is needed in the present context is to identify the capacity of Rehbein's kaleidoscopic dialectic to provide a framework for addressing our pluralistic conditions while taking into account universalistic or relativistic shortcomings. Such a framework therefore allows us to substantially interrelate various paradigms and traditions.

It is also essential to keep in mind – as Rehbein rightly suggests – that specific constellations and our interpretations thereof are not random, but always relative to given reference systems. So there is no contextless art, let alone concepts without underlying 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. However, our times, and their inherent pluralistic challenges, are different. As mentioned, changes in various domains are exerting pressure on existing frames of reference, including concepts of art (Lämmli 2012).

Several attempts are currently underway to define new foundations or criteria for art theory. An increasing number of publications and articles are formulating new or revised criteria for inclusion and exclusion practices for contemporary art (Amirsadeghi/Mikdadi 2011; Enwezor/Okeke-Agulu 2009; Smith 2011). These publications also survey the latest research findings on art in global contexts

(Summers 2003; Zijlmans/van Damme 2008; Belting/Buddensieg 2011; Asian Art Archive platform [aaa.org.hk](http://aaa.org.hk)). However, the assumptions underlying such attempts are seldom spelled out and critically engaged with.

### ***Problematised Art Discourses***

Nevertheless, there is a consensus that the existing criteria of “art history and art theory as practiced in the West” (Dave-Mukherji 2014) fall short of a substantial discussion of ongoing art phenomena. Crucially, however, the methodological consequences of this consensus are rarely taken into account. The flaws of current art discourse, art notions, and evaluation criteria are manifold: art discourse is undergoing conceptual destabilisation (Enwezor, October 2009), art criteria have become arbitrary (Foster, October 2009) and are used eclectically by critics serving and satisfying market needs and institutional exhibition politics at one and the same time. Furthermore, it has been criticised that relevant art history is not taken into account anymore (Elkins, October 2009). Also, the expansion of contemporary art practice around the globe has been noted as threatening the survival of any safe notion of art (Belting, October 2009). And, “by abandoning the discipline of art history,” art is turned into a cultural commodity merely serving trading purposes (Araeen, Field Notes 01 2012). Art, moreover, is said to have never been as socially conformist as today (Khan 2009).

Obviously, the ideologically informed edifice of art, as defined by an art history that “rose in the late eighteenth century” (Dave-Mukherji 2014) in Europe, has become highly questionable. At the beginning of my discussion, I drew attention to the fact that whereas art discourse is in a state of disarray, art practice is increasingly flourishing. Therefore, from a practical point of view, it is art theory that needs revising. Instead of complaining about art no longer being art – as it no longer matches the narrow criteria — it seems much more plausible to me to question the usefulness of the existing theories of art. Theories become obsolete. Cultural productions are in process. Constellations change. “There is no ready-made world whose structure would be absolutely independent of our practice-embedded perspectives” (Pihlström 2006).

The highly exclusive definition of art and its narrow narrative, established and

handed down by an art history rooted in the European Enlightenment and imperialistic constellation of its time, have become implausible in today's multi-centred world (Dave-Mukherji 2014; Carrier 2008). Devising more suitable research tools and frameworks is long overdue. This need is highlighted by the evident disarray of art discourse and the concurrent success of artistic strategies.

What has become most obvious is that an art history grounded in European imperialism "has not considered other art histories in its formation" (Dave-Mukherji 2014). This implicit ideological and highly exclusive presumption, which informs the reference system of the so-called Western concept of art history, explains why I see the mere adjustment of the underlying notion of art and the perfunctory widening of criteria as doomed to fail.

Furthermore, I find the labelling of this specific concept as "Western art history" deeply problematic. It renders invisible a quintessential fact: namely, the exclusive claim to quality of this art history, which also excludes other art traditions within its own cultural terrain (such as various European folk art traditions). Instead of attempting to redraw and consolidate cultural differences, I therefore find it more productive to investigate these exclusive strategies in questioning which communities were and are included and excluded from being considered worthy of qualitative art production, and for which reasons. It is also productive to relate these findings to the current worldwide debate on human rights and democracy discussions.

### ***Some Facts and Figures***

I cannot emphasise strongly enough that in many cultural contexts art is very much in flux. This is also due to the fact that art relates to social conditions, identity, and moral values. The so-called meta-change, discussed above, makes it necessary to identify and describe these factual changes and phenomena (Albrow 1996; Beck 2007). Within the scope of this paper, I can no more than point out some remarkable developments.

As highlighted, different notions of art are influencing each other; also, we are witnessing an ongoing paradigmatic shift. The scope and reach of art practice is

rapidly expanding into various scientific and social domains. This is due, among other factors, to the potential of artistic strategy to work and rework and above all to reveal current social, ecological, and economic issues. Artistic strategies bring into view particular constellations, thereby making them accessible, and may also have an altering effect and rework the “civil imagination” (Azoulay 2012, cited in Joselit 2014).

The soft sciences focus on categorising, grouping, and assigning value to cultural phenomena. Their value sets are based on existing and well-acclaimed reference systems rooted in academic tradition. Artistic practice, however, often focuses on or refers to a desired status. Furthermore, it is most directly influenced by lived values in the societies and communities producing art. The current dynamics of global and regional socio-political developments are sparking ever-fiercer, and openly waged, competition and conflict between different claims about the functions of art. This becomes apparent when browsing through art magazines. Competition focuses on local and international art production and reception, social values and belief systems. Some recent examples are the incident at Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) in early 2014 or the envisaged conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

In February 2014, Maximo Caminero, a Miami-based artist (referred to as a “local artist” in news coverage), destroyed a seemingly invaluable vase by the internationally acclaimed Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei. Newspapers speculated whether this was an activist act of resistance against blue-chip art (art of great monetary value) or whether the “local artist” acted clumsily, feeling animated by a photograph showing Ai Wei Wei himself destroying such a vase, and wrongly believing that the museum visitor is asked to do the same. It emerged that “Caminero told the arresting officer that he smashed the artwork as a protest on behalf of local artists who he felt were slighted in favor of international artists at the new \$131 million complex on Biscayne Bay.” The ensuing lawsuit and trial ended in 18 months probation and a \$10'000 fine. In a plea deal, Caminero was ordered to “also engage in 100 hours of community service teaching art classes as a result of a self-professed act of protest” (Ovalle 2014).

In Istanbul, Turkish Islamists attempted to reconvert the Hagia Sophia—currently a museum—into a religious site. The Anatolia Youth Association “has collected

15 million signatures to petition for it to be turned back into a mosque" (Nervana Mahmoud, Blog, [nervana1.org](http://nervana1.org)). Built in the fourth century as a church by Constantine the Great, it faced a turbulent history of de- and reconstruction, surviving warfare and earthquakes. In the thirteenth century, it was converted into a mosque by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, and then again, in 1934, under Turkish president Kemal Atatürk, secularised and turned into Istanbul's Ayasofya Museum. The proposed conversion has to be seen in the context of the wider ongoing cultural dispute in Turkey. The Turkish authorities are trying to repatriate Ottoman antiques from various museums worldwide. The Economist has called the strategies used as those of "a new culture war" (19 May 2012). Spending on the arts in Turkey has increased, with a view to "building new museums, repairing Ottoman remains." In 2013, a planned replica of Ottoman barracks housing cafés, museums, and shops in the Taksim Gezi Park caused a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest. A core issue of the "Occupy-Gezi" movement was the ongoing encroachment on Turkey's secularism, namely, the freedom of the press, expression, and assembly ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013-14\\_protests\\_in\\_Turkey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013-14_protests_in_Turkey)). Also in 2013, the 13th Istanbul Biennial, curated by Fulya Erdemci, was held. Erdemci initially planned the Biennial to inhabit public space with experimental artistic interventions. Due to the violent reaction of the political establishment and police to the Gezi Park sit-ins and the incidents thereafter, the Biennial was reconceptualised and brought back into existing art spaces.

Ai Wei Wei's destroyed vase and the events in Turkey might be seen as examples of a globally increasing dynamics of competing world-views and notions of art. The current transformation processes are of course related to regional art funding, biennales, art fairs, and auction sales. Art funding in Europe has come under mounting pressure due to the Euro crisis ongoing since 2009. By contrast, art budgets in other regions, most prominently in the Gulf States, have surged.

The Euro crisis has affected all European countries. The cultural sector was an early target of budget cuts (or rather slashes). "The most dramatic changes are happening in those nations that have traditionally been the biggest supporters of culture—the United Kingdom and the Netherlands—while places that have historically been less generous to the arts are now trimming their funding to a pittance" (Siegal 2013). In the Netherlands, cuts were authorised in 2011 and 2012 by a conservative coalition government, which also employed an

aggressive anti-arts rhetoric to justify the measure. From “2012 to 2013, federal financing for the arts dropped by 22 percent, or €238 million, while local, regional and provincial governments account for an additional €232 million decline in subsidies.” The cuts —as Ann Demeester, the director of the De Appel Art Center has stated in an article by Jeroen Bartelse, secretary general of the Dutch Culture Council—“cleaned up a vital part of the sector, which was actually a connecting node. When you attack culture in this way, you actually de-professionalize the sector.” Cuts affect especially young artists from all art disciplines by eroding the “intermediary institutions” and as such “the bridge for artists into the professional world.” Bartelse also points out that what is striking “is the number of institutions stopping at one time, which we haven’t seen before, and these are institutions that have existed for 20, 30 or 50 years.” Or looking at my own national context: Swiss arts funding has—for several years—been increasingly promoting popular and folk culture, whereas funding for contemporary art has come under mounting, and constant, pressure. There are obviously differences between the disciplines, but generally artist associations are making significant efforts to counteract and prevent massive cuts.

In contrast, the Gulf region is investing greatly in the cultural sector while stressing the value of “yesterday’s achievements.” Sheika Al-Mayassa bint Hamad Al-Thani of Qatar, chairwoman of Qatar Museums, has an estimated annual art acquisition budget of \$ 1 billion (New York’s Museum of Modern Art had a reported budget of \$32 million for the fiscal year 2012, “though this number is significantly expanded through private gifts”; Joselit 2014). Therefore, “the magnitude of the sheikha’s pure financial power in the art market is stunning” (Joselit 2014). Qatar, in general, is expanding its global influence through regional diplomacy and through wielding soft power, for instance, through the Al Jazeera network. Also part of this growing influence is its project to transform Doha into a “Capital of Culture” (<http://www.qm.org.qa>). “Currently, Qatar Museums encompasses major institutions devoted to conveying a more complex image of Middle Eastern culture well beyond Western assumptions regarding Islam: The Museum of Islamic Art, The Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, and The Orientalist Museum. With plans for an eventual total of some twenty institutions.” (Joselit 2014)

Looking at the art market, we can also identify major changes. Auctions have

become an important factor, and are actively used to boost artists' careers (Boll 2013). In global art market sales, the United States, the traditional market leader, was overtaken by the Chinese art market in 2011, according to the TEFAF (The European Fine Art Foundation) Art Market Report 2012 (<http://artseconomics.com>). Although this development slowed down again in 2012, we have nevertheless been witnessing rapid market expansion.

Many more examples could be given to describe similar tendencies to those mentioned. We are currently in a phase of re-formulation and fact creation, as evident in various thought contexts, cultural funding and promotion, and marketplaces.

This phase, moreover, also affects our views on exhibition history (see Exhibition Histories, [www.afterall.org](http://www.afterall.org)). A much-cited example of this transformation of exhibition histories is the presentation of art produced by Aborigines in the QaGoma Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Australia (<https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au>). Until recently, most art work with visible connections to Aboriginal tradition had no access to contemporary art museums. It was instead seen as "world art" and displayed in ethnographical museums.

The dominant contemporary art discourse of the last century therefore made a substantial differentiation between art and – what I would like to call – art and tag. Algebraically speaking this would be art+ or +art. When referred simply to as art, one meant the exclusively contemporary art production based on a Euro-American modernist tradition. All other fields of art were specifically labeled and as such implicitly positioned as less valuable art productions: World Art, Art Brut, Ethnic Art, Traditional Art, and so on. Until recently, these art fields were not discussed by art history, but by anthropology, religious studies, etc. Consequently, they also did not qualify for exhibition in modern or contemporary art museums.

The respective transformation process of exhibition history is currently discussed within contemporary art discourse in reference to the exhibitions "Primitivism" at Moma in 1984 («Primitivism» in 20th Century Art) and "Magiciens de la Terre" in 1989 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. "Primitivism" was understood by comparing forms of art from European modernity and so-called tribal art from



North America, Africa, and Oceania (Laganà 2008). Nowadays this exhibition is discussed as a colonial project (Belting 2008). "Magiciens de la Terre," in contrast, is often seen as a turning point in a formerly dominant and exclusive understanding of art. For the first time, different art traditions—according to common perception—are for the first time presented alongside Contemporary Art in an acclaimed art institution. Instead of using the terms "artist" or "craftspeople," the curatorial team under the direction of Jean-Hubert Martin spoke of "Magiciens." Whether the exhibition discusses various understandings of art or whether the mode of presentation merely showcases an egalitarian claim is subject to debate. Pablo Lafuente has recently doubted the exhibition's capacity to discuss various roles within the art system (Lafuente 2013).

### ***Culture and Art—An Ongoing Process: "Doing Culture"***

Artists' horizons of experience and their embeddedness in specific contexts more often than not are multilayered and blend various traditional traits. The crucial point being that whereas there is no contextless art, contexts may vary immensely from one person to another. These various contexts call for versatile criticism, perception, and evaluation. We need to ask how a particular art strategy is embedded in a specific and blended context and consider the particular social and economic conditions (Lämmli 2012).

In recent decades the cross-disciplinary discussion on how to research cultural phenomena has shifted from focusing on systems of norms and values to an interest in how actors are doing things within particular contexts. This shift helps to reveal current transformation processes, whereas an understanding of cultures as entities establishes boundaries based on preliminary ideas and the primacy of theoretical concepts. This shift, moreover, emphasises doing and reflecting on practice—and as such theory is also understood as practice.

The complexity and intensification of social, cultural, economic, and political processes taking place since the 1970s, have impacted existing boundaries—be they scientific, cultural, everyday, or others: they are disputed and new ones erected (Nederveen Pieterse 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that since the 1970s cultural studies and anthropo-

logy have understood culture increasingly as process and practice and less as closed entities (Hopper 2007). This also means that culture is addressed as a phenomenon where various local and global influences and traditions are blended through individual and group actions. The dynamic process between various traditions and actor experiences is not approached as a default but as an important constellation shaping culture (Ritter/Lämmli 2012).

Important impulses (across various disciplines) for understanding and researching culture go back to Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, a collection of papers published in 1973 (Hörning/Reuter 2004). Geertz points out that instead of addressing culture with a predefined concept, he is more interested in empirical descriptions "for I grow uncomfortable when I get too far away from the immediacies of social life" (vii). Drawing on Gilbert Ryle's "thick description," Geertz emphasises an interpretive approach to culture in search of meaning, "to construct actor-oriented descriptions of the involvements" (Geertz 1973:14ff) and to ascribe "intentionality to one's behavior" (Ryle, cited in Ponterotto, 2006:539).

"Culture is dynamic and in action"<sup>4</sup>: thus opens the introduction to the proceedings of a conference entitled "Doing Culture" (Hörning/Reuter 2004).

Understanding culture as process and "verb" also means studying diversity and the variety of cultural transformations and players productively engaging within particular cultural settings. "Doing culture is always also doing difference": that is to say, to do the same differently, to repeat, to hand down and alter. As such experiences, knowledge, and know-how are continuously brought into reality, experienced, and mobilized (13).

### ***Conclusion. Art in Action: Make People Think!***

"Artists of all eras are products of their relative cultures and time periods."<sup>5</sup> Instead of fostering and perpetuating exclusionary understandings of art, the networks presented in "Art in Action"—however different their approaches,

<sup>4</sup> "Kultur ist dynamisch; sie ist *in action*" is the opening sentence in *Doing Culture*, edited by Karl H. Hörning and Julia Reuter, the proceedings of a conference with the same title held in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> On contemporary art, see [http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom\\_resources/curricula/contemporary\\_art/background1.html](http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/contemporary_art/background1.html).

motivations, and goals—practise involvement in given social contexts, raise contextually relevant questions, and come up with creative solutions. These artists are WORKING REALITY and aim to bring about real change in given contexts.

Some diagnose the “crisis” of art. I disagree with this statement. Quite to the contrary: if we address the state of current art while considering the paradigmatic changes occurring on a global scale and informing our lives and reference systems, we need to draw another conclusion. What we are experiencing is the problematisation of existing frames of reference: the formerly prevailing art discourse is now (being) destabilised. On the other hand, art practice—as I observed at the beginning—is flourishing, expanding into various contexts and attaining a rarely seen significance.

I titled a recent talk “IGNORE—CLAIM—ACT.” This refers to how reality, how facts are now produced. More and more artists are becoming aware of this dynamic and are using these means of production to actively work with, and thereby, produce reality (Lämmli 2014).

An art theory that may be considered relevant for our times provides a framework for discussing these phenomena and the varieties of art notions while taking into account our multi-centred world.

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