*Are Art Criticism, Art Theory, Art Instruction, and the Novel Global Phenomena?**

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As visual art becomes more international, ways of writing about art become more uniform. This essay proposes that two disciplines concerned with contemporary visual art, art criticism and art theory, are on the verge of being effectively homogeneous around the world. They share concepts, artists, artworks, institutions, and bibliographic references. For comparison, I consider two other fields that may also be increasingly uniform: studio art instruction and the novel. The last, in particular, is the subject of a large literature; critics and historians debate whether contemporary global novels are becoming more self-similar if not more predictable. The literature on the novel allows me to conclude that it is likely writing on art is following the same tendency.

Key words: globalism; fiction; visual art; art criticism; art history; art theory; diversity

There is a tremendous and growing literature on global contemporary art, and how it is becoming a single world market of self-similar objects and ideas. What follows is an excerpt of a work in progress with the title *The Impending Single History of Art*. It is a book about the ways people write about the history of modern and contemporary art in different parts of the world. From the vast art world, I look just at the writing about art; and within art writing I consider only texts that are concerned with modern and contemporary art history; and within those texts, I am mainly interested not in what is said about art but how it is said. This may appear to be a specialized subject, but to adapt the novelist William Gass's phrase, I think it is the heart of the heart of the matter for understanding the impending globalization of art.

The subject variously called "global art history" or "world art history" has become a concern in art history departments worldwide. Sometimes scholars focus on the practices of art worldwide: how they differ from one region or nation to the next, whether they are becoming more uniform in the age of international curation, how cultural practices disseminate and produce new combinations. But "global art history" or "world art history" have always also been about how such practices are interpreted—how art history is written—and that is my subject in the book.

I think that the globalization of writing about art is the single most important problem in the discipline. Its analogue in philosophy is the global influence of European conceptualizations from Plato to Heidegger and beyond—a central concern of this journal. I will touch on these philosophic issues later in this essay.

The chapter excerpted here is an attempt to cast light on the problem of the increasing uniformity of writing about art worldwide by locating several discourses that can serve as points of comparison. Without comparing disciplines, I do not think scholars in art history can come to a sensible conclusion about their own discipline: just as a Kantian might use categories of understanding to comprehend non-Kantian forms of thought, so art historians can benefit from conceptualizations outside their discipline in order to gain clarity on their own assumptions.

Here I consider four disciplines that are related to art history: art criticism, art theory, art instruction, and novel writing. The idea with the first three is to propose that it is urgent that we study the degree to which discourse is already uniform worldwide. In the case of the fourth,

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novel writing, there is already a large literature on the problem of the increasing uniformity of the "global novel."

Before I begin it may be helpful to note that all discussions of the impending uniformity of discourses worldwide are indebted to writing about the spread of capitalism, which remains the model for the decreasing diversity of cultural practices worldwide. There is a literature on the influence of capitalism on artworld discourse, for example in Charlotte Bydler's *The Global Artworld, Inc: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (2004) and Caroline Jones's *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (2017). I am not making use of these here, just because I want to focus on the ways art is written about, rather than the production and dissemination of the art itself.

1 Is Art Criticism Global?

I have often counted myself lucky that I work in a department called Art History, Theory, and Criticism, because that triad seems to be continuously entangled. It is uncommon to find an art-writing practice that presents itself as purely art history, criticism, or theory, although that happens. And it is rare to find a writing practice that requires a fourth or fifth term, unless those are names of disciplines like Visual Anthropology or Sociology of Art.

Each of the three subjects, art history, theory, and criticism, is practiced worldwide. Of the three, only world art history has become a common subject of study. The book *Is Art History Global?* was published in 2006, but it was only in 2014 that the question of the possible impending uniformity of art criticism occurred to me. As far as I know, critics and historians have not asked whether art criticism or art theory might also be tending toward an increasing worldwide uniformity. The odd result is that even though art criticism is more widely practiced than art history, it can be difficult to find even a few pages on whether or not it is, or is becoming, a worldwide practice. The question of the uniformity of art criticism worldwide has not been raised even by the international association of art critics, AICA. (More on that in the full manuscript I'm excerpting here.)

In this context I limit my comments to a list of possible answers to the question of whether art criticism is becoming more uniform worldwide.

(1) It is, if "art criticism" means the discussions of "center," "periphery," and other terms. These are common qualifiers in a range of art criticism worldwide, because critics are often aware of the art's marginal or peripheral relations to some center of activity. However, it can be argued that center, margin, periphery, and related terms are concepts borrowed from art history, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, and that while they are among art criticism's concerns, they are not constitutive of art criticism.

(2) "Art criticism" is global, if it is best understood in terms of its subject matter. Biennales, Documenta, the Manifesta, art fairs, commercial galleries, and auction houses comprise much of art criticism's subject matter. Major contemporary artists are another traditional subject. Topics like these are common to many conversations in art criticism, and they could be a way to maintain that art criticism is a uniform practice worldwide. The difficulty with this formulation is that it reduces the activity of art criticism to its subject matter, depriving it of its methodological and interpretive interests.

(3) It is, if "art criticism" means talk about curating and curatorial studies. In the last three decades, curation has emerged as a separate subject from art history, criticism, and theory, but if art criticism is understood as an integral part of curatorial studies, then the intense and increasing globalization of curatorial studies could be cited to argue that art criticism is also emerging as a relatively uniform practice worldwide.

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(4) It is, if "art criticism" means the shorter notices that are part of the format in *Flash Art, Artforum,* and many national art magazines, because brief critical reports are fairly uniform in style throughout the world. The uniformity of such notices is largely a result of their limited length: it is difficult to do more in a couple hundred words than give the pertinent facts and some limited descriptions of the work. For some scholars, such notices therefore do not count as art criticism, because they lack the space to develop critical reflection.[1]

(5) It is, if "art criticism" means exhibition reviews in newspapers around the world, because again they are fairly similar to one another.

(6) It may be, if countries and regions that have little or no tradition of art criticism develop critical practices by emulating practices elsewhere. There is literature, for example, on the relative lack of art criticism in some Arab countries. The rapid growth of museums, especially in the UAE, is promoting the assimilation of models of art criticism from Europe and North America.[2]

(7) It may not be, if essays written in different countries and regions have different vocabularies, styles, manners, interpretive methods, and narratives, as I think they do in art history. If art criticism amounts to a series of languages, then translating one into another may result in what Luis Camnitzer calls "codes" or "dialects"—that is, texts that appear similar but lack the richness and specificity of their original places of origin. (This is from Camnitzer's essay "Esperanto," where he uses these words to describe art practices, but the same might be said of art criticism.[3])

The difficulty with this last point is that it hasn't been studied. The general tendency of conversations about art criticism, in AICA and elsewhere, is toward internationalism, which can obscure or minimize such differences. A study is needed of the differences between art critical practices in selected regions of the world, with attention not to concepts such as central or marginal, or to subject matter, such as biennales or commercial galleries, but to style, interpretive strategies, and forms of narrative and argument. In the absence of such studies, it can come to seem as if art criticism is in fact a global enterprise, with little prospect of maintaining its dwindling diversity.

2 Is Art Theory Global?

This second subject has parallels with the study of forms of philosophy worldwide, and I hope some readers will consider it as a useful parallel to their own inquiries into differences and similarities between world philosophies.

Throughout the art world, modern and contemporary art are theorized using Kant, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes. Nicolas Bourriaud has been a central figure since the late 1990s, and so have Judith Butler, W.J.T. Mitchell, Susan Buck-Morss, and Jacques Rancière. At the centers of theorization, scholars and artists talk about Alain Badiou, Brian Massumi, and José Muñoz, or lesser-known philosophers like François Laruelle, Quentin Meillassoux, or Catherine Malabou. Theories come in and out of fashion, and these waves spread unevenly and are often short-lived, but they are almost exclusively writers influenced by French poststructuralism.

In general, this is a way to argue that art theory is a more or less worldwide phenomenon. As an experiment I counted all the footnotes to theoretical sources (meaning writers cited as authorities on interpretation, rather than authorities on the specific subject matter of the essay in question) in a single issue of *The Art Bulletin,* March 2017. They are: Bruno Latour, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, Derrida, Claude Gandelman, Georges Didi-Huberman, Hans Belting (cited as a theorist, not an authority on Renaissance art), Alfred Gell, Edward Said, Foucault, Barthes, Agamben, Althusser, Louis Marin, Lacan, Heidegger, Adorno, Michael Holly (again cited for a general interpretation), Rosalind Krauss, W.J.T. Mitchell, Judith Butler, Ernst Bloch, and José

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Muñoz. These would all be familiar names to art historians, indicating a widespread dependence on a relatively uniform group of theorists.

Another way to argue that art theory has a global uniformity is to note that Western philosophy continues to encounter other traditions as "thought" and not philosophy. French scholar François Jullien, for example, speaks of Chinese "thought" and its "choice" not to become a philosophy (Jullien 2004: 91).[4] As Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre has pointed out, Alain Badiou has praised Jullien "for providing structures to Chinese thought, because when he read Chinese thought without preparation and conceptual work, he dismissed it as 'small talk,' as did Hegel many years earlier" (Frainais-Maitre 2014: 10).[5] This leads Frainais-Maitre to ask why, in France, Chinese philosophy is "isolated from philosophy": "Is it perhaps only the Western world that has the right and the ability to think? Does China not think?" The form of Frainais-Maitre's argument can also be found beyond France, and beyond China. Samer Frangie has written about a critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* by the Lebanese philosopher Mahdi 'Amil (1936-1987); the terms are strikingly similar. According to 'Amil, Said constructs a polarity between the West and the Orient, and so despite his attempts to rethink the opposition he has to "reject reason in toto, opposing it to emotion in a quasi-Romantic gesture." In *Orientalism,* 'Amil argues, the Orient "appears to be only accessible through spiritual means or bouts of individual genius" (Frangie 2011).[6]

In everyday pedagogy, students in various parts of the world encounter theorists including the ones I have named above, and it is rare to find a young artist, critic, philosopher, or historian who follows a theorist no one knows. There are always unexpected choices—in the past year or so, I have read essays and artists' statements that cite Agamben, Broch, Harman, Meillassoux, Brecht, Luhmann, Guattari (rather than Deleuze), Clough, and a couple dozen others—but the list is not infinite, and independent or idiosyncratic choices are very rare. So it may seem the only reason art theory isn't a global phenomenon is that students and artists find theorists (or resist them) at different rates. Not all young artists influenced by Rancière know much about him, or have read assessments such as Oliver Davis's "Jacques Rancière and Contemporary Art: Swapping Stories of Love and Tyrannicide," which is—strangely enough—the lead article in the spring 2013 volume of *Critique d'art,* even though the essay is not criticism as much as art theory.

Just as much of the discourse of world philosophies depends on fundamental concepts and forms of argument derived from European philosophy from Plato to Kant and beyond, so much of the discourse of art theory depends on concepts and arguments developed by French poststructuralists from Barthes and Deleuze to the present. Philosophy grapples with this issue in journals such as *The Journal of World Philosophies* and *Philosophy East and West,* but so far art theory has no forum for such problems.

The impending uniformity of art theory worldwide seems especially clear, and yet there are difficult problems lurking here. The theorists' names are usually unsurprising, but they are put to work in different ways, producing unexpected forms of diversity. Here are two reasons why art theory might be considered a national or regional practice, rather than an international one.

(A) *Theory may not be global, because it is used differently in different parts of the world.*

Theory does not look especially global when a critic like Tsai Raylin can say, at the 2013 AICA conference in Bratislava, that there is a connection between Leibniz's monad, Deleuze's nomad, and the post-human body, without justifying his assertion. Raylin's paper did not engage Patricia Clough, Katherine Hayles, Deborah Christie, Serge Venturini, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, or other theorists of the biomediated, cyborg, or posthuman; and he did not elaborate, explain, or defend his slant rhyme "monad / nomad." His paper was presented flamboyantly and enthusiastically, like a performative piece by an artist, and his use of theory was palimpsestic and

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impressionistic. I don't mean this as a criticism, because I enjoyed the paper and its wild connections, but I don't think it could be read as art theory in some other contexts.

At the same conference the Chinese critic Ling Min proposed a new theory of contemporary Chinese "ink art" and its relation to inkbrush painting. In part her claim was that Chinese ink painting be understood in terms such as "poetic" feeling and "plasticity." But she did not engage other work on the contemporary conceptualization of ink painting by Wu Hung, Mike Hearn, Zhu Qingsheng, Gucheng Feng, and others, leaving the impression that no one else has been working on the subject. Theorization of contemporary ink painting is contentious, both politically and conceptually, but Ling Min's paper made it seem as if there is no pertinent literature—so again it sounded like a contribution to something other than a global conversation.

Broadly speaking, there are two possible approaches to idiosyncratic uses of theory. On the one hand, idiosyncratic essays might be expanded and brought to the level where they address the full range of literature on their subjects, so that they join the international conversations on their respective topics. On the other hand, it would be possible to see such essays as artist's statements or personal texts that have purposes other than the wider discourse on their respective topics. An eccentric, personal, or uninformed art theory can be effectively unanswerable, because it takes place outside existing conversations. In this sense art theory is not a worldwide phenomenon, because it exists in versions as different as creoles, pidgins, or entirely new languages. The challenge for art theory would be to accept essays that seem not to be participating in ongoing conversations about Deleuze, Lacan, Rancière, or other art theorists, on the assumption that they were creating new forms of reception that fit their local or regional contexts. The analogous challenge for fora like the *Journal of World Philosophies* would be to accept essays that appear to misuse or misunderstand philosophic positions, on the assumption that their misprisions were the effect of regional or national differences in reception rather than deficits of education or understanding.

(B) *Theory may not be global, because different regions read different theorists.*

Even though French poststructuralist thinkers provide the majority of theoretical sources in art history, theory, criticism, and art world conversations, there are some exceptions—places where there are distinct regional or national habits of art theory.

There is an especially strong disconnect between Chinese theorists and theorists outside China. In my experience most Chinese historians, critics, and theorists read non-Chinese (mainly English, American, and French) philosophers and art theorists, but the reverse is not the case. Europeans and North Americans who are not specialists in China tend to get their information about Chinese art theory from François Jullien, in books like *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (2004). Yet Jullien's books are problematic as representations of China in their emphasis on words taken to be pivotal for any understanding of the culture, and they do not attempt to represent contemporary Chinese theory at all.[7] An older generation of Western scholars got their East Asian theory from French theorists who did not even make China or Japan their specialty, such as Henri Michaux and Roland Barthes. The opposite situation is hard to imagine. A number of Western art theorists have been translated into Chinese, including not only Derrida, Lacan, and Žižek, but also Roger Fry, Herbert Read, John Berger, E.H. Gombrich, Arthur Danto, Stephen Melville, Amelia Jones, Hal Foster, Douglas Crimp, and Thierry de Duve. Every non-Chinese art historian, critic, and theorist should be embarrassed if they cannot write down an equivalently long list of Chinese art theorists. Here are a few: 高名潞 Gao Minglu, 司汉 Si Han, 姜节泓 Jiang Jiehong, 周彦 Zhou Yan, 常宁生 Chang Ningsheng, 丁宁 Ding Ning, 冯原 Feng Yuan, 耿幼壮 Geng Youzhuang, 黄河清 Huang He Qing, 黄专 Huang Zhuan, 潘公 Pan Gong Kai, 彭峰 Peng Feng, 沈语冰 Shen Yubing, 王春辰 Wang Chun Chen, 王

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林 Wang Ling, 王南溟 Wang Nanming, 温普林 Wen Pulin, 尹吉男 Yin Jinan, 殷双喜 Yin Shuangxi, 杨慧林 Yang Huiling, 杨小彦 Yang Xiaoyan, and 朱青 Zhu Qingsheng. This isn't an exhaustive list; it is just the participants at a conference in Beijing in 2009. A number of Western scholars met Chinese scholars there for the first time. Most Chinese historians, critics, and theorists recognized at least some of the Western participants; no Western participants except China specialists knew any of the Chinese participants.

This sort of disconnect also happens between non-Spanish speakers and Latin America, which has a number of regionally famous critics and theorists. Some are known internationally, such as Nestor Canclini or the Uruguayan Luis Camnitzer; some are becoming known, such as the Paraguayan critic Ticio Escobar; and others remain known only to people who read in Spanish, such as the very subtle José Luis Brea or Cuauhtémoc Medina. There are many untranslated Spanish-language art theorists. Here are some names that were mentioned when I posted a draft of this text online: Ana Letícia Fialho, Virginia Perez-Ratton, Beatriz Cortez, Kency Cornejo, Eugenio Trias, Simon Marchan, and Xavier Rubert de Ventos. (Many thanks to Leonor Veiga, Esther Planas, Mayra Barraza, and Vicenç Furió for these.)

Another such cultural divide is between China and India. There is relatively little awareness of Indian subaltern and postcolonial theory in China. In Europe, theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha are known, and a few art historians read Geeta Kapur (in my experience she is more widely read by Westerners interested in postcolonial theory), but others such as Ranajit Guha, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Sudipta Kaviraj, Gyanendra Pandey, Rajeev Bhargava, Göran Therborn, Gyan Prakash, and Arif Dirlik are not read except by specialists. In China, in my experience, only Homi Bhabha is read with any frequency.

These large-scale bibliographies (Spanish, Chinese, Indian) are more dramatic, but rarer, than relatively isolated bibliographies specific to regions or languages. German-language art theory is significantly different from English-language art theory. I know only two or three North American art theorists who read Gottfried Boehm, and Friedrich Kittler and Niklas Luhmann are significantly less read than in German-speaking countries, despite the fact that both have been translated. Scandinavia, as a region, also has its specific literature. Joacim Sprung at Lund University suggested these theorists as people still mainly known only to readers of Danish or Swedish: in Danish, Carsten Juhl, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Camilla Jalving, Mikkel Bogh, and Simon Sheikh; and in Swedish, Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Tom Sandqvist, Maria Lind, and Daniel Birnbaum.

Where languages are confined to single nations, the literature can be even more restricted, but in smaller nations it might also be the case that the theoretical literature specific to the nation is not central to artists and historians in the country. But as far as I know this question is entirely unstudied. The Estonian scholar Heie Treier suggests Tõnis Vint, whose impact on Estonian artists was less written than personal. It would be interesting to convene a conference on smaller nations and their "unknown" theorists. But it is perhaps in cases like these that the lists I opened with are most nearly correct: everyone reads some Kant, some Foucault, some Lacan, some Barthes, so it can seem that art theory is everywhere.

Alisdair Duncan tells me that sometime shortly before 2013, the Tate Modern bookstore changed their label "Art History" to "Art Histories," but kept "Art Theory" in the singular. If they had adopted the label "Art Theories," it might have sounded like they meant that every theorist has her own perspective, rather than that various nations and regions have their own art theories. To me this goes to show how much work needs to be done on the subject of the worldwide dissemination of art theory. As in the case of art criticism, the impending uniformity of art theory remains largely unstudied. Art history follows suit, citing art theorists largely from the French poststructuralist tradition, and not asking how those choices might be limiting the questions that are being asked of the world's art.

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3 Is Art Instruction Global?

If art history, theory, and criticism may be tending toward a global uniformity, then its visual art instruction might also be. A more or less uniform set of practices around art instruction would not be problematic for many people, because training in art should be responsive to the globalization of visual art and the art market. Yet there are presumably sources of diversity in art instruction that might be threatened by the increasing attention to the global art market.

The homogeneity of studio art instruction is especially evident at the MFA level in larger institutions. As Dave Hickey, McKenzie Wark, Jerry Saltz, and others have said, the programs can seem like mills, turning out a uniform MFA product. That uniformity decreases sharply in smaller institutions, smaller countries, and outside the first world: more on that below.

Art instruction is also surprisingly uniform at the first-year (foundation year) level, despite the now conventional disagreement about how the first year should be taught. (There is more on this in the book *What do Artists Know?*, co-edited with Frances Whitehead, 2012.) Elements of Bauhaus instruction, for example, are common around the world, and so are leftovers of French Academy training. Bauhaus exercises in abstraction, colors, or textures and French-Academy style exercises in drawing from the model can be found in academies from Paraguay to Kyrgyzstan.

Yet it's clear that the flavor of art instruction varies from place to place. Assessment, for example, seems to vary widely: some institutions have strongly critical learning environments, and others have almost no critique culture. Some institutions have no budget to buy even basic darkroom equipment, while others can afford the latest 3D printers, computer looms, and laser routers. At larger institutions from Germany to Japan, some instruction is in English, but there are many smaller art institutions with few or no instructors who can read the principal European languages.

This sort of list could be continued, but I don't think these contingent features capture the really important differences. Here are two ways—aside from assessment, economics, and language—that art instruction is not a homogeneous enterprise around the world.

Local, Regional, and National Techniques

It might be said that techniques and skills in studio art aren't essentially parts of a global conversation. The Bucharest National University of Arts (Universitatea Naţională de Arte), for instance, teaches students how to restore Romanian frescoes; the Academy in Tehran has instructors who know how to make miniature paintings; in Tokyo Geidai students can learn Japanese lacquer; in Renmin University in Beijing you can study Chinese lacquer; and there are several academies and workshops in Italy for mosaic work.

The same is true in different ways in western European and North American art schools and departments. The art department in Durham, New Hampshire, has a strength in "perceptual art"—realistic oil painting. There are several state schools in the Midwest (Minnesota, Kansas, Iowa) where a student can learn Midwest-style landscape painting. When I was an MFA student in the 1980s, the Boston Museum School offered a class on fresco, using heated lime and mosaic with a large selection of tesserae from Italy.

I wonder if it might be true that most nameable techniques are older ones, and that newer media—at least those that are less dependent on expensive equipment—are more uniformly distributed around the world.

Local, Regional, and National Styles and Schools

There are examples of regional and national strengths and tendencies that aren't related to techniques and skills. Eastern Europe has an identifiable kind of surrealism that has continued

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into the twenty-first century; to learn it, a student would be best off studying in the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Baltic states, the Ukraine, or Belarus. China is an especially intricate example, with its smaller art academies still divided between ink painting and Western oil techniques. Academies that are influenced by the Russian academic model tend to have instructors who teach a certain kind of realistic painting; the effects of that particular school can be seen as far apart as Kazakhstan, the IRWIN group in Slovenia, and the Academy in Lhasa.

Still, these regional and national schools and styles have diminishing importance in the contemporary art world. Except for offerings in purely technical subjects (how to restore a Romanian fresco) and occasional instruction in national and regional styles (such as the influence of Soviet realist painting), larger academies and universities do not differ enormously from one part of the world to another. In smaller art schools, smaller cities, and smaller countries, local or national interests are often a stronger influence than the international. This is true even in larger first-world countries. In the US there are some unusually focused places like the one in Durham, but it is relatively common to find regional artists on the faculty in smaller state campuses. I find this is true worldwide: go a little off the art world map, and the world is filled with local practices.

This is a fascinating and important subject, because it leads art historians, theorists, and critics to misconstrue the art production of different countries. Off the beaten track of major academies in China, most art production is still a mixture of ink painting and School of Paris styles, with unpredictable admixtures of contemporary practices. It's also the case that the styles and stars of the international art world loom large even in the smallest art academies in the most isolated places, which they don't necessarily do in smaller institutions that offer instruction in art history.

The tendency, in studio art instruction, has been to omit local interests from publicity materials and curricula, emphasizing instead whatever seems global and contemporary. In order to preserve differences in art instruction worldwide, it will be necessary to find ways to revalue local, regional, and national media, techniques, and styles, and to see them as something other than leftovers of a period before internationalization. As in the case of art theory, where the names of local theorists are well known, it isn't difficult to name what is local: a wall-painting tradition, a style of painting, a technique of lacquer. The challenge is to find places for such practices in the wider international conversation on art instruction.

As in the cases of art criticism and art theory, the lesson for art history is that local practices may not appear to be pertinent: just as the website of the Bucharest National University of Arts emphasizes "European values" over their expertise in Romanian fresco painting, so Romanian art historians may value art practices that have pan-European significance such as Tristan Tzara or Marcel Janco over modernists such as Nicolae Tonitza or Ştefan Luchian.

These two sources of local, national, and regional differences are not, in general, the direction in which art instruction is going. Art instruction is strongly globalized as well as international; in another generation, as local expertise in media is further eroded, art instruction may become effectively homogeneous except in smaller academies and schools.

4 A Possible Parallel: is the Novel Global?

Art criticism, art theory, and art instruction share a lack of critical reflection on their global diversity or uniformity. The study of the contemporary novel is an instructive contrast and parallel, because it has been the subject of an extensive literature.

The novel is often considered as an optimal example of a worldwide practice that nevertheless remains attentive to the texture of local life. In that respect, it presents a close parallel to the self-descriptions of global art history. Mario Ortiz-Robles puts this well: "the novel's loose, though fairly stable, formal traits," he writes, "make it particularly well-suited to the

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task of representing […] widely varying local contexts without significant loss of structural integrity" (Ortiz-Robles 2007: 1).[8] If we read "narrative and interpretive methods" for "formal traits," we have a good approximation of descriptions of the successes of global art history: it is taken to have a recognizable form, a "structural integrity," that can work in very different cultural contexts.

The study of the history of the novel and the study of the history of art share a phase, extending roughly from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, during which scholars were interested in what Bruce Mazlish calls "world art history." In his usage the expression "world art history" denotes the study of common themes and ideas in art of different periods and cultures. In art history, that ambition marks a number of late nineteenth-century "universal histories," and includes twentieth-century scholars such as Riegl. As in the study of the history of the novel, such "world art histories" tended to disappear with the dissemination of poststructuralism. A late summary of the state of such work in literary history is in the classic text of New Criticism, René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1942, third edition 1956). The authors trace the idea of world literature to Goethe's *Weltliteratur,* which was not the study of literature "on all five continents," but "the ideal of the unification of all literatures into one great synthesis." They are in favor of reviving a study like Goethe's; today's scholars, Wellek and Warren say, have been influenced by nationalism to "increasingly narrow provincial cultivation of the study of national literatures." It is not that Wellek and Warren are against the idea of considering what makes a national literature: they are afraid of reducing literature to what would today be called ideology. *Theory of Literature* is a reminder of a time in which it was still possible to say—using the grammatical form aptly called the "present unreal conditional"—"we would argue that we cannot even seriously wish that the diversities of national literatures should be obliterated" (1942: 49). Needless to say, the authors do not mention any "literatures" outside of Europe. The histories they admire are Ernst Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), which are as enormous, as erudite, and as Eurocentric as their own book. *Theory of Literature* represents an interesting moment, just before and during World War II, in which German and Italian sources were as much a part of the conversation as French ones, and in which ambitious surveys of world literature, or world art history, could be imagined without too much awareness of art made outside Europe. I mention this as background: the parallels I have in mind have to do with the contemporary situation.

There are several possible topics in the theory and history of the novel that bear on its globalization, including the field of translation studies, and the emergence of the discipline of comparative literature as a mediator for global studies of writing. For Jacques Lezra, for example, comparative literature can play a central role in articulating national literary cultures because of its "'consciousness of languages'" and their effects on the "production of differences" (Lezra 2012: 88).[9] From many possibilities I choose three topics.

(A) *The Idea that the Global Novel is Made Expressly for Translation*

The novelist, critic, and translator Tim Parks has taken strong positions on world literature. Replying to an essay by David Shields, which was later incorporated into Shields's book *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013)*,* Parks notes that the local and the contextual is lost when writers insist, as Shields does, on a continuum of global practices, where "every man contains within himself the entire human condition." Parks advocates local, regional, and national traditions over packaged novels "that will lead to prominence on the world stage." The problem, he thinks, is "a slow weakening of our sense of being inside a society with related and competing visions of the world to which we make our own urgent narrative contributions." That kind of writing, aware of its context and tradition, is "being replaced by the author who takes courses to learn how to create a product with universal appeal, something that can float in the world mix, rather than feed

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into the immediate experience of people in his own culture" (*New York Review of Books* blog, January 19, 2012).[10]

In an earlier blog, titled "The Dull New Global Novel," Parks presents a contentious version of this concern. He notes how authors increasingly want to be published in English, and have their books sold internationally. Agents and publicists orchestrate "simultaneous launches" of books, using corporate-style promotional strategies. As a result, "a reader picking up a copy of […] a work by Umberto Eco, or Haruki Murakami, or Ian McEwan, does so in the knowledge that this same work is being read now, all over the world." Parks's target is the uniformity of the literature that is produced:

> What are the consequences for literature? From the moment an author perceives his ultimate audience as international rather than national, the nature of his writing is bound to change. In particular one notes a tendency to remove obstacles to international comprehension. Writing in the 1960's, intensely engaged with his own culture and its complex politics, Hugo Claus apparently did not care that his novels would require a special effort on the reader's and above all the translator's part if they were to be understood outside his native Belgium. In sharp contrast, contemporary authors like the Norwegian Per Petterson, the Dutch Gerbrand Bakker, or the Italian Alessandro Baricco, offer us works that require no such knowledge or effort, nor offer the rewards that such effort will bring.
>
> More importantly the language is kept simple. Kazuo Ishiguro has spoken of the importance of avoiding wordplay and allusion to make things easy for the translator. Scandinavian writers I know tell me they avoid character names that would be difficult for an English reader (*New York Review of Books* blog, February 9, 2010).

The risk is that the market for world literature will "neglect […] the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture, the sort of writing that can savage or celebrate the way this or that linguistic group really lives. In the global literary market there will be no place for any Barbara Pyms and Natalia Ginzburgs. Shakespeare would have eased off the puns. A new Jane Austen can forget the Nobel."

It is easy to be sympathetic to Parks's appeal, at the end of that essay, to "avoid writing over and over the dull, amazing novel, or the amazingly dull novel that new market conditions are inviting us to write, 'the Esperanto of international literary fiction' as Adam Shatz has called it, reviewing Orhan Pamuk."

Parks has elaborated his critique by including translators in the mix: what appears as a universal novel, worthy of the Nobel Prize, may actually be "put together" or "consigned to the page" by a translator, who is implicated in the projection of internationalism and the appeal to an "international public." He argues that the process of internationalization of the novel does not liberate, but reinforces stereotypes:

> However much you prize your individuality, your autonomy from your national culture, nevertheless you'd better have an interesting national product to sell on the international market: Scandinavian melancholy, Irish burlesque, the South American folk tradition. Or best of all, some downright political oppression of one variety or another (Parks, "The Nobel Individual," *Times Literary Supplement,* April 20, 2011).

Parks's suggestion that novelists write in a way that is easily translated is a useful way of naming the uniformity in the forms of reference that visual artists employ when they want to be visible in international venues. Complicated, apparently difficult, idiosyncratic, overly demanding

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references to the local are generally avoided in favor of signs of identity that can be easily assimilated. Perhaps that is the art world's version of translatability.

In art historical writing, there is no such length limitation, but there is a similar tendency toward ease of "translation." Local contexts and practices are presented in ways that make them comprehensible and engaging for "generalist" readers, or readers outside the author's specialty. The result can be writing that is curiously easy to digest, even though its subject matter may be very distant from most readers' experiences. Most major art history journals publish such articles regularly: they "represent" global practices of the discipline without asking readers to make the effort that would be required to read texts written for other specialists. There may be a parallel here between the carefully curated local detail in such essays and the grit and difficulty of language and words that Tim Parks misses in the "new global novel."

(B) *Quantitative and Systematic Studies of World Literature*

There are initiatives in art history to study world art using macroeconomic and financial indicators, to study dissemination and circulation of art using empirical data, and to study art as an effect of Darwinian or neurobiological principles. Those projects are small in comparison to the application of quantitative and systematic analysis to the study of world literature.

Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005), for example, leans in part on Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* (1974; part 3, 1989), which proposes a combined post-disciplinary social science endeavor, aimed at understanding the redistribution of value from the "core" to the "periphery"; it would include national or local identities but its real interest would be the "world system" of modernity, which is global. Moretti's project combines Wallerstein's ideas with Darwinian evolutionary theory and visual communications. As Damrosch summarizes it:

> In Moretti's view, the European novel can be mapped as an invasive species, spreading around the world in the wake of colonial and neocolonial political and economic developments, putting down roots in cultures that previously had little history of extended prose fiction, and variously suppressing traditional genres and inspiring new creativity, usually after an initial period of uncertain, derivative composition (Damrosch 2009: 506).[11]

Moretti's method isn't quantitative as much as a matter of "deliberate reduction and abstraction" (2005: 1). One difficulty with such an approach is that it may not make contact with existing ways of understanding the novels he studies. The culminating example in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* is "free indirect discourse," a complex term that is central to definitions of literary modernism. (It means, nominally, the practice of reporting and commenting on a character's speech and thoughts instead of just quoting them.) Moretti traces a history of free indirect discourse using a tree graph inspired by Darwin and Ernst Mayr, but for the subject itself he cites only Ann Banfield's "classic study" (1982) and older sources such as Bakhtin. His tree graph is divided into "second person / orality / collective" and "first person / thought / individual"—six contentious terms, grouped into two problematic sets. Moretti's purpose is to reveal "some fundamental principles of cultural history" by "replacing the old, useless distinctions (high and low; canon and archive; this or that national literature…) with new temporal, spatial, and morphological distinctions" Moretti 2005: 91).

A point of contact with histories of visual arts is Moretti's interest in avoiding types and genres. As he says, once you replace a "type" such as detective fiction or free indirect discourse with a tree, "the genre becomes an abstract 'diversity spectrum.' (Moretti 2005: 76). The problem in adapting such an approach to the global study of art history is that it omits aesthetic criteria.

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Significant or "interesting" novels, practices, and types—which crop up throughout Moretti's work—are discussed in terms of their survival (in a Darwinian or evolutionary sense), their success at defining niche markets, or their place in branching evolutionary trees. The result is counterintuitive for many readers. Ultimately, why study the romantic novel, the detective story, or the history of free indirect discourse, if the point isn't the individual novel or story? Moretti's answer has long been that the evolution and differentiation of the romantic novel is inherently more representative of novels than, say, another close reading of *Wuthering Heights*. The exclusion of close readings (or, in art historical terms, close descriptions, formal analysis, attention to *facture*, materiality, and other ways of paying attention to the particularities of the artwork) is ultimately an exclusion of the aesthetic moment. On the other hand, systematic studies in art history, including studies of macroeconomic, financial, and "neuroaesthetic" approaches, have contributed many needed corrections to received ideas about genres and practices.

Moretti's is only one of several projects to apply social science methods to literary history. Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) also presents a Darwinian model, and is closer at least in that respect to existing studies in global art history such as Julian Stallabrass's *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (2005), although Casanova's work has mainly had resonance in literary criticism. (For example Christopher Prendergast, *Debating World Literature;* and work by Christophe Charle, which is represented in the edited volume *Circulations*.) There are many possibilities for links between systematic, sociological, economic, evolutionary approaches to world literature and to world art.

Within literary criticism, Moretti remains controversial for another reason, which is also helpful to the study of world art: his mantra of "distant reading"—machine-assisted reading that takes in hundreds or even thousands of novels to find formal similarities—has been resisted by scholars who feel it vitiates "close reading," the *sine qua non* of aesthetic appreciation since the New Criticism of the mid-20th century A forum in the professional journal *PMLA* in 2017 brought this out very clearly (*PMLA* 132 no. 3, 2017, 613-89). As Bethany Wiggin wrote, Moretti offered a "pact with the devil": give up the pleasures of close aesthetic reading for the undiscovered territories of the world novel (682). A "distant reading" brackets out the aesthetic enjoyment of the text in the same way as a sociological, anthropological, or statistical study of world art might do. The benefit is that it becomes possible to see large-scale patterns of development.

(C) *The Globalization of the Novel*

Mariano Siskind makes a distinction between the *globalization of the novel* and the *novelization of the global*. The latter is "the production of images of the globalized world," and it produced "dissimilar imaginaries" of the global depending on the authors' geopolitical situations.[12]

The parallel in studies of world art would be the globalization of the artwork and the visualization of the global. In Siskind's account, a "cultural mediation" accounts for the "gap" between the globalization of the novel and the novelization of the global, between "capitalism's creation of 'a world after its own image' […] through the global expansion of its aesthetic and cultural institutions," and "local literary reappropriations and reinscriptions" of that process. I wonder, in the art world, how much the globalization of art and visualizations of the global could be seen to differ, except in their iconography (except, that is, for the particular subjects they portray).

Siskind asks questions directly related to the themes I have been exploring. Is there a difference, he wonders, "between the European novel and the Latin American novel, the Asian novel, the African novel, and so on?" Yes, because it is possible to point to "formal and thematic aspects of individual works" that express the novelization of the global. But no, because it is hard to find "institutional and political" differences in the function of the novel in different places. "In

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other words," he concludes, "the world system of novelistic production, consumption, and translation reinforces the dream of a global totality of bourgeois freedom with Hegelian overtones" (Siskind 2010: 331).

He says he was initially heartened by Damrosch's project of world literature in his *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (second edition, 2008) until he saw the sort of "syllabi, anthologies, and research agendas" that would actually result: they would be the same "romantic ideology," and the same idea of the "indivisible unity of the nation." So what would a better kind of pedagogy of world literatures look like? Siskind agrees with Moretti that the study of world literature must become the study of world literatures, ideally excluding nothing and therefore incapable of examples that are "isolated because of their supposed capacity to represent […] national or regional cultures." (Siskind 2010: 344) This is "convincing," but "impractical," Siskind writes, and he ends by proposing his distinction between the globalization of the novel and the novelization of the global as a way of understanding how the universality of world literature is being made, while also "resisting the temptation to fall back" on "national and regional cultural identities" (Siskind 2010: 346)

These are glimpses of the larger literature on the globalization of the novel. In different ways each raises the question of how best to write about a practice—the "global novel"—that is becoming increasingly uniform even while it continues to claim to be an authentic vehicle of the local and particular.

When Lezra ponders the sense of teaching Comparative Literature at NYU–Abu Dhabi, he is interested in what it would mean to teach what Matthew Arnold called "the best which has been thought and said in the world"—provided, Lezra says, such a thing even exists anymore, and if it exists, if it is accessible, and if it is accessible, if it is teachable, and if it is teachable, if "its teaching is desirable." In this exceptionally thoughtful account, the voice, critical terms, and issues remain faithfully American. There is no mention, for example, of the possibility that engaging Arabic-language literary-critical traditions might be pertinent or compatible. The Abu Dhabi campus has students from roughly 100 countries, and only 15% or so are Emirati students, so it poses an especially complex case for questions like Lezra's (Lezra 2012: 83).

5 Concluding Remarks

From these four case studies I draw two pessimistic conclusions. First: the fields most closely related to art history—art criticism, art theory, and art instruction—remain largely silent on the question of their increasing uniformity worldwide. Of the three examples I've discussed here, the most concerning is art theory, which urgently needs to find a way to address its ongoing working assumption that European, and specifically French, theory is optimal to interpret all the world's art. Second: studies of the global novel suggest that it is possible to make headway on the question of art history's uniformity, but possibly only by omitting aesthetic criteria and relying on statistical, quantitative, or sociological data. Studies of the novel also show how it can be possible for an artistic practice to continue to claim its fidelity to the local even while it tends toward an easy translatability.

The study of the global novel is one of several parallels that might be brought to bear on the problem of global art history. Anthropology has long pondered its global uniformity, and so has musicology, and there are also studies of worldwide practices in sociology.[13] There is also at least one study on the global spread of art journalism, Ruth Skilbeck's "Art Journalism and the Impact of 'Globalisation': New Fugal Modalities of Storytelling in Austral-Asian Writing"[14]

If these comparative studies were to be multiplied, I imagine it would be difficult to avoid becoming depressed about the increasing worldwide uniformity of the arts and humanities. This is so despite the current focus on local art, customs, beliefs, concepts, languages, and other traits

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of culture, because at the same time scholars think about those things, they write in an increasingly uniform manner within each discipline. In the absence of evidence to the contrary it appears that the arts and humanities are headed toward a remarkable global uniformity, supported by an intensifying rhetoric about the local.

James Elkins's writing focuses on the history and theory of images in art, science, and nature. Some of his books are exclusively on fine art (*What Painting Is, Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*). Others include scientific and non-art images, writing systems, and archaeology (*The Domain of Images, On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*), and some are about natural history (*How to Use Your Eyes*). He is completing a manuscript on world art history, some of which is on his website www.jameselkins.com.

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* Note on these references: in the manuscript from which this is excerpted, I follow a minimal citation practice: citations are only as complete as they need to be to lead readers unambiguously to the cited texts. The notion is that in the age of the internet, it is no longer necessary to follow the full bibliographic conventions of traditional citation. Interested readers may also contact me via my website for further information.

1 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau's contributions to *The State of Art Criticism* (2007).

2 Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (2007); Kirsten Scheid, "What We Do Not Know: Questions for a Study of Contemporary Arab Art" (2008). Thanks to Farah Aksoy for these references.

3 Camnitzer, "Arte e esperanto," *El pais,* 12 March 2012.

4 François Jullien, "Chinesisches Werkzeug: Eine fernöstliche Denkposition zur Archäologie des Abendlands," *Lettre internationale* 64, (2004).

5 Frainais-Maitre, "The Coloniality of Western Philosophy: Chinese Philosophy as Viewed in France," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 19, (2014), citing Badiou*, Oser construire: Pour François Jullien* (2007), 140.

6 Samer Frangie, "On the Broken Conversation Between Postcolonialism and Intellectuals in the Periphery" (2011).

7 References are in my *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (2010.)

8 Mario Ortiz-Robles, "Local Speech, Global Acts: Performative Violence and the Novelization of the World," *Comparative Literature* 59, no. 1, (2007).

9 Jacques Lezra, "The Futures of Comparative Literature," 2012.

10 (http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/01/19/writing-adrift-world-mix). See also, Tim Parks, "Where I'm Reading From," 31-9, 60-71, 85-92, 183-201

11 David Damrosch, "Frames for World Literature," in *Grenzen der Literatur: Zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen* (2009).

12 Mariano Siskind, "The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature," in *World Literature: A Reader* (2010) 331; and in *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*.

13 For example Sujata Patel's "Afterword: Doing Global Sociology: Issues, Problems and Challenges," *Current Sociology,* online, March 19, 2014.

14 Ruth Skilbeck, "Art Journalism and the Impact of 'Globalisation': New Fugal Modalities of Storytelling in Austral-Asian Writing," *Pacific Journalism Review* 18, (2008): 141–61.

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