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On the Politics of World Art History

I

Recently discussion has emerged within art historical circles regarding the prospect of world art history. The American art historian James Elkins has asserted that although there is not yet consensus over the meaning or value of world art history, its prospect is '[f]ar and away the most pressing problem facing the discipline'.¹ Even if one were to disagree with Elkins' assessment, it is difficult to overlook the range of recent publications that have sought to trace trans-continental cultural exchange and define universal norms according to which a global history of art could be written.² For what is world art history, at least at first glance, if not an attempt to create a unified history of all of the art cultures of the world by establishing universal bases for their comparison? This essay interrogates the politics of this nascent turn to world art history and its inherent articulation of universality – a turn that would appear to contradict the preceding 'postmodern' focus on local knowledge and histories.

One need hardly mention that recourse to universality is far from unprecedented within art historiography. Nonetheless, I will briefly outline its origin, philosophical elaboration, and more recent critique, before outlining the two lines of argument comprising this essay. Already in *The History of Ancient Art* (1764),³ a work widely regarded as one of the founding documents of art history, Johann Joachim Winckelmann wove his argument around two distinct invocations of universality – both of which we will find are essential for conceptualising world art history. Firstly, universality figured as the unsurpassable breadth and comprehensiveness of historical research. Winckelmann defined his field of inquiry as the totality of ancient art: the art of every 'Ancient Nation'.⁴ Although his research was confined to Rome and his acquaintance with the artworks comprising his field of inquiry was thus necessarily limited, his reference to *all* ancient nations nonetheless invokes an historiographic ideal exemplified by topography. Like a topographer who must chart every aspect of a given landscape to properly elucidate the relations between its features, Winckelmann's aim was to review all of the particular

¹ Elkins, 2004, p. 373.

² See, for example, Summers, 2003; Kaufmann, 2004; Onians, 2004; Jardine and Brotton, 2000. There are far too many texts that address cross-cultural exchange in relation to contemporary art to even begin listing them here. Summers argues that 'all art has a certain universality' because it must always respect 'the universal conditions of real spatiality'. Accordingly, he suggests replacing the notion of the visual arts with that of the spatial arts. Summers, 2003, pp. 38, 41. In response to Summers, Elkins has argued that space is not, however, a universal concept. Elkins, 2004, p. 375. Indeed, even where the concept has general relevance, it is not necessarily respected in any meaningful way within the realm of art production. Yoko Ono's *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961) (Scream. 1. against the wind; 2. against the wall; 3. against the sky) is just one example of a conceptual work that is blatantly disrespectful of 'real space'. For similar examples, see Kotz, 2001.

³ Winckelmann, 2005a.

⁴ Winckelmann, 2005a, p. 107.

elements comprising the totality of his field of inquiry (the art of every ancient nation) in order to adequately assess their comparability. Secondly, Winckelmann brought universality to bear on aesthetic judgement: following his earlier argument in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, he reaffirmed a canon of ancient Greek art whose universal greatness could only be paralleled through imitation.⁵ These two forms of universality – the universal adequacy of an inquiry to its objects and the universality of aesthetic judgment – bear an ambiguous relation to one another. Winckelmann suggested that the former – the adequacy of historical inquiry to illuminate the comparability of the diverse, particular elements comprising its field – is necessary to legitimise aesthetic judgment: ‘The description of a statue ought to show the cause of its beauty, and the peculiarity in its style. It is necessary, therefore, to touch upon particulars in art before it is possible to arrive at a judgment on works of art’.⁶ Unfortunately, however, in Winckelmann’s formulation, the precise derivation of value from particularity remained an unanswered question.⁷

It was in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics of the 1820s, that these two forms of universality became systematically ingrained within each other. Hegel approached art history as one discipline among many within his much more extensive and ambitious project – what Robert Wicks has described as Hegel’s ‘philosophical effort to comprehend the universe within the contours of an encyclopedic, organically structured thought-system’.⁸ Whilst Hegel’s breadth of inquiry could be understood as a magnification of Winckelmann’s, however, their approaches to aesthetic judgment were inverse. Whilst Winckelmann had sought to deduce aesthetic greatness from systematised historical inquiry, Hegel structured his history as a series of particular ‘forms’ of art in which he believed the metaphysical ‘Idea’ or absolute truth/spirit – in short, the key to the unity and history of the universe – to have been ‘shaped forward into reality’.⁹ In other words, Hegel began with judgement; he identified aesthetic greatness, then traced its history and, by association, the transformation of the Idea’s worldly embodiment.

According to Hegel’s theory, throughout the history of art the metaphysical Idea had been partially realised through particular forms which, through mutation, transformation, and innovation, were, and would continue to be, increasingly adequate to it. His historical system was teleological: the changes in and between the series of forms ‘proceed[ed] from the Idea itself’ toward a horizon, the ‘end’ of art’s historical dialectic of formal transformation and adaptation to the Idea.¹⁰ Yet the progressive realisation of the Idea was by no means assured. Hegel referred to the ‘defectiveness’ of Chinese, Indian and Egyptian art, which he explained as the result of ‘mythological ideas, content and thought’ that ‘were still indeterminate, or determined badly, and so did not consist of the content which is absolute in itself’.¹¹ Hegel thus not only traced a ‘universal’ history of

⁵ Winckelmann, 2005b, p. 2.

⁶ Winckelmann, 2005a, p. 108.

⁷ ‘But where are we taught the points in which the beauty of a statue consists?’ Winckelmann, 2005a, p. 108.

⁸ Wicks, 1993, p. 348.

⁹ Hegel, 1994, p. 147.

¹⁰ Hegel, 1994, p. 148.

¹¹ Hegel, 1994, pp. 147-8.

the realisation of spirit through art, but also asserted the priority of a European historical trajectory over other cultural traditions throughout the world – traditions that he implied had invariably obstructed spirit's realisation.

That world art history has notable precedents in its recourse to universality does not in itself provide reason for alarm. Where concern arises is in world art history's relation to the more recent postmodern 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.¹² As early as 1979, Jean-François Lyotard had argued that the Hegelian 'metanarrative' (the metaphysical conception of the realisation of spirit) had lost its ability to legitimate the production and transmission of speculative knowledge. Whilst the Hegelian metanarrative demanded the totalisation of knowledge, modernity instead witnessed its fragmentation into increasingly specialised and hermetic disciplines. Lyotard argued that whilst searching for legitimation, these disciplines had invariably exposed their own underlying presumption of Hegel's metaphysical, and thus unprovable, absolute truth, and had thereby instead achieved delegitimation.¹³ In the subsequent postmodern world, Lyotard proposed, the Hegelian metanarrative has been replaced by 'performative' legitimation: knowledge is valued (or made redundant) for its efficacy in performing localised tasks and thus promoting market competitiveness and profit maximisation (in other words, the enlightenment has devolved into capitalism).¹⁴ Where these tasks relate directly to people – be they classed as workers, consumers, or voters – Lyotard suggested that the key strategy to improve efficacy would be to induce conformism through severity and threats of exclusion.¹⁵ Against this capital-directed 'terror',¹⁶ he called for postmodern knowledge to undermine performative efficacy by demonstrating its incommensurability with justice.¹⁷ This alone would comprise properly postmodern political action.

This essay asks how the current prospect of world art history relates to the politics of this 'postmodern knowledge' which would debunk universality in the name of justice. Is world art history's return to universality grounded in a defensible critique of postmodern politics, and if so, what is the basis of this critique? If not, what are the ramifications of world art history's apparent disavowal of postmodern politics? Is world art history simply the newest attempt to improve market efficacy within the arts and arts education sectors? In the following section I will investigate the limitations of Elkins' recent attempt to delineate the possibilities available for the project of constructing a world art history, and ask what these limitations suggest about the politics of world art history. In the final section I will inquire into whether an affinity might be shared by the project of world art history and a contemporaneous body of influential political philosophy, inflected by

¹² Lyotard, 1984, xxiv.

¹³ Lyotard, 1984, p. 39.

¹⁴ Lyotard, 1984, p. 46.

¹⁵ Lyotard, 1984, pp. 62-3.

¹⁶ 'By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened... The decision makers' arrogance... consists in the exercise of terror. It says: "Adapt your aspirations to our ends – or else."' Lyotard, 1984, pp. 63-4.

¹⁷ Lyotard, 1984, pp. 66-7.

Marxist thought, in which universality has also become a focus (I am thinking of the recent discussion between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek).¹⁸

II

In his review of David Summers' *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2003), Elkins sketches five possibilities for world art history which he orders according to what he perceives to be their 'increasing radicalism'.¹⁹ Because this is the most comprehensive attempt to date to delineate the range of options available for world art history, I will outline it briefly before assessing its limitations, which, in the absence of other similar material, can be seen as representative within the field of inquiry. The first two approaches respectively involve art history either remaining 'essentially unchanged' or relativising its methodological frameworks to 'better fit non-Western art' as it expands to incorporate that art.²⁰ The more radical third and fourth approaches would involve art history respectively appropriating 'indigenous critical concepts' and avoiding 'Western interpretative strategies'.²¹ Finally, the most radical outcome that Elkins proposes is that art history disperses as a discipline.²²

There is an unquestioned commonality to each of these possibilities which suggests a certain limitation to Elkins' ability to conceptualise world art history: with no explanation, art history is presumed to be 'Western'. Whilst this is neither immediately apparent, nor obviously problematic, it becomes such in Elkins' conceptualisation of the third and fourth possibilities. The very idea of art history appropriating 'indigenous critical concepts' presupposes that these concepts exist and are relevant to art historical inquiry, whilst simultaneously falling outside of the realm of art history. To what realm does Elkins suppose that these concepts relevant to art history might belong, if not precisely art history? The problem becomes more pronounced when Elkins addresses the fourth possibility, that non-Western interpretative approaches be adopted in place of Western ones. He presents a 'simple test' that no such scholarship exists: 'no North American or European university has hired a specialist in Chinese art whose work follows historiographically Chinese interpretative norms'.²³ What this 'simple test' reveals is that Elkins assumes that the locus of reception for world art history must be Europe and North America. Is there any justification for this? What difference would it make to the status of Elkins' hypothetical specialist's work as world art history if (s)he were instead employed within a Chinese institution, or even an Australian one? There are two answers to this question. Firstly, Elkins' position implies that the work would fall outside of the purview of world art history, because the latter is defined and received only in West European and North American institutions. Perhaps this is because art historians within these regions are oblivious to scholarship from the rest of the world; but obliviousness provides no justification for prioritising scholarship according to its locus

¹⁸ Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000.

¹⁹ Elkins, 2004, p. 377.

²⁰ Elkins, 2004, p. 377.

²¹ Elkins, 2004, pp. 377-8.

²² Elkins, 2004, p. 378.

²³ Elkins, 2004, p. 378.

of origin. Moreover, it implies that scholarly horizons in different parts of the world will never intersect. This is already evocative of the current politics of world art history. The second answer, which is potentially far more radical than anything Elkins proposes, is simply: none – the location in which an art historical text is produced makes no difference to its status as world art history.

There is thus another option for world art history that finds itself somewhere between Elkins' first possibility – that the discipline remains essentially unchanged – and his fifth possibility – that the discipline disperses. Yet this option would find itself unaligned with the other three possibilities, all of which presuppose world art history to be produced and received in Europe and North America.²⁴ This other option would also require a form of dispersion, not necessarily that of art history into inter-, trans- and sub-disciplinary fragments, but the dispersion of art history's loci of production and reception across the globe. That is to say, it would involve recognition that the term 'art history' describes myriad projects taking place throughout the globe, and not simply the produce of 'Western' institutions.

Currently, such a dispersal of art history is incomprehensible. It would mean that the term 'art history' would designate activities in different regions of the world that are completely unknown to each other. What might an ideal example of this form of world art history look like? An anthology of texts from around the world would provide a suitable starting point. But how would the texts be selected and ordered (and by whom)? What level of homogeneity could be expected between them? In an ideal anthology, selection would need to be guided by an equalising principle which would relativise the globe according to neutral categories such as geographical space, population density, or nationality (à la Winckelmann; similarly the Venice Biennale exhibits according to nationality, although it does not claim to represent all nations).²⁵ However, this relativisation would need to be reflected in the global spread of art-historical communities; moreover, these communities would need to be grounded in comparable institutions for the knowledge they produce to receive equivalent legitimation throughout the world. Even if this were conceivable, judgments would still need to be made about which cultural practices within any given delimited zone are most deserving of attention – that is, valuable, or canonic – and on what basis value ought to be perceived. In other words: universal equitability will always need to be crossed by judgment; however, in the absence of the Hegelian spirit, nothing would seem to ensure universal judgment.

Nonetheless, the idea that 'art history' describes a multitude of activities dispersed throughout the globe is *de facto* accurate – even though what this 'art history' designates at present can be only partially estimated from any particular milieu. This is the case even

²⁴ For Elkins' line is merely the arc of a larger circle; his scale of radicality is incomplete and consequently misguided.

²⁵ A prominent example within recent art history of a similar 'equalising' principle being enforced was Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, which displayed the work of fifty artists from the so-called 'centres' of the art-world and fifty from the 'margins'. Unfortunately, Martin's equalizing principle only served to reinforce the distinction between central and marginal art practices. See Martin, 1989, pp. 150-9, 211, 213.

though the conditions suggested above for an ideal anthology of world art history have little prospect of being met. Australian art history is one example of proof that art historical activities exist which largely fall outside of the purview of the 'Western' discipline. Although it has a robust tradition, Australian art history has fought for decades against its marginalisation in Europe and North America.²⁶ It has had only rare victories, such as, ironically, the publication of Terry Smith's essay on provincialism in *Artforum International* – at the time, the leading contemporary art journal in the US.²⁷ When Elkins cites the exemplary work of the now US-based anthropologist Nancy Munn as an example of the scholarship of Australian indigenous cultures,²⁸ the geographical priorities of 'Western' art history are only reinforced.

At the same time that Elkins articulates the importance of art historical scholarship embracing non-Western art-cultures, he thus appears to be engaged in strengthening, if not fortifying, its legitimating institutional base. This double strategy of reinforcing dominant power configurations, whilst appearing to embrace difference, is not without precedent. Postcolonial critic Rasheed Araeen has argued that in embracing multiculturalism, Western art institutions have merely camouflaged the fact that they are 'still dominated and controlled by the Eurocentric structures of modernity'.²⁹ Political philosopher and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek has made a similar claim that multicultural and identity politics have served to reinforce, whilst diverting attention from, multinational capitalism as the real cause of identity-based conflict and suffering.³⁰ Following Lyotard, it is tempting to conclude that Elkins' text, as a representative of the project of world art history, gains institutional legitimation in two ways. Firstly, through its promise to broaden art history's domain of inquiry, and thus potentially increase the global market for non-Western cultural objects and, consequently, the demand for specialised arts training amongst art professionals. And secondly, through its confirmation of the singular importance of 'Western' institutions for providing this training. Moreover, in the context of defending the project of putting the history of world art in a book, Elkins' remark that 'the education of art historians begins with large-scale introductory narratives' suggests the prioritisation of efficacy that Lyotard argued characterised the postmodern condition and to which he was opposed.³¹

III

But might there not be another way to understand the recent recourse to universality amongst art historians? Is it entirely coincidental that universality has also re-entered the lexicon of a number of influential philosophers who, like Lyotard before them, have

²⁶ Amusingly, historians of Australian indigenous culture frequently describe non-indigenous Australians as Europeans.

²⁷ Smith, 1974, pp. 54-9. It is worth noting that Smith was studying in New York at the time of the article's publication.

²⁸ Elkins, 2004, p. 378.

²⁹ Araeen, 2000, p. 7.

³⁰ Žižek, 1997, pp. 3-27.

³¹ Elkins, 2004, p. 377.

expressed a degree of allegiance to certain aspects of Marxist thought?³² In this section I will argue that from the perspective of the so-called contemporary art-world, recourse to the category of universality to clarify the struggle through which value is produced, recognised and contested in new works, could signal a substantially different conception of world art history.

The contemporary art-world could be modeled as a complex, heterogeneous network of 'actors' and their 'institutions'.³³ Its 'actors' range from artists, gallery and museum workers and board members, critics, publicists, sponsors and audiences, to public policy writers; their 'institutions' are the organisations through which their work enters the public domain – from museums to internet blogs – and also their customs and laws: their history and policies. This network stems predominantly from European and North American art traditions and, as the above analysis of Elkins's text suggests, largely retains its association with these areas.³⁴ For the sake of simplicity, let's say that this network propagates 'artistic value'.³⁵ In this section we will focus on the contemporary art-world's articulation of 'value' *vis-à-vis* its evident shift in concern from the politics of identity to globalisation over the past fifteen years.³⁶

The term 'globalisation' has come to refer to the multifarious processes through which trans- and inter-national cultural, ecological, economic and political connectedness has increased throughout the globe, particularly since the collapse of Soviet Communism between 1989-91 – processes the art historian Charlotte Bydler has described as 'universalization'.³⁷ The effects of these processes, instigated largely through economic liberalisation and innovations in communications technology, have, within the contemporary art-world, been most readily apparent in the exhibition genre of the large-scale, multi-annual survey – the Biennial, Triennial, or Documenta. Arguably, the survey exhibition has itself undergone globalisation, growing in frequency from six in 1980 to forty-nine in 2005 and circulating an increasingly even spread of locations throughout the world.³⁸ Often where survey participants – curators or artists – have reflected upon their complicity with this globalisation, they have provoked what could be described as rehearsals of cosmopolitanism.³⁹ This should be unsurprising; the highly influential 'Third Way' political theorist and sociologist Ulrich Beck has endorsed cosmopolitanism

³² See Judith Butler's introductory comment in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000, p. 11; and Žižek's description of the philosophical inheritance of Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière and Ernesto Laclau in Žižek, 1999, pp. 171-4.

³³ The following description is loosely based on Actor-Network-Theory. For an introduction to this sociological theory see Latour, 2005.

³⁴ See Buchholz and Wuggenig, 2006.

³⁵ In reality it has only a partial and limited autonomy from other social networks and multiple functions (including the creation of employment and financial value and the betterment of social status).

³⁶ The paradigmatic example of the former was Elisabeth Sussman's 1993 Whitney Biennial. The latter has been exemplified by Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta11* in 2002. See respectively, Sussman, 1993, and Enwezor, 2002. Michael Archer also distinguishes and separately periodises the two in his survey text *Art Since 1960*. See Archer, 2002.

³⁷ Bydler, 2004, p. 16.

³⁸ For statistics and developmental graphs see Buchholz and Wuggenig, 2006, n.p.

³⁹ The connection between the upsurge of contemporary art biennales and cosmopolitanism is one of the guiding principles of Bydler, 2004.

as the horizon of ‘everyday consciousness and identities’ within a globalising world.⁴⁰ It is usually defined as a ‘subjective outlook, attitude or practice... associated with a conscious openness to the world and to cultural differences’,⁴¹ and often carries connotations of cultural elitism. As an example, at the 2001 Venice Biennale, the artist Santiago Sierra paid illegal street vendors working near the exhibition site, mostly African émigrés, to have their hair dyed blond as part of his work, *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*. The work functioned by making visible to the cultural elites attending the Biennial émigrés whom they might otherwise have preferred to ignore.⁴² It is this testing of the limits of visibility and tolerance that exemplifies contemporary art’s rehearsal of cosmopolitanism (that is to say: *not* simply its assumption), and provides a model from which to reconsider the category of universality in relation to world art history.

The key to this reconsideration lies in a changed attitude to universality: from the presumption of its reality and productivity to the recognition of its symbolic necessity, albeit qualified by an awareness of its fallibility. As we saw in section I of this essay, a tension already existed in Winckelmann’s work between the universality of all places and the universal greatness of the artworks comprising the canon. Hegel reconceived the canon, finding within it an index of the realisation of spirit and thus confirming its universality. Given that spirit is non-objective, he had to presume that it could be embodied in the canon, as he conceived it, to be able to find it there – this is the approach to knowledge legitimation that Lyotard no longer found credible. However, Hegel’s derogatory remarks about non-European art reveal that the realisation of spirit does not take place automatically; the specificity of different societies can block or facilitate its productivity. Hence the question arises: if the realisation of spirit does not *necessarily* occur, then when it ‘does’ take place, does it do so *out of necessity*, or does it merely retrospectively *appear* to have done so from a particular vantage point?⁴³ It is this possibility of contingency that has been emphasised in recent efforts to revitalise Hegelian thought for political philosophy in the wake of postmodernism. Ernesto Laclau, the major theorist of hegemony after Antonio Gramsci, has demonstrated that Hegel’s broader ‘panlogicist’ philosophical project (namely: to understand the history of the universe as a unified system) is comprehensible only if we answer that the result of the Hegelian dialectic is brought about by necessity.⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, however, has argued that in Hegel’s late work the German idealist ‘accepted that there is no Absolute *beyond* or *above* the reflexive oppositions and contradictions of the Finite [that is, the Absolute’s concrete realisation] – the Absolute is *nothing but* the movement of self-sublation of these finite determinations’.⁴⁵ Žižek thus brings into focus the dialectical movement from contingency and particularity to necessity and universality, carefully explicating how in

⁴⁰ Beck, 2002, p. 17.

⁴¹ Skrbis, Kendall and Woodward, 2004, p. 117.

⁴² On Sierra’s work and political antagonism see Bishop, 2004, pp. 70-79.

⁴³ Cf. Ernesto Laclau: ‘The important question is this: accepting entirely that the Absolute Spirit has no positive content of its own, and is just the succession of all dialectical transitions, of its impossibility of establishing a final overlapping between the universal and the particular – are these transitions *contingent* or *necessary*?’ Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Laclau in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, pp. 63-4.

⁴⁵ Žižek, 1999, p. 84. Italics in the original.

this movement the initial universality is exploded with negativity to produce a substantially different universality.⁴⁶ *Contra* Lyotard, Žižek argues that without recourse to the contingent/universal dialectic, the field of the political can only be partially conceptualised.⁴⁷

Transposed into the field of contemporary art, Žižek's theoretical edifice is able to clarify the operations through which the art-world achieves its primary function and how contemporary art's rehearsal of cosmopolitanism might relate to this function. This function - the propagation of artistic value: its generation, negotiation and canonisation - is perhaps most easily broached via the comparison of two historical examples: Clement Greenberg's notorious 'reductionist' teleology of modernism and Thierry de Duve's analysis of the legitimation of Marcel Duchamp's readymades.⁴⁸ Through his analyses of the early stages of modernism, Greenberg identified a progressive flattening of the pictorial field in the history of painting since Manet.⁴⁹ From his retrospective view, he deduced that 'flattening' was therefore the unifying cause of modern art's various transformations, its unfurling universal. As Greenberg understood 'flattening' to be a necessary part of the project of enlightenment (a project he deemed ethically defensible), he advocated it as the basis for future artistic production. De Duve uncovers the other pole of the necessary/contingent dialectic in his analysis of Duchamp's 'artification' of readymade objects.⁵⁰ The art theorist does this by tracing a chain of associational events relating to the reception of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). This reception commences with the work's initial censure at the hands of the New York Society of Independent Artists, Inc., on the basis, de Duve argues, that *Fountain* bore no relation to 'art' (as understood by the Society).⁵¹ However, de Duve relates that Duchamp subsequently forged a series of associations between *Fountain* and markers of 'art'-ness which concluded with the instatement of the work as 'art' - indeed, canonic - and the revelation of Duchamp's identity as its creator.⁵² Whereas Greenberg's retrospective gaze saw in the canon of modern art the necessary revelation of an Absolute - flatness - de Duve concludes from his analysis of Duchamp that 'art is legitimated only through comparison and that comparison can be made only with what is already legitimate'.⁵³ What this means is that the legitimation of new art within the canon need not be predetermined in any way (it is contingent), provided that the art 'can stand comparison', to borrow Michael Fried's words, 'with the painting of both the premodernist and modernist past whose quality seems to (its viewers) beyond question'.⁵⁴ Duchamp's work, like Lyotard's, thus does

⁴⁶ Žižek, 1999, p. 96.

⁴⁷ Žižek, 1999, pp. 171-2. Among the many who agree with Žižek here - to name the most prominent: Laclau, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar - most dispute his reading of Hegel, arguing that the latter's work requires a degree of modification.

⁴⁸ The former is delineated in Greenberg, 1992, and Greenberg, 1993; the latter in de Duve, 1996, pp. 89-143.

⁴⁹ See Greenberg, 1992, pp. 308-314.

⁵⁰ de Duve, 1996.

⁵¹ de Duve, 1996, pp. 96-99. Relevant here is the fact that *Fountain*'s creator, who bore the pseudonym R. Mutt, was not known to be a recognised artist.

⁵² de Duve, 1996, pp. 99-143.

⁵³ de Duve, 1996, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Fried, 1998, n. 11, p. 99.

away with the metaphysical ghouls of the enlightenment. However, unlike Greenberg's, it also does away with any sense of an ethically grounded horizon for future aesthetic transformation.⁵⁵ Žižek's lesson is that these two positions – that of Greenberg, who sees only necessity and that of de Duve, who through Duchamp sees contingency – should be thought together.⁵⁶ The horizon of necessary transformation should be understood to be contingent and challengeable without being abandoned,⁵⁷ just as action that lacks predetermination can expose a horizon quite by accident that demands transformation.⁵⁸

Might not cosmopolitanism be the horizon against which contemporary art practices such as Sierra's are bidding for canonicity? As I suggested earlier, within the contemporary art-world the ideal of cosmopolitanism is not necessarily presumed to be attainable (as Greenberg presumed enlightenment to be through flatness). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the project of working toward cosmopolitanism may appear to be ethically defensible – and the myriad contemporary works addressing cultural difference and political hardship with absolute sincerity far outnumber those which, like Sierra's work, exhibit mockery and contemptuousness⁵⁹ – however, it is certainly not immune to challenges. Indeed, opponents of cosmopolitanism regularly note its similarity with colonialism and imperialism.⁶⁰ If 'art is legitimated only through comparison' (de Duve) and the only legitimate history is that of Europe and North America, then logically, the only access to the contemporary art-world is through assimilation to this tradition. This is colonialism, not cosmopolitanism.⁶¹ If the latter has any chance, the contemporary art-world must broaden – ideally, 'universalise' – the art historical traditions upon which it allows art to be legitimated. This will be the task of world art history. Like cosmopolitanism, it may be an impossible (if not an undesirable) task.

This essay has outlined two possible 'politics' of world art history. On one hand, world art history appears as a distinctly 'Western' phenomenon. Whilst it embraces cultural difference, it does so in order to retain the current hegemony of 'Western' academia. Moreover, its primary purpose appears to be the broadening and strengthening of the 'Western' market for non-Western artefacts. On the other hand, the few steps that have

⁵⁵ This sentence should not be read a statement of my support for Greenberg's work. Here, however, is not an appropriate place to present a critique of Greenberg's conception of modernism.

⁵⁶ A similar lesson can be extrapolated from Jacques Rancière's work on aesthetics where by the given 'distribution of the sensible', the universal status quo, as it were, can be ruptured and reconfigured by new aesthetic forms, provided that the latter are able to be translated into the initial 'distribution' whilst retaining its authentically creative aspect. See Rancière, 2004, pp. 12-19, and Rancière, 1999, pp. 21-42.

⁵⁷ This is the abstract grounding of Laclau's theory of hegemony. See Laclau and Mouffe, 2001.

⁵⁸ This is what Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, calls *point de capiton*. See Žižek, 2002, pp. 16-20.

⁵⁹ Lets not forget that Sierra's marker of social and cultural difference is nothing other than the principal metaphor of fashionable ditziness in Western society: blonde hair-dye.

⁶⁰ Featherstone, 2002, p. 5. Buchholz and Wuggenig (2006, n.p.) have also expressed their fear that the apparent globalisation of Biennale culture might involve a neo-imperialistic cultural penetration of indigenous elites.

⁶¹ Cf. Butler: 'The fear, of course, is that what is named as universal is the parochial property of imperial expansion'. Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000, p. 15.

been taken in the direction of world art history could be interpreted as genuine action toward the ideal of a non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. An ideal, truly egalitarian world art history framed between the covers of a single book is an impossibility within the world as we know it. *Contra* Lyotard, however, this essay proposes that impossibility is not reason enough to abandon an ideal.

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