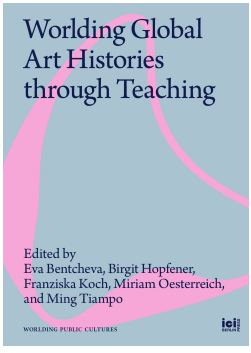
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EVA EHNINGER

The Art of Education

Art Schools as Subject and Model

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the potentials of art education — and aesthetic education more broadly — to 'world' modern art history. Art education has a material outcome, which can be analysed in light of the underlying theoretical and political premises regarding education and knowledge. It is locally implemented but globally networked and shared. Art schools allow for an object-based approach to topics of research, and this is integrated into local and regional contexts of learning and making. At the same time, they highlight complex transcultural entanglements across different timeframes and geographies.

KEYWORDS: Germany; art education; modern art history; skill

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The Art of Education

Art Schools as Subject and Model

EVA EHNINGER

The designation of my professorship is not 'global' or 'transcultural', but rather 'modern'. To 'world' the history of modern art means to pluralize the concept of art and take into account multiple and divergent cultural contexts of its production and reception; to consider temporalities that offer an alternative to the apparently uncontestable dynamic of modern progress; and to enter — by means of a different spectrum of source material and with the help of interdisciplinary approaches — into a practice of transculturation.[1] During recent years, I have experimented with

different seminar and lecture formats to address, assess, and counter the Eurocentric premises of the field of modern art history. A few words of explanation are necessary on the development of syllabi in the German academic system. As research and teaching are understood to go hand-in-hand, faculty members are relatively free to develop their course syllabi independently, on the basis of their research activities, without further oversight by a departmental committee. This allows me to try out different formats of teaching in order to address the challenge of 'worlding' modern art history.

For example, I developed practice-based seminars in cooperation with the Berlin Ethnological Museum, where my students were introduced to objects that were collected during the nineteenth century in parallel to the development of the field of art history, and which substantially shaped its disciplinary framework.[2] Seminars focused, for example, on the photographic holdings of the museum's departments. Varying in size and content, these collections have played only a marginal role in the museum's exhibition history. In another seminar, we deliberately chose objects or object-groups from the South- and Southeast Asian collections, which have remained in the depot on the outskirts of Berlin in Dahlem since the museum's move to the recently opened Humboldt Forum in central Berlin in 2021. None of these objects have ever been part of an exhibition at the Ethnological Museum. In most cases, they have never even left the depot. The syllabi of both seminars reflected my attempt to provide students with the

necessary historical background and methodological tools, sourced from a range of disciplines, for approaching these materials. The readings included literature on the history of ethnological collections; texts on the shared history of ethnology and art history as academic disciplines; theoretical contributions about the relationship between art and craft, and on relevant terms and concepts, such as 'orientalism' or 'decoloniality'; and literature on relevant methodological approaches, such as transcultural and transregional perspectives, or 'object biography'. These shared readings formed the basis for the students' subsequent work on objects from the collection, which they examined with regard to material makeup, production techniques, original function, collection history, and the changing values that were ascribed to them over time.

One object-group we dealt with, for example, consisted of painted clay models of fruit and vegetables, produced in Lakhnau, Uttar Pradesh, India, that had come into the museum as part of the private collection belonging to the ethnologist and natural scientist Emil Riebeck in 1886. Students faced the challenge that there was virtually no available research on these objects, and it was unclear on which basis they had been collected by the museum: as ritual objects of Hindu ceremonies? As objects of study for Western colonizers to learn about a relatively unfamiliar vegetation? Or due to their impressively skilful fabrication? The students developed questions that contextualized the models in these different areas of local culture and imperial economy, and critically engaged with the inherent tension



Fig 1. Measurement of bananas with help of a pen, inventory no. IC 15528 (left) and IC NLS 812 (right), South- and South-East Asian Collection, Ethnological Museum, Berlin. © Luisa Renée Mann for her BA thesis, *Nonperishable Leftovers: Fruit and Vegetable Models in the South- and South-East Asian Collection, Ethnological Museum, Berlin* (unpublished, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2024)

between research object and hand-crafted, decorative item of consumption. For this, more specific literature, including primary sources from India, needed to be taken into account, and our syllabus grew over the course of the semester. The students' continuous work in the depot broke down inhibitions to conduct research, as they experienced that their work substantially contributed to the shared knowledge about these understudied objects. The distance from a more conventional art historical curriculum was immense, however, and at times the students felt ill-equipped, methodologically and empirically, to adequately address the ethnological holdings.

With this experience in mind, I sought out ways to bring together in one teaching format grand narratives of Western art history as well as their critical re-evaluation, by integrating parallel developments in other geographies and cultures, as well as instances of transcultural exchange. One preliminary outcome was the lecture, *The Death and Resurrection of Painting*. My point of departure was the myth that painting was the defining medium of modernist art, which took hold during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has since been re-affirmed in countless textbooks, exhibitions, and museum displays around the world.[3] I juxtaposed each historical step of that well-known genealogy of modernist painting with artistic positions that did not conform to this logic — painterly positions that failed to renounce narrative or figurative elements; artistic positions that employed materials and techniques outside of painting; female positions; the queering of paint-

ing in other media; as well as painterly positions from other geographies, which do not represent, or are not represented in, the Western canon. I discussed non-Western artistic positions not as prototype and source material, but rather as different nodes of artistic inquiry into what modernity might mean. Naturally, opening up the canon in this way also meant integrating literature from other parts of the world into the syllabus, and discussing the theoretical ideas about painting and modernism that were given there.

To give one example, I introduced the Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil, to examine how her work was informed by the French school of modern painting, but changed in style and content with her move to India in 1934. Through her work, Sher-Gil contributed to the larger discourse on what 'Indian' painting should look like for an Indian nation on its way to independence. Readings for this session included primary sources from participants in the Indian Swadeshi movement as well as Sher-Gil's own art criticism, to familiarize students with the specific historical context of modern, late-colonial India.

The lecture's conceptualization had its merits as an introductory format. I offered an overview of a dominant narrative of modern art history, while at the same time criticizing and historicizing this narrative by confronting it continuously with positions that were largely effaced or devalued by it. Precisely in the confrontation of the 'canon' with that which it does not include, the ideologies and value judgments at the heart of its discursive construction came into focus. One methodological difficulty, however,



Fig 2. Amrita Sher-Gil, *Fruit Vendors*, 1937, oil on canvas, 104 x 74 cm. Courtesy The Estate of Vivan Sundaram

was the relatively small number of non-canonical examples that I could take into account. Half of the fourteen sessions were dedicated to these counterpoints, and since I aimed to provide examples from different media, geographies, and historical contexts, the chosen non-Western positions were so idiosyncratic as to verge on the arbitrary.

I was left with the question of how to 'world' modern art history in a way that would not exhaust itself in either offering an alternative curriculum of non-Western material, or integrating non-Western artistic positions in a disconnected fashion, without doing their situatedness in their respective local, regional, and national contexts enough justice. The MA seminar, 'Collective/Experimental/Radical: Educational Theory and Practice in Modern and Contemporary Art', gave me the opportunity to sketch out a third approach.[4] This seminar focused on alternative concepts, formats, processes, and models of art education, and how they reflect larger sociohistorical shifts. We were interested in models of learning that questioned conventional concepts of education and knowledge, operating often unofficially on the basis of personal networks, and at the margins of or in explicit differentiation to established institutions. The syllabus of the seminar reflected this: students read literature on the history of art education from the late eighteenth century on, with a specific focus on education reform movements. We also provided them with theoretical literature on concepts such as 'de-skilling' and 'de-schooling', or ideas about the emancipatory power of practice and participation. These often go hand-in-hand

with a critical reflection on an authoritative and institutionalized definition of skill and value. In the context of their respective case studies, students also read primary sources on the introduction of educational structures and curricula as part of larger administrative decisions, and documentation of local and personal reactions to these implementations.

Art education, or aesthetic education more broadly, takes place within the network of art, politics, and society. At different times and in different contexts, great importance has been ascribed to art and aesthetic education as a means to shape society: to reinforce manual and technical skills, to further aesthetic sensibility, to influence consumer behaviour, or to transform a society's moral state. Consequently, alternative concepts of education were discussed with much controversy, since they proposed not only aesthetic paradigm changes, but also social, economic, and global-political change. These questions gained most relevance in the context of institutions and initiatives developed outside of a narrowly defined European context, but are inextricably entangled with it through colonial or imperial claims. For example, we discussed the history of the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata, which was founded under British tutelage in 1854, and this colonial institution's relation to the Bengal School of Art, which played an important role in the Swadeshi movement and Indian quest for independence. Questions about the relation between art and craft gained specific relevance in this late-colonial context. Also, political interest in institu-

tionalizing art education figured large in our discussions. The appropriation, adaptation, and reconfiguration of colonial structures and values, as well as the transformative potential of these transcultural processes, came into focus.

In my opinion, the topic of art education has a lot of potential for the 'worlding' of modern art history:

- It allows for an object-based approach, which is at the same time integrated into the respective local, regional, and national as well as transregional and transnational contexts of learning and making. Transcultural art history consistently faces the methodological challenge of achieving this multiscalar perspective. The history of art education, which is necessarily not just a history of institutions, but very much one of its material outcomes — and the skills, materials, techniques, and designs that shape them — provides a great resource to achieve it.
- The generational logic of schools — teacher-student-relationships, and the fact that former students often later became faculty — highlights changing attitudes toward aesthetic norms and conventions in different social and political climates, and across timeframes that are defined by processes of colonization or developments toward national independence. The larger time frame that the history of art education encompasses is an important quality of transcultural studies,

which strives to analyse complex processes of transformation over longer periods of time, to do justice to their complex, non-linear, and sometimes regressive, characteristics.

– The movement of institutional formats of education highlights complex transcultural entanglements. Whether formats were implemented by the (colonial) state, or the result of the migration of teachers, or adopted by artists in search of 'alternative' concepts of pedagogy, the movement of education always goes hand-in-hand with the reinterpretation and revaluation of its underlying terms and concepts.

Art schools can serve as 'objects of inquiry' for a worlded art history. A syllabus can reflect this aim, by providing the necessary theoretical and methodological toolbox for students to enter into a transcultural inquiry, and by remaining flexible enough to add more local and primary sources over time, for in-depth analyses of specific case studies. Art schools can also serve as conceptual models for a transcultural approach. Art education has a material outcome, which can be analysed in light of the underlying theoretical and political premises regarding education and knowledge. It is locally implemented but globally networked and shared. And what is considered as 'alternative', 'critical', or 'radical' differs significantly depending on the respective historical, political, and cultural context.

NOTES

1 Monica Juneja, '"A very civil idea …", Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making — With and Beyond the Nation', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 81.4 (2018), pp. 461–85; Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?: Meditations from the Periphery* (De Gruyter, 2023). Juneja refers to Fernando Oritz' conceptualization of the process of 'transculturation'. See Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. by Harriet Onís (Knopf, 1947), reprinted with an introduction by Fernando Coronil (Duke University Press, 1995).

2 These seminars were developed in collaboration with my team and the curatorial staff at the Ethnological Museum, namely Johanna Függer-Vagts, postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Art and Visual History, Humboldt University, and Roland Platz, curator, South- and South-East Asian collection. On the relationship between the disciplines of art history and ethnology see, for example, Susanne Leeb, 'Primitivism and Humanist Teleology in Art History around 1900', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 12 (June 2015). On the dynamic valuations of objects in museums, see for example, *Museale Reste*, ed. by Nina Samuel and Felix Sattler, Bildwelten des Wissens, 18 (De Gruyter, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110733372>.

3 Hal Foster and others, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson, 2016). Current research increasingly challenges this narrative, see for example, *Reframing Modernism: Painting from South-East Asia, Europe and Beyond*, ed. by Sarah Lee and Sara Siew (National Gallery of Singapore 2016); the exhibition *museumglobal: Microhistories of an Ex-centric Modernism*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20), Düsseldorf (2018–19); Saul Nelson, *Never Ending: Modernist Painting Past and Future* (Yale University Press, 2024).

4 The seminar's topic was informed my the research project 'Art Education Between Heritage-Making and Critical Transregionality', which traced the history of art education in India and examined how colonial schools of applied art were transformed into national art academies (financed by the German Ministry of Education and Research, 2022–2025). The seminar's syllabus was developed in cooperation with Prof. Eric de Bruyn, Freie Universität, Berlin.

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