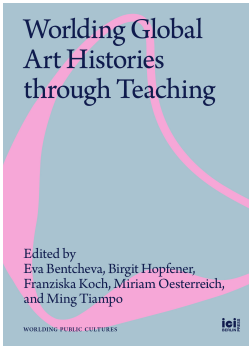
ici BERLIN REPOSITORY

https://doi.org/10.37050/wpc-co-02_6



Worlding Global Art Histories through Teaching, ed. by Eva Bentcheva, et al., Worlding Public Cultures (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 67–94

SONG XIAOXIA
BIRGIT HOPFENER

Teaching Global Art History through the Lens of Chinese Art

A Conversation

CITE AS:

Song Xiaoxia and Birgit Hopfener, 'Teaching Global Art History through the Lens of Chinese Art: A Conversation', in *Worlding Global Art Histories through Teaching*, ed. by Eva Bentcheva, et al., Worlding Public Cultures (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 67–94 <https://doi.org/10.37050/wpc-co-02_6>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)
Except for images or otherwise noted, this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT: In this conversation, art historians Song Xiaoxia and Birgit Hopfener exchange their views on teaching art history and theory in a global framework. Both scholars are particularly interested in decentring Eurocentric frameworks of art through the lens of Chinese art and philosophy, and from a transcultural perspective.

KEYWORDS: global art history; contemporary Chinese Art; eurocentrism; contemporaneity; pedagogy

The ICI Berlin Repository is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the dissemination of scientific research documents related to the ICI Berlin, whether they are originally published by ICI Berlin or elsewhere. Unless noted otherwise, the documents are made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, which means that you are free to share and adapt the material, provided you give appropriate credit, indicate any changes, and distribute under the same license. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/ for further details. In particular, you should indicate all the information contained in the cite-as section above.



Teaching Global Art History through the Lens of Chinese Art

A Conversation*

SONG XIAOXIA AND BIRGIT HOPFENER

Birgit Hopfener (BH): How and when did you become interested in doing and teaching art history in a global framework?

Song Xiaoxia (SX): In the summer of 1999, I was invited by Gao Minglu (高名潞) to visit the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens

* In parts of this conversation we have provided the original Chinese-language answer as a way of enabling a more precise understanding of how terminology is used. Translations from Chinese by Wu Xiaofan and Annie Yuan Zhuang.

Museum, New York. This exhibition opened my mind and changed my ideas on contemporary art. From then on, I became interested in doing and teaching art history in a global framework. The show examined key moments when artists in various locales around the world began to create conceptual art as a means to question the hegemony of the object over ideas in art, critique the way art is institutionalized both in museums and in modern economies, and find a new role for art and the artist in society by involving art in social and political protest.

Each section of *Global Conceptualism* was organized with attention to the impact of local contexts in creating particular variations of conceptualism. Thus the curator of the section on Africa, Okwui Enwezor, sought to show the distinctive quality of African conceptualist art in the African tradition. In addition, *Global Conceptualism* revisited several famous exhibitions which either served as protests, or catalysts for protest, among which were the *Tone Prize Exhibition* (Japan, 1964), Seth Siegelaub's *Xeroxbook* show (New York, 1968), the *Salon de Mai* (Paris, 1968), and Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan's *China/Avant-Garde* (Beijing, 1989).

BH: Did you encounter any thinkers engaging in contemporary global art history who had an impact on your interest in global art?

SX: Yes, Rasheed Araeen's *Third Text* journal, Hans Belting's *Global Art and the Museum* (GAM) programme, and Okwui Enwezor's whole body of work.



Fig 1. Song Xiaoxia at the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens Museum, New York, 1999. Image courtesy of Song Xiaoxia.

Rasheed Araeen founded the journal *Third Text* in 1987. This bimonthly publication was the first 'third-world perspective' on contemporary art and culture that I encountered. It allowed me to appreciate a new form of contemporary artistic practice that is embodied in writing and journals. Araeen and his journal not only expanded my conception of art practices, but also helped me to reposition the meaning of my work as an art historian.

In 2006, Hans Belting initiated a project called Global Art and the Museum (GAM) with Peter Weibel. GAM intentionally avoided often-used blueprints such as New York, London, Paris, or Berlin to define, present, and interpret contemporary art. This made me ponder. What does this 'new' global map of contemporary art look like, and what globalization theories are embedded within it? Can its interest in Asia and the Middle East help us move beyond Eurocentrism?

Finally, Okwui Enwezor and his whole body of work (comprising writings, talks, exhibitions, and even unexecuted curatorial concepts) uncovered new histories, and based on this, envisioned a new form of contemporaneity. His global perspective and confidence in marginalized cultures have always inspired me. Enwezor's vision and abilities have truly changed the trajectory of art in the contemporary world: he localized modernity and contemporaneity instead of universally interpreting and imposing a monolithic modernity and contemporaneity on the 'local'.

BH: Which other colleagues in, or working on, China have you have been engaging with on this topic?

SX: For me, these would be Nikita Yingqian Cai, Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu, and many artists whom I do not have the space to elaborate on here.

Nikita Yingqian Cai is Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Times Museum in Guangzhou. In recent years, her work has focused on the Pearl River Delta and the Global South. At a time when global cultural exchanges are facing crises, she has been connecting artists and researchers to re-examine and reinterpret regional concepts that have been overlooked by history. In December 2022, I organized a workshop at the Central Academy of Fine Arts titled 'The Ambiguity of Contemporaneity (当代性的歧义)', where Nikita Yingqian Cai, at my invitation, initiated a discussion based on regional imagination of the Pearl River Delta. She traced its history, shaped by multiple forces, and reflected on the characteristics of the Pearl River Delta as proposed by Rem Koolhaas in his book *Great Leap Forward*. Our discussions with her prompted us to reflect on the negative impacts of globalization.

I have maintained an intellectual exchange with Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu for many years, for instance, regarding the discontinuity (or ruptures) in the development of contemporary art in China, a topic I have repeatedly discussed with graduate students in my classes at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). I invited Carol to give a lecture at CAFA where she introduced how

she and Liu Ding meticulously analysed the art scene of the 1970s to reestablish a sense of unity in Chinese contemporary art by linking the present with the past. Through this process, they sought to bridge the gap between the earlier and later stages of contemporary art in China. I believe that, through the lifelong effort of our fellow scholars, art historians, and writers, the contemporary art landscape that has unfolded not only clarifies the historical trajectory of contemporary art in China but also reshapes the global map (that was previously centred on the West) of contemporary art, providing it with a new geographical framework.

BH: What is your understanding of the 'global' and 'global art'? What questions are you particularly interested in?

SX:

1、我们今天对"全球"和全球艺术的理解，将决定我们对于当代艺术的"当代性"的理解。

2、我对"全球"和全球艺术的理解，建立在两个重新认识的基础上。第一，"重新认识西方"。以往在讨论西方对中国当代艺术的影响时，通常是将西方作为一个有机的统一体看待，忽略了西方也是一个在政治和思想上充满差异的异质体。"重新认识西方"，重点在于西方影响是指各种影响而不是指一种影响。 第二，"重新认识中国"。 与西方发生影响的各种文化，以中国为例，也是极其复杂的，因此与西方的相互影响也是极其多样化的。20世纪中

国美术发展的历史，说明只承认一种形式的现代性的西方历史发展观是十分狭隘的。在此基础上，重新认识中西互动对彼此的影响。

3、我所理解的“全球”和全球艺术，是要建立一个联系的、互动的、碰撞的、融合的历史视野，而不局限于以国家、地区、文化的单一角度来看待“世界艺术史”。在这样的全球视野下，正视本地的历史和本土经验，将中国当代艺术基于具体的本土经验的艺术与思想实践融入全球话语的讨论范畴，因为没有唯一一种普遍化的经验。

4、我特别感兴趣的问题是：如何在具体的实践中反思欧洲中心主义，在中国的当代艺术发展中，寻找自身的逻辑，在与世界的互动中建立合乎自身的脉络。同时避免中国中心主义或任何一种自我中心主义：强调不同文明、不同人群之间的相互交往、接触、交流、碰撞，关注不同地区的艺术在全球背景下的相互影响。

SX:

1. Our present understanding of the ‘global’ and ‘global art’ determines our understanding of the ‘contemporaneity’ of contemporary art.
2. My understanding of the ‘global’ and ‘global art’ is based on two reconceptualizations. The first is to ‘re-understand/re-learn the West’. Past discussions

of the impact of the West on Chinese contemporary art often regard the West as an organic unity, ignoring the fact that 'the West' is a heterogeneity with political and ideological divergences. In 're-understanding/re-learning the West', what is crucial is that the impact of the West is plural rather than singular. The second is to 're-understand/re-learn China'. China, like other cultures influenced by Western cultures, is extremely complex. The mutual influences of such Western and non-Western cultures are therefore extremely diverse. The development of twentieth-century Chinese art history shows that the Western view of historical development that acknowledges only one modernity is quite provincial. My reconceptualization of the mutual impact between the West and China is therefore based on these two realizations.

3. My understanding of the 'global' and 'global art' establishes a connected, interactive, conflicting, and integrated historical perspective, rather than viewing 'global art history' from a singular perspective of nation, region, or culture. Taking this kind of global perspective, we have to acknowledge local histories and local experiences, and incorporate the artistic and ideological practices of Chinese contemporary art based on local experiences into our understanding of global discourse, since there is no single universal experience.

4. I am particularly interested in how to critically reflect on Eurocentrism in specific practice, and uncover the internal logic and context in the development of Chinese contemporary art as it interacts with the world. At the same time, we must be sure to avoid Sinocentrism, or any kind of centrism, but rather emphasize the interaction, contact, communication, and confrontation between different groups of people and focus on the mutual influence of art in various regions under the global framework.

BH: What does it mean to 'world' the global from China?

SX: To make sense of the global from China requires reflecting on Eurocentrism while remaining wary of Sinocentrism. This is not a challenge unique to China, but one faced by any country or region. It calls for critical thinking in confronting Eurocentrism while staying vigilant against self-centredness. For the world, China is an integral part of the global community today, regardless of how its openness fluctuates. From a global perspective, I believe that Chinese contemporary art exemplifies the complexity of navigating one's place in the world today.

BH: How would you relate current discourses on *tianxia* ('everything under heaven') to discourses on the global and global art?

SX: The recent discourse of *tianxia* (天下) is a world political view that derives from ancient Chinese cosmology. It goes beyond the political and defines politics as the art of befriending the hostile. There are three main concepts within the *tianxia* discourse: 1) internalization of the world, 2) relational rationality, and 3) Confucian optimality.

This political view of "everything under heaven" concords with certain global art concepts. In a sense, it proposes alternative ways to approach art than the Eurocentric worldview. It is an aspiration, a utopian vision. It does not, however, reflect historical political reality or the reality of international relations in the contemporary world. For this reason, I do not associate *tianxia* with the discourse of the global and global art.

As for disguising *tianxia*-ism as nationalism under the name of cosmopolitanism — letting the discourse of *tianxia* enter Chinese politics, diplomacy, and even military strategy, breaking the current international order and making this 'utopia' become a 'world system', and further, establishing a 'world government' out of this 'world system' — this deviates from the discourse of the global and global art and is beyond the scope of this discussion.

BH: What does it mean to teach global art in China?

SX: Teaching global art in China poses many conceptual challenges. Here are two examples: first, the discipline of art history in China has long been divided into Chinese Art

History and Global Art History (i.e., art history outside of China). Therefore, the students subconsciously consider the global as equivalent to the world and the world as equivalent to the West (the foreign countries). Second, K–12 and university education in China requires standard answers. However, during sessions of 'Study of Contemporary Art from a Global Perspective', I ask students to establish a multidimensional perspective that allows them to understand and tolerate different points of view. I therefore usually set aside half of class time for group discussions. For each discussion, students are given prompts tailored to the course material. Often towards the middle or end of the semester, students begin to reflect on and question their pre-existing perspectives as well as attempting to ask critical questions. Since I first started teaching this course a decade ago, I have been sending out an end-of-semester course evaluation survey. In 2024, a PhD student wrote, 'My understanding of the West changed after taking this course. In the past, my interest in global contemporary art was restricted to Europe and the United States. I neglected Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the field of global contemporary art. When discussing contemporary art, I would automatically think of art in only China, America, and European countries. Therefore, my research scope was limited'.

BH: What are Chinese discourses of the global and global art?

SX: Some are consistent with the existing narratives in the world, whereas some need to establish an epistemological foundation and value system based on Chinese history and reality to support or prove that the Chinese discourse is global and engages global art. A good example occurred during the workshop 'Worlding Syllabi' which you co-organised in 2022, where a participating scholar asked me, 'is Fu Baoshi's work modernism?'. In order to address this question, we need to probe modernism both in the sense of world art history, and the particular history of China.

BH: Can you tell us a bit about the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), the institution where you are teaching in Beijing? In what context are you teaching there? Who takes your classes? What would you like students to take away from your classes that engages with issues of art in a global framework?

SX: On the one hand, CAFA is the best higher art institution and has a strong academic tradition; for that reason, it is rather academically conservative. Taking Art History as an example, China leads in art historical study of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, even boasting international influence in these areas. However, for years, contemporary art history has barely featured in the discipline of Art History in China. About ten years ago, I introduced the special topic course 'Study of Contemporary Art from a Global Perspective' for graduate students in History and

Theory in the School of Humanities, intentionally avoiding the word 'history' in the course name. Students registered for the course included Master's and PhD students in the School of Humanities and the School of Art Management and Education, and PhD students in the School of Graduate Studies (studio practices). The average number of students taking this course has been about fifty per year. After almost ten years of dedication, more and more theses in the School of Humanities focus on topics in contemporary art.

In 2021, I introduced a course called 'Selected Topics in the Study of Contemporary Chinese Art' for third-year undergraduate CAFA students, filling the gap in the teaching of contemporary art history in the Department of Art History in the School of Humanities. Previously, the undergraduate teaching of Chinese art history in the School of Humanities only went up to the modern period. Although CAFA is capable of participating in a global dialogue and interaction with contemporary art practices, the teaching tradition of the School of Humanities still centres on premodern Chinese art history.

I hope students taking my courses learn about the concept of contemporary art as based on the epistemological foundation of the 'global' and 'contemporaneity', discarding the long-established dualistic framework in favour of a multidimensional way of thinking. I often call my courses a training in thinking, the key to which is not simply learning about canonical works and artists in contemporary art history, but thinking about art in a global framework. When students are confronted with my approach to contempor-

ary art in a global framework for the first time, they often feel culture shock from the new approach to thinking about (sometimes familiar) matters.

BH: You mentioned that at first you centred your teaching of global art on Western theories and methods, but that the course now has a 'critical focus on ourselves'. Do you mean that you are critically engaging with Chinese concepts of histories of art, and how Chinese art relates — and is historically related to — the global? Can you tell us a bit more about that?

SX: A decade ago, I launched a special topic course titled 'Study of Contemporary Art from a Global Perspective' for graduate and PhD students in the School of Humanities at CAFA. One of the course objectives was to eliminate the myth of 'the West' as well as the unconscious 'Eurocentrism' based on such myths often found in the Chinese art world. One module of this course focused on discovering why we fall into an us/other trap, through group reading, discussion, and analysis, thinking in particular about whether the reason is always the same. Meanwhile, I always reminded students to pay attention to the context of the epistemological premises and the context of concept development from the Western perspective and to be sympathetic to Western theories and methodologies. In recent years, I intentionally shifted my approach to guiding students in critical reflection, encouraging them to

move beyond egocentrism and engage in reconstructing the narrative of Chinese art history within a global context.

BH: So you are saying that there are things we cannot see when we explore art through the conventional/universalized Euro-American lenses?

SX: I will use an analogy of a river to better illustrate my point here. A considerable part of contemporary Chinese art converges with the development of European contemporary art, which is visible through 'the conventional/universalized European lenses'. At the same time, contemporary Chinese art contains a substantial undercurrent, much like the hidden currents beneath a river. It requires a deep dive, like a diver exploring the riverbed, to investigate the actual situation at the bottom. One must dig even deeper, analysing the impact and shaping forces of both the upstream and downstream areas on the river's formation. Only then can one truly swim freely by navigating this river and understanding its flow and direction. For instance, according to the current historical narrative of contemporary Chinese art, scholars both in China and abroad regard the starting point of contemporary Chinese art, the 'New Era', as the years 1978–1979. They view the artistic development before and after this juncture as two drastically contrasting phases. Nevertheless, if we are not restrained by 'the conventional/universalized European lenses', and objectively acknowledge various forces that shape contemporary Chinese art, it is not difficult to find that Mao

Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art' (1942), and the system derived from it, both assigned to the 'pre-' era, not only affect the development of contemporary Chinese art, but also contribute to modelling the thinking, concepts, methods, and means of contemporary Chinese art creation.[1] Only if we jump out of the box of dichotomy, objectively analyse the matter that is not recognized by the values of contemporary art, and demonstrate the complexity of global contemporary art (not restricted to the particularity of China or any specific region) can we move towards a 'globalized' global art history and world history.

BH: What are Chinese concepts that you are particularly interested in? What methodology are you using to approach the mobilization of Chinese concepts from critical contemporary and comparative perspectives?

SX:

概念之所以重要，是因为它承载着特定的思维、观念与问题。中国当代艺术与世界文化对话和沟通，始终都面临着这样一种困境：既不能完全用当代西方的文化话语，也没有与西方全然无关的本土文化话语可用。“当代中国人的意识”本身，就与西方思想文化有着渊源关系，在“当代中国的文化时空”中即包含着本土文化与外来文化的不断沟通。所以我想走出困境的途径还是要通过对话——在的思想识

度下， 源于不同文化的思想双方/多方的对话。其特点是：

1、对话各方都是从历史出发，从自己的文化传统出发，并不以任何一方的概念、范畴、系统来截取另一方，而是以对方为参照，重新认识、整理和发掘自己的历史。

2、由于有了历史的深度，双方的对话不再是并时性的平面比照，可以沿着时间轴前后滑动，既不受新、旧观念的时间限制，亦不受东西疆域的局限，全面开放了对话与交流的时间与空间。

3、由于历史的全面开放，对话双方相互选择和汲取的范围不再惟新是从，即使上下纵横千年亦无妨，只要这种对话能够生发出新的契机和文化推动力。像这样贯通千年的跨文化交流在中西文化史上也不乏先例。如上个世纪20年代，以美国诗人惠特曼为代表的自由体诗歌在中国风靡一时，滋养了现代中国浪漫派诗人；与此同时，美国的新诗运动（庞德Ezra Pound是其中最有影响的诗人）却从一千多年前的中国古诗中寻找到了艺术的推动力。

我感兴趣的“中国概念”也许是“中国”的，也许不完全是“中国”的。比如“自然而然”的“自然”，这个概念出自老子的“道法自然”，意思是“道”遵循着“万物”的自然本性。自然不仅是大道的特性，也是万物的属性。我之所以关注“自然”这一概念 ，因为它对理解人类文明的共通极具价值。自卢梭以降，

“自然”就是西方现代性批判的重要议题。在中国当代艺术的实践与认识（创作与批评）中，我对“自然”的理解，强调它是历史与当代的“同时代性”。我从历史与当代的“同时代性”，认识中国当代艺术中的“自然”概念。我也感兴趣能够把中国本土的实践跟世界连接起来的概念，强调中国和整个世界的关系，比如“全球当代”。从20世纪初的“美术革命”开始一直到今天，中国艺术就和西方乃至全球艺术、文化、政治纠缠在一起。我希望通过复调的叙述，提供多个不同的“当代”。

“世界化”的全球艺术史既为我提供了可以进行上述探索的认识前提，同时也是一个协作与交流的平台。

SX: Concepts are crucial because they embody specific ways of thinking, ideas, and issues. Chinese contemporary art has always faced the dilemma of dialoguing and communicating with world cultures: it can neither use contemporary Western cultural discourse exclusively, nor is there a local cultural discourse that has nothing to do with the West. The ‘contemporary Chinese consciousness’ itself has a relationship with Western thought and culture, and in the ‘cultural space-time of contemporary China’ there is ongoing communication between local and foreign cultures.

Therefore, I believe that the way out of the dilemma is still through dialogue — dialogue between multiple per-

spectives originating from different cultures, conducted on a shared intellectual level and depth of understanding. It is characterized by:

1. Each party to the dialogue starts from its own history and cultural traditions, does not intercept the other party with the concepts, categories, or systems of party, but uses the other party as a reference to re-understand, organize, and discover its own history.
2. Because of the depth of history, the dialogue between the two sides is no longer a concurrent plane comparison but can slide back and forth along a timeline, not subject to the time constraints of old and new concepts, nor the limitations of the East-West boundaries, and comprehensively opens up time and space for dialogue and exchange.
3. Because of this fully opened history, the scope of mutual selection and learning from both sides no longer follows the new alone; it does not matter if we are travelling across millennia forwards or backwards as long as the dialogue sparks new opportunities and cultural momentum. There are precedents of such transcultural communication in Chinese and Western cultural histories that bridge millennia. For example, in the 1920s, free verse poetry, notably used by American poet Walt Whitman, became popular in China and nurtured modern Chinese Romantic poets. At the same time, the New Poetry

> Movement in the United States (with Ezra Pound as one of its most influential figures) found its artistic impetus in ancient Chinese poems created over a thousand years ago.

The concept of 'China' that interests me may or may not be entirely 'Chinese'. For instance, let us look at the concept of *ziran* (自然, nature) that comes from *ziran-erran* (自然而然, naturally). This concept derives from Lao-Tzu's *Tao Tê Ching*, specifically 'tao fa ziran' (道法自然, Tao follows the way of spontaneity). Being natural or spontaneous is not only a characteristic of Tao, but also of all matter (organic or inorganic). I am interested in the concept of *ziran* because it provides a valuable basis on which to understand the commonality of human civilization. Since Rousseau, 'nature' has been an important topic in critiques of Western modernity. I understand the concept of *ziran* in Chinese contemporary art (creation and criticism) through the contemporaneity of the past and present. Thus, *ziran* becomes a way for us to see history and the present in the same place. I am also interested in concepts that connect China's local practices with the world, emphasizing the relationship between China and the world as a whole, such as the 'global contemporary'. Since the beginning of the 'Art Revolution' in the early twentieth century, Chinese art has been entangled with Western and even global art, culture, and politics. Through a polyphonic narrative, I hope to provide a number of different 'contemporaries'. 'Worlding' global art is a prerequisite for me to

explore the topics mentioned above and is also a platform for collaboration and communication.

Birgit, what do you think about the role that contemporary art from China plays in 'world' global art history?

BH: I would like to respond to your question by speaking about my understanding of a critical global art history practice. As an interdisciplinary scholar of contemporary global art history whose criticality has been shaped at the disciplinary interstices of art history, with specific expertise in Chinese and Euro-American contemporary art history and theory, cultural theory, image studies and sinology, and through engagements with different languages (German, English, and Chinese), I understand the global world as pluriversal, i.e. as plural, multi-sited and continuously generated in asymmetrical and ongoing historical processes of transculturation.

This perspective challenges an understanding of the global as a spatial container equated with economic globalization, and the idea of a global world that can be understood, framed, and represented according to neatly separated thought systems.

Understanding globality as a critical mode of interrogation, I argue that it is through reflexive transcultural analyses that 'processes through which forms [and discourses] emerge in local contexts with circuits of exchange'[2] are unravelled, and universalized art historical taxonomies, values, and hierarchies are deconstructed.[3]

Informed by postcolonial critiques of historicism,[4] I conceive of contemporary art in a global framework from a 'bottom-up', 'periphery-in' perspective, which sees contemporary artworks as plural articulations of global contemporaneity conceived as a shared yet heterogenous present continuously constituted by multiple contemporaneities.[5]

It is in this regard that I understand and examine contemporary Chinese art from the bottom up, as a contribution to a heterogenous *and* transculturally entangled global contemporaneity from a specific locale. According to the art historian Reiko Tomii, who conceptualizes contemporaneity as a geocultural concept, 'Contemporaneity can be defined as a given locale's perception regarding itself and the outside world, one empirically shaped by its interface with another locale and/or the outside world.'[6] She continues, 'Contemporaneity when cast as geohistorical concept serves as an expansive tool for decentering the ingrained Eurocentrism and opening up our discipline to examine a multiplicity of contemporary and vanguard practices worldwide. In theory, the methodology of contemporaneity constitutes not a familiar top-down (or "center-out") approach but a bottom-up (or "periphery-in") strategy, through comparative readings of various locales.'[7]

The starting point of my work as a historian of contemporary art in a global framework is an understanding of contemporary art as a critical category, i.e. as historically and transculturally constituted, and the observation that even though contemporary art has been discursively

treated as a global phenomenon, its conceptual framings have neither sufficiently attended to the plural and transculturally interconnected nature of the global world nor to the cultural multiplicity of histories and concepts that constitute the creation and interpretation of contemporary art in a global framework.

Contemporary art history and theory, despite the 'global turn', continue to be predominantly rooted in the universalized, self-referential Euro-American modern-postmodern genealogy, related temporalities, and aesthetic and critical discourses. Mainstream discourse of contemporary art in the global context, predominantly derived from Euro-American scholarship, has been largely unconcerned with rethinking Euro-American conceptual frameworks. It has been centred around defining and critiquing 'global contemporary art' as a universal effect of neo-liberal economic globalization, as a phenomenon constituted in and through global circulation, agents and institutions, without attending to contemporary art's cultural, historical, epistemological, and aesthetic heterogeneity and transcultural entanglements.[8] My transcultural art history approach critiques and provincializes mainstream Euro-American intellectual frameworks and their respective historical and epistemic 'truths' through critically engaging with alternative thought traditions including their respective governing effects.[9]

My current book project, tentatively titled *Doing Critical Global Art History: Transcultural Analyses and a Pluri-*

versal Conceptual Framework for Contemporary Art Historiographic Art, examines contemporary art-historiographic art — artistic approaches to art history writing, as its subject of study and discursive entry point.[10] I argue that even though 'historiographic art' has been discursively treated as a global phenomenon, its conceptual framings have neither sufficiently attended to the plural and transculturally interconnected nature of the global world nor to the cultural multiplicity of historiographic concepts, of how to relate to and represent the past respectively. In order to better understand historiographical problems that are discussed in contemporary artistic historiographies, and to gain new insights into the transcultural historicity and criticality of contemporary historiographic art, 'doing critical global art history' demands the expansion of these discourses to include transcultural analyses of various cultural concepts of historiography, historiography's relation to art, concepts of time, temporality, and the political implications of certain temporal regimes.[11]

It is in this regard that I have identified contemporary art-historiographic art by three Chinese artists as an ideal subject to shed light on the complex transcultural genealogies of contemporary art, to analyse and conceptually reframe contemporary art's complex relations to the past, and to write a globally connected history of art-historiographic art.

The book explores the complex transcultural processes — including their longer histories — that constitute art-historiographic art works by Qiu Zhijie, Li Ran, and Liu

Ding and the exhibition *Continuum — Generation by Generation* (buxi,不息) curated by artist-cum-curator Qiu Zhijie at the Venice Biennial in 2017. It examines how Qiu Zhijie, Li Ran, and Liu Ding contribute to critical global art historiography by dynamically interrelating multiple cultural, (art) historical, and linguistic sources and in so doing understanding, explaining and situating themselves as transculturally entangled history writing subjects from a specific locale. It examines the content of their connected art histories, the (traditional, modern, Marxist, and contemporary) concepts of historiography and art they work through, and the forms, media, techniques, materials, and aesthetic strategies they adopt from critical historical and transcultural perspectives.

I also explore how different cultural, historical, and political contexts change the meaning of the artworks and the exhibition discussed in the book. Instead of conceiving Chinese art as 'object' that is explored by a researcher and is the subject of knowledge, 'doing critical art history' is interested in exploring how meaning and knowledge are inflected in processes of moving between contexts, how migrating concepts transform contexts and vice versa, how meanings and knowledges are 'dialectical and mutually productive, blurring lines between self-other, internal-external, and researcher-researched',[12] constituting contemporary art in the global framework as a multirelational and often uneven and contested discursive field.

NOTES

1 Taking Xu Bing and Liu Xiaodong as examples, see Xu Bing, 'Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment', *Aisixiang*, 8 December 2011 <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/47865.html> [accessed 13 June 2025]; a recent interview with Liu Xiaodong, 'In Conversation: Liu Xiaodong with Barry Schwabsky', *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023 <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/art/Liu-Xiaodong-with-Barry-Schwabsky> [accessed 13 June 2025].

2 This is Monica Juneja's conceptualization of the transcultural as an analytical tool. See Monica Juneja, 'Understanding Transculturalism: Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation', in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. by Model House Research Group (Sternberg Press/Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2013), pp. 22–33.

3 Monica Juneja, 'Global Art History and the "Burden of Representation"', in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. by Hans Belting and others (Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 274–97 (p. 281).

4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

5 Terry Smith, 'Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question', in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. by Terry Smith and others (Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19.

6 Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Artin Japan* (The MIT Press, 2016), p. 15.

7 Ibid., p. 12. Reflecting on how to teach global art, Irit Rogoff has also emphasized the importance of a bottom-up perspective as a necessity to grapple with the world's complexity and a way to empower people living under the conditions of globalization. See Hammad Nasar, 'Interview with Irit Rogoff', in *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space*, ed. by Iftikhar Dadi and Nasar Hammad (Green Cardamom, 2012), pp. 101–10.

8 See *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (The MIT Press,

2013); *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Jonathan Harris (John Wiley, 2011).

9 Regarding the necessity to critically engage with the governing effects of alternative concepts in order to avoid romanticization and essentialist, radical diversity, see Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?: Meditations from the Periphery* (De Gruyter, 2023) and David Graeber's critique of the 'ontological turn' in anthropology. David Graeber, 'Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying "Reality": A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5.2 (2015) , pp. 1–41 <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.2.003>.

10 Publications on contemporary historiographic art include, Anthony Gardner, 'Which Histories Matter?', *Third Text*, 23.5 (2009), pp. 605–15; Anthony Gardner, 'Spectres after Marx: Contemporary Art's Contiguous Histories', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 10.1 (2011), pp. 201–12; Julia Gelshorn, 'Autorschaft und Autorität — Schreibt Kunst Geschichte?', in *Legitimationen: Künstlerinnen und Künstler als Autoritäten der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. by Julia Gelshorn, Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart, 5 (Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 9–18; Mark Godfrey, 'The Artist as Historian', *October*, 120 (Spring, 2007), pp. 140–72; Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* (Routledge, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003166412>; Susanne Leeb, 'Flucht nach nicht ganz vorn. Geschichte in der Kunst der Gegenwart', *Texte zur Kunst*, 76 (2009), pp. 29–45; Dieter Roelstraete, 'The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art', *e-flux Journal*, 4 March 2009 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/> [accessed 4 October 2023]; June Yap, *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Lexington Books, 2017); Birgit Hopfener, 'Mapping Art History, Relational and Ongoing', in *Qiu Zhijie. Geography of Knowledge: Maps 2010–2019* (Skira Editore, 2020), pp. 42–53; Birgit Hopfener, 'Qiu Zhijie as Historian: Media Critique as a Mode of Critical Historical Research', in *Negotiating Histories*, ed. by Yuko Kikuchi, special issue of *World Art*, 5.1 (Spring 2015), pp. 39–61. Closely related are discourses on contemporary archival art.

See for example Nora A. Taylor and Karin Zitzewitz, 'History as Figure of Thought in Contemporary Art in South and Southeast Asia', *Art Journal*, 77.4 (2018), pp. 46–48.

11 The focus of 'doing critical art history' on analysing concepts of historiography and art's relation to history is inspired by Kernbauer's book, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990*, which introduces artistic historiographies from the 1990s to today, offering invaluable new insights into 'art that explores history' by unpacking the 'complex relationship between art and history' as negotiated today *and* in historical perspective since the nineteenth century when (art) history first became a scholarly discipline in Europe/German-speaking academe (Kernbauer, *Art, History*, p. 1). Like Kernbauer, 'doing critical art history' argues that it is necessary to 'historicize the historiographical ethos itself in contemporary art and current conceptions of historicity of contemporary art' (Kernbauer, *Art, History*, p. 3). Kernbauer offers a convincing critical historical perspective that engages in rereading and by so doing complicating intellectual history of European conceptualizations of history and its relationship to art since the early nineteenth century, when history and art history were first acknowledged as scientific disciplines.

12 Leigh Jenco, 'Introduction: On the Possibility of Chinese Thought as Global Theory', in *Chinese Thought as Global Theory: Diversifying Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. by Leigh Jenco (Suny Press, 2016), pp. 1–26 (p. 4) <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18254369.5>.

ici BERLIN REPOSITORY

Song Xiaoxia and Birgit Hopfener, 'Teaching Global Art History through the Lens of Chinese Art: A Conversation', in *Worlding Global Art Histories through Teaching*, ed. by Eva Bentcheva, et al., Worlding Public Cultures (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 67–94 <https://doi.org/10.37050/wpc-co-02_6>

REFERENCES

Belting, Hans, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, eds, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (The MIT Press, 2013)

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000)

Gardner, Anthony, 'Spectres after Marx: Contemporary Art's Contiguous Histories', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 10.1 (2011), pp. 201–12 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2009.11432609>

—— 'Which Histories Matter?', *Third Text*, 23.5 (2009), pp. 605–15 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820903184864>

Gelshorn, Julia, 'Autorschaft und Autorität — Schreibt Kunst Geschichte?', in *Legitimationen: Künstlerinnen und Künstler als Autoritäten der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. by Julia Gelshorn, Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart, 5 (Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 9–18

Godfrey, Mark, 'The Artist as Historian', *October*, 120 (Spring, 2007), pp. 140–72 <https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2007.120.1.140>

Graeber, David, 'Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying "Reality": A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5.2 (2015), pp. 1–41 <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.2.003>

Harris, Jonathan, ed., *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (John Wiley, 2011)

Hopfener, Birgit, 'Mapping Art History, Relational and Ongoing', in *Qiu Zhijie. Geography of Knowledge: Maps 2010–2019* (Skira Editore, 2020), pp. 42–53

—— 'Qiu Zhijie as Historian: Media Critique as a Mode of Critical Historical Research', in *Negotiating Histories*, ed. by Yuko Kikuchi, special issue of *World Art*, 5.1 (Spring 2015), pp. 39–61 <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2015.1037403>

Jenco, Leigh, 'On the Possibility of Chinese Thought as Global Theory', in *Chinese Thought as Global Theory: Diversifying Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. by Leigh Jenco (Suny Press, 2016), pp. 1–26 <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18254369.5>

Juneja, Monica, *Can Art History Be Made Global?: Meditations from the Periphery* (De Gruyter, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111217062>

—— 'Global Art History and the "Burden of Representation"', in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. by Hans Belting and others (Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 274–97

—— 'Understanding Transculturalism: Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation', in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. by Model House Research Group (Sternberg Press/Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2013), pp. 22–33

Kernbauer, Eva, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* (Routledge, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003166412>

Leeb, Susanne, 'Flucht nach nicht ganz vorn. Geschichte in der Kunst der Gegenwart', *Texte zur Kunst*, 76 (2009), pp. 29–45

Liu Xiaodong, 'In Conversation with Barry Schwabsky', *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023 <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/art/Liu-Xiaodong-with-Barry-Schwabsky> [accessed 13 June 2025]

Nasar, Hammad, 'Interview with Irit Rogoff', in *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space*, ed. by Iftikhar Dadi and Nasar Hammad (Green Cardamom, 2012), pp. 101–10

Roelstraete, Dieter, 'The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art', *e-flux Journal*, 4 March 2009 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/> [accessed 4 October 2023]

Smith, Terry, 'Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question', in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. by Terry Smith and others (Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389330-001>

Taylor, Nora A., and Karin Zitzewitz, 'History as Figure of Thought in Contemporary Art in South and Southeast Asia', *Art Journal*, 77.4 (2018), pp. 46–58 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2018.1549875>

Tomii, Reiko, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Artin Japan* (The MIT Press, 2016)

Xu Bing, 'Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment', *Aisixiang*, 8 December 2011 <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/47865.html> [accessed 13 June 2025]

Yap, June, *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Lexington Books, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.5771/9781498555821>