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## *What Orientations for Disorientation?*

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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# What Orientations for Disorientation?

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## REFERENCES

Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les Avant-gardes artistiques 1848-1914 : une histoire transnationale*, Paris : Gallimard, 2015, (Folio. Histoire)

Eric Michaud, *Les Invasions barbares : une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris : Gallimard, 2015, (NRF Essais)

*Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, (Studies in Art and Historiography)

- 1 At a time when humanity is experiencing the greatest migratory crisis in its history, borders are being defined as much by their permeability as by the sometimes insuperable obstacle they represent. Back in 1979, the title of an interview given by Michel Foucault to the weekly Japanese magazine *Shûkan posuto* trumpeted: "The Problem of Refugees is a Harbinger of the Great Migration of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". "Because at this very moment", in the philosopher's words, "no less than 80,000 people are dicing with death, day after day. No discussion about the general equilibrium of the countries of the world, and no argument about the political and economic difficulties which go hand-in-hand with helping refugees, can justify the fact that States abandon these human beings at death's door. In 1938 and 1939, Jews fled from Germany and Central Europe, but because no one took them in, some of them died. Forty years have passed since then, and are we once more capable of sending 100,000 people to their death?"<sup>1</sup> In his interview, Michel Foucault was referring to Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, those 'boat people' who perished during their fateful sea crossings. His comments painfully echo the present-day plight of millions of women, children and men who are upping sticks to escape varying forms of violence. One of Foucault's observations, in particular, may offer a link with the

heart of the matter, underpinned by the recent publications that we are concerned with here: “the general equilibrium of the countries of the world”.

- 2 How is this equilibrium to be portrayed? What might its artistic counterpoint be? In 1975, Marcel Broodthaers produced *La Conquête de l'espace: Atlas à usage des artistes et des militaires* [*The Conquest of Space: Atlas for the use of Artists and the Military*], which was at once a miniature book and a limited-edition lithograph—a work representing the profiles of 32 countries. Arranged in alphabetical order and on the same scale, the choice of countries was arbitrary, even if they were almost all European, or former colonies, in particular French and Belgian. This case-by-case review of the proportions also helps to indicate that the predominant area is not necessarily the West, while at the same time heightening the possibility of thinking in terms of semantic shifts, when reading the maps is involved. In 1989, the *Magiciens de la terre* catalogue shrewdly borrowed this reproduction of the *Atlas* so that it would shed light on the choice to portray, on each page devoted to the artists' biographies, a map with the country of origin located exactly at the centre of the world. This work produced by Marcel Broodthaers is also what Sophie Cras refers to in her elegant essay titled “Global Conceptualism? Cartographies of conceptual art in pursuit of decentering”, where her penultimate point singles out the ambitious book, *Circulations on the Global History of Art*. By basing her propositions in particular on the exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, which was held in 1999 at the Queens Museum in New York, and by introducing a naturally associated reading of the different events listed by Lucy R. Lippard in *Six Years*, Sophie Cras seeks to underscore the contradictions inherent in the exhibition's primary wish, conceived on the basis of the diagram of a “map with many different centres with different points of origin”. She also quoted Seth Sieglaub's observation, regarding “as unique the beginnings of Conceptual art which appeared simultaneously all over the world”.<sup>2</sup> In order to visualize these assertions, Sophie Cras makes maps which trace the different artistic locations. The result confirms that the suggested “internationalization” is only partial, and that it is essentially the European countries and the United States (with New York at the forefront) which are at the centre of conceptual activities. Choosing Conceptual art as a symptom of trans-national art movements is interesting, because if artists' and critics' statements of intent veer in the direction of decompartmentalization (in particular with the possibility of getting their ideas to travel in their dematerialization), geopolitical and economic realities are such that art remains confined within a limited space. In the manner of Marcel Broodthaers's *Carte du monde utopique* produced in 1968 (nothing less than a map of the “political” world where the artist crosses out and replaces it by “utopian”), whose planetary divisions are specified by zones separated by coloured areas depicting political power rather than geographical space, it is indeed the scale of representation of a world *in its relative globality* which becomes the milestone whereby artistic productions are received in accordance with the place where they are situated. What was involved for Broodthaers was a comparison between Belgium and France, the latter being perceived as all-powerful in proportion to the former; for today's art historians and art critics, it is a matter of questioning the criteria for accommodating practices which themselves question trans-national mobility. To do this, the method is that of a re-writing of art history which takes into account both the challenge made to the disharmonies and imbalances between “centres” and “peripheries”, and those which persist between “centres” in competition even within one

and the same predominant country, as might be the case, for example, with the United States.

- 3 The quality of these books examining these geopolitical and cultural connections resides in the fact that they return, with precision, to the different possibilities of re-thinking the history of western art in the light of the critical thinking which is profoundly displacing the hegemonic paradigms of a Euro-American modernity. We might emphasize the fact that, since *Magiciens de la terre*—a show which, despite itself, introduced for the 1969s an unprecedented rift in the Eurocentric artistic and intellectual world—, a totally new age has been declared thanks to certain comparative orientations focusing their manner of analysis on forms of decentering, transfers, and circulations on a worldwide scale, in order to explore art praxes *in different ways*. There is probably good reason to insist here on the terminology inherent in these new readings, because they examine a vocabulary peculiar to the geography, the economy and the political customs which they involve. The whole being thus applied to art and its practices like so many demonstrations that these movements in space also have, as a direct consequence, various aesthetic transformations, institutional strategies, economic interests and epistemological renewals. “The criticism of traditional canons, the impact of post-colonial theories, and the spatial turning-point in the history of art itself, all lead art historians to broaden their viewpoints which are increasingly adopting the world as a whole”, to quote the emphatic first lines of the introduction by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel.<sup>3</sup> The year 2015 seems to have been one for clarification, so pointedly do the various dialogues between specialists assert the need to shed light on the irreversible theoretical upheavals of the discipline, and attract attention towards a plural methodology (embracing history and anthropology), where cultural and artistic identities are breaking down categories instead of getting caught up in them.
- 4 In her impressive research titled *Les Avant-gardes artistiques 1848-1918: une histoire transnationale*, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel specifies this space where cultural circulations were at work within the avant-gardes until the establishment of national identities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through this upset, the notion of exchange between artists and forms collides with the emancipation of thought in motion and short-circuits the fluidity of encounters which are, nevertheless, at the root of the artistic contemporaneity under consideration. This factor is also especially visible in the painstaking work introduced by Catherine Dossin, when she injects into her analysis of American art the paradox of a wavering hegemony. Her literary title, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s: a Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds*, summons melodrama and resounds with all the solemnity of a time sequence that has lived through the Second World war, the Cold war, the end of modernity, and the various alternative struggles, in order to recover the paramount role, depending on the position held. As if to underscore this fratricidal duel between Europe and the United States, it is the silkscreen print title *Le Rouge*, produced by Gérard Fromanger in 1968 and showing the bloodied American flag, which puts its seal on the book's cover.
- 5 If the period being examined by the authors makes considerable reference to the colonial and post-colonial periods, and if it focuses more specifically on the historiographical concept which prevailed in the previous century, like an echo, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was marked by a series of artistic and intellectual projects where the exhibition occupied a central place. *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, a vast undertaking conceived by Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi in 2001 at the Museum Boijmans Van

Beuningen in Rotterdam, is introduced in the publication by Chris Dercon, Mira Kho and Bert van Meggelen, who straightforwardly explain that the canons behind western values have been imposed here, there and everywhere, and that the present process of globalization is “another chapter in this history”. “After all”, they write, “the success of European art usually stems from the dialectic with which it annexes and rejects the art of the rest of the world. Europe has been the norm, the rest is deviant. [...] *Unpacking Europe* is an attempt to bring a radical change in to this situation by presenting Europe as ‘other’”.<sup>4</sup> Through these lines we can read ideas which are not that far removed from those put forward by the anthropologist Jack Goody in his book *The Theft of History*. “The ‘theft of history’ of the title refers to the take-over of history by the west.”<sup>5</sup> Goody has taken this history back to pre-history. At times his analysis overlaps with Eric Michaux’s, who chooses, in *Les Invasions barbares: une généalogie de l’histoire de l’art*, to draw up a vitriolic portrait of a discipline, and those committing it to paper. A history of art—at once executioner and victim—formatting spaces of creation, dividing individuals, and bolstering lines of demarcation. He lets his annoyance take shape in numerous sentences, one of which in the epilogue rings out in a particularly caustic way with regard to our contemporary day and age: “But on the other hand this same discourse showed that if, as Aimé Césaire said, the ‘creation of a savage continent’ during the Second World War was both the extension and the choice in return of colonial brutality, many of the cultural constructions which then shaped Europe made it possible to say nothing or disguise the fact that they were based on the same racial thinking which legitimized colonialism. Thus it was that the praise of “savage values” espoused in the name of the superiority of a “European race”, which was, in the end of the day, foreign to the values of classicism, was paradoxically able if not to justify, then at least to lessen both the crimes committed in the world war and those of colonialism, by declaring loud and clear, once again, that culture was first and foremost a question of race, and that the culture of Europe was superior to all the others, even in the register of savagery.”<sup>6</sup> We can suddenly understand how these words make convictions flinch, frame emotions, and usher in an endless line of thought.

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## NOTES

1. Foucault, Michel. “Le problème des réfugiés est un présage de la grande migration du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, interview with H. Uno, *Shûkan posuto*, 17 August 1979, p. 34-35, republished in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, Paris : Quarto Gallimard, 2001, p. 799

2. One of the three curators of *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* was the artist and critic of Uruguayan origin, Luis Camnitzer, who, from his base in the United States where he has lived since 1964, has often explored the various issues peculiar to a Conceptual art situated outside the western art worlds; Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973 quoted by Sophie Cras in “Global Conceptualism ? Cartographies of conceptual art in pursuit of decentering”, *Circulations on the Global History of Art*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, p. 167-169. The Seth Siegelaub quote can be found on page 169 (for him, the geographical decentering of art appeared very early on as something quite obvious, in

particular through the political and international dimension of his work as a critic and publisher).

3. *Circulations on the Global History of Art*, *op.cit.*, p. 1

4. Hassan, Salah. Dadi, Iftikhar. *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001, p. 6

5. Goody, Jack. *The Theft of History*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 1

6. Michaux, Eric. *Les Invasions barbares : une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris : Gallimard, 2015, p. 230-231