Alter-canons and alter-gardes – formations and re-formations of art historical canons in contemporary exhibitions: the case of Latin American and Eastern European art

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Introduction

Recently, major curatorial efforts have focussed on redrawing the global map of modernism and delineating alternative histories of art in the twentieth century. Examples include Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-1965 (2016-2017), Art in Europe 1945-1968 (2016-2017), and The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s-1970s (2017): three large-scale exhibitions of mid-twentieth century modern art aiming both to unify an appeal to a wide audience with a research-based approach, and to establish a global focus, moving beyond the fixation with the West.

Drawing on the case studies of the presentation of Latin American and Eastern European art in the aforementioned exhibitions, our aim is to discuss how current art historical canons are defined and by whom, how a new interest in rethinking the traditionally perceived centres and peripheries is finding expression in the museum landscape, and how newly shaped, ‘alter-modern’ canons are integrated into these processes. While recent curatorial initiatives have stimulated an understanding of the modernist art world that focusses on the fragmentary and ruptured, enabling a re-positioning of ‘peripheral’ art production within the latter, we propose that these initiatives nevertheless contain mechanisms for re-formations of canons, albeit in an all-inclusive global form. Our article will include a revision of the traditionally attributed roles of Latin American and Eastern European art,¹ a comparative analysis of the three recently-held exhibitions (2016-2018) and a discussion of models for alter-canonizations.

¹ While ‘Eastern Europe’ is a contested and problematic concept easily denying the diversity and complexity of the region, its persistent use in exhibition titles (including the case examples here) and the limitations of other terms, like ‘Central Europe’, ‘Soviet-Bloc’, or ‘Warsaw Pact Countries’, make it the most convincing term to use when dealing with artistic production from the European countries under state communism. Projects like East Art Map by Slovenian artist group IRWIN (http://www.eastartmap.org/, 2001-) and Former West (http://www.formerwest.org, 2009-2017) have criticized the notion of ‘Eastern European’ in contemporary art. The same applies to ‘Latin America’, which will be used here in a rather pragmatic sense and in accordance with Mauricio Tenorio Trillo’s critical historicization as well as defence of the term in: Latin America. The Allure of an Idea, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
Traditional canonizations of non-Western modern art


The modern museum, as Hubert Locher has pointed out, ‘displaying the canonical frame of reference, […] was to become the most important institution for the formation of art-historical canons […]’. Accordingly, art historian Hans Belting has highlighted the role of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), as the museum institution that “created the canon of modernist art” like no other and launched the “modernist myth”.

If modernism itself is the history of artistic rebellion against established notions of the canon and transgressions of traditional genres by a diverse array of ‘new’ approaches, its musealization has nevertheless been tied to the formation of a specific modernist canon – exemplified, as Belting explains, in the twentieth-century collections of MoMA. Belting even claims that


‘[m]odernism often functioned as a barrier protecting Western art from contamination by ethnic or popular art, and it marginalised local production as unprofessional. In response, non-Western art sometimes acted with an antithesis to the claim of universalism that was inherent in modernism.’4 The logic is thus set: inclusion into the modernist canon at the same time always meant exclusion. The canon is not a neutral term to describe ‘natural’ tendencies of art reception but is more like an ideological field, expressing powerful, instable struggles for dominance.

A famous visual attempt to construct and fix a canon of modernism is the chart of Cubism and Abstract Art drawn up by Alfred H. Barr (1902-1981): the founding director of MoMA visualised a genealogy of modernist art which was printed on the dust jacket of the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition in 1936 (Fig. 1).

Starting in the upper section, Barr presents fin-de-siècle art movements and their main protagonists as the sources for a genealogy of modernism that then complexly unfolds with the ongoing downwards timeline. “Primitivist” inspiration sources are marked in red, while abstractionist or proto-abstractionist tendencies and their protagonists are in black. In a surprisingly reductionist finale, the chart ends with only two categories, both contemporary to Barr then: non-geometrical abstract art and geometrical abstract art.

Several artists have followed Barr’s example and visualized genealogies of modern art in a much more figurative, if no less selective way: Nathaniel Pousette-Dart in 1938 and Ad Reinhardt in 1946 constructed tree charts, thus creating strong hierarchies operating from a roots-trunk-leaves metaphoric and visual constructions of a linear and progressive time.5 Perhaps the most striking example in this context is Miguel Covarrubias’s (1904-1957) Tree of Modern Art – Planted 60 Years Ago from 1933 (Fig. 2): the cosmopolitan Mexican artist, oriented towards a Europe-North

4 See Belting: ‘Contemporary Art’.
American based concept of the development of modern art, envisages a tree featuring branches both truncated and interwoven. Notably, the artist, travelling between artistic cultures and genres himself, positions two categories of traditional Western art on both sides of the tree: the modern male individual reflecting on a yet-to-be-painted canvas on the right, and on the left a classical head and an African fetish sculpture, both sources of inspiration for Western adaptions. He therefore constructs Western modernism as the result of adaptions of non-Western arts and Western self-reflection, but does not include any non-Western artist in his visual diagram.

Even if we consider modernism in general as always having been both an ongoing process of negotiations with fluent borders and an attempt to fix a specific vision of progress, the ‘traditional’ canon of modernist art, as mirrored in the collection histories of Western art museums, is nevertheless marked out by several criteria. Key parameters in the formation of the modernist canon are geography, temporality and autonomy. Firstly, modernism is dominated by a geographic focus on Western art production: art shown and received in Western loci by a mainly Western public. Here, the exhibition geography is fundamental – the road to canonization goes through recognition in the Western centres and the artistic production of any artist must display a capacity to adapt to their art world. In the main, these esteemed major museums are accessible to Western or Western-cosmopolitan visitors only.

As for the parameter of temporality, terms like ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernist canon’ imply a temporal momentum themselves: those who are first in time are modern, while ‘latecomers’ are liable to be characterised as part of a ‘belated modernity’ or ‘belated canonization’. These ‘untimely avant-gardes’ are perceived as anachronistic, as – drawing on Terry Smith’s remark on contemporary anachronisms – ‘cultures that seemed to have nothing modern about it, yet persist in modern times’. A constant overcoming of the old and a breaking with traditions and norms are thus regarded as fundamental for modernist art.

The other key parameter of modernist art discourse is autonomy: the artwork is conceived as autonomous, free from influences and social or political

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contexts, and has an internal logic that makes it capable of self-explanation. This aspect implies what we may call master narratives. Works by modernist ‘masters’ are set totally apart from the social contexts they were created in, with the ‘masters’ capable of producing an art that is convincing thanks to its sheer qualities, one of which is its genial originality.

These parameters and their application in curatorial, academic, and art critical practices are responsible for a long near-exclusion of Eastern European and Latin American art from canonization processes of modernist art. A ‘belated modernness’ has traditionally been attributed to Latin American art of the first half of the twentieth century, whereby ascriptions of the ‘exotic’ were employed to exclude this art from the modernist canon. Figurative art forms especially were interpreted as non-intellectual, naïve, intuitive and dilettantish artistic expressions – in this respect seen more as ‘primitive’ sources of inspiration for Western avant-garde art than as modern artworks themselves. Even with respect to the deliberately primitivist strategies of the Antropofagia movement in Brazil, which pursued a modernist postcolonial artistic approach to appropriate stereotypical attributions of the ‘savage’ and reinterpret it culturally, or Indigenismo, a modernist art practice that reevaluated the indigenous as a unique aspect of Latin American art, the ‘exotic’ quality and the ‘natural’ artistic merit displayed were frequently identified as specific characteristics – and hence used to highlight the ‘difference’ of Latin American modernist art and exclude it from existing modernist canons. Seen in this light, the prevailing view of twentieth century Latin American art is a construct of Western art histories and exhibitions: it is presented as the antagonism of canonical Western modernism, namely as everything modernism was not: exotic, figurative, un-intellectual, state-bound.

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11 Latin American art is not included in anthologies of art history such as in Ernst Gombrich’s famous The Story of Art, London: Phaidon, 1950. Even in 2005, Klaus von Beyme, when considering Mexican Muralism, wrote about the history of the ‘victory of Abstraction’ within a ‘fight between Abstraction and Figuration’ in Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden. Kunst und Gesellschaft 1905-1955, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005. Clement Greenberg with his promotion of Abstract Expressionism after World War II, consolidated the exclusion of Latin American figurative art, but also of conceptualist or performative avant-garde tendencies (e.g. Clement
In the post-World War II era, Latin American art movements such as neocre- 
crete art—mostly produced in Brazil— and Latin American conceptual art— 
Brazil, Argentina, and later Cuba— were referred to in specialised expert circles, 
mostly in not-yet-canonical and political oppositional contexts, including the 
collaboration between Joseph Beuys and García Uriburu, in the latter’s land art 
project at the Venice Biennial 1968 when he dyed the Grand Canal green, or in 
Mauricio Kagel’s collaborations with John Cage. The political situation in many 
Latin American countries, with brutal dictatorships in power, meant that the West 
had an extremely politicised notion of Latin American modernist art forms— which 
stood in stark contrast to the dominant abstract art forms being canonised in the 
Western world.

On the other hand, Eastern European art had been relatively smoothly 
accepted into art institutions and the international history of abstraction up until the 
Cold War. Once the east-west divide was cemented, the difference between 
figurative Socialist Realism— dominated by state doctrines and aesthetically 
conservative— and abstract Western art forms— individual and autonomous— 
hardened into a politically important construction. This dichotomy dominated the 
canonic discourses well into the twenty-first century, when finally, an interest in 
rediscovering ‘the other Europe’ was rekindled.12

Before the fall of the communist regimes, support of dissident art had an 
 obvious political meaning. One prime example of this was the exhibition of non-
obofficial Soviet art at the Biennial of Dissent in Venice in 1977, to which the Soviet 
Union responded by withdrawing its participation at the official Venice Biennial the 
following year. Eastern European art of the twentieth-century was largely 
inaccessible and not present in seminal and canon-founding exhibitions like 
Westkunst (Cologne, 1981). This has changed in recent years, with pioneering efforts 
like Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930 (Los Angeles County Museum, 2002) 
acting as showcases for Eastern European art informel, Pop art, Op art and 
conceptualism. However, this new interest in Eastern European art can be seen as 
characterised by a certain imbalance with regard to hierarchies, which moved the 
Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski to note: ‘Exhibitions of Eastern European Art in 
the contemporary art world, at one hand, compensate for absence, but one could 
view the Western exhibitions of Eastern European art as a form of inspection of 
“our” art by “their” Europe, or, put it in a different way, inspection of the ‘other’ 
Europe by Europe proper’.13 As observed by Katarina Macleod, ‘the East-West 
dichotomy is both disputed and perpetuated’ and the notion of ‘periphery is

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12 See the excellent catalogue of the two-part exhibition in Bern: Michael Baumgartner; 
Kathleen Bühler; Nina Zimmer, eds, The Revolution is Dead – Long Live the Revolution! From 
Malevich to Judd, from Deineka to Bartana, Munich: Kunstmuseum Bern and Zentrum Paul 

13 Piotr Piotrowski, In the Shadows of Yalta: Art and Avant-Gardes in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989, 
resilient’ in Western contemporary art exhibitions on Eastern Europe like Ostalgia (The New Museum, New York, 2011). Something ‘other’ is expected when dealing with Eastern European art and the Western art institution is most entrusted as curatorial and canonical authority.

It is, however, worth noting that official museums across Eastern Europe, where the period 1945-1989 is usually hushed over, now seem to have started to investigate these years as well. Examples include the exhibitions Conflicts and Adaptations. Estonian Art of the Soviet Era (1940-1991) (KUMU, Tallinn, 2016) and Within Frames. The Art of the Sixties in Hungary (1958-1968) (Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2017).

The ways in which Latin American and Eastern European art canons are either included or excluded on the basis of general standards claiming to determine what is relevant art, are comparable – not only because the processes of canonization function similarly, but also because of how political and economic hierarchies have structured the complex global history of the twentieth century. Following the end of the Cold War with all its social and cultural implications, both Eastern European and Latin American arts were ‘discovered’ as ‘exotic’ at the same historical juncture when Western art institutions and scholars started questioning the canons after 1989. This might be one reason for the fact that exhibitions in very recent years have stressed and compared these parallel structures of exclusion from the modernist art canon as represented in Western modern museum collections, such as Transmissions. Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980 at MoMA (2015-16) and The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1950s-1970s in Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art (2017-18). The tendency to draw parallels between Latin American and Eastern European art stems less from actual contacts and inter-regional exchanges in the post-war era, but is rather a matter of retrospectively observed similarities, both in regards to the socio-political conditions of various degrees of censorship, the proliferation of specific artistic styles, and, as we would argue, a similar attributed position as ‘other’ in the Western art historical canon. Alexandra Alisaukas in her review of the New York show argues with respect to this ‘othering’:

Transmissions … proposes a productive discussion between Eastern European and Latin American artists based on their common position as ‘close Others’ to Western Europe and the United States, respectively. In Piotrowski’s words, these regions are ‘on the periphery … [and] outside the center but still within the same frame of reference [as the centre].

So how have these ‘close Others’ actually been curated in recent Western shows of modern art?

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Reworking the modernist canon through a large-scale exhibition

Traditional parameters of canonization, of which we have highlighted key ones, appear to be challenged in the aforementioned exhibitions, presented as re-mappings of the modernist history of art that break with the Western canon. This revisionist claim is even described as a core quality of the artworks themselves. In the introduction to *Transmissions. Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980* it is claimed: ‘Challenging established art-historical narratives in the West and frameworks dictated by the Cold War, the works included suggest counter-geographies, alternative models of solidarity, and correspondences linking art practices in different parts of the world.’

Similar to this staging of counter-geographies and canonical alternatives at the MoMA, our case studies all unfold in institutions highly profiled in the European geography of exhibitions (with high public visibility and accessibility to a general audience), marking the entrance of the globalised history of art onto the museological centre stage. These exhibitions are manifestations of an emerging tendency to rework the canon and promote curatorial visions for an enlarged, inclusive and fragmented conception of the canon, which we propose to call the alter-canon. They also share a focus on the post-World War II years of the 1950s and 1960s as the timeframe for a new geography of art, seeking to go beyond the established art historiography of the Cold War era and high modernism, and mark out a horizon for understanding the contemporary world of the twenty-first century.

Our analysis of the three exhibitions, which we consider as exemplary for a broader tendency, will focus on the staging of Eastern European and Latin American art works and their relationship to the world-mapping aspirations as a whole. The exhibitions set up different perspectives: in one case, Eastern European and Latin American post-war art is positioned in a general world mapping, in another Eastern European art is absorbed into a re-mapping of European art, and, in

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the third case, a direct juxtaposition of the Eastern European and Latin American practice of an artistic style has been constructed. After presenting the exhibitions individually and describing their particular alter-canonical potential, we shall then discuss them from the perspective of the previously identified parameters of art historical canonization: geography, temporality, and autonomy.

**Postwar: art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965**

Subtitled ‘between the Pacific and the Atlantic’, the declared aim of *Postwar* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2016-2017)\(^{17}\) was to ‘refigure the cartographies of postwar modernism’\(^ {18}\) on a global scale, breaking with the North Atlantic predominance in the presentation of the art world of 1945-65. The exhibition drew on a dazzling array of 350 artworks by 218 artists, 23 related to an Eastern European and 28 a Latin American context. The chief curator of this ambitious attempt to create a ‘global art’ exhibition on an era traditionally associated with the hegemony of high modernism and framed by the Cold War binary, Okwui Enwezor, has formulated the essential discourse of the new cartography as ‘a truly global condition: the increasingly interlocked and interdependent nature of the world itself as a single entity, as emphasized by new political and technological realities’.\(^ {19}\) This ‘truly global’ perspective of the exhibition implies a break with the canonical geography, as well

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as with the parameter of originality – even if this whole world-optic is perhaps reminiscent of the high modernist rhetoric of ‘abstraction as a world language’.20

*Postwar* was organized into nine themed sections with titles such as ‘Aftermath: Zero Hour and the Atomic Era’, ‘Form Matters, New Images of Man’ and ‘Cosmopolitan Modernisms’,21 all conceived as global reinterpretations of the era, linking historical events or markers, such as the atomic bomb or decolonization, to artistic practices such as abstraction or realism. The presentation consequently juxtaposed household names from the Western modernist canon with works from other contexts, stressing the global circulation of styles and aesthetic approaches, from *art informel* paintings to pop assemblages: the section ‘Form Matters’, for instance, exhibited works by the canonical American artists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Philip Guston along with Czech artist Vladimir Boudnik, Argentinian Antonio Berni and the Turkish artist Fahrelnissa Zeid, while also bringing together the high modernist styles of abstract expressionism and tachism with assemblages and conceptual objects and distinctly non-Western vernacular modernist styles.

With contributions by various experts and institutions and by virtue of its interacting with the curatorial narration outlined by Enwezor and his co-curators, the exhibition presented a grand synthesis of the new world order emerging during the post-war era from 1945 to 1965, starting with the very visible moment of the dropping of the atom bomb and the ‘Zero Hour’, and ending not in 1968 but in the key year for the decolonization movement. The danger of such a synthesis and its attempt to provide an overall picture of an era is that it overshadows specific perspectives on the post-war complex it is seeking to discern and draw up, and thus in fact tends to conceal the power structures of the era and historicization, not least of all in the cases of Eastern Europe and Latin America. The exhibition falters in our view on two counts: the complex policies of style such as the role of art under state socialism, including the spread of socialist modernism in Africa and Asia, are not made sufficiently transparent; and secondly, the Latin American perspective on the post-war era is not given serious consideration, first appearing only in the fifth section ‘Concrete Visions’.

The global history of post-war art was presented in *Postwar* as very inclusive and all-encompassing, and some of the artistic positions were shown without any real feel for nuances, rehashing old stereotypes: works of socialist realism are presented immediately after and in contrast to the section on worldwide abstraction (and in the only section with display cases with printed material); and the monumental mural *The Revolutionaries* (Museo Castillo de Chapultepec, Mexico City) by David Alfaro Siqueiros is presented as a reproduction, indicating a

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different measure of value than that used for other artworks. In the section ‘Concrete Visions’, Latin American neo-concretism is not only actually more visible than European concrete art, it is even suggested that ‘South American neo-concrete art was imbued with an antirational vitalism, made socially specific, physically participatory and psychologically liberating’ as an alternative to Western geometric art, an assessment that once again attributes a non-rational, intuitive artistic approach to non-Western art.

The alter-canon suggested by Postwar can be seen as a kind of panorama based on the re-evaluation of the post-war era. While it does indeed offer new perspectives on the global constellations of the era, its presentations of Eastern European and Latin American art are underwhelming, failing to give this art the attention it deserves. As such, the show actually tends to confirm certain attributed roles in the established global canon of modern art: Eastern Europe is presented as firmly tied to realism and almost fixated by its traumatic post-war experience, while Latin America is depicted as ‘exotic modern’ with neo-concretism as its canonical moment (13 of the 28 Latin American artists were placed in this section).

Art in Europe 1945-1968

Art in Europe bears the subtitle ‘The Continent that the EU does not know’. In a striking similarity to its competitor Postwar, it was a mega-exhibition showing 400 works from eighteen countries, mixing canonical classics with un-canonical works in themed sections, apparently pursuing the aim to (re)draw the map of European art between 1945 and 1968 by inclusion of both the Eastern and Western European avant-gardes. Shown at large institutions in Brussels (Bozar Centre for Fine Arts), Karlsruhe (ZKM Centre for Art and Media) and Moscow (The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts) at a time of raising tensions in Europe, it even expressly

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22 It has to be said, though, that particularly Siqueiros (but also the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco) enjoyed widespread recognition in the North-American art scene of their time and several of their works were included in the MoMA collection and exhibited there as early as the 1930s and 1940s. See Anna Indych-López, Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. Mainly due to political reasons, foremost the outbreak of the war in 1939, there exists a difference in the recognition of Mexican muralism between Europe and the US.


25 The exhibition was shown at Bozar Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, 24 June – 25 September 2016, at ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, 22 October 2016 – 29 January 2017, and
claimed to be an ‘active pleading for Europe’\textsuperscript{26} and to take the ‘Pan-European perspective and thereby reinterpret the values, insights and foundations of Europe for the future’.\textsuperscript{27} This is possibly what the mystifying subtitle, \textit{The Continent that the EU does not know}, alluded to: the aim is to adjust the divisions created by the political structure of the continent. Whereas the standard narrative of post-war art unfurls a story where America took the lead and ‘New York stole the idea of the avant-garde from Paris’,\textsuperscript{28} and the ‘multiple modernities’ paradigm of global art emphasizes the non-Western perspectives, the declared European focus of \textit{Art in Europe} is a remarkable gesture, constructing its master narrative around a new European identity. ‘All in all, the innovation-driven, disruptive evolution of art in Europe after 1945, the emancipation from the past and the liberation from US and USSR hegemony created in the 1960s maybe the most important and influential decade of the twentieth century.’\textsuperscript{29}

The exhibition took and presented a parallel perspective on art from Eastern and Western Europe, an even-handed approach that sought to avoid binary juxtapositions. Like \textit{Postwar}, it started with the aftermath of World War II, albeit not with the atom bomb, but specifically still in wartime with the Yalta conference and the emerging probability of the forced division of Europe. The post-war artistic crisis was shown as having been quickly overcome by an explosion of ‘avant-garde’ practices, culminating in the conceptualism and media art of the 1960s. \textit{Art in Europe} went to great lengths to highlight the manifestation of this development beyond Western Europe. For instance, the only room dedicated to a single artist group was

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5}
\caption{Installation view, \textit{Art in Europe: 1945-1968. The Continent that the EU does not know} (22.10.2016-29.01.2017) at ZKM | Karlsruhe (Photo: ZKM).}
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\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6}
\caption{Exhibition Poster, \textit{Art in Europe: 1945-1968. The Continent that the EU does not know} (22.10.2016-29.01.2017) at ZKM | Karlsruhe.}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{28} To quote the famous title of Serge Guilbaut’s account of Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War, \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art}, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
\bibitem{29} Gillen and Weibel, ‘Introduction’, 15.
\end{thebibliography}
the New Tendencies/Nova Tendencija network formed around exhibitions of optical and system art in Zagreb in the 1960s. Instead of presenting Eastern European art as isolated and Other, *Art in Europe* narrated the history of a trans-European avant-garde based on experiments, networks and alternative structures. This narrative can be understood as an alternative to the canonical story of modern art, privileging contextualization over aesthetics with its somewhat sober timelines and unpretentious showing of a large number of works in ten historically themed sections, a contextualization that served to realise the ambitious goal of exploring how the whole of the continent searched a new future through a fragmented, yet prolific experimental art practice from 1945 to 1968.

**The other trans-Atlantic: kinetic and op art in Eastern Europe and Latin America**

By co-exhibiting Kinetic and Op art from Eastern Europe and Latin America, *The Other Trans-Atlantic* (Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2017) staged the comparative perspective on parallel non-canonical territories this article is also aiming to present, albeit in a different mode. Shown in museums in Warsaw, Moscow and São Paulo, the exhibition seemingly compensated Piotrowski’s reservation about exhibiting the “‘Other Europe’ in Europe proper”, being actually held in both Eastern Europe and Latin America, even if still in urban centres relatively well-known in the art world. Its canon-remapping stance highlights ‘the Other’ by stressing the Transatlantic affinity of the ‘brief yet historically significant moment in the post-war era during which artists from Eastern Europe and Latin America cultivated a shared enthusiasm for Kinetic and Op Art’, again with a

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focus on the 1960s. According to its curators, this subject ‘represented both an alternative and a challenge to the critical consensus of mainstream Northern-Atlantic art production’, with ‘another art history […] being written’.\(^{33}\) Uncovering this ‘other’ art history, the exhibition is consciously aligned with the current rereading of art history, a position stated in the accompanying anthology: ‘The Other Trans-Atlantic should be framed within the ever-expanding context of alternative art histories, and ever-growing field of “other” historiographies, as well as within the context of the ongoing problematization of the center-periphery dialectic that continues to haunt so much art-historical work to date’.\(^{34}\) This is a quintessential manifestation of the aforementioned tendency to highlight the research character of curatorial work. Despite this, it is questionable if the geographical expansion of the kinetic and op art canon really constitutes a new art historiography or if it broadens the regional frame without querying the processes of canonization and historiographies themselves.

The actual exhibition presented a survey of works by thirty artists. As in Postwar and Art in Europe, the works were embedded in a flowing structure of themes like ‘Ways of Seeing – Ways of Participating’ and ‘Utopias South and East’, which remained geographically undesignated. The rather conventional white-cube presentation, which was sometimes interrupted by the character of the works themselves, shifted the focus to formal qualities, despite the geo-cultural framing of the exhibition. With the deliberate staging of the alternative geography and ‘another art history’, The Other Trans-Atlantic pointed towards a conception of op art as specifically prominent in Eastern Europe and Latin America. To a certain extent this claim overlooked the popularity of op art in the West, as evidenced for instance by Bridget Riley winning the Grand Prize in Venice in 1968 and the exhibition The Responsive Eye at MoMA in 1965.

Comparative perspectives: altering canonical geography, temporality, and autonomy

The terms ‘re-mapping,’ ‘new geographies’ and ‘new cartographies’ abound in the rhetoric questioning the Western canon in all three exhibitions – and so too the visual material is used to illustrate this approach. The subtitle of Postwar – Between the Pacific and the Atlantic – suggests a perspective differing from the canonical geography that posits the precedence of the North Atlantic, even if it remains obscure as to what the ‘Pacific’ actually denotes in this new geography, apart from the gloomy starting point in Hiroshima. It is not Eurasia but the whole world the exhibition aims to cover. The curatorial rhetoric of the exhibition also highlights a refiguring of cartographies and a truly global representation.

The exhibition poster for Art in Europe features a map with overlapping contours of Europe’s geography and a subtitle promising access to a Europe beyond the political demarcations. The Pan-European perspective points towards a


rereading of the canonical geography and the centre-periphery paradigm within Europe (e.g. with Nova Tendencia’s Zagreb). The exhibition is part of an even larger thematic focus on New Cartographies in Art in the curatorial program of the ZKM.35 The Other Trans-Atlantic also suggests an alternative in its title, namely a rereading of exchange across the Atlantic, i.e. from the New York-Paris axis to how ‘another art history was being written linking the hubs of Warsaw, Budapest, Zagreb, Bucharest and Moscow together with Buenos Aires, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo’.36 Further cartographic references in current exhibition projects also include museum global – Microhistories of an Ex-centric Modernism (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2018/19), which uses the 1929 graphic Le monde au temps des surrealistes in its promotional material.37 The distorted map reinvents global geography according to Surrealist ideals, while the Transmissions show at MoMA used Juan Downey’s Map of America (1975, MoMA, New York) to illustrate the intended re-mapping of art canons. This predominant use of maps points to mapping as a curatorial tool, and is linked to the pronounced research-based dimension in all the exhibitions, with specialist advisors, associated conferences, reader-like catalogues and a positioning alongside the academic reassessment of art history. Mapping can be understood in these contexts as a visualizing instrument comparable to tree charts, now using graphics to de-stabilize canonical traditions.

All dedicated to specific eras and timespans, the three exhibitions under discussion also looked to extend the scope of the canon-defining factor of temporality. In Postwar, historical periodization was highlighted in the title, which claims the whole period within the two-decade timespan of 1945 to 1965. What needs to be kept in mind here is that these years have not been amongst the most highly valued in the canon of art historical epochs in the common perception, falling in between the dramatic World War II years (not to mention the glorified days of the pre-war avant-garde) and the cultural revolution of the (late) 1960s. To highlight the immediate post-war years and the ‘dull fifties’ as dynamic, energetic and intense,38 and as catalyst for today’s global world, a redefinition of the common approach to relevant epochs is implied. It is also striking that the time frame is set from 1945 to 1965, avoiding the ‘canonical’ year, 1968. While this curatorial decision can partly be related to the declared ambition to follow up the exhibition with two forthcoming volumes dedicated to the years 1965-1985 (Postcolonialism) and 1985-2005 (Postcommunism),39 it is still remarkable as a framework for re-approaching art history. The focus was not so much on the avant-gardist dynamic through or over

38 The exhibition was marketed with posters carrying the captions Postwar Energy, Postwar Dynamism, and Postwar Intensity.
time with emphasis placed on the first-moving ‘pioneers’, or on the subsequent ‘belated modernity’, but instead on a broader perspective, opening up to different and concurrent expressions of the global post-war experience. The nine sections were moreover not temporally bounded and not presented in some evolutionary succession.

*Art in Europe* kept to the usual years of 1945 and 1968 with an accentuation of their trans-European ramifications. Both here and in the other exhibitions, detailed timelines provide contextual information. Especially in *Art in Europe*, these timelines focus on broader cultural contexts, which are seen as being made up of exhibitions, cultural policy and cultural events across Europe, with references to *The First Modern Art Exhibition* at the Palac Sztuki, Krakow in 1949, and *50 years of Modern Art* at the Expo ’58 in Brussels in 1958. This contextualization signals a departure from the canonical focus on individuals and towards an awareness of institutional and cultural influences and settings.

*The Other Trans-Atlantic* stretched from the 1950s to the 1970s, framing the ‘brief yet historically significant moment’ where kinetic and op art were specifically important in Eastern Europe and Latin America. This brought these artists on a par with the Western variation of Op art, usually dated with the very same years.\(^{40}\)

It is noteworthy that the time spans of all three exhibitions bypass the debate on the end of modernism, by including various ‘high modernist’ tendencies like abstract expressionism and geometrical abstraction along with ‘post-modern’ art forms like Pop art and Conceptual art. This indicates a new tendency in art historiography to seek to overcome one of the highly-debated issues of the modernist and postmodernist generations. Regarding the canonical parameter of autonomy, which is tied to the mythologies of the free artist individual in a free world and the artwork as independent from defining contexts, the exhibitions obviously saw the assumed autonomy as in fact dependent on social, political and historical contexts of the era. Most artists, from Pablo Picasso to Mieczyslaw Berman, were represented with one work only, ruling out the possibility of attributing to any one artist canonical special status. Timelines and wall texts contextualized the artworks. And all the exhibitions were, rather conventionally, based on displaying the artworks themselves, thus insisting on the ability of art to serve as a portal to new understandings of the historical era in its different contexts. Other exhibitions with a similar reassessing focus on the global post-war era have taken a different line and relied instead on a combination of historical artworks, archive material and contemporary art, questioning more vigorously the inherent power of the work of art, for instance in *Parapolitics. Cultural Freedom and the Cold War* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2017-2018).\(^{41}\) The three exhibitions discussed here are thus not iconoclastic and are unwilling to give up the aura of the

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original artwork and the idea of artistic achievement; instead, they seek to expand the repertoire of artworks.

All the exhibitions presented challenged the parameters of the modernist canon mentioned earlier by including peripheral modernisms. The question is if this process really meant an alternative, or many alternatives, to the established canon, or if a canon-formation of the museum of modern art was widened in these cases to an extent of accepting the dissolution of a canon?

Towards the alter-canon?

The extendedly globalised remapping of modernism in exhibitions like the abovementioned should be seen as connected to the general global turn in the contemporary art world. The processes of hybridisation, of migratory and globally entangled art forms have inspired statements such as curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud claiming ‘the emergence of a global altermodernity’:

If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterized by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities.42

In other words, Bourriaud uses ‘alter’ to define a state of modernism after postmodernism after modernism, continuing a tradition of believing in cultural as well as artistic progress that names epochs one after the other in strict distinction from one another. In contrast, we propose to acknowledge modernism as always already globalised, as the exhibitions concurrently emphasize. Here it should again be noted how the exhibitions discussed earlier blurred the divide between modernism and neo-avant-garde/postmodernism often associated with the 1960s.

In 2005, the British art historian and postcolonial theorist Kobena Mercer observed on the so-called global turn in the arts: ‘In the sense that the global turn of the mid-1990s brought about a fusion between the discourses of the international and the multicultural, it may be said that a third phase of rapprochement in the dialogue on cultural difference and the visual arts has led to the current consensus on inclusion’.43 Thus, according to Mercer, an expanded global dialogue has characterized the arts concurrent with Bourriaud’s announcement of a global altermodernity. Interestingly, Mercer explains the global turn as a consequence not of theoretical debate but of curatorial practices fuelling a debate in the first place.44 These curatorial practices in the field of contemporary art (the documenta 11 in 2002

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42 The ‘Altermodern Manifesto’ for the 2009 Tate Triennial was presented online at: http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto (accessed 15 August 2018).
curated by Okwui Enwezor and the Venice Biennial in 2003 would be examples) have recently been adopted in the art historical curating of modernisms – in the experimental ‘discovery’ of specific ‘peripheral’ art practices (for instance Tropicália. A Revolution in Brazilian Culture, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2006) and, increasingly, in the form of the mega-exhibition more directly anointing the canonical with their scale and public visibility. However, Mercer assumes that a single canon, its scope extended to encompass the globe, overcomes several ‘minor’ canons.

Canonization as a constant struggle between canonical and non-canonical, metropolis and peripheries is, to cite Stuart Hall, never neutral but represents powerful hierarchies. Thus, the hierarchical structure of the canon stays intact even if today it is not one centre contrasting to a huge peripheral area, but many simultaneous and complexly entangled centres coexisting with their specific peripheries. Art historian Anna Brzyski has coined the term ‘partisan canons’ to describe canons beside and beyond official or dominant canons, rebelling against the latter, throughout history and across geography. She argues for ‘the existence of multiple, historically situated canonical formations, that is, of different canons, produced at different times and in different geographic locations by individuals, groups, and institutions pursuing at times very different agendas’ and also highlights the dominating power of canonical structures: ‘But the canon or rather canons are never just a matter of discourse and, [...], they are never neutral or inconsequential.’

In our view, ‘partisan canons’ is a convincing term for it reveals the political character of processes of canonization, an aspect Terry Smith in the same volume specifies: ‘partisan in the sense of politically partial, passionate, and resistant’. But we would like to stress that opposing canonization processes in modernism are directed against the very specific notion of the canon of ‘modern’ Western art we described earlier. Competing canons in modernist contexts – which reclaim modernity for regions that, in the context of political power struggles and colonial history, had been excluded from modernity so as to ensure and safeguard the ‘legitimation’ of Western interpretational sovereignty – need to be named specifically and be the subject of differentiated analysis in order to deconstruct and render visible hierarchical structures while stressing the competing conceptualisations of modernity.

Finally, we wish to underscore our agreement with Christian Kravagna, who extends the range of Argentinian theorist Enrique Dussel’s term trans-

45 See Stuart Hall, ed., Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publ., 2007. Hall refers here (235) to Derrida: ‘Jacques Derrida has argued that there are very few neutral binary oppositions. One pole of the binary, he argues, is usually the dominant one, the one which includes the other within its field of operations. There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition (Derrida 1972: Positions).’


48 Terry Smith, ‘Coda: Canons and Contemporaneity’, in: Brzyski, Partisan Canons, 309-26, 320. We think, however, that the term ‘partisan’ also evokes martial connotations that are questionable for the art context.
modernity/transmodernidad\textsuperscript{49} to name phenomena of diverse, including antagonistic, conceptions of artistic modernism, claiming that this is not at all only a contemporary phenomenon, but deeply rooted in the very history of – complexly entangled and globalized – modernism. In the deconstructive tradition, he aims to discover underlying, subliminal exclusivist art strategies. Harshly criticizing Eurocentric art history, he explains that it is only by concentrating on the contacts, which define the diverse transcultural exchange moments and interdependencies, that dichotomous power structures in global art history can be deconstructed.\textsuperscript{50}

Conclusion

The consensus of the formerly Western, now global art canon based on inclusion, as stated by Kobena Mercer, needs to be questioned: we do not think that there is one global canon that includes more and more formerly peripheral or ‘minor’ arts and regions of artistic productivity. On the contrary, this one canon is questioned by the existence and increasing visibility (in exhibitions) of diverse other ‘minor’ canons. At the same time, it should to be noted that the exhibitions discussed here are major institutional undertakings consciously promoted to set the scene and make their curators and institutions central players in the global art world. \textit{Postwar} was ‘branded’ with direct references to the dynamism and energy of its subject, the accompanying posters proclaiming ‘Postwar Energy’ and ‘Postwar Dynamism’, while the competing \textit{Art in Europe} used the contemporary European crisis to gain a profile. \textit{The Other Trans-Atlantic} was an investigation of another art historical field, both in terms of geography and genre, but appeared more traditional and confirming, an exhibition with a white-cube presentation that again decontextualises the artworks and can re-establish myths of autonomy.

As we have argued, the exhibitions discussed here are expressions of an ongoing debate on canonization processes in modernist art rather than conclusive final statements on one global canon. That the exhibitions coincided (the synthesising exhibitions \textit{Postwar} and \textit{Art in Europe} were both on show in southern Germany at the same time without mentioning each other) reveals an aspect of competition, also with regard to who is to define the global canon. More importantly, we find it necessary to critically assess the exhibition itself as an essential agent in the canon-building apparatus – and, potentially, as a way of rethinking, multiplying and fragmenting the modernist canon.


Hence, the shift in the art world might be not so much towards a global canon, but towards fragmenting the modernist canon itself. It seems that various co-existing, equally important ‘alter’-canons have gained visibility in recent years. This fragmentation is the very ‘modern’ canon, with fragmentation a core criterion for modern-ness ever since Walter Benjamin. After all, borrowing Bourriaud’s term but using it differently, we contend that the fragmented canon is the alter-canon.


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51 As expressed throughout The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk, posthumously published in 1999) and also in the discussion of the montage in The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, 1936).