

Writing History Without a Prior Canon **Bartomeu Mari**

One of the characteristics that unites cultural contexts as geographically disparate as the Iberian Peninsula, the countries of Eastern Europe and a handful of Latin American nations is the absence of canons as a basis for writing recent art history. Dictatorial regimes have always put more effort into denying than affirming, and culture is one of those areas in which denial, censorship and the lack of freedom have been exercised more thoroughly in these contexts. Ironically, those very absolutist governments and dictatorships are the ones who pretend to be in possession of The Canon.

Artistic creation has confronted situations of censorship and the lack of freedom with similar languages. In present-day China, artists such as Ai Weiwei have ended up borrowing strategies for representation and subject matter that were taken up earlier in the 1960s and 1970s. In spite of all efforts to block, control or censor, there is never a total stagnation of information, and artists have always found alternative circuits through which to gain visibility for their work. The presentation and distribution of art under the conditions of censorship and absence of freedom has spawned uncontrolled networks of information, but it has also produced forms and materials on the fringe of artistic convention. The integration of these forms, materials and attitudes within the present-day narratives of history and heritage is one of the major tasks confronting the museums of our time.

The idea of a canon evokes, in itself, a structuring into a hierarchy of the artistic production of a specific moment, an historical period, an epoch. Who establishes the canons and with what mechanisms? Is it the critics at the present time or the historians later on? Is it possible to conceive of a tool that is instrumental in categorizing or structuring artistic production into a hierarchy that, by way of a canon, can serve as a reliable reference for writing its history? While conventions do not constitute a canon as such, they do, however, exert considerable influence on the way taste is held up as a source of authority. The market and its ability to impose its most highly

prized figures on prevailing taste—together with the assiduous complicity of the mass media—has acted as an authoritative source since the end of the 20th century. Moreover, the fact that the majority of the biennials and major collective exhibitions have become art fairs is evidence that the market is capable of absorbing any form, material or product, no matter how much it seems to escape from or avoid the conditions and clutches of commercialization. The very structure of the art auction, one of the most powerful motivators of the market, has inserted contemporary art into its workings. Anything that is contemporary can be auctioned off. Thus, the outcome of the auction and the market prices begin to function as a canon, regardless of whether the critic has taken part in the conversation or the voice of the historian has (not yet) been heard.

Does popular acceptance constitute a canon? Theory tends to answer this question in the negative. But the “new world order” answers it in the affirmative. The corollary of this reasoning and the conclusion that brings us closer seem to question the role of the specialist, whether he/she is the curator of the exhibition—the scientific and technical author of the event—or the journalist-critic. After the Second World War the role of the critic who recognized the genius in the work of an artist became consolidated. As we approached the 21st century, the authority of the critic was diluted and its influence broken up and divided between a series of actors who have almost always been present and are not new, but have passed unnoticed among us until now. The collector will now play a more prominent role, and the freelance or non-affiliated curator, the gallery owner who brings everyone together, the auction house that can overshadow or assume the role of the gallery as the party working to commercialize the work, and the mass media, among other agents, have all taken on a highly relevant or formative role in the formation of the commercial aspect of the canon. These actors frequently converge in the work of a particular artist to the point of suggesting the conclusion that they are all related to each other. This is often the case. But exceptions abound: artists who are considered by critics to be highly significant and of great cultural value do not always command the highest market prices, nor are they commercialized by influential galleries or sought after by a large number of collectors. In contrast, there are those definitively mediocre artists who do not appear on the

museum circuit or in important international exhibitions but whose dealers can still maintain their high prices because they end up finding specific collectors for their market. The recent publication of a lecture by Eugene M. Schwartz¹ is a perfect example of the systematization of a passion and a set of intuitions to convert it into a method. What if the history of contemporary art were to be written by collectors and not by historians? Or, to put it another way, what if historians were to “historicize” only that art that has been collected and, as such, outlived its time?

The American historian Robert S. Nelson interpreted the paradox of the canon particularly well in his essay, “Canons of Art in the Space of Our Desires,”² when he said that the canon should apply to present-day artistic production. Nelson describes a great contradiction: the canon is a utopia; it has no place among us because it is an ideal construction that never becomes exemplified. At the same time, however, because it seems impossible to write history without canons, the canon, therefore, is necessary. The problem of the canon in contemporary art, in the art milieu of our time, becomes more acute when we observe that the so-called unity of artistic production, the unity of criteria for assuming the value of specific objects, does not exist. Is it possible to conceive of a canon outside the limits established by modernity? What conclusions can be drawn about the make up of what we call “modern”? To whom does modernity belong? The feminist and post-colonial discourses that emerged in Anglo-Saxon intellectual circles in the 1970s have exposed the difficulty of trying to maintain a single and univocal view—white and male—of history and its narratives. If we consider artistic production from the beginning of the 20th century, we can see that its creative centers correspond to those centers of political, economic and military power. In his now canonical work, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*,³ Serge Guilbaut analyses the transfer of the “capitality” of art from Paris to the American metropolis of New York in creative, commercial and institutional terms. Even if the canon is a utopia and does not exist per se, the voices of power and authority still have clearly defined geographic locations. In general, the displacement of the the global art capital from the center of Europe to the East Coast of the United States merely perpetuated the role of the Northern hemisphere and the Anglo-Saxon axis as economic and cultural powers capable of

¹ Eugene M. Schwartz, *Confessions of a Poor Collector: How to build a worthwhile art collection with the least possible money*, Stuttgart: Edition Taube, 2011 (The New York Cultural Center 1970).

² See Robert S. Nelson, *Now is the Time: Art and Theory in the 21st Century*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2009.

³ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983.

organizing and canonizing the art world. In these regions commercial power is accompanied by the power of the academy that provides the criteria and critical arguments. Above all, it is accompanied by the institutional power that, on the one hand, acquires (collects) and, on the other, theorizes; or, in other words, includes a particular type of artistic production within a canon.

We can see the same utopian quality of the canon in the fact that today there is no single canon but rather views of art that exist side by side, that occasionally intersect and are sometimes antagonistic. The variety of narratives that coexist in new critical ecosystems does not produce a stable and lasting canon but rather a network of ideas that interweave a system of interpretation within and amongst themselves. Moreover, we can also see at a given moment how specific canons evolve and mutate. One of the major questions that arises is whether or not the crisis of a particular canon, such as the one we have seen in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, can produce a new canon. In other words, can it provoke—to paraphrase the title of the MACBA exhibition held in 2011—another type of reference or authority based on a web of multiple or parallel narratives?⁴

Two facts can help us see some discrete but powerful, earth-shaking movements. Until recently The Museum of Modern Art in New York had put painting and sculpture at the forefront of their collections and held exhibitions as their most highly valued artistic genres. Between 2009 and 2011, however, it incorporated a series of relevant works that are very far from the previously defended canon: the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, the collection and archives of Seth Siegelaub and the Daled Collection. These three collections have one important element in common: they are centered on a type of art that was, until very recently, situated on the periphery of the dominant narratives of contemporary art history. Under the heading of “conceptual art” they gathered together a series of experiments whose essential characteristic was a change in the system of values based on the aesthetic of the transcendental and Romantic. This aesthetic holds that the art object contains the qualities of beauty perceived by the subject. But this theory was substituted by another system of values based on both acts and on behavior. This process started at the beginning of the 20th century with some of the most advanced branches of

⁴ *Museum of Parallel Narratives*, curated by Zdenka Badovinac. Organised and produced by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA); Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana; the Jülius Koller Society (SJK), Bratislava; the Van Abbemuseum (VAM), Eindhoven; and the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (M HKA), Antwerp.

the historical avant-garde, but it came to greater fruition more extensively in the 1960s and 1970s. The aesthetic of the object gave way to the aesthetic of behavior. The French philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer put it this way: “The real objective of the study of aesthetics, before theory, should be behavior, the relationships that connect us to both the world of the works of art and the world per se. These types of behavior are the ones in which ordinary knowledge becomes a source of pleasure, in which subjectivity, acquired talents, memory and sensations all play a part.”⁵ The aesthetic of behavior begins with the activity of artists whose work disqualifies the previous system. We will probably have to wait some fifty years to witness the incorporation of these works and this new system of values into the canon of art—in other words, into the normal language of the artistic institution.

In speaking of the Seth Siegelau Collection, Glenn D. Lowry, the director of MoMA remarked: “This collection of works and archives has great historical importance, as many of the works were shown together in critical exhibitions of the late 1960s and early 1970s that radically challenged traditional notions of the art object. [...] This acquisition transforms the collection of The Museum of Modern Art into a pre-eminent center of conceptual art, one of the decisive movements of the 20th century.”⁶ Conceptual art became a “decisive moment” in the artistic events of the last century and, as such, it is not an anomaly, a marginal gesture or a “systemic error”. At the same time, the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles is also carrying out a policy of acquiring artists’ archives to facilitate the reading, interpretation and diffusion of art in both the 20th and the 21st centuries.

Two important points can be concluded from these facts. First, museums such as MoMA and cultural institutions like the Getty Foundation have decided to “complete” their permanent collections with those experiments, artists and works that had formerly questioned the centrality and very authority of the institution itself. As the director of MoMA declared: “The Daled Collection is among the most significant acquisitions in the Museum’s history and substantially enhances and transforms our holdings of art from the 1960s and 1970s, filling major gaps and also adding considerable depth in other areas of our collection.”⁷ The art that questioned and caused a crisis in the very

⁵ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Les célibataires de l’art. Pour une esthétique sans mythes*, Gallimard, Paris 1996.

⁶ See Glenn D. Lowry, “The MoMA Acquires Major Collection of Conceptual Art from Seth Siegelau,” <http://www.artnowmag.com/Magazine/World/2011/Jun/World_Jun1511.html>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

nature of the artistic institution is finally swallowed up and digested by the institution itself. Does this mean that one canon has replaced another or that one artistic paradigm can take the place of its antagonist? Of course it doesn't. But it does mean that the official canon has become more flexible in order to be capable of incorporating its opposite.

One of the consequences of this change in the system has been its effect on the internal ordering of the museum, structured in a hierarchical manner and divided into specialized departments: painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, architecture, design, film, and finally performance and new media. American artist Joseph Kosuth relates a story that illustrates the inadequacy of the museum organized into departments to "cope" with the new type of art. When he requested his work *One Art and Three Chairs* (1965) from an important European museum for a temporary exhibition, the registrar department of the museum could not locate the work in its storage section. After frantic searches the work was finally located by way of its different components: the chair was in the design section, the photograph of the actual chair in the photography department and the text in the department of prints. Just as Gertrude Stein foresaw, the modern museum and the contemporary museum would clash head-on.

Another sign that made us think about how the canon is being reoriented was the way the permanent collections of the MNAM-Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, followed shortly afterward by the presentation of the Tate Modern collections in London, were reorganized. This opening took place in May 2000. The transition to the new century brought with it a new way of displaying the collections that left behind chronological order and the succession of movements and styles. These presentations were based on "thematic environments" within which chronologies have been superimposed until they become random or incidental. Art is no longer explained by a time continuum but rather around formal affinities. History is no longer an unfolding progression in time, but rather a whirlwind that we can grasp by purely ocular sensibility. *Experience or Interpretation. The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* is the title of a lecture by Sir Nicholas Sirota in 1995 and published four years later.⁸ In it he establishes the foundations for the presentation of the collection of contemporary art in the Tate

⁸ Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation. The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2000.

Modern. The back cover of the edition highlights a commentary from the *Architectural Journal*, “[it] Gives a clear idea of what we should expect at Bankside Tate.” In other words, the theoretical bases in favor of experience and physical perception beyond traditional understanding had been laid down.

The integration of the Silverman, Siegelau and Daled Collections on the part of MoMA means that the American institution decided to go a way opposite that of the European institutions. For the Americans, the canon continues to be established within a temporal continuum and is determined by a very specific vocabulary. Even so, it recognizes the viral potential of this type of art for the present organization of the museum: “Cross-disciplinary in nature, the (Gilbert and Lila Silverman) Collection will be utilized by curators from all Departments of the Museum.” In other words, the experiences in the art of the 1960s and 1970s correspond to a system of values that will not be allowed to split off into departments or specialties. All the departments, genres and disciplines will come together and intersect with each other.

One of the primary motivations for the creation of L’Internationale consortium has been to establish a vocabulary and a chronology appropriate for the writing of art history produced within the radius of the periphery. This is necessary because, even though these places are close to the centers of power, they are still external to their basic functioning. Vocabulary and chronology are essential tools in establishing a canon: vocabulary identifies objects, ideas and values; chronology locates them in the temporal continuum that situates them in history. The evolution of artistic creation in certain parts of Europe such as the Eastern countries and the Iberian Peninsula has not taken place in conditions similar to those in Central Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world. The Latin American continent has had access to forms and degrees of modernity that were very specific and unique, although different from the canonical forms. Both Africa and Asia have also come into the present by way of varying degrees of access to modernity, in its different political, economic, social and aesthetic aspects and implications. While writers such as Néstor García-Canclini in Latin America have taken up the uniqueness of those “entrances and exits” in modernity,⁹ those countries on the periphery of the European continent are now beginning to deal specifically

⁹ Néstor García-Canclini, *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, Grijalbo, Mexico 1998.

with their own particular contributions to the History of Art in capital letters. In Eastern Europe authors such as Boris Groys and Piotr Piotrowski, among others, have together produced a substantial bibliography to stand alongside the solid foundations of the contemporary heritage being established on the part of museums and private initiatives. A country's material heritage and historical narrative are two symbiotic entities: one cannot exist without the other. Logically, the acquisition of a material legacy, a collection of works, objects and documents precedes the establishment of the narratives that will become History with the contribution of the pertinent authority.

While it is possible to conceive of a History of Art without a single canon, it is not possible to conceive of a History without a museum or a heritage. The Getty Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art in New York have made it clear that the history of contemporary art cannot be written by starting only from the study of the works of art per se. It is becoming clearer that the history of contemporary art has need of the documents that accompany the making of works and allow us to translate the varied subjectivities into objectively narrated arguments. Possession of that heritage enables the institution to carry out the production of historical narrative. Our museums in Southern and Eastern Europe are economically fragile and politically unstable by nature, because we gained access to the democratic system far later than our Central European colleagues and because we maintain our precarious balance within the liberal system with less security and tradition. This is why we have an imperative duty to fulfill and conserve our heritage. This situation is made even more urgent because our conditions are understandably inferior when we attempt to develop our cultural output on a broader scale, given that we are obliged to compete with the typologies and formats that originate in and emanate from the metropolis. Our artistic production is peripheral, not because of its geographic condition but because of its typological material. Above and beyond vocabulary and chronology, it is imperative to invent new narrative typologies.

Translated from the Spanish by Selma Margaretten.