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LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY

# Eclipse

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Theories in Contemporary Art's World

**Bethany Burton**

**5/6/2014**

Globalization and New Internationalism have quickly become two of the most common and comprehensive theories for discussing contemporary art in the early twenty-first century. Moving beyond the formal qualities of a Eurocentric paradigm, today's art movement is often associated with ephemeral practices that span outside of both national territories and museum walls. While activating public space and integrating electronic multimedia, artists and curators have begun to challenge the formal art institutional apparatus, showcasing a worldwide spectacle that merges together Western and non-Western art.

As a result, new global perspectives challenge the notion that there is and always has been one art world. As international borders open up, artists who were once marginalized by a Western centered art world are now internationally recognized for their social activism and global impact. This phenomenon has widened the domain of discourse within the art world.<sup>1</sup> So what does this mean for art theory?

On one hand, diversity within the art sphere is a positive development. It encourages scholars to consider elements of art beyond the framework of a Western canon and European centered ideology. As society moves forward into an era where art is sold online, "high" art and "low" culture have become blurred.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, communication and collaboration among artists has preceded internationally and the old system of "art speak" has opened its doors to a more global spectacle.<sup>3</sup> Hierarchies are becoming dismantled and more and more people have access to an institution that was once ruled by the elite.

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<sup>1</sup> Philipsen, Lotte. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Lee, *Forgetting the Art World*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

On the other hand, however, this diversity also poses a challenge to scholars. The language and context for discussing and speculating about works of art is no longer fixed. The art world has been stretched and morphed into a nauseating flux of intercontinental semantics. This paper will investigate recent ways in which theorists such as Lotte Philipsen have begun to systematically approach the issue and why many, like Art Historian Pamela Lee, have deemed the art world terminally ill.

Firstly, in order to discuss the degeneration of the art world, we must define what it is that the “art world” actually is and what it represents in today’s society. It is easy to talk about there being such a place without defining it at all. The term art world has consequently been used ubiquitously throughout academia with no further explanation. A brief outline of the development of the art world will be necessary for the discussion of new art theory.

Beginning with the Western notion of the academy, our historical understanding of an art world evolved from the middle ages and so on through European craft guilds of the twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> Guilds were municipal organizations and regulated monopolies which inspired the modern sense of the academy, where “intellectuals met informally and discussed Greek philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> This brought about intellectual changes within the department of fine art, introducing the notion of “*disegno*,”<sup>6</sup> A term that stands for both design and drawing, and signals creativity, *disegno* inspired a vocabulary of art that undoubtedly framed the art world that we

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<sup>4</sup> Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, 9

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-13

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14



know up to today.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to note that the academic attitude emphasized a rigorous hierarchy of speech and discourse that would significantly affect society's relationship to art.<sup>8</sup>

In his book, *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Value*, Hans Van Maanen puts forth a critical overview regarding a history of theories for how the arts function in society.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by some of the most renowned aesthetic philosophers such as Author Danto, George Dickie, and Pierre Bourdieu, the term art world was established to describe a systematic commonplace. More specifically, stated by Dickie, "the art enterprise can be seen to be a complex of interrelated roles governed by conventional and non-conventional rules."<sup>10</sup>

The rules mentioned by Dickie encompass a collective of artists, performers, audience members, critics, and theorists. The art world is a domain or a system for thinking that allows for the establishment of theory in order to contextualize aesthetic value and discuss the occupation of a work of art, triangulating its relationship between society and its contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> Any type of theory of course, requires a single intrinsic language that is shared within the parameters of the art world. This language so to speak, has a historically developed nature that changes along with societal conditions.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the art world is not necessarily a physical or material location; it is an institution within society that contains a specific vocabulary. It is a sanctioned place that provides the necessary context for both the production of art work, and discussion of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>9</sup> Maanen, Hans van. *How to Study Art Worlds : On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 226

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 275

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 207

relevancy and meaning. Without such specificities, the formulaic properties used to theorize about works of art become complicated, or even worse; they cease to exist.

Dialectical complications are often referred to as paradigm shifts in which scholars of a specific time period collectively change their minds about scientific, political, or cultural concepts.<sup>13</sup> Such events have happened throughout society's understanding of history. Under changing societal conditions and advancing technological fervor, critics, scholars, and thinkers turn to new ways of establishing a dialect about aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

This is precisely what Lotte Philipsen attempts to do in her book, *Globalizing the Contemporary Art World*. Philipsen suggests that our single, cosmopolitan institution of art has become dismantled by an international epidemic. Our art world has experienced an accelerated number of international biennials, triennials, touring exhibitions, galleries, experimental museums, commercial spaces, private collections, art schools, academies, and lest not forget online blogs.<sup>15</sup> Such branding mechanisms have made artists' collections widely available to the masses, creating spectacular public affairs throughout the world.<sup>16</sup> The implementation these international circuits has eroded current dialectical properties, simultaneously degrading the institutional vocabulary of the art world and creating an "anything-goes" approach to the definition of art.<sup>17</sup> Due to its increasing heterogeneity and cross-cultural perspective,

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<sup>13</sup> Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, 83

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>15</sup> Philipsen, Lotte. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*. 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Philipsen, Lotte. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*. 4.

contemporary art has become difficult to describe, qualify, and translate into rational academic writing.<sup>18</sup> Theorist and critic, Pamela Lee, recognizes a similar visual arts phenomenon.

In her book *Forgetting the Art World*, Lee diagnoses our accelerated visual culture with a very unique illness. Our art world suffers from an ailment akin to something like schizophrenia or posttraumatic stress disorder; it has lost its singularity, focus, social ground, and established dialect.<sup>19</sup> The art world as we know it has become subject to infinite shape-shifting, prodded by multifarious intersections of politics, economics, and globalism.<sup>20</sup>

According to Lee, this sickness is largely a symptom of a cybernetic age that has pulled together a seemingly endless network of art sponsorship from around the world.<sup>21</sup> She suggests that this global epidemic has forced society to forget the art world, and describes the circumstance as an “eclipse of a historical notion of the art world.”<sup>22</sup> In turn, society has deconstructed the language used to talk about works of art. This pandemic has introduced a crisis for art theory and methodology as it once operated within a distinctly homogenous and Eurocentric vocabulary.<sup>23</sup> She states that the art world was once a closed system that “enabled the work of art to function as a coherent and autonomous thing within that ‘negotiated environment’ – transparent to those who inhabited that system’s still well-policed borders.”<sup>24</sup>

However, no longer are those borders policed. In fact, globalization has ensured the destruction of those very borders. Under such conditions, scholars, theorists, artists, and curators

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>19</sup> Lee, Pamela M. *Forgetting the Art World*. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

are challenged to search for what still separates the work of art from everyday reality.<sup>25</sup> This also proposes the issue of quality, which is inherently linked to a profoundly Western elitism. The notion of beauty and quality, as Vernon Minor suggests, has been (up until now) strongly tied to patriarchy, “biases of the ruling class,” and scholars of higher education. Perhaps forgetting the art world is a positive phenomenon that allows us to diminish such old school ideologies.

At the outset, this “eclipse” that Lee describes, is reminiscent of a Marxist critique. Perhaps one might call it a “semantic stalemate” marked by pluralism of the late twentieth century in which we have homogenized the very notion of culture and revealed just how elitist the art institutional apparatus may be.<sup>26</sup> However, what Lee is describing might actually be a development of concepts stemming from the early 1990s that indicate an era after marxism and pluralism. Lotte Philipsen recognizes the Whitney Biennial 1993 as an event that pinpoints this exact juncture, and illustrates the same degeneration and shapelessness of the art world that Lee describes in her 2012 publication.

For various reasons this 1993 biennial marked a shift away from a European emphasis on pure aesthetic quality.<sup>27</sup> Much like Parisian salons of the late nineteenth century, the Whitney Biennial is known for being a “self-appointed beacon of the arts.” In her examination of the *Whitney Biennial 1993*, academic art critic, Luis Camnitzer, describes the exhibit as a particularly historical moment that recognized artists from marginalized groups of society. She noticed that emerging artists seemed to be selected based on interests in alterity, political discourse, and social justice issues. Highlights of the show included George Holliday’s home-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>26</sup> Lee, Pamela M. *Forgetting the Art World*. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Philipsen, Lotte. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*. 80.

video footage of Los Angeles Police beating Rodney King (figure 1), an incident that soon after sparked heated concern for the treatment of minorities.<sup>28</sup> Another important aspect of the show included Kiki Smith's *Mother* (figure 2), which encouraged discussion about the social and political relationships tied to a woman's body. These pieces were non normative works of art with little formal aesthetic qualities. It was unusual that they would be curated and placed within such a facility that signified Western elitism.

In 2002, another international exhibition, *Documenta 11*, sought to escape the confines of Western tradition. Nigerian based curator, Okwui Enwezor, was selected to lead one of the first international exhibitions to truly reveal global realities and diffuse Western ideology. Enwezor stressed the importance of "postcoloniality," which aims to shatter Western global optics to "articulate modalities that define the new meaning-and memory-making systems of the late modernity."<sup>29</sup> In opposition to avant-garde, and moving away from existing epistemological structures, Enwezor used *Documenta 11* in Kassel, Germany to attack the very institutions to which *Documenta* itself belonged. His goal was to generate spaces "seen as forums of committed ethical and intellectual reflection."<sup>30</sup> Like the Whitney Biennial 1993, this was an experience for scholars and viewers that was completely different from any *Documenta* that came before.

Some critics were excited about this apparent moment of change that bridged together art and society through themes of difference and identity. It had become very clear that the Whitney Biennial 1993 attempted to reveal the idea that the very definition of art was not universal. The biennial event also raised an issue about the art institutional apparatus. Despite new technology

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 80

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communications and global efforts to recognize the Other, the art world prior to the 1990s was strongly tied to Western Imperialism.<sup>31</sup> Scholar Benjamin Buchloh suggested that this specific biennial created a positive push beyond the narrow and predominately western concern for pure aesthetic quality.<sup>32</sup> The art featured in the Whitney Biennial 1993 was strongly subversive, political, and performative. It was clear that artists and curators alike, were less concerned with "fine art's" Western ideology (or any type of art that was autonomous according to Immanuel Kant).<sup>33</sup>

As a response to an era of continuous international spectacle that works to shatter outdated models of art theory, Philipsen uses a term that she believes can address the current art scene. New Internationalism, she describes, is a theory that challenges Western art hegemony, deconstructs institutional language, and attempts to eliminate geographical or ethnic discrimination.<sup>34</sup> The aim of New Internationalism is to antagonize the formal canon of Western modernity and the art institutional apparatus.<sup>35</sup> Philipsen explains that New Internationalism is a process of articulation that attempts to replace the current language of the art world with vocabulary that is much more complex in terms of spatial and temporal differentiation.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Philipsen suggests that under the theory of New Internationalism, the normative taste within the art institution is contextually constructed.<sup>37</sup> This means that the institutional

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<sup>31</sup> Philipsen, Lotte. *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*. 79.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85

interest in globality or minority cultures is a direct reflection of “the artist’s person.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, there is an interpersonal relationship that transpires between contemporary art and the author of the work.<sup>39</sup>

In *Forgetting the Art World*, however, Pamela Lee mentions no such thing as New Internationalism. Lee’s notion of an “eclipse” is more abstract and representational; a far more metaphorical approach to art theory. She is merely concerned with the “turning point in the art world’s evolution, where even the critique of cultural capital seems woefully inadequate to capture the changes described.”<sup>40</sup> Lee does not suggest a theory of art that may help us move forward in understanding contemporary art today. Instead, she simply describes how incredibly non-normative art has become. She seems to speak to this idea that art is translatable only as much as it is non-translatable- and that’s it.

Regardless of Lee’s philosophical prose, both she and Philipsen theorize that the art world can be saved so long as society begins to accept its ephemeral and fluctuating qualities. Many artists and scholars have shunned this unfixed and unstable art world, favoring a return to Western semantics and aesthetic ideology.<sup>41</sup> Instead of simply forgetting the art world however, as Lee suggests, perhaps scholars shall consider art as a nodal point for creating a new vocabulary.

In conclusion, Lee and Philipsen do both admit that the spaces between the material world and immaterial world, the Western world and the non-Western world, have collapsed. A globalism outside of the art world has revealed a globalism within. Works of art have been the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, Pamela M. *Forgetting the Art World*. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 186

prime mover in this realization. As Lee puts it, “in its ‘mattering and materialization’ the work of art is both object of, and agent for, globalization.”<sup>42</sup> We cannot yet determine what genre we will place today’s contemporary art, but we do know that its impact has forever shaped (or unshaped) the legacy of our society’s language of art. Like every lunar eclipse though, this overcast of confusion will pass as we build a new vernacular for the arts.



Figure 1 George Holliday, Home Video of the Beating of Rodney King, 1991

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid





**Figure 2** Kiki Smith, *Mother*, 1992

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