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LOTTE PHILIPSEN

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

GLOBALIZING CONTEMPORARY ART

The art world's new internationalism

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© Lotte Philipsen and Aarhus University Press 2010
Cover: Kitte Fennestad
Typesetting: Narayana Press
Type: Garamond

eISBN 978 87 7934 348 1

Aarhus University Press

Aarhus
Langelandsgade 177
DK – 8200 Aarhus N

Copenhagen
Tuborgvej 164
DK – 2400 Copenhagen NV

www.unipress.dk

Published with the financial support of
The Aarhus University Research Foundation
The Novo Nordisk Foundation
Krista & Viggo Petersens Fond

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INTRODUCTION

New Internationalism

Kassel, Germany, 2007: 1,001 Chinese men and women visited the *Documenta 12* art exhibition as a part of the work *Fairytale* by the artist Ai Weiwei. Apart from the many Chinese visitors, the work consisted of 1,001 restored wooden chairs from the Qing dynasty, which were placed around the exhibition venues for visitors to use. According to the catalogue, the work and its title paid homage to ‘the Brothers Grimm who wrote the majority of their fairytale collection in Kassel between 1812 and 1815.’¹ In a fairytale, anything can happen. Magically, people and creatures may transform and move, unrestricted by the laws of physics and logic, and in this respect the art world today resembles a fairytale when compared to the situation a few decades ago.

For instance, it is obvious to consider Ai Weiwei’s work as a commentary on the work *7,000 Oak Trees* by Joseph Beuys, which was initiated at *Documenta 7* in 1982 and completed by the opening of *Documenta 8* in 1987. By then 7,000 oak trees had been planted in Kassel.² Though the strategies of the two works resemble each other, as both have elements of happenings that leave physical evidence, the difference between planting trees and flying in Chinese people and chairs mirrors to some extent the difference between the art world in 1982 and in 2007. The solid grounding of trees that are meant to grow for centuries and permanently be part of Kassel has now been replaced by a brief visit by people. Whereas Beuys was himself German, and thus ‘at home’ in Kassel, Ai Weiwei was born, lives and works in Beijing; but since the institutional apparatus of contemporary art has undergone a profound globalization during the past couple of decades – for instance Ai Weiwei lived in New York 1981–1993 – it seems rather natural, today, to invite Ai Weiwei to participate in *Documenta*.

The globalization of the world of contemporary art is the theme of this book, and the issue is unfolded by pursuing the fundamental question: *How*

has New Internationalism in the visual arts challenged the traditional Eurocentric paradigm of the art world? This overarching question guides the research and analysis, and I hope that the reader will find it satisfactorily answered after reading the book. But before even starting to deal with this question, some fundamental premises need to be established.

The central object of investigation is what is known in the field of contemporary art as 'New Internationalism', so I shall begin by briefly accounting for the meaning of this term, which officially stems from the establishment of The Institute of New International Visual Arts (INIVA) in London in 1991. The preparatory work for the institute was concluded by a *Final Report: The Institute of New International Visual Arts*, which, among other things, described 'New Internationalism: An Emerging Concept', listed as nine paragraphs. Since this list from 1991 represents the only official attempt ever made to actually define the concept of New Internationalism positively, we may think of it as a pseudo-manifest:

In the mainstream of the visual arts 'International' has become a term synonymous only with Western Europe and the USA. This limiting Western / Eurocentric definition has meant that in practice *the vast majority of the world's cultures (including minority cultures with western states) [sic] have been excluded from exhibitions and from the history of art.*

'New internationalism' addresses this discrepancy by placing the achievements of the majority cultures *of the world* into the discourses, the exhibitions and the history of *contemporary visual arts*.

More importantly it offers the visual perceptions, the philosophies and the histories of non-European and majority cultures as *new and challenging contributions of the mainstream of the visual arts*.

Essentially it *reflects a changing moment in art history*, resulting from post-war migration and the shifting of cultural and ideological boundaries. It is subject to evolutionary change and therefore cannot be narrowly defined or fixed, principally because it reflects this transitional moment in history.

It has emerged as a concept which *poses questions to the world of art* and its audience about the nature, their perception and interpretation of contemporary art practice.

It aims to bring the issues of cultural difference and cultural hybridity into the dominant discourse as a vital contribution to the development of visual art in the twenty first century.

'New Internationalism' is *not exclusive*. It will not disregard the achievements of Western Europe and the USA. Neither does it seek a negative confrontation with Western Eurocentric art history. It desires instead to broaden our understanding of the history of art beyond the narrow confines of the past.

'New Internationalism' embraces the concept of 'Black Art' because it hinges upon a cross-fertilisation of views in the contemporary visual arts. However it allows artists a choice, a subjective decision-making process based on personal experience which takes it *beyond the definitions of 'Black Art'*.

'New Internationalism' introduces new ways of addressing production, exhibition presentation and interpretation and will *generate critical debate* within the mainstream institutions with which *a healthy dialogue is envisaged*.³

The above nine-point list describes New Internationalism as an attitude that aims at institutional inclusion of non-Western visual art, and hence as an attitude that breaks with a hitherto prevailing Eurocentric notion of 'internationalism' in the visual arts, which was confined to Western art. Thus, the aim of New Internationalism is to replace the 'old' internationalism of the art world, which was practically confined to the West and which has tended to make use of a double-standard system, where non-Western art is judged differently than Western art. The fact that the art world (=the Western art institutional apparatus) has been ignorant of the world-wide scope of contemporary art is what New Internationalism challenges. Following gradually from the success of this challenge, the notion of 'New Internationalism' is today often simply replaced by the notion of 'global'. Likewise, the plain notion of 'international art' has been resurrected, but now in its new, global conception in which interaction or exchange between confined nations have been replaced by a much wider art institutional field in which the concept of the nation-state does not necessarily play a significant role.

The term 'New Internationalism' is used in several other fields, for instance political science and economics, with different meanings than that intended here. In this book 'New Internationalism' will refer strictly to the meaning

described within the field of contemporary visual art, and the focus on the visual arts means that investigations of institutional globalization mechanisms of art forms belonging to other domains – for instance performative arts, music, cinema and literature – lie beyond the scope of this book.

The (un)official status of New Internationalism

The establishment of INIVA in 1991 marked a turning point for New Internationalism, since a call for institutional recognition of globally founded contemporary visual art had now been taken to a level of official receptiveness in Britain, supported financially by the British Arts Council and the London Arts Board. However, the establishment of INIVA simultaneously marks the official founding of the notion of New Internationalism and its dismantling. Curiously, the InIVA website dates the establishment of the institute to 1994 – which was the year the institute moved into its building in Rivington Street, London – and in 2004 InIVA published its own retrospective history in the book *Changing States: A Unique Anthology of Essays and Artworks Celebrating 10 Years of InIVA*. Some time between the founding in 1991 and 1994 the official name of the institute went through a slight alteration, dropping the ‘new’ part of New Internationalism. As of 1994, the abbreviation INIVA was changed to InIVA – note the shift to a lower-case ‘n’, which seems to have worked its way into the official logo at some point in the late 90s – which stands for ‘Institute of International Visual Arts’, and it seems as if the institute officially denies the existence of its childhood years. The alteration from ‘new international’ to ‘international’ expresses the difference between New Internationalism on the one hand as an official *concept*, and what on the other may be considered a broader functional *discourse*. From this point on it seemed that using the term ‘New Internationalism’ as officially as in the title of the institute was too restrictive and obligatory, considering the discourse’s heterogeneous agenda.

The turning away from New Internationalism as a strict concept is closely linked to the discursive practice and self-understanding expressed by the people involved with New Internationalism. An important insight into the intentions of New Internationalism is gained from looking into what is now officially considered the first public initiative taken by InIVA, which was the organizing of a symposium entitled *A New Internationalism*, held at the Tate Gallery in London on 27-28 April, 1994.⁴ During these two days, a variety of views on New Internationalism were offered by 16 scholars, curators, artists, and re-

searchers, who presented views on the theme from European, North and Latin American, Asian, African, and Australian perspectives.⁵ After the symposium, an anthology with the papers presented was published by InIVA, which gives valuable insights into the main issues of concern in 1994, though it is far from providing us with any definition of New Internationalism. In fact, throughout the book, entitled *Global Visions – Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, a definition of New Internationalism is obstructed as a number of writers express reservations about the term ‘New Internationalism’. They are attentive to the danger of New Internationalism being or becoming just a politically correct buzzword that might be attached to any art institutional praxis, providing it automatically with a label of legitimization, regardless of the actual content of that praxis. In *Global Visions*, artist and critic Rasheed Araeen formulates it like this:

If ‘recoding’ only means changing the codes but not transforming the ‘object’ itself, would it not make nonsense of the whole idea of a *new* internationalism? Would it not imply the construction of a new façade or outer wall, in the manner of postmodern spectacle or decoration? [...] My fear is that this may in fact turn out to be the reality.⁶

And he continues to state that, ‘If “new internationalism” means a global projection of the idea of cultural pluralism, or multiculturalism, as it has been formed in the West, then I’m afraid we are on shaky ground.’⁷ Likewise, artist and curator Guillermo Santamarina writes that he

[C]annot stop wondering whether the ‘New Internationalism’ is nothing more than another variation of a Fashion called World Culture, which, if I am not wrong, arises in Europe with the neo-romanticism of the beginning of the ‘80s.⁸

And critic and curator Hou Hanru warns that “‘New Internationalism’ should not become a new “ism” but on the contrary, a process of “de-ismization”.”⁹ Like Araeen, Hou is highly sceptical about postmodern multiculturalism, since:

[M]ost of the investigations of ‘multiculturalism’, the self and the other, and related issues, have unfolded around an axis of a radical change in the relation between the colonial master and slave in the postcolonial period. [...] Our explorations of ‘New Internationalism’ should therefore not be a simple continuation of the existing