UNFOLDING CUBISM: TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE WORK OF CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI

In his latest works of *Neue Malerei* ('New Painting'), Christian Jankowski approximates the artistic style of arguably the most famous painter of European Modernism — Pablo Picasso.

The series *Cultural Cubism* unfolds in a number of portraits in which the protagonists appropriate Cubist elements — they recreate the modernist painter's masterpieces, photograph the result, and post it on the internet. There are no limits to their creativity: mundane everyday objects like stockings and cotton buds denote silk borders on evening gowns; in one instance, a dog even represents a hat. For these performative imitations, parts of the composition are recreated from painted cardboard, which is cut and arranged in the image; even the partici- pants own skin is elevated to a canvas. By capturing the depicted scene in a photograph (which alludes back to the art historical tradition of the *tableau vivant*), the individual elements are pictorially intertwined, so that the boundaries between the background and the person represented sometimes seem to dissolve. These re-stagings of art historical icons are intended for a wide audience on the internet, where they compete with each other for the most likes and followers. During the isolation of the pandemic in particular, this type of activity offered people at home creative oppor- tunities for social interaction with the world. At the same time, the internet serves as a democratic tool that gives a wide audience the opportunity to participate in art. Further *tableaux vivants* with artistically abstract aesthetics emerge from the catwalks and the photography of the fashion industry. Borrowing from Picasso's repertoire of motifs, they illustrate how his art permeates a variety of different genres and continues to make an impact in the present day. The artist Christian Jankowski took these images from the internet and pop culture and translated them into another genre: painting. He primarily collabo- rated with Travis Wu's studio in Shenzhen to do this - art studio Jankowski had already worked with for previous projects. The dimensions of the Cubist originals determine the size of the canvas for the new paintings. As a result, a new work of art emerges that is a copy of a copy of a copy, whose entire process of creation is to be understood as a performative act.

But what is achieved by multiple repetitions of the same motifs by different protagonists, coupled with Picasso's style-defining Cubism? To answer this question, we need to focus less on the symbolic content of the images themselves and more on the way Jankowski artistically plays with the notions of originality and copy, of laypeople and experts, of centre and periphery — in other words, we need to explore the question of how images and their production are stylized into 'masterpieces'[1].

[1] I have followed Monica Juneja's methodological approach. Using the work of the performance artist Pushpamala N. as an example, she exposes racist economies and interrogates the concept of freedom from a transcultural perspective. Monica Juneja, "Inside Out: Pushpamala N.'s Embodiment of Liberty", in Monica Juneja and Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.), *Motherland: Pushpamala N.'s Woman and Nation* (New Delhi, 2021).

It was the era of so-called ‘classical modernism‘ that eleva- ted originality to a core value of art and, more importantly, lent it an autonomous quality. In response to academic painting and naturalism, the painters of the European avant-garde revolted, leading to a wide variety of experiments in form and colour. The forerunners, Picasso and Braque, developed Cubism in the first decade of the twentieth century; the movement spread from France to the rest of Europe and subsequently around the world.

It is widely known that the new formal language devised by Picasso and his fellow artists drew from the rich repertoire of motifs they appropriated from non-European artefacts, which significantly shaped the modern European art form of Cubism. Indeed, these processes of appropria- tion, as well as the subsequent prevalence of the Western reading of Cubism as a universal category, was based on Europe’s hegemony, which it asserted through violent processes of colonisation.[2] These constellations of power, hierarchy, and authority are also what established the dichotomy between centre and periphery in the first place.[3] While art from Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and later London and New York became the focus of historiography, non-European art was marginalised. This is despite — or precisely because of — the fact that there have been significant developments in the work of non-Western artists since the twentieth century, whose new creations can be interpreted as a form of resistance against colonialism. In this respect, non-European artists welcomed the revolutionary character of the European avant-gardes, which challenged long-standing art historical traditions.

Borrowing from the formal language of Cubism helped the Storm Society, for example, in its attempt to modernise Chinese art and develop a new national identity through art.[4] The artist group was founded in Shanghai in 1930, at a time when important areas of China were fragmented by the colonial influence of foreign states. One of the co-founders of the Storm Society was Pang Xunqin, who studied in Paris in 1924 and came into contact with various modern art movements there. In the group’s manifesto, the artists invoked the autonomy of art and clearly stated their motivation to free it from its traditional pathways, which they described as repetitive and derivative.[5] One such example cited by the group was *guohua*, an ink-painting technique that is one of China’s oldest artistic traditions. One of its most famous representatives in the twentieth century — even beyond China’s borders — was Chang Dai-chien. His fame is reflected in the public perception of the meeting

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[2] Much has been written about the dovetailing of colonialism and ‘classical modernism‘ in recent decades. One of the outcomes of this research is a variety of exhibitions that address the global nature of art — leading the way in this part of the world was the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), which is regarded as the starting point for Western museums beginning to critically engage with the mechanisms of exclusion that dismissed non-European art. In Germany, the research project Global Museum, funded by the German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM), was completed recently: its participants, including the Lenbachhaus, the Kunstsammlung NRW, the Hamburger Bahnhof, and the Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, examined their collections in terms of global historical relations.

[3] Partha Mitter, “Modern Global Art and Its Discontents”, *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, Avant- Garde Critical Studies, 30 (2014), pp. 33–54.

[4] Barbie Kim, “The Storm Society and the Chinese Western-Style Painting Movement”, The Macksey Journal, 2/53 (2021). See also Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian (eds.), Shanghai Modern, exh. cat. Museum Villa Stuck Munich (14/10/2004–16/1/2005) and Kunsthalle zu Kiel (25/2/2005–15/5/2005) (Berlin, 2004).

[5] Kuiyi Shen, “Cubism in the Paris of the East”, in The Japan Foundation, Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues (2006), pp. 217–225.

between him and Picasso in Paris in 1956, which was described as a "summit between the masters of Western and Eastern art".[6]

Although the relatively unknown Storm Society only existed for about half a decade, the artists produced completely new and innovative modes of expression by combining Cubism with traditional formal languages. Oil painting, an important pictorial medium that they brought back with them from their studies in Europe, served to promote modernisation efforts in Chinese art. However, the group has been largely overlooked by art historians, which can be attributed to the fact that they were seen as 'too Western' in Shanghai and therefore not suitable to represent a national style. For Western art critics, they were likewise not 'Chinese' enough and too similar to the Western model, which led to their subsequent marginalisation as a mere derivative of an ingenious Western art.[7] The art historian Partha Mitter describes this phenomenon as the "*Picasso manqué syndrome*"[8]: while Picasso can appropriate non-European motifs for his work without forfeiting any of his artistic genius, references to Cubism by non-Western artists are viewed as the influence of the West. This effect continues to this day, making addressing colonial legacies in our current histories of knowledge even more relevant.

So, let's return to the *Cultural Cubism* series: Christian Jankowski is very deliberately playing with the notion of the derivative here when he has the online photographs of re-enacted Picasso works copied by painters in Shenzhen. Today, the village of Dafen near Shenzhen offers one of tone of the world's largest markets for handmade oil paintings that imitate the great masterpieces of European art history. They are produced for the global market and sold as decorative goods in large discount stores and other locations. On the one hand, these professional art copies are sometimes treated with contempt, which is partly related to China's label as a low-wage country. On the other hand, this judgement derives from the European understanding of the artist as a genius, which, as I described above, is associated with unequal political power relations. Indeed, this limited view ignores an important cultural and historical fact: namely, that the copy, according to the Chinese understanding, can articulate an important form of respect and appreciation as well as praise.[9] The Chinese word for 'original', *zhen-ji* — 'the real trace' — exemplifies this perception, which effectively deconstructs the Western idea of uniqueness as something immutable. Rather, it is about constant transformation, the creative act as an endless process that is not restricted to just one artist subject.[10] Chinese masterpieces are characterised by the fact that they are supplemented with inscriptions and imitated over the course of time. As a result, a copy of a master can sometimes acquire a higher art historical value if it is more consistent with contemporary tastes. The cultural practice runs counter to that of the West, which understands the creative act as a unique incident of genius. This disconnect led to a situation in which works by Chang Dai-chien which were exhibited at the Paris Museum of Asian Art and the Musee d'Art Moderne in 1956 were "exposed" as

[6] Cited from Byung-Chul Han, Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch (Berlin, 2011), p. 40.
[7] Kim 2021.
[8] Mitter 2014, p. 37.
[9] Han 2011, p. 26.
[10] Han 2011, p. 19.

forgeries by Western experts and his masterful virtuosity was denied.[11] This perception of the original as a process sheds an entirely new light on the paintings of *Neue Malerei*, and another interpretative dimension of the production chain unfolds that reaches all the way to Shenzhen. This should be understood in its entirety as an artistic act by Jankowski; by translating the photographs from the internet into paintings, he elevates the images to works of art — with the knowledge about the tradition and significance of the copy in China reinforcing this higher status. Translating the images into oil paintings, which results in the new works, can also be interpreted in the context of the specific transcultural relationship between China and Europe — namely in the struggle for the renewal of Chinese art. Upon closer examination, the viewers grounded in European knowledge are forced to break away from the categories instilled in them and to challenge their instinctive judgements of the works as 'low art' or cheap copies, instead recognising the specific cultural environments that have shaped them. Through his work, Jankowski promotes an approach that understands that cultures are in exchange, that there is a constant reciprocity and mutual dependence — both historically as well as in the present, something that is also reflected in the title of the work. By intertwining Berlin, Shenzhen, and many other places around the world (where the imitations were born and disseminated online), Jankowski seeks to reveal the global infrastructures and networks in which the artists are embedded and asks what value is attached to the work during the creation process — what art is, where it begins, who makes it, and in what form it can influence everyday life. His work almost seems to move through time and space like a 'real trace', which is only enhanced and made complete by its various participants. Each of the individual phases of the process is inscribed in the new paintings: the differences in proportion between the photographs of the *tableaux vivants* and the dimensions of the Picasso originals, for example, result in unpainted blank spaces at the edge of the canvas. Through this interaction between different people, places, and tem- poralities,*Cultural Cubism* opens up dimensions that depart from the linear narratives proclaimed by European art history and allows us to experience diachronic layers of depth.

The fact that Jankowski repeatedly blurs boundaries became clear during the Covid-19 crisis, when he had television programmes updating viewers about the virus in Bangkok and Berlin hijacked in order to draw attention to precarious working conditions during the pandemic (*Sender and Receiver*, 2020).[12] In his works, the artist frequently incorporates different perspectives and questions his environment, which enables him to bring something new into art. *Cultural Cubism* also relies on a large number of authors, which Jankowski assembles together at different stages. The first step is selecting the images that imitate Picasso's works.

By using their own bodies in these reenactments — a fragmented form of Cubism — the subjects represented in the image become mediums of an allegedly universal category, namely that of the genius, which Jankowski is attempting to dismantle. The multitude of online images results in a wide range of individual creative interpretations that break with

[11] Han 2011, p. 40.
[12] Presented at the Bangkok Art Biennale and Fluentum, Berlin in 2020.

the singularity of Picasso's oeuvre and open up a debate about mastery, quality, 'high' art, 'low' art, and accessibility. Here, the images from the internet unfold their own dynamic, gaining traction through a kind of 'copy and paste' mentality, circling the globe in multiple duplications. By selecting and compiling them, Jankowski slows their pace and draws attention to what he wants to tell us. After becoming complete works of art in Shenzhen, the paintings find their way back into the art world, where they are presented to an appreciative audience in well-lit spaces and can unfold all their layers of meaning.

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