The Glocal and the Singuniversal
Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World

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According to Belgian philosopher Thierry de Duve, the criticism of the art biennial as a global phenomenon from the perspective of economic and amusement value is too limited. By allowing the aesthetic value of art to again be part of art criticism, a different type of opposition against the hegemonic centres that are dominant in today's global culture becomes possible. To achieve this, De Duve lays claim to the Kantian idea of *sensus communis* – the human ability to share feelings.

In alphabetical order, so as to make nobody jealous: Athens, Berlin, Brisbane, Bucharest, Buenos Aires, Busan, Cairo, Dakar, Dhaka, Goteborg, Gwangju, Havana, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Liverpool, Luanda, Lyon, Montréal, Moscow, Perth, Prague, Quebec City, Santiago de Chili, São Paulo, Shanghai, Sharjah, Sydney, Taipei, Tijuana, Tirana, Valencia, Venice, Vilnius, Yokohama, Zagreb. This list of cities is a bit too long to figure beneath the name of a fashion designer on a shopping bag or a perfume bottle, but it might as well. Pardon my bad taste for adding Bhopal to the list. My excuse is that chemical catastrophes are the flipside of the same global economy that sends perfume bottles to every airport duty-free store in the world. I abstained at first, for fear of conjuring up bad memories of the Union Carbide gas leak, but also because I didn't want to give it away too soon and have you think of the Bharat Bhavan Biennial of Contemporary Indian Art in Bhopal. But you probably guessed already: the list refers to some of the cities where biennials, at times triennials, of contemporary art are being held these days. Their number is increasing at a crazy pace, and though Europe still houses the majority of them, the so-called periphery, with Asia in the lead, is quickly catching up; as of today, estimates oscillate between 80 and 140 art biennials scattered around the world.

Interpretation of the phenomenon also oscillates between the optimistic embracing of a democratic redistribution of cultural power among established and 'emergent' regions of the world, and the pessimistic recognition of a new form of cultural hegemony and re-colonization on the part of the West. Either the phenomenon is hailed for substituting a horizontal network of dispersed local art tribes for the vertical hierarchies dictated by those local art tribes that happen to live in the so-called centres; or it is demonized for generating a new kind of nomadic art tribe that still imposes its hierarchies the world over because it masters the art of networking and can afford to jet around the globe from one biennial to the next. As one critic expressing the optimistic view said: 'A success of a biennial also has to do with the changing of the balance of power in the international art world by focusing critical attention away from the dominant cultural centres and towards the periphery. … It is at the biennials that an art marginalized from the hegemonic centres may appear.' I lifted this excerpt from an article by Christine Wang found on a website appropriately called *The*

Gathering of the Tribes. The pessimistic and critical view was expressed, for example, by the French critic Paul Ardenne in *Art Press*, in June 2003: 'Doesn't the West make an abusive usage of art biennials as a mode of externalization of its production or of its aesthetic options, the way it does with its economic action, by delocalizing and exploiting for its own profit today's globalization of the world?' I myself have mixed feelings about this state of affairs, no doubt. But the purpose of my paper is not so much to sort out their ambiguous motivations, as it is to raise a philosophical question made urgent by the proliferation of art biennials everywhere.

Before we can broach this philosophical question, we must pay the economy its due. There is no question that the reasons for the proliferation of art biennials are mainly, if not exclusively, economic. Culture sells, attracts tourists, generates economic activity and is an integral part of the entertainment industry. *Pace* Adorno, I see no reason why we should regret this. His critique of the culture industry is vain, now that nobody seriously entertains the hope any longer that capitalism will be superseded in the foreseeable future. At best capitalism can and must learn to behave more ethically and more equitably, which it does when it is in its own interest. Militants of what is now currently called the *glocal* – a conflation of the global and the local – are pressing for such ethical behaviour. Although most often agriculture rather than culture has priority on their agenda, we might be wise to observe the current transformations in the culture industry as a significant testing ground for the glocalization of the economy. Placing this testing ground under the umbrella of art has enormous advantages. For art, identified as contemporary visual art, is the one sector within the culture industry that is the most dynamic and enjoys the greatest freedom. It is not necessarily visual in the sense of painting and sculpture. It houses experiments of all sorts ranging from the performing arts to documentary cinema to music and sound. It allows political statements of all kinds, anti-social behaviour, eccentric sexual practices and outrageous opinions to find forms of expression that would not be tolerated elsewhere. It thrives on cultural differences and confrontations and on individual and group idiosyncrasies to the point where dissent, not consensus, is the norm. Last but not least, it still enjoys the highbrow aura it has inherited from the museum art of the past, all the while having the pungent flavour of the avant-garde and tapping into popular culture for its inspiration, codes and styles. Even the opera (the proliferation of opera houses easily matches that of art biennials) cannot pretend to such a catholic reunion of conflicting features and remains a bourgeois art, in comparison with the visual art scene.

So, rather than simply signalling either successful integration of the local into the global (the optimist's view) or hegemonic appropriation of the local by the global (the pessimist's view), I think that art biennials are, quite typically, cultural experiments in the *glocal* economy. The list of city names with which I began is a sign. Promoters of glocalization often emphasize that the appropriate scale where the global economy can be reconciled with the pursuit of local interests is the city rather than the nation-state. On the scale of the city, abstract capital and international finance cannot so easily retreat into the 'ice-cold waters of egotistic calculation' and are bound to meet the needs, desires and protests of a real and concrete community of people marked as city-dwellers and citizens. With the proliferation of art biennials, all bearing the names of their hosting cities, the art community – by which I mean both the local art tribes living in the said cities and the sophisticated nomadic art tribe that hops from one biennial to the next – has seemingly turned glocal. As expressed by Christine Wang, already quoted: 'The biennials allow the cities to enter into the global economy.' Now that all grand narratives, whether classical or avant-garde, have lost their currency, the art community seems to have found a new legitimation in *glocal* ethics, based on the free and fair trade of cultural goods under the umbrella of art.

Art, so it seems, is now no more and no less than the name of a certain category of cultural commodities capable of catering to an art community defined in glocal terms. All you need

is indeed to hop from one biennial to the next to see this amply confirmed, taste-wise. My mixed feelings notwithstanding, I tend to see this state of affairs as a fact, no more to be applauded than deplored. It is simply the empirical context from which my philosophical question arises, a question first of all prompted from within political philosophy, where its intellectual context is concerned. There is an interesting symptom in the conflation of global and local by the neologism *glocal*, a symptom that suggests that the name of art may be more than an umbrella under which to conduct experimentation in glocal ethics. The word glocal implies the bridging of a hiatus from the particular to the general, a conceptual jump across a discontinuity formulated in geopolitical terms: the city, the world. In its own way, classical political theory registered this conflation, or an eighteenth-century avatar of it, with the word cosmopolitanism (from *cosmos*, world, and *polis*, city). The glocal ethos, we might argue, adapts cosmopolitanism to the needs of our time: it acknowledges the 'insocial sociability' of which Kant spoke in the fourth proposition of his *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*. Economic competition under capitalism represents the natural tendency of humans to compete with each other and egotistically pursue their own individual interests, while democracy and the hope that it can be better implemented at the level of a network of cities engaged in commerce with each other than at the level of nation-states, makes an appeal to what Kant called 'a regular process of betterment of the civil constitution in our part of the world (as it is likely to give some day laws to all the others)'. We read in this sentence an echo of both the optimist's and the pessimist's views on the proliferation of biennials, as it is clear that Kant's optimism can all too easily be denounced as rampant imperialism. In invoking Kant to discuss the glocal, I am wearing my European biases and prejudices on my sleeve. 'There is something Eurocentric about assuming that imperialism began with Europe,' Gayatri Spivak writes at the end of the section of a chapter devoted to Kant in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Can it not be said, with a similarly ironic twist, that there is something Eurocentric in assuming that cosmopolitanism, indeed born in Europe, therefore remains foreign to other cultures? Glocalization demonstrates that this is not the case, though not without casting doubt on the validity of invoking Kant.

Although it arises from within political theory, the philosophical question raised by the glocalization of the art world via the proliferation of art biennials is mainly aesthetic. It has to do with the difference we make between works of art and cultural goods produced and / or presented under the umbrella of art – I mean, the difference we ought to make *if* we attach a value to the word art other than its economic or its entertainment value. We may, of course, refuse to make this difference, and conventionally use the word art as mere registration of cultural products called art for convenience's sake. The point of my paper is to claim that we would lose something essential in doing that – something essential not to art, but to the human condition. We have a responsibility in drawing a line between the things we judge as deserving the name of art and the things sheltering under the name of art as if under an umbrella. This entails that it is our aesthetic judgement, expressed liminally by the sentence 'this is art', that draws the line and makes the difference (I'm not saying accounts for the difference) between works of art and mere cultural goods. Works of art are the outcome of aesthetic judgements – the artist's, in the first place, then ours, members of the art community – whereas cultural goods are not, or not necessarily.

Granted that glocal citizenship can be construed as the present-day version of cosmopolitanism, the question, then, where the art community is concerned, is how to conceive of *aesthetic* cosmopolitanism. The neologism glocal, as I said, is a symptom, a sign. It bridges a certain geographical hiatus by jumping from the particular to the general. When transferred to the aesthetic realm, however, the word glocal will not do. For aesthetic judgements imply the bridging of a far greater hiatus; they conflate two extremes much further apart: they are at once singular and universal. If you allow me to forge a neologism of my own: they are *singuniversal*. By singular, I mean more – or less, if you prefer – than that they are uttered by individuals before individual works of art in individual

circumstances. The same work of art repeatedly experienced by the same person renews rather than repeats the experience, and may yield quite different aesthetic appreciations. We need not suppose the work of art to be a stable entity, or the subject of the aesthetic experience to maintain itself unchanged. We are dealing with singularities: one-time events lived through by one-time subjectivities. Thus by singular, I mean something more unique and less extensive, more local, if you want, than individuality. And by universal, I also mean more – or less – than the extrapolation of a generality from a particularity to the level of the global. I mean that although aesthetic judgements are in no way actually shared by the globality of the world's inhabitants, they claim to be valid for all.

In saying this, I am clearly wearing my European biases, to wit, my Kantianism, on my sleeve again. It is indeed my conviction that when it comes to understanding what is at stake for the human condition when we utter aesthetic judgements, Kant basically got it right. Whether aesthetic judgements express themselves by phrases such as 'this rose is beautiful' (Kant's favourite example) or 'this cultural product is art', is irrelevant on that level. Kant restricted what he called pure aesthetic judgements to the realm of nature. For complex historical reasons (the 'death of God' not the least among them), a transfer has occurred from the natural to the cultural and from beauty to art, so that 'this is art' has become the paradigmatic formula for the liminal modern aesthetic judgement. But Kant's lesson remains unaltered when you read the *Critique of Judgement* mentally replacing the word beauty with the word art. What the phrase 'this rose is beautiful' (or ugly) actually does is not ascribe objective beauty (or ugliness) to the rose; rather, it imputes to the other – all others – the same feeling of pleasure (or pain) that one feels in oneself. Similarly, what the phrase 'this cultural product is art' (or not art) actually does is not ascribe the objective status of art (or of non-art) to the cultural product in question; rather, it imputes to the other – all others – the same feeling of dealing with art (or of not dealing with art) that one feels in oneself. Whether it is A claiming that this rose is beautiful or this cultural product is art, or B claiming that the rose is ugly or that the cultural product in question doesn't deserve to be called art, their disagreement amounts to addressing each other thusly: *you ought to feel the way I feel. You ought to agree with me.* Kant understood better than anyone before or since that this call on the other's capacity for agreeing by dint of feeling was legitimate. What is ultimately at stake in an aesthetic judgement is neither the rose's beauty nor the feeling it arouses; it is neither the cultural product's art status nor the feeling that it is art; it is the agreement. The faculty of taste is not important in itself. It is important inasmuch as it testifies to and identifies with a universally shared faculty of agreeing, which Kant called *sensus communis*.

Kant's *sensus communis* is not ordinary common sense; it is common sentiment. Shared or shareable feeling, and the faculty thereof. A common ability for having feelings in common. A communality or communicability of sentiment, implying a definition of humankind as a community united by a universally shared ability for sharing feelings. A cosmopolitanism that is not founded politically, but aesthetically, and on which it would be illegitimate to actually found the cosmopolitan state, because an actual aesthetic community extending to all would be a monster. For there is no proof that *sensus communis* exists as a fact, no proof at all. We cannot rely on the faculty of agreeing in order to construct civil society. What exists as a fact is that we say such things as 'this rose is beautiful', or 'this cultural product is art'; that we say such things by dint of feeling; and that we claim universal assent for these feelings, whether we know it or not.

Of course, humanity as a whole will never agree on such judgements. But that's not required for the phrase 'this is beautiful' or 'this is art' to be legitimate (I'm not saying true, I'm saying legitimate). All I need is to make the supposition that my feeling is shareable by all. And that's what I do suppose. That's what we all suppose, you and me, everyone, when we make aesthetic judgements. The implied 'you ought to feel the way I feel' is what justifies me in my claim, you in yours, and all our fellow human beings in theirs, even

though there is not a hope in the world for universal agreement among us. War is the rule, peace and love are the exception. But Kant felt it was his duty as a philosopher to grant all humans the faculty of agreeing, whose Kantian names are taste and *sensus communis*. Regardless of whether *sensus communis* exists as a fact, we ought to suppose that it does. Regardless of whether taste is a natural endowment of the human species – say, an instinct – or whether it is merely an idea, a mere idea, it is an idea we cannot do without. In Kant's vocabulary, a mere idea we cannot do without is called a transcendental idea. From what he said in his *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, we gather that for him *sensus communis* was no more than a transcendental idea, indeed. Where instincts are concerned, we'd better assume that humans are wolves to each other: their wars are waged on every terrain, the aesthetic included. For it is clear that even on this terrain we don't agree, neither on the beauty of roses nor on the art status of cultural goods. Kant has once and for all fathomed the depth of aesthetic disagreements among humans: they amount to nothing less than denying the other his or her humanity, all the while appealing to it. Hence his scepticism about *sensus communis*, and his conviction that it nevertheless ought to be postulated, even in the absence of theoretically demonstrable empathy in the human species.

The Kantian idea of *sensus communis* offers a transcendental – by all means not an empirical – solution to the antinomy of man's 'insociable sociability' in postulating that what constitutes humans in their common humanity is the idea that they are able to live in peace with each other. The amazing thing is that he grasped that an issue of such magnitude as peace on earth was at stake in a statement as anodyne as 'this rose is beautiful'. When replaced by 'this cultural product is art', the real depth of his thinking on aesthetics comes to the fore.

The philosophical question raised by the glocalization of the art world via the proliferation of art biennials, as I said before, has to do with the difference we *ought* to make between works of art and cultural goods presented under the umbrella of art, *if* we attach a value to the word art other than its economic or its entertainment value. Kant teaches us that we *ought* to attach such a value to the word art. This *ought* is the quasi-moral obligation that makes us 'require from everyone *as a duty*, as it were, the feeling contained in a judgement of taste' (*Critique of Judgement*, § 40). It is a very strange *ought*, for we do make aesthetic judgements all the time. We cannot help it: feelings of beauty or ugliness, etcetera, are involuntary, automatic and, one might say, irresponsible. But what we are dealing with, here, is not feelings of beauty or ugliness, although they may intervene; it is the resulting feeling that a given cultural product deserves to be called art. We would lose something essential to the human condition were we to take for granted that the exhibitions we visit contain art simply because they are announced as exhibitions of art. What we would lose is a certain idea of universality that defines the human condition by the supposition, the mere supposition, that all human beings are endowed with the faculty of living in peace. We have a responsibility in drawing a line between the things we judge as deserving the name of art and the things sheltering under the name of art as if under an umbrella. Admittedly, this responsibility is mostly symbolic: it won't change your life much if you are an occasional visitor to one or the other biennial of contemporary art. It may mean a lot, however, if you are among the organizers, if you are a critic writing reviews, and more, still, if you are a curator or an artist.

The mixed feelings I have about the proliferation of art biennials have little to do with the phenomenon as such, they have to do with the way some of the works shown at art biennials confuse the aesthetic cosmopolitanism art stands for with some cultural glocalism or other, and deliberately use art as an umbrella under which to advance well intentioned critical or political agendas with, however, sometimes poor aesthetic results. I need not draw you the whole picture. You know that this is the trend in today's art world, and that it has many supporters in the art establishment as well as in academia. The re-

baptizing of art schools as visual culture departments, and the erasure of the word *art* from their curriculum in favour of *cultural practice* are symptoms. But there are also symptoms or signs of resistance to this trend, sometimes even in the head and in the actual practice of their best proponents. It is the archetypical double bind of today's artists, art teachers and theorists alike, to be torn between the wilful denial of the aesthetic and its return through the back door as uneasy feelings – most often, alas, of guilt. The discourse of the anti-aesthetic has been dominant for 30 years now, at least in the West. It has never succeeded in suppressing aesthetic feelings, but it has gone a long way to forbid their expression. Kant-bashing is its favourite strategy (along with Greenberg-bashing, anti-formalism, and so on).

I am nevertheless convinced that anybody seriously interested in art has a sense that whereas all works of art are definitely cultural goods, some are not reducible to cultural goods, and that these are the ones that matter, the ones I would call, with an old-fashioned word, authentic works of art. Art and culture are not the same thing. The line is drawn case by case by the singular aesthetic judgement in its claim to universality. Cultures, in their variety, are a subject of comparative analysis for the anthropologist, but our global world has turned us all into amateur anthropologists of our own culture, in its global uniformity. *Glocalism* is in that respect a manner of resistance to the hegemonic world culture, which is of course controlled by and exported from the hegemonic centres.

The *singuniversal* of the aesthetic judgment is a different kind of resistance, which supposes two things: an actual, committed practice of the faculty of aesthetic judgement in pursuit of the best quality in art, and some sceptical, definitely non-utopian but nevertheless firm attachment to the realm of ideas. The *singuniversality* of our aesthetic judgements not only jumps from the singular to the universal, it also bridges the hiatus between the empirical and the transcendental – something the *glocal* does not do. The *glocal* is entirely an empirical concept. Struggles done in its name are important because as citizens we live in the empirical world and must learn to manage the 'insociable sociability' of our fellow human beings and ourselves. Without the *singuniversal*, however, the *glocal* remains devoid of purposiveness. Beyond freedom and justice, peace on earth is the ultimate purpose of political action. Violence and aggressiveness are among the instincts our nature has equipped us with to achieve the purpose of peace via devious ways. This is Kant's thesis in *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*. I find it realistic, politically. Art is ridiculously powerless on the political level. Its domain is the purposiveness without the purpose. It places its bets on *sensus communis*, the faculty of agreeing by dint of feeling, as if it were an instinct, knowing well that the chances are great that it is merely an idea. My talk, I realize, is a plea for empirical pessimism combined with transcendental optimism, which is why I embraced neither the optimistic nor the pessimistic view of today's glocal art world. I am the observer who reflects on the situation. But I am a militant when I claim that there is a difference between the expanding *glocal* communities involved by the various art biennials and the *singuniversal* community demanded by the aesthetic judgement when it is uttered as 'this is art'. The latter community is humanity itself, all of us.

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Tags

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