

Decentering Cultural Globalization

While new art world centers, like Beijing, Sao Paulo, and Sharjah, are on the rise and challenge the global cultural world's status quo, an equitable distribution of fame and fortune remains elusive. Using measures such as financial and critical rankings, sociologist Alain Quemin (2015) concludes that the most famous artists still come from the West. Germany, the UK, and the US account for the largest share. European and US artists like Jeff Koons, Gerhard Richter, or Jean Michel Basquiat feature prominently, as do a few predictable non-Western superstars like Ai Wei Wei or El Antansui.

Still small numbers of artists and writers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America do manage to break through and some even manage to chart trajectories to new nodes of cultural power. What makes this possible? In my work with colleagues Kangsan Lee and Chantal Valdivia, we focus on the role of migration, labeling and in particular the capaciousness and porousness of the categories used, vernacularization and policymaking in cultural decentering. Creators and their creations scale up when they circulate successfully to countries of higher power and prestige within or beyond their geographic or cultural trans-regions. Creators and their works scale out when they circulate horizontally between positions of more or less equal power. Understanding what make scale shifting possible is to understand how global cultural decentering and diversification actually works. The overarching question which connects this work to the themes of this conference is to what extent the decentering of the global cultural world writ large contributes to the decentering of national or urban cultural fields and vice versa? What is the relationship, if any, between a more inclusive global cultural scene and creating more inclusive and pluralistic cultural institutions within nations and cities.

In my talk today, I can't yet answer that larger question, although I hope we can discuss it together. What I will do is present the qualitative findings from our research on how cultural globalization actually unfolds in Argentina, South Korea, and South Korea, although I'll only talk about our first two cases today. We draw upon interviews with 275 artists and other institutional actors and analyze nearly 8500 records of exhibitions of works by 98 artists mounted around the world.¹

Our qualitative and quantitative analyses of the career trajectories of the artists reveal the important role that mobility—for study, work, or settling abroad—plays in the initial stages of gaining international attention and in creating new urban centers of power within the global art world. We also highlight the role that vernacularizers and, in particular, co-ethnic, diasporic actors play in catalyzing and diversifying artistic circulation. Third, we find that the labels first used to describe artists, which drive forward their initial circulation, can continue to facilitate but also constrain the circulation of their work at a later stage. We suggest four types of labels are at work: aesthetic, ethnic or identity, geographic, and ideological (i.e. when an exhibition or work is termed “post-colonial” thereby signifying an ideological stance). Lastly, we focus on the role of government policy as a catalyst or impediment to global cultural decentering.

Let me say a little bit more about our choice of words before moving on. We find that particular cultural intermediaries play an important role in scale shifting. We call these individuals vernacularizers to call attention to the fact that they go beyond simple transmission and translation to make something comprehensible, appropriate, and useful as it travels from one context to another (Merry 2006, Levitt and Merry 2009). Two types of vernacularizers are important in the decentering of art worlds. The first are members of the

¹ For an in-depth discussion of our methods and sampling, see the methods section below.

transnational cultural and academic class or the gatekeepers of the global art and academic worlds. While many of these individuals are the products of the Global North, increasing numbers, while born in the Global South, study, work, and live outside it (Levitt 2020a). Because they move from place to place, and carry the new tools they acquire from one place to another, they homogenize practices. Pedagogy, museology, and curation, to name a few, become more and more similar as these people move from place to place and carry an increasingly comparable toolkit with them (Levitt 2015, Levitt 2020b).

A second particularly important subset of transnational professionals are part of the national diaspora. They are the ethnic-national scholars, art critics, and curators who now live and work outside their countries of origin but still maintain strong personal and professional attachments to it or are open to overtures on the part of sending governments to do so. These individuals, and the social networks they create, strongly affect the breadth and depth of circulation.

So let me begin with Argentina:

Because of Argentina's colonial history with Spain, its strong economic and political ties with Europe and England, and the many Argentines who claim Spanish or Italian roots, the country has always been strongly influenced by European intellectual and cultural life. Even today, many Argentines take great pride in their Italian and Spanish roots. They share a language, religion, and some cultural similarities with Europe and other parts of the Americas and their art and literature was recognized earlier by international audiences than our other two cases.

Still, just as the Latin American literary boom was purposefully promoted by writers and publishers alike (Santana-Acuña 2020), so the recognition and expansion of markets for Argentine and Latin American art also had to be fostered. In the Argentine case, several key collectors and gallerists did this work of vernacularization. When Marian Eppinger

describes how she and her husband built their collection, her stories are filled with names of key vernacularizers in the Latin American and Latinx art worlds (interview 2018).

Transnational curators and academics such as Marie Carmen Ramirez, who works at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and Robert Storrs, the Former Dean of the Yale School of Art, she recalls, “cut their teeth” looking at her artworks. Mauro Herlitzia, a collector, philanthropist, and gallery owner understood that creating a vibrant, prestigious art scene required more than just producing interesting works of art (Interview 2018). You need, he said, to document and archive exhibition catalogues. You need art historians who will use these materials to analyze and critique them. Toward this end, he founded The Espigas Foundation, a documentation center where such materials are collected and made available. He also created and ran ArteBA, the first major art fair in South America and was instrumental in bringing the first Art Basel Cities project to Buenos Aires. Eppinger and Herlitzia ‘s effort laid the foundation for a thriving art scene and also signaled to the world that Buenos Aires was open for business.

Several important diasporic vernacularizers, working from inside and outside the country, also play critical roles in heightening the prominence of art from the region. Inés Katzenstein, who is now the Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 2017, Andrea Guinta, an art historian at the University of Buenos Aires co-curated a major exhibition, “Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960-1985” which showed at the Brooklyn Museum in NY and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Both of these women promulgate and promote new imaginaries, including spaces of cultural production that encompass Latin American and Latinx artists working in the US or the Global South as a region of vibrant interchange. They are rewriting art history by inserting “radical women,” decentering traditional centers of cultural power by creating new ones, and rewriting the metrics for evaluating success.

The changing demography of the United States helps their cause. As the US moves closer to becoming a fully majority-minority country, these major population shifts are pushing its cultural institutions to diversify their exhibitions and collecting practices. To survive and thrive, museums must bring in the next generation of individuals who will produce, collect, and visit the art of the future. This means paying more attention to Latinx art makers and art consumers and bringing Latin American and Latinx cultural production under the same label.

This regional re-imagining got a recent boost from several key institutions. In 2014, for example, the Getty Foundation launched *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, a multi-year project premised on the idea that Los Angeles has long been a Latin American city and that the connections between “the vital and vibrant traditions in Latino and Latin American art” demanded a fresh look (Getty Foundation, accessed December 2021). Expanding the Latin American label to include Latinx artists makes it a broader, more visible category that is an identity, a geography, and a political position of solidarity with people of color throughout North and South America. This categorical expansion is also driven forward by institutions like the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston with their significant collections of Latin American material culture. Collectors are socialized into this imaginary through its embodiment in Art Basel Miami—the new go-to place for art buyers interested in the Spanish-speaking world.

Argentina, in sum, was already more integrated into the global art world than our other two cases due to its strong intellectual and cultural ties to Europe. Its recognition as an important site of Latin American literary production also bolstered its status. The early travels of a few key artists like Guillermo Kuitka, Martha Minujin, and Roberto Jacoby laid the groundwork for international circulation as did the growing number of regional cultural happenings such as the Sao Paulo Biennale. Key vernacularizers, including collectors,

gallerists, curators, and academics, worked to create and showcase “Latin American art.” The next generation does not have to move to get international recognition. Support from US cultural institution and foundations expanded the Latin American label to include Latinx art from the US. This more capacious label, which is a geography, an identity, and an ideology, decenters the art world away from its English and French-speaking capitals to a Spanish-speaking (and to some extent Portuguese) space encompassing North and South America as well as Europe.

Note here that the national government plays a minimal, fluctuating role in promoting cultural production and export which changes depending upon which party is in power. It is the city government of Buenos Aires that brought Art Basel Cities and private investors who created ArtBA in contrast to the case of Korea where there is a purposeful policy strategy to export Korean culture abroad.

South Korea:

The heightened presence of Korean cultural production on the global stage did not begin until 1988 when a newly democratic Korea, whose economic fortunes were also on the rise, opened up fully to the world by hosting the Olympics in Seoul. Before that, Koreans rarely had passports or traveled abroad. The small number of artists who studied abroad, such as Nam June Paik and Park Sae-Bo, went to Japan. It was the rising prominence of the *Hallyu (the Korean wave)* said Literature and Translation Institute Director Boohan Yun, that set the country’s sights outside its own borders (interview 2018). “From the Korean wave, we have gained confidence that we are not just a small country on the far side of Asia but that we can compete on the world stage.”

Aspirations for international fame in the art world grew with the meteoric ascent of what became known as Danseakhwa Art (Korean Monochrome). In the mid-1960s, a group of artists interested in struggles over national identity, belonging, and tradition began creating

monochromatic works that ultimately took this name (Kee 2013). Most worked valiantly but in relative obscurity with occasional shows in Asia until the early 2000s when a perfect storm took shape. The new global focus of the art world, with its sights on emerging markets such as Asia, brought previously under-recognized artists and movements like Dansaekhwa into the spotlight.

Prof. Joan Kee is a critical vernacularizer, working from the diaspora, in this story. Prof. Kee's book (2013), *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method*, the first English-language account of this movement, made a compelling case for distinguishing Korean monochrome art from similar works made in Japan.² Two major shows at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul, in August of 2014, and, less than a month later, at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, that were curated by Prof. Kee, received a great deal of attention. As a result, several major institutions acquired Dansaekhwa works. Collectors took their cues from these international tastemakers, and the prices for Dansaekhwa skyrocketed (Degen and Kim 2015). "I've never seen," said prominent art advisor Allan Schwartzman, "this amount of widening interest in a particular circle of non-contemporary artists in historical material before" (as cited in Degen and Kim (2015)). It was a "no-holds-barred" effort to create a national cultural product that could be clearly distinguished from its Japanese or Chinese counterparts. While many of the most prominent contemporary Korean artists today, including Haegue Yang and Do Ho Suh, do not work in the Dansaekhwa tradition, this aesthetic label brought attention to a geographic one. The art world became interested in all things Korean and Korean cultural producers were more than willing to create accordingly.

State and private companies and foundations all play a role in advancing the national cause. As the country became known for Kpop and television dramas, the government put in

² Dansaekhwa and Tansaekhwa are used interchangeably.

place an extensive set of strategies to promote Korean culture abroad. It often does so through public-private partnerships with Korean corporations and with help from diasporic vernacularizers. The Hyundai corporations is a case in point. It entered into an 11-year partnership with the Tate Modern Museum in London which includes the yearly Hyundai Commission in the Museum's Turbine Hall and the creation of the Hyundai Transnational Research Centre—both efforts to make sure that art from beyond the US and Europe gets put on display. While the fruits of these efforts are not confined to Korea, the country is certainly well represented among them. The Director of the new research center is Korean-born, Sook-Kyung Lee. She recently co-curated a large Nam June Paik retrospective. Korean-born Anicka Yi won the Hyundai Commission for 2021-2022.

These examples speak to the important role that diasporic vernacularizers play in promoting and interpreting Korean culture. Anicka Yi is Korean born but now lives and works in New York City. Sook-Kyung Lee lives and works in London. Joan Kee was educated and teaches in the US. The Tina Kim gallery in NY is owned by the daughter of the Kukje Gallery in Seoul. Because holding an international graduate degree is an unofficial requirement to get hired at a Korean university, there is a generation of primarily US-trained scholars who are now writing art history and curating exhibitions from in and outside the country. Even if these individuals are not predisposed to the cause, they are often attracted by the money and resources the Korean government makes available to support it—funding for research, exhibitions, residencies, or events which is hard to resist.

These infrastructures jumpstart and lend momentum to artistic circulation. Haegue Yang's career is a good example. She left Korea for Berlin in 1994 and now splits her time between Germany and Korea. Although, when she first migrated Paris, loomed large as a place to study art, she ended up in Germany because art school was free.

Early on, after she graduated, she was forced to take a break from art making to support herself. By the time she could get back to work, she felt “like the whole world had forgotten me.” Her first post-break exhibition was in Amsterdam when an “unexpected miracle happened.” Binna Choi, a Korean-born woman who graduated from De Appel, an exhibition space and curatorial studies program in Amsterdam, saw her work and liked it. According to Yang, at that time, there was a group of Korean-born curators who were just starting out but they were working in isolation and did not know one another. Choi was among them, recently employed at the Casco Art Institute in Utrecht.³ When an opportunity unexpectedly opened up for Choi to curate her own exhibition because her boss went on maternity leave, she offered Yang a solo exhibition. “That show changed everything,” Yang recalled.

Doors began opening. She met people who later invited her to be part of the Korean pavilion in Venice, to exhibit her work at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, or who would go on to become one of the chief curators at M+ in Hong Kong. At the same time, Korean-born curators began returning regularly to Korea once the Gwandju Biennale started in 2010. Thus began the rise of an international and national market for Korean art fomented by art makers and art managers living in and outside the country.

In the Korean case, widespread migration among cultural creators and managers is fairly recent. It coincides with a systematic national push to “globalize” and to export Korean culture in the same way the country previously exported computers and cars. Early diasporic vernacularizers used two key labels, one aesthetic (Dansaekhwa) and the other identity/geography (Korean Hallyu) to put Korean cultural production on the world map and to clearly distinguish it from its regional competitors, China and Japan. It’s important to note

³ Which describes itself as a “platform where art invites a social vision” (<https://casco.art>).

that labels are applied and claim. That is, part of what keeps someone like Hague Yang identifying as Korean, is that, she said, she will never be allowed the claim Germanness—the most immigrant artists and writers in Germany are not included under the label “national artists. The remarkable success of people like Hague, though gets a big boost from the Korean government and Korean corporations which underwrite exhibitions, research, and scholarly conferences to use cultural power, in conjunction with political and economic power, to reposition Korea more strategically on the world stage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholarly interest in cultural globalization is on the rise as the neo-liberalization and marketization of the artistic, literary, and music worlds increases in conjunction with our heightened global connectedness through technology and market expansion (Lee, 2018). But, to date, much of this scholarship still treats cultural globalization as a tug of war between an admittedly more diverse group of centers and peripheries. It focuses on how norms are diffused and reinforced and on variations in how circulating norms and practices are adapted (Buchholz 2018, Crane, Kawashima and Kawasaki 2002, Shin, Lee and Lee 2014). In this picture, peripheral “cultural locals” are assumed to be receivers of central norms rather than producers and disseminators of norms in their own right.

We build on this work but also extend it by empirically studying how global cultural decentering works through four factors: artists’ physical migration, the interventions of vernacularizers, labeling, and policymaking. Using mixed methods, we track the proliferation of decentered “alternative” routes and how these new destinations increase and broaden over time. It is true that many members of the early generation of contemporary artists, such as Nam June Paik, Guillermo Kuitka, and Paul Guiragossian, left their countries of origin voluntarily or by force in order to gain international recognition. We find, however, that once these circulatory pathways are established, physical movement is not a prerequisite for

traversing them. Instead, the role of vernacularization and labeling becomes more important for the circulation of work and its broadening to a more diverse set of destinations over time. Artists' physical migration coupled with vernacularization during an earlier period is critical but it becomes less important as circulatory pathways grow more established and when labeling catalyzes the circulation of artworks more than where the artist is actually working from.

In each of our country cases, there are key individuals, working from in and outside the country, who communicate and make legible the exigencies of the world outside the nation to those who aspire to have their work exhibited and collected there. We identify two types of vernacularizers. The first belong to a transnational cultural class of curators, gallerists, or museum professionals who live and work around the world, adding to their toolkit each time they take up a new position. The second are co-ethnics, living in the diaspora. These vernacularizers help educate and socialize new audiences throughout the Global North and South about art and cultural produced in places previously unknown. They often do so through labeling—using identity, geographic, aesthetic, or ideological markers that set this new work apart and makes it visible in new ways—both enabling and constraining future circulation. But although labels can create clearly identifiable clusters of artists, such as the post-war generation in Lebanon, they can also constrain—consigning artists to do the same kind of work about the same kind of topics for which they become known.

Both groups play a crucial role in making artists and their work visible, understandable, and valuable but we find that they do so from somewhat different positions and with different goals in mind. The vernacularizer who is not part of the national diaspora does not have a nationalistic agenda vis a vis cultural globalization. They may enjoy greater autonomy but they do not have access to the resources dedicated to cultural promotion and export that national governments like Korea provide. In contrast, we find co-ethnic

vernacularizers are sometimes willingly enlisted and sometimes co-opted into the national project. They benefit from additional resources but they are constrained in their artistic and curatorial choices by funders' goals.

We do not mean to suggest that all of the artists in our sample have shifted their sights away from the traditional cultural centers of power. What we do argue, however, is that a significant number are creating alternative pathways and institutions that lead to new destinations in a more decentered cultural landscape. They include the Sharjah and Gwandju biennale, the Kuitca Fellowship, and organizations like Ashkal Awan and the Arab Image Foundation. It remains to be seen whether these efforts add up to a new, sustainable vision for cultural production and dissemination and that, even if they do, they will be able to stand firm against the ever powerful presence of economic values in the art market.