21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual: Pluriversal Openings

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Pluriversal Openings: Relational Thinking and Historical Practice.

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In art history, plurality has often been framed as something to be contained or managed, be it through additive, hierarchical, or relativist approaches that ultimately reproduce binary frameworks with claims to singular authority. What might a critical art historical practice look like if it grounded itself in the reality of human, cultural, and epistemic plurality, embracing relational thinking to open a more dynamic, pluriversal horizon?

Pluriversal Openings. Relational Thinking and Art Historical Practice aims to bring together scholars and artists with different regional and disciplinary perspectives in a series of constructive, self-reflexive dialogues, unfolding in continuous relation to one another. The dialogical format seems particularly suited to the aims of the series we wish to launch: engaging in dialogue itself enacts the relational and plural thinking the project seeks to cultivate. It can foster new methods and bring forth reflections that cannot emerge from scholarship pursued on a purely individual basis. More importantly, pluriversalizing art history generates continuous self-reflection on what can be known and articulated under specific conditions. It asks that we be ready to disengage and transform these conditions of intelligibility, to relate differently, to recognize, make space for, and explore alternative and entangled histories, epistemologies, and ontologies of art.

A pluriversal approach to art history – understood as a practice that takes the challenge of plurality beyond the merely additive – builds on the paradigm of transculturation as epistemic critique. It further draws impulses from debates in anthropology and philosophy – often discussed under the rubric of the “ontological turn” – that have foregrounded relational ontologies to conceive of humans, nonhumans, and environments as fundamentally interconnected. In other words, pluriversality conceives of differences not as fixed properties or markers of identity contained by rigid boundaries, but as constituted and negotiable through transcultural relations. It cautions against conceptions of incommensurable worlds and related constructs of radical alterity, demanding instead a critical engagement with the governing effects of the plural traditions of thought it refers to. An intersectional perspective forms a crucial point of departure, foregrounding how positions of knowledge emerge through the overlapping structures of social, historical, and geopolitical constellations. The critical tension lies not between regions, cultures, ethnicities, or traditions, but between claims to singular epistemic authority and the coexistence and entanglement of multiple situated knowledges. Taken together these perspectives effectively challenge different variants of centrist, self-referential thinking buttressed by assumptions of a single, universal framework of analysis. While a pluriversal approach has opened important pathways to epistemic

and ontological plurality, it also raises critical questions about translation, representation, and the concomitant risks of appropriating and extracting hitherto silenced forms of knowledge to sustain a given academic discourse. It fosters a mode of knowledge-making premised on epistemic humility and an ethics of interpretation that can hold opacity and transparency in tension rather than view these as polar opposites.

Pluriversal Openings has been envisioned as an experiment that conjoins thematic inquiry with the practice of dialogue. It invites scholars not to offer isolated contributions, but to engage in a sustained dialogue across disciplinary, regional, and epistemic boundaries, and to develop such exchanges as a methodological principle for art history. The process has been planned in two stages. In an initial meeting with the editorial collective, the selected pair of contributors will articulate shared questions and concerns in a move to familiarize themselves with each other's perspectives. The editorial collective understands its role less as curatorial authority, more as a facilitator of dialogue. This involves, among other things, creating conditions for attentive, empathetic listening and exchange. Building on this first step, the select pair of contributors will further develop the dialogue among themselves, to be then submitted in written form for publication in the journal.

Some broad areas that might orient the discussion are as follows:
— The ways in which a pluriversal lens could enable a rethinking of established art historical modes – e.g., comparison, historiography, etc.
— Engaging regional expertise and situatedness pluriversally
— How artistic practice can enable new ways of thinking of relationality, plurality, and situated knowledges

Interested scholars and artists may apply as tandems or in other dialogical formations with a shared thematic focus. The latter is entirely open with regard to region, epoch, or medium. Proposals should explain the theoretical stakes of their exchange and identify the objects of investigation central to the art historical inquiry.

Particular attention will be given to contributions that engage both the theoretical and practical dimensions of encounter. Please submit a proposal of max. 500 characters together with short bios to the editorial office of 21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual: 21-inquiries@unibe.ch.

This is an open call for contributions to be published across multiple issues of 21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual on a rolling basis. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis with no fixed deadline.

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