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Is Distant also Detached? A Digital Art Historical Approach towards Understanding Processes of Canon-Formation

In my PhD research, I investigate the way three museums, the Tate Collection in the UK, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York represent the art of the Central-East

European (CEE) region through their collection.

The local canon these collections of artistic centres forms on the art in such a semi-peripheral region carries global influence; the way they depict it considerably shapes the way the modern and contemporary art of the region is seen. Better understanding these representations and their similarities and differences is thus both with theoretical-epistemological and with strategic relevance.

However, merely acknowledging the act of inclusion is not sufficient. As Fonteini Vlachou phrased it in her seminal essay, mere geographical inclusion and canonization of art from the peripheries doesn't do much towards altering their status as such.[1] What should be done is to reflect on the configuration and practices which (re)produces hierarchy. Practices, according to Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, such as strictly monographic approaches, a naturalized concept of canon-formation and the maintained focus on a few artistic centres.[2] These practices result in the fact that even when the art of the periphery is investigated, it is most likely done in and through the lenses of artistic centres.[3]

The main goal of the present research is to contribute to the knowledge on the practices and patterns of canon-formation and it aims to find a position from which a "distant reading" on these processes of collection-building could be conducted. Doing so it introduces a theoretically embedded quantitative approach. It involves large scale data on both the museum collections and the artists incorporated within, enabling a comparative analysis of the three collections that allows a broader perspective. Through such a broader perspective systemic patterns are derived connecting seemingly different acquisition strategies. In a nutshell, a relational-structural approach is taken.

But is "distant reading" free from structural constraints? In their seminal essay from 1981, Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg talks about the controversial nature of the concept of exclusively artistic centres. Since there must be surplus value flowing which can be channelled towards artistic production, they claim that being artistic centres is dependent

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[1] Vlachou, Foteini. „Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery" *Visual Resources*, 32:1-2 (2016), 9-24. p.10.

[2] Joyeux-Prunel, Beatrice. „Graphs, charts, maps: plotting the global history of modern art". *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros*, 67 (2017): 17-37. p.19.

[3] Vlachou, p.9.

on being central also in other; economic, political, religious aspects. [4] Hence extensive professional, timely and financial capital is needed to build and maintain representative databases in the field of art, data availability enabling any distant reading is not independent, but heavily embedded in the distribution of power and the structure of the field of art. Is there any advantage then to conducting distant reading on phenomena related to canon-formation compared to any other tradition forms of art historical inquiry? This doctoral research hopes to be in the intersection of digital art history, critical data theory and the sociology of art. It discusses epistemological questions related to big data usage in research tackling phenomena related to non-central parts of the global field of art. The research also shows a possible approach on conducting data driven inquiry through the lenses of artistic centres without necessarily reinforcing centre-periphery power structure in the field of art.

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[4]Castelnuovo, Enrico, Ginzburg,Carlo & Curie, Maylis."Symbolic Domination and Artistic Geography in Italian Art History. *Art in Translation* 1:1 (2009):5-48. p.9