



Michał Zawada

**THE GLOBAL MUSEUM AND THE
POLITICS OF VISIBILITY**

What we used to call art operates in a highly structured and hierarchical space. Every hierarchical relationship produces a centre around which a particular order is organised. In this text, which is a reworking of thoughts expressed elsewhere,¹ I will attempt to look at how the system of institutions shaped by the historical process constructs and distributes the overarching currency of the visual arts, namely visibility, and how this currency influences the distribution of roles within the diverse and heterogeneous field of art, creating strong focal points and their peripheries. This task requires looking at artistic activities in general from the perspective of the social and political (and thus historical and material) mechanisms that determine the processes of building hierarchies and distributing prestige. The categories of centre and periphery will not be understood here in a strictly geographic-spatial context, but will refer to any manifestation of the hierarchical tensions that characterise contemporary art institutions.

That is why I ask what processes make the fundamental difference between the collections of those who speak and those we ultimately hear, as well as those who show and those we ultimately see. These are questions that need to resonate as artists confront what we call the art world in the context of global economic, social, climatic and political change. In this text I focus on the ideological conditioning of divisions and power structures within the art world. In order to better understand the system of phenomena and relations within the art world, i.e., the works, the creators, the interpretations, the audiences, the institutions and the relations between them, I will refer to them as the 'Global Museum'. It is a term that organises the totality of the elements mentioned, but it situates them within a historical and political process.

The totality of languages of art and languages about art, sometimes consonant with each other, sometimes mutually contradictory and mutually exclusive, and thus co-creating its heterogeneous landscape, is situated in the broad field of a complex system of representation. This system (or rather metasystem made up of historically and geographically variable subsystems) can be defined, following Louis Althusser, as an ideological semiotic apparatus, which is a meaningful structure, representing the real conditions of life and generating a complex stratigraphy of meanings.²

According to Althusser, ideologies are systems of representation consisting of concepts, ideas, myths and images in which people experience imaginative relations to real conditions of existence. This definition of ideologies as systems of representation recognises their discursive and semiotic

1 M. Zawada, 'Języki sztuki i globalne Muzeum', *Zeszyty Malarstwa* 13, 2019, pp. 36–40.

2 L. Althusser, *W imię Marksa*, transl. M. Herer, Warszawa, 2009, idem, *Ideologia i aparaty ideologiczne państwa*, transl. A. Staroń, Paris, 1976.

nature. Systems of representation are the systems through which we represent the world to ourselves and others. Ideological knowledge is the result of specific historical practices related to the production of meaning. We need systems through which we represent the real to ourselves and others, and as humans we simply cannot live in a space that would be ideologically unmediated. Althusser wrote, 'Only on the basis of an ideological world-view is it possible to imagine a world without ideology; the utopian idea of a world from which all ideology (and not just one or other of its historical forms) has disappeared without a trace to make way for science.'³ And further: 'Ideology is therefore no aberration or accidental extravagance of history; it is a structure necessarily accompanying the historical life of all societies. And it is only by recognising this necessity that it is possible to exert some influence on ideology, to transform it into a tool for consciously influencing the course of history.'⁴ Social relations and conditions of existence actually exist, independently of our will, so our representations of social relations do not exhaust their effects. However, we can only access them through these mediations. Ideology is essentially unconscious 'and this is true even when (...) it presents itself in a deliberate form. While ideology is a system of representations, these representations themselves mostly have nothing to do with "consciousness", they are usually images, sometimes concepts, to the vast majority of people, but they impose themselves in the form of structures that bypass their "consciousness" altogether.'⁵ Ideology is therefore closely linked to the problem of distributing visibility and defining hierarchies.

The Global Museum is a historically, geographically and socially (class) conditioned system that functions as an ideological apparatus. The correct identification of ideological conditioning (done, of course, from within the ideology) is only the first step. The question of actionability, which is most important from the ethical perspective, remains one of the most pressing imperatives faced by art institution practitioners.

The concept of art which, after many reinterpretations, we are using today is, of course, a relatively young creation, one might say it is modern par excellence. Its emergence is linked to the beginning of aesthetic reflection and, simultaneously, to the emergence and development of its first European public institutions in the 18th and early 19th centuries.⁶ It

3 L. Althusser, *W imię Marksa...*, op. cit., p. 267.

4 Ibidem, p. 268.

5 Ibidem.

6 Although exhibition institutions displaying objects classified today as fine arts were established as early as in the 15th and 16th centuries, the period of the Enlightenment saw a turn towards making collections accessible to a wider public, which was the case for the Capitoline Museums in 1734, the British Museum in 1753, the Royal Bavarian Collection in 1779, and the Uffizi in Florence around 1789. Making the French collection at the Louvre available

is worth noting that this is also the moment of the maturation of modern capitalism and, on the one hand, the emergence of the idea of nation states and, on the other, the beginnings of globalisation. All subsequent transformations within it, made especially in the avant-garde and contemporary periods, are based on a reconfiguration of this original concept. What we understand as art at any given time is linked to specific changing modes of experience growing out of historical and social circumstances.⁷ Following Jacques Rancière's thought, art is an assumption that makes objects that would otherwise have different functions visible: this is determined by a particular division of the presentation space.⁸ My proposed term 'Global Museum' helps to distinguish between inquiries rooted in an ideological definition of the field of art and reflections on the concept of art understood in a supra-historical perspective. It involves a central institutional apparatus that integrates artefacts into the circulation of the art world and therefore guarantees their visibility.

The Global Museum is a historically and geographically conditioned system representing the totality of phenomena and relations within the art world: the works and their creators, the languages of interpretation and representation, the audiences, the institutions and the relations established between them. Through interpellation, the Global Museum as ideology is responsible for empowering the aforementioned phenomena within the system. It is a decentralised, multi-level apparatus of power exercised within its ever-changing borders. Due to the lack of an unambiguous centre and the absence of constraints and barriers, we can consider this definition of the Global Museum as close to Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's concept of Empire, transposed onto the operation of the art world.⁹ Under contemporary conditions, the Global Museum functions, like the Empire, as a global apparatus, hegemonically incorporating into its framework all the practices, individuals and artefacts it desires. The Global Museum has the power of naming and therefore exercises power over the process of empowerment. It decides what will be included and, in doing so, gives the impression of having knowledge of what the included subject wants. This desire is to get closer to the

to the public during the Great French Revolution (1793) is an important reference point in this movement because of its political, republican context. See *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th- and Early 19th-Century Europe*, ed. C. Paul, Los Angeles, 2012.

7 See J. Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, New York-London, 2019, pp. IX–XII.

8 Idem, *Estetyka jako polityka*, transl. J. Kutyla, P. Mościcki, Warszawa, 2007, p. 24.

9 M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Imperium*, transl. A. Kołbaniuk, S. Ślusarski, Warszawa, 2011.

artistic core of the system, while the Global Museum seeks to regulate the object of this desire accordingly.

At the centre is the idea of art, which is impossible to be grasped precisely: it cannot be defined definitively and therefore is susceptible to transformation and a continuous process of interpretation. It becomes the condition for all ideological operations carried out by the Global Museum. It is a kind of black hole that, by the force of its gravity, attracts empowered, albeit alienated, individuals and practices to itself. Being included by the Global Museum into the discourse seems to promise a rapprochement with this centre.

The Global Museum as an ideological apparatus seeking to maintain dispersed power is nowadays closely linked to the hegemonic position of global capitalism. However, this trivial statement about the incorporation into the economic and political ideological system has consequences for virtually all manifestations of activity in this field, which are easy to ignore on a daily basis. It conditions everyday life, hierarchies and valuations, regulates languages, determines their audibility and visibility, but also moderates gestures of resistance. The contemporary habitual identification of the art world with the art market (and thus with one of the most pathological manifestations of the functioning of the global market) is a perfect symptom of this process. The anti-capitalist strategies that are emerging within the contemporary Global Museum are doomed to operate within the paradigm already set by the hegemonic position of Euro-Atlantic capitalism.

Any discussion of the hierarchical and unequal distribution of roles within the art world, and therefore a debate that questions the structure that determines positions in the centre and the periphery, should try to get to the source of the processes. I therefore propose the following, certainly fragmented, set of features of the Global Museum to help better understand its gradual evolution.

- a. The Global Museum is a historically conditioned phenomenon. Historicity thus determines the constant fluctuation of its identity, subject to constant renegotiation and translation into new economic, political and social conditions. In the simplest terms, its idea crystallises at the dawn of modernity to take its mature form in the period of Enlightenment. A symbolic moment for this process is the opening of the royal collections in the Louvre to representatives of all states during the French Revolution, as well as the transformation of art academies characterised by their explicitly authoritarian character into modern schools.¹⁰ The establishment

¹⁰ The process of change within art education took longer, and although the French Revolution brought a redefinition of the model of how the academy

of the first institutions gradually gives rise to discourses around art: that is how the modern academic art history and aesthetics are born. This is the first time that the Museum so radically separated the art, which began to reside inside its structure, from what remains outside. In a gesture of aestheticisation, art history 'calls' selected objects 'art' in a somehow anachronistical manner, stripping them of their original functions. Boris Groys argues even more radically that since the French Revolution, art has been treated as a de-functionalised and exposed corpse of past reality (the revolution turned the utilitarian objects of the *ancien régime* into art devoid of any function).¹¹ Finally, and this seems symptomatic, the timing of the emergence of the Global Museum coincides with the beginning of the secularisation of the Western European societies.¹²

b. The Global Museum as a historically conditioned phenomenon is subject to constant metamorphoses, which included several turning points: the crisis of the Parisian Salon at the end of the 19th century, the historical avant-gardes, the relocation of the centre from Europe to the United States during World War II or the dominance of the private sector from the second half of the 20th century onwards. New circumstances, whether political, social or aesthetic, provoke reactions from art institutions that adapt their language to the changed rules of the game.

c. The Global Museum is set in a specific geographical location: Western Europe experiencing a gradual trend of abandoning absolutism. Thanks to the institutional and hegemonic tendency of aesthetics and art history, it is gradually colonising other centres that are culturally and politically influenced by Europe.

d. The Global Museum is therefore developing in centres that are gradually gaining economic advantage and cultural dominance. The 19th century is a historic moment of a shift in the balance of economic power in favour of Europe and the Atlantic production

functioned, it was not until the mature modernism of the 20th century that truly spectacular transformations in institutional modes of teaching were brought about.

- 11 B. Groys, 'On Art Activism', [in:] idem, *In the Flow*, New York-London, 2017, pp. 47–49. Text also available: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/> [access: 28 December 2022].
- 12 The relationship between the emergence of the modern notion of art and the processes of secularisation was raised, among others, by: H. Belting, *Obraz i kult*, transl. T. Zatorski, Gdańsk 2010. See also: J. Dehail, 'Secular Objects and Bodily Affects in the Museum', [in:] *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions. European Configurations*, ed. M. Scheer, N. Fadil, B. Schepelern Johansen, Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 61–74.

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and trade system as well as a period of accelerating colonisation.¹³ The Museum is thus maturing with the acceleration of Euro-Atlantic capitalism, so its functioning and modes of hierarchy are closely linked to the speculative, financial model of the functioning of the economic system.

e. The Global Museum is characterised by a tendency towards hegemony and expansion (colonisation). The definitions of art it produces, despite their historical context and European origins, tend to claim universalism, which is why the Global Museum so easily systematically appropriates the creations of different regions of the world and different temporalities.

f. The Global Museum develops alongside the idea of the nation-state, whose crisis at the end of the 20th century affects also the functioning of the art world. The Global Museum combines the simultaneity of a global (universalist) dimension with a local, particularist one (the continuation of the tradition of national pavilions within an international exhibition endeavour such as the Venice Biennale can be given here as an excellent example).

The origins of the Global Museum are linked to a specific class (the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie), which has control over its discourses and its system of hierarchy and valuation. For this class, the gesture of aestheticising and defunctionalising objects is a tool for neutralising political orders that are hostile to it. Despite the gradual opening of the Museum to representatives of the lowest classes or marginalised groups, the most important centres of power remain in the hands of the richest and most influential actors.

g. The Global Museum was created by men.

h. It exploits and mythologises the creative potential of the individual; it builds on antagonism and competitiveness, later transferring them to other, higher levels (of groups, institutions, centres).

i. Its emergence is accompanied by the creation of institutions that are supposed to protect its interests. Emerging alongside museums are art associations (e.g., the German *Kunstvereine*), auction houses specialising in works of art, public museum institutions, private galleries, biennales, etc.

j. The Global Museum exists as a hierarchical structure that determines the constantly changing systems of evaluation. However, regardless of the methods of this evaluation and the democratisation processes taking place within it, it retains a market-driven and symbolic capital-driven tendency to hierarchise its actors. The

13 For more on reorientation points in the history of the global economy, see: K. Półlocki, *Kapitalizm. Historia krótkiego trwania*, Warszawa, 2017.

Museum's policy is largely based on the production of scarcity (the regulation of artistic overproduction carried out precisely by maintaining certain hierarchies and values). This phenomenon means, as Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber recently argued, that 'even the most sincerely radical anti-capitalist critics, curators, and gallerists will tend to draw the line at the possibility that everyone really could be an artist, even in the most diffuse possible sense. The art world remains overwhelmingly a world of heroic individuals, even when it claims to echo the logic of movements and collectives – even when the ostensible aim of those collectives is to annihilate the distinction between art and life.'¹⁴

k. With increasing globalisation and the spread of liberal tendencies within the Global Museum, processes of at least declarative democratisation are emerging, occurring, however, with the continued retention of a strong core of power. The Museum makes a universal, democratic promise of participation while ensuring that its core retains a strictly hierarchical, individual-based character.

l. The Global Museum is based on the fetishisation of artefacts as commodities. The radical acceleration of capitalism and the crisis of the public support system for culture make the speculative nature of the art market accelerate.

m. The currency of the Global Museum is symbolic capital, understood as the prestige of individuals and institutions, which is not always linked to the mercantile value of artefacts. The lowest class in the order of the art world is the dark matter, as defined by Gregory Scholette, which ensures the Global Museum's smooth functioning.¹⁵

n. Under the dominance of the liberal order, a huge percentage of artistic activities declaratively isolate themselves from the political order; they adopt a neutral position. Radical actions, on the other hand, are gradually neutralised and institutionalised.

14 N. Dubrovsky, D. Graeber 'Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity', *e-flux Journal*, 2019, 102: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/102/284624/another-art-world-part-1-art-communism-and-artificial-scarcity/>, [access: 9 November 2019].

15 According to G. Scholette, the dark matter of the art world consists of artists who have lost out in the race for institutional visibility. However, the presence of these invisible activities makes it possible to construct hierarchical relationships within the official field of art. See G. Scholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, London-New York, 2011.

The Global Museum is thus a structure within which resound the languages of art produced by, among others: artists, their works, museums, galleries, art schools, local and global biennials, publishers and foundations within both the public and private sectors, critics, curators, aesthetes, art philosophers or educators. Each link in this ideological structure guarantees its functioning and continued growth.

For these languages, the Global Museum is the only global system of representation and therefore distribution of institutional visibility. That is why anyone who wishes to be heard (seen), even the most radical contestant of the Global Museum, is condemned to move within it.

The subjects of power within the Global Museum represent the full political and social image, ranging from the most revolutionary and radically democratic to the most hard-core conservative, the only difference is that subjects with a strictly conservative perspective believe that they occupy a position outside of ideology, in a pure space from which they can make moral judgements. As Althusser noted, 'what actually happens in ideology seems to operate outside of it: one of the results of ideology is the practical negation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says "I am ideological"'.¹⁶ The Global Museum's subjects can both narrate/show visions of sudden transformation, emancipation and participation as well as dream of a lost (but never existing) past. However, as long as they generate their discourses within the paradigm of hierarchy and market fetishisation, they generate them within the Global Museum, which loads them with its ideological charge.

Is there any artistic activity outside the Global Museum? Yes. It is a set of phenomena often described as peripheral, regardless whether this peripherality is determined by geographical distance from the world's artistic centres, the ethnic or class origin of the artist or creator, or the niche set of technological or formal means within which activity is undertaken. However, it is the Global Museum that holds the promise

16 L. Althusser, *Ideologie i aparaty ideologiczne państwa*, quoted in: http://www.nowakrytyka.pl/pl/Ksiazki/Ksiazki_on-line/?id=888 [access: 13 November 2019]. A clear symptom of this trend on the Polish scale is the recently announced substantive and organisational programme of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, prepared by the newly appointed director Piotr Bernatowicz. Bernatowicz declares there the ideological purity: freedom from ideologisation understood, as he writes, as 'a mechanism of thinking detached from reality'. Such tracing of 'ideology' from the supposed perspective of ideological freedom remains not only disarmingly naïve, but imposes on us a duty of even greater critical vigilance; http://bip.mkidn.gov.pl/media/docs/ogloszenia/2019/Program_merytoryczny_i_organizacyjny_csw_-_z_u_na_2020-2026_z_akceptacja_Ministra.pdf [access: 13 November 2019].

of empowering it and making it visible, which is why everyone is so eager to come to its edifice. The cultural dominance of the Euro-Atlantic region since at least the mid-19th century has guaranteed the Western concept of art as a hegemony within which the colonised regions can only carry out systematic assimilation. This process was particularly evident after the fall of the Iron Curtain or the collapse of colonial regimes. New actors entering the art scene are seeking mechanisms that are both globally legible and preserve the local particularity. This is because the process of assimilating what is radically different takes longer and is far more complicated.

Any action taken at a distance from the centre has the potential to be incorporated into the Global Museum, but carries at the same time the possibility of changing its shape, even if this change will be slight or in the long term irrelevant. Activity outside the centres of dominant discourses can become a laboratory for new possibilities and forms of collaboration. Their intensification can lead to the systematic transformation of the Global Museum and the loosening of hierarchies. However, it is impossible to imagine such a change that would not be accompanied by changes of a social and political nature, even if previous attempts at an inclusive reorganisation of the art space have proved to be short-lived and sometimes superficial. Perhaps, as Hardt and Negri argue,¹⁷ there is an opportunity to establish a new community based on a radical multiplicity abolishing hegemony and in its stead proposing cooperative relations within social and cultural life. But will it centre around 'art'? Discussions on peripheral phenomena undertaken in many forums, the ongoing process of emancipation of those who have hitherto been excluded from the Global Museum, debates initiated in the context of events such as the *documenta fifteen*, curated by the Indonesian *ruangrupa*, produce real fissures in the creaking edifice.¹⁸ It is impossible to ascertain their permanence, but the knowledge that the Global Museum was created as a result of specific historical transformations ensures that it is a conglomerate of institutions that can be subject to constant reconfiguration.

The process of emancipation by the excluded phenomena alone does not solve the problem of institutional hegemony. We need to be aware that processes of empowerment, however desirable within the Global Museum institution, can still replicate elite hierarchies and thus lead to further exclusions. Not every change coming from the periphery

17 M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford, 2017.

18 M. You, 'What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on *documenta fifteen*', *e-flux Journal*, 131, November 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/131/501112/what-politics-what-aesthetics-reflections-on-documenta-fifteen/> [access: 19 June 2023].

is by definition a desirable change, just as not every decision taken from a position of the centre is a wrong decision. It is impossible to think of the field of art as a space that is devoid of agonic dynamics, free of tensions and conflicts. Nor is there a world of complete and egalitarian visibility. However, the more the procedures for regulating it disperse, the less dominant the centres will be. The processes of expanding visibility must concern all art institutions: those dealing with creation and exhibition, but also the research and theoretical ones. It is ultimately the institutions that carry the burden of collective efforts within the visual arts.¹⁹ As the conditions of domination are constantly changing, the processes of systematic institutional critique must also adapt to the realities of the present. Since the 1970s, the waves of institutional criticism themselves became systematically institutionalised, eventually becoming another tool for evaluating artistic practices. It becomes clear that it is not only institutions that need to be criticised, but also the strategies of criticism themselves. At stake in such critical mechanics (or 'metacritical' mechanics, which recently takes the form of instituent practices²⁰) is the pluralism that is still waiting to be implemented, remaining perpetually in the realm of theoretical hypotheses and declarations often unsupported by real action. However, we should be aware that the contemporary Polish institutional and political context shows that the renegotiation of the model for the functioning of venues exhibiting contemporary art can take on a counter-revolutionary character, based on resentment and violent appropriation. This fact cannot obscure the need for constant renegotiation of current global hierarchies. However, their effects are still difficult to predict.

19 See T. Beery, 'Instituent Practices: Art After (Public) Institutions', *Temporary Art Review* 2018, January 2, <https://temporaryartreview.com/instituent-practices-art-after-public-institutions/>.

20 The term was introduced by G. Raunig in 'Flatness Rules: Instituent Practices and Institutions of the Common in a Flat World', [in:] *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. P. Gielen, Amsterdam, 2013, and defined as 'the actualisation of the future in the present becoming'.

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Abstract:

The text attempts to diagnose the hierarchical relations regulating visibility within visual arts institutions. Despite processes that increase the declarative inclusivity of art institutions, referred to by the author as the Global Museum, the reality of art circulation remains conditioned by relations to hegemonic entities. Using the concept of ideological apparatuses of the state, the author treats the institutional circulation of art as a complex, historically and socially conditioned system. Presenting the topic in a historical context allows for a better understanding of the processes shaping the division between centre and periphery within the globalised art world. The article also asks the question about possible scenarios to move beyond the closed circuit of hierarchical relationships which regulate who, within the institutional framework, becomes visible and who will remain marginalised.

Keywords:

Global Museum, institutions, art world, hierarchy, hegemony, ideology, ideological apparatuses of the state, centre and periphery, exclusion, visibility, instituent practice

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