

DAVID JOSELIT

In my book *Heritage and Debt*, I argue that art's globalization has the capacity to redress Western modernism's cultural dispossession of the Global South. Both imperialism and slavery—two primary means of capital accumulation in the nineteenth century—claimed the cultural inferiority of non-Western cultures as justification for appropriating their land, labor, and the personal freedom of their peoples. While non-Western art was denigrated and suppressed in its places of origin, it was nevertheless appropriated by European modernism in the subordinate position of “primitivism” or “exoticism,” or collected as defunct anthropological relics in encyclopedic or natural-history museums in the European or American metropolis. Global contemporary art confronts this history of dispossession in its counter-appropriation of cultural heritage as a *contemporary* resource. The term *heritage* may seem jarring in this context since historically, its application to non-Western cultures has typically abetted their dispossession rather than combatted it. While European modernism claimed freedom from the ballast of tradition, it relegated non-Western art to a form of heritage that lacked dynamism and contemporary relevance. By asserting European modernity as universal—and thus not bound to any particular heritage (despite the fact that modernist movements such as Cubism were deeply and self-consciously rooted in the “local” history of post-Renaissance European painting), the West was emboldened to view all other expressions of modernity as indebted to it, as *derivative*. Such indebtedness not only underwrote the dual modern institutions of imperialism and slavery by positing subject peoples as not fully human and consequently in debt to their rulers or masters for access to modernity, it also continues to characterize neoliberal (or neo-imperial) techniques of governance through debt, by which loans from international financial agencies such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund serve as instruments of interference in a wide range of policy issues. In my usage, *heritage*, by contrast, denotes any kind of cultural inheritance passed down anywhere, thus encompassing both ostensibly “traditional” practices like literati ink painting in China and “modern” ones such as Op art in Euro-America. Native and postcolonial thinkers for whom tradition is and always has been a living resource have roundly criticized the Eurocentric presumption that heritage is dormant and safely sealed in the

* This excerpt has been adapted from David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Spring 2020), and reprinted courtesy of the MIT Press.

past. In *Heritage and Debt*, I depend upon these insights to argue that the aesthetic—and often economic—response to Eurocentrism under conditions of globalization has been a reactivation of heritage as a resource for inventing alternate genealogies of modernism and diverse experiences of contemporaneity.

Fundamental to globalization, then, is a highly consequential cultural recalibration: The West “regains” its heritage *as a particular* rather than universal set of traditions, while the Global South reasserts its dynamic traditions *as contemporary*. Global contemporary art is one primary locus of this recalibration, and thus, following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, it is an arena in which “cognitive justice,”¹ understood as acknowledgment and respect for myriad ways of knowing and experiencing the world, may be demanded. I argue that the *inalienability* of heritage—as the inheritance of a group, people, nation, or region, rather than an individual’s private property—also functions as a unique economic resource under conditions of globalization, where the values of authenticity, which are ever rarer and thus more valuable in a globalizing world, are monetized. In this sense, the capacity for heritage to compensate for indebtedness is not merely a metaphor but borne out through contemporary art’s worldwide participation in economic development. *Heritage and Debt* does not therefore omit consideration of economics and politics, but rather develops its analysis from an account of art’s agency within their dynamics—both as a special form of knowledge and as a resource for development. The art politics I discern are thus founded not in the solipsistic type of critique much Western contemporary art celebrates but rather in art’s potential to redress cultural dispossession.

Most accounts of global contemporary art adopt one of two forms: either the in-depth study of nations or regions in the Global South whose particular practices of modernity have been overlooked; or the broad survey, whose anodyne multiculturalism assembles art from around the world without sufficiently acknowledging, let alone redressing, the histories of conquest and dispossession that precede their appearance in a contemporaneous moment. As significant as the former are (and essential to my arguments in the book), these new national or regional histories are recounted largely outside a comparative global framework. Conversely, surveys of global contemporary art simulate a form of ethno-geographic diversity almost entirely divorced from local histories.² It is the typology of the biennial exhibition, with its tradition of national pavilions joined to diverse, often thematic survey exhibitions, that has consolidated these two dominant formats for analyzing global contemporary art.³ Despite their undoubtedly good intentions, such exhibitions sever artists from their heritage in a superficial form of multicultural representation—or tokenism—that fails to do justice to their art’s histories. In this book, I argue that heritage has

1. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South; Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), p. 133.

2. This term is used by Lee Weng Choy. See Lee Weng Choy, “On Being Curated,” in *Begriffe des Austellens (Von A bis Z): Terms of Exhibiting (from A to Z)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), p. 64.

3. While most biennials no longer adhere to the structure of national pavilions (with the very notable exception of the Venice Biennale), there remains a hybrid effect of national presentations and de-historicized group shows.

emerged as a resource for demanding such justice, because in *becoming contemporary* heritage calls for the adjudication among several different and often contradictory world epistemologies, histories, and even ontologies.

While I believe that the reanimation of heritage can be a progressive tool for claiming justice in a postcolonial, post–Cold War world, it is undeniable that at the present moment claims on heritage are being aggressively deployed to deeply authoritarian, often quasi-fascistic, ends. The rise of ethnic or cultural nationalisms or populisms across the world—including of course in Europe and the United States—substantiates my assertion that the myriad forms of cultural dispossession accomplished by liberal capitalism and global neoliberalism have led to a worldwide reactivation of heritage. But contrary to Eurocentric and modernist prejudice, I believe there are no inherent politics in the reanimation of heritage, just as democracy itself can lean toward radical inclusion, on the one hand, or promote disastrous programs of militarist neo-imperialism on the other. In *Heritage and Debt*, I trace a particular progressive potential and aesthetic model of heritage as it is reframed by what might be called a “curatorial episteme.” I argue that curation encompasses what I have elsewhere called the epistemology of search—ways of knowing that are premised on the algorithmic sorting and patterning of vast accumulations of data.⁴ As a form of human or “bespoke” search, curation is now invoked as an organizing concept well beyond the precincts of art, naming a value-enhancing principle of selection for goods ranging from cheeses to luxury apartments. An aesthetics of curation is not only widespread among global contemporary artists whose work ranges from the aggregation or reanimation of appropriated content to a widespread archival turn in contemporary art, but it also encompasses cultural policies, such as the foundation of new museums worldwide, meant to distinguish localities within a competitive global market. Perhaps most important, a curatorial approach to knowledge is particularly well suited to recalibrating the relationship between different forms of world heritage in its capacity to hold unlike objects and images together without placing them in a fixed hierarchical relationship to one another. The problem remains, however, that actually-existing curatorial practice does little or nothing to challenge dominant forms of knowledge, or to accommodate itself to non-Western ways of knowing. And yet it carries the political potential that I identify in *Heritage and Debt*—a form of curation, accomplished not only by curators and philosophers but especially by artists, that can *re-temporalize* heritage in order to imagine new and more just futures.

4. See my *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), especially pp. 55–60.