Contemporary Asian art and Western societies: cultural "universalism" or "uniqueness" in Asian modern art

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Abstract

The expectations modern art has to fulfill are of various kind. Modern art is to be a seismograph of societal developments and thus sensitive to political and economic themes. Thus, Western (critical) contemporary art is in the dilemma to deal with and challenge capitalism in mostly bourgeois frameworks of musealized exhibitions, criticizing political leadership and social inequalities and presenting it largely to exactly the established classes. Here contemporary art's task lies in both the individual and arts self-reflection and self-critique. Creating awareness of individual and collective historical processes and being able to sense and experience societal antagonisms can be described as conscious making by the means of critical modern art. Taking in account that to learn (socio-historically) art and thus to be able to sense dissonances is a pre-condition to understand modern art the question arises: How to deal with contemporary art from foreign cultures and unfamiliar civilizations? How to understand Asian critical contemporary art with a Western sensual kind of sensing and understanding? It is the question of universality and uniqueness of modern art and/or the integrating power of Western capitalism and consumerism within the sphere of critical art. Is it possible to sense and understand Chinese or Japanese art with a Western education and different socio-historical and political-economical understanding? How to decipher and contextualize modern art without "cultural expertise"? This contribution deals with the contradictions between the (cultural) particular and the general serving as gatekeepers for sensing societal and historical grown antagonisms and sensing of cultural and social dissonances in modern art production. Is modern art by definition Western? By experiencing Asian modern art the purpose of this research is to find the particularities and the general of (Asian) critical modern art.

Keywords: Asian art, Western art hegemony, Japanese aesthetics, Tea ceremony, Art tourism, Aesthetics of imperfection, Aesthetics of contingency, Traditional uniqueness, Universal culture, Globalization

Globalization, culture and art tourism

In the course of globalization and industrialization, art has been becoming increasingly a subject of (inter) national interest. With the development of the tourist industry, art and cultural entertainment has proven to be an important economic (national) factor in most countries. "Art tourism has always been stimulated by the relative immobility of art – that for a variety of reasons it is 'placed', where it was created, or where it is

collected together, or where it is displayed, where it is traded and where it is embedded in the cultural life of specific cities, civilisations and peoples." (Franklin 2018, p. 404–405). Before modern globalization and the global expansion of the international travel infrastructure, the modern phenomenon of "(mass) tourism" was unknown and the purpose to travel was mostly related to reasons of trade, education or pilgrimage. However, cultural education, learning languages and getting familiar with other cultures by the means of travelling has been a privilege of the rich. Howard Hughes emphasizes that from the 16th to the early nineteenth Century the British young (male) upper-class travelled around Europe to gain knowledge and experience "of government and culture before returning to 'settle down' to the business of land-owning and governing. This, by the eighteenth century, had become common for men of wealth, accompanied by tutor and servants. The particular focus was usually Italy as the birthplace of the Renaissance and of the earlier Roman civilization though France was an important destination also. 'Pleasure' undoubtedly featured in this Grand Tour despite the high-minded intentions and there were many opportunities for pleasurable diversion such as plays, concerts, parties, socializing, sexual encounter, eating and drinking during the journey and at destinations. By the end of the eighteenth century the 'pleasure' attractions of Italy, its people, climate and way of life, were increasingly recognized as being the reason for travel (Withey, 1998)." (Hughes 2000, p. 49). Nowadays, the "traveler" has turned into a "tourist". The first one was open and spontaneous with respect to time and space due to financial possibilities and/or occupation-related-freedom, when the latter one is restricted to a narrow time frame and financial resources as a result from the respective (national) wage-labor contractual agreements on the duration of vacation and the level of income. In the beginning of the tourism industry, the aim of the masses was to travel in order to relax and regain their work power. However, with the increase in white-collar labor the focus shifted more and more to cultural tourism. Hughes differentiate between "universal cultural tourism", "wide cultural tourism", "narrow cultural tourism" and "sectorized cultural tourism". Concerning universal cultural tourism, Hughes states that most "international tourism is 'cultural' in this sense because it usually involves some exposure to aspects of other cultures. Even those tourists who do not deliberately seek to experience other cultures will be exposed, to some degree, to the culture of destinations. It would be misleading though to classify it as cultural tourism as it does not have a deliberate 'cultural' purpose." (Hughes 2000, p. 52). Wide cultural tourism is related to experience different (national) cultural areas, as for example, "the arts, crafts, work, religion, language, traditions, food and dress" (Hughes, 2000, p. 52) that are related to non-Western ethnic cultural heritages. However to experience just (superior) cultural techniques, intellectual and/or artistic artworks, and not everyday culture is framed as narrow cultural tourism (Hughes 2000, p. 52). Sectorized cultural tourism is understood as historical/heritage, arts and musealized tourism (Hughes 2000, p. 53), that is museum- and exhibition-hopping in order to reassure to see originals artworks from the famous artist and cultural workers.

Adrian Franklin differentiates between cultural tourism and art tourism. For him "cultural tourism is the putative orientation of tourists to learning or experiencing at firsthand the cultural specificity of any given destination. While this is certainly true for many activities often included in cultural tourism, Stylianou-Lambert (2011) shows that it is certainly not true for them all, and especially not in the case of visitors to art

museums." (Franklin 2018, p. 401). Art museums are characterized by their specific subject matter that is more related to (cosmopolitan) arts enthusiasts than to tourists showing an interest in knowing better other cultures. Franklins sees the increase of art tourism in relation with urban development, that is the growing numbers of art museums and urban festivals, as well as "the centrality of art, and especially of contemporary art to contemporary life, culture, design, making and the life-chances of cities and regions; the growing significance of major exhibitions, events, biennales and festivals (Seffrin, 2006; Stevenson, 2003) and the generalised hope that tourism and cultural florescence will go a significant way towards replacing the jobs, income, identity and morale – in other words, the vitality of urban, regional and national life – from lost manufacturing, industry and trade (Grodach, 2008; Landry, 2012; Plaza, 2000)" (Franklin 2018, p. 401).

However, the focus of art, culture and tourism is too one-sided putting the viewer/observer and consumer in the middle of the interest but neglecting largely the history of the artwork, its socio-cultural aspects of the artists as well as the power relations that are related to Western art hegemony.

Culture, history and modern (Asian) art

In thesis XVII in "Theses on the Concept of History" Walter Benjamin emphasizes that historicism ends up in universal history and that the additive methodological approach of historicism "offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time" (Benjamin 1992, p. 152). According to this concept to understand and classify history, historical events and products, human achievements are summed up in a linear and homogenous order. Benjamin opposes this approach with the concept of materialist history. Understanding history as a constructive principle, the historical materialist works with the historical object while grasping it as a monad, a unique encounter in history having the potential to confront the suppressed past. "He perceives it, in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history; thus exploding a specific life out of the epoch, or a specific work out of the life-work. The net gain of this procedure consists of this: that the life-work is preserved and sublated in the work, the epoch in the life-work, and the entire course of history in the epoch. The nourishing fruit of what is historically conceptualized has time as its core, its precious but flavorless seed." (Benjamin 1992, p. 152).

Benjamin's critique on historicism can serve as example how historiography can narrow down (historical) perception and thus reducing the potential of understanding the past and its relatedness to the present and future. In the same way, historicism is treating specific events and time in an inadequate way, a parochial focus on regional and cultural space conceals (inter-) cultural complexity.

The origin and development of modern art is typically related to modernity and the perception of Western society's industrial development, progress and societal fractions. The concept of individuality and the capability to question and confront (societal) appearances and general social assumptions with modern artwork seem to be related to Western master narratives of modern art. However, the development of (modern) art is not absolute spatially separated. Even if China as well as Japan closed themselves up for foreigners for a specific period, Asian artists and artwork have influenced European artists. In line with the world exhibitions in Paris, that is the "Exposition Universelle" in 1855, 1867 and 1878, Japanese Ukizo-e-woodcuts became known and inspired, for

example, Claude Monet. From the two-dimensional graphic artworks made by Utagawa Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai Édouard Manet learned to shorten drastically the perspective in his paintings. And Monet did not just adopt the shortened perspective but integrated additionally the asymmetric composition of Ukiyo-e in order to create emotional tension (Gompertz 2014, p. 62). According to Gompertz, many European artists adopted Japanese techniques and integrated them in their work. Especially the impressionists have been "impressed" by the plain elegance. Edgar Degas was fascinated by the artist Hiroshige who produced, inter alia, graphics of all 53 resting stations of the 470-km long street from Edo to Kyoto (Gompertz 2014, p. 63). One can see the influences of Hiroshige's work especially in Degas' painting "Dance Lesson" where he works with alike techniques as Hiroshige in the artwork "The Station Otsu". Both works are composed with a bird's eye perspective and integrate a diagonal – from lower left to upper right – thus transmitting a feeling of movement and creating a spatial construction giving the notion that the action in the scene is moving to the upper right, even out of the graphic. With these techniques, Degas gives the impression of movement and immediacy in his paintings (Gompertz 2014, pp. 63–66). However, at least until the mid-nineteenth Century it was not a cultural exchange, rather a one-sided transfer. Because of their contacts to foreign countries and their acquired knowledge and techniques from the so-called "Dutch-sciences", the painter Watanabe Kazan (1793–1841) and the physician Takano Chôei (1804–1850) have been negatively sanctioned by their Shôgun (Ishida 2008, pp. 29–30).

In the letters from Arles, Vincent van Gogh describes, especially in the ones to his brother, Theo, the enormous influence of Japanese artwork on his artistic development. He bought many Japanese prints himself and he admired the Japanese artists' dedication, art-focused way and simple way of living as well as relatedness to nature. The (diagonal) perspective, asymmetrical composing of the scenery as well as the heavy contours, the use of color and the intense focus on the simplest motifs fascinated him. In a letter from Tuesday, June 5, 1888, he writes to his brother: "Look, we love Japanese painting, we've experienced its influence — all the Impressionists have that in common — and we wouldn't go to Japan, in other words, to what is the equivalent of Japan, the south? So I believe that the future of the new art still lies in the south after all.

(…) I'd like you to spend some time here, you'd feel it — after some time your vision changes, you see with a more Japanese eye, you feel colour differently. I'm also convinced that it's precisely through a long stay here that I'll bring out my personality. The Japanese draws quickly, very quickly, like a flash of lightning, because his nerves are finer, his feeling simpler" (Van Gogh 1888).

Even if Asian art in general and Japanese art in particular influenced and coined (especially) from the beginning of the nineteenth century European artists, Asian art was never really recognized as art stile competing with European and American stiles and movements. It was rather acknowledged as a curiosity, as an exotic stylish ingredience giving the European artwork more impression but Asian Art did not get the recognition for its very own sake. A decade ago, David Clarke claims that it was difficult to find Western artists giving the expression that they could learn something meaningful from contemporary Asian art (2002, p. 238). Contemporary Asian art falls in terms of recognition far behind the pioneers of European modern art. "Despite vastly increased possibilities for travel and the massive high-speed flows of information

between cultures in our electronic age the asymmetry of knowledge which prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s still exists: it is the Asian contemporary artist who knows what his or her American counterpart is doing and not the other way around." (Clarke 2002, p. 238). However, Clarke notes a change in interest, but he makes clear that this interest is primary in "contemporary art exhibition spaces rather than in studios" (2002, p. 238) and it is the interest of curators and not of artists. Although admitting that there are signs of a change Clarke believes that due to the lack of a sense in mainstream or of artistic progress that comes along with the postmodern era that Asian art is still regarded as regional peculiarity. He claims: "Rather than forcing a reorganization of the system of conceptual pigeonholes, Asian contemporary art may still be placed as a further temporary novelty for Western palates or viewed as comforting evidence that the non-Western world is becoming more like the West, is learning to speak its (artistic) language." (2002, pp. 238). Even if Asian contemporary art is increasingly displayed, it seems to be that the context is more a Western appropriation. To support this hypothesis, Clarke points to different examples in order to show the missing acknowledgment of Asian in general and Chinese art in particular. Considering popular US-American college art textbooks, he emphasizes that in the textbook "*Gardner's Art Through the Ages,* for instance, [it] seems so unaware of the basic facts of modern Chinese history that its ninth edition (published 1991) can have a sub-heading in its only chapter on Chinese Art which reads 'Ming, Ch'ing, and Later Dynasties'. There were no 'later dynasties', of course, and a mindset is revealed which wants to subsume modern Chinese history into that which had preceded it, to emphasise continuity over change." (2002, p. 240). And he continues that placing the Chinese art chapter before European Renaissance indicates the development of European and Western art shows Chinese art – in comparison to the Euramerican one – as "static" and "homogeneous". Clarke continues with Gombrich's book "The Story of Art" revealing the unquestioned leading Western perspective in matters of art and with Sherman Lee's "A History of Far Eastern Art" where Chinese art is "compressed" to some worthy examples of Chinese art whilst ignoring Asian art in the twentieth Century. He concludes that because treating Asian art in the textbooks more in anecdotal way "that even where modern and contemporary Asian art is being dealt with in the classroom, it is being largely confined to an Asian Studies ghetto and not placed alongside its European and North American counterpart" (Clarke 2002, p. 240). Like the contemporary scientific hegemony, that is neglecting, for example, Arabian scientific achievements; Western art hegemony either ignores other cultural art traditions not taking them as equal worthy, or is treating art otherness as exotic and different as supplement. Caught in the world of ideas of Euramerican history, not being aware of the regional cultural socio-historical developments art history is mainly centered on narratives of Western artists. However, with the acceleration of contemporary globalization it gets increasingly difficult to ignore cultural art otherness or at least to accept socio-historical (art) developments influencing mutually – more or less – each other. "Indeed, what is needed is a dethroning of Western-centred narratives of artistic modernity altogether, an awareness of the variety of ways of responding to the modern condition that artists in different cultural situations have made. What might be crucial in one cultural situation may have no relevance in another: early 20th-century Chinese modernism for instance had no need for Cubism since there had not been the several hundred year dominance of illusionistic realism that European art was

attempting to throw off." (Clarke 2002, p. 241). In order to begin to create awareness and understanding of different cultural historical contexts and the interrelating – as well as different – aspects of global art development is a fundamental change in the perception and appreciation of art deriving from unprejudiced acknowledgment of cultural regional developments. Or as Clarke puts it: "Only when a multiplicity of such perspectives exist, in dialogue but with none granted in advance any particular priority, can we talk of art history as having become globalised as a discipline. Globalisation requires an insight into the local nature of meaning which rules out the possibility of a panoptic mastering viewpoint." (Clarke 2002, p. 241).

European art hegemony

In line with Clarke's argument, there is, according to John Clark, a lack of discourse in global art history taking modern Asian art seriously into account. Pinpointing to single examples, such as the exhibition in 1834 in Amsterdam of the Asian artist Raden Saleh, Clark states that Asian modern art was not seriously recognized in the global discourse before the Venice Biennale in 1993 where especially Chinese artists presented their works. Until then global art was covered "by an immanent Euramerican hegemony" (Clark 2014, p. 68). This can be explained by "the pragmatic interlinking and its hermeneutic positioning" of the "empirical nature of art practice" (Clark 2014, p. 68). Until the 1990s postmodern, postcolonial, transnational as well as global discourses served as the conceptual framework of art interpretation. Another approach is "the 'worlding' of phenomena—the application of interpretive frames to art discourses that are visible in a global perspective across cultural and temporal zones—that have been occluded, by Euramerican domination, as derivative or different from those in Euramerica. This occlusion did not mean these discourses, which include parallel or alternative modernities made possible by that worlding, had not been there already, however difficult to view they might have been from a Euramerican position." (Clark 2014, pp. 68–69). Worlding is thus a conceptual framework focusing on local interpretative frames that are not generated by dominant (global) discourses. "'Worlding' is marked sometimes temporarily, by the period when a discourse is supposed to have overcome its inwardness or closure, or it is spacially designated as in distant, regional, provincial styles within an art culture." (Clark 2014, pp. 69). Thus, worlding is not that far away from Benjamin's concept of understanding history as in a materialist way, that is, to focus on a specific epoch related to a specific life in order to grasp the interrelation between the uniqueness and general of both the specific epoch in question and the entire course of history (cf. Benjamin 1992, p. 152). The potential contradictory interpretations of endogenous and exogenous regional, cultural and hegemonic complexities in time and space can be exemplified by the task of following the Japanese art of the tea ceremony and its changing concepts due to the socio-historical context.

The tea ceremony and Japanese aesthetics

The traditional tea ceremony can serve as a very good example to explain Japanese cultural and aesthetical uniqueness. Cultural heritage, extraordinary sense of aesthetics in combination with spiritual superiority by the means of humbleness characterized by an idealized picture of Samurai feudalist culture and Zen Buddhism are mainly brought into relation with the tea ceremony. In "Zen and Japanese Culture" Daisetz T. Suzuki

presents an idealized understanding of the tea ceremony. He introduces the principle of the art of tea (cha-no-yu) as "the spirit of harmonious blending of Heaven and Earth" providing "the means of establishing universal peace." (Suzuki 2010, p. 276). The tea ceremony and everything related to it is not left to coincidence but is meticulous planned and performed. The spirit of Zen Buddhism and the art of the tea ceremony are inevitably interrelated and a founding figure of this "humble" social praxis, Sen no Rikyū. expressed the spirit of art as follows: "When tea is made with water drawn from the depth of Mind Whose bottom is beyond measure, We really have what is called cha-no-yu." (Suzuki 2010, p. 280). In the pure understanding of the tea ceremony by Sen no Rikyū it is about the concretization of the (Zen Buddhist) philosophy of emptiness that is expressed in solitariness, poverty and absolutism. Thus, the landscape where the tea hut is placed, the architecture of the tea hut and the setting of the tearoom, all utensils have to be in full harmony. As described by Suzuki "the principles regulation the tearoom are four: (1) Harmony (*wa*), (2) Reverence (*kei*), (3) Purity (*sei*), and (4) Tranquillity (*jaku*). The first two are social or ethical, the third is both physical and psychological, and the fourth is spiritual or metaphysical. When one goes over these four items, one will see that here are represented the four schools of Oriental teaching: Confucianism is for the first two, Taoism and Shintoism for the third, and Buddhism and Taoism for the fourth." (Suzuki 2010, pp. 304–305).

This specific understanding and celebration of the tea ceremony is caused by an antagonistic struggle of the meaning and (re-)presentation and the aim of the ceremony as such. Yasushi Inoue gives a revealing impression of the power struggle related to the power of definition of the tea ceremony and its protagonists. He describes in his famous novel "Death of a Tea Master" the life and work of Sen no Rikyū and his confrontations with other interpretations of the tea ceremonial. At the end, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the Imperial Regent of Japan, for whom Sen no Rikyū served as tea master, ordered Sen no Rikyū to commit ritual suicide. Even if the full circumstances remain unclear, the ritual suicide of the tea master is related to confrontational interpretations and teachings of the tea ceremony (Yasuchi 2017). In order to grasp the contradictory implications of (modern) art in Japan, in general, and the tea ceremony, in particular, it is crucial to understand its socio-historical development.

Kato Shuicho subdivides the tea ceremony's history in three periods. The first period is connected to the Muromachi (1392–1573), Momoyama (1573–1615), and Edo (1615–1867) period and includes four tea masters: Murato Jukō (1423–1502), Takeno Jōō (appr. 1504–1555), Sen Rikyū (1520–1590) and Kobori Enshū (1579–1647). The tea ceremony was not just a ceremony of the nobility but it expressed the societal understanding of the relation between art and life. The first relation between art and life can be identified with "art for art's sake", that is art serves only its own purposes and is not related to other aims. Art for art's sake has been attributed to Japanese literature at approximately the beginning of the thirteenth Century. The peak of this long period is especially related to the tea master Sen no Rikyū emphasizing the concept of "wabi" to its extremes. The concept of wabi refers to simplicity and imperfection (Yuriko 2007, p. 94) and is spiritual related to Zen Buddhism. It is an art period where the artists dedicated their life to art. At this time "life for art's sake" was at its peak in Japan and it has been obtained under the "patronage of despotic authority". In the service of the powerful ruling families of Ashikaga, Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Tokugawa, the tea

masters run at risk to be put to death while failing to carry out their art to the regent's fullest satisfaction, as it happened in the case of Sen no Rikyū. The tea master's "transformation of life into art was not the transformation of the life of society. It was an undertaking possible only to particular individuals under particular circumstances – to the specialists, that is, who were master of the tea ceremony." (Shuicho 1981, p. 155).

The second period – being partly at the same time with the foregoing period – is from the ending of the Momoyama period and lasts during the whole Edo period. The tea masters coining this period are Katagiri Sekishū (1605–1673), Matsudaira Fumai (1751–1818) and Ii Naosuke (1815–1860). In this period the relation between art and life is "art for life's sake" dominating largely the eighteenth Century within the Edo period. Here, art served, on the one side, to experience pleasure and to enjoy life, and on the other side, it reflected the Confucianism's instrumental notion of art for moral educational aims.

And the third and last period begins in the twentieth Century in modern Japan (Shuicho 1981, pp. 155–156).

According to Kato Shuicho, the first period of the tea ceremony that begins around the thirteenth Century at the Heian period is inevitably connected to civil war and a crucial change in the Japanese political power relations. For the artist, art for art's sake is an attempt to escape from these times of political unrest due to the struggle between the Japanese feudalist society and the shogun-system. Along with the decline of Japanese feudalist structures and the transition to the military rule of the shogunate, there was as well a religious transition from Buddhism to Zen Buddhism because Buddhism faced severe problems of legitimation in order to explain the societal chaos. Buddhist trends proclaimed salvation after death and emphasized, thus, a faith of "Latter Day". In contradiction to this faith, Zen Buddhism emphasized the notion of "void" and "nothingness", "on obtaining control of one's own emotions through methodical religious training (…) 'Void' – was to give rise against the same background of social secularization, to the system of aesthetics typified by the tea ceremony with its emphasis on *wabi*. (…) The beauty and harmony that man perceived in the simplest, most rustic dwelling, once he discovered that even the most ornate palace was essentially no different from that dwelling, are the basic principles underlying the aesthetic of the tea ceremony." (Shuicho 1981, pp. 154–155). Wabi is related to pure enjoyment and satisfaction of nature; it is about sensing the interrelatedness of the artistic and creative spirit of nature in valuing the greatness of the simplest everyday experiences. Thus, wabi contrasts material sensation or comfort (Suzuki 2010, pp. 257–258). The concept of wabi constitutes life for art's sake.

In the second period of the tea ceremony, the tea masters were not professional artists. Their priorities were to serve as ministers of the shogunate. Their dedication to the tea ceremony's art was only relevant beside their political life. Even if they felt totally committed to the art, their political duty acquired a lot more attention and work. This "second period sees the tea ceremony as such cease to be an end in itself; instead, it functions in the service of and as one of its adjunct – the whole life, that is, of the individual concerns. Thus even within the history of the tea ceremony, a shift had occurred from 'life for the sake of art' to 'art for the sake of life.'" (Shuicho 1981, pp. 156).

The last period of the tea ceremony begins in the twentieth Century. The tea master is not an artist anymore but an instructor of the ceremony following a process of

commercialization that began before the Second World War. The art of the tea ceremony were (almost) exclusively taught to upper class women of Japanese society. After the Second World War until today, the tea ceremony as symbol of social rank and social prestige changed to a subject of mass consumption. "Whatever the case, the development of the tea ceremony from 'life for society's sake,' even though it may not in itself reflect the process of secularization that has been going on in Japanese culture for centuries past, at least illustrates the process of the commercialization of art that is its result." (Shuicho 1981, pp. 157).

Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency

In contradiction to general Western aesthetics and art that is based on a rather geometric and symmetric conceptual framework, Japanese aesthetics seem to have a different approach focusing more on aesthetics of asymmetry, imperfection and insufficiency rather than symmetry. According to Suzuki, Japanese art shows specific characteristics of asymmetry underpinning a specific logical formalism. He claims that: "Japanese are often thought not to be intellectual and philosophical, because their general culture is not thoroughly impregnated with intellectuality. This criticism, I think, results somewhat from the Japanese love of asymmetry. The intellectual primarily aspires to balance, while the Japanese are apt to ignore it and incline strongly towards imbalance." (Suzuki 2010, p. 27). This statement is based on the assumption that asymmetric aesthetics is a one-dimensional conception acknowledging unbalance and irregularity in order to contradict the symmetric aesthetic approach. Yuriko Saito explains these kind of Japanese aesthetics considering philosophical and religious, social and political, and aesthetical implications. She also refers to the tea ceremony and the conception of wabi and describes the artistic creative steps of this aesthetics of imperfection. The first one is to find objects and tools that are already in an imperfect condition, that is: aged, damaged and/or having stains, being defect or are "imperfect" in another kind. Examples are "weather-beaten or moss-covered rocks" as stepping stones as well as "rustic and impoverished" tea huts with an interior with unpainted walls with caked mud (Yuriko 1997, p. 378). Regarding to the philosophy of Sen no Rikyū and Abbot Kōyū she cites the first one: "Concerning the tea utensils for the small tea room ... it is recommended that they should, in every way and aspect, fall rather short of perfection. There are people who find it repugnant to have a tiniest defect in them. This I do not understand." (Yuriko 1997, p. 378) and emphasizes this statement with Abbots Kōyū comment that it is a sign of being unintelligent to insist on complete and perfect sets of things. He claims that imperfect things and sets are preferable rejecting the notion of completeness and uniformity. Saito attributes the accomplishments to enjoy and appreciate the appearance of imperfection and impoverishment going even one-step further to create "artificially" non-artificiality. However it is not about designing the old and wracked as a new trend of beauty but to acknowledge the signs of time and history on objects. It is comparable to perceive wrinkles in a face as a sign of lived life rather than an even surface of a polished face with shiny make-up. "The accidental damages to tea wares or signs of their age did not stop their use; either the bowls were left unrepaired or the trace of repair was left visible. Furthermore, many tea wares were cherished precisely because of these seeming defects." (Yuriko 1997, p. 378).

The religious and philosophical considerations have its origins in the religious tradition of Shintoism celebrating via nature worship everything in the world. Not (just) referring to the locality of gods like in Shinto, Zen Buddhism introduces a universal religion that is based on worldly suffering and an egalitarian concept. To avoid conflicts between the two religions Buddhism and Shinto there have been found ways of coexisting by the means of integrating Shinto's "local aspects" to Zen Buddhism in Japan (Mason and Caiger 1997, p. 39). The binding element in both religions is the appreciation of nature and with respect to Buddhism it is the "thoroughgoing egalitarianism concerning the Buddha nature (understood roughly as the ultimate reality), which makes no value discrimination between various objects and activities" (Yuriko 1997, p. 381) appreciating impoverished, misshapen and broken things. To overcome the perfect, opulent and pompous appearance as well as such a behavior whilst valuing the natural aspects of life, the imperfect state of being and its transformation during its lifetime is one of the ways to Zen enlightenment (Yuriko 1997, p. 382). Concerning the artist's work, it is a turning away from the notion of perfect rationalized and planned artwork and a turn towards a possibility space of the artist's control. Thus, it is a combination between the knowledge, artistic skills and abilities and the spontaneous moment creating a unique work. And that applies also to work with already marked life utensils. "Instead of lamenting the fact that the object no longer exhibits the original, perfectly shaped, lustrously colored appearance, the aesthetics of imperfection elevates this fall from the graceful perfection to an even higher aesthetic plane by celebrating vicissitude and perishability." (Yuriko 1997, p. 383).

The aesthetic aspect lies, inter alia, in contrasting the impoverished and the rich, shiny attributes. "For example, Japanese gardens in general are created by arranging various rocks and trees so as to articulate their individual characteristics. This is often accomplished by juxtaposing materials of contrasting qualities for mutual enhancement, such as a vertical rock with a horizontal rock, or a smooth-textured rock with a rough-textured rock." (Yuriko 1997, p. 379). The dedication to the imperfect and insufficient is based on sensual contradictions. Contrasting the opulent or the perfect with the opposite creates a tension. This disharmonic tension is the core of the aesthetics of imperfection because it awakes curiosity and helps to arouse a different perceiving of the everyday overcoming for a short time everydayness. "The appreciation of the imperfect is then interpreted as an end product of a dialectic movement, a resolution to the disappointment or dissatisfaction in the ordinary context." (Yuriko 1997, p. 380).

In the context of the social and political considerations, it should be noted that the protagonists of the aesthetics of insufficiency and imperfection belonged to the privileged and affluent social hierarchy. Even if it sounds contradictory, it is exactly their privileged position that made this unusual special indulgence possible that is to value the aesthetic notion of enjoyment of simplicity. "For example, Rikyū severely criticized his patron shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi's (1536-1598) gold-gilded tea hut, not only for its garish uncouthness but also for its political imprudence for possibly incurring the wrath of the underprivileged." (Yuriko 1997, p. 380). In order to show the exposition of power and wealth of his patron, the tea hut functioned as a critical opposition manifested itself in a poor and humble mountain tea hut with a specific small size and ceiling height. "In addition, a symbolic gesture toward social egalitarianism was displayed in a low washbasin and an extremely small entrance to the tea hut, forcing all

participants to literally lower themselves and the warriors to cast aside their long swords, a proud symbol of their status. The absence of a spatial center in the tea hut also eliminated the social hierarchy of seating the guests" (Yuriko 1997, p. 381). Also the interior of the hut was constructed and kept in a less condition, that is unpainted (mud) walls and unpolished wood furniture "decorated" the hut.

Japanese aesthetics of contingency

This concept of imperfection and insufficiency of aesthetics is questioned by Robert Wicks who takes the Japanese shōji screens and tatami mats as starting point for his discussion. Both, the shōji screens and tatami mats, are uniformly shaped and do not show any irregular form, that is they are not following the pattern of asymmetry, imperfection, nor show they stains or defects of aging. Taking this into account Wicks suggests that the general notion of Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency should be taken into reconsideration. Rather than focusing only on the items affirming the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency Wicks claims that the main difficulty lies in the problem that the "concept of 'perfection' has been underthematized" (Wicks 2005, p. 89). The interrelation between the perfect and the imperfect, the sufficient and the insufficient shows the larger picture. Stains and signs of transience and impermanence are highlighted in the concept of imperfection in relation within a perfect and sufficient scenery for reasons of perceptual accentuation. "The typical group of concepts used to describe traditional Japanese aesthetics has neglected to give due consideration to the function of the back- grounds of perfected items and arrangements within which the 'imperfect' and 'insufficient' objects are set and through which they are brought into perceptual accentuation. Hence it is misleading to refer to this aesthetics as an 'aesthetics of imperfection' to the extent that the characterization overlooks the important perceptual role of the perfected background presentations." (Wicks 2005, p. 89). This critique is based on Dōgen's philosophy of the appreciation and understanding of the concept of contingency. That means in Buddhism "the foundation of things is contingent, conditional, and nonabsolute" (Wicks 2005, p. 89). It is the contrast of permanence and change, of stability and signs of processes of permanent fluctuation and irregularities. Wicks agrees with Masao Abe's interpretation of Dōgen's understanding on Bhudda Nature. "If one emphasizes basic qualities of temporal experience, it becomes incorrect to reduce to pure change, for the constancy of the present is a requirement for the perception of change. From our first-person perspective, it is always and this 'now' is the absolute and inescapable experiential locale within which everything happens to us." (Wicks 2005, p. 92). With regard to (human) being one could add that with the change of the "now" follows moreover a change of consciousness. Thus, Japanese aesthetics is not (just) about the awareness of impermanence. The notion that asymmetry stands for imbalance is related with a superficial understanding of the socio-historical aspects of aesthetical constellations in art and everyday life. This misunderstanding is also true for Western art. "Piet Mondrian's paintings from the early 1920s defy all attempts to divide them in terms of bilateral symmetry, but their respective arrangements of lines are perfectly balanced, and Mondrian intended them to be so. Asymmetry is consistent with the aesthetic values of balance, perfection, and organic unity. The simple architectural lines of a tea room are a clear-cut reflection of this." (Wicks 2005, p. 93). And Wicks relates the Japanese aesthetic of the tea hut to

Mondrian's art: "The simple architectural lines of the tea room are perfect in their Mondrian-like compositional balance, and yet they are imperfect with respect to considerations of symmetry and regularity; the irregular teacup is imperfect with respect to considerations of symmetry and regularity, but it is perfect with respect to its exemplifying well, the desideratum that an irregular item be present. So the semantic scope of concepts such as "perfection" and "imperfection" should be contextually specified within these discussions at the outset." (Wicks 2005, p. 94). It is the notion to sharpen the awareness and consciousness of contingency and not the one of aesthetics of imbalance and insufficiency. The latter one should not be ignored or discounted but has to be seen as one element among others in a contrasting aesthetical composition. It is the dialectical movement between the general and the particular; it is the general harmonious scenery of the landscape where the tea hut is placed that is the rich perfect general environment being set in aesthetical tension by the means of the particular, the seemingly dissonant tea hut. Japanese traditional aesthetics is not just about the "idealization of contingency" (Wicks 2005, p. 97), and the aesthetical opposition between perfection and harmony and imperfection and imbalance but is about processes of awareness and conscious raising. An aesthetical configuration, such as the arrangement of the (traditional) tea ceremony is cultural related to socio-historical imaginations. In the process of globalization aesthetical configurations are constituted increasingly with different cultural, national and historical aspects.

Socio-cultural and National Aspects of aesthetics

The possibility of aesthetic perception is inevitably related to the social-cultural framework. To "understand" the nation's history (of art) is fundamental to build the sensitive capacity of national cultural imaginations. Different aspects of culture that have being constituted in the course of the (national) history pervade everyday life and, thus, transmitting social history. Until around the nineteenth Century the German concept of culture and the French concept of civilization differed not much in meaning both referring to human achievements and action, like technical, judicial, political, economic and scientific progress as well as advancements in fine culture and the arts. Thereafter a process of valorization of the concept of Bildung to the detriment of the concept of culture took place in Germany. Since then philosophy, aesthetics, arts and (human) education are strong interlinked with the term Bildung. "Deriving from German idealist philosophy, the meaning of culture is mainly coined by the educated classes resulting in an understanding of culture that is 'emphatically targeting the supposedly higher spheres of the projection of meaning in value-rational (*wertrational*) areas' when civilization covers 'the area of the means-end (*zweckrational*) organization of human *praxis*' (Geyer 2010: 2)." (Michel-Schertges: Toward a Critical Theory of Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education, forthcoming). According to Nagao Nishikawa a nation's social cohesion is deeply based on a national ideology that is interwoven with national culture. Relating the concepts of culture and nation, she identifies differences in socio-historical developed perceptions and understandings. Nishikawa combines the German conception with "'culture-nation' (Kultur-Volk)" and the French conception of "'civilization-nation'" with the respective differences within the nation-building processes (Nishikawa 1993, p. 130). "In Japan, both *bunmei* (civilization) and *bunka* (culture) are translated terms in modern times. Until the 20's, in the Meji era the term,

civilization was much more influential (Bunmei kaika), and later, along with the intro-duction of German thought into Japan, the term, culture gradually became predomin-ant. I [Nagao Nishikawa] still cannot specify the period when the translated term, *minzoku* (Nation-Volk) came into general use, but it is at least certain that the period should be in accordance with that of the diffusion of the concept of culture." (Nishi-kawa 1993, p. 130–131). Nishikawa shows different interpretations of Japanese culture and emphasizes, inter alia, on the German architect Buno Taut (1880–1938) and the Japanese author Ango Sakaguchi (1906–1955) both writing on Japanese culture. Taut lived and worked for a while in Japan and he describes Japanese culture more from a European point of view, whereas Sakaguchi shows a critical stance. Taut classifies Japa-nese culture as static and European culture as dynamic. According to this, he only per-ceives a specific notion of Japanese culture as is: "Japanese culture is not merely one of the various cultures on the earth, but it is a harmony filled with vitality. If Japanese cul-ture has a constant preference for simplicity in art and life, that is nothing other than what properly educated people call 'modern' in a positive sense." (Nishikawa 1993, p. 138). The key concepts of Taut's understanding of Japanese culture can be summarized with "purity, tradition, nationality, national character, Japanese spirit, the spirit of Ten-noism" as well as "the good Japanese tradition such as Katsura-rikyu, Ise-jingu, Japa-nese artists from Sesshu to Tessai, *noh* play, *bunraku*, tea ceremony, Japanese cuisine, *sumo, judo, kendo, kyudo, kemari*, etc." (Nishikawa 1993, p. 139). Taut's romanticized picture of Japanese culture that even positions the ancestry of (European) expression-ism in Japan and excludes rigidly foreign cultural influences on Japan. This view by Taut is confronted with Sakaguchi's interpretation. Following Sakaguchi especially this kind of Japanese spirit praised by Taut functions well as militaristic ideology. Sakaguchi considers the political situation and militaristic "Zeitgeist" and is more concerned with "fundamental questions: 'What is tradition? What is nationality? Is there an inevitable character in the Japanese or is there a fatal factor that leads us to invent Japanese clothes and warm them no matter what?'" (Nishikawa 1993, p. 142). Sakaguchi reflects skeptically upon Japan asking himself if the picture of Japan in Western eyes offers the possibility of perceiving the "revengeful nationality of the Japanese" (Nishikawa 1993, p. 143). Another critique on the romanticized picture of Japanese culture is the celebra-tion of spiritual culture aligned with the German concept of Bildung. In contradiction to this concept of fine arts defining social hierarchy, Sakaguchi claims: "Culture, in the first place, is not a matter of tradition of nationality but ultimately a question for each individual: how to live." (Nishikawa 1993, p. 146). A nation's self-perception is crucial based on its understanding of its culture, aesthetics and art and its distinction from other national cultural aspects.

Globalization and traditional Chinese culture

The (main) worlding of Asian culture, in general, and Japanese and Chinese culture, in particular, is mainly connected to the aesthetical concepts of insufficiency and imper-fection as spiritual contemplation. Unique cultural processes, as the tea ceremony, serve as signifiers concerning nation-building and –preserving processes. It is thus a cultural political economy of aesthetics. Lily Chumley combines the cultural peculiarities with national brands. "The identification of an aesthetic with a social order such as a nation, culture, or ethnicity is analogous to the concept of brand. Like brand, this aesthetic

identity produces a "relationship between some set of otherwise differently construed commoditized objects and a common formulation of them as members of the same class (e.g., as Puma, Reebok, Nike)" (Nakassis 2012:627). And like brand, this relationship is constituted by interpretive regimes that take particular aesthetic features (colors, materials, shapes) as marks of their place in social orders." (Chumley 2016, p. 97). Chumley uses the strange picture to show a "structure of disjuncture" of two commodities that are associated with different cultural worlds. A traditional tea set is arranged alongside a camping furnisher set in a camping store's window display in the Tangrenje shopping mall in Bejing. Both commodities have been produced in China, but the camping chairs and the table are imagined as Western or foreign and the traditional tea set is imagined as (national) Chinese origin. The contradicting notions of cultural content embedded in these two opposing cultural imaginaries show the (aesthetical) contradictions of national modernity in times of globalization. The exaggerated emphasize of national and cultural "identifiers" may lead to ethnonational constructions. Chumley introduces the term *Jianwai* as a concept of "seeing strange" in the sense that familiar items are conceived in an estranged way, opening up for a possibility room of re-contextualization. "(...) the cultural identities (and qualities) of people and objects can be called into question. The coming-to- or bringing-to- prominence of Chinese things as *Chinese* can impose a new frame on other objects nearby (...), making it possible for them to be recognized as 'un-Chinese,' and by extension potentially casting doubt on the ethnonational identities of their Chinese wearers and bearers." (Chumley 2016, p. 99). Traditional cultural imaginations are turned upside-down. On the one side, contemporary socio-cultural aesthetics bear the quality of modern relatedness of (processes of) globalization, and on the other side contemporary socio-cultural aesthetics can only be understood in relation to its socio-historical particularities. The latter aspect tries to contradict the first aspect, that is the ubiquitous superficiality of aesthetical levelling down caused by the mechanisms of (Western) culture industry and the commodification of the world. However, opposing the general tendency of globalized (cultural) standardization, the socio-cultural particular object is in danger to become fetishized. In order to present its socio-historical originality, the cultural particular object turns into a cultural signifier itself. Within the process of clear dissociation, the non-identical uniqueness turns self into a symbolic cultural signifier. Opposing the camping furnisher set, the traditional tea set loses its non-identical qualities while representing the general imagination of uniqueness and traditional socio-historical qualities of all traditional tea sets. The commodification of uniqueness turns it into cultural superficial abstractness bearing the general idea of cultural originality.

Japanese traditional uniqueness and universal culture

The concept of Japanese culture, that is (re-)presented as Japanese uniqueness, has been supported by the Japanese government from the 1950s on in order to (re-)produce and maintain apparent traditional cultural properties. Even traditional craft techniques and vocations related to these techniques "were designated by the government as 'human' or 'national' treasures" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005, p. 159). Especially traditional buildings and locations (still) "maintain" as traditional signifiers in order to preserve spots of national and eternal Japanese collective identity as well as to serve as "authentic" Japanese touristic spaces. These Japanese traditional villages – often protected by the Japanese Folklore Society

– sell an image of Japan to the visitors to Japan (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005, p. 159) supporting the manufacturing of Japan's imaginary of unique tradition. To spread this uniqueness Goldstein-Gidoni refers to the (national) support of "cultural brokers", that is foreigners who visit Japan in order to learn cultural techniques, such as for example: the tea ceremony, kimono dressing, calligraphy, martial arts. (2005, p. 161–163) These (foreign) cultural ambassadors are meant to spread the image of Japanese traditions in the world. Thus, (mainly) all over the world, workshops and cultural education (re-)produce the Japanese imagination of cultural techniques. This serves, on the one hand, the stabilization of national Japanese collective identity and, on the other hand, the marketing and selling of the product of Japanese uniqueness.

Socio-historical uniqueness in the form of religion and ritual sites are strongly related to culture and art tourism. According to Franklin, the religious and (ethnic) ritual field strong associated "with travel, tourism and cathartic periods spent away from the everyday (…) Ritual and religious ceremonies typically held at distant sacred sites, particularly those associated with individual transformation, redemption and insight are features common to most cultures (Turner and Turner, 1978)." (Franklin 2018, p. 405). In order to see contemporary art or unique culture, tourists are ready to travel around the globe, "to the social margins, to remote Japanese islands, wilderness areas of China, islands off Australia and high desert regions of Texas or Nevada." (Franklin 2018, p. 412).

Franklin emphasizes John Urry's understanding of the "offshoring of Western paternalistic and corporate manufacturing prompted the transformation of redundant industrial capital, plant, architecture and estates into 'industrial cultural heritage and 'archaeology', and thence into museumisation and touristification. New streams of income and employment had to be found and what was one day the grim, gritty, industrial quotidian became an aestheticised space for tourists, for cultural education" (Franklin 2018, p. 411).

However, the uniqueness in contemporary Japanese art and culture and especially its preservation and mediation is inevitably related to the (non-Japanese) cultural ambassadors. Even though the learning sites and training centers of Japanese culture are mainly still situated in Japan, cultural (arts) places are spreading all over the world offering Japanese cultural uniqueness. The cultural interested (art) tourist is not travelling to Japan just to consume Japanese cultural uniqueness but the tourist becomes sufficient socio-historical socialized in order to be transformed into a cultural art-ambassador. On the one hand, Japanese culture is mediating and trading its traditional uniqueness in Japan and especially all around the world by the means of cultural (art) ambassadors bringing the cultural (art) tourist attractions to the countries and cities of the tourists. On the other hand, contemporary Japanese art "emancipates" itself from the influence of the foreign concept of modern art.

There are two main assumptions concerning the influence of contemporary globalization on culture. Briefly, the first one can be summarized as global homogenization that is the transformation to superficial mass-product standardization in order to make profits and to subsume even socio-historical culture under the logic of Western capitalistic culture industry. The second main assumption is the cultural concept of hybridization, which is the mixing of indigenous cultural discourses with the (Western) one. Goldstein-Gidoni argues that both approaches cannot explain adequately the processes between indigenous and the (dominant) global cultures. (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001, p. 70; see also Goldstein-Gidoni 2005, p. 168). According to her, it

is about self-definition processes, "the cultural construction of the West that typically characterized this process (…) has been coupled with a parallel construction of the 'Japanese' and the 'traditional'. These parallel processes of cultural construction are another manifestation for the relative flexibility with which the so-called local and the foreign interact" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001, p. 84).

Goldstein-Gidoni is right to question the one-sided cultural processes underpinning the homogenization and the hybridization approaches of cultural globalization and to emphasize the interrelatedness of these processes. The problem lies in the dialectical process of preserving and levelling up (*Aufhebung*) of traditional Japanese culture. Because it is about preservation of a (re-) constructed and artificialized imagination of Japanese tradition and instead of a levelling-up, rather it is a levelling-down to global standards of mass production and cultural perception and understanding related to the global market of culture production and consumption. The commercialization of the art of tea ceremony, as described above, can serve as an example of the processes of "preservation" and "levelling-down" of Japanese tradition. Thus, it is the process of fetishization of the particular, where the unique (tradition) turns into a general and universal cultural signifier, undermining everything that constituted its uniqueness. With respect to (critical) modern art, Kato Shuichi exemplifies the development of Japanese architecture in times of globalization on three different architectural pieces. The differences in architectural styles mirror the socio-historical confrontations with non-Japanese architecture. The first building is the Hyōkeikan building in Tokyo. It is built around 1900 and shows a typical copy of Western architecture. Several buildings of this type have been erected at this time in Japan presenting the influence on Japanese art and the struggle of Japanese self-confidence in finding its own identity. These buildings "are all examples of the first series of buildings erected in Japan using Western materials and techniques. They resemble the government offices – exact replicas of what they were accustomed to at home – that the British set up in the heart of the great Indian cities. They reproduce exactly forms that were evolved without any references whatsoever to the natural surroundings, culture, and history of their new habitat, forms evolved in a country where all these factors were vastly different" (Shuishi, 1981, p. 164–165). However, the Hyōkeikan was built by Japanese architectures. The second example, is the National Museum in Tokyo. Instead of a simple reproduction of Western architecture, the National Museum is a peculiar mixture of traditional Japanese architecture and Western concrete buildings. It was built between 1932 and 1937 and is a typical example of buildings for this time in Japan. Crude and unadorned concrete walls are placed under a traditional Japanese roof. A simple blending between Western and (traditional) Japanese architecture. The National Museum in Tokyo can be understood as an attempt to find a – at this time – adequate architecture overcoming the architecture in the style of Western colonization. "The immediate result of such thinking was this kind of monstrosity. It is characterized by a total lack of relationship between the traditional forms (for example, the shape of the roof) that it incorporates and the structure of the building as a whole. The structure of building as a whole is subject to restrictions imposed by its size, the materials used, and the purpose for which it is intended. To take Japanese forms, which were developed for buildings of utterly different sizes and purposes and using utterly different materials, and attempt, on the grounds that they are "traditional," to graft the onto concrete buildings is like trying to graft bamboo onto a tree." (Shuishi, 1981, p. 165). The attempt was unsuccessful because of its pure

combination of two socio-historical different architectural styles, glued together without any cultural references to each other. The last example is the Festival Hall in Tokyo. Built in 1960, after WWII, it shows a new Japanese self-understanding. It is a post-modern building build by a Japanese architect "using what might be called the 'international language' of contemporary architecture in order to express himself." (Shuishi, 1981, p. 168) The Festival Hall is not just the adaption of "post-modern" architecture but an artwork where the artist used contemporary technology and knowledge in combination with his (Japanese) aesthetical understanding of architecture. The result is the realization and fulfillment of the artist by the means of the artwork. "In theory at least, the question of whether the results are 'Japanese' or not is not of primary importance. In practice, one is justified in expecting that quality characteristic of the work of Japanese will make itself felt in such buildings, and what happens, I would suggest, is in fact the creation of a peculiarly Japanese architecture. But this is not the aim, of course, the aim; the aim is, quite simply, to create architecture." (Shuishi, 1981, p. 168–170) It is not a matter of technology or finding cultural combinations, but to create artwork of its own. Shuichi gives further examples concerning the development of Japanese music, (abstract) painting, and literature. The development in all these presented forms of artistic and aesthetical expressions is characterized by three stages. The first one is the simple imitation of Western aesthetics and styles, the second one is the simple combination of both Western and Japanese aesthetics and styles, and the last stage is characterized by aesthetics and art where "international styles have come to provide the framework within which the artist seeks expression. These international styles were perfected, not within Japan, but in the world outside Japan." (Shuishi, 1981, p. 177).

The quality of contemporary art depends mainly in the expression of the artist by the means of the used material. It is the realization of (inter) cultural internalized aesthetical values and concepts of the development of global art that characterizes high quality artwork. It is neither, the simple adaption of the culture industry, the affirmation of aesthetical and political dominating discourse, nor the (re-) production of traditional imaginations in order to preserve artificially ("glorious") past, but the creation of new authentic artwork that generates its uniqueness by its inevitable interrelatedness to the general international. The same applies to Western art. High quality Western art and aesthetics must be, too, in opposition to (Western) hegemonic understandings and a cultural domination of art and aesthetics.

Art and aesthetics must fulfill the challenge to materialize culture. While on the one side art should be socio-historically constituted by cultural uniqueness being both preserved and *levelled up* (*Aufgehoben*) in critical processes of questioning and challenging the dominating cultures of aesthetics and acknowledging and absorbing all different forms of cultural expressions of art and aesthetics irrespective of cultural or national provenience. In contemporary globalization, it is the task of critical artists by the means of their artwork to raise critical consciousness in the public concerning the dissonant interrelation between cultural uniqueness and universalism in order to spread awareness about the societal and socio-historical antagonisms (within the art world). The aim of contemporary aesthetics and art can be compared to Benjamin's concept of materialist history and its confrontation with historicism. Thus, art should be a constructive principle, where the artist works with (historical) unique cultural aesthetical aspects confronting them with the oppressing dominating universalities, while not overestimation uniqueness in itself, turning in cultural reification that is aesthetical socio-historicism.

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