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Anselm Franke, about *Kanon-Fragen*

EDITOR'S NOTE

Anselm Franke's curatorial work is characterised by long-term research and intense collaboration with many other researchers. He uses the exhibition as a device to undermine the division between aesthetic objects, political and epistemological practices of all kinds, and archives. His epistemological and political project consists of exploring the possibilities for exiting the binary partition of modernity by rewriting its history. Ethnology is the pivotal discipline in his approach: firstly, because it was established during the formation of colonised societies, and secondly because it lends itself equally well, in an introspective gesture, to explaining "modern" societies themselves (Cf. his exhibition *Animism*, 2012). Since 2016, as head of the visual arts department at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt [HKW] in Berlin, Anselm Franke has chosen the concept of "canon" as the theoretical approach through which to continue his research. Here, he discusses the "canonisation" of art and its epistemological and political functions with Maria Stavrinaki, a member of the International Scientific Committee of *Critique d'art*.

- 1 **Maria Stavrinaki:** The program of *Kanon-Fragen* that you have been developing since 2016 at the HKW in Berlin attempts to question in a critical manner some moments of the history of art and culture of 20th century World. With your various prolific companions, you are trying to rethink the ideological construction and the political functions of modernism and its many revivals in liberal democracies and capitalist economies, as well as in colonial and postcolonial realities. You are thus revisiting the canonical discourses of Western universalism and the sovereign model of a self-realizing Reason, especially such as it was legitimized after the defeat of fascism. May I ask you to introduce this project for us?
- 2 **Anselm Franke:** The HKW is an institution with several departments: music, literature and science, etc. I thought it was necessary to create a space that allowed us to reflect on the place of the visual arts in that structure, rather than merely producing thematic exhibitions in which artistic works tend to be somewhat subordinated. We wanted to

use the freedom that this institution gave us - as compared to a regular museum - to start a transdisciplinary inquiry into art history and the current place or status of art in the broadest sense, and I still think we have barely scratched the surface of what could, and will have to be done in terms of historical revision. In the current moment we are witnessing the final downfall of the liberal postwar order. It has become somewhat more urgent to realize the reasons for this downfall and what the terms of this order were in the first place. Because we need to realize the extent to which our historiographies of the modern (again in the broadest possible sense) have been dependent on this liberal postwar order, and on a bigger time scale, to the rise of the bourgeoisie and European expansionism. It feels like 500 years of modern history are blowing up in our faces, doesn't it?

Neolithische Kindheit: Kunst in einer falschen Gegenwart, ca. 1930, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt: Diaphanes, 2018. Edited by Anselm Franke, Tom Holert

- 3 **Maria Stavrinaki:** That is, if we agree on what “modern” means. One way of discussing it would be asking you to introduce more specifically the main conceptual axes of the historical revision you have undertaken with “*Kanon-Fragen*”.
- 4 **Anselm Franke:** We pursued two lines of inquiry within *Kanon-Fragen*. The first was to develop alternative narratives and counter-mappings of the history of art along liberation movements, resistance and networks of solidarity and taking into account larger geopolitical contexts that haunt the global imaginary of transnational futures. This inquiry already started much earlier at the HKW in projects such as *After Year Zero* (in 2013), but *Kanon-Fragen* opened in 2016 with *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine 1978*, curated by Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, which revisited aspects of biennials in Venice, Baghdad, and Rabat and museums in exile in Santiago de Chile, Managua, and in Cape Town and uncovered an intricate trans-national solidarity network of politically engaged artists and artists’ collectives in cities like Paris, Rome, and Tokyo and artists’ unions in Damascus, Baghdad,

Casablanca, Berlin, and Warsaw and beyond. Further projects along this line of inquiry included *Saving Bruce Lee - African and Arab Cinema in the Era of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*, curated by Rasha Salti and Koyoh Kouoh in 2018, or *Bodies of Fact, The Archive from Witness to Voice* organized by Denise Ryner also in 2018, right up to the project *Afro-Sonic Mapping. Tracing Aural Histories via Sonic Transmigrations* by Satch Hoyt and curated by Paz Guevara in 2019.

- 5 Secondly, large-scale exhibitions such as *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War* (2017/18) and *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, c. 1930* (2018) then focused on renewing a “revisionist” approach to the history of Modernism. *Parapolitics* focussed on the use of modernism as weapon in the Cold War, it told the strange story of how modernism came to represent Western liberal values, by focussing on the CIA-sponsored network and activities of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was instrumental in this process of the transposition of modernism, together with MoMA and other key Western institutions. What happened was that after 1945 modernism will have become “classical modernism”. A multifaceted rebellion against the bourgeois institution and enclosure of “art” was turned into an emblem of bourgeois liberty. But how is this story to be told on a global scale? A large part of the cultural activity of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was in the Third World, in the decolonizing world. What did modernism come to mean there?
- 6 Most big museums and art history departments are now trying to expand and overcome their Eurocentric histories. Nobody can close their eyes anymore to the fact that modern histories with capital H have been written along colonial and ultimately racializing, imaginary divisions, and the divide between Western modern and Non-European primitive arts was how that division worked in art history. Now that this division has become an embarrassment, museums struggle with re-narrating themselves and their holdings. Most large-scale institutions try to overcome the modern/premodern divide by resolving it towards the “modern”-pole: much of what has been excluded from Eurocentric accounts of modernity is now being recovered as part of modern and modernist history. The problem here is that a specific set of institutional divides and a value form is exported. The concept of art, in its debordering, becomes affirmatively generalized, obscuring that the modern (pre-)history of that concept is a matter of the highly limited field of a colonial form of value and discipline. In the shadow of (necessary) corrections to structural Eurocentric exclusions, a colonializing generality of capitalist modernization is perpetuated under the banner of art as a universalized norm of radical inequalities that continuously and unwillingly marks the present as the mirror image of late-nineteenth-century high imperialism. In projects such as *Neolithic Childhood* we began working towards the opposite approach, and there will be several large projects that will further continue in this direction. I mean not to resolve the divide(s) into the “modernity”- pole, but into the pre-modern, “primitive”, in such a way as to ultimately undermine the division and its logic altogether. *Neolithic Childhood* was based on the work of Carl Einstein, as you know, and led us into the abyssal dimensions of bourgeois-imperial culture and the rebellion against it from within in the context of the larger “foundational crisis” shaking up the imperial Western rationality and sociality. But it was also a re-appraisal of the “primitive”. It is wrong, I believe, to discard the history of this term to the toxic garbage heap of racist fantasies alone, because what entered into Western rationality with that term was in fact an entire cosmological matrix or anthropology of media that holds keys to counter-universalism, once it is freed from its imprisonment

into categories such “savage”, “primitive” or “pagan” and so forth. That is why this kind of knowledge also were a major force in bringing about the foundational crisis of nearly all institutionalised disciplines of knowledge. But that foundational crisis was repressed and pushed underneath the blanket of the new imperial order after 1945, it was covered up by cybernetics and Structuralism and so forth. The history of postwar art, of contemporary art, is to some extend nothing but the continuation of this repression and false pacification.

Saving Bruce Lee: Afrikanischer und arabischer Film in Zeiten sowjetischer Kulturdiplomatie, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2018. Edited by Rasha Salti with the collaboration of Gabrielle Chomentowski

- 7 **Maria Stavrinaki:** Let's go on with the same critical approach, but by reversing it. A first question would thus be: how one doesn't construct new canons by demolishing the old ones, how we can stop the vicious cycle of "canonization", which also implies the fetishization and the neutralisation of activist potentials? The "barbarian" was the reversed image of the "classic", the anonymous "people" still is that of the "ruling class", but God knows how many reactionary programmes have been grounded in this ideology. Today that the tension between the "universal" and the myriad of "particulars" is becoming once more very strong, this work on the reflexivity and the reversibility of the canon seems me necessary. What do you think?
- 8 **Anselm Franke:** In our initial conference for *Kanon-Fragen* at HKW in 2016 Erhard Schüttpeitz gave us a framework of periodization. He said that in modern era, there was first a technical canon, then an aesthetic canon, and later an avant-gardist quest for a new or revised canon. In the technical canon, there is no difference yet between “art” and “ars”, between technical skills and a rarefied artist-subject yet. In other words, it is art *before*, or at the margins of being subjected to “primitive accumulation” in Marxist terms. The technical canon was dominated by rhetorics, and it was meant to make an ancient antiquity available. A canon exists only in relation to some notion of an antiquity. During the aesthetic canon, the period off classicism, it was of course Ancient

Greece and Rome that served as that foil, and for the modernist avant-gardes that notion of “antiquity” had come to broadened, it was by large identified with everything believed to be “primitive”, that is, broadly speaking, all “pagan” cultures, and hence the colonial world. In the past 70 years, late 19th/early 20th century “modernism” has become our antiquity. I can’t recall right now who proposed that first, but I think it is totally spot on. There are two or three sides to why this is “our” antiquity: one is simply that the Neo-imperial “liberal” world order after 1945 had turned modernism into a flagship of Western civilization and bourgeois culture. The revolt against bourgeois culture from within, the quest for an anti-bourgeois canon (and that is pretty much the best definition of modernism I can think of) became domesticated as an expression of bourgeois civilization itself, it was made into “classical modernism”. The avant-gardist quest for “heteronomy” was assimilated to the institutionally guarded principle of “autonomy”. Modernism is our antiquity: we are prisoners of an undead bourgeois idealism, even if historically this class formation has long outlived itself and had already clearly done so in 1945. It is also our antiquity for a different reason: because the modernist/avant-gardist quest for a new canon fell into one with a far broader “foundational crisis” at the heart of modern knowledge and rationality mourned the beginning of the 20th century - a crisis of the modern that has been falsely pacified with cheap substitutes in the post-45 discursive order, such as cybernetics and Structuralism. I think we could say that we live in the corpse of an imperial knowledge formation, which had already been undermined by its own “trans-modernist” worldly encounters around the period of high imperialism. But the depth of that crisis is not present and available to us anymore, and yet it defines our epistemic or even cosmological condition. So we spent some fifty years in Western art institutions half-heartedly reconstructing the ruins of our modernity/antiquity, all the while repeating the basic paradoxical transfer: turning a radical revolutionary and cosmological quest into a bourgeois idealism and possessive liberalism. What should have been the canon developed in the sign of the foundational crisis? I think we would have to think together world socialism with the world paganism to imagine that. Perhaps that’s exactly what James Joyce did in *Finnegans Wake*. Perhaps.

- 9 A non-Eurocentric canon would also have to “include the excluders” (as Erhard Schüttzel characterized the modern/Eurocentric attempts at monopolizing history), and of course the basis of that can no longer be the humanist-renaissance “man” - that was basically a “selective humanization” along colonial and racial lines. So in other words, I believe we need to work towards a new canon, an anti-modern and a-modern canon. It is also what is demanded from our view of history in the light of Black Lives Matters.
- 10 **Maria Stavrinaki:** The same problem can be seen from another perspective. In fact, it seems to me that the “Kanon” and its deconstruction is symmetrical to “modern dualism” and its contest by thinkers like Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, and some anthropologists of the “ontological turn”. Take the statement: “We have never been moderns”. Despite its affirmation, its praiseworthy intention and contribution to the necessary critique of the “Grand partage”, it is profoundly dualistic itself: it is even so dualistic that it has swallowed “moderns,” as if they constituted One Universal Subject. What you call the “cosmological matrix” of the “primitive,” freed from all the hierarchical and racist functions, has interesting things to say about a non-universalist modernity (as Einstein thought it did when he evoked the “ethnology of white people”). Is there a lateral modernity, which is not necessarily hegemonic, which is constantly

doubting, is profoundly ambivalent, not only despite itself and without its knowing, but deliberately?

- 11 **Anselm Franke:** There are two or more questions in this one! One is the role of binary coding, the “Us/Them” question, and all that can and has been done with it historically. To define an outside is a kind of anthropological universal, I think, especially if we speak of the moral cosmos of a group or society. But beyond that I feel that is super important to introduce a broader historical perspective here, and perhaps even a trans-disciplinary typology of the way borders and boundaries are being drawn by and around collectives as well as individuals. Binary coding is inevitable and a trap, because language obviously can’t do without binary coding as well, and storytelling and sense-making can’t... I think there is a fundamental difference between the anthropological universal, the mechanism as such, and the imperial usage of the mechanism. By imperial usage I mean the use of a negative category, such as a “barbarian”, as constitutive of a self that is rising above this discarded element. Yet not every binary coding necessarily boils down to this - the foundation of the self on this type of constitutive negation. The fact that there are strangers for everybody in the world is a given, and we know well that they can be encountered in a million different ways. For the imperial history of monotheism, the constitutive exclusion, their constitutive “negative” is the *false* believe of pagan polytheisms and animisms, and from that follows an entire narrative or mythological matrix in which literally almost all history writing has been stuck until the late 19th century. The point here is to recall that such a thing as “paganism” and “false belief” didn’t exist before it was invented as a negative category. The single most important narrative matrix for the last 2500 years, that of the passage from *mythos* to *logos* and its many variants reproduce this foundational act in so many shades. It is typically understood as the act of the self-civilizing of the rational subject *against* its irrational others, its coming-into-being by heroically wringing-down the forces of otherhood or/and demonic superstitions within itself and without. This mythical narrative structure has turned into the collective colonial lie of Europe, e.g. tales of the White man’s burden or the inevitability of modernisation - really ever since renaissance humanism founded itself upon a property-principle that *demand*ed the constitutive exclusion, and expropriation, of non-proprietyed collectives as the condition of their *inclusion* into colonial-capitalist accumulation. That is why it is tantamount to understand modernity from the position of the slave, from the position of those constitutively excluded from modern sociality and its property principle, or from the position of those whose *humanity* has been in question. In short, from the vantage point of the colonial world.
- 12 The problem with the universals is always their foundations, also their material foundations. The modern universals, and their political promises, have remained phantom universals: privileges of just a few, and often explicit designs for the implicit reproduction of constitutive exclusions from these privileges, as in liberalism. Any cursory look at the geopolitics of today suffices to illustrate that, especially in a time when the liberal promises are being increasingly abandoned. They are abstractions in the service of accumulation. Universalism breaks with capital, I would say. Upon what alternative narrative are we to build a universalist canon? I think that anthropologies with anarchist leanings have quite serious suggestions to make in this respect. But the work on the other hand has hardly begun. What we need is an anti-modern, or rather, an a-modern cosmological universalism, or rather, a base universalism, together with a base materialism, for a historical account of how different societal formations and their

cosmo-symbolic logic. That requires to bring the study of “religion” and of what anthropology calls “cosmologies” into art history and its future global canon. Or rather, it means the opposite: to dissolve art history into cosmology. It is possible, but it means to get rid of the teleology in “art”, and to recover quite seriously the “religious” and “spiritual” into a debordered materialism.

- 13 The funny or farcical aspect of modern and modernist art history is that this is most easily imaginable if we turn to the concepts that are now most shunned. The term “primitive” today sounds like a racial slur and insult or at least an embarrassment. It sounds like a colonial knowledge formation designed to engineer a divide between the modern European and the colonised. And it certainly was that, as long as it serves to reproduce the difference. But the strength of the concept could unfold wherever it undermined the dichotomy modern/primitive itself. It really radically decentered “modernity,” even dissolved it, but that was never taken to its conclusion. Today we are trying to include everything in to the modern, to overcome the exclusions of yesteryear by saying: Sorry! We wrongly claimed for ourselves modernity (and the revolt against it called “modernism”), but now we realise that it was a history of entanglement all the way through. I think that is absolutely inevitable, because without actually understanding for instance how Yoruba culture became a sort of hidden 5th world religion after 1945 with the global triumph of pop music, how are we to understand our history, let alone our cosmology? But the problem is that we seek to include everything into the “modern” pole of the dichotomy. And that means ultimately to get stuck illiberal delusions whose material base is property. So in the field of culture and politics, we will find ourselves ever deeper in the traps of propertied speech titles. We should universalise “the primitive” instead, and we will arrive at a non-modern outlook on culture, and inevitably also at a different museological and scholarly project. That is what decolonization in my eyes should entail for scholars and museological narratives alike. The sources are there, within the colonial archive, often clearly and sometimes through a glass darkly, but the dogmas of modernization and capital prevent it from being put together, prevent us from breaking through this wall of amnesia guarded by property. It certainly would undermine the representational value and power of institutions. But it is without alternative. And it is the only way we can resist being trapped in the weaponisation of binary codings. There is different “canon” out there, a much less exclusive one, one that provides endless resources for resistance and non-accumulative social formations, but always endangered by class division. It is the canon of “surviving-despite”. It will be more than necessary than ever with what is to come.

Liebe und Ethnologie: Die koloniale Dialektik der Empfindlichkeit (nach Hubert Fichte), Berlin: Sternberg Press: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2019. Edited by Diedrich Diederichsen, Anselm Francke