

James Elkins

The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing

North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Acknowledgments	13
1 The Conditions Under Which Global Art History Is Studied	17
2 Leading Terms: Master Narrative, Western, Central, Peripheral, North Atlantic	39
3 Are Art Criticism, Art Theory, Art Instruction, and the Novel Global Phenomena?	63
4 The Example of <i>Art Since 1900</i>	95
5 State of the Field: Six Current Strategies	113
6 Reasons Why Escape is Not Possible	145
7 Finding Terms and Methods for Art History	153
8 Writing about Modernist Painting Outside Western Europe and North America	165
9 The Most Difficult Problem for Global Art History	193
Envoi: Writing Itself	205
Main Points	209
Index	215

7. The language of art history is English

The last of these framing problems regards English. If you live in a country whose language is not English, you may need conversational English in order to attend conferences and meet scholars from other countries. If you're a teacher and your students don't speak English fairly well, they may face limited job choices and mobility. If you don't speak English fluently, you may have difficulty as a student in English-language seminars and lectures, and it will be hard to gauge what you are missing. If you don't read English easily, you may favor art history written in other languages, which will have an effect on your research. And if you do not write English reasonably well, you may not be able to publish outside your country or region.

Speaking, teaching or learning, reading, and writing are mixed together in a typical art historian's career, and each may be more or less important depending on the context. Each raises sensitive and interesting cultural, political, and institutional problems. It's strange that so far, disciplines like art history, visual studies, art theory, and art criticism do not often discuss these issues except when it comes to deciding which languages will be spoken at a given conference or symposium.

Speaking and teaching (or listening) are often open for discussion, and there are institutional precedents for decisions that are made about them. Scholarly societies adopt policies about the languages of their meetings; smaller conferences do the same; sometimes it's necessary to budget for simultaneous translators, and that affects the viability and composition of conferences; and admissions officers adopt standards they hope will ensure students understand their teachers. (There is a large difference between simultaneous and alternating translation in lectures: often, I've had to rewrite lectures so they fit the form of translation, even aside from the translators' skills, the institutional context, or the probable interests and knowledge of the audience.)

There is a great deal to be said about each of these abilities, but I want to concentrate here on the ones I think are the least talked about and the most pervasive: reading and writing. I will divide the subject of English reading and writing into three separate issues: art historians who do not read outside their principal language; art historians who do not read easily or often outside their language; and art historians who do not write fluently outside their language.

(A) Art historians who do not read outside their principal language. It is often said that scholars from the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand are especially likely not to speak other languages. That is a complaint voiced in many countries, but it may be especially common among German-speaking art historians. Scholars like Horst Bredekamp, for example, have long maintained that most art historical writing is German,

and Anglophone scholars ignore it at their peril. Actually, English-language art history is published in more journals, produces more books, and is practiced in more departments than German art history by a ratio of about two to one. (The statistics are in the book *Partisan Canons*.) But on the other hand, the UK has one of the worst records in the EU of monolingualism. A 2004 poll found that only 1 in 10 Britons could speak a second language. (A 2000 poll found 1 in 4 Americans could carry on a conversation in a second language, and 1 in 5 speak a language other than English at home.) Enrollments are down in UK language departments, and internationally its scholars are among the most likely to be monolingual. At least in the UK, the situation is getting worse: the number of departments in the UK offering modern language degrees dropped from over 100 to 62 between 2000 and 2013.

The general lack of Anglophone readers of German-language art history is significant because German-language art history is the largest tradition outside of English, and over the last half-century or so it has developed its own concerns, leading concepts and methodologies, traditional points of reference, and interpretive traditions. The distance between German *Bildwissenschaft* and Anglo-American visual studies, for example, is often difficult to assess because of the lack of scholars who read in both. (This is a principal subject of the book *Farewell to Visual Studies*, 2015.)

These issues apply equally to Anglophone scholars' ignorance of writing in Spanish, Chinese, and other major traditions. The Anglophone practice of bypassing Spanish-language writing may be even more monolithic than the habit of not reading German, but it is less often noted. (One of the few Spanish academics to explore this is Vicenç Furió, especially in his *Arte y reputación*, 2012.) French and Italian may be the principal exceptions to Anglophone monolingualism, because so many North American art historians specialize in French and Italian subjects.

Yet the monolingualism of American and English art historians, along with those from Australia and New Zealand, is a trope within art history—a traditional complaint. As such it obscures more complicated lacks of English. In Ghana I met some art historians and critics who spoke 4 or more “local languages” and also spoke English, but did not write it well enough to publish outside Africa. At the University of Cape Town, the Michaelis School of Art has to work hard to support some of its black African students whose languages may include Zulu, Xhosa, and other Bantu languages but only basic English.

The trope of English-language monolingualism also deflects attention from other monolingualisms. Several traditions around the world are effectively monolingual. Aside from English-language scholarship produced in the UK and the US, another principal example would be Latin American scholarship with the exception of Brazil. Many Central and South American art historians speak a small amount of English, but in general the literature is isolated. A Chilean scholar put this concisely in an application I recently read: “from a Latin American point of view,” she wrote—and I’m quoting

verbatim to give a sense of the texture of the problem—“it seems that lack of knowing another languages has stopped contribution.”

A second principal example of non-English monolingualism is China: of the hundred or so most active Chinese art historians, theorists, and critics, something on the order of twenty speak English well enough to carry on scholarly discussions. In my experience co-organizing conferences in Beijing from 2009 to 2011, Chinese scholars have a general, if uneven, awareness of writers like Panofsky, Warburg, and especially Gombrich (whose books were extensively translated in the 20th century), but little knowledge of more recent figures. Together with a Chinese graduate student I have been compiling a list of all art history books translated into Chinese, and it shows that the dozen or so most prominent Western art historians active in the last few decades are likely to be represented in Chinese by just one or two books each. Those books, in turn, are sometimes translated so inadequately that the books are not read or are grossly misinterpreted. Hal Foster came to one of the conferences I co-organized in Beijing; only three or four Chinese scholars in our group of about thirty knew who he was, and only one mentioned trying to read his one translated book. On the other hand, none of the Western scholars who attended those conferences—except for those already specialized in Chinese contemporary art—knew a single one of the Chinese art historians, theorists, and critics. (I will explore this in chapter 3.)

A third example of non-English monolingualism is Russian. Russian-language art history is especially isolated, with relatively few scholars working in English or other languages. In some ex-Soviet countries the situation is better: in Belarus a small group associated with the EHU (European Humanities University) work in English; in Romania art historians know French and German; in Bulgaria there is some knowledge of English; in Turkey there is variable knowledge of English, and older scholars who learned in French and German. But in countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the second language (after Russian) is likely to be Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek, and not English. Another largely monolingual country is Iran, where a small number of historians and critics speak English. (As in China, there is an asymmetry in translations: when I visited I tried to collect examples of art history and criticism translated into Farsi, but it wasn't easy, mainly because the print runs are so tiny that even the few venues that carried the books did not have complete collections.)

Effectively monolingual traditions call for a special kind of intervention. It would be a good use of Getty or Mellon funds if lists could be compiled of books and essays translated into selected monolingual traditions: that would be a first step toward understanding what counts as “European,” “Western,” or other art history in those traditions. Without a good knowledge of the shapes of art history in different countries, it is impossible to gauge how texts written in different languages are read—how they are understood, against what historiographic background, in relation to what sense of the discipline. Translations *from* effectively monolingual traditions into Eng-

lish are more commonly funded, but I am not convinced that is a good strategy. The journal *AIT*, *Art in Translation*, tends to find essays whose methods and scholarly habits are already familiar—they are already close to the North Atlantic model. Monolingualism is not the most serious issue in the languages of art writing, but it requires a special study, and not just translations into English.

(B) Art historians who do not read much, or often, outside their principal language. Many scholars are effectively monolingual because they do not read *easily* in languages other than their own. The qualification here makes all the difference: it turns this from an apparently trivial condition into a very difficult problem.

It is not true, for example, that German-language scholars are unproblematically or perfectly aware of English-language scholarship. A typical contemporary publication written in German might well make reference to the principal works on its subject in English, but there might not be any extended encounter with those English-language texts. German scholars do read English, but it is an open question how much is read, and there are many instances in which the literature in English is cited more than actually engaged. German *Bildwissenschaft* and art history have not developed the Anglo-American interest in identity, for example, even though authors like Judith Butler appear regularly in German publications. The many large edited volumes produced by Eikones, the image research center in Basel (2005-2017), are a good example. I served as a site panelist there for five years, and each year I reviewed dozens of essays, monographs, and edited volumes. When the topics overlapped those that are traditional in postwar English-language art history and theory, such as gender, sexuality, and identity, the German-language authors would usually cite the pertinent sources, but after the citations the authors tended to return to their own concerns and follow lines of thought that were more dependent on German-language art theory and art history.

A good example of an attempt to bridge this gap is Birgit Mersmann and Alexandra Schneider's *Transmission Image* (2009), which includes a number of texts on gender, identity, and ethnicity, and—from the German-language tradition—a number of texts that carefully discuss image reception. Another example of German scholars reading some, but not much, English literature, is the influence of Tom Mitchell in Germany: it went up sharply after the publication of an anthology of his work in German, even though in my experience German scholars often say they had known his work for some time.

A similar example is Scandinavian countries' relation to French. Students in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden tend to read English and German by preference over French. I have seen third-level syllabi in visual studies departments that have almost no French readings. This isn't because the students don't know French, but because they are not fluent enough to read French easily. These slight lacks of skill can have significant consequences: entire scholarly traditions can be deflected from one literature, one nation's scholarship, to another, and that can change the entire tenor of

research in a country. In this case Scandinavian *Bildvetenskap* and allied disciplines are influenced by Anglo-American and German writing, but less so by French writing.

I think Spain may have a higher percentage of English-speaking art historians than South America, but a version of this problem still applies. Spanish scholars who do not read fluently in English are largely dependent on just a few publishers, such as Akal; similarly Portuguese scholars who are not comfortable in English are dependent on just a few publishers such as the Brazilian journal *Arte & Ensaios*. Czech scholars have the journal *Umění* and several volumes of theoretical essays edited by Ladislav Kesner, but there are large gaps. The result of these limited translation programs is an idiosyncratic sense of English-language art history, formed mainly by the translations that happen to be available.

(C) Art historians who do not write easily in English. This, I think, is the most interesting of these issues. It is difficult to define what it means to say scholars in a country don't read "much" or "easily," but it is clear when scholars do not write well enough to submit their essays to the principal English-language journals. Any number of accomplished scholars in countries like France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the Balkans, Poland, and Russia write English well enough to communicate, but not quite well enough to publish. I find this problem is more or less unknown to Anglophone scholars, but it is a subject of intense concern in parts of the EU and elsewhere.

(This issue does not exist as such in English-speaking countries outside the EU such as Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, and the Philippines, because the distance between their scholars' practices and North Atlantic norms can be great enough so that the content of their scholarship, aside from their language, makes it difficult for them to be published in US or UK journals and books. I will return to this question under a different heading.)

French scholars in particular often have good conversational English, but don't write quite well enough to submit essays to *The Art Bulletin* or *Art History*. This subject has been discussed by Matthew Rampley in his excellent anthology *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks* (2012), and it is a concern for Francophone groups such as the Artl@s initiative. A slight deficiency in written English can effectively hobble a career. French scholars may not want to publish only in French journals (which do not have wide circulation outside Francophone countries), but they may be effectively prevented from writing for the world Anglophone press.

Scholars who do not experience this problem often don't know about it, and I have heard it said that art historians who face this issue can just employ translators. But that is actually quite difficult: translators who can deal with art history, theory, and criticism can be difficult to find. Hans Belting, who has an elegant written style in English, still felt the need for finding English translators, and in 2011 he told me that finding good translators was one of the principal obstacles in getting his work into

English. In addition, of course, translators are expensive, and English-language publishers will often require a completed chapter or entire book manuscript in English before they will even consider sending a manuscript out for review. It is not an exaggeration to say southern and eastern Europe have many scholars whose work is not known outside their countries because of a *slight* lack of English.

Exceptions to this problem are, I think, mainly localized in northwest Europe: scholars in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and to a lesser degree Finland and Estonia may well have written English good enough to submit essays to any of the principal English-language journals and publishers. But outside that geographically narrow compass, the world is full of scholars who can read some, and perhaps a great deal, of the English-language literature, but cannot easily publish their work.

It is sometimes said that scholars from “unusual” places can’t submit articles to English-language journals. One Croatian scholar complained that people who “come from so called ‘margins’ barely have the opportunity to submit papers or to publish in the prestigious scientific journals.” But the reason such applications might be turned down without serious consideration is not the place the scholar lives but the language of the cover letter. Even before the editor has seen the essay, she will have an idea of how much work (and expense) it may require to turn the essay into English in the “house style” of the journal. When I edited a book series involving a number of international contributors, I tried to address this problem by permitting people to write in whatever English they could command, and then undertaking extensive “translations” from broken English to fluent English. I did that kind of work myself because the process often takes more time than an ordinary translation, and it can only be done by someone who knows the nuances of the subject matter. A professional translator would miss many of the inflections that matter so much in scholarly work. But that kind of work is prohibitively expensive for most presses, so essays in less than adequate English tend just to be rejected.

Before I conclude, there’s another aspect to the language issue that is not often discussed: the question of multilingualism, and its effect on the discipline. Major universities in the North Atlantic are effectively multilingual: each of their art history faculty speaks and writes fluently in several languages, and their students are expected to do the same. In North America, only the very top tier universities achieve this, and they do so by accepting only the most qualified students, and by advising them to increase their language skills. Anthony Grafton tells me that Princeton students are encouraged to write and give lectures in their research language; most universities in North America would not ask that of their American students. But in the EU, especially in smaller countries, there is a different kind of issue to do with multilingualism. Heie Treier tells me that several of her Estonian colleagues have studied abroad, in Paris, London, New York, Berlin, and Helsinki. When they come back home, she writes, “they

speak Estonian but think in the categories that come from the country and university where they studied. These are different traditions of thinking and analyzing art. So, the result is that colleagues sometimes can no longer speak about art with each other in Estonian! They all think in different language traditions, but speak Estonian.” That is a polylingualism issue seldom seen in larger countries. Similarly, a Chinese scholar told me that because she learned her art history through English, her Chinese style is recognizably “foreign.” It’s not clear to me whether that might be a common issue for Chinese editors and publishers.

These three subjects—lack of *languages*, lack of fluency in languages, and lack of fluency in writing—are divisive problems in art history worldwide. They are, perhaps, not the most profound problems: those have to do with content, the subject of this book’s final chapter.