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In the Art World, Globalism's New Spin

It feels like the right time to reassert global consciousness in the universe of art. Even some of New York's large and conservative museums have been thinking this.

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When the American economy bottomed out in the early 1990s, the contemporary-art market fell apart, and some gate-crashing occurred. Artists who were once denied entry, many of them nonwhite, came in. So did new kinds of art, much of it with roots outside Western traditions. An expansive new age of globalist art had begun, and it felt excitingly utopian. By forging links among far-flung people and cultures, art could do what politics could not: bring everyone to a communal table for share-the-wealth feasts, with museums serving as hosts.

In the years since — with all the museum news about architectural expansion, technological enhancement and audience attraction — globalism as an ideal, in the 1990s sense, faded somewhat from view. The proliferation of international biennials and triennials dulled its edge. The concept had become shopworn from use as a marketing tool. And when globalism became confused with economic globalization, political questions arose: To what extent does sharing dilute difference? Who's in charge of building that communal table? Who decides the seating?

Recently, globalism, as global consciousness, has come back into focus, at least for me, thanks to American politics: to the spreading plague of racially based violence, and to a presidential candidate who preaches — promises — a future of barrier-building and ethnic expulsion. It feels like the right time to reassert global consciousness in art, not just as a practical reality, but as a positive idea. And, as it turns out, even some of our large and conservative New York museums, in not always obvious ways, have been thinking this, too.

If, in the early 1990s, your knowledge of art in the city was confined to what you regularly found in Manhattan's flagship institutions, you might never have known that something called global contemporary art existed. It was readily apparent if you looked elsewhere, to small, ethnically specific institutions like the Americas Society, Asia Society, El Museo del Barrio and the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Queens Museum, institutions notably responsive to their culturally diverse communities. But the big museums were slow to respond to the era's globalist impulse. And the bigger they were, the slower they were.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its encyclopedic holdings, is the most intrinsically globalist of all. Yet nowhere has contemporary art been given less notice or looked less at home. Recently, this has begun to change, as the Met adjusts itself to the reality that in museums everywhere, contemporary art is an overwhelmingly popular audience draw, not to mention an area of interest to a high percentage of collector-trustees and other benefactors.



An installation by Walid Raad at the Museum of Modern Art, called “Section 88: Views From Outer to Inner Compartments_ACT XXXI.” Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

For a while now, the Met has been integrating contemporary purchases into its collection displays. And, given the cultural span that collection covers, it’s no surprise to find non-Western work among the arrivals. A splendid 2014 fabric piece by the Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté now hangs in the African galleries. A surreal 2011 sculpture by Kohei Nawa, made from the crystal-encrusted body of a deer, has become a popular fixture of the Japanese wing.

But by far the most significant sign of a big push in a contemporary global direction came last spring in one of the two exhibitions chosen to inaugurate the Met’s tenancy in the Breuer building, once home to the Whitney Museum of American Art and now generally assumed to be the platform on which the Met will stake a claim to contemporary relevance.



Sheena Wagstaff, chairwoman of the department of Modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit Damon Winter/The New York Times

