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# The canon in art history: concepts and approaches

Gregor Langfeld

## Introduction

The term 'canon' or 'canonisation' expresses a process in which specific aspects of culture are established as crucial, of the utmost importance or exemplary. In antiquity, a sculpture by Polykleitos was named the 'canon', as it perfectly expressed the proportions of the human body. It was regarded as a standard, a reference point and therefore as worthy of imitation. Another well-known example of an art-historical canon is that produced by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), whose *Lives of the Artists* from 1550 – in which he compiled biographies of the Italian artists and architects whom he regarded as the 'most eminent' – led him to be regarded as the father of art history. In this work, Vasari intended 'to distinguish the better from the good, and the best from the better, the most distinguished from the less prominent qualities'.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the canon of Italian Renaissance artists Vasari established in his book endures as the standard to this day.<sup>2</sup>

A canon lays claim to permanence, as it is thought to be valid independent of time and place. Works of art that in their day were locked in an irreconcilable struggle with one another exist harmoniously side by side in the neutralised state of the canon and enter history. The institutionalised hierarchy of artists and styles is continually fed to society; it is 'parroted' out and accepted as something self-evident. For that reason alone, it is important to remain conscious of the canonisation processes that led and still lead to some artists being included in the canon and entering history and others being excluded. The frequent references here to 'canon' in the singular should not, of course, rule out the possibility that there can also be canons, for example, of specific forms of art, periods, regions, nations or particular social groups. One should not, however, lose sight of the fact that the canon of the modern era, as expressed in the collections of large, influential art museums, in textbooks, in market prices for art and so on, is relatively homogenous. In this sense, there is largely agreement about which works of art, artists and movements should be regarded as canonical at a given point in time. The dismissive attitude many art historians express today regarding the canon and its conceptual

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. by Mrs. Jonathan Foster, vol. 1, London: H. Bohn, 1850 (orig. pub. 1550), 301.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Giorgio Vasari', <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giorgio-Vasari> (accessed 14 August 2018).

basis should not obscure the fact that hierarchies in the field of art continue to be relatively clearly established.

Until recently, the canon has not been analysed critically as a concept, and the subject of canon formation has been ignored and rejected as an area of study.<sup>3</sup> Yet canonisation practices represent an area of research that deserves more attention, since art historians have traditionally concerned themselves primarily with art as such and have in the process themselves contributed to the establishment of this art as worthy of study and therefore participated in its canonisation. It is only if this area of research continues to develop that it will be possible to uncover the processes determining the assessment of art and the formation of artistic taste. However, there does not seem to be clarity, much less agreement, on how such research should be conducted. Art historians have taken different positions and even singled out concepts and approaches pursued in relation to the canon as contradictory and incompatible. This article intends to explain the main positions that dominate literature on the canon and canon formation, especially with regard to modernism, the theoretical and methodological starting points that provide the framework for such research, as well as to propose that social art history offers a more comprehensive approach that might overcome the strict separation between these positions.

Although presumably the majority of art historians would no longer dispute that the historicity of the object and aesthetic experience always must be considered, it seems necessary to point out that within the field of art there is still the presence of a distrust of questions that seek to explain the processes by which taste is formed. I noticed this during a seminar for graduate students on *Kunst en de canon* (Art and the Canon) at the University of Amsterdam, in which professors from different

<sup>3</sup> Some examples of this growing interest in the topic are (chronologically): Michael Camille et al., 'Rethinking the Canon: A Range of Critical Perspectives', *The Art Bulletin*, 78, June 1996, 198–217; Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London: Routledge, 1999; Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham, eds, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999; Linda Boersma and Mieke Rijnders, eds, *Canonvorming: Het museale verzamelen en presenteren in Nederland*, special issue of *Jong Holland*, 18: 2, 2002; Anna Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons*, Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007; Elizabeth C. Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, New York and London: Routledge, 2007; Ruth E. Iskin, ed., *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World*, New York etc.: Routledge, 2017. See also the sources noted in other contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography*. Furthermore, the thirteenth Deutscher Kunsthistorikertag in Marburg in 2009 was dedicated to the subject, as was the annual scholars' program of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles from 2014 to 2015. Marcello Gaeta and Katrin Heitmann, eds, *Kanon. 30. deutscher Kunsthistorikertag: Universität Marburg, 25.–29. März 2009. Tagungsband*, Bonn: Verband Deutscher Kunsthistoriker, 2009; Getty Research Institute, *2014/15: Object, Value, Canon*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2013. <http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/years/2014-2015.html> (accessed 21 August 2018).

chairs in art history gave lectures. Whereas most were of the opinion that socio-historical conditions in the reception of art should be integrated into discussions of canon formation, one of the professors rejected this view and almost became angry about it. He cited as an example the work of the Japanese painter and printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), the quality of whose work, according to him, can be appreciated in equal measure by viewers in Japan, Europe, Africa or wheresoever.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by a heated discussion, which turned out to be very productive thanks precisely to the differences that clearly emerged. It displayed seemingly irreconcilably opposed views on the canon and canon formation: on the one hand, the view that aesthetic qualities, as the most essential component of the work of art, are timeless and universal, and, on the other hand, that the canon should be understood as changeable and within its specific societal context. This discussion demonstrated the urgency of addressing these divergent views on the canon in art-historical education and art history in general.

### **Aesthetic judgement**

The idea that the canon exists independently from time and place and is based on universal characteristics of quality, which has dominated art history for a long time, has come under fire over the past few decades, not least due to the influence of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) and New Art History since the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In order to understand these changing and diverging views on the canon, it is necessary to trace the roots of the more traditional concept first before exploring how it might be integrated in a more critical approach with regard to canon formation.

The static concept of the canon is, like art history in general, heavily influenced by the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), which gives priority to form over content.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the purpose and function of the work of art recede to the background. Kant separated aesthetic judgement from all other practical realms of life and from the theoretical realm as well, defining it as disinterested.<sup>7</sup> The judgement of taste is based on the subject's feeling of pleasure in the object and cannot be demonstrated logically. Nevertheless, it can raise a claim to universal or

<sup>4</sup> Lecture on 27 September 2016 at the University of Amsterdam, chaired by the author of this article.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel with Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, trans. by Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991 (orig. pub. 1966); Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984 (orig. pub. 1979); Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996 (orig. pub. 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994 (orig. pub. 1790), § 52, 264.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 5, 122.

intersubjective validity, because the source of the pleasure on which such a judgement is based can be traced to the harmony or 'free play' of our higher cognitive faculties or the faculties of understanding and imagination.<sup>8</sup> Any subject who is capable of knowledge must also be able to experience this pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Kant hardly pays any attention to the social and historical aspects of the production and reception of art. What is beautiful and what is not is always judged the same way, and this is done independently from sociocultural diversity and historical change.<sup>10</sup> However, within his transcendental deduction of judgement, Kant does not have any empirical attempts to explain processes of canonisation in mind. Nor does he assert in his analysis of the beautiful that aesthetic judgement alone represented a meaningful and insightful engagement with a work of art. He merely points out that other forms of judging a work of art do not concern its beauty. The very thing that makes a work of art beautiful thereby fades into the background. For the moment, he is interested only in the question of how the beautiful can be grasped by the human faculty of cognition.<sup>11</sup>

Empiricists, such as the art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–94) who invoked Kant, have contributed to misunderstanding the latter. Greenberg claimed the objective validity of the aesthetic judgement. His view appeals to the durability of that judgement: 'Time progressively irons out disagreements of taste, allowing a core consensus to persist which is confirmed and reconfirmed across succeeding generations.'<sup>12</sup> Greenberg's formalist approach is problematic when he excludes extra-aesthetic conditions that form the canon, such as inequalities of access to power and discourse, ideology, class or gender, differing fundamentally from Kant's transcendental aesthetics. Moreover, the view of the canon as a consensus that emerges over time is highly problematic, as this article will show.

It cannot be denied that visual qualities are supposed to be the most innate element of fine art, and their effect is tied to their formal appearance. This

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 6–8, 124–31.

<sup>9</sup> This claim to universality was questioned by scholars, such as Bourdieu, because the disinterested play and pleasure of an aesthetic judgement requires very specific economic and social conditions. It is a privilege of those who have access to these conditions, which allow that disposition to be durably established. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 314; Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

<sup>10</sup> Communication about the aesthetic value of a work of art cannot get beyond the level of the judgement itself because of the terminological indefinability of the beautiful. 'It is just as limited as it would be under the assumption of taste valid only for the individual – with the sole difference that dissent over the value of a work necessarily leads to the assumption that at least one of those involved has poor cognitive faculties'. Caspar Hirschi, 'Die Regeln des Genies: Die Balance zwischen Mimesis und Originalität in Kants Produktionsästhetik', *Conceptus: Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 32: 81, 1999, 217–55, 224 (translation by G. L.).

<sup>11</sup> Hirschi, 'Die Regeln des Genies', 225.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Gager, 'Constraints and Conventions: Kant and Greenberg on Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 39: 4, October 1999, 376–91, 381.

distinguishes art, and more specifically the 'legitimate' Western bourgeois mode of art perception, from other areas of life, such as politics and religion. For example, the art museum removes works of art from their context and strips them of their original political or religious function. When presented in a museum, art is reduced more to a specific function as art. It now serves to promote contemplation, which in many cases goes hand in hand with the loss of its previous meaning. In this way, presumed universal qualities are attributed to the work of art, resulting in the idea of an enduring canon of works of art whose quality can ultimately be traced back to their visual appearance. It is therefore understandable that art historians and art critics trained in the 'legitimate' mode of art perception using a formalist approach – such as Greenberg, for example – were often influential when it came to establishing certain artists and art movements. Obviously, aesthetic judgement plays an important role in art perception and therefore should be involved when engaging with canon formation. However, it must be acknowledged that even the connoisseur's or professional's eye is the product of social and historical developments, as will be illustrated with an example in the next section.

### **Sacralisation of art**

Research into canon formation requires questioning the mechanisms that lead to the sacralisation and fetishisation of art and conceal the socio-historical conditions under which art arises and is canonised. There are striking parallels between art and religion, as illustrated, for example, by the artist being referred to as a 'creator'. Subsequently, the work of art, as something 'holy', 'consecrates' those who satisfy its requirements, who are among the initiated, who are receptive to it. A cultivated nature or love of art is represented as a blessing or gift, as Bourdieu elaborated. The work of art is said to have the power to awaken the blessing of aesthetic illumination in anyone, no matter how uneducated. Bourdieu noted that one only needs to disguise the social conditions that enable the appreciation of art as second nature to perpetuate the faith of cultured people in barbarism.<sup>13</sup> Not only with regard to the sacralisation of art but also canon formation in general, Bourdieu's concept of the artistic field as an autonomous social space of mutually interdependent positions provides an excellent framework. In his theory he pays attention to 'the *objective relations* which are constitutive of the structure of the field and which orient the struggles aiming to conserve or transform it'.<sup>14</sup>

Bourdieu refers to the sociologist and ethnologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), who demonstrated that magic is less about the techniques, instruments and individual peculiarities of the magician than about the collective will to believe in

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art*, 111–12; Erwan Dianteill, 'Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Religion: A Central and Peripheral Concern', in David L. Swartz and Vera L. Zolberg, eds, *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2005, 65–85.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 205 (emphasis original), see also 141–73.

magic. The power of the magician is a legitimate deception that is collectively overlooked.<sup>15</sup> Much the same happens in the art field, which conceals the conditions under which art is produced and canonised. Such concealment is understandable, since questions concerning, for example, who created the creator and in what way this figure was created by critics, gallerists and so on, would lead to a profanation or disenchantment of art. For that reason, such questions are still scorned in certain parts of the art field. That has been particularly true since the end of the eighteenth century, with the development of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. The tendency of art to detach itself from its previous religious and courtly function culminated in the *l'art pour l'art* movement in the nineteenth century, when the autonomy of the art field was fully developed.<sup>16</sup>

This, at first glance, paradoxical interrelationship between society and the formation of the autonomous field of art in the modern era only makes it that much more important for the discipline of art history to draw attention to it, so that changes in artistic taste can be explained. At the same time, this should not mean that the formal and aesthetic aspects of the work of art should no longer be the subject of art-historical scholarship, since they represent a clear innate component. However, the effect of the visual qualities on the viewer, which is tied to their formal appearance, is neither timeless nor independent of location. Art historians should, in any case, consider the historicity of the object *and* its aesthetic experience.

The following example in relation to the canonisation of German expressionism, which was dismissed on aesthetic grounds until the 1939–45 war, is illustrative here. Expressionism was characterised as ugly, coarse, gruesome, horrific and excessive.<sup>17</sup> Its 'demolition of form', the deformation or deviation from the reality of forms and colours, was set against artistic taste at the time, especially with regard to the Brücke artists, who did not gain any significant international recognition. After the 1939–45 war, aesthetic attitudes toward expressionism that had endured for decades suddenly turned in a positive direction within the course

<sup>15</sup> Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. by Robert Brain, London and New York: Routledge, 1972, 35, 114–19; Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 169.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Bürger points out that sociology too easily ignores this historical development when it dismisses such autonomy as mere illusion, since the production of art can never be regarded as set apart from society. In his view, sociology was thus ignoring the complexity of the concept of autonomy. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, *Theory and History of Literature* 4, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011 (orig. pub. 1974), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Gregor Langfeld, *German Art in New York: The Canonization of Modern Art 1904–1957*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 100, 146 etc.; Gregor Langfeld, *Duitse kunst in Nederland: verzamelen, tentoonstellen, kritieken; 1919–1964*, Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 2004, 29–30; Geurt Imanse and Langfeld, 'Expressionism in the Netherlands', in Isabel Wünsche, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*, New York and London: Routledge, 2018, 295–315, 304–05.

of a few years.<sup>18</sup> The reasons for this sudden canonisation of expressionism were clearly politically and ideologically motivated. A good guide to what influential actors in the art field declared taboo and what they canonised after the fall of the National Socialist regime reflected the art that had either been praised or proclaimed 'degenerate' by the Nazis respectively. Expressionism, one of the primary targets of the Nazi 'degenerate art' campaign, was thus accorded a great deal of recognition and 'degenerate' art was positioned as the antithesis of fascism. Furthermore, during the Cold War art promoters drew parallels between National Socialism and communist-oriented systems, which amounted to updating the political reevaluation of the art that had been condemned in these countries and gave it additional weight.

Expressionism was identified with Western democracies and endowed with a symbolic value: by representing democracy, freedom and individualism, it contributed to the formation of identity in Western democracies.<sup>19</sup> Various museum directors endowed with the power of consecration considered expressive art to be the only appropriate form of art in the wake of Nazism, which is why expressionist art from the 1910s connected so well with contemporary art, such as that produced by the Cobra group of artists (who had their breakthrough during the Cold War).<sup>20</sup> Viewers became open to an aesthetic that did not really conform to their ideas of beauty. Conversely, the promoters of such art defined realist tendencies that could be connected to the National Socialist and the Eastern bloc taboo and were thus deemed 'unworthy of the canon'. The association of realist tendencies with totalitarian regimes was a crucial reason for dismissing them.

This example shows that the canon's hierarchies can change over time according to political and ideological goals. It is not the case that more and more art enters the canon, since when penchants for certain art forms change, it can also mean that previously celebrated works of art lose their earlier significance. The recognition of the art condemned by the Nazis was based on ideology and thus shaped its identity. The viewers recognised themselves in this art and found their convictions affirmed.<sup>21</sup> Identification with the ideology associated with the work of

<sup>18</sup> In the United States, this tendency had already begun in the second half of the 1930s, whereas in Europe it occurred after the war. See Langfeld, *German Art in New York*; Langfeld, 'How the Museum of Modern Art in New York canonised German Expressionism', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 11, December 2014, 1–13, <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com>; Langfeld, *Duitse kunst in Nederland*.

For similar developments with regard to other movements, see the contributions by Claartje Wesselink and Elena Korowin in this issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography*.

<sup>19</sup> See Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 118–19, 128, 142, 147, 149, 164, 169, 173ff.; Langfeld, 'How the Museum of Modern Art', 9–13; Langfeld, *Duitse kunst in Nederland*.

<sup>20</sup> See Wesselink's article about the canonisation of Cobra in this feature section of the *Journal of Art Historiography*.

<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu speaks of a homology between positions in the artistic field and positions in the social field in its entirety. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 166 and 251–2.



art in question created the precondition for the work being considered worthy of the aesthetic gaze. Viewers opened themselves up to an aesthetic that initially did not correspond to accepted notions of beauty. The intense colours and distortions employed by expressionists took on positive meaning.

### **Power struggles in the art field**

Raising awareness of canon formation in its socio-historical context is extremely important for art history because its processes are systematically covered up in the system of art, which is involved in and perpetuates the mythologisation of art. What is regarded as given and self-evident and is separated from living practice can in truth be traced back to decisions by specific figures in the art field and the institutions with which they are associated. The system that leads to the canonisation of certain artworks, artists and movements and the power relations, processes and discourses that play a role in the acquisition of this status need to be reconstructed. Another point one has to bear in mind is that access to power and discourse is unequal and aesthetic experience is class-based (such as in the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art), as Bourdieu demonstrated.<sup>22</sup>

Power struggles are an aspect inherent to canon formation, and their existence is more or less hidden. To uncover canon formation means to focus on how actors in the art scene and its associated institutions influenced the assessment of certain art forms. These actors include artists, art collectors, gallery owners, educators, patrons, curators, art historians and critics. This makes it possible to demonstrate the influence of specific groups, institutions and networks on the definition of 'legitimate' taste. The degree to which specific groups and institutions were able to prevail reveals their influence on and their dominance over society. That is why the view of the canon as a consensus that emerges over time is misleading. The establishment of art does not occur harmoniously based on the cooperation of individual agents but rather through rivalries over the dominance of specific positions.

Especially since modernism, the art field has been characterised by a rivalry between the defenders of traditional norms and those that sought to change them. Avant-garde movements, which shrugged off the norms of traditional art, were initially met with strong resistance and were respected by only small circles. Artistic hierarchies were defended from innovations, which could only gain acceptance by struggling with the old ones, according to which innovations act differentially as instruments of distinction. It was about the struggle between the successful, dominant figures who were contesting to stay on top and the newcomers who wanted to break up continuity and repetition.<sup>23</sup> Not only traditionalists and

<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Jensen explores artistic innovation that to a large extent shapes the canon and what artwork, artist or movement is included in textbooks, for example. Jensen, 'Measuring

progressives but also art promoters competed with each other within these groups with differing understandings of art.

In order to illustrate this, I would like to take German expressionism as an example once more, specifically how it had been previously received in the United States when it was not yet canonised. This example also shows that, over the course of time, art promoters project different meanings onto art movements and bring its artistic significance up to date. During the interbellum period modern art promoters presented German expressionism, on the one hand, in an international context and, on the other hand, in a national one, directly taking up the nationalist discourse on art that had developed in Germany during the 1914–18 war.<sup>24</sup> The international position is evident in the activities of the artist Katherine Dreier (1877-1952), who was perhaps the most active supporter of modern art in the United States in the 1920s. She was convinced that the modern movement was not restricted by national borders and never organised national exhibitions in the strict sense. Dreier's idea of modern art was tied to theosophy, the religious doctrine avant-garde artists in particular felt a connection to because it attributed particular importance to abstract art. Because German art was merely part of that movement, Dreier did not perceive it primarily as German.

By contrast, an art historian such as William R. Valentiner, and later Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1902-1981), director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), underscored an alleged distinction between 'French form' and 'German content' in art, which was based at least in part on irrational, clichéd ideas with a long, sometimes centuries-old tradition that had rarely been questioned critically.<sup>25</sup> This long-lasting identity of German art, and its equation with figurative expressionism, which supposedly conformed to a timeless German character, gained much more acceptance than the international position, even if the art was not yet canonised at the time. The nationalist perspective of German art proved to be so successful that it has lasted up until the present day. In contrast, Dreier was a long way from being able to gain any broader acceptance for her understanding of art. She allowed herself to be guided by her personal preferences and an esoteric ideology, which made her suspect to art experts. Her exhibitions promoted abstract art one-sidedly, still one of the movements that was granted the least recognition at

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Canons: Reflections on Innovation and the Nineteenth-century Canon of European Art', in Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons*, 27–54.

<sup>24</sup> Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 37–65.

<sup>25</sup> Barr was taking up an old idea, originally developed by Giorgio Vasari, that the unclassical Gothic can be traced back to Germany and not France. In his *Lives of the Artists* of 1550, Vasari wrongly attributed unclassical Gothic (and earlier) architecture to Germany, rather than France, when the Gothic had in fact emerged in the mid-twelfth century. By doing so, he contributed to a consequential development that would prevail into the twentieth century. He described German architecture as vast, barbarous and rude. He used the word 'degenerate', in the sense of deviating from one's own national, classical ideal. Vasari, *Lives*, 21, 24–25.

the time. As was the case for other artists and artists' groups, she did not have the art-historical and institutional authority of a figure such as Barr, the director of MoMA, who also tried to minimise her influence.<sup>26</sup> She did not have the power to legitimise her understanding of art. Only posthumously, after her art collection was incorporated into museums such as MoMA, did she receive recognition for her tireless promotion of modern art.

### **Marginalisation of social groups**

Another approach to the canon is driven by the desire to expand the canon to marginalised groups of artists. This approach suggests itself since the canonisation of artists always entails selection and the marginalisation of a much larger group. Since the early 1970s, this perspective has evolved out of Marxist and feminist art history. Later, gender, queer and postcolonial studies developed out of this. This form of art history has done a great deal to make us increasingly aware that the canon is not timeless and fixed but represents just one possibility among others. There is always a broad spectrum of possibilities for artists, art works, movements and so on that might enter the canon but only a few achieve this. In particular, as a result of efforts in recent decades to realise a global and transnational art history, questions of the canon have acquired a new dynamic. The discipline today remains strongly rooted in a 'Western' (specifically European and North American) and nationalist art historiography. The significantly increased presence of 'non-Western' artists at documenta and other venues since the turn of millennium<sup>27</sup> and in biennials organised outside the West suggests the direction in which the canon of contemporary art might evolve. An increase in geographical inclusion should not, however, obscure the fact that global art histories and transnational perspectives, too, are thoroughly Western constructs that are only comprehensible and persuasive to those who are already well within this vein of North Atlantic art history.<sup>28</sup> Postcolonial theory and feminism have not only been widely employed in art history but in all fields of the humanities, and they share similar starting points. This article mainly focuses on feminist approaches as one example of the kind of research that has been carried out on the exclusion of social groups, such as female, minority and 'non-Western' artists, from the canon.

In her influential article 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Linda Nochlin (1931–2017) does not dispute that in the past women created fewer masterpieces than their male colleagues did but rather explains how this inequality

<sup>26</sup> Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Lotte Philipsen, *Globalizing Contemporary Art: The Art World's New Internationalism*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010, 37–38.

<sup>28</sup> James Elkins, 'Afterword', in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015, 203–29, 210; Elkins, 'Canon and Globalization'.

arose based on the institutional structure of the field of art, since women did not have full access to institutions, such as the academies of art.<sup>29</sup> This and similar studies demonstrate ways in which social history might be integrated into feminist approaches in order to understand the mechanisms that lead to the marginalisation of certain social groups.<sup>30</sup> The focus on marginalisation seems to be the most important added value of feminist and related approaches with regard to canon formation, although it must be said that it can be methodologically more challenging and harder to substantiate than research into the canonisation of specific artists since discourses as they have appeared in reception documents, such as exhibition catalogues, mainly deal with artists from dominant groups and to a lesser degree with excluded or marginalised artists.

Feminists frequently called for a revision of the existing canon, aiming to expand it to female and other marginalised artists.<sup>31</sup> The social marginalisation of certain groups was attributed to the canon, which was accordingly regarded as unjust. The goal of revising artistic hierarchies was a reason behind feminist art historians ruling out the criterion of the formal quality of the work of art.<sup>32</sup> They distanced themselves from an aesthetic perspective, which receded to the background or was regarded as unimportant. However, more recent art historians, such as Janet Wolff, have attempted to reintroduce the aesthetic element ‘without falling back on discredited notions of timeless beauty and universal values’.<sup>33</sup> According to Wolff, the beautiful and the political are not necessarily in conflict with one another. She proposes that the dilemmas within aesthetic judgements that feminism is confronted with, such as gendered hierarchies and bias in museum practice, should be addressed ‘in terms of the exploration of social groups and their

<sup>29</sup> Linda Nochlin, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?’, *Art News*, January 1971, 22–39 and 67–71, 25 and 32.

<sup>30</sup> Since the 1990s the sometimes heavily critical tone of earlier feminist literature was tempered in surveys that explore the historical position of female artists such as: Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012 (orig. pub. 1990); Hanna Klarenbeek, *Penseelprinsessen & broodschilderessen: Vrouwen in de beeldende kunst, 1808–1913*, Bussum: Toth, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> That trend is also reflected by the fact that today’s modern and contemporary art museums, such as the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, one of the most important museums for modern and contemporary art in the Netherlands, consciously collect more art by woman in order to strike a balance between male and female artists represented in the collections. At the same time, the Stedelijk Museum states that they had already collected art by female artists in the past but that, from their art collection up until the 1960s, only a few of them were noteworthy. The policy to collect more contemporary works of art by women has been a primary aim since the 1990s. *Stedelijk Museum: Collectieplan 2012–2013*, 30 September 2011, 9; *Stedelijk Museum: Collectieplan 2014*, 27 September 2013, 4, 7–9.

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of ‘feminism’s distrust of beauty’, see Janet Wolff, ‘Groundless Beauty: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Uncertainty’, *Feminist Theory*, 7: 2, August 2006, 143–58.

<sup>33</sup> Wolff, ‘Groundless Beauty’, 147 and 153.

ideological and aesthetic interests'.<sup>34</sup> This concept differs from Griselda Pollock's psychoanalytical approach, which made us aware of patriarchal mechanisms and sexism, especially in relation to the work of art as such.<sup>35</sup> Pollock's approach is less grounded in the concrete social and historical conditions of the reception of art and so consequently an understanding of the processes that lead to marginalisation in all their complexity recedes to the background.

If the power struggles with regard to canon formation are reduced to the hegemony of men over women, and other factors that are also influential are ignored or marginalised, accounts that lack nuance or are distorted can be the result. Important processes in the field of art, such as the struggle between conservatives and progressives or innovation (phenomena that are constitutive elements of the modern era), should be integrated into any true understanding of processes of canonisation. The Story of Art cannot be reduced to an illustrated Story of Man, as Pollock claimed. Later art historians, such as Whitney Chadwick and Amelia Jones, argued for a position that acknowledges differences among women conditioned by age, class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, as well as social changes.<sup>36</sup> Queer studies has also pointed out that a binary division can be problematic and obstruct an understanding of processes of canonisation. Furthermore, they do not do justice to women who played an important role in promoting and institutionalising modern art, such as Dreier, discussed above, who also advocated for women's rights;<sup>37</sup> Hilla Rebay, who assembled Solomon R. Guggenheim's art collection; the legendary Peggy Guggenheim; or Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan, who established MoMA and had a considerable influence on its collecting and exhibiting strategies, to mention just a few example figures in the United States, who were not exceptional cases at all internationally in this respect despite being outnumbered with regard to male art promoters.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Wolff, 'Groundless Beauty', 153.

<sup>35</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*.

<sup>36</sup> Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 502, 505; Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Dreier worked for women's suffrage, advocated for social reforms in Argentina and promoted women artists. Furthermore, she headed the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, which provided young women with education in order to open up better job opportunities for them, and she was active at the German Home for Recreation for Woman and Children. Katherine S. Dreier, *Five Months in the Argentine from a Woman's Point of View, 1918 to 1919*, New York: Frederic Fairchild Sherman, 1920.

<sup>38</sup> See, among other publications, Doris Wintgens, *Peggy Guggenheim and Nelly van Doesburg: Advocates of De Stijl*, Rotterdam: nai010, 2017; Karole P. B. Vail, ed., *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting: Hilla Rebay and the Origins of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009; Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Art of Tomorrow: Hilla Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2005; Wendy Jeffers, 'Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: Patron of the Modern', *The Magazine Antiques*, 166, November 2004, 118–27; Isabel Wünsche, 'Sammlerinnen im Dienste

While, especially in the early stages, feminists had to fight against oppression and male hegemony within the patriarchal structures of art history, feminist and gender studies have since had a powerful and considerable influence on canon formation. Feminist art historians tend to be active players in the art field, who aim to change our views on art and the compilation of the canon. In their role as university teachers, they are agents of power that shape new generations of actors in the art field. One might consider, if one were to study how female artists have been canonised since the 1960s, why specific groups of women artists such as modernist artists have gained an international reputation. The number of these artists who have been added to the canon since then is relatively small and well-defined. Representatives of art institutions, such as those for the great museums of modern art, who constantly have to make choices and defend them, are largely in agreement about the selection of artists. However, the great majority of (women) artists still remain unknown or are part of 'dark matter', as has been said elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> For this reason, it is necessary to ask why institutions select this small group of artists and leave the vast majority unseen. The issue raised by feminist revisionism, namely that the criteria for judgement themselves are gendered, can be one way in which to answer questions pertaining to the principles of aesthetic judgement. It is the question of canon formation itself or of 'aesthetics after feminism' in the post-critical age, as Wolff phrased it.<sup>40</sup>

Feminist art history has hardly changed the highly selective system that has led to the canonisation of specific artists; it has instead confirmed it, despite the modification of the canon. It turns out to have been an illusion to have thought that the canon or the system in the art field that creates the canon could be eliminated. Nowadays, many art historians try to avoid the term 'canon' explicitly, but that does not mean that it disappeared or is not referred to anymore. The discipline of art history is part of a system that produces a canon. The whole art field generates and maintains the canon continuously: textbooks, prices on the art market, leading art collections and the UNESCO World Heritage List are just a few examples of

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der Kunstvermittlung – Katherine S. Dreier, Galka E. Scheyer und Hilla von Rebay', in Ulrike Wolff-Thomsen and Sven Kuhrau, eds, *Geschmacksgeschichte(n): Öffentliches und privates Kunstsammeln in Deutschland, 1871–1933*, Kiel: Ludwig, 2011, 194–215; Deborah Wye and Audrey Isselbacher, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Print Collecting: An Early Mission for MoMA*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999; Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, and Elise K. Kenney, eds, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984; Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982; Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*, New York: Universe Books, (1946) 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory Sholette, 'Heart of Darkness: A Journey into the Dark Matter of the Art World', in John R. Hall, Blake Stimson, and Lisa Tamiris Becker, eds, *Visual Worlds*, New York and London: Routledge, 2005, 116–38.

<sup>40</sup> Wolff, 'Groundless beauty', 149.

institutions and media that contribute to the continual reproduction of artistic hierarchies.

Notwithstanding the importance of the issue of a more inclusive canon, it is doubtful whether concepts such as a counter-canon or pluriversal or multiple canons are helpful with respect to marginalised groups.<sup>41</sup> The concepts of pluriversal and multiple canons suggest canons that form independently of one another, although they are part of the same system and condition one another. It is not about harmonious coexistence but rather about a power struggle to acquire new positions in the field of art and in the process to consign the old (such as the Eurocentric canon) to the past as outdated. These concepts can convey a false impression of different canons of equal value existing side by side and hence they tend to conceal the objective hierarchies that actually exist in the field of art and can be very clearly demonstrated on the basis of the artists who are included in textbooks, for example. The point is rather precisely to make these hierarchies visible in order to then raise the question of why and how certain master narratives emerge and become established. This does not mean, by the way, that there are no canons associated with subdivisions in the cultural field or no specialised canons with regard to specific media, regions or social groups, for example. Finally, concepts such as the counter-canon and multiple canons often concern contemporary art that has not yet been canonised, which is why such concepts can likewise be misleading.

### **Other methodological considerations**

Research into processes of canonisation might be understood as a form of reception history that demands a greater integration of the viewer relative to reception aesthetics. It focuses on the formation of taste and integrates the role of the promoter of art. In order to show their influence on the formation of the canon, an excellent method is to study documents of reception, such as exhibition catalogues, art reviews and art-historical writing, in order to analyse the discourse and uncover how recipients understood art at a particular moment. What is made visible here is the constructed nature of the discourse that creates the art work, its meaning and value.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth E. Iskin uses the terms 'counter-canons' and 'pluriversal canons' and Anna Brzyski that of 'multiple canons'. Iskin, 'Introduction: Re-envisioning the Canon: Are Pluriversal Canons Possible?', in Iskin, ed., *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon*, 1–41, 13–14, 24, 28 etc.; Anna Brzyski, 'Introduction: Canons and Art History', in Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons*, 1–25, 3.

Wolff problematises the concept of multiple canons and Elkins does the same for the related concept of multiple modernities. Wolff, 'Groundless beauty'; Elkins, 'Afterword', 227–29.

Exhibition catalogues play a crucial role as documents of the reception of modern art as the discourse developed largely in the wake of exhibitions.<sup>42</sup> They provide information about which artists were exhibited and which were ignored or marginalised and how they were presented to the public. Art reviews are another kind of analytical document of reception; they make reference not only to the works of art themselves but also to how exhibitions were presented and to what was written in the catalogues. Reviews show how much critics identify with the work of art and the exhibition and reveal what positions, across the spectrum from conservative to progressive, emerge. Exhibitions organised at different times can be studied in this way – that is to say, art reviews can be analysed synchronically as well as diachronically. This requires a systematic analysis, since art reviews permit a wide latitude of interpretations, which can lead to different, arbitrary conclusions.<sup>43</sup> The arguments of critics can be aesthetic, (art-)historical, political, social, religious, biographical and psychological. Based on the problem at hand, one should ask whether the intention of the particular recipient was to canonise, upgrade, degrade or update the work of art and what comparisons or contrasts to the purpose in question were used.

Whereas the history of exhibitions, and especially exhibition catalogues, tends to provide explanations for why specific movements were appreciated to a greater degree than others, the history of museum collections in particular indicates when artists and movements became part of the canon. The constitution of museum collections enables us to identify the ranked position of specific artists, since it is museums that provide modern art with its ultimate institutional recognition. The acquisition of works of art is based on a long-term viewpoint, in comparison to temporary exhibitions. Usually museums acquire works that are assumed to have lasting value, in the expectation that they will turn out to be valuable in the future as well. That is why they are conserved and documented with great care. A purely quantitative examination of collections is insufficient. It is not enough to determine solely how many works by a given artist were collected but also their technique and representativeness (such as the completeness of an artist's oeuvre or the attention paid to specific periods) have to be studied. How much of an artist's work is

<sup>42</sup> By this point, not only have there been numerous publications on specific exhibitions by modern artists' associations, museums and other art mediators, but also surveys of exhibition history, such as: Barbara Schaefer, ed, *1912 – Mission Moderne. Die Jahrhundertschau des Sonderbundes*, Köln: Wienand Verlag and Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 2012; Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler, eds, *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions that Made Art History*, vol. 1: 1863–1959, London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2008; Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998; Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, eds, *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Maximiliane Drechsler, *Zwischen Kunst und Kommerz: zur Geschichte des Ausstellungswesens zwischen 1775 und 1905*, Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1996.

<sup>43</sup> This is further elaborated in: Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 17–19.



available on the art market can play a role here too. Although museums select donations carefully, one should consider whether the acquisitions were part of an active collecting strategy. After all, the point is to determine which museums functioned as models that others followed, which ones gained prestige by owning this art and hence which of them can 'demonstrate art history' in this way.

The trend of market value – that is, the price of a work for sale at a given point in time – can also provide information about how much the art work is appreciated. However, it would be wrong to attribute canonisation processes entirely to the effect of the art market, which can only be one part of the overall process; for example, works of art that enjoy immediate economic success and respond in pre-established forms to a pre-existing demand usually are fated to rapid obsolescence without ever having an opportunity to find a place in the canon.<sup>44</sup> One must always remain conscious of the fact that these are social processes that involve diverse figures and institutions. Moreover, art-historical surveys establish hierarchies by including certain artists, treating them in greater or lesser detail, or by excluding them.<sup>45</sup> It is also possible to determine which artists are appointed to academies, that is, who is offered the opportunity to convey their views of art within the educational system. Finally, governmental support of art can enable us to draw conclusions about its social status. When studying the canonisation of modern art all of these aspects should be integrated and examined in their social context. The goal should be to show how the players on the art scene and the institutions to which they belong influence the assessment of certain artistic statements and what their respective positions in the art field in terms of symbolic power are.

Relationships of institutional power shift over the course of time. For example, the system of art dealers and critics replaced a system dominated by art academies and the state during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the first half of the twentieth century, the modern art museum emerged, which played a dominant role in canon formation. However, in the earlier reception process the most important initiatives came from artists and artists' associations, which were less able to get their views of art to prevail at that time, until they were discussed at a later point by cultural entrepreneurs. In the second half of the twentieth century, the art fair and huge international exhibitions for contemporary art, such as documenta in Kassel and biennales, emerged as influential institutions.<sup>46</sup> The extent to which one can speak of canonisation in contemporary art is, however, debatable.

<sup>44</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> See for quantitative approaches: Jensen, 'Measuring Canons'; James Elkins, 'Canon and Globalization in Art History', in Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons*, 55–77.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016; Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, eds, *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Bergen: Kunsthall Bergen, 2010; and articles in *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (autumn 2009), Landmark Exhibitions Issue.

It is no longer the case today that art can only be canonised post-mortem, as Bourdieu still claimed,<sup>47</sup> but art always only obtains canonical status over the course of its reception within a complex process. However, these blockbuster exhibitions such as biennales can play an important role in an early phase of this process.

## Conclusion

For all of their differences, both traditional and current art-historical approaches tend to contribute to giving prominence to certain artists and art forms. But what was ignored until relatively recently in art history is less concerned with the work of art as such and should be understood as being positioned at a greater distance from it, whence one can see the ways in which the canon is formed and certain works of art, artists and movements are canonised or marginalised. Ideally, a discipline should generally possess that kind of self-awareness, which can lead to new insights and ultimately to the transformation of the canon, since its supposed 'universality' and 'timelessness' will be eliminated.

The common practice in art history of separating out concepts and approaches related to the canon is ultimately too absolute, since they tend instead to be characterised by complementarity and instances of overlap. If these positions are not integrated, no real understanding of the phenomenon of the canon as a whole is possible. If one ignores the formal and aesthetic aspects of the work of art, the most distinctive element of fine art is ignored. However, the aesthetic gaze can never be timeless and universal. The aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, the political and the ideological should not be regarded separately from each other because they are interdependent.

Although the insight that not only the historicity of the object but also that of the aesthetic experience always has to be considered seems commonplace, for art historians it can be challenging to unmask such historicity because the art field covers up the conditions under which art is produced and canonised. The process from the production of the artwork up to its canonisation is distinguished by mechanisms that sacralise art, resulting in these conditions being concealed. The goal, therefore, should be to uncover these mechanisms.

Canonisations are social processes that involve diverse actors, networks, institutions and discourses that collaborate and compete with each other. It is therefore necessary to guard against one-sided and simplistic attempts to explain them, for example by attributing canonisation entirely to a single institution, such as the art market, which can only be one part of the overall process, or reducing power struggles in the field of art simply to the hegemony of men over women or 'Western' over 'non-Western' artists, since other factors such as innovation also influence complex processes of canonisation. Our discipline requires concepts and approaches that will enable us to reconstruct the whole system, as well as the

<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 147.

processes that lead to the canonisation and marginalisation of certain art works and the power relations and discourses involved. Inclusions and exclusions are interrelated and should not therefore be observed separately from one another.

The canon and processes of canon formation are not, as used to be assumed, static but are rather characterised by an incredible dynamism. Because this field of research is relatively young, much remains to be done in this area. This is particularly true in our discipline today when one is confronted with new challenges, such as developing more global and transnational perspectives on art. Solutions must be found, and they will have effects on the canon.

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