

# Aesthetic Encounters

Rethinking Autonomy, Space & Time in Today's World of Art

Bertelsen, Marianne

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**AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS** RETHINKING AUTONOMY, SPACE & TIME IN TODAY'S WORLD OF ART

PhD Series 09-2016

**Marianne Bertelsen**

# **AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS**

**RETHINKING AUTONOMY, SPACE & TIME IN TODAY'S  
WORLD OF ART**

The PhD School of Economics and Management

**PhD Series 09.2016**



**COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL**  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

**AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS**  
*RETHINKING AUTONOMY, SPACE &  
TIME IN TODAY'S WORLD OF ART*

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*Rethinking autonomy, space & time in today's world of art*

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## Summary

By studying what goes on in the world of art, it is possible not only to make observations about art and the artist but also to understand how modern-day culture is being organized and negotiated. From this perspective, understanding the experiences of autonomy and contemporaneity in being an artist today, and how these relate to cultural structures, can serve to explain some of the cultural structures that organize the world of art. In this thesis, my empirical starting point is the local context of a Danish art school and global attitudes to cultural policy-making and art education. These attitudes, in turn, carry my research process across the global world of art, involving the local context of a Chinese art school. Moving away from the somewhat simplified conflicts of autonomy and heteronomy, the global and the local, and the traditional and the contemporary, the three main themes of autonomy, time, and space serve as essential prisms through which to understand and explain the everyday experiences of contemporary art at art schools today.

This thesis is positioned as a contribution to the sociology of art but also draws on, and hopes to inspire, scholarship in global art history and aesthetic philosophy. Building upon the classic groundwork in the sociology of art I shed light on how, in an ever more changing world of art, the idea of contemporary art now involves a complex group of issues which go beyond classic approaches, and I suggest the explanatory potential of focusing on individual artists, acting in and making sense of the cultural structures of the world of art. My research process has been guided by critical realism and the methodological meta-approach of engaging with complexity through reflexive research. In this sense, the title “Aesthetic Encounters” refers not only to the conceptual and empirical results and contributions of the thesis but also to the explorative research process of engaging with the complexity of cultural and artistic worlds. As the main outcome of my research, I develop and present the concepts of “antinomies of autonomy”, globally connected but locally present contemporaneity, and the “heterochronies” of specific space-times. These are the socio-cultural dynamics which the experiences of the Chinese and Danish artists and their faculties brought me to understand. I then appropriate these dynamics as a means of rethinking and explaining some of the structural features in the world of art and the cultural developments evolving around the increased globalization of and changes in the role of the artist.

## Resumé

Ved at studere kunstens verden er det muligt, ikke blot at blive klogere på kunst og kunstneren, men også at opnå en bedre forståelse af hvorledes kultur i det moderne samfund organiseres og forhandles. Ud fra dette perspektiv vil en forståelse af hvordan autonomi og samtidighed opleves, og hvorledes disse oplevelser knytter sig til kulturelle strukturer, kunne forklare nogle af de kulturelle strukturer der organiserer kunstens verden. Denne afhandling tager empirisk afsæt i en dansk kunstscoles lokale kontekst, og i et globalt udsyn indenfor kulturpolitik og kunstnerisk uddannelse. Dette udsyn har bragt min forskningsproces på tværs af kunstens globale verden, hvorfor jeg også inddrager den lokale kontekst af en kinesisk kunstscole. Jeg forsøger at bevæge mig væk fra de for så vidt simplificerede konflikter mellem autonomi og heteronomi, det globale og det lokale, og det traditionelle og det samtidige, gennem tre hovedtemaer: autonomi, tid og rum, der har fungeret som essentielle prizmer for forståelsen og forklaringen af hverdagsoplevelser af samtidskunsten på kunstscoler i dag.

Denne afhandling er tænkt som et bidrag til kunstsociologien, men den trækker også på, og håber at kunne inspirere, forskning indenfor global kunsthistorie og æstetisk filosofi. Med udgangspunkt i klassiske værker indenfor kunstsociologien demonstrerer jeg hvorledes ideen om samtidskunst, i en stadigt mere foranderlig verden af kunst, nu involverer et komplekst sæt problemstillinger, der rækker ud over de klassiske tilgange. Jeg foreslår således, at fokusere på den individuelle kunstner, der agerer og skaber mening i kunstens kulturelle strukturer, for herigennem at forklare disse. Min forskningsproces har været inspireret af kritisk realisme og en metodisk metatilgang til at undersøge kompleksitet gennem reflektiv forskning.

Titlen "Æstetiske Sammenstød/Sammentræf" kommer således til at referere ikke blot til de konceptuelle og empiriske resultater og bidrag i denne afhandling, men også til den udforskende proces i at dykke ned i kompleksiteten i kulturelle og kunstneriske verdener. Som det væsentligste bidrag fra min forskning har jeg udviklet og præsenteret de tre koncepter "antinomier af autonomi", en globalt forbundet men lokalt tilstedeværende samtidighed, og "heterokronier" af specifikke tider i rum. Forståelsen af disse socio-kulturelle dynamikker er jeg kommet frem til gennem de kinesiske og danske kunstneres, og deres underviseres, oplevelser heraf. Efterfølgende har jeg benyttet disse dynamikker til at gentænke og forklare nogle af de strukturelle aspekter i kunstens verden og den kulturelle udvikling omkring en tiltagende globalisering og forandring af kunstnerens rolle.

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## **The organization of the thesis**

This thesis is organized into two main parts. Part I includes the overall preparatory introduction to the thesis. It is structured into Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4, which, respectively, set the scene; introduce the research questions and key themes; present the theoretical position of the thesis and its epistemological reflections, and explain the contributions of the thesis as a whole. Part II includes the three papers that are the main product of my research. It is structured into Chapters 5, 6, and 7, each paper constituting a chapter. The intention with this structure is to provide the reader with an understanding of the empirical, theoretical, and methodological sources and foundations for my research. In outlining in Part I the debates I engage in and the discussions I propose to further explore on account of my findings, my aim is to equip the reader with the overall reflections shared by the three papers, in the hopes that this will enrich and focus their reading in Part II. Part I thus serves as the preparation for Part II, the outcome of my research.

Chapter 1 introduces my initial empirical point of departure in the Danish world of art, as well as the key themes and concepts of the thesis which emerged from here. The research question of the overall thesis, the sub-questions of the three papers, and summaries of the three papers are also presented here. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical positions, in the sociology of art and beyond, which have served as the foundations for the central theoretical proposition of the thesis: that in seeking to understand everyday experiences of contemporary art at art schools today, it is possible to explain some of the cultural notions structuring the world(s) of art and to contribute knowledge on the organization of culture in a broader sense. This proposition is positioned as a contribution to the sociology of art but also draws on, and hopes to inspire, scholars across global art history and aesthetic philosophy. Chapter 3 focuses on the epistemological reflections of the thesis and their methodological implications. It does so by showing how my process (from empirical curiosity to encountering cultural complexity and its multiplicities) has been guided by critical realism and the methodological meta-approach of engaging with complexity through reflexive research. In this chapter I present four ontological and epistemological considerations around the key epistemological proposition of this thesis: that by understanding how cultural structures are acted in and made sense of as socio-cultural dynamics in everyday life, I can explain some of the dynamic, complex multiplicities in these cultural structures. Chapter 4 outlines the results of my attempt to reconsider autonomy, space, and time in today's world of art by summing up the results of each

paper. Following this, I discuss the overall theoretical contribution of the thesis to the sociology of art and the related methodological implications. I briefly discuss how the outcomes of the three papers could contribute to a broader discussion and touch upon possible political implications, as well as ideas for further research into autonomy, time, and space in art and cultural organization.

Part II of the thesis is made up of the three papers, the central part of this thesis. The first paper, “Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art”, presented in Chapter 5, sets out to reconsider artistic autonomy as experiences of everyday life and the utilization of art. It uses the alternative concept of “antinomies of artistic autonomy” as a way to reconsider and explain the ambiguous meanings and actions experienced by young contemporary Danish artists in the utilization of their artistic practice. The second paper, “Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art”, presented in Chapter 6, aims to reconsider artistic contemporaneity and the temporalities of a globalized world of art. It concludes by proposing “heterochronies” of locally specific space-times as a concept for explaining the “ordering” of times in the arts and the potential temporal traps, which were experienced by Danish art school faculty as they visited and initiated collaboration with a Chinese art school. The third paper, “Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art”, presented in Chapter 7, sets out to reconsider artistic contemporaneity as experiences of global and local spaces in art. As a result, it offers an alternative explanation of how it is to be a young contemporary Chinese artist in today’s world of art and to explain the concept of local contemporaneity as an ongoing dynamic individual experience of being both globally interconnected but locally present.

**PART I / Introduction**

# 1. Framing, research questions & key themes

In the process of producing this thesis, I have found that in everyday life in the world of art, the organization of culture is a messy and contradictory process. As I have encountered conflicts, complications, and dialectics, socio-cultural dynamics have been coaxed out, revealed, and analyzed. This has led me to propose as the overall claim of relevance for this thesis that by studying what goes on in the world of art, it is possible not only to say something about art or “the artist” but also to understand how culture today is being organized and negotiated. From this perspective, understanding everyday experiences of contemporary art in an ever more changing world of art and how the individual takes part in this development can serve to explain not only how the world of art might be changing but cultural organization in a broader sense.

The local context of the Danish world of art and the global attitudes to cultural policy-making and art education, as introduced in this chapter, are not just metaphors or narratives to create a sense of atmosphere for the reader. Instead, they are to be understood as part of the research process. This chapter serves the dual purpose of contextualizing not only the issues studied in this thesis but also, just as much, my process as a researcher. I will therefore, in describing the developments in the Danish art world that inspired this project, take note of how these played into the reflexive process of my research. In other words, the complicated impressions which appear in the following have served as both empirical inspirational points of departure and also as part of the conceptual and thematic structures guiding my thoughts throughout this project. Correspondingly, the research questions which emerged on account of these initial puzzling impressions are presented at the end of this first chapter, followed by the key concepts and themes of the project. As mentioned above, in the final sections of this chapter, brief summaries of the three papers are also presented.

## **Simplified notions of autonomy, space, and time, and the puzzles of what it means to be a contemporary artist**

In October 2011, Denmark got a new Minister for Culture, Uffe Elbæk. In spring 2012, as I was drafting the proposal which was to become this PhD project, Elbæk started to present and initiate what he termed a “progressive” new cultural policy agenda and, in March, he explained one of his key views: as a function in society, artists are expected to maintain and guard their ability to view art and society in a critical and challenging manner and art should not be held responsible for anything except its artistic quality. However, at the same time, the minister suggested that the art and cultural sectors should become better at functioning as profitable businesses. They should not settle with the prevailing assumption that artistic quality and economic profitability automatically rule each other out. It was now officially part of artists’ societal responsibility to cooperate further with cultural entrepreneurs and other agents of the creative economy in order to contribute to greater commercial success in the arts and culture scene (Elbæk, 2012a). In advocating for these new collaborations, the minister emphasized how art institutions, in his view, had a tendency to “count on the state to pick up the bill” (Elbæk, 2012b).

Like in many other European countries, since the wake of the Second World War, and officially since 1961, Denmark has embraced an arm’s length approach to cultural policy: the arts should not be politically controlled but should have the space to express the sentiments and concerns of society and contribute to the enlightenment and edification of society in general (The Ministry of Culture, Denmark, 2014a). In this, artistic autonomy is emphasized as essential for the arts to be able to form a foundation for public debate and for society to develop new ideas and perceive of itself as a responsible collective (The Cultural Affairs Committee, 2015). However, with Elbæk’s point of view, it appeared that the tradition of the arms’ length principle had evolved from emphasizing autonomy from political interference into also suggesting artistic autonomy from the market, for example, by way of financial support from the Ministry of Culture. In the fall 2012, Elbæk underlined this perspective, stating that “culture has a great potential for becoming a far greater driving force in all levels of Danish society. But this cannot happen without an extensive change in the mentality across large parts of the cultural sphere... The art is not to be hitched to a political agenda. But we must dare to talk about, what art can also do, without being accused of wanting to instrumentalize it”<sup>1</sup> (Elbæk, 2012b).

As I embarked on this PhD project in the fall of 2012, the Danish art world was harsh and confident in their criticism of the new Minister's agenda. Elbæk's progressive cultural policy, as well as the way he openly addressed the pragmatic politics of art business and social responsibility, had opened up a passionate discussion of the classic issue of artistic autonomy. According to the Danish arts and culture scene, the new Minister was way out of his jurisdiction; you could either be artistically autonomous or subject to political, societal, or commercial heteronomy: not both. As a consequence, any discussions about the role of art in society looked to be over before they had a chance to begin.

I found the minister's oversimplification of the challenges of autonomy and the role of art in society and the reactions of the Danish art scene puzzling and annoying. Why could the minister not succeed in initiating his intended dialogue about "what else art can do" without artists jumping to conclusions concerning budget cuts and less autonomous art? I found myself thinking that the idea of artistic autonomy which seemed to dominate the Danish world of art appeared to still draw on quite simplified, and locally dependent notions of what an artist is and of the societal role ascribed to them.

I had prior experience in studying the socio-psychological dynamics of the development of professional identity and work-life motivation among art school graduates and their teachers. From this earlier research, I had an idea that in the actual work life of individual artists, their everyday experiences of artistic autonomy and the role of contemporary art in society involve much more than a simple conflict between free art on one side and politics and commercial markets on the other. For example, merely drawing a distinction between art works being made use of (by a market, politics, or society) and artists' experiences of they themselves being made use of was a complicated task (see Chapter 7).

It seemed as if the Danish world of art was running short of concepts and suitable vocabulary for seriously discussing the complexity of meaning experienced by the individual artist, which goes further than a simple conflict between the autonomy of the artistic sphere and commercial, political, or societal heteronomy. This became a guiding theme for this PhD project: to help understand individual artists' (and art educators') experiences of acting in and making sense of the cultural structures of their everyday world of art, as a way to inform and enrich how we can talk about these structures.

## **The art school as the local context for developments in the world of art**

In winter 2012, the Danish Ministry of Culture published a report on the internationalization of Danish higher arts education. Written in close collaboration with the rectors of the different art schools, the report set out an internationalization agenda to attune the art schools' outlooks to an increasingly global (labor) market for art and creative practices, particularly highlighting the tool of student exchange (The Ministry of Culture, Denmark, 2012). Elbæk had already firmly requested art institutions to focus on the opportunities of the creative economy instead of merely counting on the state to pick up their bills, as mentioned earlier. Now, art education and the development and internationalization of artistic entrepreneurial capacities were becoming part of the cultural policy agenda (Elbæk, 2012b).

Subsequently, a substantive cultural exchange program between Denmark and China, funded by Danish government bodies and foundations, was set up to run from autumn 2014 to summer 2015<sup>ii</sup>. By now, the title of Minister for Culture had, as of December 2012, been passed on to Marianne Jelved<sup>iii</sup>, who in broad terms picked up Elbæk's visions for the Danish culture and arts scene. The aim of the international cultural exchange was closely related to "growth market strategy" with the BRICS countries, and especially China, serving as the central geographical focus area (The Ministry of Culture, Denmark, 2014b). In the words of Jelved, the link between the properties of art and international cultural exchange were evident: "[a]rt ties people together and builds new bridges across borders. It speaks to us in a language that we can all understand. Cross-cultural dialogue is, therefore, essential for us to strengthen future collaboration between our two nations" (Danish Agency for Culture, 2014).

Building on my prior research on art school graduates, I approached the schools of higher arts education not only as places of education but also cultural institutions, formative in the ongoing development of contemporary culture. They contribute actively to the passing on of culture-bearing disciplines and traditions, just as they continuously challenge these, thus becoming a significant context for artistic and cultural development. Practically speaking, higher arts education forms the arena in which a group of individuals every year emerge as "artists". These individuals, from a societal perspective, according to the Ministry of Culture, are expected to play a significant role in future culture-bearing and artistic development. As such, higher arts education institutions are vital to building modern artists and thereby maintaining or

challenging the cultural field and, consequently, our societies. Accordingly, to understand how this area is changing today can help explain how culture might be developing in a broader sense.

I found the cultural exchange initiative and the entrepreneurial and international requirements put on the art schools key examples of the changes foreshadowed by Elbæk's cultural policy agenda. How would the cultural structures of the Danish and Chinese worlds of art, as well as the institutional changes and policy agendas influencing them, effect how the young visual artists would experience their roles as artists?

Again, a sense of contradiction emerged. On the one hand, there was an apparent ambition to use art as a vehicle for cultural exchange and future market revenues. On the other, one might assume artistic autonomy would be required to actually tie people together, build bridges, and speak across languages. Could this reoccurring issue of what art can and should do be understood and explained in terms other than those of a conflict between autonomy on the one hand and global entrepreneurship and cultural exchange on the other? Again, the question arose of how to understand the dynamics between the ideal objective world of pure artistic autonomy or art as a universal language and the subjectively experienced everyday life of an art student going on exchange or art schools collaborating across local art worlds. How to explain the workings of these ideal notions as part of the developments in the world of art today?

## **The idea of the contemporary artist from a global point of view**

In 2012-13, I was conducting preliminary interviews with students and recent graduates of the Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen. It was my intention that I could somehow contribute to an updated conceptual understanding of what it means to be a contemporary artist today, by empirically investigating respectively a Danish and a Chinese art school. The choice to look to China was partly based on the political attention pointed in this direction and partly on a presumption that Chinese cultural attitudes to the role of art in society would differ from Danish ones.

Parallel to this initial stage of research, the Schools of Visual Arts at The Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen were taking initial steps towards establishing exchange collaboration with the Art College at Xiamen University in China. This would potentially involve not only student exchange but also joint development of

cooperative courses, and possibly even long-term educational programs, with an international mix of Chinese and Danish students as well as faculty. A professor from the Chinese school had initiated the collaboration and given the impression of having substantial financial backing from official Chinese art organizations. The Chinese professor summed it up to the rector of the Danish school in the summer of 2013, saying, “[i]n China, the Danes will be welcomed very warmly and with lots of opportunities!” He later added, “This would be a great way to do propaganda for Denmark in China.” As such, the Schools of Visual Arts had the potential to serve as the Ministry of Culture poster child for cultural exchange with growth market countries.

However, there were significant differences at play between the schools which, from a cultural perspective (political and financial backing aside), questioned the possibilities of collaboration. For example, the art school in Xiamen, though opening up to European methods of teaching, appeared to remain loyal to the Chinese tradition of meticulously learning technically advanced skills mimicking the style of great masters, before establishing one’s own. The Xiamen art school focused on traditional media such as drawing, painting, and sculpture and sought to establish the skills for a commercially successful profession. In comparison, the art school in Copenhagen applied a more individually oriented approach, focusing on the development of autonomous, original artistic practices, regardless of whether specific technical skills were achieved in the process. Consequently, a range of disciplines and media were studied at the Copenhagen art school, ranging from artistic research, installation art, and performance art to painting, graphics, and curation. When the Chinese art professor, during a meeting, vividly elaborated on the great possibilities for landscape painting in his region, the Danish rector informed him that it had been quite some time since any student at the Danish school has done landscape painting. In similar opposition to the ideas of the Chinese schools, artists at the Danish school are not trained for or expected to have a commercially successful practice.

The Danish school thus remained sceptical towards engaging in the collaboration. They feared that the Chinese were too focused on the cultural capital that could be gained from offering diplomas from a European art academy, if not the business potential in the idea (in China, unlike in Denmark, the students pay to go to art school). The Danish school was not interested in creating a cash-cow and filling up the auditoriums with “willing to pay” Chinese art students, preferring an exclusive, small course or program with the resources to deliver properly engaged contemporary art

education as they knew it. As the Danish rector told me about the Chinese art world in the fall of 2013, “They are struggling to have it [their art] be contemporary, yet they have no basis for this. No tradition for contemporary art as we have had since the ‘50s, or the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>iv</sup> He noted that it would nonetheless be interesting, from a Danish perspective, to engage with the Chinese school for the chance to challenge the Chinese “authoritarian atmosphere and copying tradition”.

And yet again, several puzzling questions arose. Is the relationship between contemporary art (and its legacies) and creative work as a vital driver of economic growth experienced differently in China and Denmark? How do two different groups of young artists, in different places, with different contexts of cultural policy and art world traditions, experience artistic autonomy? What is a real “contemporary artist”? What does being “artistically autonomous” or “contemporary” even mean today? And how can we understand these terms as global phenomena?

The contexts of the two art schools<sup>v</sup> came to serve my work with this thesis as rich “cases” involving the complexities of the simplified conflicts between autonomy and heteronomy, the traditional and the contemporary, and the global and the local. The contexts also provided everyday subjective experience of what it means to be a contemporary artist in relation to artistic autonomy, the roles of art in society, and agendas of international cultural exchange. With a point of departure established, I set out to solve some of the puzzle of the experience of being a contemporary artist today and to thus explain the workings of some of the cultural structures of the world of art.

I found that the different conflicts and complications I had encountered so far, in essence, were about autonomy, space, and time in today’s world of art. These complex notions, I expected, were working dialectically between the simplified pairings of autonomy and heteronomy, traditional and contemporary, and global and local. These simplified pairings appeared to be covering up the actual dynamic complexities of the art world. Consequently, I set out to understand and explain some of these dynamics by way of, in each of the three papers, rethinking, respectively, the notions of “autonomy”, “time”, and “space” in art. This led me to pose the following research questions:

## Overall research question:

- *How to understand experiences of autonomy and contemporaneity in being an artist today, and how these relate to cultural structures that organize the world of art?*

## Sub-research questions:

- *How to reconsider artistic autonomy as experiences of everyday life and the utilization of art?*
- *How to reconsider artistic contemporaneity and the temporalities of a globalized world of art?*
- *How to reconsider artistic contemporaneity as experiences of global and local spaces in art?*

## Key themes and concepts

When I first embarked on this research process, I thought that I would answer these questions by way of a qualitative, explorative, comparative study of the experiences of being an (art school) artist in Denmark and in China. However, as I embarked on the research process and delved into the various current developments of the Danish and the Chinese worlds of art, I found that keeping with the comparative methodology would involve the risk of merely adding new simplifications to the puzzles at hand. Moving from the somewhat simplified conflicts of autonomy and heteronomy, global and local, and traditional and contemporary, I instead came to respond to my main research question by way of the three overall themes of autonomy, time, and space in art, as perspectives which I found essential for understanding and explaining everyday experiences of contemporary art at art schools today. The three themes have evolved from a reflexive empirical perspective and have been explored as subjectively

experienced objective structures. The following concepts related to autonomy, time, and space have been part of my research process: heteronomy, aesthetics, the global, the local, worlds of art, temporalities, and the contemporary. The conceptual contributions of this thesis (“antinomies of autonomy”, “local contemporaneity”, and “heterochronies”) have all come out of an empirically explorative approach, carried out in a continuous dialogue with existing research (represented by the central concepts associated with the three themes). The three themes of autonomy, time, and space in art, though they jointly play a part in my overall research process across the three papers (presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7), also came to guide and organize my focus between the three papers, in my aim to have these each serve as single contributions in their own right.

In the following, I will introduce these three themes by relating them to the different preliminary questions, raised in the sections above, regarding the developments in the Danish and the Chinese worlds of art.

## **AUTONOMY**

Autonomy relates to the puzzle, discussed above, of how to understand and explain the complexity of meaning experienced by the individual artist regarding their work, going beyond the conflict between desire for artistic autonomy and the commercial, political or societal desire for heteronomy. In order to discuss how it might be possible for artists, in their work, to view art and society in a critical and challenging manner, while simultaneously maintaining artistic quality and a profitable business, it is crucial to reconsider the notion of autonomy. We saw an example of this in the debates provoked by Elbæk’s cultural policy agenda. The experience of autonomy is culturally structured (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993c) but the notion of autonomy as I have worked with it in this thesis is equally open to being maintained and challenged by individual artists, who, though structured by cultural notions and ideas, also have agency (Heinich, 1996; Swidler, 2001), both in how they act in these structures and in how they make sense of them. This dynamic and potentially messy experience of autonomy is in this thesis approached via an aesthetic perspective, where the experiences of autonomy and heteronomy are far from clear cut and are made sense of as part of an ambiguous, complex, and continuously developing partaking in the everyday life of art (Rancière, 2002, 2010). In sum, autonomy is the subjective everyday experience of an individual agent taking part in and making sense of the objective notions of artistic autonomy and

heteronomy, as structured by the cultural notions of contexts such as the art world (Becker, 1982) or a given artistic field (Bourdieu, 1993c).

## **TIME**

In this thesis, time is explored in terms of how the narrative of history can structure our experiences (Gumbrecht, 2014; Koselleck, 2004; Osborne, 2013; Rancière, 2012). We find examples of this in how we understand the notions of being autonomous and contemporary across local places as global phenomena, and in how we approach the way in which Jelved, as the Danish Minister for Culture, was able to talk about art as a universal language, while recognizing that there are bridges to be built between differing worlds of art. Both individuals and institutions (including myself as a researcher) make use of the notion of time in how we organize the meanings in art<sup>vi</sup>. For example, the discourse of contemporary art suggests that we understand contemporary art in a linear progressive manner, as indicated with the Danish art school's experience of potential collaboration with the traditionally oriented (and some might suggest "outdated") Chinese school. This limits our ability to grasp what is actually going on in the everyday lives of artists and art educators, just as with the overly simple dominant discourse on autonomy. In seeking to go beyond the simplifications tied to the objective structures of the world of art, I engage with the theme of time as plural in the messy, non-linear sense of multiple "temporalities". In this, I work with the concept of being "contemporary", as meaning being present, acting in, and taking part in the structures of one's social context (T. Smith, 2002). Consequently, the art or the artist experienced as outdated and traditional in one temporal discourse might be experienced as contemporary in another.

## **SPACE**

I recognize the existence of a material world (Archer, 1998, 2003) of geographical structures enabling us to differ practically between the local and the global space. The planet as a whole is the global space and an art school is a local place. Nonetheless, I work with the theme of space as particularly related to the concept of "global" and "local" from a socio-cultural perspective. We can talk about "global" space, yet any idea of the global, for example, a global world of art, will always be experienced locally (Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2009), using the cultural structures and social dynamics

of that local place. This is apparent, for example, in understanding and explaining how the cultural structures of the Danish and the Chinese worlds of art influence how young visual artists act in and make sense of their own roles as artists and the expectations towards their doing so. In other words, from a spatial perspective, I distinguish between and take into account the “global” that everybody talks about and is influenced by and the specific “local” context in which these structures are experienced. The theme of space thereby comes to relate to the question, brought forward above, of how young artists in different places experience artistic autonomy and what it means to be contemporary. As indicated above, for example, the relationship between art as creative work and as a driver of economic growth as experienced differently in China and Denmark. When appropriate, I have applied the terms “artistic field” (Bourdieu, 1993c) and “art world” (Becker, 1982), yet I primarily make use of the less-loaded concept of multiple co-existing “worlds of art”. I also make use of the alternative “world(s) of art” to emphasize that I am referring to the cultural, social, and natural world of art as it is experienced in the local contexts of Xiamen/China or Copenhagen/Denmark, as opposed to a more spatially “bounded” notion of a Chinese art world or Danish art world by itself.

With these key themes and concepts in mind, I present the summaries of each of the three papers.

## **Summaries of the papers**

### **Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art** *(Marianne Bertelsen)*

This paper sets out to propose a way by which we can reconsider the notion of artistic autonomy and, specifically, artists’ experiences of artistic autonomy as they make use of their artistic practice, and in this, make sense of everyday life as artists. In today’s global world of art, with growing art markets and neo-liberal agendas, the utilization of art and the state of art in society appear as matters of increasing complexity (Alexander & Bowler, 2014). As I interviewed a group of young artists from the Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art I encountered contradictory notions of artistic autonomy. In spite of developments towards a revitalized idea of the studio artist and the artist as a brand, the culture around artistic autonomy included a

dominant notion of “art for art’s sake”. This complexity should be reflected in the understanding of artists’ experiences of utilizing their artistic practices. Yet, a simplified dichotomy between the almost mythic notion of “art for art’s sake” and the more prosaic everyday utilization of art, as part of an actual career in the arts, remains central to how artistic autonomy is commonly conceived in the sociology of art.

As a proposition to re-open rather than foreclose the question of artistic autonomy, I offer the alternative concept of “antinomies of autonomy”. The concept is developed through a theoretical conversation between the sociology of art, represented by the structural emphasis of Pierre Bourdieu, and aesthetic philosophy, in the form of Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic perspective on artistic autonomy, as an ongoing dialectic between the discourses of art and everyday life. Likewise I have drawn inspiration from the Kantian idea of antinomies as dialectic attempts to understand subjective experience in relation to mythical principles (Grier, 2006; Kant, 1933). With vignettes of everyday experiences of young Danish artists woven into the theoretical conversation, I have sought not only to illustrate the theory but also to exemplify the empirical relevance of antinomies of artistic autonomy to the everyday sense-making of the artist and give reflections on the culture surrounding artistic autonomy at the art school in Copenhagen.

### **Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art**

*(Marianne Bertelsen and Timon Beyes)*

This paper seeks to present and reflect upon the issues of time, temporality, and contemporaneity as important notions for the understanding of cultural organization and exchange. It is set in the world of contemporary art, one of the prime areas of globalized processes of organizing and an area of increasing importance to the politics of culture. With a point of departure in the Danish political agenda of cultural exchange with growth market countries such as China, we observed representatives from the Schools of Visual Arts in Copenhagen in the early stages of such collaboration with the Art College in Xiamen. We interweave descriptions of encounters of “Western” and “Eastern” art educators and young artists with reflections on the narratives and performances of history and contemporaneity that clash in these encounters.

This way we show how the discourse of contemporary art, and perhaps the practices of Western cultural organization in general, are informed by the dominant concept of the homogeneity of time (Rancière, 2012) or the chronotope of historical time (Koselleck, 2004). Here, time becomes an agent of linear transformation and history is used to enact an identity shared between the global “march of time” and the time of individual artists and local institutions. Yet the chronotope of historical time cannot account for the “broad present” (Gumbrecht, 2014) of contemporary art. The Danish delegation for example focus on, respectively, the “progressive” notion of time in their own conceptual and idea based artistic practice, and the “reactionary” notion of time in the Chinese artistic practice as predominantly technical, focusing on style and form. These temporalities are present across local art worlds, yet their interplay takes on different forms according to “site-specific” conditions. We therefore outline the idea of cultural organization as fundamentally “heterochronic”: constructed out of simultaneous, contradictory, and heterogeneous temporalities. In conclusion, we sketch how the “heterochronic” constitution of cultural production calls for a reconsideration of the way cultural organization and cultural policy conceives of and deals with time.

### **Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art**

*(Marianne Bertelsen)*

In the last couple of decades, Chinese contemporary visual artists have stepped on to the scene of the international world of art. Yet, here they are accused of or misunderstood as not being “contemporary”, according to the styles or forms they are expected to use by the globally dominant Western perceptions of contemporary art. Contemporary Chinese artists are consequently often stereotyped as either cosmopolitans seeking freedom from an oppressive government or money- and fame-craving sham-political artists stylistically catering to wealthy Western private buyers or art institutions. This stereotyping exemplifies a laziness in the Western “center” of the world of art to take seriously the “periphery” (Phillips, 2014; Batchen, 2014). As I visited the Art College of Xiamen University I found this local place to be beyond its representation in the fiction of the contemporary (Osborne, 2013).

Interviews with young Chinese artists, considered in the context of the Chinese world of art, serve as the explorative empirical point of departure for finding examples of local contemporaneity as it is experienced in everyday life between global and local

spaces in art. The empirical material is unfolded and analyzed in a discussion of contemporary art as not being about a certain style, but as the aestheticism of everyday life (Gao, 2012) and survival within, and transformation of, present social structures (Smith, 2002). In a culturally complex place between global and local spaces in art, the young Chinese artists find their “own way” (Gao, 2012) of an individual presence in their personal feelings about the world. Concluding, as a contribution to understanding the local and contemporary on a global scale, the paper proposes an explanation of “local contemporaneity” as an ongoing, dynamic, individual experience of being globally interconnected but locally present.

## 2. Theoretical position(s)

In the framing chapter above, I outlined my empirical, inspirational point of departure, as well as the key themes, concepts, and research questions emerging from this. In this chapter, I present the theoretical position of the thesis, as centered in the sociology of art, and also drawing on thoughts from across global art history and aesthetic philosophy. This position serves as the theoretical point of departure for the proposition made across the papers that in understanding everyday experiences of contemporary art at art schools today, it is possible to explain some of the cultural notions structuring the world(s) of art and to contribute knowledge on the organization of culture in a broader sense.

In the first “sociological” part of this chapter, I begin with an account of the classic, influential groundwork of the sociology of art and, consequently, my work with this thesis. I bring attention to how, in an increasingly globalized world of art, the idea of “the artist” now involves a complex of issues, which exceed the classic approaches. Following this, I explain the conceptual relevance of the art school as the immediate context of this study and, finally, I present an alternative focus as a potential contribution to the sociology of art: the individual artist, acting in and making sense of the cultural structures of the world of art. In embarking on this endeavor I complement my positioning in the sociology of art with thoughts from across global art history and aesthetic philosophy.

In the second part of this chapter, I draw up the perspectives I have built upon from three areas: firstly, from global art history. In particular, I make reference to Terry Smith, his socially dynamic definition of contemporary art as the ongoing survival within and transformation of social structures, and his concept of using major structural art world “currents” as tools for understanding (global) art today. Secondly, I discuss the perspectives I have gathered from aesthetic philosophy, in particular the works of Jacques Rancière and his theory on the aesthetic regime, perceiving the aesthetic as a complex and dynamic sphere of experience, which can be understood as simultaneously constrained and enabled by the contextual framing of everyday life, and, thirdly, I introduce, as a bridge between these two disciplines, Peter Osborne’s theory of the so-called contemporary as a structural influence by which we can understand the inability in the international art world to acknowledge the existence of different but equally contemporary (local) situations of contemporary art.

## **The sociology of art**

As stated above, my research process has been developed around the key theoretical proposition that in understanding what it means to be an artist in the everyday experience of an increasingly globalized world of art, it is possible to explain how the world of art is developing in a broader sense. Accordingly, in the following chapter, I situate my thesis in the research field of sociology of art, intending to contribute my knowledge of the world of art.

In the world of art, I have come upon conflicts, complications, and dialectics in aesthetic, social, political, and economic matters. From these, socio-cultural dynamics have been coaxed out, revealed, and analyzed, and I have, as mentioned, found that in everyday life in the world of art, the organization of culture is a messy and contradictory process. As a consequence, by studying what goes on here, it is possible to say something about how culture today is being organized and negotiated. In other words, it is important to understand and explain the world of art, as this can not only tell us something about art or artists, but can potentially also inform us about how culture is structured and developing.

In this endeavor, I first explain how the influential works of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993c, 2010) and Howard Becker (Becker, 1982) formed the groundwork for not only the sociology of art but also for my work with this thesis. My emphasis here is on the major similarity between these two significant voices, suggesting that despite a degree of individual artistic agency, this agency is still acted out within a principally substantially regulated social life, especially if viewed in relation to the socially structuring role of art education. From this point of departure, I bring attention to how, in an increasingly globalized world of art, when looking at art institutions, art forms, digital media, and so on, the idea of the artist involves a range of aesthetic, social, and political issues that exceed classic approaches in sociology of the arts. As we go beyond the general structures and collective processes and consider the messiness of everyday life in the sphere of art, the question “who is an artist?” becomes an increasingly complex one (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Zolberg, 2015).

Second, I propose to seek answers to this question in the context of the art school, as the formative cultural institution in the world of art and beyond. I do so by positioning this thesis in relation to some of the classic sociology of art accounts of the significance of considering artistic training or education as a context in understanding how artists make sense of utilizing their artistic practice or their experience of being contemporary.

Third, I bring forward an additional theoretical focus by exploring the role which the individual artist (and art educator) plays in the world of art and what it can tell us about society. I do so to add to the knowledge on the socially structuring dimensions in the world of art which traditionally characterize the field of sociology of art and to contribute to an emerging focus on the role of human agency in the actions and meanings of being an artist. In this part of my research process, I have specifically drawn inspiration from Natalie Heinich and her unfolding of how the idea of the artist works in a contradictory dynamic of mental and temporal gaps (Heinich, 1996) and Ann Swidler's (Swidler, 2001) study on the how people pragmatically maneuver in the cultural structures of the mythic notion of romantic love, similar to the mythic idea of purely autonomous art or spatially or temporally singular notions of contemporary art. These two scholars do not figure directly in any of the papers but their thoughts have been formative in how I have approached the relationship between the experiences of the individual artist and the cultural structures of the world of art as a complex, continuously unfolding dynamic.

### **The cultural structures of art and the agency of the artist**

Social theorists and sociologists of art investigate the social function, structures, and dynamics of art in society. Traditionally, they did so by investigating subjects such as how we speak of "geniuses" and "masterpieces", whether these terms are social creations and how art relates socially to entertainment and popular culture (Harrington, 2004), all issues present in the discussions in the Danish art world presented above. Elbæk as Minister for Culture challenged, if not the ideas of the genius artist or the masterpiece themselves, then the idea of art as possessing exceptional characteristics, which exclude it from the requirement of being a profitable business or contributing to societal edification. These are requirements which likewise re-open the old discussion of the role of art in society, maybe here not specifically in terms of entertainment and popular culture but rather concerning the instrumentalization of art in any sense which goes beyond the "art for art's sake" prerogative more easily claimed by so-called "fine" or "highbrow" art.

The idea of the artist as a unique creator, an enchanted genius, has since the Renaissance been part of our understanding of this "role". The notion of such an individual agent is "less easily reconciled with the collectivizing understanding of the behaviors conventionally studied in sociology" (Zolberg, 2015, p. 907). According to Bourdieu, "that's the fault of art and artists, who are allergic to everything that offends

the idea they have of themselves: the universe of art is a universe of belief, belief in gifts, in the uniqueness of the uncreated creator, and the intrusion of the sociologist, who seeks to understand, explain, account for what he finds, is a source of scandal” (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 139). Or, as Becker argues in proposing his theory on art worlds, perhaps it is “because so many writers on what is ordinarily described as the sociology of art treat art as relatively autonomous, free from the kinds of organizational constraints that surround other forms of collective activity” (Becker, 1982, p. 39). Whoever can claim the fault for the challenges in resolving these discussions, the question remains: what is a sociologist of art to do, and where to begin, if attempting to understand the artists of today?

The famed sociologists of art Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker have, among other influential voices across the field, served to develop an understanding of social structures in the world of art. In their shaping of the sociology of art, the focus has been first and foremost on the production of art, but also on investigating the role of art consumption in structuring society. As a result, Bourdieu’s *Distinction - A social critique of the judgement of taste* has left us with concepts such as “cultural capital” and “habitus”, now inevitable parts of the vocabulary of researchers, practitioners, and cultural policy makers. With this contribution, Bourdieu revealed some of the social dynamics by which consumers value and make use of art. Some of the key dynamics are closely associated with the social influence of the general educational system (Bourdieu, 2010, first published in 1984).

In Bourdieu’s other highly influential contributions to the sociology of art, compiled in *The Field of Cultural Production, essays on art and literature* (Bourdieu, 1993c), he proposes we understand the artistic sphere as a “field of production”: a social structure of objective relationships between agents and institutions of art and culture, such as reviewers, magazines, dealers, collectors, and audiences, for whom the “value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 78). With his compilation of essays on the field of cultural production, Bourdieu paved the way for understanding artists as caught in a “structurally ambiguous position” (Bourdieu, 1986a). A “position” in which they must act as defenders of “art for art’s sake”, and consequently, with this alleged aim, as incompatible with the social, economic, and political which also structure the artistic field (ibid). This is a challenge similar to that faced by the Danish artists described in the introductory chapter above.

Bourdieu offers the concept of disinterestedness as a way to understand how artists not only produce the value of their art objects (which are then to be consumed as high art,

popular art, and so on) but also, closely related, produce themselves as artists (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 164), as they act in the structures of the social, the economic, and the political. Bourdieu further develops the related idea of the “pure gaze”, an artistic motivation by which cultural producers reject any external demand on their artistic practice (Bourdieu, 1968). In sum, in terms of the relationship between the cultural structures of art and the agency of the artist, Bourdieu laid the groundwork for sociologists of art to work with the concepts of “the artist” and “artistic agency” as socially structured phenomena, which are deeply entwined with, among other things, the socio-cultural “position” of being disinterested in external factors, especially economic matters.

In his classic book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker introduced an understanding of the artistic sphere, of an “art world” as being a “cooperative network through which art happens” (Becker, 1982, p. 1). Essentially these networks function on the basis of structured conventions, which enable artistic cooperation to proceed without significant difficulty should any of the people involved be replaced. A classic example would be jazz bands, building their (however intuitively present) performance on a broadly familiarized repertoire. Consequently “[w]orks of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, ‘artists’ who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions” (ibid, p. 35). Similar to Bourdieu’s notion of the artistic field, Becker ascribes to the art world the ability to distinguish between what is art and what is not, who is an artist and who is not.

In this he defines four types of artists who relate to the structures of the art world in different ways. Firstly, the majority, the “integrated professionals... fully integrated into the existing art world”. This enables anyone to cooperate with them and, consequently, lets their work “find large and responsive audience” (ibid p. 229). Secondly, the “mavericks... artists who have been part of the conventional art world of their time, place, and medium” (ibid p. 233) but found the institutions therein too constraining, consequently seeking to circumvent them in various ways (while nonetheless “in fact abid[ing] by most of them” (ibid p. 243)). An example would be setting up their own spaces for exhibition (an art world institution), yet creating art in styles or forms not obliging to the art world’s norms. Thirdly and fourthly (and of less relevance in the context of this thesis), the “folk artists”, people doing art as part of the culture of their community, and the “naive artists”, with no connection to any art world, producing art for more or less intelligible personal reasons. Through for example the works of maverick artists, art worlds *do* change continuously. However, in

terms of the relationship between the cultural structures in art and the agency of the artist, as art worlds are first and foremost cooperative networks of established relationships among the participants, “[o]nly changes that succeed in capturing existing cooperative networks or developing new ones survive” (ibid, p. 301).

Many people have given their opinion on both the similarities and differences between these two influential voices in the sociology of art. In my view the main difference can be explained as follows: Bourdieu adopts a *structural* perspective, in which artists have the ability to maneuver in their field of art but the options for changing the field are highly limited. Meanwhile Becker adopts a *relational* perspective, in which individual agents have a larger degree of agency in (re)shaping the structures at hand but the structures, the collective dependence, are still essential for the art world as a social phenomenon. This leads on to the major similarity: no matter the degree of individual agency, this agency is still exercised within a principally structured social life: as Becker phrases it, the “after all, substantial regularity” of social life (Becker, 1982, p. 380). Consequently if we are to “fully” understand social life, we must investigate first and foremost the structures of the world of art and develop knowledge of how they work.

However, while I take a point of departure from Bourdieu and Becker’s contribution to how we investigate the structures and dynamics surrounding art in society, in the remaining parts of this theory chapter and in the following methodology chapter, I position my research in this thesis as bringing forward an additional, separate perspective of individually experienced complexity to our understanding of everyday social life in the arts.

This proposed additional perspective, focusing on individual agents in the world of art, is in my view closely related to an increasing emphasis within the sociology of art towards recognizing the world of art (along with the rest of society) as increasingly global. The limits in the classic approaches to the sociology of art can be seen in responses across the discipline. Zolberg sums up the profound changes in art over the past century and their implications. “In the past three decades even the massive wall between commercial art forms and the ‘disinterested’ arts, which pursue autonomy from material concerns of ‘bottom line’ thinking, has been jolted to the point of crumbling... The entry of Latin American, Asian, and African visual and musical forms and motifs into the western dominated canon has gained increasing legitimacy and audiences” (Zolberg, 2015, pp. 907-908)<sup>vii</sup>. Correspondingly, in their review of changes in the art world in recent years, with increased commercialization, the global

art market in rapid growth, and ambiguity and new roles for artists, Alexander and Bowler (2014) state how these changes complicate how we define what it means to be an artist and the role of art in society (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 1). In other words, “in today’s world, who is an artist is a particularly complex question” (ibid, p. 10). Consequently they call for further comparative “multiple level” art world research, considering institutions and organizations of the arts, as well as the individual artist (ibid). As we go beyond general structures and collective processes, the messiness of everyday life in the sphere of art becomes apparent, a complexity which is only the messier if investigated from a global outlook, considering the changes in the globalized world of art.

These changes, as illustrated from a Danish perspective in the introductory chapter, tap into the classic question of artistic autonomy and the issue of artistic contemporaneity and they have the potential to challenge traditional sociology of art and the tendency to analyze the artistic sphere primarily by way of general structures and collective processes of production.

From this perspective, understanding what it means to be an artist in an increasingly globalized world of art and how the individual takes part in this development can serve to explain not only change in the world of art but cultural change in a broader sense. I recognize that this is a vast issue, which I will not “solve” in this thesis. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, and as I will elaborate on below, it is nonetheless my ambition to contribute to an understanding of these processes, which has led me to complement the theoretical frameworks offered in the sociology of art with those of, among others, Rancière, Smith and Osborne, from aesthetic philosophy and global art history.

### **Art education as social production of art & artists**

Several previous studies have suggested the relevance of considering the context of artistic training or education in understanding how artists make sense of autonomy or their experiences of being contemporary in their artistic practice (e.g., Keane, 2013; Rengers & Plug, 2001; Thornton, 2008; Wong, 2014). For example, as illustrated in the framing chapter, the choice of the Danish school to look to China based on the political attention pointed in this direction indicates the effect of geo-political developments. Ideally, one would explore these developments as they are experienced in the actual context of the school, in order to understand the cultural structures and

social dynamics at play in them and their complex role both in influencing everyday life at the art school and the training of the artists *and* as societal changes.

In the sociology of art, the schools of higher art education (whether we call them art academies, art colleges, or simply art schools) are ascribed influence on what it means to be an artist and what artistic practice entails and how it relates to the surrounding art world and society in general. For example, Bourdieu places the autonomous artistic field (as the basis for any “pure gaze”) in opposition to the academic system and other established art world institutions (Bourdieu, 1985). Similarly Becker, with his two first artist types, ascribes significance to official artistic training or the refusing of such. The integrated professional is understood as practicing art according to the conventional training he or she has received, whereas the maverick artist, who has been schooled under the same conventions, rebels against these and creates new conventions or new versions of the old ones. With reference to state schools in, among other places, Scandinavia (such as the academy in Copenhagen) Becker states that “these institutions provide a pool of people for established art worlds, and usually inadvertently also provide a pool of well-trained rebels to staff alternative art projects which do not fit into the established ways of those worlds” (Becker, 1982, p. 80).

However, in an increasingly globalized world of art, with continuous changes in the role of artists, the art school as a cultural institution has come to concern a complex of aesthetic, social, and political issues. I find that these present issues exceed the traditional dichotomies of, as Bourdieu proposes, an autonomous artistic field and state-governed conventional institutions or, as Becker suggests, a group of artists abiding by the conventions taught in the established art world (a stereotype) on the one hand and (another stereotype) a rebel group attempting not to on the other. I suspect it is more complicated than that. And so it appears does Becker, as he notes, with regard to distribution of the art work, that “to say that artists work with an eye to these matters does not mean they are completely bound by them. Systems change and accommodate to artists just as artists change and accommodate to systems” (Becker, 1982, p. 95). Nonetheless, he does not provide an explanation for how such change might take place or its possible complexities.

Even so, it is still precisely in building on Bourdieu and Becker that I, from a methodological perspective, have chosen to look at the art school as “an autonomously developing field” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 119). My focus is not on understanding the art school as a hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, an institution of consecration, as Bourdieu would argue, built, in its peer-relationships, on signs of recognition or exclusion. Instead I have explored the idea of the two art schools in Xiamen and Copenhagen as

cases of “mini-fields” or “mini-worlds”. As such, they can serve as empirical points of departure to investigate the social life of artistic activity. They constitute living, dynamic, messy worlds of art, in which all the changes of increasing artistic entrepreneurship, globalization, and so on play out and are acted in by the individuals involved.

From a methodological perspective, using the art schools as “cases” is also a way to introduce a contextual focus-point to the chaotic group of people who might (or might not) perceive themselves or be labeled by others as “artists” (cf. Bille, 2012; Finney, 1995; Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Menger, 2006; Pralong, Gombault, Liot, Agard, & Morel, 2012). Yet most importantly, as mentioned in the chapter above, the art school, as the state-governed cultural and educational institution it is in Denmark and China, adds to society with its structuring influence on what it means to be an artist<sup>viii</sup> and can, likewise, as a context, tell us something about the role of art (and the culture and knowledge surrounding art) in society. As Steven Henry Madoff eloquently phrased it, “...the complexity of what that knowledge should be, how its production is configured and unfolds, who translates it across the bridges of generations and time, whether its structure is rigid or limpid in its willingness to change, whether it is resistant to external mandates or longs for the imprimatur of an outside authority, and what status and success signify for its teachers and graduates” all make up for the influence of the art school on the contemporary artists of today and tomorrow (Madoff, 2009, p. ix). Consequently, the art schools (from both a sociology of art perspective and a reflexive methodological perspective) serve well as “cases” of local points of departure in which the dynamics between the complex cultural structures of the world or the field of art on the one hand, and the agency of the artists on the other play out.

### **Individual agency as revealing the complexity in the cultural structures**

The introductory chapter indicated various differences in terms of how Chinese and Danish artists are taught. Artistic methods, styles, and approaches to the utilization of art all differ. The art school in Xiamen, while opening up to European methods of teaching, still favored the Chinese tradition of the meticulous practice of technical skills and the mimicry of the style of great masters and commercial success as the realization of these practices. The art school in Copenhagen applied a more individually oriented approach, focusing on the students developing autonomous, original artistic practices and not expecting commercial success. However, while these

overall cultural structures can tell us something about what it is to be an artist in Denmark or China, they only provide an overall, potentially simplified picture and may fall short if we seek to go further and understand the actions and meanings in the everyday lives of these young artists. If we wish to investigate, unfold, and grasp the lived experiences of the local, the global, the traditional, the contemporary, the autonomous, and the heteronomous, we will need a perspective which can fully open them up. I propose the individual artist and the art educator as the subjects which can provide such a perspective (there is more on the epistemological and methodological considerations of this in a later chapter)

In her recent article on the state of cultural sociology of the arts, Vera Zolberg notices the call for an increasing focus on agency in the sociology of art. “[T]he question as to *if* art should be analyzed as if in a space apart from societal context is hardly an issue, especially for social scientists... Instead, rather than ‘if’, the question becomes that of ‘how’ and ‘under what conditions’, at what level of analysis art and context are separable... Most strikingly, many contemporary sociologists take pains to recognize the importance of human agency” (Zolberg, 2015, p. 901). Similarly, Austin Harrington (in referring to Weber) outlines the ambition that “[a]ll explanations in sociology of arts must be ‘meaningfully adequate’ (sinnadüquat) to the lived experience of the individuals whose engagement with the arts is in question... meaningful accounts of their own actions and experiences”. To do so, he suggests that we go beyond an exclusive focus on social conventions, institutions, and power relations in the sociology of art and draw from knowledge on the broader notion of “art and social theory” in related disciplines such as art history and cultural studies (Harrington, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Correspondingly, noteworthy social researchers such as DeNora (1995), Elias (1993), and Heinich (1996) have used the individual artist as a point of departure in explaining the social world of art from across (art) historical, cultural, and philosophical perspectives. Each in their own way, they have (in what could now be termed classic works) investigated the cultural idea of the genius artist by critically examining this via the contemporary contexts of the art work and the life of the artist. They thereby unfold the social role of the artist and the individual artist’s agency therein as (historically) highly complicated matters. In *Beethoven and the Construction of a Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (1995), Tia DeNora shows how the idea of the artistic genius is a myth, constructed in (here building on Bourdieu) the relationship between the artist’s identity and social capital and the context of canonical and emergent artistic

institutions. In similarly exploring the tension between individual artistic activity and the tastes of a particular historical period, Norbert Elias in his *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius* critically discusses the romantic dichotomy in the idea of the gifted artist. He shows how the concept of the genius can be understood not as a mysterious force working the individual as a puppet on a string but as the ordinary existence of human agency, acting between creativity and convention (Elias, 1993). One might say that while DeNora emphasizes the social structures of artistic production, Elias seeks to unfold the individual experience of its heteronomy.

I particularly wish to bring forward *The Glory of van Gogh: an Anthropology of Admiration* by Natalie Heinrich (Heinrich, 1996) as having informed and inspired my research process. Heinrich seeks to do justice to both the ways in which structural features of artistic production (and consumption) change over time and the more or less deliberate acting of the individual in that process. In building on, among others, Bourdieu's works, Heinrich (with an empirical point of departure in France at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century) describes the two seemingly paradoxical methods of constructing artistic greatness: "challenging the current structures or mastering them", or, in other words, in this context, either aiming to be avant-garde or following traditional academic styles and techniques (ibid p. 11). She engages with the classic issue of artistic autonomy and "art for art's sake" from the perspective of the artist, unfolding how this dialectic aesthetic position of "art for art's sake" coincides with social and political positions. For example, as the traditions of the academy are associated with the bourgeois majority, and the aesthetic minority of avant-garde artists is associated with the oppressed people, "poverty was converted into proof of quality, opposition into a mark of greatness, and marginality into a principle of excellence" (ibid p. 11).

Heinrich makes use of Vincent van Gogh as a singular example of a phenomenon which transcends van Gogh as an individual: the notion of the artist. By metaphorically describing van Gogh's practice as, among other things, an apostolic calling and a monk's vocation, Heinrich unfolds the complex multiplicities in "the temporal gap between a wretched present and a grand future; and on the other hand, the mental gap between a miserable exteriority and a sublime interiority" (ibid p. 56). Correspondingly, she argues that the categorizing of artists into "types" originates from various attempts (in the late 19th century) to "rationalize such exceptionality and deviation from the norm" (ibid p. 81). One might argue that it was also an attempt to rationalize complexity. As a result, "[t]he legend of van Gogh has become the founding

myth of the accursed artist... this ‘bohemia’ antedated van Gogh in the art world; but through him it became an obligatory image, myth, a stereotype” (ibid pp. 140-141).

Interestingly, in terms of the global outlook of this thesis, Heinrich notes that “[t]his phenomenon is limited, however, to the scholarly sphere of the modernist discourse on art, the only place where specialists jettison the traditional arguments around beauty” (ibid. p. 144). In other words, beyond being a rational notion covering up the complexity in the gaps, the idea of the bohemian “art for art’s sake” artist is intertwined with Western modernist discourse on art (see also Chapters 5 and 6).

Heinich’s artist-subject is a world-famous assumed genius, while my young art school artists, at best, might have the potential (though not necessarily the desire) to become such. Likewise, there are obvious significant methodological differences. I interview and observe the artists and art educators of my study as they are in the midst of acting in the contexts of their contemporary artistic activity, while Heinrich explores the experiences of van Gogh and his contemporaries and the social, political, and aesthetic contexts in which they act via sources such as diary notes, letters, and reviews. Yet I find Heinrich’s contribution to be of particular relevance and inspiration to the overall idea behind this thesis, the idea of going beyond the simplified notion of conflicts and the stereotypes applied to rationalize them in order to explore the multiplicities of messy and contradictory social dynamics at play with phenomena such as artistic autonomy and contemporaneity.

However, while Heinrich unfolds and terms these contradictory social dynamics as a “mental gap” between a miserable exteriority and a sublime interiority and a “temporal gap” between a wretched present and a grand future, she does not explain the dynamics of how the individual artists, such as van Gogh or his peers, act in and make sense of these gaps. With this thesis, I hope to build on Heinrich’s work by investigating exactly this issue.

I aim to do so by working from the notion that the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy, global and local, and traditional and contemporary in this thesis are structured, yet not solely defined, by a surrounding world of art. They are interchangeably being experienced, acted in, and made sense of by the individual artist. Consequently, besides Heinrich’s perspectives presented above, I have, throughout my research process of investigating the dynamics in dialectics and gaps in the world of art, also drawn on the framework of Ann Swidler’s “cultural tool kit” or “cultural repertoire” (Swidler, 2001). The notion of the cultural tool kit has assisted me in organizing the complex of meanings I have encountered as I seek to understand how

the individual agents of the art world, here the young artists and their faculties, make sense of concepts such as artistic autonomy and contemporaneity as they act in them.

The mythic romantic ideas of art as somehow contradicting the actual everyday dynamic of art and lived life, bear some interesting similarities to the mythic and romantic ideas of love as somehow contradictory to (or at least experienced in a complicated manner in) the everyday life of marriage. In Ann Swidler's (2001) study she investigates for example how people enter marriage, based on a romantic "Hollywood" myth of love and later, as life happens, find themselves getting divorced, having to redefine their understandings of love and marriage, or both. Yet, even after several divorces, Swidler shows, people never fully abandon the romantic myth of love and marriage, but keep this as part of their cultural tool kit. This makes Swidler argue that the inherent irresolvable contradictions in the institution of marriage (such as the idea of passionate romantic love in a relationship which is presumed to last a lifetime), motivate an ongoing alternation between romantic-mythic and prosaic-realistic cultural codes on the meaning of love (Swidler, 2001). Consequently, to the individual, seemingly irresolvable contradictions somehow become reasonable. Hence, by investigating how the individual agents of the art world act in and make sense of the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy, global and local, and traditional and contemporary, I intend to go beyond the simplified notions of these structures and, inspired by Heinrich and Swidler, unfold their dynamic, everyday complexity.

Neither Heinrich's nor Swidler's conceptual frameworks figure directly in any of the papers presented in the following chapters. Yet, their thoughts have served as highly formative in how I have approached understanding the relationship between the experiences of the individual artist and the cultural structures of the world of art. The work of Ann Swidler in particular has also influenced my epistemological considerations and their methodological implications, hence I draw on her framework again in the following chapter on these matters.

## **The sociology of art & cross-disciplinary insights**

In the endeavor to understand what it means to be an artist in an increasingly globalized world of art, how the individual takes part in this development, and how such an understanding can serve to explain not only how the world of art might be changing but also cultural change in a broader sense, I see potential in joining together

disciplines investigating art from various perspectives. As mentioned, this has led me to complement the theoretical frameworks offered in the sociology of art with thoughts in several ways. First, global art history, in particular the work of Terry Smith, his socially dynamic definition of contemporary art, and his idea of art world “currents” as a way of understanding (global) art today; second, aesthetic philosophy, in particular the works of Jacques Rancière and his theory of the aesthetic regime, in which the aesthetic is a complex and dynamic sphere of experience, simultaneously constrained and enabled by everyday life, and third, as a bridge between these two disciplinary angles, Peter Osborne’s theory that so-called “contemporary art” is a global, structural influence that covers up the different (and equally contemporary) local situations of contemporary art.

### **Imagined histories and possible futures in global art**

Deformations, distortions, and interruptions shape our present world of art into “a simultaneity of antinomies” p. xv (preface) (Terry Smith, Enwezor, & Condee, 2008). In this, “[o]ne of the most striking features of contemporaneity is the coexistence of very distinct senses of time, of what it is to exist now, to be in place, and to act, in relation to imagined histories and possible futures” (ibid). In taking on the complexity of the contemporary arts on a global scale, dealing with concepts such as the “postcolonial elephant”, the contemporaneity debate (e.g., Enwezor, 2009; Foster, 2009; Kwon, 2009; Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2008) in the emerging field of global art history, attempts to capture the locally unique and antinomic meanings in being a contemporary artist today. According to Terry Smith (2009), if we wish to understand art today, we must recognize how profoundly it is shaped by its “situation within contemporaneity” and see it as a multiplicity of relationships between being and time. Consequently, he argues that it is these “multiplicities” of time and space, which make the contemporary foremost as a construct for understanding art today, compared to the “kinds of generative and destructive powers named by any other comparable terms” (such as the modern or postmodern). In his book *What is Contemporary Art?* (2009), Smith attempts to answer his own question, explaining and offering these multiplicities as a tool for understanding the particularities of (global) art today, through three major “currents”<sup>ix</sup>.

The first current Smith describes as a “retro-sensationalism” of the aesthetic of globalization, a relentless “re-modernizing” in an ongoing interchange with on-and-off

“contemporizing”, governed by the influential institutions of “modern” and “contemporary” art towards an aesthetic one might describe as representational of globalization, drawing on Jacques Rancière (Rancière, 2013; see also Chapter 6). A significant aspect of re-modernism (as an attempted ongoing contemporizing), is that it suggests a shared “universal flow of time” in art (Smith, 2009, p. 196). The second current Smith describes is the cultural imperial heritage of displacing “unmodern people into past, slower, or frozen time” (ibid), which in the post-colonial era has been challenged, particularly by former colonized peoples. This heritage unfolds itself in a constant dialogue across local and international agendas of diversity and identity (Smith, 2009). The third current is characterized by the autonomous “potentialities” and “connectivity” of young contemporary artists, within a “seemingly limitless stream of times”. Consequently, while this current draw on the first two currents, it has, compared to these, far less consideration for the struggles of form, style and power (ibid) (see also Chapter 7).

With the three currents, Smith reminds the reader of the insistent presence of multiple, often incompatible temporalities which encompass many different directions of “backward travelling, forward trending, sideways sliding, in suspension, stilled, bent, warped, or repeated” time and consequently many different experienced meanings in art (Smith, 2009 p. 196).

In the introduction to the 2008 anthology *Antinomies of art and culture; Modernity, postmodernity, contemporaneity*, Smith confronts and acknowledge the messy complexity of studying the globalization of art. He does so by capturing some of the antinomies in the contemporaneity of art and presents the features of multiteity, adventitiousness and inequity as the unpredictable essences of contemporary art today (Smith et al., 2008).

Smith and his fellows (especially from this 2008 contribution, e.g., Gao Minglu and Wu Hung) play with several different ways of grasping the phenomenon of contemporary art, using multiple currents and antinomies. These involve perceptions of contemporary art including seeing it as an institutionalized network, viewing it art-historically, or seeing it as a system of culture-organizing institutions and practices (Smith, 2009). In the same way, Smith in his earlier work suggested the institutional, cultural “spirit” and representational “stylistic aspects” as possible perspectives for looking at the question, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Smith, 2002). In both instances, he concludes that for a proper understanding, we must combine these perspectives and consider contemporary art as “about survival within, and transformation of, the present social structures” (Smith, 2002, p. 8), in which are also present the antinomic features

of multiteity, adventitiousness and inequity. All these perspectives aid us in moving forward in the attempt to understand the contemporary artistic activity today. Smith and his peers have thus added to the research process of this thesis and to the potential implications for how the field of sociology of art discusses and understands contemporary artistic activity in “global times” (Smith, 2009).

Additionally, it should be noted that Smith applies the art-historian perspective of mainly grasping the social, cultural, and subjective through the artistic object (Smith 2002, 2009), as do, among others, Gao (2008) and Wu (2008), whose thoughts on contemporaneity also contribute to this thesis. They focus on how the experience of contemporary Chinese artists today is expressed in their works. Arguing for the explanatory potential of the subjective perspective, as I do in this thesis, is an alternative approach in the contemporaneity debate. The intended contribution to the sociology of art of this thesis is, as a result, also a potential input to the emerging field of global art history.

### **Aesthetics as a complex and dynamic sphere of experience**

According to Jacques Rancière, we can view the aesthetic dynamics around art, such as the sense of autonomy and heteronomy or the experience (I propose) of being contemporary, as a “new collective ethos”, a social or cultural code through which we can understand and make sense of the world and changes in it (Rancière, 2002), changes such as those in the world of art, and consequently in the sociology of art, as suggested by, among others, Alexander and Bowler (2014) and Zolberg (2015) in the above. Recall for example the proposed increases in commercialization, the breaking down of the difference between commercial art and disinterested art, and the increased legitimacy of art outside the Western canon. All suggest new ambiguous roles for artists and complicate the endeavor of defining “artistic work” and “the artist” (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Zolberg, 2015).

By drawing particularly on Rancière’s idea of aesthetic communities (Robson, 2005), with an emphasis on the globalization of contemporary art as a process of subjectivization (Dasgupta, 2008), I add a second line of alternative thoughts and inspiration from aesthetic philosophy to the sociology of art foundation of this thesis.

Aesthetics are, from the perspective of Rancière’s aesthetic regime, not to be understood in the narrow sense of the perception and judgment of art<sup>x</sup> but in the broader sense of the “articulation between art, the individual and the community”

(Robson, 2005). Likewise, aesthetics are proposed as being a never-ending dynamic process, which Rancière defines in opposition to the intended enlightening effect of the ethical regime or the imposing of form and genre in the representational regime of art (Robson, 2005). This more broadly engaged version of aesthetics becomes a “new way of studying the interface of art and life” (Bennett, 2012, pp. 2-3), an interface which can be approached as a dialectic shuttling between the social, the aesthetic, and the political in a specific place (Rancière, 2005, 2010), a dynamic which is understood as simultaneously constrained and enabled by the contextual frames of everyday life (Rancière, 2002, 2010), such as traditions and changes at art school and locally experienced worlds of art.

By introducing the perspective of the aesthetic regime of Rancière, I aim to shift the focus beyond the “production and consumption of art”-perspective that traditionally dominates the sociology of art (cf. Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993c). Instead of viewing aesthetics as a matter of “art and taste” and risking being distracted by the cultural political connotations of doing so (Rancière, 2005), Rancière argues for a broader understanding of aesthetics as a complex and dynamic sphere of experience, or, as Papastergiadis puts it, as “different ways of being in the world” (Papastergiadis, 2008), as part of, among other things, the production and consumption of art. Consequently, what this thesis draws from the perspective of the aesthetic regime is the idea that the “art for art’s sake” idea of artistic autonomy, only exists in concept and not in everyday life. Instead, various experiences of some sense of autonomy are an ongoing, intertwined part of the complex and dynamic sphere of experience between art and life. According to Rancière, this enables us to move to a level of understanding beyond the claims of autonomy of contemporary avant-garde art, based on conflict with an institutional, political, or stylistic heteronomy and beyond the inherent dialectic between the sense of heteronomy in the emancipatory expectation of art “changing life” and the sense of autonomy found in its actual potential to do so (Rancière, 2002, 2010). Keep in mind here firstly how this resembles the debate in the Danish art world outlined in the introductory chapter and secondly how this perspective resonates with and adds to Smith’s (2002) idea about contemporary art as ongoing survival within and transformation of social structures. However, while these structures, in Smith’s analysis, are cultural and institutional ones, related to the representational stylistic aspects of art, Rancière’s perspective of the aesthetic regime aids us in expanding our outlook from here and unfolding what is going on in the world of art today, potentially adding to the representational perspective, which for good reasons has characterized art

history, and the focus on structural production which, also for good reasons, has influenced the sociology of art.

The notions of space and time play a significant part in Rancière's idea of the aesthetic regime, in which he assigns explanatory power to who and what take part in the "reconfiguration of the sensible experience" of life in a specific perpetual place, a place understood to be in the overlap between discursive space and territorial space (Robson, 2005). According to Rancière (2005), the simple links between "art and life" as found in the Western modern perception (for example, the ambiguous legacy of the "art for art's sake" idea of autonomy) conceal the "contradictory nature" of the aesthetic regime of art and its politics. In Rancière's "politics of aesthetics", politics is to be understood not in terms of its relationship with art (for example, a state's political influence on the arts or the political emancipatory potential of the arts), but in terms of what is taken into account by it and who plays a part in it. Recall the introductory section, in which I made an initial attempt to move from the perspective of "bad" politicians cutting funding and "good" artists defending the autonomous role of art in society to a more complex and dynamic perspective. Building on Rancière here would mean considering the young artists and faculty of the art schools as agents taking part in playing out this simplified "bad against good" conflict and exploring how they actually experience this as a continuous shuttling back and forth between experiences of autonomy and heteronomy in their everyday lives in their specific places.

An additional point here is that this never-ending reconfiguration of experience also from a temporal perspective is to be understood as a contradictory "back and forth", rather than a linear modernity construct (Rancière, 2002, 2012). This leads to the third and final cross-disciplinary point of inspiration.

### **The contemporary in multiple divergent presents**

Rancière elaborates on this perspective in his recent investigation into art theory (2012) and proposes that the construct of linear modernity performs a "distribution of the sensible", a "set of relations between the perceptible, the thinkable and doable that defines a common world" (p. 11). This thus orders how and to what extent people can take part in the world of art and can be held capable as artists. Consequently, Rancière argues, time becomes "the best medium" for "exclusion" (ibid.). In other words, the cultural structures of time can organize our experiences (Gumbrecht, 2014; Koselleck, 2004; Rancière, 2012). For example, the Danish art school, in its experience of

potential collaboration with the traditionally oriented Chinese school fulfils a “gate-keeper” function in its role as a Western art institution. Rancière’s perspective correlates with the somewhat similar structure found in Smith’s notion of ‘re-modernism’ (Smith, 2009), as it denotes the efforts of the institutions of art to control the contemporary in the aesthetic of globalization, through a persistent re-modernizing of new art along old modernist imperatives alongside an occasional opening up to a renewed contemporizing of art.

On the one hand, these discussions admit to the highly influential institutional structures of “the contemporary”, which, in building on a trajectory of ongoing one-way progress in the arts, aid us in positioning everything, from museums and journals to individual artists, according to Western art history (Osborne, 2013; Rancière, 2012). On the other hand, contemporary visual art today (and at any time in history) is also a global phenomenon indicating the simultaneity of divergent presents – multiple artistic contemporaneities – across local art worlds (Osborne, 2013; Smith, et al., 2008). Peter Osborne’s (2013) reflections on the “fiction of the contemporary” explain how it has covered up different but equally present situations of the contemporary, by ordering space and time into official, generalizable artistic styles, forms, and institutional structures. As stated, we cannot and should not ignore these. We must, in seeking to explain them, recognize how they (also) bring along representational issues which are associated with the Western notion of artistic modernity or contemporaneity (Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2002; Wong, 2014). In sum, all these perspectives critically address how changes and developments in contemporary art are framed within the dominant narrative of what Koselleck would call a modern chronotope of historical linear time (Koselleck, 2004), a “global one-way time”, which, according to Rancière, with its assumptions and mystifications, makes us “unable to understand what it makes possible or impossible” (Rancière, 2012, p. 20). Consequently, as Gumbrecht (2014, p. xiv) phrases it, if we seek “to understand [contemporary art’s] various vectors, we need to provincialize modernism, that is, to spatialize it as a series of local modernisms rather than one big universal modernism”. In other words, the possible and the impossible, the politics of aesthetics and decisions of what is taken into account or who plays a part (Rancière, 2005) are all influenced by the spatial and temporal cultural structures of the world of art. This is true in terms of how we understand such key aspects as teaching, practicing, governing, selling, and using art. In this thesis, I have chosen to investigate these structures from a sociological point of departure which draws on the many different contributions that have been discussed from across aesthetic philosophy and global art history.

I have, as mentioned, worked from the key theoretical proposition that in understanding what it means to be an artist in the everyday experience of an increasingly globalized world of art, it is possible for me to say something about the cultures organizing the world of art, and how these might be developing. Additionally, I have proposed that in everyday life in the world of art, the organization of culture is a messy and contradictory process, yet from this, socio-cultural dynamics can be coaxed out, revealed, and analyzed. Consequently, by studying the world of art, it is possible to say something about how culture today is being organized and negotiated.

I have in this chapter outlined how I, while taking a point of departure in Bourdieu and Becker's significant contributions to how we investigate the structures and dynamics around art in society, position my research in this thesis as bringing forward the additional perspective of individually experienced complexity for understanding everyday life in art, as it becomes an increasingly global phenomenon. I have presented how I approach the two art schools in Xiamen and Copenhagen as cases of "mini-fields" or "mini-worlds" for investigating this living, dynamic, messy world of art, in which all the changes brought about by, among other things, increasing artistic entrepreneurship and globalization are acted in and made sense of by the individuals involved. I have attempted to understand the actions of and explain meanings in the everyday lives of young artists (and their educators), by exploring the perspective of the individual artist (and art educator) as the subject acting in objective structures around the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy, global and local, and traditional and contemporary.

Finally, in the last part of this chapter, I presented perspectives from global art history and aesthetic philosophy, investigating the complex multiplicities of art from alternative perspectives. These perspectives have the potential to aid not only the investigations of this thesis but the field of sociology of art in general.

In the following chapter, I account for the methodological reflections that led me to and through the encounter with these complex multiplicities as they play out in the everyday life of art.

### 3. Epistemological reflections

In the first chapter, I showed how, upon familiarizing myself with the empirical fields of my focus, I encountered a number of puzzles which did not fit the available theory. The methodology of the reflexive research applied in this thesis emphasizes the need for a continuous reflexivity when engaging with confusing and contradictory empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). From a complexity perspective, such confusion and contradiction can be approached via a sensitivity towards their multiplicities (Mol & Law, 2002). Correspondingly, from a critical realist perspective, these multiplicities, if engaged with in a continuously reflexive and explorative manner, can be investigated through culturally structural contradictions, and the socio-cultural dynamics in which they play out as individuals make sense of and act in them (Archer, 1998, 2003). In this chapter, I further explain how a complementary mix of the epistemological perspectives of critical realism (Archer, 1998, 2003; Fleetwood, 2005, 2008) and a methodological framework of the reflexive approach to studying complexity and research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Mol & Law, 2002) have guided and inspired my entire research process.

With this explorative reflexive framework, the different steps of my research process have overlapped and evolved. Consequently, in this chapter I do not outline a specific research design as such, nor do I go into the technical details of my methods, for example, how I carried out my unstructured interviews or shadowing observations. Instead I focus on the epistemological and methodological framework which has guided, though not defined, my process. In other words, the methodological framework described in this chapter is not a framework in the sense of a specific design outlined at an early stage of the study. Instead I have continuously reflected and made decisions regarding the methodology of this study throughout the process. The train was built as I was moving through the landscape of this research process. As mentioned in the introduction to Part I of the thesis, the title “Aesthetic Encounters” comes to refer not only to the conceptual results and contributions of the thesis but also to the explorative research process which has led me here: the landscape of thoughts, practicalities, sense-making, decisions, activities, and experiences (both mine and “my” subjects’s) which have been encountered on the way.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: first, I outline why the idea of complexity has been important in the research process of this thesis and how the reflexive

approach has been useful to me in grasping the contradictions, gaps, currents, heterochronies, and antinomies encountered in the cultural structures and individual experiences I have investigated. Second, in “Explaining cultural complexity by understanding how people experience it”, I sum up the four ontological and epistemological notions which have served as a pragmatic “philosophy of science” point of departure for my reflexive, explorative methodology, as it has taken on the task of understanding and explaining cultural complexity via the socio-cultural dynamic in which subjects engage with cultural structures. I elaborate in particular on how Margaret Archer’s work has informed these four ontological and epistemological considerations that surround the key epistemological proposition of this thesis, that by understanding how cultural structures are experienced as socio-cultural dynamics in everyday life, I can explain some of the complexities of these cultural structures.

As mentioned, I do not provide an exhaustive account of the research process, nor do I account for what I specifically did on the practical-method level of gathering my empirical material, as this is done separately in the three papers. However, as I describe the methodological meta-framework (“meta” in both the ontological and epistemological considerations and the personal sensitivity by the researcher in the reflexive approach), I provide examples of how I have made use of it throughout my process. The structure of this part of the chapter thus comes to resemble the openly organized yet intellectually grounded structure of my research process.

## **Grasping the complex by reflexive research**

The social world and its human interactions are complex matters. These matters are ascribed some sort of order: structural properties which we can study and aim to grasp and understand. Yet, to use Mol and Law’s admittedly simple definition of complexity in research, things do not always add up, events occur outside the process of linear time, and phenomena can share a space but not be mappable on to the same single set of dimensions (Mol & Law, 2002). This three-fold explanation of complexity correlates (curiously) well with the key themes of this thesis: autonomy, space, and time in art. How do we, as social science researchers, engage with unfolding and understanding such complex phenomena? How in the research process does one avoid repressing or ignoring complexity (or seeing it as something one must move beyond) and consequently provide clarity and valid knowledge on a phenomenon? How does

one familiarize oneself with cultural complexity and the puzzles it raises to close in on the socio-cultural dynamic in which it works in everyday life?

In this thesis I have attempted to engage with the notion of complexity in both the cultural ideas that structure our world and the empirical investigations of them. An emphasis on the explanatory potential in acknowledging complexity is shared among scholars across the social sciences. For example John Urry, in editing a *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue on ‘Complexity’, describes a “complexity turn”, referring to a shift in the social and cultural science “from reductionist analysis to those that involve the study of complex adaptive (‘vital’) matter that shows ordering but which remain ‘on the edge of chaos’” (Urry, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, David Byrne in unfolding what he terms the “complexity programme” points to how the “inherently dynamic and transformational” notion of complexity holds the property of “demarcating the distinctive character of the social as an object of knowledge, but also allows for the reflexive, knowledge informed, reconstitution of the social order” (Byrne, 1998, p. 51). This is a property, Byrne explains, which it shares with critical realism. Below, I elaborate on how Margaret Archer’s thoughts on the relationship between structure and agency as a dynamic complex of order, contradiction and emergence (Archer, 1998, 2003) have guided me throughout my process of exploring the conceptual and empirical complexity of this study.

In my research process, I have also drawn practical guidance and inspiration from Alvesson and Skjöldberg’s “reflexive methodology”, which emphasizes the ambivalent relationship between a researcher’s text and the realities studied and the consequent need for a continuous reflexivity in engaging with confusing and contradictory empirical material. Similarly, Alvesson and Kärreman’s “methodology of sorts” for theorizing from empirical material (2007), which focuses on the researcher exercising sensitive constructions, has guided me in my process. This ambition of continuous reflexivity concerning my sensitivity as a researcher has been complemented by Mol and Law’s (2002) introduction to how we can understand complexities in cultural studies (among other fields) via sensitivity towards their multiplicities, which should be engaged with in a continuously reflexive, explorative manner as they appear across culturally structural contradictions, the socio-cultural causal level, and the variance among the individuals studied (Archer, 1998, 2003).

In this explorative reflexive sensitivity towards investigating complexity, it was confirmed to me during my research process how the craft of research “cannot be

reduced to steps, manuals, and models” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1272). This craft, I find, goes beyond the technical craft of one’s methods of choice. A craft, in my view, involves dealing with something intrinsic, something personal to the researcher. As it sometimes is with artistic processes, some might consequently argue that the matter at hand, this intrinsic personal craft, is too intangible and vague to properly discuss. As Archer phrases it, methodologically “it is not easy to get the propositional uncluttered by a mass of socio-cultural overlay belonging both to those investigated and imported by investigators as part of their theoretical baggage” (Archer 1998, p. 534). This makes the process of untangling complexities and contradictions “a matter of methodological ingenuity not of theoretical intractability” (ibid). As with managing an artistic process, I find that managing the craft of research is primarily a matter of deliberate reflection on this ingenuity. In other words, the “intrinsic personal craft” part of research becomes tangible and workable, even imaginative and creative (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), in the activity where I as a researcher remain reflexive throughout the research process, a process which I have sought to manage as a dialogue between the guiding ontological and epistemological notions, existing theories, the multiplicity in the empirical material, and my personal sensitivity as a researcher.

## **Explaining cultural complexity by understanding how people experience it**

As stated above, the key epistemological proposition of this thesis is that by understanding how cultural structures are experienced as socio-cultural dynamics in everyday life, I can explain some of the dynamic, complex multiplicities in these cultural structures. As Swidler (2001) precisely put it, if we seek to explain culture, we need to understand how culture is put to use. Accordingly, in studying the Chinese and Danish artists and their faculties, I sought to explain the complex multiplicity in the cultural structures in the world of art by understanding how the young artists experience acting in and making sense of artistic autonomy in utilizing their artistic practice and in being contemporary between global and local traditions and developments.

I realize that the structure/agency discussion in itself is bordering on enormous in both disciplinary scope and historical scale. It is a discussion beyond the range of this chapter and this thesis. In this, I am very aware of the risk of superficially referring to any structure/agency relationship without exploring or explaining more fully the

thoughts and reflections, fractions, and “turns” relevant to it. As an example, the relationship between cultural structures and individual actors (and the role socio-cultural dynamics play in this relationship) is still to be explored and defined. As Archer and Elder-Vass agree, there is a “need for a realist ontology in relation to culture, but disagreement on how a realist perspective might translate into a more specific understanding of the origins, nature and influences of cultural factors that contribute to shaping the social world” (Archer & Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 94).

I will not be discussing the historical and philosophical trajectory of the critical realist position or the much-debated challenge of merging the indeterminacy of an agent-contingent emphasis and the determinism of a structural-institutional emphasis (Archer, 2003; Fleetwood, 2005). Instead, inspired by Alvesson and Sköldberg’s reflexive methodology of vistas, working towards a pragmatization of the philosophy of science and/or an intellectualization of qualitative methods (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), and guided by Archer among others, I have made use of the critical realist perspective in a reflexive, pragmatic sense.

For example, in this thesis I work with cultural structures as objective features composed of ideas and notions of how the world is organized. This definition coincides with Archer’s definition of cultural systems (Archer & Elder-Vass, 2012). Archer acknowledges that her definition of cultural systems can be taken for structures (*ibid.*), just as they are referred to as such in discussions of her work by, among others, Fleetwood (2008). For the sake of terminological consistency, throughout my thesis I have applied the term “cultural structure”. Similarly, I recognize that the “complexity approach” of engaging with multiplicities in the way Mol and Law (2002) do, sets out to go beyond exactly such discussions of the dynamic between structure and agency. Nonetheless the structure/agency relationship is, as I show below, essential to the epistemological reflections I find of relevance to my research process and thus bring forward in this chapter.

In the following, I present the four ontological and epistemological considerations which have served as a pragmatic “philosophy of science” point of departure. As mentioned, I do not provide an exhaustive account of the research process. However, as I outline the methodological meta-framework, I provide examples of how I have correspondingly drawn on the reflexive approach and the complexity perspective in my process. These examples take the form of vignette-like inserts. Some are conceptual, analytical remarks while others involve more practical associations.

## **A stratified social ontology of cultural structures, socio-cultural dynamics and individual agency**

Firstly, in the interpretation of the empirical material and the conceptual discussions of it, I acknowledge the autonomous agency of the studied subjects as individual actors able to exercise genuine choice between the alternatives presented to them, within the context of the cultural structures and the causal mechanisms that they draw upon, reproduce, or transform (Archer, 2003; Fleetwood, 2005, 2008; Reed, 2000). Archer terms this perspective on how subjects are influenced by culture and through their actions take part in challenging or maintaining its structures a “stratified social ontology”, with “different emergent properties and powers pertaining to different levels of cultural reality” (Archer & Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 96). In this, she distinguishes between what she calls the “cultural system” and what she terms the “socio-cultural interaction” between the agent and this system. These interactions (dynamics or mechanisms) “empirically are encountered conjointly though ontologically they constitute different strata” (Ibid., p. 96).

From a critical realist perspective, one will inevitably encounter complexity when studying the social world and the human interactions in it, because the cultural structures are continuously being developed, challenged, and maintained by the people acting in them (Archer, 1998, 2003). “Like structure, culture is man-made but escapes its makers to act back upon them” (Archer, 1998, p. 507). Hence, ontologically I identify individuals as, via socio-cultural dynamics, having the agency to strive towards and succeed in reinterpreting and renegotiating the discourses and ideas by which we perceive the world. Yet this occurs within a pre-existing structure of material, social, and discursive relations, which cannot and should not be ignored or reconstructed out of existence (Archer, 2003; Reed, 2000).

In this thesis, I focus on the cultural structures and the socio-cultural dynamics in which this agency plays out, but I correspondingly recognize the existence of a material world, which includes geographical structures that enable us to differ practically between the local and the global and the physical need for artists to make a living so they can house and feed themselves. Allow me to briefly reflect upon why I do not engage with the meaning in the material object of the art work.

Going into this study, I was well aware of the obvious difference in the aesthetic form of the art produced by the young Chinese artists and the young Danish artists. Applying a material perspective, these differences could have been taken as the point

of departure for unfolding the social dynamics at play among these two groups in the contexts of their respective art school.<sup>xi</sup>

I was also aware that within the sociology of art, a fraction of cultural sociologists are exploring the “relationship between the production of art works, objects designated as art, and the production of meaning” (Eyerman & McCormick, 2006, p. 2). In their edited volume from 2006, *Myth, Meaning, and Performance: Toward a New Cultural Sociology of the Arts*, Ron Eyerman and Lisa McCormick outline the motivation for and potential of this new cultural sociology of the arts. The volume includes contributions from influential voices (who had also served to inspire it) such as DeNora (DeNora, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) and Witkin (Witkin, 1995, 1997, 2006). Building on this, Eyerman and others emphasize the need to go beyond the production perspective of Becker’s art world and Bourdieu’s field, and the overestimating of external determinants of action and meaning found in them (Eyerman, 2006). Culture, they propose, “should be understood as relatively autonomous, always intertwined but never completely determined by social structure” (Eyerman & McCormick, 2006, p. 7). I share these epistemological and ontological considerations. Yet this thesis will not include analysis of, or a specific sensitivity towards, art works and the aesthetic form and material properties of them. Similarly, again, I am also aware that Mol and Law work within a “post-human” perspective of complexity; this is however not how I engage with complexity. My point is that by going via the artist’s personal, subjective experience of being autonomous or contemporary, I am able to unfold the complexities of autonomy and contemporaneity from a perspective which is an alternative not only to the influential structural perspective in the sociology of art but also to the material perspective of analyzing the art work found in Eyerman and his fellow cultural sociologists, as well as, as mentioned, in the emerging field of global art history.<sup>xii</sup>

In sum, while recognizing the existence of a material world, the social and cultural structuring of the individual experiences of this world is (in the sense of an ongoing, individual agency within the dynamics through which the structures are generated) perceived as fundamental to the constitution of the natural and social reality, as it is studied in this thesis.

### **The “actual reality” and the “empirically graspable”**

Secondly, the idea that there is no unmediated access to the world has equally guided me in my research process. What makes an entity “real” in the studies of this thesis is

explained by whether it has causal efficacy – an effect on people’s experiences or actions (Fleetwood, 2005). In this, I differ in my sense of how things, events, and phenomena, (which as actual are not directly accessible or necessarily observed in the natural and social world), as they are experienced and subsequently studied, become empirical (Byrne, 1998). Drawing on Fleetwood’s definition, cultural structures can be defined as “socially real” in existing independent of our identification of them, yet nevertheless are dependent on human activity for their existence (Fleetwood, 2005), and it is this human activity I can investigate empirically. Applying this approach to cultural analysis enables me to differ between the real cultural structure and its empirical causal dynamics (Archer, 1998). Experiences of the world do not necessarily have to be based on “correct” or “complete” knowledge of a given cultural structure (for example, the subjects might not be aware of how they are influenced by the romantic idea of love or artistic autonomy). In the same way, it is equally possible for research subjects to have partial conception or knowledge of a cultural structure but choose to ignore or deny it (Fleetwood, 2005).

In Ann Swidler’s (2001) study of the American middle class and how they act in and make sense of the idea of love and marriage, the romantic myth of love and expectation towards it in marriage are talked about by the interviewees in a concrete and detailed manner, even though the people interviewed have not necessarily experienced love or marriage personally. Instead, they might have experienced it indirectly, influenced by the cultural contexts and institutions of middle class America, such as romantic Hollywood movies.

Consequently, from an epistemological perspective, the young artists (and art faculty) studied in this thesis are able to talk about and reflect upon some aspects of being a contemporary artist in a quite concrete and detailed manner, though some of them have not yet had much personal experience with the art world “outside” the school. Such cultural meanings can be equally culturally reasonable, whether they are, for example, deeply internalized, of recent origin, or even mistrusted by the individual (Swidler, 2001). A young artist in Copenhagen might not “believe” in the romantic idea of the bohemian artist but nonetheless be influenced by the closely related “art for art’s sake” notion of artistic autonomy anyhow. A Danish art professor might “believe” in the idea of art as universal language, yet as he encounters foreign art nonetheless perceive this according to Western notions of contemporaneity. Therefore, what might appear as cultural confusion or even contradiction, can be seen as exemplifications of the socio-cultural dynamics by which the young artists and art educators engage with the cultural

structures they encounter, such as the dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy or the contemporary and the traditional.

Since I am not able to access and observe the entirety of the actual natural and social world, the empirical material which I “collect” or “gather” will always merely be part of – a window on to – a bigger and very complex and dynamic picture (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Mol & Law, 2002). In this thesis, instead of looking directly at the complexity in the cultural structure (and risk (re)producing a simplified understanding of the complications in how it works), I have aimed at empirically grasping it via its causal effects: the socio-cultural dynamics unfolding as individuals maneuver in these cultural structures.

From the beginning of this process, it has been my intention to unfold and understand the multiplicities in the cultural structure by engaging with and exploring them in all their complexity and to do this via an open, explorative process of diving into the empirical material, made up of relatively small local samples, unfolding the experiences at the art schools in Xiamen and Copenhagen. This choice also illustrates an ambition of mine: to show the methodological potential in engaging with the individual perspective on a global scale. This endeavor is made practically possible via small samples and methodologically justifiable via acknowledging the dualistic approach to accessing the big, complex, actual world through the evidently smaller window of the empirical.

Thus, as I aim to understand and explain complexity, I must reflect firstly on the empirical as a window on to the real, and secondly on how I engage with interpreting what I see through this limited, constructed outlook (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Mol & Law, 2002). In doing so, Archer proposes, one is in return able to analyze and explain properties like contradiction or autonomy in items of cultural structure “anywhere in time or space” (1998, p. 512). More on this in the fourth notion below.

### **Making sense of cultural complexity through the subjective experience**

A cultural structure is constituted by “all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone” (Archer, 1998, p. 504). It does not depend on “whether contemporary social actors are willing or able to grasp, know or understand” these different items (ibid). Nonetheless, on account of the dualistic approach

presented in the prior section, the third epistemological notion presented here is as follows: individual contemporary agents serve as a fruitful way to grasp socio-cultural dynamics and consequently the (contradictory or consistent) cultural structure which generate them, since “agents possess properties and powers distinct from those pertaining to social forms”, they possess the feature of “personal experience” (Archer, 2003, p. 2). Thus I have sought to take the individual agent seriously, while I have correspondingly kept in mind that the experience of the social world varies with the individuals being studied, as with the researcher in question (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

Allow me to bring an illustrative example from the research process leading to the paper “Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art” presented in Chapter 6. Both in my own observations of the Danish art school faculty visiting the Chinese academy and in the experiences of the Danish faculty whom I observed and interviewed, the Chinese approach to teaching and doing art was experienced as outdated and not “properly” contemporary. Encountering the cultures of teaching and doing art in the Chinese art world, it quickly became clear that they were not consistent with their Danish equivalents. At first these contradictions were attributed, by me and my subjects, to the Chinese simply being behind on the process of modern artistic development. Nonetheless this “result” puzzled me. It did not feel right, partly because it triggered post-colonial guilt and partly because it simply did not make sense. Why would this group of people be defined as being “behind” on their artistic development, just because they were acting and making sense of their artistic practice and the teaching of it in a different way? The Danish faculty and I had primarily made use of the cultural structures we had with us from Denmark and (at first hand) ignored the existence of the structures organizing everyday life as it was experienced at the Chinese art school. Yet once I began to analyze these structures, reflecting on the inconsistencies and contradictions between the Danish and the Chinese faculty’s experiences of the “right” way to teach and do art, I managed to understand some of the socio-cultural dynamics of how the modern Western idea of a linear one-way art history influenced the outlook of both the Danish and the Chinese in their encounter with each other.

This illustration leads me to briefly reflect upon how some might find it a methodological issue that I, a European researcher, do research in China and in this personally bring with me Western cultural structures for understanding and explaining what I find. In the same way, some might see an issue in me applying predominantly

Western scholarly thoughts and theories in my interpretation and analysis of this material. I have remained reflexive regarding these issues and, regarding the latter issue, I have included Chinese scholars in my research process when they were relevant. However the sociology of art and particularly aesthetic philosophy are still fields with a strong centering in the West. Engaging with thoughts from the emerging research field of global art history has informed both my research process and my reflections upon myself as a researcher. Inspired by the discussions in this field on the notions of time and space from a global perspective, I have continuously reflected upon my own experiences in doing fieldwork and reviewing literature and on how I have been (and still am) personally influenced by the cultural structures of the world of art and beyond. Chapter 6, in particular, as indicated above, serves as a testimony to this attempt of cultural and cross-cultural sensitivity and reflexivity.

Bearing in mind the risk of (cross-)cultural presumptions, I as a researcher – due to the complexity of the structures and variance of the individuals studied – do nonetheless not expect a verbalized verification for a given structural or agency feature, and consequently the dynamics in their relationship, to be considered empirically real. If I were to look for meaning explaining the cultural structure via language alone I would have the cultural structure “collapse into the Socio-Cultural realm” (Archer, 1998, p. 507).

In working on the paper “Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art”, presented in Chapter 7, I encountered a specific example of such a methodological challenge. The official name of the art school department that in the paper is referred to as the contemporary art department is the “multimedia department”. As one of the teachers of the department explained, after laughing heartedly at the question of why it was called this, “The system does not allow changing the name. But you can change the content.” He preferred “contemporary art department”, but seemed to apply a “pick your battles” attitude to the situation, which characterized the political atmosphere surrounding contemporary art in Chinese higher arts education. In accepting the naming of the department dedicated to contemporary arts as the “multimedia department”, several teachers explained to me, they avoided picking a fight with the traditionally oriented art school management and were able (to a certain extent) to stay under their radar.

As a result, the young artists I spoke to, not being accustomed to the term “contemporary art”, interchangeably used terms such as “Western”, “European”, and “international” art, alongside terms such as “new”, “modern” and “abstract” art and

“concept” and “design” art. As one of young artists stated, “Different people have different definitions... [we do] not have the chance to get this informational education.” They were referring to the critical atmosphere towards contemporary art forms across the Chinese art world. Now, how does one perceive this “plethora of allied concepts” (Smith, 2002 p. 6) from a methodological perspective? Does one view it as an early indication that (Western-defined) contemporary art simply has not gained solid ground in the Chinese art world beyond the internationally oriented art markets of the biggest cities? I choose not to think so. Inspired by Smith (2002), I decided to dive into this “battle of terms” and approach this complex of varying and unofficial lingo as an initial illustration of the everyday complexity experienced in any local situation of artistic contemporaneity: the exact complexity which I sought to unfold in the explorative analysis of this data.<sup>xiii</sup>

These experienced complexities must be collected via empirical material and interpreted by the researcher. In this interpretation is an inevitable element of construction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). I recognize the personal power or influence that lies with the researcher in this action, which is exactly why I have sought to maintain an explorative and sensitive reflexivity whenever I have interpreted individual or collective experiences as part of my research process. As Archer puts it, “if we cannot ascribe beliefs the end result is that sociology has *no* role to play in explaining action” (Archer, 1998, p. 523, her italics).

### **Understanding socio-cultural dynamics in an everyday context**

Finally, I turn to how I can assert the existence of cultural multiplicities, which leads to the fourth epistemological notion, that “two cultural items (at the structural level) may appear contradictory in isolation but may not be so if considered in context” (Archer, 1998, p. 524). In other words, in context, empirical contradictions start to make sense. They are unfolded and interpreted by the researcher to entail more than confusion, misunderstanding, or lack of clarity. Consequently, if I find that two sides of a contradiction are empirically equally real, I can start to investigate and explain the contradictions as socio-cultural dynamics. An example of this would be the belief, on a cultural level, that a proper artist is a poor artist and the culturally contradictory idea of the primacy of commercially successful mega-star artists.

I investigate the personal experiences of this contradiction in the practical lives of artists in the cultural and social contexts in which they act and attempt to explain the

dynamics in this co-existence (see also Chapters 5 and 7). As Archer would phrase it, being an artist (or any other social “role”) “is a matter of causal relations with other people and these effects therefore can be analyzed at the socio-cultural level” (Archer, 1998, p. 527). Hence, in my investigation I have aimed to differ between the “co-existence of inconsistent demands and the entirely different question of how people live with them” (ibid).

I was inspired by Ann Swidler’s (2001) study of middle class Americans and ideas on love and marriage, and Swidler’s analytical framework of the “cultural tool kit” (previously applied within sociology of the arts by, among others, Tia DeNora (2003a)) assisted me in my initial organizing of the empirical findings of this study. A “cultural tool kit” is defined as an individual repertoire of cultural meanings offering people the capacities they need for acting. As part of the tool kit framework, Swidler introduces the more specific construct of semiotic codes as systems of meaning guiding our actions (though not necessarily our understandings) by signifying to us what our actions will mean to others (Swidler, 2001). “Semiotic” refers to the codes’ capacity for categorizing meanings, thereby enabling individual maneuvering in contexts of complex and even contradictory cultural meaning. Cultural meanings often appear as a pattern of collective utilized meanings within a given contextual framing. The American mythic idea of marriage equaling romantic love is an example of this as is the idea, in the Danish art school, of artistic autonomy conflicting with utilization of the artistic practice, which is discussed in the paper “Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art”, presented in Chapter 5.

Yet, as we move into locally experienced complexities, “the difficulty of letting the context in, as one must, is the absence of flood gates. For there is nothing in the context itself which dictates just how much of it is relevant to any proposition, concept or unit” (Archer, 1998, p. 524). Consequently we risk losing ourselves in the complexity and ending up with nothing but “simplification by complexity” as the undesirable outcome (Mol & Law, 2002). Instead, as Archer proposes (1998), I have tried to focus my contextual empirical investigation primarily on the immediate art school context.

Hence, despite the fact that the three papers differ greatly in how they, in their final forms of respectively empirical, material, and theoretical discussions, bring into play the local context, they all share a strong empirical and consequently contextual everyday point of departure. Nonetheless, as the dialogue between the empirical

material and the theoretical discussion progresses, the empirical everyday point of departure and the wide range of contextual material drift into the background as the theoretical framework is brought forward to support the conceptual argument proposed. Inspired by Alvesson and Skjöldberg's (2000) emphasis on the ambiguous relationship between a researcher's text and the realities studied, as well as the communicative potential and challenge in bringing the sensitivity and reflexivity of my research process into the article format, I have, in papers presented in Chapters 5 and 6, played with this format and interlaced empirical vignettes with the conceptual discussions. My hope is that these vignettes will serve as windows on to the rich everyday realities experienced by the young artists and their faculties in the local art school contexts of Xiamen and Copenhagen.

By maintaining a sensitivity towards the subjective and the contextual everyday empirical material and, I hope, creating a sense of mystery for the reader by giving them a feeling of the puzzles I as a researcher encountered (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), it is my hope that this approach to the writing process strengthens the potential for imaginative readings among scholarly readers, practitioners, and policy makers from the world of art. In the paper presented in Chapter 7, the ambition was similar, yet here I have applied the more standard approach of prioritizing a significant space in the text for the empirical analysis. This was primarily due to the substantial part in the analysis (compared to the other two papers) played by the Chinese art world, as the locally particular context in which the individual artists experience contemporaneity between the global and local spaces in art. Accordingly, in the work with this paper I have been particularly aware of the flood gate issue, when it has come to deciding the amount of contextual information and factors to include. On the one hand, it would have suited the form of the paper to have a shorter context section; on the other hand, for the reader not familiar with the Chinese world of art, the somewhat thorough outlining of the central dialectics at play here seems a justifiable element.

In sum, as stated above, building on these four epistemological considerations, I have applied the overall notion that by understanding how cultural structures are acted in and made sense of as socio-cultural dynamics in everyday life, I can explain some of their dynamic, complex multiplicities. In the case of this thesis, this has meant studying the Chinese and Danish artists and their faculties, as I have sought to explain the complexities of the cultural structures in the world of art by understanding how the young artists experience acting in and making sense of their artistic autonomy in utilizing their artistic practice and of being contemporary between global and local traditions and developments.

## 4. Results and implications

In the previous chapters, I introduced the overall empirical point of departure, the research questions, and the key-themes of this thesis. I also introduced the theoretical framework in which I position the thesis and the epistemological reflections that have been essential to my research process.

In this final chapter of the preparatory Part I, I discuss the results of and contributions made by the three papers, which are subsequently presented as the main outcome of my research in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, making up Part II. This involves my thoughts concerning the overall theoretical contribution of this thesis to the sociology of art and the related methodological implications. I briefly discuss how the outcomes of the three papers might contribute to a broader discussion and touch upon possible political implications and ideas for further research into autonomy, time, and space in art and cultural organization. Yet first, I very briefly outline the results of my endeavor to rethink autonomy, space, and time in today's world of art by going over the three sub-research questions and summing up the results of each paper.

### **Results of rethinking autonomy, space, and time in today's world of art**

As a proposition to re-open rather than foreclose the question of artistic autonomy, I have in the paper *Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art* offered the alternative concept of “antinomies of autonomy” as a way to understand the ambiguous everyday experiences by artists in the utilization of their artistic practice.. Through a theoretical conversation between the sociology of art, represented by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and aesthetic philosophy, in the form of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic perspective on artistic autonomy, as an ongoing dialectic moving between the discourses of art and everyday life, I argue for this alternative narrative of artistic autonomy. Building on empirical examples of young contemporary Danish art-school artists' everyday experiences, as well as the Kantian idea of “antinomies”, antinomies of autonomy are suggested as being an inherent dynamic of the “and” in “art and life”. Consequently, they have the potential to explain cultural dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy across art objects, artists and the structural aspects of the world of art.

Based on the observations of a visit of representatives from a Scandinavian art academy to a Chinese institution of higher art education we found, in the paper *Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art*, that the discourses of contemporary art, and perhaps the practices of Western cultural organization in general, are informed by the dominant plot of the homogeneity of time (Rancière, 2012). Here time becomes an agent of linear transformation, and history is used to enact an identity between the global “march of time” and the time of individual artists and local institutions. Yet the chronotope of historical time (Koselleck, 2004) cannot account for the “broad present” (Gumbrecht, 2014) of contemporary art. We suggest understanding the experience of times in the arts as a potential temporal trap and close in on a more nuanced explanation of contemporaneity as being made up of “heterochronies” of locally specific space-times. We show how these simultaneous, contradictory, and heterogeneous temporalities are present across and within local art worlds, and how, in their interplay, they can take on different forms according to “site-specific” conditions. We can thus rethink the linear notion of historical time and consequently reflect upon the influence it has in global cultural exchange and on the organization of culture in a broader sense.

As a way to reconsider the local experience of contemporaneity between stereotypes of the Chinese artist as either sham avant-garde or cosmopolitan I aimed to understand and explain contemporaneity as experienced by these artists between a complex of local and global spaces in art. The paper *Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art* proposes to take the “local” and the so-called “periphery” seriously by looking at individual artists and their everyday experiences of being contemporary in a particular local place. While their everyday lives as artists are influenced and structured by global and local notions of what it means to be a contemporary artist, they are not without a sense of agency, not without a sense of individual artistic presence. In an attempt to go beyond the conflict of global and local and the complications in perceiving this from the perspectives of artistic style or politics, I offer an empirically and contextually grounded alternative understanding of the individual experience of being a Chinese contemporary artist today. As a result I offer the concept of “local contemporaneity” to explain the ongoing, dynamic experience of being globally interconnected but locally present between the complex of local and global spaces in art.

## **Main contributions to understanding cultural structures in the world of art and beyond**

As the main research question of this thesis I asked; How to understand experiences of autonomy and contemporaneity in being an artist today, and how these relate to cultural structures that organize the world of art? This question picks up on a growing emphasis within the sociology of art towards investigating the world of art as an increasingly global phenomenon. For example, as mentioned earlier, Zolberg re-emphasizes the significance of “[t]he entry of Latin American, Asian, and African visual and musical forms and motifs into the western dominated canon has gained increasing legitimacy and audiences” (Zolberg, 2015, pp. 907-908) (An initial development she first pointed to in 1997 (Zolberg, 1997). I find that if we look beyond the representational properties of the art objects emphasized in this quotation and elsewhere in research in this area (Adams, 2008; Regev, 2003; Zhang, 2006), we can see changes being proposed to how we define what it means to be an artist. From a global perspective, Alexander and Bowler’s (2014) statement that “[i]n today’s world, who is an artist is a particularly complex question” (ibid, p.10) only becomes the more insistent. Subsequently they call for further comparative “multiple level” art world research, considering institutions and organizations of the arts, as well as the individual artist (ibid).

I apply the conception that globalization is a highly multifaceted “back and forth” dynamic, in which a complex mess of global and local influences move in and out of any given local place. Consequently, it is almost needless to say that with changes towards an increasingly global outlook in understanding the world of art, levels of complexity are bound to increase. I propose that these changes have the potential to challenge the traditional sociology of art and the tendency to analyze the artistic sphere primarily by way of general structures and collective processes of production (e.g., Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993c).

This, I suggest, does not obviate a considering of the structural level. It merely indicates a need for approaching it in a different manner. In this endeavor, I propose two main contributions to the sociology of art: first, illustrating the ability of the perspective of individual agency to reveal the complexity in cultural structures, and second, bringing to the sociology of art insights from related disciplines, investigating cultural structures in the world of art from alternative perspectives.

First, while the dialectics of autonomy and heteronomy, global and local, and traditional and contemporary are structured by dominant notions in the world of art, they are being experienced, acted in, and made sense of by the individual artist (Heinich, 1996; Swidler, 2001). To explain such dialectics, it becomes sensible to “recognize the importance of human agency” (Zolberg, 2015, p. 901) and investigate meaningful accounts of “the lived experience of the individuals whose engagement with the arts are in question” (Harrington, 2004, pp. 2-3). Second, in the contexts of the two art schools and the everyday subjective experience of what it means to be a contemporary artist in these contexts (in relation to the social, political, and economic role of art in society and agendas of international cultural exchange), complex dialectic notions of autonomy, space, and time appear to be at work in the simplified pairings of autonomy and heteronomy, traditional and contemporary, and global and local. Beyond these apparent dichotomies, there seems to be a more complex, dynamic organizing of the world of art and the developments in it. Hence, as I found that the different conflicts and complications I encountered in my research process were centered on the notions of autonomy, space, and time, these themes appeared as essential to engage with in order to understand the cultural complexity of the world of art and beyond.

As mentioned, I consequently set out to understand and explain some of these complexities by way of, in each of the three papers, rethinking, respectively, the notions of autonomy, time, and space in art. And in this I have drawn on insights, theories, and concepts from aesthetic philosophy (e.g., Eagleton, 1990; Kant, 2005; Rancière, 2002, 2010, 2013; Robson, 2005), global art history (e.g., Foster, 2009; Gao, 2012; Smith, 2002, 2009; Smith et al., 2008), and works bridging the two (e.g., Gumbrecht, 2014; Koselleck, 2004; Osborne, 2013; Rancière, 2012; Shusterman, 2006; Welsch, 2008; Wong, 2014). Consequently, as the overall contribution of this thesis, I propose that the individual experience of autonomy, time, and space in the world of art can not only serve to explain how the world of art might be structured and changing but also contribute to an understanding of cultural structures and change in a broader sense. This understanding and explanation is offered in this thesis by way of the three conceptual contributions explained above: the antinomies of autonomy, local contemporaneity, and the heterochronies of locally specific space-times.

## **Aesthetic encounters investigated as cultural multiplicities**

Recall Mol and Law's (2002) three-fold description of complexities, emphasizing how in research things do not always add up, how events can occur outside the process of linear time, and how phenomena can share a space but not be mapped on the same single set of dimensions. As mentioned, this is an approach which correlates with the key themes of this thesis: autonomy, time, and space in today's world of art. In studying the Chinese and Danish artists and their faculties, I set out to explain some of the complexities of the cultural structures of art, by understanding how they are experienced by the agents in the world of art. Building on a critical realist philosophy of art, especially the thoughts of Margaret Archer, and a stratified social ontology of cultural structures, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual agency, I have sought to unfold complexity, across structural and individual levels in today's world of art, through the themes of autonomy, time, and space. In this, I have differed between the complexity in the structures and that within and among the agents as respectively the "actual reality" and the "empirically graspable". I have done this as a way to make sense of cultural complexity through subjective experiences, experiences in this context conceived as a complex of both consistent and contradictory actions and meanings. Additionally, I have focused on the everyday context in endeavoring to grasp socio-cultural dynamics as the explanatory link between the empirically graspable experiences of the agent and the multiple cultural structures at play across notions of autonomy, time, and space, and dialectics of local and global, autonomy and heteronomy, and traditional and contemporary. I elaborate my thoughts on such "cross-thematic" multiplicities in the discussion below. From a methodological perspective this can be seen as one response to the call in the sociology of art for research which works on multiple levels of an increasingly global world of art, in order to rethink the complex notion of contemporary art and being an artist today (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Winnie Won Yin Wong, 2014; Zolberg, 2015).

Consequently, I bring forward the concepts of the ambiguous antinomies of autonomy in the utilization of art, a globally connected and locally present contemporaneity, and "heterochronies" of specific space-times. These are the socio-cultural dynamics which the experiences of the Chinese and Danish artists and their faculties brought me to understand and which I in return make use of to rethink and explain some of the structural features in the world of art, and the developments in it. Developments which, in this thesis, evolve around increased globalization of and changes in the role of the

artist across notions of; creating art for art's sake; making art as decoration or a craft; or producing art as commercial value or a political tool.

Recall how the title of “Aesthetic Encounters” came to encompass both the research subject of the cultural multiplicities organizing the world of art and my reflexive, explorative research process. Likewise the perspective of complex cultural multiplicity sums up both the subject of investigation and the main methodological contribution of my research process, described in the propositions above as how to investigate these dynamic cultural multiplicities across cultural structures, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual agency.

## **Results and contributions in a discussion of political implications and next steps**

Consider again the statement of the then Minister for Culture Marianne Jelved regarding cross-cultural dialogue for the sake of future collaboration between China and Denmark; “[a]rt ties people together and builds new bridges across borders. It speaks to us in a language that we can all understand” (Danish Agency for Culture, 2014). With the contributions above I wish, as an additional conceptual contribution and political implication of this thesis, to bring forward a particular focus on how the world of art tends to assume, or wishes to believe, that contemporary art is culturally universal. It is in principle beyond style, form, and the boundaries of established institutions, as it crosses national borders as a metaphysically shared human language (cf. Kant, 2005), across the complexities in autonomy, time, and space. However it is a language that is often uttered and interpreted via the styles and institutions defined by a Western notion of artistic modernity (Batchen, 2014; Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2002), in turn closely related to specific notions of autonomy, time and space. This results in an “us or them”, an “either, or” framing, as was discussed in the rich contributions to the special edition of *World Art* devoted to “Local Modernism” (Sekules, Lau, & Thøfner, 2014). In this edition, Phillips (2014) in particular talks about the challenges in taking local art and artists seriously, as I do in the paper “Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art” (Chapter 7). Here contemporaneity in the assumed “periphery” of the international art world (Batchen, 2014), somehow perceived as a relative newcomer to the scene, is revealed as unfolding between a complex of local and global spaces. In this, I found the young Chinese artists acting out a dynamic sense of individual artistic presence between a

local Chinese art education (with a tradition of connecting with the surrounding society via traditional technical and money making artistic practices) and a development of their comparatively conceptual, idea-based contemporary practice, by going on exchanges to Europe and being taught by visiting teachers from the “center” of the “contemporary” world of art (Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2009).

The young Chinese artists are not only shuttling back and forth between different “spaces” in art. As Rancière would argue, they are “shuttling between and across; the individual, social, and collective; autonomy and heteronomy; and the art and the non-art” (Rancière, 2002), as they make use of their artistic practice in maneuvering between and taking part in a variety of “times”, including an official Chinese art world that is in parts looking to revitalize historical and traditional Chinese arts and an international context craving the narrative of the revolutionizing Chinese avant-garde artist.

Accordingly, an interesting next step would be a study of how young Chinese artists experience autonomy in making use of their artistic practices, thereby potentially further exploring, from a sociology of art perspective, aesthetics as distinctly “intercultural” (Welsch, 2008). The Chinese artists I spoke to in this study did not experience the lack of freedom of expression induced by the government with any particular sense of heteronomy. This is opposed to what one might assume or to what parts of the international art world would like to build a narrative around. Instead the artists seemed to focus on the experience of heteronomy in the emphasis on representational aesthetics (Rancière, 2002; Robson, 2005) of style and form in the official art organizations and the consequent favoring of traditional art. As opposed to the Danish artists, they furthermore did not so much associate a sense of artistic heteronomy with engaging with the commercial aspects of the art market.

Nonetheless, as an equally pertinent point to taking the local seriously, I think (as is also suggested above) that a future challenge for the sociology of art will be to take the global seriously and to question how the structural notions of autonomy, time, and space in art play out from a global outlook. Yet, as discussed in the paper “Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art” (Chapter 6), this is more easily said than done. The preliminary cultural exchange between the Danish and Chinese schools studied here does not succeed in tying the people of these two schools together or building new bridges across borders. In this case, art does not work as a universal language leading to artistic global dialogue, future cultural industry revenues, or privileged contacts in the Chinese art market. Instead, the plot of a homogeneous

process of time (Koselleck, 2004; Rancière, 2012) is illustrated in the different scenes as the Danish delegation (and, in parts, I as a researcher) seems to focus on the “progressive” notion of time in their own dialectic of the contemporary and traditional and the “reactionary” notion of time in the Chinese equivalent.

I will argue that the young artists at the Chinese school are perceived by the Danish delegation not only as in risk of being less contemporarily trained, but also as less artistically autonomous, on account of this notion’s close association with the Western understanding of artistic (post)modernity (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Heinich, 1996; Rancière, 2002, 2005) and its historically linear notion of artistic progress. Accordingly, an interesting next step would be to investigate how the Chinese art school faculty experienced the visit, or how they themselves have experienced visiting European art schools – which they had all done preceding the Danes visiting – and what notions of autonomy, time, and space could be coaxed out and revealed from their behavior in the encounters with a Danish school and its notions of teaching and doing art.

In the paper “Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art” (Chapter 5), simplified notions of artistic autonomy between the mythic notion of “art for art’s sake” and the prosaic everyday life in art are reconsidered in light of the complexity of today’s increasingly global art world of growing art markets and neo-liberal artistic agendas. In an attempt to have this complexity reflected in the understanding of the artists’ experience of utilizing their artistic practice, and inspired by the Kantian idea of antinomies (Grier, 2006; Kant, 1933), the concept of antinomies of artistic autonomy is offered as the socio-cultural dynamic that encompasses the many conflicts of autonomy and heteronomy across the art object, the individual and structural levels. Similarly in the paper presented in Chapter 7, which focus on notions of time, a multiplicity of contemporary and traditional dialectics are at play across different levels of time: a (objective) historical timescale, a geographic (spatial, e.g. Danish or Chinese) timescale, and an individual timescale experienced by the art students and their faculty. The form or style of an art work can thus speak to a specific experience of time (for example, through Western art history), while the meaning in producing it can be understood as related to another experience of time (for example, a local individual Chinese sense of being contemporary).

In the paper in Chapter 5, in which I focus on autonomy, I propose that scholars, as well as practitioners in general, might draw inspiration from the more pragmatic everyday perspective that is considered in the concept of antinomies. The Schools of

Visual Arts in Copenhagen in particular could grasp the opportunity to reflect upon the bohemian “art for art’s sake” notion of autonomy in the context of their dominant culture of artistic autonomy. Additionally, as with the other propositions for future research crossing the three central themes of this thesis, it would be interesting to investigate the young artists and the school in Copenhagen (“in house”, not abroad) while more specifically focusing on their notions of time and space. Allow me to develop this particular point by ending Part I of the thesis where it began, by offering a number of questions, inspired by the Danish world of art: more specifically, the Schools of Visual Arts in Copenhagen.

As pre-events to the conference *Arts & Globalization - Achieving Intercultural Dialogue Through the Arts* in spring 2015, two “art talks” were held at the exhibition venue Kunsthal Charlottenborg, which is part of the Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art. The purpose of the talks was to discuss issues such as “institutional racism, political correctness and Denmark’s colonial history” (Arts & Globalization, 2015). Following the first of the two pre-events, one of the organizers wrote a column on what seemed to be the core issue of the debate. The title of the column was “Modern art was born racist - so was I”<sup>xiv</sup> (Faurby, 2015). At the second talk, this perspective was further unfolded, as the participants in the panel and the audience circled around the “assumed illusion” of “color blindness” in the Scandinavian art world. The main (self-)criticism centered around how this “globalized self-righteousness” covered up institutional racism towards artists and aesthetics of other localities or ethnic backgrounds. This included not giving these artists the same opportunities to exhibit their art or receive funding. This institutional racism, among the actors from the Danish art world represented at the event, was said to have its roots in a deep entanglement between Western colonial history and the history of (Western) modern art.

No doubt the art students, the art school faculty, and other art world actors were on to a relevant and interesting discussion (cf. Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2009). Nonetheless, as a thought for further reflection and research, it would be interesting to investigate these experiences of the actors of the Danish (and Scandinavian) world of art, while considering the notions of time, space, and autonomy at play here, regarding what it means to be a contemporary artist today. Is the shared meaning here simply that the Western, in this case Scandinavian, institutions of art are neo-colonial and racist? Are the empirical material in the paper in Chapter 6 and the statement of Marianne Jelved examples of this? Or are we dealing with a situation which is far more complicated

than a matter of globalized self-righteous but racist institutions of art?<sup>xv</sup> Is the assumed “illusion” of color blindness “real” to those experiencing it and, either way, why?

If these questions were investigated, I think that interesting findings would occur regarding not only the dynamics which these actors experience in terms of the institutions’ treatment of periphery art, but also how their own understandings of themselves – and their peers across the globe – as artists (or art educators) are part of a messy complex of cultural structures around the idea of contemporary art. Here the three papers composing the main outcome of this thesis are only the tip of the iceberg of various cultural multiplicities at play. Consider for example: who would be the artists they wish were given a chance to enter the Western institutions of art, such as schools and exhibition venues? The undiscovered artists with intriguing aesthetics of other localities or ethnicities? Or the successful cosmopolitan revolutionary avant-garde? As a case in point, the Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei was in September 2015 rejected by the Danish company LEGO as he sought to buy a large number of LEGO blocks for an installation to be exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia as part of the show “Andy Warhol / Ai Weiwei”. Ai Weiwei took LEGO’s rejection as a case of censorship and in protest started his own global collection of blocks. Kunsthall Charlottenborg took on the part as the official Danish collection point, since, as director Michael Thøuber stated, “we are on art’s side, and see it as our role to take part in realizing internationally acknowledged artists’ works. So when we were asked... to be the official collection point in Denmark we immediately said yes” (Schools of Visual Arts, 2015).<sup>xvi</sup>

Taking into consideration the results of this thesis, along with Winnie Wong’s (Wong, 2014) rich contribution to this discussion, in reflecting upon who would be the kind of (properly contemporary or autonomous) artist that the Danish world of art would invite to its art schools and exhibition venues, Ai Wei Wei is a successful cosmopolitan artist. He is revolutionary avant-garde in the sense that he pushes the boundaries of both the Chinese government, and the idea of the contemporary artist, and does so by way of (also) applying aesthetics of non-western localities and ethnicities, as he draws on Chinese history, materials and art forms. However, most importantly, he is already “in”. From here questions to further explore – which would contribute to further unfolding not only cultural structures in the world of art but also the workings of cultural structures in general – would be as follows:

What does it mean to be a contemporary artist? To be timely, by being untimely? If so, is being untimely a matter of being ahead, a frontrunner? Or can one challenge the structures of contemporary art by being untimely in looking back in a world preoccupied with moving forward? Is being contemporary about being in time with the right revolutionary agenda? Where in the world of art is contemporaneity assessed? The space which is the subject of the art work? The space in which it is created? Or the space in which the art work is evaluated, exhibited, or bought? Is being avant-garde in the Ai Wei Wei sense merely a commodification of being against time in a timely way, in being against certain developments in Chinese society in a time when the world applauds such critic? What about the non-political, highly technically skilled, young, Chinese artist who creates beautiful Western-style paintings and either sells them for good money or simply sells a lot of them? Is she contemporary?

## PART II / **The papers**

## 5. Antinomies of Artistic Autonomy: The ambiguity in making use of art

*Marianne Bertelsen*

### Introduction

While I was researching for this paper, a young contemporary artist and student at a Danish art academy shared an experience with me. He told me that alongside his training at the school, he had been quite successful in selling a series of paintings he referred to as insignificant “sofa art”. This had enabled him to buy a very expensive wristwatch, which he had long dreamed of buying. Nevertheless, he would hide the watch or simply not wear it when at the art academy. He did not want his peers to accuse him of “selling out”. Throughout 2013 and 2014, I interviewed and observed a group of young artists from the Schools of Visual Arts at The Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen. Here I found a puzzling ambiguity in the artists’ everyday experiences of artistic autonomy in making use of their artistic practice, as briefly illustrated in this anecdote.

While the young artists had an idea of ultimate, romantic autonomy (primarily from their time at the art academy), they also told me about various other more messy and far less “pure” experiences of artistic autonomy. It seemed as if the notion of autonomy was more complicated than a simple conflict between “art for art’s sake” and making money or a career from the utilization of one’s artistic practice. Based on this, the key question this paper seeks to investigate is: how to reconsider artistic autonomy as experiences of everyday life and the utilization of art? The utilization of one’s artistic practice would include: selling art to a private buyer or publicly owned institution (be it a project idea or a final product), creating art in exchange for public subsidies or philanthropic funding,<sup>xvii</sup> or achieving any other outcomes or reactions from different art world actors which could benefit one’s career, such as being able to put on an exhibition at an acknowledged gallery and add this to one’s *résumé*.

Making use of art is not a new thing. Looking back to the Renaissance, rich patrons and members of the clergy exercised and signified their influence through art. Though not necessarily a symbiotic relationship, the artists producing the art obviously benefitted socially and economically from this setup. As such, beyond mere commercialization, the utilization of art has historically also involved a variety of political, social, and economic gains. However, as the relationship of art and its use has continued throughout history, our understanding of this mutual dependence has increasingly moved towards seeing them, if not in dichotomous opposition, then at least as uneasy bedfellows.

This paper positions itself within the sociology of art. This field of research has dealt extensively with the issue of artistic autonomy in the utilization of art. In this, the autonomy of the artist is often positioned against or in relation to the structures of the field or world of art. Classic references include the significant contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993c) and Howard Becker (Becker, 1982). More recently, influential publications on this issue include Hans Abbing's work *Why are artists poor? The exceptional economy of the arts* (Abbing, 2002), in which he draws together the economic thought and sociology of art studies, particularly those of Bourdieu, in seeking to understand this "exceptional" field; Chris Mathieu's edited publication *Careers in Creative Industries* (Mathieu, 2012), in which the different contributions draw on Becker in particular (1982) (ibid. p.10) in investigating the dynamic between "uncertainty" and "freedom" in working within (and across) the artistic, cultural, and creative sectors, and Natalie Heinich (1996), who, by drawing on art history, critically builds upon Bourdieu's works and individualizes its structural perspective. Via the stereotype myth of the bohemian artists (personified in van Gogh), she unfolds antinomic ways of constructing artistic greatness, where the individual acts in a dynamic aesthetic position, which coincides with the social or political structures surrounding artistic production.

Drawing on these three examples, it would be easy to assume that, for example, poverty and uncertainty result in heteronomy, while freedom and greatness result in autonomy. What I find inspiring in these publications is that poverty, uncertainty, freedom, and greatness are not presented as equaling either artistic heteronomy or autonomy. Rather they are investigated as inherently complex and interrelated in messy ways: a relationship that resembles the empirical complexity I found when interviewing the young artists in Copenhagen. Within the sociology of art, it is this development towards an increased emphasis on the complexity in the relationship

between the artist and the structures of the world of art that I seek to further with the discussion in this paper.

There are many changes occurring in the world of art today. The global art (labor) market is in rapid growth, and neo-liberal agendas are being introduced in arts institutions. As these changes occur, the utilization of art and its implications for art in society appear in an increasingly complex manner (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Zolberg, 2015). For example, the “shifting roles for artists” as a result of (among others) the revival of the studio model for producing art, the idea of the artist as a commercial brand (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 13), and the increasing bearing of “art and entrepreneurship” discourse (cf. Mangset & Røyseng, 2009; Scherdin & Zander, 2011) are all developments which further challenge our (historical) understanding of artistic autonomy. Yet, ever since Bourdieu proposed the bohemian “art for art’s sake” idea of artistic autonomy as a way to explain meanings and actions, such as a denial of economic interest (Bourdieu, 1993c), the notion of the artist as motivated by the romantic idea of practicing art solely its own sake remains influential in how autonomy in the utilization of art is conceived in the sociology of art (e.g., Abbing, 2002; Alexander & Bowler, 2014;; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006; Mathieu, 2012; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007).

As a modest contribution to the sociology of art, I propose that we engage with the everyday experiences of autonomy in the utilization of art as an opportunity for re-opening rather than foreclosing the question of artistic autonomy. I offer the alternative concept of “antinomies of artistic autonomy” as a way to reconsider and understand the ambiguous meanings and actions experienced by the artist in the utilization of his or her artistic practice. This concept is unfolded here through a theoretical conversation on how Jacques Rancière’s thoughts on artistic autonomy, as an ongoing dialectic between the discourses of art and everyday life, have the potential to complement the Bourdieuan legacy in the sociology of art. These two different notions of autonomy, spanning the sociology of art and aesthetic philosophy, share a point of departure in Kant’s *Critique of judgment* and his thoughts on autonomy in the aesthetic experience (Eagleton, 1990; Kant, 2005). However, moving away from this same point, they differ a surprising amount.

Bringing together these seemingly incompatible theoretical viewpoints and adding the Kantian idea of antinomies as dialectic attempts to understand experience in relation to mythical principles (Grier, 2006; Kant, 1933) forms the basis for reconsidering the

notion of artistic autonomy in relation to the utilization of art. This reconsidering brings forwards an alternative narrative of artistic autonomy: antinomies. As this theoretical conversation is greatly inspired by my empirical observations, it is explained through vignettes based on interviews with young Danish visual artists, sharing their experiences of artistic autonomy in utilizing their artistic practice. The vignettes serve to emphasize the empirical relevance of antinomies of artistic autonomy as important to the everyday sense-making of the artist.

## **Artistic autonomy in the sociology of art (and among artists)**

The romantic idea of the artist practicing art solely for its own sake (in particular in Pierre Bourdieu's essays referring back to the mysterious social universe of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian bohemians) and the sense of artistic autonomy as the intentional avoidance of any utilization external to the art work itself (Bourdieu, 1993c) have been very influential on how artistic autonomy in the utilization of art is conceived in the sociology of art. Previous efforts have been made to understand the "extent" of artistic autonomy in utilization of the artistic practice, by defining artist stereotypes relative to an "art for art's sake" ideal. This can be seen in many places, including Becker's ideas of "integrated professionals", "folk artists", and "naïve artists" (Becker, 1982); Bourdieu's conceptions of those doing social art, "art for art's sake", bourgeois art, and industrial art (Bourdieu, 1993c); the idea of the anti-market bohemian artist, the academic artist, and the artist (self-)taught outside the system (Rengers, 2002), and Abbing's artist-researcher, artist-entertainer, postmodern artist, and artist-craftsman (Abbing, 2002). Being an artist and making use of one's art is clearly neither a simple nor an easy endeavor. Abbing (2002) describes as "mythological" the idea of autonomy present in how Dutch visual artists frown upon commercial sales over other ways of making money on their art. Røyseng et al. (2007) describe how young Norwegian artists use the myth of the charismatic artist as a way to maneuver in a "deinstitutionalized" contemporary art world opening up to the cultural industry. Eikhof and Haunschild (2006) show how German theater artists use the bohemian lifestyle and "art for art's sake" idea as motivation in engaging with the self-management required of them as part of a career in theater.

All these studies have added noteworthy concepts to the understanding of the working life of the artist. Yet what these studies also come to show is that the romantic, mythic

idea of artistic autonomy still today “thoroughly saturates contemporary definitions” of the artist (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 13). They reveal a number of social dynamics which are important for our understanding of the working life of artists. Yet if we focus on the notion of autonomy, these different dynamics are situated in the conflict of autonomy against money, sales (Abbing, 2002), cultural industry agendas (Røyseng et al., 2007), and a highly uncertain and network-based labor market (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006): all aspects or structural features of the utilization of art.

After talking to the young artists about their everyday experiences of artistic autonomy in the utilization of their art, I found the situations which they were describing to be even messier and more ambiguous than the structural dichotomy of mythic autonomy and prosaic utilization of art. Despite the fact that Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu, 1993c) contributions to the field properly asserted how the universal mythic idea is indeed corrupted, “autonomy vs. utilization” is an engaging narrative for both artists and researchers, a narrative, I suggest, which risks standing in the way of grasping the notion of autonomy as important to the everyday sense-making of the artist and, consequently, the ambition in the sociology of art to understand the “ambiguity” in what it means to be a contemporary artist today (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 13). The dominant narrative of artistic autonomy could do with a bit of reconsideration.

### *Autonomy at the art school*

In order to show that the dominant narrative of heteronomous utilization against romantic artistic autonomy not only informs the sociology of art but also artists themselves and their practice, I must very briefly describe the Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen as a specific place and the part it has in its students’ experience of artistic autonomy in the utilization of art.

Along with the European liberation protests and student movements that began in 1968, the idea of the artist’s role in a Danish context broke away from the prior conservative, elite tradition of the arts and, since the mid-1980s, a conceptual intellectualization of the Danish art education has prevailed (Fuchs & Salling, 2004). This sense of liberation in breaking with prior institutional norms on how to train artists is exemplified in the system of admission to the school. Students are not required to possess any specific technical or literacy skills but must submit independent works of art, which are then assessed based on their artistic originality and the applicant’s individual potential for further development. Correspondingly, the

school teaches a mixture of traditional and contemporary artistic disciplines, including painting, sculpture, graphics, video, photo, installation, and performance art. Among these various opportunities for artistic development, the individual young artist is then expected to autonomously orient him or herself (Fuchs & Salling, 2004).

The Schools of Visual Arts build their notion of artistic autonomy on the European romantic bohemian legacy of “art for art’s sake”. This comes through in the idea of the “privilege in being poor” expressed by both students and faculty in my conversations with them. Being poor signifies, in various ways (see the methodology section below), that you are taking the time and effort to engage in your art for its own sake. This notion manifests itself in the tradition of preparing the students to become artists with a “big A”: conceptually creative individuals who over long periods sustain and develop their artistic project, without focusing on creating commercially successful works.

To move on from here, I propose a conversation between the sociology of art and thoughts from aesthetic philosophy. More specifically, I propose that Jacques Rancière’s thoughts on artistic autonomy and the Kantian notions discussed above have the potential to complement the Bourdieuan legacy.

I argue that the rich collection of essays gathered in Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993c) have served as a significant durable contribution to sociological research on artistic autonomy in utilization of art. The idea of the artistic sphere as a “field of production” and the concept of “disinterestedness”, as a way to understand how artists, when producing the value of art objects, correspondingly produce themselves as artists, are now essential parts of the vocabulary of many researchers studying the social world of art. In order to initiate a conversation between this legacy of Bourdieu’s and Rancière’s sensible aesthetics, I first outline Bourdieu’s thoughts concerning autonomy in the utilization of art, presented in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993c).

Rancière’s thoughts on aesthetics as a distribution of the sensible take noteworthy inspiration from Kant’s legacy of universality in the aesthetic experience (Rancière, 2005), a legacy which Bourdieu, by contrast, worked on “turning around”. One might say that Bourdieu in his contributions sought to “deconstruct” artistic autonomy and universality from a sociological perspective. Hence I find it suitable, as part of outlining Bourdieu’s perspectives, to briefly reflect on the relationship between Bourdieu and the Kantian legacy in aesthetic philosophy, as it comes across in Bourdieu’s thoughts on autonomy in the utilization of art found in *The Field of Cultural Production*.

## The Kantian influence and the Bourdieuan legacy

Considering the significant legacy of Kant's *Critique of judgment* (Kant, 2005, first published in 1793), there is obviously plenty to be said about it in its own right. I abstain from such an endeavor but take a point of departure in his conception of "disinterestedness" as the first moment of pure aesthetic judgment. This concept is particularly interesting for the discussion in this paper, as Bourdieu and Rancière appear to be inspired by (whether in turning them around or building openly upon them) Kant's perspectives on universality, subjectivity, and autonomy as part of his idea of disinterestedness. Kant introduces disinterestedness as a potential for autonomy in the subjective universality of the aesthetic experience. In lingering in contemplation upon the freely pleasurable and beautiful, the individual aesthetic judgment is free from external taste inclinations, such as sensible, moral, or intellectual interests, which interfere with or override the aesthetic (Kant, 2005, p. 73). We are here dealing with a rather rigorous separation of aesthetic judgment from any cognitive, ethical, or political positions (Eagleton, 1990, p. 10), and in this, as a result, the subject has (at least in theory) the potential for autonomous judgment of the aesthetic. At the same time, this judgment involves an element of universality: while dependent on being experienced by the subject, it is nevertheless beyond subjective taste (Kant, 2005, pp. 64-65). In other words, the subjective aesthetic experience can aim at a truth which goes beyond the particular and tangible, beyond taste, and aims towards the universal. An important point here is that such a universal truth, in Kant's view, is conditional on the exclusive anticipation towards the autonomy in art (Raffnsøe, 1998, pp. 32-33).

This idea of the potential universal truth found in autonomous art, as experienced by the disinterested individual, formed part of the backdrop against which Bourdieu developed his essays (published between 1968 and 1987) collected in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993c). Across these essays, Bourdieu's take on the autonomy of art and the artist challenges both the Kantian legacy, in aesthetic philosophy and the idea of disinterestedness as vital for the sensing of aesthetic quality, and the related "ideologies of artistic and cultural autonomy from external determinants" that form the basis for this notion of artistic autonomy (Johnson, 1993, p. 2).

From Bourdieu's perspective, such ideas of universal aesthetics and cultural practices are nothing more than a thinly veiled imposition of dominance by the privileged ruling elite, including aesthetic values and institutional norms imposed by art academies, ateliers, salons, and so on (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 250). As an alternative, he proposes the

“field of production”, a social system of objective relationships between agents and institutions, such as reviewers, magazines, dealers, collectors, and audiences, within which the “value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 78).

The artistic field is more than just a milieu of relationships and networks. It is a separate social universe with its own institutions and cultures, concerning the utilization and evaluation of artistic practices and works (Bourdieu, 1986a, pp. 162-163). As such, the structure of the field is to be found “practically in every act of production” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 109). Bourdieu differentiates “the field of restricted production”, the members of which are the artist and his peers, privileged clients, reviewers, and fellow artists and “the field of large scale cultural production” producing cultural goods for the public at large, who are not producers of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 115). In this, the former comes to form an “autonomously developing field” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 119) of the artists and their fellow cultural producers, where they struggle for “cultural legitimacy” in the evaluation and utilization of artistic practices and works (What is a real artist? What is good art?), which are seemingly beyond “any external factors of economic, political or social differentiation” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 115). In other words, the idea of autonomy of the artistic field of restricted production is ambiguously dependent on what could be defined as a heteronomous “system of symbolic distinction” deeply intertwined with the disavowing of such “external” factors (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 108) as economic, political, or social differentiation.

In this, Bourdieu introduces his own “disinterestedness”: the deliberate distancing of oneself from any economic necessity related to one’s artistic practice. This “disavowal of the ‘economy’ is neither a simple ideological mask<sup>xviii</sup> nor a complete repudiation of economic interest” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 76) but a way for new artists in the field to signify to the dominant figures that they are the right kind of artists (“art for art’s sake” artists rather than social artists or bourgeois artists) (ibid.). This in turn may eventually enable them to, in different ways, economize on the symbolic capital they gain from this position. In short, in the reciprocal peer-to-peer legitimization of the artistic field, “art for art’s sake” means “art for artists” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 51).

With his essays on cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993c), Bourdieu paved the way for understanding artists as caught in a “structurally ambiguous position”. A “position” in which they must act as defenders of “art for art’s sake”, and consequently, with this alleged aim, as incompatible with the social, economic, and political which also

structure the artistic field (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 167). In this, Bourdieu's disinterestedness forms the basis for understanding the artist as not only producing the value of the art object, but also, inseparably, producing himself as artist in the "universe of belief" which is the artistic field (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 164). This essential premise is present across all the various studies within the sociology of art which have been referred to in this paper so far, just as it forms the basis for this paper itself. In other words, this way of grasping artistic autonomy has been applied, tested, and advanced in the sociology of art.

In framing the artistic field as autonomously capable of setting up its own norms for artistic legitimacy, Bourdieu further develops the related idea of the "pure gaze": an artistic motivation by which cultural producers reject any external demand (Bourdieu, 1968). From this point on, following Bourdieu's influential contribution in *The Field of Cultural Production*, I argue that the concept of artistic autonomy has gone from an idea focusing on autonomous art as a universal truth which the subject (in principle) can strive for a disinterested autonomous judging of (Kant) to something which could also be understood as a socially structured phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural positioning of the purely autonomous artist, disinterested in external factors, in particular the economy (Bourdieu).

### **Autonomy as an ongoing messy dynamic in everyday life**

"The autonomy theorem has always been misunderstood if one chooses to take it absolutely," Welsch specifically states, drawing on Gehlen and Adorno reminding us that "autonomy always has a precise societal function as its reverse side" (Welsch, 1996, p. 21). In line with Welsch, I propose that in real life, there are no instances of "pure" autonomy. The romantic notion of "art for art's sake" and the myth of pure autonomy (if understood as a structural, symbolic fixed point in the cultural practices around the utilization of art) risk concealing the full complexity of the ambiguous relationship between art and real life. In other words, such a structurally fixed dichotomy (though admittedly still an ambiguous one) between the artists producing "art for art's sake" and the utilization of this art (as proposed by Bourdieu) prevents us from exploring and grasping the messiness of the "contradictory nature" of the artistic autonomy experienced and acted out in the "and" of "art and life" (Rancière, 2002, 2005, 2010). The "and" is the missing link in a simplified take on the complications between art and life, for example between the idea of the artist (among artists themselves, as well as in the sociology of art) and the actual life of working with art and making use of it. Hence, in moving on, I propose to reconsider approaching artistic

autonomy as “a structural fact”, as something one can “possess”, and instead seek to understand it as a highly complex, ongoing dynamic which “appears” in everyday acts “entangled in heteronomy” (Lütticken, 2014, p. 83).

In this paper, I propose a conceptualization hopefully enabling a discussion of the “and” in “art and life” as a mess which cannot be pinned down in a simple dichotomy of good and bad but instead should be understood as a messy complex where the supposed opposites of heteronomy and autonomy are constantly working together in a continuously developing dynamic, a complex between the various legacies of pure, disinterested artistic autonomy and the everyday life of utilizing the artistic practice (and its experiences of autonomy and heteronomy). I suggest that recognizing and exploring the ambiguous relationship between the mythic idea of art and real life as a shuttling between the individual, social, and collective, between autonomy and heteronomy, and between art and non-art (Rancière, 2002) can assist in reconsidering the notion of artistic autonomy. I propose to move on from here by introducing “antinomies” as, building on Rancière, the sensible experiences of the lived autonomy and heteronomy dialectic in the everyday utilization of artistic practice. The idea of antinomies as reasonable contradictions can assist us in grasping this ambiguous dynamic in the experience of artistic autonomy and going beyond the simplified conflict of mythical pure autonomy and the heteronomy of external factors, in particular the economy.

Inspired by Rancière’s (2002, 2005, 2010) sensible aesthetics, I explain artistic autonomy in today’s world of art as a complex, dynamic dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy and propose how we can understand artistic autonomy as antinomies of ongoing, ambiguous, yet reasonable experiences, if viewed from the pragmatic perspective of the everyday life of the artist.

From this point of departure, I propose a different narrative of autonomy, one that wrestles it away from the Bourdieuan discourse, in which autonomy is corrupted in how it is socially structured but the romantic stereotype nevertheless still holds sway.<sup>xix</sup> Instead, I aim to restore some of the agency of artistic autonomy in the form of the freedom to utilize and engage with the heteronomous.

## **Methodology: Everyday experiences of artistic autonomy**

As the theoretical conversation unfolds into a more analytical discussion in the following section, it will be exemplified with situations from the everyday lives of the young Danish artists and their experiences of artistic autonomy in the utilization of their artistic practice. As stated above, the everyday utilization of artistic practice is here understood as something which can take place across social, political, and commercial spheres, and may take the form of selling art (from a project-idea to a final product) to a private buyer, or to a publicly owned institution; creating art in exchange for public subsidies, or philanthropic funding; or achieving other direct or indirect outcomes or reactions from different art-world actors, which could benefit the career of the artist, such as being able to put on an exhibition at an acknowledged gallery and add this to one's résumé, or branding oneself via various media. In such situations, both direct and indirect valuation of artistic practice is an inherent part of utilization, just as the notion of artistic practice, as indicated, covers both the output of actual art works and other activities involved in working as an artist.

This exemplification of the theoretical perspectives will take the form of vignettes. These are built on three specific individual interviews from a total of 23 interviews with contemporary art students (across cohorts) and recently graduated contemporary artists from the Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art. The interviews were conducted at the Academy, in the artists' studios or homes, or in cafés across Copenhagen throughout 2013 and 2014.<sup>xx</sup> Based on earlier studies and fieldwork on the Copenhagen art and culture scene and my background within the sociology of art, I expected some forms of ambiguity to be voiced by the artists concerning the utilization of their art, but I did not go looking for these issues in particular. I found this issue to be rather overt in its ambiguous structure, and as such it seemed already to have been covered in prior research. I therefore embarked upon this project with the very explorative objective of unpacking the everyday experience of being an artist in today's world of art and the current developments taking place there, such as the revival of the studio model of producing art, the idea of the artist as a commercial brand (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 13), and the increasing influence of art and entrepreneurship discourse (cf. Mangset & Røyseng, 2009; Scherdin & Zander, 2011). Consequently, the interviews were loosely organized by the overall theme of the young artists' personal experience of "being a contemporary artist" in a manner which minimized the intrusiveness of my initial impressions and prior knowledge on the subject and would potentially open up the possibility of discovering new meaning in

the young artists' experiences. To this end, the interviews were guided by whatever issues were deemed to be of significance by the artists.

As I examined the transcribed interviews, one aspect stood out. For a group seemingly disinterested in utilizing their practice beyond the notion of "art for art's sake", these young artists nonetheless talked a lot about this issue, and they did so in various individual ways. In fact, one recurring theme stood out: many of them do not expect to be able to earn a living from their art, and referred to this as a given and as a form of privilege. This sense of autonomy was seen by several of the young artists as closely related to being able to immerse themselves in and explore their artistic practice without being distracted by external tasks or expectations. For example, both faculty (who were also all practicing artists) and students shared stories about how, while being poor might entail an immediate sense of economic, political, and/or social heteronomy, it would be accompanied, and maybe even overruled, by the experience of the resulting artistic autonomy: not spending time on secondary jobs, which might otherwise reduce the time available to focus on one's art; the political authentication of whatever (more or less indirect, though often anti-establishment) message one might wish to convey; or the social stamp of approval gained from one's peers by prioritizing art over economic, political, or social factors.

On the other hand, the economic, political, and/or social heteronomy experienced in utilization was also seen as potentially leading to a sense of artistic autonomy (related to a sense of freedom or greatness), as the expensive equipment, travels, and the like they might desire as part of their artistic practice were suddenly within reach. For example, they could achieve such goals by simply selling their art, or as a result of utilizing their practice in various networking activities or promotion via different media, which might, for example, earn them a residency abroad. Similarly, different kinds of utilization which somehow earned them money or promoted their careers would provide them with a sense of artistic autonomy as the result of not having their artistic process cluttered by the reality of such matters as having to help provide for a family.

However, these latter aspects were not emphasized by either the students or the faculty in the interviews; rather, they came out as part of their talking about the conflict between artistic heteronomy by utilization and artistic autonomy in the form of having time, focus, freedom, authenticity, and so on. Yet in this, I noticed, there was a strong tendency for them to contradict themselves or (more or less consciously) tell of multiple experiences of (and future expectations regarding) utilizing their art which

were “incompatible” with their expressed sense of artistic autonomy, which clearly referred back to the “art for art’s sake” culture at the school. In this, it became clear that the young artists had the idea of pure romantic autonomy with them, but they were also telling me about various other, messier and far less pure experiences of artistic autonomy and heteronomy. If I wanted to understand the ambiguous mess of contradictions they were experiencing while carrying this idea with them in the everyday life of working with art, I realized that I needed somehow to add to the structural complexity which characterizes much research on this area.

To illustrate the theoretical conversation that these messy empirical findings led me to explore, rather than taking excerpts from across the different interviews, I, as mentioned above, present three detailed vignettes based on individual interviews with three of the young artists. In principle, these vignettes could have been built upon most of the 23 interviews. The choice to focus on the stories of Emma, Simon, and Olivia<sup>xxi</sup> was based on the assessment that these three excerpts between them empirically unfold a variety of specific examples of the everyday experience of practicing art and considering a career in the world of art. I feel that these examples represent the empirical variety in the autonomy and heteronomy dynamics across all the interviews. Accordingly, these individual vignettes, which have been selected at the expense of other situations and quotes, are intended to be few but relatively encompassing. In the form of these somewhat lengthy, “messy” vignettes, which resemble the actual narrative progression (and locality) of the interviews, I empirically explain how each of these young artists experiences the ambiguity of what I have come to define as the antinomies of autonomy in the utilization of their practice. In other words, my focus is how they experience the ongoing shuttling back and forth between a sense of artistic autonomy and heteronomy (Rancière, 2002, 2010).

## **Antinomies of Autonomy: The aesthetics in the ambiguous everyday life of the artist**

The following discussion will be structured as a conversation between the Bourdieuan legacy as a formative factor in the trajectory of the sociology of art and a “return” to aesthetic philosophy in the form of Rancière’s thoughts on the everyday sensible experience of the dialectic relationship between the social, the aesthetic, and the political in the practice of art. As explained above, this conceptual conversation will be

empirically exemplified using the everyday experiences of young contemporary artists, and will conclude with the concept of the antinomies of artistic autonomy as a way to understand ambiguity in making use of art today. We begin with a visit to one of the young Danish artists.

## **I - Emma**

In her small basement studio, which she shares with a group of peers, I meet the recently graduated Emma. I take off my wet raincoat and breathe in the smell of damp cement dust, fresh wood, and ink. We start talking as I get settled across from her at her desk, where she is working on a series of prints. Emma describes herself as a “capitalist-critical and norm-critical” artist. The studio is located in one of the upcoming trendy areas of Copenhagen, and I comment on the location. She replies that they just got the place and are very excited about the area. However, it would be absurd for her to sell her prints in any of the hip local design shops, she explains.

But then she stops herself. “It’s actually much more complex than that. And I’m not saying that I would never get a gallerist, either... what’s a gallerist, really?” she asks me, rhetorically and perkily. I leave the question hanging in the air as the kettle boils and Emma gets up to make us some instant coffee at the makeshift kitchenette in the middle of the room. As she sits down, she continues: “I’m just not interested in that stuff, you know. It’s more about art work as a dialogue... People who want to buy my stuff, but who are really interested in what I do. Those are the kind of people I would like to sell to. Then it all kind of makes sense – you get excited because it sort of acknowledges that they too find it interesting as a dialog, which is way cooler than if they wish to resell it for profit. That I’m not interested in. I don’t find that interesting at all... but I’m quite consistent in that way: political before I’m interested in money. That’s also part of my practice.”

We go on to talk about other matters for a while, and then return to the issue of money. Emma explains to me how people at the art academy are “scared shitless of talking about how to make money” and she quotes one of her professors at the school, who courageously opposes this culture in saying to the art students, “Seriously, nobody dares to talk about how artists make money because that is totally taboo, but we all want to make money from our art.’ She finds that “absolutely liberating” in that she, as she explains to me, “personally struggles to be with a gallery, while also being political, because is it then okay to be with a gallery, or...? I think we are all very torn

about it, and it is crazy difficult, because we wish to be political with our work, and then you have this grocer as this bizarre middleman.”

In a critical tone, she goes on to describe fancy gallerists and dealers who pick out artists and hype them only to sell their works for a higher price. In short, she thinks the whole “gallery thing is extremely neo-liberal”, and, considering her practice, she is not sure she wants to be part of that. “On the other hand, they go to some really awesome fairs, which gives you the opportunity to be noticed and maybe be invited to bigger exhibitions.” Emma’s tone of voice changes here, and as she chats about going to cool art fairs in London, Berlin, and New York, she takes my imagination away from the grey basement studio matching the Copenhagen fall outside.

Halfway to New York, I come to think about Bourdieu’s words on the art dealer as the “cruel unmasking of the truth of artistic practice”, as they reveal the calculating self-interest of the artist.<sup>xxii</sup> However, sitting here, listening to Emma, the situation appears to be more complicated than that. She continues, “This does not happen if you are at some paltry gallery in the countryside, where people on the other hand would be totally real and actually interested in the work you do, and wont resell, but maybe just want the art hanging in their home, and maybe that’s more down to earth in a way.” I too come back down to earth, and have a sip at my now cold coffee as Emma notices offhand that in such a place you “could probably really sell a lot”. She ponders for a second, then looks at me and again asks, rhetorically and now with a sense of discouragement, “Should I get two different identities, then? Because you do not put that on your website, what you are selling at a place like that, or what?”

In the “return” to the philosophical question of aesthetics, fronted in particular by Jaques Rancière, the aesthetic is not to be understood in the narrow sense of the perception and judgment of art.<sup>xxiii</sup> Recall the Kantian notion of artistic autonomy as the anticipation of autonomous art as a universal truth of which the subject (in principle) can strive for a disinterested autonomous judging.

Instead, it is to be understood in the broader sense of the “articulation between art, the individual and the community” (Robson, 2005). An experience that is relevant to life in general (Shusterman, 2006), not limited to the arts as such. Rancière attempts to shift the focus away from aesthetics as a matter of “art and taste” (Rancière, 2005) and all the cultural political connotations within that and towards “different ways of being in the world” (Papastergiadis, 2008, p. 364) as a broader encompassing understanding of

the aesthetic as a complex and dynamic sphere of experience. In this way, Rancière's notion of aesthetics differs from the (in the sociology of art) influential "production and consumption of art" perspective<sup>xxiv</sup> (e.g., Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993c). Similarly, as Rancière phrases it with reference to Bourdieu's *Distinction* (2010),<sup>xxv</sup> it goes beyond aesthetics as a "mere sublimation and concealment of social difference" (Rancière, 2005, p. 15).

Curiously, while Bourdieu, as mentioned above, claims Kant's work to be a thinly veiled dominance by the privileged ruling elite (Bourdieu, 1993b, p. 250), Rancière criticizes Bourdieu for similarly staging aesthetics as "social distinction concealing itself under the veil of the Kantian 'disinterestment' of the judgment of taste" (Rancière, 2005, p. 15). However, the point here is that, opposed to Bourdieu's differing between the social, the economic, and the political across seemingly incompatible levels, fields, and capital, in which artists are caught in a "structurally ambiguous position" as "defenders of art for art's sake" (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 167), Rancière emphasizes the 'dialectic relationship between the social, the aesthetic and the political' (Rancière, 2005, p. 15) across the individual, social, and collective, autonomy and heteronomy, and the art and the non-art (Rancière, 2002). This refers back to the Kantian legacy of universality in the aesthetic experience in understanding this as a specific sphere "which invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience" (Rancière, 2005, p. 15). In other words, this more broadly engaged version of aesthetics (compared to those of both Kant and Bourdieu) becomes a "new way of studying the interface of art and life" (Bennett, 2012, pp. 2-3).

In the framing of art and life as an ongoing dialectic, Rancière proposes aesthetics as the (re)configuring of time and space, in how we grasp, for example, the state of art (Rancière, 2005, p. 13). In the case of this study, "the state of art" would involve developments in how the artists experience the utilization of art and artistic autonomy, and how these developments influence how we might understand the artists, and maybe art in society. The notion of an ongoing dynamic (re)configuring can be understood as a "distribution of the sensible", a "set of relations between the perceptible, the thinkable and doable that defines a common world" (Rancière, 2012, p. 11) In that sense, we can understand the practice of art (similar to Rancière's "practice of labor" (Rancière, 2005)) as a dynamic distribution of the sensible in a reconfiguration of experience (Dasgupta, 2008) with no final answers. Consequently, the experience of autonomy in the utilization of art contains a potential reconfiguration in how art relates to everyday life, and how one chooses to make use of it.

Recall the young artist Emma and her autonomous claim to be a “capitalist-critical” political artist on account of a heteronomous “extremely neoliberal” and “capitalist” gallery scene against which she positions her practice against. Further, this dialectic plays out in a constant shuttling back and forth between two elements. Firstly, the possibility of autonomously acting in the gallery context, when the people buying her works are “really interested” and “find it interesting as a dialogue” as opposed to reselling it “for profit”. Secondly, the antinomy in the awareness of the signature of her practice (maintained via her website, for instance) and how this does not benefit from engaging with uncool galleries, where she suspects to find that kind of client (which fit with her idea of artistic autonomy in relation to the dialogues about art work). This could instead serve her in moving into the galleries which she experiences as heteronomous in their capitalist logic, but which are also potential stepping stones to having her art shown both at home and abroad (a prospect which taps into the hope of artistic autonomy for her as an artist). Recalling Bourdieu’s basic premise of the artist as not only producing the value of the art object, but – inseparable from that – producing himself as artist (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 164), these are aspects of artistic autonomy and heteronomy related not to the art work as such but to her experience of making use of her practice, acting, and working in the world of art. With Emma’s example, however, we can take a first step towards revealing the complexity in these experiences – experiences which could be defined as an ongoing multifaceted antinomy of what she reflects upon as a personal struggle of being “torn” between her “consistent” capitalist-critical practice, the artistic signature within it, and her hope to utilize this in various ways.

As such, Emma’s experiences resemble the notion of the structurally ambiguous position of the artists struggling for cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986a). However, the “art for art’s sake” culture at the art academy, which in Bourdieu’s perspective would belong to the autonomous part of the struggle experience, is here revealed also to contain a sense of autonomous antinomy between the autonomous claim of not making money from one’s art and the heteronomy in this same culture, the distancing of which she obviously feels liberated from in referring to their talks on the subject. Similarly, consider her autonomous hope and sense of possibility in potentially putting on or partaking in bigger exhibitions and joining cool fairs abroad to exhibit her art, as well as showing it to a broader audience while also adding to her *résumé*, and how this hope works in dynamic antinomy with the described heteronomy in making money from her art and engaging with this seemingly neo-liberal capitalist gallery scene.

The next vignette, of my meeting with young artist Simon, further unpacks and exemplifies a number of antinomies of artistic autonomy.

## **II - Simon**

“I was sure I was never going to be an artist, because I did not want to be poor, and art just equals poverty.” I have arrived at a Copenhagen café to interview the young artist Simon. He quickly clarifies that he nevertheless ended up choosing “the premise of making ‘art for art’s sake’”, and now works a second job designing digital apps to be able to fulfill that intention. We sit at a small, wobbly table outside the café, watching people pass by. Simon says he sees his artistic practice as an ongoing personal development to be maintained throughout his life. He explains that it is when this development “...stagnates that you are in danger. And that is where the market becomes a dangerous thing.” That artists, upon having a bit of success in the market, risk becoming trapped in repeatedly producing the kind of art which the gallerists have found to be sellable as opposed to the autonomous art one would produce independently of that.

This is where digital design comes into the picture. Simon reminds me, “So I have something to fall back on... Nobody has the opportunity to work only with their art, to be an artist body and soul.” He ponders for a while and then says, “which is quite interesting in terms of what art then is today.” He explains how a lot of his peers choose to do their conceptual art in the form of photos, drawings, text, and digital video, “because that is a cheap way to do art... That is what they can afford to produce.” They get an idea and they fairly quickly execute it via accessible mediums or forms. This reminds me of one other artist I have spoken to, so I share with him the story about Jane who told of an upcoming exhibition of hers. She wanted to produce a very large print on aluminum which would prove quite costly to produce. She wanted to apply for funding but would not receive a reply before the exhibition was scheduled. This left her with the options of using her own money or producing it in another, cheaper fashion. Aesthetically, the aluminum would be amazing, but if she did not get the funding or were unable to sell the work afterwards, she would lose all the money. In sum, the whole situation left her feeling artistically inhibited.

Simon nods in agreement, and then points his finger at me to emphasize his point: “That is where society’s big clock comes into the picture.” He tells me how he feels alienated in his subjugation to the societal norms of having to earn money and fit into other people’s expectations of how he spends his time in relation to the amount of utilizable output. He feels that society in general perceives artists as doing nothing with their time. But they do, he sighs, “It is just a very individual creative process, which does not always materialize itself in an actual work. It can just be an idea or sketch, and then you stop there.”

We take turns balancing our coffee cups on the unstable café table. Simon’s concerns about art and time relates not only to public opinion and the art market but also to public and private funding for art. In principle, he tells me, funding rather than commercial sales is the way to make the big projects which will cost more time and money to produce. On the other hand, to secure the much sought-after funding, artists need to show an impressive record of prior exhibitions, which “is also a very expensive process, since it takes a lot of time”. He sighs, “You cannot just exhibit the same work twice; you need to bring something new, plus you also want to be able to challenge yourself.” In addition to this, he makes clear, the success rate is very low and the amount of time he would spend on writing the applications would quickly exceed the potential pay-off.

I ask him whether challenging himself is part of his practice, referring back to the fear of personal stagnation, and he responds by telling me about how it is equally important for him to challenge and influence society and “fulfil his social responsibility”. “The artist has a capacity in society that is totally exceptional,” he says, and emphasizes that it is not just about simplified political ideas of “an overheated planet” but “more of an approach, an atmosphere, and understanding”, which – he underlines this point by articulating it carefully – “works slowly”.

We talk about other issues for a while and then return to social perspective, as Simon frowns thoughtfully and declares, “I think I have lost my faith in changing society for the better. ...it is the signature of the artist that creates the value. You get respect and acknowledgement from your name and what you create is in a way put in second place.” I ponder the ambiguities in Simons narrative, as he adds, “You can make insane amounts of money on cheap-ass material. There is no logic to why it should be so expensive. That can be very stressful and time-consuming.” He says he is aware he must support himself; he is not complaining. The main issue lies elsewhere; some politicians argue – he paraphrases in a sarcastic tone – “that you can make art whenever you feel like it, and it does not cost you anything!” He breathes, grabs his

coffee to finish it, and looks at me. “And that is absolutely correct... a good idea in itself will cost you nothing, but getting it out there, that costs you a lot of money.”

As outlined above, Rancière works with the aesthetic in a sense which relates back to the Kantian idea of “*a priori* forms of sensibility” (Rancière, 2005, p. 13); a sensing of life through an understanding of how it actually works rather than by mere observation. Aesthetics, he further states, “is not a matter of art and taste; it is, first of all, a matter of time and space”. (Rancière, 2005, p. 13). Consequently (and opposed to Bourdieu’s structural emphasis), the connection between art and life in a specific place is never fixed or ordered, but takes place in a variety of situations of shuttling between autonomy and heteronomy influenced by the complex mix of history, power structures, and hierarchy in a given place (Rancière, 2002, 2010).

Bourdieu’s “position-taking” as the social dynamic found in the struggle between established traditions and new ways of, for instance, practicing art and being an artist, serve somewhat in the same way to “loosen up” the structuring of how the individual relates to the culture of the given field(s) and the dispositions of the specific individuals involved (Bourdieu, 1985). This is similar to the way his thoughts on the “pure gaze” indicate agency with the artist, as a pure artistic motivation by which cultural producers as individuals nonetheless take part in rejecting any demands external to the artistic field. This pure motivation is also part of the field being understood as autonomously capable of setting up its own norm for artistic legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1968).

Nonetheless, this “space of possibles which transcends the individual agents still functions as a kind of system of common reference” (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 177), where – as a result – the “artistic position-takings are essentially understood as semi-conscious strategies in a game in which the conquest of cultural legitimacy... is at stake” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 137). In other words, despite the potential to take new positions, from a Bourdieuan perspective this notion of artistic autonomy still emphasizes the artist’s place in the world of art as structured by the conquest of cultural legitimacy. This sense of structure, I propose, risks overlooking the real-life complexity (and potential change) in the world of art – a complexity which, in the everyday experience of it, is likely go beyond a notion of autonomy characterized by the idea of “disinterestedness”, that is to say the deliberate distancing of oneself from any economic necessity related to one’s artistic practice (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 76).

Let me exemplify this using the example of the vignette of the young artist Simon. Note the antinomy in Simon's autonomous hope of ongoing artistic development on account of engaging with a "dangerous" heteronomy in the art market. Consider how Simon's similar claim of autonomy in producing art which does not compromise on the time and money needed to realize its artistic potential works in ongoing antinomy with the public funding which can enable this, but which is also experienced with a sense of heteronomy in its institutional structures and low success rate. Consider, too, how the same choice of the premise of "art for art's sake" and autonomous freedom from being subjugated to temporal or economic structures ("that art works slowly") plays against the heteronomy of both "society's big clock" and the public prejudice of lazy artists and the hobby-like simplicity of artistic practices.

Building on this, yet another and related antinomy unfolds itself as Simon expresses the reason for being part of such society, not only how this involves a heteronomous awareness that he "must support himself" but also an autonomous "exceptional capacity" to challenge and influence that society. The shuttling back and forth between a sense of heteronomy and autonomy continues as the autonomy also entails a sense of heteronomy of its own. This can be seen in how quickly he seems to lose faith in this capacity when relating this to the heteronomy of the abstract and illusive economic logic of an art market where "you can make insane amount of money on cheap-ass material". Nevertheless, this option of utilization also carries with it a sense of autonomy: that of enabling him to produce art without the heteronomy of worrying about expensive material or production forms.

Recall how, when framing art and life as an ongoing dialectic, Rancière proposes the aesthetics, the dynamic sensed "and" in "art and life", as the (re)configuring of time and space (Rancière, 2005, p. 13) to be understood in the broader sense of the "articulation between art, the individual and the community" (Robson, 2005), and as an experience that is relevant to life in general (Shusterman, 2006), not limited to the arts as such. Drawing on these thoughts, Simon's experience of the different antinomies of artistic autonomy would not qualify as a case of pure gaze, of pure artistic motivation rejecting external demands (Bourdieu, 1968). Instead, we might understand his experiences as a constant back-and-forth in him as an artist who senses the time and space in which he works. These notions of time and space go beyond the artistic field, as one which is autonomously capable of setting up its own norms for artistic legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1968), to involve such elements as society and the public also.

Consider, also, Rancière's proposition to reconsider approaching artistic autonomy as a structural fact, as something one can possess, and to seek instead to understand it as a highly complex and ongoing dynamic experience appearing in everyday acts entangled in heteronomy (Lütticken, 2014), opening up to different ways of being in the world (Papastergiadis, 2008, p. 364). If we apply this broader, encompassing perspective of the aesthetic sphere of experience to the notion of the multifaceted complex of antinomies, the social dynamic struggle of "position-taking" which Simon is encountering as an artist (Bourdieu, 1985) has in a way become "multi-dimensional". It has shifted from the idea of a dynamic between the autonomy-aspiring individual and the culture of the field, and the risk of artistic heteronomy in the social, political, and economic aspects within it, to the notion proposed here: a constant, dynamic antinomy which, for example, also includes individual experiences of autonomy based on the anticipation of – not a romantic notion of autonomy suggesting a universal truth (as Kant would suggest) – but an anticipation towards heteronomy, which enables the individual to sense and act in this multifaceted complex of artistic autonomy as experienced in everyday life. In this way, individuals also engage with heteronomy without personally or culturally losing their sense of themselves as artists.

### **III - Olivia**

We are in a shared kitchen on one of the floors housing the student's ateliers at the Art Academy in Copenhagen. They had a little spontaneous party last night, Olivia explains, as she clears one of the tables of empty bottles. And they don't have any more coffee, she apologizes, but she might be able to find some clean glasses for water. I sit down at the make-do clean table, as she clatters around near the sink. "I have two parallel thoughts," she says, joining me. She explains that she oscillates between "accepting that you are an artist" in the sense of looking inside and practicing the art "as my personal, as my own... with no other options than really living in your art" and taking a different job, such as teaching art.

However, in embracing the former situation, which sounds to me like the ultimate case of art for the artist's sake, "then there's nothing else, and then you're so very exposed, and you're so dependent on people – other people. And I think that's what I'm afraid of." I nod to acknowledge the ambiguity she expresses, as she unpacks the matter further. "For economic reasons, you cannot just not show your art in 10 years. That's not how it works, you must maintain it. And then you end up having to put on an exhibition," she says, placing very strong emphasis on the "having to", "because now

you have a gallerist and he says that now you must – because it’s like a job. But it’s this weird position of being your own slave, in a way. That’s why I’m not sure I really want to be an artist, because I want the art to stay completely untouched. I want a house in the countryside, where I can just be and do my art.”

One of her peers comes to the kitchen and also clatters around for while probably looking for the missing coffee, and the two of them briefly exchange humorous recollections from the night before. The young man cheerfully leaves, empty-handed, down the long hallway, heading for a door which opens to his small studio. Olivia says, “As soon as you start to think about it, the art market is like all these speedbumps... When you think about: this should be sellable. Before you couldn’t sell a performance piece, but even that you can do now. It’s very hard to make art which cannot be sold. Even though some artists work on this – I think that’s super cool – obviously.”

We talk about the community on the floor, how they have all personalized their small studios, from the “empty white cubes” which were handed over to them from the graduating cohort. Olivia likes the underlying symbolic resistance to the institutionalized “white cube”, and tells me, “Personally, I think you can be an artist without selling your art... but...” she pauses for emphasis, “If you do sell your art, then you’re an artist – because then you have sold your art. It’s kind of full-circle, and then it’s in a way okay; I’ve worked and I’ve gotten my money.”

She assures me that “one is aware of the market as an artist”, and goes on, “this doesn’t mean that you have to adjust your art to it – but you’re still not totally free either!” I nod again, and drink some of my water. “But then there are different ways to free oneself, for example create art which cannot be sold, or say, I won’t sell my art. But then you need another job, and then you have less time for your art, and then your art won’t be as cool. The cooler you want your art to be, the more time you have to spend on it.” I think of Simon and all the others, as Olivia adds, “But if it is really cool art, it gets sold.” She talks a bit about some “fantastic super narrow art” recently sold on the market, and then reassures me, and maybe herself, “You can always sell your art to a gallery or a collector who is very intellectual and interested in art – somebody who’s a good buyer. But then you still don’t own it anymore, and it can end up anywhere!” I’m reminded of my interview with Emma, coincidentally one of the graduates whose studio Olivia and her friends now inhabit, as Olivia sums up, “It’s all very complicated... that’s the way it is, I guess.”

If we follow Rancière’s line of thought, and what has been illustrated to us in the vignettes above, there is no conclusive answer to the link between the beautiful (the art

in itself, and all the legacies it brings with it) and the art of living (life as experienced). This link is constantly playing out in different situations of what is taken into account and who takes part in the experience (Robson, 2005). This takes us back to another corner of the Kantian legacy. In his *Critique of pure reason* (1933, first published 1794), Kant reflects upon reason and experience in a natural science context. From this I draw the notion of “antinomies” as dialectic attempts to understand experience via mythical and misleading principles (Grier, 2006, p. 196), in order to further explain the idea of them put forward in this paper. From Kant’s perspective, one can understand antinomies as an example of “categories viewed in abstraction from the conditions of sensibility (space and time)”, which as a result can serve as illusory “formal rules” or “pure concepts” for thinking about possible objects which (essentially) “must be given to us in experience” (Grier, 2006, p. 192). As such, the theoretical idea of, say, pure autonomy can indeed work as a reasonable conception which, according to Kant, gives “direction to our thought that would in no other way be received” (Grier, 2006, p. 192). But at the same time, Kant argues, there is an inherent illusion involved in such reason, which is exactly what is revealed in antinomies (Grier, 2006, p. 194). That is, the shuttling back and forth between various categories of “pure concepts” and the, I would argue, messy everyday experiences of these concepts and ideas.

The notion of antinomies hereby comes to reflect the equally rational yet contradictory result of relating sensible perception or experience to pure conceptual thought. The notion of antinomies can thus serve as an attempt (if nothing else) to grasp “experience” in relation to (as opposed to falling outside of or being solely dominated by) “society’s ruling concepts” (Eagleton, 1990, pp. 13-14). Consequently, one can grasp the individual artist’s anticipation of autonomous art as not necessarily equaling a case of strategic position-taking in the field of art. In this, life’s “mysterious ways” somehow become “mappable” via sensibility (Eagleton, 1990, pp. 13-14): making sense of what it means to be an artist in today’s world of art.

Let us go back to the vignette of the young artist Olivia and her ultimate autonomous hope, the pure idea, of doing art for her own personal sake, as “really living in your art” as “your own”, inherently playing against a heteronomy of both economic and social motivations for utilizing her art, “for economic reasons you can just cannot show your art in 10 years” and “if you do sell your art, then you’re an artist”. This antinomy results in a dialectic feeling of being her “own slave”. Similarly, Olivia reveals an antinomy in the dialectic of shuttling between, on the one hand, the heteronomy in the current salability (and underlying notion of “selling out”) now related to art forms which used to signify autonomy from art-market forces, such as performance pieces,

and, on the other hand, the autonomous claim of how she “obviously” found the artists who nevertheless fought this development “super cool”. Correspondingly, however, she expresses an individual, autonomous hope in the potential for selling her art, based on the logic that “if it is really cool art, it gets sold”. And how the antinomic shuttling continues as this is related to the potential autonomy of finding a gallery or collector who is very intellectual and interested in art, as an expectation positioned against the sense of heteronomy in her then not owning her art anymore and the possibility for it to “end up anywhere”.

Earlier, I proposed to explore the ambiguous dynamic between these mythic ideas of art and real life as a shuttling between and across the individual, social, and collective, autonomy and heteronomy, and the art and the non-art (Rancière, 2002). From the different antinomies experienced by Emma, Simon, and Olivia, I gather three main characteristics for the reconsideration of autonomy which all work across these different levels and aspects of the lived experience of artistic autonomy.

Firstly, it appears that the antinomies between the various mythic or pure ideas around autonomy of art and the everyday experiences of acting in, with, and/or against these ideas unfold across what I will call *individual* and *structural* collective aspects of the world of art; individual aspects such as motivation and identity and collective aspects such as the art school, the gallery scene, public funding, and the idea of society and the public. Recall Olivia as she expressed the individual-collective link in how, for economic reasons, you have to show and sell your art (despite the heteronomous experiences of engaging with the commercial aspect of the art world this might entail), since “if you do sell your art, then you’re an artist”. Or Simon’s example of the ongoing antinomy between the autonomy in producing art while not compromising on the time and money spent, and the public funding which on the one hand can enable this but which on the other causes a sense of heteronomy due to its institutional structures and low success rate. Then we saw Emma, who struggles with the antinomy of, on the one hand, a sense of heteronomy in actually having the wish to make money and engage with a gallery, with “this grocer as this bizarre middleman”, while experiencing artistic autonomy in being a “capitalist-critical and norm-critical” artist. Secondly, the antinomies of autonomy also seem to be experienced across issues relating to the autonomy and heteronomy of *art work* as an object and of the artist as an *individual*. Remember, for example, Olivia’s experience of antinomies of autonomy in being her “own slave” when producing her art, while she expressed autonomous hope of being in sync with her art and watching over her art, and heteronomy in letting it go

into the world only to worry how it could “end up anywhere”. Or Simon’s statement that “you cannot just exhibit the same work twice”, which causes a sense of heteronomy on account of the time and money then required to produce new works, not only because the galleries would want something new, but because there is a sense of artistic autonomy in the idea that “you also want to be able to challenge yourself”.

Thirdly, antinomies of autonomy also appear to be experienced between the autonomy and heteronomy related to the *art work* and the *structural* aspects of the world of art, as Simon explains in his experience of autonomous art working “slowly” in relation to the heteronomy of “society’s big clock”. Recall Emma and how the autonomy experienced in the hope that her art works will enable a “dialogue” between the art and the people buying it was working in a dialectic antinomy with the heteronomy of the uncool galleries where such buyers were found.

Thus, the “and” in art and life, as the inherent dynamic in artistic antinomies, can be a lot of things, and hereby the idea of antinomies entails the potential to explain a great mess of multiple possible antinomies across the art work as an artistic object, the agency of the individual artist, and structural collective aspects in the world of art.

In other words, in this paper I have proposed a conceptualization of artistic autonomy which hopefully enables a further discussion of the “and” in art and life as a mess which cannot be pinned down in a simple conflict between good and bad. Instead, it should be understood as a messy complex where the supposed opposites of heteronomy and autonomy are unfolding in a continuously developing dynamic, which evolve along with more general developments taking place in the world of art. For example, the revival of the studio model for producing art, the idea of the artist as a commercial brand (Alexander & Bowler, 2014, p. 13), and the increasing bearing of the art and entrepreneurship discourse (cf. Mangset & Røyseng, 2009; Scherdin & Zander, 2011). This dynamic complex of antinomies of autonomy is made up of the various legacies of pure, disinterested artistic autonomy and the experiences of autonomy and heteronomy in the everyday lives of those utilizing artistic practice. These antinomies of autonomy are experienced across the various levels and aspects of the art object, the individual, and the structural collective.

Accordingly, this paper concludes along the lines of Alexander and Bowler’s (2014) proposition that a fixed final answer to what it means to be an artist in today’s art world is very difficult to pin down. Similarly, to draw on yet another proposed art-world development suggested at the beginning of this paper, the move towards a degree of “increased commercialization” in today’s art worlds (Alexander & Bowler, 2014) will inevitably need to be understood in a multifaceted and culturally ambiguous manner,

where commercialization does not equal artistic heteronomy alone. By reconsidering the idea of artistic autonomy as only a “pure” ideal, artistic autonomy can be understood as ongoing dynamic antinomies between the discourses of art and everyday life.

## Conclusion

Interviewing and observing a group of young artists from the Schools of Visual Arts at The Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen led me to discover a puzzling ambiguity in their everyday experiences of artistic autonomy in making use of their artistic practice. It seemed as though the notion of autonomy were messier and more ambiguous than a mere contradiction between, for instance, “art for art’s sake” and making money from, or a career out of, one’s art. Sociology of art as a discipline has dealt extensively with the issue of artistic autonomy in the utilization of art, and in this, the autonomy of the artist is often positioned against or in relation to the structures of the field or world of art (e.g., Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993c). Yet in the sociology of art, there is also a shift towards an increased emphasis on the complexity of the relationship between the artist and the structures of the world of art (e.g., Abbing, 2002; Heinich, 1996; Mathieu, 2012), which I have sought to further with the modest contribution of this paper. This development coincides with a present-day situation in which changes in the world of art have come to include a global art (labor) market in rapid growth and the introduction of neo-liberal agendas on the part of arts institutions. In these circumstances, the utilization of art and its implications for art in society appear to unfold in an increasingly complex manner (Alexander & Bowler, 2014; Zolberg, 2015). In spite of this, Bourdieu’s (1993) notion of the artist as motivated by the romantic idea of practicing art solely for art’s sake remains influential in terms of how autonomy in the utilization of art is conceived in the sociology of art (e.g., Abbing, 2002; Alexander & Bowler 2014; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006; Mathieu, 2012; Røyseng et al., 2007). This inspired the proposition of this paper, namely to reconsider the notion of artistic autonomy in the utilization of art as important to the everyday sense-making of the artist.

In order to contribute to this increasing scholarly emphasis on the complexity of the relationship between the artist and the structures of the world of art, this paper evolved as a theoretical conversation on how Jacques Rancière’s thoughts on artistic autonomy as an ongoing dialectic shuttling between the discourses of art and everyday life has the potential to complement the Bourdieuan legacy in the sociology of art. This

conversation took a point of departure in Kant's *Critique of judgment* and his thoughts on autonomy in the aesthetic experience (Eagleton, 1990; Kant, 2005), just as it has also drawn on the Kantian idea of antinomies as dialectic attempts to understand experience in relation to mythical principles (Grier, 2006; Kant, 1933). From this conversation, as an opportunity for re-opening rather than foreclosing the question of artistic autonomy, I have proposed the alternative concept of antinomies of artistic autonomy as a way to reconsider and understand the ambiguous meanings and actions experienced by the artist in the utilization of his/her artistic practice. The dynamic in antinomies, can play out in many different ways, and the concept of antinomies of autonomy thus has the potential to explain a vivid multiplicity of possible antinomies across: the art object, the individual, and the structural aspects in the world of art and beyond.

By weaving the three vignettes of interviews with young Danish artists into the theoretical conversation, I have sought not only to illustrate theory but also to exemplify the empirical relevance of the antinomies of artistic autonomy as important to the everyday sense-making of the artist.

Moving forward, Rancière argues that it is a simplification to talk about the autonomy or heteronomy of art in relation to art or the artist as such having the potential to change or develop collective life (Rancière, 2002, 2005).<sup>xxvi</sup> Considering the state of art in society, the antinomies of artistic autonomy could have interesting implications for research on and the practice of autonomy and the utilization of art in the interaction between art or the artist and collective life. Instead of (still) seeing art and the artists in the light of a mythic exalted role, scholars as well as practitioners in general might draw inspiration from the more pragmatic, everyday perspective found in the concept of antinomies. Likewise, this might be an occasion for enriched reflection at the Schools for Visual Arts in Copenhagen regarding the bohemian, "art for art's sake" notion of autonomy in the dominant culture around the artist with a big "A" as a conceptually creating individual who sustains and develops an artistic project over a longer period without focusing on creating commercially successful works.

## 6. Uses of time: Organizing the messy temporalities of contemporary art

*Marianne Bertelsen and Timon Beyes*

### **Introduction: a cultural exchange**

The scene is set in the large auditorium of a Chinese art academy. The walls are coated in modern wood panels bearing a curvy, organic design which gives a soft but clear sound to what is going on in the room. In rows of comfortably padded chairs, a couple of hundred Chinese art-school students and faculty members are attending a guest lecture. The tall man at the podium is representing a Danish art school. Leading up to this event, he and some colleagues have spent a week visiting the Chinese art school. Having finished his lecture on art education in a Danish and European context, he puts down his notes. He is about to add some non-scripted impressions. Indeed, some members of the Chinese faculty have asked and encouraged him to end his speech with honest feedback on the art exhibited in an exhibition at the school. What does he make of it?

The speaker hesitates. Perhaps he is thinking of the pitfalls and sensitivities of cultural exchange in general and this situation in particular. He glances over and smiles at the crowd, then says, “First of all, I want to say that I am very impressed by the level of the skills you have achieved... I see the exhibition as a demonstration of technical skills and abilities... Some of you master them very well. But at the same time, and forgive me for saying this, I also get the feeling of stepping into a world that does not exist anymore. It is as if, the moment I step into that room, I lose any contact with the world that we live in.”

The lecture and the subsequent feedback are being simultaneously interpreted from English into Chinese, causing oddly delayed responses from the crowd, who repeatedly seem to nod or frown out of sync with the timing of the speaker. Such contact with the world, he goes on to explain, involves “a consciousness of what this style, this technique is good for. And not only that: a constant reflection on who am I? Why am I

here? What am I doing? What is it all good for? When you look at these works, art is simply entertainment, ornament, decoration – probably commercially viable – but not at all relevant to the life we live today.”

A few minutes and several illustrations later, the faces in the crowd display a mix of skepticism and excitement as the tall man at the podium continues, “Let me go back to the students’ show here. I do not mean to be vicious or anything; I am saying this with the best intentions and deep respect for everything you learn. But what I see there are all examples of stylistic expressions which were used 100 years ago. It looks like European art from the 1910s or 1920s, as if nothing has happened since then. Those methods were relevant back then. They are hardly relevant today. So what would you like to show here?”

I look down at the notebook on my lap<sup>xxvii</sup>. Earlier in the lecture, when talking about art education in a Danish and European context, I noted the Danish speaker saying, “Of course we must admit that when we, 50 years ago, threw away the old master-apprentice education and craftsman-based education, something was lost in the fire. A certain technical ability, level of technical skill, was maybe lost. But on the other hand, [Danish] students have achieved a level of expression, individuality, autonomy and freedom of expression, and independence that is so much more important.” He went on to share with the Chinese audience examples of art education as practiced at the Danish Art Academy. I think to myself that the Chinese school is facing the same development process that the Danish school embarked on in the 1960s, and I feel pleased with this kind of cultural exchange: an honest example of what is gained and what is lost in the process of becoming a contemporary art school of the 21st century, an example from which the Chinese colleagues can learn. On the other hand, I have a strange sensation of sadness on behalf of the lost skills and abilities of the Danish artists, which in turn makes me feel reactionary and old-fashioned. After all, technical abilities in the artistic practices of 2014 come in the form of hired studio assistance, do they not?

## **Towards “heterochronies”**

Our introductory scene is based on ethnographic fieldwork that one of us (Marianne Bertelsen) undertook in China, following representatives of The Schools of Visual Arts at The Royal Danish Academy of Art, as they visited the Art College at Xiamen University in China in January 2014. The trip had two agendas. One was to exhibit the

Danish schools' collection of European graphic art. The second and main agenda was to explore the potential for future student exchange collaboration between the two schools. However, while the two schools share structural similarities which would enable them to potentially establish such an exchange agreement, a week of observations revealed how narratives and enactments of what it means to be contemporary differ significantly. Constructed around a number of vignettes mainly based on fieldwork notes that exemplify the different ways of making sense of, and producing, "the contemporary" in the aesthetic encounter of the two art schools, this paper seeks to develop an understanding of contemporaneity that can explain the contradictory and entangled temporalities of a globalized world of art.

Moreover, the field of art in general and art education in particular have become rather relevant matters of concern for cultural policy and cultural exchange. In the winter of 2012, the Danish Ministry of Culture published a report on the internationalization of Danish higher arts education. Written in close collaboration with the rectors of the different art schools, the report set out an internationalization agenda for how to attune art schools' outlook to an increasingly global (labor) market for art and creative practices, particularly highlighting the tool of student exchange (The Ministry of Culture, Denmark, 2012). In addition, as if foreshadowed by the art school visit, a cultural exchange program between Denmark and China was set up from autumn 2014 to summer 2015, funded by Danish government bodies and foundations. As seems customary these days, the aim of international cultural exchange is closely related to "growth market strategy" – to the homogeneous, linear time of economic growth, with the BRICS countries serving as the central geographical focus of the Danish initiative (The Ministry of Culture, Denmark, 2014b). Art is summoned to act as a vehicle or lubricator for cultural exchange and future revenues (Beyes, 2015).

In the words of the Danish Minister for Culture, "[a]rt ties people together and builds new bridges across borders. It speaks to us in a language that we can all understand." (Danish Agency for Culture, 2014). As our introductory scene indicates, however, this aesthetics of a shared language seems to be predicated on a certain notion of time and temporality; it enacts a given assumption of what the "contemporaneous" in contemporary art means. Consider the Danish speaker's sense of "stepping into a world that does not exist anymore", of styles and methods without relevance or contact to the world he lives in today. This assumption seems to suggest a temporal hierarchy of locally specific space-times of art production and education. The Chinese school is, compared to the Danish, somehow "behind" in time. In this sense, our modest study

has reverberations that venture beyond the much-discussed question of how to understand and define the contemporary of or in contemporary art (Foster, 2009) to the framing and practices of cultural policy, cultural exchange, and cultural organization in more general terms.

In order to coax out these reverberations, this paper restages some scenes of the encounter of Danish and Chinese art educators and artists<sup>xxviii</sup> and connects them to a reconsideration of temporality and contemporaneity. First, we present how the Danish contingent makes sense of and enacts “the contemporary” in the aesthetic encounter of the two art schools. In line with the dominant thinking of the (historical) development of art up to the present, we discuss how the Western visitors appear to enact the contemporary as a “temporal plot” of a homogeneous, global “one-way time” (Rancière, 2012, p. 22), or the modern chronotope of historical time, where time becomes an agent of linear transformation (Koselleck, 2004). Second, we consider our observations of the Danish-Chinese encounter as interruptions to this “temporal plot” (or perhaps “temporal trap”) of homogeneous time, in which the configuration of what is (aesthetically) possible or impossible, of what belongs and what does not belong to the contemporary and thus to contemporary art production and education, is momentarily laid bare and potentially altered. Third, on the basis of this, there emerges an enriched and more nuanced understanding of contemporaneity as “heterochronic”, that is to say made up of different yet interconnected space-times. The contemporaneous here is constructed out of simultaneous, contradictory, and heterogeneous temporalities present across local art worlds, where their interplay takes on different forms according to “site-specific” conditions. Perhaps the chronotope of linear, historical time has given way to a “broad present”, to use Gumbrecht’s term, which can be characterized as “a vast moment of simultaneities” (2014, p. xiv). In conclusion, we argue that the “heterochronic” constitution of contemporaneity reflects back on how to approach and make sense of cultural organization, and we offer a few preliminary implications for cultural exchanges in and beyond the field of art education.

### **“This has nothing to do with art”: Historical time and contemporary art**

Upon their arrival, the first activity scheduled for the Danish delegation was the visit of the exhibition at the Chinese art school. The exhibition presented a selection of works by the most talented students and some of the school faculty. As they entered the

exhibition, a couple of professors from the Chinese school took the lead in guiding the visitors through the exhibition. The group moved quietly across the dark grey, wall-to-wall carpet covering the exhibition space. As they passed the different art works, all in the form of paintings or graphic works, the Chinese professors explained the local references which appeared in several of the works. In particular, they stopped and elaborated on the works in which traditional Chinese techniques, such as ink painting and watercolor, had been applied. They were especially proud of a very unique and complicated varnish painting technique of which some of the students, through a series of paintings, demonstrated elegant mastery. The Danes nodded and smiled politely as the Chinese explained all of this. My personal impression of the paintings was that their technique indeed appeared complicated, but aesthetically they were uninteresting, even mediocre in my eyes. But what do I know? I am not an art critic. Yet I had a tense feeling of being on the cast of "The Emperor's New Clothes". I smiled and nodded along as the group continued to move unobtrusively across the carpeted space.

After a while, the hosts left the visitors to explore the exhibition on their own. As they moved along the white walls, while talking among themselves in Danish, the Danes' body language signaled curiosity and recognition, perhaps out of courtesy to their hosts. As they reached the opposite end of the exhibition space from where their Chinese hosts had gathered, they were practically whispering to each other. Not because anybody could understand them, but because their experience of the exhibition had put them in an awkward situation. One of them finally dared to say what, it seems, they were all thinking: "This is not grounded in any sort of artistic tradition whatsoever." Another added, "Looking at it actually kind of puts you in a bad mood, you know." A third chimed in, as if to sum up the group's experience: "This has nothing to do with art."

As the delegation left the exhibition to move towards the school café for refreshments, they passed through a hall where a series of man-sized sculptures were lined up. The sculptures were highly diverse in material and style, from marble to plastic, from renaissance to pop. To the visitors, the sculptures seemed to confirm the exhibition experience; again they talked among themselves about the lack of art-historical reflexivity on display. One of the Danes discretely commented to his peers, "These could have been made at the same time; how is one supposed to assess them then?"

To rephrase this, how is one to assess contemporary art when one cannot situate its production within the homogeneity of time (Rancière, 2012) that shapes Western

discourse on contemporary art (Osborne, 2013)? Even the disjointed, heavily theorized field of contemporary art and its “post-medium condition” (Krauss, 1999), where artists routinely transgress the conventional media of art practice and draw on any material whatsoever, seems to rely on this plot. Perhaps it is precisely because institutionally recognized art has since the 1960s become diverse and conceptual to such an extent that it “requires greater discursive support to be intelligible” (Kuzma, Lafuente, & Osborne, 2012, p. 7). This discursive support is found predominantly in the linear framework of Western art history, which enacts its own sub-plot of a larger narrative of one-way temporality (Osborne, 2013). What, then, is the notion of temporality at play here? How does the plot work?

This one-way temporality mirrors modernity’s dominant “chronotope”, to use Bakhtin’s term, and thus a specific representation of the configuration of time and space. The seminal work of the historian Reinhart Koselleck on the “temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history” (2004, p. 11), or what can be called the chronotope of historicism (Gumbrecht, 2014), is helpful here. The birth of modernity is entangled with a historically new construction of time as a forward-marching agent of change, presupposing an open future, a horizon of possibilities towards which we continuously move, turning the respective presents into all but momentary points of transition.<sup>xxix</sup> For our purposes, what is most striking about Koselleck’s analyses is how they demonstrate the emergence and eventual domination of a certain imagination of time, according to which phenomena are invariably affected by changes in time and humans are tied to a linear path moving through time.

In this sense, the Western idea of artistic modernity and its transformation into contemporary artistic practice reproduces the chronotope of (linear, one-way) historical time. It assumes a homogeneous process of making-present as a kind of generally accepted “regulation” between the global “march of time” and the time of individual artists and local institutions. This process is far from innocent. As philosopher Jacques Rancière has made clear in a recent foray into art theory (2012), this chronotope performs a “distribution of the sensible”, a “set of relations between the perceptible, the thinkable and doable that defines a common world” (p. 11). This common world thus orders how and to what extent people can take part and are held to be capable, so that time becomes “the best medium” for “exclusion” (ibid.). The grand narrative of “historical time”, to use Koselleck’s term, takes the form of a dialectic of, on the one hand, the necessity of progress, and, on the other hand, critical counter-narratives mourning the damages wrought by modernity, commodification, spectacle, mass

individualism, and the like. Yet both sides depart from and reproduce the same chronotope: ‘they conclude on the impossibility of resisting the law of time’ (p. 20). In his work on the contemporaneity of contemporary art, Terry Smith proposes a somewhat similar dialectic of “re-modernism”. The latter denotes a contradictory dynamic found in the efforts of the institutions of art to control “the contemporary” in the “aesthetic of globalization” through a persistent re-modernizing of new art to the old modernist imperatives alongside an occasional opening-up to a renewing “contemporizing of art”. In other words, change and development are framed within the dominant chronotope of historical time as it conditions the discourse of contemporary art.

As our scenes from the encounter at the Chinese art school suggest, this temporal plot appears to involve a strong sense of contemporaneity as being in “contact” and “relevant” to “today”, which itself is grounded in a specific narrative of artistic tradition and development. According to Rancière, such “global one-way time”, as well as its assumptions and mystifications, makes us “unable to understand what it makes possible or impossible” (Rancière, 2012, p. 20). Consider the two art schools. In inadvertently serving as an example of a Western art institution that exercises some kind of cultural gate-keeping, the Danish school becomes part of the temporal plot of a homogeneous global one-way time. Its representatives, it can safely be assumed, embarked on the trip to visit the Chinese school with good intentions to be “global citizens” in their meeting with the artists and aesthetics of a non-Western locality, expecting to gain new insights and foster creative dynamics via the intended student exchange program. They clearly appeared uncomfortable in the position of assessing Chinese art production and education. However, they also seemed to find reassurance in the chronotope of modern Western art history and their position within it.

### **The ordering of time and aesthetic (im)possibility**

At a later point during the Danes’ visit to the school, the representatives from the two schools sat down to discuss possibilities for a student exchange program. Before long, they seemed to become stuck on the issue of language. Compared to the Danish school, the English-language capacities of the Chinese students and faculty were limited. The Chinese did not consider this a problem since, according to them, within the visual arts, the oral or written language was not a vital aspect in teaching. The Danes disagreed and explained that how they taught and worked with art at the Danish school was based

on oral discussions and ongoing dialogues among the students as well as an often quite personal, dialogical relationship between teacher and student. Their Chinese counterparts told the story of a local faculty member who was asked by his students to elaborate on an assignment he had given. They did not need to understand what he was telling them, he answered, they just needed to do as they were shown. Everybody laughed politely on hearing this.

Leaving the discussion to go for lunch, the Danes were still clearly concerned by the language issue. In the car that took them to the lunch venue, they related this to their scepticism about a type of education focused on the mimicking of former great masters, which was a fundamental part of the curriculum at the Chinese school. They discussed how the Scandinavian style of dialogue and discussion-based teaching was a deliberate reaction to and turning away from the conservative teaching styles of the past, and how it would make no sense to send Danish students to partake in the traditional Chinese ways of teaching art.

As the delegation sat down for lunch and everybody started eating, the two groups took a break from the polite conversation in English, and among the Danes one told a story about a Chinese exchange student at a Swedish art school. Faced with her graduation project, she was confused and lost concerning examiners' expectations and how she should accommodate them. Her Swedish professor then told her to find all the Chinese restaurants in Stockholm and make paintings of their facades. "She was insanely technically skilled, like most of the Chinese art students, and the whole thing was a huge hit, because the audience saw it as a conceptual project," he explained heartily. The Danish group seemed to agree that this was a positive story of East meeting West, but that the Chinese student was also lucky in that she – exceptionally – was not required to deliver a conceptual piece, since this would have been outside her artistic capacity.

Rather than a field of inclusion and possibility, the discourse of contemporary art emerges as one of exclusion and impossibilities. In other words, one can argue that today's art institutions appropriate the plot of the homogeneity of time by defining the "ordering" of times in the arts, and thus by distributing the possibilities and impossibilities of how and to what extent people are able to take part in this world. For example, the Chinese focus on technical skills and the corresponding educational approaches are considered to be untimely and out of date and to have "nothing to do with art". Somewhat ironically, such methods are perceived as requiring and

demanding less artistic capacity than more conceptual, “contemporary” methods of practicing art. In this sense, we identify, what could be termed, a “monochronic” background to Ruth Phillips’ (2014) discussion of a neo-colonial hegemony in the Western art world’s “tenacious determination” not to take art outside the West seriously. She argues that this “gate-keeping authority” suggests a resistance towards recognizing “the contemporary cultural competence and vitality” in global modern art (Phillips, 2014, p. 19).

In her remarkable study of the Chinese urban art “village” of Dafen, famous for its mass (re)productions, especially of landmark Western oil-paintings, Wong adds a further twist to this argument. According to her, the condescending curiosity about the dialectics of “original” and “mass reproduction” enacted in Dafen captures not just aesthetic disputes but also Western concerns about increasing political and economic competition from China (Wong, 2014). This interpretation is confirmed by further accounts of the relations between developments in contemporary art and geopolitical and economic changes in Asia (e.g., Antoinette, 2014).

Such work underlines the institutional effects of the Western perception of contemporary art practices in other parts of the world. It is not just a matter of aesthetics in the narrow sense of the perception and judgment of art; it is, of course, also a matter of political and economic influence within the international art world – and of the position to define what counts as art and artful making. Reflecting on our empirical encounters through a temporal lens suggests that such non-recognition and such ordering of aesthetic possibilities and impossibilities is predicated on the ordering of time and thus on the chronotope of historical time. What is possible and impossible in the broader sense of aesthetics as different ways of partaking or ‘being in the world’ (Papastergiadis, 2008) – and thus the manifold interrelations between the social, the aesthetic, and the political (Rancière, 2005, 2010) – is significantly shaped by the chronotopes that allow certain aesthetic practices and objects to be seen and recognized while making others invisible, unrecognizable, and unthinkable.

The notion of historical time as a dominant chronotope that informs the perception and possibilities of art allows us to make sense of what happened in the encounter between the Danish and Chinese art schools and how the good intentions of international collaboration became the aesthetic impossibilities performed by institutional gate-keeping. It is as if the dominant plot of homogeneous time opened up a temporal trap for the Western art institution, a kind of self-imposed impossibility, which surfaces in the attempt to understand art which does not fit the modernist narrative of the

development of art and culture. To understand how this trap comes to the fore, we first follow Wong (2014) back to Dafen, before returning to our art-school encounter.

In her ethnography of what is perceived as the assembly-like production of art in the southern Chinese location of Dafen, where thousands of art workers were busy repainting Western masterpieces (van Goghs, Da Vincis, Warhols, etc.) for the global market, Wong (2014) reflects on what she terms the West's misunderstanding of the complexity inherent to the Chinese appropriation of the modernist legacy of Western art. How could we categorize what is going on in Dafen? Is it a matter of an alternative version of artistic modernity with Chinese characteristics? Or is it modernism's avant-garde at its best, playing with, subverting, and pushing further the (Western art world's) boundaries of what art and artists are? Wong does not argue that Dafen art is either less or more artistic; instead, she emphasizes that the artists at Dafen, beyond often independently managing their "copying" practice, do not stand at some kind of art assembly line. They work in individualized studios, also painting their own "original" paintings and pursuing individual artistic aspirations. The conditions under which the Dafen painters work are therefore strikingly similar to the independent, highly specialized, project-based way of organizing artistic work practiced by "real" contemporary artists across the globe (Wong, 2014). In this sense, they constitute a mirror image of structures and practices of global art production, appropriating these in the highly commercial Dafen "village" set-up.

The boundaries being pushed further here, then, are those of the organization and utilization of artistic practice. Arguably, such ostentatious utilization of art collides with one of the major tropes of (Western) art discourse, which even in this "presumably postmodern age" still carries with it a romantic legacy of "art for art's sake" (Alexander & Bowler, 2014). We suggest, however, that, more fundamentally, it is the presupposition of a unity of global time with the time of individual artists – or the temporal trap of homogenous time – that is cracked open here. With regard to both the "misunderstanding" of the technically potent painters at the "factories" in Dafen and the Danes' assessment of the young Xiamen artists as narrated in the previous scene, the one-way chronotope of art-historical time seems to dictate that technically advanced artistic skills allow for a smaller possibility to take part in this "common" art world than conceptual skills and capacities of self-reflection. These artists are "out of time", non-contemporary, not only on account of (the hypocritical assessment of the) resolutely commercial nature of their art, but because of their skills and methods of practicing art. Recall the Danish speaker in the opening scene: "there are all examples

of stylistic expressions, which were used 100 years ago. It looks like European art from the 1910s or 1920s, as if nothing had happened since then. Those methods were relevant back then. They are hardly relevant today.” However, as he also pointed out, there is a lingering sense of having “lost in the fire”, these methods and technical abilities: that is to say lost them in the hurry to keep up with time.

The common art-historical understanding of contemporary art sees “the avant-garde practices and various kinds of institutional modernisms” as driving the development of “modern art in Europe from the 1850s to the 1960s”. This understanding and the corresponding practices of art making were “adopted in varying degrees in most of the colonies – and [were] adapted and transformed in many of them”, as these “provinces generated their own modernities” (Smith, 2009, pp. 262-263). However, the notion of avant-gardism as pushing the boundaries of the present has, as we have shown in the scenes above, remained a central concept in the linear time of Western art development and its ordering of what is aesthetically possible or impossible. This homogeneous time involves both the romantic tradition of “art for art’s sake” and the current emphasis on conceptually grounded artistic practices. It is in this sense, we believe, that Wong’s suggestion to view the Dafen painters as avant-garde amounts to a provocation. For sure, it highlights the commercial structures organizing the world of (among others) contemporary art. It relates avant-gardism to technical skills “lost in the fire” of the expanded field of contemporary art and its pedagogies. In our reading, however, all of this is enveloped in a temporal challenge to the notion and practice of historical time, which connects the idea of avant-gardism to a linear history of Western art development (and thus to a certain monopoly on being and producing or educating the avant-garde). In this way, Wong’s book cracks open the dominant chronotope, exposes its traps and blind spots, and brings us one step closer to grasping contemporaneity as “heterochronic”.

### **The temporal “trap” and its interruptions**

The week after the visit, the delegation had returned to Denmark, and I had stayed behind. At the time of departure, expectations for the potential exchange program between the schools were low. Besides the differences in teaching and doing contemporary art, the Danes felt that it was unclear what would come out of the collaboration. They were open to the productivity of differences serving as “positive disturbance” and their potential to “shake things up a bit” at the Danish school, but the

impression lingered that at this point in its development as an art school, the Chinese organization would benefit greatly from a collaboration that would introduce them to “proper” contemporary art education, whereas the visitors (including myself as the participant observer) were not convinced by what the exchange could offer in return. In one of these concluding talks, one of the Danish art professors had referred to a cautionary tale about a Danish art student on exchange at another Chinese art school. Among other things, he had shown an interest in learning Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, but the respective professor had refused to teach him as he did not have the requisite years of prior training.

The Danish art educators emphasized that if a Danish student wanted to learn a specific technical skill, he or she was free to explore any given new art form or style as part of his/her individual artistic practice, under guidance and advice from faculty members knowledgeable in the area. Enforcing meticulous requirements for technical abilities and training would serve only to limit the development of the art students’ autonomous and original practices, they opined. In a broader sense, (re)introducing such inhibiting structures would be tantamount to stepping back in time to the conservative, elite art education which the Danish school had rebelled against in the wake of the student liberation movement in 1968, and from which its current identity as an avant-garde art school, with an intellectual, conceptual approach to teaching contemporary art, had emerged. Back to the “decoration and design”, then, which the Danish art educators felt characterized the Chinese’s approach to both teaching and doing art: “You might as well spit a Danish artist in the face before you call him a designer!”, one said. Consequently, the Danish delegation had agreed that a teaching style based on the Western example would constitute a prerequisite for collaboration between the two schools.

At the same time, it seemed unclear how the Chinese felt about the Danish way of teaching and how they saw the potential of interacting with “their” approach. The Danes thought that the Chinese were giving rather mixed and even contradictory signals. I was sympathetic to the Danes’ situation; they had helped me gain access to the school, and I had seen them struggle to make sense of the potential for collaboration all week, while also fully endorsing the idea of an international exchange of artistic ideas and practices inherent to potential collaboration. Hence, as I set out to visit one of the Chinese professors in his studio to interview him for the study of the students, I abandoned the presumed neutrality of explorative research and adopted an additional agenda of fostering the Chinese school’s partaking in the collaboration.

After several detours, I found the studio, beautifully located in a new building by the waterfront. The Chinese professor offered me a seat on one of several small sofas in the middle of the open studio space illuminated by midday sunlight through the big windows. He switched on the kettle, and as he waited for it to boil, he said, “[Chinese] education is very much about tradition and it is only about learning without thinking... They are not used to thinking for themselves. The teaching is very much about apprenticeship. You learn without thinking.” He continued to talk as he poured the water over the tea leaves: “If we think one way works, we will rather keep it that way - for a long time, and never change it...” I got the feeling that the Chinese professor was telling me what he thought I wanted to hear, knowing perfectly well that I was part of a culture of seeing art education as enabling autonomous and reflective ways of thinking and “doing” art. This annoyed me, or the non-neutral research persona I had become. He continued, “I would say there is nothing wrong with drawing, because we have done that very much, the drawing technique, and I still think if you want to be a good painter, you have to be able to make a good drawing, that is very important, the right way to train.”

Listening to his opposing statements, I now felt an odd mix of immediate irritation and a confirmed sense of judgment. I caught myself thinking that there was indeed a problem if the best the Chinese school had to offer the Danish students was drawing courses. I thought back to the first week, where we had spoken repeatedly of this issue in the Danish group. It seemed to us that there were so many other skills and competences of relevance for these young contemporary artists (Danish and Chinese) to explore.

Again relating the reflections on historical time to our empirical observations, we can now propose that the “trap of time” is becoming visible in situations where the sense of the homogeneity of time is interrupted, and, secondly, that this interruption lays bare and unhinges the temporal dialectic between the necessity of progress and its critical debunking. In these interruptions and twists, time shows itself to be “heterochronic”. First, if “interruptions” are “moments when one of the social machines which structure the time of domination breaks down and stops” (Rancière, 2012, p. 29), then time as a “principle of impossibility” (which can take the form of an aesthetic impossibility enacted in post-colonial art worlds) is distorted for moment. As if they had not received the memo on the contemporary “impossibilities” of practicing and educating in certain forms of art, the Chinese artists and educators encountered in our study made

use of the modernist legacy and mixed it with traditional and contemporary Chinese aesthetics. In doing so, the sense of the “impossibility” of time – or time’s exclusive force – was challenged and interrupted. Consequently, our vignettes show how encountering the local Chinese aesthetics of contemporary artistic practices unsettles the dominant temporal narrative informing the Danish representatives’ experience.

Second, this embodied and enacted sense of time takes the form of a dialectic response which is itself contradictory. Such is the temporal trap of the homogeneity of time: on the one hand, there is a belief in the “necessity of progress” in the sense of doing contemporary art in 2014, which seeks to break away from codified ways of doing and thinking art in different ways. On the other hand, and simultaneously, the Western responses – which include our participant observer – take on a peculiarly reactive stance in the encounter by intuitively fronting specific generalizations and assumptions about ways of doing and thinking about art as the “right”, or most contemporary, ones. The educational and artistic practices encountered at the Chinese school are consequently perceived as quaint, long-gone, “anti-progressive” approaches to doing and teaching art.

### **“Different but equally present”: the contemporary as a multitude of space-times**

Back in the studio in present-day Xiamen, and several cups of tea later, I ask the Chinese art professor how he imagines the collaboration between the schools. I begin to suspect that the irritation is mutual, as he says with an air of grievance, “The Art Academy in Copenhagen, they do not draw that much. Which I think is wrong... I have seen the level of the students, it is very low, and they have nothing. They have nothing to compare with Chinese students technically.” I balance the tiny tea cup to take a sip as I think of a diplomatic response. Before I come up with one, however, the professor continues, “But at the same time... I want to know the education system [in Denmark]; I want to know what the students and teachers think about what is art? So sometimes it is not about making a good painting, it is about what art IS! It is about the BIG questions, it is not about small painting... And in that matter both teachers and students at the Art Academy in Copenhagen are very much aware; very, very much more aware than the Chinese students.” He ponders how great it would be to have more space for discussions and workshops. In that way we are “not so different”, he tells me, and says that he “really hope[s] to combine” the two schools’ approaches. I feel that the number of contradictions in the conversation is reaching a whole new

level. The Chinese professor puts a small bowl of walnuts on the low table between us, tells me they would be good for my brain, and continues speaking about the Chinese students: “You know, technically, they are really quite good, but it cannot touch me. Too old-fashioned – it is not their own language.” I fight the impulse to ask the man to decide whether he wants the traditional approach to teaching and doing art or whether he prefers the “contemporary” approach of engaging with what are perceived to be the big questions of art by the Danish Academy. We talk about other matters for a while, but then return to the potential collaboration and the “Danish approach”: “You know, some teachers meet students once a week and talk, only talk; I do not believe in that,” he says. “I do not believe that is suitable right now for all of the Chinese students... They are not used to this form. They will get lost. So I will have to be very much involved for this entire education program – combine it with the classical, the technical, and try to open their minds.” I gaze out the big windows and reach for the walnuts.

From the participant observers’ temporally trapped point of view, does this encounter speak of a calculated institutional agenda of appropriating a legitimizing, Western art-world approach to the Chinese way of doing and teaching contemporary art? Or is it, rather, a matter of the professor’s acting under the condition of multiple space-times? Adopting a “site-specific” point of view, to produce and teach contemporary art entails what is perceived as a reactionary, outdated focus on technical abilities and rule-following as well as a critical stance towards, say, teachers meeting up with students once a week just to talk. Yet it also entails what is perceived as a progressive interest in getting to know the education system in Denmark and engaging with “what the students and teachers think about what is art?”.

In our empirical encounter of two art schools, we thus begin to sense the simultaneous presence of heterogenous temporalities in two ways: by attending to the breakdowns of the routine schemata of time as a one-way, homogeneous temporality and medium of exclusion and the ensuing misunderstandings and irritations, and by listening more closely to, for instance, the educator’s seemingly contradictory musings. Consider, too, Wong’s case, where artists are the forefront of rampant copycat commercialism just as much as they seek their independent artistic practice, where the “art village” of Dafen returns the question of avant-gardism with a twist to perhaps perplexed Western onlookers just as much as this kind of avant-garde is based on traditional technical prowess.

As researchers of cultural organization then, we need to problematize and uproot the ingrained notion of the chronotope of historical time and learn to move away from its dialectical plot of temporal convergence and divergence that enacts one homogeneous temporality. With regard to the potential of art, or a new politics of art, Rancière (2012, p. 34) envisions the practice and study of “heterochronies”. Loosely modelled on Foucault’s notion of heterotopias or “other spaces” (1986), “heterochronies” are assemblages of times, of intersecting temporalities normally held to be incompatible. They both relate to the dominant chronotope or ordering of space-time and reconfigure these distributions of what can be perceived, thought and done.

Such a science of “heterochronology”, as we could call the temporal twin of Foucault’s sketch of a science of heterotopology, would accommodate, yet go beyond, for instance, Smith’s proposed dialectic of art-institutional “re-modernism” that sanctions “the contemporary” according to the modernist order in combination with an occasional renewal or “contemporizing” of older forms of doing and making art. Here, as illustrated in Wong’s study (2014) and as indicated in the opening vignette, Chinese ways of practicing and teaching art are granted an alternative modernity (to become part of the “altermoderns”, see Bourriaud, 2009). This indeed constitutes a contemporization of other art-world aesthetics. But it is a contemporization that still seems premised on the modern plot of homogeneous, global one-way time. Such alternative modernities will inevitably seem inferior since they came later than, and are somewhat derivative of, original, “proper” modernity. At best, as we have seen, they can be provocatively presented as an alternative, or even the actual, contemporary avant-garde. Nevertheless, an avant-garde is similarly defined according to the chronotope of historical time, denoting the practice of aesthetic boundary-pushing that “has its time” but cannot really vary heterogeneously across larger spans of time or across space. A “heterochronic” understanding of art and the art world would need to push further towards the simultaneity of divergent temporalities present within and across local art worlds. As Osborne (2013) notes, uses of the “contemporary” usually make invisible the “problematically disjunctive conjunction of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities” (p. 25; italics original).<sup>xxx</sup>

Adding to our examples from the Chinese context, we can broaden the scope of our understanding of the contemporary across multiple space-times. For example, somewhat parallel to the pre-war European avant-garde, the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century New Cultural Movement (Gao, 2008) appropriated the idea of the contemporary in

challenging Chinese artistic practice as the profession of the elite literati (Jiang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999) by way of contemporary styles of “Western modes of art-making” (Clarke, 2011) as well as a cultural “spirit of rejection” (Jiang, 2008) aiming for a modern time of democracy and science (Wu, 2008). Similarly, the idea of the contemporary artist as a political renegade challenging both the political and cultural authorities was reintroduced in 1980s and 1990s China, with the “Xiamen Dada” group serving as one of the “more radical” examples of this (Fei & Huang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999). This appropriation of “the contemporary” would earn Chinese contemporary artists a place on the international art scene.

As Osborne argues, there can be no such thing as a “non-historical ontology of art”, as contemporary art is inevitably a development of modern art, which is “irreducibly historical” and temporal in terms of how we understand its implications (Osborne, 2013, p. 10). However, this temporal dialectic, “which gives qualitative definition to the historical present... must be mediated with the complex global dialectic of spaces” if we are to make sense of the increasingly “global” fiction of the contemporary (Osborne 2013, pp. 25-26). Consequently, the aim here is not only to introduce the notion of a number of spatially diverse – alternative, for instance – modernities or avant-gardes. As mentioned above, this would potentially lead us into the homogenous, one-way notion of aesthetic impossibilities: if the Danish school stands for one version of modernity or contemporary art and the Chinese school for another, the Xiamen or Dafen version of modernity or contemporaneity would still come after the Western version, looking suspiciously like belated attempts at catching up with contexts deemed superior in their aesthetic progress. However, the notion of “heterochronies” asks us to engage with locally specific space-times that are nevertheless closely connected to global mechanisms in the world of art. It is anytime or not at all, to paraphrase the title of Osborne’s book *Anywhere or not at all* (2013). In other words, temporal contemporaneities across and within local art contexts constitute a broad present, a ‘vast moment of simultaneities’ (Gumbrecht, 2014, p. xiv). “To understand [contemporary art’s] various vectors, we need to provincialize modernism, that is, to spatialize it as a series of local modernisms rather than one big universal modernism.”

## **Conclusion: attending to the temporalities of cultural organization**

If, then, the chronotope of linear, historical time has given way to a broad present, to a vast moment of simultaneities, how does a “heterochronic”, “heterotemporal understanding” (Enwezor, 2009, p. 36) of contemporaneity reflect back on cultural organization? Let us return to the words of the Danish Minister for Culture. In our example, this preliminary cultural exchange did not succeed in tying the people of these two schools together and building new bridges across borders. In this case, art did not work as a universal language that might lead to future cultural industry revenues or privileged contacts on the Chinese art market. If this outcome is considered a failure, we suggest not to problematize the motives and actions of individual Western or Chinese delegates but rather to reflect on the temporal trap of the chronotope of historical time and the possibilities and impossibilities thus laid out for thinking about, practicing, and teaching art.

The plot of historical time, that is, assuming a homogeneous process of regulation of the global “march of time” and the time of individual artists and local institutions, is vividly exemplified in the different scenes as the Danish delegation seems to focus on, respectively, the “progressive” parts of their own dialectics of the contemporary and the “reactionary” parts of the Chinese equivalent. Consequently, the attempts at opening the door to a potentially constructive combination of reactionary and progressive aspects of the collaborative teaching and production of art are misunderstood.

As we suggest understanding the “ordering” of times in the arts as a potential temporal trap, we close in on an enriched and more nuanced explanation of contemporaneity as “heterochronic”, locally specific space-times. These “heterochronies” are nevertheless closely connected to global mechanisms in the world of art and, in this, jointly produce a broad present.

We have shown in this paper how these simultaneous, contradictory, and heterogeneous temporalities are present across and within local worlds of art, and in their interplay take on different forms according to “site-specific” conditions, and we can now revise the chronotope of linear, historical time and suggest the notion of a “broad present” in the world of first contemporary art and, subsequently, globalized cultural exchange. In other words, reviewing and reconsidering the temporalities that inform cultural exchange brings us closer to understanding the complexity of such endeavors.

By taking our own understanding of the contemporaneity inherent in Western narratives of art and culture seriously, we can not only begin to understand art as it is practiced in other cultures, but also open up to the potential for new forms of seeing and acting out the politics of art and culture: what art can do, abroad and at home.

## 7. Different but equally present: Local contemporaneity between global and local spaces in art

Marianne Bertelsen

### Introduction

*'The local requires new meaning in a global era. In the end art becomes a local idea.'*

Hans Belting (2009, p. 6)

We are at the Shanghai Biennale in 2000. A Chinese curator is talking to an American art critic. He tells her, "Because all of the early show of Chinese contemporary art took place in foreign countries, it made me feel that the Chinese artists were just working for foreigners." He then continues, "We wanted to show the 'fuck-off' show style, not working for the government or in the style of Western countries, but a third way." The curator was Feng Boyi,<sup>xxx</sup> who, along with Ai Weiwei,<sup>xxxii</sup> organized the "Fuck Off" show (the show's Chinese name translates as "uncooperative attitude") at the Biennale that year. The art critic was Barbara Pollack, who included Boyi's statement in her book on the "wild, wild East" of the Chinese art world (Pollack, 2010, p. 64). The matter I aim to illustrate here is not how the artists of the Fuck Off show shocked commentators across the globe by literally leaking their own blood into the streets and dining on human fetuses, or how the show was expectedly closed down by the government two weeks later. The focus here is the double adversaries drawn up by Boyi on behalf of Chinese contemporary art, namely (i) the dominant styles and forms of the Western world and (ii) the Chinese government. This led to the voicing of a need for an alternative style, or a third way, for Chinese contemporary artists to practice their art.

In the last couple of decades, Chinese contemporary visual artists have stepped on to the scene of internationally recognized art institutions: museums, auction houses, biennales, and fairs. However, in these forums they are accused of or misunderstood as not being "contemporary" in accordance with the styles and forms which have

historically been closely related to the internationally dominant Western notions of artistic practice (Smith, 2009; Wong, 2014). For example, these artists are criticized for catering to global market interests by adopting the sarcastic styles of “cynical realism” or “political pop” (Keane, 2013; Wu, 2008). Such styles are seen as playing to the international interest in politically dissident Chinese artists by way of (at least in the eyes of wealthy Western buyer and critics) easily recognizable oil paintings echoing a postmodern style of, for instance, American pop art. Similarly, these Chinese artists tend to be assessed on their contemporaneity from a Western geopolitical outlook, which stereotypes them as either “cosmopolitans” seeking freedom from the Chinese government and its “ambivalent relationship with experimental art” or as “propagandists” practicing “sham-avant-garde” art on behalf of that same government (Ong, 2012, pp. 274-275). There seems to be no in-between, or, to follow Boyi’s call, no third way between falling short on contemporaneity on account of style and/or politics. In other words, there seems to be no way of understanding Chinese contemporary art, which acknowledges and encompasses the complex of global and local notions in contemporary art, beyond the simplified notions of global diffused contemporary styles or local politics. As such, the ‘Fuck Off’ show and Boyi’s call points firstly to a need for understanding what it means to be a Chinese contemporary artist in his/her own right. Secondly, it indicates how such efforts have so far centered around, and hence, I propose, been limited by the outlook of simplified notions on what being a contemporary artist means in a global world of art.

With the aim of taking the local art of the (Western) art world’s “periphery” seriously (Batchen, 2014), numerous scholars across global art history and social and philosophical studies of art have explored how contemporary artists have been positioned within, or try to find their own place in, simplified conflicts of the local or global (Gaskell, 2012; Kwami, 2014; Ong, 2012; Sanyal, 2014; Wong, 2012). However, these discussions too tend to center around artistic styles and forms or the institutional structures of politics and influential art organizations. These aspects should not be ignored. However, they also bring along representational issues which are irreducibly associated with Western notions of artistic modernity (Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2002; Wong, 2014); I propose that such notions lead to the exact same simplifications as those according to which a Chinese artist is a cosmopolitan seeking freedom from an oppressing government.

I wish to bring to these discussions an alternative perspective on the local in the seemingly increasingly global world of art. I position this paper in the emerging

research field of global art history while drawing on philosophical contributions to this discussion and being inspired by cultural sociology in my methodological choices. In this, I apply the theoretical conception that globalization is a highly multifaceted “back and forth” dynamic in which a complex mess of global and local influences move in and out of any given local place. On this basis, I propose that local contemporaneity can be pragmatically grasped and conceptualized via the personal experience of the individual artist (as opposed to focusing on the style and form applied, or the political involvement in play). By looking to the artists and their particular “experience of living” in the local present (Smith, 2009), I propose to explore their “personal engagement” with the local and global notions at stake (Wu, 2008). In other words, to grasp the local contemporary by way of the “subjective daily perspective” of art, in a particular place and at a particular moment in time (Gao, 2008).

Consequently, my epistemological view here is that in studying the global world of art one should take into account the “global” everybody talks about and the particular local contexts in which these notions of contemporary art play out in various ways. In doing this, I aim to understand artistic contemporaneity as it is personally experienced at the local level, which should allow me to reflect upon the global cultural phenomenon of contemporary artistic activity. In other words, I seek to answer the question of how to reconsider artistic contemporaneity as experiences of global and local spaces in art.

In January 2014, I interviewed a group of young contemporary artists (and a number of art educators) at the Art College at Xiamen University, China. When talking to these young artists about practicing contemporary art, neither cynical realism, political pop, propagandist, cosmopolitan, nor any other label drawing on simplified global or local notions of stylistic or political aspects seemed to do justice to the meaning of contemporaneity in their local situation. The interviews with the young artists from Xiamen in this paper serve as the explorative empirical point of departure in showing local contemporaneity as it is experienced in everyday life between global and local notions of art. In this, the global notions of being contemporary are represented by, for instance, how the young artists experience the influences of European art schools and the international art market, while the local notions are revealed in their individual experiences of the different issues at stake across the Chinese world of art. The paper will proceed as follows.

Firstly, I set the scene of the Chinese world of art in general, and the Xiamen Art College in particular, as the local context in which I investigate the personal experiences of contemporaneity between the global and the local. Here, I emphasize three central dialectics which I find significant in the experience of being a contemporary artist: (i) an autocratic type of cultural politics and the ambiguous soft-power value of contemporary art; (ii) the idea of the visual arts as an elite, literate profession in a double-edged type of art education; and (iii) the long-standing state-governed art organizations which favor traditional art in a world of art otherwise working primarily on market terms. Secondly, I present the methodological reflections behind this study, which emphasize an explorative and empirically grounded contextual approach to grasping the contemporary by way of locally complexifying the simplified global and local notions of art. Thirdly, I outline a conceptual framework inspired by insights from significant voices across the global art history and philosophical and social studies of art. I draw particularly heavily on Terry Smith's (2002) distinction of contemporary art as art being about survival within and the transformation of present social structures, Peter Osborne's (2013) reflections on "contemporary art" as a global, structural influence that covers up the different (and equally contemporary) local situations of contemporary art. A notion of local space being beyond representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies, and Gao Minglu's (2012) thoughts on contemporary practice as an individual third space which does not give definition to a certain style, but where artists combine aestheticism with their everyday lives.

Fourthly, I structure the empirical material in a dialogue between the contextual frame and the conceptual framework. This yields four main findings on how the young Chinese artists experience contemporaneity in combining and relating the global and local notions of art. Firstly, they appear to enact a notion of contemporary art as an individual, autonomous process, closely related to the globalized "rule of no rules" assumption and played out in a local context, emphasizing the form and style focus of the more collectively oriented, less autonomous, technically meticulous artistic practice dominating the school. Secondly, they differ between, and yet draw on, both a globalized European notion of the bohemian artist's lifestyle and their local way of combining artistic practice with commercial disciplines. Thirdly, they likewise appear to balance between the local notion of the arts as a profession as opposed to the globalized (bohemian-related) notion of artistic practice as a personalized lifestyle. Fourthly, they play on the globalized notion of Chinese contemporary art as a (collective) revolution of society, but by way of an individual and personally motivated

local notion of increased appreciation for contemporary art by “revolutionizing” the national art market. Finally, to explain local contemporary visual art and the artists doing it on a global scale (and one potentially not limited to China), the concept of local contemporaneity is introduced to the debate as an ongoing, dynamic individual experience of being globally interconnected but locally present.

## **Setting the scene: Being a contemporary artist in the Chinese world of art**

In setting the scene of the Chinese world of art,<sup>xxxiii</sup> I present what I find to be three central dialectics relating to being a contemporary artist in this context. I propose that these dialectics involve both global and local notions of artistic style and artists’ political engagement, in different ways. The aim of this section is to give a contextual overview of the central dialectics in the Chinese world of art relating to the local situation of the individual art-school artists from Xiamen. Therefore, in a rich alternative to a traditional context section, the experiences of young contemporary artists from the art school on Xiamen and insights from observations and conversations carried out during my fieldwork in China in 2013 and 2014 are woven into relevant previous research on the Chinese world of art. The three central dialectics thus come to represent the local place where the young contemporary Chinese artists, among a complex of various local and global influences, experience being contemporary.

### **Autocratic cultural politics and the ambiguous soft-power value of contemporary art**

Post the Mao-era the autocratic cultural policy makers of China have not been shy of introducing economic agendas, and generally do not perceive the arts as a sector in its own educational or cultivating right.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As Michael Keane so precisely puts it, “in China culture is no longer simplistically equated with ideology. Its function is no longer one-dimensional, that of educating and training the mass population. Instead culture is formally recognized as having material and spiritual components, with the latter ideally operating as a check on the excesses of the former” (Keane, 2000, p. 245). Despite the relaxation of central authority, contemporary art in China is often associated with a lack of freedom of expression, as “all policies promoting cultural

liberalization... essentially recognize the hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party” (Keane, 2000, p. 253). This tradition was established during the Cultural Revolution in 1966-76, when the Communist party considered fine art and culture as subversively bourgeois, material heritage and art works were destroyed, and artists were punished (Fei & Huang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999). In this period, many art schools were closed or enlisted to serve the communist regime. Today, contemporary art in China is still viewed politically as involving the risk of revolutionary troublemaking, as has generally been the case since the 1989 Tiananmen Square “incident”.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The current success of Chinese contemporary artists in the international world of art, including those criticizing the state, is, however, perceived in a somewhat positive light. In line with the government’s strong “soft-power” agenda the international success of these artists is appreciated for externally portraying China as a modern state which allows free artistic expression.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Similarly, these artists, with their often very publicly visible commercial success, exemplify personal dreams in the political agenda of economic growth. By especially promoting contemporary art in the styles of cynical realism and political pop, which by the late 1990s onwards (according to their critics) had earned so much international commercial success that any political dissidence was lost, “the Chinese authorities could show an enlightened image of themselves to foreign countries” (Kharchenkova & Velthuis, 2015, p. 123).<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Opposed to putting an emphasis on the specific issue of free expression of the arts, the Chinese contemporary artists I interviewed emphasized the state’s focus on supporting traditional art forms, including the postmodern painting styles of Critical Realism and Political Pop. Their explanation for this was that the bigger and arguably internationally oriented, soft-power cities of e.g. Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are the only places where the state supports public venues for contemporary art. Cities such as Xiamen must make do with support for venues promoting traditional and indigenous art forms such as “some drawing or antique museum”, as Ying, a young woman and current student at the art school, explained. Or, as Li Qiang, whom I meet at the Xiamen art school – a graduate from the contemporary department who was now working for an advertising agency alongside his artistic practice – complained, the politicians believe that it is difficult to discern any directly internal societal value in contemporary art, and refer to such value as “quite invisible” to them.

Similarly, while also tapping into the globally diffused promise of economic growth in the cultural industries, according to the artists and art educators I spoke to, Chinese

cultural policy tends to focus on supporting the infrastructure of big museums, concert halls, and the like, rather than, facilitating the development of original artistic content, such as contemporary visual art.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is similar to the way in which contemporary artists serve as part of strategic creative root zones for the semi-autonomous cultural industry (e.g., Beijing's Factory 798, Park 19 in Guangzhou, and Shanghai's M50), which are intensely promoted in the bigger Chinese cities (O'Connor & Xin, 2006). However, the ability to serve as creative inspiration is primarily assigned to the more commercially oriented contemporary artists, not those who produce art that is too "unofficial" or avant-garde by dominant Chinese standards. In other words, the soft-power advantage does not equal an actual shift in the official idea of the role of the artist in Chinese society, as there is still little or no support (financially or politically) for groups such as visual contemporary artists.

### **Elite literate profession before bohemian lifestyle in a double-edged art education**

In Chinese higher arts education, the curriculum of fine visual arts training is dominated by a variety of traditional disciplines, such as Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, as well as those of European origin such as oil painting and sculpture. These art forms are valued as artistic expressions adhering to the Chinese tradition of beauty and harmony as key characteristics of the arts, where technical control of the medium is essential (Keane, 2013; Sullivan, 1999). The development of such skills is part of a tradition of learning collectively by mimicking the techniques of former great masters before developing one's own style, and involves meticulous repetitive practice of the required technical skills.

In parallel with the Chinese world of art opening up to the Western idea of contemporary art, many Chinese art schools have relatively small yet internationally well-connected departments committed to the practice of contemporary visual art, applying styles and forms such as video, photography, installation, and performance. This is also the case of the Xiamen school.<sup>xxxix</sup> Nevertheless, on admission to art school, students are usually assessed by means of tests in traditional fine art skills, such as sketching, drawing, and painting.<sup>xl</sup> The young artists I interviewed at the school in Xiamen, though now part of the "contemporary art" department, had therefore all initially been trained in the traditional visual art skills required to enter the school. Several of them expressed appreciation for working with the traditional techniques, for

example working with paper cuts or ink painting “in a contemporary way”, as they would put it. Building on this traditional background, the artists in this study had all either studied contemporary art abroad (as part of their studies at the school) or were being taught by contemporary European artists. Similarly, all the teachers in the contemporary department had a traditional background but had later been to Europe to study and work with contemporary art.

In the Chinese world of art, artistic practice is first and foremost closely related to a long Chinese tradition of highly technically skilled elite literate artists. In early Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, artistic practice was perceived as an elite literate profession used to escape the reality of mundane society<sup>xli</sup> (Jiang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999). This tradition was challenged by the New Cultural Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gao, 2008), and (as part of another agenda) nearly destroyed during the later Cultural Revolution. Opposed to the idea of the European bohemian, present-day Chinese artists, unlike their historical predecessors, do not seem to have the privilege of escaping from the realities of the economic growth agenda trickling through Chinese society. Similarly, the elite literate legacy concerning the role of the artist has recently been revitalized as part of an increasing appreciation of the historical and traditional (pre-Cultural Revolution) Chinese arts (Joy & Sherry, 2004). This heritage of Chinese art and culture is promoted nationally towards a growing market for indigenous cultural industries and internationally via the worldwide network of Confucius Institutes.

Along with a booming Chinese middle class and the international commercial success of, in particular, the postmodern painting styles of cynical realism and political pop, the risk of troublemaking in contemporary art is less commonly seen as bourgeois nowadays than it was during the Cultural Revolution, or as particular Western “social and cultural dislocations” (as was the case in the late 1980s and early 1990s) (O’Connor & Xin, 2006, p. 273). Instead, the potential for trouble ascribed to the anti-material association of the European bohemian is politically, as well as in the eyes of the public in general and artists in particular,<sup>xlii</sup> viewed as being out of kilter with the overarching political agenda of economic growth. Li Na, one of the young artists I spoke to, who had been on exchange to Europe as a student and returning on graduating from the Xiamen school to study and work there independently for five years, told to me how Chinese artists in general were “not like all the old artists in Europe, who made art their whole life, and still made no money, and then they died”. She was familiar with the cultural trajectory leading to this difference, including the

romantic idea of the bohemian artist, and explained that “[Chinese] artists, they do not understand - why work hard all life and not make any money?”<sup>xliii</sup>

## **Official art organizations favoring the traditional in a world of art on market terms**

In spite of a globally growing art market looking to China, the national market for contemporary art is limited to the biggest and most internationally oriented cities. The local audience is still very small, as the state-governed art institutions and associations – which heavily influence the artists’ opportunities to exhibit and find studio space in which to work – continue to support the more traditional visual arts (Gao, 2012; Kharchenkova, Komarova, & Velthuis, 2015). The Chinese art schools are also considered part of this network of official art organizations. In short, these organizations primarily include and support the artists working in the classical academic or realist styles, and “the emphasis remains on the mastery of technique, rather than on concepts and ideas” (Kharchenkova et al., 2015, p. 84). As Zhang Jie, a young graduate of the contemporary department at the Xiamen school, and now a teacher here, bluntly observes, “China has a lot of systems – artists’ memberships of official associations, propaganda, favoring Chinese art exhibitions. It is like the Nazis’ time... [and] they like calligraphy and ink paintings”.<sup>xliv</sup>

After playing a significant role in structuring the commercial market for contemporary art as it developed nationally in the 1990s “outside the circle of internationalized, global art”, the state-governed official art associations are still, “almost by default, the only ones to provide structure to the market” (Kharchenkova et al., 2015, p. 89). For example, the work of an artist who is also a member of an official association is generally considered to be better and a more stable investment. According to the young artists I interviewed, this also sustains a situation in which, as Ying explained to me, “Few buyers, few customers can appreciate [contemporary art]... and their standards for appreciating paintings are quite old and at quite a low level”. Hence, in spite of a globally growing art market looking to China, and other pressures of cultural globalization, the government, through the art organizations, upholds the hierarchy of official and acknowledged traditional art as superior to unofficial and unacknowledged conceptual contemporary art, thus maintaining a situation in which the local audience, prefers the traditional art for aesthetic, political, and/or economic reasons.

In parallel to this, several of the young artists I interviewed spoke optimistically about a potential increase in what they referred to as a qualified appreciation of contemporary art among the growing middle class in China. Another of the young artists at the Xiamen Art College, Zhang Jie, illustrated this hope with a conceivable scenario: a rich man buys a piece of contemporary art for his home. He does so not out of qualified appreciation (he might still find it less literate and decorative), but because he also wants to seem modern. Then, his wife and children, and his friends visiting him, will experience the contemporary art and come to appreciate it and potentially buy some for themselves. Similarly the young art school graduate Ming, after explaining the need for a “revolution” towards a greater appreciation of contemporary art among the general public and in the art-school context, stated, as though it were obvious, that the way towards such a “revolution and change is the market”.

The hope of introducing contemporary art to Chinese society via the market appears to be inspired by both the political agenda of economic growth and the international success of Chinese contemporary art. As Li Na, who now also worked as a teacher at the contemporary art department, enthusiastically observed, “Like in Beijing there is also a very big group making money with contemporary art, with world-famous artists,” emphasizing to me how this was indeed possible. Yet, the commercial focus (whether a means or an end) also seems to be linked to what Gao describes as a “change in standards and values away from humanistic concerns” characterizing the art movements of the 1980s and 1990s towards current values and motivations in the Chinese world of art “centered on the market, celebrity and self-interest” (Gao, 2012, p. 212). He goes on to state that “the fundamental task of art – its independence and transcendence – has been eroded, squeezed more and more by the double-sided system of politics and capital” (ibid. p. 209).<sup>xlv</sup> All of this suggests that the Chinese art schools do not subscribe to the romantic (some might say reactionary) Western myth of autonomy from political and commercial interest (cf. Alexander & Bowler, 2014) which is to be found in, say, the Scandinavian art schools (cf. Chapter 5 and 6).

## **Conceptual Framework: The complex of global and local spaces in art**

Contemporary visual art is today a global phenomenon indicating the simultaneity of divergent presents, that is to say multiple artistic contemporaneities, across local worlds of art (e.g., Osborne, 2013; Smith et al., 2008). Artistic media, expressions, and disciplines have traveled across borders, and high-end auction houses, world-famous museums, and super-star artists all indicate a globalized world of art. Contemporaneity of art practices, whether in China, Denmark, New Zealand, or Ghana, are not locally singular, unperturbed by global processes. Yet while contemporary visual arts may be globally related, they are also locally particular. Despite “persistent generalities” across the international world of art, that same world is “drowning in a rising tide of particularity” (Smith, 2009, p. 264) from its various “local” peripheries. This section begins deciphering these generalities and particularities and discerning in them concepts which will aid the effort understand the local in an increasingly globalized world of art.

In this endeavor, I will proceed through four conceptual steps outlining the framework which I have drawn upon in honing the concept of “local contemporaneity”. Firstly, I propose to work with the concept of contemporaneity in art as being “about survival within, and transformation of, the present social structures” (Smith, 2002, p. 8). Secondly, I move into the spatial realm by laying out the idea of the “fiction of the contemporary” as a universal yet locally particular experience (Osborne, 2013, p. 25). This idea suggests that artists can be understood as contemporary on account of their own local space and sense of being present here. Thirdly, the idea of the local is defined as conceptually exceeding the “narrow” representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies found in various institutional structures and stylistic influences. The fourth and final conceptual step outlines how I propose to grasp locally experienced contemporaneity in global times as the individual artist’s personal engagement with the domestic and global spheres (Gao, 2008; Wu, 2008).

### **The concept of contemporaneity**

Among scholars and practitioners in the world of art (e.g., Aranda, Wood, & Vidokle, 2010; Foster, 2009), there is a prevailing notion that the “contemporary” in contemporary art is a free-floating, invisible matter that is hard to pin down. In

principle, it is determined neither by a period of specific styles or forms nor by any of the art institutions born out of Western (post)modernity. On the other hand, these same discussions tend to admit to the highly influential institutional structures of “the contemporary”. These structures aid us in positioning everything, from museums and journals to individual artists, according to Western art history. This history displays a complex dialectic trajectory of, on the one hand, ongoing one-way progress in the arts (Osborne, 2013; Rancière, 2012) (cf. Chapter 6) and, on the other hand, a romantic reactionary myth of autonomy from political and commercial interest (Alexander & Bowler, 2014) (cf. Chapter 5). This is a complex dialectic which suggests that the everyday lives of those practicing contemporary art are far from clear-cut, and I posit that this only becomes increasingly messy if investigated in local contexts, which are at the “periphery” of the dominant notions of what contemporary art is.

As the first step in my endeavor to move on from this illusive point of departure of the Western yet globally influential notions of contemporary art and conceptually frame the messy local contemporary, I propose to work with the broadly encompassing concept of contemporaneity in art, drawing on Smith’s (2002) distinction of contemporary art as art “about survival within, and transformation of, the present social structures” as opposed to art which merely reflects those structures (p. 8). Importantly, Smith notes in recognizing the complexity in everyday artistic activity that every contemporary artist “is both, it is the degree that matters’ (Ibid. p. 8).

## **Different but equally present**

In his 2013 book *Anywhere or not at all*, Osborne argues that the complex global dialectic of spaces in art is covered up by the simplified historicist’s use of the “fiction of the contemporary” (p. 25). Consider this the second conceptual step towards grasping the concept of local contemporaneity as a universal yet locally particular experience. The first example of this global fiction of the contemporary we find in the post-World War 2 American appropriation of, among other aspects, the styles and forms of 1930s European avant-garde art (Osborne, 2013).<sup>xlvi</sup> These artists came to signify the cultural superiority of US society as being more modern or contemporary than that of (Central) Europe, which had previously defended this title for centuries. This example (which is also brilliantly discussed by Serge Guilbaut in his *How New York stole the idea of modern art* (1983)), Osborne argues, draws attention to the “inadequacy” of simplified dialectic conceptions of spaces in art. Another example which Osborne proposes entails the (Western-based) periodization that conceives

contemporary art as beginning some time in the early 1960s. This periodization is seen as “more geopolitically expansive in its sense of the artistic terrain than the previous one”, though is still seen as operating within a “largely North American and residually European” space, as Japanese and South American artists, for instance, were enrolled in an “internationalizing US hegemony” (Osborne, 2013, p. 22).

The point of drawing in these “different but equally present” situations or experiences of the contemporary (Osborne, 2013, p. 10) is to show that, when considering the definition of contemporaneity proposed above, these are equally “present” even if viewed from a historical temporal perspective. However, they are also, consequently, equally present across the global space in which they take place. In other words, just as “the contemporary” as the frontrunner of a linear historical progress is a “fiction”, so do situations of contemporaneity, I propose, venture beyond the sphere of the Western world of art. Doreen Massey (2005) and her ideas on space as a dynamic phenomenon underline Osborne’s thoughts. Massey proposes that we perceive of space as an effect of interrelations and interactions, beyond matters of scale. As we take into account space as the continuous co-presence of difference, it becomes a way in which we can talk about a “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality... Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space” (Massey, 2005, p. 9). We can thus conceptualize “space as both social product and generative force” (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p. 48). As I refer to different global and local notions of art, building on Osborne, I can consequently talk about the global and local spaces in art as carrying a similar kind of meaning as would notions or cultural structures. I shall now explain this idea of different yet equally present and interrelated contemporary spaces in art.

In parallel to the pre-war European avant-garde, across the globe in China, the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century New Cultural Movement, with its focus on the social conditions in China at that particular time (Gao, 2008), was challenging the poetic and philosophical aspects of early Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, perceiving, as it did, the artistic practice as an elite literati profession which sought an escape from reality (Jiang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999). This early-20<sup>th</sup>-century movement challenged the status quo with contemporary ideas in different ways: on a stylistic level of “Western modes of art-making” (Clarke, 2011) and in the form of a cultural “spirit of rejection” (Jiang, 2008) with the ambition of introducing a modern epoch of democracy and science (Wu, 2008). Keeping in mind Smith’s definition of contemporary art as being about survival

in and transformation of social structures, the New Cultural Movement can be considered an equally valid example of artistic contemporaneity.

Similarly, as part of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which in temporal terms ran somewhat in parallel to Osborne's second example of the fictive periodization of the contemporary, attempts to foster a peasant art movement suppressed the old elite scholarly image, which conflicted with visions of Chinese communist society at the time<sup>xlvii</sup> (Joy & Sherry, 2004; Sullivan, 1999). Similarly, the idea of the contemporary artist as a political renegade challenging both the political and cultural authorities was reintroduced in 1980s and 1990s China, with the "Xiamen Dada" group offering one of the more radical examples (Fei & Huang, 2008; Sullivan, 1999).<sup>xlviii</sup> In summing up this second step in the conceptual framework, all of these examples could, I speculate, be understood as situations of contemporary art – of their own time and of various localities.

### **The representational set-up**

As indicated, on the one hand, contemporary art is a free-floating and elusive matter, which can be defined neither by a period of specific styles or forms nor by any of the grand narratives of modernity. On the other hand, "in order to give compelling communicative form to the spirit of contemporaneity, artists these days must work through a particular set of representational problems; they cannot overlook the fact that they make art within cultures of modernity and postmodernity that are predominantly visual" (Smith, 2002, p. 4). In other words, there can be no such thing as a "non-historical ontology of art" as contemporary art is inevitably a development of modern art, which is "irreducibly historical" in terms of how we understand its implications (Osborne, 2013, p. 10). Following this line of thought, one could easily conclude that being a contemporary artist in China<sup>xlix</sup> means carrying a dialectic burden of "indigenous tradition[s]" culminating with "aggressively 'modern' techniques" from a foreign take on art history (Vine, 2008, p. 18).

My point here, however, following Osborne, is that this representational set-up "which gives qualitative definition to the historical present... must be *mediated* with the complex global dialectic of spaces" (Osborne, 2013, pp. 25-26, my italics) if we are to make sense of the local contemporary on a global scale. Consequently, I seek to understand the local in such a way that its complexity exceeds the "narrow" representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies found in both global and local institutional

structures and stylistic influences. This is because they risk leaving one with the impression that one has understood, and taken seriously, local contemporaneity merely by looking at the art work and structures of the institutional art world. Nevertheless, we must still consider these different influences and structures as they are part of the world of art in which the local contemporary is taking place. Consequently, as the third step in the conceptual framing of this paper, drawing on Osborne (2013) and Massey (2005), I approach the representational set-up by way of emphasizing the spatial multiplicity and differences inevitably related to any given representation. This approach resembles a non-representational theorizing of space, emphasizing the “processual performativity of space – of spacing” (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p. 52).

### **The artist as individual mediator in the global and local spaces in art**

Previous studies have deepened our understanding of “the contemporary” in Chinese art in a way which has attempted to transcend simplified dialectic takes on the local and global. For example, Cheung (2014) argues how Chinese contemporary artists, through a hybrid visual discourse in their art work, respond to and challenge the tension between a mindless pursuit of Western art trends and government censorship. Similarly, Gaskell (2012) challenges the homogenization approach to the globalization of art by arguing how all stylistic categories, across the world of art and beyond, “stage” their own version of “Chineseness” by both challenging and reinforcing stereotype ideas of what a Chinese artist is. While Wu argues that “international art exhibitions encourage the tendency to reduce a local tradition into ready-made symbols and citations” expecting to find Chineseness in an “exotic self-orientalizing” form (here referring to the meaning attached, for instance, to cynical realism and political pop art by the international world of art) (Wu, 2008, p. 299). These contributions bring different highly interesting perspectives to the idea of a “third way”, as called for by Feng Boyi and Ai Wei Wei with the Fuck Off show mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Yet, what these studies also have in common is that they first and foremost focus on the style and form of the art work and/or political or institutional structures as ways in which the simplifying spaces of the local or global dialectics are maintained. I propose to unfold the explanatory potential of this in the processual performative idea of local space presented just above by offering as an alternative focus to the institutional structures and stylistic influences, and, as the fourth and final conceptual step in this paper, the proposition to grasp local contemporaneity as experienced by the individual artist.

In a rich contribution to taking the local art of the art-world “periphery” seriously (Batchen, 2014), a recent “World Art” special edition brought together the efforts of a number of scholars to inform our understanding of contemporary art in local contexts across New Zealand (Skinner, 2014), Mexico (Flores, 2014), Egypt (Seggerman, 2014), and Ghana (Kwami, 2014). However, though Kwami (2014), for example, offered a particularly personal case, there is still an absence of research acknowledging the in-depth perspective of the artist as a cultural producer in the particular local context (cf. Adams, 2008; Regev, 2003). In other words, if we wish to go beyond seemingly familiar forms (Schneider, 2003) and established world-of-art structures, we must investigate the meaning around contemporary artistic practice as it is experienced by the people doing it. As Wu proposes: “Although the domestic and global spheres of contemporary Chinese art are connected on the institutional level... the main linkage between the two spaces... is provided by contemporary Chinese artists themselves. They thus function not only as creators of contemporary Chinese art but also as mediators between the multiple identities of this art” (Wu, 2008, p. 301). In other words, keeping in mind Osborne’s (2013) distinction, one can investigate the Chinese artists as individual mediators, and hereby explain some of the complex dialectics of global and local spaces in art.

Similarly, drawing on the thoughts of Hu Shi, a central actor in the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century New Cultural Movement in China, Gao refers to his idea of “particular time, specific space, my truth” as a “heritage of pragmatism” which has influenced the rapidly changing contemporary Chinese art ever since (Gao, 2008, p. 137). Gao proposes how we can understand the contemporary as a subjective “perspective of daily environment and a person’s choice of truth and value” in a particular moment in time (Gao, 2008 p. 137). Correspondingly, Wu Hung argues that any analysis of contemporaneity requires that we consider the “artist’s personal engagement with the domestic and global spheres” (Wu, 2008, p. 301). Later, Gao develops the individual perspective further, calling for “a third space – an individual space”<sup>li</sup> of mind and personality, allowing for the individual artist to engage with the present societal and cultural conditions,<sup>li</sup> while resisting the authority of the state as well as the market (Gao, 2012, p. 213) This pair of adversaries, and the response which they receive, correlate with the scenario drawn up by Boyi above, but here they can be approached specifically from an individual, local perspective. Similarly, Gao and Wu’s idea of individual engagement resonates with Smith’s (2002) distinction of contemporary art as about survival in and transformation of present social structures, while also emphasizing the individual agency in this.

## **Methodology: The art school artists living in the global and local present**

The particularity characterizing peripheral contemporary artist appearing from under the “global horizon” of the international world of art is, according to Smith (2009), to be found in above all in “art-school art”. Along with an increasing tendency to play a significant role in generating the world’s contemporary art, young artists have less regard for the “fading power structures and styles of struggle” of the post-colonial debate and art world generalizations (Smith, 2009, p. 264). Smith further argues that the “mindset and modes of practice” of these young contemporary artists are above all grounded in “their experience of living in the present” (Smith 2009, p. 264), which echoes Wu (2008) and Gao (2008, 2012) as presented just above. As also mentioned above, I maintain that we can understand local contemporaneity as something which must be grasped practically as taking place in the personal experience of the individual artist, in his/her specific place between local and global notions or spaces of contemporary art. It is this proposition which I seek to test using the example of the young contemporary artists in Xiamen and, the Art College as the local context for their personal experiences of contemporaneity between the global and the local.

Since this group carries out its artistic practices across an unlimited variety of conceptually based forms, mediums, and styles, I can, from the representational perspective, refer to this group of young artists as “contemporary”. Nonetheless, applicable as the label is, I must remind the reader that this form of labeling of art or artists as “contemporary” is something that I am also questioning and discussing here. It is therefore important to note that I use the label here primarily on the grounds of, first, Smith’s (2002) distinction of contemporaneity in art, according to which the practices of these young artists, beyond style and form, also involve challenging or commenting on the present social structures around them; and second, the conceptual foundation offered above, which enables me to talk about the experience of being contemporary as an active, personal, different, and co-present process taking place among individual young artists (Gao, 2012; Massey, 2005; Osborne, 2013; Wu, 2008).

The rest of the young artists at the school, who will be drawn into the analysis as secondary figures, I refer to as “traditional”. However, though their artistic practice is heavily oriented towards (what according to established world-of-art standards would be referred to as) traditional disciplines, such as Chinese ink-painting and calligraphy,

or oil painting and sculpturing of European origin, they can, in keeping with Smith's distinction, be considered as equally present and equally contemporary on the condition that their practice involves a surviving within and a transformation of the social structures around them. What is more, considering the premise of this paper (and the thoughts of Wu (2008) and Gao (2008) in this respect), one must bear in mind that these artists can be considered contemporary if this is how they experience themselves. Yet, keeping in mind Smith's definition, one could also argue that commenting on contemporary social structures is not to be understood as only a subjective experience of self. In sum, a specific analysis of this group of young artists is not the focus of this study, and these traditionally oriented art students will be referred to as exactly that – traditional, as opposed to contemporary. Nor is a comparative investigation of these two groups of young artists, interesting as it would doubtless be, the focus of this paper, and it will not, therefore, be further reflected upon.

The explorative empirical basis for this study has been developed in a reflexive dialogue between existing research and empirical material from interviews, conversations, and observations – carried out preliminarily in Shanghai in the summer of 2013 and, subsequently and primarily, in Xiamen in the winter of 2014. In January 2014, I interviewed a group of young contemporary artists (and a number of art educators) at Xiamen Art College in China. I conducted interviews with five current students affiliated with the contemporary art department and six young artists recently graduated from it. I also interviewed faculty from across the traditional and contemporary departments in order to be introduced to the formal and informal workings of the art school. Quantitatively speaking, this is not a large group of informants. However, as this is an explorative qualitative study, I feel confident that the experiences of this group of artists and the personal anecdotes and examples which they shared with me will suffice in providing a valid empirical basis for analyzing and discussing contemporaneity in local artistic practices. As I further account for the data-collection process, it is my intention that this will come across.

The interviews were explorative and in-depth, and lasted from one and a half to two hours, which provided the time and space to meet the explorative purpose. The majority of the interviews were conducted individually, though a couple of them were partly carried out jointly with two students. The issues of relevance to the young artists guided the interviews. The only structuring element was the overall aim of the study, which at this point was to explore these young artists' experiences of being or becoming contemporary artists in their local place. The interviews began with a

generic opening question for the purpose of stimulating free association on part of the young artists. The questions were along the lines of “Why did you choose to study art?” or “How do you find being an art student at the school?” The questions posed during the interviews included asking the young artists to talk about, explain, or describe their everyday artistic activities, or to reflect upon their motivations towards practicing art and their aspirations for their practice in the future.

So that the Chinese artists could voice their own experiences, no direct questions were posed regarding specific world-of-art structures under certain local or global cultural influences. Instead, when issues related to these themes were addressed by the interviewee on his/her initiative, I would follow up on this in an explorative manner and thus link the different experiences at play together. For example, as one of the artists told me how she felt nervous thinking of how her conceptually oriented artistic skills were not perceived as valuable by Chinese society or by the art school, which favored traditional technical skills, I asked her to elaborate on how this influenced (negatively or positively) her everyday experience of practicing art. Another artist explained how he was highly skilled in the traditional techniques, but had become bored with the repetitive meticulous mimicking involved in studying this kind of art, and was now motivated only by practicing idea-based contemporary art. In response, I asked him how that shift had made a difference to how he envisioned the everyday life of his artistic practice in the future.

Upon my return from Xiamen, the interviews were transcribed. Following this, the transcripts, as well as field notes written during the trip, were analyzed. Based on my initial empirical impressions from the fieldwork and prior knowledge of research on the globalization of the arts, this process was characterized by my keeping an open mind towards meanings and experiences playing out across, within, and beyond the spaces of local or global cultural influences. Based on my conceptual framework for rethinking local contemporaneity as outlined above, and from this empirically rather messy point of departure, I looked for aspects which could be considered as locally generalizable across the young artists’ experiences, just as I paid attention to common experiences among the artists, which could be understood as global notions of contemporaneity. - Throughout, taking a point of departure in the experiences of the young artists. As a result, the global spaces on being contemporary were, in this case, represented by such aspects as how the young artists experienced the influences of European art schools and the international art market, while the local spaces were exhibited by their individual experiences of the different issues at stake across the

Chinese world of art. In the preliminary analysis which followed, complex patterns of global and local meanings in the young artists' experiences of being and/or becoming contemporary artists in this particular local place appeared across the interviews.

## **Analysis: Local contemporaneity exemplified by young Chinese artists**

In this section, I explore the empirical material garnered, in a dialogue with the context set above, and the four conceptual steps taken: (i) being contemporary is about survival within, and transformation of, present social structures, (ii) the institutional fiction of the contemporary, is covering over different but equally present contemporaneities, (iii) art in a particular place is more than representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies, and, consequently, (iv) the individual artist's personal experience is an alternative approach to grasping local contemporaneity. I have organized this into a pattern of four examples of local contemporaneity between the global and local. These four groupings which I extracted from the empirical material will structure the following analysis, but they do not correlate strictly with the four parts of the conceptual framework summarized above. They each lead to the final discussion section, where I bring the analysis together and, as the closing contribution of this paper, offer a new interpretation of "local contemporaneity" as an ongoing dynamic, individual experience of being globally interconnected but locally present.

### **Traditional "skills connect with society" and contemporary art is "the easy way"**

The young artist Wang Jun had been top of his class in traditional painting and drawing until coming to Xiamen Art College, where he now wanted to focus solely on developing his skills within a contemporary artistic practice. In telling me about how his parents preferred him to stick to attaining traditional artistic skills as opposed to exploring the intangible, idea-generating skills which he saw as crucial for contemporary artistic practice, he summed up his parents' perspective as follows: "Because skills connect with society. You can very easy find a job, because you have a skill. I can paint, so I will be a painter." Several of the young artists mentioned their parents' concerns about their career prospects, and related these to how the meticulous

technical skills required in working with the traditional art forms are experienced as valuable in a local context emphasizing hard work and economic growth. Similarly, Zhang Jie complained when describing the dominant culture at the school: “Painting skills are very good, and painting pretty and nice things people can buy.” Similarly, Wang Jun recalled a time when one of the traditionally oriented art students had lectured him on the lack of commercial potential in doing contemporary art: “You cannot do it in the market – you can’t produce it.” This was a reference to the more ephemeral characteristics of, for example, installations or performance art.

In short, compared to the variety of media and forms of expression explored in the contemporary art department at the school, the traditional art forms are considered to be more literate and professional, as well as more beautiful or decorative, and, as such, generally more commercially viable.

The young artists also told me that, due to the less technically demanding use of style and form, contemporary art is perceived as the easy option by the traditionally oriented majority at the school. Wang Jun expressed this by imitating a student from one of the traditional departments: “Oh, you are so lazy; I do not know why you are not painting; you just sit there and talk to your teacher.” He went on to explain, in a more serious and insistent tone, how it could actually be very exhausting when, for example, “the teacher wants us to have 20 ideas in one hour”. Li Min, a recently graduated artist whom I interviewed at the international design company where she now works alongside her artistic practice, illustrated these issues to me with the following example. As a student, she had loved discussing and developing artistic concepts and ideas at the contemporary art department. Nevertheless, she would often get worry as she watched the students of the more traditionally oriented art departments improve their more commercially viable skills of drawing or painting at great speed. This made her feel as though her class were simply filled with kids playing around, not real artists.

Despite the critical atmosphere, these young artists do not experience themselves and their artistic practice as detached from the Chinese context (e.g., only focusing on international career potential). These young artists express a critical local categorization of their artistic practice as, firstly, not providing them with skills suitable for a real job which will enable them to contribute to society; secondly, not having any commercial potential, which in turn underlines the lack of job potential and societal contribution; and, finally, entailing no effort or hard work, but instead just unprofessional play, which again questions the commercial and societal value of their

endeavors. In other words, this is the first example of local survival and (hopes of) potential transformation (Smith, 2002) as experienced by these young artists. However, how, then, do they go about making sense of this and acting upon it? For example, how does the rather critical atmosphere surrounding their kind of artistic practice influence their motivations for “transforming” or challenging these and other social structures encountered in this local place?

**“The contemporary art has come quick, but they only see the form” – and the money**

Zhang Jie, a graduate and now also a contemporary art teacher, described how “...we have had this concept of contemporary art since the beginning of the 1980s: China just opened to the West and a lot of oil paintings and Western artists came to China... We now have a lot of form, art form borrowed from the West, but also a very large distance between the contemporary art and the art education system, and this means that a lot of Chinese artists not really understand what is this form.” In referring to the opinions of the traditionally oriented majority at the art school, Ming agreed, “It’s just very easy to think about the material for making the art as what can be considered modern or not.”

As an example of a “wrong” use of the contemporary form, Zhang Jie further told me how internationally successful contemporary Chinese artists also include “artists who finish their studies in the old system”; the traditional art-school training and official art associations. These kind of artists, as Li Qiang later elaborated, “try to pretend in a contemporary way... they need it for the customers. They can sell it for very good prices.” This is a reference to the international commercial success of artists practicing the styles of cynical realism and political pop. In other words, according to these young artists, there seems to be a difference between art which is understood as actually contemporary and art which, to them, appears to comply with the old system of official art organizations and traditional art training, but nonetheless tries to come across as contemporary (e.g., to get in on the international commercial art market potential).

Similarly, Li Na recalled realizing, after being on exchange in Europe and coming back to work with contemporary art at the Chinese school, that the students at the more traditional departments, such as those working in the cynical realism and political pop styles, were not doing “real art”. What made it “not real” to her was that “they do not

even know themselves what they like, they just know they can make lots of money”. She went on, “Contemporary art has come quick, but they only see the form. They see some famous artist on the walls that get very famous so they say, ‘Aha, this is art.’ And they immediately are quick to make the same thing, it is easy.” She further explained how the traditionally oriented students, as well as the Chinese higher arts education and world of art in general, did not, in her view, “get the inside” of contemporary artistic practice. Likewise, Li Qiang, referring back to the critical atmosphere at the school, complained how the traditional students found contemporary practice very easy and would say things like “I can also put a banana on the museum floor”. Finally, he turned to me with a look of indictment mixed with despair and said, “But what is the thought behind that?”

In this differentiation, they clearly saw the cynical, the realism, and the political aspects in cynical realism and political pop art as superficial properties adhering only to the form and the style imported from the West without putting any thought into these. As such, curiously enough, these young artists would want those favoring the traditional arts to see beyond form and style when understanding the contemporary art, yet they themselves failed to apply this “multiple” perspective.

I gather from this that these young artists experience contemporaneity as a somehow unique aesthetic dynamic, where the Western origin of the styles and forms within it are not significantly meaningful as such. However as rule-free as this may sound, they nonetheless apparently distinguish between practicing this autonomous individual process in the right or wrong way. Consequently, in this particular local place, the inherent dialectic of “no rules” and assumed generalizations concerning contemporary art found in the Western world of art are also brought into play when structuring meaning around the contemporary. This yields a second example to help us grasp something of a universal yet local contemporaneity. Drawing on Osborne (2013), the above could serve as yet another local example of the fiction of the contemporary as the covering-up of different but equally present situations of the contemporary in the global complex of spaces. Yet, on the other hand, there also appears to be an alternative (potentially universal) sense of contemporaneity present here which goes beyond (or, one might say, works below) the mechanisms of this global fiction: the local notions of art as beyond representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies (Osborne, 2013). This perspective recalls the work of Gao Minglu (2012) (a link that I develop further below) on contemporary practice as an individual third space which does not

give definition to a certain style, but where artists combine aestheticism with their everyday lives.<sup>lii</sup>

### **“I was there to train myself to be more independent”**

The young artists’ experience is generally that in Chinese art education, there is little room for the individual student. “We are like chickens, like a factory, one system, one factory,” Zhang Jie, a recent graduate and now teacher at the contemporary department, told me. He links the culture and traditions at the art school to this “factory” culture of the Chinese educational system and society in general, a culture of working hard and creating economic growth for one’s family and the Chinese nation. Consequently, as the young art student Liu Yang told me, “We do not know what we like, what we are interested in. Because our education system always gives you something and you remember it and they never tell you to think what you want.” This experience can be contrasted with what the young artists from the contemporary art department reported. To return to Liu Yang, “They teach us, just find your heart, find yourself, and your work can be special,” before continuing with great enthusiasm, “you can be special! That really encouraged me.”

Li Na supported this perspective. On the subject of the Chinese art school and her initial, traditional classroom-based technical training, she observed, “Here we more do things in group and... I could not find out what I really liked.” All the while, she had the feeling that “there is more going deeper”. Later, going abroad and encountering the contemporary practice there, she explained, influenced her practice towards a more individual grounded one. The graduate, artist, and former exchange student Ming echoed Li Na’s experience of the European contemporary artist: “They are super independent artists... they are making totally different things.” Ming summed up the issue in explaining the purpose of her European exchange: “I was there to train myself to be more independent and more strong.”

From these insights into the experiences of the young Chinese artists, it seems that – inspired by the contemporary practices encountered in the European art schools – contemporaneity is experienced with a strong sense of them as individuals making do within, but also criticizing, the “factory” culture characterizing the Chinese educational system and society in general. Their experience is that collective learning and employability focus fall short of providing them with the training they need to become

contemporary artists. By emphasizing an essential element of individuality in their practice, an individuality which is closely related to a sense of differentiation and artistic independence, they appear also to challenge the dominant local attitude towards the arts as a profession, as opposed to a personalized lifestyle.

These young artists are, however, also aware that their circumstances differ from those of their European peers; as demonstrated above, they recognize the bohemian legacy in the European idea of the artistic lifestyle, while noting that this kind of anti-material artist would never survive in a Chinese context. This perspective, and the presence of a pragmatic market orientation among these young artists, is indirectly underlined by the fact that almost all of the graduates earn their living from related but more commercial creative sectors such as advertising, design, and architecture, and identify this as a general norm among them and their peers. Here, then, is our third example of how the artists experience contemporaneity in their artistic practice between the complex of global and local influences encountered in their local place. I find this form of local individual differentiation to be pragmatically connected to a global multiplicity in which they draw on different spaces of contemporary artistic practice. This relates to Osborne's idea of the different but equally present situations or experiences of the contemporary (Osborne, 2013) – equally present from a historical temporal perspective, and also from a spatially global one. We should also remember Massey's thoughts on space as a dynamic phenomenon and an effect of interrelations and interactions, which enable us to talk about a continuous co-presence of difference and multiplicity (Massey, 2005). Similarly Smith fronts the idea of a collectively oriented "relationism" as an essential part of the autonomous "survivalism" of (particularly the young artists) doing contemporary art in global times (Smith, 2009).

**“Okay, we draw a river – you feel something? I write some calligraphy – but what are my feelings?”**

The Chinese artists explained to me that, for them, contemporary art is an opportunity to express themselves in a personal way, and one which the technical, mimicking style of the traditional arts and the “fake contemporary”, which focuses only on fortune and fame, cannot offer. Wang Jun has studied traditional Chinese painting since he was six; he observes, “I paint very well, but now I just do not want to paint in the art college.” He went on to explain how, compared to his earlier traditional work, his current contemporary art work “is personal: if I use the Chinese painting I cannot make this”.<sup>liii</sup> Similarly, Zhang Jie explained that he felt unable to express himself through traditional

art, which to him is “just atmosphere, ambience”. Rhetorically, he asked me, “Okay, we draw a river – you feel something? I write some calligraphy – but what are my feelings?” Li Min concurred with this, relating how she came to appreciate contemporary practice after encountering it at art school. She referred to the Chinese tradition for landscape painting as she explained why she liked practicing contemporary art: “You draw from your inside and from that I really start to enjoy this different way to draw, different way to think. Because I like to draw the landscape from my feelings, not the real landscape, but my feelings.” She concluded enthusiastically, “That is why I like it!”

This refers back to Gao’s (2012) thoughts on a metaphorical space where Chinese artists combine aestheticism with their everyday lives, and where art is seen not as a profession but rather as part of one’s personality. This tallies with Wu’s proposition according to which we understand the somehow universal properties of contemporaneity via the artist’s personal engagement with the domestic as well as the global spheres (Wu, 2008). Gao refers to this personal individual sense of being a contemporary artist as “a third space” which allows for the individual artist to engage with societal and cultural conditions while resisting the authority of the state as well as the market (Gao, 2012, p. 213), a pair of adversaries and, a response to them, which correlate with the scenario drawn up by Boyi in the introductory section and Smith’s distinction of the social transformative contemporary art. Here, then, is our fourth example: the experience of the young Xiamen artists of an independent personal expression found in contemporary art appears to be related to (as mentioned earlier) a survival within and an indirect transformation of the autocratic rule of the government and the power of the allied official art associations. The young artist Wang Jun underlines this experience by emphasizing how any way “to make a change, for Chinese people now” would not come via traditional Chinese painting.<sup>liv</sup> Nonetheless, these young artists may not be attempting to revolutionize Chinese society; it seems, rather, that they are more focused on revolutionizing the national art market, as this makes sense to them in light of the local place in which their artistic practice works.

## **Discussion: Local contemporaneity as different but equally present**

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter above, although Chinese contemporary visual artists have now stepped onto the stage of internationally recognized art institutions, they are (still) accused of or misunderstood as not being “contemporary”. They are understood from the perspective of the internationally dominant Western spaces in contemporary artistic practice, and consequently criticized for catering to global market interests by way of, for instance, the styles of cynical realism and political pop, just as they are stereotyped primarily as, say, cosmopolitans, propagandists, and/or sham avant-gardists. The pressing issue at hand is that there seems to be no current alternative interpretation of how it is to be a contemporary Chinese artist – and consequently any artist from the so-called art-world periphery.

As explored above, young Chinese artists are engaging with an artistic practice which in their local place is generally perceived as not providing them with skills enabling them to contribute to society, not having any commercial potential, that is to say job potential, or making any societal contribution, and entailing no effort or hard work, which again calls into question the commercial and societal value of their endeavors.

My empirical work reveals firstly that they experience contemporary practice as an autonomous, individual process of artistic activity. They are opposed to traditional art and the “fake” contemporary of the likes of critical realism and political pop, which is primarily understood via style and form. In other words, they appear to enact a form of individual differentiation pragmatically connected to a notion of contemporary artistic practice as an individual process. This is a pragmatic fiction of the contemporary closely related to the globalized “rule of no rules” notion of contemporary art. However, it is played out in a local context in which it emphasizes the autonomous, individual process over the focus on form and style of the more collectively oriented and technically meticulous traditional or fake contemporary practice at the school. The young artists characterized this by a significant lesser degree of individual autonomy.

Secondly, the differences they experience between what they see as a globalized notion of the European, state-supported bohemian lifestyle and their local way of combining the artistic practice with related and more commercial disciplines suggest a similarly different but equally present survival within and transformation of the local circumstances. This again suggest local contemporaneity in the social survival and

transformation, not through the aesthetics of the art work as such but in the activities of the artistic practice in a broader sense, including the distribution of the art work, as shown in their ambitions to revolutionize the appreciation of contemporary art via the market.

Thirdly, their sense of contemporaneity is also found to be closely related to a local experience of them as individuals making do within, but also criticizing, the (collectively oriented) “factory” culture of the Chinese educational system and society in general (also related to the local notion of the artistic practice being a profession). This notion is experienced in relation to the different (individually oriented) contemporary practices encountered in European art schools. By emphasizing the essential element of individual differentiation and artistic independence in their practice, the young Chinese artists engage, in their own way, in challenging the dominant local notion of the arts as a profession as opposed to the globalized (bohemian-related) notion of the artistic practice as a personalized lifestyle.

Fourthly, the experience of independent personal expression via contemporary artistic practice also appears to be related to survival within, and an indirect notion of transforming, the autocratic rule of the government and the power of the allied official art associations. These young artists may not, therefore, attempt to reaffirm the global notion of Chinese contemporary art as a (collective) revolution of society. Rather, they are more focused on expressing their self-conscious, individual feelings and personal experiences. However, those feelings and experiences also relate to a local space in art, such as revolutionizing the national art market, as this makes personal sense to them in light of the local context in which their artistic practice works.

Whether I echo Osborne (2013), Massey (2005), or Smith’s (2009) propositions in calling this, respectively, different and present, multiplicit and co-present, or relationism and survivalism, these empirical perspectives on contemporary artistic practice show how the young artists enact and make sense of their artistic practice in a way which is characterized by a globally multiple interconnected and self-conscious individual and, indeed, locally present contemporaneity. The former is exemplified here by how the young artists experienced the influences of European art schools and the international art market and their appreciation for contemporary art, and the latter is exemplified by their individual experiences of the different issues at stake across the Chinese world of art. This experience of contemporaneity can, in line with the arguments above, be explored and understood not only via styles and politics but – in line with Wu and Gao’s thoughts on understanding the contemporary as a subjective perspective of daily environment and a person’s choice of truth and value (Gao, 2008),

and the artist's personal engagement with the domestic and the global (Wu, 2008) – as an individual experience. In other words, this offers a dual perspective on local contemporaneity as an ongoing dynamic individual experience of being globally interconnected but locally present.

Additionally, one can still choose to grasp contemporary art as somehow being related to a specific period or era in official societal development, an artistic movement which manifests itself in its collectivity, and/or through a certain (collective) style, such as abstract painting. On the other hand, as this paper has aimed to show, it can also be argued that at the “moment of global transnationalism”, artistic collectivism becomes a speculative collectivity in contemporary art, an additional “function of fictionalization” (Osborne, 2013).

For Gao, while the appropriation of “the contemporary” in cynical realism and political pop would earn Chinese contemporary artists their initial place on the international art scene, any substantial independent manifestation of contemporary artists in Chinese society remains to be seen (Gao, 2012).<sup>lv</sup> Somewhat correspondingly, Smith argues that, to this day, if compared with the Euro-American art world (and the now somewhat “past glory” of the idea of contemporary art here), any movement leading the idea of the contemporary artists has not yet succeeded in becoming an established part of the official Chinese art world (Smith, 2008). Different contextual and societal conditions are assigned as explanations for this, such as the previously mentioned event of Tiananmen Square in 1989, or more general features such as the “cultural and political boundaries” (Gao, 2008)<sup>lvi</sup> characterizing the Chinese art world and society, such as those outlined in the earlier section (recall the issues of, respectively, autocratic cultural politics and the ambiguous soft-power value of contemporary art, the idea of the visual arts as an elite, literate profession in a double-edged art education, and the long-standing, state-governed art organizations favoring traditional art in a world of art otherwise working primarily on market terms).

These issues admittedly do not support any substantial manifestation of contemporary art in the official Chinese world of art as such. However, I propose an alternative understanding of the situation here, and an alternative perspective on being a Chinese contemporary artist today. I suggest that the young artists from Xiamen, in their experience of being contemporary as explored above, show that they are indeed, in their own way, enacting an independent manifestation of artistic contemporaneity, and a manifestation which need not necessarily be a knowingly collective movement. Smith (2008) refers to how contemporary artists have not yet become an established part of the official Chinese world of art, which is not inaccurate as an assessment if we

consider “the official” as the powerful official art organization. Gao (2012) argues that a substantial independent manifestation of the contemporary artist in Chinese society remains to be seen, which again is perfectly plausible if manifestation is seen as societal recognition of the political, aesthetic, and/or commercial value of contemporary art beyond postmodern painting.

Instead of merely being perceived as appearing from under the horizon of the international world of art (Smith, 2009), this group of young Chinese artists, and others (un)like them across the globe, can be seen as an example of local contemporaneity in their own right.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to unpack and explain the locally different but globally equally present contemporaneity experienced by young Chinese artists between a complex of local and global spaces in contemporary art. However, while their everyday lives as artists are being influenced and structured in this way, they are not without a sense of agency in this, and not without a sense of individual artistic presence. As an alternative perspective on how it is to be a Chinese contemporary artist today, I posit that local contemporaneity can be explained as an ongoing dynamic of a globally interconnected but self-conscious, individual, and, indeed, locally present contemporaneity.

I reached this explanation by considering first, three central dialectics in the Chinese world of art which I found significant in being a contemporary artist here: (i) an autocratic type of cultural politics and the ambiguous soft-power value of contemporary art; (ii) the idea of the visual arts as an elite, literate profession in a double-edged type of art education; and (iii) the long-standing state-governed art organizations which favor traditional art in a world of art otherwise working primarily on market terms. Following this, I offered four conceptual steps as a framework for understanding local contemporaneity: (i) I defined being contemporary as about survival within, and transformation of, present social structures (Smith 2002), (ii) I identified the institutional fiction of the contemporary, as covering over different but equally present contemporaneities. This allowed me to talk about the global and local spaces in art as carrying a similar kind of meaning as would notions or cultural structures (Osborne, 2013), (iii) I emphasized the spatial multiplicity and differences inevitably related to any given representation, hereby revealing how art in a particular place is more than representational aesthetic idiosyncrasies (Osborne, 2013), and,

consequently, (iv) I suggested understanding the contemporary as a personal engagement with the daily environment of domestic and global spheres (Gao, 2008; Wu, 2008). As a result, the individual artist's experience has been proposed an alternative approach to explaining local contemporaneity.

Finally, I identified above four examples for how to understand this dynamic among young Chinese artists. Firstly, they appear to experience a form of pragmatic individual differentiation of contemporary artistic practice at the art school. This is closely related to the global "rule of no rules" in contemporary art. However, it is played out in a local context in which it emphasizes the autonomous, individual process as opposed to the focus on form and style of the more collectively oriented and technically meticulous practice at the school. This focus, to the young artists, involves a significant lesser degree of individual autonomy. Secondly, in distinguishing between a global European notion of the bohemian artistic lifestyle and the artists' local way of combining artistic practice with commercial disciplines, as well as their space in the increased appreciation of contemporary art via the market brought on by the Chinese world of art issues making up for their local context, I suggest an experience of contemporaneity involving both survival within and transformation of the local circumstances. Thirdly, the interviewees' sense of contemporaneity is also found to be closely related to a local experience of them as individuals making do within, but also criticizing, the (collectively oriented) "factory" culture of the Chinese educational system and society in general. Here, the young Chinese artists appear in their own way to locally challenge the arts as a profession as opposed to the globalized (bohemian-related) artistic practice as a personalized lifestyle. Fourthly, their experience of an independent personal expression via contemporary art also appears to be related to survival within, and indirectly transforming, the autocratic rule of the government and the official art associations. However, this is achieved not directly, via the global notion in Chinese contemporary art as a (collective) revolution of society, but rather via a personally motivated local increased appreciation for contemporary art by "revolutionizing" the national art market.

These empirical findings on artistic contemporaneity in the periphery underline the need to reflect in global times upon "the growing perplexity of Sino-Western cultural relations and of the need to recognize the agency of Chinese institutions and individuals engaged in a renewed and ongoing production of aesthetic progress" beyond "Eurocentric narratives of modern and contemporary art" (Wong, 2014, pp. 5-6). Yet, as indicated above, in an attempt to understand contemporary art in an increasingly global world of art, there is a need to acknowledge the everyday

experiences of the contemporary artist, not only in China but across the globe, regardless of whether the particular local place is geographically or historically located as a frontrunner in the fiction of linear historical progress dominating the Western world of art (cf. Osborne, 2013; Wong, 2014, and Chapter 6 of this thesis).

I recognize that the empirical point of departure for this study was a specific local Chinese context suggesting the local and global to be an East and West issue. Consequently, one might question whether it has anything to say about, say, young African artists, or even young Chinese artists from another local part of China. Empirically, that is possibly not the case. What it does offer, however, is a sensibility to take the predicaments of these young artists seriously as being contemporary. Naturally, this opens the door to much further research in other local and global spaces across, for instance, African, South American, and Middle Eastern contexts, in order to contest and/or develop on the concept of local contemporaneity as introduced here. Nonetheless, I propose that this conceptualization of being “contemporary” as locally different but equally present can work at any time and in any place. I say this even though the way, or the form or style, of how it is practiced might not fit prevailing implicit assumptions or the rule of no rules determining the generalizations about “the contemporary” found in the Western world of art. With the perspective of individually experienced local contemporaneity, it becomes easier to move beyond the limiting properties of the fiction of the contemporary as constructions of “temporal unity and the disjunction of spatial standpoints” (Osborne, 2013, p. 26). This study has thus sought to contribute to taking seriously and grasping the local in contemporary art anywhere across the globe.

Smith sums up this endeavor and the onward direction for studying the phenomenon of contemporaneity in a global world of art as follows: “This is not a recommendation for stand-alone, singularizing particularism – rather, it is an appeal for radical particularism to work with and against radical generalization” (Smith, 2008, p. 9).

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## Endnotes / Chapter 1

<sup>i</sup> Translated by the author from the following: "Kulturen har et stort potentiale for at blive en langt større drivkraft i det danske samfund på alle niveauer. Men det kan ikke ske uden en vidtgående mentalitetsændring i store dele af kulturlivet. ... Kunsten skal ikke spændes for en politisk dagsorden. Men vi skal turde tale om, hvad kunsten også kan, uden at blive beskyldt for at ville instrumentalisere den".

<sup>ii</sup> Cultural exchange between Denmark and China were intensified in 2014 and 2015 with a substantial cultural program involving a number of major cultural stakeholders in both countries. The Danish cultural season kicked off in China in September 2014 and the program ran until July 2015. The cultural season included exhibitions, concerts, film festivals, literary events, performing arts and theatre, design and architecture, and special events dedicated to children and young people.

A wide range of Danish cultural institutions and stakeholders actively participated in the cultural initiative. The cultural season was coordinated by the Royal Danish Embassy in Beijing, the Danish Ministry of Culture, and the Danish Cultural Institute, as well as the Danish Arts Foundation, Danish cultural institutions, artist ensembles, and individual artists. The cultural program was anchored in Denmark's International Culture Panel, which is a cross-ministerial organ consisting of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Danish Ministry of Culture, and the Danish Ministry of Business and Growth. In 2012, Denmark and China entered into an agreement to establish a Danish cultural center in Beijing and a Chinese cultural center in Copenhagen. In addition, two agreements were signed to strengthen collaboration between Danish and Chinese museums and to establish the world's first Music Confucius Institute at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.

The Danish-Chinese cultural exchange initiatives were financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish Ministry of Culture. The Danish Arts Foundation provided a number of grants to finance the cultural program within the fields of music, literature, visual arts, and performing arts. The A.P. Møller and Chastine Mc-Kinney Møller Foundation contributed with a substantial grant and the Maersk Group supported the cultural program with transportation sponsorship. In addition, participating Danish and Chinese institutions contributed financially to the realization of the various projects.

<sup>iii</sup> From December 2012 to June 2015, she was Elbæk's successor.

<sup>iv</sup> Translated by the author from the following: "De kæmper for at få det gjort tidssvarende, men de har ikke noget belæg for det. Ingen tradition for samtidskunst som vi har haft siden 50'erne, eller hele det 20. århundrede".

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<sup>v</sup> I realize that the case of the two schools at first hand will come off as entirely bilateral. However, the notion of the global in this project is to be understood in a broader conceptual sense. I engage further with the discussion of the pragmatics of local artistic practices and contemporary art as a global phenomenon in both Chapters 6 and 7 (and to some extent in the list of key themes, below). At this point in my process, the notion of the global as a central concept came to involve a multiplicity of times and spaces in the world of art.

<sup>vi</sup> I recognize that such experiences can also involve the practical notion of having time (or space) to produce one's art or to in other ways engage with the artistic process. Though this take on both time and space is touched upon in relation to the notion of autonomy in Chapter 5, it is not part of the key understanding of time as worked with in this thesis.

## Endnotes / Chapter 2

<sup>vii</sup> Here Zolberg refers to an earlier publication of hers from 1997: *African legacies, American realities: Art and artists on the edge*, in *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture* (Zolberg and Cherbo, 1997)

<sup>viii</sup> The Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen is by size, location, and history the most prestigious and renowned of the Danish art academies. Comparatively, the Xiamen Art College is a medium-sized art school well reputed but not among the most prestigious and renowned art academies in the country. However, the relative national status of the two schools are in this study insignificant, as they are first and foremost considered as relevant local art world contexts due to their functions as educational institutions in higher arts education, i.e. organizations training young people to become contemporary visual artists. This does not mean that the relative empirical idiosyncrasies of the two schools have been ignored, quite the contrary. It only suggests that this study in principle could have used cases from any local art school across the globe, regardless of relative status and history. Further studies in other local contexts, such as art schools and/or art worlds with alternative idiosyncrasies, will preferably serve to further test and develop the contributions of this study.

<sup>ix</sup> The book attempts to show the emergence of these currents in both art institutions and the practice of art on a global scale.

<sup>x</sup> This narrow sense of the term aesthetics is also referred to as “surface anesthetization”, the exercise of taste and judgment of art (Welsch, 1996), or as a “theory of the art”, a theory of the essential quality of art (Shusterman, 2006).

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## Endnotes / Chapter 3

<sup>xi</sup> This is (in parts) done by Julia Chi Zhang (among others), as she analyzes the styles applied by the Chinese (yet Western oriented) post-Tiananmen avant-garde against a historical narrative, whereby she places these aesthetic forms within a broader context of societal development (Zhang, 2006). This is to some extent similar to what Heinrich, DeNora, and Elias did in their interpretations of the alleged artistic geniuses.

<sup>xii</sup> Since I am neither an art historian nor artist by training (or conviction), pragmatically speaking, this choice is also influenced by a concern to avoid potential art-historical or representational-aesthetic pitfalls, which would be a considerable risk in me attempting to seriously bring the art work into the analytical equation. As I develop my competences as a researcher, I suspect I could find both exploratory and explanatory sense in including the art work in my investigations, for example by looking into how autonomy and contemporaneity is specifically experienced and acted out in the artistic process of producing (ideating, executing, etc.) the art work. Such endeavor is however beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>xiii</sup> I later noticed a curiously similar example by Becker (1982, p. 378): “When the Brazilian military juntas forbade academic sociology, people organized research institutes – with outside help of course – and began to practice ‘urban anthropology’, which was not forbidden.” This similar situation emphasizes the need to explore the cultural structures and socio-cultural dynamics behind terms and official lingo. I do however also admit to the potential simplification that lies in the decision not to explore the linguistic details and possibly varying meanings in the different “contemporary aliases” at play.

## Endnotes / Chapter 4

<sup>xiv</sup> Translated by the author from the following: “Den moderne kunst blev født racistisk – ligesom jeg”.

<sup>xv</sup> As stated in Chapter 6, this thesis has not been a normative study, setting out to criticize cultural policy makers or various art-world actors. Rather, I am grateful to them all for using their experiences of the world to coax out, reveal, and indicate to me in my research the complex of dynamics and structures which organize the world of art.

<sup>xvi</sup> Translated by the author from the following: “Vi er på kunstens side, og ser det som vores rolle at være med til at realisere internationalt anerkendte kunstneres værker. Så da vi blev spurgt fra Ai Weiwei studio i Berlin om Kunsthall Charlottenborg ville være det officielle indsamlingssted i Danmark, sagde vi ja med det samme” (Schools of Visual Arts, 2015).

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## Endnotes / Chapter 5

<sup>xvii</sup> A range of interesting issues exist in relation to these different forms of exchange acts and the relationship between them in different national contexts. For example, Abbing (2002) argues that a significant number of Dutch artists value the money they earn from selling a painting to the government as more socially “valuable” than the same amount of money earned from selling a painting to a private corporation. Rengers and Plug (2001) argue that subsidizing artists enhances the so-called winner-takes-all tendency of the Dutch market at large.

<sup>xviii</sup> One could read this as an indirect yet quite clear reference to Kant.

<sup>xix</sup> As illustrated in the examples above, the Boudieuian discourse understands artists and their involvement with utilization in terms of types or positions, with (opposed to dynamic everyday experience) specific pre-defined characteristics, which are assigned to the individual.

<sup>xx</sup> The young artists were initially approached via email, with the email addresses provided by the schools. The invitation to participate in the study was short, describing the study and the interview subject, namely what it meant to these young people to be a contemporary artist today. The young artists, who responded with their agreement to partake in the study, were then interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Danish and all direct quotes from the interviews used in the paper were subsequently translated into English by the author. A number of faculty members at the school were interviewed as well, for the contextualization of the history and current organization of the school. All the names in the findings are aliases, as all the young artists were promised anonymity in the initial invitation to participate in the study.

<sup>xxi</sup> These are not their real names.

<sup>xxii</sup> Bourdieu, 1980, p. 79.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This narrow sense of the term is also referred to as “surface anesthetization” or a “theory of the art” as such (Welsch, 1996), the exercise of taste and judgment of art or a theory of the essential quality of art (Shusterman, 2006).

<sup>xxiv</sup> No “rules” without exceptions (e.g., Ron Eyerman & McCormick, 2006).

<sup>xxv</sup> In “Distinction”, Bourdieu (2010) similarly critiques the Kantian legacy of the universality of the aesthetic by unfolding the social function of the judgment of taste in culture and art. After having made use of what he terms a “sort of deliberate amnesia” regarding the tradition of philosophical aesthetics (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 487), Bourdieu in his postscript to “Distinction” opens up to a confrontation with the Kantian legacy which it contains. Having noted that these two perspectives need not mutually exclude each other, as the universal claim of “intrinsically egalitarian meaning of aesthetic judgment” does not dismiss these judgments from also serving a social function (Davis,

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2010, p. 132), and recognizing the significance of this disagreement in the trajectory of Rancière's critique of Bourdieu (e.g., Rancière, 2004), this paper will not concern itself with this controversy further.

<sup>xxvi</sup> A "promise" introduced along with modern art, as he phrases it: "Any profane object could get into the realm of artistic experience. Correspondingly, any artistic production could become part of the framing of a new collective life" (Rancière, 2005, pp. 21-22).

## Endnotes / Chapter 6

<sup>xxvii</sup> The singular first-person narrator who appears throughout this work is one of the authors, Marianne Bertelsen, speaking, as explained below, from her experience of fieldwork undertaken in China in January 2014.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The majority of art educators are trained and practicing artists.

<sup>xxix</sup> As Gumbrecht (2014) points out, the significance of the chronotope of historicism cannot be overstated. It proves to be pivotal for the idea of the Cartesian subject by offering its epistemological *raison d'être*: this subject is always on the move from the past, through the present, to the future. Picking up options from what the future holds then becomes the basis for human, individual agency. Conversely, of course, if the chronotope of historicism has run its course, then the question of what has replaced it implicates the question of what notion of subject, subjectivity, and human life corresponds to, in this sense, "postmodern" times.

<sup>xxx</sup> With regard to the localized spatialities of such disjunctive-conjunctive contemporariness, see Chapter 7.

## Endnotes / Chapter 7

<sup>xxxi</sup> A Chinese curator and art critic who, among many other activities, took part in the development of District 798 and several controversial exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art. Feng Boyi also trained at the Central Academy for Fine Arts, and has engaged with the official China Artists' Association.

<sup>xxxii</sup> A Chinese contemporary artist and political activist who is internationally known for, among other things, his antagonistic critique of the Chinese government on issues of democracy and human rights, as well as for being the artistic consultant on the Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Olympics. Ai Weiwei lived in the US for a number of years and moves in the upper echelons of the international art world, where his works are sold for considerable sums.

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Various interpretations of the phenomenon of “the art world” have been presented and defined. See Danto (1964) and Becker (1982) for respectively philosophical and sociological classic accounts, Thornton (2008) for an empirically rich description, or Belting and Buddensieg (2009) and Lee (2004) for more critical global accounts. In the context of this paper, it makes sense to talk about art worlds in the plural. Correspondingly, I work with art worlds in a broad sense which goes beyond, for instance, Becker’s or Danto’s network-based and institutional definitions, and instead approach the concept in the global form in which it is critically applied by Belting and Buddensieg (2009) and Lee (2004). As mention in Chapter 1, when referring to such matters as referencing, I make use of the alternative “world(s) of art” to emphasize that I am referring to the world of art as it is experienced in the local context of China (as opposed to a more spatially “bounded” notion of a Chinese art world).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> In February 2014, Chinese Vice Minister Wang Xiaohui presented the new 2013 policy reforms at a public meeting at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. The reforms spanned many political areas and included cultural policy. Responding to questions on cultural policy and the role of the fine arts in that policy, the Vice Minister maintained the focus adopted in previous Chinese cultural policy: culture and the arts are viewed mainly as either historical heritage to be maintained or part of the creative industries and a means to economic growth.

<sup>xxxv</sup> The 1989 Tiananmen Square “incident”, which followed, amongst others, the 1985 “New Wave” art movement inspired by modern and contemporary art created in the West (Sullivan, 1999). However (keeping in mind the dynamic of global and local influences and structures potentially at play here), it is also argued that the demonstrators on the square were not (only) looking to the West but, in their own right, “looking to another, original way towards development within and beyond underdevelopment” (Negri, 2008, p. 25).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Finding based on conversations with young artists and art educators during fieldwork in Shanghai July 2013 and in Xiamen January 2014.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Besides this there might have been a sense of victory in, by the 2000s, beating the Western art world at their own game; how the internationally successful ‘high-profile’ formats of Cynical Realism and Political Pop was at large scale auctions (Gao, 2012) and consequently appearing in newspaper articles, not with a focus on the (more or less genuine) political message of the work but on the ‘multimillion dollar prices they achieved’ at these auctions (Pollack, 2010).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Finding based on conversations with young artists and art educators during fieldwork in Shanghai in July 2013 and in Xiamen in January 2014.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Xiamen Art College, a medium-sized art school, is in line with this tradition of professional literati, well reputed partly due to its affiliation with the renowned University of Xiamen.

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<sup>xi</sup> There is a rare exception to this requirement. If a student has a sufficiently high grade average, he or she can enter the school without passing the tests of technical skills. However, none of the current students or recent graduates I spoke to fell into this category, and it is rarely used, since if a student has such higher grades, the pressure from parents and general societal norm steer him/her towards an education guaranteeing a higher income and prestige such as law or medicine.

<sup>xii</sup> Parallel to this, a less literate and more romantic image of the painter in contact with nature as he portrays the Chinese landscapes and still lives remains a smaller and less influential part of the Chinese tradition of artistic practice.

<sup>xlii</sup> Finding based on conversations with young artists and art educators during fieldwork in Shanghai in July 2013 and in Xiamen in January 2014.

<sup>xliii</sup> The young artist Ming, who had also been on exchange to Europe and was now, beside her artistic practice, running her own design consultancy with a fellow artist, also found it interesting to compare the conditions of herself and her peers with the European artists and their bohemian lifestyles. She saw these lifestyles as being supported by the state in various ways. Concluding, she simply observed that “in China, these artists cannot survive”.

<sup>xliv</sup> Liu Wei, an artist I met at an opening of a show at the Xiamen Art School who was trained in the traditional disciplines but now heading one of several independent contemporary art communities around Xiamen opposing the traditional approaches at the school, confirmed these circumstances: “In the Chinese art market the main attitude... is more manipulated or mastered by the government, the policies... So this is the dominating mainstream – the traditional art.”

<sup>xlvi</sup> Gao gives a further, telling example in describing the influence the workings of the market and potential stardom have had on especially the youth of Chinese society: “I recently heard a postgraduate student at the Central Academy of Art in Beijing claiming that the institute supported the idea that a student driving a Mercedes-Benz should be seen as successful. His works may get sponsorship from companies and may be sold after the graduation exhibition, which will be an honor for the professors and the institute. This is a very common phenomenon now” (ibid. p. 218). This example tallies with the young artists’ explanation of how, as part of their schooling, they were taught “how to cater to the market”, as the young artist Ying candidly phrased it.

<sup>xlvi</sup> He classifies this “extended postwar” periodization as the “first chronological” period of contemporary art, and as one which dominates the temporal and spatial understanding of contemporary art to this day (Osborne 2013, p. 20).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Whether this was a case of the suppressing or “enrollment” of “artist soldiers” turning to practice the political symbolism of Mao’s revolutionary art on their own initiative is not clear (Gao, 2008;

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Wu, 2008). At any rate, I argue that the example serves the intended purpose of illustrating a local situation of contemporary art.

<sup>xlviii</sup> This appropriation of “the contemporary” would, as mentioned above, earn the Chinese contemporary artists a place on the international art scene.

<sup>xlix</sup> Obviously, the subjects in question need not be Chinese; they may be found in any local space. Likewise, as the context of China is indeed big and complex, the case in this paper is only a small snapshot of it.

<sup>i</sup> With no reference to Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace* (1998).

<sup>ii</sup> He focuses specifically on the nation state as the spatial frame.

<sup>iii</sup> Though he also notes that contemporary practice “could be used as a way of illuminating a certain style, such as Chinese contemporary abstract paintings” (Gao, 2012, p. 213).

<sup>liii</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 3, I deliberately avoid providing examples of the specific contemporary art works which the young artists from Xiamen are referring to in some of the statements, such as this one. This would be beside the point. Instead, the aim of this paper is, as stated, to offer an analysis which goes further than the style and form of the art work and/or the political or institutional structures around it.

<sup>liv</sup> Obviously, the traditionally oriented students also consider their works to be some form of personal expression. The focus here is not a comparative battle between the different approaches to the artistic practice I encountered at the school, but how that artistic practice, experienced by the young artists who identify as contemporary, can be understood as an example of local contemporaneity.

<sup>lv</sup> He considers the “apartment art” which emerged from the 1989 Tiananmen incident (Gao, 2012, p. 210), a manifestation or reinstatement of the independent artist as the “highest expression of spirituality” (ibid. p. 217). Artistic activity of the kind which he proposes would require a third space.

<sup>lvi</sup> Cultural and political boundaries, ranging from concrete legal limitations on artistic freedom of expression to more intangible limitations such as the culture surrounding contemporary art in the public sphere and the lack of an actual national market for contemporary art.

## TITLER I PH.D.SERIEN:

– *a Field Study of the Rise and Fall of a Bottom-Up Process*

### 2004

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*SEGMENTATION IN TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION MEMORY SYSTEMS  
An empirical investigation of cognitive segmentation and effects of integrating a TM system into the translation process*
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Et socialkonstruktivistisk casestudie af partnerskabsaktørers virkelighedsopfattelse mellem identitet og legitimitet*
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*Industriel forskningsledelse  
– på sporet af mønstre og samarbejde i danske forskningsintensive virksomheder*
13. Martin Jes Iversen  
*The Governance of GN Great Nordic  
– in an age of strategic and structural transitions 1939-1988*
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  20. Sabine Madsen  
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Diskursive forhandlinger og magtkampe mellem rivaliserende nationale identitetskonstruktioner i østrigske pressediskurser*
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36. Finn Janning  
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*Seduction, Conquest and Discovery*
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*Strategic Management of the Radical Innovation Process*  
*Leveraging Social Capital for Market Uncertainty Management*
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## 2006

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