

This Way, Paris

05.04 – 06.01.2024

Beau Travail



Skånegatan 108, 116 35 Stockholm, Sweden

Behzad Dehno

Opening:

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According to the standard view, the world of contemporary art is one of peaceful internationalism, a world of free and equal access in which recognition is available to all participants. It is an enchanted world that exists outside time and space and so escapes the mundane conflicts of history. Such a view was fabricated in nations where the belief in a pure definition of art is the strongest: art removed from history, from the world of nations, political and military competition, economic dependence, linguistic domination—the idea of a universal art that is non-national, non-partisan, and unmarked by political or linguistic divisions.

However, nothing is more international than a national state: it is constructed solely in relation to other states, and often in opposition to them. National rivalries arise from the fact that their political, economic, military, diplomatic and geographic histories are not different, as one might presume, but rather unequal. Competition defines and unifies the world system while monopolists set limits between metropole and periphery. So, while not every artist proceeds in the same way, all attempt to enter the same contest and, despite unequal advantages, all endeavor to attain the same goal: legitimacy. The globalization of contemporary art depends on the entry of new contestants intent upon adding to their stock of artistic capital: each new player, in bringing to bear the weight of their national heritage helps to unify the spaces of contemporary art and extend the domain of cultural rivalry.

How might one map this world? The artistic and intellectual map cannot be superimposed upon the political map, neither are reducible to political history. Nonetheless, art remains relatively dependent on politics, especially in countries without artistic resources. On the one hand, one sees the world with its profusion of facts, political, social, economic, ideological; and, on the other, the artwork, a phenomenon that is apparently solitary, always ambiguous for the fact that it can carry more than one meaning at a time. These two geographies seldom coincide.

At one point in recent history, one might have located Paris as the world capital of art. To Gertrude Stein, “Paris was where the twentieth century was” and Walter Benjamin claimed it as the capital of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1789, Paris became a capital for a world republic that had neither borders nor boundaries, a universal homeland exempt from all profession of patriotism, a kingdom of art set up in opposition to the ordinary laws of states, a transnational realm whose sole imperatives are those of art and literature: the universal republic of culture. Victor Hugo writes in the 1867 *Paris Guide*:

Without 1789, the supremacy of Paris is an enigma: Rome has more majesty, Trier is older, Venice is more beautiful, Naples more graceful, London wealthier. What then does Paris have? The revolution of all the cities of the earth, Paris is the place where the flapping of the immense invisible sails of progress can best be heard.

Paris combined two sets of apparently antithetical properties, bringing together the historical concepts of freedom. On the one hand, it symbolized the revolution, the overthrow of the monarchy, the invention of the rights of man. On the other hand, it was the capital of letters, the arts, luxurious living, and fashion. Paris was at once the intellectual capital of the world, the arbiter of good taste, and the source of political democracy: an idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived; a destination, as Octavio Paz once expressed, that could be remembered in advance of one's arrival.

One could additionally, like Valéry, describe Paris as the imperial bourse of aesthetic judgement. Or, per Bourdieu, describe its symbolic politics as “an imperialism of the universal” for having used denationalization for national purposes. Paris' incessantly proclaimed universality produced two types of consequences: one imaginary, which helped construct and consolidate a Parisian mythology; the other real, associated with the inflow of foreign artists, political refugees, and isolated artists who came to get their start in Paris—and its impossible to say which were the consequence of the other. This twin phenomena increased and multiplied, each helping to establish and support the other. Paris was doubly universal, by virtue of both the belief in its universality and of the real effects that this belief produced. An ideal Parisian would be one whose horizon extends far beyond their city and who is not content to be from Paris. This is so that nothing may be foreign to Paris, so that Paris may always be in contact with everywhere in the world, that it may become a capital beyond all local politics.

It was through this very process of emancipation from national politics that Paris became the world capital of art in the nineteenth and twentieth century. It was able to manufacture a universal art while consecrating works produced in outlying territories, impressing the stamp of culture upon works that came from far flung lands; thereby denationalizing and departicularizing them, declaring them to be acceptable as legal tender in all the countries under its cultural jurisdiction. Yet this power to universalize hazarded a unilateral structure of judgement that interpreted peripheral context as anachronism, evidence of a blindness peculiar to metropolises that assumes the burden of a tax on artists from the antipodes.

It would be hard to argue that the Paris that has been described so far is recognizable in the present. The image of a cultural flatland littered with cheap souvenirs and unmerited snobbery is hard to square with a once-revolutionary imaginary. Was it the fallout of 1968? The repudiation of 1789 by the collapse of Soviet Union and the decline of movements for national liberation? Or perhaps the Fifth Republic's provincialization by an American-lead international order which transformed contemporary Paris into something like a third-century Athens when it was dominated by Imperial Rome, minus the benefit of imperial citizenship.

It is with the living memory of this world capital that the present exhibition assumes its form. A series of painted arrows mounted to the gallery's walls each orient its audience's attention in the direction of this world historical city—what if *la promesse de bonheur* bore a dedicated a sign post? This is accompanied by an unedited archive of state-mandated broadcasted interviews with American lottery winners, a literal community of fate.

By drawing a map of the contemporary world and highlighting the gap between great and small nations, one may hope to be delivered from the prejudices inculcated by the center. The dream would be to reverse continental drift; that, distant though they are from each other on the map, the world and the artwork can nonetheless be brought together, be interlocked with each other. One might imagine a world to compliment the following remark by Brancusi to Tzara: In art, there are no foreigners.

– *Sam Pulitzer*

Behzad Dehno (DK, TR, IR) b. 1993 Aarhus, is a transnational artist, currently based between Geneva, Switzerland, and Stockholm, Sweden.

Behzad explores the imaginary in his artistic practice. He works with art based on an interest in perceptions of reality and time - both their boundaries and moments of blur. His works consist of fragments that form a playful encounter with pre-existing systems, often situation-specific, and where the viewer becomes a participant.

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