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Book Review of Néstor Canclini's *Art beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society without a Story Line*

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Abstract:

Néstor García Canclini. *Art beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without a Story Line*, trans. David Frye. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 240 pp. $84.95 cloth; $23.95 paperback

Reviewed by Tijen Tunali

Néstor García Canclini is an Argentine-born Mexican anthropologist and a leading figure in cultural studies worldwide. He is known for his studies of hybrid cultures and multicultural conflicts. Canclini has a long history of thinking at the intersections of disciplines. Once again, he successfully orchestrates a unique perspective transgressing the disciplinary borders of art history, sociology, philosophy and anthropology and analyses what has been happening to art in the past few decades.

Throughout the book, Canclini does not only question the concept of art but also that of the 'art world' and 'art field' that have entered in complex and contemporaneous interrelationships with politics, economics, and culture. For Canclini, it is more important to talk about what's happening to art, or what art can do than about what and who defines art. To understand art's

condition as oscillating 'between the inevitability of being inserted into the society and the desire for autonomy', Canclini builds his discussion on two important concepts: 'imminence' and 'postautonomy'.

Canclini reminds us that art has entered a postautonomous condition because it is deeply connected to other fields such as cultural industry, media, tourism, and fashion. Thus, for Canclini, postautonomy creates a shift from artistic practices based on objects to practices based on contexts, which is widely evident in social media, electronic networks and interactions. Through examining the works of Francis Alÿs, Antoni Muntadas, León Ferrari, Teresa Margolles, Santiago Sierra, Carlos Amoroles and Gabriel Orozco, Canclini demonstrates that although art is no longer an autonomous field, there are tactical autonomies that allow art a postautonomous condition. This gives art a privilege of being 'in exodus'—a state of being inside and outside, being autonomous and interdependent, being a piece of merchandise and being displayed in a museum at the same time.

Art, for Canclini, is the locus of imminence 'the zero point, the instant just before existence'. Canclini states: '[works of art] situate themselves in a prior moment, when the real is possible, when it has not yet broken down' (p. xiv). From the perspective of anthropology, he makes these majestic assumptions about art: 'Art attempts to narrate, to translate indecisions and enigmas, to make visible the tension between rootedness and traveling'(p.82) and 'Art exists because we live in tension between what we desire and what we lack, between what we would like to name and what is contradicted and disagreed upon by society.'(p.127) Canclini further argues that being situated at the point of imminence gives art the ability to recognise and reveal the contradictions and conflicts in art's own condition in relation to the current capitalist system. And he posits: 'I conceive of imminence as the experience of perceiving in the existing reality other possible ways of being that make dissent, not escape, a necessity.'(p.168) Canclini's statements about art's imminent existence and postautonomous condition lead the reader to the question: could this give art the ability to change itself in relation to the capitalist system?

Canclini in the final chapter, putting forward French philosopher Jacques Rancière's theory on aesthetics and politics, explains that art's imminence allows it to make visible the oscillation between 'consensus' and 'dissensus'. For Rancière, 'politics' is the dimension of dissensus—a division within the consensual agreement that is the mechanism of 'policing'. And 'police' is the organisation of powers rooted in the consent of collectivities (agreement), and the systems of legitimisation and distribution of this power. Canclini criticises Rancière for questioning art and aesthetics solely in terms of reestablishing or reinventing social ties. Indeed, what Rancière talks about is the antagonistic relationship between the organization of homogeneous acts of 'police' that depends on consensus and heterogeneous acts of 'politics' that correspond to the disagreement, divergence, disturbance, and division in the consensus. In sum, Canclini agrees with Rancière's discussion of police and politics,

but discusses these concepts from the point of social relations, and insists that art is solely capable of *making visible* what 'politics' and 'police' are, not dismantling the social relations that they produce. Canclini, after this point, goes back to his postmodernist roots and emphasises that a successful artist's strategy lies not in directly confronting the powers but revealing the gaps within powers, and not in just questioning the Western values but the whole artistic canon.

Indeed, it is quite refreshing to see that a book which deals with the condition of art today from an anthropological perspective does not dwell on whether contemporary art and/or the art world has been globalised and to what extent it has been globalised or what globalisation of art entails. Rather, it dwells on the complexity of the changing forms, roles and theory of art in relation to the the neoliberal capitalist system since the late 1980s. *Art beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without a Story Line* offers clear and urgent discussions and pertinent examples that are quite compelling for students of the anthropology of art.

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