

FROM THE NATIONAL TO THE GLOBAL RULES OF ART

Contributions and Questions for Globalizing Field Theory

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Globalizing Bourdieu's field theory has been a collective endeavor for over two decades, propelled by foundational interventions such as Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* (2004) and Johan Heilbron's study of global translation flows (1999). Yet despite the proliferation of studies across domains – culture, academia, politics, religion, and beyond – a coherent theoretical framework for theorizing global/transnational fields has yet to emerge. Amid this fragmented landscape, the contemporary visual arts offer a particularly suggestive case. As a medium that is seemingly less constrained by linguistic translation, pedagogical nationalism, or the requirements of live performance – unlike literature or theatre – visual art appears to exemplify a field with heightened globality.

This impression quickly unravels under scrutiny, however, as visual art – like

other cultural practices – is deeply embedded in historically specific social relations. Artworks are not universally legible but require contextual translation and mediation through infrastructures shaped by national, institutional, and geopolitical forces. The notion that visual art is inherently more “global” therefore risks falling into a kind of medium essentialism – obscuring the relational and historical foundations that shape all fields.

More fundamentally, this example highlights a deeper epistemological challenge: the need for robust, rather than spontaneous, analytical categories to compare how fields emerge, evolve, and operate across global space. This is not merely about extending Bourdieu's relational concepts beyond the national frame but about constructing a comparative framework to theorize the commonalities and divergences in global/transnational field formations – a critical step toward a more unified and reflexive global field theory.

That said, such a preamble should not obscure the fact that we can learn something from the global art field more broadly. The *Global Rules of Art* (Buchholz, 2022) offers valuable insights for how we can think about the emergence, structure, and spaces of global/transnational fields. This article draws on that study to first distill its key findings, before reflecting on some broader methodological and theoretical con-

tributions to a comparative theory of global fields.

From West-centric Domination to a Global Logic of Struggles

The Global Rules of Art traces how visual art has evolved through successive waves of globalization – from 19th-century imperial circuits to the seemingly borderless networks of the 21st century. Focusing especially on the last forty years, the book examines how visual art circulates, gains recognition, and acquires value on a global scale.

At its heart lies a central question in cultural globalization: Has recent global expansion disrupted longstanding Western dominance in the arts, or merely repackaged it? Well into the 1980s, the “international” art world remained predominantly transatlantic – centered on North America and Western Europe – with artists from other parts of the world largely sidelined.

Scholars remain divided on how much has changed. Some herald the rise of a “global art world” in which historically excluded artists now gain visibility and agency. Others, invoking cultural imperialism, caution that such shifts may obscure persistent asymmetries under the veneer of pluralism.

The Global Rules of Art intervenes by advancing an intermediary position. Rather than viewing globalization as

either rupture or reproduction, it argues that the art world has evolved into a “global field”: an expanded yet unequal space where new agents participate in shared institutions, discourses, and stakes. This transformation has lessened but not eliminated power imbalances. Cultural authority remains concentrated in major Western hubs, but more multi-directional forms of “asymmetric interdependence” are at play. The book’s relational approach thereby counters one-sided narratives of cultural imperialism. When participants from both centers and peripheries enter a shared force field, all are transformed. In this evolving field, meanings and canons are being redefined through ongoing struggles involving artists and institutions across continents. While West-centric norms have not been entirely dethroned, they have become increasingly unsettled by plural, often contradictory forces.

One of the book’s key insights is how the global field manifests differently across its symbolic and commercial subfields. The former, autonomous subfield – driven by biennials, curators, and critics – has expanded into countries like Brazil, South Korea, Senegal, and beyond, creating global circuits that uplift postcolonial artists and cosmopolitan discourses. Meanwhile, the heteronomous pole – the globalizing commercial art market – remains more geographically concentrated in the Global North.

Driven by market dynamics such as branding, speculative value, and financial investment, it largely favored artists from economically ascendant nations.

The Chinese contemporary art boom of the early 2000s illustrates this divide. Artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Yue Minjun achieved commercial prominence within the heteronomous subfield, which, however, outstripped their institutional or curatorial recognition – illustrating a growing disconnect between economic and symbolic capital in the globalizing field.

The divergences that the book uncovers highlight the need to move beyond binary frames such as West vs. non-West or “Global North” vs. “Global South”. *The Global Rules of Art* argues for a multi-dimensional subfields perspective that accounts for uneven geographies, temporalities, and power structures within globalization itself.

Overall, while much of the Bourdieusian tradition has focused on the national reproduction of inequality, this study reorients attention toward the transnational reconfiguration of cultural hierarchies. In a moment shaped by calls to decolonize canons and institutions, the book offers both an empirical account of how “peripheral” actors gain recognition and a conceptual framework for understanding how global cultural inequalities are made and unmade.

Constructing Relations in a Multi-Scalar Global Field

Although *The Global Rules of Art* centers on a specific case of “high culture,” it offers conceptual and methodological insights that extend beyond the cultural sphere. Three core contributions emerge: the multi-scalar construction of global fields, the mapping of relational heterogeneity within globalizing subfields, and the role of geography in structuring global power.

First, whereas Bourdieu and others have theorized the genesis of new social fields primarily as horizontal, autonomous differentiation from adjacent fields, *The Global Rules of Art* substantiates a complementary model in which global fields emerge through vertical differentiation – that is, through hierarchical structuring across spatial scales. The concept of “vertical autonomy” (Buchholz, 2016) captures how a global field can arise not simply through scale expansion (regional to global), but through the creation of new hierarchically distinct logics and positions that operate relatively independently of national or regional fields.

This scalar perspective also prompts a methodological reorientation for examining the emergence of a global field. Traditional field analysis often begins by tracing the evolving competitive relations among a set of agents within a relatively bounded space. Casanova’s

account of world literature exemplifies this at the macro level, where symbolic competition among national fields drives internationalization (2004). Yet such an approach is difficult to transpose to global art: treating national fields as coherent actors risks reification, while mapping relations among individual actors across continents is logistically and methodologically challenging.

To navigate this complexity, the book redirects the analytical starting point. Rather than tracing evolving struggles among agents (macro or micro), it foregrounds the infrastructures that make global relations possible. This shift – from analyzing field-specific relations to their enabling conditions – is not merely methodological, but epistemological. It moves from objective relations to the mediating institutions and symbolic frameworks through which global fields emerge. In doing so, it retains Bourdieu's concern with “structuring structures” while departing from bounded models of relational mapping.

In this, the book fleshes out three types of infrastructure central to the emergence of global field relations: field-specific institutions that facilitate regular transcontinental exchange and competition (e.g., the biennial and art fair circuits); global mechanisms of hierarchization and valuation (e.g., prizes, rankings, and gatekeeping platforms); and post-national discourses that reframe the field's core practices and values (e.g.,

cosmopolitan curatorial frameworks). The historical analysis shows how these infrastructures do more than connect agents; they reconfigure how competition, legitimacy, and symbolic value are produced across space, in complex interaction with various broader forces.

By the early 2000s, what had emerged was a vertically differentiated global field – not reducible to national levels, though still shaped by their refractive dynamics. Artists, curators, and collectors now operate across local, regional, and global levels simultaneously.

Yet a multi-scalar field perspective goes beyond descriptive layering. As Buchholz and Schmitz (2025) argue, the task ahead is to theorize more the variable strength, directionality, and mediation of interscalar effects. Fields at different scales exhibit uneven “fieldness:” They vary in degrees of relational density, institutional coherence, and symbolic integration. The challenge for global field theory is to analyze how historically variable interdependencies shape scalar field relations, and how capital conversion and translation dynamics operate differently in vertical versus horizontal field configurations (Ibid.).

How Do Subfields Relate, Transform, and Pluralize in a Global Context?

In addition to proposing a multi-scalar framework, *The Global Rules of Art* ex-

tends Bourdieu's theory of autonomous and heteronomous subfields – such as the specific symbolic and commercial subfields of cultural production – into the global arena. The subfield concept offers a powerful lens for theorizing internal differentiation within globalizing spheres in ways that cut across, without dissolving, conventional territorial units like nations or regions. In doing so, it invites attention to genuinely transnational forms of sub-differentiation – an analytic space still underdeveloped in global comparative field theory.¹

Offering one of the most sustained extensions of subfield theory at the global scale, the book traces how meso-level subfield dynamics interact with macro- and micro-level forces to produce distinct transnational patterns. By examining these multi-level dynamics through a single case, the study offers a model for how subfields emerge, interact, and undergo relational transformation in a global context.

Contrary to claims that globalization leads to generalized heteronomization or the erosion of subfield boundaries (cf. Bourdieu, 2003; 2008), the book shows how global expansion can sharpen internal differentiation and intensify polarization. As the global art field took shape, its subfields did not merely grow

in size and reach – they were transformed in ways that deepened their divergence.

The globalizing symbolic subfield was transformed through an expanding ecology of biennials, experimental artists, and mediating agents – curators, critics, artist-centered galleries – whose practices propelled postcolonial critique, new debates on “global art,” and emerging cosmopolitan criteria of legitimacy. Global biennials, for example, recalibrated hierarchies of artistic value by introducing curatorial frameworks that displaced Eurocentric canons, elevated postcolonial voices, and helped consolidate a more discursive logic within the field. These shifts unfolded not as mechanical effects of globalization, but through field-specific developments that were refracted by broader currents: decolonization, migration, and identity politics.

Conversely, the commercial subfield – dominated by mega-galleries, fairs, and auction houses – was influenced by economic globalization, rising global wealth, and liberalized markets. As speculative logics took hold, market valuation became increasingly decoupled from critical recognition or institutional legitimacy. The emergence of a financialized global “art industry” thereby complicates

¹ For insightful exceptions that extend subfield analysis to global contexts, see Steinmetz's theorization of colonial knowledge production

through intersecting subfields of empire and state formation (2016), and also Sapiro's mapping of transnational publishing flows in global academia (2023).

Bourdieu's model of large-scale production. Artworks, though entangled in speculative markets, retain material singularity and symbolic distinctiveness. Theorizing this global subfield requires new tools to capture its distinctive technological infrastructures, speculative temporalities, and financial interdependencies – dimensions not fully captured by Bourdieu's original framing of heteronomous cultural production.

Taken together, globalization did not flatten the art field – it fractured it in new ways, creating increasingly divergent poles: cosmopolitan discursive production on one side, corporatized financial speculation on the other. Still, the divergence between symbolic and commercial poles should not be mistaken for a rigid binary. The field remains internally plural, and future research must examine other cross-border subfields of circulation, activism, or alternative production that may follow different logics and trajectories in a global context.

This more open-ended perspective encourages a shift in how we approach global comparative field theory. Rather than focusing on emerging global fields, it calls for deeper theorization of their internal sub-differentiations. As subfields globalize, a series of comparative questions arise: When does global expansion foster subfield pluralization, and when does it blur boundaries? What configurations sustain relative autonomy

under conditions of looser integration and symbolic ambiguity? And what theoretical and methodological strategies best delineate subfields at the global level, where social structures are more fluid and harder to trace? A global subfield perspective not only illuminates the internal complexity of cultural globalization but also expands the analytic scope of field analysis itself.

Transnational Articulations of Physical, Social, and Cultural Space

Globalization has not displaced but sharpened scholarly debates on the geography of social and cultural processes. While Bourdieusian sociology has long used spatial metaphors and demonstrated how physical space shapes social reproduction – through domestic divisions, residential segregation, or the concentration of institutional capital – global and transnational research offers an opportunity to incorporate geography more explicitly into field theory. *The Global Rules of Art* contributes to this emerging agenda by proposing a framework for understanding how geography mediates power in cross-border fields – both territorially and interpretively – through its articulation with subfield-specific social and cultural relations.

Territorially, global field theory entails theorizing the unequal geographic dis-

tribution of power resources across macro entities (e.g., urban, national, regional fields), which delineates field-specific geographies of centers and peripheries (Buchholz, 2018a). In the global art field, this appears in the uneven spatial distribution of “macro capital” (Ibid.; Buchholz, 2022), including institutional resources essential for the transnational production, mediation, and valuation of contemporary art. Crucially, a field’s center–periphery configurations can vary across subfields. In the autonomous global subfield – revolving around symbolic consecration – the geography of power is shaped by a high concentration of cultural infrastructures in cities like New York, Berlin, and Paris. In the heteronomous global art market, commercial infrastructures – auction houses, galleries, and art fairs – cluster in hubs such as New York, London, and Hong Kong. Thus, the centers of the autonomous and heteronomous poles diverge and must be treated as analytically distinct, depending on the subfield-specific forms of macro capital that structure competition (Buchholz, 2018a). Importantly, global centers do not exert influence uniformly. The ways geographic inequalities create a “multiplier effect” (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 91) on field dynamics are mediated by subfield-specific social and cultural relations. In the autonomous subfield, where embodied cultural capital and strong ties matter, peripheral artists often had to

migrate and be physically present in cultural centers to gain global recognition and institutional validation. In the heteronomous art market, however, artists have achieved international success without relocating. Here, transactions rely more on weak ties, and remaining in one’s home country can even enhance value as an “authentic” geo-aesthetic asset. Such variations underscore the need to theorize not only different subfield-specific centers but also how geographic, social, and cultural power relations interact. Together, they generate distinct territorial logics of competition across borders, even within the same field (Buchholz, 2022, pp. 269–273; Buchholz, 2025).

More intricate still is geography’s influence on interpretive frameworks. The book’s case studies of artists from Mexico and China highlight how geographic classifications shape symbolic competition within global and transnational fields. In the global art field, there has been a shift away from Eurocentric, time-based evaluative categories (such as the new vs. the outdated, the contemporary vs. the modern) toward frameworks rooted in geographic difference. As the field globalized, the exclusionary logic of a linear, Western-centric art history – reflected in Bourdieu’s temporally oriented theory of artistic innovation (1996) – became increasingly untenable. With temporal categories losing credibility and geo-

cultural “diversity” gaining value as symbolic capital, labels like “Chinese,” “Mexican,” or “global” emerged as alternative markers for interpreting and evaluating art.

Yet these labels function differently across field domains. In the autonomous subfield, they act as refracted signals shaped by hierarchies and aesthetic discourse. In the heteronomous, market-driven subfield, they tie more directly to broader global narratives and economic imaginaries. The book thereby offers a typology of four modalities through which geo-cultural classifications imbue symbolic practices with value: universalist, cosmopolitan, cultural-identitarian, and cultural wealth frames. This typology serves as a comparative tool for theorizing the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, roles geographic categories play in global cultural fields – and potentially beyond, in other globalizing arenas where symbolic classifications matter (Buchholz, 2022, pp. 269–273; Buchholz, 2025).

These insights into the territorial and interpretive dynamics of transnational geography raise new comparative questions for globalizing field theory. How do configurations of autonomous and heteronomous centers generate distinct spatial logics of recognition and competition? When does mobility become essential for peripheral actors, and when can geographic distance be revalued as symbolic capital? How do geo-cultural

labels acquire varying meanings, weights, and institutional effects across subfields? And what relational mechanisms shape the emergence, consolidation, or transformation of mono- versus polycentric macro structures over time?

Global field theory stands to gain from a deeper conceptual engagement with geographic spatiality. Attending to the territorial and interpretive dimensions of geographic power through a field-theoretic lens – not as fixed structures, but as shifting and field-specific relational formations – offers a multidimensional framework for analyzing how geographic configurations shape and refract struggles over value, legitimacy, and influence in globalizing social arenas.

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