

## Press Clipping

Pick up by the gallery, By Diedrich Diederichsen, *Polar Vortex: On Mi You's Art in a Multipolar World*, Artforum 63, no. 10, Summer 2025, pp. 150–153.

### ARTFORUM

#### Polar Vortex

*On Mi You's Art in a Multipolar World*



Xinyi Cheng, *Losing Oneself*, 2023, oil on linen, 23 7/8 x 36 1/4".

**IN HER RECENT CRITIQUE** of art-world politics, *Art in a Multipolar World* (Hatje Cantz), the curator and theorist Mi You sets her sights on the credibility and effectiveness of the “progressive” visual arts in their totality. She does so without embracing any of the positions adopted in the art world for years, whether the ethically and politically justified whistleblower approach formulated with all due urgency by Andrea Fraser in the wake of the first Trump administration (2016 in *Museums, Money, and Politics*, 2018); prominent artists’ expressions of solidarity in opposition to acts of war (and the markets implicated in them) and the increasingly frequent attempts to censor and muzzle them; or activism as a last-ditch effort to reclaim political agency—all of which occur now amid a worldwide uptick in censorship. For You, these acts are attempts to preserve art’s political orientation as left-wing and capitalism-critical—albeit produced under extreme capitalist conditions and in full awareness of that cognitive dissonance.

Instead, You—a researcher at the Documenta Institute in Kassel—wants to characterize a not-always-consistently-neoliberal policy universe (where states behave “liberally” to varying degrees and in distinct ways) marked by old and new differences between the West and the non-West. You identifies a prehistory to this state of affairs in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Bandung conference and its aftermath during the predominantly bipolar Cold War era. She examines the forces that are not only shaping the art world—present since the rise of art institutions and market power in countries like China and the Gulf states—but also, increasingly, determining geopolitics in general. Her shorthand for this is the multipolar world.

For You, the poles of totalitarian versus liberal, Global Northwest versus Global South, are not merely reductive descriptions but already embroiled in performative contradictions. The real difficulty begins, however (to slightly overstate her position), when these poles are mapped onto each other in such a way that the Global South is always the good guy, totalitarianism is always the bad guy, and everything collapses and really becomes misguided when one is supposed to be—or not allowed to be—identical with the other.

In a 2024 e-flux essay summarizing some of the book’s theses, You calls this critical discourse in the visual arts “sanctimonious.” I would have preferred “pious” (frömmelnd in German): ascribing moral integrity to oneself when it can only be granted by others, or when it isn’t even the real issue. After all, while it’s true that art’s cognitive dissonance comes at a cost, what would the alternative be? In a certain sense, one could almost say that sanctimony is art’s duty toward the world. Isn’t it a constant in the conditions under which sensational products like artworks are created? One must always act as if one can say anything and accomplish anything, show anything and think up anything, like a saint—which, of course, one isn’t. That is not a romantic or even a desirable goal, but there is no other way. By contrast, what has been downright ugly in recent decades is the piousness that misconstrues one’s own actions as free of contradiction so long as one maintains a self-image as morally irreproachable. Ultimately, artists and their actions are less important in this analysis than their embeddedness in institutions, movements, curation, and cultural policy.

You espouses complex, fractured perspectives, negotiation and relativism. Typical cases would be artists from or working within states regarded as illiberal and authoritarian in the West but who nevertheless have decolonial agendas in their projects—agendas, however, that they can only realize, to a very limited extent, if at all, by cooperating with those same illiberal states. She promotes an unusual perspective on the controversy surrounding the most recent Documenta—including the particularities through which it unfolded in the realm of German public opinion.



Xinyi Cheng, *Midday Troubles*, 2021, oil on linen, 63 x 78 ¾".

Here, she focuses less on the German government's "reasons of state"—its absolute commitment to Israel and its policies on the part of state institutions, which react to any public reservation regarding Israeli policies with bans, cancellations, and police operations. Instead, she criticizes the cluelessness of both critics and supporters of ruangrupa, Documenta 15's artistic directors: each side, in her view, cobbling together a coherent, decolonial, and anti-imperialist perspective as a near phantasm and projecting it onto actors from the so-called Global South. For her, both are symptomatic of the fragility introduced to the categories of political conviction in the art world as these categories change contexts. But this also speaks to the ignorance of those doing the projecting, who disregarded (in the case of Documenta 15) the complexities and nuances of Indonesian art, cultural policy, and history over the past thirty years.

Her question is thus, What happens when postcolonialism comes home? This line of reasoning exemplifies one of the book's strengths: It scrutinizes the operative terms that have guided the public sphere of culture—or at least its artistic component—for the past two decades, and subjects them to an examination that is not confined to their critical substance but questions the unspoken assumption that such terms are universally applicable. This tendency reaches its peak, of course, in the meta-categories "left" and "right." You does not completely reject these concepts (unlike the many who do so, generally to cover up right-wing thinking). Rather, she attempts to probe, on a case-by-case basis, what could, for example, distinguish good internationalism from bad globalization, good geo-specificity from bad tribalism or ethnocentrism. What frame of reference would we use? The culture of a milieu, a country, or a tribal bubble? A distinction must always be made, she argues, between Chinese discourse produced for foreign consumption and one aimed at an internal audience. And "internal" means different things depending on what phase of Chinese internationalization and globalization we are talking about.

For You, Documenta 15 and the early stages of Documenta 16 are examples of the failure of communication in a “deeply pluralist” world in which the West can stipulate neither what constitutes an appropriate degree of artistic freedom nor what would be an appropriate critique of this Western interpretive monopoly. Her response, however, is not that others should make that determination—nor that negotiating, relativizing processes should ultimately lead to different outcomes. Rather, in a bewildering turn, she suggests that what is ultimately at issue is not truth at all but peace. Her claim does not come with any ambitious politics or philosophical explanation; it is neither post-history nor Kant’s “eternal peace” but the absence of controversy (based on the false pretense or requirements of Western discourse). It could refer, it seems—she’s unspecific on this point—simply to the absence of civil or tribal war.

**There exists a piousness that misconstrues one’s own actions as free of contradiction so long as one maintains a self-image as morally irreproachable.**

This is noteworthy in that a great many people are prepared to accept many things for peace. Indeed, everyone who agrees with this vague (cultural?) pacificism surrenders various truth claims, and this behavior seems to be quite commonplace, especially in light of the three superpowers’ concentrated potential for intimidation. Except that, up to now, we have tended to encounter and expect this behavior from protagonists inhabiting the semiabstract regions of administration, soft power, and cultural policy—not as a demand of artistic work itself, or curatorial work proper.

Even if one wishes to dialectically dismiss art’s truth claim as a quasi-cynical effort to stabilize the lie by setting up a purely compensatory circus of truth in the arts, it can’t be done without this claim to truth. Indeed, the replacement of modernism by postmodernism was already a response to the fact that the one monolithic truth was becoming untenable for very disparate reasons (involving Eurocentrism and colonial thinking). However, the many “little narratives” that sprang up in the process could only replace that single truth on the strength of—now more appropriate—truth claims: that is, through an appeal to truth. Constructions such as intersectionality emerged to guarantee the urgency of the “smaller” truths as well, to say nothing of the fundamental superiority of minoritarian art in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. But now this is all swept aside, leaving only: peace.

The author makes a persuasive case. She gives a riveting, fascinatingly convoluted depiction of her practical experiences with cultural and ideological negotiation work—as a curator, connoisseur, or observer, for example, of the Chinese scene’s critical and (also) left-wing cultural standpoints. She also describes the moment in 2018 when “the big Russian oligarchic-funded art foundation V-A-C, run by a progressive leftist team of curators, organized a discussion between [Aleksandr] Dugin and Yuk Hui.” That’s the Dugin whom You describes as a fanatical madman and whose philosophy could, even then, be described as partially fascist and ambiguous at best.

And yet, “although walking an ambiguously thin line between celebrating non-Western philosophy and building an anti-Western philosophical alliance,” the champion of technodiversity and critic of colonialism Hui is described as having a “thought provoking” conversation with Dugin, the neo-Eurasian and friend of Putin—which, of course, would no longer be possible today. The moment when a left-wing critique of modernity, the West, and/or coloniality crosses the line and becomes right-wing critique is, of course, always the moment when it becomes associated with a power claim of its own and no longer reproaches its Western counterpart for wielding power but for having the wrong agenda—although it still makes a difference whether that wrong agenda is called exploitation and capitalism or decadence and “Gayrope.”\*

One of this book’s chief arguments is that, in the multipolar art world, action can be guided less and less by simplistic truths or distinctions like these. As the author explains with regard to curatorial action, “left” and “right” cannot always be determined, especially when it is a matter of judging whether one is dealing with “left wing” Eurasianism or with “left wing” interpretations of, say, Chinese Tianxia thinking (the term covers a wide-ranging semantic panorama, from “everything under the sun,” in a philosophical or geographical sense, to the “Sinosphere”). In her curatorial work focusing on the Silk Road, You tells us, she has preferred to work with artists who question these categories rather than those who have, in her view, become a symptom of these reductive labels. At the same time, the author herself operates throughout with the distinctions “progressive” and “reactionary” and uses words like “fetishistic” in the classic Marxist sense. Although she does a great deal of relativizing, qualifying, and appealing for complexity, she is unable to escape the problem that when a certain form of judgment and decision-making is rejected, another must be offered in its place.

In this context, her recommendation that we be “intellectually resourceful in devising remedies, for instance, differentiating the gradients of conservatism all the way to extremism instead of labeling everything right of oneself right-wing” becomes questionable. Whom is she seeking to protect, and up to what point is collaboration still OK? At what point—let us say at what degree of Dugin’s radicalization—is it no longer permissible to speak with him publicly? Or is it not the degree of radicalization that matters but the (ultimately not very surprising) fact that a loathsome philosophy is now making common cause with a loathsome politics? Is there any need for criteria that are nonnegotiable? Or is it just their application that ultimately decides, in keeping with a pragmatism that eclipses all possible judgments and fights, as she demands, for “the least-worst” outcome? Or, to quote the maxim of the Town Musicians of Bremen: We can always find something better than death.

This is further called into question by the fact that, in the few months between the manuscript’s presumable submission and the book’s printing, the entire diagnosis of a multipolar world began to teeter after the recent depressing election results not only in the US but in Austria, Germany, Slovakia, and Romania.

Hasn't the art world muddled through for too long and looked on in appeasement at the developments that have now brought us to the brink of a monopolar world, a world in which three fascist or para-fascist superpowers—working with a tiny handful of tech oligarchs and just a single tool, the algorithm—wield executive power and no longer soft power, promote censorship of content and no longer merely economic control of the infrastructure, and engage with genocide instead of cybernetics? Or was the art world really the last remaining somewhat politicized pole—and, justifiably, in a much less accommodating sense than other segments of culture amid an otherwise sluggish and conformist world—so that, as punishment, its members must now gradually begin to look around for a country of exile, a category of country in increasingly short supply?

In fact, whiny, self-contradictory, and sanctimonious art has achieved a great deal of cultural-political, though not necessarily artistic, success. It has become a bastion against the fascist and para-fascist new world order: Indeed, it is that order's declared nemesis, with various political leanings attributed to it—wokeness, critical race theory, and trans rights—becoming a shared negative fixation cohering among otherwise very disparate völkisch racists and radical economic libertarians all over the world.

Still, the art-world figures who appear in this book are predominantly authors and curators who play a supporting role in it, acting on its margins and helping to administer it, and not its primary actors: artists. It is perhaps unavoidable that, seen from the initially quite productive macro-perspective adopted here, the positions, formulations, and gestures of the producers do not play an important role. The idea that it makes a difference whether, say, Vaginal Davis or Olafur Eliasson instigates a discourse or sparks a cultural policy measure is not considered here. And yet even in the old bipolar world it was already the case that art was shaped less by its concrete ideological conditions (the Cold War, Western freedom kitsch, “really existing socialist” oppression, Third Way hopes, Bandung, CIA cultural policy as support for undogmatic leftists, and so on) than by the general grammar of the bipolar: the possibility of being in the right, of designating alternatives. One option or the other.

In the multipolar world, one had to perform a minoritarian stance (literally, but also in the extended sense à la Deleuze and Guattari) and was only in the right on the condition that there was no “right” that was also binding for others beyond the minority thus constituted, or that, at most, it existed only in another minority. Yet, for some time now, there has been a third movement that tends to be articulated more in art than elsewhere, even if elsewhere there has long since ceased to be any alternative. It's the movement of a dark, monopolar world: exodus, flight, the state of refuge.

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/ Translated from German by James Gussen.

\* Editor's note: Gayrope is a homophobic neologism and slur (gay + Europe) used in Russian anti-Western discourse and Kremlin propaganda to denominate and discredit the supposed revision of the ostensibly “natural” gender order and traditional morality in liberal Europe through LGBTQ+ rights, multiculturalism, and feminism.