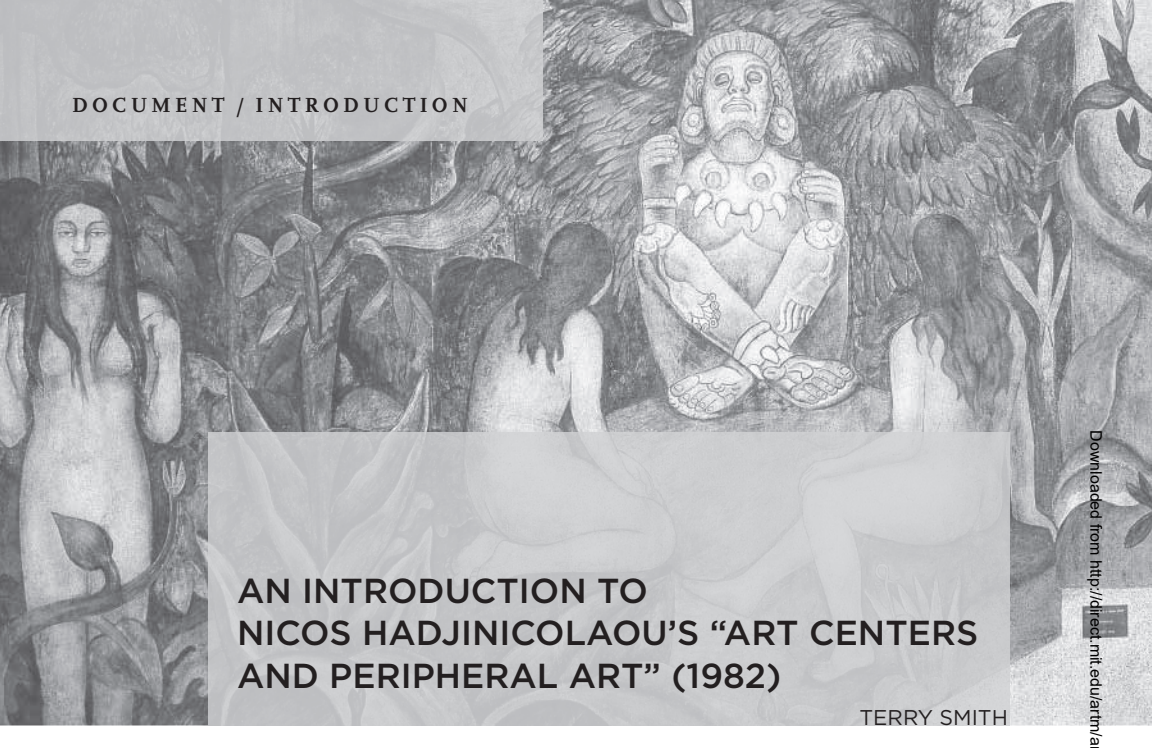

AN INTRODUCTION TO NICOS HADJINICOLAOU'S "ART CENTERS AND PERIPHERAL ART" (1982)

TERRY SMITH

Nicos Hadjinicolaou's "Art Centers and Peripheral Art" (1982) is an important but under-recognized contribution to debates within the discipline of art history about how to characterize the relationships between the art of major cities and that made in places peripheral to them, as well as between the art produced in the metropolitan centers of empires and the art of their colonial outposts or cultural provinces.[1] This question has shaped the discipline—from its outer edges inward, as it were—since Giorgio Vasari evoked the developments distant in time if not in space that led up to, in his own time, the crowning achievements of Michelangelo. The question was central to modern art history as it developed in Germany during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The issue has returned in recent decades, as the modernist monopoly has been stretched on the rack between, on the one hand, globalization's drive toward totality and, on the other, decolonization's drive toward independent contemporaneity. Presented as a lecture in Hamburg in 1982, "Art Centers and Peripheral Art" was written on the cusp of this return, mapping some of its outlines and articulat-

1 First published as "Kunstzentren und periphere Kunst" in *Kritische Berichte* 11, no. 4 (1983): 36–56. I thank Professor Hadjinicolaou and the editors of *Kritische Berichte* for agreeing to both the translation of this essay and publication in this journal. The translation was done by Dieter Wältermann, reviewed by my University of Pittsburgh colleague Barbara McCloskey, and approved by Professor Hadjinicolaou. I also thank Ilhan Ozan for assiduous research assistance.

https://doi.org/10.1162/artm_a_00266

ing several of its tensions, while manifesting its author's commitment to what was by then a mature, self-critical Marxist art history, within which he had become a major contributor.

Born in Thessaloniki in 1938 and schooled in Athens, Hadjinicolaou studied art history, German literature, and philosophy at the Universities of West Berlin, Freiburg, and Munich between 1959 and 1965. Throughout the tumultuous late 1960s he was in Paris, active as president of the Association of Greek Students (Association des Étudiants Hellènes de Paris) from 1966 to 1971. He was a member of the Greek Eurocommunist Party (not the pro-Soviet Greek Communist Party) and participated in the efforts to inform French student groups about the situation in Greece after the military coup of 1967.[2] Effectively in exile from Greece during the "Regime of the Colonels" (1967–1974), he pursued his dissertation *La Lutte des classes en France dans la production d'images de 1829/1831* at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, under the guidance of Pierre Vilar. His doctorate was granted in June 1980, but the book *Histoire de l'art et lutte des classes* (*Art History and Class Struggle*) had already been published by Maspero in Paris in 1973. It subsequently appeared in several languages and in multiple editions, including in English in 1978.

Hadjinicolaou was well versed in the classics of Marxist art history. For example, he developed a bibliography of the writings of Frederick Antal, as well as brought to publication in Italian, German, and Spanish Antal's manuscripts on Renaissance and Mannerist painting in Italy.[3] *Art History and Class Struggle* broke new ground in its systematic application to art and art historical thought of Louis Althusser's theories of how ideology functions as both the essential shaper of personal and social imaginaries and a disguise of its own operations.[4] Hadjinicolaou was in no doubt as to the object of art history as a discipline: "The science of art history is a particular branch of historical materialism

2 See Kostis Kornetis, *Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Politics and the "Long 1960s" in Greece* (New York: Berghan, 2013), 64. See also Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "O δικός μας Μάης του '68 (Our Own May '68)," *Αρχειοτάξιο*, no. 10 (June 2008): 92–100; and Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "Greek Art Critics and Historians in Paris, 1945–1975: A Personal Testimony," *Ιστορία της Τέχνης* 5 (Summer 2016): 117–29. Hadjinicolaou's website is http://nicoshadjinicolaou.com.

3 Nicos Hadjinicolaou and Anna Wessely, "Frederick Antal Bibliography," *Kritische Berichte* 2, no. 3 (1976): 35–37; Frederick Antal, *Italian Painting from Classicism to Mannerism* (Italian ed. 1977, German ed. 1980, Spanish ed. 1988).

4 Hadjinicolaou acknowledges the importance of both Althusser and his disciple Nicos Poulantzas to his own thinking; see *Art History and Class Struggle* [1973] (London: Pluto, 1978), 8.

concerned with a sphere of the ideological level which enjoys relative autonomy"—that is, in his italics, *"the analysis and explanation of the visual ideologies which have appeared in history."*[5] What is a visual ideology? It is "a specific combination of the formal and thematic elements of a picture through which people express the way they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination which constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class."[6] Although he acknowledged that the making of art—or what he preferred to call "the production of images"—was in certain ways a practice distinguishable from the economic, social, and political forces that shaped it, and that art history as a discipline was distinct from other disciplines, these autonomies were, he and Althusser believed, always relative. Thus, for art historians (again in his italics), "*The principle on which time is divided into periods is always external to the history of the production of images, because of the constant determination of this field by other spheres of the ideological level (for example, the sphere of political or religious ideology) and, in a direct or indirect manner, the determination of the ideological level in its entirety by the economic or sometimes the political level.*"[7]

Art History and Class Struggle stands out among New Left reconsiderations not only for its no-holds-barred title, but also for its structuralist schematism. In this, it parallels another text from the time to which he continues to attach "some importance": the 1978 essay "On the Ideology of Avant-Gardism," which is a similar attempt to set out a comprehensive schema for a major art historical topic.[8] This pair of works might be illuminatingly compared, and significantly contrasted, to another set of breakthrough texts written in Paris at around the same time and in similar circumstances: T. J. Clark's two books of 1973, *The Absolute Bourgeois* and *Image of the People*.[9]

I recall being absolutely riveted by the two writers' approaches, while also seeking a conceptual framework that could encompass their contradictions. Around 1980 I composed a dissertation project that would pursue, in a close reading of the artworks and the responses to

5 Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, 184.

6 Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, 96–97.

7 Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, 190.

8 See *Histoire et Critique des arts*, no. 6 (July 1978): 49–76; in English in *Praxis*, no. 6 (1982): 37–70.

9 T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848–1851* and *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973).

them, an account of the aesthetic ideologies of each of the avant-garde art movements as they appeared throughout the world during the 20th century—an account that would show, I hoped, how those ideologies had related to other ideological operations, and, in the first and last instances, to the economic "level" of each society and the interactions between the different places. My advisers, wisely, suggested that I begin in the United States, as its art had been, at the time, least studied from such a viewpoint. Over a decade later, the outcome was *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America*.[10] The larger project, suitably deconstructed and encompassing contemporary conditions, drives me to this day.

"Art Centers and Peripheral Art," presented as a lecture at the University of Hamburg on October 15, 1982, where Hadjinicolaou had previously been a visiting professor, is a forthright attempt to radicalize modern art history's interest in the geography of art—one that had long been peripheral, we might say, to its primarily nationalistic focus. Within the institutionalized profession, "geography" came up when the differences and connections between artistic cultures seemed striking, and when art made elsewhere, at a distance from what was taken to be the center, came into view—in a colony, for example, or as spoils of war.[11] The transcript is presented here in its slide lecture format, the text unchanged but the images reduced to eight. Hadjinicolaou begins by proposing that it is in the unequal power relationship between centers and peripheries that historians in general, and art historians in particular, must seek answers to the "most important, most complicated question" that they face: "*how* and *why* does form change?" He breaks this question down into several components: the "inundating and overpowering [of] the art production of the periphery" by the art production of the center; "the *resistance* and/or *accommodation* of art production in the periphery to art production of the powerful center"; peripheral art and culture being seen from the center as relatively insignificant, second-rate, "a *peripheral* art, in the *derogatory* sense"; the "Euro-American centrism" [*Euro-Americano-Zentrismus*] that views art made elsewhere as inferior (he illustrates this very early use of the term by citing Kenneth Clark's views as typical of "upper middle-class

10 Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

11 Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann references Hadjinicolaou's essay in his survey *Toward a Geography of Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), n. 144.

contempt of the provincial"); and, finally, the need for reception theory—which, he suggests, will play "a groundbreaking role in the future for the development of art history as a discipline." We continue to discuss these issues today, although with a stronger sense of the past agency of provinces and the current vitality of the peripheries, in what is now a radically decentering world.

Nicos Hadjinicolaou subsequently focused most of his attention on the reception of works of art at their time of production and since. It is the art of El Greco, the Cretan painter who effectively spent his life away from his home, first in Italy and then in Spain, that has primarily occupied Hadjinicolaou since the 1980s. A critical denunciation of the nationalist responses (Greek, Spanish, Italian) to the Cretan's work dates from 1987.[12] Hadjinicolaou highlights the registration of El Greco's "modernity" as a constant theme in the reception of his art—for example, in the essay "He Is, Indeed, a Prophet of the Moderns," a contribution to the catalog of the exhibition at the Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, *El Greco of Toledo: Painter of the Visible and the Invisible*, a key event of the "Greco Year 2014."[13] Around 1980, Hadjinicolaou was a visiting professor at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, and three times a visiting professor in the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. In June 1985 he became Professor of European Art History at the University of Crete, a position he maintained until his retirement in August 2005. At that university he held many senior positions, including Dean of the Faculty of Letters (1990–94), and was appointed by the Minister of Education to several positions, including the boards of the National Research Advisory Council and the National Library of Greece. Since 1991 he has been responsible for the El Greco Centre at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Rethymno, Crete. During this period he organized several major exhibitions, including El Greco in Italy and Italian Art (1995), The Death of Che Guevara (2002), and later, Valias Semertzidis (2012).

I conclude by highlighting one of Hadjinicolaou's footnotes from "Art Centers and Peripheral Art," as it expresses, albeit with some restraint, a viewpoint to which he might still subscribe:

12 Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "Greco's Transformations between 1838 and 1912," *Ο Πολίτης* (*The Citizen*) (November 1987): 62–69.

13 Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "He Is, Indeed, a Prophet of the Moderns," in *El Greco of Toledo: Painter of the Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Fernando Marías (Madrid: Ediciones El Viso, 2014), 89–113.

> The history of art is created from (among other factors) the (unequal) interrelationship of periphery and center. Just as misleading as it is to want to understand a history of art only from the point of view of the center (even if it is done with a cultivated impassiveness), it would be exactly as misleading to understand the history of art as a static juxtaposition of center and periphery. However, what is being pleaded for here is that we will one day (until the desired larger syntheses become possible) change the perspective and will also observe historical developments from the point of view of the periphery. One could, of course, pose the question of whether it makes any sense at all to demand of institutions or institutionalized art history of the center that they will abandon the point of view of the center. . . . One could plead for it nevertheless and convince at least a few individual researchers of the fruitfulness of such a change in perspective.

We can say, today, that more than a few researchers have made that change in perspective, and that a generation of researchers are now among us who have taken up Hadjinicolaou's call for a "political art geography," even as Marxist art history in its 20th-century modes attracts fewer followers.[14] "Art Centers and Peripheral Art" was drawn to my attention by one member of that generation, the late Foteini Vlachou, a graduate student of Hadjinicolaou's who specialized in the arts of the Portuguese empire and its postimperial phase. She located the essay in a sequence that included Kenneth Clark's published lecture *Provincialism* (1962), Ljubo Karaman's book *On the Impact of Place in the Art of Croatian Regions* (1963), my essay "The Provincialism Problem" (1974), and Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg's "Symbolic Domination and Artistic Geography in Italian Art History" (1979).[15] It is notable that all of these analyses (including Clark's) were offered

14 Yet see Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (London: Pluto, 2006), and Warren Carter, Barnaby Haran, and Frederic J. Swartz, eds., *ReNew Marxist Art History* (London: Art/Books, 2014), as well as recurrent essays such as Laura Fair-Schulz, "Writing Marxism Out of Art History," *Red Wedge*, posted May 1, 2019, at http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/writing-marxism-out-of-art-history.

15 Respectively, Kenneth Clark, *Provincialism* (London: The English Association, 1962); Ljubo Karaman, *O djelovanju domaće sredine u umjetnosti hrvatskih krajeva (On the Impact of Place in the Art of Croatian Regions)* (Zagreb, 1963); Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* XII, no. 1 (September 1974): 54–59; and Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, "Symbolic Domination and Artistic Geography in Italian Art History" [1979], *Art in Translation* 1, no. 1 (2009): 5–48.

from a peripheralist perspective that was specific to the circumstances of their authors. For her own part, Vlachou was an astute theorist of the pitfalls but also the potentials of peripherality: "The periphery has the potential to subvert categories that have dominated (art) historical thinking since its inception (center, canon, nation), while bringing to the fore the fundamentally unequal power configurations that have characterized the discipline and its various practices."[16] Vlachou's 2016 essay "Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery," from which I am quoting, might well join "Art Centers and Peripheral Art" on the list just cited as essential texts within these debates. The project of making Hadjinicolaou's essay available in English, with all the attendant ironies of its entry into what the world is currently obliged to accept as its language, is dedicated to her.

16 Foteini Vlachou, "Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery," *Visual Resources* 32, no. 1 (March–June 2016): 10, reprinted in Foteini Vlachou, *The Disappointed Writer*, ed. Mariana Pinto dos Santos and Rui Miguel Ribeiro (Lisbon: Ediçōs do saguão, 2019), 311.