1. You are active member of the Cluster of Asia and Europe in Heidelberg and Professor of Global Art History. Can you explain where the idea of this Cluster and the concept of “transculturality” to approach different fields (from Cultural Economy to Global Art History) came from? What’s transcultural?

MJ: The Cluster of Excellence has been instituted within the framework of the German Federal Government’s initiative to reinvigorate the German university education by encouraging innovative research, a more active interface between research and teaching and by fostering greater international cooperation. The Clusters of Excellence, created in a handful of universities in Germany and selected on the basis of highly competitive procedure, have been envisioned as institutes which bring together committed scholars from that particular university together with international cooperation partners, newly appointed professors, post-doctoral fellows and graduate students – to carry out research on a range of themes, all held together by a broad conceptual framework. The Cluster Asia and Europe in Global Context. The Dynamics of Transculturality – instituted at the University of Heidelberg in 2007 – brings together scholars investigating connected histories of Europe and Asia from the theoretical perspective of “transculturality”. These histories have been characterized by conflict and competition as well as by long centuries of cultural interactions ranging from migration, trade, mobile objects and artistic practices and a reciprocal formation of concepts and institutions. Exploring these relationships requires expertise in different regions and languages – European as well as Asian. Such expertise has been present in Heidelberg over many decades in departments of several area studies. However institutional structures within the university system have meant that each of these regional studies departments – Sinology, Japanology, South Asian Studies, Egyptology, Islamic Studies, Ancient Near East, Greek and Latin Antiquity, as well as European studies (which has mainstream status) – has existed and worked in isolation of each other. Research problems have been defined as hermetically sealed and each region’s history and culture regarded as explicable purely from within. The Cluster’s important role is to bring these different expertises together on a common platform, frame new research agenda which connect the different regions of Europe and Asia and finally to create 5 new chairs – defined by disciplines – which will also work as a bridge between university institutes and the Cluster. The new professorships – Intellectual History, Global Art History, Visual and Media Anthropology, Cultural Economic History and Buddhist Studies – are all concerned in rethinking the premises of individual disciplines which were constituted within the framework of nation states. Instead the positions in the Cluster have been defined in a ways so as to be able to investigate different areas – such as religious practice, modern media, the production of knowledge or art practice – in a framework that transcends boundaries between cultures and regions, i.e. a transcultural perspective.

Transculturality – or transculturation (as it was termed in 1941 by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz) denotes in our understanding a process of transformation that unfolds through extended contacts and relationships between cultures. The concept can be used to
refer both to a concrete object of investigation as well as an analytical method. The discursive category of „culture“, as it emerged in the social sciences in tandem with the modern nation, was premised on the notion that life worlds of identifiable groups were ethnically bounded, internally cohesive and linguistically homogeneous spheres. Culture, applied as a conceptual category to societies, past and present, invariably existed in tension with unruly and contradictory trends generated by mobility and extended contacts which have characterized regions and societies over centuries. The terms “transculture/transculturality” are an explicit critique of this notion, for the prefix “trans-” enables emancipation from the concept. Transculturality is about spatial mobility, circulation or flows but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these. During the first phase of the cluster much of our research, taking its cue from studies of globalization, focussed on studies of “flows” and the consequence of asymmetrical exchanges between cultures. However this brought with it the realization that we need to engage intensively with the different kinds of relationships between actors, objects and cultural groups which follow from encounter and mobility. And this requires intensive, micro-level research. Transculturality therefore goes beyond flows: it focuses on processes through which forms emerge in local contexts within circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction and entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance), is an element that makes up this field. This attention to uncovering the dynamics of those formations both in the past and the present constituted through regimes of circulation and exchange distinguishes our understanding from studies of globalization or the more recent expositions of transculturality by the German philosopher, Wolfgang Welsch, who regard border-crossing and cultural mixing as unique attributes of modernity. Instead our research projects at the Cluster go back to Antiquity and extend into the present in order to understand historical forms of mobility and how these have changed in modern times. In other words, our research aims to investigate the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historicising and re-reading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance – or a succession/co-existence of any of these. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conceptions of identity and alterity, or against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance, when discussing relationships between cultures.

2. How do you explain the idea of “Global” and specifically “Global Art”? Is art “global”? And can Art History be made “global”?

The terms “global”, “global art” and following from that “global art history” are slippery – it is difficult to pin down their meanings as they are used in differing ways by the large number of people who use them. However in relation to art, Hans Belting has defined “global art” as contemporary art from non-Western cultures which can now be seen in global exhibition circuits – biennials, international exhibitions or mega-shows like the Documenta. This definition has found current usage – however it is not without its looseness – since selection processes which determine access of works to international shows are far
from being stable. Moreover, this understanding rests on a European view of the art of the rest of the world. Is European contemporary art not global also, when it is part of the same global art circuits? However, when people today refer to “global art” they generally mean contemporary art which circulates across the globe.

Global Art History, as a disciplinary designation, however, is by its very nature not confined to the contemporary period. Here too the designation is used in different ways. It is often collapsed with World Art History/World Art Studies which stand for an attempt to deal with different world cultures — according to region and across time — one after the other within the framework of a single discipline, sometimes within a single book. The attempt to break away from a Eurocentric delineation of the subject leads to an inclusion of the “world” in an additive sort of way. As a theoretical and pedagogical move however, inclusion by itself does not critically question the theoretical foundations of a discipline if the terms on which the addition of the world takes place are not reflected upon. The professorship in Global art History of the Heidelberg Cluster — the first and still the only one of its kind in the German speaking regions — understands “global” as transcultural. It works to re-define the units of art history, away from national frames and following the logic of the movement of agents, objects and practices. Finally it involves a de-centering of the discipline, and introducing multiple vantage points of view rather than proceeding with Europe as the sole centre. This agenda involves rethinking basic concepts of the discipline which were framed in a European context and are now applied to the rest of the world. Global Art History, defined as transcultural, means finding a language to describe and analyze the processes of interaction that are constitutive of art practice — such as copying, translation, adaptation, reconfiguration, even refusal or resistance. Concepts such as copying, repair, bricolage — all are important categories of transcultural/global art history and need to be freed from the negative connotations attached to them by a modernist privileging of “originality”.

3. We live in the so-called “Globalization” but is (or might be) really everything global? What’s the limit to it or what are the boundaries?

We tend to think of globalization as a modernizing, homogenizing process which spreads from certain centres in the West and flattens differences across the world. We think also in terms of a global-local binary which assumes that the local is a site of resistance, of “authenticity” which opposes the global which functions as a force of dissolution and frequently alienation. And finally we also encounter the term “glocal” coined by Roland Robertson which simply refers to the obvious connectedness between the global and the local without explaining the nature of that relationship which can vary across time and regional context. However a transcultural approach helps us to view these processes in a more critical fashion and does not view globalization as a uniform process — nor does it see the local as a pure untouched space of tradition. The “limits” of globalization are defined in each case by the complex interactions between the two — it is also possible that certain economic processes of globalization work in both directions — they can be an emancipatory force and at the same time strengthen local traditions. Traditions themselves are both a resource as well as a constraining factor — especially when it comes to the field of gender.
relations or religious fundamentalism. Artists often remain tied to the locality and yet see it as a possible site of a new cosmopolitanism that links to other localities. One of the challenges to scholarship today is to refine and nuance our understanding of the locality.

4. What should we preserve of our own culture and what should we leave out for an equal and balanced “transcultural” relationship between regions or countries?

A transcultural perspective is not poised against one’s “own culture” – rather it is a tool and a perspective which helps us understand how that culture we call our own was constituted in history and during the present. In other words we become sensitive to the ways in which cultures are formed through interactive relationships with other cultures – and not a “pure” product of one nation or locality. Such an understanding can be enriching even as we identify with certain cultural practices and realize that ethnocentrism or in a more extreme form – xenophobia are often reactions to histories of cultural entanglement.

5. You have been one of the key-speaker at the Biennale in Venice this year, what was your general impression about this event that gathers various types of art from different areas of the world?

The Venice Biennale is the founding biennial and continues to be organized along the lines of individual nations. Each nation – often state institutions – is responsible for the exhibit at their individual pavilions. Art continues to be closely linked to national identity – even as global circuits foster dynamic forms of exchange which transcend national sentiments of belonging. The coexistence of a biennial like that of Venice with other biennials which have proliferated across the globe and follow different models – i.e. they are not organized under the aegis of individual states but often by an international curatorial team which can follow a transcultural approach – shows on the one hand that the nation state continues to be an important framing principle both in an enabling and a subversive sense. Artists from Germany, for example, have frequently used the site not simply as a place to display their art, but to contest the idea of the nation. A provocative example was that of Hans Haacke whose work Germania featured during the 44th Biennale (1993) used the broken shards of the floor tiles of the national pavilion to question and disrupt the utopia of the nation. This time two European nations – France and Germany – “switched” pavilions as a gesture of fraternity – and we know that the German pavilion featured no “German” artist – if nationality is a guideline. Yet the work were joined by the shared spirit they articulated– the idea of freedom, of human rights and their erosion, the critique of religious fundamentalism and fascism across boundaries and the role of human memory and its archives. At the same time the nation as a space of identity was very central to participants from young nation states – such as the new post-soviet republics from Central Asia or nations from Africa, now beginning to find a place on the global art map – as this was a sign of overcoming existing asymmetries of power and gaining visibility on an international platform.
6. Do you think that people have a different approach to Art today? Are people educated to understand art? Have they a sensibility to it?

I think many more people are getting exposed to art today – both to contemporary art and to exhibitions and collections in museums. The approaches differ – for many, art is a medium through which you enter a particular culture – and get an understanding of it. Contemporary art has provided an open, infinitely elastic, definition of an art work – it could be something temporary made of perishable materials, is no longer bound to established norms of the aesthetic – could be any object from everyday life – a kitchen utensil or a discarded article of furniture, or else digital images, a wrapped up monument, animal performances, even human embryos. This expansive definition today is shared by viewers all over the world since we accept the premise that the moment the object enters the domain of curation and exhibition, it becomes entitled to the status of “art. Yet this shared understanding is dependent on access to certain kinds of information and expert knowledge – those who have access to museums and galleries, consent to the authoritative role of institutions, theories, journals and individuals who ratify these objects as art. Those individuals in societies of the world who do not enjoy access to institutions, expert knowledge about art or share the belief in its autonomy and transgressive functions – exist and function on the other side of a dividing line that is global one. Conflicts such as those which erupted around the Danish cartoons are an example that not all groups living – even in the heart of Europe – share the same values about art, its autonomy and its functions.

7. You have been living in Europe for many years now, in your opinion what is the main difference between European and Asian culture and art?

Not an easy question to answer – Europe and Asia themselves are huge entities and have long histories – any statement I would make would only express cultural essentialism – which is exactly the opposite of what transcultural approaches strive for.

8. Can you see yourself as “transcultural”?

That is an interesting question – as I have often asked myself what it could mean to think in terms of a “transcultural self”? To what extent is identity shaped by the colour of one’s skin or one’s passport? Being home in many languages and cultures gives you a sense of release from being bounded to one unit and the freedom to draw upon different resources – cultural, linguistic and emotional. Whenever I go to India – where I spent many years of my life and still have family and friends – it is like going home. And when I return to Germany – where I work, live, also have family, pay taxes and vote – it is also like coming home. I suppose that is what it means to be “transcultural”.
9. Last question: After the next five years of funding what about the Cluster? How do spread its concept and to make other institutions (that are generally very conservative) understand and maybe adopt it? (maybe you could say a few words about the CATS)

After 2017 there will be no more “Cluster” officially, but the institutional and academic harvest of what we have done these past years cannot simply dissolve. The purpose of the enormous investment of energy and resources in the Excellence Initiative is precisely for these structures to become a permanent part of the University system. Our institute will then become the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies. In addition we will become part of a larger organization formed together with other Institutes – Sinology, Japanology, South Asian Studies, Ethnology – to be the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS). This will continue to work together European Art History, History and Ancient Civilizations – so the task begun by the Cluster will be carried forward through a new institutional setup.

Thank you very much.