My scholarly interest in global issues is partly the product of growing up in Dresden, a city cut off from the outside world during the Cold War era. In the 1980s, Dresden was part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the poor, eastern area of Germany, which, since 1961, had been separated by a wall from the wealthier, western part. Where I lived, unlike other areas in the GDR, we did not have access to foreign television. My hometown was so isolated that it was called the “valley of the unaware.”

When friends and I walked home from school, past the monotony of prefabricated, socialist high-rises, we played a question-and-answer game. “Given the opportunity,” we asked each other, “what place would you most like to visit?” We went on imaginary travels, envisioning what it would be like to ascend the Eiffel Tower, embark on safaris in Africa, or explore the Amazon. But at the same time, we felt certain we would never even get to see West Germany. We all felt a sense of marginality, captives of the East’s gray reality and its daily shortcomings.

In 1989, when the television announced that the borders were open, it felt surreal. Adults rushed us into the street, chattering with one another as if they were all seeking reassurance that it was really happening. Amid this joyous exhilaration, intermingled with more than a few tears, cheers, and drinks among the grown-ups, I sensed that something had happened on that cold November evening that would change my life forever.

After the Berlin Wall fell, I came to treasure every opportunity I had to visit countries beyond the former “Iron Curtain.” I later took a gap year before university and traveled extensively throughout Asia, Australia, and Europe. As I emerged from a closed society and immersed myself in extended trips abroad—precisely at the historical moment that the internet was growing and “globalization” was becoming a buzzword—I noticed familiar patterns forming across cultures, albeit amid major postcolonial inequalities. I was stepping into a so-called global village of near boundless communication, an expanding consumer culture, and a thriving travel industry for backpackers who were
exactly like me, people who had set out to see the authentic, exotic “other” only to realize how interconnected the world had actually become. Even the remotest Akha hill tribe village in Thailand had Coca-Cola for sale.

Stimulated by these travel experiences, I interned at the House of World Cultures in Berlin as a university student. Established the same year the Berlin Wall came down, it was a major German center for international cultural exchange. Shortly after I started working there, the September 11 attacks happened, and I instantly found myself in a hotbed of activity. Renowned social scientists and intellectuals were invited to try to make sense of the shocking events, and they debated the role different cultures play in ongoing global conflicts. Most refuted the ideas of the conservative political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, whose “clash of civilizations” thesis, which predicted a near inevitable cultural conflict between the West and Islamic civilization, had become quite popular. One platform where this debate unfolded was “Democracy Unrealized.” It was a conference convened by the Nigerian-born curator and writer Okwui Enwezor as a prelude to Documenta 2002 in Kassel, a major international group show in the contemporary visual arts. September 11 had transformed Enwezor’s program into an important discursive forum for engaging with the painful events. Many of the speakers opposed Huntington’s cultural essentialisms as well as any reductionist dichotomies between the West and East or between good and evil. Instead, they tried to come to terms with cultural difference and integration in an age of globalization in more complex ways, paying special attention, of course, to the contemporary visual arts.

Through that event, the contemporary art world emerged in my eyes as a pioneering cosmopolitan laboratory for an alternative vision of worldwide cultural interrelationships. Theorists, artists, and curators talked about how the field had begun to welcome new kinds of exchanges and discourses after decades of artistic segregation and Western hegemony. They also discussed how formerly marginal players from Eastern and Southern world regions were now gaining recognition, prompting new ways of thinking about the arts in more globally connected terms. These discussions gave me the electrifying impression that a sea change was under way in this field. It was as if a new cultural cartography was about to be invented for the visual arts, one that would open not just territorial borders but also long-standing cultural ones. I once again felt like I was living through history in the making.

Observing this intense phase of international intellectual debate firsthand was deeply inspiring. I, too, wanted to join the community of thinkers who were exploring this more constructive side of global culture, one that looked beyond Huntington’s scenarios of apocalyptic conflict. Perhaps because of my earlier sense of marginality in the GDR, I was particularly drawn to understanding how artists from historically peripheral locations had managed to
break through old barriers and become central figures within a system that had not welcomed them previously. While the 2001 Documenta platform had highlighted single artists and works in this regard, it did not offer any broader explanation for these significant changes in the field. As someone who had just started studying sociology, I believed that the discipline’s more collectivist and empirically grounded approach could uniquely contribute to the formation of a more complete picture that would be able to answer several pressing questions: How much had actually changed with regard to the recognition of artists from formerly marginalized countries? What were the broader social and cultural processes contributing to the breaking down of boundaries among segregated types of creative producers? What, after all, are the mechanisms that enable the development of more equality and diversity within a globalizing cultural space? Eventually, I decided to pursue the topic more closely from a sociological point of view, conducting research that explored the dynamics and consequences of globalization in the contemporary visual arts.

My initial findings were sobering. During extended empirical analyses in 2005, it became clear that despite all the talk of a new era of globalization, the hierarchies among the most recognized artists in the world seemed hardly to have changed since the 1970s; artists from regions outside the West continued to be highly marginalized into the new millennium. I struggled to make sense of this puzzling situation, which stood in stark contrast to what one would have expected. In the same year, I published the results with my academic mentor at the time, Ulf Wuggenig, in an international arts journal, and in the spring of 2006, I presented the work at a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There, I was surrounded by art historians, curators, and theorists who were as surprised about the findings as I had been originally. Later that year, I gave a talk at an international conference about Pierre Bourdieu at the University of Michigan. The critical impetus—identifying and explaining the ongoing marginalization of “non-Western” artists in a globalizing cultural realm—met with an engaged sociological audience. At that conference, I also learned that Alain Quemin, a French sociologist, had pursued similar questions and had just published his first English article on the topic. Though he had used a different theoretical approach, Quemin had reached a similar conclusion. Despite globalization, the contemporary visual arts remained strongly dominated by artists from a small number of Western countries, most notably the United States and Germany. Instead of a new world marked by cultural openness and exchange, Western cultural dominance seemed to be unfolding on an expanded global scale.

Then, in 2007, something remarkable happened. Chinese contemporary artists like Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi rose to the highest echelons of the global art market, achieving multimillion-dollar sales at major auction
houses, rivaling the economic success commanded by such Western market superstars as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Unsettled by this sudden and unexpected turn of events, I realized I had to think differently. I soon found myself conducting interviews with gallerists and art-market experts in New York during a particularly hot summer, seeking to understand what had happened. Although these interviews ultimately could not answer my questions in a convincing way, they all underscored one important insight: success in the auction market did not necessarily correlate with what some gallery owners, curators, and art critics perceived as true artistic value and merit. There seemed to be a disjunction between commercial and artistic valuation.

This insight was a critical moment for my research. If the criteria for success in the global auction market were so different from what central gatekeepers considered to be artistic quality, then the dynamics underlying the recognition of artists from “non-Western” regions must work differently in contemporary art’s commercial sphere. And I wanted to find out how they differed. In particular, I wanted to understand what had allowed these artists to break into this market and dramatically unsettle existing hierarchies in unexpected ways.

In this regard, Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production, which he elaborated in *The Rules of Art* (1992), seemed key. It centers on the opposition between specific artistic recognition and commercial success, between art and money, or more generally, between the sacred and the profane. To critically extend Bourdieu’s influential framework, I decided to pursue the difference between market success in contrast to artistic prestige in my work on globalization. Hence, I revised my research approach again. Instead of focusing on the reproduction of hierarchies, I needed to explore possibilities for change—that is, the conditions that make the broader recognition of artists from historically peripheral countries possible. At the same time, however, I had to find out how and why these conditions were different in commercial and cultural cross-border circuits. In short, I wanted to account for the historical formation of a global art field and its dynamics of valuation, paying special attention to its internal divisions around art and money.

Little did I realize the challenge ahead of me. The study’s geographic scope was almost too large for any serious art and subject-area specialist. Inevitably, nuances will be lost if one examines the historical emergence and multidimensional economy of valuation of an entire global art space. Doing so also required me to rely on sweeping, large-scale analyses while trying to stave off severe intellectual vertigo. The Italian literary scholar Franco Moretti once justified far-reaching quantitative analyses on the world literary system in time and space with the metaphor of “distant reading.” That is exactly how the research process felt to me at times.
Even more dauntingly, as my work progressed, it became clear that any attempt to write a book about global processes that used a theoretical framework with Western origins would be an intellectual minefield. Raewyn Connell is correct when she argues that sociologists who merely upscale Western theory to make wide-ranging claims about the nature of ‘global society’ are being one-sidedly Northern-centric.\(^5\) How could I avoid being a Northern, global, top-down theorist with my project? Indeed, when I joined the Harvard Society of Fellows as a junior fellow, my conversations with anthropologists and humanists made me painfully aware of how deeply my classifications were still steeped in Western bias. Just as I thought I was ready to complete my book manuscript, I had to revamp my methods and re-collect and reanalyze my data.

I also had to think more deeply about my conceptual methodology. To be sure, it did not make sense to simply discard Bourdieu’s complex theory, which was suitable to my research problem. (In chapter 1 of this book, I expand on my rationale for using his approach.) But how could I extend his theory from a national to a global context without ending up with Northern upscaling and deductive reification? During the fellowship, this search turned me into an advocate of “analogical theorizing,” a concept originally championed by Diane Vaughan.\(^6\) In her method, which draws from Georg Simmel’s formal sociology, analogical heuristics are used to identify basic equivalencies across cases that may involve different levels of analysis (for example, in her research on deviance among individuals and organizations on a subnational level). This establishes a basis that can then be used to identify how a new case differs from the original one in systematic ways; it thus provides one analytical strategy for reflexively altering theory. I realized that analogical theorizing also provided a fertile conceptual methodology for carefully extending and revising concepts across different scales in a global-level analysis.\(^7\) Ultimately, I had to rethink my theoretical framework several times, all while remaining alert to the limitations stemming from my own geopositionality as an academic researcher in the privileged Northwest.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, while working on this book, I also became convinced of the promise of going beyond the additive logic of single, specialized articles in journals or edited volumes and striving for a more integrative approach to the globalizing contemporary visual arts and the field’s dynamics of value creation. We know that today, the most noted visual artists are becoming increasingly established on a worldwide level. But we still know relatively little concerning how an emerging global cultural system affects such processes. We know even less about the conditions that allow such systems to move toward greater equality and diversity among their leading creative producers. By developing a global field perspective, I have attempted to address such gaps and complement the array of insightful studies on specific countries and their rising art
worlds or those works on specific globalizing institutions—such as art biennials, museums, “global galleries,” art fairs, or auction houses—with an integrative historical-theoretical perspective that traces how these entities connect and diverge within a global context. I hope this book, however, will spark additional methodological and theoretical debates about the development of a global (historical) sociology of culture.

Lastly, while changes in the commercial global art market drew me to this study, I believe that one key contribution of this book is that it comparatively showcases the globalizing circuits for artistic and intellectual exchange that resist those same dynamics. With the dramatic growth of the auction market for contemporary art in the new millennium, spectacular record prices in major global cities have garnered ample public attention, and globalization in the arts has widely come to be associated with the market’s overarching triumph.

Concomitantly, an intellectually corrosive approach has gained momentum—a market-centrism that gauges the contemporary visual arts primarily by their economic output and allegiances. This perspective is not just an ideological reality in the executive offices of cultural policy makers or certain museum boards. It has also been fed and legitimated by a recent flood of publications by economists and some sociologists. Several of these scholars have their professional homes in the growing institutions of higher education that were founded by auction houses and that specialize in the “art industry.” When “art markets” or the “art industry” are studied, a great heterogeneity of institutions and actors from the nonprofit sphere and the profit-driven market are thrown into the same analytical pot without paying much attention to their diverging interests and principles of evaluation. Instead, the “industry” metaphor is unhesitatingly extended to all of them. Within the rhetoric of market-centrism, artistic innovation is directly compared with disruptive innovation at technology companies, artistic careers are reduced to the establishment of marketable brands, and curators and critics appear as little more than entrepreneurial handmaidens of commercial interests. Any critique one might offer of the market-driven rhetoric in such scholarly writings is decried as archaic, quasi-theological, or merely anticommercial posturing.

In *The Global Rules of Art*, my goal is to counter and respond to this social scientific way of thinking. While I do not deny that market forces have gained power over the past few decades—and from a global perspective, this book sheds added light on how they did so—it is important not to ignore or preemptively sound the death knell of a coexisting noncommercial sphere in global contemporary art either, one that has still been capable of articulating and defending its own values. Scholarly market-centrism has unfortunately lost sight of that noncommercial sphere’s distinctive and evolving characteristics. It is precisely by adopting a comparative perspective on the globalizing
dynamics in cultural-institutional circuits that are dedicated to art as a relatively independent sphere of discourse and activity and those that strive to enhance profits and market brands that one can more clearly see how the former have their own discrete momentum and how their transnational protagonists strive to resist the pulls and pressures of commerce.

This comparative perspective has also allowed me to see more sharply where the real impulses for a more cosmopolitan, global vision of contemporary art originated. Noncommercial art organizations and circuits provided the necessary space for curatorial risk-taking beyond Western orthodoxies. They empowered agents to undertake genuine artistic and discursive explorations, and even to form symbolic revolutions, across borders—a dynamic that is quite distinct from the fads and fashions of the market, the raucous celebrity culture of certain art fairs, and the impatience of some deep-pocketed buyers who shun an engagement with art to hop on the latest artistic “brand-wagon.” Without losing a critical bent, I am seeking to create space for more sociological inquiry into a relatively autonomous sphere of the globalization of culture, the distinctive features of which become more visible when they are traced against the backdrop of its growing global commercial counterpart. Instead of joining the chorus of market-centrism or giving in to stultifying market fatalism, this book spotlights the cross-border dynamics of institutions, artists, and their mediators that have run against the zeitgeist of financial instrumentality. Using a comparative perspective, it tells the story about an embattled but nevertheless resistant terrain of art production in a global context and about the tireless work of its advocates. Now more than ever, given the onset of a worldwide pandemic, their engagement and solidarity is absolutely critical for contemporary art’s cosmopolitan laboratory to persist and evolve further.⁹
THE GLOBAL RULES OF ART