

Curating the Other: Curator as Tourist

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keynote presentation delivered at the seminar under the same title, Dartington College of Arts, 21 April 2007

We all saw it coming. Everyone who is an exhibition goer saw arts from the peripheries crawling into the major shows, artists from Eastern Europe, then Latin America, China, Africa, South East Asia and art of minorities in general. At first, uncomfortably dotting large exhibitions that made a point to flirt with the unknown, the exotic, the primitive, the magic - in short, with 'the other'. Other than 'us', the rational, the conceptual, the encyclopedic and self obsessed Western civilization.

It started somewhere in the late 1980's, and grew steadily since then. Now we are already familiar with a few dozen artists whose names we find hard to pronounce, but we have seen time and again in different contexts. We are faced with huge exhibitions of Chinese, African, and other remote geo-cultural regions. Globalization seemed to be the cause, the reason for all these changes. As the world becomes a Global Village, as air travel and tourism became the fastest growing industries in the world, this magic word - Globalization - is in everybody's mouth, it seems natural. The discovery of the artistic creation in the peripheries and the drive to adopt this in the Occidental art world seems natural.

Certainly, this is part of the global enterprise called 'The International Exhibition', meaning a growing number of biennials, triennials and other mega-shows that started booming beyond proportion at that time, moved by interests ranging from the political (such as the short-lived Johannesburg Biennial) to urban regeneration (such as the Liverpool Biennial) but mainly serving local tourist interests. These exhibitions served as a tool, but also as a motive for the internationalization of the art world, and are in many ways the power behind the drive for the peripheral. To this we should add an unprecedentedly booming art market, a market that has experienced a growth in the last 15 years that seems to be totally - and literally - bulletproof. In fact, wars and stock exchange crashes used to cause art market recessions - but not any more. The need for new markets is best exemplified by the international art fairs that have been also opening in different locations - from Bulgaria to Taiwan, from Denmark to the United Arab Emirates, it shows a bulimic art market looking for young, unknown artists to discover, raise to fame and in prices - and then ejected. And peripheries are indeed a never-ending resource for young, fresh and compelling art works. Early examples of the way the market and the institutions collaborated in creating regional 'hypes' are the Soviet and Eastern European Art rush - right before the collapse of the Iron Curtain, and the short-lived Cuban Art tsunami that washed the New York galleries and Museums - roughly between the years 1996 -1999.

There are also political alliances and interests forged by governments, or by corporations, in which the sponsoring of the arts plays an important role in an ecology built to launder and shut up any criticism coming from human rights, ecology activists, or mere outraged liberals; after all some of the governments in these peripheral countries are constantly blamed by the same enlightened UN and other agencies as serial violators of human rights. Such is the

case of the UK-China alliance, and some African countries' doubtful dealings. We should always bear in mind that involvement in the arts - whether collecting or sponsoring has always been just another public relations exercise - and a never-failing way for laundering names, familiar and personal histories and murky corporate policies.

I must say, then, that although driven by the same interests that drive Globalization - that is, the political and financial interests I just mentioned, we might find the art and culture spheres in a strangely backwards position, rather stuck in colonial times. To explain this, we should go back for a moment to earlier colonial times and see the way European art saw 'the other'.

Delacroix had been traveling to North Africa to absorb local colors; Gauguin had been mimicking the Maori 'primitive' look in his paintings after going to the South Pacific Islands; but we can also find exoticism in Van Gogh's formal Japonisme, and Picasso's primitive Primitivism etc. Visual artists who were interested in the art of 'the other' made a point to consume it in whatever formal way, romanticizing and inventing their way through it to find a way out that would be new, surprising, yet palatable to European taste. Turning out to 'the other' in European art has always been a way of opposing dominant taste rather than the reflection of a true interest in learning and absorbing something new. The same goes for the enormous influences we find of non-European arts in popular music, dance, theatre, etc. The arts and culture of the colonies was always seen as a means to cross-pollinate a culture that consumes and drains itself all too quickly - just as the colonies' natural resources, its culture is used and abused to boost European lifestyle.

Recently, talking about this subject with a French cultural official who was for years in charge of fostering African Art, I asked him what were his, and his agency's, expectations in making African Art known and available to Europeans - and he told me, to my surprise:

'I don't care about this. I see in our exposure to African art a need to re-vitalize our European culture'.

In fact, the relation of modernist movements was never different, on the contrary, it was sometimes even more consciously and manifestly abusive. Dadaism, the movement that had the programmatic luxury of being un-articulate and un-explicit about its strategies, saw in what they called African Art a way out of the corrupt European culture. In fact, African Art was for them not more than ugly masks made out of paper they could wear on stage and the array of Bruitist poems that Huelsenbeck and Tzara would recite in the soirées at Cabaret Voltaire. Huelsenbeck's trademark for what he denominated 'Black Poems' - sounds that in his mind recalled primitive tribal ones - was always ending with the words 'umba umba'. When given transcriptions of actual 'negro' songs by Jan Ephraim's - Cabaret Voltaire's landlord, who had spent extensive time in Africa, Huelsenbeck did, in fact, read them in public, but he always took care of ending with the same 'umba umba'. I can imagine a conversation between Huelsenbeck and Jan Ephraim, in fact where the artist would say - as my friend did... 'Who cares how "negro" songs really are! - For me it is only a way of attacking European culture'.

In his views, my friend and the powerful agency he was directing, are echoing the good old colonialist cultural policies that characterized European and American views of the Oriental, African, South East Asian, Caribbean and all the peripheral cultures as such. For all the museums of Oriental and African art we have in Europe, for all the educational programs; are we really interested in understanding the cultural background of artistic creation in other places? Or it is still just mining out colors, shapes, rhythms, movements and functions, detaching them from their contexts and backgrounds to nurture our own culture?

We all know the way colonialism traditionally deals with 'the other' was to exterminate it - at best it gave this 'other' a chance to adapt - and that is the case in my view also with the art from the peripheries. Adoption, in this case, means the adoption and absorption of Occidental conceptual art principles and techniques, to make it more palatable to Occidental public and market, or otherwise, maybe a long-term extermination.

I find in these issues a sense of urgency, as I think we might have here the last chance to try to understand and profit from Peripheral art before this one becomes - indeed Global, and adopts the Western principles, leaving only formal and thematic issues as a token of whatever is left from their identity.

If we adopt the simplest definition of Globalization as the 'adoption of the Capitalist model by the Peripheries', then it is my opinion that in matters of culture and art we are not living yet in a Global situation, but we are rather witnessing a multiplicity of processes taking place at various paces in different parts of the world, all in various levels of transition from the colonial to the global. To strengthen this point, I could argue that, while colonialism saw in the colonies only a source or production, Globalization requires that the Peripheries consume as well as produce. It is not enough that South East Asian children produce Nike sneakers being paid a few pennies a day, Globalization requires that the middle class in the area wears those shoes and buy them at the same price as a teenager in New York or London. This applies to the art market as well, but only recently moves to develop a peripheral field for Western markets are beginning to take shape. We could mention again the Art fairs drive, or even some great museum's bid for building satellite institutions around the world. In fact, following the success of the Bilbao branch, another Frank Gehry designed Guggenheim Museum is being built in Abu Dhabi, and a Jean Nouvel Louvre is planned to follow at the same location.

From that point of view, as I said before, I think we are still in a colonial stage. However, the adoption of the art market principles, of the western institutions - and therefore, the adoption and absorption of Western art into the peripheral seem to be crawling in every periphery. China seems to be lost, but with pockets of 'insurgent' artists struggling between the adoption and the rejection of the West and its structures and concepts - or maybe trying to find a way for both centre and periphery to cohabit the same globe. Africa seems to be holding there, especially because there are not such political and commercial interests that require a faster pace of adaptation. Eastern Europe seems to have come to an archimedical point in between holding to its identity and flirting with the West. If so, we might find in it a way out of this conflict. We must bear in mind, however, that Eastern Europe was always part of the European cultural heritage and was active in developing modernist ideas probably more than the West part of the continent,

and that the Peripheral position it developed was prompted by political circumstances rather than civilizational differences.

What are the globalizing means of attaining the fortune and fame our market offers artists? Uppermost in this scale of other issues lies one that we could call - paraphrasing the title of this session - *The Artists as a Tourist*. This is definitely a subject worth another seminar, but to be concise, a growing number of artists in residency opportunities, some of these related to international exhibitions, make a point of inviting artists to work and create works in a specific urban context. We might even see in this nomadic artistic practices and the media they use a trademark of the globalized art world, where artists need not be fixed in their studio but rather mobile. This might even account for the recession in the exhibition world, although not in the art-as-commodity market of traditional painting and sculpture. Photography and video as well as installation and projects are media that not only permit the artist to travel freely and create in whatever surroundings asked to, but actually dictate specific subject matter, related to reality, popular culture, media and political issues. In short, these practices embody the conceptual and processual elements that define the artistic mainstream in the last decade or so.

The international exhibition phenomenon created a cast of artists that are a comfortable and excellent core with which to start and develop an international show. Mobility, physically and conceptually, are without doubt a prerogative of these artists. We might briefly mention here a central point in the transition of the artist from the peripheral to the mainstream and that is the complex issue of the Diasporic artist – and as a matter of fact, the diasporic curator as well. But for that, we have to take a step back and touch once more the issue of 'the Other'.

In fact, the issues of 'the Other' and of 'Centre and the Periphery' are central to this discussion and so far I've been skipping the need to define it. It would be a fool's excuse to say that since these have not been solved on the macro-cultural level, it will also prove impossible to define around artistic issues. It might be a matter of semantics, since in the end centre and periphery are clearly defined in our minds in terms of macro geographical, cultural and economical gaps. Still, one definition might come handy at this point in my presentation, as I am trying and tackle the landslide towards the mainstream or Eurocentric and American Art world. I like to define centre and periphery as a matter of access to means of production and means of distribution. Whereas artists in the centre have the means to produce their works – that is, they have commissions, venues, funds – and also the means of distributing his or her works, through galleries, exhibitions, festivals etc., artists in the peripheries are normally working with minimal means and a very reduced set of exhibition possibilities and therefore a small public. What I appreciate in this definition is that it takes away the issue from the geographical and opens it to artistic shape and content, be it genre, radicalism or any other aspect that would make a work of art 'unwelcome' in wider circles. In this context, the globalization of Peripheral art is simply done by making the means of production and distribution available to Peripheral artists, but only as long as their subject matter and form fits into these structures. However - and this is another point that helps me in positioning the art world in a process of globalization rather than one globalized - Peripheral artists that manage to keep a taste of the exotic while adopting Occidental content in order to be absorbed by Occidental Art

world are apparently criticized in their own places - giving rise to terms that I learned from the participants in the seminar: Banana Artist, and Coconut Artist - meaning yellow outside, white inside and black outside and white inside respectively - Asian and African derogative terms, respectively.

Central to this process of Globalization and adaptation is the role of the curator, the figure who should be the mediator, the intellectual, the interested and respectful individual, a creative figure that is expected to find ways of preserving, understanding and exhibiting art. But has the curator been acting as a globalizing agent? Rather showing the way for peripheral artists to adopt our mainstream ways? Has the curator been the executioner of globalization rather than a mediator for western audiences to preserve and understand Peripheral art and culture?

The title of this session 'Curating the Other: The curator as a tourist' points both to the problem and the tool, but it paraphrases the curator's function to the practice of the uninformed, not especially interested, little-time, highlight seeker we all know, as we have all been tourists somewhere; and if we take this further on, to the exhibition of peripheral works of art as 'souvenirs' rather than as the product of exhaustive research and deep understanding - which seems to be the case in more than one exhibition. I can quote one of the central players in this global game, Francesco Bonami, who said that 'recent curatorial practice risks becoming a kind of cultural safari for contemporary souvenirs'. He also said: 'We travel to prove through the discovery of the unknown our knowledge of it'. The terminology used by Bonami echoes once again in the colonial rather than the truly Global.

It might be impossible to try and dislocate the function of the curator from the institutions and the way they work, from the market forces, the structures of the International shows and the political and financial constraints that I mentioned before. That is why I took some time in describing this vast machine, which needs to be dissected and criticized as part of any criticism of curatorial practice. We might easily depict the curator as a small screw in this machine. But then, it is still imperative to ask the questions and be constantly aware of the challenges we are confronted with, even if we do not have the answers, even if time and budget constraints are always going to leave us with no time or energy to pursue our work as we believe we have to.

The role of the international curator in selecting artists and in curating shows has been steadily highlighted in the last two decades as well. A generation of young curators took over the institutional world and the leading of big international shows. Their mobility - as Bonami said - is vertiginous, some of them don't even have a proper home to come back to. These curators raised to notoriety together with that generation of highly mobile artists I was mentioning before. Together they developed a number of ideas that address and shape the world of exhibitions, and in no little part - of contemporary art in general, and it is my opinion that they were instrumental in this globalizing process of the art world.

It is with this sense of urgency that I think the curator - when curating an exhibition or selecting peripheral artists for an international exhibition - has to ask questions regarding the authenticity of the art in its own context, its function and value. It is my belief that a new ways and methods have to be found for the curator to do his/her job properly,

one that will look for the local and the differences rather than from the universal and globalized. One that will encourage peripheral artists to stick to their tradition putting on us, the artistic public on this side of the world the responsibility to understand and respect it.

The obvious way out would be to work outside of the globalizing system, outside of the market, the big institutions and mega-exhibition system. That would probably give more time for research and understanding, more contact with the works in their original state rather than with the artists in hotel lobbies.

An important suggestion I can make would be to address and redefine the issue of the public, of our public. In the end, we are forcefully smoothing-out a multicultural world for our homogeneous art crowd, while most of our societies are multicultural in themselves! Changing, or at least expanding our public would be a factor that could help redefine the issue of the peripheral. In a society of immigrants the issues of the Diaspora will be meaningless as well. Another way could be reviewing and adapting anthropological methodologies to re-vindicate the status of ornament, of craft, and of the social function or art.

Or maybe what we have to do is to look back into our own, European, Conceptual and Christian art with different eyes and search back for its social meaning, to see it again as part of our culture and not only that of the rich and powerful. For after having written all this, I suddenly think that maybe we have forgotten to see in our own art these values we still can find in the arts from the peripheries, and to see in our art something other than a commodity.