

Art and Critics: Other Realities, Other Objectives. New Spaces for Social Reflection

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For years we have been seeing a phenomenon in the world of art that, in some way, revolutionises the perception we have of the limits and even the transgressions that could be expected of this discipline. Visual art, in the contemporary social context, has ceased to be an individual creative activity to become an additional path of reflection concerned with both the political and economic life of societies and its own dynamic of transformation and development. Going a little further, the aesthetic factor has ceased to be the preponderant concern with adopting a secondary or residual position. At the same time, critics, the traditional bridge between creators and viewers, have taken the course of pure multidisciplinary creation, turning their positioning as analysts of works to establishing themselves as producers of them based on the prior analysis of reality.

Return to a Society in Search of Balance

Rejecting its elitist component as a pleasure of secondary enjoyment, echoing the new realities that have emerged from the globalising process that rules each of the aspects of our life and also reflecting the profound changes (in permanent repositioning) provided by the mobility of populations, contemporary art has set itself up not only as a mirror but also as an alternative path (heterodox, iconoclastic, without formal rules or theoretical limits) for the analysis of the distinct factors that come into play in the everyday reality of individuals and communities. An analysis that, far from being limited to theory, seeks to be an active part with a manifest will to affect the changes of attitude and positioning.

In this way, the art of recent decades has increasingly played the role of a visualiser of the new social realities (with the diverse migratory phenomena as the main axis) and has shown the failures of the agents responsible for managing these changes. But far from being limited to justifying or investigating the reason for these failures, it has sought to take the reigns of action to propose to us solutions and demand from all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, involvement. So that the art that today is taking positions as an interlocutor and active part in society is an art that does not accept contemplative passers-by.

If we re-examine the main artistic events in recent years to check these transformations, we see that in 2007 the heading of the 8th Sharjah Biennial,¹ “Art, Ecology and the Politics of

1. www.sharjahbiennial.org.

Change” and, that same year, that of the 3rd Symposium of Art Critics in a Global World organised by the Catalan Association of Art Critics,² echoed all these new realities and concerns, locating them in a post-national, post-historical and post-colonial scenario. Both events showed the phenomenon of mobility (both the privileged and that resulting from precariousness) like a generator of cultural and identity tensions and changes. At the same time, through a criticism of what they define as a “neo-colonialism approach”, they tried to get us to break with some vices inherited from other centuries which, despite the advances, we seem to find it hard to shake off.

In 2009, the 11th Istanbul Biennial,³ with the slogan “What Keeps Mankind Alive?”, called for the recovery of the revolutionary role of pleasure in a society characterised by the hedonistic superego while showing the other side of the coin through the criticism of the opportunist *biennialisation* of the world of art. This criticism is linked to the fears expressed on more than a few occasions by diverse voices on banalisation, through merchandising and excessive presence, of the most belligerent contributions. The objective is to find ways of interconnection at different scales: from the intimate to the global through the urban, the national and the regional.

The line of work of the symposium Aftermath of the 25th Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries⁴ focused on the future of contemporary art and the media to activate cultural exchange between Mediterranean countries. It seems interesting to me to men-

tion because, accustomed as we are to hundreds of proposals of cultural exchanges of all kinds and conditions, we always have the bittersweet feeling that, at root, exchange is scarce. The 10th Lyon Biennale,⁵ for its part, spoke of rethinking the relation between the artists – who are inspired in the experience of existence –, art and people, so that the coherence between the world of creation and society continues to exist. For this we would have to examine reality critically, imagining new social orders. This means that an art that is not connected to the society in which it lives has no sense.

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The 6th Berlin Biennale,⁶ under the slogan “What Is Waiting Out There”, showed in 2010 that technological development, just like global economic, political and social crises, had caused ruptures in our reality “widening the space we speak of and the world as it is in reality.” Thus, the event advocated an art that returned to this reality and avoided more formal themes.

To finish this look at current great events in the world of art we will mention the warning of Sinopale 3⁷ that, with its slogan “Hidden Memories, Lost Traces”, alluded to the danger of losing one’s own references; the campaign “Cities without Frontiers”, co-produced by the Museo Reina Sofía,⁸ which publicises and denounces the situation of the migratory move-

2. Catalan Association of Art Critics, 3rd Symposium of Art Critics in a Global World, “Art Geographies and Identity Politics”, 2007, www.acca.cat.

3. www.iksv.org/bienal.

4. www.alexbiennale.gov.eg.

5. www.biennale-de-lyon.org.

6. www.berlinbiennale.de.

7. www.sinopale.org.

8. www.museoreinasofia.es/redes.

ments in a system without frontiers; the explicit slogan of the 53rd Venice Biennale,⁹ “Making Worlds”, which suggests that if a work of art is a vision of the world, it can also be considered as a way of making worlds; in other words, of proposing alternatives; and, in the same respect, the idea on which the proposals of Manifesta 8¹⁰ are based: reality is an effect to be produced.

An “Invading” Contemporary Art

We can say that art is given the privilege of transgression. Since the start of this century, this prerogative has served it to go further on a path it shares with other disciplines, appropriating their methods and theses. We are not referring to the blurring of frontiers between visual arts, performing arts and cinema, a practice fully assumed in our current schemes of art, but to its incursion into disciplines that have nothing to do with it. In this way, many of its interventions and exhibitions enter without problems in the fields of sociology, politics or economics. In this new disciplinary space the creative capacity is put at the service of the needs of the population and the organisation of coexistence in ambits that go from ecology to town planning or education, to name a few.

This role of art as a social interlocutor, validated by its presence in the main exhibitions and international forums, is its real contribution to society at the start of the 21st century. It is a “contemporary art” which redefines the concept of “art” and adds a new and differential meaning to “contemporary”, allowing it to distance itself from this concept while living together with other realities of artistic crea-

tion. Its objectives are above all aesthetic and formal (including various traditions and contemporaneities) but follow their own dynamic of genesis and intervention.

If we revise recent history, in the nineties we see a return to art as a critical practice that had already appeared in the sixties and seventies, but this time situated in a context of globalisation that obliged art to question the different forms of social insertion of the individual. Jean-Christophe Royoux says in this respect:¹¹ “Inventing alternative forms to the homogeneous and repressive system of globalisation constitutes the primordial ethical-aesthetic question of our time.” Also important, in this respect, is the search for new modes of intervention of art in the social and cultural field, reasserting in this way the social responsibility of art.

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Questions about territory, frontier, identity or citizenship are increasingly more often approached in art centres, museums and biennales, which multiply everywhere and, therefore multiply the scope of their theses. In 2002, Tonia Raquejo pointed out the problem suggested by this great presence: “The proliferation of the activist artistic practice, instead of generating resistance, can in the end establish itself as another of the many artistic models absorbed by the institutionalised history of art [...]. Artistic activism can end up as pure merchandise.”¹²

9. www.labiennale.org.

10. www.manifesta8.es.

11. Jean-Christophe Royoux, “A propósito de Documenta X”, <http://aleph-arts.org/pens>.

12. Tonia Raquejo, “Una reflexión sobre arte y resistencia hoy”, *Acto. Revista de pensamiento artístico contemporáneo*, No. 1, Tenerife, Aula Cultural de Pensamiento Artístico Contemporáneo, Universidad de La Laguna, 2002.

Meanwhile, groups such as *Wochenklausur*,¹³ created in 1993 and the main denouncer of the inflationary tendency of the self-referential and self-satisfying spiral of the aesthetic-formal discussion, make creation not only a work about forms or objects but an intervention in society through specific proposals – most, the result of commissions – oriented to the reduction of socio-political deficiencies.

Criticism as Creation

At the centre of these new theoretical approaches a new figure of power emerges: the curator as an art critic who is not only involved directly in the creative processes but encourages and manages them. In this respect, in this new role of relation with the community reality and its diverse issues, critics leave to one side the mere function of manager carried out in previous years and become creative directors, consequently choosing the artists according to the visibility they bring to their discourse. In this way, the exhibitions organised are not presentations of works by artists, but presentations of ideas and theses with a well-defined conceptual structure.

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Therefore, through the curator, conflicts, problems and concerns are channelled, realities and proposals aimed both at the individual viewers and any body of power, as the message can reach them without difficulty thanks to

the propagandistic and multiplying role of the open networked media. As Hou Hanru, curator of the 10th Lyon Biennale 2009, said when emphasising the active role of this figure with a growing presence in the art panorama: “Being a curator is not only inventing the best exhibition in the world [...]; an exhibition is not an end, it is the beginning of a long process to propose ideas for the future, for society.” An idea shared by the 4th Bucharest Biennale,¹⁴ interested in the relation, on the one hand, between creative practice and social development and, on the other, between local and global contexts, in the same line as the aforementioned Istanbul Biennial.

New Realities, New Concepts

If we start with the idea that naming is to make exist and the words and concepts impose limits, we will also have to accept that the immobility of the terminology of art means the impossibility of continuity. Critics repeatedly make clear the scarce evolution of the terminology of art in the last 50 years, as well as the pressing need for its renewal to make possible not only the progress of art but the analysis of its new manifestations. On more than a few occasions we use words while we are aware of their limited precision, lacking that defining term that clearly should exist. In this context, the circles of artistic thought make the slogan of the 16th Paris Biennale (2008-2010)¹⁵ their own: reinventing the terminology of art, making clear the need to coin new terms for new practices which are the result of new needs. Between October 2010 and June 2013 a series of roundtables will take place (in Nicosia, Ath-

13. www.wochenklausur.at.

14. www.bucharestbiennale.org.

15. www.biennaledeparis.org.

ens, Paris, New York, London, Madrid, Beirut, Teheran, Cairo and Milan) to debate these new definitions and include the new terms in the dictionaries.

The Future Is Future?

The foregoing shows, first, that contemporary art seeks to be useful to society and for this has not hesitated to create a new path with new rules and with the use of any of the expressive and communicative instruments within its reach. This renewed social activism emerges from the confluence of two fundamental variables: rejection of the superfluous

and the strictly individual. Moreover, it has established itself to some extent as a catalyser of the bad collective conscience that has been building up in the society of opulence, which in the end has revealed itself as false and fictitious. Many of the readings, perspectives and interpretations that the new social activism has made, both of other societies and its own, have also been revealed as false and fictitious. So that this positioning of contemporary art as a vehicle of social criticism attempts to reorganise not only the outward perspective, but the more difficult inward perspective. Because this new path, to summarise it in a phrase, is not an aesthetic path; it is simply an ethical path.