

## Art: A Transnational Experience between Aesthetics and Ethics

Néstor García Canclini asks how we define the relationship between North and South or between East and West in the arts when exploring the current relationship between art, artists and society: “Today artists do not want to be seen as representatives of national cultures. Instead they seek to insert themselves into networks that link New York with London, São Paulo, Beijing, Dubai and several other cities that are connected throughout the year (not only when there are biennials or fairs) through digital networks that make it possible to interact from any point on the planet.” With these words, the Argentinean anthropologist follows the cultural and geopolitical analyses carried out in the last two decades by James Clifford, Sara Thornton, Arjun Appadurai and David Morley, who reflect on the transnational character of current artists.

The problem posed by the new languages, new forms of expression and new technologies has led us, in all cultures, to question ourselves about the origins, the relation between modernity and tradition, the use of new technologies and the reconstitution of the contents of art in the traditional sense of the term. However, although the different previous eras generated narratives that today are difficult to apply (imperialism, colonialism, etc.), processes of domination and asymmetrical, unequal, links between countries or cultures still persist and require new approaches. Despite information and communication technologies placing artists in an ideal transnationalisation, it is not always possible given the difficulties in obtaining visas that help mobility. Art and culture very effectively maintain their own creative value, based on the premise that cultures are dynamic and, therefore, integrate the mainly artistic mixings. Nevertheless, there is a value of economic or political domination that can marginalise or create spaces considered peripheral until they are observed and related. Cinema, theatre, audiovisuals and different visual formats flow before our eyes when the establishment of a channel of communication is achieved. Faced with intolerance and cultural stereotypes due to ignorance, art is more effective than politics in creating messages and generating empathy between transmitters and receivers.

*Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, in its strategy of approaching trends, breaking down stereotypes and encouraging greater understanding between the two shores of the Mediterranean, has called this dossier “Art and Communication in the Mediterranean”. It is a reflective approach, but in some aspects pragmatic, on art, artists and the role of communication, with the aim of stressing these concepts beyond the local or civilisation elements.

Artists produce aesthetic and ethical emotions in their works, acting as mediators that try to transmit, magnify or denounce in a direct and human form, linking with

mystery and enigma. Therefore, our dossier includes works by academics that have carried out their research in the visual arts and architecture not only of the 19th and 20th centuries in the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb, but also by European artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, we obtain reflections by analysts and artists with the objective of developing some articles that go beyond the recurrent topics of Orientalism, colonialism or areas of civilisation. The Mediterranean is a disparate area shared by different countries and cultures, a laboratory with references from historical civilisations that, instead of being treated as elements that have interweaved important creative nexus that have influenced each other, are seen as irreconcilable and confronted references. Because although today cultural heritage is valued, especially as a source of economic income thanks to cultural tourism, there is a certain alienation, not without stereotypes about past civilisations, which acts as if culture were not a complex mosaic of perceptible and imperceptible pieces, but living pieces.

This issue has various focuses that we have not wanted to excessively compartmentalise either in geography or time. Analysts and artists mix their texts at random to create circular counterbalanced visions between past and present. Sometimes the analysts talk about artists; on other occasions, the artists offer texts of reflection and combat. Some articles are the result of the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES), which took place in Barcelona in July 2010, presented by their authors in a panel entitled “Methods, Approaches and Themes of Current Research on the Visual Arts in the Middle East and the Maghreb”. This panel was led by Annabelle Boissier and Silvia Naef, who explains in this issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* the reasons for holding it with a solid academic base. On the one hand, Naef mentions the urgency of recognising a reality – that of modern art – which has existed for more than a century in the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb. On the other, there is the need for this art to be considered as a phenomenon in itself, as a product of modernity, and not as an appendix of Islamic art, something that still happens all too frequently. Thus, we publish the works of Martina Becker, Nadia Radwan, Cécile Boëx, Fanny Gillet-Ouhenia, Émilie Goudal, Anas Soufan and Joan Aicart, who approach the historical evolutions of arts as diverse as cinema, painting, sculpture or architecture, focusing particularly on Syria, Egypt, Turkey and Algeria. These works highlight the importance of academies and professionals, as well as the singularity of artists, based on political situations in evolution but also on the link of artists with local artistic elements and transnational technology.

Perhaps one of the topics most related to art has been that of Orientalism as an ideology, more as a result of a colonialist vision than of artists themselves. Another of the topics is that which ignores the modernisation of Muslim countries such as Turkey, Egypt or Syria. This modernisation had a very important influence on the creation of artistic schools and also on the influx of foreign artists and architects who reintroduced old artistic expressions from these countries, thereby producing a hybridisation.

Another line of reflection in this dossier of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* comes from the artists themselves, such as Michelangelo Pistoletto or Abraham Lacalle, whose written

contributions analyse the social reality of artists and their personal aesthetic link in the Mediterranean. We also have a series of articles written by analysts, whether art critics, intellectuals or representatives of cultural centres, who discuss an artist to exemplify some relational aesthetic values. From among the first, we highlight Pistoletto's proposal to create an intercultural network of cooperation between institutions, artists, architects, writers, and researchers from the countries of the Mediterranean area, aimed at the development of socio-political projects in favour of a responsible social transformation. The diverse ambits of art, culture, religion and sciences linked to the network cooperate on the development of projects and actions in which creativity designs new perspectives for the whole of society. For his part, Abraham Lacalle insists that artistic production cannot and must not be classified according to the innumerable commonplaces concerning Mediterranean sensibility, which supposedly must maintain some fixed and well-defined characteristics in which we can all recognise ourselves. At root, Lacalle affirms, these characteristics are only a historical burden that, perhaps, artists must shake off in order to develop a freer work and greater creativity. For the artist from Almería, Mediterranean identity is in constant motion and belongs to a collective subconsciousness full of images that are only one part of the web that sustains artistic production.

Among the contributions that portray some artists representative for their communicative ability, Maria-Àngels Roque enters the fascinating world of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo, whose enterprising spirit, influenced by a cosmopolitan education, took him to create innovative works of great originality in the fields of lighting, stage design, photography or engraving. From his vantage point in Venice, a city where he lived, he used his profound knowledge to assimilate the distinct Orient in his aesthetics and in the emotions he sought to transmit. For his part, Edward W. Said uses as discursive examples the works of Jonathan Swift and T.S. Eliot to introduce the world of the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum and the value of her threatening and accusing aesthetics, linked to some objects recognisable in memory but useless. Moreover, Vicenç Altaíó tells us about the young Miquel Barceló before he became a great international artist and his work, in which the classic themes of the baroque painters, as well as the aesthetic struggles of artists of the first half of the 20th century already reappear. In this way, the Majorcan artist has been, since his beginnings, a painter who has gone beyond the limits of his contemporaneity. Valentín Roma's article analyses Antoni Miralda's ability in numerous projects to transmit intangible memory, as well as the displacement of the frontiers between the public, the common and the individual, for which the Catalan artist uses languages such as ritual ceremony, the parade or the banquet. In this way, Miralda develops new forms of creating heritage and participation that reject the traditional and strict museum spaces to become spaces without walls that question numerous cultural archetypes.

From a disciplinary ambit, the historian José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec presents diverse historical eras to us, showing the importance of the ideologies but also their difficulties in fully incorporating into art. For example, when Christianity became the official religion of Europe, and art endeavoured to integrate the sacred of the dogma, it sought to

resist classical influence. It did not fully achieve it because style and taste impose a silent law that has marked the future of works of art in the Mediterranean world for almost a thousand years, independently of the cultural and religious territory in which we place ourselves. The philosopher Rafael Argullol summarises the different semantics applied to art and states that, if we want to return to the dimension of negotiation, mediation and shared values, we must remember that in the different conceptions of art it is very important to preserve the relation between art and enigma. Because art is not only communication, or accumulation of data, but that which allows us to speak directly, without mediators. For the philosopher, art constitutes an infinite plural and multilateral interrogation, which will always contain new angles which must be explored. Therefore, artists act in the present, but they do something else: they construct it based on the past and with a view to the future.

The art critic M<sup>a</sup> Elena Morató coincides with several authors when presenting the dangers of the exploitation of art, which has frequently happened in totalitarian societies. Moreover, she affirms that art is currently given the privilege of transgression, a prerogative that has helped it go further on a path it shares with other disciplines, appropriating their methods and theses. Not so much with the aim of blurring the frontiers between the visual arts, performing arts and cinema, a procedure fully assumed in our current art schemes, but with a view to its incursion into disciplines that have nothing to do with it. Morató considers that the role of art as a social interlocutor, validated by its presence in the main international exhibitions and forums, is a real contribution to early 20th century society. In this he coincides with Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, who confirms that today artistic works are conceived to awaken the emotions of viewers, as well as their critical sense of the existing problematic issues. Given all of this, distinguished artists with a committed social vocation support cultural projects, art exhibitions or exchanges of mobility between artists in search of a possible language and a common creativity in the region, as is the case of Love Difference – Artistic Movement for an InterMediterranean Politic, led by Michelangelo Pistoletto. The fundamental objective of these projects is social and cultural transformation through art and the rediscovery of the Mediterranean as an area of creative and heritage effervescence.

This dossier is completed by the interview conducted by Rosa Martínez, former curator of the Venice Biennale, with the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer. The work of this artist is interesting as a synthesis between eastern and western tradition, the fine arts and arts and crafts. Her paintings, videos and installations represent an intimate reflection on women and their situation in today's society. The use of codes characteristic of abstract painting, whose tradition is clearly masculine, allows the Egyptian artist to occupy a terrain historically denied to women to integrate a feminine universe into it. Through this process of reappropriation and hybridisation, her work becomes a new territory, with distinct meanings. In this way, Amer does not seek equality between men and women, but the independence of the feminine, the voice that allows expression of difference without yielding to the tradition of masculine power.

The dossier is closed by an article about current Turkish television series affecting the social trends of this country and the review of the latest work of Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of An Interrupted Modernity*. This work is a magnificent culmination to the current issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, in which the author proposes another thought, another future, another meaning of modernity, an approach which eludes the “colonisation of minds” that does not permit a complex treatment and a critical appropriation of the historical-cultural reality of the Mediterranean.

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