

# Art... What For? A Reaction to Failure

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A question for a reflection. We look back and we are not satisfied with what has been achieved. Twenty years are enough to make a series of observations, enough to see that in our society there are no new challenges or new needs: they are exactly the same as before. But by failing, not in the diagnosis but in the policies implemented, the current feeling is that with the loss of opportunities to do it right, society has suffered and receded. Good intentions (were there really any?) called for equality, development, cooperation and exchange. Was it a joke? Was it a manoeuvre of distraction? It undoubtedly was. There have been many words and little action. And in this context of disenchantment and a certain fatigue, what place will be given to creation in the future? I am not optimistic, but I do firmly believe in the power of art.

## Which Art Faced with Which Society?

In the last 20 years, we have witnessed significant shifts in how society has faced and positioned itself (or rather ceased to face and position itself) in terms of diverse situations derived from the mobility of people and groups, an individual and collective fluctuation forced by the economic realities that, far from following a lineal pattern, broke with the expected schemes and placed us in completely unexpected panoramas. Desperate migration has been one of the determining factors for our environment in the last few years, and the approaches made to it by the world of art could have helped palliate

the problems, contradictions and hesitations that gradually emerged in political action; but they have not done so, basically because they have not been taken into account.

We should not underestimate the strength of visual creation. Contemporary art has provided (and still provides) extensive proof of the desire to raise awareness as an agent of transformation and development. In previous issues of the journal<sup>1</sup> we noted that contemporary art has emerged not only as a mirror but also as an alternative (heterodox, iconoclastic, without formal rules or theoretical limits) way of analysing the different factors that come into play in the daily reality of individuals and communities, unashamedly “invading”

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1. M. E. Morató, “Art and Critics: Other Realities, Other Objectives. New Spaces for Social Reflection”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 15, 2011.



Artists of the M-Art group at the Institut Français de Mauritanie in Nouakchott (María Elena Morató).

disciplines such as sociology, politics and economics, abandoning aestheticism and calling again for the social responsibility of art. The desire was diaphanous, but there was a more than clear danger: that artistic activism would finally become pure merchandise.<sup>2</sup>

### Art, Combative Again

The world of art, and especially of artists, is one of the groups that can more clearly detect and make visible the problems confronting society, facing them head on, taking their temperatures... In the same way that it has echoed the issues associated with it both individually and collectively, artistic creation set itself up as a privileged and combative representative

that makes visible for the rest of society (that until recently, just before the outbreak of the protest movements in southern Europe, was an overly dormant society, too pliable, too passive) all those movements of constant location and delocation, whose management caused endless headaches for local authorities. Art has not passively observed these intertwined social whirlwinds to which we were bound and in which we found ourselves immersed, but has rather stood at the vanguard of protest movements and made a *major reflection*, like an uninhibited standard bearer, pointing out paths that the social agents concerned neither dared nor knew (and still do not know or, at least, do not want to know) how to face. In this context, the figure of the art curator was also an accomplice of that dialectic; as Hou Hanru, curator of the

2. T. Raquejo, "Una reflexión sobre arte y resistencia hoy", *Acto*, Universidad de La Laguna, 2002.

10th Biennale de Lyon, said in 2009: “Being a curator is not only inventing the best exhibition ever. An exhibition is not an end in itself, it’s the beginning of a long process of coming up with ideas for the future, for society.”

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Taking a perspective view, aware of the social de-structuring threatening us, the role played by art at the vanguard of the interpretation of the events has been notable. It has become almost ostentatiously present in the most important international events (biennales, mainly), pushing those with the power and the obligation to take sides and act in consequence. A call for attention, sometimes brutal, which (Oh! Surprise?) has been skilfully and quickly absorbed, trivialised and snubbed by the corridors of power almost to the point of taking all its potential for condemnation. Art is not allowed to be social. It is allowed only certain levels of protest: just enough to make it spectacle, mere graffiti that has paid the toll (more or less expensive, according to the countries) of submission.

## A Polite Protest

Continuing with the pressing problem of social mobility in which we were (and still are) immersed, we said a couple of years ago:<sup>4</sup> “Deciding how we manage the visibility of emigration and how culture channels this visibility are issues that are, or should be, on the agendas

of those who manage citizen life. Because if culture is a key element for achieving social cohesion, policies that provide for cultural development should be a priority [...] The role of the state and local institutions is fundamental in the process of constructing the different urban collective identities that enter into dialogue as, through laws and regulatory provisions, they create the framework of reference of diversity, and soften the negative impact of certain stereotypes, attitudes and situations.” Other voices, such as Salah Jamal,<sup>4</sup> also made their immortal recommendations: “More political and economic solutions and fewer theories of interculturalities and multiculturalities,” thus illustrating the intellectual fatigue that was beginning to provoke so many useless words.

## Mediterranean: Mapping Societies and Spaces. Freedom and Repression

If we position ourselves geographically, we cannot talk about the Mediterranean as a whole, we must talk about Mediterraneans. The plurality is too mentally diverse and distant. The way society and, consequently, creation and the form in which the citizen response to social injustices or challenges are organised must confront different and variously veiled forms of repression, to the point that we usually do not notice it or do not consider it pernicious enough to act. The repression of ideas, certain ideas, is performed through suggestion; manipulation is subtle, even attractive.

For many years we have mistakenly spoken of the postcolonial period, giving free rein to the outrages of colonising forces that have never ceased to be so, savagely clinging on to

3. M. E. Morató, “Interculturality: A Future Social Challenge. Identity Management and Community Cohesion”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 17, 2012.

4. S. Jamal, “More Political and Economic Solutions...”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 10, 2008.

the prey (see Africa, for example). In general, we are all guilty of not opposing these outrages more earnestly to avoid the opacity of those “invisible forces that practice the politics of plunder and that cause, consequently, more poverty and dependence than independence.”<sup>5</sup>

### Mental Distance, But Not So Distant

The crisis in developed Europe has shown us that the demands of its inhabitants are not so different from those of other countries that we regard, furtively, over our shoulder.

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It is art, creation tolerated or considered *useless*, that over the last decade has notably led the conscience of our no longer self-satisfied society (if we refer to Europe) or of those societies that have attempted liberations (if we refer to North Africa) or even those whose artists are pioneers of conscience and underground revolutions (carried out discreetly in the midst of dumbfounded or apparently petrified societies), as in many sub-Saharan countries.

These political events, social uprisings or demands from marginalised groups are realities that have been taken as inspiration for visual creation, clearly driven by the ineptitude of political actions, to the point of making art one more of the agents of social invigoration

and renewal... unfortunately minimised and reduced by 90% to its mere aesthetic component.

### And the Words of Warning...

Many of the articles published by the journal *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* in recent years could be written today and would be wholly relevant. So many wasted words, so many fossilised reflections! In one of these articles, Tahar ben Jelloun<sup>6</sup> said: “Despite finding ourselves in the mass media era, the image projected of the other contributes absolutely nothing to bringing us together.” If this is so (and it is), what path is left to us? Where is that dialogue and that interculturality that was discussed in an issue published on the 700th anniversary of Ramon Llull’s stay in Bougie (1307)? What has become of his supposed reason? Let us recognise the failure of the approaches and find a remedy once and for all.

We have filled the media with great headlines on intercultural dialogue between Mediterranean countries, between East and West, between North and South, but here (I am writing from Barcelona), in this wonderful microcosm that is the Iberian Peninsula, we have completely forgotten the notion of intercultural dialogue. Why is there no promotion of a peninsular Erasmus? Simple: it is of no interest (you decide to whom), despite the fact that, in contrast, the atavistic suspicion of the neighbour is promoted. There is no peaceful reason to justify it, just as there is no peaceful reason to justify the belligerent exacerbation of spirits. But this is easy to resolve: you only have to want it. We only have to lose the fear of confronting democracy, just justice and equal equality (not uniformity). Speaking of

5. S. Jamal, *Ibid.*

6. T. Ben Jelloun, “Orient/Occident : l'éternel malentendu”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, 14, 2010.

political language, emphasising what unites us (used as a reductionist mantra) does not mean having to obviate or forget the particularities of minorities and not respecting them, and much less despising them out of a supposed and false cultural superiority. Let us be warned again.

## Art and Education

Art and culture are undoubtedly our best assets for peace and progress. The most pressing challenges are focused on education and on culture at street level, at the epidermis level, at the informative level... meanwhile, art attempts, like David, to palliate that peaceful reason we spoke of, but there are too many flanks from which it is still excluded, too many restrictions imposed on it. Art, just like humanistic culture, is the only hope for society, but it seems that precisely because of this it is obstructed as much as possible for commercial reasons. The conclusion they want us to reach is that thought is not productive, which is also completely false.

Let us ask the question negatively: do we really not want a peaceful society? We should reflect on this.

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The challenges today involve recognising not only in theory but also above all in practice the determining role played by creation and, consequently, by art in the development of a mentally healthy, balanced and creative society, free to find new solutions and new practices, and with the courage to apply them.

Encouraging the repeated generation of new discourses and fostering endless meetings does not seem to be the solution to anything. The recommendations have been made. The paths of action are set. All that remains is the will to follow them.