Women of Art: A Long-Distance Run of Endless Stages

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In the last fifty years, and in the context of the dialectic between art and feminism in the Mediterranean region, we have seen a series of cyclical dynamics in which the stereotypes around women artists are reproduced with each generation, as society is incapable of securing the ephemeral advances. Thus, these artists must be doubly combative with respect to their male counterparts, since any achievement of freedoms inevitably entails the subsequent loss of these same freedoms. Women artists in the southern shore of the Mediterranean, due to the specific realities of their countries, have also had to deal with cultural neo-colonialism in a general context in which the achievements of the last fifty years are threatened. This forces us, from a political as well as artistic and cultural perspective, to try to open doors and broaden visions that provide complementary readings.

Often, when I reflect on art and society, I am overwhelmed by a dispiriting feeling. Not because of art but because of a society permanently disintegrating that forces it to maintain a militant profile, distancing it from aesthetic freedom to transform it into a champion of the most diverse causes. Society places all the conflicts that it is unable to resolve itself onto the shoulders of art, and delegates, due to incompetence, the creative search for paths to harmonious coexistence.

In the context of the art/feminism dialectic, this article does not seek to be an overview of creation by women artists in the Mediterranean region — impossible for an article of these characteristics to undertake —, but rather an approach, on the one hand, to the social and political frameworks that, in the last fifty years, have delimited the development of the work carried out by these women, and, on the other, to approaches in which it is clear that, from north to south and from centre to periphery — the directionality is not fortuitous or innocent —, the realities are as similar as they are diverse and embrace the dual personal and social standoff.

Looking Back: The Illusion of Awakening from a Lethargy

I remember that at the end of the 1970s, when I started out in the world of journalism, there was a lot of talk about art as a universal discipline that had no gender. And I also remember how many of the women working in the visual arts — painters and sculptors of the generation starting out and the one just before — had to constantly deal with the stereotype embedded in society of wives responsible for household
chores almost inherent to their sex. The liberal opening was caused by the social changes in a Europe that wanted to be the daughter of the French May 68 – or rather, of its myths – and heir to currents of thought championed, a few years earlier, by the combative Simone de Beauvoir. Paradoxically, it was a group of beautiful women from the world of cinema, art and fashion who created a mirage of glamorous cinematographic freedom accessible only to those of the privileged strata. In short: women artists were perceived as another category of women, for whom certain behaviours were allowed or tolerated that were forbidden to all the others.

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These highly vocational female creators would become angry when some of the critics writing in the most widely read publications spoke of their “feminine sensibility”, making constant references to their gender status. And we, innocent, became angry with them, convinced that the struggle for emancipation (aesthetic, political, social and economic: all of them) was linear and irreversible.

Seen from the perspective of the more than forty years that have elapsed, there are several reflections that arise; first of all, about the way we used to approach and now approach the treatment of gender. If we once referred to achieving rights, we now must speak of defending positions – in a markedly belligerent language –, since the achievements seem increasingly ephemeral and unstable and, more alarmingly, regressive.

The aesthetic and mental opening of the 1970s in Spain – we realised later – was quite superficial and did not eradicate paternalistic mentalities, which were associated with a certain formal politesse due to women who dared to walk the paths of the visual arts and wanted to do so without any theoretical constraint. Being a woman forced you, whether you wanted to or not, to constantly reaffirm your status as an artist, overcoming the labels associated with femininity and the feminine as well as with the profession itself. Therefore, women had to be doubly combative, even from personal postulates and attitudes that could seem diametrically opposed – both because of the styles of creations and because of life experiences –, but who, in fact, shared ideals and paths.

Over time, the new spaces built for society began to crumble, subtly or brutally, and we learned that the protest struggles must be constantly restarted: the social and the aesthetic. Because the stereotypes – past and present – weigh like a stone and are reproduced in each generation, because society is incapable of securing the ephemeral advances. Therefore, the double combativeness we referred to above continues to be an argument that creative women encounter time and again; whether they explicitly say so or not; whether they assume it in their work or not.

And We Return to the Concept of Cultural Neo-Colonialism

Contact with the cultures of the south and east of the Mediterranean (Maghreb and Mashreq) provided us, in the 1980s, with the rereading of a new perspective, both of the reality of societies and of the parameters from which it was necessary to face their aesthetic particularities and unique spaces of protest, different insofar as social and family customs directed and marked – sometimes without being aware of it – the perceptions and starting positions of creative women. And, suddenly, we had to leave our comfort zone and realise that when we talked about art, we were not only talking about art.
Something that, in those years, part of the self-satisfied criticism that sought to be progressive did not take much into account – too focused on itself and its rather monochrome view of what was and was not contemporaneity – was that the world of creation did not have the same progression everywhere, nor the same aesthetic goals due to these different realities. In both cases, however, the deep-rooted currents that marked the purely aesthetic reflections were the same: the achievement of freedoms, first, and the loss of freedoms, later. It was then that the progression that seemed linear to us turned out to be cyclical and forced us to rethink work and analysis.

The very concept of “contemporaneity” as an aesthetic ideal – sometimes, a quasi-mystical goal that a certain fashionable sectarianism wanted to impose – was radically different north and south of our sea, despite the constant comings and goings of artists. There was, certainly, a transfer of forms – both from north to south and from south to north –, but the respective realities and the consequent readings kept the borders quite impermeable. Both perspectives converged in an intermediate zone that could not be reached without previous partial sacrifices, although some were fundamental and others only anecdotal. To the north, that contemporaneity implied renouncing figuration; to the south, just the opposite.

It was in the 1990s that, in this context of dual contemporaneities – and with the theoretical precedents of Edward Said, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Chinua Achebe –, people began to talk openly of cultural neo-colonialism to counter and question the prevailing concept of post-colonialism, attempting to
differentiate the fields of politics and culture despite the undeniable deep-rooted relationship that existed between the two and the multiple paradoxes associated with these concepts.\textsuperscript{1}

Regarding this ambivalent and elusive contemporaneity, we could apply the same reflection that the semiotician Walter Mignolo made about the concept of modernity: “‘Modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’ [...] there is no modernity without coloniality.”\textsuperscript{2}

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Thus, all the theoretical contributions placed us amid a multitude of misleading perceptions regarding concepts such as development, emancipation, independence or cooperation, both in their social and political meanings. Especially interesting in this respect are the words of Antonio Niño published in 2009:\textsuperscript{3} “The culture in which the bureaucracies responsible for the foreign action of the states are interested does not have, therefore, the connotations that the concept takes on in an anthropological sense, nor does it reach the broad meaning that historians give it when they refer to it as the system of values and meanings shared by a community, or the set of codes and rules that explain social behaviour [...]. The term cultural cooperation has the advantage of suggesting reciprocity between countries, agreement to achieve common goals, if not pure altruism, which seems more acceptable in these times. This is really a change in rationale rather than a change in practices. The use of these euphemisms and the name changes has no objective other than to avoid the use of the word propaganda, which has become a stigma, and to establish a distance from something even worse, the accusation of cultural imperialism, the suspicion that they are practices that accompany the projects of international hegemony.”

The suspicions that something was not working with the positive progression implied by the development of societies multiplied the attempts to take a theoretical photograph of the extremely contradictory reality in which we were immersed. Colloquiums and meetings of all kinds have made an effort, in these last two decades, to recognise and analyse the complexity of the societies in which artists carry out their work and all the conflicts that are hidden in their creations, especially in women and especially in the south.

\textbf{North African Women Faced with Space and Representation}

Something similar to the social path experienced by European women artists happened in the countries of the North African shore. The conviction and will to form part of communities that were advancing unstoppably towards mo-

\textsuperscript{1} Jorge Ramos Tolosa, “Introducción. Colonialismo y neocolonialismo en el mundo árabe contemporáneo”, \textit{Ayer. Revista de historia contemporánea}, Marcial Pons, 124, 2021. See also Ariosto Sosa D’Meza, “Neocolonialismo cultural: piel negra, máscara blanca”, digital journal \textit{Acento}, 25 September 2018: “Colonialism came to an end in its manifestation of institutional political domination of direct interference, but not in the cultural sphere, and less so in the psychological. Post-colonialism would be, in Hegelian terms, the antithesis of colonialism. However, colonialism in reality has not been denied, but reaffirmed by a new model, by a model that follows the same paradigm of colonialism, and this is what I call cultural neo-colonialism.”


\textsuperscript{3} Antonio Niño, “Uso y abuso de las relaciones culturales en política internacional”, \textit{Ayer. Revista de historia contemporánea}, 75, 2009.
dernity – whatever this concept was – meant that African women, although with greater difficulty than their European colleagues, strongly entered the field of visual creation, sharing the aesthetic and social concerns of male artists. These groups were especially large and active in Morocco and Tunisia, which were always characterised by being at the forefront of artistic movements in the region, although the contributions in Algeria and Egypt were also significant.

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The spell of social progress was first broken in the Algeria of the 1990s, with the emergence of an extremely violent and castrating Islamism that later overtly spread to the other countries that, dreaming of springs, ended up in nightmares from which they have not yet managed to awaken. And in that south, once again, the artist’s craft transmuted into an activity involving real physical risk, turning artists into declared heroes who championed, on the front line of the trench, the multiple claims of a society that did not wish to abandon the desire for emancipation and progress.

And, also once again, the gender status returned to the foreground. What for years seemed like an outdated approach – the specific art/woman dialectic – was once again taken into consideration at an academic level, in view of how events were evolving and alarms were going off in communities that were losing levels of freedom.

Thus, women resumed the demands of the previous generation and the art centres echoed this unexpected and painful plot twist, rescheduling – and often being criticised for doing so – exhibitions specifically focused on women’s work.

From Rabat to Cairo, passing through Paris and many other European capitals, during the last decade the approach to art from a gender perspective has been de-stigmatised, and interest has been resumed in partial readings that help to shape the complete reading of the universe of artistic creation more clearly. The alarming perception that the gains of the last fifty years are under threat – and not only for women – is widespread in all these countries.

Reflecting this general interest, in September 2021, the International Association of Art Critics held in the Mohammed V University in Rabat the conference “Les femmes et l’art au Maghreb” [Women and Art in the Maghreb], which enabled the production of a map of the female presence in the art of the Maghreb beyond gender segregation. Thus, the difficulties or disadvantages that women...
encounter in the practice of their craft were confirmed – from creation to curatorship or journalism – and the existing cultural bridges between Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia were clarified, which helped understanding of the grassroots movements that creative women currently experience.

Thus, for art, events mark a trend that is less and less self-conscious when it comes to presenting, through exhibitions and fragmented readings, an overview of visual creation that, far from being a return to gender discrimination, facilitates and promotes the understanding of contexts in a much clearer and more effective way.

And Now... What?

Once we have confirmed the change in trend in terms of approaching and presenting to the public the work undertaken by women artists, we should make some observations to avoid letting ourselves be led, once again, by the disastrous law of the pendulum. We know that we currently live in a society that tends towards polarisation, black or white, with me or against me. In this respect, we could recall that the role of administrations – and that of any agent that works for any of the members of society – is to attenuate this trend and, at the same time, avoid excessive subordination to numerical quotas that has led us to an interpretation of the law of parity – referring to sexes, origins, ethnic groups, cultures, etc. – based not on excellence and skills but on percentages that are often absurd. Equally absurd is that political trend that wants us to believe that, if we are in favour of a people, we should not question the repressive, unjust, illegal and even genocidal actions of its leaders.

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In short, both in politics and art and culture – which is just another way of doing politics –, it is a question of opening doors and broadening visions that contribute complementary readings, without having to change one for the other. And all for the sake, of course, of shared progress and the entente between communities and peoples.