

COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION AND LOCALITY

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As the exhibition *The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989*¹ (2011) made clear, one of the “virtues” (goals) of globalization, as far as its impact on diverse areas of artistic production and reception is concerned, lies in its paradoxes or, in other words, in its dual alliance with the mechanisms of a market that seeks both homogeneity and the utopia of relationality and reciprocal generosity.

In this respect, the curatorial work that has been carried out over the last decade serves as a true seismograph, in which some of the paradoxes of the globalisation meet and reflect, and not only reflect the various transnational and translocal exchanges derived from the global economy, but can also modify the way in which we imagine, understand and engage with the world, and with others. All of which is based on a fusion between what Marsha Meskimmon, in her book *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*², calls cosmopolitan imagination, locational identity and embodied ethics, seen as a new version of political responsibility in the global age.

How can we be, both literally and metaphorically, cosmopolitans in our own place of origin, shunning simplistic myths about origin and authenticity? How do we analyze the various relationships between the global and the local, without it being a mere exercise of one (the global) dominating the other (the local). Can questions arising from cultural hybridity and diaspora help us to rethink the traditional conventions on cultural identity and interaction?

These are some of the questions I shall be posing in this essay, based on discursive explanations of various geographical experiences. They share a

¹ *The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989*, ZKM. Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, September 2011-February 2012.

² Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p. 5.

similar way of “being at home” that is marked by all kinds of mobility, displacement and multiplicity.

In the midst of the calls for debate on a concept of “place” that even goes beyond the anthropological concept of place as a record of cultures and identities, the deconstruction of national space as a natural category and a homogeneous location with closed frontiers and a traditional sense of belonging, becomes an imperative. It is a process that puts us in territory that is marked by “nomadology”, in a context whose predominant features are eclecticism, syncretism, mediation, debate and difference.

In this respect, the ideas of Roland Robertson come to mind. His essay *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture*³, sees globalization as a process that depends on the local and the global in equal measure, in its quest for the simultaneity of the particular and the universal. As Robertson points out, “globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”⁴

Along the same lines, Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*⁵, explains that the hybrid cultures created by migrant, diasporic communities exist because there is a “third space of enunciation”, an “in-between space”, whose cultural and historic components and meanings can be appropriated, translated, historically re-historicized and read anew.

All of which presents us with a radical change, due to which, were we to enquire what artworks show us about the world, one could answer that they help us participate in and deal with it. This is based on the premise that all aesthetic intervention in the concepts of “place” and “subject” provides new bases for rethinking the issues of knowledge, agency, and political commitment in a globalized world. The important thing is how to deal with the feeling of belonging to a place on the basis of the demand for subjectivity or, more

³ Roland Robertson, *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture*, Sage, London, 1992.

⁴ R. Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 37.

precisely, an “affective” form of subjectivity in which the essential principle of difference is combined with “cosmopolitan imagination”. In this context, we understand cosmopolitan to mean “relational” and aimed at a cultural diversity that goes beyond the narrow confines of geopolitical boundaries that link the concept of home with the notions of dwelling and hospitality⁶. **All this, too, within** the framework of what Jean Fisher calls “the syncretic turn”⁷. It is a turn that encourages constantly-moving relations, that invites identity to transform and renegotiate in the light of new and changing situations. According to Fisher, the syncretic would enable the elements to coexist whose precarious identities are constantly modified in their mutual encounters.

Along the same lines of discourse are the theories of Kwame Anthony Appiah⁸. In them, by referring the “new cosmopolitanism”, he enquires how we can connect our *response-ability* to our *responsability* within the world community, after previously acknowledging the importance of the strategic principle of a conversation that suggests opening our “self” to “others” as an imaginative engagement rather than for mere assimilation purposes. As Appiah claims, “conversations across boundaries of identity —whether national, religious or something else— begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own”⁹.

These intrinsic connections between conversation, imagination and art, currently serve as the focal point of numerous curatorial practices which see globalization as the source of new forms of reflexivity that not only alter the terms of citizenship or broaden the scope of mixtures, but which, following the

⁶ Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort (eds.), *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2002. Cited by Marsha Meskimmon, *op. cit.*, p. 6-7.

⁷ Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism”, in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Blackwell Publishing, London, 2005, p. 233-241.

⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, W.W. Norton, New York and London, 2006, p. 85.

⁹ K. A. Appiah, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

ideas put forward by Rob Wilson¹⁰, provoke an “aesthetic of openness toward otherness” that is not just an attempt to colonize or commodify.

Since the late 1990s, these practices have understood this “global utopia”-cosmopolitanism - to be being both at home and in the world, which would suggest that our homes are not fixed objects, but rather processes of material and conceptual engagement with *other* people and *different* places.

Some of the questions posed in *The Global Complex. The Incompatibility of Viewpoints* and *The Global Complex Continental Drift*¹¹ (both 2002), should be seen in this way. For instance, what right does someone who lives in a province have to make themselves known in the “global complex”, and what would make this option credible? It is a complex that affects not just a geographically confined area that can in no way be described as a state or region, but instead a *network* that is to be found both on the outskirts of Paris, London or Chicago, and those of Peru, Congo or Mongolia.

Also in 2002, via its curator Okwui Enwezor, DOCUMENTA 11 Kassel saw the consolidation of a type of artist who is not only involved in the consequences of globalization - the need to deal with contexts of origin with a wider range of transnational debates – but also committed to the necessary process of internationalization. Enwezor identified “nearness” as the predominant way to understand the current condition of globalization, even going so far as to state that “the post-colonial today is a world of proximities. A world of nearness, not an elsewhere”.¹²

¹⁰ Rob Wilson, “A New Cosmopolitanism is in the Air: Some Dialectical Twists and Turns”, in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p. 351-61.

¹¹ *The Global Complex. The Incompatibility of Viewpoints*, Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Oberösterreich (Austria, Mayo-Julio 2002) and *The Global Complex Continental Drift*, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz (Austria, June-July 2002).

¹² Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box”, at *Documenta 11 Platform 5, Exhibition Catalogue*, Hatje Cantz, Kassel, 2002, p. 42-45.