

Notes on Globalisation, National Identities, and the Production of Signs

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The growing globalisation of the art world in general – and the increase in biennial shows of contemporary art in particular – reflects a veritable revolution in contemporary culture, one in which the distinction between the so-called ‘mainstream’ and the alleged ‘margins’ no longer holds. There is no more mainstream, but rather a multitude of streams that mutually feed into, diverge from, and flow in relation to one another. Bangkok, where a major exhibition in July 2004 featured the key figures of the Thai new wave, was a no less intense place than New York at the same moment. The recent biennial in Moscow, the explosion of Chinese creativity and the slow structuring of an artistic circuit in Black Africa are symptoms of a cultural globalisation that extends far beyond mere economic globalisation. Nowadays, no truly self-contained cultures exist; there do exist, on the other hand, unequal levels of economic development and a worldwide struggle between ‘contemporary’ culture and traditional cultures. What differentiates nations in 2005 is above all specific economic systems in different stages of the evolution toward global capitalism; there are also highly diverse reactions to the standardisation stemming from a modernisation that has little to do with artistic modernism, being primarily economic. To begin with, not all countries have emerged from industrialism, whereas most Western societies have already reached a subsequent stage of development. The West has become an information society; that is to say, it features an economy in which the supreme value, as the sociologist Manuel Castells has pointed out, is information created, stored, accessed, processed

and transmitted in digital form. In such a society, Castells goes on to argue, what has changed are not the activities performed by humanity, but rather its technological capacity to generate direct productive power from the very thing that makes our species unique: our higher aptitude to handle symbols.¹

If we accept the idea that the Western economy is postindustrial, centred on the service sector, on the reprocessing of raw materials from the former 'margins', and on the management of interhuman activities and information, then we can see that artistic practices will necessarily be transformed.

But what of artists who live in industrial, or even preindustrial, societies? Can we really believe that all artistic imaginations are created free and equal today?

Indeed, rare are the artists originating from 'marginal' countries who have succeeded in joining the mainstream of contemporary art while remaining in their country of origin. A few have nevertheless managed to free themselves from cultural determinism by uprooting themselves and replanting their native culture in soil that is not their own.

Artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija from Thailand, Sooja Kim from Korea and Pascale Marthine Tayou from Cameroon – plus dozens of others who might be mentioned here – work on the signs of their native culture from within the economically 'mainstream' countries in which they live, as though the import and export of forms truly function only right in the middle of the global circuit. But this could be a trap.

For what is a global economy? It is an economy able to function on a planetary level, in real time. So is there really a global culture able to 'function' on a planetary level? This is the issue to be addressed in coming years.

Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the unification of the global economy has led to a spectacular standardisation of cultures, rather than the emergence of a worldwide culture. In the 1990s there appeared what is called *multiculturalism*. According to certain critics, contemporary art is progressively falling into line with the movement toward globalisation; but the standardisation of economic and financial structures does not lead to a diversity of forms, which is the accurate, if inverse, reflection of this growing uniformity.

1. Manuel Castells, *L'Ère de l'Information, vol. 1: La société en réseaux* ('The Rise of the Network Society') (Paris, Fayard, 1998).

This is the standpoint from which we can appreciate the significance of performance art and happenings in countries that were formerly part of the Soviet bloc: they apprise us of the local impossibility of getting art objects into circulation, of the political virtues of cathartic action and of the importance of *leaving no traces* in a hostile ideological context. Which just goes to show that contemporary art is above all contemporary with the economy that envelops it.

We would furthermore have to be truly naïve to believe that a contemporary artwork is a natural expression of the culture from which the artist has sprung, as though culture constituted an independent, closed universe. Correspondingly, we would have to be truly cynical to promote the idea of the artist as a 'noble savage' in his or her native idiom, bearer of an authentic difference not yet contaminated by White colonialism – that is to say, by modernism.

(Far from constituting a simple mirror in which a given period might recognise itself, art does not derive from the imitation of contemporary procedures and fashions, but rather from a complex interplay of resonances and resistance that sometimes pull art closer to concrete reality and sometimes propel it toward abstract or archaic forms. While the use of machines, or advertising imagery or binary language hardly suffices to make an artwork 'contemporary', we have to recognise that the acting of painting no longer has the same meaning today as it did in the days when it meshed with the world of work like a gear in a clockwork mechanism. That this is no longer the case in no way prevents painting from continuing to exist, but any attempt to deny the transformation renders painting invalid. Art conveys the overall evolution of productive processes, the contradictions between practices and the tensions between a given period's image of itself and the image it truly projects. So at a time when representations intervene between people and their everyday lives, or between people themselves, nothing could be more normal than an art that sometimes eschews representation to become part of reality itself.)

The logical fate of 'human history' – understood as the interaction and growing interdependence of the groups and individuals making up humanity – is to become universal. Global art and multiculturalism thus reflect a new stage in the historical process triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall, without however always coming up with a pertinent, satisfactory answer.

The art world is now dominated by a kind of diffuse ideology, multiculturalism, which claims in a way to resolve the problem of the end of modernism from a straightforward, quantitative standpoint. Because more and more cultural specificities are enjoying visibility and consideration, this must mean that we are on the right track. And because a new version of internationalism is allegedly taking over from modernist universalism, the achievements of modernism will be preserved.

Charles Taylor, the Canadian who has developed a theory of the *politics of recognition*, argues that it is vitally important to grant dignity to cultural minorities within a national community. What holds for North America, however, does not necessarily hold elsewhere. Can we be sure that Chinese and Indian cultures are 'minorities' ready to be content with polite recognition? How can we reconcile the validation of 'marginal' cultures with the codes (or values) of contemporary art? Does the fact that contemporary art is effectively a Western historical construction, a fact that no one would dream of challenging, really mean that tradition needs to be rehabilitated?

Artistic multiculturalism settles this issue by refusing to decide. It thus comes across as an ideology of the domination of the West's universal language over cultures that are valued only insofar as they turn out to be atypical and therefore embody a difference that can be assimilated by that international language. Within this alleged multiculturalism, any good non-Western artist must bear witness to his or her cultural identity as though worn like an indelible tattoo. The artist is therefore immediately presented as contextually alienated, creating a spontaneous opposition between artists from 'marginal countries' (assuming they display their difference) and 'mainstream' artists (who must adopt a critical distance vis-à-vis the principles and formats of the globalised culture). This phenomenon has a name: reification. In multiculturalist ideology, an Algerian or a Vietnamese artist has an implicit duty to produce imagery based on his or her alleged difference and on the history of his or her country – and, if possible, also based on Western codes and standards (such as video technology, which now constitutes a perfect 'green card' for entry into the Western market, being a kind of technological leveller and a de-territorialising medium par excellence).

Multiculturalism thus adopts an ideology of the naturalisation of the culture of 'the Other'. It also presents the Other as a putative nature reserve,

a reservoir of exotic differences distinct from American culture, perceived as globalised, hence synonymous with universal. Artists, however, reflect not so much their culture as the mode of production of the economic (and therefore political) spheres within which they operate. The emergence of contemporary art in South Korea, China, northern Africa and the Republic of South Africa reflects a given country's level of cooperation with the process of economic globalisation; its national entrance onto the international art scene can be directly deduced from the political upheavals that have occurred there. But what image does a country acquire? It has to be conveyed in simple terms, or else difficulties will certainly arise. In her video work, the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat was able to provide a straightforward and direct visual translation of her culture and the distance she has taken from it, and her international success probably comes from her ability to supply Iran with an image that differs from the simplistic ones currently circulating in the global imagination.

There nevertheless exists an alternative to this globalised vision of contemporary art – an alternative that asserts there are no pure cultural biotopes, but rather traditions and cultural specificities riddled by the phenomenon of economic globalisation. To paraphrase Nietzsche, there are no cultural facts, only the endless interpretation of those facts. What might be called *interculturalism* is therefore based on a twin dialogue: one between the artist and tradition, and another between that tradition and the set of aesthetic values inherited from modern art, which currently form the basis of international artistic debate. Major intercultural artists today range from Rirkrit Tiravanija and Navin Rawanchaikul to Pascale Marthine Tayou and Subodh Gupta via Heri Dono and Sooja Kim – they creatively erect their own idiom on the modernist ground plan, reinterpreting the history of the avant-gardes in the light of their own specific visual and intellectual environment, thus building on their tradition to reach the greatest number of people. The quality of an artist's work depends on the wealth of his or her relationships with the world, and these relationships are determined by the economic structure that more or less powerfully formats them – even if, fortunately, each artist theoretically possesses the means to escape or elude that formatting. 'The important thing', said Jean-Paul Sartre, 'is not what people have made of you, but what you yourself make of what people have made of you.'

The global creative imagination is a *postproductive* imagination – by which I am referring to all artists who create works from already produced objects, whether they be other artworks, films, industrial products and so on. Everything is already there; the artist merely weaves signs between them. Being subjected to an incessant flood of objects from the culture industry is another phenomenon of our times – artists from Dakar to Tokyo are working in a dense jungle of quotations and forms that now shape our everyday lives, yet did not exist just fifty years ago.

The art of the twentieth century grew from the industrial revolution, even if the effect of that revolution was long in making itself felt. When in 1914 Marcel Duchamp exhibited an ordinary bottle rack as a piece of sculpture, the production tool he used was a mass-produced object. He was thereby carrying into the sphere of art the capitalist mode of production (working on already accumulated labour) even as he aligned the role of the artist on the world of exchange. According to Duchamp, an artist is suddenly a merchant who merely shifts products from one place to another. Duchamp began from the principle that consumption is also a mode of production, as did Marx, who wrote in his *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: 'Consumption is simultaneously also production, just as in nature the production of a plant involves the consumption of elemental forces and chemical materials.' A product only becomes truly a product once it is consumed, because 'a dress becomes really a dress only by being worn, a house which is uninhabited is indeed not really a house'. Such was the first virtue of these consumer items that Duchamp transformed into artworks and dubbed 'ready-mades': they established an equivalence between selecting and making, between consuming and producing.

This postproduction art has therefore emerged in the very particular historical context of our age. Indeed, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, human beings live surrounded by transmitters – television, radio, newspapers, advertising and publicity of all kinds. What now characterises our daily existence – to varying degrees, depending on whether you live in New York or Djibouti – is the fact of being in the constant midst of an infinite stream of broadcasts (indeed, of discourses) that we then transmit ourselves. We have ourselves become media. We pass on messages that come from elsewhere without really thinking about it. What characterises artists today is precisely the fact that they are aware of this fact – and that they act

to interrupt, deform or disturb all these signals by creating artworks that give us pause. An artwork is a pause in this infinite process, a halt in the incessant stream of social broadcasts. It should be said of such broadcasts that they can adopt the most diverse of material forms, yet all of them shape our behaviour, guide our thinking and influence our way of seeing the world – regardless of whether we are American or European, African or Arab. They coagulate most of the time in real scenarios (the ideal story of the 'American family', the code of conduct of a Muslim or a Catholic).

In his essay titled 'Arts de faire: l'invention au quotidien' ('The Practice of Everyday Life'), the philosopher Michel de Certeau analysed the developments that underpin the notions of production and consumption. Consumers, contrary to popular belief, are in no way passive; on the contrary, they perform a set of operations that might be called *silent production*, one that is almost clandestine. That is because using an object necessarily means interpreting it, and exploiting a product can perhaps mean betraying its original concept in one way or another.

Beholding, viewing or analysing an artwork means knowing how to subvert it; use is a kind of micro-piracy that constitutes what might be called an act of postproduction. Starting with an imposed language (the *system* of production), each speaker constructs his or her own sentences (the *acts* of everyday life), thereby reappropriating, through a micro-tinkering process, the last word in the productive chain. What counts is what we do – whether artist or not – with the components we are allocated.

Thus we are all 'occupants of culture' – every society constitutes a text or a framework that allegedly passive users subvert from *inside*, via postproductive practices. Every work, suggests de Certeau, 'can be occupied like a rented apartment'. By listening to music or reading a book, we generate new material – we produce. And every day we are allocated new methods for organising this production: remote controls, recording equipment, computers, MP3 devices and tools for selecting, editing, recomposing. Postproduction artists are agents of this evolution, skilled workers in the task of cultural reappropriation. Art now constitutes a tool that allows us to view different versions of our own world.

As Jean-Luc Godard used to say, 'Culture is the rule – art's the exception.' It follows that this exception – art – refers to the entire set of activities through which worldwide culture is shaped and transformed. It

also follows that artistic activity does not involve obeying a tradition or belonging to a cultural community, but rather learning to detach oneself, at will, to reveal something that has never been displayed.

Translated from the French by Deke Dusinberre

The States of the Strait

Nadia Tazi

The English call the Strait of Gibraltar *the gut*, the intestinal passage, possibly a reference to both its narrowness (seventeen kilometres at the widest point) but more importantly the extent of the attachment they feel for it. For the Arabs, it was long known as *the Andalusian canal*: not a boundary but simply a passage within the same land. Its profuse imagery then suddenly flips, not without resentment, yielding gods and giants, the dust of empire, the crusades, commerce and all kinds of traffic, drowned dreams, battles and mythic designs. But today, its etymology says it all: from the Latin *destringere*, which is also the root of *distress* and which means 'bound on one side and the other', 'keep apart', 'hold back', 'prevent', 'stop'; *strictus*, meaning 'narrow', and *distrinctus*, 'chained', 'shared', 'hesitant'. *El Destrecho, the Strait, al-madiq*, is no longer a boundary, in fact. It designates the most violent demarcation line: the edges of a barbed wire barrier of meanings that trace the line separating two worlds that we call indifferently North and South, Orient and Occident, Islam and Christianity, Europe and Africa, but which express more than any one thing: 'Everything is hiatus.'¹ Nothing seems more in agreement in this space where history and geography meet on a single line that we might call *destinal*. The political, the symbolic, all levels of life, information, demographics, even mythology partakes of this general economy through the figure of Hercules who separates the continents. Its character, at once total, hyperbolic and disjunctive, creates the unity of the place: nowhere is the evidence of separation so complete and so brutal.

1. Zakya Daoud, *Gibraltar croisée des mondes* and *Gibraltar improbable frontière* (Paris, Séguier, 2002).