

Postglobalization Era: the Return to Regionalism and Centralization

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Experience at *Flash Art* (1994-2000). I began working as an Assistant Editor at *Flash Art International* in 1994. During those first few years the computer was used only rarely to send material to Francesco Bonami, *Flash Art's* New York office manager at that time, through a shared folder. Only one small Macintosh in *Flash Art's* entire editorial department had been set up for that type of transmission. It was an analogue line and, compared to today's speeds, it took a long time for the material to reach Bonami and for him to send it back. Nonetheless, we were always quite excited when

we were able to communicate this way. During those years, we still received most of the material needed to edit the magazine by surface mail, or in the best case, by fax. After a couple of years each office workstation had an Internet connection and we were all electrified by the conviction of finally being able to communicate with the whole world as part of a global, vital and creative movement. Technology and the use of a common language, meaning English, opened the doors to the entire world.

Flash Art had always tended to look beyond the Western art scene. With this in mind, I remember the experiment involving the only issue of *Flash Art Russia* published when Perestroika began in 1989 (a new issue of *Flash Art Russia* was published in May this year). One year later, in 1990, the Polish edition of *Flash Art* was issued. And if Szeemann dedicated the Biennial of 1999 to China (another example is the first Chinese edition of the magazine *Domus* came out just this year), the first two editions of *Flash Art China* date back to 1992. Instead, the first Czech and Slovak *Flash Art* issues came out this September and will be published every three months).

The Multitude as seen by Negri, Hardt and Obrist. During that exciting period, the height of which took place at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, a peak in globalization –a term now abused and overstated- led us all to consider ourselves part of a vital and creative global movement, capable of activating new circuits of information and cooperation that crossed countries and continents, making an unlimited number of meetings even easier. Although the idea of globalization already appears symbolically in European imagination at the beginning of the 16th century, the globalization we refer to and that began in Europe during the years marking the fall of the

Soviet block, was effectively summarized in the international bestseller *Empire*, published in March 2000 by Harvard University Press.

Dedicated to the study of globalization, the book was also read and highly appreciated by the art world. I'm thinking for example of Hans Ulrich Obrist who borrowed the concept of Multitude to outline many of his projects. In their text, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt analyze the formation of an Empire described as an entity without a centre or periphery where the Multitude of individuals plays a prominent role. The Empire seems a sort of "Socialist Paradise" in which an unprecedented mobility, "the power of getting up and going", is the world's greatest catalyst for change. According to the authors, globalization has two sides: on one hand, the one we know so well of the imperial order, its hierarchies, and standardization; and on the other, the great mobility that characterizes it, that allows different groups to form a Multitude intended as a social force of liberation capable of taking action at a planetary level, inventing and disseminating new forms of democratic co-existence.

Obrist considers these specific concepts in explaining his constantly evolving and mobile exhibitions: "*Empire* describes how multitude designates new spaces as its journeys establish new residencies. Autonomous movement is what defines the proper place of a multitude. Multitude fights the homogenization of globalization; it constructs new temporalities, immanent processes of constitution". Thus, mobility of the multitude can also be seen as being synonymous for a world of art that migrates to encounter itself in various parts of the world where artistic events and Biennials blend together. But, as we will see later, this tendency to inaugurate contemporary art events in all continents around the globe can be considered a form of cultural colonialism.

Biennials in Dialogue. If *Empire* was published in March 2000, it's interesting to note that in August that same year the first international conference Biennials in Dialogue was held at the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel. I like to consider the book and the conference, for which there is no relationship except for the one that forced, as the result of that electrifying conviction of finally being part of a global, vital and creative movement. For René Block the purpose of the conference Biennials in Dialogue was to initiate communication between the various biennials that have been and are inaugurated year after year in various cities around the world to share experiences and to foster an institutional expansion and in-depth analysis of global dialogue. The international conference provides curators and directors of contemporary art biennials around the world with the opportunity of meeting, sharing experiences and discussing their approaches and aims. The biennial network that emerged from this initial meeting has continued over time up to this year in Singapore. The aim of the roundtable organized in conjunction with the Singapore Biennial was to discuss the growing network of curators who attend these biennials.

The Microcosms of Art. To keep track of and understand the world of art's journey –that I feel continues to move and meet up basically unchanged in other places (flat cosmopolitanism)- it may also be useful to understand if in some way that small elite world can be considered a microcosm capable of representing today's broadest society. Could art be implemented as a means of finding orientations? Recalling that the Biennale of Venice generates 265,000 visitors while an Italian prime time TV program ends up drawing 9 million spectators, it's very difficult to state that the world of art can be considered an example of today's society. And to an even greater extent if we agree that it is, in any case, a privileged elite and that, as we should always remember, the majority of mankind does not migrate.

***The Culture Game* by Olu Oguibe, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.** Now I would like to focus on the Nigerian-born artist, curator and scholar Olu Oguibe, who's based in the USA. In his recent book, *The Culture Game*, he states that this continuous migration to seek new places to settle and begin a contemporary art event indicates how the West is, now more than ever, obsessed with exoticism. In his controversial essays, Oguibe analyzes the West's appetite for differences in global cultural relations.

As Oguibe states: "In self-congratulatory tones of tolerance and open-mindedness, the Western gatekeepers of the contemporary art world take great pains to demonstrate their inclusive vision of world culture. If, in past decades, cultural institutions and the critical establishment in the West resisted difference, today, they are obsessed with exoticism. Both attitudes reflect firmly entrenched prejudices."

Tourist villages and Biennials: the Fortresses distributed around the world by the West. I totally agree with Oguibe's idea that this long-debated issue about the "new" centres of contemporary art is a clear indication of intellectual colonialism and exoticism obsession. We rarely consider that art already existed in those "newly discovered areas" much earlier than the takeover of the established and exhibitionist Western art system with the Biennials and other events. In fact, we are interested in those areas not because of the art they express, or better yet, have always expressed, but because we reconfirm them, exporting the strength of our values in those places. And this is very reassuring. It's interesting to note that most of the time those areas, where vigorous albeit non-established artistic practices already exist, are quite pleased to become part of the Western system of art, because colonization takes place in a subtle manner, i.e. it is conveyed by the word "culture" and no longer crudely by the shovel. As much as we all do, they also long to be noticed by the mainstream and uniforming art world where it becomes more and more difficult to judge if an artist is from New York, London or Beijing. And this attitude is very similar to what the world of tourism implements when it establishes a Western village in what, for us, are very remote areas. Only a few of us would easily adapt to the real living conditions in those places, and so we boast of opening our horizons to the differences in the world and to travel far away but only where we can find usual habits and comforts. These are the fortresses of the west, beyond which we would be hesitant to venture much farther. If we really interacted with the art in the places we wish to discover, we would consider it with haughtiness and arrogance and hurriedly write it off as folkloristic.

In an essay published in *ArtNexus* in 2004, Gerardo Mosquera notices that within such a complex and contradictory reality, the propensity seems to mainly oppose the clichés of Universal art in the centres, derivative expressions in their peripheries, and the multiple "authentic" realm of "otherness" in traditional culture. Even though the very notion of centre and periphery has been strongly contested in these times of migrations, what we are witnessing indicates that the distinction between centres and peripheries is still vivid and alive.

Transcultural Cannibal (op. cit. Mosquera). Let's consider the work *Feliz Natal, Buon Natale, Merry Christmas* that Brazilian artist Marepe presented at the 2nd edition of the Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art and where he appropriated the Western customs of Christmas: decorating the tree with the typical coloured Christmas balls and the tradition of Santa Claus. By appropriating a ritual infused with colonial history, Marepe creatively transforms it into

something locally specific. In his aforementioned article, Mosquera talks about the tendency in Latin America, since the early days of European colonization to creatively appropriate alien cultural elements. These subversive strategies of resignification and transformation are seen as a paradoxical means of constructing difference and identity. The peripheries have thus developed a "Culture of resignification" (as defined by theorist Nelly Richard) out of the repertoires imposed by the centres. Within homogenizing global tendencies, we witness a stronger affirmation of differences and identities.

Game by Olu Oguibe. With regard to Oguibe I would also like to talk about the artwork titled *Game*, which the artist presented at the 2nd edition of the Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art. Olu made his first trip to Liguria during the 1st edition of the Biennale, entitled *The Happy Face of Globalization*, which took place at the same time as the G8 summit in Genoa, which was marred by violence, just 26 kilometres east of Albisola.

In fact, while we were celebrating the revival of the historic collaborations between contemporary artists and master ceramists in Albisola, in Genoa an intense battle was being waged between Italian security forces and thousands of social activists. Dedicated to this event, *Game* is an installation consisting of a large ceramic mural, and a board game set with a table and two chairs. A chess board on the table has sixty-four alternating black and white ceramic squares and an unusual orange diagonal. Then, rather than the customary number of game pieces, the artist made 101 terracotta figurines that instead of Kings or Queens, represent the masses of people who presently crisscross the planet; immigrants, refugees, travellers, citizens, every one of them a pawn in an indeterminate, global game in which the real players are invisible presences beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen. Eight figures on the ceramic mural, all men, represent the leaders of the group of eight industrialized nations. Each figure is dressed in colonial attire inspired by various models of the African representation of colonialism. Standing guard over the rest of the world, the eight strong men of the new empire oversee and manipulate the curious game of global usurpation and domination.

Botha's *Towers and Multitude* by M. Hardt and T. Negri. That same year at the Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art we presented *Towers*, by the South African artist Andries Botha, in which a carefully constructed terracotta grid structure is worn down and ultimately destroyed from within, despite its apparent integrity and meticulous order. The broken pieces of the collapsed tower are then used to methodically reconstruct the tower. The tower's entire construction, destruction and reconstruction process was filmed. Once edited, the shots created an alarming video that was projected in the room where the reconstructed tower was installed. The work is clearly referring to September 11th and the theme is a reflection of our epoch: the certainties of our civilization have proven to be a mere fable.

Multitude. These projects were used as an example of an apprehension that recently replaced the enthusiasm I had mentioned earlier. Excitation caused by a globalization that made us feel as if we were part of a vital and creative planet-wide movement has clearly diminished with the "advent of Osama" and to such an extent that Hardt and Negri felt the need to write a second book. In that work, entitled *Multitude*, war and the emergence of fear and anxiety insinuate into the optimistic vision of the first book. Written after September the 11th, 2001, *Multitude* continues the discussion begun by *Empire*, analyzing the present configuration of war and its contradictions.

Multiplicity: The Ghost Ship and New Walls. To this regard, I would like to talk about The Ghost Ship, a project presented at Documenta 11 in 2002 by Multiplicity, an agency for territorial investigation based in Milan that encompasses a network consisting of architects, geographers, artists, urban planners, photographers, etc. The project reconstructs the tragic story of a “ghost” ship with 283 clandestine immigrants that sank a few miles off south eastern Sicily on Christmas Eve in 1996. For five years, the questions by the relatives and survivors remained answered by the Italian authorities, who repeated that “the shipwreck had never occurred”. Meanwhile, fishermen from the area continued to find bodies in their nets. Neither the fishermen nor the local authorities had the courage to tell the truth, until an ID card belonging to a young man from Ceylon was found. This suddenly created a breach in the wall of silence, thanks to the efforts of a reporter working for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.

The Mediterranean Sea. The story of the 'ghost ship', as well as many other events that unfold along the entry “corridors” for clandestine immigration in Europe, gives us an unpredictable and strident image of the Mediterranean Sea. The great basin of water, for centuries described as the cradle of civilization, the hub of thousands of traditions and the meeting point of various cultures, is changing. The Mediterranean is becoming a “Solid Sea”, a territory ploughed by predetermined and fixed routes and insuperable boundaries subdivided into strictly regulated strips of water. Clandestine immigrants, cruise tourists, armed forces, fishermen, sailors, submariners and rig engineers, all maritime activities and freight traffic involving also illicit activities, like the smuggling of goods and people, cross the Mediterranean every day without communicating and often without even noticing each other, locked in their own identities and their own predetermined course that increasingly respond to the logic of exclusion and separation. (By the way, according to Multiplicity investigation, the Port of Barcelona is an example of this hyper-planned and hyper-controlled trend). The great and optimistic expectations that refer to the previously analyzed mobility of globalization are not met: in fact, these courses and paths never come in contact one with each other, and only rarely become the occasion for cultural encounters.

Radicalized differences. As indicated in Multiplicity's analysis, the movement of goods and people fed by globalization, that we imagined to be a forerunner of great opportunities, would appear today instead, if anything, to feed collisions that exaggerate and radicalize differences. In fact, based on their research, Multiplicity discovered the places where the population groups involved in these movements and flows are forced to accentuate their origins and cultural-religious roots. In a world in which borders seemed to have been swept away, the differences become more visible, new walls are raised, and new types of protectionism emerge. What has gotten the upper hand is a great need for identity for which it becomes important to feel part of a group. Incredibly, according to their analysis, internationalism was more widespread and effective when the borders between states were stricter and the rules less flexible.

New Walls. At the beginning of this lecture, I was referring to the collapse of the Berlin Wall that at the end of the 1980s helped us to dream of a better world. Now, as I come to the end of my speech, I would like to talk about other walls that are actually rising. Certainly we can mention, among other things, the wall between Palestine and Israel rather than the wall about to be built between the USA and Mexico. This seems to contradict the proposals of the inSite experience, the exhibition being held right on the border between San Diego and Tijuana. (Taking place over a

period of two years, inSite is a process involving artist residencies, conferences and the creation of artistic projects that explore the terms “public”, “urban” and “border”.)

Linguistic walls. At the beginning of this presentation, I mentioned how we are still partially under the illusion that English can become a global language capable of bringing us all together; but I wonder to what extent we will be able to properly understand each other translating our different cultures into a common language. Will we really become closer speaking poorly in a common language, etymologically so distant from our mother tongues and with which we are able to translate our respective cultures in such a limited and poor manner? Is it better to agree to communicate poorly rather than not communicate at all? But won't this difficulty in extensive communication lead to new conflicts? My experience would indicate that often this is the case.

To this regard, I would like to talk about two projects, which were also presented at the 2nd Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art, and both focusing on the almost always complicated and not always successful attempt at communicating.

Soo-Kyung Lee: Translated Vases. A final example of the difficulties in communicating and linguistic walls that may emerge during encounters between cultures is the project that Soo Kyung Lee presented at the 1st Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art. Travelling to Albisola from Seoul, the artist's interest involves collaboration with local ceramicists –a process of spontaneity, translation and “inter-subjective dialogue”. A local ceramicist, following Soo-Kyung Lee's instructions, fabricated 12 white vases similar to those from the 18th century Korean Choson Dynasty. Original tales about the vases were translated for the ceramicist, before she decorated the vases –a test by the artist who wanted to expose notions or biases of the broader Eastern culture. The texts, transliterated from Korean into English and Italian, gave new significance to the expression “being lost in translation” and led to sever misinterpretation. Lee describes this procedure, “along with the different stages of translation, the notion of the white porcelains of the Choson Dynasty de-materialized from vases to text and then were translated, transformed, rematerialized and re-presented as vases”. In this way, Korean nationalist icons were transculturated into hybrid objects as their “forms and images were interwoven with the regional characteristics of both the Italian and the Korean culture”.

Rainer Ganahl and Ghazi Al Delaimi: Iraq Dialogues. The project entitled Iraq Dialogues by Rainer Ganahl and Ghazi Al Delaimi is a sort of dialogue platform consisting of an exchange of ideas and opinions regarding the Iraq crisis with a group of Iraqi expatriates and/or refugees living in North Europe. Rainer Ganahl created his own personal “war archive” based on dominant U.S. TV news material concerning the current Iraq crisis. After isolating logos, titles, subtitles and other interface elements from this footage, Ganahl looked for Iraqi people willing to participate in this project, asking them to respond to this title: “Next Target? Heavy Bombing, Operation Freedom Iraq, etc.” The results were then painted on ceramic tiles.

As Ganahl states: “In many cases, the logos and textual media landscapes characterizing U.S. news broadcasts are very confrontational, aggressive and opinionated, if not downright cynical, arrogant and scary: ‘Next Target, Showdown Iraq, Would US Use Nukes?’ and so on. These elements are selling, branding, justifying and authenticating the news and, in this case, the war”. The artist is interested in de- and re-contextualizing them, using them to help those people directly affected by this confrontation to write back.

For the set of Iraq Dialogues made in the ceramics studios in Albisola, Ganahl collaborated with Ghazi Al Delaimi, who was born in Baghdad but now lives in Düsseldorf. He has been working as a calligrapher, graphic designer and as an artist. Over several weeks Ganahl sent Al Delaimi images to which the Arabic calligrapher responded with his own words and his own calligraphic layout. All the sentences written in Arabic are entirely conceived by Ghazi Al Delaimi and are his views and statements.

Only Centres are Bombed. At this point I would like to touch upon one final point, i.e. the concept by now in fashion in the world of art that the peripheries are disappearing. A concept that in reality is not so readily acceptable if only the large centers continue to be protected against possible bombings. As stated by James Leigh in his *Ever Buoyant Roman Empire*, our world reveals that the proponents of globalization have not been able to successfully realize its objectives, to bring the world together into an harmoniously interconnected political and cultural interactive web, all built upon economic integration from one universal free market. I believe instead that the centrifugal force of globalization that we talked about earlier has now been replaced by a strong centripetal force moving towards different protected centres, in some of which the Western world of art has established its outputs, meaning the Biennials. Thus, what is emerging is a multipolar, fragmented world with competing superpowers around and beyond which the peripheries, like the hinterlands of cities, continue to exist, and how. In fact, as we saw above, it is the urge to reconfirm of our identity that marks the return of the attractive force of Regionalism where we seem to rediscover strength and apparent safety.

The immobile globalization of today. What we are seeing is a situation teeming with contradictions. If 19th century globalization involved large-scale movements of populations to new lands, the present phase involves mainly commodities and images. The globalization of our times (the third in a series that began in the 16th Century) enthral and binds together mainly a new aristocracy, but, as stated by Ralph Peters in *Return of the Tribes* the remaining billions who lack the culture and the confidence to benefit from one world have begun to erect barricades against the internationalization of their affairs. Such aristocracy – which could be seen as the above-mentioned elite representing the art world– may well be more at home with foreigners of their own cultural status than with their less-fortunate countrymen. For the billions remaining, globalization and its consort, the information revolution, is merely an open window into and exclusive shop they are not allowed to enter.

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