

# Museum International



What can art still do ?

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# Editorial

“Art will save the world”. One hundred and fifty years after Dostoyevsky’s triumphant declaration,<sup>1</sup> UNESCO asked, with a touch of scepticism, “What power does Art still have?”

Between the mid 19th century and the start of the 21st, then, it seems that doubt has crept in concerning the power of Art in human destiny. It is true that, in the meantime, the world has undergone profound upheaval, and its intellectual, political and cultural foundations have been shaken by colonisation, totalitarianism and national and international conflicts. The history of the last century, then, has done much to endanger the force of Art. So we were justified in asking the question.

However, the reasons for the question “What power does Art still have?” are not solely contingent. This kind of soul-searching is a strong part of UNESCO’s tradition, and is closely linked to the reasons it was created and to its mission. The articles in this volume of *MUSEUM International* are the result of a colloquium that was the closing act of a programme entitled “Pathways of Thought”. Drawn up by the essayist Eduardo Portella,<sup>2</sup> the programme explored the tensions of recent cultural history, through meetings and publications, in order to remain at the cutting edge of expectations. The intention behind this impressive title refers back to UNESCO’s original mission of confronting thought with events, understanding the past and envisaging the future of humans and society through exercising the thought process. “Only insofar as he thinks” explains Hannah Arendt, “does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time between past and future.”<sup>3</sup> De facto, the failure of dominant Western values caused by the Second World War opened up a gap in historical time, a “breathing space” that allowed an appeal to thinking to make itself heard and to place a moment of truth in this gap, as Arendt suggested. From this appeal to thinking, UNESCO was born.

Dostoyevsky’s declaration announced another rupture, the rupture that put an end to the history of styles and aesthetic autonomy in art history, and asked questions about the meaning and functions of art. Thus the way was opened for art used as a system for the symbolic understanding of the world.<sup>4</sup> Once the barrier between art and its social or cultural background had come down, new uses and new narratives began to appear. UNESCO, for its part, took on the task of reconnecting with dispersed and

damaged cultures, highlighting the value of their works and access to them, including their reproduction.<sup>5</sup> Whether for the supposed capacity of works of art to build peace through dialogue (from a humanist viewpoint), or by asking about the role of the arts in education, UNESCO, in the first decades of its mandate, worked at the universalist and supportive role of its mission using a series of surveys intended to make art known in all parts of the world. In doing so, UNESCO transformed this mindset of understanding and symbolic representation into a unique institutional programme within the United Nations system.

This primary intention of recognising the historicity of all cultures via their arts and envisaging the whole history of humanity as a single indissociable entity was continued by the launch of a programme of conservation and designation of heritage.<sup>6</sup> With an extra-ordinary outcome after the previous slow breakdown of any artistic legitimacy and intentionality, this programme now has the whole of the international community of Member States behind it for protecting cultural works and expression. And the journal usually has the privilege of discussing this programme. So it is less usual to find discussion here on art, and particularly modern and contemporary art, because they are somewhat lost in the institutional programming. However, this issue deals with this very theme, mainly for the reasons mentioned above, by publishing the communications of the colloquium “What power does Art still have?” in two volumes (n° 244, December 2009 and n° 247, September 2010).

It was important to situate the theme of this issue of *MUSEUM International* in the history of UNESCO and so highlight the arguments of the published texts. Two different sets of documents are presented, illustrating two directions in art analysis. The texts in the first group are similar in that they analyse the practice of contemporary art from a theoretical and even philosophical stance, based very greatly on European experience (Hamashita, Dufrène). However, all these texts reaffirm the social value of art, and do so more pragmatically and less ideologically than in the past. This reinforces the legitimacy of the connection made with policies for promoting art education (Sasportes, Argullol). The more militant texts of the second group portray facets of the cultural and political uses of art in other parts of the world. Some of the thinking also reflects historical concerns. Nettleford is one example, with the question of the representation of memory and resistance through art education. Another is the existence of an appropriate way to write the “sharing of the sensory” and the transcendence of art in postcolonial contexts (Boni, Tikri, Mixinge). Although the texts in this volume are very different, they share the same strong epistemological conviction that artistic expression and the sharing of art both emancipate and liberate.

With its reminder of the importance of promoting art education policies nationally, this issue of *MUSEUM International* makes an important contribution to the resources available for UNESCO's second World Conference on Art Education.<sup>7</sup> Its aim is to consolidate the socio-cultural dimensions of art education and research capacities on the subject. As these texts suggest, the Conference roadmap shifts the analytical perspective and its formulation into the area of national policies. It reminds us that "Arts Education can bring about a better balance between cognitive and emotional development, helping to produce sound moral behaviour, which constitutes the solid grounding of the citizen."<sup>8</sup>

A final word. This Editorial cannot end without paying tribute to Professor the Honourable Ralston (Rex) Nettleford, who died suddenly while the proofs of this issue of the journal were being corrected. Jamaican artist, intellectual and academic, Rex Nettleford was involved in the *Pathways of Thought* programme, and played an important part in conceptualising the notion of intangible heritage throughout UNESCO's work.<sup>9</sup> Yet another proof, if needed, of the power of Art in the world.

**Isabelle Vinson**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

## | NOTES

1. From the life of Elder Zosima. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, London, Penguin, 2003
2. See the preface of this issue.
3. Hannah, Arendt, *Between past and future*, New York, Viking Press, 1968 [1st ed. 1954].
4. Hans, Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, Munich, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1983. [French translation: *L'histoire de l'art est-elle finie ?*, Paris, Éd. Jacqueline Chambon, 1989, Preface.]
5. Cf. documents on the programme of cultural activities from 1947 to 1956.
6. This new programme began by major campaigns for saving monuments and continued with the adoption of the 1972 Convention and later the 2003 Convention.
7. Second World Conference on Arts Education, Seoul, (Korean Republic), 25–28 May 2010.
8. Road map or Arts Education, World Conference on Arts Education: Developing creative ability for the 21st century, Lisbon 6–9 March 2006, p. 5. See <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/fr>
9. Rex, Nettleford, "Migration, transmission and maintenance of intangible heritage", *MUSEUM International*, n° 221–222 (Vol. 56, n°1–2, 2004).

# Foreword

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## MUSEUMS, life

A museum is the complete opposite of a mausoleum. A mausoleum is a place for preserving funereal memories, where time-worn obituaries are renewed. This is not the case for museums. Museums are life-giving power houses, where different works in inhospitable and unpredictable styles confront each other, and are given new life by the critical viewpoint of time. Because they are constantly moving forward, museums have become a space that structures our existence. They are places we go to polish up, recycle and recreate our ability to see and apprehend people and things, in manifestations which are fleeting and very often silent.

Art has always been a driving force of Western history, right from the start of the introduction of hegemonic metaphysics. The truth of art had to come face to face with the truth of science. And it did not emerge triumphant from this unequal combat. It looked very much as if art would only ever get to play second fiddle.

It is only today that we are beginning to realize that the supremacy of science led us into a closed room with no doors or windows, in which the only air was atmospheric pollution. It was an indifferent and insensitive bunker of a place, in which warring and necessarily binary programmes circulated. All natural or even artificial breathing there began to send out serious warning signals.

At this point, some people started to worry about the increasingly lethal progression of science without a conscience. The wisest scientists – and fortunately there are some – themselves began to worry about this cul-de-sac, and to see art as a warning signal on the horizon. Art, as an expressive truth, but never a predicative truth like science, has a flexibility and freedom that is rarely found elsewhere.

This also means that art can escape from the market forces of mass production, become emancipated and take its rightful place in the free life of the world and play its role in producing quality and emancipation. We need art to bring structure back into our world which seems bent on self-destruction.

# | The Quest for Beauty against the Arrogance of Art

by Masahiro Hamashita

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The worldwide financial crisis in 2008 added a new twist to the 1992 US presidential campaign slogan: 'It's the economy, Stupid!' When value and merit are assessed primarily in terms of money or numbers of units sold, the inference for works of art is that a work is not genuinely art unless it can generate investments or sales. But let us not lose sight of reality. *The Observer* of 17 May 2009 reported that police had finally solved the mystery of the internationally revered, two-ton *Reclining Figure*, which had been missing since December 2005. The £3 million Henry Moore sculpture had been melted down and sold for a paltry £1,500, in order to meet 'China's growing demand for electrical components' (Townsend and Davies, 2009). Likewise, when the house of Takesada Matsutani, one of my favorite Japanese artists, was recently robbed in Japan, most of his belongings were taken, but all of his artworks remained untouched.

That being said, art has never been more prosperous than now. This is not only due to the expansion of national museum policies. Advances in multimedia technologies such as digital photography and film have conspired with worldwide broadband internet connections to



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1. *Annunciation*, Fra Angelico (1387–1455), San Marco Museum, Florence (Italy).

produce massive increases in the circulation of visual culture. Computer technologies can now skillfully outperform human hands in tasks such as drawing and imaging. There is also considerable demand for the artworks themselves to serve not only the demands of political rhetoric, but also as investments and merchandise in the business world. As Ortega and Gasset suggested in *Revolt of the Masses* (1930) [*La rebelión de las masas*], their production *en masse* has resulted in dispersal, loss of concentration and a lowering of the standards of excellence championed by the traditional concept of art. Beauty has lost its authority. One of the three supreme classical values along with truth and

goodness, beauty is no doubt the most readily accessible to us in our daily lives. But even as art grows in volume and prominence, we grow less and less attentive to beauty, and the discipline of aesthetics is reduced in the process to a sort of science of art.

In fact, art tends not towards the beautiful, but to the aesthetic. Hermann Broch, for instance, criticized 'kitsch' for tending towards beauty rather than goodness (1933). But his argument is only relevant if one leaves out 'the aesthetic'. When we discuss art, we usually talk about beauty. But art can be deeply at variance with beauty. In fact, it is





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2. The Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado on the occasion of the presentation of his book *The Cradle of Inequality*.

not beauty – but the aesthetic – that has the stranglehold on our imaginations, illusions and representations, in one word, our *phantasma*. As our societies and technologies have developed, the range of the aesthetic has stretched considerably beyond the categories relating to beauty (the beautiful, the sublime and the graceful). It has gradually included the ugly, the grotesque, the tragic, the comic, the novel and the ridiculous. The aesthetic is what stands out in the foreground, leading the way and influencing lifestyles, making one seem virtuous and sophisticated without actually being so. Emotions are aesthetic when they are sharp enough to elicit feelings of pleasure,

disgust or displeasure at levels above and beyond those of ordinary sensation. But the aesthetic lies in a conscious sphere that is far removed from reality. Although it is the stuff of fantasy, illusion and representation, it constitutes a powerful driving factor in every area of human activity.

We know, for example, that the recent worldwide financial crisis was caused by a culture of conspicuous consumption that drove us to spend beyond our means and by a cult of luxury that ensnared us to spend beyond our needs. There was confusion between the substantive and the symbolic value of money. In numerical terms, the derivative financial market reached an estimated US\$700 trillion, over twenty times the entire world's total annual production; the United States' share was US\$419 trillion, or forty times as much as its GDP.<sup>1</sup> Therefore we can assume that the monetary system was dazzled and disrupted by a flood of misleading information. Cultural or civilizational phenomena such as this thrive on the interplay between fantasy and reality and thus illustrate the paradigm of the aesthetic at work. Mass-media tricks and discourses produced forms of pseudo-charisma, conveying delusions of power and performance and disconnecting us from any sense of value or reality.

Kant's notion that 'The delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest' (1928, p. 42) is helpful for understanding the concepts of the aesthetic and aesthetics. Kant's conception of disinterestedness is twofold. On the one hand it requires that one have no interest in acquiring or in possessing the object viewed. The implication is that an aesthetic experience is different from an ordinary experience

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in that it is not motivated by self-interest. The aesthetic experience must be free of the desire to possess. Only then can one appreciate an object impartially and objectively and judge it in relation to beauty. The other facet of Kant's conception of disinterestedness has to do with the object's actual existence and indeed it prefigures our age of virtual reality. It puts forward the idea that the representations and images of an object are independent of the object's reality. One can see an image even if there is no corresponding reality to it. The phenomenon of representation is what makes aesthetics possible. In a paradoxical way, virtual reality or images produced by highly developed electronic technology and IT help to illustrate this point. So does contemporary art, which usually pays no tribute to the ideal value of beauty, its strangeness and excess often quite at odds with reality. This is because today's art is contemporaneous of an era that tends to disconnect from the sense of reality, and beauty only thrives on a harmonious interaction between illusion and reality.

Often translated as 'imagination', the concept of the *'phantasma'*, which Aristotle elaborated essentially in his *De Anima* [*On the Soul*], actually covers a great deal more. It accounts for institution, technique and technology, as well as for ideas and ideologies that are autonomous from and second nature to the nature–reality and life–reality planes. In a nutshell, one might equate *phantasma* to 'art', as opposed to the basic reality of 'nature'. But what of the essential relationship between nature and art? This is a question that brings to my mind the Leibniz maxim that *'natura non facit saltum'*. Aside from its countless implications, inevitable

cosmological aspects and disavowal of any possible vacuum or human ruse to hold on to life and reality, what Leibniz's maxim basically expresses is that nature hates all sudden changes. The Leibniz maxim was somewhat reiterated by the economist Alfred Marshall (*Principles of Economics*, 1890), who claimed that 'Nature does not make a leap'. Even Charles Darwin opposed the theory of leap and mutation, arguing instead for gradual adaptation (*The Origin of Species*, 1859). Joseph Alois Schumpeter, however, was an advocate of radical changes, and claimed that development is driven by destructive creation (*Das Wesen und der Hauptinhalt der theoretischen Nationalökonomie*, 1908).

My own experience at the time of the great Hanshin earthquake (or the Kobe earthquake) in 1995 would lead me to conclude that nature makes no leaps. In the spring that immediately followed that January quake, the devastated landscape was promptly graced with cherry blossoms.

In contrast, the artificial does tend to make leaps: leaps of the imagination, leaps in the financial market, leaps when betting on a horse at the races. Could it be that nature does not imitate art after all? Was Oscar Wilde wrong when he said that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life'? (1889). What if art shifted its focus from the aesthetic to the beautiful? As Aristotle suggested, the problem with the concept of *'phantasma'* may be that it never judges, but only indiscriminately and unselectively exposes<sup>2</sup> – and in this the *phantasma* is quite suited to the postmodern mindset, which spurns value judgements in favour of pseudo-tolerance and an 'anything-goes' attitude.<sup>3</sup>

This frame of mind has gone a long way to reshaping and even destroying traditional values of truth, goodness and beauty. It has made them seem outdated and unconvincing and replaced them with traits such as usefulness, efficiency, convenience, cheapness, speed, ease, niceness, and so on. By placing the latter traits above the former qualities, we mistake the attributes, derivatives and tools for the values that appeal to our phantasma. Within this framework 'art' is like a kite severed from its string. It is fun but aimless. For art to be able to shift its focus from phantasma to the beautiful there would have to be ways of redeeming the meaning of beauty. Of the two that come to mind, one is Hume's concept of beauty related to pride, and the other is Plato's description of 'suddenness'.

According to Hume, the beauty of one's body, its strength, swiftness and utility, leads to self-confidence. Both natural and moral beauty are sources of pride. In contrast, a physical deformity can make one feel humility (1978, p. 298ff). While beauty gives pleasure, delight, satisfaction and pride, deformity produces pain, unease and humility. Hume concludes from this that beauty can only be 'beauty' if it brings about 'pride'. We may be delighted by and in awe of richly and artfully decorated scenes found at commercial or shopping areas, or lavish furnishings and displays in the suites of successful executives or powerful politicians. Yet, the people who enjoy these privileges may seem unhappy, humble and lacking in self-confidence. To Hume, their wealth is lacking in beauty. Likewise, works of art may well stimulate and distract, but if there is no true beauty in them, what is the point of art?

The demands made on contemporary art are that it be fun, easy, efficient, cheap, convenient, instant, and so on. In so doing, art may represent people who look happy, though humiliated, or who are rich and successful, but lack pride. The only common thread with beauty is pleasure. What prevails, not only in art but also in other forms of representation, criticism and discourses is a misplaced pride that one can only identify with arrogance. In sum, the problem lies in the lack of attention paid to the value of beauty.

Plato's idea, as described in his *Symposium*, 210a–212a, is that access to a vision of beauty occurs in ascending stages from the physical, through the moral and the intellectual, culminating in the sudden revelation of something astonishingly beautiful. To Plato, the entry point to the ultimate experience of beauty is the 'suddenness' (*eksaiphnes*) of the experience. In the passage above I discussed the problem of the leap from 'nature' to 'art', the jump from reality to phantasma. But my reading of Plato suggests that *natura facit saltum*, nature does make leaps – that the sudden leap is necessary, and that the relationship between nature and art is in fact twofold: comprised of continuum and disruption, succession and destruction. Excessive and sudden leaps from nature to art are sometimes necessary. Excess is sometimes the only road to moderation.<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, the quest for beauty may be an arduous one, but we should never despair of beauty as Plato does in *Hippias Major* 304e when he says that 'All that is beautiful is difficult' (*chalepa ta kala*). There are paths to beauty in simplicity. In fact, beauty may lurk among us. To

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borrow a remark of Aby Warburg, 'God is in the detail' (Curtius, 1973, p. 35).

In *Regarding the Pains of Others* (2003) Susan Sontag criticized Sebastião Salgado's work for exposing human suffering in beautiful ways, depriving depicted victims of the viewers' sympathy. Her argument was that beauty is always spurious, that the beautification of ugliness artificially eases tensions and problems. Natsuki Ikezawa objected to the contrary that it is the very beauty of Salgado's photographs that seizes our memory of misery and sympathy.<sup>5</sup>

Beauty is above and beyond such clichés as 'west meets east' because it takes root in the universal. When I first saw Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the San Marco Museum in Florence, for instance, I was not so much in awe of the Italian Renaissance artist than of the evidence before me that a human being could reach such heights of spirituality. In my mind, Fra Angelico makes all humankind proud.

To conclude, contemporary artifacts may seem lost to beauty because of art's concessions to vulgarity, brutality and violence. But if art could offer opportunities to discover and to experience beauty, it would bring us back to our senses, to our sense of reality and to our pride as human beings.

Ernst Gombrich once said: 'There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists' (1984, p. 4). We may agree with this or not, but for art to recover its significance, we would need to recognize the status of the artist as well. Art education requires the nurturing of

a good eye as well as a recognition of the artist's role as messenger from beyond this mundane world.

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## | NOTES

1. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Global\\_Economy/KC13Dj09.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Global_Economy/KC13Dj09.html)
2. '[W]hat we imagine is sometimes false though our contemporaneous judgement about it is true', Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 428a.
3. 'Sensations are always true, imagination ("phantasma") are for the most part false' (ibid.).
4. When staying in Japan from 1876 to 1905 as the Emperor's own doctor, Erwin von Bälz observed the Japanese's efforts to depart from the feudalistic regime and mentality and called it the 'salto mortare' (leap for death). (*Berutsu no Nikki* [The Diary of Bälz], Japanese version, Iwanami Bunko, Book 1, p. 45f.)
5. *Mainichi Shinbun* [The Mainichi Daily Newspaper], 10 August 2003.

# | The Arts: safe havens or harmony in the making?

by *Thierry Dufrêne*

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What power does art still have? In 2008, the artist Jeff Koons displayed ready-made vacuum cleaners amid works of art in the Château of Versailles; meanwhile in the National Gallery in Washington DC visitors are herded towards a shop where they can purchase a Rothko in the format of their choice or a miniature Brancusi Kiss. If a heritage showplace can invite a contemporary artist to exhibit in its midst, and visitors can display a replica of a cultural heritage masterpiece in their own home, art seemingly has the power to do anything. But since, as certain studies seem to show, art has become a simple commodity, the answer to the question 'What power does art still have?' is doubtless more ambiguous.

These issues infused the recent public debate in France surrounding the building of the Abu Dhabi Louvre. In a political cartoon by French satirist Georges Wolinski, an Emirati is shown remarking: 'It's a shame she's (the Mona Lisa) not for sale', to which his wife replies: 'What's the point of showing her then?' The *Mona Lisa* will not be exhibited in the Abu Dhabi Louvre. The painting was last taken



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3. Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, *Monument against Fascism 1986–1996*, Hamburg (Germany).



© Image Courtesy of Gerz studio/Breaking Ground, Ballymun

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4. A phases of the art project, *A Map to Care 2003–2014*, by Jochen Gerz, in Ballymun, Dublin (Ireland).

abroad to the United States and Japan by André Malraux. But with the continual emphasis on terms such as ‘show’ and ‘sell’ the question remains significant: has art been reduced to a saleable commodity?

Visitors to the Smithsonian Institution’s two ‘Native American Art’ museums (in Manhattan and Washington), staffed entirely by Native Americans, are confronted with a ‘living culture’ selling them products woven on-site in mock-ups of their natural habitat. This approach underlines the museum’s focus on the future as well as the past. However, such simulations inevitably disappoint art historians, whose efforts to examine historical items from this culture, or learn facts about its cultural history, necessitate visits to far less striking environments less open to visitors. So has living culture made light of this past, this history of art?

Visitors to the last Venice Biennale in 2009, directed by Daniel Birnbaum to the theme *Making Worlds*, came face-to-face with the paradoxes of contemporary art. In the Scandinavian Pavilion visitors encountered two models, one playing dead in a swimming pool, the other sitting naked in an armchair. It seems that art has the power to do absolutely anything. It has incredible liberty, but if art goes to such extremes and indulges in such paradoxes, it is basically because we no longer see it. Victor Misiano, the Russian art critic, explains that artists must produce accidents or events, otherwise no one pays them any attention. How can anyone be interested in art after reading five pages of kidnappings, murders, corruption and crime? The Venice Biennale is often the occasion for affirming cultural identity: in 2009, the artists Oleg Kulik and Andrei Molodkin focused on Russian identity, Molodkin presenting models of the Nike of Samothrace shot through with human



© Image Courtesy of Gerz studio / Breaking Ground, Ballymun

5. Jochen Gerz, *A Map to Care* 2003–2014, Ballymun, Dublin (Ireland).

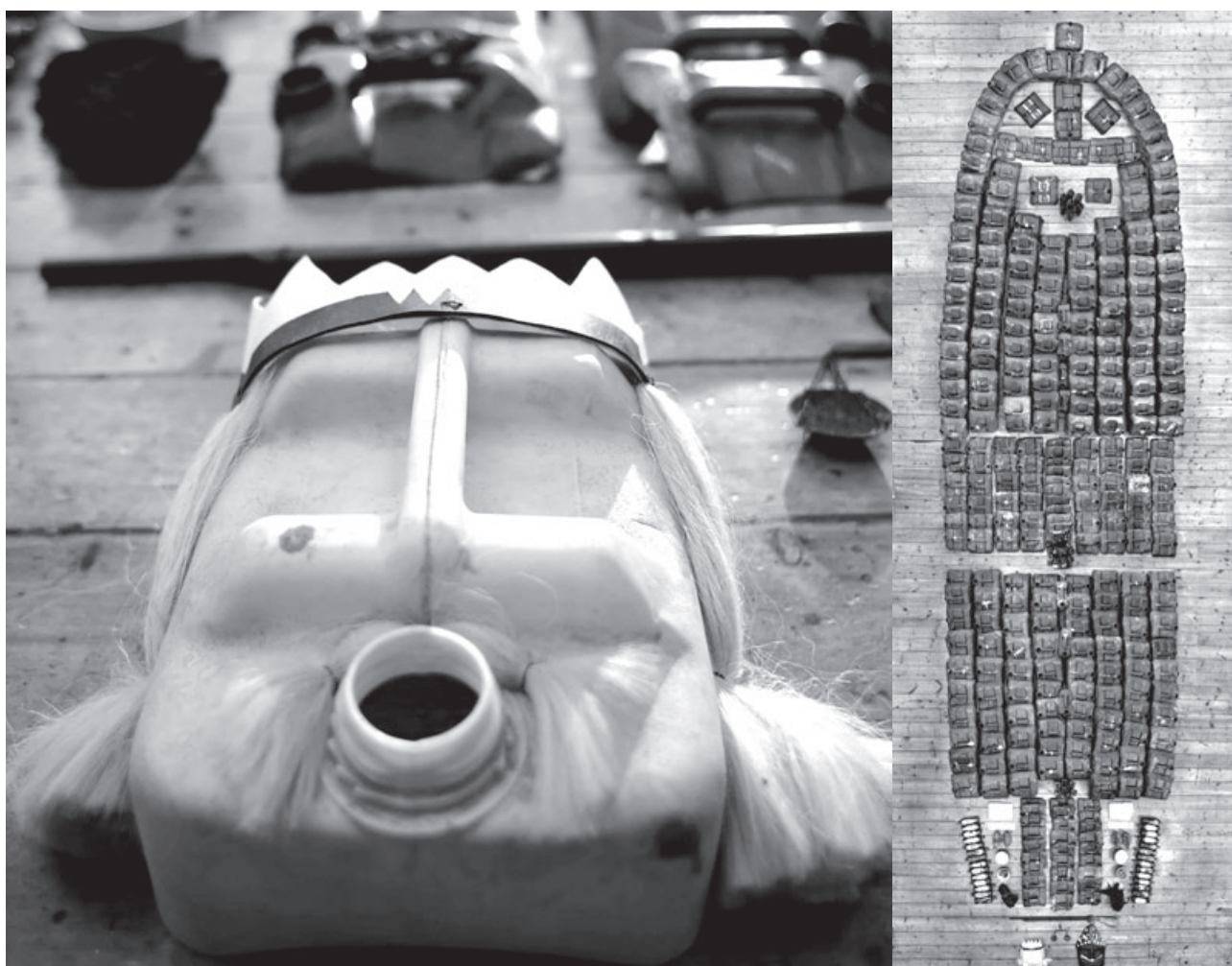
blood. Art has the power to do anything, but in this case, what can it still do?

Given all these examples, is high culture condemned to kitsch and banality? Visitors to Versailles saw in the place of the equestrian statue of Louis XIV the astonishing *Balloon* sculpture by Jeff Koons, while stars like Michael Jackson and a modern Marie-Antoinette hugging the Pink Panther reigned in the salons and apartments of the Sun King. The exhibition also offered the opportunity to look at vacuum cleaners. A new effort to domesticate nobility? The portrait emerging here of different attitudes to art presents

two faces: on the one hand, cultured, blasé spectators looking for new and extreme sensations, and on the other, art and cultural heritage seemingly dedicated to exalting the values of mass consumption.

The question of art being stifled by commodification or snobbery was raised by Hannah Arendt in her 1961 essay 'The crisis in culture'. For Arendt, culture is threatened not so much by mass culture, as by what she calls 'cultural philistinism'. The cultural philistine practises a form of elitism that seeks deterritorialized sensations, and ascribes value to cultural objects, so that the 'Art World' becomes a hedge against inflation. James Turrell's *Skyspaces*, which invite the spectator to look at the sky, or statements by Ben claiming that 'Art is what it is. Everything is beautiful', are symbolic of this kind of 'Art World'. It may be said that this philistinism also touches the presentation of the primary arts. It is significant that an advertisement for the Quai Branly Museum in Paris is similar to one created for the HSBC bank group: both portray a dialogue of cultures and economies. The Quai Branly Museum and the future Abu Dhabi Museum both aim to be landscape museums, conjuring up a mythical Africa in one case, and oasis scenes inspired by the Medina of Marrakesh or Tunis in the other. Both institutes seem to want to create a fictitious re-territorialization. This is reminiscent of the work of contemporary artist Sergio Vega, whose series *Paradise in the New World*, shows how we 'customise' interior design with tropical motifs and so create a totally artificial image of the world. In the years since the publication of Hannah Arendt's essay, this two-pronged





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6. Romuald Hazoumé, *La Bouche du Roi* (2007).

phenomenon of the commodification of art and 'jet set' art seems to have escalated, notably with the effects of globalization.

In reaction to this, the years since the 1970s have witnessed a turning inwards to one's identity alongside the instrumentalization of cultural heritage. This is not to condemn the legitimate claim of indigenous peoples to their cultural identity, the movement of Australian aborigines to

reclaim their land, or people who assert their Afro-Cuban identity, for example. But these are a string of juxtaposed heritages, a turning inwards on oneself. Meanwhile, Greece continues to press the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles to the new Acropolis Museum that has reserved a place for them. All of this is obviously very right and proper, but seems to flout the great dream of humanity built around the notion of the universal museum: the dream of a shared culture.



© Courtesy of Alfredo Jaar. New York

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7. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996).

Berlin's Altes Museum designed by architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel was the first universal museum with a cupola and zenith lighting. Art from all over the world was gathered under the cupola that bathed it all in an equal light. Jean Nouvel uses this cupola concept for the Abu Dhabi Louvre, which sets out to be a universal museum, rather than a museum of eastern culture such as the Guimet Museum of far-eastern culture in Paris. The Abu Dhabi Louvre houses as much western as eastern art under its cupola. The UNESCO World Heritage logo also recalls the Universal Museum cupola, its circle surrounding a square a symbol of local culture in need of safeguarding.

Art historians and ethnologists are currently looking at the power of art and images to study the ways in which certain countries or cultures have used art to claim their identity, sometimes for legitimate reasons. In his book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972) Michael



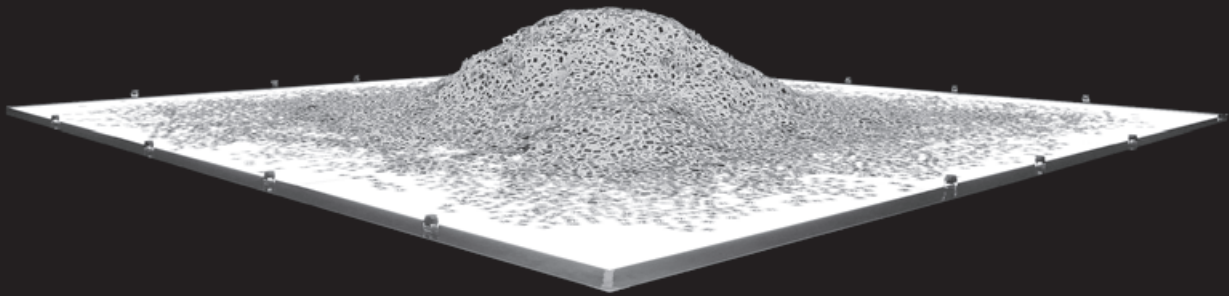
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8. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996).

Baxandall tried to uncover exactly what these, to us, incomprehensible fifteenth century Italians were seeking. Since its publication, other art historians and ethnologists such as David Freedberg (1989), Hans Belting (1990) and more recently, Alfred Gell (1998), have considered the new power of images in contexts characterized by the (re-)claiming of cultural identities. All emphasize the highly intentional nature of images. Josef Beuys' rediscovery of artistic shamanism in *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) also explored the highly symbolic power of art, the artist spending three days in a room with a wild coyote at the René Block Gallery, New York. We need to meditate anew upon the following extract from Theodor Adorno's 1965 lecture *Functionalism Today*:

Today an aesthetic thought that is an artistic thought should go beyond art and, at the same time, beyond the old-fashioned opposition between what is final, that is, art as an instrument, and what is free from all



9. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996).

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finality [or which can become philistinism if we refer to Hannah Arendt], and the artist suffers from this as much as the spectator.

This same period also saw André Malraux definitively revisit his concept of the 'imaginary museum', in his 1976 book *L'Intemporel*, part of *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*. Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt and André Malraux, with his concept of 'metamorphosis', all lead us to think that if art still has the power to do anything, it must be to overcome this opposition between *a world of art*, which would be art for art's sake outside the world, and *an art of the world* which would be strictly instrumentalized, thus bringing *art into the world*. For Arendt, this takes place through negotiation. 'Art, perhaps along with politics, is the only thing not to be founded on absolute truth or dogma, but which must be negotiated with others' (Arendt, 1961). And art is indeed that which introduces a third party, that is, negotiation with the other. To quote Arendt again: 'Judgements of taste and public opinion have in common their persuasive character. The person who judges, as Kant said rather beautifully, can only "court the consent of the other in the hope of finally reaching an agreement with him"' (Arendt, 1961). One can court the judgement of other cultures. I look forward to the day when art history students recognize that the most beautiful sculpture in the Louvre is not Houdon's *Diana*, but the sculpture of *Gou*, the Mali War God. On that day we will have taken an enormous step forward in negotiating with other cultures as to exactly what our idea of art is about.

I defend the idea that we need to keep non-western works of art in the Louvre, and not

transport them to the Quai Branly Museum, as some would argue. The Louvre must remain a universal museum, and as such needs Inuit and African art as much as it needs European art. Negotiating an agreement between cultures can focus on the past, as well as the future. Malraux teaches us that art does not belong to a single time, nor to a single frame of meaning. Richard Long's *Mud Circle* was exhibited alongside Aboriginal Dream Paintings at the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (Pompidou Museum, Paris). In fact, the original layout of the Pompidou Museum displayed surrealist paintings alongside primary works from Oceania, to demonstrate how twentieth century art helped viewers discover art from the past. This was Malraux's lesson: we understand contemporary art through a return trip from the past to the present.

So, what power does art still have? If we compare the works of artists like Cezanne and Sergio Vega, for example, we are obliged to realize that there has been a change in the scale of values. In the past, artists travelled to be influenced. Van Gogh came to discover the landscapes of the South of France; Cezanne painted the Sainte Victoire mountain. They were influenced by the world around them. Today, artists travel to be influential, to act on the environment. Sergio Vega's photographs of deforestation are an example of these situated actions. In the same way, Alfredo Jaar's work *The Lament of Images* is saying that, faced with the Rwanda genocide, images are not capable of conveying the reality of the conflict, but must confront it, even if only as a blank – an inability to present it. In 2007, the Benin-born artist Romuald Hazoumé presented the British Museum with a work entitled *La Bouche du Roi*



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10. Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images* (2002).

[*The Mouth of the King*]. Lines of plastic petrol cans were laid on the ground. Their previous owners had changed them into African masks (to identify them) and used them for organized smuggling between Benin and Nigeria. The entire work was a symbolic representation of an Atlantic slave ship. The artist is always the one to challenge our memory.

For the German artist Jochen Gerz there is no point in erecting monuments. On the contrary, they should disappear, like the stones of the paved square that form the Invisible Monument in

Sarrebruck. Each stone has the name of a Jewish cemetery engraved on the underside. Since the cemeteries have disappeared, the names are no longer visible. In the same way, the *Gegen Faschismus* [*Against Fascism*] column in Hamburg was reduced by 1 meach year. Everyone was invited to write about fascism at the height their hand could reach. The point was to make people understand that they cannot unload the responsibility for memory onto art in order to do away with history and one's own present responsibility. Each living being needs to act and engage with these political questions. In 2004

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and 2005, Jochen Gerz worked with the residents of a disadvantaged area near Dublin to produce a work entitled *A Map to Care*. He invited all the residents to buy and plant a tree, which may seem paradoxical. Some denounced the work as scandalous, claiming that the project should have been funded by government authorities. On the contrary, Gerz believed that in this way people would become more involved because the project belonged to them, not Brussels, the European Commission or an abstract government authority. On each tree was placed a plaque (and these were paid for by the government) on which each person answered the question posed by Jochen Gerz: 'If this tree could talk about you, what would it say?'

Thus it is not only artists but institutions who must continue to draw cultures together. This is why organizations such as UNESCO must take up the new challenges facing dialogue between cultures.

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© Sergio Vega

11. Sergio Vega, *Paradise on Fire 1* (2008), Galerie Karsten Greve, Cologne (Germany).

# | Art's Undertakers: a portrait gallery

by José Sasportes

*José Sasportes is the Former Minister of Culture for Portugal and Chair of the First World Conference on Art Education in 2006. He is the author of numerous publications and essays. Some of his most recent works include the novels Os Dias Contados (2005), A vingança de Marcolina ou o ultimo duelo de Casanova (2009), and works on the history of dance including La scoperta del corpo – percorsi della danza nel Novecento (1988) and Balli teatrali a Venezia (1994).*

The question 'What power does art still have?' implies doubts about the need for art. The idea that art, or rather the arts, are dying is not a new one. Some of the best theorists have announced the sad demise of art. However, the very fact that such pronouncements reoccur on a regular basis should be sufficient to demonstrate the futility of the debate. But as the question is raised again we are challenged afresh. Quoting Tolstoy, who was among those who uttered a fatal prognosis, has art become a 'living corpse'?

Hegel is reported to have spoken of the death of art to his students in 1828, stating that contemporary conditions were not favourable. Beethoven had just died, true, but Goethe had not yet finished the second *Faust*, and Delacroix had just completed *The Death of Sardanapale*. Yet 1828 saw the birth of Tolstoy, while Verdi and Wagner celebrated their fifteenth birthdays on opposite sides of the Alps. Although Hegel could not know it, what was emerging that year was not so much the death of art as the budding of romanticism.

In the twentieth century, Futurists such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, followed by the Dadaists and the Surrealists, all proclaimed the



death of art as it had been known for centuries. Yet modern art rose up out of these ashes. After the carnage of the First World War, Paul Valéry realized that 'Now, we civilisations know that we are mortal' (Valéry, 1919). The worst was yet to come, but artistic creation never stopped renewing itself, giving a voice to the turmoil. In 1933, the poet Lincoln Kirstein stated that ballet was dead. However, this did not prevent him from participating in the renaissance of Balanchine's New York City Ballet. After the unspeakable brutality of the Second World War, Theodor Adorno predicted that it would be impossible to write poetry ever again.

The calmer 1980s saw Arthur Danto proclaiming the end of art, while director Peter Greenaway announced that cinema was dead, stating that he would henceforth concentrate on projects that glorified early art: Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* and Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*. The diagnosis was no better for theatre, deemed to be undergoing a crisis since Ancient Greek times, despite the advent of Shakespeare, Molière and more recently Pirandello, Peter Brook, Peter Stein and Botho Strauss. The list of art's undertakers is long, whether famous thinkers or mediocre epigones. After the death of God and the end of history, the end of art does not seem terribly important.

The words 'power' and 'still' in the question: 'What power does art still have?' should make us think. Does art have any power? If so, how is this seen? Where does the need for art come from? For what purpose is art needed? Writing in 1936, Paul Valéry provided elements of a response.

Art and science, each in its own way, tend to create a kind of 'useful' from the 'useless', a kind of 'necessary' from what is 'arbitrary'. Thus artistic creation is not so much creation of works of art as creation of the *need for works of art*, because works of art are products or a 'supply', which presuppose 'demand' or needs (Valéry, 1936).

But why ask this question today? Where are the signs that art has no more power? And if we answer that art has no power, and never has had, or, on the contrary, that art has every power and that it is in perfect health, or the third possibility, which is fortunately more likely, that we can reach no agreement, what should organizations like UNESCO do?

In 1952, seven years after the butchery of the Second World War, UNESCO held a conference in Venice on *The Artist in Contemporary Society*. Guests included Le Corbusier, Henry Moore, Arthur Honegger, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Vinicius de Moraes, Thornton Wilder, Hans Hartung, Roberto Rossellini, Stephen Spender, Ivo Andric, Gabriela Mistral, and many other famous contemporary artists and thinkers from some forty different countries. Cultural monolithism was being imposed in Eastern Europe. Despite this, the Venice conference was looking for ways of rebuilding the arts, in total disarray since the war. There was no doubt about the power of art, however, it was defined.

Speaking personally, the reason for asking this question now seems less obvious. Certainly, the current economic crisis has affected the funds available for culture. But when the crisis began in

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2007, art flourished, with a significant upturn in the international art market brought about by new buyers in China and India, African and Arab countries, Russia and other former Soviet countries.

Today, it seems that a great deal of money is available for culture, with many sponsors supporting the arts. Museums, theatres and concert venues are growing in number and are increasingly filled. Turnover in the art market is substantial. Large numbers of artists are working in conventional and totally new areas, and there is a lively discussion with artists from other continents. Enrolment levels in art schools are very healthy.

But amidst all this euphoria, shady areas and conflicts of interests remain. These constitute the negative corollary of the power of art and its values. This new fascination with art draws into stark relief the millions of people throughout the world who have found no place in this movement. For them, the question is not ‘What power does art still have?’ Their creative and artistic potential is crushed, either by the catastrophic economic climate, or by the weight of dogma, blocking access to creativity. Rather, we should ask, ‘What can we do for the art of others?’

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup> remain very far off target, but UNESCO as a whole has undertaken a lot of work to support artistic creation. A good example of this is the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003. Another is the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural

Expressions, adopted in 2005, which focuses on promoting and protecting contemporary, usually oral, artistic creation, especially in developing countries. The 2005 Convention was approved by almost all UNESCO member states, whose number has quadrupled since 1952. So what power does UNESCO still have? If we succeed in demonstrating the power of art, or on the contrary, showing that it is absolutely futile, will this change anything within the organization and its processes?

This publication precedes a preparatory session of the second World Conference on Art Education, due to take place in Seoul in 2010. The first conference was held in 2006 in Lisbon, and was attended by 1,200 experts from ninety-seven countries. Reading the report and the recommendations from it, and comparing them with the recommendations of the 1952 conference in Venice, the difference is striking. Almost sixty years ago, art education was already seen as a fundamental need, but was considered only in terms of a necessary, if not indispensable, means of training up a new public that the arts desperately needed. In 2006, the arts were recognized as contributing in specific and irreplaceable ways to the psychological development of children and adolescents and their social integration; a way of optimizing their ability to learn and stimulating their creative resources. I would like to distinguish here between education in the arts and art teaching. Education in the arts, in and out of school, uses techniques and methods drawn from the art practice of different cultures, but its priority is not to train new artists. That is the area of art teaching. Nevertheless, it is certain that young people who have had some art education will be more open to the idea of

pursuing a career in the arts, and are more likely to nurture a flame of interest in past and present art. However, if you ask these new recruits on the arts scene if art still has the power to achieve something – if it is necessary – their answer, like mine, might sound like Cocteau's famous quote: 'Poetry is indispensable – if I only knew what for.'

Advances in neuroscience often come from studying medical conditions, because malfunction is frequently a way of uncovering how a normal brain functions. The same is true of art education. Its capacities become obvious when we look at art-based therapy, such as music therapy, dance therapy, art therapy or psychodrama. They achieve results by restoring emotional balance and providing a new social framework for people with behavioural problems. This inevitably leads us to think about the advantages of art education for the equilibrium and well-being of everyone.

In his opening speech at the Lisbon Conference, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, author of *Descartes' Error*, ended with a strong defence of art education:

Arts and humanities education actually foster the imagination that is necessary for innovation. Without the richness that comes from traditional narrative, and the traditional exercise and experience of arts and humanities, it is unlikely that human beings will develop the kind of imagination and innovative, intuitive thinking that will lead to the creation of the new. To forget the arts and humanities in the new curricula is equivalent to sociocultural suicide.<sup>2</sup>

By partnering with the World Conference in Seoul, UNESCO proves that it shares this point of view. Once again, UNESCO chooses to place its full weight behind the defence of education in the arts, to ensure that member states see it as an inalienable right, as was already recommended by the Lisbon conference. I take the risk of believing that, for UNESCO, art still has a great deal of power.

## | NOTES

1. There are eight Millennium Development Goals drawn up by the UN in 2005 to be achieved by 2015:

eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve primary education for all; promote gender equality and the empowerment of women; reduce infant mortality; improve maternal health; control HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; preserve the environment; and create a world partnership for development.

2. Antonio Damasio, « Arts and humanities education actually foster the imagination that is necessary for innovation. Without the richness that comes from traditional narrative, and the traditional exercise and experience of arts and humanities, it is unlikely that human beings will develop the kind of imagination and innovative, intuitive thinking that will lead to the creation of the new. To forget the arts and humanities in the new curricula is equivalent to socio-cultural suicide. Speech given at the opening of the Lisbon Conference. Reference provided by the author.

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# | Aesthetics and the Construction of Global Ethics

*by Rafael Argullol*

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The question posed in the title of this article is a difficult one to address. Here, I will attempt to summarize some ideas developed during recent discussions, and formulate conclusions that may cast some light on the ethical potential of aesthetic experience. Whether there can be any link between pictorial abstraction and mathematical abstraction is an interesting but ultimately unanswerable question. Whether art is useful or not is another interesting question, but one that can never be answered. If we try to make art useful, it can be easily used, as has often been the case in totalitarian societies; if we attempt to make art avowedly non-useful, it will not respond to human aspirations and will be relegated to the sidelines, its potential diminished.

These last two questions illustrate how difficult it is to debate this subject. The notion of contemporary art has been discussed in this context, which I am rather sceptical about because I believe that contemporary art is created in the here and now – in silence. Likewise, I am sceptical about contemporary art museums and exhibitions because they tend to fossilize what is being

created, even before the creative act is ended. I note, however, that many Western artists and intellectuals are often sceptical about what is known as contemporary art because it is identified with fetishism, snobbery, political correctness, showmanship and pretence. In contrast, in other continents – Africa in particular – the power of contemporary art claims to be able to bridge the gap between the individual creator and the society for which the work is intended.

What has been at stake throughout the meeting is the issue of the power of art, present in the title of the meeting: *The Power of Art* versus *the Art of Power*. What power does art really have over the powers that be? What power does art have to enliven human existence or that of the artist? Moving testimonies abound about the power of art as resistance in the face of political power, the violence of power and the totalitarianism of power. However, as soon as we talk about the power of art, we are led on to a closely related question, that of beauty. My Japanese colleague, Masahiro Hamashita, writes in this issue of a beauty that protects itself from the arrogance of art. It is a formulation that I find just because a certain arrogance manifests itself today among some who proclaim themselves artists, yet who are incapable of accepting and understanding the complex, global and contradictory nature of beauty or aesthetic experience. No less difficult than the questions about abstraction or the usefulness of art are issues about the relationship between art and beauty, art and aesthetic experience, art and humankind's spiritual experiences (as in sacred or religious experience), and art and the experience of the community, of the 'polis'. Although these questions are clearly

unanswerable they enliven our relationship with art and the creativity of artists.

Other issues, such as new languages, new expressions and new technologies, have prompted all countries and cultures to wonder about their origins, the relationship between modernity and tradition, the use of new technologies, and the reconstruction and rebuilding of artistic content in the traditional sense of the term. Such issues often lead to communication problems. In Europe, in particular, recent debates on new technologies, techniques, expressions and languages often take place, but the content of what is communicated through these new techniques is often very poor in terms of spiritual capacity and spiritual re-creation. And amid all the conflict and debate through which we attempt to define art (abstraction, non-abstraction, usefulness, non-usefulness, modernity, avant-garde) an idea has repeatedly come to light in different ways – negotiation, mediation, talking and sharing. This idea merits our attention.

If we cling to antagonistic terms, we will probably never move forward. Personally, I am weary of arguments about figurative and abstract arts that have led to absolute deadlock, at least in the Western world. Naturally, I am always inclined to see both sides of arguments between people from 'iconophile' and 'iconophobic' traditions. At times, I have come to truly believe that humanity can be divided into people who are brought up in a world where divinity is represented and people brought up in a world where it is not. However, this kind of dichotomy can take many different forms.

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Once in Berkeley, California I met a famous mycologist called Gordon Wasson who had previously been a banker and had written a book entitled *The Road to Eleusis*, with the Swiss chemist and LSD inventor Albert Hofmann, among others. The book attempted to recreate the initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. Wasson did not divide humanity into people who had represented divinity and people who had not, but rather divided humankind into people who ate mushrooms and people who did not. He devised a geography to distinguish mushroom eaters (such as in Russia) from non-mushroom eaters (like the English). This led to completely different forms of symbolism, which seemed to me a very appealing distinction that appeared to have some links with the representation or non-representation of divinity. Take the case of a European brought up in a strong Catholic environment, such as myself. It is obvious that my idea of beauty, even before I could make personal choices, was the result of a meeting between the iconoclastic culture of Judaism, a culture deeply enamoured of the human figure – Classical Greek culture – and Christian culture, which in certain ways constituted a symbiosis of these two traditions in its personification and giving form to an abstract God. Therefore, Christians, and Catholics in particular, I believe, have a chaotic mix of taste for both abstraction and representation.

To return to this element of negotiation, mediation and sharing, it is vital to preserve the relationship between art and enigma in the different conceptions of art. Art is not simply communication, information or data accumulation; art is the human speaking to the human. It is therefore a plural and multilateral

questioning that will never end, and will always have avenues to roam and corners to explore. This follows on in part from the famous statement by Aristotle, raised in recent debates, about the superiority of poetry over history. Poetry has the power to evoke what can be, whereas history can only evoke what already is. Nowadays, we could adapt this and say: art, the aesthetic that respects enigma, presents us with what the human condition may be. Conversely, the media, journalism, news-making, and so on provide us with a snapshot of each moment: what is current and what constitutes the construction of the present. The artist works in the present but constructs from the past and towards the future. This is why there is always a kind of circularity in the time of the artist.

I should like to describe a personal experience. Five years ago I published a book that is about to come out in India. The book was written by myself and an Indian writer and thinker from Varanasi or Benares, called Vidya Nivas Nishra. We spent five years preparing the book, exchanging letters with the help of a mediator, before eventually meeting up in India (Varanasi) and Barcelona. Our conversations covered a number of themes selected by mutual agreement. These were recorded and form the substance of the book. The aim was not to convince the other, but to compare two stances and mindsets through a friendship of ideas. When I paid a visit to Varanasi after these years of exchanges, dialogue and correspondence, I remember thinking that we would be able to start work on the very first day. I went with the very European mentality of getting down to work immediately. However, on the first day my colleague stopped me and said,

'before we get to work, we must achieve a certain level of friendship'. This was very interesting, but also contradictory. How can one achieve, in terms of sensitivity, a certain level of friendship? And then I realized that, unlike what we are often told by politicians, diplomats, journalists and even academics, the dialogue between different traditions cannot take place on the superficial level of words and translation, but must take us through concepts that are often difficult to grasp. Ultimately, we must walk in the territory of the sensory, and the senses are definitely in the territory of the aesthetic.

Throughout the days spent talking with my Indian writer friend, now deceased, something became increasingly apparent. It was obvious that his concepts of death and time were very different from mine. However, the bridge linking these different concepts was that of aesthetics and sensitivity. With the latter we could communicate and link concepts that seemed far apart. When Vidya Nivas Nishra subsequently came to Barcelona, I remember he was fascinated by Romanic art, with which he was not familiar, and by the work of Picasso, which he did know but was able to view at his leisure at the Picasso Museum. He repeated to me that both Romanesque art (which seemed far removed from the Indian subcontinent) and the art of Picasso were manifestations of sensitivity; that they adumbrated an aesthetic bridge that permitted the linking of ideas and also contributed to our friendship.

I could cite many other examples of enlightenment that emerged from our discussions, but I shall describe just one. It relates to a concept that is very important in the Greco-European

tradition. I had been trying to talk about the term 'universe', but found that we were unable to understand one other. Then one day, instead of universe, I used the word 'cosmos', which is a word much loved by all of us brought up in the Greek tradition. By translating 'universe' as 'cosmos', we understood each other at once. Why? Because at that moment the import of the Latin term 'universe' suddenly dawned upon me. 'Universe' was the adaptation, reduction and centralization that the Roman Empire made of the ancient term 'cosmos'. And the 'cosmos' that was polycentric, plural and rich in nuances turned into a mirror image of the Roman Empire and its capital Rome. The term 'universe' denotes absolute centralization. Once I had eliminated this word and concept, the conversation flowed again, and the cosmic vision being discussed could be related to and understood once more. In a word, my interlocutor got along better with Heraclitus, Anaximenes, Anaximander and Einstein than with the centralized idea of the 'universe' that we have so often held up as an example in medieval Christian Europe – a Europe that, more or less until the twentieth century, had not reformulated its model of 'cosmos'.

I could give several other examples, some related to language, that provided us with mutual enlightenment. I realized that it may be possible to reconcile some of the different elements we had considered about the question of art, beauty, aesthetic experience, and the usefulness or non-usefulness of art. I believe in the power of art, but I do not believe in the power of art subjugated exclusively to the idea of utility. I am very Kantian in that I believe in the disinterest and essential uselessness of art, it being understood that this is an active uselessness and an active

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disinterest. But in what direction is art's active disinterest moving in? According to the reflections of a Stoic philosopher, it is moving in three directions. According to this philosopher, the 'logos', that is the word and the verb, manifest themselves in three directions: towards the cosmic, the all; towards the community, in other words towards others; and towards ourselves, towards the spirit or intimate being. I have the impression that the power of the aesthetic experience is much greater when the balance between these three dimensions is respected: the cosmic, the community (the essential usefulness of art) and ourselves – the apparent external uselessness of art but also its huge usefulness for building one's own ethos, personality and character, which is ultimately the very root of ethics.

To conclude, I would like to recall a magnificent word in Spanish that is no longer widely used but illustrates my point very well: 'entereza'. 'Entereza' comes from 'entero' (whole) and basically means totality, in the sense of fullness, conciliation and completeness. But 'entereza' also refers to plenitude in terms of sensory completeness. It is one of those words that sometimes have a particular strength. I am under the impression that what we have been calling 'art' – which is perhaps the same as that found in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira – is humankind's enigmatic and never ending search for 'entereza', for completeness. In my final meetings with Vidya Nivas Nishra he sang in Sanskrit. When I asked him what he was singing, he replied that he was singing about something linked to nostalgia and the search for something that is wanted, wanted because it is felt inside but does not exist in the immediate present. This something, he said, is akin

to 'what you Westerners call plenitude but what other cultures may call nothingness'. It seems to me that what we call 'art' must comply with the enigma of questioning of humans by humans, because this is our main means of seeking completeness and plenitude.

Earlier, I mentioned painting and writing. In Greece, a friend welcomed into someone's home would receive one half of a clay tablet called a symbolon on departure. If, thirty years later, the two people were to meet again and reassemble the two halves of the symbolon, then the friendship would also be reformed. In terms of images, art is the quest to reform that friendship. In terms of writing, I believe we are born with half of the sentence written, and we spend our lives trying to write the other half. As far as I know, we have no instrument more powerful than art for this. Some believe it is religion, others believe it is ideology or politics, but I am convinced that art is the most powerful means we have because it incorporates all the others.

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# | Decolonizing the Spirit: the work of the creative imagination

*by Rex Nettleford*

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To the two-thirds of the world's inhabitants, otherwise known as the Third World or the developing world, the issue of national and cultural identity ranks high up on the agenda of concerns. The decolonization of the spirit, which forms part of the ongoing quest for dignity, self-esteem and sense of place and purpose for most who inhabit the post-colonial world, not infrequently finds answers in the exercise of the creative imagination.

Such exercise results in the production of artistic culture, especially in the fields of literature and visual and performing arts, guaranteeing to individuals a form of self-empowerment and to entire societies recognition and status in the world at large. This phenomenon takes on a significance in the new globalized world order, giving to the arts iconic and seminal proportions in the socio-economic, political and cultural development demanded by today's knowledge economy. This, if nothing else, dictates the mandatory, central role of the arts in education, which is itself the driving force of the knowledge economy characterizing the world in the twenty-first century.

## ART AND RESISTANCE

‘A society without the creative arts is a cultural desert’ said Sir Arthur Lewis, the St Lucian-born Nobel Laureate in Economics, in a thoughtful essay on a Caribbean yearning for uniqueness. ‘I would commend to our statesmen’ he concluded ‘that they put a lot more money into the creative arts department of our secondary schools’ (Lewis, 1983). I would add, and into the primary and tertiary institutions as well. For it is to the exercise of the creative imagination and the products of such exercise that the now globalized world must turn for a sense of balance that the dissonance and chaos of our world demand, just as it did at the time of the Renaissance.

The homogenization of the world order under globalization is bound to provoke resistance since homogeneity, as a principle of social organization, is clearly against the natural heterogeneity of human sense and sensibility. The retreat to zones of comfort where people individually and collectively feel secure beyond the reach of oppression and subjugation is everywhere evident in our contemporary times. Cultural indices such as religion, language, kinship patterns and artistic manifestations now take on the role of high-profile demands for the powerful notion of concession to the notion of plurality and texture in human relations, as well as modalities that will have us learn to live together rather than simply side by side. This puts the developing world and the developed world together in the same boat.

The vision of a future dedicated to the development of education towards a more resourceful, constructive and creatively dynamic globalized world is regarded as a given. It is easy to assume that anyone endowed with a natural love of



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12. The Cocolo Dance Drama Tradition (Dominican Republic) inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

learning would equally want to address the question, ‘learning to what end?’ The uncertainty of where we are heading and how to make the journey continues to haunt us despite an expressed commitment to education as a priority instrument in development strategies, both as medium and long-term initiatives. What is obvious is that the education necessary for developing countries has to be implemented and concentrated by developing communities if they are to produce resourceful and



13. Writer Derek Walcott. Nobel Prize in Literature 1992.

creative human beings able to face the challenges of an increasingly globalized world – one that is undergoing a communications technology revolution and rapid changes in worldviews and world order. The universities of the developing world are endangered and are likely to be of little use in the near future if they ignore the implications of tying education narrowly to a specific job or skill area without exposure to the arts of the imagination.

The Commonwealth Caribbean is more than well placed and equipped to contribute to the global discourse on the role of arts education in human development in the twenty-first century. Yet in their self-doubt and lack of confidence Caribbean people (and no doubt many developing countries) still tend to follow what the North Atlantic has done, is doing or is likely to do, ending up usually a generation behind in their own explorations and

experimentations in the field. European authorities remain references, but there are other authorities in the world, and I think it is important for UNESCO to remember this and for it to encourage others to remember.

The global nature of the Commonwealth should give support to the concept, outlined by the Jacques Delors Commission in a Report to UNESCO, that education rests on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. '[T]he learning process should be designed so as to enable every individual to develop by making the very most of his or her abilities. The concept of education can then be enlarged in time and in the social space to embrace that of learning throughout life'. The notion of 'learning throughout life' is germane to the topic of the presumed gap between educational development and cultural reality (which is itself a lifelong reality) – between education and the community, which is itself the cradle of culture (Delors *et al.*, 1996).

One area of serious concern is the delivery to our people of the sort of education that will enable them to take hold of their destiny and make decisions in their own interest consonant with the demands of a country poor in material wealth but rich in human resources. Such education would enable them to inherit the legacy of independence, self-reliance, individual initiative, and the capacity for coordinated social action towards mutual growth bequeathed by their forebears, who ploughed the land and made their society safe for human habitation.

We must never forget that there are a certain number of human values that need to be



14. The Maroon Heritage of Moore Town (Jamaica) inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

nurtured and kept alive in human-scale communities – values such as the dignity and responsibility of the individual, the freely chosen participation of individuals in communities, equality of opportunity, and the search for a common good and cultural certitude, all of which can be realized through the field of education and the arts.

In many parts of the developing world, the refusal to see the arts as integral to education

persists among the public bureaucracy and the teaching profession, despite the evidence that many of those who have had anything of value to say about life and living exercised their creative imagination to make historical experience and existential reality a little easier than that of being immersed in the establishment – in other words give meaning to living reality. We have certainly found our way and have been able to extend our activities into the wider community of the Caribbean and beyond, and much of this has taken place through the work of artists. We, in the Commonwealth Caribbean, have more artists per square inch than is probably good for us. Literary artists are linked by a common language of communication and discourse, English in our case; where the French colonized it would be French.

Economists and planners notwithstanding, it is the artist who has plumbed the depths of our anguish and our possibilities, producing words and music, movement and myths, syntax and satire.

With these have come hard cash or precious foreign exchange to the monetarists and bottom-line advocates, who persist in viewing artistic products as self-indulgent exercises that cannot contribute to the *per capita* income (the gross national product or the gross domestic product), rather than as productive variables in the development equation. Where there is a change in perception, it finds drive and energy in schools and universities of the Commonwealth.

We need to take heed of the lessons which cultural activists, whether individual or collective, have taught as our planet journeys into the new millennium. Nothing short of a new expansive

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vision for our groping multi-cultural world, a new sense of self, and new ways of knowing to underpin new ways of living, can guarantee us safe conduct. This is not just the case for the developing Caribbean or the developing Americas; it is the case for the entire world. At present, a paradigm shift is taking place across the globe and the arts have an important part to play in helping us to redefine and reshape our societies and cultures.

A developing world writer, Derek Walcott, defines history 'not as records of monuments and empires in habitual celebration of domination and the humiliation of large hordes of humanity, but rather a self-redeeming, self-accepting story of one's person, culture and of one's ultimate significance in the order of things' (Walcott, 1977). His sojourn at the University of the West Indies certainly helped him in honing his vision. His words are an excellent mission statement for the planners and deliverers of education to the generation that will inherit the twenty-first century.

In the Caribbean it is the presence of the creative artist, exercising their imagination and intellect, that has enabled the forging of a viable truly plural society, where people indeed live not just side by side, but together. This society has been born from African, Asian and European encounters on foreign soil, further forged in the crucible of Caribbean heritage, together with the heritage of the Americas. I say plural society because it is a crossroads civilization, like those of the Mediterranean of Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Iberian Peninsula where Africa, the Jews and Southern Europeans met on foreign soil. It is often said that the moment that Spain exiled the



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15. The Cocolo Dance Drama Tradition (Dominican Republic).

Jews and the Moors it lost its intelligentsia and its imagination. Until recently, one of the most un-American activities of the USA was its denial of its own identity as a crossroads civilization. Barack Obama, a representative of this truth, is now confronting the USA with this strange phenomenon, wherein the sense and sensibility grown out of this chaotic, kaleidoscopic crossroads world will have to be engaged.

It is largely through the exercise of the creative imagination that we have come to understand the dynamics of these 500 years of *becoming*, ever since Christopher Columbus sailed from the shores of the Iberian Peninsula, producing in all of the Americas genuinely new peoples, and a new sensibility of sufficient substance and uniqueness to make a difference in the development of humankind.



16. La Tumba Francesa (Cuba) inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The best among many contemporary artists, by definition, have no problem with being the creatures of all of their ancestors – the textured, complex, concentrated offspring of the wilful accidents of modern history. This is true for Commonwealth Caribbean artists such as Derek Walcott, Edward ‘Kamau’ Brathwaite and George Lamming, as it is of Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya, Nadine Gordimer of South Africa, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Arundhati Roy of India – all of whom will have read Shakespeare, Marlowe and Dickens, as well as Balzac, Cervantes and Goethe. This reality endows the Commonwealth Caribbean person with a unique knowledge of the crafting of a new sensibility, not out of some void as in the Book of Genesis, but out of the disparate elements of differing cultures. All of this is cause for celebration rather than self-negation, self-contempt or self doubt.

What can the arts do? They can release the human being from such obscenities. Finally, power comes to all of us who are able to make definitions about ourselves on our own terms and to proceed to action on the basis of such definitions. The artist when creating is involved in a form of action; this is not escapist activity into some netherworld about beauty or the setting or rising sun, it is a form of action that provides a zone of comfort in which to renew oneself without denial to the continuity of action.

All civilizations have ways of putting this. In the East, the haiku says ‘Where the ripe fruit falleth, there, more trees will grow.’ At the moment of maturation we get the moment of disintegration, but at the same time this is a moment of regeneration. A good, old African Bantu proverb says that all of us are no more than the manifestation of those who have gone before, those living and those yet unborn. This cyclical process of regeneration, of renewal and continuity is the creative process with which the artist is endowed. And that of course is the guarantee of continuing life. This is how we see it in the Caribbean, those of us engaging the thing of lived reality.

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# | Writing in Emergency Conditions or the Unequal Sharing of the Sensory

by *Tanella Boni*

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Jacques Rancière's idea of 'sharing the sensory' could be an anchoring point for my thesis. He says: 'What I call sharing the sensory is the system of sensory facts that reveals both the existence of the shared and the divisions that define the places and the respective portions of it' (Rancière, 2000, p. 12). The ability to express oneself through art is common to all cultures. However, although this ability – like articulate language – includes us as part of a shared humanity, the way of participating in artistic practice, in consumption, circulation and recognition of artistic production and cultural expressions differs from one country to another, from one continent to another, and differs even more between decision-making centres, centres of sharing, right out to the fringes of the world.

## Writing as a life sustainer that cuts across languages

Here I talk specifically about the artistic and literary life related to the construction of the



17. Yann Reinette. *Untitled*.

'fringes of the world'. I also talk about entering into art in all the places that are still controlled by others. As if the freedom to write and create did not exist; as if the artists from these countries must not take part in this *sharing* that, to my mind, is not geographical or economic division – and thus inequality – but rather proposals of writing, images and meaning that take us back to these 'fringes' controlled by others – their 'legal guardians'. However, I dare to believe that it is from these distant parts, which remain largely unknown, that pockets of fresh air circulate, original and sometimes inaudible breaths, foreign accents able to shake off the rational or calculated arrangement of that 'world republic of literature' that Pascale Casanova speaks of (Casanova, 2008).

A whole wealth of the sensory exists to be explored in creations from far away, and ironically from near at hand, brought by the individualities

that are expressed by artists and writers in their countries, which are still dominated by others. Sometimes these individualities have made the crossing and, belonging to the 'Diasporas' disseminated throughout the world, they carry the ambiguity of current human relations despite the progress in relationships of domination. Memories alone still retain traces of historical violence and new violence linked to post-colonial situations. Yet in art and literature, individualities are subjectivities with wounded memories, confronted by what I will call the urgency of existing as a human and artist or writer.

However, how can a person be a writer under difficult conditions of creation and reception and where production and communication systems barely exist? Sometimes, in some African countries a closed system operates which works very well. This is the case for *Onitsha market literature* produced locally in Nigeria. However, the question that quickly arises is what language is used for writing? This problem has to be faced because in every language a part of the individual identity is expressed that binds the individual to the group.

Thus writing in the language of the other, by necessity or choice, could pose a problem. It's as if writers move away from themselves and are likely to lose their own identities. Writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya, Boubacar Boris Diop from Senegal and many others like Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize winner for literature, have answered this question. They are writing in the language of the colonizer, but also in their own language. However, they reserve the right to translate a text written in a local language into an 'official' language. So *Doomi Golo* by Boubacar

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18. Muriel Diallo, *Untitled*.

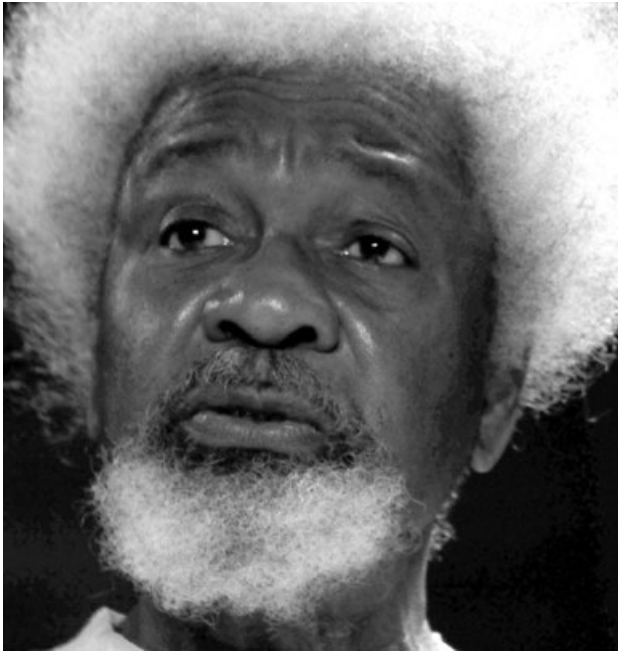
Boris Diop, published in Wolof in 2003, has just been translated into French by the author with the title *Les Petits de la guenon* (*The She-Monkey's Infants*, 2009).

Is it possible to write in a language other than one's own without losing one's identity and one's values? Is it possible to use one's imagination needed for literary creation while gripped in the vice of that 'ambiguous adventure', to quote Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1962)? Authors sit down to write with that uneasy feeling of being 'between two stools', somewhere between two cultures. Although they have learned to be intellectuals in Western culture, they regret being uprooted from their own culture. They have the impression that their world has collapsed. So writing becomes a

place of extreme tension where authors play out the drama of being bound for other worlds they have not chosen. They carry in their bags some images and snippets of words that cannot flow in their writing, the means of expression they use in their daily physical combat, testing the validity of their knowledge and multiple identities. Thus, right from the first half of the twentieth century African writers, particularly those of the Negritude Movement, participated in the fight to emancipate blacks.

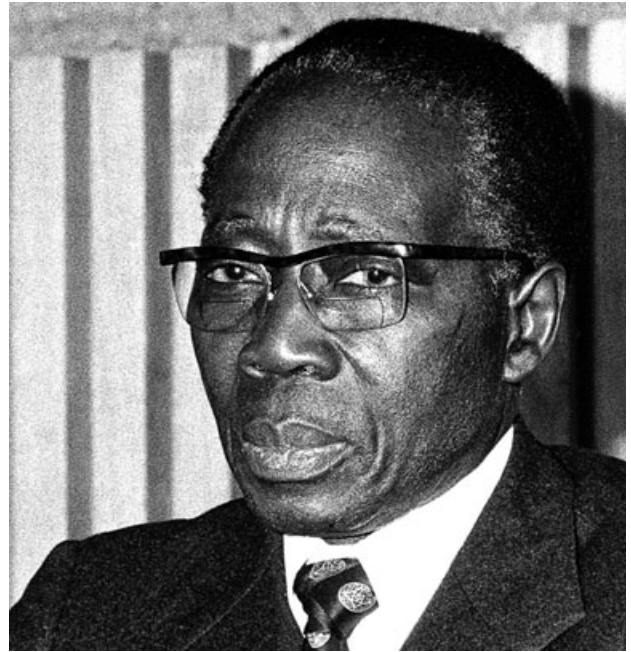
#### **The unequal sharing of the sensory and the weight of legitimating entities**

Because the urgency of writing as a 'life sustainer' is related to the language used, the question arises of



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19. Writer Wole Soyinka, poet and playwright, Nobel Prize of Literature 1986.



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20. Leopold Sedar Senghor, the poet and former President of Senegal.

how to inhabit this interval between very different languages, and to do so without conflict. I refer here, for example, to the conflict between the official language used for writing while other languages haunt us and continue to irrigate our words and phrases and colour the stories we want to tell. From this point of view, the difficulties of *sharing* are firstly interior. They make themselves felt in the form of conflicts caused by the omnipresence of the multiple identities dimly visible on every page we write, in every image we produce.

The difficulties are also external and related to the systems that govern this sharing of the sensory. Artists and writers from the fringes of the world are often rejected in the places they work. These places can be ghettos, as is the case in

literature; in Paris, for example, the all-pervading capital of *Francophone sharing*. It is very obvious that French writers are not classified as ‘Francophone’ by critics or by the general public. The writers from the former French colonies are those who find themselves in the ‘Francophone’ category because they write in French. The twentieth century poet President Léopold Sédar Senghor was one of the first to bring the term ‘Francophony’ into popular use after the late nineteenth century geographer Onésime Reclus. But the cultural and linguistic Francophony to which African writers belong takes many forms because they share this common language with writers from many different places, not only France but also Switzerland, Belgium and Quebec, for example. But doesn’t each Francophone have a different relationship with the written language? In

my opinion, Francophone Africans use French when they have no other choice.

However, we should ask ourselves how there can be common sharing when the legitimating bodies (publishers, press, cultural networks, university critics, etc.) of all types of works of art, and literature in particular, impose their own limits on the field of sharing, and govern it with their own rules, which are sometimes derived from their own networks and selective affinities.

Therefore the geography of sharing underlines a situation of domination in which this fringe literature is found. It is always considered as minor, underage, non-emancipated and controlled by 'legal guardians'. The conditions under which literary texts are produced and received remain dependent on the language in which they are written (French, English, Portuguese, etc.). However, Francophone artists and writers are affected by a further hierarchy which can add to their invisibility. There is a very obvious hierarchy of languages spoken in the world, and English ranks far higher than French. Therefore writers from Francophone Africa who choose to write in French run the risk of hemming their works into the closed system of 'Francophony' unless they are translated into English or other Western languages. But how can they enter the mediatized system that is the making or unmaking of a writer in the world?

Books published in Africa are also judged by the rest of African society, including the family and the weight of tradition. These are local legitimating entities (or psychological and moral



21. *MUSEUM International N°239*. UNESCO Publishing and Blackwell Publishing, September 2008.

barriers) that are tied to political power or a censorship that is not often mentioned as such, but that is liable to appear in many different forms. One well-known example is the weight of religious threats on writers' freedom of expression.

### Writing in conditions of emergency

It is perhaps in the fringes of the world, in the former colonies that are still under Western control in many respects, that artists and writers have the most interesting experiences. These experiences concern resisting time, powers and events.

The word 'events' in the plural covers much unspoken meaning and can be a euphemism for severe emergencies. The word 'events' (in the plural) is used to describe the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The same word is used to describe the

recent incidents in Côte d'Ivoire. 'Events' is a word to describe the unspeakable, the indescribable, the odour of death. 'Events' means things that crush us, or man's inhumanity to man – to the human being who is never portrayed as being 'like us'. Therefore the word 'events' is another name for an emergency. This is a very short, almost inexistent, moment for speaking of a vital experience, for writing or saying what cannot be said and will remain engraved in the deepest recesses of individual memory. In an emergency, there is no ordinary situation. Time is running out, but no-one knows how long, how many days, hours or minutes are left. However, this is no ordinary race against time that 'busy' societies are living today, in which everyone is too 'busy' to greet their neighbour. Rather, as we know, collective memory is also at issue. This is why the work of writing can be part of the work of memory, where the emergency has occurred and has destroyed whole lives.

In severe emergency conditions, life itself is lived as something exceptional, and this is known in political terms as a 'state of emergency' (cf., for example, Agamben, 2003). A state of rupture with history and with the order of human laws but that, ironically, may not be brief insofar as the exceptional tends to replace the ordinary time of laws.

Whatever we may say about literature, it is still tied, in these far-flung fringes of the world, to the age we live in, with its history, memory and geography. But it is still a particular page, written in emergency conditions by unique writers who communicate to potential readers from their uniqueness as humans like no others. However,

these writers have only unspeakable words in which to express their humanity. And in order to find the words that abandon us humans in unspeakable situations, maybe writers need to be seers, prophets or even receive some divine inspiration.

### **An intellectual and sacred activity**

One of the images we have of writing – and this has been noted in analyses of the semantic field of writing and reading in certain African languages – is not related to 'literature'. Writing is carrying out an intellectual, sacred activity represented by the 'paper' medium. In addition, writing has to be read, calculated or narrated because writing is setting out words and figures that recount how the world is arranged and also refers to the way daily activities are ordered. However, reading is an activity that is just as sacred and is related to the entity of the 'book', which comes from elsewhere, from an encounter in the distant past between Arab-Muslim and African cultures. This encounter took place long before the 'carving up of Africa' in 1884–1885 at the Berlin conference, which fixed the colonial borders that are still present today on a map of Africa.

In this type of conception of books and reading, the true value of the artistic activity of writing to produce literature cannot be appreciated, and this is why it is often abandoned. It is seen as something curious, sometimes has bad press, lacks readers and yet is still subject to all kinds of censorship at times. However, it can also meet with internal interference from literature that defends and illustrates immediate political causes with great realism.

### Ordinary emergency

Producing literature in difficult moral, political, social and economic conditions means fighting against always receiving the meanest share and the invisible position at the fringes of the world. I hope I have made it clear that this invisible literature is quite literally the literature produced in emergency conditions. It is produced when there is a lack of time and leisure. Aristotle believed that leisure (which is also the time for intellectual studies) is not for manual workers, and certainly not for slaves, because they have no choice but to work for their means of survival.

In African countries, the means of survival are a daily reality. How can anyone be an artist or a writer when the problems of finding food, housing, healthcare and education are so severe? The emergency here, even if we exclude war, immediate death and *events*, can be totally ordinary. It is the emergency of routine, the time that is not a rupture or an accident but is part of the seamless daily fabric of life.

If emergency speaks of a short time, or even lack of time, as I mentioned, this very lack is also the confrontation of the individual with linear time, clock-governed time, the time we have difficulty controlling. So the writer from the fringes of the world faces daily the experience of time lived in its most brutal acceleration which, pushed to its limit, results in a life or death situation. So in the last analysis, the word 'emergency' or 'urgency' expresses the 'tragic sensation' of life passing by (Cf. the title of the book by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, *Del Sentimiento Trágico de la Vida (The Tragic Sense of Life)*

published in 1913. Tragic because we cannot escape from time and, in the time we have left to live, we have to do something. We have no time to lose. Urgency is far from being a time for waiting, yet although it seems totally impossible, everything seems to show that it is from this very awareness of the urgency in which we live that the best for the future emerges. Therefore this openness to the best that is to come leads to an attitude of resistance. And this attitude is lived with all the risks and trials that it entails. For it is not at all self-evident to persevere in one's being despite all sorts of adversities, to fight the destructive forces in one's culture and, at the same time, be open to otherness.

However, this is how we must describe the activity of African writers. These are the words we must use, because writing in conditions of emergency and severe emergency can be thought of as a way of resisting. But resisting what? This is the question. Perhaps resisting the world around us and its political, economic, social and religious powers.

### Writing in emergency conditions – the stakes

Writing is doubtless the exceptional and yet daily activity that breaks with the omnipresence and the all-powerful nature of orality. Plato, in his day, showed that he preferred oral debate to writing. Orally, he could defend his ideas before a limited group of people, whereas a written text carried knowledge to all and sundry. Here too orality reigns. But it is not fossilized; the forms it takes are constantly changing and express themselves wonderfully in living arts such as oral poetry, story-telling, theatre and songs. So let us take a

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brief look at the history of the change from the oral to the written form.

During colonization, literature from the fringes of the world emerged as a means of recovering a battered and bleeding identity. Writing and producing literary texts was a way of surviving on the path of the quest for identity. The only way to talk to the colonizer was to speak his language to describe and give prestige to a reality that he had hidden, denied or deformed. Africans who decided that they had a duty to take up the pen knew that there would be a handful of people who would read their books, those who had an approach to Africa that differed from that of politics or religion, or those who were curious enough to travel by reading.

Contacts between Europe and Africa had already begun to increase. Europe's borders opened up to unknown worlds, leaving time for the myth of the 'noble savage' to take form in European imagination. Africa itself had become a myth, 'pacified' by colonizers and described by explorers such as René Caillé, Faidherbe, Savorgnan de Brazza, Stanley, Binger ... So from the end of the eighteenth century, an abundant literature built up, composed of travel books and other texts about Africa and Africans, written by non-Africans.

We know that African intellectuals made their voices heard, in one way or another, to the colonizers from the early twentieth century. In France we should mention specialists on Africa such as Michel Leiris or Theodore Monod, philosophers such as Emmanuel Mounier and Jean-Paul Sartre, novelists such as André Gide, surrealist poets, artists

such as Pablo Picasso, André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck, who discovered Africa through its culture and thought. They were able to testify to the vitality and fecundity of African culture, by the positions they took or through their art. Sometimes they prefaced writings. And what is a preface if not a friendly or fraternal way of accompanying a book and its author up to the main gates of publishing. A preface can also, for an unknown author, be thought of as permission to be heard and exist in a hostile world. Thus African writing or 'negro' literature in general was published in the Old World cities. The writers were aware of belonging to a new movement. They were the elite who had the right to speak, who could dialogue with others using their favourite weapon: writing. So it is not hard to understand why some crossed the threshold from literature to politics. It was urgent to speak, to re-establish a truth. They did this. But it was also urgent to act, and they took part in the action.

As soon as the different countries gained independence in the 1960s, writers were confronted with other emergencies. They became disillusioned and this could be seen in the books they published. Their dreams of emancipation and freedom petered out and turned into illusions. Political regimes and modes of government soon became one of the favourite sources of fictitious characters for writers. The political scene with all its trials and tribulations is a bottomless reservoir for African literature, which is looking for the direction it should take and its *raison d'être*, and is still one of its major themes today, with numerous variations. One of these variations is 'rupture' novels, which are notable in their use of the French language at the crossroads of a multitude of African languages. A good example is *Les Soleils des*

*Indépendances* by Ahmadou Kourouma (1970), in which Malinke syntax gives its rhythm to the French. Another is *La Vie et demie* by Sony Labou Tansi (1979), where local words and thought patterns colour the use of the French. Today African writers do not stop at resisting or breaking with any given ideology. Instead they cross over. They are also migrants, in all senses of the word, in a time of globalization. But they carry in the heart of their writing the state of emergency of their countries, cultures and languages. The urgency or emergency of whatever kind never leaves them.

Books by African authors published in Africa or in the cities of the former colonies, like all literary books, are positioned at the crossroads of art and market forces due to the omnipresence of a system governed by the media, but also by editors who act as legitimating entities. Literary prizes, some of which are made to measure, help give recognition to literature from the fringes. A few, such as the Renaudot Prize in France, are exceptions that prove the rule of prizes reserved for a certain category. But everyone knows that for one book by an African spotlighted by the media, a thousand others remain inside indescribable walls that seem so ordinary that they have lost all power to shock. These collections of works labelled ‘Francophone’, ‘black’, ‘from the global South’ perpetuate the invisibility of ‘African origin’ writers in the capital of ‘French’ literature, as if the French language was never shared fairly in ‘Francophony’.

In addition, the question of the reserved space, which resistant writers run into permanently, reappears in other debates that regularly divert attention, such as the question of ‘litterature-monde – world literature’. A manifesto

with this title was signed. A book of texts on the subject has been published, making a few scratches on the shiny bodywork of ‘Francophony’ (Le Bris et al., 2007). Isn’t this a piece of advertising or another system of legitimating for some writers, while other are excluded, with the moral support of a few writers, some of whom are not particularly well known in France? What are the conditions for being included in this ‘world literature’? Does yet another label in any way improve the conditions of those who live daily with the urgency of writing, as their only weapon for fighting the death all around them? Other debates arise regularly, and they all drive African writers further still from their essential goal of inventing their own space in the geography and archaeology of the sensory.

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‘A society without the creative arts is a cultural desert’ said Sir Arthur Lewis, the St Lucian-born Nobel Laureate in Economics, in a thoughtful essay on a Caribbean yearning for uniqueness. ‘I would commend to our statesmen’ he concluded ‘that they put a lot more money into the creative arts department of our secondary schools’ (Lewis, 1983). I would add, and into the primary and tertiary institutions as well. For it is to the exercise of the creative imagination and the products of such exercise that the now globalized world must turn for a sense of balance that the dissonance and chaos of our world demand, just as it did at the time of the Renaissance.

The homogenization of the world order under globalization is bound to provoke resistance since homogeneity, as a principle of social organization, is clearly against the natural heterogeneity of human sense and sensibility. The retreat to zones of comfort where people individually and collectively feel secure beyond the reach of oppression and subjugation is everywhere evident in our contemporary times. Cultural indices such as religion, language, kinship patterns and artistic manifestations now take on the role of high-profile demands for the powerful notion of concession to the notion of plurality and texture in human relations, as well as modalities that will have us learn to live together rather than simply side by side. This puts the developing world and the developed world together in the same boat.

The vision of a future dedicated to the development of education towards a more resourceful, constructive and creatively dynamic globalized world is regarded as a given. It is easy to assume that anyone endowed with a natural love of



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12. The Cocolo Dance Drama Tradition (Dominican Republic) inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

learning would equally want to address the question, ‘learning to what end?’ The uncertainty of where we are heading and how to make the journey continues to haunt us despite an expressed commitment to education as a priority instrument in development strategies, both as medium and long-term initiatives. What is obvious is that the education necessary for developing countries has to be implemented and concentrated by developing communities if they are to produce resourceful and





13. Writer Derek Walcott. Nobel Prize in Literature 1992.

creative human beings able to face the challenges of an increasingly globalized world – one that is undergoing a communications technology revolution and rapid changes in worldviews and world order. The universities of the developing world are endangered and are likely to be of little use in the near future if they ignore the implications of tying education narrowly to a specific job or skill area without exposure to the arts of the imagination.

The Commonwealth Caribbean is more than well placed and equipped to contribute to the global discourse on the role of arts education in human development in the twenty-first century. Yet in their self-doubt and lack of confidence Caribbean people (and no doubt many developing countries) still tend to follow what the North Atlantic has done, is doing or is likely to do, ending up usually a generation behind in their own explorations and

experimentations in the field. European authorities remain references, but there are other authorities in the world, and I think it is important for UNESCO to remember this and for it to encourage others to remember.

The global nature of the Commonwealth should give support to the concept, outlined by the Jacques Delors Commission in a Report to UNESCO, that education rests on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. '[T]he learning process should be designed so as to enable every individual to develop by making the very most of his or her abilities. The concept of education can then be enlarged in time and in the social space to embrace that of learning throughout life'. The notion of 'learning throughout life' is germane to the topic of the presumed gap between educational development and cultural reality (which is itself a lifelong reality) – between education and the community, which is itself the cradle of culture (Delors *et al.*, 1996).

One area of serious concern is the delivery to our people of the sort of education that will enable them to take hold of their destiny and make decisions in their own interest consonant with the demands of a country poor in material wealth but rich in human resources. Such education would enable them to inherit the legacy of independence, self-reliance, individual initiative, and the capacity for coordinated social action towards mutual growth bequeathed by their forebears, who ploughed the land and made their society safe for human habitation.

We must never forget that there are a certain number of human values that need to be



14. The Maroon Heritage of Moore Town (Jamaica) inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

nurtured and kept alive in human-scale communities – values such as the dignity and responsibility of the individual, the freely chosen participation of individuals in communities, equality of opportunity, and the search for a common good and cultural certitude, all of which can be realized through the field of education and the arts.

In many parts of the developing world, the refusal to see the arts as integral to education

persists among the public bureaucracy and the teaching profession, despite the evidence that many of those who have had anything of value to say about life and living exercised their creative imagination to make historical experience and existential reality a little easier than that of being immersed in the establishment – in other words give meaning to living reality. We have certainly found our way and have been able to extend our activities into the wider community of the Caribbean and beyond, and much of this has taken place through the work of artists. We, in the Commonwealth Caribbean, have more artists per square inch than is probably good for us. Literary artists are linked by a common language of communication and discourse, English in our case; where the French colonized it would be French.

Economists and planners notwithstanding, it is the artist who has plumbed the depths of our anguish and our possibilities, producing words and music, movement and myths, syntax and satire.

With these have come hard cash or precious foreign exchange to the monetarists and bottom-line advocates, who persist in viewing artistic products as self-indulgent exercises that cannot contribute to the *per capita* income (the gross national product or the gross domestic product), rather than as productive variables in the development equation. Where there is a change in perception, it finds drive and energy in schools and universities of the Commonwealth.

We need to take heed of the lessons which cultural activists, whether individual or collective, have taught as our planet journeys into the new millennium. Nothing short of a new expansive

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vision for our groping multi-cultural world, a new sense of self, and new ways of knowing to underpin new ways of living, can guarantee us safe conduct. This is not just the case for the developing Caribbean or the developing Americas; it is the case for the entire world. At present, a paradigm shift is taking place across the globe and the arts have an important part to play in helping us to redefine and reshape our societies and cultures.

A developing world writer, Derek Walcott, defines history 'not as records of monuments and empires in habitual celebration of domination and the humiliation of large hordes of humanity, but rather a self-redeeming, self-accepting story of one's person, culture and of one's ultimate significance in the order of things' (Walcott, 1977). His sojourn at the University of the West Indies certainly helped him in honing his vision. His words are an excellent mission statement for the planners and deliverers of education to the generation that will inherit the twenty-first century.

In the Caribbean it is the presence of the creative artist, exercising their imagination and intellect, that has enabled the forging of a viable truly plural society, where people indeed live not just side by side, but together. This society has been born from African, Asian and European encounters on foreign soil, further forged in the crucible of Caribbean heritage, together with the heritage of the Americas. I say plural society because it is a crossroads civilization, like those of the Mediterranean of Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Iberian Peninsula where Africa, the Jews and Southern Europeans met on foreign soil. It is often said that the moment that Spain exiled the



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15. The Cocolo Dance Drama Tradition (Dominican Republic).

Jews and the Moors it lost its intelligentsia and its imagination. Until recently, one of the most un-American activities of the USA was its denial of its own identity as a crossroads civilization. Barack Obama, a representative of this truth, is now confronting the USA with this strange phenomenon, wherein the sense and sensibility grown out of this chaotic, kaleidoscopic crossroads world will have to be engaged.

It is largely through the exercise of the creative imagination that we have come to understand the dynamics of these 500 years of *becoming*, ever since Christopher Columbus sailed from the shores of the Iberian Peninsula, producing in all of the Americas genuinely new peoples, and a new sensibility of sufficient substance and uniqueness to make a difference in the development of humankind.



16. La Tumba Francesa (Cuba) inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The best among many contemporary artists, by definition, have no problem with being the creatures of all of their ancestors – the textured, complex, concentrated offspring of the wilful accidents of modern history. This is true for Commonwealth Caribbean artists such as Derek Walcott, Edward ‘Kamau’ Brathwaite and George Lamming, as it is of Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya, Nadine Gordimer of South Africa, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Arundhati Roy of India – all of whom will have read Shakespeare, Marlowe and Dickens, as well as Balzac, Cervantes and Goethe. This reality endows the Commonwealth Caribbean person with a unique knowledge of the crafting of a new sensibility, not out of some void as in the Book of Genesis, but out of the disparate elements of differing cultures. All of this is cause for celebration rather than self-negation, self-contempt or self doubt.

What can the arts do? They can release the human being from such obscenities. Finally, power comes to all of us who are able to make definitions about ourselves on our own terms and to proceed to action on the basis of such definitions. The artist when creating is involved in a form of action; this is not escapist activity into some netherworld about beauty or the setting or rising sun, it is a form of action that provides a zone of comfort in which to renew oneself without denial to the continuity of action.

All civilizations have ways of putting this. In the East, the haiku says ‘Where the ripe fruit falleth, there, more trees will grow.’ At the moment of maturation we get the moment of disintegration, but at the same time this is a moment of regeneration. A good, old African Bantu proverb says that all of us are no more than the manifestation of those who have gone before, those living and those yet unborn. This cyclical process of regeneration, of renewal and continuity is the creative process with which the artist is endowed. And that of course is the guarantee of continuing life. This is how we see it in the Caribbean, those of us engaging the thing of lived reality.

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# | Art and Transcultural Resistance

by Rachida Triki

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This article explores both the local and transcultural aspects of the arts as a way of resisting both a bland, universal, globalized taste in art and the traditionalistic clinging to ethnic identity which I will call identitarism. The question for artists today is how to transgress accepted current modes of identification, while at the same time maintaining the emancipating power of original artistic practices that allow for otherness. I will present the arts as a force for resisting all types of power, basing my thesis on contemporary plastic art in North Africa, and more specifically in Tunisia. Obviously, this analysis could be broadened to include other arts such as poetry, which remains a major art form in that part of the world. However, the specificity of plastic arts arises from their position in a situation of resistance. I am referring here to the way plastic arts were introduced from outside, just over a century ago. This means that today they are faced with an art market, with its orientations and means of identification, which is foreign to their culture.

We can start from two basic premises. First, the globalized economic liberalism in all areas, including culture, is driving institutions



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22. Halim Karabibene, *Welcome, Bienvenue, Bienvenido.*

increasingly to become pro-market structures. Forms of personal individualization are increasingly caught up in a conformism fed massively by the media and the culture industry. Arts do not emerge unscathed from advertising. Today, cultural mass consumption touches the very individuality of the artist. It robs artists of their sensory experience, their desires, and even their personal judgement in matters of taste, but does so by a subtle means of control disguised as liberalism, and even multiplicity and emancipation. While the culture industry's type of democratization pretends to exclude elitism and provide equality in acceptance and taste, in fact it

standardizes behaviour. It does so to such an extent that it weakens the sensation of existence that feeds on the appropriation of artists' imagination and desires. This is a perversion of what Jacques Rancière calls '*le partage du sensible* [the sharing of the sensory]' (Rancière, 2000).

My second premise concerns identitarism. What would remain in a culture and artistic practices that rejected all otherness and boxed themselves in conservatism to ensure continued identity? It would probably be a set of practices that were either completely mummified or repeated like nervous tics. Yet what makes a



23. Nicène Kossentini, *Saint Jacques Street*, video art colour (2007).

culture authentic and universal is its vitality. The more people participate in and create their own culture, the more that culture can develop, encounter other cultures and tend to universality. This is because cultural practices carry within them that living spark of human creativity, with its intuition for creating social interaction, communication and new meanings.

Contemporary plastic arts in North Africa are a showcase for resisting both these types of straitjacketing. North Africa is and always has been a crossroads culture, wide open to the influence of the North, the East and the rest of Africa. It was a

hotbed of ancient civilizations, and yet has readily taken ownership of new imaging technologies. Little wonder then that the arts can provide emancipation and a future, by resisting straitjackets and giving new possible meanings.

I call these ways of being and doing contemporary plastic art in North Africa ‘creation in the space in-between’. What moves artists to create is often the desire to place themselves at the crossroads of contradictions. These artists share a heightened awareness that they belong to a world in which their identity as artists or citizens is constantly being changed by the pressure of the new demands of globalization. These new demands affect society and politics as much as culture, because the new – mainly Western-managed – art market causes new artistic and aesthetic values to emerge that give greater visibility to certain specific ways of doing things, including ever greater use of new technologies. However, these changes are mostly driven by the global North, with the problems specific to its socio-cultural context, its institutional changes, its public space and its own art history.

Today, in practice, it is well known that certain cultural figures decide what is ‘contemporary’, and the criteria often involve the use of modern techniques such as installations, video arts and all the different methods of performance. The thrust of this type of art is interactive, relational or simply confrontational, so it presupposes a public arena, freedom of action and a respect of basic human rights. The choice of these types of practice is mainly the result of the rupture in Europe with avant-garde and modern aesthetics of art, and also demonstrates ‘sharing of

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the sensory', in which the spectator is invited to interact socially. With the globalization of the art market, the risk is that all artistic production, from whatever place or culture, starts to depend on this choice if it wants broad visibility and sufficient media coverage.

The same artistic criteria exist for the so-called contemporary form of works of non-European artists, and particularly artists from former colonies like the North African countries. They have to use new technologies, plastic art has to be theatrically staged, etc. Young North African artists are totally at ease with new techniques, particularly virtual images, video art and photomontage, although they have very little material means and get almost no state or private support. However, in terms of ideas and images, the art market tends to favour settings with fairly neo-colonial overtones. The intention is certainly to use forms of plastic dramatic art to give exposure to social or individual fictions, but it is done using extremely caricatured imagery and imagination. The imagery mainly revolves around the female form hidden from prying eyes and fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. According to one author, 'this dependence on the concept of fixity is a result of colonialism and its modes of representation' (Bhabha, 2007, p. 121). This is why the attention is often focused on stereotypes such as veiled or scandalously unveiled women, or on symbols of oriental violence.

These criteria are obviously unspoken, but are easily verified by the number of works in these genres in large world art fairs, which give most of their floor space to artists who produce the expected stereotypes. Fortunately this kind of

selection is not applied by the organizers of all artistic events. Some exhibition organizers are aware of the aesthetic and cultural problems of exhibiting artists, and are able to sit lightly to established representations.

Faced with this neo-orientalist vision but also with the opportunities provided by the visibility of artistic productions in the international arena, a certain number of North African artists today create from a position of resistance while remaining open to otherness. For them, contemporary artistic practice is a very real means of emancipation that allows them to create 'in the space in-between'. Their aim is both to rid themselves of exogenous modes of identification and not to fall into the trap of a closed-in identity. The use of new media, multimedia and installations have become an ideal way of creating fresh situations and fictions that help them rethink the present, without mimicking the art market's present forms.

In contrast to what was possible within the confined space of fine arts, these new ways broaden the field of creation to encompass the whole of life. They are also ways for artists to think, express and ask questions about their environment, their identity as artists and citizens or simply about their own uniqueness, or even their intimacy. Above all, they are a process of creation without borders: on the one hand, they free artists from bondage to a certain way of practising plastic arts, particularly from abstractionist and modern painting which, in North Africa, was the consensual form; on the other hand, these contemporary methods allow them to escape from a form of exogenous recognition that tries to label them as belonging



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to a particular culture or civilization because of certain signs or symbols that are supposed to be the main characteristic of the culture.

Creating in the space in-between the endogenous and the exogenous is an avowed goal, particularly for the new generation of artists who refuse to submit both to the constraints of a local art history as an insurmountable boundary, and to the image that the West has of them. In this case they are not trying to break with their cultural field or with globalized art. They are trying to create differently by being true to themselves, respecting their uniqueness and their engagement in the present. So being contemporary means precisely being with one's time and artifying situations or objects, extended to all the components of one's world. This is what gives coherence and a strength of presence to the works. In this sense, we can refer here to Natalie Heinich's discussion in *Le Triple jeu de l'art contemporain* (1998) based on the survey she carried out among contemporary Western artists, because it is perfectly suited to defining the contemporaneity of North African artists. She examined the different values that drive contemporary artists and the appraisals of their work to conclude that 'authenticity' today really is an artistic value. 'Authenticity' here does not mean fitting into a particular tradition but being true to oneself. It refers to the way artists try to create differently, but in a way that corresponds to their own feelings, daring to use processes that fit their vision so that they can remain true to their own artistic desire. Therefore it is no coincidence that contemporary artists often talk of truth, sincerity and even need, to show that creation for them is an engagement.

Over the last few years, this freedom to create without borders, without the weight of tradition, current standards or the requirements of the global market, has allowed artists to distance themselves from what already exists and produce really original work. Some of the aesthetic standards in plastic arts dear to the 1960s generation of artists after independence in North African countries are now finished, and young artists are aware of this. These standards were part of the regional heritage and the wider tradition of Arabic visual decorative arts.

The abstractionist movement in the arts that began in the 1960s certainly produced a diversity of configuration in which heritage signs became pictorial elements and were reactivated aesthetically. However, the over-use of these shapes finally produced a means of representation that was just as stereotyped as the exotic and oriental images from the early twentieth century, and simply confined artistic production within new boundaries. These boundaries limit the sharing of the sensory to a visual environment that bears all the signs of a re-conquered homeland. Berber symbols, Arabic calligraphy and the architectural lines of the Medina finally caused a fossilizing of identity by giving it a mandatory meaning.

Young contemporary North African artists, brought up with new technologies and new means of communication, and freely circulating mixing of images having different representations, broaden their creative field. What they now want is to be unique as artists, have a certain North African–Berber–Arab identity, and also be citizens of the world. This is what allows them to work in a wider,

cross-cultural environment, capturing some of this intensity and producing sensations that meet their desire for creation.

Creating means 'resisting', to quote Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1991). It means 'embracing a future that never ceases to be an adventure'. Artists are always 'involved in a struggle with an uncertain outcome' because they are open to all possibilities, easily varying their techniques depending on the process of the creation to hand. Being true to themselves, their desires, their need to produce or simply express themselves using a suitable medium: these are shared values for many artists of the new generation. They are concerned about what their identity will become, not to mention their uniqueness as women, mothers, future migrants, bi-nationals, citizens, artists ... Uniqueness should be understood both phenomenologically and socially. The relationship with the world is that of bringing to light the changes, violence, contradictions, or simply totally new sensations and unique situations that artists artify to make their reception even stronger.

Some of the artists I was able to follow have a desire to create that enables people to feel and think through daily life with its social problems. The Tunisian artist Halim Karrabibène typifies this stance. He presented a large installation, a sort of theatrical presentation of illegal immigration, with much black humour, at the North Africa–Spain Exhibition in Pontevedra in 2008. He staged a parable of the dream of emigrating that haunts many young people without visas in the global South today. In a photomontage and an installation in the form of a boat, his characters, who are ready

to leave, irresistibly drawn by the image of a European Eldorado, are separated by a fence from the objects they desire. The objects spread out before them on the sand of an anonymous shore greet them aggressively and form a barrier. The objects are kitsch toy soldiers and weapons 'made in China', imported into Europe and really sold by these future illegal immigrants on the black market in city streets, so that they can pay the people smugglers.

Since the 1980s, women artist graduates from fine arts schools in their countries who have been able to continue their studies in Europe have enriched their artistic experience and exhibited their works as a group or individually. Their force of character and creative passion has allowed them to transgress socio-cultural barriers that can still discourage many women. Their innovative approach has slowly but surely been able to make an impression. Today, if installations and video arts are present, it is mainly thanks to this generation of women artists who have adopted a plastic approach that a discerning public is beginning to appreciate, despite the fact that the places they exhibit in are very marginal. The works of these artists show how much their creation distances itself from that of previous generations, who were concerned with a certain pictorial aesthetic that belonged, in a more or less obvious way, within the wider cultural heritage. Today, on the contrary, it is the existential dimension, if we may call it that, that is most important. It also questions the sensory relationship to the environment and the socio-political context.

Women artists Nicène Kossentini and Mouna Karray from Tunisia, Amina Menia and

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Rachida Azzdaou from Algeria, and Safa Erruas and Jamila Lamrani from Morocco use photography, video or installations to create works that capture, and deliver to our senses, appearances and disappearances and subtle changes to living spaces and situations that defy identification. These phenomena are given to suggest an intangible but no less determining meaning of our ways of life. The artists hunt out fleeting or disturbing details that are at the heart of the current changes taking place in our world. For them, this is an 'outside the box' way of dealing with the problem of the uniqueness of each person confronted with the disappearance of traditions but also with the appearance of various other internal or external constraints.

Tunisian artists Nadia Kaabi and Sana Tamzini work on non-places. Each artist in her own way questions the present using an interactive installation. One uses rubbings from the walls of Tunis, Paris and Berlin, and the other captures a diffuse light in the opaque transparency of a large veil that reveals anonymous figures walking. Their quest is for the inter-human experience and mixture that silently inhabits our walls and our atmospheres transcending cultural differences. Mouna Jmel, the photographic artist, has taken on the task of portraying her own life as a mother of triplets. She reworks photos of the children who now fill her immediate surroundings and her daily life, with a playful wink at the visual environment of Andalusian and Arab ceramics.

We can conclude from all of this that contemporary art practices in North Africa have found a force of de-identification and de-subjectivation that liberates them from

representations that cause atrophy and alienation. They do so by claiming cultural plurality, meaning that creative space is opened up to all the phenomena that touch what human beings become. In this sense, imagination is a driving force for moving borders and preventing any clinging to ethnic identity. Being contemporary in North Africa seems to imply using one's uniqueness to mark a presence in a space–time closed in upon the consensual.

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24. Nicène Kossentini, *Bou Jmal*, black and white photography (2005).

# | Autonomy and Self-transcendence in Contemporary African Art: resilience, change and renewal

by Adriano Mixinge

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## Transcendence, a vital necessity

Art as a form of historical, social and aesthetic awareness, as an institution and/or a creative medium has always been concerned about the autonomy of its systems and the self-transcendence of its values. While autonomy distinguishes art from other forms of historical and social awareness such as politics, morality and religion, self-transcendence allows it to break free from its own limits and boundaries. This process of opening up, of flexibility and constant regeneration or, to quote Jolanta Brach-Czaina, 'this phenomenon whereby a domain is abolished and surpassed through its own internal development and expands into values beyond itself' (1991, p. 212) is a vital necessity.

Although Jolanta Brach-Czaina's definition of transcendence is somewhat unorthodox, the concept is clearly sacred and religious in origin. What fascinates me about transcendence is its



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25. António Ole, *Hidden Pages, Stolen Bodies* (2001).

ability to allude to and/or narrate the transformation of a particular body or being from one state to another, in cycles, at a unique pace of intense continuous metamorphosis. Transcendence, whether of a body or soul, substance or breath, before, during or after, is a concept likely to take many and varied cultural forms in different parts of the world and, quite probably, pre-dates and is common to multifarious worship practices. As such, it developed long before art existed as an autonomous sphere of historical and social consciousness.

Jolanta Brach-Czaina has defined the theoretical and conceptual bases on which she analysed the phenomenon of self-transcendence in art. Drawing on a series of artistic practices

that emerged in the twentieth century, ranging from the abstractionism of pop art to environmental art, including Joseph Beuys of Grotowsky's Theatre Laboratory, she made a distinction between two forms of transcendence. In one, the elements that relate to a specific domain are formed elsewhere (*external self-transcendence*); in the other the values of a given domain are created intrinsically but are not confined to it (*internal self-transcendence*).

Jolanta Brach-Czaina contends that – as might have been the case in the 1980s – transcendence could equally well reproduce, regenerate, sustain or create a particular culture. Transcendence is the cornerstone of formative developments in art, and beyond. In explaining the



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26. Romuald Hazoumé, *Dream* (2007).

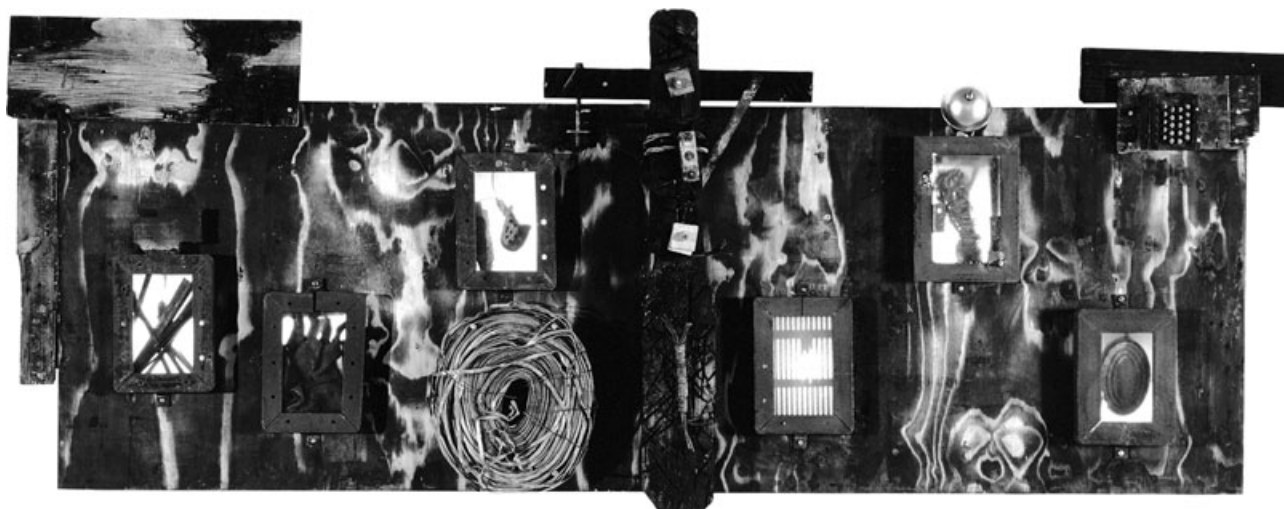
phenomenon of self-transcendence in art, Jolanta Brach-Czaina draws on examples from environmental art, land art, happenings and performance art to describe what she calls a new vanguard – a vanguard concerned with ecological values, the values of community ethos, individual development, individual responsibility in the face of world events, and the value of engaging in transcendent action (1991, pp. 212, 230).

### The definition and chronology of contemporary African art

African art was neither mentioned nor critiqued in this analysis, and the vanguard concept at this time did not possess quite the same meaning in non-Western cultural settings as in Europe and the USA. However, it is unquestionable that Jolanta

Brach-Czaina’s portrayal of international art in the 1980s encompassed an embryonic form of *vanguard, modern and contemporary African art* that had begun to develop two decades earlier, following the accession of African states to independence.

While the concept of art was integrated late into African culture, this is not true of aesthetics. As Wole Soyinka explained (1987, pp. 581, 607), the concept of art is historically linked to colonialism and to some of its contradictions. The notion of aesthetics was undoubtedly tied to the genesis of the physical production process and to the very origins of humanity and, in that sense, had existed long before art institutions (galleries, schools, art criticism, the art market, etc.) (Vansina, 1988, pp. 639, 696).



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27. António Ole, *Mens Momentanae II*, Bayreuth (2009).

Contemporary African art encompasses both colonial and post-colonial modern and contemporary art, which has developed in various African countries from the 1930s to the present day. My vision is, understandably, coloured by my experience as a curator of international exhibitions, beginning with *Between War and Peace* at Johannesburg's first Biennial in 1995, to which Angola contributed.

The contemporary era is intimately linked to the period between the two world wars, commencing with the 1930s, a time that corresponds to the social categorization of the visual arts (Vansina, 1987, p. 642). Various art forms – traditional, touristic, popular and academic – co-existed, and were distinguished by the type and purpose of the work created, the place and role of the artist, and the type of audience and customer. The Senegalese art critic, Abdou Sylla similarly characterized the educational trends, styles, consequences and new aesthetics apparent

in the types of art that developed in Africa (1998, pp. 48, 65).

Certain authors trace the start of contemporary African art to the Paris exhibition *Magicians of the Earth* in 1989. I am more inclined to agree with Nigerian art historian and philosopher, N'kiru Nzewgwu, who opined in a series of lectures delivered in Benguela, Lobito and Luanda in May 2009 that the emancipation of contemporary African art began over twenty years earlier in 1966, at the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal and was one of the highlights of the first fruits of emancipation.

The *Magicians of the Earth* exhibition was, nonetheless, important and contributed to a greater understanding of the visibility acquired by contemporary African art from the 1990s onwards; however, it does not constitute a benchmark for its development and establishment. Not restricted to African visual



artists, the exhibition acted as a catalyst for the entry of non-Western artists into independent and international art circuits formerly the exclusive preserve of Western artists. However, in mounting the *Magicians of the Earth*, an ethnic or geographical origin approach was taken in circumscribing a number of artistic practices situated between the sacred and the secular: only non-Western artists were labelled exotic, and somehow, Paris regained its position as the geopolitical centre of contemporary art.

Another twenty years have elapsed and Western views of the art of non-Western 'Others' have altered. New York recently played host to the multicultural, generational exhibition *Younger than Jesus*. Meanwhile mass exposure through the internet to the avatars of *Second Life*, not to mention video and digital art, is now widespread. Throughout these years, the world and art have undergone countless changes: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the events of 11 September 2001, the election of Barack Obama and the international economic crisis have all made the world a different place.

At the end of the twentieth century, the Havana, Dakar and Johannesburg Biennials afforded opportunities to consolidate recognition of non-Western artists, and African artists in particular. There were undeniable differences in the geographical criteria applied by the Biennials and the aesthetic platforms of Kassel Documenta curated by Okwui Enwezor: something radically new had emerged, something which the recent *Younger than Jesus* exhibition only confirmed.

### Legitimization circuits and critiques of contemporary African art

For contemporary African artists, collective common history, territory, languages, identities and, obviously, attitudes have ceased to be evocative of a fixed and immutable essence; they have become a substance that is constantly being made and remade. To quote Achille Mbembe, 'it is, then, the conception of human destiny which stands ready to be redrawn. To understand the significance of these changed meanings, it must be borne in mind that they are rooted in history' (Mbembe, 1988, p. 120).

It is thanks to the uninhibited creation and recreation of new traditions – in which collective history is sifted through the personal history of each creative artist – that Africanness must be regarded in today's world as a process, a movement, a 'crossing': one that can be made anywhere and wherever a creative individual is found who espouses his Africanness and freely draws on elements evocative of pre-existing cultural substrata, to invent, reproduce, revert, challenge, question or construct new imaginary forms.

When Valentim Mudimbe wrote that 'History is both a discourse of knowledge and a discourse of power' (1988, p. 188), he was pointing out that discourses of power always become discourses of history. The same tends to hold for legitimization discourses fashionable in contemporary African art, but whose references, at least in the case of Angola and, I suspect, many others, do not exactly reflect reality on the ground.



28. Ziad Antar. *Brooklyn Bridge* (2009).

Given the number of African artists who have participated in recent years at individual exhibitions and at prestigious international events, as well as the quality of the works presented, contemporary African art now unquestionably has a place on the international art circuit, as borne out by the *Africa Remix* exhibition (Dusseldorf, London, Paris and Tokyo, 2005–2007). But true though this may be for artistic creations, the same cannot yet be said for the debates, history and critiques to which African art is linked.

There is a marked imbalance, to paraphrase Okwui Enwezor, between what is seen, what the mind retains, and what is thought about contemporary African art. In any event, critics such as the aforementioned Okwui, Gilane Tawadros, Olu Oguibe, Simon Njam and Abdoulaye Konaté are today well known – all too often because they live in cities such as New

York, London or Paris. However, they are trees, hiding a forest in which can be found lesser-known writers such as Saliou D. Diouf, Abdou Sylla, Roger Somé and Pie-Aubin Mabika. These authors of general books or monographs on the art history of their country are ultimately ‘invisible’ to the general public, although their books may be found in the catalogue of publishers such as Harmattan.

The critical discourse on post-colonial African art would still be in its infancy according to Sidney Kasfir (1999, p. 135), were it not for the efforts of Achille Mbembe, who deciphered the problems of the post-colonial state of Africa; Jean-Godefroy Bidima, who addressed the geopolitics of Negro African art; or N’kiru Ewechia N’zegwu, who worked on the specificities of critical discourse. Even so, a profound change has occurred, one which anticipates the formalization of concepts. However, theoretical and critical reflections on contemporary African art can be coherent only if they draw on the theoretical contributions of philosophy and critiques of African literature. Exclusive localisms and puritanical positions are no longer valid.

#### The current state of art: ‘twixt crisis and reinvention

According to Mario de Micheli (1972) and Ana Maria Guasch (2001), during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, in metropolitan cultures throughout the world, art to a greater or lesser extent remained an autonomous realm, and any intermingling with reality or life in general was utopian; in the last quarter of the century, however, the picture has been totally different.

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29. Ziad Antar, *La marche turque*, black and white video (2006).

Owing to a variety of contemporary factors the divisions between life and art are crumbling or, failing that, art, as proof of its vitality, has emerged from its more orthodox settings to pervade all realms of human existence across varied social sectors.

Wavering between chaos and order, the world seems to have fallen into a trance. Amin Maalouf paints a picture of the world that is if not disastrous at least alarming when he writes that ‘we have ventured into the new century without a compass ... From the very first months, there have been troubling events, which suggest that the world is being considerably deregulated in several areas at the same time, namely in the intellectual, financial, climatic, geopolitical and ethical spheres’ (2009, p. 11).

It is in this context that art has developed, between autonomy and self-transcendence. During the closing decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, art has been a

stage, a goal, a witness and an actor in ongoing changes that have affected its very essence, identity and existence. Some, such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, speak of a crisis and unease in aesthetics, while others like Nicolas Bourriaud and Paul Virilio try to put a name to the state of affairs or to characterize the times. Some, such as Yves Michaud, are attempting to take a form of action. All are affected by the disenchantment born out of Francis Fukuyama’s simulation of the end of history or Hannah Arendt’s in-depth scrutiny of totalitarianism.

These changes have profoundly affected societies: Jacques Rancière and Paul Virilio in *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (2004) and *L’art à perte de vue* (2005) respectively have assessed the state of art and culture in stark terms. Rancière and Virilio were not alone in so doing nor were they the first to address and attempt to describe the incessantly shifting landscapes of art and culture, which are significant enough to constitute, together, indicators of human development trends.

The dilemmas faced by art include adjusting to the speed of communication media and technology, avoiding marginalization as a result of the proliferation of television, offering choices as varied as those found in the pages of a book, and reproduction as rapid and immediate as a webpage transforming a local news item into a global scoop. Art has to shift from substance to volatility, from fossil materials to recyclables, from reality to simulation, from autonomy to self-transcendence. The *Younger than Jesus* exhibition (New York, 2009) thus fits into art’s sliding tectonic plates: origins no longer matter, only the crossing counts.

### Origins and the crossing of paths

In this complex international arena, contemporary African art is attempting to define itself and find a place in the new geopolitics of art circuits, contributing, where possible, to the emergence of alternative art platforms through internal structural consolidation. At this point the thematic question arises: what can art still achieve?

For the time being at least, an analysis of art in Africa yields, to my mind, a clear answer: art can still achieve everything, provided that it can be nourished and sustained by other social structures, blend into them, break out of the straitjacket of false autonomy and self-transcend into other expressions of culture in all societies. The time has come, then, for change and the renewal of creativity and of mechanisms and strategies that lead to legitimization. The criteria linked to ethnic (or other) origins are no longer valid, for, to paraphrase the title of one of Fernando Alvim's works displayed at the *Africa Remix* exhibition, we are all post-exotic. In our time, world problems have become, directly or indirectly, everyone's problem. We are all exotic in the eyes of others and difference alone cannot justify extolment: originality, aesthetic excellence and a new humanism should facilitate the universality of dialogue.

The emergence and dynamics of the history of African art are deeply embedded in the political and social history of the continent. *L'Art négro-africain* [Negro-African art] (1977), a painstaking study by Jean-Godefroy Bidima, examines the longevity of African art, which has withstood the most trying circumstances and the harshest attacks, resisted and survived the most

unjust historical contingencies, the most complex social changes and the most sophisticated technical and scientific transformations. He provides evidence that aesthetics and hence African art, whether *traditional, modern or contemporary*, have been nurtured and constantly replenished by cultural substrates that provide insights into their current characteristics.

Various types of African artwork, practices, artefacts, materials, creative strategies and institutions, evidenced at numerous archaeological sites and derived from syncretic complexes, have been conveyed through diverse types of crafts: classical art typical of kingdoms and empires, and the colonial period characterized by modernism. Here, autonomous art reached its glorious peak, its delayed contemporaneity thereafter protracted by an unusual flexibility. African art thus tends to self-transcend, using the mechanisms of historic resilience, transformation and refoundation of its many identities and imaginary and aesthetic forms.

Like art in other parts of the world, African art is caught between tradition and contemporaneity, between the material, symbolic and hermeneutic spheres that strike a balance in the rates of change, stabilization and equilibrium by which any cultural entity is transformed. African art, whether by compulsion or by choice, is trapped within its own transitional cycle (Jean-Godefroy Bidima) that characterizes its development and existence, and is intimately linked to the origins of human beings, cultural and migratory patterns on the African continent throughout the centuries, and its current and future forms of expression.

In his thoughts on art in transition and the metaphysics of identity, Bidima (1997, pp. 106–07) demonstrated the complexity of the phenomenon claiming that:

to treat African arts in terms of their origin, of Africanness, is to support an obsolete conception of the movement which posits that any progress needs a source, a lever to set it in motion. Origin assumes a state, while the art in transition posits a process devoid of an origin. An origin means a starting point, but that is already a point of arrival, a crossroads and a transition of sorts. To gain a grasp of African art in motion entails an evaluation of its integration into a pre-existing movement. [He continued] it is not a matter of knowing what African art is, but rather of evaluating how it improvises within social transformations.

### I. the viewer

The tectonic plates of art have indeed shifted and my vision as a viewer, my understanding and perception of contemporary African art only makes sense when analysed in the context of art as a whole. My sense of the power of art today clearly comes from an aesthetic appreciation derived, in general terms, from some sectors of contemporary art practice. In the same way that the exhibition *Younger than Jesus* indicated likely future paths for art, projects such as António Ole's 'Township wall' (Espaço Cultural Elinga, Luanda, 1994), Christian Boltansky's 'Archives of the heart' (Maison Rouge, Paris, 2008) and Rikrit Tiravanija's 'A long march' (Contemporary Art Centre, Malaga, 2009) individually and

collectively call for new approaches to art and aesthetics.

In other words, to view the remarkable recycled suburban refuse exhibited by António Ole in Luanda (Angola); to have my heartbeats recorded as part of the inventory and memory work offered by Christian Boltansky, at the Maison Rouge, in Paris (France); to wear a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Freedom cannot be simulated' and then be photographed like a prisoner, full-face and profile, are all experiences that have markedly reshaped my perception of the direction being taken by autonomy and self-transcendence in art.

António Ole's artistic trajectory from the 'Margem da Zona Limite' (Luanda, 1994) to the *Hidden Pages* exhibition (Beirut, 2009) is evidence enough. It constitutes a history of numerous interdisciplinary exercises (principally film, painting, sculpture and architecture), but also an internal self-transcendence of art. It is founded on the aesthetic reappropriation of apparently decadent materials and values, lifted out of African suburban life to redefine the aesthetic concepts of the mainstream and the typical circuits of the autonomy of art and culture.

For 'Archives of the heart', Christian Boltansky used a procedure borrowed from medicine – auscultation – to create a record of heartbeats, which like finger prints are unique and peculiar to each human being. The heartbeats are to be stored on Naoshima island in southern Japan or Malaga, Spain. This approach makes it difficult to really know what is and what is not art, what is and what is not aesthetic, and what is and what is not transcendent.



30. Roberto Fabelo, *Sobrevivientes*, façade of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana (Cuba), on the occasion of the 10th Havana Biennale.

By participating in Rirkrit Tiravanija's work 'Freedom cannot be simulated', by donning the t-shirt and its slogan and allowing our image to be recorded and used as the artist saw fit, we contribute to the mainstreaming of images and manifold mass-media manipulation. Our freedom to simulate no longer exists because images hold tyrannical sway, akin to a new form of totalitarianism.

António Ole is concerned with recycling industrial waste and creating aesthetics out of refuse and ordinary objects, Boltansky is exercised by the human heartbeat and our record thereof, and Tiravanija's work focuses on the ethics of individual behaviour. All three artists have concerns that transcend the art world and relate, in one way or another, to human destiny, life and political history.

Constructive or radical works of art, such as those reviewed above, therefore provide an explanation of the prevalent sense of chaos in the art world at the beginning of the twenty-first century and raise questions about its role in social transformations, in which its autonomy will certainly be of little importance.

### Conclusion

The place that art and related cultural expressions have always held in the most diverse non-Western cultures is no reason to share the disastrous scepticism of the West, and even less for accepting the idea that art can achieve little or nothing. I agree with N'kiru Uwechia Nzegwu that the importance of exploiting and rationalizing environmental resources with the future of humanity in mind is closely linked to the enhancement of retraining in the arts, the removal of borders in the art world, and to the many future transfigurations of art.

The autonomy and self-transcendence of art, in general, and of contemporary African art in particular, was and is possible only because they have always been nurtured by other cultural expressions and representations, both endogenous and exogenous, often caught up in mechanisms belonging to wider material and symbolical

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complexes. Throughout history, on countless occasions, art has stood at the epicentre of transformations in various forms of creation, both in work and leisure, while, on other occasions, it has remained autonomous and independent, creating and recreating its own system of power and legitimacy in its entirety. In order to exist and survive while maintaining its function and logic in terms of promotion and the marketplace, art has been and is reinventing itself. Therein lies its fascination and pure unalloyed magic, and the secret of its ongoing renewal and journey: the collective crossing of human paths.

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