

States of flux in the city of ghosts: art in times of uncertainty

A crisis is when the old is dead but the new not yet born

Antonio Gramsci

With more than two thousand years of urban life as an economic and religious crossroads between East and West Thessaloniki is undergoing yet another time of uncertainty and transformation. The street protests that began on 2008 across Greece signalled the need for political and economic changes in the midst of society's disillusionment.

Of course no crisis is totally new, but rather one more manifestation of unbalance. For the ancient Chinese, 'revolution is a realignment of the world', so perhaps looking at this present global crisis and its localised expression in Greece, a revolution of the existing value system is due. Thessaloniki sits at the foot of the Balkans. In that particular geographical situation, the definitive discredit of Communism that followed the collapse of the Socialist block in 1989, the raise of religion's sectarianism (my truth against your truth) promoted by Western powers' neo-colonial policies in the Middle East, and the emergence of nation states out of larger political blocks were strongly felt in the city. This not only applies to Thessaloniki of course, as it seems to have been the breeding ground of our contemporary malaise in a wider context.

In this tempestuous river of change which brings to mind Heraclitus sentence: *On those stepping into rivers the same, other and other waters flow.*" what role can art play?

Thessaloniki was incorporated to the Greek nation state in 1912, following the demise of five hundred years of Ottoman rule. In 1923 the Muslim and Christian populations were expatriated from one side of the new religious border to the other: from Turkey to Greece and vice versa. The Muslim and Jewish communities that had settled in Thessaloniki since the Spanish expulsion of 1492 had contributed to the city's five centuries of diversity, a true ethnic and religious conviviality where the three main monotheistic religions formed the pillars of Thessaloniki's rich identity. The mistrust and confrontation between the monotheist faiths so characteristic of our times were unknown to the people of Salonica for centuries. Today, the ghosts of those diverse social groups inhabit the memories of the people: they are the shadows of Islamic rulers, Greek Orthodox Christians, merchant Sephardic Jews, and a handful of Balkan warriors and migrants – Albanians, Serbians and Bulgarians who in turns governed, preached and controlled trade.

As Slavok Zizek argued when referring in particular to Afganistan and Iran, Fundamentalism was not in the historical tradition of Islamic countries. The same can be said of Asia Minor and Macedonia, which were foremost governed by what he calls 'enlightened despots formed in the secular traditions'. Zizek maintains that Fundamentalism was in fact brought to those lands by the West, with their incorporation into global politics, therefore, a relatively new development, somehow induced by those who most fear it.

But global politics also promote global activism and the rapid dissemination of protest: the uncertainty produced by the present global economic meltdown has been expressed in Greece with the type of social upheaval that reminds the riots against the banking system in the midst of political collapse that hit Argentina in 2001. There, housewives played the sound of cooking pans in the streets as the middle classes attempted to bring down the pristine glass facades of financial institutions with stones. Here, banks and high street shops selling luxury goods have been the target following the killing of a child during a peaceful protest.

What models for consensual living together can artists propose to society at large? Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual model inspires a great part of the artists' community: active in the surrounding world, messengers of the states of flux and actors of symbolic change. Terry Eagleton reminds us of the value of culture, therefore implying the role played by cultural thinkers, intellectuals and artists in society: *Value, speech, image, experience and identity are here the very language of political struggle, as they are in all ethnic or sexual politics. Ways of feeling and forms of representation are in the long run quite as crucial as childcare provision or equal pay. They are a vital part of the project of political emancipation.*¹

But can this notion be expanded to encompass the type of creator and intellectual that born in one place, resides and practises in a multitude of places? Is this state of de-localisation conducive to focused social interaction or is the very movement imposed on artists by the global art scene in detriment of art's real social impact? Cultural thinker Néstor García Canclini optimistically suggests that *the uncertain localisation of many cultural processes contains a poetic and hermeneutic potency for art production and its communication*². In a recent lecture, he also reviewed the relation between art and politics and the critical possibilities that art can offer *while de-legitimising not only institutions such as museums and biennales but also the barriers that separate it from work, politics and everyday life.*³ Considering this, what effect might have an exhibition of contemporary international art in Thessaloniki in times of economic and social instability?

In an emblematic drawing of 1936, Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García put the map of South America upside down and entitled the work 'Our North is the South'. By applying this simple strategy he made a simple but radical ideological proposition: the redrawing of economic and social paradigms implied a concentrated focus on the culture of *here*, expressing the need for intellectual and cultural independence from the North/ *there*.

The emergence of medium and small size biennales in countries East, South and beyond the mainstream tend to signify a similar opportunity. The new cartographies attempted in the by now decades long initiatives might call for a regeneration of meaning, or the placing of emphasis in cultures off the radar.

¹ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, 2003, p.47

² Néstor García Canclini, *La reconstrucción de la Teoría del arte y los fracasos de la globalización*, paper presented in the symposium 'Desafíos que plantea la Globalización', organised by UNTREF, Buenos Aires, August 2008.

³ *Ibid*

This principle certainly inspires the young Biennale of Thessaloniki, this year in its second edition, by relocating it in the diverse map of Southern Europe, in close vicinity with Asia Minor, South of the Balkans and at the margins of the mega Biennale circuit.

Southern Histories

As Torres did in Uruguay with the creation of the School of the South, in other cities of Latin America artists of the historical avant-garde worked within a framework of reference that attempted to re-elaborate the cultural movements imported from Europe into a locally manufactured complexity. Enlightened poet extraordinaire from Brazil Oswald de Andrade named this process *Anthropophagy*: a selective assimilation of the other culture, a cannibalism of European civilization for the purpose of elaborating something new.⁴ This manifested in the continent at different times in a number of ways. After his return from Europe to Uruguay in 1934 Torres García developed a pictorial language that integrated European Constructivism to the indigenous visual languages of pre-Colombian America: he called it *Constructive Universalism*. Few decades later, a local form of conceptualism infused a high dose of political struggle and direct social intervention across the continent, examples of which have been recently 'discovered' in the international circuit⁵ for their particular relevance to current participatory practice. As new as this might seem, it is important to signal that historically, Latin American artists have not made distinctions in their practice between the cultural and theoretical and the aesthetic, and in general terms have not split visual and social communication. This is why it is surprising that recently published research under newly coined concepts such as *relational aesthetics* seem to disregard over fifty years of achievements by artists' interventions in social life outside the mainstream.

Similarly, contemporary art does not float in a vacuum but is framed by a great number of individual searches either failed or successful in the eyes of history. With this in mind, the Thessaloniki Biennale 2 incorporates the work of three artists who are paramount in the creation of schools of thought and visual experimentation.

Venezuelan master of Kineticism Carlos Cruz Diez (b.1925) is part of a group of painters from Caracas, alongside Alejandro Otero and Jesús Soto that conceived painting as a tool to challenge the limits of perception through the use of light and the vibration of colour while at the same time empowering viewers to physically engage with the works. Argentine artist León Ferrari (b.1920), creator of controversial works made in a broad range of mediums, has been pushing the boundaries of art making its materials and function to its more daring borders since the 1960s. Similarly, Leticia Parente (1930-1991), an artist from Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, left a body of experimental work in video and performance that predates the most radical practices of the last thirty years. Her works expose the body as a site of feminist and post colonial critique in pieces of succinct elegance and playful inventiveness.

⁴ Oswald de Andrade, *Manifiesto antropófago*, 1928

⁵ I am referring to the recent exposure given in Documenta XII to *Tucumán arde*, a n experimental art exhibition organised in the towns of Rosario and Córdoba, Argentina in the mid 1960s.

By including these three artists from a previous generation in the exhibition, contemporary art is rooted and enriched, expanding beyond the present.

In an attempt to work in a meaningful way in the public space of Thessaloniki, British artists Zoë Walker and Neil Bromwich were commissioned to produce a radio programme based on material recorded locally. The programme is the result of collaboration with the New Media Course at the Polytechnic School of the University of Thessaloniki and a number of individuals and will be aired on internet radio during the Biennale from the *Celeste*, a mirror-tiled boat which will be sailing the coastal area.

The *Celestial Radio* project was born in England out of the utopian impulse to create a means to mobilise opinion, reawaken the history of the cities it visits and provide a platform for the re-elaboration of notions of citizenship. The radio, with its privileged place in mass culture, presents a unique opportunity for artists to cross boundaries. Curator and writer Gerardo Mosquera proposed once that *television should enter art*⁶. He argued that the methodologies of communication employed by the vehicles of mass culture could be effectively used by artists in order to have a field of action broader than that of the art world, intrinsically elitist. Similarly, in *The Human Condition*, Hanna Arendt distinguishes between labour, work and action and refers to the public sphere, where action takes place, as neither cyclical nor linear. In this public sphere *action forms a network structure into which people can actively enter, again and again and at different place*.⁷ *Celestial Radio* will hopefully stage a space of generosity in Thessaloniki, establishing a public sphere that will be less judgemental, less threatening than the institutional, fixed space of the museum. The space of exhibition will therefore be shaped as a larger visual and aural arena which encompasses not only the magnificent historical venues of Thessaloniki: the XV century *Bezesteni* and *Hamams*⁸, the port venues and the other idiosyncratic spaces that have been given to the artists to exhibit their works, but an invisible and pervasive area inhabiting the internet, the radio and, hopefully, the city of ghosts at large.

*Sugar cane fields forever*⁹

The exhibition includes artists from the Caribbean, Africa and the Diaspora in an attempt to enlarge the possibilities of generating an ideological relation between histories linked by a common colonial past.

Sonya Boyce's double projection *Crop over* filmed in both England and Barbados and Hew Locke's imposing installation *The Kingdom of the Blind* bring the voices of Diasporic cultures from the UK into a dialogue with Alexandre Arrechea's Foucaultian analysis of power relations. Their works trace the map of colonialism with a powerful visual approach that problematises the cultural paradigms transplanted from continent to continent by the slave trade. In tackling issues of power and self

⁶ Mosquera, Gerardo, *Arte y política: contradicciones, disyuntivas, posibilidades*, Brumaria magazine, issue 9, Madrid, 2008

⁷ Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958.

⁸ Turkish names of markets and bath establishments

⁹ Title of a song by Brazilian singer and composer Caetano Veloso

representation they become intertwined with the noiseless violence of control society represented by Arrechea's videos. . At the same time, these issues set up house in Thessaloniki as the echo of a past populated by slave owning and trade – which in the Mediterranean lasted until the 19th century - and the trauma of multiple exiles. In a similar vein, the photo performances enacted by the *border brujo* Guillermo Gómez Peña evoke through highly baroque portraits of alien characters the gender and racial deviations implied in border crossings that according to the artist can't compete with the spectacle offered by the mainstream bizarre. The question is what can images produced by artists summon in a world of media reality shows. What can be outrageous after the scandalous dissemination of the photographs showing prisoners abuse in Abu Ghraib, whose horror was prolifically documented and staged with the intention to display humiliation for the sole purpose of global consumption? Nietzsche stated that art makes life bearable: Gómez Peña's interactive performance *Five Psycho-magic Actions Against Violence* presented in the framework of the Thessaloniki Performance Festival is an attempt to ritualise our fear and deactivate the spell of horror spread by the global war on terror that found a place in our nightmares.

Another performance, presented in the Biennale by the duo Mad for Real (JJ Xi and Cai Yuan) *Dou-pi-gai: Struggle Criticism and Reform*, is presented as a re enactment of punitive forms of self- inspection and public humiliation imposed during the Cultural Revolution in China. So called 'Thought Examination' was applied to Chinese citizens accused of bourgeois tendencies, which manifested in having to write down their ideas, attitudes and relationships and to publically humiliate themselves. Employing soy sauce and ketchup as weapons – materials commonly associated with Eastern and Western cuisine and charged with symbolic cultural associations - Mad for Real exercise those ritualistic actions by lending themselves to be punished by the viewers as an act of self incrimination.

Thessaloniki is providing a new space for a multiplicity of voices to come together as an idiosyncratic melody. To which extent the voices are dissonant or in tune is open to discussion, but they certainly remain a proposition of construction: the limits of an art exhibition can only be exceeded by the desire and curiosity of the recipients. Plato was right when he argued for the expelling of the poets from the city, as they seemed to him more dangerous than the military. Art in times of uncertainty can be a catalyser, an eye opener, or, at its best, a weapon of mass construction.

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