

SENSIBILITY OF "BLIND DATES"

CITTADELLARTE PROJECT FOR

"Ottomans & Europeans, Reflecting on 5 Centuries of Cultural Relations" 2015-2016

"We are not compelled to view the world from such a western-European perspective. The physical world has neither apex nor nadir, and it makes just as much geographic sense, to take an equally arbitrary case, to study the Far West (western Europe) from the viewpoint of the Near West (the Ottoman Empire) as it does to foreground the successor states of Christendom. If we imagine Istanbul rather than Paris at the middle of the world, relations with the rest of Europe assume a startling character."

Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe (New Approaches to European History)*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.6

Throughout the 20th century, the dictums of European Modernism, pressures of Cold War and categorization of so-called 3rd World Countries practically restricted a reciprocal communication and collaboration between Europe and Non-Europe in arts and culture. Europe and USA have felt that they were seamless and complete in themselves, and claimed cultural and artistic domination of the world. The rest of the world in turn felt that they are diachronic and accessible.

As a manifestation of this policy the Council of Europe has organized a series of art exhibitions from 1954 on *"with the aim to increase knowledge and appreciation of European art as one of the highest expressions of Europe's culture and common values. Over almost half a century the series has succeeded in illustrating most of the great epochs or the contributions of great personalities who left an indelible mark on their time..."* (1)

An exhibition in Cologne in 1981 entitled "Westkunst" ("WestArt") curated by Kaspar König, advocating the achievements of Western artists was an example of this kind in contemporary art. "Westkunst" was still defining European Modernism as the valid source of contemporary art and for the Modernism of the whole world. (2) Even in 1984, MOMA was presenting an exhibition entitled "PRIMITIVISM" IN 20TH CENTURY ART: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, as the *"first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history"*. (3)

However, in Late Modernism (1970-1980) and Early Post-modernism (1980-1990) there were some provocative exhibitions to be mentioned here as a contradictory manifest to Euro-centrism and its predictable dissolution.

"Weltkulturen und Moderne Kunst" [Cultures of the World and Modern Art], which was organized on the occasion of the 1972 Olympics in Munich has opened the way to reflect on the Non-European sources of Modernism. (4)

In 1989 the exhibition 'Magicians of the Earth' curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in the Centre Pompidou in Paris showed the works of 50 European and non-European artists. This was expectantly pronounced to be a breakthrough into the awareness of reciprocal interaction between the cultures of the world. However, later reviews have opened arguments and pointed out that the exhibition still indicated the division between European Modern art and the world's ethnic or folkloric art. It was a well-timed exhibition, which had a political implication corresponding to the end of the division of Europe into East and West and of Cold War.

Since then, following the global intellectual expansions such as the *"the passage from solid times to liquid times"* (Bauman 2007) and *"the end of traditional structures and institutions, and the end grand narratives"* (Lyotard 1984) as well as with the emphasis on multiple lanes and plurality of civilizations; on cultural diversity and difference; and on the subjectivity of all knowledge official and institutional policies have adjusted their policies fundamentally. Thus, transformation was not considered as a progression without compromise, but as a series of networks, flows, connections and reconnections. Modernist thinking underlined direction, order, coherence, stability, control, autonomy, and universality whereas Post-modern thinking encouraged fragmentation, diversity, discontinuity, contingency, pragmatism, multiplicity, and connections.

Hans Belting describes the impact of this paradigm shift to contemporary art as follows: (5) *Twenty years after its first manifestations, the time has come to discuss the nature and purpose of global art that emerged, like a phoenix from the ashes, from modern art at the end of the twentieth century and opposed modernity's cherished ideals of progress and hegemony. Contemporary art a term long used to designate the most recent art, assumed an entirely new meaning when art production, following the turn of world politics and world trade in 1989, expanded across the globe. The results of this unprecedented expansion challenged the continuity of any Eurocentric view of 'art.' Global art is no longer synonymous with modern art. It is by definition contemporary, not just in a chronological but also, as we will see, in a symbolic or even ideological sense. It is both represented and distorted by an art market whose strategies are not just economic mechanisms when crossing cultural borders, but strategies to channel art production in directions for which we still lack sufficient categories.*

The ongoing surge in the number of Biennales is one of the earliest reactionary symptoms of this transformation. Now there are over 100 across the world, and most of them in regions, which were not considered as having "art" at all. These biennale invite curators and artists and collaborate with galleries, art-fairs, and collectors from five continents.

One of the first biennale breaking through the dictums of Euro-centrism was Istanbul Biennale (1987 and 1989) which first of all was not based on national pavilions but on artists, art-works and spaces and which opened the path to artists, curators and art critics to explore contemporary art in Non-European countries.

Beginning of 90's, corresponding to the new EU culture policy of restoring the

Eurocentric gaze and approach, Istanbul was considered as the threshold for the expansion of contemporary art productions and global culture industry towards Middle East and Asia. The political and economic disruptions throughout the 90's and the shortsightedness of the officials and private sector prevented Istanbul to fulfill the infrastructural requirements of becoming a contemporary art capital in the region. The global art market and corporate museum phenomena has shifted quickly to the Arabic Middle East and China to become a Neo-capitalist project that increasingly affected the aesthetics and content of contemporary art productions.

Since 2000, besides the Biennale "artist in residency" as an effective strategy is being successfully practiced in contemporary art, utilizing the various possibilities of global funds, institutional investments and local official and private facilities. These residency programs emphasize that in the age of online communication and collaboration in which art theories, art making and all creative productions can radiate to all regions of the world, geo-political, ideological and religious perimeters are not an obstruction. History, civil and individual memory, democratic processes, global ecology and urban life are a stage of reflection and action for artists and art experts.

Residency programs meet the requirements of contemporary art making. The production of an art work- defined by Nicholas Bourriaud as "relational aesthetics" - is aimed to address the local and global public with its complex research, conception and realization procedures. In starting up to visualize or objectivize the art work, the artists encounter problems necessitating further research in the initial or primary sources, or perhaps the consultation of more secondary or latent sources. The production of an artwork – even if it is initially a mental and theoretical process - imposes demands on artists, which are very different from those of academic research. It needs a direct everyday involvement into the targeted essentials of the chosen concept. If an artwork is meant to be a metaphor of the past, present or future realities, it will incorporate ingenuous explanation, analysis and description. If it aims to convey causes and consequences, discusses different topics and themes of different geographies it should truly exploit that political, economic, cultural triangle of past, present and future. The residency projects give artists the opportunity to work *in situ* and achieve these knowledge, skill and experience.

The project "The Ottoman and European" in Bozar, Brussels is undoubtedly a new challenge of rethinking the cultural relations between Europe and Turkey. It is plausible that after 100 years Turkey is still considered as the inheritor of the Ottoman culture. The historians and art historians proclaim that the roots of the cultural relations and communications of the West and the East are mainly based on the 500 year of relations between Ottoman Empire and Europe.

Prof. Günsel Renda in her essay (6) describes this relation as "*...cultural relations stayed firmly behind political and economic developments. Among the Islamic communities; ...the Turks have always had the closest relations with the Western Christian world;...in the earlier years the Turkish image in Europe carried an exoticism;... the pompous ceremonies of the Ottoman court and the elaborate*

Ottoman costumes were reflected in European art;... a profound European influence was not encountered in the Ottoman culture and art until the eighteenth century;...the political balances in the nineteenth century pushed the Ottomans into an intensive westernization and the European culture was much more influential.”

The project, with a major historical exhibition similar to those of the last 50 years, proposes to stimulate perceptions of citizens and artists from both sides towards constructive solutions for cultural reciprocity. European-Ottoman cultural relations are utilized as a restorative model for today's global *problems of racism, xenophobia, intolerance and national and ethnic discrimination*. Exhibitions, conferences and residency based 'Blind Dates' between young artists are the highlights of the project.

The “Blind Dates” project coordinated by Cittadellarte - Fondazione Pistoletto in collaboration with the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, will stimulate creative encounters between young and senior generations of European artists with artists from Turkey. The project consists of a three weeks summer residency in Biella (Torino), followed by a shorter period of encounter in Turkey in 2016. Six senior artists from Turkey and EU will join the residency for a shorter period.

The aim and objective is to open a discussion on the historical and present cultural interaction between Europe and Turkey and make the young generation artists aware on the historical endeavours, on the values of the memory and invite them to think and practice with sensibility on new ways of communication and collaboration for a sustainable cultural relationship.

Following the point of departure from the “University of Ideas” the residency program of the Fondazione Pistoletto has conceived the “Blind Dates” project. The main objectives of this project are:

- to utilize critical theory, art-praxis and relational aesthetics;
- to discuss and explore global themes such as *the image of the other, the migration of minorities, the impact and relevance of cultural activism, past and present cultural mobility, secularity versus laicism, the encounter of monotheisms*;
- to investigate methodologies of creative interventions to empower the relation between art and the society;
- to activate projects for a socially responsible change in society.

The artists are expected to share their ideas and produce the outcome with joint performance, presentation, concert, or public dialogue at the end of the session. These presentations will be filmed, broadcasted, posted on the partners website. All projects partners will try to create as many different platforms for the creations as possible.

As a basic reading Michelangelo Pistoletto, the initiator and mentor of the “Blind Date” residency project in Biella presents his last manifesto entitled “Omnitheism and Democracy”. It is a contemporary codex for reconstruction of relations between nations, religions, societies and individuals. (7)

The following paragraph clearly explains why he founded Cittadellarte and why this project is an inherent consequence:

Cittadellarte incorporates two meanings: that of citadel, in other words an area in which art is protected and well defended, and that of city, which corresponds to the idea of an openness to the world and a complex interrelationship with it. Cittadellarte, in fact, pursues the objective of combining the aesthetic qualities of art with a substantial ethical commitment to produce a real transformation in every area of civil society. With this resolve Cittadellarte is helping to steer the profound and epoch-making changes underway in a responsible and beneficial direction, thereby extending the initial idea of City to that of Civilization of Art. We are entering a new phase of society, one of which we are all co-authors.

He further proposes a new concept and attitude *"Omnitheism neither denies nor asserts the existence of god, either as a distinct, unique and supreme creative entity or as an entity integrated into every element of the universe, but is founded on the responsibility that derives from a person's ability to think."* This indication to religion and God is undoubtedly based on his observation related to the political developments in South and East Mediterranean: *"We see that in the countries to the south of the Mediterranean, where elections have been held after the so-called Arab Awakening, the majority of the population has chosen to vote for parties of a religious denomination..."* He furthermore associates Omnitheism to Democracy with the conviction that *"...individual thought is constructed through conscious interpersonal relationship, just as in Democracy political action is shaped by participation, exchange and dialogue among people. In Omnitheism and Democracy the interaction between community and individual takes place on the broad and complex plane..."*

Indeed, geopolitical upheavals and wars and economic depressions are destabilising the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey is tragically affected by the massive immigration from the war zones as well as the emergence of a neo-radical violence form of Islam on its southern borders. Furthermore, due to the recent adversary policies and actions of the ruling party the integration to EU seems to be in jeopardy. EU communities are being sceptical towards the non-democratic developments. The relations between the EU and Turkey, which survived for the last six decades, may seriously be put to the test.

Today, for Turkey, the question Michelangelo Pistoletto is asking in his manifesto is very crucial: *"Democracy signifies 'power of the people'. How can the people exercise power if it is not taken on individually by each person and then extended to everyone else?"*

Precisely this question gives a fundamental meaning to the content and development of this project. For the artists of Turkey, extending their ideas through the artworks to the public is -before all other benefits- a contribution to Democracy, freedom of expression and human rights. Contemporary art making is above all the manifestation of the power of the creative individual. Under the aegis of

Michelangelo Pistoletto's manifestation, this project will present an expedient ground for expanding and complementing their opinion about the existing cultural and socio-political context and problems. As it will be based on shared information, interpretation and substantial collaboration with EU colleagues, the outcome of the project is much more valuable than expected.

Beral Madra, May 2015

1. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/events/exhibitions_en.asp
2. http://www.macba.cat/uploads/20101028/03_westkunst_eng.pdf
3. http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6082/releases/MOMA_1984_0018_19.pdf
4. <http://www.hausderkunst.de/forschen/architektur/olympia-1972>
5. <http://www.globalartmuseum.de/media/file/476716148442.pdf>
6. <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/ottoman-empire-and-europe-cultural-encounters>
7. <http://www.cittadellarte.it/attivita.php?att=70>