

Some Problems in Transcultural Curating

Gerardo Mosquera

I am going to concentrate on some basic problems from a rather generalising point of view, aware that I am flattening many tones and specificities. Occasionally, I may even slip into caricature; but this seems plausible in order to underline the gravity of a whole field of contradictions and submissions within which we act and which, although we acknowledge them, we still assume in practice to be more or less normal and customary.

To this end, I shall use in an operational way terms which have been much discussed, such as 'centre', 'periphery', and 'Third World', aware that there are many different centres and peripheries and relations among them, as well as a 'Third World' in every First World and vice-versa, as was pointed out some time ago by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Supposedly, we live in a world of global exchanges and communications. Every time the word 'globalisation' is mentioned, one tends to imagine a planet in which all points are interconnected in a reticular network. In fact, connections only happen inside a radial and hegemonic pattern around the centres of power, where the peripheral countries (most of the world) remain disconnected from one other, or are only connected indirectly via — and under the control of — the centres. I proved this by experience during the years I travelled around Africa, where the best way to travel, even between adjacent countries, was by way of Europe. As I did not have enough money to do this, I was disconnected from the system, detained in a zone of silence and precariousness. This structure of axial globalisation and zones of silence is the basis of the economic, political and cultural network that shapes, at a macro level, the whole planet. The to-ing and fro-ing globalisation is really a globalisation from and for the centres, with limited South-South connections. Such globalisation, despite its limitations and controls, has undoubtedly improved communication and has facilitated a more pluralistic consciousness. It has, however, introduced the illusion of a trans-territorial world of multicultural dialogue with currents that flow in all directions.

This problematic is clear enough in exhibitions of visual art. The interest of the North in the art of the South has expanded. Transcultural shows have therefore increased, with an upsurge of an apparent ecumenical goodwill for 'global' shows. All this, obviously, constitutes an advance with respect to the iron grip of centralisation that has so far prevailed. Some things have improved, but many of the old problems, together with their core, still remain, while some new ones have been introduced. A very centralised system of museums, galleries, publications, collectors and market networks still prevails, and it exercises its legitimising power on an international scale based on Eurocentric and even Manhattan-centric criteria. These central circuits possess the money to invest in the construction of 'universal values' from their points of view and those of the market.

The potential of visual art works to become luxury and prestige objects, a highly profitable currency and a means for laundering money, has so inflated the market that the whole system of visual arts (education, production, circulation and reception) has become market-centric. This means there are too many and too powerful interests making it difficult for art to pursue a major cultural or social function. The whole business of art, however, is shameful, because it sells a cultural aura, which implies a certain incompatibility with speculation. For this reason the market tries to hide behind cultural practice.

The system has been set historically in accordance with the evolution of the different elements at play. It is based on knowledges of art and its ranges of value, constructed from European perspectives and then colonially exported. Its discourses have 'nothing-ed' (*ninguneado*) the aesthetic-symbolic production of the Third World, as they might say in Mexico. These constructions confer universal cultural value on mainstream processes, to the level of almost identifying them with the entire History of Art almost without any relativisation.

The scandals surrounding fakes expose hyperbolically the power of the material in art centres. A while ago I lost some of my naïveté when I took part in a forum where some experts discussed this question and also pointed out the *combinazioni* between museums, collectors, dealers and critics in order to value and devalue artists for the purpose of speculation and other not very spiritual ploys. A German critic summarised by advising: "Never buy an original whose fake is in the Louvre Museum." Despite this, the power groups in the arts maintain cultural prestige by contamination, by working with cultural values, and by disguise, given the necessity of having to look after their good image.

I do not want to exaggerate by saying that the ultimate objectives of the hegemonic circuits are completely extra-artistic and extra-cultural. But I want to emphasise that they determine international circulation and evaluation based on their own artistic and cultural interests, which are, in turn, conditioned by other interests neither so artistic nor so

cultural. Power has increasingly been interweaving closely with the processes of culture.

The new interest of the centres in the periphery's contemporary art has hardly modified all this. It is true that there is a more open consciousness, a more multicultural relativism and an attraction for the Other. But the specific gravity in international circuits of those exhibitions and publications relating to the periphery's visual arts is still disproportionately low, although it has increased. The scheme centre-periphery has become more flexible but remains untouched. We are still far from a globalised art scene.

These are the old problems, which are the least arduous. Some space has been opened, and its enlargement might be a matter of time and initiative from the South; especially if — and despite so many controls — we believe the world is becoming more interrelated.

The new problems are the most dangerous because they come out of the re-designing of hegemonies, in accordance with the contemporary processes of internationalisation, plurality and multiculturalism. A Lampedusian strategy of changing so that everything remains the same.

Western centres themselves have begun to make an intercultural circulation of art for the Third World, fulfilling the visions and interests of the centres. Most cross-cultural exhibitions showing one or more cultures to another, take place along the vertical axis from the centres down to the peripheries. They are financed, organised and curated by institutions and specialists in the centres, who are the only ones who have the power and initiative to do it. To paraphrase James Clifford, we could say that the restless desire and power of the postmodern West to curate the world has now begun.

In this way the radial scheme reproduces itself. The centres are not satisfied with sending their own art to the periphery, they also bring back art of their choosing from the periphery, under control, keeping disconnected the zones of silence. After repackaging it, they send it again, taking charge of exhibiting the peripheries in the peripheries. This is what is known as the international circulation of art. A phenomenon of *inverted curating*: the countries which host the art of other cultures are at the same time curating the shows; it is almost never the other way around, and it is regarded as the most natural thing to happen. The world is practically divided between curating cultures and curated cultures.

Of course, the first rules over the others. At their convenience curating cultures select, legitimate, promote and purchase. The ecumenical Eurocentric vision chooses what is valuable in the world, imposing it internationally through its networks. Apart from the more obvious implications, this provokes the art of the curated cultures to adapt in order to satisfy the preferences of the curating culture, not only looking for material benefits, but following the prestige of the paradigms legitimated by the centres. In art, material and symbolic powers depend

one on the Other, and interpenetrate. Such adaptation can be observed in Latin America, where some artists and processes have developed a certain capacity of Latin American art for offering alterity without leaving the West, which emanates from a hybrid ethnogenesis. This is the *mestizo* alterity: at the same time kin and different, western and non-western. It is no coincidence that the best internationally auctioned, living Latin American artist produces a tropical paradise painting. And worst of all is that the work is justified with nationalistic, populist and even anti-hegemonic rhetoric.

I said that the legitimating hierarchy of the centres encouraged this process. But what is most serious is our convinced acceptance of their imposed criteria and systems of value. There are material problems of power and lack of resources for promotion, but even worse is the colonial mentality. The Third World seems to lack the capacity to legitimate artistically. This arises from a deficit of logistics, but also from a lack of assertiveness, of initiative from 'inside towards the outside' and from not strengthening enough its own epistemes. This absence of South to South prestige is not surprising since the amount of art that circulates South-South is insignificant.

Before, all this happened more indirectly. What from the 'outside' used to be legitimated by the 'inside' was so scarce that artists in the peripheries aspired to go and live in the centre, to blend with an Ecole de Paris or a New York School, both of which were a sort of artistic melting pot. The relative valuation of the Other motivates an inverted initiative, with the curators from the centres acting as postcolonial explorers, who penetrate our urban 'hearts of darkness' in order to scout out their wealth. The old colonial narratives of 'discovery' continue today in the geography of art. The hegemonic West is always the Self, and we the rest are the Other.

The growing importance of the role of the curator as the author of exhibitions has matched very well with his or her new function of 'explorer' and 'discoverer', of the *Adelantado*, to use the title given to the Spanish conquerors of the Americas. It implies an acceptance of the curator's capacity to make transcultural judgements and, from here, the belief in the universality of art. To deny it would imply an anagnosis: acknowledging that a selection is made from local criteria (from a particular institution, culture and aesthetic) leaving behind any globalising discourse.

I myself experienced many of the implied contradictions when I curated contemporary African art for the Havana Biennials. Although the biennials constitute a unique space of encounter, acknowledgement and diffusion for the art of the Third World, both South-South and South-North; although part of my cultural roots come from Africa, and in Cuba I share and participate in experiences of African culture in America; and although I did my best to base my decisions on local criteria, a feeling

of arbitrariness and even absurdity began to grow in me. I was curating from a globalising 'Thirdworldist' perspective which was abstract by force. This did not correspond necessarily to local values and uses, which responded to particular historical, social and cultural grids, as well as to concrete interests and many other issues and variants. This experience gave me a sensitivity towards the complexities of working among different cultures and societies, where one has to start by accepting an ample margin of contradiction.

I am not standing for solipsism. Extreme relativism leads to inaction when mutual exchange is most needed. But there has to be a clear awareness of the implicit dangers and conflicts, of the need to curate with both eyes and ears. Most importantly, to assume ones' own limitations. Every transcultural curatorship must begin by being an exercise of modesty. Nonetheless, I am not condemning *a priori* the application of a curator's or group of curators' point of view in their selection of art from other cultures. In some cases this would facilitate the introduction of the curated culture into that of the curator, and perhaps hearing opinions from external viewers would be enlightening. The curator could be, as Mari Carmen Ramírez says, a 'cultural broker'. The problem is that the flow only flows in one direction because it responds to a hegemonic structure. The records are shocking. For example, 'Ante America', a show curated by Carolina Ponce de León, Rachel Weiss and myself, was the first large exhibition of contemporary Latin American art ever to be curated and organised from the South and later exported as a complete package to the North.

The situation would improve if the transcultural projects emanating from the centres were collegiate, including the participation of specialists from the curated cultures right from the moment of conception. There should be at least one representative of the culture or cultural region being curated. At the very least there should be a real and influential intervention by local advisors, who would also write the catalogue, participate in forums, and so on. I know that this involves, on the one hand, the risk of neutrality coming from too broad a diversity of criteria, and of rhetoricisation by more or less official nationalisms, or of bureaucratisation. On the other hand, it risks tokenism. But the point is to take on projects in a dialogical sense and to set up viable teams with clear objectives. An example of a more laudable decision was that of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, who appointed the Brazilian Ivo Mesquita to curate a show of current Latin American art which was exhibited in Canada, the US and Latin America.

There is an urgent need to put forward an international set of principles to moderate the transcultural colonialism of exhibitions and the new role of the curator as 'discoverer' and transcultural czar. This last implies an old-fashioned and technically untenable pedantry. Such 'curatorial correctness' has turned out to be indispensable not only due

to reasons of power and ethics, but to minimally professional ones. According to my own experience, curating in small teams with the input of diverse advice produces more useful and sophisticated results.

It is surprising that multiculturalism within the centres, firstly, made little demand of the hegemonic institutions that its exhibitions about other cultures be pursued only with their decisive participation. Secondly, that it has shown little initiative in organising them through their own institutions. Both strategies could produce results beneficial to their cultural perspectives and interests. The search for a real multicultural diversification of international exhibitions would also be an action of solidarity from parallel situations. Here, I should like to underline the influence that can be exerted within the metropolis by communities of non-metropolitan origin in support of the cultures of peripheral countries. More aggressiveness is urgently required in this respect.

In general, within the centres, multiculturalism has operated in a horizontal way, as a differentiation and active self-awareness within the communities, rather than towards the axes of power. Multiculturalism in itself cannot be a formula for participation without exposing the structures of power that lie within it, or the manner of its insertion into society, where it could be inverted into a formula for ghettoisation. It should not lead to complacency but, instead, to a critical anti-hegemonic offensive.

There is also the problem of exporting multiculturalism and its strategies from the centres to the peripheries, particularly from the United States. What began as the affirmation of diversity could be used to approach the peripheries from the centre's own diversity, instead of opening itself to that of the other. George Yudice's phrase, "We are *not* the World", expresses an unlimited number of different situations impossible to fit into this paradoxical multicultural 'imperialism'.

However, all the proposals above are not enough since they prolong the initiative of the centres. By all means it is necessary to reclaim the support of international and central organisations so that the art of the periphery can be shown internationally by the periphery itself. The movement would have to be South-South, so that we can establish dialogue without mediators, as well as South-North, so that we can offer our own views to the centres. The zones of silence need to connect horizontally, and the abandoned audiences, outside the so-called 'international' exhibition spaces, should also be served. They constitute the majority of the world's population, and all they are getting are exhibitions bottled in the old or new metropolis.

Nevertheless, the peripheral countries cannot just allow others to come and solve their problems. Rather than limiting ourselves to a help-claiming mentality, which reinforces dependency by blaming it for everything, we need to encourage action towards internal solutions to our problems. A more aggressive attitude is needed, as well as a better use of indigenous resources and possibilities, especially in the pursuit of alternatives in civilian society.

The efforts towards a truly inter-cultural circulation of art cannot be reduced to an international diversification and democratisation of existing circuits. Democratisation should also embrace the very structure of the circuits. The current system of museums and galleries tends towards market-oriented élitist circulation. A reform of the *status quo* in the manner I have discussed, even though it would signify a very valuable 'cultural revolution', would limit its effects to a reduced radius of action. The transformation has to include the internal mechanisms of circulation. This implies a change of formats, cultural extension, work within schools and communities, the use of the press and mass media, and the development of many other ways emerging from local characteristics, interests and inventiveness. It must become a part of the responsibility of every curator of the Third World, as well as elsewhere, who aspires to a true plurality in the diffusion of art. In this context, the curator's work would be under the protection of Elegguá, the Afro-Cuban messenger, the trickster of change, the cross-roads and uncertainty. It must aim as much for communication as for transformation.

Translated from the Spanish
by Jaime Flórez