

Gerardo Mosquera

Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization and Cultural Dynamics

In 1976 Juan Downey took this photo of a Yanomami filming him – and by extension us, the viewers of the photo— with a video camera in the Amazon. The image represents a shift of the gaze taken on by the “primitive”, the “peripheral”, the usual object of anthropology, who became an active subject instead. Nevertheless, we only know this picture taken by the artist, not the picture of Downey – of us – taken by the anonymous Yanomami. The Other filming us is still a representation from the central Self: it does not imply a plural circulation of gazes and representations. The problem is not only cultural but of access and power. Can't the subaltern speak, as Gayatri Spivak would say? Is instrumentalization always present?

My paper is based on my own practical experience as a freelance international curator. It will analyze problems of art and cultures in the context of contemporary globalized art circuits, delving in the tensions between homogenization, co-optation, contexts, cosmopolitanism, appropriation and the agency of multiple new cultural subjects on a global scale. Following this situation, it will discuss new epistemological grounds for the cultural dynamics of artistic discourses in an expanding international arena.

The relationships between contemporary art, culture and internationalization have been silently yet dramatically transformed in the last fifteen years. We have left behind the times of art trends and manifestos, as well as those of centralized establishments. The key issue for contemporary art today is the tremendous expansion of its regional and global circulation, and the implications that this expansion has in cultural and social terms. There are approximately 200 biennials and other “perennials” (periodic large-scale artistic events) in the world, to mention only one aspect in the growth of art circuits. This explosion involves a vast multiplicity of new cultural and artistic actors circulating internationally, who either did not exist before or were confined to local environments.¹ For example, several Asian Pacific countries have virtually skipped modernism and passed directly

¹ See <http://universes-in-universe.de> just to have an idea of how diverse the international art circuits are today.

from traditional culture and socialist realism to contemporary art. In some cases they “learned” contemporary art through the Internet.

This change has initiated very dynamic cultural negotiations between artistic practices, contexts, traditions, international circuits, markets, audiences and other agents. It seems set to continue in a twofold way. On the one hand, it contributes to the development of ever-increasingly globalised art scenes as a result of the growth of international art networks, events, communications and global public spheres, together with the activity of emerging artistic and cultural subjects from all over the world. On the other hand, it stimulates the new energy that is producing new contemporary art locally in areas where it didn't exist before. Most of this activity is “local” in the sense that it is the result of artists' personal and subjective reactions to their contexts, or because it seeks to create a cultural, social, or even political impact in the artists' milieus. But these artists are frequently well informed about other contexts, about mainstream art, and are also looking for an international audience. Sometimes they move in and out between local, regional and global spaces. Usually their art is not bound to nationalistic modernism nor to traditional languages, even when it is based on vernacular cultures or specific backgrounds. Contexts themselves are becoming more global through their interconnection to the world. These processes do not exclude frictions, compromises and inequalities; they still respond to remaining colonial configurations and segregations, and to economic and structural disproportions that determine the power to legitimate art. The term “glocal” blurs these contradictions, since it connotes a fluid and universal connection between the two terms that it mixes together.

The art world has changed quite a lot since 1986, when the 2nd Havana Biennial held the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art, gathering 690 artists from 57 countries² and pioneering the extraordinary internationalization of art that we witness today.³ Because of the silent mutation that has taken place, the multiculturalist discourses and practices of the 1990s, which involved policies of correctness, quotas and neo-exoticism, are no longer relevant to our times, to the extreme of connoting a simplistic programmatism. Until recently, a balanced national pluralism was sought after at shows and events. Now the problem is the opposite: curators and institutions have to respond to contemporary global vastness. The challenge is to be able to stay up to date in the face of the appearance of new cultural subjects, energies and information bursting forth from all

² *Segunda Bienal de La Habana'86. Catálogo general*, Wifredo Lam Center, Havana, 1986.

³ Elena Filipovic, Mieke van Hal & Solveig Øvstebø (editors): *The Bienal Reader. An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, Bergen and Ostfildern, 2010.

sides. It is no longer possible for a curator to work today just following the New York – London – Germany axis (as used to be the case not so long ago), and to look down from that highbrow view. Now curators are forced to move around with open eyes, ears and minds. This is a task that proves difficult to accomplish, since our eyes, ears and minds have been programmed by specific canons and positions.

At the same time, the mystification of the processes of globalization and the spread of communications lead us to imagine a planet interconnected by a grid-like network that extends in all directions. In reality, globalization is not as global as it appears. Or, to paraphrase George Orwell, it is far more global for some than for others. There is no doubt that the world is now much more global in terms of economics, culture and communication. For as Manray Hsu has indicated, in some way or another and to a greater or lesser extent, we all are cosmopolitans today, because “there is no more world out there”; the “being-in-the-world” of Heidegger has become coextensive with “being-on-the-globe”.⁴ However, what we in fact have on a planetary scale is a radial system extending from diverse centers of power, of varying sizes, into multiple and highly diversified economic areas. Such a structure implies the existence of large zones of silence, barely connected to one another or connected only indirectly, via self-decentered centers.⁵ This axial structure motivates intense migratory movements in search of connection. On the other hand, national, ethnic and religious separatisms tend to Balkanize the globalized world, while regionalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, frontiers, migration and fanaticism continue to be issues which are as significant as they are polyhedral.

The times of globalization are also those of movement, migrations and accelerated urbanization. We are living in an era of “roadrunners” that has broken down the idea of fixed identities and generated post-national subjects who find themselves in constant physical and cultural movement. Immigrants use their feet, but also other parts of their bodies: a Hispanic baby is born every 30 seconds in the United States – a time bomb that has unleashed apocalyptic fears in the minds of Samuel P. Huntington⁶ and others. Cities grow vertiginously and chaotically as a result of

⁴ Manray Hsu: “Networked Cosmopolitanism. On Cultural Exchange and International Exhibition”, in Nicholas Tsoutas (editor): *Knowledge+Dialogue+Exchange. Remapping Cultural Globalisms from the South*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, 2004, p. 80.

⁵ Gerardo Mosquera: “Notes on Globalisation, Art and Cultural Difference”, in *Silent Zones. On Globalisation and Cultural Interaction*, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, 2001, p. 32.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington: *Who Are We? : The Challenges to America's Identity*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004.

massive exoduses that take place from the countryside in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while brand new cities bloom in China and other emerging countries. At the beginning of the 20th century, only 10% of the planet's population lived in cities.⁷ Now, half of the globe inhabits urban environments. From 1975 to 2000 the world's city-dwellers duplicated, and they will double again in 2015. The chief aspect in this vertigo is that two-thirds of the urban population will live in poor countries.

Obviously, cities are not prepared to afford such demographic shock. Thus, one hundred million people do not have permanent lodging – a majority of them are children. Many millions more inhabit improvised, precarious slums that proliferate in today's cities, with the attendant contamination, insalubrity and violence. The situation seems untenable but, as Carlos Monsiváis put it, “the city is built upon its systematic destruction”.⁸ The cultural implications of this spontaneous ecology are obvious. A most important one is the complex, metamorphic and multilateral process that entails the substitution of the traditional rural environment by the urban situation, a clash that involves a massive amount of very diverse people.

These processes interact with external migrations that are redrawing the ethno-social maps within receiving countries, unraveling heterogeneous cultural dynamics. All these displacements entail acute problems such as xenophobia (whether practiced by skinheads or by ex-victims of apartheid in South Africa), racism, nationalism, tribalism and fundamentalism based on “purities” of different kinds, growing anti-immigration barriers (which even prohibit internal displacements within a country, as happens in China and Cuba), and the odysseys of boat people, asylum seekers and refugees... Much more than even before, cities are today complex laboratories that produce heterodox urban culture, neologisms, and “border culture”. The connection between art and the city has not evolved very far yet, but will probably indicate a main course of action for artistic practice in the near future.

Nor has there been much progress in “South-South” and “South-East” linkage (so to speak, now that the “East” is beginning to leave the “South”), other than economic recessions. Globalization

⁷ All statistics are taken from: *Mutations*, Actar, Bordeaux, 2001; “Ciudades del Sur: la llamada de la urbe”, in *El Correo de la UNESCO*, Paris, June 1999, and Helmut Anheier and Willem Henri Lucas, “Indicator Suites”, in Helmut Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar (editors), *The Cultures and Globalization Series (1). Conflicts and Tensions*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapur, 2007.

⁸ Carlos Monsiváis: “Architecture and the City”, in Gerardo Mosquera & Adrienne Samos (editors): *ciudadMULTIPLEcity. Urban Art and Global Cities: an Experiment in Context*, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2004, p. 270.

has certainly improved communications to an extraordinary extent, just as it has dynamized and pluralized cultural circulation while providing a more pluralist consciousness. Yet it has done so by following the very channels delineated by the economy, thus reproducing the structures of power in good measure, while maintaining a deficit in “horizontal” interactions. Although the situation has improved, the development of “horizontal” circuits and spaces continues to be of major importance in order to “fill in”, on the global level, the grid of the “vertical”, “North-South” radial circulation schemes traced from power centers –which are inherent to the globalization of cultural exchange –extending and democratizing these circuits and spaces, while also connecting the “zones of silence”. And even more importantly: “horizontal” networks subvert the control axes typical of the radial scheme by including a variety of new centers on a smaller scale. This whole process will contribute to pluralizing and enriching culture, internationalizing it in the real sense, legitimizing it according to different criteria and to the criteria of difference fostered by the diversification of circuits, constructing new epistemes and unfolding alternative actions. Only a multidirectional web of interactions will pluralize our definitions of “international art”, “international art language”, “international art scene”, and even what we call “contemporary”.⁹

In the early 20th century, Brazilian modernists created the metaphor of anthropophagy in order to legitimate their critical, selective, and metabolizing appropriation of European artistic tendencies. This notion has been used extensively to characterize the paradoxical anti-colonial resistance of Latin American culture through its inclination to copy (only the Japanese beat us in this), as well as to allude to its relation to the hegemonic West. The metaphor goes beyond Latin America to point to a procedure characteristic of postcolonial art in general. It was coined by the poet Oswald de Andrade in 1928¹⁰ not as a theoretical notion but as a provocative poetic manifesto. Its emphasis in the subaltern subject's aggressiveness is extraordinary, as well as its bold negation of a conservative, lethargic idea of identity. Andrade even dared to affirm: "It only interests me what is not mine",¹¹ reversing the fundamentalist politics of authenticity.

“*Anthropophagy*” has been developed by Latin American critics as a key notion for the Continent's cultural dynamics. It has not only survived the pugnacious modernism of its origins, but it has been

⁹ Gerardo Mosquera: “Alien-Own / Own-Alien. Notes on Globalisation and Cultural Difference”, in Nikos Papastergiadis (editor): *Complex Entanglements. Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, Rivers Oram Press, London, Sydney, Chicago, 2003, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ Oswald de Andrade: *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, Sao Paulo, 1928.

¹¹ Ibidem.

impelled by poststructuralist and postmodern ideas about appropriation, re-signifying and the validation of the copy. “*Anthropophagy*” has been a very influential paradigm in Latin America, and even the subject of the memorable 24th Sao Paulo Biennial curated by Paulo Herkenhoff in 1998. Contrary to Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of “mimicry” – which outlines how colonialism imposes upon the subordinate subjects an alien mask from which they negotiate their resistance amid ambivalence – “anthropophagy” supposes an attack: to voluntarily swallow the dominant culture for one’s own benefit. It is important to underline that anthropophagy and transculturation articulate their discourses from their position in early neocolonial modernity and their indirect foundations on anthropology, diverging with similar notions in classic post-colonial theory, which departed from literary criticism and the colonial situation.

Although the notion refers to a “critical swallowing”, we must be alert to the difficulties of such a pre-postmodern program, since it does not take place in a neutral territory, but is subjected to a praxis which tacitly assumes the contradictions of dependency. As Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda has warned, anthropophagy can stereotype a problematic concept of a carnivalizing identity that always processes beneficially everything that “is not its own”.¹² It is necessary also to examine whether the transformations that “cannibals” experience when incorporating the dominant culture do not subsume them into it. Also, appropriation, viewed from the other side, satisfies the desire of the dominant culture for a reformed, recognizable Other who possesses a difference in the likeness – which, in the case of Latin America, departs from its cultural kinship with Western meta-culture, creating perhaps its perfect alterity –, facilitating the relation of domain without completely breaking the difference that allows it to construct the hegemonic identity by its contrast with an “inferior” Other. Yet this quasi-Other acts at the same time as a mirror that fractures the dominant subject’s identity, rearticulating the subaltern presence in terms of its rejected otherness.¹³

If the tension of “who swallows whom?”¹⁴ is more or less present in any intercultural relationship, then it is also true that “frequently one plagiarizes what one is ready to invent”, as Ferguson has

¹² Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda: “Feminism: Constructing Identity and the Cultural Condition”, in Noreen Tomassi, Mary Jane Jacob and Ivo Mesquita (editors): *American Visions. Artistic and Cultural Identity in the Western Hemisphere*, ACA Books, New York, 1994, p. 129.

¹³ Homi K. Babha: “Of Mimicry and Men. The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, in *October*, New York, n. 28, 1984, p. 85.

¹⁴ Zita Nunes: “Os males do Brasil: Antropofagia e questao da raça”, Papeles Avulsos Series, n. 22, CIEC/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, 1990.

said.¹⁵ Cultural appropriation is not a passive phenomenon: the receivers always remodel the elements they appropriate according to their own cultural patterns.¹⁶ Moreover, subordinate receivers also transform and re-signify the models imposed on them by dominant cultures. Often, these appropriations are not “correct”. Receivers are usually interested in the productivity of the element seized for their own ends, not in the reproduction of its use in its original context. Such “in-corrections” are commonly situated at the base of the cultural efficacy of appropriation, and frequently constitute a process of originality in the sense of a new creation of meaning.

The peripheries, due to their location on the maps of symbolic power, have developed a “culture of re-signification”¹⁷ out of the repertoires imposed from the centers. Nevertheless, cultural appropriation must be qualified to break with connotations that may prove too affirmative. Even though it has been a path to resistance and affirmation of the subaltern, co-optation is a menace to all cultural action based on syncretism. Today, in the global and post-colonial era, the syncretistic processes are defined as a basic negotiation of difference and cultural power.¹⁸ But those processes are turbulent; they cannot be comfortably assumed as though they presented a harmonious solution to postcolonial contradictions. They need to maintain their critical edge. Beyond all these interpretations of cultural processes, a more arduous problem persists: the flux of culture still continues to circulate, following to a considerable extent the same North-South direction as dictated by the power structure, its circuits of diffusion and the accommodation to them. No matter how plausible the appropriating and transcultural strategies are, they imply a rebound effect that reproduces the same hegemonic structure, even if they contest it. The current must also be reversed, not to create a “repetition in rupture”, as Spivak would say, but to contribute to a true pluralization and enrichment of international cultural circulation.

Anyway, “anthropophagy” and the prevalent cultural strategies of appropriation and syncretism typical of post-colonial and “peripheral” art are increasingly being replaced by a new perspective that we could call the “from here” paradigm. Rather than appropriating and critically re-functionalizing the imposed international culture, transforming it to suit their own needs – as artists

¹⁵ Quoted by Paul Mercier: *Historia de la antropología*, Editorial Península, Barcelona, 1969, p. 170.

¹⁶ R. H. Lowie: *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, New York, 1940.

¹⁷ Nelly Richard: “Latinoamerica y la postmodernidad: la crisis de los originales y la revancha de la copia,” in her *La estratificación de los márgenes*, Francisco Seghers Editor, Santiago, Chile, 1989, p. 55.

¹⁸ Jose Gatti: “Elements of Vogue”, *Third Text*, London, n. 16-17, Winter 1991, pp. 65-81. For a thorough discussion on the idea of syncretism regarding Brazilian religions and culture, see Sérgio Figueiredo Ferreti: *Repensando o sincretismo*, EDUSP, Sao Paulo, 1995.

in postcolonial situations had done until recently – now artists are actively involved in the first-hand creation of that meta-culture. They do so unfettered, from their own imaginaries and positions and on a planetary scale. This epistemological transformation consists in changing from an operation of creative incorporation to one of direct international construction from a variety of subjects, experiences and cultures.

The work of many contemporary artists, rather than naming, describing, analyzing, expressing or building contexts, is made from their personal, historical, cultural and social contexts in international terms. The context thus ceases to be a “closed” locus related to a reductive concept in order to project itself as a space from which international culture is built naturally. This culture is not articulated in the manner of a mosaic of explicit differences engaging in a dialogue within a framework that both gathers and projects them. It works, largely, as a specific mode of recreating a hegemonic set of codes and methodologies established in the form of a global meta-culture. In other words, cultural globalization tends to configure an international code multilaterally, instead of appearing as a multifaceted structure of differentiated cells. That codification acts as a defective lingua franca that allows communication and that is forced, knocked about, and reinvented by a diversity of new subjects who are gaining access to international networks undergoing outright expansion. In a near sense, Charles Esche has also mentioned a combination of sameness and non-self-conscious singularity in art today.¹⁹ As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have argued of “minor literature”, many artists work by “finding [their] own point of underdevelopment, [their] own *patois*, [their] own third world, [their] own desert” within the “major” language.²⁰

Difference is increasingly constructed through specific plural modes of creating artistic texts within a set of international idioms and practices that are transformed in the process, and not by means of representing cultural or historical elements characteristic of particular contexts. Difference lies in action more than in representation. This inclination opens a different perspective that opposes the cliché of “universal” art in the centers, derivative expressions in the “peripheries”, and the multiple “authentic” realms of “otherness” in traditional culture.

¹⁹ Charles Esche: “Making Sameness”, in Arjan van Helmond & Stani Michiels: *Jakarta Megalopolis. Horizontal and Vertical Observations*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2007, p. 27.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: “What is a Minor Literature?”, in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (editors): *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, New York, Cambridge (Massachusetts), London, 1990, p. 61.

Artists are less and less interested in showing their passports. Moreover, if they were, their gallery-owners would probably prevent them from stating local references that might jeopardize their global potentials. As Kobena Mercer puts it, “diversity is more visible than ever before, but the unspoken rule is that you do not make an issue of it”.²¹ Cultural components act more within the discourse of works than in relation to their strict visuality, even in cases in which these have been based upon the vernacular. This is not to say that one cannot point to certain identifying traits of particular countries or areas. The crucial fact is that these diverse identities have begun to show themselves more through their features as artistic practices than through their use of identifying elements taken from folklore, religion, the physical environment or history. Thus, their specific art practices are identifiable more by the manner in which they refer to ways of making their artistic texts than by outward projections of their contexts.

This procedure seems a plausible strategy in the globalized, post-colonial, post-Cold War and pre-China-centric world of today. Naturally, it is not a path without obstacles, and many challenges and contradictions remain. Although art has much to gain from the rise of artists from all over the world who circulate internationally and exert influence, on the other hand this development simplifies art, since artists have to express themselves in an “English” of art that has been hegemonically constructed and established. It makes intercontextual communication possible, but simultaneously indirectly consolidates established structures, while incorporating the authority of the histories, values, poetics, methodologies and codes that constituted the language. The active, diversified construction and re-invention of contemporary art and its international language by a multitude of subjects who operate from their differences, supposes not only an appropriation of that language, but also its transformation from divergences in the convergence itself. Hence, art language pluralizes itself, despite having been broadly instituted by mainstream orientations. This is crucial, because to control language and representation also entails the power to control meaning.²² Of course, this dynamic takes place within a porous strain between renovation and establishment, in which the hegemonic structures show their weight.

Another difficulty is that the use and legitimation by artists worldwide of an international language set up by the Western mainstream, even when transforming this language, implies the discrimination of other languages and poetics. Consequently, artistic manifestations that do not

²¹ Kobena Mercer: “Intermezzo Worlds,” *Art Journal*, New York, vol. 57, n. 4, Winter 1998, p. 43.

²² Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera: “Introduction”, *Over Here. International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, New York, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 2004, p. 5.

speak the prevalent codes are excluded beyond their individual contexts, marginalized in ghetto circuits and markets. This exclusion is even more radical if we consider that the international language of art has seized for itself control of the right to be contemporary and to act as a vehicle for artistic contemporaneity.

The old paradigms based on appropriation reproduced the situation of domain, as they depended on an imposed culture: cannibals are only cannibals if they have somebody to devour. Although the "from here" paradigm does not indicate a rebellion or an emancipation, and while it confirms the hegemonic authority, it has simultaneously mutated the ping-pong of oppositions and appropriations and the alienation of the subaltern subject, thus creating a new artistic-cultural biology where this subject is inside of central production *from* the outside.

What about museums, *Kunsthallen*, alternative spaces and other institutions that deal with contemporary art? It seems as if these institutions were having difficulties answering the new problems brought about by the expansive cultural dynamics of these changing times. Perhaps the new situation suggests the prospect of a major shift in their practice, one that will lead them from the prevalent space-centered routine to another, more dynamic endeavor, in which the institution will be a moving activity spread all over the globe. This is what I call the museum-as-hub.²³ If museums have brought the world into their space, perhaps the moment has arrived to launch museums into the world. The museum as an international hub of artistic activities entails a decentralized institution that would conceive, curate, and/or participate simultaneously in a diversity of projects in different places worldwide. Its level of involvement in these projects (exhibitions, events, ephemeral urban art, workshops, gatherings, etc.) should be very flexible. Projects would be organized mainly as joint ventures and collaborations with other institutions, informal groups or individuals, with varying degrees of commitment. The results could have full or partial manifestations in the museum's space, or have none. In fact, the space would tend to disappear, since the museum would function more as international network of exchanges and activities, participating in a flux of information, projects and actions in several ways and directions. The museum-as-hub would be an attempt to match the new developments in a changing world, with the museum participating directly at the very spot where art practices take place. For the museum, as for many other things, the future will mean an increasingly global and decentralized activity.

²³ Gerardo Mosquera: "Seven Notes on the Museum-as-Hub", in *Re-Shuffle / Notions of an Itinerant Museum*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York, 2006.

Upon arrival in America, the Spaniards were obsessed for years with knowing whether they had arrived at an island or mainland. A historian of the nineteenth century, a priest from the Cuban village of Los Palacios, told us that when Columbus asked the indigenous people of Cuba whether that place was an island or a continent, they answered him saying that it was “an infinite land of which no one had seen the end, although it was an island”.²⁴ James Clifford has pointed out that perhaps “we are all Caribbean now in our urban archipelagoes”.²⁵ Are we living today on a globe of infinite islands?

²⁴ Andrés Bernaldes: “Historia de los Reyes Católicos”, *Memorias de la Real Sociedad Patriótica de La Habana*, Havana, 1837, vol. 3, n. 128, quoted by Cinto Vitier and Fina García Marruz: *Flor oculta de poesía cubana*, Editorial Letras Cubanas, Havana, 1978, p. 6.

²⁵ James Clifford: *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988, p. 173.