DIOGENES

Paradigms of the Beholder. The Perception of Art in a Global Age: Over Here – Over There

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Over recent years Art History has experienced a shift in the axioms, models and paradigms that we take as the basis for each descriptive, interpretative and hermeneutic effort. For a long time, our discipline was dominated by an historiographic narrative that dealt with time, with the past and present, reflecting on the notion of development and historical distance. Today, we focus on a spatial reference, reflecting upon geographic dispositions and cultural territories (Lippuner 2007). The cartography/mapping of art has become a major field of research and a paradigm of its own. The timeline is replaced by the map, hermeneutics by anthropology, the 'where' substitutes the question of the 'when'; the place replaces the date as central issue of methodological reflection (Onians 2004; Elkins 2007; Belting 2009; DaCosta Kaufmann 2005; Carroll 2007).

Of course, the opposition is not as simple as that. There is an interesting moment in the translation between these models. As Kravagna (1997) has rightly observed, we often find local distance translated into a historical distance. However, I use this simplified binary in order to ask whether we can learn something from the discussions on historical distance as a hermeneutical problem that enables the exploration of some of the issues of world art history today.

I am referring to a discourse that deeply influenced ideas of a progressive art history in the 1980s in Europe. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) discussed the problem of historical distance as the main predicament for hermeneutics. How can we understand a work of the medieval period – and why should we try to do so? Does historical distance inherently mean a loss of understanding – and is the reconstruction of a historical perspective the only answer? Gadamer's ideas concerning the potential of historical distance – the idea of validating the present encounter between the contemporary beholder, his or her horizon of experience, and an old work that was once bound into a ceremonial and clerical use – had a deep impact on new hermeneutical models (Bätschmann 1984). Art historians started reading Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1986) together with the works of Max Imdahl and Umberto Eco (1976). The notion of the perceiving subject, bound to his or her own context and time, had powerful consequences for academic Art History and museology. Art History had become interested in the variety of possibilities for looking at historically aesthetic forms, and began to examine, for instance, past artistic interpretations

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Figure 1. Alfredo Jaar, *Weltanschauung*, 1988, © Courtesy of the Artist.

of old masterworks. The history of "errors" and "misunderstandings" in the perception of a work through its past was taken as a dimension that would actually contribute to the meaning of a work of art, adding layers in an open process of interpretation. Today, the challenge of the contemporary viewer's historical distance from the "original" function of an image in a church, say, has certainly not lost its urgency; however, we accept the variety of possible references.

The new challenge today is much less related to time, to historical distance, than it is to spatial distance and cultural difference. Relations in space can be identified as a new, dominating, reference system. Although I would claim that this reference system is even more complex than the temporal one, discussions seem to fall back upon the fruitful reflections of the seventies and eighties and become caught up in the same issues originally presented by historical distance. Too often, and sometimes driven by political motives, we try to claim a "right" perspective against a "wrong" one, reintroducing old concepts of authorship, intention and authenticity.

In an almost paradoxical way this is a result of a very poor understanding of space and location, linked to the notion of ideal unity. There are countless examples of introductions in exhibition catalogues that describe this imperative of an interior understanding instead of the multitude of outside perspectives. The artist, his work and the ideal beholder are thought to belong to the very same cultural, social and even discursive context, dominated by native traditions and integrated into an authentic cultural practice. This unity is referred to as the ideal model to comment on the difficulties of a perception that is informed and influenced by a different context and directed towards a different audience. This unity is also very often referred to when commenting on an artist's identity. Critics of an exhibition of Indian or African art, for example, like to point out the fact when

Figure 2. Sergio Vega, *Paradise in the New World*, Biennale Venice, Arsenale, 2005, © Courtesy of the Artist.

artists are included who received their training in the West – so allegedly somehow spoiling the idea of an "authentic" African or Indian art. The logic of this viewpoint is directly linked to the fatal dialectic of inside versus outside, of "us" versus "them", and to the issue of who would legitimately be able to speak, to describe and to judge (Rogoff 2000; Martin 1989; Spivak 1988). However, a closer look at this concept of location reveals that the site turns out to be very fractal.[1]

To begin with, the contemporary artist is already a traveller. The CIHA Conference in Budapest discussed the concept of the nomad, which dates back into history and still today shapes the artist's self definition (Schneemann 2008). The object, which we tend to define by its link to an original site, travelled long before the emergence of universal exhibitions – we know of Chinese artefacts in the eleventh century designed for diplomatic use as gifts that were sent out into the world, adapting to changing projections and altering their status constantly (Anderson 2009). Finally, the beholder has a dynamic relation with the location wherein he is confronted with the artefact. More and more, the public has adopted the rules of tourism (Groys 1997).

Artistic projects that define the "where", the site, the borders, and which comment on mobility, belong to the core of contemporary artistic practice. The sites of display, namely museums and art exhibitions, take on the task of introducing us to these foreign worlds. One of the oldest characteristics of the geographical reference system is "projection", for instance the longing for a "better world" or a place we cannot reach. The idea of the world as a blueprint connected with it the responsibility of the artist as designer/draftsman, as the horizon of his utopian fantasies of omnipotence, is radicalized. Sergio Vega's project, which was exhibited under the title 'Paradise in the New World' at the Venice Biennale in 2005 as work in progress, raises such questions about vision and reconstruction (Vega et al. 2006).

Vega was born in Argentina, spent sometime in New York and Yale as a student and now lives in Florida. His travels concern his own identity as well as a place whose presence unites the

problems of the Third World with a dream of modernity. His cycle is based on a publication of 1650, which locates Paradise in South America. The activity of travelling thus starts with Vega's examination of the literary tradition and the natural historical and theological discussions about the earthly location of Paradise in the seventeenth century:

> When I decided to embark in the search of Pinelo's paradise I only had a copy of his book, a map drawn by Pedro Quiroz in 1617, and an airplane ticket. I was destined to reach into the very heart of South America and flesh things out on my own. Thus the journey of discovery, once begun, was bound to become the confirmation of a previous text, which was in itself the revision of a preceding one, and so on and so forth in a vast, never ending cacophony of echoes that went through Dante and Marco Polo all the way back to the Old Testament (www.sergiovega-art.net).

In a second step, his project leads to installations in Western museums, which play with the image the stereotypical visitor has of Brazil. With the fragments collected during his journey Vega builds an environment where the boundaries between documentation and imagination blur. He links his journey to the stereotypes and to the "modes" which the museum visitor has adopted that play with the exotic. We are confronted with "lounges" in which the parrot serves as decoration and the record player offers the Bossa Nova. Brazil's language of modernism is hinted at together with images of destroyed tracts of the Amazon, or a "reconstructed" *favela* shack. The place of staging the image of the "over there" is completely anagrammatical, hybrid and fractal.

In short, I think that we could take the complexity of the spatial and cultural reference system, to find a multilayered understanding that proves its potential in its dynamic quality. One could go even further and link the utopian quality of art to the fact that the geography of art follows its own rules. Art is not only inscribed into geography, but is an active agent in forming the geographic pattern, defining its centres and borders, producing images of the near ("here") and the far ("there").

When we look at the visitor information for the Venice Biennale, we look at a map that tells its own story of geographies of art and about countries most of us may well have never visited. Furthermore, we are confronted with a geography created by artworks that promise an understanding of distant countries and that shape our imagination, for instance in the work of Theresa Margolles from Mexico (Medina 2009). The visitor of the old Palazzo Rota Ivancich was confronted by two very different languages. The first was that of simple information. A narrative describes the Mexican drug war and the numbers of deaths. These drug wars, referred to collectively under the term "narcoterrorismo", turn Mexican cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Culiacán – where Margolles grew up – into lawless killing fields. Last year, there were 5,000 narco-related deaths. This information then led to the second language. The visitor was informed about the work that would consist of performances and installations, through the medium of blood, the blood of the victims. The narrative about the place of the far away is transformed into an experience based on the physical reaction towards the smell of blood and the consequent morbid experience provoked by the palazzo installation. The information given at the entrance of the "exhibition" thus served as a reference system linking the perception to the imagination of a place on another continent that many of the visitors may never have visited.

When we think about a "spatial reference system" we have to consider it as unstable and dynamic, embodying a fictive quality formed conjointly by the artist's evocation and the beholder's imagination. It develops its potential and its problems by becoming a narrative of its own. The place of discourse might be very distant from the imagined "authentic" context as setting. Thus, the assumption of being intellectually connected to the place that is conjured up develops into a consciousness that this involvement is something hardly ever possible. At the Documenta 11 in 2002, Okwui Enwezor reacted against the notion of a monolithic world art exhibition and challenged the

Figure 3. Teresa Margolles, *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, Biennale Venice, Mexican Pavilion, 2009, © Courtesy of the Artist.

notion of universalism with his innovation of five platforms all over the world, which were set up for the discussion of issues related to globalism, difference and identity. Enwezor's act of decentralisation illustrates the fact that there are always places and discourses going on that we cannot participate in. We are used to talking about places, imagined and constructed, that we will never be able to visit. Thus, the geographical reference system has become a fictional one, serving the need for a cultural pluralism that, in the economic system and even in the globalised art market, seems to be under pressure. Although Ilya Kabakov has lived in America for many years, his reference system still remains the Soviet Union. In works like *Dans la Cuisine Communautaire*, he evokes cultural issues of everyday Soviet and post Soviet Russian life.[2] We perceive his art as Russian and even use it to complete our imagination of that distant country. Olafur Elliasson, born in Denmark, lives and works in Berlin yet his reference system is Iceland. These examples show that the spatial and cultural dynamics do not mean that the reference to a geographic space has become irrelevant. On the contrary, it develops its narrative quality to exist at a level that involves imagination and clichés as a productive power that is more than just "right" or "wrong".

    This ambivalence, however, does not work when everything is meshed into universalism. It becomes evident that we need the concept/notion of the "other", a term that has been widely discussed in postcolonial discourse in relation to the once-colonised countries of the British Empire

(Bhabha 1994; Enwezor 2003). We need there to be the "other", the difference, the very process of misunderstanding so as to prevent any rigid universalism (Bydler 2004). Until recently, the "other", that is non-Western art, was conspicuously absent from the Western understanding of contemporary art (Weibel 2007; McEvilley 1992).

In line with the postcolonial discourse, museums also have adapted their discourse and engaged with art production worldwide, claiming to restore the relationship between Western and non-Western art, or, as Joaquin Barriendos writes, "to rewrite the geopolitical debts between Western and non-Western regions" (Barriendos 2009: 98). In doing so, these emerging "geo-aesthetic regions" (Barriendos 2009: 98), are included into the geography of the Western canon of art. However, instead of achieving diversity, such "geopolitical revisionism" (Barriendos 2009: 98) fails because of its persistent Eurocentricity. The result is, according to Barriendos, "a re-Westernization of the global art concept" (Barriendos 2009: 98).

One tendency that supports the concept of universalism, however, is neuro-arthistory, an art history that incorporates neuro-scientific knowledge. Its most prominent exponent, John Onians, claims that neuro-arthistory helps to understand why art is actually made in the first place, and why it is made differently at different times and in different places (2007). The neural plasticity of the brain is constantly reshaped by visual experiences. Whenever we look at an object, new connections between neurons are formed. Neuro-arthistorians argue that since most people of a community will look at the same environment (fauna, flora etc.), their brains are aesthetically trained in a similar way. A whole community has thus comparable aesthetic preferences, which are then obviously also mirrored in art production and reception. Thus, advocates of neuro-arthistory see the relevance of their field for global art history in the fact that it allows the treatment of art of all places and periods with equal attention, seriousness and rigour, in other words to treat art in a universal manner.

However neuro-arthistory's strong emphasis on biology limits it in serving the discussion of relevant issues of world art history, such as the pluralism of reading and understanding. Besides its specific aesthetic training, every community has its own symbolic system that is developed out of its cultural, social and religious background. The differing symbolic systems in a complex spatial structure affect the contemporary object, its production and its perception. The perceiving public as a heterogeneous group shows the potential of a "productive misunderstanding" which manifests itself in the example of the "Cube Venice 2005" planned by the German artist Gregor Schneider for the 2005 Biennale. Schneider's project permits an argument to be advanced for a new and positive consideration of the beholder who transmits his own identity into an artwork. As an invitee to the Venice Bienniale, Schneider proposed the construction of a black cube, which was to be placed in Piazza San Marco. With only bare construction details provided of the almost classically minimal 12 x 13 x 15 metre cube, the artist evoked a reference to the most sacred sanctuary of Islam, the Ka'aba, in Mecca. But whereas the Ka'aba presents a masonry exterior, Schneider only wanted to work with scaffolding and black cloth. Also, the dimensions he proposed would not have correlated with those of the Islamic shrine. Nevertheless, the Italian government responded surprisingly swiftly and decisively when it learned of the project. In an act which comes close to censorship they imposed a ban on its realisation. The media discussed the prohibition with reference to possible reactions from the "Islamic world". The problem of a hermetic, or more specifically, a complete lack of, understanding of formats of appearance of contemporary art, can be immediately converted into a scenario which envisages a "danger of terrorist attacks". This assumption was maintained by the public authorities, even though Nadeem Elyas, chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, regretted the prohibition.

Further consequences ensued from this legal ban, which in their significance could hardly have been surpassed had they been planned conceptually. Even the inclusion of the project in the
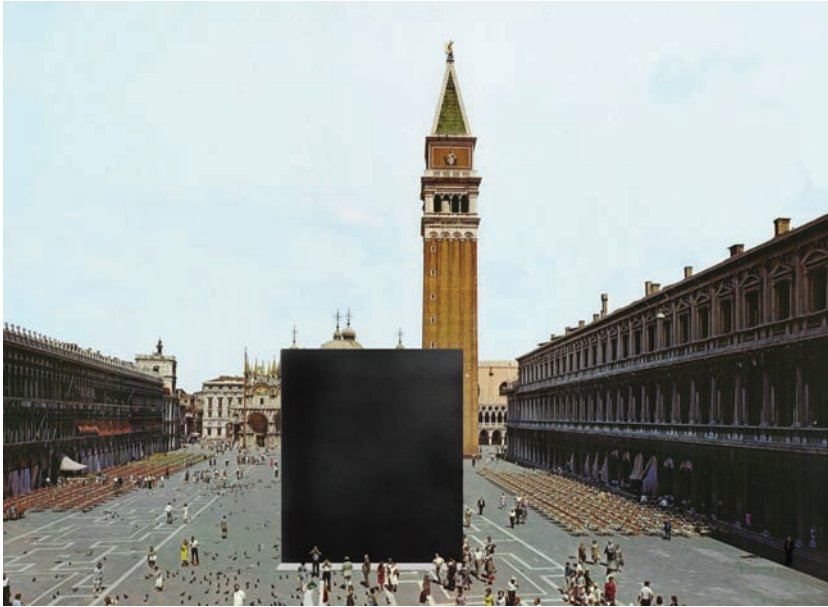
Figure 4. Gregor Schneider, *Cube Venice*, graphic visualization, Biennale Venice, 2005, © Courtesy of the Artist.

catalogue was hindered. Although a catalogue entry can be found, which includes the artist's name and his biography, both the small portrait photograph and the rest of the six catalogue pages are blacked out. It was only at the last moment that a video document could be integrated into the exhibition.

In the numerous interviews that followed this incident, Schneider took on the role of the fighter against "misinterpretation". The purpose of my argument here, though, is not to discuss the problematic situation the artist was faced with and I do not want to allege that he deliberately put himself into the limelight over the matter. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of the case which illustrate a shift of the classical *topoi* of effects in art history.

Schneider wanted to carry out this project and still intends to do so. However, it cannot be denied that the project once realised would have to compete with the effect which the work – as non-realised – has already created. As an object, the unusual power of the work would, I think, become questionable: could a black cube/dice really precipitate a terrorist attack? Schneider fuses the Western tradition of the pure form of the cube with the symbolism of the Islamic religious centre. By doing so he charges the form with new qualities. Due to such a process, in the twenty-first century the work of art would again have the capacity to reach the position and authority of a cult object, because its inversion might, as in this case, provoke fundamentalist reactions through its perceived violation of religious feelings. The differing perceptions of a particular work leads us to acknowledge that our neighbour might read its form in a way we do not understand. Such different perceptions clash with the neuro-arthistorians' claim of a universal reading. The result of cultural pluralism is thus a "productive misunderstanding" – a notion we are confronted with when, as dislocated subjects, we look at dislocated objects. There is no strategy of display or framing that

can avoid the independent establishment of categories of understanding. The claim for a "right" understanding that should reveal a "real" intention and meaning of an artwork is thus unmasked as an illusion. Perceiving is inevitably linked to projection. Furthermore, as we can see for instance in Gregor Schneider's project, it is the misunderstanding and the plurality of readings that reveal the – which may not even have been intended – potential and plurality of meaning of an artwork. If there were not different (mis)understandings, Schneider's project would have only been a black cube, a very abstract and formalist object. There is no beholder who can adopt the "right" perspective of an artwork, not even if he or she is from the same origin as the artist. But every beholder, by means of misunderstanding – or better: by means of producing his own understanding – contributes to the potential and power of the dislocated object.

Notes

1. For the fractal, heterogeneous quality of the site cf. Kwon (2002) and Suderburg (2000).
2. Works: *Dans la Cuisine Communautaire*, Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris 1993; *L'Album de ma mère*, Paris 1995; *Hello, Morning of our Homeland!*, 1981: *The Red Pavilion*, Biennale di Venezia, 1993.

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