

Modernity and Art Field: toward new cultural references

Post-modernity, globalization and multiculturalism are some of the words more used and often misused both in the artistic and sociological literature of these last years where the social complexity hides the existence of a phase of the human existence uncertain and transitory from the theoretical-cognitive point of view because not yet entirely explainable or explained. From this point of view it is emblematic the famous study of the French sociologist **Liotard** that defines post-Modernity the stadium of the human existence deriving from the collapse of the history, the “Grand narratives” (Enlightenment, Idealism and Marxism) and the high ideals. In the art field this condition dovetails with the end of the utopian and progressive idea of the Avant-garde and notably of the Neo-Avantgardes that contested the degrade of an artworks in merchandise and the degeneration of the collector in financial speculator in favour of a cultural nomadism, an acknowledgment deprived of any historical linearity as we can find in the artworks of **Nuovi-Nuovi** movement, **Anachronism** movement or **Transavantgarde**. This loss of references converges with the exhaustion (following the fall of the Berlin wall) of the American cultural hegemony, consolidated by the second post-war period until 70’s also thanks to the division of the European continent in two contrasted blocks, favouring the entrance in the art field of the artists coming from all the continents with a presence of young people deriving particularly from the Asian Southeast. For the first time this art multiculturalism took form in the exhibition **Les Magiciens de la terre** held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989 where the curator **Szeemann** emphasized and legitimated some extra-western artistic practices putting in doubt the absolutism of the Western artistic canon. Anyhow the relationship between the loss/change of the cultural references and the redefinition of the Western artistic canon is not visible only in the conspicuous presence of not Western artists but more generically through the inclusion of figures almost always marginalized in the past as the women, the sexual, cultural and ethnic minorities conducting the art field toward an extension of the citizenship rights recognized to its members. Nevertheless this art democratization is based on a fragile equilibrium among the new universalization of the Western culture (globalization) and the closing of the various national cultures in a sort of rigid and rigorous incommunicability, where each culture taken by fanatic egoism defends and legitimates exclusively itself (localism). Therefore the boundaries lose weight even if the Western artistic canon endures. The history teaches us that the art history is also an history of the relationships of power

among nations, therefore the following footsteps could be really the relativization of the Western artistic canon behalf other canons own of other countries (I think about the oriental one that is much in ferment at the moment). Telling during his artistic career his condition of homosexual sick of AIDS *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* practice is an example of the artistic reflection on the sexual differences. Underpinning on our sensibility to the consumption products he accumulates candies and chocolates in quantity equal to the weight of his body or that of his dead boyfriend in installations in which he invites the visitors to eat them recalling in this Eucharistic ritual a grisly sense of death. Using different artistic forms as photo, video or cinema the Iranian artist *Shirin Neshat* with a special sensivity overlaps some antithetical iconographies, places side by side the violence and the spirituality not only to investigate the woman condition in Iran but more generically to explore the incommensurability between different cultures and worlds. The Italian performer *Vanessa Beecroft* promoting a dialogue among different disciplines as the sociology, the anthropology, the art and the aesthetics succeeds in arousing in the observer of her tableaux vivants (trapping him in the passive condition of voyeur) a dis-orientation towards the more debated social and cultural themes: homologation, social and cultural stereotypization, immigration, power, violence, gender differences, anorexia, use of social masks... Loss of references also rhymes with the increasing individualism bringing some artists as the above mentioned Beecroft but also *Maurizio Cattelan*, *Cesare Pietroiusti*, *Massimo Bartolini* or *Rirkrit Tiravanija* to favour with their artistic practices the social relationships creating in this way new spaces of socialization and conviviality (as in the case of the distinctive culinary performances of Tiravanija who defines them "platform for interaction") or however new forms of reflection on the sociality (the so-called relational art according to the French art critic **Nicolas Bourriard**).

For other artists this loss of references, this knowledge crisis of legitimacy or however loss of faith in a rationalized or reasonable society turns into the wish to go over the limits, over the boundaries be them genetic and human as for example do *Matthew Barney* or *ORLAN* that modify their body, their humanity departing really from the scientific and genetics searches or the plastic surgery in the case of ORLAN. This neofaustian art tendency with its desire to overcome the imposed limits to the human nature is however developed in very different and original way. For example *Stefano Arienti* intervenes on pre-existing images perforating their contours or shredding and doubling over geographical maps, calendars and telephone directory creating in this way delicate three-dimensional

sculptures and paper-folding. Other artists compete through their virtuosity with the possibilities offered by the new technologies: *Maurizio Cannavacciuolo*, for example, with his exasperate dexterity covers the canvas with his bright and intricate pictorial texture; the English artist *Glenn Brown* with his minute brushstrokes produces some “vibrations” that seem to melt the canvas. Other artists as in the case of *Alessandro Moreschini* don't succeed in containing their exuberant and meticulous creative vivacity that breaking down the canvas escapes from the bi-dimensional plan and concretizes itself in a objectual three-dimensionality. Finally this overcoming of borders can be understood as an art depersonalization to advantage a collective enterprise. A testimony in this sense is the open group of artists and not denominated **Gruppo Oreste** and invited to the Venice Biennial in 1999. The contribution of this group to the Biennial exhibition has not consisted in an artwork but in a series of meetings and seminars. One of these coordinated by the sociologist **Luigi Negro** dealt with the theme of the frontier, the border and the limit verifying the possibility to create a 'neutral territory' among the various search fields departing from the verification that the specialistic languages often impoverish with their specificity and exclusiveness the same disciplines, preventing from practicing its liberty. Last time we begun a reflection on the evolution of the art field following the advent of the Modernity: beginning from the Impressionism the art field acquires an autonomy from the other social fields and changes the Western artistic canon in the part regarding the represented object including new perception formalities of the surface on which the artist intervenes. With the exhibition **When Attitudes Become Form** edited by the above mentioned Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle in Berne and the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1969 the art field took a step forward accepting the invitation of the curator to not adore only what it is material as the western artistic canon has accustomed us but to extend our artistic sensibility to the gesture, to the action, to the transitoriness and precariousness typical of the liquid society of which **Bauman** wrote. With the 2000s we took a further step forward with the consolidation of the questioning of the oneness of the Western artistic canon: we can also consider art what it belongs to other cultures and that from these it is considered art. In other terms the Western artistic canon proceeds toward a reconsideration of itself in terms of inclusion / exclusion (connection / disconnection in the contemporary language that borrowing terms proper of the computer science prefers to speak of the society as a social network), perhaps to be an half-caste one or we don't know still what. The exhibition **How Latitudes become form** edited by **Philippe Vergne** at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2003 (then hosted at the Foundation

Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin in the 2004) wanted to document this passage at least historical in a world that comes nearer and at the same time it goes away, that meets itself but in the same breath crashes. Certainly the contemporary social complexity and its sudden changes disorientate us inducing us to think of terms of loss of the points of reference. In reality one of the characteristics of the Modernity is truly this ability to continually reflect on itself losing and always finding new cultural references. From this point of view our world is still profusely modern. What will there be after the Modernity? We wait for new proposals...

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Modernità e campo dell'arte: alla ricerca di nuovi riferimenti culturali (Modernity and Art Field: toward new cultural references).

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