

Getting my ideas straight in La Habana

LLILIAN LLANES

Undoubtedly, the problems that the art world faces currently are complex and of varying kind; perhaps they correspond to those that beset the whole the planet. An approach to these problems would force one to carry out specific analyses of the multiple relationships between artist, work and its reception that occur at local, regional and global level. But this is an arduous task, given the fragmentary or limited body of information available today, though progress could be made in this direction, should there exist the sincere will to know what exactly takes place in art internationally.

It is relatively easy to be informed of the work of those artists that tour the capital cities of the rich countries. Apart from being strategic centres of economic power, these cities are the privileged site of the great museums of modern and contemporary art, whose prestige, won after many years of hard work and the availability of considerable resources, confer on them the necessary credibility in the mind of the public. They have developed the principal methods of art distribution, the auction houses, art fairs and the most important commercial galleries, as well as art magazines with the greatest international circulation; and, of course, the equally important fine art "international" events, whose successive editions attract public opinion, and have found in their institutions exceptionally valuable space where certain artists or trends can be confirmed.

This system leaves very little to chance, or to good will. Critics, curators, museum directors, gallerists, editors, with independent outlooks or trend followers, we all have our share of responsibility in the way that art is at present projected.

In fact, until very recently, the contemporary art of Latin America, saving rare exceptions, wasn't known beyond its local frontiers. The same occurred with Asian and African countries that tended to be the subject of anthropological exhibitions. Nevertheless, very gradually, the artists of these regions have entered the market, and more cautiously, the most prestigious museums of some european countries and North America. And for reasons that aren't pertinent now, this acceptance has been granted more easily to latin american

creators than to artists from other regions. But let's not kid ourselves. This attitude doesn't reflect a genuine intention of assuming as part of global contemporary reality what happens outside the traditionally accepted circuits.

Despite the sudden interest in contemporary african, asian or latin american art, it is still deficient in terms of achieving a global vision of contemporary art. We understand as contemporary and universal, avoiding conflict, what is seen, produced, what circulates in those countries whose level of development in other areas allows them to project an image of superior civilization, as a consequence, among other factors, of the communicative power of their images, that, doubtless, gain universal diffusion with a speed that is generated by their media.

In general terms it is taken for granted that one of the chief aims of museums is the organization of a collection, and instilling into the public a taste for those works that must be considered as part of the artistic heritage of a nation and of the world. Yet their responsibility goes further. Among their basic functions is the programming of exhibitions that keep the public well informed, not only after time has brought fame to art, but when it is achieving it as well. In my opinion a museum of contemporary art should devote itself to the task of informing how thought and sensibility evolve during any given epoch. And in order to succeed, it has to maintain a compromise with art, artists and the public, so that the latter may have the ability to differentiate the transcendent from the ephemeral, the meaningful from the meaningless. Thus the universe of its interest can't merely limit itself to what surrounds it. Obviously a curator doesn't have to know everything that happens in the world. Yet a museum team of any international level must be competent enough to assume that there are values beyond the reach of their familiar territory, and if it ignores such reality, at least it shouldn't underrate it.

It causes infinite distress to hear a critic or curator of reputed expert professionalism, refer to the contemporary art of any part of the Third World with contempt and even go on

to state that they aren't at all interested in what happens in those regions; and when asked how many artists he knows, not being able to mention more than half a dozen in the best of cases.

Although such attitudes are widespread, it is certain, as we have already affirmed, that over the last few years a marked interest in the contemporary art of Latin America, Africa and Asia has occurred. However, we have to point out that most of the big exhibitions, especially the latin american ones, emphasize the work of the first avant-garde artists. In my opinion this is due to an inevitable process of acquaintanceship with an unknown historical reality. But can this really explain the almost nul presence of exhibitions devoted to young artists? Or the repetition of certain names, "discovered" by the curator of a european museum that others mention, out of laziness, or not to "err"?

It isn't my wish to judge directly any intuition, yet what the Centre Georges Pompidou did last year in the exhibition Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century brings out some of these phenomena. What reasons can justify the fact that the young artists included weren't shown at the Pompidou for lack of space and were diverted elsewhere? This would need a separate chapter.

Anyhow, despite growing interest for latin american, asian and african artists, and to a lesser extent, arab, the truth is that their presence in the museums of greatest world credibility, generators of opinion states on what is relevant in contemporary art, is insignificant. And we must say that those who don't get into such circuits, have all the difficulty in the world in finding their way.

A situation not much different to that produced by museums occurs in the market. Even though art galleries sail through troubled waters recently, it is undeniable that they have played a leading role during the last few years, in contrast to the timidity of public institutions, and in tandem with the market.

Inspite of the present conditions, art still moves enough capital to relegate the protagonism of galleries and fairs that continue to function, though the volume of sales has decreased. The market is still one of the key possibilities of making a career in the art world today, and its influence in the formation of hierarchy is undeniable.

Increasingly, latin american artists (and africans to a lesser degree), are being included in the agenda of many long standing galleries, though what seems more frequent is to see the appearance of new galleries, that specialize in artists of these regions. It is evident that latin americans are more and more exhibited in fair stands and are publicised by their galleries in the promotion pages of international art magazines. However, I still consider that they are treated as exotic curios rather than accorded a non-prejudiced and imaginative analysis.

In parallel development with the market, collectionism, that has considerable influence in the art world, hasn't really helped to bring about a change of mentality concerning latin american art. Artists of these regions included in private collections or better known public ones are rare. And the buyers of art works from these regions are collectors specialized in latin american art, and often latin american nationals.

Having reached this point it is worth indicating that the questions regarding the problems of the universal in art and of what the concept of such a category means, are ever more

frequent, while the number of people opposed to the eurocentric application of these categories similarly increases.

My aim isn't to delve into the technical problems derived from these issues. The truth is that the increasing complexity of the problems confronting the planet at present, in political, economic and social terms, has immensely contributed to emphasis being placed on certain issues in the sphere of art that until recently were of interest only to limited minorities. Or should we say, of majorities with small audiences. Despite the interest these problems generate we still can't sense the development of ideas that analyze them from a stance where Humanity is at the centre of all concerns. Growing areas of military conflict, irrational warfare, the weakness of those who lack resources, whether they are countries or individuals, gives the idea that Mankind is at the expense of what an élite believe who, for varying reasons, assume their truth to be absolute, and who believe they are right by virtue of having power. We live under the Empire of force, and everybody seeks their own convenience. No dialogue is possible under such conditions for there isn't a climate of respect in the world. There's no logic in principles, and that enables an action undertaken by some to be valid, while if done by others it can be condemned.

In the field of our concern, issues like identity, globalism, the market, among others, are being debated in many media and begin to have universal dimensions, despite the diversity of opinions, generated by the contextual differences that produce them. Until very recently, the need to define identity was an exclusive problem of the Third World. Latin Americans know how much energy their intellectuals and artists have spent trying to define our roots, our singularities, our identity, our future. And just about when we are at the end of this conflict of identity the problem presents itself in Europe. It must surely be a very sincere need for self recognition, and deep set causes no doubt motivate this conflict between nations that seem so sure of themselves historically.

It's curious that when Europe is considering the need for integration these conflicts should emerge. This phenomenon ought to provoke profound reflection on the origin of these concerns, or at least a greater precision of the motivating causes.

Could the increasing migratory trends, the fear of contamination, racism and the mixing of races, belligerent nationalism all have something to do with these crucial questions? For whatever reasons, the truth is that this conflict that seemed to be the prerogative of the South has grown to universal size. Will it become manifest in art? How? At the moment we are under the shadow of doubt, because those elements presumed universal emanated from that european world that is now searching for itself.

Slowly, the affirmation of cultural identity is becoming a permanent demand, not only of the individual but of groups and nations the world over.

To a great extent, given the process of cultural uniformity that threatens the whole world, and not only Latin America and other regions of the Third World, it is natural that the struggle to defend one's rights to cultural identity has come to the fore. It is similarly logical that such a struggle takes place at regional and subregional level, determined by the historical community, common problems and the collective search for solutions. Within this framework, to search for cultural identity would comprise, among other things, the conservation of traditions, history and the moral, spiritual and

ethical values passed on by the past generations, yet in no circumstance can this stand for traditionalism or immobilism. The search for the traditions inherited from ancestors is a cultural principle, but this principle also implies the assimilation of the present, in terms of the dynamics of cultural and social life as a whole, of contemporary creativity and the values that inspire the future. The legitimate vindication of identity can't be self-centred introspection, quite the opposite, and it establishes a mutual basis of benefit for relationships, through cultural dialogue, in the context of cooperation between free and equal agents of conversation.

In the midst of the complexities of the phenomena that characterize our epoch, when dangerous manifestations of extreme nationalisms begin to appear, mankind has the responsibility more than ever before of thinking in regional and universal terms, if we really want to come up with an effective answer to the problems faced. Given the possibilities of communication extant today, an overall aim of this kind could lead to the integration of different peoples never achieved to date.

Often, in the search for identity, the will to emphasize differences and to conserve a compartmentalized and fragmented world is uppermost. The diversity of the multiple expressions present in the planet today, far from being a divisive factor, could be a principle of balance and revelation. But this depends on the vision employed, for the establishment of a fertile dialogue between various cultures, could propitiate a true integration of races and peoples, but all criteria of cultural hierarchy would have to be abandoned.

Presently, recognition of culture as universal but not just of one kind grows and this implies the establishment of the equality and dignity of any culture, defending the idea of equality and not of hierarchy. These are fundamental and strategic principles that contribute to the transformation of the mentality that holds sway in the world.

It isn't sufficient in present circumstances just to underline the importance of culture in the preservation of Mankind, it is absolutely essential to understand the need for developing the principles that will enable man to survive and to head towards a future worthier for all, which is the greatest challenge of our time.

Having reached this point we ought to consider what the universal is and with what standards we are able to measure it. Is the universal the european, the western? Are universal and local values antagonistic? Given actual circumstances, would the consideration of the cultural factors of the Third World have any effect on the redefinition of the universal?

I don't think anybody questions the fact the world currently faces universal problems that are expressed in special ways, albeit common. For instance, the problems of marginality. Everywhere discrimination is discussed as the result of racial difference or on account of women's condition. Can we say that a woman in the USA is less discriminated than a woman in the arab world? No. She is simply discriminated in a different way. If among the thousand top companies of the USA with the highest gross income there isn't a single executive woman at top directional level, she is being as discriminated in those circumstances as a sudanese woman castrated at birth. What these facts reveal is the existence of ethics that tolerates discrimination.

Anyhow, there's still a long way to go in order to achieve a true comprehension of the universal, that requires not simply more flexible or wider definitions, but more profound

ones of what could constitute a source of spiritual gratification for contemporary man.

Considering the world situation, the contradiction between the highly industrialized North and the underdeveloped South acquires a special dimension, as a result of the technological abyss that separates both areas of the world.

What happens in art? On the one hand, the fundamental means of knowing what happens in the art world at global level are submitted to principles of cultural hierarchy that don't condescend to a humanist understanding of its singular differences. And either the genuine values of other cultures aren't understood, with the argument that they are anthropological expressions, that they aren't art, or they are sweetly ignored, out of sheer ignorance.

It's hard to imagine an ethiopian runner, an argentinian footballer, or a cuban boxer not attending the Olympic games, and then not winning gold medals if they triumph. When you leave your opponent on the ground, you are the uncontested winner of a gold. But how do you measure quality in art? What standards can prove that Borofski's work is better than Tunga's?

In our debate, this dilemma introduces a series of problems whose complexity forces one to reflect and not to underestimate them, with the justification of a supposed "quality", a category which like many others can be dangerously relative. Above all when referring to an art work pretended universal categories are applied, that envisage the definition of the universal as something pertaining to a part of the planet, considering that there the highest standards of development have been reached.

It would be worth asking ourselves in this sense what circumstances favour or prevent certain artists being more prominent than others. What part do international exhibitions, magazines, auction houses, private and public collectionism and the market have in the protagonisms of art today?

If we really want to understand the world today we must get rid of certain prejudices.

Regrettably, we are so accustomed to seeing exhibitions where "quality" is the thing that we forget the problems that preoccupy artists as a result of their non-aesthetic concerns.

For example, many of the works exposed at the Kassel Dokumenta made me reflect on the absence of some artists who could have contributed to offering a more complete universal vision of contemporary art. What could have prevented a palestinian artist like Mona Hatchum from being present in this exhibition? Or that the work of the Filipino Junjee shouldn't enrich the visual experience of the spectators. I'm convinced that many visitors would have been interested, in the context of the exhibition, in the work of the south african Sue Williamson or of the argentine Victor Gripo. However artists such as these or many others that could be chosen weren't considered. Although we have to admit that for the first time in this edition of the Dokumenta there was a greater presence of artists from the southern hemisphere of the globe.

Fortunately, despite the problems here expressed, I am utterly convinced that we are going to meet in zones of mutual understanding. European museum directors and critics that are open to dialogue are more and more numerous, a fact that obliges those of us who come from the Third World to get rid in turn of our prejudices.