



THE OTHER EDGE

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It could seem paradoxical that, admitting the historical character of displacement, or the tendency of men to emigrate and to change their status in relation to a specific physical, cultural, or socio-political environment, some self-appointed judges still insist on controlling the movements and choice of a virtual space whether permanently or transitorily, for the sole reason of avoiding an intermingling that is already uncontainable and is blurring many frontiers.

In truth, this interbreeding and communion is feared by those who still aspire to achieve that ideal of the Arian race's superiority, as it was expressed by the Comte de Gobineau after the French Revolution.

What is most interesting about this estranging phenomenon, is perhaps that the sternest resistance is shown to the acceptance of those who are not considered "whites". The "Centre" refuses to accept the "periphery" that lays, in reply, a tense and powerful siege.

This fact contrasts with a parallel reality that certain continents like the European have experienced, where migratory movements between their countries should already have generated a favourable predisposition towards multiple exchange.

The Second World War gave way to a marked rise in migrations between states in the old continent, while it

simultaneously encouraged the exodus of Europeans to the "New World". Then America only continued with a "hospitable" tradition towards men from all over the globe and carried on integrating new components in its hybrid identity.

Despite such recognition of migratory processes, the strongest of feelings and frontiers have developed; separatist politico-ideological theories, that have rigged an antagonistic structure in the world.

Power centres have ruled the fates of subdeveloped countries, (condemned) to economic degradation, similar to a superfast tuberculosis epidemic. The marked and almost unbreachable distance between North and South has caused mass emigration to highly developed countries in the search for the "Promised Land". As a result the First World has faced a dilemma in relation to its identity or rather with the fragility of this concept, that implies the gradual loss of "hyperdeterministic discourses" (1).

In spite of the rejection that the immigrant experiences and even accepting the ambivalent feelings he provokes which include indifference, his presence becomes a socially important factor. "The other" penetrates the structure and the organization of First World culture. He brings to his new environment his inherent values, in order to participate in an interaction

that forces him to develop an integrating capacity and adaptability to his new space.

Obviously this process implies a shock for the economic, political and ideological structures of developed countries, who produce replies and “defence mechanisms” that counter the “avalanche” that is aimed against them. Even the bureaucratic powers of cities feel victimized. In this way we experience the

process of internationalization seems to be definitely upsetting the polarity system and proposes a new map, whose structures depend on mobility and relativity, in accord with modern society’s demands.

Art and culture aren’t divorced therefore from this dialectic process of assimilation and negation, of resistance and conciliation. It is well known that the artistic creation of underdeveloped



Manuel Piña (Cuba). *Aguas baldías*. 1993. Installation.
Photos Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam. La Habana.

rise of nationalist racism, xenophobia grows, just to mention the most drastic reactions; but let’s not forget the false democratic models and the paternalistic schemes that finish up by turning the “foreigner”, the immigrant, into the paradigm of the exotic.

Despite all these separatist declarations that defend schism, the interracial

countries has been notably distanced from the hegemonic centres of art. Its inclusion in international projects is carefully “classified” as representative of “otherness”, when not as “derivative” or simply as “primitive”.

The immigrant artist must accept the challenge that new environment imposes as a way of penetrating the limits of

Western art. This experience means confrontation, trauma, because living between two worlds, also demands reorientation and integrating willpower, reformulation of codes and models in order to return in exchange an art purged of rhetoric and exoticism.

This reflection on identity can’t be satisfied with nostalgia, or with the emphasis on difference, echoing ethnocentric arguments; it is necessary to legitimate the demand of a common cultural belonging in any location. In general terms, the intercultural shock is positive for the immigrant and his receptive society. It is this fusion or at least this crossbreeding that engenders the context of multiculturalism, deriving from the assimilation of different languages, expressions, behaviour and customs.

Now, in order for this interrelation to occur more is required than the mere physical displacement of men. The internalization of art and of problems make exchange possible and favour the appropriation of languages and tendencies, transcending all frontiers. On the other hand, the sentiment of attachment and the recognition of a common cultural substratum that all men share overcomes both nationalist and temporal barriers. Historical or contemporary cultural references are taken as sources and recontextualized, as outcome of the most varied debates or artistic discourses.

The exhibition “La Otra Orilla”, *The Other Shore*, that is part of the general project of the Fifth Habana Biennial, hopes to synthesize the points of view and the problems that we are referring to now, from the stance of interculturalism.

The phenomenon of exile that the act of migration enforces, the singular conditions of this physical and spiritual uprooting, frequently interrupted by death, is acutely illustrated by Caribbean artists, where the drama of departure takes on special significance and has socio-psychological repercussions: Raul Recio (Dominican Republic) reflects sometimes with vehemence and at others ironically, the circumstances that favour voluntary or involuntary exile of many inhabitants in this part of the world.

In works as “¿Por qué todos se van?”, (Why do they all go away?), the clear juxtaposition of image and title emphasizes the game the spectator must play. Here satire or irony reveals one of the conflicts of Caribbean man. The Caribbean is presented as technicolour paradise or the tourist’s idyll. Why shouldn’t it be so for its inhabitants? If not a paradise, at least a society less fragmented in its power structures. Thus the analysis of its original context is directed from an ethical and social perspective, that turns the work into a proposition engaged in an emancipatory dialogue.

The Cuban artist Manuel Piña describes the trauma and the temptations that the infinite space of the sea provokes. The physical bounds that separate us from it are also the containers of fear and the stimulus to take the “Leap”.

It is this condition that predisposes towards exodus that the Cuban writer Miguel Barnet describes, as a result of the *mestizo* composition of the Caribbean “(...) where so many migrations and cultures converge (...)” (2), and that is also expressed obviating political and economic reasons.

The enlightened photography of Piña isn’t only the snap shot that captures the action. His images belong to that psychological sphere of the individual where the emotional and the rational clash, the analytic ability and the vocation for adventure. “Aguas Baldías” (Barren Waters), rejects narrative in favour of conceptual synthesis.

Within this effort to transcend the descriptive we can classify the work of Sandra Remos, (Cuba). The suit-case installations of Sandra capture the anguish of the emigrant, and they become personal and collective portraits that underline the social and ideological reach of the migratory phenomenon in Cuba.

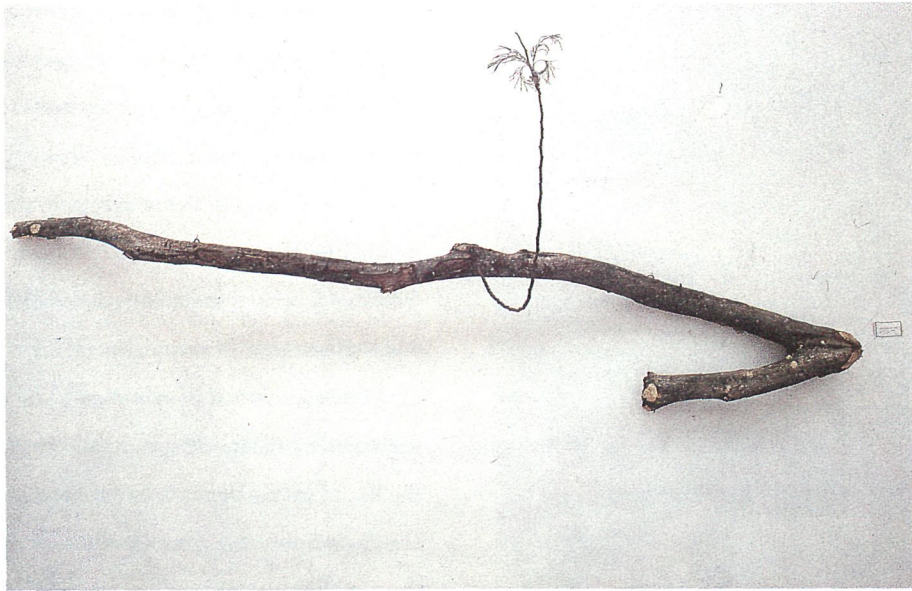
The distance that she refers to through visual symbology, carries a more

transcendental message, it represents incommunication. The memory-objects extol the humanized vision that provokes a non-prejudiced reflection on uprootedness, the rupture of the social and the familiar, on one hand, and on the other, on intolerance.

In the installations of the Cuban artist Alexis Leyva, (Kcho), the materials used acquire a strong symbolic character, a greater semantic charge, apart from the role that national symbols have in his language. The palm-oars, the doodle-island, make up apparently juxtaposed pairs that initiate a conceptual and formal game, which the spectator must complete.

With an analytical bent of anthropological character on the intercultural conflicts of the Tijuana frontier between Mexico and the US, the photographic project of the Mexican artist Lourdes Grobert and the sociologist Néstor García Canclini, explores the life and the culture of that controversial place, whose appearance has been transformed by migratory movements and tourism.

The dual, rather plural image of Tijuana reveals the interactions of the border. On one side the groups that cross the frontier seeking employment, on the other, the progress of tourism, the profusion of advertising that characterizes commercial enterprise, and whose bilingual expression in English



Alexis Leyva [Kcho] (Cuba).

and in Spanish emphasizes the complexities of such intercultural relations.

Aspirations and contradictions merge in this kind of social laboratory. Notices like "DON'T GO: our country needs your knowledge and experience", together with the wish to conserve traditions, coexist with attempts at assimilation of the "new" multiple basis. The photographic images function at sociological level, more than in a testimonial or representational plane, to motivate a dialogue full of ideological contents.

Such is the case of the Indian artist resident in England, Sunil Gupta. His "TRESPASS" series tends to construct a more universalist language, transcending local and even individual experience, using for that purpose the

symbols and images that function as paradigms of culture and socio-politics.

The mural photographic images try to offer a vision of what could constitute a new Europe and the social impact of immigrant cultures in the transformation of the Old Continent's appearance, despite eurocentric traditions. According to the artist, "(...) the work tries to shatter the hypothesis of the purity of cultural history." (3).

From a frankly radical and politicized attitude, the etchings of the artist Juan Sánchez, (born in the US and descendent of a Puerto Rican family), are a social warning with different levels of interpretation. Insular reality, the status of the Latin national in the US, the aspirations, frustrations and even the resistance of these individuals to the metropolitan model, reveal the

fragmentation of a culture that speaks in myriad voices and styles.

As Lucy Lippard states, in Sánchez's work, the mythological, the everyday, family values and political radicalism all mix. He develops a complex, multiple plot that is the outcome of the artist's dual condition, of his problematic capacity and of his experience as a man living between two contexts and compromised with assimilation and confrontation.

His spontaneous yet thoughtful appropriation of different expressions, the challenge to what could be a pamphlet, gives his work multiple readings. He uses the opportunities that silkscreen techniques offer, as well as photocopy laser, in collages that he then transforms in order to achieve unity.

The reformulation of the debates on identity have as basis the analysis and the recontextualization of the



Ik-Joong Kang (South Korea), 2,000 Buddhas English Speaking. Installation.



Páicita Abad (Filipinas), *L.A. Liberty*, 1992. M.T./Canvas.

immigrant's experience, of his cultural values and political values, of the questioning of the new assumptions that his new society impose. Yet he is also able to enlarge his interests and his

intervening capacity in matters that are not the exclusive domain of any one social group, in a heterogeneous medium destined to dilute racial, political and cultural frontiers.

Mo Bahe notes that: "My recent work is based on the layer of mixed feelings and difficult situations that being an asian/corean in the US implies. As a "voluntarily uprooted" immigrant in this multicultural centre of the First World, I tend to ask what I apparently have and what others have in this place... I only find a manufactured past and an inheritance processed for tourism. Thus, the use of tourist symbols isn't only about the confusing recovery of a lost identity, but also about the ambivalent reply of the in-market New York culture..." (4). His work tries to be a synthesis of such ideas that still operate within the limits of reorientation and confusion, trying to apprehend that "point" that fluctuates between his "minority" status and his attitude towards "tradition" and "nationality".

The similar will to establish a link between the individual and collective experience of the immigrant can be verified in the work of Ik-Joong Kang, (also of corean origin), whose images "suggest the process of adoption, adaptation, rejection and convergence of his inheritance with the cultural climate of American society". (5).

His work has an autobiographical tone, in that it reflects, as artist and as individual, how he assumes "the crossfertilizing of influences from oriental and western culture" (6).

The recurrence of Buddha images,

together with stereotypes of the mass media, texts in english, and an exaltation of everyday, or “ordinary” events punctuate his ironic intentions. However this visual and sonorous universe that marks his great installations also suggest a pathos that derives from contradictory experience. The *horror vacui* of his works renders the sensation that the artist feels in the midst of his multiple medium, characterized by the deafening profusion of messages, manipulations and warnings. Both in the work of Kang as in that of Mo Bahe we can confirm the defiance of reducing any culture to a series of stereotyped functions, transcending the pitfalls of postmodern discourse.

Yong Soon Min is an artist born in South Korea, who emigrated to the US with her family at the end of the Second World War. The effects of the war in her own country and then the awareness of international conflicts, that she soon learned about in the US, determined the overtly political sense of her work. Her polemic orientation has led her to create a work committed to the problems of racism and power relations; yet she also reflects deeply about the consequences that Confucianism’s principles have had for asiatic women.

Her ambitions have enabled her to convey different interpretations and to achieve this she has resorted to various media such as photography, installation,

performance, and any means that has provided her with a liberating capacity that has been denied to women, especially in those highly strict patriarchal societies.

Min’s work contains the diversity of the ideological debates in which she takes active part, and this can be felt in the impact her images cause and in the use of verbal structures that channel dialogue with the spectators.

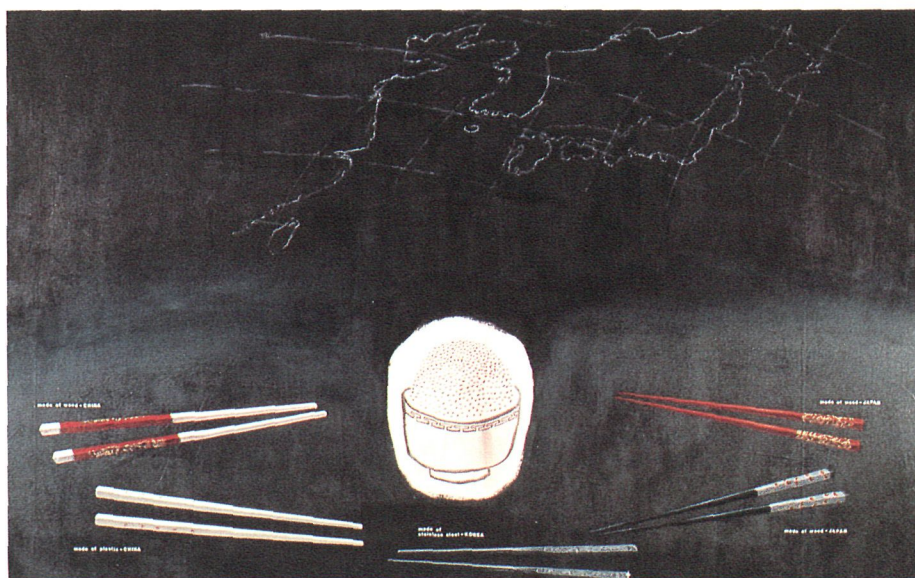
With a rather more narrative character, the works of Filipina Pacita Abad and the caribbean Felix de Rooy address the subject of interculturalism.

Pacita Abad moves between the dramatic and the ironic, extracting from general context those notorious or specific aspects of the afroasiatic community’s experience in the US: contrast or intercultural counterpoint and the status of the immigrant as a

racial pole within a society that still matches them up against defenders of Buffon’s and Gobineau’s ideas, who conceived civilizations as “a pyramid whose summit would be occupied by the blonde Germans or the French, and the base, or rather, the bottom by the Red Indians and the Blacks.” (7).

The American Dream, exported as a paradigm of an apparent model of democracy and civilization, gains new depth and reveals its controversial nature, in the light of social conflicts generated by the presence of other cultures.

De Rooy illustrates this parable-like relation in his assemblages and collages. His experience in the film and theatre world has enabled him to present a panoramic view in his artistic work, constructing what in film language is known as “parallel editing”. This, that appears to be only a formal technique,



Mo Bahe (South Korea). *Looking at far East.* Acrilic on canvas, 60 x 96”.

also has a conceptual depth, inasmuch as it reflects images of the contemporary social panorama, where assimilation and exclusion, interaction and difference, coexist. As a positive phenomenon, interaction has manifold ways of being expressed. One of them is the displacement of information.

The twentieth century has been in such a sense a detonator for interrelation, despite its hierarchizations, prejudices and discriminations, in terms of knowledge.

Societies have survived isolation and this has been expressed, for example, in the adaptation of the artistic expressions of other epochs and different cultures. The possibility of interacting, of pronouncing judgements that require comparison, has been made possible by that will to understanding, or at least to communication.

The work of the mexican Dulce María Nuñez is a good example, to verify that multiple reference capacity, that is

simultaneously a reflection of the recognition of “cultural belonging”.

Her continual reference to the past in her ideas on pre-colombine culture and to the presence of europeans in the cultural formation of Mexico, is juxtaposed with typical mass media images to comment on the present and future circumstances in which we live and act.

All of these “instances”, as Charles Merewether has come to call them, reestablish inner connections.

Carlos Capelán (Uruguay/Sweden), rebuilds an identity shaped by different influences and experiences, for as Pehr Martens would say, “The creation of an identity is not a terminal process, as it is constantly submitted to new influences” (8).

Capelán introduces a curious conceptual play in his work, using the “Earth” as pictorial element and verbal structure. “When we say MOTHER EARTH, are

we referring to the planet or to the land that makes vegetation grow, in a cycle similar to the uterus? The terrestrial globe is familiar to all of us, but territory is specific to every place.” (9).

This idea is also related to his sense of multiculturalism, that excludes homogeneity and uncontaminated fragmentation. His reasoning isn't that of his poetic message which acts as an approach to a reconsideration of the “contemporary historical subject”, who will assume, “in his perception of his contemporary situation the contradictions of the particular and the general, or the subjective and personal versus the socio-political and will control the debate between the “representant” and the “representated”. (10).

The realization of this idea will contribute to the consecution of the new cultural context that is taking shape. Then we will be ready to face the syndrome of cultures and carry on being “ourselves”, “all of us”, without having to foresake our individual independence.

(1) Term used by T. Todorov in his work: “The mixture of cultures”, in *Criteria magazine*, La Habana, 25-28 -1989 XII- 1990, p. 9.

(2) Quoted by David Martín del Campo. “The Hurricane’s route”, in *Memorias de Papel magazine*, Mexico, 2nd Year, Num. 3, April, 1992, p. 48.

(3) Sunil Gupta. *Commentary of the artist*.

Document Archive of the Wilfredo Lam Centre.

(4) Mo Bahc. *Commentary of the artist*. Document Archive of The Wilfredo Lam Centre.

(5) Arlene Raven. “Throw Everything Together and Add”, in *Village Voice*, December 1990, p. 104.

(6) Helen Harrison. “Artists View the World in Statements With 3, 142 Images”, in

The New York Times, NY, March 17th, 1991, p. 14.

(7) Tzvetan Todorov. *Op. Cit.* p. 9.

(8) Pehr Martens. *Commentary on Carlos Capelán*, Document Archive of the Wilfredo Lam Centre.

(9) Paul Martens, *Ibidem*.

(10) Carlos Capelán. From his project, “Canto a mí mismo”, exhibited in the Fifth Habana Biennial.