

Joy and pain of interculturalism

The first word that comes in mind while thinking about cultural exchange is reciprocity. Reciprocity includes the understanding that you give something to someone while not knowing whether, when and how you will get back something. Of course, this is not what people do arbitrarily to anyone who crosses their path. One is the more inclined to do so, if there exists a deeply grounded layer of confidence in the other person that is sustainable. The relation is uneven because there is no contract that regulates what you give and what you get. You never know how and when you will be recognised for, for instance, a not obligatory gift or service. It might never happen. But this does not matter to you. It is not a point of first interest. An appreciation may come back at a completely unexpected moment and in a form that does not relate to what you gave.

Reciprocity

However, if the relationship becomes completely one-sided, this is the end of (the) confidence in the relationship and the reciprocity may become extinct. Some people may be masochistic and wait and wait until; most are not. If the not outspoken balance between giving and getting gets completely lost, the spontaneity in the relationship faces its end, making place for a more calculated approach in the exchange.

Reciprocity is a beautiful human capacity. It invites people to be generous without feeling generous or self-content. It makes life easy; in any case easier than if one would have to do only with relationships that are based on the contract, the cash register or the box office. Is it a luxury? Not really. It is a desirable condition of human life. (Pessers 1999)

What can we imagine that a gift can be in a reciprocal relationship? It might be some-

thing of value, a service, a support in difficult times, or an enjoyable dinner. It might be as well the gift of an artistic expression that might be used or further developed by the other. We should not forget that reciprocity is surrounded by symbols, common signs and expressions of meanings. This is exactly the field of the arts.

Artistic expression is a very special gift, because the arts are very deep expressions of who we are, what belongs to us, of our pleasure, of our sadness, of our philosophical considerations, of our vulgarity. The arts never are just entertainment. They are; of course, but there is more. They make us become the person we are. The arts are signifiers in human life; a field where ambiguity can play a role. If someone may use, or uses, artistic expressions coming from another culture, this demands care. Is it that you appropriate expressions that have deep meanings for other people? In a reciprocal relationship you know that

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the use of such important elements of human life demand respect, due recognition, maybe shyness, and certainly not a crude infringement and appropriation.

This should be the case between people in general, who know each other well, but specifically between artists when we speak about cultural expressions. In the rest of this article we will see that this is not by definition the normal state of affairs, because human beings are not always respectful. Apparently, reciprocity is for artists not very easy; often they have big ego's; their public presence seduces them to be selfish. It might even be more difficult between people representing cultures that are living a distance from each other, geographically, socially, or economically. Crossing the border to another culture is a delicate process, or that is what it should be.

The Indian theatre director Rustom Bharucha has a rich experience in the field of intercultural performance, mainly in Asia. He makes a distinction between neoliberal or postmodern artists, who assume the crossing of borders as their birthright. At the other side he feels himself attracted to artists who 'never fail to take the border for granted.' (Bharucha 2000: 30) You are not me. There is a border between you and me; between your culture and my culture. It is not self evident that I may cross this border. Reciprocity includes that one is very much aware of subtleties; what can be used, what are the limits, what should be respected, what demands specific contexts? One should acknowledge as well the

uncertainties of the intercultural encounter. 'To work with an acknowledgement of "imperfect knowledge" could be the surest way of securing the thrust of one's collaborators.' (Ibid.: 71)

There is nothing self evident in that one can, and may jump into the cultures of other people, and may permeate into the layers under the surface. It is also not obvious that artists make the effort not to hit and run and consume other cultures as fast food, but take the time and try to create, while learning from each other, from each other's cultures; keeping distance and coming nearby. Let's face reality, we are not very good in the respectful collaboration of cultures. We never have been, in almost no period of history and in not so many places on earth. Nevertheless, inescapably we live quite close to each other, and that is nearer than ever. Without the conviction that this demands some form of reciprocity, we will live surrounded by bloody wars, suppression, and exploitation. As we may see, artists can be the pioneers in living together peacefully. It can be; under certain conditions that I will analyse at the end of this article. But let's face first the many pitfalls that may come with cultural intermingling.

Such processes of cultural intermingling may have two different characteristics. First, we will discuss the cultural exchange, collaboration and intermingling that is not really intended; it just happens. There is no explicit will to cooperate. This story will be distinguished again in two sections: the

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Van Gogh and Picasso forms of intermingling, and what we may call the post-modern pastiche. The second main distinction concerns the cultural collaboration and exchange that is intended. There is an explicit will to collaborate. Also here I make a distinction in two sections: those situations where there is an institutionally steered and desired form of cooperation (many times more or less initiated or supported by states); and, at last we know many circumstances where there is a huge urgency that there would exist cultural collaboration and exchange, like between Israeli and Palestinians.

Van Gogh and Picasso

We may admire the work of our great painters, textile designers, composers and writers. In Western societies this admiration has become a little bit a perverse in character. We consider Van Gogh as a genius, Picasso as a hero. And, regularly we praise their originality. Meanwhile, we know that it would be better to speak of doubtful originality. Picasso looked very well to African artists, and Van Gogh was heavily inspired by Japanese works of art. There is nothing wrong with such forms of derivation. No artist creates out of nothing. They add something to what has been developed by other artists that have become a part of our public domain of creativity and knowledge, and so it goes on and on. We may respect them for such additions, but we should recognise that it stays additions.

The French philosopher Roland Barthes analyses in *The Death of the Author* that in,

what he calls, ethnographic societies ‘the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose “performance” - the mastery of the narrative code - may possibly be admired but never his “genius”.’ The author, he mentions, is a modern figure. (in Caughie 1996: 208,9; also in Newton 1988: 155) It is interesting to observe that many artists working in the internet do not consider themselves any longer as original authors; they sample, use the works of others, and so on and so forth. They introduce and practise again the concept of *creative adaptation* that has always been the base of the ongoing process of creation and performance.

If we land down on earth again and forget about the artist as the near-god creating out of nothing, then we should be aware that this has far reaching consequences. Though, isn't that this originality concept is one of the main reasons to grant to artists – and their business people – a monopolistic exclusive intellectual property right that may extend for nearly one and a half centuries and may include everything resembling a specific work of art? There is thus reason to discuss this octopus-like character of our Western copyright system that has existed only over the last couple of centuries. Except for this contemporary Western aberration, such an intellectual property regime did not exist in any culture, anywhere in the world. In an Annex to this article (The unavoidable meltdown of copyright) I will summarise my analysis

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why we should get rid of this system of private appropriation of our common stock of creativity and knowledge, while proposing alternatives that give due respect to the public domain and assure artists a fairer remuneration for their work than they earn under the present copyright regime. It will demand an enormous intellectual effort to transform the present unjust system of intellectual property rights (copyrights, patents, trade marks and so on) into a logic that does not privatise the knowledge and creativity that we desperately need to maintain in common hands for future creators and performers.

When we speak about cultural collaboration we should keep in mind that the Western copyright system specifically has an abject hit and run character concerning non-Western countries. In the ongoing processes of globalisation we see that Western cultural conglomerates or enterprises use artistic material from non-Western cultures on a huge scale. One could claim that this is the creative adaptation that should be stimulated, as I argued before. Everybody should have the right to make even minor creative changes in a work as was tolerated and promoted in all cultures, everywhere in the world. Does this mean that those forms of industrial creative adaptations do not have problematic aspects? I would not say so.

The main problem is that Western cultural conglomerates and enterprises exploit the work being derived from non-Western cultures while controlling cultural markets all

over the world. They determine the character, sphere and ambiance in which the work will be presented. This is no longer the normal kind of creative adaptation that takes place in an ongoing cycle of additions, changes, and cultural dynamics within a community. However, this should be characterised as: after we, giant cultural industries, have taken hold of the work by owning its copyright no creative adaptation will take place anymore, unless, we, cultural conglomerates, decide that it might or will happen, and moreover only under our conditions. Actually, this means that the cultural conglomerate alone decides what the work will be, now and in the future. This is completely opposite to the practice in all cultures that creative adaptations were the object of quarrels and enjoyment within a community where nobody could say: this work and all its possible adaptations belong forever to me. A problem as well is that cultural industries are not by definition respectful to the work they adapt.

By the ownership of copyright the creative adaptation ends with the cultural conglomerate that has appropriated artistic material from non-Western countries. Copyright is the legal fence causing the final phase of the creative adaptation. Moreover, the price of the works cultural industries have adapted and copyrighted is astronomic compared to what it costs and yields in non-Western local cultures. This is a discrepancy too great to be justifiable.

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Postmodern pastiche

We continue with the not intended cultural intermingling. A second aspect may be what can be called the postmodern pastiche. This is taking the surface of all that looks or sounds nice, exotic, or exiting. One uses it, makes a delightful looking or sounding mix, and throws it away after it has been exhausted and that is rather quickly. It is eating up cultures that have been developed during centuries.

Is this forbidden? Shouldn't be done? That is difficult to say. Of course, it is very enjoyable to discover many new elements and to add them to a work of art in statu nascendi. The risk is that the combination of many superficial elements will not become more than a superficial creation or performance. If that is the meaning, o.k. let it be, but why to take pain (if it is) in creating it? And why to buy or attend if only a hollow event is on the offer?

A bigger problem is the damage the postmodern pastiche phenomenon is doing to the public domain. Many works of art have a manifold of deep layers; there are multiple and partly unconscious lives concealed within them. There are symbols that do not present themselves at the surface; there are contradictory meanings that reveal themselves only in dribs and drabs; emotions that never could have been expressed in daily language, or the everyday sounds or images; violence that better can stay hidden; and enjoyments that may surprise people from completely different cultural

background, decade after decade, and century after century. By neglecting this precarious affluence the work becomes worn. It becomes more and more difficult to see that there is an "under the surface" as well. One forgets that it could be worthwhile to what to? To give a work of art in all its different aspects the chance to be. To take care that future generations will not stay with empty hands because we have made banal what they could have used as their energizers. To jump from experience to experience without respecting our own feelings and needs.

Of course, this sounds as if pleasure is out of order which is not; as if the daily routine may not exist and as if in the past all things were better which is obviously not true. Apparently, it is time to reconsider again concepts like pleasure, satisfaction, or experience. This challenges a couple of observations. The first is that important works of art should not be used at random in all imaginable contexts; that would deprive them from their force; from the multiple aspects they have to offer. Opera director Peter Sellars once spoke about the end of the *The Sacrifice*, the film by Tarkovsky. There is a lot destruction going on, and at the end the house on the hill burns down. A boy walks from the house to the lake where he fills a basket, and goes to a tree that he waters. Then, music starts; the cantata *Erbarne Dich* from St. Matthew Passion. Peter Sellars: Tarkovsky did earn with his pre-eminent film the right to use this music. This should not be done at any occa-

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sion. Otherwise it will be emptied of meaning. This is such an important and rich creation that one should use it only in a context as intense as this cantata is. It does not demand much sensitivity to know exactly where the borders are, and how they should be respected, and then there is a lot of freedom. This observation concerns the content of the work that should not be eaten up.

The second thought reaches to the harm the easy consumption of all different cultural elements can do to the development of our identities. When nothing is sure, when everything can disappear, when someone's deepest belief is just an accident of history, when no value has the chance of being respected, let alone protected, and when every work of art is just an ephemeral occasion that can be replaced by any other happening, then the individual person as a subject is the loser. What else is left to give one a grip on life, to contribute to the development of self-esteem, and to proclaim one's own value as a human being? There is no longer a self present to do the feeling.

In my book, *Arts Under Pressure*, I elucidate this with two quotes that I like very much and that circle around the question of the loss of identities. (Smiers 2003: 128) The writer Elizabeth Fox-Genovese throws light on the remarkable coincidence that "Western white male elites proclaimed the death of the subject at precisely the moment at which it might have had to share that status with women and peoples from

other races and classes who were beginning to challenge its supremacy.' During the 1996 Avignon Festival a theatre group, *Champ d'expériences*, had quarried a lot of corridors in a field near the century old city walls. While walking through those corridors the public could see many small performances, objects and texts. One of those texts since then never faded away from my mind: 'Let's ask why the word *alienation* has disappeared from the hit parade of current vocabulary to make place for *virtual*. In this conjuring trick, it is us who disappear; it is our existence that becomes virtual.'

People do need strong own identities, because without identity there is no difference, and thus no inter-subjectivity and reciprocity possible. The arts is a seminal field where we can develop our identities; by creating; by receiving or attending; by inhaling, or by denying.

The institutional cooperation

Not all forms of cultural intermingling are unintended, "just happen", as discussed thus far. There might be, on the contrary, a strong desire (or an urgency, but that is what we will discuss in the next section) to collaborate or exchange. Such a project was "through the surface", the collaboration of British and Japanese textile designers, but there are many more. For instance, the *kunstenfestivaldesarts* in Brussels. The word festival has been surrounded by the Flemish (*kunsten*) and the French (*des arts*) words for the arts. This is an expression of Flemish – Walloon cultural

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cooperation that, for the rest, is sporadic in this bilingual country. The driving idea behind the festival is that artists from many parts of the world, and from the Flemish and francophone regions in the country as well, contribute to the cultures living in Belgium and collaborate, and, when they leave, take stories and other sources of inspiration with them to their homes. It reminds us to the concept of reciprocity. Frie Leysen, the director of the festival muses on one of the questions that raise curiosity. 'How do artists let succeed and forge the marriage of the local and the international, like ropes grazing each other?' (Conference Kunsten92, Amsterdam, 13 February 2004)

There are other forms of intended cultural cooperation as well. Those have a bit more institutional character, in which states may play a more or less important role. Well known are the cultural institutes, mainly from Western European countries. Interesting examples are the German Goethe Institutes that may differ from character from place to place, of course. But, since the start after the Second World War, a decisive drive was to tell the world that the new Germany was not the same as the one that provoked the war and the holocaust. This desire caused the Goethe Institutes generally to try to link cultures with different sensibilities, without being only the export agency of German culture.

In 1997 the French president Chirac makes a state visit to China. While there he invited fifty Chinese architects to study in

France; this initiative became complemented with the establishment of a French Observatory on contemporary Chinese architecture where Chinese architects and students are regular guests. The French newspaper *Le Monde* analyses this as a phenomenon that has several advantages. It opens the Chinese market for French architects and enterprises; for haven't their Chinese counterparts learned to know them and their way of working and organising projects? The second benefit can be found in, what one may call the ideological domain. Chinese architects start to design according to the contemporary styles they have seen in France. (*Le Monde*, 2 January 2004) It would not be exaggerated to call this a one-way collaboration.

The decisive question is thus, who has more weight concerning the "exchange". It is rare that artists from Vietnam, for instance, have the opportunity to go to, say, Chile or Zimbabwe, while most Western artists can choose where to find inspiration. Rustom Bharucha comments: 'Indeed, the "crossroads" of cultural exchange are often substituted by the "inroads" of institutionalized interculturalism, whereby the South-South exchange is unavoidably mediated by the North. While it could be argued that these mediations are not necessarily undemocratic, I would acknowledge that they are extremely constraining because they work against the basic premises of voluntarism on which interculturalism is based as a theory and practice.' (Bharucha 2000: 30,1)

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One should have no illusion, Rustom Bharucha adds, 'that intercultural interactions can be entirely free from mediations of the nation-state. In particularly authoritarian states like Singapore, for instance, the state *will* inscribe its presence in the intercultural narrative . . . In short, there should be no false euphoria about the celebration of autonomy in interculturalism. The autonomy exists, but I believe it has to be negotiated, tested and protected against any number of censoring, administrative, and funding agencies that circumscribe the ostensibly good faith of cultural exchange itself.' (Bharucha 2000: 4) Should this reality stimulate an aversion to the state? With Rustom Bharucha one may wonder: 'If the nation-state disappears, what mechanism will assure the protection of minorities, the minimal distribution of democratic rights, and the reasonable possibility of growth of civil society?' (Bharucha 2000: 5) In any case, this is what WTO, IMF and World Bank will *not* do.

Sometimes it might happen that cultural "cooperation" is the only way states can be in contact with each other. A case in point is the cultural relations between Taiwan and Europe. Taiwan is according to the People's Republic not an independent state and is not supposed to have diplomatic relations and should not be represented in international bodies. Thus, cultural relations are a way out in order to keep relations open, nevertheless, between Taiwan and the rest of the world. That is not bad; it is what it is. In January 2004 French president Chirac commented on Taiwan's planned referendum on missile defence that he

called a "grave error". This was enough reason for Taiwan's cabinet to ask two of its ministers – the chairwoman of the Council of Cultural Affairs and the chairman of the National Science Council – to call off their trips to France aimed at promoting cultural and scientific links. (International Herald Tribune, 30 January 2004) A bright idea? I would not say so from a cultural, but also not from a diplomatic point of view.

Urgency

This Taiwan case brings us to the second reason for intended and desired forms of cultural exchange and collaboration. This is what we may summarise with one word: urgency. War and tensions are always possible, for instance between the People's Republic and Taiwan. The challenging question, however, is how to break out of the impasse? Pioneers can be artists. But let's first recognise that reciprocity between people and between cultures is not self evident. It includes the capacity to relate oneself to another and to accept existing realities. 'It might be clear,' Dutch scholar Dorien Pessers claims, 'that moral reciprocity as a standard for inequality functions only in groups and associations that have a high degree of cohesion and solidarity. The less a sustainable relationship exists, the more difficult it will be letting grow reciprocity. Immerse oneself in the unknown is by definition more difficult than in the person you know and who is more near.' (Pessers 1999: 32) Even one may pretend that harmony and rest are not the normal human conditions, but competition, struggle,

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power, revenge, vendettas; what one should call the negative reciprocity. (Ibid.: 35)

Rustom Bharucha might be right when he claims that, while ‘much theoretical work has been done on “desiring the Other”, relatively little attention has been paid to the somewhat bleaker prospects of being *rejected* by the Other for very strong social, historical, and political reasons. This resistance to an assumed reciprocity in cultural exchanges needs to be inscribed in our search for collaborations.’ (Bharucha 2000: 43) We know the many situations where the rejection is very strongly developed and causes threats, fear, poverty and bloodshed: between and inside countries (former Yugoslavia, Congo, Northern Ireland; Israel and Palestine; North and South Korea; and too many other sad examples all over the planet). The situation of refugees and immigrants should be mentioned as well who become marginalised, expelled, expropriated and oppressed. Also inside the European Union, certainly after the enlargement, peoples are relative strangers to each other, not to speak of the relation with their (new) neighbours, like Russia or Turkey.

Would it make sense to promote, exactly in those situations, cultural relationships and what could it bring about? Peter Sellars, the opera director, analyses that we live in a world without a centre. We feel the crisis everywhere. Can we succeed in a global culture? In Los Angeles, where he twice directed the L.A. Festival, people from more

than a hundred different cultural backgrounds live, in complete separation. The city is full of ghettos, and there is no communication among the people living there; like between Jews and Arabs. There exists no negotiation table; there is no zone for discussion.

This is the situation of many parts of the world. ‘Enemies must learn to speak with each other. Why are they doing what they are doing? How can we frame the discussion? Politics and the media are not longer able to heal the despair and the broken illusions. Both have made themselves silent because their only reference to life is lies.’ Only the arts, which do not simplify can keep the public discussion going. The Greeks went to the theatre to find answers on those questions. ‘That enlarged their view of democracy. In theatre they learned to analyse complex situations and they developed a feeling for complex processes. But this forum is effective as a mediator of public life only if an artist does not simplify. The artist must use his or her tools to let something be as multiple as it is. Someone in society has to stand for what is complex.’ One of the decisive questions is: ‘Where does morality brings you when you have to take action?’ (Smiers 1998: 185-8)

Many situations exist where there is urgency for cultural collaboration and exchange. Artists may be pioneers, setting the first step, under the conditions Peter Sellars has described. But, we should be warned, according to Ellen Shohat and Ro-

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bert Stam, that a radical, polycentric multiculturalism cannot simply be “nice”, like a suburban barbecue to which a few token people of colour are invited. ‘Any substantive multiculturalism has to recognize the existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment, since the multiple cultures invoked by the term “multiculturalism” have not historically coexisted in relations of equality and mutual respect. Multiculturalism has to recognize not only difference but even bitter, irreconcilable difference.’ (Shohat 1994: 358,9)

Cultural cooperation, exchange and intermingling, nevertheless, may be a great pleasure, and it makes sense: to recognise cultural differences, confront them, put them on the table. There is lot of work to do between suppressors and victims; between long time enemies; and, who is the terrorist, or can we get rid of this term? Is the Western feeling of superiority unavoidable or can it be melted down? The artists are not the only ones who can contribute to the development of positive forms of reciprocity. But, their craft is communication, and they present in their work exactly those layers of our feelings, emotions and rationality that do not become expressed in our normal daily connections. It is a chance to explore, to use and to enjoy those.

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