

Chimeras of Today and Corporeal Minds

“As one examines carefully this fleeting and permanent reality, one has the impression of exploring the night-side of societies, a night longer than their days, an obscure sea from which successive institutions emerges, an oceanic immensity of which socioeconomic and political structures appear as ephemeral islands.” Michel de Certeau ¹

Existing as wanderers of a global scale, today artists are able to *re-appropriate* the means of artistic production and locate themselves, temporally, at the center of the production of sense.² What is paradoxical here is the fact that, in many cases, we are facing an absence of the art object or at least, a re-elaboration of its means and ends. We are witnessing how the everyday has been taken over the art world and vice versa.³

Such re-appropriation is performed by a *minority* of artists that “have no model” because they live as peregrines, permeating not only artistic sites, but also non artistic sites. This *minority* (that could be a multitude), in terms of Gilles Deleuze, are becoming “process” (a flow); they are like lines of flight.⁴ Their presence is noticed not only in cityscapes but also in the *virtualscapes* of the global world. They are a horde that flows freely across the crevices of the system.

But, how artist, also as political subjects, are able to change conceptions concerning production, circulation, and consumption of the art object?

Contemporary Art Biennials, art festivals, and art events are rooted in the tradition of the world-expos, the cabinets of curiosities, and also in the *comedia del'arte* (a western precedent for street theater and performance). These events are based on the modern concept of “universalism” and the “international” and almost always take place at cultural centers, museums, or special selected venues, etc., in several of the network of cosmopolitan cities of the global order. A taxonomical force moved these events that rest on 18th and 19th century French and English enlightenment and colonial practices. The newly created academy of art and sciences worked with explorers and officials in expeditions to value the newly territories and peoples of the Colonial world. Empiric data plus reason established taxonomies in order to understand, evaluate, and shaped an efficient system of control and production in the colonial world.

In 1850, Prince Albert convened the committees to assembly the first World Exhibition, an event that would show the works of all nations. “A Universal Exhibition that would have every machine known to man.”⁵ The great exhibition of 1851 in London was conceived to symbolize their industrial, military and economic superiority. To make the exhibit truly international with invitations being extended to almost the entire colonized world. The British also felt that it was important to show their achievements right alongside those of “less civilized” countries. The Crystal Palace would symbolize not only the architectural

achievements of the empire (the exceptional building was built in less than a month and disassembled in a week) but also the harmonious and perfect use of new engineered materials (glass and iron).⁶

The artistic version of such events was fixed more recently, in Italy. In 1895 the Venice Biennial was founded as apparatus of capture of the art produced internationally (in the centers of production, mainly European by that time), and with the intent to recover Italy's past glory, during its modern colonial project. Establishing a center for artistic events, today the Venice Biennial is a mega-spectacle not only concerned with the visual arts, music, film, and theater, but also with the art market, cultural diplomacy, and cultural tourism. The incorporation of new countries in its structure of national pavilions, and the special invitations, are markers of the inclusion and/or exclusion of territorial, ethnic, or regional unities.⁷

Today art biennials, triennials, festivals, blockbusters, and international art exhibitions connected or not with old colonial circuits of power are mapping the production of art in the era of late capitalism. Some of them have recognized its connections to the modern project and are reacting against the old taxonomical institutions of art; the academy, the gallery, the museum, and the theater, becoming nodes among the flows of alternative artistic production. That is the case of events such as the Havana Biennale and the Arte Nuevo InteractivA, which, if well, using a parallel model (sometimes in contradictory fashion) are focused in raising consciousness on new practices that happen in marginal and border sometimes ex-centric situations. These events are establishing new routes, trades, centers, and flows of artists, critics, curators, local and transnational audiences. Some die out soon, suffering of lack of support and financial stability; the lasting ones become normalized and institutionalized.

In that case why do they contradict? Why do they act also as apparatus of capture? Why corporations, banks, and foundations as wells as national and local governments finance them? It seems that the way knowledge and history are produced is too pervasive and embodied in the codes of the West, a meta-narrative that is almighty and that is interested in the "new" as a way to deploy its own rhetoric of a better future. How come conceptual, body, land, and performance art as well as installation, video, and net-art were appropriated by the art market? How are they co-opted and capture by collections of contemporary art manipulated by major players of the art world? Is it not enough the return of painting (announced by many, among them Charles Sacchi with his series of exhibitions titled "The Triumph of Painting") and the new fetishism of postindustrial gadgets, video games, and movies? The bridge between *lo* and *hi* art opened up during a short period, today again the distance between them is unsolvable, or at least is a one way street.

It gives the impression, that the domestication of the flows, the codification of them throughout surveys, maps, scanners, fancy publications, cultural policy

(dictated from the embassies and Departments of state), programs of urban development and renewal (as in the case of Havana, Bilbao, or even the Tate Modern) and its selling by travel agencies, and circuits of cultural tourism is where the possibility of autonomy and independence succumbs. The recent boom in renovation and construction of museums is part of this trend.⁸ However, some believe on the potential of art to resist the old and new institutions, if it is true where do its force and potential reside?

Potentiality of Constitution

Contemporary artistic practices, away from the art market, are processes that allow us to follow micro-narratives of the present. These practices are embedded in the production and reproduction of images, objects, narratives, testimonies, and/or artistic actions related with the body and mind and its functions. In most of cases they are rooted in particular (minor) languages attached to cultural, political, and aesthetical realities, and traversed by global discourses. They allow us to hear voices, commonly silent, that act autonomous, sometimes against great-narratives connected to global capital. In that way they become not only events, but also actions. In his *Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau (1984) relates how cultural practices are tactics that fight against strategies.⁹

According to de Certeau, *Tactics* are narratives of action (theory and praxis comes to mind). *Tactics* can be inserted in the geometrical space; like biological interruptions in which the every day life presents itself throughout micro-narratives of the present (made by organic and desire machines and agents). On the other hand, *Strategy* refers to the set of rules, agents and institutions that control society at large the so called geometrical space. De Certeau explains that *tactics* are attached to what once was *popular art*, which previously was located at the basis of the social landscape. But popular art became fetish, and was sanitized through its codification by historians of popular culture. Its transformation into a reassuring object of learned nostalgia evidences its domestication. However, at first cultural historians were unconsciously avoiding to mention the early acts of violence that were used to control and alienate the “popular”.¹⁰ The state terror during the Paris communes reintroduced the popular as part of French culture at the end of the 19th century; State terror erased for decades the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s in the Soviet Union; State terror eradicated expressionism, dada, and surrealism from Nazi Germany; and State terror implanted abstract expressionism and its market as rhetoric of freedom during the first years of the Cold War.

Generation and *corruption* are notions described and confronted contemporary societies. For Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt generation is connected with the biopolitics of the multitude, “seen from the standpoint of desire, (generation) is nothing other than concrete production, human collectivity in action. Desire appears here as productive space, as the actuality of human cooperation in the construction of history.”¹¹ On the other hand, corruption is at the very center of Empire being one of its constitutive forces. In addition, cultural practices are present in form of *tactics*, which are the actions of the weak; acting

against *strategies* that are the actions of control and subjugation. These practices are located within the geometrical space of power. De Certeau uses the anthropological space defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the place of contingency.¹²

It is possible to argue that some of the “events-actions” in which, today, some of the most interesting art and artists are present are *generation*. But at the same time it can be argued that they have been corrupted by dynamics of late capitalism. It is possible that these alternative artistic events not only create sense, but at the same time they are negotiating their souls to power; a contradictory stand, in the best modern fashion.

It is said that science works directly with materials from nature, while modern philosophy used to avoid matter because it argues that materiality resists any constitution of rational form. Since Descartes a radical distinction between the “I think” and “the thing” (*Res Cogitans / Res Extensa*) was established. Matter and form, matter and spirit, have been located in opposite poles. Recent studies in neurological science and cognitive theories, however, are modifying this bipolar perception. Mind and body have always worked together in order to develop knowledge. The recent development of concepts such as *corporeal mind* argues on the plasticity of the human mind.¹³ Art as the archive of the present has always connected both dimensions. It produces *Chimeras* that address what is required to raise the collective body without organs towards the constitution of a better, or at least different, future.*

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday Life* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1984)

² Derived from the list of “political demands” of the multitude; *Telos* (reappropriation), is one of the demands that will signalize the raise of the political subjectivity of the multitudes. In Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg.402-406

³ I am proposing here that the practice of making art is part of what Negri and Hardt called “Living Labor” and/or “Immaterial Labor Power”. I suggest that such notions are inherent to the production of art and that they are categories included in its historical practice. For living labor (affective labor) see Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s use of the concept “Immaterial Labor Power”, derived from Marx’s notion of General Intellect, and Maurizio Lazarato’s notion of immaterial labor. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg. 29, 53, 290, 292, 364, 365.

⁴ Lines of flight are everywhere. They constitute the available means of escape from the forces of repression and stratification. Even the most intense strata are riddled with lines of flight. “Territorialities, then, are shot through with lines of flight testifying to the presence within them of movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.” In: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pg. 55

⁵ The committees putting together the Great Exhibition gave a great deal of attention to their system of classification. The British proposed a system that included five major divisions, such as Raw Materials, Machinery, and the ever popular Miscellaneous. Countless subdivisions and sub classifications were used to put all man had made into appropriate categories. In Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

⁶ In: “*The Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in the Victorian Station*” Accessed in April 8, 2004 from: <http://www.victorianstation.com/palace.html>

⁷ As a matter of fact in a recent interview with Okwui Enwezor and Salah Hassan they narrated their participation in the creation, after more than a century, of the African pavilion at the Venice Biennale. See, Miguel Rojas & Lucrezia Cipitelli. Interviews with postcolonial curators and art critics. (forthcoming)

* This is a short version of a larger text containing cases, examples and a further discussion on the issues raised here. It can be found in Arte Nuevo InteractivA07 web page.

⁸ In the last decade more than 50 new museums of contemporary art have been built. The New York Times has featured a number of articles on the issue one of the most recent talks about the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. See Caron Vogel, "On the Bowery, a New Home for New Art" & Museum Expansion, Coast to Coast. New museum projects at 46 institutions. New York Times, March 28, 2007. See also, Victorio Magnago L. & Angeli Sachs, *Museums for a New Millennium. Concepts and projects* New York, London: Prestel, 2000.

⁹ In his work *Arts de faire* (The Practice of Everyday Life), Michel de Certeau argues for a reconsideration of place and space. For him, place is where "the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own proper and distinct location . . . It implies an indication of stability." Contrast this then to space, where "one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. This space is composed of intersections of mobile elements." Simply put, "space is a practiced place". Michele de Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 118.

¹⁰ According to de Certeau, Julian, and Revel violence was exercised during the second half of the 19th century in France and spread over the western world to control the products of popular culture. In Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julian, and Jaques Revel "The Beauty of the Death" in *Politique Aujourd'hui*, Dec. 1970, pg. 3-23. Cited by: Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau. Interpretation and its Other* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pg. 132-35

¹¹ Antonio Negri and Michael Hard, *Empire* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pg. 388

¹² As de Certeau argues throughout his work, the agent of practice is the embodied self. He suggests that a physical place, say the Place de la Concorde, only becomes a space upon the consideration of human elements such as time, speed, direction; that is, at the moment its rigid imaginary boundaries are violated by self-determined agents. In doing so, he draws upon Merleau-Ponty's distinction between geometrical space and anthropological space, here meaning the difference between a Cartesian, objective space that can exist only as a ideal mental abstraction and a space that is invested with incarnate consciousness existing in the world, a space where people exist. This distinction reflects Merleau-Ponty's central concern in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: that Descartes's split between the body and the mind cannot account for the way in which we actually live, the way in which our mind is woven into our body, which are in turn woven into the world. Merleau-Ponty reworks Descartes, arriving at his incarnate Cogito, in which mind, body, and world cannot be separated. This geometrical space can be related, also, with the "disciplinary societies" described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1945)

¹³ Francisco Varela, Edward Thompson, & Ernest Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive science and human experience* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), pg.202. Cited by Carmen Bernádez Sanchis, "Materias y Memoria" in a paper given in the conference: La violencia y el mal en la cultura y el arte contemporáneo: Representaciones y conceptos. University Carlos III, Madrid, November 21-22, 20033. Electronic version used, accessed from: [<http://www.uc3m.es/uc3m/dpto/HC/AGR/\(2\)#\(2\)>](http://www.uc3m.es/uc3m/dpto/HC/AGR/(2)#(2))