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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/5673>

DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.5673

ISBN : 2265-9404

ISSN : 2265-9404

Éditeur

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 novembre 2012

ISBN : 1246-8258

ISSN : 1246-8258

Référence électronique

Elvan Zabunyan, « Distant Encounters », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 40 | 2012, mis en ligne le 01 novembre 2013, consulté le 03 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/5673> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.5673

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 3 mai 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Distant Encounters

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RÉFÉRENCE

Making art global (Part 1) : The third Havana Biennial 1989, Londres : Afterall, 2011, (Exhibition Histories). Sous la dir. de Rachel Weiss

Intense proximité : une anthologie du proche et du lointain, Paris : Palais de Tokyo : La Triennale : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2012. Sous la dir. d'Okwui Enwezor

Global studies : Mapping contemporary art and culture, Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz, 2011. Sous la dir. d'Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel

ARC : the magazine (art, recognition, culture), Saint-Vincent : Arc : the magazine, 2012, issue 05. Sous la dir. de Holly Bynoe

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Traduit du français par Brian Horihan

- 1 Referring to the Second Havana Biennial, held in 1986 in the Cuban capital, Gerardo Mosquera confirms the artistic issues prefiguring one of the major transitions in the history of contemporary art. His unequivocal position allows us to look back and consider how art works were received within the process of globalization and to grasp the essential differences between various points of view within the enduring West/Third World dialectic.¹ "The second edition, in 1986, reached a full Third World scope. It was the first global contemporary art show ever made: a mammoth, uneven, rather chaotic bunch of more than fifty exhibitions and events presenting 2,400 works by 690 artists from 57 countries. [...] More importantly : never before had artists, curators, critics and scholars from so many places – Beirut, Brazzaville, Buenos Aires, Jakarta and Kingston, to name just a few – met 'horizontally.'"² For Gerardo Mosquera, one of the event's curators since its inception, the historical character of the 1986 biennial was due less to its artistic conception than to the curatorial possibilities it opened up for the future. What he calls

the “internationalization” of the contemporary work of art began in a country that occupied a particularly unusual cultural and geopolitical position in the world. Cuba, thumbing its nose at the United States’ policy of economic isolation, managed the feat of organizing in 1986, then again in 1989, thanks to its diplomatic ties with a great many African, South American and Asian countries (at the time Cuba had an embassy in almost every country in Africa), two international art exhibitions that, for the first time, saw the convergence of Third World countries in a place that symbolized, paradoxically, both revolution and censure. The South-South Cooperation established among artists on an international scale following these two biennials in Havana logically reflects the development of a global economy. It is clear, however, that what these transnational exchanges set in motion goes far beyond what we think of today in the sphere of Western art as a “separate issue.” Postcolonial theories and the exhibitions linked to them suffer from what we might call a “thematic” reception, as if there were, on the one hand, works that logically belong to the history of European and American art, and, on the other hand, works that, with their difference, their “foreignness” (requiring the related disciplines of ethnology and anthropology in order to understand them), originate in some mysterious *Third World*.

- 2 It suffices for us to delve into the history of that exceptional event that was the Havana Biennial, recreated for us by Rachel Weiss and Gerardo Mosquera, to understand that the duality between “center” and “periphery” was not the Biennial’s primary vector. The curators, aware of their responsibility in organizing this monumental event, maintained an exciting, original position in which the horizontality of the encounters disrupted the “globality” of the art world. Gerardo Mosquera explains: “Around the mid-1980s, segregation was an essential part of the visual arts system. The periodic international art events already in place, from the Venice Biennale to Documenta, were far from global. This was not only because the participating artists were mainly from Western backgrounds, but because the events’ idea of art was restricted to the Western mainstream, and their organisers were not interested in exploring what was going on elsewhere. Thus the Biennial created a new space, acting as a gigantic ‘Salon des Refusés’ that involved most of the world, born from a spirit of action.”³ The reference to a “Salon des Refusés” obviously resonates strongly with those who think in terms of inclusion and exclusion. The analogy with a concept closely associated with the history of 19th-century European art, with its consequent artistic and aesthetic implications, is not to be glossed over when emphasizing the necessity of showing artists’ work outside the conventional circuits of cultural exchange and communication networks. At the same time, this necessity does not mean that the organizers of the Biennial consider the art “of the third-world” to be an ontological category in opposition to “Western art.”⁴ This point is important because it is precisely here that the paths begin to diverge. The theoretical and critical approach used to understand these works of art “unknown” to Western observers tends to isolate them.
- 3 Gerardo Mosquera quotes Luis Camitzer as saying that the Havana Biennial’s position was not that of “otherness” but of “itness.”⁵
- 4 Contrary to the Western approach where artistic questions are routinely associated with national origins (these serving as cultural and geographical markers that reinforce, or not, any number of stereotypes and preconceived ideas), the aesthetic judgement privileged by the Biennial’s curators depended on contextualization, in other words a thorough knowledge of the conditions of artistic production and creation. Only with such

contextual knowledge could the paradoxes experienced by artists in the *Third World* be understood. The cultural and artistic differences on which the Biennial laid such emphasis must be placed, as Gerardo Mosquera points out once again, in a postcolonial context in which art is “created and consumed internationally.”⁶ He reminds us, however, of the contradiction facing the event’s organizers: in bringing together the world of contemporary art, itself an essentially European concept, the Biennial was accused of being too “Western.”

- 5 But this is simply a matter of the labels that are always stuck to works of art as soon as they are classed within a certain genre or medium. The Havana Biennial brought together thousands of works chosen become part of “contemporary art.” In 1989, under the banner of “Tradition and Contemporaneity,” the event questioned these multiple accessions to multiple contemporaneities without however disclaiming what the notion of tradition had allowed to emerge. This is what R. Weiss means when she writes: “There were many different contemporaneities, because there were multiple histories through which the constituent locales had encountered the ‘universal’, many forms of neocolonial and pseudocolonial persistence, many different forms of what Okwui Enwezor has called the ‘terrible nearness of distant places’ characteristic of globalisation.”⁷
- 6 Enwezor had already observed as much in the catalogue of the 2002 Documenta exhibition, for which he served as artistic director, a full ten years before conceiving the title “Intense Proximity” for the Triennial he organized in Paris. The event’s concept was to investigate the analogy between curator and ethnologist, as he explains in the show’s catalogue, whose subtitle, *An Anthology of the Near and the Far*, itself echoes the many miles travelled by the artists in attendance. The two activities – that of ethnologist and curator – are related by the place that travel occupies in their work. “Every contact begins with a journey,” writes Okwui Enwezor.⁸ The reference is to Mary Louise Pratt’s idea of “contact zones,” also analyzed by James Clifford.⁹ Though when the latter reminds us that, for him, a journey is “a mingling of experiences marked by terms such as ‘diaspora,’ ‘border,’ ‘immigration,’ ‘migration,’ ‘tourism,’ ‘pilgrimage,’ ‘exile,’” we understand that it is not only a question here of leisurely excursions but of a grueling succession of spacial and temporal processes that determine one’s place in the world, here and elsewhere.¹⁰
- 7 The curator, like the ethnologist, is “condemned to wander.” Okwui Enwezor evokes this winding path: “the road begins by a series of detours, disorientations and disarticulations of cultural geographies. The map is continually being redrawn after each hurried reconfiguration. How is the contemporary art curator’s work involved in this process of cartographic disorientation?”¹¹ Gerardo Mosquera also mentions the dozens of countries visited in the course of meeting and inviting artists to participate in the Havana Biennial in 1986 then in 1989.
- 8 The condition for theorizing the relations between globalization and art will inevitably depend of the possibility of reconsidering our troubled times, “at once characterized and traumatized by the collapse of distances,” a collapse that makes differences visible, writes Okwui Enwezor¹². The remark is eloquent. It allows us to understand that, despite the aura and media attention surrounding such a major event on the French art scene at the Palais de Tokyo, and despite the inevitable (and sometimes inarticulate) reservations with regard to any attempt to introduce new problematics, this “collapse of distances” represents, for Okwui Enwezor, an affliction. It is not merely a question of inventing a new “thematic” issue around which to organize an art exhibition. It is rather the sign of a genuine effort to comprehend a profoundly destabilized world.

- 9 It is perhaps in response to this trauma of collapse that the expositions and symposia initiated by ZKM in Karlsruhe in 2009 and summarized in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* seem, on the other hand, to represent a retreat into a didactic and exhaustive undertaking that gathers together many similar points of view. The arrangement by theme (“Between Local and Global Markets,” “Contemporaneity and Commitment,” “Contemporary Art as Historical Discourse,” “Representation between Otherness and the Global,” “Art under the Conditions of its Production”) brings together articles by specialists (mainly European) whose research bears on the relationship between art and the global. While the Havana Biennials reveal with clarity and exactitude the birth of an art in dissent with notion of universality – which, with the emergence of a global potential in the process of becoming, has become utterly abstract – the ZKM’s efforts, despite the quality of their investigations, seem to have been reterritorialized within the official scientific channels – paradoxically already out-of-date. In a highly conventional manner, questions about the representation of the “Other” come back incessantly. Is it possible to read without flinching: “Representation of the Other is by no means limited to the almost fictive narrative of an exotic foreign land [...]”?¹³ Such a sentence, even as it clearly disapproves of such limits, nevertheless perpetuates the rhetoric that refers us back once more to the dichotomy between an “us” and a “them.” In 1989, Mirko Lauer gave a talk at the Havana Biennial where he evoked the dissensions between the “first-world” and the “third-world”: “This also has to do with the notion of a common situation within the Third World, a view rooted in theories that see primitive art as the expression of a shared savage mind.” He added, insisting: “The idea that the difference between the arts in the Third World are about geographical rather than historical difference arises from this: a determinism of what is natural and an indeterminism of what is historical.”¹⁴
- 10 It would be necessary to reexamine the approximations and clichés with which these notions of globalization continue to be treated, which would require analyzing in greater depth the paradigms inherent in these basic questions and looking more closely at books and journals published outside Western spheres. To this end, the annual publication of the *Sarai Reader*, produced in Delhi since the beginning of the last decade, as well as periodicals like *ARC (Art, Recognition, Culture) Magazine*, devoted to cross-cultural studies in the Caribbean Islands (the fifth issue dates from May 2012), enable its readers to grasp the necessity of maintaining an artistic and intellectual specificity while detaching themselves from a stigmatized identity. Although none of the hundreds of artists who participated in the Havana Biennials were identified by their countries of origin, and this has also been true of the shows curated by Okwui Enwezor (from the Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 to the Triennial and including the 2002 Documenta exposition), not a single article in the French press spoke of the artists included in *Intense Proximité* without mentioning their cultural identities.

NOTES

1. The term *Third World* (which, except when it appears within a quotation, will be written in italics and, when in English, capitalized) is used in the sense that the authors of *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, *The Third Havana Biennial 1989* has given it. Rachel Weiss, Gerardo Mosquera and Mirko Lauer use the term in a critical and historicized manner, where the *Third World* is symbolically composed of all the countries not belonging to the Western world.
2. Mosquera, G. "The Third Bienal de La Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts," *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74
3. *Ibid.*, p. 74
4. *Ibid.*, p. 74
5. *Ibid.*, p. 74
6. *Ibid.*, p. 74
7. Rachel Weiss, "A Certain Place and a Certain Time: The Third Bienal de la Habana and the Origins of the Global Exhibition," *op. cit.*, p. 33
8. Enwezor, Okwui. "Intense Proximité: de la disparition des distances," in *Intense Proximité: une anthropologie du proche et du lointain*, Paris: Palais de Tokyo; La Triennale; Centre national des arts plastiques, 2012, p. 27
9. Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eye: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Londres : Routledge, 1992 ; Clifford, James. *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1997
10. Clifford, James. *Op. cit.*, p. 11
11. Enwezor, Okwui. *Op. cit.*, p. 21
12. *Ibid.*, p. 22
13. Birken, Jacok. "The Content of the Present Volume", in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, (edited by Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz; Karlsruhe: ZKM 2011, p. 34.
14. Lauer, Mirko. "Notes on the Art, Identity and Poverty of the Third World", in *Making Art Global (Part 1)*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.