Artists From the Hell Screen: Reports, Observations and Other Disturbing Things

by Reece Augiste

In 1943 the Bulgarian writer Elias Canetti provided a disturbing observation: "I cannot look at any maps any more. The names of cities teem with burning flesh." In 1939 the European atmosphere still reeks of burning flesh. Ethnic cleansing is on the political agenda, a new Europe is being born. Maps, as they historically, contemporary or futurist, go beyond notions of national sovereignty and geopolitical boundaries. Maps help define national identities, epic narratives of self, cultural differences and racial belonging, out of which flows imagination and control. Maps too often are the cause of warfare and cultural genocides.

At a party I listened to an enlightening discussion on Europe. A man of the old European imperial school was forced to concede that Europe was now practising on its own people what it had for centuries practised on the "daiker racism", cultural genocide and barbarities. As he put it, "The beast had turned upon itself." Science descended, a few walked away, others plucked up the courage to say that war and death are part of the post-modern condition. The irony was not missed.

With the 50th anniversary celebration of Columbus’s Atlantic voyage of "discovery" and cultural decimation came the idea of the "new Europe," a Europe estimated to have 50 million people of non-European origin by the year 2000. Approximately 10 million already possess citizenship in a European state. Europe’s internal boundaries have been dismantled and it is now creating a new identity characterized by a sense of cultural unity shared by all its citizens. The byword is that we are all Europeans now. At least, that is the official version. It’s picturesque, pastoral and consumer friendly.

The Russian experiment of ethnic cleansing and the frightening growth in racial attacks from Rostock to London, Vienna to Paris, Amsterdam to Milan, makes it difficult, and maybe even suicidal, to believe that this new identity is based on some shadowed notion of "cultural unity." I see only further fragmentation, an increase in racial intolerance, inner decline and suffering.

This practice of racial intolerance, bigotry and xenophobia recently made the headlines in certain sections of the British press. Not another racist attack or some human foetus being banned from entry. It was the actions of a small group of art curators who ordered the bloodstains. In the spirit of cultural diversity and cross-cultural exchange, they mounted a touring exhibition called In Tension: New European Art. On display were the works of eleven non-European artists living and working in various European states. Their points of origin are as diverse as their current places of residence. Coming from the Caribbean, Iran, Africa, Latin America, China, Turkey and Lebanon, they found not only that their presence was not welcome, but that their art was not considered art.

With the Birmingham Post’s headline: "Tories Blat Exhibition of Foreign Art Out of Sight" and the Daily Mirror’s headline: "IM Art Show a Load of Nonsense," the bells of intolerance began ringing. Although most of the controversy focused on British Telecom’s $1 million dollar sponsorship deal with the South Bank Centre for British art shows over the next three years, the monetary factor was a convenient excuse for attacking the kinds of issues and subject matter that the artists chose to address in their work.

Attacked by Birmingham’s conservative councillor Alan Bainton, the exhibition was dubbed "...a diabolical liberty that we have to pay for this so-called art through our phone bills." If this is all BT can come up with they should spend the $1 million dollars on reducing the customers’ bills." This outcry forced the Bell Gallery director Elizabeth McGregor to respond, "I don’t know why Tory politicians are complaining about BT’s excess profits where they privatized it... I can only remain happy to debate the work we show, but I object to politicians condemning things they haven’t seen.

Even more alarming is the fact that this backlash occurred in an English city that attempted to promote itself as a European centre of art and culture last year. As the Birmingham Post’s art editor Terry Grimley said, "Conservative councillors... struck a blow against Birmingham’s international aspirations by condemning an exhibition they had not even seen." It is this parochialism, a product of the English village pump mentality, with its congenital capacity for always looking inward, of which in a paradoxical way the work on exhibition was a critique. In my estimation the In Tension exhibition was one of the best curated exhibitions so far this year. For their inventiveness, courage and capacity to provoke debate, and even wonder, the eleven artists have demonstrated that the racial factor is at the cutting edge of what is defined as the "new Europe." Again, in a strange twist of historical and geographical circumstances, the works on display point to new possibilities: what Europe may become once it is stripped of its privileged position on the custodianship of a singular truth. It is about what will happen to white ethnicity when the dramatic influx of new identities, formed as they are by a set of distinctive non-European attributes, are woven into the social fabric of European nation states and European culture in general.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in an essay, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," made overtures to precisely this new development when he wrote: "No one can say what will become of our civilization when it has really met different civilizations by means other than the shock of conquest and domination. But we have to admit that this encounter has not yet taken place at the level of an authentic dialogue. This is why we are in a kind ofull or interregnum in which we can no longer prosecute the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the skepticism into which we have stepped."
It is this skepticism that is fueling the upturn in nationalist paranoia and xenophobia currently engulfing Europe. And it is also this skepticism and its effects on transnational consciousness that will deliver a mortal blow to the current idealistic edifice which says that Europe is becoming a post-modern cultural space, where ethnicity, cultural plurality and racial difference co-exist. The post-modernist crusade against the hegemony of modernism has had its advances and successes, but its attempts to incorporate the post-colonial imagination into its general strategy against the grain of modernism only serves to highlight the theoretical and political limitations of post-modernism itself. It is incapable of addressing race or ethnicity as a concrete, lived experience. How does a post-modernist address the change in Bosnia: war as a post-modern condition?

This is the sociocultural context in which the exhibition has to be read and the controversies generated understood. Twentieth century history is one of migration and cultural displacement, whether or not the movement is the result of political upheavals or the search for inspiration in another country. From Gueggin to Modigliani, from Dolli to the African-American artist David Hammons (currently resident in Europe), migration and cultural interaction have been potent sources of inspiration for artistic production and cultural engagement.

Indeed, migration is the organizing theme of the work of Lebanese artist Bazzi Elref. Currently based in Amman, Elref’s installation entitled ‘Ararat Express’ was originally conceived as video-works and TV monitors placed on horses and carried to a certain location. An installation continuously mobile thus reinforces the themes of cultural flow, disorientation and the lived experience of exile.

Within the physical confines of the art gallery Elref has had to introduce a degree of stress, nonetheless with tremendous impact. Here we have a long line of video machines and corresponding monitors placed on wooden supports with an abundance of diverse images flooding across the screens: images of migration and cultural dispersion, of boat people drowning in the process of finding their own niche in Mekkah, political refugees, hoards of animals and an endless stream of people on the move. Suggestive and moving, Elref’s work is about the world outside the art gallery and what it’s impact on the artistic imagination, Ararat Express is about the ecological/ethnic/linguistic changes of the latter part of our century and a hint of the future cataclysm in the near. The contrast between hi-tech electronic displays and horses quietly grazing on dry grass in the background brings into focus Elref’s central motif of motion and the logic of migration/return.

Like Elref’s, the Brazilian Claudio Goulart is concerned with exploring in a spectacular way the experience of travel and dislocation. Goulart’s installation consists of 100 gold-foiled suitcases juxtaposed with images of conquest and exploitative brutality. These images of torture and human depravity echo the frightening canvases of Nirognome Besch. Goulart’s selection of images deliberately goes against the dominant representations that European artists produced of America. Commenting on this strategy, Goulart declared that “…most of these artists who made them (images) never left Europe and consequently their production is saturated with idealizations and is on the border, if not pure fantasy.”

Victor Meirelles’s nineteenth century painting The First Mass in Brazil falls into this genre. In deconstructing the nineteenth century fantasia, Goulart presents a series of black and white prints which depict cultural confrontation defined by the parameters of subjugation and cruelty. These images are mass executions, disembowelment and beheadings. Entitled It’s Worth Its Weight, Goulart’s installation is an ironic statement on contemporary Europe and its cultural genesis.

The cataclysm hinted at in Ararat Express we find at the centre of Felix de Rooy’s installation as it traces the origins of European conflict through a series of collages. Framed by de Rooy’s themes of racial tension, religions and languages, his work explores, through allegory, the seemingly disparate cultural and historical elements that define Europe’s symbiotic relationship with its illegitimate children. His use of brilliant light to underscore the religious intensity of his subject matter serves to highlight the chaotic and cataclysmic forces shaping the European landscape. In fact, these collages present emblems of European trends, conquest, cultural imperialism and remnants of its classical age. In a piece entitled Surrender de Rooy addresses the themes of life and death through a complex juxtaposition of shallow Greek statues and skeletal seminarians reminiscent of an Egyptian mummy, set against a luminous landscape of mysterious images. Pagan and subhuman, these images seem to carry a message of redemption through resurrection, while at the same time recapitulating Europe’s sense of itself as a higher civilization in the context of cultural domination.

This theme of cultural stigmata is most clearly expressed in another piece entitled Cry Surinam. Using a porcelain heater (an object common to immigrant homes in the 1950s, 60s and 70s) upon which are placed three artichokes, a book with Surinam written on it, a large human bone, a black hand with its mouth open as if in a scream, and an effigy of a Christian saint stuck half way down its throat, de Rooy expresses the historical terms of Europe’s relationship with its former subjects who now populate its landscapes.

However, the significance of de Rooy’s installation is that it is directly related to his Negrophilia collection, an archive of over 5000 items/objects of “Western popular culture containing representations of black people from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day.” Encyclopaedic in scope, the collection is a meticulous documentation of every racist stereotype ever propagated by the West. In fact, the collection exists as a...
archaeological site of the racial self and its psychic foundations in Western culture. It is a complex visual testament of the processes of cultural domination and its philosophical and political impact on the black self, resulting in psychic scars, ontological bruising, and spiritual fragmentation.

Paradoxically, the Nerophilia collection is also an inversion of the discourses of racial domination and dislocation in that it defies the psychic orientations of post-Enlightenment man in his relation to and representation of the racial other. It occupies a space of racial phantasmagoria, a figure of cultural perversion invested with a delicious identity. And it is probably in this context that the collection has its greatest value as a repository for the study, reflection, and analysis of Europe's historical and contemporary relationship with diasporic subjects.

Placed between the notions of cultural relation and historical demands is the work of Uruguayan artist Chukri Peyrul's, shown in Peru: The Dream of Babel. The grammar of her exhibits are so culturaly specific that even the phrase "Product of Chukri Peyrul" reinforces a hermetic discourse of the representation of the other. Its beauty is that it demands a reckoning of modernity by placing at its centre the desires of the artist and her work. The immediate, most striking thing about Peyrul's "prostitute" is the colour black. Every single object is stained with charcoaled or black dye and arranged in precise, systematic order. This fusing of objects (sculls, jars, crates, Diego and honda of different sizes) functions as an ironic statement on the West's obsession with exile as it struggles to exclude and maintain its grip on modernity as essentially a white aesthetic edifice.

Peyrul makes overtures to new possibilities of an "inappropriate culture" in which the guardians of modernity accept their cultural debt to ancient traditions and the aesthetic tropes of ex-colonies in the formation of modernity itself. But it has to be understood that Peyrul's chamber of objects is a call for recognition that goes far beyond the West's classical notion of "cultural influences." As is quite often the case when art historians refer to the primitivist forms and ethiestic tendencies in Picasso, her work is a recognition of syncretism and Europe's acceptance of acculturation as an evolving and intrinsic component of its symbiotic relationship with diasporic culture. In our modern babel, linked by satellite systems producing a circuitry of electronic images underpinned by syntaxes of migration and exile, cross-cultural translations become the new paradigm through which identities can be expressed.

It is in the Uruguayan artist Carlos Capelán's work that we encounter a subliminal expression of the self as Europe begins to fragment under the tensions of nationalism and ethnic conflict. In an interview with a British newspaper, Capelán declared the nature of his trajectory: "I'm trying to focus on the Western self and otherwise in relation to this self." But it is the manner in which he visualizes this relationship that holds the greatest fascination for it is predicated upon the historical conditions of a Uruguayan exiled in Sweden.

For the construction of his "chamber of identities" Capelán used 75 litres of mud carefully pressed over four walls, 400 old books, 40 rocks and an assortment of furniture with which he created a living room. At once private and yet public, this living room is also a museum that houses objects "with which we surround ourselves to establish our identity." Capelán uses old books mostly positioned in stacks held down by blocks of rocks; the mud walls are inscribed with quotations from linguistics, sociology, philosophy, art history and friends. Personal items invested with sentimental values are encased in glass cabinets. The room's coloration is further heightened by a siezia quality of lighting produced by reading lamps and triangular standing lamps. On the walls are also fragments of a tree root, elongated objects like bisso bones shells hung off the walls, hold together by black strings.

Capelán's room is like an ancient shrine. Devotional and ritualistic, it is a kind of cultural testament to the complex issues confronting Europe, issues pertaining to the recolonized self, cultural boundaries, linguistic borders and spiritual location. Ultimately Capelán's project is about making contact with otherwise, of forging through a dialogue free of the violence associated with xenophobia and cultural arrogance. "What I'd like," he says, "is to build a self that is not hegemonic - which is in contact with nature and with what is happening outside the home and which doesn't believe this culture is superior to other cultures." On entering Capelán's living room one sees a sign on the wall that reads: WELCOME TO MY ROOM. Capelán's room, like the work of the artists I have discussed and those whose work for reasons of space, I am unable to discuss, presents us with a nonhegemonic global vision of culture that is syncratic and shamanic.

Together or as individual pieces, the work of these artists constitutes a living map: a map of theush and its psychic foundations as we approach the next century, a map built on a new set of philosophical and cultural values. Perhaps it's the kind of map that Klaus Kuznitz would have liked to have seen.

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