

Burcu Dogramaci *In the last years you wrote and edited many important books on Exile, Migration and the Arts like the four volumes of 'Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts'. Can migration be a special source of inspiration for artists and influence their reflection, imagination or artistic concepts?*

Kobena Mercer Your question is straightforward but to answer it we must take care to think carefully about the reality of migrant experiences. The decision to uproot oneself from one's surroundings is never taken lightly. To give up all that is familiar in order to journey into a new world that probably knows nothing about you is to take a leap of faith. To migrate requires self-determination and courage as well as endurance when faced with a receiving society that may be hostile or indifferent because it only sees your visible 'difference'. But when we consider the huge responsibilities any migrant takes on their shoulders – feeling responsible to those left behind, such as grandparents, or those yet to come, such as children – one emotion felt most strongly in the migrant experience, I believe, is guilt, a kind of survivor guilt. Art is motivated not by the easy things in life but comes about as a result of an artist's quest to make sense of complex, and often painful, experiences. Because it is complex there seems to be a time period of years and decades, maybe generations, before such experiences become a topic for artistic reflection. Migrants don't start making art as soon as they get off the plane. As the first of its kind, your initiative in producing a special issue on art and migration is far-reaching and hugely important, and hence I think, to do it justice, migrant lives need to be approached with full appreciation of the width and depth of the big picture.

B. D. *If there is art which is migration specific how can the cultural origin of the artist be revealed within it?*



K. M. Let's reflect on terminology. If we are looking for «migration specific» art do we mean art that explores migration within the artist's biography or art that takes migration as subject matter? Rather than wanting to name a total package with one label, so that «migrant art», for example, might equally apply to artists with immigrant backgrounds, artworks that addresses migration, or audiences composed of migrant communities, I would prefer a more perspectival approach. It should be understood that migration is not specific to German-Turkish artists, for example, but relevant to all aspects of art at a time when globalization is intensifying transnational flows of peoples and cultures.

Let me give an example of why it might help to distinguish the artist's identity from the topic examined in the artwork. The Mediterranean is today a site of crossing for African migrants from Mali or Chad trying to get to Italy or Spain. This topic is the shared focus for Ursula Biemann's documentary film *Sahara Chronicle* (2006–07), for photographs by Yto Barrada and by Kader Attia, and for the installation, *Western Union/Small Boats* (2007), by Isaac Julien. None of the artists have the same identity as the migrants whose lives are being depicted. But in light of Attia's French-Algerian background or Julien's cultural origin as the son of Caribbean migrants born in Britain we can say their perspective may add an extra insight, even though the topic is open to everyone to explore as a contemporary reality with universal political relevance.

The expectation of visibly seeing the cultural origin of a migrant artist in every aspect of their artistic production is understandable when one is building a context for an identity that was previously invisible. More to the point, many audiences in Europe and America today may not be aware of the German-Turkish presence or may still have in mind such works as the film *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) by Werner Fassbinder, or the photographs of Jean Mohr narrated by John Berger in *A Seventh Man* (1975), which are now many years old, and worthy of our attention as attempts to bring the guestworker experience into representation, but which lack the migrant perspective itself. Where is the German-Turkish viewpoint today, not just in art, but in literature, in cinema, in photography? What are the driving concerns being voiced by German-Turkish identities? I believe an introductory survey exhibition would be beneficial to international audiences who are curious to know more about how Europe today is being hybridized into multiple variations by new patterns of cross-cultural translation.

B. D. *If we assume, at least for the first generation of immigrants, the concept of a hybrid immigrant culture in transition, the question arises if, in your opinion, terms such as «home» and «homelessness» play a major role for the art production of this first generation of immigrants?*

K. M. Being historically precise gives us advantages. When we say «first generation» what we mean for post-1945 Europe are the 1950s and 1960s when the ruling assumption was that migrants would assimilate. There was a cost/benefit idea that, in exchange for higher standards of living, migrants would give up religious and linguistic differences that gave them particularity. The so-called «second generation» questioned assimilation. Not only did they find that discrimination prevented them from being fully equal to their British or French or German counterparts, but they also wanted to value their «homeland» to gain a collective sense of «roots» and belonging.

Hence in the 1970s the rediscovery of cultural heritage conflicted with assimilation. By the 1980s, hybridity emerged to name the cross-cultural mixtures arising from different elements that were previously felt to be incompatible. But hybridity was not an option for the first-generation. This is why the private realm of the home became so important as a shelter from the cold and grey world of a hostile, and often racist, public sphere.

If we pay attention to the interior decor by which domestic space in migrant homes is filled with richly patterned fabrics, shelves displaying ornaments, trinkets, and family photographs, we can see that such taste is not kitsch but a visual plenitude creating an aura of fullness and richness in the home that «answers back» to the feeling of being metaphorically homeless in a society that rejects you because you look different. Migrants are wanted economically but unwanted socially. The communal space of the mosque or church provides one type of sanctuary, but in the privacy of home, one's aesthetic freedom of expression is maximized. *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* (2009) by Michael McMillan is a brilliant investigation into aesthetic choices made by first generation West Indian migrants in the UK. I urge you to consult this illustrated text as Dutch-Surinam and Moroccan homes included in the book as comparative examples can be taken as a chance to explore more comparisons in German-Turkish contexts. Also, we should notice that it takes two generations or so before artists and intellectuals can look back to their parents' experience of migration in the 1960s and see with fresh eyes the symbolic logic of cultural forms and practices whose meanings would not have been visible when one was a child.

B. D. *Memory is an important issue for the work of some German-Turkish artists. What significance does memory have for you, in the work of artists who have migrated, as a resource for subjective experience?*

K. M. The question of memory is absolutely vital to every type of migration. My research examines black diaspora art in the 20th century among African American, Caribbean and black British artists. Considering the importance of archives for neo-conceptualists like Fred Wilson, Keith Piper or Renee Green, or the imaginary «Africa» among 1940s Negritude poets and the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, the conclusion I have reached is that memory matters so much precisely because diaspora arises from the loss of an origin that can never be fully recaptured or reclaimed. We are dealing with what Lacan called a «lack» – the primal absence that activates the motor of desire.

What defines a diaspora is the involuntary nature of forced migration, such as the Atlantic slave trade or the Exodus narrative at the origin of Jewish diasporas. As sociologist Robin Cohen shows in *Global Diasporas* (1997), this coercive factor does not exist in labour migrations (such as the Irish in America and South Asian Muslims in East Africa) or in trade migrations (such as Lebanese merchants in Australia or Chinese businessmen in Latin America), both of which differ, in turn, from emigres and expatriates and colonial settlers. But whereas art serves nation-states by building monuments to the past (mostly glorifying war) that objectify collective memory into plastic, physical form, migrant cultures that are not territorialized do not «monumentalize» memory but carry it on their backs subjectively. Hence, being haunted or ghosted by undigested memory becomes a sub-

theme in black diaspora art. As I was saying before, art comes into existence as a medium for working through the pain of loss and absence. «Home-sickness» is the original Greek meaning of the word nostalgia and in his amazing film, *Nostalghia* (1983), Andrei Tarkovsky tells the story of a Russian translator exiled in Italy who bursts into flames at the end of the film, so strong is his passion for his homeland that is now painfully unreachable.

- B. D.** *Can plurality of mother tongue and homeland languages, or the experience of language based on several traditions and cultures, influence the work of an artist?*
- K. M.** Absolutely. Being bilingual or multi-lingual is obviously an asset in a global economy but the cultural richness of seeing the world in a multi-perspectival way – Edward Said called it a «contrapuntal» perspective – is one of postcolonial theory's key insights. For an artist like Mona Hatoum, whose family spoke Palestinian Arabic when she was a child, but who had to flee to Beirut, where French was spoken in her social circle, and who, as an adult, emigrated to London, we find a multilayering of languages. For such a child of exile, memories are «housed» in different languages, as Amna Malik states in her chapter in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* (2008), which I edited as a contribution to show that migrancy acts as a constant factor in all aspects of 20th century art.

If language does not passively «reflect» reality but actively influences the ways reality is «constructed» in discourse, then linguistic plurality is an advantage migrants may have over those dwelling in a monologic universe. The question of language not only raises issues of code-switching (for example, migrant kids speaking one language in private another in public) but also translation, which is central to postcolonial thinking. When art is understood as a practice of translation what matters is carrying over the tone of a voice rather than any one-to-one purity or fidelity that will fully match the original. Something is always «lost» in translation, which is haunted by untranslatability, but we gain an awareness of the creative process by which «newness» is generated from cultural differences. In studies of literary modernism, the view Raymond Williams took was that the immigrant experience helped de-naturalize the various national languages: for an Irishman in Paris like James Joyce, the sound and the meaning of words, the signifier and signified, began to separate and this is Saussure's insight into the arbitrary and conventional nature of the sign in language.

- B. D.** *In contrast to migrants from the former British colonies, who already possessed British nationality when they entered the country, Turkish migrants for many years and decades lived in Germany as temporary, tolerated, foreign workers. Are you of the opinion that this condition, and the knowledge of only being able to reside in the country for a limited period of time, can shape awareness of home and identity?*
- K. M.** What you are getting at here is the migrant's status as «other» to the citizenship granted by the territorial rights of belonging to a unitary nation-state. As we touched on before, the political economy of migrant labour was absolutely essential to Europe's post-1945 reconstruction. By withholding citizenship rights from guestworkers, government not only saved itself money in regards to housing, education and welfare, but also created instability in migrant communities (who might be vulnerable to deportation). I believe this precarious condition must be a factor in art production in German-Turkish contexts. To say multiculturalism has failed,

and just leave it at that, as Chancellor Angela Merkel did in 2010, is an outrageous neglect of the fact that there was no official policy to integrate guestworkers on equal terms and thus prevent social segregation. By being left to support themselves, it should surprise no-one that mutual aid and solidarity among German-Turkish people gave rise to ethnically-defined communities that are misinterpreted by the majority as being 'ghettoes'.

Such developments are forms of 'boundary maintenance', to use a term Sudesh Mishra employs in his book *Diaspora Criticism* (2007). Where the receiving society does not wish to dialogue with the 'other' or the 'foreign' but puts up barriers in the form of discrimination and exclusion, we can say the possibilities for hybrid mixing or for a cosmopolitan ethics (going beyond tolerance towards the shared enjoyment of our cultural differences) are also closed down when minority communities, in turn, thus become inward and defensive. Boundary maintenance inevitably blocks the cross-cultural flows that allow artistic production to flourish. What is needed, I feel, in considering the implications of your question, is an historical account, from the 1950s to now, of the cultural and political conditions that have shaped German-Turkish lives and the artistic and visual forms in which they are represented and narrated.

B. D. *How far does immigration change the historiography of a national art history? Should narratives which are based on a geographical or a fixed territorial border (Italian Art), (Netherlandish Art) be questioned categorically?*

K. M. Yes! As a discipline art history would have us believe that it was always existed and that its roots go back to Vasari. But as an academic subject it is barely 120 years old. Before Riegl and Wölfflin set out to find a so-called 'scientific' basis for research, art history took over from the 'amateurism' of collectors and connoisseurs at the height of 19th century European nationalism. When he called for 'art history without names' in his *Principles of Art History* (1915), Wölfflin was taking aim at the biographical cult of personality, but he also wanted to overcome nationalist and chauvinist stereotypes of 'Flemishness' or 'Netherlandishness' or 'Britishness' that prevented the study of art's universal forms. But what happened next was that formalist universalism then made it forbidden to talk about any kind of 'difference' – whether cultural, gendered or ethnic – and this attitude from the 1920s to the 1960s was only overturned during the 1980s.

This takes me back to an earlier remark: migration gives us a perspectival viewpoint. It is not an issue specific only to those who identify as migrants but is of universal relevance in giving us an alternative standpoint which does not accept the monocultural language of nation-states as natural or unchangeable, but as historical constructions to be deconstructed and reconstructed anew. In *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, Steven Mansbach addressed the numbers of emigre scholars who fled Nazism and migrated either to England (like Gombrich) or the United States (like Panofsky). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947) living in Los Angeles as exiles. German expressionism spread into Hollywood film noir and Bauhaus design influenced American architecture all as a result of such huge migratory displacements. Taking such a perspective further, we can say that the 15th century invention of easel painting that liberated painting

and sculpture from the church altar, and allowed it to enter the marketplace, signalled the beginnings of a modern universe where objects and information migrate with as much speed and impact as people and the cultures they carry. Because of the experience of having been «othered», the migrant's perspective can reveal aspects of art and its history previously hidden by discourses and ideologies that assumed nation-states were unchangeable.

B. D. *Is it possible nowadays to speak of «the» German culture? Does this approach not undermine the heterogeneity of an immigration society?*

K. M. But was it ever truly possible to talk of «the» German society, or «the» British society, or «the» American society, as if such nations had never been affected by migrating cultures? Nationalism always creates its own mythology where the nation-state is seen to originate in a «pure» birth uncontaminated by foreign powers. But it was only by means of war that most modern European nations were born. In the case of Germany, we could say the unification Bismark achieved in the 1890s created a nation then torn into West and East, after which a third «version» of a reunified Germany emerges post-1990. Three versions of national boundaries in one hundred years! But the work of ideology is to always smooth over such discontinuity and disruption, thereby creating a homogeneity that must be reinforced daily in the effort to reproduce consensus and keep everyone believing in the same old stories.

For me, the best account of nationalism's constructed character is still Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). By showing how print culture such as the daily news, or visual culture, such as flags, all helped to construct the modern nation-state, he demonstrated that the collective imaginary is a dynamic factor in all politics, whether left, right or centre. Art is political by default because in engaging society's imaginative life it is implicated in our ability to find alternatives to stories supporting the status quo or, at worst, it prevents us from even thinking about such alternatives.

B. D. *Whilst globalization is discussed intensively in German cultural studies and the opening towards world-art history has become a subject of interest, migration, however, as a topic of research does not play a big role in cultural studies at German universities. Is there a greater focus on migration in art history in academic research in the Anglosphere?*

K. M. Because of the formalist universalism that dominated art history from the 1920s to the 1960s issues such as migration are not readily accepted in Anglophone institutions either. What has happened over the past twenty years is a slow filtration of methods from cultural studies, via visual culture, into art history departments that previously would have regarded migration as a remote background factor only applicable to the social history of art. When I observe that more books in African American art history were published between 2000 and 2010 than in the 1990s and 1980s put together I feel we are at a tipping point, to which I hope the four books in my *Annotating Art's Histories* series also contributed. But art historiography is notoriously slow to change.

In my view, it is the «multiple modernities» thesis that emerged from cultural studies and the sociology of culture in the 1990s that has helped shift the balance. The first phase of postcolonial studies focussed on visual representations of self and other, whereas by shifting attention to the agency of appropriation carried out by colonized subjects who incorporated some aspects of

modernity while rejecting others, the more recent phase led by art historians such as Partha Mitter and Lowery Stokes Sims, in their chapters in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (2005) for instance, shows how different modernisms were also taking shape under various local conditions. The insights into globalization put forward by Arjun Appadurai, Ulf Hannerz, Jan Nederveen Pieterse and John Tomlinson provide us with geopolitical maps of cross-cultural migrancy that can be historicized so as to understand the complex entanglements from which diverse modernisms arose. In his 1990 essay 'Traveling Cultures', James Clifford gave us a repertoire of terms for conceptualizing migrancy – from the traveller, the tourist, and the flaneur, to the guestworker, the border-crosser, and the pilgrim. While there is the tendency to empty out specificity by saying we are all migrants now (a fate that befell terms such as hybridity), the fact is that the interdisciplinary labour of translation is just incredibly slow. We need to know more about why art history is so resistant to the postcolonial, whereas literature, cinema studies, media studies were all early adopters.

B. D. *In Germany there is intensive debate on the idea of so-called 'migration museums' and thus in Berlin and Hamburg museums should be opened or rededicated which focus on half a century of immigration to Germany. What do you think of the musealization of migration? What risks but also chances could they be in dealing with immigration and its images in this way.*

K. M. This is new to me as I was not aware of the debates, but a musealization of migration strikes me as very double edged. Following unification GDR materials were then put into museums as if to say now the Cold War has ended the whole East German way of life is a thing of the past. The writer Boris Buden commented on how the pedagogic instrumentalization of the museum also had the opposite effect of stoking *ostalgie* as a reactionary force. Is the migrant museum now being proposed as a tool for educating the German majorities but which, because it will display 'non-German' minorities, might also become a target and a flashpoint for right-wing xenophobia?

As you imply, the alternative is that there might be a chance to do memory-work, to pursue the production of what Foucault called 'counter-memory' as a resource for all the identities, German and 'non' German alike. If museums can add to such a process, then this would confirm my earlier point about the need for something like a historical survey exhibition addressing German-Turkish life over the last fifty years.

B. D. *How can one speak, examine or write about the work of artists with a non-German background without again adopting the practice of exclusion and separation? Do you have a suggestion?*

K. M. My response is to quiz the binary logic of A:non-A. Such rhetoric does exclude and separate because it is 'definition by antithesis'. On the one hand, it simplifies reality, giving us clear-cut distinctions that encourage action to be taken. But, on the other hand, post-structuralism taught us that whenever a discourse uses dichotomous and dualistic reasoning to reduce the world to binaries, we need to ask what is being repressed – cognitively and politically – by such either/or thinking? If we accept reality's contradictory character, such that seemingly antithetical elements may each be true and co-exist, then the alternative is to use an A: B logic – which is differentiation rather than oppositionality – and this introduces 'ambivalence' into the equation.

My suggestion, then, is to think imaginatively in the hyphen that both connects the two terms – Turkish and German – even as terminology such as German-Turkish (or Turkish-German) allows both elements to retain their individuality. We have a situation with the hyphen that deconstructionists would call a «double scene». The line that hyphenates the two terms – in African American for instance – acts as a bridge connecting two separate identities in the very act of keeping them distinct, thus forming a composite hybrid instead of a duality. (Postcolonial theory used to call this «the third space»; a bit like synthesis is to thesis and antithesis in dialectical thinking).

One hears the politically productive potential of such ambivalence when the two terms «black» and «British» are put together (even without a hyphen). Britishness can never be the same, and the equation of British nationality with «racial» whiteness is also called into question, by virtue of being semantically hyphenated with blackness. Will German identity be the same as it was before it was hyphenated by the language and culture Turkish migrants brought with them, as well as their food, their music, their religion, their attitude to life? And how does Turkishness in diaspora differ from national, cultural and ethnic identities as they are constructed in Turkey itself?

These questions are simultaneously cultural and political. When writer Salman Rushdie reminded us in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) that the word «translation» comes from the Latin for «bearing across» he said migrants, having been borne across the world, are «translated men» (I think he meant to include non-men, that is to say women, as well!) The task of translation is long and slow not quick or easy. But it need not be unenjoyable for it is on the basis of ambivalence in political discourse – whereby one sign may generate a multitude of meanings – that historical change is introduced into the world as a concrete possibility. The principle of ambivalence – whereby art makes us uncertain of what we see, so we have to look again and look again even deeper – is what also introduces a bit of newness into our everyday lives.

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