

## **Multiplicity**

*Euro-Med relations in contemporary artistic creation*

### **Charlotte Huygens**

The XI Documenta Art Platforms in Kassel featured an impressive installation called 'ID: A Journey through a Solid Sea'. The guiding narrative is a tragedy, long denied by local authorities, that took place on December 26, 1996, when a fishing boat with 283 clandestine refugees was rammed by its Lebanese mother ship and sank between Malta and Sicily. The creators portray the Mediterranean Sea as an unassailable frontier, 'the largest Mediterranean cemetery since World War II', confronting the public with the assertion that: 'No longer a vivid place of the blending of cultures and traditions, the Mediterranean territory has become solid, a place for the trafficking of fixed identities'.

The installation displays research results and methodologies visualising Mediterranean routes of passages, and various trajectories of identity visually map an ever-changing territory of processes (...) Europe's territorial, economic, and geopolitical identity, read through the cultural, fundamentally reformulates a new understanding of the European city and the forms of its representation as a collective mode of a spatial reflection and memory. (For a full description, see Nadja Rottner, in: Documenta 11\_platform 5: Ausstellung/Exhibition, Kassel, 2002, p.166).

The artists were six people united in a collective called 'Multiplicity' that was founded in Milan in 2000. By transforming an accident that was not even covered in the media into a deeply moving work of art, they drew urgent attention to the horrible consequences of cultures and countries becoming self-enclosed and excluding others. In its artistic vocabulary, the installation of *Multiplicity* fights indifference, expressing the desire to create a new free space for rethinking and re-establishing cultural relations against the backdrop of political reality.

Working as a curator of exhibitions in the Netherlands for the last fifteen years, I have witnessed great changes in international relations, especially in the past decade. Political tensions, massively heightened after September 11, globalisation and digitalisation influence the arts just as much as practically every other part of society today. The artistic expressions that cross the Mediterranean Sea, along with all forms of cultural exchange: these are framed by the new realities. They create not only the world of media and public perceptions, but also new conditions for artistic production and distribution worldwide. The arts reflect these conditions of life in general, and are subject to them; but they are also, by their very nature, charged with the urge to question these conditions and create spaces for freely expressing and debating the views of cultural actors – thereby paving the way for society as a whole to develop new visions.

### **Defining common ground**

Historically, relations between Europe and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Turkey, have been largely defined by what can be described as 'cultural imperialism' and more specifically as 'orientalism', concepts elaborated by Edward Said in two books named after them. The characteristics of these relations that go back to the era of the Crusades have persisted into 20th century colonialism. They are still very influential and appear in political discourses on the so-called clash of

civilisations. The imbalance of power in relations between these countries and 'fortress Europe' has created a longstanding and politically imposed frame that is supported by exclusion and confrontation, as well as by differences of socio-cultural and religious values. It is not too daring to presume that differences between neighbouring cultures such as Europe and the MENA countries are even more acute than those between cultures that are further apart: one quarrels with the neighbours, not with someone from the next block. Nowadays, however, the influence of economic globalisation and the powerful involvement of the United States globally are altering the perspectives.

Speaking of perspectives and cultural relations, Europeans – especially those from smaller countries like the Netherlands – should bear in mind that the distance between Amsterdam and northern Morocco is the equivalent of the distance between Tangier and southern Morocco. Whereas one is naturally inclined to remember cultural and historical differences between Holland, France and Spain, major differences between territories of equal size *within* a country are easily overlooked. In most countries, contemporary intellectuals and artists probably have more in common with intellectuals and artists in other countries than with their fellow countrymen.

As contradictory as it may appear, it is in search of this 'otherness' that most people cross the borders of their own country and go in search of new input to their personal lives and professional practice. On the one hand, they have a strong desire to get to know other cultures, and a sincere interest in meeting the representatives of those cultures. On the other hand, they are not seeking shared developments or common features, but whatever makes for difference. The danger, then, is that precisely those who actively seek cultural exchange will not succeed in establishing a balanced basis for exchange. The positive side of their attitude – the fact that they appreciate difference as enriching to themselves – remains a useful starting point; it is what made them reach out in the first place. One can conclude that, anyway, in Euro-Med relations it would not be wise to overlook these cultural differences.

### **Designing common ground**

Rather than remaining tied to stereotypically orientalist oppositions between East and West and overestimating their importance, defining common ground between Europe and the MENA countries would better serve well-balanced, long-term cultural relations. In this search for definition, questions are as valuable as answers.

Artists and intellectuals help us to evaluate our own world and question the prejudices that prevail in today's international relations. Cultural exchange seems to be needed more than ever. The intention behind *designing* common ground is to create and strengthen the conditions for cultural encounters in the performing and visual arts. While the process of reflection and debate should certainly also aim to improve facilities as a condition *sine qua non*, its starting point should be determining the right spaces for dialogue, the most inspiring meeting places for cultural operators. Where does the exchange have added value to the partners on both sides of the Mediterranean? In cultural heritage and diversity? In artistic freedom? In facilities? Nor should the process neglect to determine which perceptions or actual obstacles hinder the establishment of working relations.

For the debate to begin, a *multiplicity* of scopes of mutual interest must be formulated, drawn from the reality of today's art scene. It would seem to me to be more interesting

and inviting simply to place two opposing possibilities on a par (e.g. cooperation with the government or none at all, focus on heritage or on contemporary art, excluding the field of religion or embracing it) and then compare cultural practice in each country or region against this background.

Taking existing forms of cultural practice as the starting-point of a possible meeting between partners across the Mediterranean, we can discuss what a successful cooperation requires of both sides. My own experience of making an exhibition on Morocco provides an illustration of the contemporary creation / heritage dilemma. First, I had to deal with the obstacle presented by the Dutch association of Morocco only with folkloric tradition: should I then focus on traditional classical arts, or choose contemporary visual arts anyway, or show a chronological development from one to the other? Next I must decide whether to organise this exhibition of Moroccan art in the Netherlands entirely with 'Dutch eyes' (all choices made by Dutch curators and the standards such as to meet with the approval of Dutch art critics) or have the exhibition made completely by Moroccan curators and reflecting the Moroccan cultural climate. A challenge for the Reflection Group is to find a way – somewhere between the two ethnocentric possibilities – to formulate a desirable form of international cooperation, one whose results would still appeal to the public.

The Reflection Group can formulate and explore themes from various disciplines, including theatre, music, film and new media, design, fashion, and the visual arts. The ECF will be able to draw on its experience of a comparable reflection process involving South East European operators. After a thorough discussion, the outcome of the Mediterranean reflection process should serve artists and other cultural initiators in their efforts to establish lasting cooperation and intercontinental artistic exchange.

It is my sincere conviction that artistic hospitality improves contact with other countries as well as other cultures within our own countries. Cultural encounters, across the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, allow us to stay in touch with new global realities and find new orientations. Artistic exchanges enable us to share perspectives across borders, while challenging us to deal with cultural complexity and differences. Artists and artistic operators can and must offer the public a free space to evaluate cultural issues.

I hope the Mediterranean Reflection Group process on contemporary artistic creation will support open-minded cultural relations, as these are a condition for peace and justice.

Charlotte Huygens is curator of Arts and the Islamic World, and currently is a project curator for the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. The exhibitions she curates range from cultural heritage to contemporary arts. Her most recent exhibitions were 'Morocco: arts & design 2005', at the World Arts Museum, and 'Istanbul: the City and the Sultan', in the Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam. She also works as an adviser and guest speaker at several universities and cultural institutions.

This article reflects her personal views.