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Heterochronia & Vanishing Viewpoints

Art Chronicles and Essays

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Marcelo Guimarães Lima PhD, MFA, born in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), is a visual artist, writer and professor. He has exhibited his artworks in Brazil, the US, France and the UAE, and has published essays and critical writings on Art and Philosophy, Psychology of Art and on cultural and educational themes in the US, Brazil, France and Spain.

A Note on the Texts

The essays and articles here presented are revised, edited and corrected versions of digitally published materials. Most appeared in the *Panoptikon: On Contemporary Visual Culture* (www.panoptikon.net) an Internet art newsletter I edited since 2007, initially for the Visual Communication Department of the American University in Dubai.

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The writings on this book have migrated from cyberspace to print, they have been *re-mediated*, to use the expression by Dr. J.R. Osborn in his introduction to this collection of texts, thanks to the encouragement and initiative of Dr. Irene Barberis as head of Metasenta art center and publishing house. I thank her for this. — MARCELO GUIMARÃES LIMA

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INTRODUCTION

by J.R. Osborn

Marcelo G. Lima—Postcards from the Aesthetic Diaspora

'This is a historical lab, Dubai.

The city of the permanent diaspora.'

— M.G. LIMA

For over five years, Marcelo Guimarães Lima has been living and teaching in Dubai, a perplexingly global city populated by an expatriate majority. In 2007, he began sharing his aesthetic and critical observations online via the 'Panoptikon' (www.panoptikon.net). As Dubai's glittering skyscrapers stretched towards the sky, he kept his feet firmly planted on the ground: drawing lines and sketching figures that connect the frenzied project of globalized development with the contemporary experience of artistic production.

Dr. Lima's observations remind us that questions of Dubai's modernity are also aesthetic questions. Between the rise and fall of economic and political fortunes—the meteoric rise of Dubai as a bourgeois playground, the global economic crash, a wave of social network revolutions—art persists on its own pace. The autonomy of art modulates a timeframe in which the artifact and observer circle one another with shared subjectivity. As a city of monuments that briefly sat atop the world's imagination, Dubai locates the riddle. But its reflections are global.

The following collection travels smoothly from Latin America to Europe through Australia and beyond. These are not centralized dictates from the panopticon but scattered glimpses of the panopticon core. These multiple reflections on artistic communication point us toward a shared experience of imagination, possibility,

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and aesthetic sensibility. Through a continual process of looking inward, the diasporic position connects the dots and new figures emerge. Although the ball may move across the center of the field, the sidelines offer the best vantage point from which to observe the beautiful game.

Near the center of this collection, Dr. Lima introduces imagination as the common faculty of art and science. Both processes shape our sensory inputs into a string of signification. Signification here is both informative and constructive; it is transformative as well as enlightening. Dr. Lima is particularly interested in artistic signification as ‘the creation of the experience of possibility.’ His essays demonstrate that the viewing of art can be an experience of the possible.

“From now on all art will be Mimetic again, or will not be!”

— PIERRE MENARD

It is here that we may glimpse a ‘theory of art’ that resonates across the text (presuming, that is, that such grand claims can still be made, much less voiced from the outskirts). As touristic *flâneurs*, Dr. Lima guides us from the Italian Renaissance through the graf-fiti-pocked streets of São Paulo; from the gold mines of 1920s Peru into the gold-plated fixtures and crystal chandeliers of Abu Dhabi’s Emirates Palace; from visualizations of twenty-first century data to political challenges contra 1980s conservatism. We leave the baroque halls of the Louvre and step into the bustling noise of a modern day traffic circle. Circling the intersection of advertising and public art, signs point toward the shifting gaze of Emirati painting, the vistas of photographic surrealism, the liberatory vision of a cyborg transhumanism, and the silent echoes of Japanese calligraphy. Choosing an exit at random, we return to a darkened chamber,

decorated with the aesthetic scraps of industrial Dubai.

This book freezes a shifting environment; it materially remediates the online Panoptikon series. These writings appeared in digital form during the period of 2008-2011. The blog posts were linked to other sites, re-linked from other sites, and embellished by comments and user input. As digital entities, they continue to shift and evolve in a networked ecology. Yet, it is fitting that they also gain new life, and a new temporal presence, in book form.

The book is a curious artifact: historically significant, temporally experienced, radically memorable, prematurely pronounced dead, refreshed, reissued, and persistently stubborn in its resurrection. Like works of art, books communicate autonomously from the external passage of time. The book provides a material portal into moving currents of signification which are paradoxically bounded from the world in which the artifact dwells and circulates. As a curatorial collection, this book isolates its contents from the flows of networked information and organizes them in a visual array. As a gallery of informational art, it allows us to view the displayed works side by side. The juxtaposition introduces us to the themes and palette with which Dr. Lima works.

As we flip these pages, we enter his experience of possibility. We are displaced through new sensibilities of artistic communication and hetero-synchronous time. Dr. Lima has sent us an invitation to join him in the permanent diaspora. These works are the Derridean postcards of an aesthetic *dérive*. They imitate and remediate artistic discovery. In doing so, they also record a global journey upon which we have recently (or long ago) embarked and which the possible destinations are yet to be imagined.

LEON GOLUB & NANCY SPERO:
ARTISTS FOR OUR TIME

Leon Golub (1922-2004) & Nancy Spero (1926-2009)

I saw Leon Golub's works for the first time in the mid-1980s at the University of New Mexico where I was a graduate student in the Fine Arts Department. An exhibition of his large paintings of the Vietnam War and his *Gigantomachia* series was held at the University museum. It caused some internal controversy among faculty, as well as a few negative reactions within the somewhat provincial cultural atmosphere of the city of Albuquerque, amid the rising conservative political climate of the time.

Meeting Golub through one of his personal friends—an Art History professor in my department—was, for me, a surprise. Here I was facing a 'big name' of the New York art scene who, to my amazement, was a genuine and unassuming person. What immediately impressed me was his personal integrity. He was an affable man, at ease with himself, lucid about his creative choices and artistic path, and at ease with the notoriety that his polemical series of big canvases on political subjects had brought him at the time. The contrast in personality and attitude to other 'big' or not-so-big names of New York artists and art critics that had visited the University during my period as a Fine Arts student was indeed striking. The contrast in Golub's personal attitude to what I had previously experienced within the general atmosphere of the American arts sub-culture of the time was intriguing. And I became interested in the person of the artist, after I had experienced the provocative power of his work.

Golub's large 'raw' paintings challenged not only 'mainstream' political views, they also challenged commonly held assumptions and ready-made ideas about what art works are supposed to be and

what they are supposed to do or not do. Here was, in my view, an important artist worlds away from the generic individualism, the cult of mundane success, and the generalized intellectual *arrivisme* (coupled with a narrow specialization of interests and perspectives) that constituted my common experience of the 'art world' in the US (as well as in other places I had lived and worked in before). This experience was even at times reflected or recreated, *mutatis mutandi*, in the microcosm of the art school's 'ethos' and atmosphere. Yet here was an artist who was not just another fashionable 'provocateur', but someone genuinely and deeply involved, through his paintings, in the philosophical matters of art, and above all, in the question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. This was the start of a friendship.

On my first visit to his studio in New York, I also met Nancy Spero. The impression I had was of two clearly different and yet very similar individuals sharing a common attitude and common goals—two creative individuals and political beings sharing a core of common values and a common praxis in life and in art. In the studio, I saw a series of dark and powerful paintings by Nancy from the time when the couple lived and worked in Europe. In some respects, I believe that the works on paper, prints, drawings and installations which she became known for later in her career all take their energies from and elaborate upon the powerful works of this earlier period.

In the early 1990s I was a visiting artist and scholar at Rutgers University. I renewed my contacts with Golub, who was a professor at the school of Fine Arts. He was in the last year of his teaching career at Rutgers, and I was able to participate in one of his graduate seminar classes as a guest, and also to speak on a panel he organized on issues of art, politics, cultural imperialism and the internationalization of art. He visited me a few times at my small studio in

the printmaking lab; we exchanged ideas about my work, and in a couple of visits to his New York studio we exchanged a few ideas about his paintings. We also traded prints. The asymmetries of our professional conditions played no part in those exchanges. One night he and Nancy invited me to Soho to hear a public poetry presentation by Amiri Baraka, who I knew by name as a playwright, but not as a poet. I was indeed pleasantly surprised by the intensity and formal vigor of the poet's work. My spontaneous comment at the end of the recital: 'There is indeed intelligent life in America! We just found it!' greatly amused my friends. I realized that to find that kind of life of the mind in the New York of the 1990s was not a task that I could have accomplished by myself. For this I needed the guidance of Leon and Nancy.

During my years of teaching in the US, I had occasional contacts with Leon via phone and short letters and messages. I also attended a couple of his and Nancy's openings in New York and in Chicago. His letters of recommendation helped me at the beginning of my teaching career. At some professional episodes in my teaching life, of the more or less common kinds in academia, I had his letters of active support. I was in those moments, though we worked in different places, a colleague that he respected and supported.

The careers of both Leon Golub and Nancy Spero spanned several decades—two careers built in the US, as well as in Italy and in France, where they lived for more than a decade in the 1950s and early 1960s. As 'art exiles' in Europe at the time, they found a receptive environment to their artistic ideas and subjects, far removed from the various ideological and artistic formalisms, including the conceptual variety, more or less dominant at that time in the American art scene. In my opinion, Leon and Nancy's cultural sensitivity also set them apart, as did Leon's unassuming intellectual sophistication, and I believe that these characteristics

were confirmed and further developed by their experiences abroad.

Their return to the US in the mid-1960s also marked a period of political activism that nurtured and invigorated their art.

Recognition came to both artists in the 1980s, in the so-called 'pluralistic' era of the arts. A time that, in contrast, marks the beginning of the long night of Republican ideological hegemony in American politics. Here we see the beginnings of Reagan's ultra-reactionary policies that promoted mass killings and wars in Central America, as well as in other parts of the world. This period marked the beginning of both that 'religion' of market ideology also known as *TINA thinking* ('There is No Alternative')—a political program disguised as a statement of fact), and active practices of economic intervention at a global scale. These interventions were later known as 'neoliberal' policies, the ultimate consequences of which we have all experienced in recent years and will certainly experience for some time to come.

The 1980s was a time of more or less contradictory paradigm shifts in the arts. It was also a time during which Golub's series on torture as State policy and intervention in Latin America, and Spero's explorations of sexual politics, of female political identity and struggles, offered a visual counter-commentary and criticism of the *zeitgeist*. Nancy's work was both counterpart and complement to Leon's colossal paintings. Her gestural drawings and prints presented the paradox of human corporeal fragility as the ground and source for the power of resistance: scars, fluids and the matter of the body were transfigured into the graphic rhythms of a metaphorical space of surfaces, of the external, the point of contact between the bodily self and reality. As in Golub's paintings, a classical sense of corporeal dynamism and expression as the externalization of inner powers informed the artist's works.

The notice of Leon Golub's death reached me while I was away

from the US in 2004. Nancy Spero later passed away in October 2009. Today as in the past, the all too familiar shifts and turns in the art world, modeled in the manner and method of strategic market practices and values, continue to produce their effects. And yet, below superficial agitation, there are always deep currents. Today, the life of the great majority continues to be or has become again, even in the hegemonic economies, a life of anxieties and of daily and difficult struggles for existence. In this time of present uncertainty and future dangers in the making, the legacy of Leon and Nancy's works may speak once again, and with renewed significance.

Beyond the specificities of their formal and conceptual contexts, these works and the artists who produced them, show us the concrete example of a contemporary 'Pascalian wagering' in the arts. Here, despite the limited powers of the human spirit, and within the uncertainties of our all too human condition, one assumes all the risks of confronting the powerful forces that dehumanize us and 'deconstruct' the very roots of our common humanity and shared destiny. Facing an increasingly hostile and senseless world, we, like Pascal's believer, have everything to gain by assuming that our present predicament was produced not by blind fate, as a kind of inevitable natural calamity, but by human choices that can and must be altered and redressed. Like Pascal's uncertain believer, and from within all crucial experiences of radical human destitution, we have nothing to lose but our despair.

To give visible form to our indignation is indeed no small accomplishment: it is to fight against moral anesthesia and programmed indifference. The example of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero's works may remind us of the classical philosophers' ancient lesson: that the ethical and the aesthetic are but two faces, or two designations of one and the same human reality.

Martin Chambi (1891-1973)

At 14, Martin Chambi worked in the gold mines that the British exploited in his native Peru. He learned the rudiments of photography from the same foreign bosses. He became a professional photographer working on commissions, especially portraits, as well as on his own, photographing the land and his people. As Alfredo Suru observed in a recent note¹, the commissioned works served to fund his passion for documenting his time and culture.

In Chambi's works, photography is both the medium and the index, the tool and the testimony of the modern developments that affected the Peruvian nation and its peoples in the early decades of the 20th century.

Chambi's works capture and re-display moments of coexistence between the past and a present in transition, that is, a time internally divided between what was and what will come. Split between being and becoming, the present is no longer identical to itself: it is a time of non-identity. And yet, life goes on as a homogeneous duration. The paradox of lived time, like photographic time itself, is that, in many ways, it is a time that does not pass. The place of photography is located between the already gone and the always (t)here.

One of the remarkable elements of Chambi's photography (perhaps we can say this without too much exaggeration) is indeed the power of amalgamating in one and the same look, gaze or regard, the modern and the 'ancestral', technology and the 'soul'—that is, photography, the image-machine, and the spirit or the 'aura' of a people, a place and a culture. A *culture*, that is, a specific form of life, a unique form of humanity is made visible by the photographer.

The ‘aura’, that is, an emanation of light that frames a unique pattern, a momentary and original configuration, both instantaneous and timeless.

Chambi the photographer is himself the bearer of modernity, of a new vision to and of his culture. The photographer is like an intruder or trespasser in his own land. And yet the look, gaze or regard in his works is reciprocal, a kind of dialogue between the artist and his subjects, a commerce of places between the observer and the observed. In this case, the photographer is simultaneously an external observer and an internal one. The aesthetics of genre and of the picturesque becomes a medium of reversal—the foreign gaze may serve as a tool for self-reflection. Chambi’s subjects gaze at the photographer with a similar ‘mechanical’ gaze, equally focused and intense, yet at the same time as ‘distracted’, indifferent or suspended, as the vision of the camera.

The indigenous photographer does not simply ‘deconstruct’ photography, romanticism and genre: he uses them to his own ends. His is an implacable logic of the instrument or medium as such. Photography may indeed register time and culture with enough objectivity, because it is in itself a collective enterprise, a collective medium implying in every shot a multiplicity of points of view, including the photographer’s, his subjects and viewers. Photography’s multiple gaze can express the infinite forms and modulations of human experience—all unique and yet equivalent, that is, eminently translatable in the image. Time itself translates its many dimensions in the forms of photography.

Chambi’s oeuvre is a large collection of postcards documenting the people and the landscape of Peru. In this vast collection, the photographer transits effortlessly from public display to private visions. In the postcard as a form, the image is a mediating point between the gaze of the other and vision as a subjective

recollection. The photographic image reveals human vision as a relation of exchange between two absents. It gives itself to a third absent: the postcard addresses itself to the future.

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Available at: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-3815-2010-05-06.html>

From the 28th of February through the 5th of June 2011, the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City presented the exhibition *One Without the Other: Travel Photography and Films by Rufino Tamayo*. One of the most important Mexican artists of the 20th century, Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991) had a long career, and was recognized both in his country and internationally. With artistic as well as personal roots in his native Mexico, Tamayo, of Zapotec descent, was also a cosmopolitan artist who, through the demands of the profession and through his own personal and artistic ambitions and goals, lived and worked in the US and Europe for various decades. Invited to exhibit in prestigious museums and galleries around the world, he traveled constantly.

The present exhibition of his travel photographs and films discloses an intimate aspect of the artist's life: his records of visits to countries and cities across the globe. His involvement with photography and film, as observed by the curators, is, on the one hand, that of an amateur or everyday user of the ordinary media of photography and film in the cultural-industrial context of 20th century life. On the other hand, something of the artistic vision and the poetic world of the master painter also comes through in this collection of images that we could perhaps characterize (following some remarks in the brief interview-presentation by the Museum director and co-curator of the exhibition, Juan Carlos Pereda) as unselfconscious, or also as 'vernacular' or 'quotidian'. They are visual records from different periods in the life of the peripatetic artist and were not intended for public view.

Given the exhibition materials, introduction, interviews, prefaces and images available on the museum website and in the museum's digital newsletter, it is not clear how one is to connect

the occasional or amateur photographer and filmmaker with the celebrated professional painter or how to link the images that are the focus of the present exhibition with Tamayo's painted oeuvre. Perhaps the best way to characterize the exhibition is to follow some of the questions introduced by the curator Alejandro Cesarcó. The exhibition presents one more aspect or element in the extended panorama of Tamayo's life and work: a peripheral element, and yet an element inhabiting and disclosing a particular territory 'in-between' the public and the private. We can observe that this territory is one of exchanges and passages that may demonstrate that, contrary to appearances, the One is really never without the Other.

In their very 'secondary' nature (as a kind of 'secondary elaboration' of his 'primary' artistic interests, themes and concepts) these photographs may provide clues that help enrich our understanding of the man and his work. This may be possible precisely because these images are presented in the very place primarily dedicated to the artist and his art, to the *presence* of Rufino Tamayo.

Tamayo's photographs of New York, Thailand, Guatemala, etc. are on one hand markers of vision, documents of that absorption of the visible world proper to the painter's eye and experience. And yet, the painter can indeed become a master of vision only by a process of exchange in which his own point of view is absorbed and transformed by the 'point of view' of reality. In this process, vision is made flesh and confounds itself with all things, with the matter of reality. Subjective vision is absorbed into the general point of view of the world and the painter's images become mirrors in which the world discloses or 'paints' itself. In this way, the art of the painter turns into the 'self-representation' of reality. It becomes the endless search, as revealed in these photographs of the artist Rufino Tamayo, for another point of view, that is, the point of view of the

other, the search for another vision. In many ways, the art of the painter as much as that of the photographer, has essentially to do with a capacity for 'self-effacement', the production of the artist's own absence as the condition to bring about, to disclose the face of the real as the reality of a presence.

In this sense we can say that the photographs of Rufino Tamayo, in their exploratory nature, their somewhat 'unguarded' and tentative or quasi-spontaneous dimensions, display, as a counter-mirror to the artist's established works, an essential element of the constantly uncertain and perilous ways of art. As to remind us that the artwork is always the echo, the permanently 'precarious' result, the momentary synthesis, the provisory 'documentation' of a quest, of the *adventure* of the visible.

‘THIS IS THE COLOR OF MY DREAMS’

*Surrealism, Photography and Film at
the Centre Pompidou, Paris*

‘La Subversion des Images’, Centre Pompidou,
September 23, 2009 – January 11, 2010

Ceci est La Couleur de Mes Rêves a painting by Miro dated 1925, opens the exhibition ‘La Subversion des Images’ (The Subversion of Images) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The word ‘Photo’ is painted on the upper left side of the work; a spot, a blob of blue paint occupies the lower right under which we read the inscription: “This is the color of my dreams”. It is indeed fitting that an exhibition focusing on the relationship between Surrealism, photography and film would start with a painting: the work of Miro recalls the common surrealist strategy of contrasts and conflation of language and image, exemplified in Magritte’s celebrated *This is Not a Pipe*. And it discloses the profound surrealist intuition of the inner identity of all forms of human expression in the common stock, the common ground and common denominator of the imagetic mind.

The surrealist image attempts to short-circuit the distinction between the substance and the form of representation by playing upon (by both extending and contracting) the distance between the sign (or the icon as subsumed within a given significant system) and its supposed, intended or anticipated meaning. The written word as imagined in the painting of Miro is language itself finally revealed in its essential nature, namely, as a specific form of the imaginary. And the image, grounded in the free workings of the human mind—fixed and yet unstable as in photography, mutable and yet constant as in film—reveals itself essentially as ‘abstraction’: the image, that is, thought itself.

Photography, the mechanical image, can be called an *allographic* form in contrast to the autographic dimensions of, for instance,

drawing, painting and sculpture. In the hands of the surrealist artists, photography, the most ‘subject-less’ form of image production, turns into a universal interior mirror. And yet, here the most intimate, as represented in the work of the surrealist artist-photographer, is what was already inscribed and disclosed in the real. It befalls to photography to unveil what is already there ‘in the open’ and yet ‘unseen’, that is, still unrevealed as the other dimension of reality or, more specifically, reality itself, that is, our own ‘all too human’ condition as the ever evolving process of becoming other.

The image is disclosure, unveiling, revelation. This can be attested either in the form of the instantaneous photograph, such as in Dora Maar’s *Untitled*, 1935, a street scene snapshot of a man (a worker?) on the sidewalk with his head disappearing inside a sewer hole or in the form of elaborations on photographic montage and on different techniques specific to the various elements and moments of the photographic process. In both these forms, the surrealists explore the technical dimensions of photography in order to de-familiarize the documented reality, and to test the ground and limits of the photographic process and the photographic image (this includes the use of collage and hybrid forms).

Close to 400 works (photography, film, collage, printed works, drawings and documents) were shown in various thematic spaces entitled, for instance, Anatomies of the Image, The Scopic Pulsion (on the desire to see), The Theater of Unreason. The artists include, among others, Man Ray, Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun, Raoul Ubac, Jacques-André Boiffard, Maurice Tabard, Paul Eluard, André Breton, Antonin Artaud, Georges Hugnet, Léo Malet, Victor Brauner, Artür Harfaux and Benjamin Fondane. The film section presents the works of Luis Buñuel, Man Ray and Germaine Dulac.

For us, one of the most interesting results of this relatively

large group of photographic and photography-related works is the understanding of Surrealism as, properly speaking, a collective creation, stressed by the ‘anonymity’ or ‘impersonality’ proper to the medium of photography and film. The collective surrealist action was indeed emphasized by Breton, and is the theme of one of the exhibition spaces. It gains however an added dimension when we connect it to our present context, and to what the French call “les nouvelles technologies de l’esprit”. The new technologies of the mind in the late 20th and early 21st centuries raise the question of a new collective intelligence defined as “une intelligence variée, partout distribuée, toujours valorisée et mise en synergie en temps réel”¹ — “a versatile intelligence, distributed everywhere, always valued and synergistically related in real time”.

We can observe that the surrealist collective action and collective work have anticipated in significant ways the new conditions of what we might today call a ‘collective creative intelligence’, an aesthetic and artistic collective mind at work within the potentialities of a new technological environment of communication and exchanges — a new cultural universe being born amid the paradoxes and the conflicts of the present. It foresees in the arts, beyond the ambiguities, impasses and contradictions of our current situation, and beyond the restrictions and limits of the existing domain of the arts today as a socially and ideologically structured, a new collective artist in the making.

We can therefore, building upon the first essays of a new art by the surrealists, reformulate and complement Breton’s “*la beauté convulsive*” with a new ‘*la beauté collective*’: from now on all art and all beauty will be the work of everybody, and belong to all and everyone, ‘or will simply not be’.

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1. Levy, Pierre, 1995, *Pour l’Intelligence Collective*, Le Monde Diplomatique, October, Available at: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1995/10 LEVY/1857>

Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese

The exhibition, *Titien, Tintoret, Véronèse... Rivalités à Venise*, officially translated as, ‘Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese... Rivals in Renaissance Venice’, presented at the Louvre Museum between September 2009 and early January 2010, examined the context of professional life in the visual arts in 16th century Venice as a way to more completely understand some important internal aspects in the evolution of Venetian painting during that period. Initially conceived by Frederick Ilchman and shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston between March and August 2009, the exhibition was expanded and developed into its final form thanks to contributions by the curators Jean Habert and Vincent Delieuvin in Paris.

The artistic relationships between the celebrated Venetian masters can be better understood, according to the exhibition’s concept, when related to the context in which these renowned painters developed their professional activities—a context marked by competition, rivalries, disputes, shocks and alliances between individual artists and their artistic factions, admirers and supporters. These disputes were both artistic and commercial in nature: a competition for the hearts and the pockets of patrons, both public and private. Fame is the basis of fortune, but one has to have the means to secure recognition, and at a given point, at a certain stage or position in the careers of these artists, different strategies were devised and employed for that purpose.

The subject of professional and personal rivalries among the leading painters of the period was discussed by early writers and historians of Renaissance and Venetian art such as Vasari, Ridolfi and others: competition among the greatest helped to develop and

sustain a constant level of artistic excellence and formal renewal.

To exemplify and examine precisely how that form of competition was reflected in the creative process, the ideas and the works of Venetian painters in the mid and late 16th century was the aim of the exhibition by placing side by side paintings of the same subjects and genres by different artists. Works coming from European and North American public collections were seen together allowing an exceptional *in situ* examination and comparison.

In the case of Venice, the impulse and the energies of Renaissance art came together in the mid and second half of the 16th century with the relatively long overlapping period of the careers of exceptional painters. Working side by side, Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto contributed to producing a particularly charged field of artistic rivalries. The ensuing competitive process presented challenges, conflicts and criticism, but also mutual influences, exchanges and emulation among these great masters.

The particular social and institutional context of the arts in Venice would explain the more positive artistic results of such an intense process of competition. Under different circumstances, the perils and destructive effects of these kinds of strong disputes could rapidly emerge. Such was the case, quoted by Ilchman, of the artistic rivalries in Rome and in other places where artists had to battle for privileged positions within a courtly structure of art production, resulting, in the long term, in barriers to the emergence of new talent and in the stultification of artistic development.

The exhibition was organized along chronological and thematic subdivisions that included portraiture (a properly Venetian 'obsession' during that period as a mark of social status) and power; the *paragone* (comparison between the arts) and the theme of mirrors and reflections (the painting of multiple points of view in one picture); the intermixing of the religious and the profane in works

that united genre and the monumental, piety and the sensual or the festive; the desired woman and the woman in danger (the female nude as an invention of Venetian painting); the nocturnal sacred scene (expression of the new religious sensibility of the Counter Reformation); portraits of artists and collectors and small decorative works (the role of this last section in the general economy of the exhibition was less clear). Offering a somewhat extended panorama of the period, works by Jacopo Bassano, Francesco Bassano, Palma Giovane, Domenico Tintoretto, as well as by Schiavone, Sustris and Von Achen, complemented the paintings of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, displayed side by side in thematic relations and formal disputes, in counterpoint, and in relations of mutual influences or confrontation.

Among the main elements that composed the unique field of the arts in mid-16th century Venice, we can point out the sumptuary code of the city's public culture, civic art, civic patronage, the disputes of the *scuole* (fraternities)—a diversity of sources of patronage and artistic freedom. These elements were integrated on the basis of Venice's enormous commercial and industrial wealth, its technological and military powers, maritime expansion and exchanges—central features that were all related to the city's role as a point of articulation between East and West.

The role of Venice as 'cultural mediator', as point of intersection and bridge between East and West was also one of the sources of its artistic originality and of its pioneering role in Renaissance painting. As 'source', that is, as model, example, or inspiration, Venice contributed in important ways to the development and transformation of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance art throughout Europe.

The unique urban milieu of Venice is the result of an original historical process of state and city building by a combative and resourceful people. Merchants and seafarers at heart, their outlook

was both practical and adventurous. The civilization they created, as it developed to its highest form, combined a highly structured and organized society around a dominant, almighty political center, conscious of its wealth and power, with the enjoyment of material life, an appetite for material goods and the display of wealth. These, we can observe, formed the two integrated poles of its distinctive culture characterized by public discipline and control on the one hand, and sensual energy, material enjoyment and gratification on the other.

The very physical milieu of the city is one that provides a unique visual experience and a unique dynamic sense of light, form, space and color. Coupled with the heritage of Byzantine and Oriental art, Venice would produce a particular synthesis of the Renaissance artistic energies and forms as an original creation. It was the only artistic center that could and did, in fact, rival the pioneering creative role of Florence, especially in painting.

The artist who showed the way to the Renaissance in Venetian art was Giovanni Bellini. Those who consolidated the new art, giving it a decisively indigenous character, were his direct disciples: Giorgione and Titian. Giorgione transformed the lessons of Bellini into a new concept and a new method of painting and opened the way to the development of the art of Titian. After the early death of Giorgione, Titian developed Giorgione's formal concepts and technique in a personal way. Titian's work confirmed Venetian painting as one of the major original contributions to Renaissance art. From a historical point of view, we can consider Titian as the central figure of the narrative of art in Renaissance Venice. He can also be considered the point of articulation of the exhibition's narrative of artistic disputes and exchanges in Venetian art. Titian was a supporter, guide and, at times, professional mentor for Veronese. He also fiercely competed against Tintoretto for commissions and

for artistic and aesthetic prominence and leadership at a time in which a new and dynamic concept of the work of art and of the artist as a creative force was being developed.

The new ideas and practices we see developing in the art of Renaissance Venice express a general change in the historical course of art. A process that affected the very foundations of art's relationship to the times, to the social context, and it represented a change in the cultural and social roles of artists. Indeed, we can point out that the artist as such was born in the Renaissance. The Renaissance is the period that consolidates the autonomous sphere of the Fine Arts as distinct from the domain of the Crafts, and the concomitant concept of the artist as distinct culturally, socially and professionally from the craftsman or manual laborer of previous times. The emancipation of the artist and the creation of the autonomous work of art are two faces of the same cultural process at the origin of modernity.

The autonomous artist, emancipated both professionally and ideologically from the guild system, now exercised his activities within transformed conditions of production. This required the artist to manage his own professional life, standing and reputation, to be constantly vigilant with regard to competition, inventive in differentiating himself from other artists, and, at times, to create new marketing initiatives, all of which demanded a great reserve of energy at all times.

The great masters of Venetian art contributed to a new awareness of painting as an autonomous form that went beyond the linear and sculptural formal paradigms of the Florentine Renaissance in the previous century. They achieved this by stressing color, mass, sensual and dynamic effects, and also by modifying the relationship between the visual and the literary domains.

The 'obscurity' of Giorgione's themes and allusions did not pre-

vent patrons and art lovers from recognizing and enjoying the high artistic quality of his work. The audacities of form in Tintoretto's work may have shocked many of his contemporaries, but it did not prevent the recognition of his artistic genius. Giorgione invented a new poetics of painting that went beyond the illustration of narratives either sacred or profane, and beyond the more or less factual record of appearances. His painting was able to recreate, in the substance of color and surfaces, the effects of poetry and music, subordinating the factual, the narrative, and the illustrative elements of the pictorial arts in a new autonomous visual synthesis.

Tintoretto's formal liberties and inventiveness (a Venetian response to Mannerism) affirmed the mastery of the artist over his art. Recreating, at the will of patrons, the aristocratic elegance of Veronese or the modern classicism of Titian with a kind of titanic energy, Tintoretto marks as his own whatever he borrows or appropriates. He does so by means of the visible signature of the painter's touch marking completely the forms and surface of his canvases. The established ascendancy of Titian in Venetian art would not preclude his direct responses to Tintoretto's challenge: for instance, the *finito* and the *non finito* rub shoulders in Titian's later works, such as in the obscure, intriguing and fascinating *Child with Dogs*, 1570-1576—work that illustrates Panofsky's characterization of Titian's late style as a kind of 'sum' or unity of conflicting and contradictory formal impulses.

Beyond the differences in their origins, styles and temperaments, the three great painters of Venice had in common the fact that they were above all... painters, that is, *hommes de métier*, each one in his own way a proud professional painter. Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto were also accomplished amateur musicians when the workday was over. They were certainly not uncultivated, but they were not, nor did they intend to be, scholars or writers, sculptors

or architects, as did some of the great Florentine artists. They did not feel the need to rival writers and to publicly justify their art by words and concepts. The classicist element in Titian's art, for instance, was always a vivified modern classicism. He was never an antiquarian, nor a painter-erudite.

To the Venetian masters, the art of painting can stand on its own, that is, it can produce its effects from its own internal energies, as much as music and poetry can. And just as music and poetry, it addresses itself to our sentient selves, to our substantive or material consciousness; it is, therefore, as an expression of life, its own justification.

In a general way we can say that in the experience of great Venetian art we are given a kind of a phenomenology of the body in the guise of the body of painting: a celebration of the unity of the sensory self and the world. Such an experience reverberated in many ways throughout the history of art. It was reflected, for instance, in the work of Rubens, in the brush strokes and color usage of the impressionists, and in works by the abstract expressionists of the 20th century with their focus on the gestural, on the physicality of painting and their concept of the work of art as an arena for the body in action.

But perhaps the true heir of Venetian art, one closer to the spirit of the human adventure that was the brief splendor of Venetian civilization, was Watteau in 18th century France. In the seduction of color and matter, Watteau, the painter of time and human passion as remembrance, the painter of love and melancholy, that is, of the dream that once was, can be considered the last of the Venetians. In *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese... Rivals in Renaissance Venice* the focus was certainly not on the aftermath, but on the original creative moment: we are transported *in medias res*, at perhaps the most embattled period in the consolidation of the epoch-making

art of the Venetian Renaissance. And here lies the interest of this particular group of works brought together for us here and now.

Note

Our thanks to Jean Habert for the personal interview in the Louvre in December of 2009; special thanks to Céline Dauvergne for her kind assistance, for the published materials and the photos of the works.

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An Exhibition by Hannes Brunner

Rotunda Gallery, American University in Dubai,
 November, 2008

"There are mirrors for the face but none for the mind.

Let careful thought serve as a substitute."

— BALTASAR GRACIAN, THE MANUAL ORACLE, 1647

Images are coded and travel the world at great speeds in the digital dimension. An ever changing IMAGOSPHERE envelops the planet.

A riddle is entered in the search engine's text field: the response is a series of images in a graphic template on the screen. This graphically composed group of images is then printed, cut and assembled as a box.

The search engine is like a daring or perhaps an unconcerned fisherman throwing his net into deep and murky waters, indifferent to the potential risks of every quest, of every search, of every wish, of every human endeavor.

The assembled images reverberate with textual associations: quasi narratives being produced on the screen of the mind, in the cinema of thought. Everybody can see that the machine has a heart, a poetic mind of its own.

The mind-screen is a blank slate with its compartments, like a table of categories whose definitions and relations, however, exist only in that brief time of interaction between the eye and the screen. It exists, that is, it persists, as remembrance, as traces of things forgotten—the very stuff of poetry.

From the rectangle of the computer screen to the rectangle of the paper, from the visible object in the light field to the reflected

light of the plane, a surface. Cutting and pasting the articulated fields, the hinges and divisions of a body. From two-dimensional space to the space of the room—an elementary lesson on basic topology and topography.

The thought-images confront us now as bodies in space. A kaleidoscope of figures with faces both visible and hidden. They are ready to exchange places, to be assembled and reassembled in the contiguous space of a large *tabula rasa*.

The large white table in the middle of the room is a strategic field. A field of categories yet to be devised in a newly composed table of knowledge that will confront the shifting landscape of our thought processes, of our understanding of the ever-changing limits of things, and of our actions.

The riddle of representation is that the ‘immaterial’ needs to inhabit bodies, surfaces, and spaces in order to be understood, conceptualized, and transmitted—in short, in order to be. The mind belongs ‘out there’ in the world of things, images, figures.

Printed images are traces, colored shadows on the surface of a paper sheet, a delicate membrane, folded into a geometric body. Mirrored and connected to other boxes, it is an analogue of the material brain: a compact body made of communicating folded surfaces.

Reflecting on these emerging patterns and spatial structures of Hannes Brunner’s installation, we might conclude that without the map, there is no territory, that the map is indeed the territory.

How Art Creates the Artist

According to a common notion, the divine act of creation in the biblical narrative must be considered the paradigm of all creative acts. The first creator was the ‘sublime artisan’, the ‘supreme artist’, that is, God himself, creating the universe ‘from nothing’. Creation is original/originating activity.

In its most essential aspect, therefore, following from this kind of ‘primordial paradigm’, creativity is always ‘*ex nihilo*’. Creativity is productive activity considered from the point of view of the novelty that it generates. Novelty, it goes without saying, is something dissimilar or unlike what is or what previously was there, something other than the already known or produced. In this sense, the new can be understood as the unfamiliar, the non-evident, the unpredictable, the unexpected. The new is ‘what was not there before’ and had to be produced, in order to overcome what we may call, following Bhaskar (1993), a perceived, intuited or felt need, lack or absence in reality.

How to produce the ‘unexpected’? If productive activity is activity conscious of its finality and, in its fundamental aspects, guided by it, this could be considered a kind of first ‘paradox’ of creativity. With regard to the ‘serendipity’ character of scientific discovery, the famous dictum by Pasteur gives us an initial approach to the question of the relationship between creativity and knowledge: “Chance favors the prepared mind.” Creativity supposes the mastery of a domain of knowledge/activity and, at the same time, requires going beyond acquired knowledge and common practice.

We may state that there are two main models (understood in a general way that would include the various specific models from particular domains of activity and practice, as well as from transitional and maybe 'dual' forms) of creativity in our culture: science and art.

Science and art have a common aim: to make the world intelligible. In the case of science, the proposition is somewhat self-evident: as we all know, the aim of science is 'knowledge of the world'. It seeks to give a rational 'explanation' of reality. 'Autonomous knowledge' is a central dimension of the scientific point of view, in spite of the fact that a common understanding of science's aim today stresses the technological dimension, the practical ways and practical consequences of scientific knowledge, as the essential or structuring element of the scientific enterprise. The relation between pure and applied sciences is indeed a complex subject. For our purpose here, we can focus on the cognitive dimension of science.

Just as the goal of science is the knowledge of objective reality, the aim of art is the knowledge of subjective reality. In both cases, and considering their different paths and approaches, the common goal is to make the human world, the world of human experience, meaningful. The word meaningful points here to the essential unity of knowledge and experience, of knowledge and sense.

The result of science is the expansion of knowledge and, with it, technological development. In a similar way, art results in an expansion of human experience, the enrichment of personal experience, the expansion/socialization of subjective life. This process implies both a cognitive and a practical dimension, as well as a kind of reciprocal organization developing both ways: from the individual to the social sphere, and from social life, from social structures and the collective symbolic domain to the individual.

An essential element common to both the scientific and the artistic enterprises is the symbolization of human experience, what we may call the semiotic dimension of both art and science. In science this is exemplified, for instance, by mathematical expression, the essential use of a 'mathematical language' in scientific formulation. In art, by what we may call imagistic expression. In the various artistic forms: music, painting, poetry, etc., we witness the use of a 'language of images' manifested or embodied in specific ways within each discipline.

Semiotics is the discipline that studies the creation and use of signs, sign systems and processes of signification. A general, well-known definition of a sign is: 'something (anything) that stands for something else'. From this definition we can observe that the sign is a function, the signifying process is a relational process, and that, in a general way, the concept and practice of making and using signs point to what we may call a dialectics of presence and absence.

What properly distinguishes the human mind and human activity is the capacity to organize and communicate experience by means of signs/sign systems: the capacity to know and act in reality through the intermediation of signs.

Though not exclusive to the human animal in its basic components and processes, this capacity in the human subject greatly surpasses in scope the elementary mediation capacities of other organisms in the natural world.

This fundamental process of semiotic mediation detaches the human being from the pressures of the immediate, from the restrictions of immediate experience, from the confined context of the 'here and now' of common existence, liberating the human subject from the automatism of instinct, habit, etc., which produce our first responses to environmental pressures. Semiotic mediation extends human reaction to the demands of reality in time and space.

It creates a space of delayed responses, and therefore of possibility, experimentation, knowledge and choice.

In science, semiotic mediation structures the process that starts from empirical evidence and leads to scientific explanation, from perception to conception, to the knowledge of the external world by reasonable, reasoned, rational constructs. In art, semiotic mediation relates to the knowledge of the subject as the self-reflection/ self-representation of our 'being in the world', bringing to consciousness the structures, meanings and processes of our active and receptive relationship to reality, our emotionally structured and activated experience of the self and of the world in what we may call a dialectics of identity and otherness.

Semiotic mediation, therefore, marks a common ground between science and art. Going beyond the given, the actual, the immediate, and towards the reflected, the ordered, the structured, the formalized, the systematic, it is essentially the discovery of larger, deeper and more complex relationships and patterns of relationships, the discovery/creation of patterns, of models of experience, of reality, and of their interconnections.

Just as science produces models of objective reality, art creates models of 'subjective reality', that is, art structures and systematizes patterns of subjective experience, including self-representation and self-knowledge, that is, the representation and knowledge of our 'inner' life.

In his *Psychology of Art* (written in 1925, published in the 1960s), Vygotsky presents two important ideas about the nature of art. He states: "Art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life".

The socialization of inner life is a fundamental contribution of art, and it works in two ways: from the individual to the circle of

social life, and from the social sphere to the individual, reaching the inner core and the private aspects of subjective experience.

It is indeed art that allows for the elaboration and communication of dimensions of individual experience that socially must remain 'veiled', 'obscured' and 'concealed' and that, by their very dynamic nature, are not easily amenable to categorization and conceptual apprehension.

At the same time, as Vygotsky observes, the energies of individual psychological processes surpass conscious life and the restricted demands of daily practices and needs. The human psyche may be characterized by an 'excess' of energy that must be managed to ensure psychological balance. The recognition of a psychological dimension of the subject exceeding the imposed necessities of practical life will result in the understanding of the adaptive functions of art. The role of art is to channel and bring to consciousness, through art products, the scope and structures of that inner dimension. In so doing, art also produces some structural effects. By revealing and mastering energies otherwise unknown to the subject, art becomes, in Vygotsky's words, "the organization of future behavior".

The result of human artistic capacity is inner plasticity and flexibility, that is, the ability to internally change and adapt. These are the very psychological elements at the basis of the process of scientific inquiry and the objective knowledge of reality.

Art and science also share a common faculty: imagination. Imagination can be defined broadly as the capacity to produce images. What is an image? The role of the image is 'to make present the absent'. This capacity of presentification allows for the enlargement of experience by introducing the possible and the virtual into the field of the actual.

Imagination in science is the productive capacity that allows

for changes in perspective, changes of problematics, changes in approaches and points of view, all of which constitute the process of development of scientific knowledge, of going beyond existing knowledge and towards discovery. “Imagination is more important than knowledge”—a famous dictum attributed to Einstein—points out the ‘qualitative leap’ involved in the process of scientific discovery.

Contrary to popular belief, imagination, as exercised in art, is not the ‘negative’ of the knowledge of the real. The domain of art is not simply that of ‘unreality’ as such, as in the ‘absolute’ opposition between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ that considers the imaginary as simply ‘error and illusion’. The artistic ‘illusion’ (for instance, the mimetic element or moment in art) is self-conscious illusion; the play of the imagination dialectically marks and inscribes difference and non-identity within reality. Imagination is the creation of the experience of possibility.

Artistic activity is for the human subject a ‘school of possibilities’. It is through art that the experience of the plasticity of the subject finally contributes to the understanding of the plasticity, that is, of the dynamic character of reality itself. Art contributes to human adaptation to reality.

The making of art objects is at the same time the making of the subject reflected in this productive activity and in its products. That is, the subject capable of internal growth, self-reflection, change and development.

The development of the capacity to organize and communicate personal experience at different levels, to objectify oneself, that is, to be actively and wholly present in the world understood as both the theater and the product of human experience, to contribute personally to the common world of human activity and knowledge, are different aspects of art’s most essential contribution.

Historically and at the level of human individual processes, they represent different aspects of the most important achievement of art: the creative activity in art produces the creative individual.

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On Hannes Brunner's *Driver's Comments* *

A trip, explains Paul Virilio¹, is composed of three parts: the departure, the path or trajectory, and the arrival. According to Virilio, today we experience the dominance of the arrival over the other elements of a journey or voyage. The acceleration of time in communication and transportation today results in a loss of spatial extension: 'real time' has absorbed space in the same way that an absolute present, the 'now', exemplified by the immediacy of digital communication and of virtual models or virtual worlds, is in the process of absorbing the past and the future. The result is a time without dimensions, concomitant to a space without boundaries or configurations, ensuing not from unlimited physical expansion, but from speed and the contraction of our experience of distance, and, therefore, of our experience of place, and, ultimately, of physical space as such.

In a world transformed by technology, art becomes, according to Virilio, a strategy of resistance against the losses that technical transformations impose upon human reality and experience. There is a price to be paid for every technical conquest. And as much as the benefits of technical progress are in one way or another self-evident, it is the role of artists and thinkers to dwell in the negative of unintended (or unstated intended) consequences of poorly mastered or unmastered, that is, autonomous (J. Ellul) technical developments.

Traffic circles in Europe, just as in the UAE, display what we may call public artworks and monuments, as well as advertisements and other kinds of visual and textual messages. Categories which are sometimes amalgamated in the uncertain species of these

sculptural or three-dimensional structures on highways and on city roads, these hybrid (?) super-objects (or meta-objects), these large significant objects, that is, these public conveyers of meanings associated with place and with the functions and the experiences of the modern road transport systems and their related urban and non-urban spaces.

In the figure of the circle, departure and arrival points coincide: a homogeneous or homogenized space corresponds to an equally homogeneous time of general equivalences, repetitions, co-incidences, and tautologies. Traffic circles are points of confluence of paths. They can be seen as points of arrival and departure. They are intersections and points of relay, separating and uniting itineraries and directions, mapping and remapping dynamic routes. They are also kinds of spatial interfaces designing territorial synapses, virtual encounters and evanescent, momentary, unstable configurations of experienced pathways, of time and distance.

The structures of traffic circles are markers in an undifferentiated or poorly differentiated spatial continuum and homogeneous time. How to understand them? In Hannes Brunner's *Driver's Comments*, we circle around roundabouts, the driver notes forms, associations, gives captions to images seen within the frame of a car's window, moving images of an animated, recurring landscape or town-scape, in which all the circles are one. The driver applies categories (art-historical, cultural, aesthetic, symbolic, etc.) that belong most probably to another 'space', to other kinds of objects, to another kind of 'territorial' experience and to another experience of time. These categories are incongruous to the objects and to the situation of a traveler or a user of the modern highway system. The driver speaks from a position of estrangement that is both internal and external to his temporary functional identity.

The messages of traffic-circle structures are addressed to the

passerby, that is to the newcomer, the 'foreigner', to the territorial *other* that needs to be informed about where he is, both in practical, as well as in symbolic terms. On the road, we are simultaneously on the inside and on the outside a location, on the road, out of the place, entering or leaving, both entering and leaving at the same time. We are dis-placed. The driver reads the itinerary directly or indirectly via the messages of traffic circles. What do they say? Not much in relation to what they allude to, whether local histories and local identities, national symbols, or expressive configurations of modern experience such as leisure, 'culture', etc. The messages say relatively more about the functional spatial organization, speed and efficiency, and similar subjects associated with the transport system itself. Traffic circles speak of traffic as spectacle, they speak of the modern experience of the spectacle in the form of highways, automobiles, mapped territories, rationalized spaces and rationalized time. In their own ways, they speak of the spectacle itself as the exclusive horizon of modern experience.

The driver's comments, displaced in form and in substance, speak about displacement itself. The road is a space of passage, and therefore a non-place, if by place we understand a meaningful and relatively stable space of experience, the experience of relative constancy of the self, of relative continuity of time related to the environment, physical and symbolic, to a situated structure of being, and therefore to the structural, constitutive exchanges between subject and milieu.

Monuments mark territorial centers of interest that define sacred, social, and political spaces, and that define inclusion and exclusion, group identity and others. Monuments in traffic circles report on the utopia (literally, the non-place, the nowhere) of the present, the extended non-place that we inhabit as itinerant dwellers of an accelerated time and an undifferentiated space.

THE MIMETIC MANIFESTO OF PIERRE MENARD

Paradoxes: accelerated time becomes contracted time or time without dimensions, and overextended space becomes contracted space, it becomes a symbolically unstructured space therefore open for fantasies of meaning. Traffic circles name our general displacement; they gently disclose or exemplify the anxiety of naming, the textual anxiety of labeling the territory as a way of access to a meaning that has escaped the subject.

The road returns its own image to the driver: traffic circles' 'artworks', emblems, and visual structures speak of a certain nostalgia. They speak of the disappearance of the landscape, including the historical landscape, in itself a fantasy of history. They speak about the modern fantasy of the traveler, the fantasy of being oneself in the guise of the other, and vice-versa.

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The fundamental human fact is that of memory
Everything that happens, happens through contact
Trace, imprint, genes, memes, what exists, exists through replication
From the Microcosm to the Macrocosm
From physical processes to biological processes
Matter organizes itself and life by copying,
By repetition:
The fundamental fact not just of Life, but of the Universe as it exists and persists from the so-called "Big-Bang" (this scientific myth of an absolute beginning that, as we know now, was not the beginning) to today
Conscious replication is what distinguishes the very fact of human memory
Without mimesis there is no history and no identity and therefore no language and no culture
Even intelligent machines are only so because they mimic us at first, themselves later
Against the postmodern abolition of time and memory
Against collective amnesia and self-willing ignorance
Against digitalized imbecility
Against the false innocence of those who celebrate a time without dimensions

Without a future because without a past
Against the reification of an impoverished present
Against the closed circuit of unconscious tautology
Against post-media aesthetics
Against the technological illusion and the demise of human responsibility
We proclaim a return to the mimetic in the arts and in culture
Artists of today need to know who their real parents are instead of believing naively in parthenogenesis
Against the illusion of self-generation, which is in fact the fear of the Other, the fear of the Many, the forgetting of the Dyad
Against Platonic Monism
Mimesis is conscious selection
It reintroduces the arrow of time within the prison of the a-temporal
Our credo can be simply and clearly stated by replicating the great Isidore Isou, father of Lautreamont: "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it!"
Plagiarism: conscious selection, creative, artistic memory in action!
From now on all art will again be Mimetic, or it will not be!

— PIERRE MENARD, 2007

Pierre Menard, A Biographical Note by M. G. Lima

Pierre Menard was born Pedro Menardo in the small town of Benjamin Constant, in the Amazon Region of Brazil. In his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Colombian author and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Marquez fictionalized episodes of Menard's youth. In this "roman à la clef", the mythical Macondo is said to be a fusion between Marquez's Colombian hometown and the town of Benjamin Constant in Brazil. Menard had met Marquez in Cuba in the late 1960s.

Menardo became Menard after living in France for several years. Due to his love for French culture, he enlisted in the Foreign Legion in order to obtain French citizenship, but he was expelled after a few years of valuable service because of his activism in Human Rights issues and in issues related to the rights of minorities. He later met Foucault, but refused to collaborate with the French philosopher due to philosophical disagreements and, above all, to Foucault's support of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran. Instead, he became a close collaborator with filmmaker and poet Isidore Isou. But again, disagreements over matters of literary theory prevented Menard's name from being mentioned in the literature of Lettrisme. Together with Guy Debord, he founded the 'Situationist International' and collaborated for a while on many experimental films by the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, a book that was, in part, a product of long political and philosophical discussions between the Situationists and Menard. He met briefly with Borges¹ in Buenos Aires before the military coup of 1974. Menard now lives between Latin America, and the Middle East.

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A Project by Pierre Menard, Director

The Center for Fictitious Art is dedicated to the theory and practice of art, and the reflection on the structures and the workings of the cultural sphere in our contemporary world. Art that looks like 'art' but may indeed not be so, is a matter that may generate discomfort for the layperson. Rather than simply to oppose 'appearance' or 'illusion' to the 'real', we, future members of the CFA, do not believe that the subject of Fictitious Art can be reduced to a confrontation between on the one hand 'genuine' art, and on the other 'error' or 'deception'. Moreover, Fictitious Art is not simply 'bad art' passing as 'good'. It may well be no art at all. But then again, it may be that Fictitious Art, examined objectively, without preformed conceptions, received ideas, and unconscious prejudices, will end up revealing the 'fictional', that is imaginary, illusory, self-deceptive nature of all art and of human experience in general.

The Center for Fictitious Art, celebrates the ambiguities, uncertainties, fallibility and gullibility of our human condition. Indeed we believe that, for reasons that have to do with the structural needs of present day globalized market economy, and are apparently too 'complex' to be discussed here, the refusal, inability or unwillingness to decide between conflicting explanations, ideas, values and forms of action, the practical embracing of contradictions while explicitly rejecting them in the institutional domains that structure our world, as well as in everyday life, is at the core of what has been called the 'post-modern condition'. It is an important element of the cultural identity of our time, a time that wants proudly to transcend the impasses and errors of the past by denying that there ever was a problem in the first place.

Considering the fact that forms of graffiti and tag (signatures) are found in both Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, we can state that it is a phenomenon that belongs to urban culture in general or, at least, to that stream of urban culture whose ultimate sources are related to the beginnings of city life and city structures in Greece and Rome, that is, to the origins and early forms of Western Civilization.

Considering 'informal' or under-formalized inscriptions found in prehistoric caves, side by side with the celebrated 'artworks' of prehistoric humanity, we can perhaps state that graffiti is as old as humanity. As old as that part of humanity that developed, around 30,000 years ago, a system of visual communication based on highly sophisticated painted, drawn and incised images and symbols, which constitutes some of the earliest examples of the visual arts and of proto-writing.

In cave-art images and signs, the activities and forms of drawing, painting and 'writing' overlap in important ways, as they result from the same formal-aesthetic-functional-communicative-ideological and technical complex. The overlap of image and sign, of drawing and graphic marks, is one aspect (among others) that prompts us to suggest analogies between the very old and the new.

Considering the historical precedents above, the novelty of the modern phenomenon of graffiti and tag in contemporary urban settings would therefore be related to a change of scale that affects various aspects of urban culture and ways of life today, as the city itself has changed into the Megacity of our times. And, as we know, more often than not, a change of scale implies a change in nature, as quantitative change turns into qualitative transformation. And, as we also know, the city, the urban phenomenon, is now everywhere¹.

The paradox of the city today is that it has become unbound – a territory without frontiers and therefore in need of new forms of orientation, of new spatial concepts, of a new cartography. Among other things, the paintings and signs on prehistoric caves and the rock art of native peoples around the world, constituted territorial charts and cosmological representations, that is, cosmographies that located and oriented human life within the universe.

These ancient cosmographies represented and expressed the many dimensions of reality as one universal order. They represented universal solidarity and the essential relationships of the various orders or levels of reality: the transits and passages between heaven and earth, the relationships between the parts and the whole, the local and the universal, human life and the life of the universe. Since time immemorial, humanity has engraved cartographies on stone, on cave walls, as well as on exterior rock surfaces. Humanity has incised in stones proprietary marks and signs of social identities, and it has projected and inscribed maps upon territories.

The Megacity of today is both the Hyper-city and the Meta-city. The Meta-city is where we can locate the contemporary phenomenon of urban graffiti and tag. The Meta-city, that is, the reflection of the city within and upon itself, is the image of the city as both map and territory.

In the Greek legend, when Narcissus contemplated his reflection, he discovered beauty in an essential or purified state. This discovery led to his self-destruction as he attempted to possess in reality what was an unsubstantial reflection, that is, a mirror image of his own self. The image is reality detached from itself and reduced to a plane, to a surface. Detached from Narcissus, his own beauty confronted him as another reality, desired, ungraspable, and fatal. Like modern-day Narcissuses, graffiti and tag artists or practitioners turn the city into a mirror. They turn to the city, a mirror of

the energies, desires and aspirations that it generates and attracts, and yet that lay dormant, repressed, under-utilized, unfulfilled and unrealized within it. In this sense, tag and graffiti may be signs of danger in the everyday urban landscape. In different ways and at different levels, graffiti and tag remind the urban dwellers of the unstable energies at the core of the city's life processes, in the production and reproduction of its social forms and structures.

Pixação is the Brazilian name for tagging, that is, for those unsolicited, unauthorized, and, therefore, criminal and disruptive graphic marks, written signs and emblems inscribed on city walls and facades. It distinguishes itself from *grafite* (graffiti) by its hurried or 'improvised' appearance, by the more limited visual vocabulary it displays (in part related to its origins in typographic styles and conventions) and its (apparent) absence of meaning other than the defiant gesture of defacing architecture and public and private spaces.

In Brazil, *grafiteiros* (graffiti makers or graffiti artists) paint walls and façades in an attempt to create relatively coherent visual symbols of different kinds, with diverse forms, using diversified strategies of elaboration, and with different degrees of success. The domain of *grafite* may approach mural painting at times. *Pixadores* (tag or signature makers), on the other hand, attach their pre-developed marks and add inscriptions to surfaces. Their formal elaborations are more restricted in comparison, since the communicative power of their graphic creations rests on a shared code of meaning, expressing a code of conduct that is indeed central to understanding *pixação* as a form of activity and a form of sociability developed in the contemporary metropolis.

A *pixador* is evaluated for the amount of his or her work, for the extent of the urban area he or she is able to cover with his or her marks. But the *pixador* is also evaluated according to the difficulties

of access to the sites and to the dangers that he or she has risked in the making of the works. This also involves the ability to avoid being caught by the police or by owners and residents of the targeted buildings and areas. More often than not, the *pixador* who is caught will suffer moral and physical punishment in the hands of the captors in addition to suffering legal penalties.

The graphic marks, signs and emblems of *pixaçao* adapt the forms and images of current language and recreate everyday codes into a specialized group language. For those outside of it, that is, the majority of the population within the cities, they appear as meaningless scribbles. They appear as disruptive, aggressive acts, purely destructive gestures adding ‘rubble upon rubble’, adding fragments of visual and linguistic codes to an already fragmented and dilapidated body of the city, such as abandoned structures, decayed areas, vacant lots and their walls, etc., or attacking public and private buildings and structures in central areas of the city and marking them with the language of decayed codes and the appearance of decomposing surfaces. To the insiders, that is, the different groups of *pixadores* and their followers, these marks, as they re-signify the space of the city, re-signify and re-evaluate their makers.

As a contemporary phenomenon of youth culture and youth mores and behavior, *pixaçao* in Brazil has both indigenous and global sources. Among the latter are the global mass media cultures, including the constellation or amalgam of hip-hop, rap music, comic book, New York (and to a lesser extent L.A) graffiti, the sub-cultures of American youth gangs portrayed in the movies and on TV, etc. These are indeed some recognized references, however local histories and contexts are equally important.

The word ‘piche’ means tar, asphalt or bitumen. ‘Pichar’ is to cover with tar. It also carries the connotation of smearing or soiling, similar to the English word ‘tar’ in expressions such “a tarred

reputation”. “Tarring and feathering” was a physical punishment, used to enforce formal justice in Medieval times, and in later times was used as a form of mob punishment. *Pichar* refers primarily to informal, unauthorized marks and inscriptions on walls in public places. The modified spelling of the words: *pixar, pixaçao* adopted by Brazilian tag makers is another instance of graphically affirming a gesture of transgression of the linguistic code and norm. This conscious refashioning of the linguistic norm also intends to mark a difference in relation to the meaning, and, therefore, to the perceived value of their activities.

Beyond private uses and meanings, informal and unauthorized inscriptions were also used in 20th century Brazil in public contexts such as unregulated commercial advertising in popular neighborhoods, wild advertising to promote candidates in political campaigns in the cities, religious callings by sects and churches, as well as political protests during the Military dictatorship period (1964–1985). Art critics mark the 1970s as the earliest appropriations (by young artists, would be artists and adventurous middle-class youth in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) of the forms and processes of *pixaçao* or graffiti in general. In the same period, young political activists and urban guerrilla fighters risked their lives in order to make public slogans against the dictatorship. The others risked being mistaken for guerrillas, and therefore also risked imprisonment, torture and death. The 1970s also marked the defeat of guerrilla movements in Brazil. The next decade saw the end of the dictatorship, but this was also a period of great economic difficulty, paving the way for the consolidation of the neo-liberal social and economic policies that dominated the 1990s.

At the origins of modern *pixaçao* we have, therefore, an indigenous tradition distilled and reshaped by global influences within a new social-political context at the end of the 20th century

and the beginnings of the 21st century. This is a context marked by the neo-liberal economic model and its policies of exclusion, economic spoliation and segregation of the urban masses, the decay of the urban environment, rampant individualism and cultural as well as political alienation. In short, for the majority of the Brazilian urban youth, this was a general crisis of socialization that generated its own forms of resistance and struggle.

The political context related to the irruption of graffiti in 1970s New York was analyzed by Jean Baudrillard in a well-known essay². The emergence of graffiti followed a period of mass unrest and riots in the black ghettos. It also marked the end of a period of insurrectional politics and the strategies of organized rebellion. In a sense, it is possible to say that an incipient revolutionary graphic art of posters, leaflets and mural paintings, spatially and ideologically confined, was substituted or superseded, as the political context changed, by different forms of graffiti, universalized within the space of the city, and later globalized via the mass media to the Hyper-city of today.

The essential changes in the organization and functioning of capitalism in the late part of the 20th century were summarized by Baudrillard in the concept of a “Semiocracy”. When the production and circulation of signs becomes the essential economic process of hyper-capitalism, a struggle to signal/signalize/signify the city becomes a new front in which the imposition of a signifying logic meets the resistance of new, fractionated and unstable signifiers.

To Baudrillard, the logic of exclusion and ghetto-ization is indeed the universal logic of capitalism embodied in the postmodern city with its functional organization and compartmentalization of the physical and the social space and its fractioning of life. The city itself is a space segregated from its inhabitants; it is the organization of generalized segregation as a way of life and as a mode of produc-

tion. Graffiti and tag both refashion and subvert, that is, mirror and invert the spatial, visual, structural codes of the Hyper-city. They make visible the boundaries, borderlines, and inner frontiers structuring the life of today's cities as places of fractured meaning and action.

Attempts to contain *pixaçao* in Brazil have oscillated between (or mixed together in more or less contradictory ways) violent repression and co-optation via artistic and institutional public and private programs and projects.

The passage from *pixaçao* to *grafite* and to institutionalized artistic production in galleries and museums has been attempted with different degrees of success by some young grafiteiros and pixadores. The refusal of any kind of ‘officialism’, of anything that would end up taming the activity and robbing it of its confrontational nature, has been asserted vigorously by many pixadores, and has led to collective actions of *pixaçao* against an art school³ and a commercial art gallery in São Paulo, and, in 2008, to an assault with spray cans and markers on the São Paulo Biennial⁴.

Still, other pixadores and grafiteiros have chosen to transit between the worlds of art and illegal actions, between the subculture of *pixaçao* and the official cultures of art. They show their artworks inspired by *grafite* and *pixaçao* by day and assume their pseudonyms in illegal graphic actions with their comrades at night.

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Emirati Expressions (2009) at Gallery One, Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, as the name indicates, is a kind of cross-section of contemporary UAE art, curated by Anne Baldassari, director of the Picasso Museum in Paris. In the brief introduction to the exhibition, the curator referred to the common goals that unite the Picasso exhibition, presented last year in the same gallery, and the current show of Emirati artists: to “change the gaze on modern and contemporary art history”.

To “change the gaze”, in this case, may possibly mean to change our perspective on the visual arts of the UAE, to change the viewer’s gaze, to change public perception. It may also mean to change the perspective of the art itself, to change the way artists look at their world and their own work. This is merely a question of emphasis, one can certainly observe, for art is indeed the action and the reflection which reveals that to see and to be seen are two aspects of the same process. Artistic vision is indeed the expression of the commonality of human experience and of the fact that the very foundation of that experience is the relational, relative and exchangeable nature of our individual and collective perspectives on self and on the world at large. Every art exhibition, apart from being the presentation of artists’ works to the public, is also the occasion for artists to be presented to their own works, that is, literally, to see their own efforts and products ‘in a new light’, away from the familiar space of production in the workshop, and in a dialogue with the exhibition space, with other works and with new perspectives, new gazes or visions complementing and transforming original intentions, gestures, marks and ideas. ‘Emirati Expressions’ may therefore constitute an occasion for a (provisory) *bilan* of contemporary art in the UAE, whose effects we may expect

to see in terms of the public understanding of Emirati art, and also in works to come.

The white or off-white walls and ceiling of Gallery One in the Picasso show were painted black for 'Emirati Expressions'. Gallery One's long hall was transformed into a long, dark rectangular box, and the works of Emirati artists were presented under relatively low light, with focused illumination highlighting the individual pieces. The general atmosphere was quiet, almost meditative. The metaphor of the black box was suggested by Anne Baldassari to characterize the space of the exhibition. According to the curator, this referred to the opacity of processes of knowledge in the contemporary world. Science is, by definition, methodical, structured knowledge that can and must be replicated in order to be scientific, however the processes of scientific insight and discovery are only 'evident' retrospectively, after the results, and cannot be anticipated. The idea of the black box represents the apparent paradox of the unknowable processes by which knowledge is produced. Scientific discovery and artistic creation share this common condition of always being a surprise, that is, in many different ways, a disruption of previously assumed ideas and procedures. We cannot see what goes on inside a black box. Input and output, initial conditions and effects, are all we can attest to, and what we must account for. Indeed, a contemporary paradigm of knowledge states that knowledge is the knowledge of effects. Knowledge is produced in the reconstruction of the conditions and processes producing any given effects, including, as it is the case in contemporary culture and in the arts, the effect of knowledge itself. All knowledge is in fact retrospective, that is, in a way, essentially historical knowledge.

Bringing together this particular group of works at Gallery One could also be considered a kind of historical statement, an epistemological exercise. Why this particular group of works at this

place at this time? The answer is unclear, unless we can understand that one cross-section of the present is, in a way, the equivalent of any other, if what we must grasp is in fact the notion or principle of articulation itself and the act of choice in its formal structure, rather than its substantiality. Starting at the hypothetical 'zero degree' of knowledge, any beginning is the appropriate beginning, whose proper task is to put into motion the machinery of knowledge. Therefore, 'Emirati Expressions' as it presented itself might be understood as constituting its own justification: the absolute coincidence of the expressed and the expression, and the beginning of a new perspective. And, as with any beginnings, dialectically insubstantial—a question yet to be answered, or rather, an interrogation still in search of its proper formulation.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno called attention to the fact that artworks not only presuppose each other, that is, the fact that art exists in a historical context and historical continuum, but also that artworks struggle against each other in a life and death contest. There is a kind of Darwinian selection process at work in the various fields of culture, as much as in nature. In art as in nature, life and death are inextricably connected. Accordingly, the history of art is not just a battlefield, but also a memorial.

Another metaphor of the 'dark box' of Gallery One, in this sense, could be that of the tomb. And here the actuality of the works that were displayed in 'Emirati Expressions', could be said to have re-created or re-enacted, as in a ritual, an original or ancestral condition of art: its foundational relation to death. All art is indeed a memorial, a monument, the reconstitution of a presence that is at the same time the disclosure of irremediable absence as the *telos* of beings transfixed in the works of time. Art is indeed one of the instances in which the anxiety of being is played out, enacted and, so to speak, exorcised. Death, as much as life, is the mark of memory. By way

of memory we hold on to traces (effects) of things vanished in the works of time, acknowledging its powers by building monuments, that is, recreating a presence on the foundation of the absent.

Art lives on the precarious interval between, on the one hand, death and oblivion, and, on the other, memory as the power of projecting oneself into the future, as the hope of a recreated life. In this kind of confrontation with our original condition, art approaches religion. At the same time, it opposes religion by making its home in the element of radical immanence. Art reveals the world and time as radically ours, in spite of, or rather through, all alterity and distance. It discloses the fractures of reality as our own. The idea of the artistic tomb, or funerary housing and monument, links the present with the ancestral sources of the culture of the region in what we may call, more or less properly, an exercise in topological time following the model of the Deleuzian fold.

‘Emirati Expressions’ presented mostly young or emerging artists, as certainly befits a relatively young country such as the UAE—a young country built upon the foundations of an older society and culture. As a young and unique nation-state, a federation of city-states and sheikdoms, the UAE searches for its proper expression in the visual arts, as in other fields, from the accumulated energies generated in the encounters between the East and the West. Since time immemorial, the position of the Arab region as a mediator between East and West has been one of the sources of its strength, and also of some of its historical impasses and conflicts.

Anne Baldassari pointed out the location of contemporary artists in the UAE as being at the “epicenter of an unprecedented cultural, semiotic and iconographic tension”, at the “intersection of Orient and Occident”—a tension of cultural domains overlapping each other, of diverse visual codes and of diverse iconographic traditions with their divergent semantic values and processes. According to

Anne Baldassari, in the midst of the encounters and conflicts between, at times, heterogeneous historical and cultural lines of force, artists are caught within divergent, contradictory processes and clashing demands. This is a situation that may open up what we can call neutralized spaces. These spaces risk, of course, to neutralize artistic gestures, but they may also, we can observe, open up possibilities: the artistic process and product, the artwork, may turn into a kind of negative presence and negative critique of its own condition of possibility, of its identity and its relationship with the other. In the search of Emirati expressions, we will soon recognize the impossibility of an immediate, that is, an unmediated, expression of a culture in the arts. Or, indeed, the awareness of the lines of pressure that structure the artistic field is what allows artists to navigate the fractured space that, here as elsewhere, (in fact, anywhere) is the condition of art in the present. We may call that condition the ‘non-lieu’ of contemporary art.

An astute awareness of the contemporary condition was indeed present at the exhibition, for instance, in the works by veteran UAE artist and pioneer of contemporary art in the region, Hassan Shariff. Here, he showed a few collages and paintings from different periods in his career.

Photography and photographic disciplines and their related genres, modes and strategies (digital works, etc.) appear in prominent ways in works by the young generation of Emirati artists. The oneiric, elegant disposition and gentle opacity of *Reflecting* by Lateefa Maktoum shows a reorganized corner of nature in what appears to be a public garden within the modern urban environment of the UAE. An elegantly dressed feminine figure in the traditional local attire is perched over a pond, her head covered with a large green scarf. A feminine Narcissus whose immediate reflection in the pond is not of herself, but of the cityscape, the modern build-

ings in the background. The image is a kind of reflection on what we may call the ‘post-modern romantic’, a kind of ‘pre-Raphaelite’ feminine recreated in the mode of a contained sublimity. In a similar vein, *Desperate Princess*, a large format photograph by Summayyah Al Suwaidi, explores the imaginary, fictional representation of the feminine, adding to it however a dimension of irony that lifts colors, soft textures, and ingenuous moods to a self-aware play of signified and signifiers.

Alya Al Sanad’s photographs, by contrast, focus on the head and the painted face as masks of identity, or identity as representation and appearance. Identity as appearance points to its ground on the phantasmagoric, on the fictional presentation of identity, on its dimension as the anxiety of subjacent lack and absence. *Letter from the Land*, for instance, shows a face covered with sand as a kind of mortuary mask, or as the formative moment in which a stare, one open eye, emerges from the sand, a face and a head molds and sculpts itself to recognition out of an original soil, in the exchange of gazes, between the represented figure and the viewer, the original moment of self-recognition as the recognition of the other.

Painting was also represented in the exhibition. We can mention, for instance, the abstractions of Mohammed Al Quassab, or the action-painting of Wasel Safwan, among others. Where the calligraphic sensibility intersects with painting, whether consciously or unconsciously, it is clear that the translation of that sensibility into painting is not always as evident or comfortable as one could suppose. Something of the unresolved relations between underlying diverse concepts of color, mark-making, and surfaces, and of the functions of painting, reveal themselves here with various degrees of intensity. The works of Jalal Luqman, on the other hand, bridge between photography, painting and sculptural or quasi-sculptural construction, focusing on the male figure in a more assured way,

and displacing or exchanging some of these questions for others.

All in all, art as an exercise in the remembrance of things seen, but also a memory of things anticipated, the souvenirs of a dreamed future, appeared as a possible common denominator in this group of works. At the end of the room, a dark mirror duplicates the room’s perspective, as if intending to duplicate and multiply the exhibition in an infinite series. Here, the metaphor of the ‘black box’ also becomes that of a ‘bottomless pit’.

The post-modern condition of art, we can state, approximates the God of Pascal: “like an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere”. In the end, the ‘vertigo’ of the unbound and the non-grounded, of the equivalent infinite progress or infinite regression, of time suspended between the past and the future, can be understood here as the particular expression of our universal condition.

ARC Biennial, Brisbane 2009

Across the Gulf opened on September 4, 2009 as one of the central events of the 2009 Arc Biennial of Art in Brisbane, Australia. The art show, curated by Irene Barberis, presents works by 22 artists from Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. *Across the Gulf* is a Metasenta® – RMIT University project funded by the Po and Helen Chung Foundation.

The 2009 Arc Biennial of Art in Brisbane organized by Kevin Wilson and the ‘Artworkers Alliance’ runs from September to December 2009 presenting exhibitions by contemporary Australian and international artists, as well as workshops, talks and conferences.

The venue for *Across the Gulf* was Shed E of the complex of unused warehouses known as the Howard Smith Wharves on the Brisbane River. It is a beautiful location, near the curve of the river. The access to the old warehouses has been converted into a promenade from where it is possible to see the large modern buildings of the downtown area. In Brisbane, the omnipresent river and the city appear to mirror and complement each other with the same placid energy and vigorous presence.

It seems no other venue could have been more appropriate, in the character of the space and in its symbolism: the warehouse as a place of material exchanges, of human work and energies, of communication and passage. Here, the artworks took the place of commodities and products. The exchange of ideas and images follows past exchanges of goods, remaking and complementing old fluxes, routes, and networks, as if re-framing, remapping and relocating human communication and energies within the ‘immaterial’,

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heterogeneous landscape of a new time in the making.

The large interior space was divided with scaffolding, metallic posts and boards. The reconstructed interior space presented itself as a kind of concrete metaphor of contemporary art from the Gulf Region understood, properly speaking, as a 'work in progress'. The artworks appeared as fused within the interior divisions and the larger structure of the building, as articulated members of one continuous space and place. The exhibition became a kind of meta-work encompassing the many dimensions of a place visited once more, but within a different time-element, by distant objects and the meanings, dreams and visions they embody. *Across the Gulf* became this place of passage and material contacts, constant and momentary, enduring and transient like the artworks it accommodated: both fluid and compact like the river.

Across The Gulf, as the title indicates, showcases current art of the Persian Gulf, specifically of Arab countries in the region. Within these countries, the region is also named the Arabian Gulf, or simply the Gulf area. The present exhibition is a result of the several visits to the area by curator Irene Barberis, and of her contacts with artists and art organizations. *Across The Gulf* is, in many ways, a record of these contacts, the traces of a journey of discovery, a periploous in search of the contemporary artistic expression of the region.

The Gulf is a region made up of countries united by a common culture and a common language, but also distinct in their regional roles, in the specific configurations of their historical experiences, in the particularities of localized historical paths and patterns, in the distinctive forms and expressions of each country's present self-understanding and aspirations for the future.

Within the region, the UAE is a young country created from the encounters of a centuries old peripheral traditional society and the modern world with its demands, pressures and opportunities of integration, disputes, struggles and cooperation. Indeed, the UAE as a country was born out of the challenges, conflicts and energies of a late 20th century process of modernization. Its present successes are predicated on a kind of a categorical 'will to modernization' that expresses itself in the form of an inscription in the contemporary imaginary.

This is done via the global media, and by way of a material expansion whose forms, or images, are given primarily by the inscription on a borderline landscape, between the sea and the desert, of cities that refashion themselves as condensed mirrors of our own globalized times, mapping in the former periphery the as yet

ambiguous configurations of a new century in the making.

Within the UAE, the city of Dubai has been at the forefront of this process. In Dubai, Tashkeel, a young organization for contemporary arts founded by artist and photographer Lateefa Maktoum, and directed by herself and designer Jill Hoyle, served as the strategic and logistical partner for Across the Gulf.

The group of artists from the UAE here presented is emblematic of the current context of cultural and artistic development in the country: the young and relatively young are majority, there is significant female participation, the majority of these artists embrace happily and emphatically new artistic genres and technologies.

The exception in this group is UAE artist Hassan Sharif. In recent years, the growing recognition of Sharif's pioneer role as one of the leading figures of a movement of renovation (or re-invention, a double or second invention) of the visual arts in the UAE has allowed for an initial mapping of a local or indigenous contemporary artistic development. A development in which personal history and national history intermingle as two inseparable aspects one and the same reality. In the case of Sharif, the local reality connects with the developments of European art, specifically of British art in the late 1970s and early 1980s via the artist's studies and researches in England at The Byam Shaw School of Arts (today a part of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design – University of the Arts London).

Sharif initiated his career in his homeland as a graphic artist and cartoonist on local and international political issues. He experimented with painting and sculpture but, according to the artist, it was the encounter with the European avant-garde in London that allowed him to find his own artistic voice.

The intersections of culture, the arts and, from his previous graphic works and interests, a political reading of the world, a

dissatisfaction with what he came to perceive as the limitations of traditional artistic genres and languages to express the contemporary experience, the opening towards a self-questioning of artistic practices which, in the case of Sharif, as with many artists of the 'peripheral' regions of the world, immediately transcends the allures of any kind of conscious or unconscious formalisms, were the elements of this personal reorientation and the foundation of the experimental works he developed, first in London and then in his homeland.

These were the elements that allowed him to plant himself firmly in the soil of his ancestral land and young nation, to navigate the landscape of contemporary art, to relate the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of our contemporary experience, of modern and postmodern culture, and gave him as an artist an original and critical perspective on the vertiginous transformations experienced by his generation in the UAE.

Since the 1980s Sharif has created performances, paintings, sculptures and sculptural objects, installations and public art projects and, more recently, collections of objects made of simple materials, serialized objects of daily life, discharged materials, disposable objects that the artist adds together, assembles, selects and categorizes, modifies, paints, decorates, refashions in an ongoing and cumulative process. The artist shows himself here as an obsessive collector of discarded materials, that we may read also as the symbolic equivalents of aspects of human experience that are marginalized, discarded, sublimated or suppressed in the life processes of the present system of universal 'programmed obsolescence' – a system that also entails the mirror obsolescence of its subjects.

Collected, arranged, transformed, the objects, notebooks, packages and boxes of Hassan Sharif offer us both an epistemological and a phenomenological perspective on the present. On one

hand they speak of systems of classification, tables of categories, the structures of the human mind as it attempts to apprehend reality, to mold the world in the forms of discursive rationality. On the other hand, they refer to a kind of meditative praxis, a meditation by the gesture, the ritual of making as an inscription of the subject in the lived time, the horizon of all subjective experience. In this respect, the art of Hassan Sharif may be said to connect with the tradition of the mandala, and of pattern creation as the contemplative experience of infinity in Islamic art.

In a time and a culture that measures itself by its capacity for material waste and superlative consumption, Sharif's transformation of garbage into art offers an ironic reminder of the relativity and the fragility of human endeavors, and of the perils of material hubris. At the same time, however, in the almost affectionate relationship to his materials and in the gentle intensity and obsessive dedication to the recurring process of transformation, the rescuing of the scraps of human work, we are reminded that the way out of our material and spiritual predicament lies also in human work liberated from its submission to the autonomous movement of capital's self-valuation and re-considered, reoriented and recreated as care, a notion that we can here relate to the Heideggerian *sorge*.

In the 1980s Hassan Sharif was a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society and in 2007 he founded the art collective *The Flying House* with fellow artists Fatma Lootah, Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim and Mohammed Kazem, an organization devoted to preserve, study, promote and, by means of an initial process of historical self-reflection, retrospective and prospective at the same time, to extend the works of the first and second generations of Emirati experimental artists.

We can observe that, in a way, Sharif's generation of artists had to create, together with their art, the beginnings of the very institu-

tional field of their activities. The new generation of Emirati artists represented in *Across The Gulf* is the product of a different stage of cultural development of the UAE and of an altogether different institutional environment. The majority of these young artists are graduates of local art schools. Schools such as the University of Sharjah, The American University of Sharjah, The American University in Dubai and Zayed University offer courses and degrees in the Fine Arts and Design fields. Here, the proximity of these two fields, a configuration that is indeed symptomatic of our general present condition in the arts, takes a particular form or specific tonality with some specific consequences having to do with the previous absence of an autonomous sphere of the fine arts. Parallel to the growth of educational opportunities for aspiring artists we witness the development of large international exhibitions, such as the internationally established Sharjah Biennial and, in a different vein, Art Dubai, and the development of commercial art galleries and a local art market.

However auspicious these developments may be, they are still far from offering a coherent or organic framework for the arts in the UAE. We can point out that, whether acknowledged or not, uneven development, is an essential 'law' also of the cultural processes of the contemporary world. In the case of the emerging generation of artists the paradoxes, aporiae, opportunities, energies and challenges generated by an accelerated stage of the process of national development, account for both the most productive as well as the most uncertain aspects of current art. It goes without saying that this development does not occur in isolation from the global conditions of today.

History, in the sense of the inherited, given conditions of a society and culture, can be both foundation and limit, that is, at the same time support and obstacle for the actual development of

human life. The experience of history is not simply the reception of given forms and ideas, but decisions on their meanings and value. And any choice about inherited conditions is at the same time a choice on the identity of the present and on how we must act here and now.

Human beings act according to representations, that is informed, misinformed, objective, distorted, clear or confused judgments (that is, decisions) about the world and the self. The present is the urgency of decisions, and therefore it constitutes itself as the very foundation of our historicity. The present is the 'link' between the past and future not just in the common sense of the reproduction and 'handing out' of the already given but, properly speaking, in the sense of the continuous production of meanings and values.

The identity of the present is its immediate difference from the conditions inherited, that must be acted upon (and thus transformed in the present) and, at the same time, from those future conditions produced by present decisions and actions. The present is not the past, nor it is the future, and yet the past and the future are essential conditions or dimensions of the present. 'Excluded' in concept, they return in the ever-vanishing reality of what we call 'now'.

The present is therefore the experience of time as fundamentally heterogeneous, and with it, the possibility of self-estrangement and misrecognition at the core of our representations and actions here and now. It is the experience of radical indeterminacy at the foundation of our actions and decisions, that is, the condition of having to think and act within a time always distinct from itself, to think and act without any preexisting guarantees to the success of our endeavors, to the objectivity of our choices and to the effective accomplishment of our intended goals. The present is our universal condition, and its proper figure is the Sphinx. The present is itself

the enigma that must be solved, as the absolute condition for survival.

A specific intersection of diachronic and synchronic axes of development, the intermixing of a peripheral experience and re-centering processes, the emergence of new forms of spatial organization at the crossroads of diverse temporalities and of heterogeneous cultural structures, are constitutive elements of the present historical experience of the UAE. How are these elements reflected in the arts? To make sense of this question we should have in mind that 'reflection' must be understood here as something other than a passive mirroring of external conditions and processes. In fact, the arts become one more element in the constitution of the present, one more of its many enigmatic dimensions. The question is therefore: how do artists respond to the riddle of art, that is, to the riddle of the times?

The works of Ebtisam Abdul Aziz thematize the relationship between the systematic procedures of mathematical and statistical reasoning and quantitative research methodologies as appropriated by contemporary art, with special reference to the works of Sol Lewitt. All these elements or aspects are filtered through the perspective of daily life environments and actions. Noor Hamidaddin explores autobiographical narrative in the medium of video in a kind of 'spontaneous' archeology of the quotidian as the 'infra-historical' or the 'sub-historical'. Muna Abdul Qader Al Ali reproduces 'matter-of-factly' the subject-less urban, infrastructural-technological and commercial landscapes of the UAE in an attempt perhaps to locate the two 'functional classes', workers and consumers, at the foundations of the present material developments. Maitha Hilal Bin Demithan scans herself and visually reconstructs the artist public body as a kind of articulated two dimensional puppet.

These and other works in the present exhibition have in common a double or triple ‘articulation’, referring and collapsing together the new technologies of the image, the given artistic languages, strategies and genres of contemporary art, and the ‘post-modern’ environment of the UAE’s ‘new cities’. As the UAE itself appears to collapse together modernization and post modernization as one continuous process, a kind of ‘permanent revolution’ of the present phase of globalized capitalism. In this context we can point out that the institutional novelties of recent artistic developments in the UAE present their own demands and pressures on the young generation of artists, such as, at times, the constraint to pursue their education in public. *Across the Gulf* give us the chance to see how artists accept and respond to the challenges of the times. The task of the new generations is, here as elsewhere, to make a home for themselves within and among the uncertainties and the possibilities of the present.

The following is a presentation written for the catalog of the exhibition of paintings and photographs of Darwin Guevarra at Tashkeel in Dubai from May 7 to June 11, 2009

Darwin Guevarra is a painter and photographer born in the Phillipines. The present exhibition at Tashkeel Art Center, his first one-man show in Dubai, focus on paintings, or rather, painting-assemblages: mixed media works constructed with a myriad of objects—pipes, machine parts, everyday utensils or parts of utensils, coils, wires, etc,—glued upon a canvas surface attached to panels.

This myriad of heterogeneous objects and materials interacts with the painted surfaces and painted figures: heads, faces, the human body and body parts. They interact with molded reliefs of faces and heads, and with collaged photographic fragments, printed images, etc. as well as with painted representations of common objects. Inanimate objects such as, for instance, a tennis shoe, a dollar bill, or creatures reduced to an inanimate state, and therefore to the common condition of objects, such as dead fishes, butterflies, plants and plant fragments, etc.

These objects interact also with painted duplications of the same materials, machine parts, wires, etc, in a kind of play of mirrors—a play between the collaged objects and their painted symbols or painted doubles. In his paintings, the artist employs, many times in the form of parody, the strategies of *trompe-l’oeil* art. At the same time, he utilizes formal elements and concepts reminiscent of *art brut* or outsider art. These works also resonate something of the atmosphere of the so-called ‘Gothic’ style of modern day popular culture and mass culture. In their hybrid nature, that is, in

the myriad of heterogeneous forms and sources, both conscious and unconscious, informing the imagination and the practice of the artist, we may say that these paintings touch upon some specific elements of our post-modern condition.

One such element is the crossing of genres and domains between 'higher' cultural forms and mass culture. In the culture of this first decade of the 21st century, transitional forms, translations and hybrids between the 'fine arts' and the 'popular' or commercial arts, take the place of the 'transgressions' of the avant-garde movements in the early part of the 20th century.

The historical avant-gardes of the early 20th century wanted to 'implode' the arts to open up new creative possibilities and new forms of cultural action, production and intervention. What was at the time a struggle for a radical transformation of the conditions of artistic production and of the role of the arts in the culture at large, has, in a sense, become a 'given' but, as a different process, that is, a process of a different nature, in a dissimilar context, and with a different meaning.

Today, new technologies of production and communication cut across the divisions between professional and amateur art, between expertise and specialization, on one hand, and spontaneous expressions, on the other. We are confronted with a gamut of mixed genres and diverse circumstances, with their different forms, audiences and different, sometimes conflicting, demands.

The result of this condition is, on the one hand, a new territory of possibilities. On the other hand, a new form of paralysis of the artistic imagination, caught within the abstract universal equivalence of cultural forms and practices, and within the limits and restrictions of the given social circuits of communication.

At the thematic level, the works of Darwin Guevarra explore the paradoxes of the human subject in the contemporary world.

Here the question of the identity of the post-modern subject is the question of the transformations, or more specifically, of the technologically induced and produced mutations of the body. The new image of man is that of the cyborg, that is, the transhuman, generated by a symbiotic process between man and machine. In the paintings we see the body disjointed and dismembered, the body trespassed by machine parts, the body integrated into external circuits of energy and information, and therefore submitted to external processes and forces- in short, the heteronomous body.

The paintings of Darwin Guevarra, with their patterning and multiplication of objects, recurring arrangements of heterogeneous parts and materials, integrated to the larger dispositif of the rectangular canvas, are like enlarged electronic boards, with their complex circuitry and connections. In search for the understanding of the brave new world of our new transhuman existence, the artist imaginatively remakes by hand, out of scraps and discarded 'low tech' materials, these basic unities of communication and energy exchanges of our time: the computer chip and the computer board.

There is an interesting contrast and relationship between the paintings and the photographic works of Darwin Guevarra. In his photographic works, we observe a self-conscious display of photographic technique, the use of strong contrasts, intense colors, a fascination with photographic effects that, at times, does not refrain from the spectacular and the glitzy. By contrast, this series of paintings are somber in their colors and moods, at times strangely silent and almost meditative. And yet, they are also, in their own ways, strident and spectacular. In their deliberated coarse expression, in their relatively large sizes, in the drama of rough surfaces and dark colors, in their self-conscious theatrical tones and reiterative communicative strategies, these works boldly court, now and again, the rhetorically bombastic.

Mixing eschatological symbolism, narrative and raw art, these art works also quote narrative forms such as the storyboard, comics and film. We can observe, therefore, that these dark and elaborated paintings also have a fictional, ironic and ludic dimension. Their closest film analogy would be a cross between *The Matrix* and *Cidade de Deus* (City of God): 'high-tech' narrative and the imagination of daily life, that is, brains and bodies under the pressures of circuits of information and the quest for survival, among social and cultural circuits of exploitation, power and powerlessness.

SCRAPS, installation by Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi at Total Arts Gallery, Dubai, March 10 to April 15, 2009

SCRAPS is a collaborative installation with found objects, sculptural works and photographs by Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi. The couple has lived and worked in Dubai for many years as artists and also directing Total Arts Gallery.

The project started thanks to a 'chance encounter' with the site of a man made disaster: the explosion and fire of an Al Quoz warehouse. Al Quoz is an industrial and commercial area in the city of Dubai, and is also the place where Total Art is located, as well as other contemporary art galleries. The Al Quoz district presents today an interesting amalgam of disparate activities that reflect the rapid pace of development of the city and the not uncommon process by which the planned development of urban spaces is revised and transformed, beyond original directives and intentions, by the many everyday decisions of different urban actors. A visit by the two artists to the remains of the burnt warehouse started a process that would lead to the present exhibition.

At first, the artists were simply fascinated with the site and the remains of objects and materials transformed by explosions and fire, out of which emerged distorted metallic structures, amalgamated and fused objects of plastic, paper, aluminum, etc, everyday objects such as toothbrushes, safety pins, plastic bottles and containers fused together into sculptural shapes. Traces and scraps of common objects, together with structural remains and materials, had been mixed and refashioned by a spontaneous process of estrangement by fire. Photographing the destruction and the space that resulted, and collecting the materials, led to the development of a more

conscious aesthetic relation to the found site, to the materials and objects from which emerged the concept of the present installation. Darius Zandi is a practicing architect and a photographer, Shaqayeq Arabi is a painter, sculptor and installation artist. Both their specific and their common experiences and competences in the visual arts are brought together in the present exhibition.

Entering the penumbra of the gallery space, with lights focusing on forms and objects hanging from the ceiling, displayed on the walls, standing on the floor or on platforms and pedestals, with photographic projections crossing the space and crossing within and among sculptural bodies and metal structures, one is first struck by the 'theatrical' atmosphere and dramatic impact of the work. Forms, as well as colors and surfaces produced by fire and smoke transposed into the gallery space, acquire a distinctive aesthetic quality. Or rather, one could say, their immanent aesthetic qualities were recognized and enhanced by a simple transfer of place, a change of environment from the everyday world into the space of art. Art does not imitate life in this case, but it simply 'frames' it.

Indeed, a common understanding of what an *objet trouvé* (found art object) is states that it is, in fact, 'merely' the unreflected transit of things, a direct communication or transposition from life into art. If that is the case, we can observe that the aestheticization of the banal in contemporary art could be considered as simply the counterpart of the banalization of art, or the banalization of the artistic gesture.

Since Duchamp and the Surrealists in the early part of the 20th century, the ready-made and the *objet trouvé* (analogous but not identical concepts and art practices) have been recognized as established artistic forms. And with the recognition of the ready-made as a kind of artistic 'genre' in itself, come also the risks and challenges

inherent in the repetition of 'inaugural gestures'. Considered however as components of the conceptual vocabulary of contemporary artists, the found object is one element in a contemporary artistic discourse that interrogates the world itself; it interrogates our time, and, contrary to popular beliefs about the nature of aesthetic experience, it is not simply content to 'color' reality with subjective 'points of view'.

Accordingly, we can observe that SCRAPS proposes to the viewers both an immersive and a contemplative or reflective experience. Its initial 'dramatic' effect is counterbalanced by the finely designed arrangements of spatial structures, sculptural forms, and combined or isolated objects, including the remains of a bicycle. Displayed in the gallery space, it inevitably reminds us, not without a hint of irony, of Duchamp's ready-made construction *The Bicycle Wheel* (a bicycle wheel fastened to a kitchen stool) originally created in 1913.

The industrial forms and mass objects transformed by fire, suggest fossilized organic forms and, by that, an affinity to the surrealists' *'objet trouvé'*, that is, natural objects, 'naturalized' artificial objects, strange natural formations, etc, associated with the surrealist 'encounter' with the 'supra-real' (sur-réel) dimension of reality. If not directly related to the aesthetics of Surrealism, the present works can be indirectly related to the poetics of the surrealists, that is, to their artistic productive strategies. Transformed by fire, these objects of human work, the products of human industry, return to dust, to nature. These products of a society of unlimited consumption return to the condition and the form of the inorganic in nature.

But not only Duchamp's artistic concepts has been 'remade' in the burning furnace of an exploding warehouse in Al Quoz. Scissors sculpturally fused together into a compact and yet finely articulated metal bloc, remake the 'accumulations' and serial

sculptural works of French-American artist Arman. Arman created art from the serialized mass objects that populate our world. The precise and clean forms of industrially produced objects were rearranged into elegant sculptural forms.

Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi perform in *SCRAPS* the role of ‘archaeologists of the future’, excavating the remains of life systems in the soil of a destroyed industrial deposit in modern Dubai, and extricating from the ashes of our present condition the artistic layers of visions and forms that are part of our understanding of the world.

Indeed, one important part of Dariush Zandi’s professional expertise and practice is architectural restoration of buildings and sites. In his own original architectural works, the recycling of materials of previous constructions goes together with the post-modern ‘recycling’ of forms and appropriations or quotations of a diversity of concepts and styles. His artistic practice includes photography as a central discipline. Given also the fact that photography itself is a kind of ‘found object’, that is, in one way or the other, the photographic object is a the result of an encounter with reality, that is, a vision born out of the material imprint of light on a sensitive surface, we can point out here the sources and concepts of *SCRAPS* from the artist’s previous experiences.

The very notion of ‘scraps’, making art out of discarded materials brings to mind the frenzy of construction that so far has been the mark of modern Dubai with its accelerated pace of development. This frenzy of construction inevitably creates material and perhaps also human refuse, exhausted, discarded, used and unusable elements.

Making art out of refuse, waste, garbage was also part of the strategy of *Arte Povera*, the Italian art movement of the late 1960s. The richly sensuous elements, the unusually transformed materi-

als and the dramatic dimension of *SCRAPS* are certainly at odds with the rather ‘minimalist’, that is, muted and restrained, aims and methods of *Arte Povera*. In contrast, we can say that *SCRAPS* does not appear to fear a certain ‘excess’ of the dramatic or refrain from the spectacular. These are however conscious ways of highlighting the ‘artificial’, the constructed nature of the artwork itself. It is because the artist can produce and master a significant relationship with reality that contemporary art is able to open itself to things as they are, that is, as they present themselves, and as they become.

The following is the presentation text for the catalog of the video art festival *Video' Appart Paris-Dubai, March 10-28, 2010*

Video' Appart, the video art festival, started in Paris during 2006. Its unique concept intends to bring together an experience of conviviality and the appreciation of contemporary art. According to the organizers, *Video' Appart* fosters a “dynamic sense of exchanges” by a shared experience of art in social settings not restricted to the usual specialized spaces, but including private homes and artists studios.

Such an approach, we can observe, recapitulates in a different context an important element at the historical sources of video as an art form in the late 1960s. A marginal project within the art world of the time, video developed through a network of artists’ initiatives in unconventional spaces such as coffee houses, artists associations, etc. Beginning as a ‘peripheral’ form, video art was able nonetheless to express and foretell, directly or indirectly, present and future mutations at the foundations of contemporary culture which arise in the crossroads of technology, new forms of sociability and forms of production.

The development of video art in the 1960s and the 1970s, jointly with other artistic currents and conceptual innovations of the period, brought important challenges to common understandings and established notions of the work of art, including those of the institutionalized modern or modernist tradition. Video art was one of the new artistic practices that contributed to defy and upset the contemporary system of the arts within which notions about what constitutes a work of art were elaborated. From the start, video art incorporated and was incorporated into different forms, genres and disciplines, such as performance, installation, etc.

As a technological form, a new practice of the image and a new

regime of visibility, video represented at the same time a development and a rupture in the field of the moving image previously exemplified by film and TV.

‘Flow’ (as originally conceptualized by Raymond Williams) and ‘real time’ are two central ideas for the understanding of the specificity of the video experience. The continuous flux of images, the simultaneity of production and reproduction of the moving image, are characteristics of the technology and the processes of television. The advent of the recorded video process exacerbated the process of automation/autonomization of the image proper to television: real time, observed Frederic Jameson, was henceforth the time of the machine itself, and the flux of images constituted the perpetuated, ever-recurring, ‘perpetual present’ and presence of the image. In this way, following Jameson, we can observe that video translates the spatialization (objectification) of time and the concomitant temporalization (subjectification) of space at the core of the postmodern experience: the ‘trading of places’ between the subject and the object, or, the ‘neutralization’ of the real.

In this regard, we can point out that in the artistic context of early video art, the developments from Minimalism to Conceptual Art, commonly interpreted as the progressive ‘dematerialization’ of the art object, can perhaps be better designated and understood as a process of ‘virtualization’ *avant la lettre*. These movements preceded technology, which would eventually transmute and recreate the image and transform image practices and processes, artistic and otherwise, within an emergent new space: the digital space of computer technology.

Video art as a dynamic, mutant, multiple and multipliable form, anticipated the era of the digital image and of digital art forms. More than ever before, the mutant and the multipliable characterize both today’s economy and today’s ontology, or more appropriately

perhaps, the ontologies of art. Incorporated by and incorporating digital processes, products and strategies, video art turned digital video art continues to unfold its powers of transformation and hybridization, together with the extended capacities of simulation and modelization at the core of the artistic concepts and practices of the present.

With the expansion of digital technology within diverse spheres of life, the hybridization of forms in the visual domains entails the crossing over not only between diverse disciplines, but also between diverse institutional domains, different spheres of social practices, that often involve convergent and/or contradictory uses and functions.

Video art reflects, and contributes in its turn to the process of ‘neutralization’ of the categories of art and of the aesthetic experience of a not-so-distant past. As with other forms of digital arts, it presents and reproduces itself as intrinsically or necessarily a non-canonical art form, that is, a form that can only be conceptualized horizontally, as a series, in a non-hierarchical way.

We may conclude that video festivals, such as *Video’Appart* itself, are indeed the proper locus for the appreciation of video art. Only a multiplicity of works can concretely show a multiple art form.

Video’Appart connects together artists and viewers from Paris and Dubai. To my knowledge it is the first event of this genre, linking two cities with their heterogeneous histories and diverse cultures, in a shared experience of contemporary art. As to indicate that perhaps the very identity of these postmodern times is to be located in current and future processes of amalgamated or ‘hybrid’ forms of experience.

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The works of Athier consciously elaborate on the question of the encounters between on the one hand the *calligraphic tradition* and the *calligraphic sensibility*, that is, the calligraphic territory of the Arabic visual arts, as well as the pattern making inventiveness so central to the Eastern visual arts, and on the other hand *painting on canvas* as a particular art form or genre with its specific aesthetic and ideological constructs (beyond the simple consideration of technique and materials *per se*) that were initially formulated within the Western historical development of the visual arts, specially since the Renaissance and the Venetian artists' adoption of both oil painting as medium and canvas as support.

In the case of the present works, *Fragmented Events* at Cuadro Fine Arts Gallery, Dubai, November–December 2011, by the young British-Iraqi artist, it is possible to argue that we are presented with a kind of postmodern play on the history of early 20th century painting *as both a recapitulation and a marking of distance*, or the statement of *repetition as difference*, that is, an exemplary *postmodern parody*—both homage and caricature, one with the other, one by means of the other—of the formalistic and self-referential dimension of modernist artworks and artistic strategies turned into a reference to history and to historical closure, with all the complexities that such a notion entails. But certainly that is not all, for amalgamated to the subject of painting there is the other implicit or explicit reference, common to many forms of contemporary Middle Eastern arts, to the visible forms of language turned into images.

The strategy of formal fragmentation and the poetics of the fragment points also to a central art form or practice and a central artistic concept of 20th century art: the collage. The breaking

of boundaries between genres and art forms, between contexts, between representation and reality, etc. resulting from collage (born out of Picasso's Cubist experiments) anticipated the forms and conditions of art, that is, the artistic developments of the late 20th century into hybrid forms and hybrid art concepts. Here, it is as if the postmodern artwork assigns itself the paradoxical task of representing the breakdown of representation as a finalized process (perhaps the very paradox of postmodern art itself). In such a process painting becomes the theory of painting or painting as its own theory.

The notion of historical closure and aesthetic closure leads directly to the question of historical experience and of the nature of the present period. A reference to the past is always also (or perhaps we should say: always already) a reference to the future and to the unstable nature of our historical experience, that is the experience of the modern world as such. Contrary to a commonly held notion, the past is as much an imaginary construct, an *object of desire*, as the future.

One may argue that in their own ways these paintings interrogate the fragmented nature of our historical consciousness by way of our artistic consciousness, and do so in the clash of language and image, of context and intention, of flow and form, division and unity, historical and cultural references, analogies and allusions, etc, including 'oblique' allusions to the graphic forms of contemporary urban art and graffiti.

The result is a type of gently ambivalent architecture of form, of 'soft' deconstruction and poetic fragmentation. It can (or must) be read, at the same time, as a 'sign of the times': as a kind of visual reflection on historical entropy. It brings to mind two interrelated theoretical motifs in Walter Benjamin: *the poetics of the fragment* related to the Romantic notion of the *ruin* as historical memory

(also as a kind of historical 'anticipation' of collage), and his 'untimely' meditations on the history of the 20th century expressed in the concept of modern history, or modernity itself, as catastrophe.



Marcelo Lima by Gabriel Lima

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Marcelo Guimarães Lima PhD, MFA, born in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), studied Philosophy at the Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil), Studio Art and History of Art at the University of New Mexico (USA). He taught at the University of Illinois and Goddard College in the US, and at the American University in Dubai (UAE). He was a visiting scholar at Stanford University (USA), a visiting artist at Rutgers University (USA) and a visiting lecturer at the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain).

He has exhibited his artworks in Brazil, the US, France and the UAE. His drawings and prints can be seen in private collections in Brazil, the US, France, Spain and the UAE, as well as in public collections such as, among others, the Museu de Arte Contemporânea (São Paulo, Brazil) and the Rutgers Center for Innovative Printmaking (Rutgers University, USA). He has published essays and critical writings on Art and Philosophy, Psychology of Art and on cultural and educational themes.

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