

Gennaro Castellano: Speech for the Biacs2 Symposium

Reading and re-reading the outline of the Symposium by Okwui Enwezor I began to reflect about the concept of neighbourliness. In this time of crisis, what does it mean to be neighbourly? A very good question.

I thought immediately to some concepts of the Indian intellectual Amartya Sen and I imagined he would answer like this: to be neighbourly you need to assume a moral imagination towards the others that concretely means trying to understand the real situation of your interlocutor. Not necessarily interceding on his behalf, but only know the true situation in which it is. In the western world from the 70's it's become strange speaking about moral, it sounds like moralistic. A big part of the intellectual scene preferred to speak about ethic. In spite of that, it is really urgent now re-starting to use this word maybe as adjective: like moral imagination, for example. Our time is characterized by a massive misunderstanding: the truth isn't what really happens, but what media say about it, how they explain the facts through the agenda setting. The question could be if it really exists a possible truth to share with others in spite of all personal interests, of the financial lobby's interests, the state's reasons, the religions. And in fact how many people are really interested to know the truth, or rather it seems that the most important thing is to be with one accord to all possible commonplaces, and in anyway never against them. Is it about of fear or easily opportunism? It's hard to imagine what sort of power could in the past oblige millions of people to accept phenomenon like nazism or slavery and now oblige millions people, not very different in their complexity then former, to disinterest their self about the violence of the clash of cultures, which we have to bear on the media as daily death's chronicle. Ideology makes people blind and fear too. We can only observe that history doesn't teach enough.

In the past, till now, some artists and intellectuals have assumed the attitude of denunciation against power abuse, against risk of cultural clash, against the non respect of human rights. This attitude is not useless, but maybe it's not enough to denounce society's guilts, perhaps someone has to make active processes which go in the opposite direction of what is denounced.

Therefore it's important that art now tends to overcome the confines of the traditional art places to become a mirror of the society and a ground of reflection of what happens in outside world. Today artists not only go out from the very surface of the object, but also from the protected enclosure which goes from studio to gallery to collector.

They turn to a bigger yard, as the territory, the country, the world, recognizing the value of social legitimation, not only the philosophical one. They concentrate their attention more to the process than to object or concept, they pick and anticipate what we can define as the positive vocation of the contemporary and globalized age, where the value is not only born from single identity, but from the synthesis of complexity. In this process art does not lose, but amplifies its own symbolical meaning, without defining itself as political or social.

Hence, I find appropriate to suggest a concept of Carlos Basualdo: “If the logic of capital is realized through a growing process of instrumentalization linked to the incrementing of efficiency in all productive areas, the artist, in order to continue being an artist, will attempt to constitute the autonomy of his practise around an anti-instrumental impulse. The forms this anti-instrumental impulse takes, however, are highly specific. Lately they seem to manifest themselves in an effort to reflect on the social and ethical dimensions of form”.

If today one of the most urgent problem is that cultures do not communicate, we have also to try to let them communicate, for what we can do. The aim of the project Voyages Croisés that we display in Biacs2 is just to create a platform of debate between Italian and African artists, intellectuals, politicians about one of the most urgent issue of the contemporaneity: the phenomenon of migration and its consequences.

This project falls within the current debate aimed at going beyond the dichotomy between multiculturalism and hybridism in the field of arts. It takes intercultural issues into consideration. It extends beyond the specificities of contemporary art to embrace sociology, human and political sciences. In this case the condition to create a neighbourliness was a possible convergence on some issues like: culture and democracy, economy and development, spirituality, migration, and the idea of other.

The differences which emerge on general line between cultures, countries and civilizations become the argument of all kind of fundamentalisms: the individuation of the Other, as an enemy, is a strategy to solidify the internal front. Indeed, it needs to avoid every generalization in the speech, it's the intellectual condition, whom we should not renounce.

To understand how complex the matter is, it should be enough to observe the couple dynamics, where sometimes the choose partner could become very stranger to us and there is in fact the serious problem of the couple's incommunicability. Finally, we can notice that the human being often has a contradictory relation to himself, sometimes bordering on schizophrenia.

This let us understand that questions of neighbourliness and distance between difference environments regard also our private life, where personal relations play a very important role and are the only we can really control. It is useless to bother religions and civilizations. The intimacy between people depends from other complex factors. Maybe isn't enough to be of the same country or religion to create conditions to trust others.

In fact at the beginning of the project, everything seemed to summarize a general, perhaps even generic, reflection on the human being itself. A carrier and at the same time the object of prejudice of all kind: social, political, religious, sexual, behavioural or otherwise linked to instinctive factors.

To conclude my argument, I think that every fight regarding a special category, as women's rights, immigrant's rights, or classes clash, even if legitimate, of course, sends away from the most important target, which is the one against power lobbies. Weapons business, control of oil, slave trade, traffic in women and children, huge investments in security: these are lobbies which have no colour, no religion, no countries. Like the sociologist Salimata Wade, one of the participant of Voyages Croisés, tells in her text, the political domination is the one that most hurts the susceptibility of people, but it assumes, more and more, the form of the economical relationship. Factually, we know that economic power is the privileged tool to express the political one, imposing market rules.

Cross trips

We travelled in Africa in February 2004 to know a reality that we knew indirectly studying the territory of Zingonia, in the hinterland of Milan, characterized by a strong presence of immigrant inhabitants and for this considered as an intercultural laboratory.

In the Zingonia project, from 1998 until 2002, we have proposed and experienced the involvement of artists in direct relation with the territory and its issues, let us know, in the first phase, that it was necessary to individuate an interlocutor in loco able to give us a reading key of the forced exodus from some African countries to Europe. The second step was the travel in Italy of Huit Facettes to some meetings with cultural institutions interested in public art projects, but also immigrant associations. As it happened in July 2004 in Zingonia, when Huit facettes meet the community of African immigrants, resident in the area between Bergamo and Milan in the northern Italy. The meeting intended to promote and let local community know a picture of intellectual activity existing in African lands. The aim of the initiative was to animate a comparison and an

analysis on crossing and communication between different cultures, through the witness of professionals of world of culture, public administration and media.

The presence of intellectuals and artists permitted to develop various issues about the intercultural dialogue. A real meaning of migration, beyond the dictates of a consumerist society.

The African immigrants have been glad to present to local community some representative artists, who guaranteed for the intellectual and cultural heritage of those countries, too often painted in western logic as a simple and reducing folklore. We should underline that it happens to every cultural phenomenon: it seems in fact that marketing loves reducing cultural issues in folklore to sell them better.

It all began in 2003, with a long-distance debate regarding the possibility of a partnership between REPORTING SYSTEM and HUIT FACETTES in an artistic project, built around the concepts of migration, contamination, intercultural. Observation, listening, mediation, dialogue, transversal action, all instruments that the parts chose to use. We must recall that there were certainly tensions and misunderstandings. The interests of the individuals and of the group are all important. The discovery of kindred aims, practices and methods was in fact not enough to allow us to completely overcome the diffidence and the generalizations.

We went beyond “making distinctions between the responsibility of the individual and the system”, as Kan- si wrote in his text, which we agreed completely.

A journey of knowledge between cultures, through the live voice of figures from the art world, politics, from the African and Italian societies, cultural institutions and public entities invested directly, to give ideas and elements for thought regarding the complexity of intercultural dialogue and on the possible role of culture in this process.

We chose to communicate in French, a foreign language for both parts, as well as all possible to signs and behaviours that serve to transmit something of ourselves.

We left for Senegal, after one year of preparation, in February 2004, together with Aliou Gueye (Ass.ne Senegalesi bergamaschi) and Nafy Drame. During the first days in Dakar with Mor Lyssa Ba and Amadou Kan Sy (coordinators for Huit Facettes) we set up an intense program of appointments, meetings, and visits. The further along we went, the stronger the interest in the project became, and each person suggested new names and situations to explore.

We met and interviewed sociologist Pape Demba Fall at the IFAN, Institute Fondamental d’Afrique Noire, and on the same day Oumar N’dao, literary figure and scenographer. Over the

following days we had meetings with Malamine Tamba at the Congad headquarters (Senegalese Ong consortium) and Koyo Kouoh, critic and curator. Through Koyo we met the sociologist Salimata Wade and saw the Forut Media Center, the production centre for young African video art. Then the jurist Moussa Samb, who declared that “through a reflection on the cultural dimension legitimate governance can be founded”.

Soukeyna N’daie Ba, Minister for the decentralized cooperation, gave us an official version of government politics and of the relations between Senegal and the rest of the world. We had meetings with the Minister for Senegalese living abroad and with the Secretary of the Minister of Culture. Finally, the interview/debate with Kan Sy and Mor Lyssa Ba, with which we closed the circle.

In July of that same year, Amadou Kan Sy, Mor Lyssa Ba and Oumar N’dao came to Italy as guests of the Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, Connecting cultures in Milan, a titolo in Turin and the Fondazione Olivetti in Rome. This was a “pre-project” made on by learning trips: Reporting system and Asso.S.B. in Senegal to learn about a reality that they had been working on and investing in for some time, followed by Huit Facettes coming to Italy for a series of meetings, seminars and workshops.

A work in progress, with the aim of building a bridge towards a reality as complex and dynamic as that in Africa, acting out the role of culture as dialogue and as a possible ground upon which to analyze the more relevant themes of contemporary culture.

Following the meetings in Dakar and in Italy, we asked the participants to elaborate on one or more topics among those in question, setting up a long-distance debate. A merry-go-round of texts, interviews and other various documents via e-mail that communicated to each person involved the point of view of the others. In a project in which works of art are not created, except perhaps behind the scenes, but rather reflections and reactions, the method we found to be the most suitable to avoid losing all the material we had gathered and the potential it expressed was to publish it.

With the job of transforming a remarkable quantity of diverse material (texts, interviews, photos, videos) into something legible for the public before us, we took on the responsibility of a publication that, rather than being “scientific”, was more a synthesis of the whole process.

