

On Transference

To whom do historical traumas belong? Is this moment, fast-tracked as a trauma of still unknown proportions and implications, shared as one? Or, is this trauma's contextual, regional, home-grown 'expression' subject to the laws and regulations of political and cultural heritage? Artists travel. Artists have travelled throughout modernity, although the terms of this travel have changed in notable ways. Rather than travelling for 'inspiration', artists now travel for work. Rather than travelling on the grounds of privilege, as was often the case with artists of modernity's colonial landscapes and 'observation' mentalities, the accelerated contemporary (where - one feels compelled to note - colonial attitudes and gazes are far from absent) incorporates artists' travel as access, increasingly, to the wound of capitalist globalisation. The European Union blurred the boundaries of labour mobility and a gradually offensive as much as unsustainable cosmopolitanism without taking care (in fact, deliberately *not* taking care) to extend full citizen rights to its mobile labour force. As a result, the European Union is now suffering the consequences of its structural deficit in tying labour to democracy.

For all its emphasis on the 'mobility of artists and culture professionals', the European Union condemned artists moving within its border to becoming witnesses to the European Union's own processes of disarticulation, without ever resolving the problem of their 'foreignness'.¹ Numerous debates concerning both art institutions (and, of course, art itself as an institution) and works of art or exhibitions are, implicitly or explicitly, predicated on this condition of perpetual externality. The structures that support artists' mobility, including residencies, are always an intermediate solution to the problem of 'getting to know' and, to borrow a contemporary buzzword, 'learning from'.² To this twinned cause or even objective, Laura Ruiz and Nora Aurrekoetxea's ... *A STRONG NEED FOR SECURITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING* gives a wayward solution. Rather than witnessing in the form of 'learning from', the work (or rather, composition of works) attempts a test of transference.

The reference to transference, rather than translation, should already be indicative of certain traits that I see as salient in the narrativisation attempted by the two artists. 'Translation' is

¹ See the European Commission's web page Mobility of Artists and Culture Professionals http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/cultural-creative-industries/mobility_en Accessed 31 March 2017.

² 'Learning from Athens' is the title of Documenta 14, April-July 2017.

imbued with positivity: postmodernism left us with the legacy of multiple references to 'cultural translation', which in 2017 sound as empty promises of intercultural understanding and a *pax cultura* that never came. 'Translation', despite its difficulties, is positively inflected, which seems inappropriately optimistic given the intercultural *hostis* that neoliberalism is concluding with – and it is a long-drawn conclusion, experienced daily in the Global North (the Global South has a more consummate experience) where we find a fracturing or 'multi-gear' European Union, the promise of a US-Mexican border wall and an increasing withdrawal from an existence in common. 'Transference' bears no such illusions. It is negatively inflected and associated with therapy. In general terms, it describes the irruption, at the wrong moment and in the wrong place, of things (especially feelings) that we would call 'suppressed'. An attachment to trauma, and its impossibility of containment, is transference's prevalent feature. As a psychoanalyst might say, I believe that all of us here – readers and witnesses- know what I am talking about.

... *A STRONG NEED FOR SECURITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING* enacts a transference in spatial terms, bearing in mind that Marx's prediction concerning the 'annihilation of space by time' is mostly realised by, for, and within finance and its speed of transactions.³ Looking down from the tower of finance to the lives lived – or even 'executed' (pun intended)- on the ground, space is where solidarity, a favourite staple of the ethical, rather than political, Left, gets to be tested every day, in the looped temporality of a 'crisis'. But to be more accurate, one needs to refer either to the refraction or the multiplication of that crisis. Let's opt for the latter term for, as this exhibit's transference re-assembles and tests images of Athens in Bilbao, it should be obvious that we have two different urban realities and two different traumas that 'happen' to be unfolding in parallel. What however ... *A STRONG NEED FOR SECURITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING* implies or (to repeat myself for emphasis) puts to the test is that 'parallel' is a misnomer and that, as David Harvey has suggested, capital always endeavours to externalise its crises (and mostly succeeds in this) presenting them as some other problem as much as someone else's problem.⁴ There is no doubt that since 2010 Athens has emerged as an excellent case study with regard to the effects of accelerated artificial scarcity in a European economy, right when global scarcity – manufactured also through the Syrian catastrophe –

³ Indicatively, see Michael Lewis, *Flashboys: A Wall Street Revolt*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York 2014. See also Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin, New York 1993 [1857], p.p538-39.

⁴ See David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Verso, London 2007 [1982] and David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capitalism, and the Crises of Capitalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

exerts its unstoppable pressure. The abandoned neoclassical Athens building – grey, peeling off, embodying decay – becomes emblematic in this setting, as much as it gets a conceptual lifting in the gentle, slow-motion move of the sky-blue fabric covering its obscene facade. The truth of this acceleration is, as the material amassed in ... *A STRONG NEED FOR SECURITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING* shows, registered on an existential level. This is a level that can be conveyed through fragments of what sometimes Marxists call ‘a real abstraction’ -that is, an abstraction with concrete effects. For the generation of the Bilbo-originating artists who amassed this material, the ‘real abstraction’ is registered as a question of ‘where do I belong?’ or ‘do I belong here?’ and ‘how can this ‘here’ become substantiated?’

The questions are not infused, as one might have expected, just with anxiety. In introducing their take on this ‘strong need for security’, the artists opted to quote Aristide Antonas’s words, ‘...lighted by the fire of instability and the promising negation of the present’, as indicative of their own perhaps emotional framework in thinking across an economic and a national trauma that marks two edges of the continent. Choosing a phrase with the prospect of ‘negating’ at its core speaks to wider, and not necessarily connected, constituencies at present – and note that it is ‘the present’ that holds the promise and hope of its own negation. Recasting an end as a beginning is not easy. We are told by many voices that something fails to be born in our times, in this very present, a common present – whether we like it or not.⁵ How can one proceed from here without falling into the familiar ‘longing for the past’, for the past as identity? What can one show by way of this dream of proceeding without generating a nightmare in the process – and we are full of these? How is the transference attempted here legitimised without confinement to the solidarity discourse rather than praxis?

These questions are not rhetorical and yet they are impossible to answer in the current state of disconnect as the provisional solution to the problem of demarcating all that separates us rather than make us belong. In these conditions, transference becomes a right as much as an exploration of the many wrongs that comprise the living history of our present(s). And yes, we can keep re-enacting our traumas as the motor of our living history, but the critical question to be asked is: to what extent are we forced to do this and to what extent do we choose to? This question – its two sides- should be read dialectically. Its two parts are constitutive of one another – which is said here without implying anything more than what

⁵ Indicatively, see Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Times of Interregnum’, *Ethics and Global Politics* 5/1(2012), 49-56.

the liberal ideology of 'choice' and 'free will' affords one to imply. The histories of Bilbao and Athens dispel such illusions, demonstrating instead the compulsive iterations to go on by building on what is available rather than on what these cities' subjects might wish to make available, to themselves and to others. The transference, in that other sense - the sense of compulsive iteration - will go on. It is the struggle that one must live up to and within which one must, also, live.

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Athens, 10 April 2017