

THE LOCAL TANGO AND THE GLOBAL DANCE

An Unfinished Conversation between Vasif Kortun and Cuauhtémoc Medina¹

Dear Vasif,

There are few pleasures so great as conversation, my dear Vasif. It was really great to spend time with you in such a faraway location as Helsinki. Then I got home and found your almost compulsory invitation to talk about what curating has meant in Mexico since the late 1980s, and I thought about our meeting over noodles and coffee, hoping to draw some ideas from it. I took out your card and read your quite imposing title: Yönetmen from Istanbul Güncel Sanat Müzesi. That sounds grand to me, but what does it mean? So I thought: why not continue the conversation not over coffee but across two or three oceans? What is the Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art? What is Proje4L? How do you envision its role in Turkey in regard to the balancing act between local activists and international curators that we started to discuss in Helsinki?

Cuauhtémoc

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Dear Cuauhtémoc,

The man whose name I could never pronounce now has a face. The lunch was memorable for me as well, but why do you have to ask questions first, just when I was gearing up to commence an interview with you?!

Regarding your first question, the easy one, Proje4L and Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art are one and the same; it can be read all together in one breath. Although I am pushing the Proje4L part as a concept, like that of Kiasma or Baltic or Moderna,² it is simply a label. But, let's break the name apart: Proje (an experimental space for contemporary visual arts; a place for multidisciplinary and critical dialogue); 4L (the shortened name of a modernist housing district close to the museum, built in the 1950s); Museum (a public space open to new and diverse audiences).

Regarding the second, more complex question, I use the dualistic terms (local activists and international curators) only for convenience. The periphery needs a singular center to utilize and to exploit, whereas for the center, there are always multiple peripheries that it can visit upon and dismiss at its own will. Hence, the center

¹ Vasif Kortun is director of Proje4L Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art, and a member of the Walker's global advisory committee. Cuauhtémoc Medina is a researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, National University, Mexico; a member of Teratoma, a group of curators, critics, and anthropologists based in Mexico City; and associate curator of Latin American Art at the Tate Gallery, London.

² I refer here to Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland; the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, England; and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden.

does not ultimately need one periphery, and the periphery never really wants to do away with the dualistic system that it inherits and sustains. Who knows if one is not in fact the center of the periphery? So, in a way, I try to operate outside the local/global, center/periphery system; they are orbital constellations interdependent on each other. There are, of course, tactical handicaps in working simultaneously within both realms—it is one thing to approach these systems as merely operational, but shall we go on?

Warmest,
Vasif

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Dear Vasif,

Yes, I think we should go on. First, because it seems to me that there is still something to gain from upholding the operation of the periphery/center dichotomy, namely, preventing a regression into new twisted forms of nationalism and covert nationalist cultural policies. Just recently, an elderly Mexican art critic, Raquel Tibol, proclaimed that Mexico is not a periphery, that “we are both our center and our periphery.” This in my view entails an attempt to reconstitute the cozy feeling of a local artistic wholeness, where local artists can be as indulgent as they want with their sense of belonging, local institutions can still pretend to create a local canon and then try to export it without any questioning, and finally local critics (like me) can benefit from an easily achieved local authority. As a friend of mine told me many years ago, in places such as mine there is always the risk of becoming the little king of a little kingdom. Despite the constant violence involved in the arbitrariness of global selection and the constitution of the transnational artistic canon, I feel that the very randomness of this machinery is more exciting and more intellectually effective than the reconstitution of the idea of “international art” as something akin to a United Nations assembly of small national schools.

I would even go so far as to propose that it is only through the current interlocking and, yes, as you put it, the complicity of the periphery and the center that we in the periphery can pretend to search for a sense of radicalism in cultural practice. Very cynically, if you want, I would say that it is due to the center’s longing for some kind of political specificity in the art coming from “out there” that we see artists emerging around us who do not conform to the expectations of the market or to local institutional tastes in terms of “quality,” “formal discipline,” and “seriousness.” In fact, political and intellectual radicalism in the periphery emerges and has a chance of becoming artistically relevant because of what I would describe as “foreign intervention”—the displaced utopian and critical desires that the critics and curators in the centers cannot necessarily find in their immediate surroundings.

To a certain extent, this may apply to your own situation. How do you explain the apparent contradiction of Proje4L departing from yet depending on the specific dynamics and resources available in Turkey? In other words, can our local practices survive their inherent unpopularity without the certain stamp of authority that comes from our thin participation in the global sphere? To be more specific, what exactly do you show in your museum? Is it a professional and well-funded venture like Kiasma? Is it concerned with representing accurately what is going on around you in your place?

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Dear Cuauhtémoc,

It is precisely the luxury of the periphery that needs a historical dismantling. Otherwise, the contemporary cannot be wholly emancipated. I think it was Luis Camnitzer who articulated in the *Hybrid State* catalogue the “local kingdom” with its middle- and bureaucratic class base.³ The class base of the peripheral power can therefore be linked to the project of modernity (other modernisms, if you will) as the privileged subject and agent.

³ See Luis Camnitzer, “After the Fall of Bureau Communism,” in *Hybrid State*, exh. cat. (New York: Exit Art, 1992).

To talk about today, I am at pains to understand the situatedness of the practice from “out there,” and the way it displaces itself from the local tango of cultural economy. Twice-displaced critics and curators that we are, we claim to transport knowledge about a conversational and convertible art practice situated within the local dialect. You spoke so eloquently about this situation—when the Mexican and the Turk met up in a nouvelle Japanese soup joint in Helsinki—in the context of the contemporary art practice as it operates outside the local tango and divorced from the humanist disciplines of culture. That weak layer you speak of is the very community that sustains me, although we betray each other now and then.

Having just visited the Seventh Biennial here in Istanbul and comparing it with the ARS 01 exhibition⁴—the way the former is laid out haphazardly, creating an ambience rather than a reading, using large spaces around which works are scattered in a directionless way—forces me to respond to your question in an honest way. I don’t think I can ever attain the level of Kiasma in my little institution, and I will never be able to provide the care for the works that they do, or that kind of stability. Proje4L does not represent accurately what is happening in Turkey. It is biased toward contemporary expression, forever facing the risks of its own volatility.

You know how hard it is to pursue this line of work when one is both a cultural critic—an active agent in the contemporary visual arts field—and a museological interpreter. I cannot see anything of this sort being possible in the great Middle/Northern Europe and North America today; perhaps once, but not today.

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Dear Vasif,

I write to you today while bombs are falling in Afghanistan. I find it interesting to transpose our discussion of “out there.” Perversely, it is the notion of “the center” that most likely seduced the Muslim fundamentalists to stage their fears of globalization by crashing airplanes into skyscrapers. They could not restrict themselves to creating a purist Muslim kingdom amidst the mountains and the valleys of Afghanistan. Good children of the religions of “the book” (which in my view involves the idea of the West after all), they thought they could symbolically defeat the Americans and at the same time provoke them into attacking “the Muslim world” so as to induce an overall Muslim reaction against the West. I mean, they could not be so naive as to imagine they would not be attacked in response. On the other hand, American statesmen will ultimately profit from the fact that they have finally restored the idea of a “radical other,” reviving their sense of civilizatory uniqueness and their duty to forcibly modernize the rest of us. Ultimately, even though the Taliban bans TV, photography, and cinema for its population, Bin Laden needs CNN to broadcast his call for a universal Jihad against Jews and Christians and against all of those who live under Jewish and Christian rule. Likewise, American and British governments have trained their “special forces” to parachute into the middle of the desert relying on something you could call “applied social anthropology,” for they are trained in the local languages, technologies of cultural exchange, and the management of local systems of power. Here you have a perfect illustration of the complicity between the center and the edge: both of them are required to advance their positions by means of an efficient administration of their mutual instability. It is hard to even focus one’s mind on the so-called collateral damage in such a situation. I admit that rather than making me feel alienated, this whole global tragedy simply proves to me how futile my personal political mores are in the present situation, not only in terms of signing petition letters circulating in cyberspace but also in terms of how these mores relate to the very banal questions of art and art criticism. This recent crisis highlights something we have been experiencing for a long time: the difficulty of working out modestly effective political goals and strategies. We are doomed to operate blind to the outcome of our provisory assumptions.

Having said that, I find two really challenging issues in your letter. The first is the image (or should I say mirage?) of something you call whole emancipation. I find this notion really unfathomable. I guess the first thing I will ask you to clarify is how you define “emancipation” in this case: Do you mean the pursuit of fair-

⁴ The Seventh International Istanbul Biennial took place September 23–November 17, 2001; ARS 01 was presented at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, September 30–November 17, 2001.

ness in cultural exchange, or do you mean the emancipation of our local elites from the demands of their own interpretation of modernism? But to keep the conversation interesting, I'll say a few words on this issue first.

The pursuit of inclusion and the battle against modernizing local dreams are clearly two different issues, which our “global discussions” do not always allow us to distinguish with clarity. I grant you that Camnitzer has a great deal to say about the division of labor that exists between the expectations of the local kingdoms and the question of how to repoliticize their participation in “wonderbread” global art. But to be honest, I guess we (the privileged, doubly displaced ones, as you clearly pointed out) always knew that **the center was expecting from us an illustration of “cultural difference” that was mostly a matter of their own needs—the need to deal with local, multicultural politicization around immigrant communities.** In response to this yearning, local artists who had no particular interest in that field found a way to insert themselves into the global circulation where (I hope) they intervened more in the direction of questioning the assumptions about cultural practice than of pretending to have anything to do with a “local dialect.” They (we, in fact) took advantage of the expectations of exporting a form of local taste to actually champion something I prefer to call “periphery bad taste” or “sophisticated maladjustment”—to address a manifold of both local and metropolitan cultural concerns using any means at our disposal.

My question is in fact a form of confession: I currently am not overtly interested in issues of inclusion. The local dynamics of this place make me feel that I am concerned more and more with the radicality of the specific artistic projects emerging from my surroundings. **These works do not need from me anything like a “translation”; they have increasingly integrated, in the sense of carrying within them, the elements that make them readable to informed art audiences from Argentina to Helsinki.** What I attempt to do, and at times probably with some narrowness of spirit, is to preserve their local significance in relation to their global circulation, even inside my own city. I'm the one who struggles to keep them slightly localized, at least for the sake of argument, both to have something to say about them and to prevent them from being merely a free signifier in the global arena, in the way Orozco's work became a deterritorialized but nevertheless nationally branded type of production in the early 1990s. I probably fool myself into believing that this is a way to preserve their political meaning: wanting to make it seem that they are advancing a new form of local culture when in fact their work has a built-in internationalism. But perhaps the only thing I am achieving is a brief (and increasingly ephemeral) moment of local consumption (mine at least), before or while these things find their natural way into the global arena. All of this is obviously perverse. At times it is nothing more than the worst kind of justification: I feel that without the center/periphery power games I would end up moving to New York because the art here will become (again) really bad!

The operation has to a certain extent backfired; because this criticism is written for international consumption, it has begun to work better abroad than in this locality, where, if originally written in English, I myself mistranslate it into Spanish and read it to people who justly find it abstruse and removed from their own perceptions. I call this pantomime (retrieving an old surrealist slogan) a form of literary magnification, of inflationary criticism. Surely these contemporary things we like are, as we talked about the other day, forms of cultural practice that have little if any relation to the local academic discourse and to its modern/humanist assumptions. I entertain the fantasy that the good thing about art in Mexico is that globalization caused it to escape the thrust of Mexican culture, and I do not mean any essential ethnic trait but simply the styles and the issues that Mexican writers and intellectuals continue to find so engaging, for example, the critical writings of Ernst Jünger and Paul Valéry. I am certain that those local dynamics of culture are very much unscathed by globalization in art; the local academia and cultural discourse have been forced to accept globalization as “the current thing” without feeling in any way challenged by its implications. Let me use my perpetual example: Orozco's work is now seen by the Mexican cultural authorities as a useful currency to claim, inside more than outside, that we Mexicans are as contemporary as any other culture. Even the minister of foreign affairs says that he is going to promote Mexican creativity abroad, from Francisco Toledo's painting to Orozco's installations! For the administrators, contemporary art is simply another of “our” tickets to appearing modern. What I find so displeasing about that brand of new cosmopolitanism is that it tends to be so easily absorbed; compared to this, even folklorism is politically significant.

So the truth of the matter is that the “local tango” is far more resilient than the global dance. At least in the international arena, audiences are forced to eat the cake with the theoretical crust. So of course I am inclined to believe that you, like me, are involved in some kind of misrepresentation of “local art.” Of what kind?

Cuauhtémoc

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Dear Cuauhtémoc,

I was talking about an emancipation from the local elites’ interpretation of modernism, a break from the carcass of the acquisitions of modernity, the nationalist will, the economic and administrative class base. I know it sounds arrogant, even deceptive, to seal it off like that, but how else can the actuality be negotiated without compromise? Should we not admit that the tussle has been more with the institutions of local culture than with the center? From the late 1980s, for about a decade, the translating agencies—the middle-men—involuntarily had to illustrate the locatable energies of their places of so-called origin. This, of course, intensified the rupture between the local elites’ interpretation of modernism and the specificity of local contemporary work in the displaced discourse of international syntax. Who won, and what was lost? You know we can’t dig trenches or act as snipers any more. There is a triple caveat here: one has to do with the vestige of local archaic power, an archaic power that lacks the idealism of its origins; the second deals with the naiveté of many international institutions; and finally, there is the terribly sobering realization that we now have the power to make choices. The first position is weak; gone is the thrust of the local academic discourse, its monopoly on information and the privileging translations! Gone are the days of the “splendors of Mexico”!⁵ Regarding international institutions, they have shown remarkable flexibility, have helped artists and curators pay their bills, have provided tickets for travel, and we in turn have provided them with the critique they need to extend their license! Let’s discuss the third caveat. If we go back to your favorite hobby-horse, Mr. Orozco, is not “art for export”—if I can express it in the most banal way—locked in the reciprocity of the local’s imagination of what the center desires and the center’s imagination of what the local should desire? I don’t think this is a self-conscious process but an interpersonal, collective one. In fact, it collapses the strategic difference between Orozco and Kcho. If one issue deals with how we negotiate our arguments into the center and then air them out, another deals with the situatedness of our reading. Twice in the last two years, an artist from Istanbul has put me in a deep quandary. The first instance was when we were doing a critique of a project I had curated. This artist said that she was no longer interested in what she wanted to say to the world, but instead cared about what she wanted to say to herself. And, not long ago, during an exhibition planning conversation for *Becoming a Place*,⁶ she said that I was looking inside from the outside, and that instead I could be looking at the inside from the inside. The ins and outs referred simply to the situatedness of her work. Then, in a recent interview, she said, “The look at the inside from within is an attempt to understand, transform, and produce the context that is inhabited. It’s a preference to remain within, in pursuit of genuineness and credibility. And despite misunderstandings, ill-definitions, and prejudices against it, it can also work critically.”⁷

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Dear Vasif,

Months have passed, deadlines falling on our heads, and I finally come back to your last letter. I would like to say that if my answer has taken so long it is because you instilled in me the very anxieties you referred to, for the simple reason that I feel more and more that a perspective of “the inside from the inside” has become completely impossible for me. This of course may involve my inability to interact with some works and artists properly because they seem to me to project an “inside” (both geographical and emotional/psychological/per-

⁵ *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* was a blockbuster exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 10, 1990–January 13, 1991, and one of the first “selling of nations” exhibitions.

⁶ *Becoming a Place* was the inaugural exhibition of Proje4L Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art and opened September 21, 2001.

⁷ Aydan Murtezaoglu, unpublished interview with Erden Kusova.

sonal) that at the moment appears imaginary. It's funny, but the assignment to write about curating that initiated this conversation had to do in part with acknowledging that in some people's minds I was imposing a foreign view on local art. In any case, let me address two issues.

First, to what extent does the notion of an "inside" depend on how feasible it is to conceive something like a local art history? I am convinced that the way in which contemporary art in Mexico in the 1990s broke with all local artistic tradition was so drastic that no one can even recall anymore those pre-1990 local contexts. The only artistic references that seem to have meaning for artists operating at the moment are precisely those moments that were left out of the narrative: Alejandro Jodorowsky, Marcos Kurtycz, Ulises Carrión, or even a police tabloid photojournalist such as Enrique Metinides. Artists here, my dear Vasif, are titling their works in English, if not actually writing them in English. **We are so integrated by now into the American economy and psyche that the question of "identity" seems to be fruitful only if looked at from the outside:** Ruben Ortiz-Torres, who is based in Los Angeles, has more to say about what it means to inhabit the Mexican stereotype by addressing the underlying revolutionary content of Speedy Gonzalez than anybody who is working from within a spiritual or geographical "inside." Would you say that things are radically different in Turkey? Can contemporary artists have a relative dialogue with a historical cultural structure?

The second issue has to do with the question of the interaction between local and global politics. I am immensely impressed with the way Hardt and Negri, in their book *Empire*, argued that there had been a shift from the old-fashioned idea of a horizontal internationalist class struggle toward a continuous eruption of very local and brief political events based on regional concerns, which immediately touch on central issues of global power without becoming global in themselves.⁸ They spoke metaphorically of a transition from Marx's "Old Mole" to movements that behave more like snakes leaping from regional concerns to challenge the universal order. The Zapatistas, of course, articulated this model. But just a few weeks ago there was another rebellion in San Salvador Atenco, a town a few miles east of Mexico City, by people, branding machetes and taking policemen as hostages, who oppose the expropriation of their communal lands to build a new airport. They were questioning the assumption that extending the global network of business and communications was more important than their existence as a community. And I would say that there is not any more pressing global issue than this.

Once you realize that the more you think locally the more you end up acting globally, developing a view from and to the inside becomes hard to achieve. I guess that one of the things we find interesting in artists working from this location (Francis Alÿs, Santiago Sierra, Teresa Margolles, Minerva Cuevas, to name a few) is that at the same time they refuse to illustrate "globalism" they also show that by operating locally they can have global currency.

Are the conditions of artistic production in Turkey entirely different? How would you distinguish between looking at artworks and artists "from inside" versus merely curtailing their possibility for expansiveness? Perhaps what I am saying is that I find it difficult to address what your friend, the artist, said when she argued that she was interested in working for herself. Call me an ideologist, but such a position has less and less meaning for me.

Apologetically yours,
Cuauhtémoc

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Dear Cuauhtémoc,

Good to hear from you. I guess it is time to close the discussion before it becomes something, or nothing, else.

I am not speaking of conscious processes or illustrations but of the insider's view that shifts the index from the inside, without having anything to do with local artistic traditions. For me, the least meaningful works today

⁸ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

are the neo-exotic, hyper-urban, nontoxic proposals. Something went amiss between the Cities on the Move project and a structure such as the Palais de Tokyo.⁹ This “new authenticity” might be a trap, and it just might be translated as the return of the exotic through a hyper-urban outing.

I assume that the position of artists in Turkey or Russia—in the region I am speaking from—is somewhat different. For one thing, these places were never subjected to colonialization from the outside, so there is no ongoing relationship of seduction. Rather, one can examine the context of a Muslim urban culture where mental constructs such as inside and outside simply mean different things. But, this is another discussion altogether.

So dear Cuauhtémoc, hope to see you again soon, somewhere.

Vasif

⁹ The Palais de Tokyo, Site de création contemporain is Paris' newest contemporary art center.