

The World is Large and Art is its Prophet

I first came across today's North Korean art while working at the inaugural exhibition of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. That project had started in Europe in late Spring 2001 and the Summer of the following year, after having moved to Tokyo, I began to make field researches, as anthropologists would say. I was confronted by an area about which I then knew little, even though I did not lack detailed, though indirect, information. For at least fifteen years I had established important relationships, especially with artists and writers of that vast and complex territory. I speak of the Pacific area, from the western coasts of North America—I had a certain familiarity with California already since second half of the 70s—to the East and South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand. What differentiates that ocean from the Atlantic, which, at least from the first decades of last century and even more so after the Second World War, was the axis of the Western Art universe [*Going West*], is a situation somewhat more relaxed, where the dialectical oppositions, the dichotomies that marked the history of Western Culture and determined its never-ending unrest, soften until they almost vanished. I mean that high and low, spiritual and material, individual and public, original and replica, first and last, all merge, though they remain distinct *per se*, in amalgams sometimes difficult to disentangle. That peacefulness of the Pacific was for me an exciting discovery. Art produced there seems not to recognize canonical rules, and therefore not to be subjugated by them. They however exist, from area to area, from culture to culture, but next to them different procedures emerge and materialize and, at the showdown, they turn out to be equally fruitful.

These considerations are extremely generic and they can appear superficial and misleading, however they represent my position as regards a complexity that not only I do not dare not to take into account, but which is also an inexhausted source of attraction. Even more so considering the crisis Western Culture, and art which is its expression, is now experiencing. What I am confronted with within the Pacific area offers a wealth of proposals, solutions and results, and each of them does not pretend to set itself up as a universal model as it has always been in the West. Therefore there is nothing to mourn but something to celebrate like a new birth. Western Art came to the end of its road, long live Art!

So when, in my researches, I came across the works by the painter Kim Sung-Ryong and by the sculptor Kim Chul-Eok I did not hesitate to include them in the show I was preparing and that would have opened in October 2003 with the title *Happiness. A Survival Guide for Art and Life*. Basically, it was a contemporary art exhibition that included also Modern Classic (from Picasso to Henry Moore), XIX century European painting (from Turner to Gauguin) and Asian art (from India to Japan) from VI century to present times. The presence of the North Korean works was not so much instrumental to the theme of the exhibition, to which however they fully responded, as they were direct proofs of a quality, to my eyes, both extraordinary and *off*.

And when, almost a year ago, Pier Luigi and Eugenio Cecioni made me the proposal to be the curator of an exhibition based on the collection of works they gathered and imported from the Pyongyang Mansudae Art Studio, of which the two artists who arose my first interest were members, I was happy to accept the assignment.

Today what world art, more than the art world, offers in all its new, or regained, vastness is extremely diversified. However, though in this uncontrollable variety, everything moves on the wake of Western Art models, even after its demise: those procedures of artistic art making that imposed themselves from the XIII century in Europe to then spread in the whole planet in the course of centuries. Their basic nucleus can be identified, in great synthesis, with an ever-increasing assertion of the value of individual artistic creation and, simultaneously, with a continuous alternation of styles—it will be appropriate to talk of a phenomenology of styles. Often they are in contrast, in more or less open conflict one with the other, in the hope each one has to prevail over the others and to acquire a sort of supremacy, of absolute, or at least preferential, dominance, in expressing the spirit of the times, of the *Zeigeist*, and for this reason determining a process of continuous substitution. The phenomenon of a dominant style for a certain period, in a perspective of repeated obsolescence, produces also a temporary gradation of values that favours distinctions, often once again dichotomic, as those between major and minor arts, main and secondary lines, centres and peripheries, noble and vile, correct and incorrect. When we reach the Twentieth century, this process of distinction—the *distinction* postulated by the great sociologist Pierre Bourdieu comes to my mind—arises such a wide range of artistic expressions and practices that artists themselves, even if they are united under the same denomination of “art”, recognise themselves as such only if they belong to the same operative current. A totally negative consequence of this attitude is to widen the already existing gap between art and society. The XIX century had entrusted History, specifically Art History, and the Museum with a single codification criterion. And already from the second half of that century times were ripe for Theory and Criticism, with the indisputable merit of looking at the flagrancy and at the problems of the present instead than waiting for the verdicts of History and dismissing its becoming. Finally, in the last decades, it was Market—the Art Market, to be specific—to not so much propose a new kind of systematization as to establish quality and values. However this phenomenology, sometimes passively or obsequiously observed, some other time more or less openly opposed by artists themselves, could not avoid, over the years, nor it can today obstruct in the proliferation of experiences and control the expansion of art.

As the Nazis stigmatized as “degenerate art” that of the avant-gardes, so the dominant culture in today’s art tends to delegitimize as non-art that which is the object of this exhibition. And it does so for very good reasons that I will not here list, since they are in everyone’s consciousness, and that I certainly will not challenge, even more so since my vision, my sensitivity, my way of thinking, not only took shape in this cultural framework, but also because I still recognize myself in it and I share to a great extent those reasons. However I do not dispose *a priori* of a co-presence and of a contradiction in time. At their basis there are two fundamental entities: freedom and desire. And Art solves those fundamentals in Sense, sense as feeling and sense as meaning. Expressed in a different way: Art is the expression of a Sense.

As far as North Korean painting and graphics presented here are concerned, it is clear, it will be clear to everyone, that it is a regime art. And however, it must be noted that, though it is such—without setting by this any limit, much less a negative one—it is a modality of art making and conceiving, co-present with the planetary art of the times in which we are living, and therefore, though it may appear as untimely, it is an ineliminable component of it [“So goes the world, it goes also like this” *sang Bertolt Brecht*]. And therefore this is the specific feature on which this exhibition is based.

Today’s planetary artist takes on himself, as a first person singular, full responsibility, first of all aesthetic, but also ethical and civil (in the sense of civilization) of declining the reasons of a history and a tradition, sometimes millenary, on the perception, mediated or direct, of the reality of his or her and our times—I think about the Chinese Cai Guo Qiang and Yang Fudong, the Taiwan Chinese Chen Chieh-Jen, the Japanese Takashi Murakami, just to name a few of excellent quality and of international renown. It is clear that this is not the case of the artists of the Mansudae Art Studio for which the individual trait applies only to each one’s technical-artisanal skills and personal sensitivity, while it does not concern nor the ideal project, that they can however share, nor the thematic and iconographic choices, established regardless of individual will. So this art is the expression of a society guided, controlled and ruled by a dominant ideology, the State “Confucian Socialism”, or, more precisely for art and culture in general, by the *Chuch’e* idea, a sort of autarchic valorisation of a unitary national ethics in the absolute respect of the *Workers’ Party* and of the leaders of the country that hold the power.

For a more specific analysis of the state of culture in North Korea I refer to the essay *Two “Compulsory” Genres in a Unique Reality* by the historian Maurizio Riggio. Here I like to specify only some aspects that Riggio too takes into consideration.

The first concerns the direct derivation of this art from the Socialist Realism that imposed itself in the Stalinist Soviet Union in the 30s of last century. Art converts to propaganda producing compositions of spectacular and explicit narrative power and in so doing it proposes exemplary situations that aim to give an always positive image of the life, the social life, the regime favours, supports, promises and makes possible. Life in a Socialist regime can only be happy, by having eliminated every drama of existing in the world, cancelled all contradictions, healed any friction. What is represented is a Paradise, the Socialist Paradise, substantiated by a well-being without conflicts, of a diffused and displayed delight that no labour nor hardship can obscure, inhabited by positive heroes, generally anonymous, except the great ones that set the example: a *vie en rose*, the Utopia Island of Thomas More realized. This life is *now*, in the world and not somewhere else, and the signs that show who created and who now guarantees of its lasting are pointed out even in the details: work, the army, the order of the state. Today this is North Korea’s art and as such is unique in the world. False and lying? Certainly unique. In the rest of the world the world happiness is made spectacular by commercial advertising, from which art distances itself, though not always in negative terms. It is clear that in both cases the seduction of the images tends to carry messages which substantially do not belong to the Sense of art mentioned above. However, in the case of North Korean art one sometimes perceives a vein, we could call it subcutaneous, made of contiguities, of proximities, of subtle warmth and ambiguity, that advertising, in the immediacy required by its task, cannot, and it will never be able to, possess. Its present appeal derives from this, irrespective of its evident function.

The second aspect concerns what I would call an inadequacy. Socialist Realism too went back to pre-Impressionistic, when not even Neo-Classical, XIX century models of representation, but here two other factors, overlapped one on the other, converge.

The first is a glance at national tradition, itself in debt with classical Chinese painting, that however had acquired, in the course of centuries, its own distinctive features. The other factor is the penetration in the second half of the XIX century, in Japan as in China and then in Korea, of Western techniques and iconographic modes. They sometimes replace the national ones and other times merge with them producing hybridizations of great cultural interest, though often they attain only very modest artistic results—just think about the so called Nihon-ga painting in Japan, that adapts oil painting to traditional iconography. When I speak of inadequacy I refer to the gap created between the use of a language developed somewhere else, and then taken as a medium for the expression of a local culture, and the deep needs that that same culture wants to express, for instance the search for beauty. This phenomenology too finds a precedent in the West, in the XIX century, and goes under the name of Kitsch. The inadequacy is then between content (desire) and form (aesthetics), between meanings to convey and the linguistic medium selected. This phenomenology

reappears every time the contrast between autonomy (freedom) and restraints of any nature, be it cultural (ethics included), social, economic or political, is reintroduced.

Finally I wish to underline two other fundamental components of this exhibition [*The Hermit Country. See on Exhibitions*], concerning specifically the presentation of these works in the West and forming its necessary frame: the architecture of the exhibition and its “image”.

The first was entrusted to the Italian Gruppo A12, one of the more distinguished exponents of a fluid architecture, not at all marginal in the scene of today’s world architecture, that does not aim to raise monuments lasting more than bronze but mobile and ephemeral settings that dissolve once their function has been accomplished. That function is to create communication spaces, transit places of easy, but not neutral, usability.

“Image” was entrusted to the Greek designer Angelo Plessas, whose entire work aims to make explicit an aesthetics which is common and shared in the young people world and in its spectacular subcultures, where digital technology plays an essential role in the formalization processes.

Spatial fluidity and subcultural aesthetics seemed appropriate for presenting this kind of art, by now unique in its genre, and able to emphasize both the aspirations for an ideal democracy and the complexity of the present world scene, in which contradictions and frictions tend to come to light no longer in a conflicting order but in a network of relationships that we would want to be positive and, in the end, a liberation.

Pier Luigi Tazzi
Athens, May 2007