Art and the Discourse of Nations: Reflections on Biennial of Nations

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This past summer, members of the art world set off on pilgrimages to exhibitions in Europe which emblazoned opposite faces of the moral meaning of art. One exhibition, of course, was the Biennial in Venice, an event the symbolism of which has been submerged, perhaps, by the periphrastic air of money, novelty, prizes, celebration and national competition. The other was the exhibition in Saint Petersburg, of art confiscated by the Russian troops in their punitive occupation of Germany in the second World War, and kept so hidden ever since that in most cases the works were believed lost. The confiscation of art by conquest is the dark side of the same moral coin whose bright obverse side is the proud international display of art in the Biennial format. Only by considering both faces, can we attain to a true understanding of the meaning art holds in the symbolic discourse of nations. It is too profound an experience to be captured by such thin concepts as aesthetic pleasure, visual entertainment, artistic novelty, or the machinations of the art market, in terms of which art so often is discussed.

About a year ago, there was a message on my voice mail at Columbia from someone in Johannesburg, asking me to write a catalog essay for the first Johannesburg Biennial, to be held February, 1995 details to follow. As it happens, The Venice Biennial is a hundred years old this year, and I imagine the idea that having written an essay for the oldest of the Biennials in 1993, I might write one for the newest, in 1995, and of course I accepted. The exhibition for which my essay was called Punti Cardinale del’Arte (=the cardinal points of art-) and it was a kind of index case, is an interesting thing to consider, both because of the many artists included in this exhibition, but also the way in which the Biennale is structured, and how different aspects of the art world are represented in it. In particular, the way in which the South African artists are represented, and how their work has been received by the art world, provides an interesting case study of the way in which art is received and interpreted in different cultural contexts.
ledge its readiness to participate once again in civilized discourse. And in participating in that exhibition the gesture itself was acknowledged. After World War II, Austria and Japan sent exhibitions of reconciliation to America as a sign that hostilities were over. When detente set in the 1980's, there was no better sign of it than the exchange of exhibitions of Impressionists and Post-Impressionist paintings between the then Soviet Union and the United States.

I think this is the bright side of something that goes deep into ancient human practices, namely that victors' power by taking the art of the defeated as trophies, which is a kind of cultural rape. To rob a society of its artwork is to humiliate, to violate its women, a way of destroying its seed and humiliating it totally. Agamemnon took the gold of Priam from Troy to Mycenae, which was, in the last war, carried by Russians from the defeated Germans. The Germans under Hitler and Goering did the same, as did Napoleon, to whose wholesale confiscation of art we owe the museums of Europe, as temples for the display of artistic trophies from defeated nations - or, as in the case of the Altes Museum in Prussia, as a temple for art-treasures reclaimed...

It is possible to argue that by not, at least not officially, engaging in this practice, the United States has behaved consistently with the senatorial rhetoric that art is so much frill. But the whole entire testimony of international practice, on both its dark and bright sides - on the side of humiliation by taking an enemy's treasures, and on the side of establishing exchanges of art in the confidence that they will not be taken hostage - stands open to this pretended indifference. Art language in which nations convey so much to one another that one has to ask how they would do this if art did not exist, and then what it is in the nature of art that enables it to play this extraordinary symbolic function.

My sense is that the answer to this question would take us back to the caves of Lascaux and Ardeche, and the role that art must have played for human beings under the most severe conditions of survival, to have devoted so much energy to making it. Something as deeply embedded in the meaning of victory, defeat, recognition, and acknowledgement as art is cannot seriously be stigmatized as being only of concern to elites. The Swedish troops who bore off the prizes of Prince Rudolph's collection in Prague, the Aztec king who sent examples of the art of his culture to Charles V, a king he had never heard of in a country he would not have known about, had his own land not been invaded, understood the meaning of art. As did the Parisian populace which crowded into the galleries of Louvre to see the art which had become theirs by overthrowing the king whose power was defined through that art. As did the artists from the compass points of the world of art who converged on Johannesburg early this year as a symbolic handshake of moral acceptance.

I find myself invited for the third time to compose some words for a Biennial catalogue, this time for the Istanbul Biennial of 1995. Though Turkey was represented at the Biennial in 1993, no Turkish artist was highlighted as one of the "Cardinal Points" of the compass of art, selected by that year's director, Achille Bonito Oliva, and for whose own exhibition within the Biennial my essay was solicited. But the idea of a makalemin üzerinde odaklaşması istenen "kardinal noktalar"ın biri olarak seçilme şansı yaşamıştır. İstanbul, bu noktadan çıkarırken,-pic izgara şeritlerinin eğilimini gösteren bir asamada birer, İstanbulun her ne kadar kişiselleştirilmiş olsa da, herhangi biri tarafından, benim
compass carries a certain meaning as a metaphor which neither the Johannesburg nor the Istanbul Biennial could claim as their own. The compass presupposes a center, from which lines radiate outward to the cardinal points, and without a fixed center the compass would be useless as an instrument for locating oneself. It is, after all, where one is supposed to stand. The metaphor of the compass implies that Venice is the center of the world of art, whatever the status of that city in the political and commercial reality of the world. Johannesburg did not, could not, have thought of itself as the center: it merely wanted to have some location on the map of the world of art. Istanbul sees the very idea of a center absent in the world today, and its polemic is embodied in its brilliantly drawn "Oriention" emblem, which is a cartoon of a compass whose center is nowhere and where North and South are adjacent points, West seems to be missing, and Istanbul is itself a point. The compass has lost its function in "the vision of art in a paradoxical world": the Istanbul emblem declares the city's appropriateness as a site in a world without directions or hierarchy. "From an eurocentric view, all the young Biennials take place at geographical margins", the prospectus of the IV International Istanbul Biennial declares, seeking to discredit the metaphor of fixed centers and cultural margins. This too says something about the discourse of nations. The art world is an international policy with a plurality of foci, and art today has no special regard for the boundaries which are the domain, after all, of armies and of customs officials. In reality, of course, there are monstrous practical and bureaucratic problems involved in crossing those boundaries, but the art world acts as if these are mere nuisances rather than cosmic divisions, and conduct itself as if these terrible borders have been erased. The Biennial exhibition is a glimpse of a transnational utopia. I want to conclude with an observation based upon a contrast between the art of the First Johannesburg Biennial and the trophic art which almost concurrently went on display at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which belong, as I began by saying, to the bright and the dark side of art as moral currency, a distinction which is always a matter of tremendous significance that art and what I might call terrorsousness have gone in different directions. Montezuma felt that only gold was a suitable medium, as did King Piam. Media today can be videotape, plywood, newspaper, discarded garments, industrial paint, shattered glass, or bodily gestures. The magic is unaffected by the detresorification of art, and the mystery of its acknowledged significance remains. In some respect too hidden for me to say anything further about it, it is connected with what it means to be human. It is treasure in a very different sense from the gold and jeweled objects in the Topkapi Palace Museum, and that contrast makes Istanbul a marvelous place to ponder the evolution of art in an art world without deterministic directions.