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A kangaroo was there

It was very odd to find a kangaroo in Conzano, a tiny town in the heart of the Piedmont in Northern Italy. Odd and confusing I felt, since I could not discern the grounds of such a concrete presence.

Imperative is to stress that I mean “concrete” in two senses: the material (the cement of the moulding) in which this particular marsupial was made and hung on the lateral outer wall of the local bar, facing the main square; and its categorical ubiquity.

The kangaroo was there and I could fantasize that it has been –from immemorial times- monitoring every movement in this community: from the unperceived panting of a fly to the exact instant of the crunching echo of a blossoming flower; from the hopeful sigh of an enchanted heart to the dripping rumoring about the weather and the scented conversations held at the terrace of *Uva Blu*...

Even though I was perplexed by its presence, I rapidly evoked Reiner Maria Rilke's *Letters to a young poet*. More precisely, letter number four in which he states: “*Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them*”. Whenever I come across a riddle, this particular quote arises in my mind as a frequent (even mechanical) reaction to calm down any drip of anxiety towards the unknown.

So I wait. I wait with luminous patience since I have also learned from the poet that patience is everything. Every mystery, every question, will eventually have its resolution. Thus, there was no need for me to hurry to jump into assumptions of any texture.

[...]

I left the kangaroo and my inquietude behind and decided to wander around town. Arriving a day earlier is always a benefit. The 2016 COCOAA Forum was about to start the following morning and I could enjoy the pending time between my arrival and the beginning of such a promising reunion and debate doing what I do best. Hence, I walked.

The action of moving my legs to the beat of a futile stroll brought along a sense of unequivocally peace. Any kind of meditation, idea, thought and/or belief (any sort of mental clatter) was adjourned in order to let the weft of my pores unfold to the density of the exterior.

The waving smooth hills, the forming of a verdant patchwork emerged in their muteness just to activate a symphony of light and textures in my retinas. The

coldness of the stacked stones evoked the ardor of anonymous hands which laid them to give themselves shelter; to create a sense of home and coziness after endless journeys of inclement work.

The rowdiness of the graveyard indicating that those hands (the hands that shaped the architectural layers and landscapes that make Conzano today) finally found rest; expired hands that reveal the relentlessly circularity of life.

[...]

As I was flowing through a wave of multiple and diverse stimuli, utterly absorbed in them, I ran into a road sign that, with no rush, began to unveil the mystery of the kangaroo. A welcoming sign that alerts the drivers that they are about to arrive to a town twinned with another one over 15,000 kilometers away: a town called Ingham in North Queensland, Australia.

I wondered then: why? Why would a sign present this community in such manner? What is the story behind this? Since I assumed there had to be a rich, savory tale behind an always dull and ordinary road sign.

There was. Indeed.

[...]

I was born in Argentina. Part of my genetic information comes from Italy and my surname clearly reveals my peninsular DNA structure and origins. Then again, this is no eccentricity for the immigration waves coming from these particular European *countries within a country* started by 1860, turned out to be massive one decade later and continued up to –at least- 1960.

During one whole century people from all over Italy settled in Argentine territory, transforming the latter in the second country with *Italians-out-of-Italy* after Brazil. So much so that it is said that Jorge Luis Borges stated with unequivocally causticness that “*Argentiniens are Italians who speak Spanish*”.

Despite the *always-very-intellectual* Borges’ quotation, it is a demographic fact that half the population in Argentina has Italian descent. So much so, that we all are so sturdily proud of our pasta, *milanesas* and *buseca*, ice-cream, pizza and *Fernet Branca* that there would not be outrageous to think that some compatriots would even tend to believe that all (or some of) these were actually invented in these latitudes.

Even our slang is crisscrossed by Italian linguistic forms: *engrupir* (from *groppo*, to cheat); *mina* (from *femmina*, woman); *fiaca* (from *fiacco*, laziness); *chapar* (from *ciapar*, to kiss); *pibe* (from *pive*, young man) are some common examples.

This simple summary is a brief illustration of Italian culture being part of our idiosyncrasy. Borges was right this time.

[...]

I came to learn that the people of Ingham are also as proud of us of their legacy being the town known as *Little Italy* and having also half of their population being Italian descent. So much so that they (since 1995) annually organized the Australian-Italian Festival¹ in which they honour their heritage and cultural background dating from the mid-XIX century, when the first immigrants arrived to the region as mancraft for the sugar cane plantations.

Hence, this (at first sight) very fortuitous and meaningless presence of a kangaroo started to shape up and make some kind of sense. However, and in the same movement, it opened a range of new questions that brought light to what for me emerged as a contradiction: to symbolically make a tribute to the men and women of Conzano, who (with their nerve and determination) helped to model the territorial and cultural, landscape of Ingham, with the icon of an endemic species introduces (even with the possibility of not being conscious of the total connotations of this gesture of acknowledgment and gratitude) the problem of colonization. More particularly, it sprouts the complexity of the material and symbolic articulations and tensions in any colonization (hybridization?) process.

How so?

What the kangaroo said to me without saying a word is that the pilgrim, the colonist, will invariably appropriate and resignify the material and symbolic structure of meanings and usage of anything (literally, anything) given by a native community in order to deactivate its original strength and power. To undermine and deactivate subjects and objects (bodies and things) by subordinating them to a new, exogenous and strange form of codification is a matter of power and disciplining which will attempt to erase all traces of their original contents.

The mystery of a kangaroo, the reason why one kangaroo has been located in an Italian town, hid stories of uprooting and migrations. But, collaterally, revealed another aspect (much less conspicuous) linked to the use of images, in this case, by a colonial hegemony.

In other words, it is possible to learn more about the paradox of colonialism from the weirdness of a kangaroo in Conzano.

[...]

And what all this has to do with *art, curating, critical practices and (de)colony in contemporary times*?

When I was invited to engage as a speaker and participant to last year's edition of the COCOAA Forum it took me long hours of reflection to deliberate on exactly how to approach to the convening theme.

Honestly speaking, colonialism and de-colonialism are not my areas of expertise and I broke my head trying to find a vein to bore through the topic.

[...]

¹ <http://www.australianitalianfestival.com.au>

I was lucky enough when my dear good friend Miguel Novero posted on my Facebook wall the song *Collage* in which Sergio Pángaro (the author and band leader) states: “*the language of freedom has a colonial grammar*”.

Eureka!

Miguel had only the intention of making me laugh and remembering those long nights of studying for the doctorate seminars, surrounded by books, *mate*² and his cat *Yonki*. Needless to say that he succeeded since I laughed and went back in time. However, what he could not ever imagine is that this song was (for me, at that precise instant after hilarity) some kind of a very uncanny epiphany as I was struggling to find a concise perspective to address this very challenging theme for me due to consider myself a neophyte on the matter and since there was a more epidermal and obvious cause: I speak the tongue of the conqueror. That is: my symbolization structure, my ways of seeing, thinking and imagining the world were determined by a linguistic form that had been imposed, in this part of the globe, by the end of the XV Century.

Being self-conscious of that fact can be discouraging, as the interstices and margins of maneuver to emancipate from those derived epistemic frames are, in truth, almost impossible: “*To think seriously, scientifically, academically, to think rigorously, means to self-enslave, to be tied to the categories of thought and norms*” (Mignolo, 2006, p.11).

Furthermore, the contradictory sentiment grows even bigger as I learnt to think in another imperial language. For this reason I ought to unveil this intrinsic conflict, as it establishes my enunciative position: I am a product of the *colonial matrix of power*; I was educated within that logic because “... *the university is part of (...) the triangular structure of coloniality: coloniality of being, the coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge*” (Castro-Gómez, 2005, pp.78-79).

Therefrom and after many years, I understood that my commitment as a researcher was (still is) to attempt to “... *sow doubts, destroy certainties, annihilate convictions*”.³ This might be quite ambitious and then again, it is worth striving for. Even though I will not be able to obliterate my linguistic and conceptual matrix, I can at least use it to deconstruct myself and to call attention to its traps.

In similar fashion, I allude to this for the reason that there are too many vanishing points to address the intersections between art and (de)colony. The first one which comes up to my mind (probably due to being the most evident one) is that we may consider the possibility of reflecting on what ways contemporary art practices tackle –synchronic and diachronically- the process of (de)colonization of protectorates and dependencies as well as the complex range of issues of subordination related to gender and all kinds of minorities.

The discussion, hence, will be compelled to focus in the never ending examination of the articulation (as well as the dissociation) of aesthetic practices and politics: a

² Traditional South American caffeine-rich infused drink. In 2013, the Argentine Law 26,871 declared *mate* the “national infusion”.

³ From the prologue of Lao-Tse’s *Tao Te King* (Barcelona: Ediciones 29 / Río Nuevo, 1997).

theoretical discussion which goes back to the Greeks and has continued to develop and widen to the present day.⁴

The systems of understanding the phenomena, its epistemic architecture have been growing –adding a new foundation, a new layer, a new floor, a new window- for centuries, even before the emergence of art as a specific semi-autonomous field.⁵ It has been a subject of constant concern of artists, curators, historians and intellectuals.

Yet the problem, for me, has to do with the conjunction “and” used to underline the engagement of some artistic production and curatorships to social and political issues, whatever these may well be.

“And” hides a definition, a starting point: the (conscious or unconscious) recognition of a distinctive sphere of symbolic creation that has given to itself the authorization to legitimately draw attention to conflicts (whatever conflict) through different rhetorical and metaphorical devices, among other semiotic tactics and strategies. Art has the liberty to speak unreservedly and we have a propensity for conveniently forget the origin of such credence, as we tend to disregard the fact that the triumph of the autonomy of art, its self-legislation and its prerogative to address any issue in any form imaginable are part of the triumph of Modernity. Thus, art –the institution of art- is the result of the ideological project of colonization of the world (not only and far beyond the actual colonies).

That was the so-called *epiphany*: the terrain that emerged to be considered the language of freedom *par excellence* is based in a colonial grammar for –among other things- the micro-cosmos of art reduplicates the system and structure of social division of work, accumulation of capital and speculation, teleology and instrumental reason, fetishism of merchandise, homogenization of procedures, metropolis and peripheries, dominants and dominated, etc. All this, by the way- is very well masked in order to endure its (re)production.

As a result, I find it awkward to think of the possibility of reflecting on art *and* (de)colony when the former is an after-effect of (and a tool for) colonization.

Why?

While art is an institution whose power is also primarily ideological, since its practices of liberty and free expression operate as false promises, the conjunction *and* acts as an evidence of the inner condition and contradiction of art as a system. It reveals that aesthetic or poetical practices can either exercise on beautifulness or expose the injustice or abusiveness in the world, but in both cases the statements against deteriorated orders (of any kind) will circulate and be diffused through the artistic institutionalized mechanisms of recognition and legitimization.

⁴ So far away to Plato and Aristotle, moving onward to Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Lukács, Trotsky, Schiller, Heidegger, Adorno, Breton, Brecht, Foucault, Rancière, Groys, etc. The list can be interminable.

⁵ In the sense used by Pierre Bourdieu.

Art *and* (de)colony, art *and* politics, art *and* feminism, art *and* ethnicity, art *and* violence, art *and* poverty, art *and* ecology, art *and* religion, art *and* technology, art *and* sexuality, art *and* the body and even art *and* institutional critique of art.

The list can obviously be stretched. Yet my purpose is to demonstrate that art works as a centrifugal force, carrying to its logic of functioning –to the rules that set the artistic game- all sort of tribulations that are –by default- deactivated. That is to say: art can show, indicate, bring to light whatever problematic issue is taking place in the ground of reality, but in that movement it shuts down the possibility of effective material transformation. In other words: art colonizes conflict by turning it into spectacle. For that reason art institutionality modulates discontent and dissent, which efficiency is based on the distribution of the benefits of signification to the active partakers.

In the meanwhile, no revolution may soon (may ever?) emerge from art because its colonial grammar enjoys very good health: art continues to reinvent the fiction of liberty by enhancing the possibility to fulfill the promise of a better world, a promise that –in facts- cannot be accomplished.

And I still genuinely wonder if it is conceivable to decolonize art from art. How could it be done? What would happen if we succeeded? Would something be changed?

How could artistic practices stop being, at the end of the day, the kangaroo?

So far I suppose that the first step is to reveal and dismantle the paradox. As I said before, *destroy certainties and annihilate convictions*. Maybe, maybe afterwards we can take another pace, wherever it should take us.



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