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CRITICS' CONFERENCE

GLOBALISM (Open Panel 10/24/91, 2.00-4.00 p.m.)

I would like to point out some considerations about the theme of this panel, and I would rather read them for a better understanding of my English. This considerations result not from the thought given to the subject in the last days, but from the experience, after years of research and study precolumbian art. I believe that an art critic must understand artistic facts in its cultural context so he can initiate others, and wake up their capabilities to enjoy, love or even reject the art of peoples distant in time and space, and far from our actual comprehension of the universe in which we live.

1. My first consideration deals with the acceptance of precolumbian art, it stands as a good example of the process from rejection to universal recognition.

It is well known that, what today is accepted as the art of precolumbian times, was not always seen as such, on the contrary, it has gone through stages of acceptance and repulsion. The spaniards that conquest Mexico in the XVI century, left well stablished, in their writings, their admiration towards architecture, urbanism and jewelery: but also the generalized repulsion for the images in sculpture, painting, ceramics and other media. They were thought to be idols of demons. So is said, in the letters of Hernán Cortés, and in the Historys of the Conquest by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Lopéz de Gomara, and Fernández de Oviedo, among others.

This repulsive attitude prevail until the second half of the XVIII century when foreigners began to travel to exotic New Spain, and started the comparison of precolumbian art and architecture with egyptian piramids, mesopotanian sculptures, and christian simbols such as the Cross in some Palenque reliefs. Until now, where the most extravagant hypothesis,

among them the ones about olmec colossal heads being of african origin, or the maya king portrayed as an astronaut in the sarcophagus lid of Palenque, show that very generalized position of unacceptance and incomprehension of the art of Mesoamerica. Not so long ago, the mayas were still named, by scholars, the greeks of America. The history of the recognition of precolumbian art, is surprisingly amusing, and we can easily detect that the predominant attitude is the incapacity to recognize the creative strength and skill of native american people.

Since the Renaissance the world view was eurocentric; the only true art was the one of mediterranean origin or that which resembles it. The stereotype of cultural individualism lasted until XIX century romanticism when social stereotypes supported that the audience, the people to whom the art was directed, was responsible for artistic experience. Precolumbian art was for the antiquarian, the exotic collectionist, and the ethnological museums; when it was seen as an art expression it was always analyzed under the eurocentric perspective. It is really until late XIX century, that this approach began to change with the slow integration of Asia, Africa and Indian America to western world. Europe knew for centuries about the people in those continents, but they were almost ignored but for the possibilities of exploitation of their natural wealth and human resources.

We all know this attitude has changed now, but not completely. The advanced international communication, the new economic relations, and the dissolution of geographic barriers have accelerated the process. Initiated decades ago the diffusion of precolumbian art in the U.S., for instance, with the Before Cortes show and the opening of the Rockefeller rooms at the Metropolitan; and more recently with the Art of Aztec Mexico, here at the National Gallery, and The Blood of the Kings in the Kimbell Art Museum. Many, perhaps, too many, art books, articles, congresses, conferences, colloquiums, TV series; written or held by scholars, professionals, well informed journalists or amateurs, have placed the art of

Ancient Mexico in a world wide common place. And with this I go on to my second consideration.

2. If Mesoamerican art was seen for nearly five centuries under the lights of eurocentric taste and knowledge, the global transformations in the last decades have propitiated that centrism moved from Europe to North America. So we are now under a northamerican centrism, at least in what concerns Ancient American art. I might question if this is globalism?. I do not question the amazing advances made by some well known northamerican scholars, but I do wonder about the enormous distance of perception of the world, between the northamerican intellectuals and let us say with the Teotihuacan painters. Is there a real possibility to universalize mesoamerican art because of modern communications, economy and geography? Is there not another very important aspect in human creativity, that is inmerse in language, ethnicity, religion, geographic environment, etcetera ? that is not totally considered in this accelerated universality.

In other words, is it possible that northamericans have a wholistic appreciattion of precolumbian art?. Are we not going through a mythical position that supports northamerican view as the only universal comprehension of other worlds and cultures? Is it technology, economy, and politics the only human conducts that might make art of other latitudes comprehensible? I might suggest, there are some human values such as education, in the original sense of Kultur, that signifies the search and realization that man, and human community, makes for their authentic beings. Is this concept considered on an northamerican golbalism?

I know, that I am not an olmec or a teotihuacan person, that I cannot think and beleive the way they did, and that I have neccesarely to approach to their art under my cultural background and circumstances. But, does this mean that I can understand their creations and am able to communicate their meaning to the civilization of XXI century?. And if I do, does this signifies something in the comprehensing of the

process of universe? We have some sort of conscience of the universe as a whole, of the microcosm, of the development of organic life on earth, of the degradation that man has made of its natural habitat; in that context what could it mean the awareness of an artistic conduct performed in a particular geographic and cultural environment 2000 centuries ago?. And this leads to another consideration.

3. Is this new centrism the one to judge the quality of non european, non northamerican art?. The first doubt that I confront is about the parameters to judge this qualities? Which are the values to qualify those diverse artistic expressions? There was a tradition, according ideal or natural rules and proportions, to judge about perfeccionism in art; this has long time ignored by creators and by art critics, What, then are the legitimate parameters -not to judge, but to comprehend- this universal creative human conduct of communication?

Let me point again that there are at least two aspects in the process of criticism: the first one is to understand the creative phenomena; the second one, is the capability of communicating this comprehension, so the community might be able to enlarge its historical and human perspectives. Well, then is it possible to comprehend a human action in such a distance of time and space? We can not avoid the cultural circumstances in which we live, -I am not aztec, I am a mexican scholar of late XX century-, but, and this is, I believe is important, I might be able to get near the aztec thoughts and costumes, through the knowledge of their language. Language reveals the thought of people and by that way one can have access to their culture. The written sources to know about the aztecs are nahuatl registers translations to spanish in the XVI century. They are certainly transformed from its original meaning through the transfer from one culture to another, but nahuatl is still a living language.

There are other cases among precolumbian peoples in which we do not know the language they spoke so the more important source to approximate to their culture is precisely the work

of art in itself, the search of the comprehension of its artistic language. So let us identify its signs and symbols, let us compare them with other equivalent signs and symbols, let us propose, comparatively, their forms and meaning, with some of other precolumbian cultures; let us in fact, try to understand their common artistic language. If we do so, we might be nearer their original meaning. And this leads me to my final consideration.

4. Is there any sense in globalism art criticism? Are we dealing with general common facts as to know about that there was an astronomical knowledge in the construction of some precolumbian buildings, or that they were pyramidal constructions to elevate the image of the supernaturals and to guard in funerary enclosing their governors or kings, or to recognize the lack of proportions -according to what premises?- and the most expressive feelings in sculpture, painting, and ceramics?

Is there any meaning in a globalism that gives no more than superficial and vague knowledge? What is the universal purpose of this knowledge? Is it important to know more generalities of less particularities?

Let me emphasize my opinions.

1. First I believe that personal knowledge of any human aspect leads to its communication, that is to share some sort of human experience. In that sense I feel that if one approaches the creative aspect of any -non western-civilization of the past or the present, one, as a critic or an historian, has the fundamental human compromise to share it with its community.

2. This personal inquiries about past human activities have a radical purpose: better understanding of the historical world we live in.

Is this globalism? I feel, and this is a general appreciation, with all the dangers that implies, that mexican people are proud of their precolumbian past, because is a support of the national feeling of identity. I do not believe that in a near future linguistic, ethnical and religious

frontiers might be dissolved. They are the basis of identity for a community, for a nation, for a race. Non occidental people feel more confident in their beings with the support of the best knowledge of their past.

My position towards globalism is relativistic. Globalism is just one of the facets of the phenomena, the opposite, is its particularity; both are important as to comprehend dialectically a human conduct.

The unique compromise of the art critic, or the art historian -let us say the critic of its times- is to illuminate on the human activities.

So far, as natural and exact sciences have advanced to a more precise knowledge, the social sciences, pretend to reach a universal position of knowledge.

We might legitimately desire to know more of our past, so we, as a community, face our present and future; and that globalism -that is common general knowledge about human activities- is a danger that might only lead us to non humanistic awareness of creation.

Since we are anchored in the past, let us suppose, that the basis of our past experience, might lead us to a better appreciation of, our present, and our future. Not in a universal significance but as a more reduced, but deeply enriched panorama of our human significance.

Man is the same in this universal world, but humanity rests on its diversity, this gives us the feeling of uniqueness in the history of the universe.

Beatriz de la Fuente. Ciudad Universitaria, México,
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