

BIG deal**tourism & aesthetics**

Have you heard about the Stendhal syndrome? Graziella Magherini, a psychoanalyst of the Freudian school, diagnosed it around 1979 in Florence, Italy – more precisely at the Uffici. Magherini observed the states of dizziness, mental and emotional confusion endured by tourists visiting the Uffici in Florence, and came to a diagnosis she then named the syndrome of Stendhal. It consists in a reaction of rapid heartbeat, striking paralysis, deep emotion, sometimes nausea and even hallucination, that can invade people confronted with high art. The way in which the designation has spread since then makes it an excellent research issue for experts within the field of communication theory, so Polaczek¹, who suggests that such a syndrome could only be diagnosed at the Uffici because there was a psychoanalyst on the spot... (it was a very hot day, by the way).

And yet... the world is nowadays such a big and beautiful bazaar.

So beautiful that in these times of accentuated representation of the body mass and of general aestheticization of each and everybody's experience, it is hard to understand how art – once the domain of aesthetics *par excellence* – manages to deal with this obsessively aesthetic material without getting confused and blur... (do you know the art of the airport? its beautiful travel outfits; its beautiful flasks; its exotic fancy fragrances of Faraway...)

We have to acknowledge that the demand for aesthetic experiences in daily life engages a non-stop quest for new spaces to invest; and that this quest for more aesthetics undoubtedly blends with the quest for more well being. In the heart of that quest there is an industry that plays a considerable part and is currently more important than automobile, oil or nuclear industries. The top world industry is tourism. And tourism itself is, in a way, a quest for *aesthesis*. Indeed, what is at stake in tourism is an expansion of each and everybody's *sensorium*, namely by globally referring to anything that has to do with art (especially with the art of aestheticizing every little thing on Earth) and also by promoting the very experience of art itself. Not very long ago, at the age of high Art, the spectator would visit a museum or a cathedral hoping to fill herself with a *je ne sais quoi de sublime* that should take her far away from the misfortunes of this world. At present, the spectator-becoming-tourist hopes to clear his mind, relax and get some distance from daily practices. Travelling and tourist-stays are

¹. Dietmar Polaczek, DU 747 – Was ist Kunst?: Zeitschrift für Kultur [What is art?: Culture Magazine], N°5, Juni 2004.

expected to enable extraordinary sensory experiences, specifically aesthetic, preferably exotic, generally inscribed in a cultural and artistic programme: obliged tour in the national local gallery, purchase of the exotic statuette, the postcard and, sometimes, the purchase of the unprecedented sexual experience. The tourist emerges aesthetically enriched, and life is beautiful.

And yet... in times of a general aestheticization of each and everybody's experience, we don't seem to think enough about the relations between tourism, airports and art. Surprisingly, this general aestheticization which nevertheless affects actual art practices at many levels, is not yet taken into account when it comes to actual art, for the criteria used to think the art of the big A (we still believe in it) are still at work. This explains why we don't like to think about the tourist dimension of art nor about the artistic dimension of tourism.

And yet... it is indeed – in many senses – the quest for *the aesthetic* that makes people move around and spend their money, for in our collective imaginary travels and airports (including the posters of exotic landscapes, the uniforms of the stewardess, and the beautiful flasks) remain the doorways both into the outer world and deep into one-self, as well as to unimagined sensorial encounters.

That there was nothing really BIG about art, we already knew. BIG is only the entanglement zone where the networks of artistic, cultural and socio-economic production cross and actualise in the worldwide electronic networks. What is there is there and – let us admit –, the entangled *thing*² largely outmatches both the big *génie* and the big art object. Actual artistic practices interfere with the big communication network: «l'herbe pousse par le milieu»³ and not upwards or downwards. Such practices are best defined as semiotic crossbreeding, where the artist becomes at once a trades-man-or-woman, a billsticker, a critic and curator, and the stewardess an artist that plays the stewardess, that plays the artist who sells, sticks, criticizes and curates her art.

In BIG2, the goal is clearly not to advocate art as a mass cultural production, and even less to criticize the so-called alienation it is supposed to produce – this would be by the

². In the occidental philosophical tradition, the “thing” designs chaos or the Greek *hylé*, which is matter yet not yet formed; the nature “thing” or a fabric of confuse relations, hard to capture within a finished form. It thus differs from the Latin *res*, which designs a well-formed object. For the “thing” refuses to enclose in a form, and keeps as such in *formation*.

³. As Nicolas Bourriaud has it, quoting Gilles Deleuze (*Esthétique relationnelle*, Paris, Les Presses du Réel, 2001, p. 13)

way claim the existence of a “higher culture” in clear opposition to a “popular culture” –, but rather to get in a sphere of *con-tact* with the apparatuses of such cultural, socio-economic production. In the present case, much seems to be about *touching* the depth of surfaces – literally. Far from presenting itself as a simple bazaar that would either reproduce popular culture or criticize it, BIG2 sets up an apparatus of *monstration* that dislocates some presupposed relations between art, culture, sociability and economy, producing something completely different: a plateau of kaleidoscopic perceptions whose critical potential is precisely to dislocate the authority of any critique. Should there be any critique then, it will be the sort of critique we can see at work in a very particular *positioning*: in BIG2 everything that looks like a positioning is in reality no more than a kaleidoscopic stroll with no intention of founding a position. This is the reason why we will only find short term positioning moves towards... an immensity of strolling factors, i. e., towards bodies in variation.

*...to engage in dealing **with** is neither to engage **for** nor **against**...*

Paula Caspão, 2004

(from the French / re-written, 2008)