



Biennale 3.0 | 30 years of creative productions

Mobility, social-cultural policies and new perspectives between Europe and the Mediterranean

The BJCEM (Biennale des jeunes créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée) organised the «Biennale 3.0 | 30 years of creative productions» forum, hosted in Turin on October 23rd, with the support and under the Patronage of the City of Turin, and under the Patronage of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. The purpose of the forum was to reflect on the field of contemporary art in the Mediterranean area, in particular on the strengthening of relationships among different areas surrounding the basin. Starting from Biennale's thirty years of experience and from its two cores – both the promotion of artistic research and the intercultural exchange – the association

has identified mobility as the key point and essential premise of each and every statement related to dialogue and creativity, and has felt a need to debate on current problems. Exchanging ideas and feedback coming from experts, artists, and representatives of important cultural organisations has been a way to focus on the most urgent issues and to find the path that a network such as BJCEM must follow to keep building bridges and offering exchange opportunities.



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Mobility is a round-trip ticket

What do we talk about when we talk about mobility? Basically about the circulation of people and ideas. It is evident that it is a wide subject, inclusive of personal displacements as well as migration events involving huge parts of populations; it can refer to national or international relocation, but also to sharing ideas and having virtual exchanges.

In order to establish some fundamental points it is useful to start from what Giovanna Tanzarella, general delegate of the René Seydoux Foundation, brings up: mobility is a right, recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, with regard to the refugees, the Geneva Convention. It is something that humanity has in its own dna, it is definitely an element of European identity, and it is also the spark that makes every culture able to be born and grow.

Let's narrow our focus a little, and consider only the field of artistic mobility, a free movement that generates meetings, exchange, cultural development. The process is mental as much as physical: artists should be able to explore ideas and concepts exactly as they should be able to move. The two sides, mental and geographical, are interconnected. The opportunity to move, to meet, to discover is crucial because – using Giovanna Tanzarella's words – it allows to share awareness, competences, and it facilitates open-mindedness

and critical sensibility.

But what is the practical translation of artistic mobility? Surely artist professional and personal growth – beginning a dialogue out of their own culture, opening them to contamination, creating a network, showing their work and reaching a wider public are just some positive effects of the displacement. However, there are also advantages for the entire society. This is a key point that comes from the debate: not only do those who host artists and cultural operators make strategic investments on their own development, but the very same investment is also made by those who allow artists to leave and welcome them back after their travel. Luigi Ratclif, secretary of the Association for the Circuit of Young Italian Artists, highlights the point when he recalls the Biennale milestones during the introduction of the forum; by involving as many as 9000 artists, the 17 Biennials have emphasized the value of the exchange. Soon after, Ferdinand Richard, president of the Cimetta Fund, confirms the idea by using an almost mathematical formula: the travel made by an artist is an accelerator for social development. Significantly, the Cimetta Fund mobility programs make it a point to pay not a one-way, but a round-trip ticket.



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The problems of mobility

If it is true that mobility is a right, it is also true that a lot of people benefit from it only in theory. Economic and social differences create a rift between European and non-European countries, and recent migration events show that hundreds of thousands of people aren't free to go where they would like to (quotas and push-backs are current political terms). Furthermore, the very same idea of mobility is queried and seen as dangerous from within Europe.

Arab and African citizens lack the resources to move and are damaged by the visa system. Mais Irsusi, who works on mobility for the Arab Education Forum in Amman, points out that in 2011 a large percentage (30-40%) of the people who asked the fund (or other associations) for support couldn't travel due to visa problems. We must not forget that in many countries Police or Government offices deal with visas issues, and the procedure is often vague, arbitrary, and not respectful of human rights, and besides it costs a lot of money (even when a visa is not issued at all). Moroccan artist Ramia Beladel highlights the duration and complexity of the process, and describes the impasse experienced by herself during some months: she could apply for a visa to Italy as an artist, but she found it extremely difficult to obtain it.

It seems obvious that visas, and mobility

in general, are global issues, concerning everyone, not just artists. The speakers agree on the subject, as recapped by Luca Bergamo, general secretary of Culture Action Europe: artists have to be citizens of their era, this is no time to ask for particular rights. As for practical solutions, two proposals come up, both focused on the idea that short-term visas are a limit to mobility: Giovanna Tanzarella claims that it is essential to abolish them, as requested by civil society networks; Ferdinand Richard thinks that short-term visas could be extended and transformed in two year-long visas, allowing different entries into the same country.



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Europe, Mediterranean, world

Europe and the Mediterranean are the areas BJCEM has always focused on, but today the dialogue and the exchanges are more difficult than a thousand-year long common history could suggest. As we know, the countries of the Southern shore are disadvantaged because of climatic changes, global crisis, and socio-economic inequalities, and they suffer from the mobility problems previously mentioned. However, interactions are more complicated than they appear according to usual descriptions, and it is necessary to rethink the North-South dichotomy.

Nowadays, the Arab world is varied, highly skilled and culturally independent from the European and Western one, even if little-known by Western intellectuals and artists. Arab creators are often more interested in the artistic experience of other Southern countries both Arab and African, and they are paying less and less attention to Europe; young artists look at the world, not only at the Mediterranean. Nevertheless European (and generally Western) cultural networks find it difficult to leave the Eurocentric views behind, and instead of thinking of the Euro-Arab area as a shared home from which they could speak to the world, they keep using a «top-down» logic, where Southern partners are an excuse to build projects. Over the

years even the Biennale – as reminded by Carlo Testini, coordinator of the Culture Area for the National Direction of ARCI – hasn't always been able to intercept the challenges coming from South or East.

Ferdinand Richard says that fair trade must be the rule: the time of the post-colonialist attitude we can describe as «cultural humanitarianism» is over. The Arab (and non-Western) world doesn't need that sort of charity it normally gets. Instead, fair professional partnership and corporate method are needed to change the well-established habit of developing «North-South» projects where Arab cultural organisations are never project leaders.

These considerations are followed by a language-related issue, introduced both by Ramia Beladel and Ibrahim Spahic, BJCEM emeritus President: isn't time to break some inner barriers and to introduce Arabic as one of the languages used by networks, in particular by the Biennale?

Internal mobility

In Marseille there are young people who never come out from the ghettos they live in and are nearly illiterate. In Turin, precisely in the neighbourhood that hosts the forum, there is a large Arab community, few represented in the city cultural organisations.

Mobility doesn't only mean moving to another



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country or another continent. It also means moving within our own country or even our town, becoming acquainted with the neighbours, exploring talents and ideas arisen from the surroundings.

Mais Irqsusi explains this concept by saying that when she started working on mobility in the Arab world, she noticed that several people applied for a grant to travel to Jordan, where the fund (called Safar-Istikshaf) has its headquarters, because they wanted to meet Jordanian intellectuals and artists. Starting from this observation, the fund decided to study its own environment in depth and to implement local-based initiatives (for example, it gave grants to Palestine, Mauritania, Morocco, Egypt). Mobilizing the communities has become a key point of the agenda promoted by the fund: in the past centuries mobility was an integral part of the development of Arab societies; nowadays, although technology makes it easier to exchange ideas, those Arab societies are not fully engaged in supporting the concepts of mobility and cultural exchange. Therefore it is essential to fight social constraints and fear factors that are still discouraging many people (and especially women) to engage in the development of their communities.

This is about internal mobility, however, it is worth saying once more, it is also mental mobility. According to Ramia Beladel's interpretation, it means moving through ideas, shaping them, bringing them from brain to body to the outside space. According to the movie critic Tahar Chikhaoui, it is crucial to move within ourselves, to be brave enough to look at the other who is already

there (Chikhaoui is referring to those artists who aren't taken into consideration by the cultural system, but it isn't probably a misconception if we extend his idea to Roma people, the most invisible of all in our cities).

Under every aspect – internal, external, global, mental – mobility proves itself to be a main issue, not just for artists, but for anyone who lives the present.

Rendering complexity

Broken up: this is the present according to Chikhaoui. The meaning is not negative; it means, as the Tunisian critic explains by quoting Pascal, that there is not a centre anymore («the universe is a circle whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere»).

The age we are living in is an age of horizontality and chaos, as Glissant says. How can we understand what is happening, from Arab Spring to terrorism, from wars to migrations? The answer is a multifaceted prism. Every contribution to the debate lights up a different face, but the essential feature is one: complexity.

Observing the complexity means getting rid of old frameworks. Gerarda Ventura, President of the Con.Me-Contemporaneo Mediterraneo network and general secretary of the Euromed Platform, exhorts to see all these issues not as a conflict between North and South, Europe and Arab world, but as an across-the-board class struggle, a rift opening on the edge of education levels and socio-economic status.



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Revealing the complexity is a political program, says Giovanna Tanzarella; avoiding the simplification of reality, adds Ferdinard Richard, means fighting gloomy and misleading stories such as the shock of civilisation theory, which keeps making its way in Western media.

It is interesting that not just cultural operators, but artists too, insist on complexity. Lisa Parola, who coordinates the Resò network art residency program, shows the works made by Alessandro Quaranta and Jasmina Metwaly during their residency in Cairo. Both artists focused on Tahrir Square events, and Lisa Parola stresses the fact that in these years complexity is what artists direct their attention to and deal with.

The artist has to stay in his own time: this is Gian Maria Tosatti's firm belief. In his opinion as a visual artist, creators should be at the front line. Tosatti tells the experiences he made in Naples, in the Forcella district, and in Rome at MAAM, the museum opened in a former Tor Sapienza meat factory occupied by migrants and homeless. Society is more advanced, artists have to follow it: they have to leave the exhibition mentality behind, and they also have to activate positive conflicts in specific areas.

As we said, the prism is multifaceted. Complexity shouldn't be reduced, but assimilated. How to render it? Artists must and want to stay in this time; universal rights are today's problem, and the struggle to achieve them should be fought collectively; artists have to ally with migrants, cultural networks have to ally with third sector and

cooperation. If mobility is a global issue, then cultural networks must strive to absorb it, support it and spread it. How? Let's recap what is being done about it.

The institutions: Creative Europe

In spite of Europe's troubles looking outside and inside itself, the mandate of its culture agency (full name: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) includes cultural diversity protection and promotion. Silvana Verdiani, EACEA Project and Communication Officer, describes the Creative Europe program launched by the Agency in 2014, where there is some important news: EACEA is able to fund third countries which previously could just be partners, not project leaders. Today «South-South» projects do exist, and a third of the activities supported does have partners who aren't members of the Union (Ukraine, Kosovo, Lebanon, Israel, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Azerbaijan).

Although there is a «result requirement» – the agency assigns public money and has the duty to evaluate the outcome of its investments –, Silvana Verdiani guarantees that the Creative Europe program is extremely open: the calls for proposals give artists and associations real freedom, and provide a unique opportunity for mobility, market access, and involvement of public sectors never reached before. European citizens, Verdiani says, have to point out visa issues to the attention of their



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elected representatives in Brussels. It is their duty to submit the matter to the European Parliament and to work on it. The Agency is trying to respond to the latest migrant emergency with a special call for tender that will be opened in January or February 2016. It will be addressed to the associations that have already worked on immigrant welcome, and it will have the aim to start relationships between guest and host communities (without making distinctions between those who are passing and those who will settle down). It will fund activities that can help mutual knowledge and provide the incomings with moral support and expression space.

Non-governmental organisations: the Cimetta Fund and the Arab Education Forum agenda for mobility

As Ferdinand Richard stresses, a fund is not a foundation: its job is to find money and redistribute it. The Cimetta Fund has its headquarters in Paris, its heart in the Arab world. We have already mentioned the activities implemented: individual grants to support artist and cultural operator mobility, financial aid given to some Arab organisations as a contribution to organise and stabilize themselves, and, recently, support to exile artists from war areas (only in Beirut the fund identified four hundred Syrian activists in need).

Artist travel (return included), fair trade, and sustainability: these are Cimetta Fund leading values. Lately the fund set up a coalition with other

cultural organisations from all over the world (Australia, Africa, Asia, Russia) and launched the Ibn Battûta Artistic Alliance, for the purpose of widening the funding possibilities of exchange for artists and cultural operators travelling between the Euro-Arab geographical zone and other parts of the world.

The Arab Education Forum Safar-Istikshaf program is also involved in the redistribution of money, but Mais Irqsusi announces that at the moment resources are no longer available. The program will stop for one year and will focus on finding public and private partners who can support mobility. Significantly, financing mobility is one of the issues listed in the agenda drafted by the organisation.

The agenda identifies four key points, all very interesting: adopting mobility within the national agendas (but also within city agendas, as experimented with the municipality of Amman) in order to recognize it as a development tool and support it; working with public and private institutions and the donor community to find money, and to agree on transparent mechanisms for allocating budgets and distributing funds; endorsing the free movement of people across the Arab countries, implementing visa's simplification, and encouraging better immigration policies; supporting internal mobility, by engaging the communities as said before.



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Other experiences: Pépinières européennes pour jeunes artistes and Resò

The overview of mobility operators offered by the forum ends with the Pépinières association (represented in Turin by Valentine Busquet), which, together with public and private partners, supports mobility programs all over Europe and beyond, and with the Resò network, which involves nine institutions and is supported and promoted by the CRT Foundation.

Pépinières has partners in more than twenty countries. It was born as a European-based association, but it also works a lot with Canada, and it is trying to develop links with cultural operators from the Euro-Mediterranean zone. Resò is a network supported by just one Italian region (Artists from Piedmont go abroad, international artists come to Piedmont), and it has started programs in Egypt, Colombia, Brazil, India and Ukraine. In spite of their differences, both consider artistic residencies as a way to develop an «open geography», to activate exchanges of expertise and good practice, to promote cultural diversity, and to help artists in their professional growth.

Both Pépinières and Resò share a global perspective and are aware of the relevance of networks (Resò shows this awareness even in its name). They know, in other words, that the partnership between operators from different areas stimulates the access to the culture and benefits each one of these areas.

Any periphery is a centre

What remains after one day of intense debate? The sensation of being in transit, as Luigi Ratclif says. He collects the main issues emerged during the discussion, and he identifies the categories based upon which the road to transition is to be oriented. The essential subjects, cultural network polar stars: mobility and relationship with society. The problems: funds and inequality. The methods: sustainability and networks. Which are the new perspectives we are looking for? Operators and artists insist on multiplying the angles of vision, going beyond frameworks not corresponding anymore to a complicated and multicentric world, and taking on our own responsibilities. We can borrow Ferdinand Richard's words to say that we must not lose sight of the indisputable link between biodiversity, cultural diversity and democratic pluralism.

To draw some conclusions, associations and networks working as BJCEM on intercultural exchange have to implement a blended strategy: on one side they have to establish connections with the areas they work in, using culture as a social and political change tool; on the other they have to strive to adopt new practices, or to implement practices until now sporadically experimented. To be more specific: making synergies to alleviate funding obstacles (like Ibn Battûta Alliance is trying to do); building strong networks based on fair trade which allow little organisations to express their skill and bring new blood to the networks; strengthening the



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cooperation at regional level and the relationship with local operators; organizing themselves to be ethical and autonomous entities, dedicated to supporting creativity, diversification, and innovation.

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October 23rd, 2015, Scuola Holden, Piazza
Borgo Dora 49, Torino

An event promoted by



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de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée
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