

MIGRATION AND CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART: EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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When Castles and Miller (1998) described the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century as an “age of migration”, they were not mistaken. As the world becomes more connected and borders dissolved (Augé, 2009), human beings seem to be increasingly assuming the inclination to migrate that is imprinted in their DNA (McNeill, 1984). In 2020, it was estimated that almost 281 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth, which represented 3.6% of the world population at the time (IOM, 2024).

Addressing migration means to approach human mobility as fundamentally tied to the concept of territory. This territory, from which one comes, and to which one goes, where the migrant is “absent despite presence and present despite absence” (Sayad, 2011), is much more than a geographical coordinate. Haesbaert (2007) uses the concept of “multi-territoriality” to describe geographical locations as composed of different layers — economic, political, social, and cultural. Thus, it is possible to characterize a specific place by its political and economic aspects, but also its culture, social structure and symbolic repertoire. The process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as they occur in migration, encompass both geographical mobility and the distancing or approaching of an entire framework that endows the subject’s life with meaning and significance.

When going through it, migrants become “potential wanderers” (Park, 1928, p. 888), facing moments of identity fracture and reconfiguration — biographical ruptures¹ that encompass discontinuity of the entire context in which the individual bases an idea of herself, may it be discourse, symbolic, cultural, political, economic and so on (Lechner, 2019). This rupture allows for new self-perceptions that ultimately foster the emergence of questions regarding socially

¹ It was a biographical rupture of this sort that played a pivotal role in an important rupture in art at the end of the 18th century, driven by the French Revolution. Centered in Europe, this rupture with tradition was driven by the creative process of migrants who came from across the ocean, such as the Americans who worked in England. One example is John Singleton Copley, who innovated in the theme and technique of his painting “Charles I Demanding the Handover of the Five Impeached Members of the House of Commons, 1641” (Gombrich, 1995, p. 482).

and culturally constructed identities, as well as social representations of certain social groups that are socially marginalized. In fact, studies show that not only the migratory process, but also life as a migrant, promotes intense internal subjective activity.

Considering that art is a realm of symbolic dispute and one of the structuring structures within societies (Bourdieu, 1999), contemporary visual art has been a fertile ground for the birth of these new perspectives and (counter)narratives about migrants' world and their personal experiences of migration. "Contemporary art" does not refer to a specific style or time, but to a different way of creating and understanding artistic creation that emerged in the mid-1970s, marking its distinction from Western modern art. This new approach completely broke with all the traditions that have been written and studied by Art History until then — which is why author Danto (2014) speaks of a "post-historical" art — and emerged in a period marked by a clear absence of aesthetic tradition, which included instead reinterpretation of artworks and boundaries-free experimentation. Tradition no longer guided artmaking, but by the personal and political interests of the artists, who began to address collective and personal agendas through art.

With the increasing experimentation, liberation, political questioning and strengthening of the artists' authority, and diminishing the role of the art object, influenced by the French post-structuralist tradition (Blocker, 2009), migrants have assumed a pivotal role in telling their own stories through different artistic languages. In contexts marked by social and cultural asymmetries, art produced by marginalized social groups — the "silent and silenced centers of the circuit marked by this epistemic violence", as said by Spivak (1988, p. 54) — introduce new perspectives that challenge prevailing norms across various social and cultural domains. Their artistic poetics are a product of creative endeavors that turn subjectivity in materiality (Ostrower, 2014) from their point of view and place in the world, with her/his body-territory "constructed in the struggle, in the clash in the face of a threat — which, in the extreme, is the threat to one's own existence, in the face of which one must resist" (Haesbaert, 2020, p. 87).

Because migrants' art is multidirectional, it makes us look at the different perspectives of the migrant subject: here and there, departure and arrival, beginnings and resumptions, what is being said and how it is being said (Maneval & Reimer, 2022). That is why, in many ways, talking about contemporary visual art and migration is talking not only about individual activism, but also collective activism. It is addressing changes in the way of seeing (Berger, 1987), but also in

the way of showing and broadening the understanding regarding marginalized social groups that are plural and diverse in so many senses and ways.

These manifestations have opened doors to important and urgent questions about social and cultural power and gained more space internationally.² Making use of different materialities and mediums for creative expression that are particular to contemporary art (Cauquelin, 2018), they question mechanisms of oppression that marginalize people and oppress subjectivities, such as colonialism and the patriarchy. This was the case, for example, in the trajectory of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, who, in the 1960s, was forcibly migrated to the U.S. by her parents. This experience and her life as a migrant prompted a drastic shift in self-perception, leading her to question racialized and stereotypical social identities, which influenced her artistic focus on feminism and the human-nature relationship, which themes deeply resonated in her creative process and artworks.

In many other cases, contemporary visual art created by migrants involves not the creation of something new, but the reinterpretation of a work created by another artist. Reinterpretations are, in fact, characteristic of artists producing contemporary art, who use already established works to reinterpret them and thereby write new (and often counter) narratives (Danto, 2014). This is the case shown in a work of art of Raphael Gomide, a by the Brazilian artist living in Portugal, that was exhibited in an exhibition that took place in 2016 in Porto, Portugal, featuring works by Brazilians inspired by the work of Rafael Bordallo Pinheiro, a Portuguese artist from the 19th century. Gomide made a reinterpretation of Portuguese artist Bordallo Pinheiro's "Zé Povinho", one of the most well-known characters created by the Portuguese artist, with colors and elements characteristic of Brazilian national history, such as the colors of the Brazilian Empire's military uniform, and the substitution of the European goldfinch with the Brazilian canary.

Following this movement, research on visual aesthetics that emerge in transcultural contexts, especially those crafted through the eyes of migrant and diasporic subjects, have begun to receive more attention in recent years (Maneval & Reimer, 2022). Mirzoeff (2000), for example, identified two aspects that are particular to art produced by diasporic individuals. First, the "multiple viewpoint" which displaces the Cartesian and linear perspective to "a forward-looking,

² The *Nucleo Storico* of this year's International Art Exhibition of *La Biennale di Venezia*, for example, under the motif *Stranieri Ovunque* (Foreigners Everywhere), has a room dedicated to worldwide Italian artistic diaspora in the 20th century. It also gathers works of art from 20th century artists from Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin America (La Biennale di Venezia, 2024).

transcultural and transitive place from which to look and be seen” (p. 6), which raises many questions about the “gaze”. Secondly, intertextuality, because migrant art must be understood in dialogue with other texts (images, discourses, and contexts) that involve or have involved not only its creation, but also its social sharing.

As I see it, these new paths will benefit from an intersection between the Social Sciences and the Humanities to understand the impact of the migration process and the experience of being a migrant on the artistic creative process and the practice of art activism. This intersection, which allows us to combine the perspective on the materiality of the artistic production of individuals in diaspora with the contexts in which it is born and socialized (Maneval & Reimer, 2022), allows for a broader look at the relationship between experiences and the exercise of the creative impulse in migrants, without neglecting the complex dynamics of power, identity, and culture that exist in the background. By analyzing the artistic production that arises in a diasporic and intercultural context. Considering the particularities of contemporary visual art, the objective should be to understand the discourses on/of migration that these new poetics highlight and support as a collective visually engaged activism.

Without any intention or possibility of ending the debate on these matters here, these reflections were written to contribute with a multidimensional vision centered on the human being as a creative vector of action in the world. The core objective here was to open new possible paths for future interdisciplinary research on Migrations and Contemporary Visual Art. As it becomes explicit, it is of utmost importance to deepen the scientific analysis to understand not only the new forms of contemporary art created by migrants, but also the uses given to it in socially complex contexts. This includes political and activism-oriented artworks used as vehicles of resistance and the dissemination of (counter)narratives. It is also crucial to pay attention to the aesthetic aspects of these artworks, understanding the new poetics and discourses they sustain to comprehend how socially marginalized groups visually shape their narratives as resistance.

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