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Cultural Complexities and their Environment: Investigations of Code–Switching in Contemporary Visual Arts

Abstract:

Contemporary artworks are primary sources for a better understanding of the most important issues in our current reality. The complexities of cultural interactions are often thematized in pieces of art using the artistic means of code-switching, and where the investigation of these questions is pursued *in* and *with regards to the issues of* the broader context, including the built and the urban setting. In this paper I examine some aspects of these questions, with the help of some inspiring examples, through artworks by creators coming from five different parts of the world: hence in the works by Manit Sriwanichpoom, Nandipha Mntambo, Michael Rakowitz, Yinka Shonibare, and Marja Helander. In this way I aim to emphasize the global relevance of these issues, as well as what we can thus learn from and about our own origins, current standpoints, and further possibilities.

Keywords:

cultural interactions, code-switching, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Nandipha Mntambo, Michael Rakowitz, Yinka Shonibare and Marja Helander

We can find a really interesting, and, at the same time, very succinct summary of the essence of contemporary art in a recent essay by Christopher S. Wood.¹² Let me quote his words a bit longer:

Today, we actually have a universal style, known as global contemporary art. To speak of the universalism of global contemporary art is not to suggest that art has become homogeneous or bland. The data sets and experiences processed by contemporary art are too diverse. Difference is pervasive. And yet there is definitely a shared idiom which we all recognize... . All the artworks populating the global contemporary paradigm “understand” each other, no translation necessary. Despite local differences, the infinite plurality of personal and collective histories, and the multiplicity of centers, indeed the breakdown of the once-basic distinction between center and periphery – despite all this, global contemporary art is synchronized, convergent, and universally intelligible. Local content may require some explanation, but the styles or the strategies rarely do. Global contemporary art, in only a few decades, has achieved a universality more complete than any of the previous aspirants to stylistic universalism.³

While I can absolutely agree with this description, I nevertheless would like to suggest the following contribution to all of this: that this is so also because many contemporary artists are particularly and explicitly interested in investigating cultural complexities – this might also be part of what Wood labelled as the “strategies” – and observers of the works benefit from it a lot. Hence the “universally intelligible” nature of contemporary art and the fact that “no translation is necessary,” as Wood claims, is not because we are able to immediately understand everything and anything, but because we are alert and – hopefully also – interested in the artists’ very survey of the cultural complexities, which might give us the reading key for many of the aspects of the works.

In fact, this is why we can claim that in contemporary art one of the most fascinating aspects is precisely when artists are investigating the complexities of cultures in general and the equally complex interactions between different cultural traditions and codes in particular.

Besides this however, as it will be evident from the survey of the examples I quote in this paper, the artists’ examination of cultural complexities is very often pursued *in* and *with regards to the issues of* the broader context, including the built and the urban setting. However, this does not only mean that the city or the built environment appears as a mere motif in the works, and does not even refer to the fact that these pieces are created and shown in the cities. Beyond these obvious factors, we can also see that the creators are aware of and have an active interest in the numerous issues of the everyday urban reality, of the built environment, as well as several other aspects connected to these contexts, including the situation of the multi-layered social strata of the metropolises, the political history of towns, the issues of globalization and global commerce, the effects of mass industrialization, and the multiple problems of environmental emergency.

Many of these and other areas, their connection with the urban environment; as well as the philosophical, the aesthetic and practical implications have been analyzed in scholarly literature too. Just to quote some

1) An earlier version of this paper was presented in the international conference “Multimodal Code-Switching” organized by the Code-Switching in the Arts KRE and LangueFlow Research Groups at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, in Budapest, Hungary in April of 2022. I would like to thank the participants from the discussion for their important comments and questions.

2) This paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (OTKA), Project Nr. OTKA K-143294, “Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics” (2022–2025).

3) Wood, “Universal or Global Style,” 66.

of the many fascinating, new and emerging research areas, we can remember the investigations of the experiencing of the urban context (for example in the work by Dénes Schreiner),⁴ the survey of the aesthetic features of the urban atmospheres (Adam Andrzejewski and Mateusz Salwa),⁵ or analyzing the particularities of the representation of cities and the philosophical perspectives in urban regeneration (Zoltán Somhegyi).⁶ Sanna Lehtinen researches the importance of care in architecture,⁷ while Lisa Giombini focuses on issues of heritage and authenticity.⁸ Max Rynnänen wrote about the questions of tourism,⁹ while Tim Edensor scrutinized the effect of decaying industrial heritage.¹⁰ Naturally, the list could be continued with other inspiring fields at the intersection of art, architecture, urbanism, and philosophy; the above is just to indicate some of the exciting areas of research.

This is why it becomes important that to these extremely crucial questions and aspects of the contemporary urban sphere and everyday life we also add the examination of cultural complexities through works that are connected to our social, political, and physical environment; works which are pursued by visual artists. Therefore, as mentioned above, contemporary artworks can be primary examples and also excellent sources – and sources of inspirations – for a more complex survey of diverse cultural realities and phenomena. This can definitely motivate, again, the researchers, thinkers, and anyone interested in our contemporary existence to focus on the conscious examination of the intricate relationship between cultural interactions, artworks, and the everyday urban reality.

Needless to say, already in earlier and classical forms of art we can find more or less direct examples of and references to the complexities of cultures and to their interactions. However, in modern and contemporary art the conscious reflection to these issues has become particularly strong, resulting in works of art – what is more, in entire oeuvres – that contain important and at the same time fascinating considerations on these issues. In other words, we can observe that we are already on a meta-level. These conscious reflections are thus not only one of the many possible layers in the interpretation of the works, but they often constitute the key issue, the chief concern of the work; practically they become the main subject-matter of the piece of art.

From the artist's side it is authorial choice, a conscious decision to turn to the investigations of these matters. Therefore, when surveying these sorts of works, through the topics we can trace the original intentions of the artist of how to elaborate these issues and turn them into becoming the core of an authentic work of art. The piece will then thematize the connections of cultures and their codes on several levels, through diverse references, and as we saw, it can occasionally make this question the main subject matter of the work.

Of course, this process can have different layers. For example, the piece can simply display diverse codes, and their mere co-existence. In this first case the codes have a rather additional or perfunctory nature, without really being in the focus. In a second type of approach, the very essence of the codes can become the chief concern. In this case the work can focus on the proper nature, function, and functioning of the codes, for example completing each other, or, just the contrary: clashing with each other. And, as a third type, we can also see when code-switching itself becomes the main topic, hence the explicit subject-matter is the very examination of what happens through the code-switching, and what results we can achieve through it.

4) Schreiner, *Tragikus Voyeur*.

5) Andrzejewski and Salwa, "Urban Atmosphere?"

6) Somhegyi, "Filled Vistas to Empty Piazzas"; Somhegyi, "Revaluing the City."

7) Lehtinen, "Objects of Care in the Urban."

8) Giombini, "Reconstructing Heritage."

9) Rynnänen, "Cityscapes as Theme Parks."

10) Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*.

Topic-wise, the investigation of the interconnection of cultures, the survey of the working of different codes, and the examination of switching the codes can be really polyvalent. It can include references to colonial and postcolonial issues, critical concerns of gender inequalities, questions of personal, social, and cultural identity, problems of power relationships, and the critique of political systems and social aspects. In many cases, artists are right in not offering neither direct nor quick answers, nor easy and cheap solutions to these complex issues. They often find it sufficient to raise awareness to the problems, and while taking a definite stance toward the issue, they at the same time leave broad space for the observer of the piece for profound reflection.

In the next part of my paper, I would like to show a few actual examples from artists' work from different regions of the world that can demonstrate the above claims. As it will become evident, my examples are, on the one hand, practically covering the "four quarters" of the world as well as multiple directions within the interactions between East, West, South, and North without naturally me wanting to stress too much this almost random geographical categorization. On the other hand, the works also show an interesting variety grades evaluating how explicitly the artists' political and social critical aspects are expressed. The quoted works also share the feature of being connected to certain defining aspects, influencing factors, and other impacts of the circumstances of the built and natural environment. In this way, issues of heritage, identity as well as cultural – what is more, even the social-political – clashes are analyzed with an active awareness and consideration on the everyday reality of such physical and metaphysical contexts. This is why I claim that it is really useful for contemporary aesthetic and art historical discourse to investigate these sorts of works and from these perspectives. Such pieces of art are expressive, visually strong, and aesthetically engaging, even *before* the observers are familiar with the actual content and references of the singular pieces. Hence, they "capture" the viewer through their appearance, which will then help to convey meanings, express critical aspects, and stimulate further reflection.

Starting with a series of work from Asia, I would like to quote the intriguing works by Manit Sriwanichpoom. The renowned photographer from Thailand is well-known for his works investigating various issues in contemporary society and recent history. On his series we can often find his collaborator, "Mister Pink," a Thai actor. Dressed in a flashy pink suit, accompanied by an equally flashy pink shopping cart, Mister Pink appears in various contexts. Sometimes shown on the street in everyday context, sometimes in touristic places, sometimes embedded in historic press photographs that depict the inexpressible brutalities of massacres, sometimes in a setting that references classical Thai operas. As it was summarized on the website of an art agency representing the artist:

Mister Pink is a Thai actor. He is in fact a creature invented and directed by Manit Sriwanichapoom, an activist artist who uses photography and transforms it into a revealing element... Both radical and full of humour, playing with kitsch while remaining true to the seriousness of the subject, the ensemble highlights both a minimalist and hilarious actor's act and the talent of the director who often refers to cinema and painting (lunch on the grass, for example, in Paris).¹¹

What is interesting for us now here is the complex applicability of Mister Pink in different situations and the references of the pieces of art to diverse cultural traditions and codes. While through the shopping cart he is obviously referring to modern and originally Western, but now global consumer culture; in the Opera series for example Mister Pink can also stand for the strange clashes of the values of traditional art forms and the superficial and ephemeral joys of shopping. These clashes are even more emphasized through the titles of the

11) <https://agencevu.com/en/serie/mister-pink-2009/>; accessed August 13, 2023.

works, coming from Thai proverbs. Or, the very color itself can stand for the ambiguities of codes, for example in the “Life in Pink, Paris” series, where as we read: “If in French and Western culture, this colour is associated with happiness and love, in the artist’s case, it is associated with bad taste and vulgarity.”¹²

Continuing our survey in the African continent, we can find a captivating work, titled “Praça de Touros” by the South African Swazi artist Nandipha Mntambo. Here the elaborations of traditional tribal cultural forms, and atavistic practices and references to the Iberian public spectacle of bullfighting, meet in a short video and photo series. In the art pieces we can see the artist standing alone in the middle of a derelict bullfighting arena in Mozambique, replaying the fight. In this mode the replaying truly becomes dramatic, in a double sense. On the one hand it is really like re-presenting the fight, as if being an actor: dressing up, walking on the stage, performing, and so on. On the other hand, however it is also dramatic in the sense of being not only theatrical but also striking, impressive, and powerful. The decaying environment, the run-down arena, however does not have any spectators. The artist is fighting alone, hence physically even her enemy is not present, even if its presence is definitely felt. She prepared her own dress, made of cowhide, thus creating a duality or ambiguity of her own role and identity in the play or re-enactment itself. As we can read on the website of the Seattle Art Museum: “Enacting this fight alone, she equates this private spectacle as a way to confront an internal struggle with her own animalistic instincts. She is both the bull and the bullfighter.”¹³ Here however, besides the aforementioned investigation of the several dual principles like animal-human, masculine-feminine, aggressor and victim, we also need to be aware of the post-colonial survey through the choice of the very location, Mozambique being a former Portuguese colony for centuries.

In my next example of an artwork examining diverse traditions, and the opportunities of expanding our reflection on these cultures through code-switching, changing of context, and also material, I would like to quote the Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz. He has an ongoing series titled “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,” that he started in 2006. In this project the artist aims to recreate more than 7,000 objects that were either looted from the Iraq Museum or were destroyed in the following tumultuous years, including the brutal destruction caused by ISIS in the country. My actual chosen example is from 2018, and it was shown as part of the Fourth Plinth project in Trafalgar Square, the well-known and popular public art commission in London. In this, Rakowitz recreated a more than 4 meters long lamassu – an ancient Assyrian gate-protecting deity – that was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The material of the reconstruction however creates further layers in the interpretation of the work: the artist used empty metal date syrup cans. As the artist summarized their history:

The salvage of date syrup cans makes present the human, economic and ecological disasters caused by the Iraq Wars and their aftermath. Iraqi dates were once considered the best in the world and constituted the country’s second largest export after oil. In the late 1970s, the Iraqi date industry listed over 30 million date palms in the country. By the end of the 2003 Iraq War, only 3 million remained. To circumvent the 1990 U.N. embargo and reach a Western market, Iraqi manufacturers shipped date syrup to Syria to be packed in unmarked cans. The cans then went to Lebanon, where they received a label identifying them as “Product of Lebanon” and were exported worldwide as a veiled commodity. Today, post-sanctions, only one brand among dozens lists Iraq as its country of origin due to the exorbitant security-related charges levied by U.S. government agencies on imports indicating Iraqi origin.¹⁴

12) Ibid.

13) Mntambo, “Praça de Touros.”

14) Rakowitz, “The Invisible Enemy.”

As we can thus see, here the work entails references to various important issues through actively experimenting with diverse codes, cultural forms, and temporal perspectives. It pays homage both to a lost actual ancient cultural monument and to a still-active – though significantly decreased – agricultural tradition. It criticizes international policies that make it difficult to re-establish the industry and thus to help people in the country of origin. Besides the social and political aspects however, it also has important comments on contemporary art's possibilities of fighting global consumption, consumer habits, and environmental pollution by the upcycling of 10,500 cans used for the creation of the work.

A similarly convoluted investigation of global trade, industry and former colonial practices are evident in the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's oeuvre, especially through the spectacular use of the fabrics that definitely contribute to widely recognizing his signature style. As the textile's history is summarized on the website of the Tate:

Indonesian batik techniques were appropriated and industrialised by the Dutch during the colonial period. English manufacturers copied the Dutch model, making fabrics in the Dutch wax style in Manchester, using a predominantly Asian work force to produce designs derived from traditional African textiles. The fabrics were then exported to West Africa, and became popular during the African independence movement, when their bright colours and geometric patterns became associated with the struggle for political and cultural independence. Today they continue to be sold in Africa and in markets in New York and London. Their designs are constantly adapted: one of the layers of fabric in the skirt in this work has a Chanel logo motif.¹⁵

What we can see here – with the help of for example an eighteenth-century work, “The Swing” by Jean-Honoré Fragonard – is thus a conscious examination of the patterns of history, where actually the word “pattern” can be understood in a double sense. It stands for describing the pattern, in other words the motif appearing on the fabric, but it also refers to the geographical pattern that this very fabric travelled through, from Asia through Europe to Africa and then to the world. Re-creating the original iconic painting in a life-size 3D installation is however not merely a switch of the artistic form. It rather becomes a means to critically examine diverse problems related to history, colonialism, society, and identity through an object and motif, the printed cotton, following its intricate travel patterns.

Going a bit more to the Northern regions, we find my last example which has the most explicit political, while it is also a work that uses the practice of code-switching in the most direct way. The Sami artist Marja Helander's work titled “Birds in the Earth,” from 2018, shows two young twins sisters, Birit and Katja Haarla also of Sami origin, who are classical ballet dancers. In the approximately 11-minute video the dancers are shown in the Nordic landscape, sometimes dancing directly in the snowy fields, in ballet costume, while in other parts of the work they appear and dance in traditional Sami dresses, (for example in front of the Parliament building in Helsinki), as a form of protest and for raising awareness of their cultural fight.

The work is thus a beautifully made film investigating not simply the meeting of cultural traditions, but more importantly, the struggle for keeping traditional forms and lifestyles among the framework of modern social and political structures. The artist actively uses the artistic form and means of code-switching between the scenes and the dresses, while the protagonists remain the same, in order to highlight her critical message. What is equally curious however is a sort of parallel investigation of the formation of the personal and the Sami cultural identity. As Veli-Pekka Lehtola wrote: “Der Gegensatz zwischen Tradition

15) Shonibare, “The Swing.”

und Moderne ist eines der Hauptmotive der Fotografin Marja Helander. Gleichzeitig symbolisiert sie ihren eigenen Kampf um ihre Identität. Helander ist eine städtische Sámi, die ihre samischen Wurzeln auf vielerlei Arten in ihrer Kunst analysiert hat.”¹⁶ It will be precisely this what makes it even more obvious that besides the examination of the different codes – and the artistic application of the explicit code-switching between these – also the various contexts, the urban, and natural environment are given an essential role in the creative process.

These exciting works of the above five artists, coming from different parts of the world can, I think, nicely illustrate not only the complexities of the investigated questions, but also the benefits of being aware of what else and what more we can understand about these issues when we consciously examine the way the creators use and apply diverse codes in their works. This will lead to a better comprehension of the fact that a truly global view of the arts, especially of contemporary visual arts, should include the more detailed and more conscious observation of the local features, of the modes how they shape and extend the meaning of the work, as well as of the context (physical and cultural), environment, urban, or natural setting. What is more, even if it seems like a different and distant cultural aspect, compared to our own, it will nevertheless be highly beneficial to know more and understand better numerous aspects in our culture. As also David J. Getsy highlighted: “a globally and historically attuned aesthetics would allow us to see more precisely the work of art and its receptions in relation to varied historical and cultural situations – even our own.”¹⁷ This is and will be the reason why, when learning more about other traditions, it is one of the best ways of understanding more about our own, and thus about our own selves too.

The curious aspect is (and actually, also for this we could see several examples above), that this complex investigation functions and it is really fruitful not only on a “horizontal” scale (for example with geographically different cultures), but also on a “vertical” one (hence when considering the different “levels” in the cultural production). With the latter I am referring to the exciting meeting points of art with popular and folk culture. We can agree with Max Ryynänen when he emphasized:

The true history of most historical works of art oscillates between art and popular culture. If we are able to step out a little from the dominance of “art” so that we can start working on taking back some of the less-discussed and less-embraced features and sides of cultural heritage, we will for sure find many new nuances in our traditions. Scholars in aesthetics need to study this new way of reading the history of the modern system of arts as a whole, without forgetting its shadows, and to acknowledge that, similar to the late twentieth-century discussions on Eurocentrism and male dominance, we might here again find a new perspective for rewriting the story of who we are and how we have ended up being who we are.¹⁸

All the above considerations in this paper may help us in seeing better what benefits we can get when we are endeavoring to focus on the examination of the cultural complexities mediated through contemporary artworks. These forms of investigations are often manifested through the explicit references to codes and code-switching, taking into consideration the broader context and setting (for example the contemporary urban reality), which definitely influences the everyday existence of a larger and larger proportion of humanity. When we are aware and consciously interested in these issues, it can lead not only to fascinating

16) Lehtola, *Die Sámi*, 273.

17) See his remark in the discussion section of: Elkins, *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, 196.

18) Ryynänen, *Central European Art. The History*, 79–80.

insights into further layers of meaning in the actual pieces of art, but also to exciting experiences that will then, as a sort of a further and crucial benefit, help us understanding our own origins, current standpoints, and further possibilities.



Michael Rakowitz: *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)*, 2018
10,500 Iraqi date syrup cans, metal frame, 4.69 x 1.70 x 4.48 m
Photo: Gautier DeBlonde ©
Courtesy the Mayor of London

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