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Dubrovnik, church of St Blaise, view of the restored interior.
(Photographic Collection of the Institute of Art History, Zagreb)

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LETTERE DALL'ESTERO

Colonialism and revisionism
How do we teach to increasingly diverse demographics, within an ever-changing cultural landscape?

Interview with Prof. Sussan Babaie
(Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London)

MANOLO GUERCI
University of Kent

Increasingly in recent years, not a day goes by without reading about an aspect related to the legacy of colonialism, particularly British, whether it is the use of regalia with contentious provenance, demands for restitution from musea around the world, or EDI (Equality and Diversity) quota. At ground root level, the question is how we, engaged with education, can or should teach our own subjects and, more broadly, help students to critically think about these issues. The topic is of course not new, but it is felt and understood differently according to where one is in the world, one's own experience, and circumstances.
Sussan Babaie is an internationally renowned curator, scholar and professor on the art of Iran and Islam at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London (https://courtauld.ac.uk/people/sussan-babaie/). Her research includes empire studies, transcultural visuality, and the historiography of the global contemporary, all of which makes her an ideal interlocutor for such an interview.

1. In our own field/s of art and architecture, or space cultures more generally, how do we teach while reconsidering aspects of revisionism, related to, but not exclusively, to colonialism?

As I try to unload myself from the sense of urgency attached to these key questions, which have been on my mind for a long time, the attention shifts, temporarily, to Sussan's home setting, filled with art objects, some of which indigenous. This immediately sets her to talk about the importance of history, and indeed her own education, which started with graphic design in late 1970's Tehran.

> We have a mandate to protect historical knowledge and to keep it at the forefront of teaching. This is not an issue when it comes to Europe or America, where nobody is debating whether history matters. Of course it matters!

(Meanwhile in my mind I think about all sorts of potential ramifications of what she just said, and how that history is often played with or manipulated. Which is of course the point of our discussion!)
The reference to America prompts me to talk about a recent exhibition I saw at the Sainsbury Art Centre at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich,

UEA student accommodation: the Ziggurats, just opposite the Sainsbury Art Centre, early 1960s.
(photo by the author, 2023)

Norman Foster's iconic gallery built in the 1970s within the setting of Denys Lasdun's impressive campus, with its beautiful ziggurats. A form, incidentally, which rather aptly brings one away from the West, as it were!
The exhibition is on 'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast' (12 March-30 July 2023 – https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/whats-on/empowering-art-indigenous-creativity-and-activism-from-north-americas-northwest-coast/), which she also happens to have seen, and on which she says: "For such as exhibition to have made it into fruition is a big step".
We share our own impressions, and agree that we were perhaps unequipped to fully understand it. But the lack of an understanding is exactly the point here! We discuss this alongside the centre's permanent collection, an impressive array of artworks and objects from all times and provenance mixed together to portray the way they were collected and originally displayed at home by Lord and Lady Sainsbury.

The Sainsbury Art Centre, UEA, main gallery with permanent collection.
(photo by the author, 2023)

That concept of world art, she says, referring to the arrangement of the permanent collection, “is now under stress”, as it no longer carries the same meaning, even if compared to recent times. I ask her to expand on this, and she continues:

> Under the rubric of ‘World Art’ or its relative, Global Art, much has been debated since the turn of this century. Some of it surely was stimulated by the narrative of cultural binaries that were sharpened after such seismic events as 9/11, invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the amassing of collaborating and competing powers into camps alongside east and west divides, Euroamerican or western world, and the rest. Any effort at levelling the playing field of Art History, at making room for the arts of places outside the canonical Western arts, represents foundational change but only if ‘World’ in world art is not reduced to everything that had been marginal to the West. In other words, World Art carries the connotations of art other than the West, hence all of it appears to be collapsed into a shapeless mass. That’s not helpful!

At this point she mentions Islamic art, and begins to tell me about the limits of what she has, by now, been studying for a long time. As a student in the USA she begun with American art, and then went into the Renaissance. She knows, in other words, what the fundamentals are.
The use of the word “fundamentals” is, at this point, interesting. Even more so when she mentions something that completely surprises me: “I felt like a slight aberration to the practice of art history”.
And she explains. Changing such strongly felt perception is what she has been doing at The Courtauld. Thinking trans-Asian, from what we should refer as the so-called fundamentals to areas that colleagues do not quite know what to do with. She does not want, in other words, “to feel alone anymore”.
And here is the nature of our debate: it is not only or simply a matter of filtering through the lenses of colonial versus post-colonial, which she describes as problematic, as “we have done nothing to decolonialise!” Rather, we need to ask different questions: not why or what, for instance, the British did in India, but what happened because of it. In other words, shifting the debate from an empire led (British or otherwise) point of view. (This of course is what I am interested to dwell upon as I come from Rome and, like Sussan, do not come from a background with a colonialist past. We both, however, developed a substantial part of our careers in the UK).

Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Isfahan, Iran.
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/AJM2822.jpg)

The “aberration” is about how she felt (or was made to feel) about Islamic art, something that does not resonate with me – clearly things have changed in that respect thanks to the likes of Sussan!
She explains that when she begun studying it, the subject was seen as a step-child of art history, and only in the past twenty years fields like Islamic, pre Columbian or south Asian art have become more cutting edge in the way we think about them. Their language, tactile and sensorial, is based on very different environments of production, and it is within an emerging interconnectivity of analysis with western European, or traditional art historical practice, which has taken a long time to develop, that the potential to think differently is embodied. So “to decolonise”, she continues, hence, by extension, to revise, “is not to teach more India, Iran, China, etc.”, but to engage with, and consider non Western perspectives and tools of analysis.
If I relate this to my own teaching of Early Modern Europe, for instance, the point is to rethink the whole question of models within other contemporaneous non-European contexts. I tell Sussan that my course begins with Florence, and with Santa Maria del Fiore. And her comment is that we know far too much about Brunelleschi and his dome than we do of the many Islamic parallels which all belong to that category. Piazzas: the Baroque ideal, she says, is not (or not only) the Piazza Navona. It is elsewhere, such as, for instance, the Maydan in Isfahan, Iran. Either way, she clarifies, “the point is not just to offer comparisons but to learn from those other examples, some of which were more complex and are more relevant to the discussion around the subject of public square, for instance”.
Instances notwithstanding, the point is to create parallels, as this is how one sees the whole. My question of how one teaches within an ever-changing cultural landscape is therefore primarily to do with the need to break up the concept of art history, and remove or reconsider the idea of national identities. This brings me to my next question:

2. Is there, or should there be, an idea/sense of boundary/ies when it comes to teaching a given topic? Or is boundary a contentious concept?

We continue using the instance of my own teaching, and she adds that if she were teaching (as she did at the start of her career) the Renaissance (or the Renaissance of Europe), she, hence I, would be wise to include 15th c. Samarqand, for example. In other words, the point is to teach that there is no hierarchy when it comes to sources and models. And that one should instead think in terms of solutions: "if you want to build a building that serves a certain function, what solutions do we have? Plain and simple". This of course does not remove the "genius loci", or spirit of the place, and all that that entails, from the equation, and the point, I guess, is to reconsider locality and scale, hence boundaries, within a new, more open framework of analysis, as discussed so far.
But when it comes to literature, we do not really have enough, as works tend to be compartmentalised. And this has of course to do with the need to revise how we write history.
My last question is about her own view now, after a long career tackling these questions:

3. What do you think and what is your experience?

In terms of personal path, she re-iterates that it was hard, especially as she essentially had to flee her country, and build a career elsewhere, as non English, ambitious, and interested in the non mainstream. Some of this touches a personal cord with me, and I tell her how much I miss Rome and my own stones, as I often put it. Meanwhile, she talks about Tehran, where she cannot go back to (whereas I can and often go back to Rome, however temporarily). We are, in different ways, displaced, and I can see her pain when she talks about this. Nothing is easy, and it's a journey.
This she says about her own path, pointing to an article in the New Yorker Magazine that made her feel better about herself (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/20/late-bloomers-malcolm-gladwell), for, as she continues:

> I had become an art historian by accident (her brother had signed her up for it), after living through the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, delayed re-start of post-graduate training, having had to repeat MA degrees, and slowly learning to write in English and to become professionally recognised. The journey was long!

I then ask how much she feels relaxed now about what she advocates and whether what she told me about my own teaching of Early Modern Europe she applies to her own field. Her reply is: "one has to come to terms with our own differences before being able to consider them". (Very true. And not always easy, I think).
For instance, she currently has a project for a co-curated exhibition on the art of the Great Mongol State in the 13th and 14th centuries. The exhibition is for The Royal Academy of Art London, to open late 2026-early 2027. This is about the art made across Asia – from China to Persia/Iran, Central Asia to Russia – in the Mongol era through which one could argue the Mongols were invented as distinct but connected cultural worlds. And how all differences are both acceptable and enriching, such as, for instance, in the city of Tabriz in north-western Iran, where Marco Polo goes and about which he writes.

We conclude by going back to my initial question of how one teaches: most students come with an open mind, and one has the chance to help them shape their understanding of the world. The point, in her view, is to go beyond boundaries, to re-consider what these are, as solutions may be different, but concepts are the same.
Both of our experiences give us a personal interpretation of the topic of this interview. And I feel somewhat relieved not just to have discussed it with a like-minded individual, not to mention eminent scholar, but to see that the whole question of decolonisation and revisionism, often slogan driven, western led, and at such a fast pace that one is at best confused, can be tackled in ways that I not only fully embrace but also understand.

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