

RAPHAEL VELLA

5. TRANSLATING THE ‘MEDITERRANEANS’

Art, education and understanding ‘between the lands’



Still from *Ulysses, Burner of Borders and the White Sea in the middle*, a film by Algerian director Malek Bensmail premiered as part of *Méditerranées* in Marseille.

© Dana Farzanehpour/production Marseille-Provence 2013

INTRODUCTION: THE ‘MEDITERRANEANS’ THAT SURROUND US

Known in English and the romance languages as the sea ‘between the lands’, the Mediterranean goes and has gone by many names: ‘Our Sea’ for the Romans, the White Sea (*Akdeniz*) for the Turks, the ‘Great Sea’ (*Yam gadol*) for the Jews, the ‘Middle Sea’ (*Mittelmeer*) for the Germans, and more doubtfully the ‘Great Green’ of the ancient Egyptians. Modern writers have added to the vocabulary, coining epithets such as the ‘Inner Sea’, the ‘Encircled Sea’, the ‘Friendly Sea’, the ‘Faithful Sea’ of several religions, the ‘Bitter Sea’ of the Second World War, the ‘Corrupting Sea’ of dozens of micro-ecologies transformed by their relationship with neighbours who supply what they lack, and to which they can offer their own surpluses; the ‘Liquid Continent’ that, like a real continent, embraces many peoples, cultures and economies within a space with precise edges. (Abulafia 2011, p. xxiii)

Described as a huge ‘exhibition-fiction’, *Méditerranées: Des grandes cités d’hier aux hommes d’aujourd’hui* was one of the major events organised for the opening

VELLA

of the European Capital of Culture in Marseille in January, 2013. When I visited the exhibition in a very industrial-looking building known as J1 at place de la Joliette a few days after its inauguration, I was immediately struck both by its appropriate siting near the sea and by its very unusual layout: several black ship containers filled a massive open space, providing the organisers with convenient zones for mini-exhibitions and inviting spectators to venture through doorways cut into each container to discover different stages in a complex series of narratives. Short, fictional films about a contemporary Ulysses (an irregular immigrant), creative animations and contemporary photographs were woven into a dense structure made of 171 museum pieces, textual histories and personal narratives that told different stories about a sea that diverse peoples inhabit. The different components of the exhibition were transformed into fascinating pieces of cargo, bringing to life the fact that the story of the sea is not only about an exchange of commodities but also a commerce of ideas.

Yet, what stood out most prominently, perhaps, is that this sea that so many different people inhabit is simultaneously the same and not the same sea, hence the plural title *Méditerranées*. As the historian David Abulafia reminds us, the Mediterranean we think we know is a sea with many names: an in-between sea or sea ‘between the lands’. Alternatively, as he writes elsewhere, the world has several ‘Mediterraneans’, all of which present us with vast, empty spaces like a sea or a desert that have helped to bring into contact with each other very different cultures. Such regions—as distant from each other as the ‘real’ Mediterranean and Japan – share “a fundamental characteristic...the relative proximity of opposing shores, but the clear separation between shores” (Abulafia 2005, p. 92).

In a parallel fashion, several related questions about proximity and separation came to mind as I traversed the dark containers at J1 in Marseille. Do the histories highlighted by the different segments of the exhibition overlap or do they merely illustrate vast gaps between separate civilisations? And do the filmic fictions in the exhibition bring us any closer to understanding ourselves and those whose homes are built on “opposing shores”? Can art help to teach, learn or ‘understand’ the Mediterranean or ‘Mediterraneans’ that surround us?

ART, POLITICS AND DISAGREEMENT

When we cross art with the concept of ‘understanding’, we easily run into clichés: from the over-optimistic notion of art as a tool for universal understanding to the hackneyed, romantic idea of the artist as a misunderstood recluse. The place of understanding in the developing trajectories of art and education has probably become more conspicuous and yet more complex than ever, surfacing regularly in the discourses of multiculturalism and policies of inclusion in the educational and wider political arenas. At the same time, the disruptive aspirations of modern and contemporary art never disappear from the horizon, always ready to question that arrogant sense of confidence that leads some to imagine that by ‘understanding’ the other’s art, we also ‘understand’ the other. Art challenges this series of simplistic linkages between art, understanding and the other in various ways. There is firstly the problem of ‘understanding’ in the field of art appreciation or critique, that

unstable bridge linking a piece of art to an audience. One can think of this facet of the problem as the focal point of a discord between two essentially heterogeneous domains: between the wild, artistic gesture of the painter Karel Appel, for instance, and Jean-François Lyotard's insistence on the difficulty or even the impossibility of converting that gesture into commentary (Lyotard, Parret and Buci-Glucksmann 2009). There is something in the visual that inevitably disrupts the structures of discourse we may be accustomed to, something that refuses the directness of a decoding exercise, something that challenges every possibility of 'this' agreeing with 'that'. Writing about art is not a way of understanding it, but a way of coming to terms with our misunderstanding of 'that'. As Lyotard states when he writes about the French artist Marcel Duchamp: "In what you say about Duchamp, the aim would be not to try to understand and to show what you've understood, but rather the opposite, to try not to understand and to show that you haven't understood" (Lyotard 1990, p. 12). What attracts Lyotard to Duchamp's work is precisely its renunciation of the universality of understanding and good taste, its transformation of the field (*du champ*) in a way that threatens to render art unrecognizable.

Yet, the predicament that hovers in the gap between two different domains like painting and language expresses only one aspect of the problem. What if this lack of understanding does not revolve around a misconstruction or misunderstanding of the specificity of another domain, but rather around a disagreement within a single domain or within the very grounds that are common to two or more separate entities? Jacques Rancière describes this as a situation "in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying". He continues:

Disagreement (*mésentente*) is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (Rancière 1999, p. x)

Rancière explains that language—traditionally perceived as an anthropological invariant that supposedly permits different political groups or persons to arrive at some sort of consensual understanding—is always already a disputed space. In fact, not even 'understanding' can guarantee equality. Referring to a work by an ancient Mediterranean thinker - Aristotle's *Politics* - Rancière shows how the Greek philosopher relates speech to the human ability to distinguish between the just and the unjust, or in short, the ability to be a political animal. Other animals also have a voice but only use it to express pleasure and pain. For Aristotle, however, this distinction does not set apart *all* human beings from animals; it does not apply to slaves, for instance. Slaves in ancient Greece were also capable of making sounds, of course, and those at the top of the social order even understood that these sounds functioned as some sort of language, but the sounds alone could not secure a more egalitarian relationship because, according to Aristotle, slaves could only perceive reason in others but did not possess it themselves. The 'disagreement' here is about the very basis of human communication and its

affinity with a political or apolitical existence. Slaves may have understood language just like others in the social hierarchy but the existence of institutionalised social divisions in ancient Greece did not permit others to recognise their equality or the real political significance of their voices.

How can art express such a *mésentente*? By way of example, I shall turn to the work of John Latham, an artist known especially in Britain for the radical book-sculptures he produced in the 1960s and also for his influence on the younger generation of British artists in the following decades. In late 2005, a few weeks before his death, I visited Latham at his home in Peckham in south-east London to talk with him about his fascination with books and especially about an exhibition dedicated to his work that was being shown during this period at Tate Britain. The exhibition had made the headlines, not quite because of the work that was displayed on the gallery's walls but because the organisers had decided to exclude one of Latham's works from the show. The excluded work belonged to Latham's *God is Great* series, and was made of copies of the Bible, the Koran and the Talmud embedded in a sheet of glass. During the construction of the piece, the artist had cut each book in two in order to make them appear like they actually traversed the transparent glass. Given the tense atmosphere in London following the suicide bombings that occurred on 7th July, 2005, this work was seen as being potentially offensive by the administration of Tate Britain and as a result, was removed from the display. Furious at this omission, Latham lashed out at Tate Britain, calling the decision an act of "cowardice" (Smith 2005). His anger was very palpable even when I spoke to him at his home: he described the exclusion as a huge "misunderstanding" of his artistic concept, which in his view was actually more ecumenical than a cursory view of his work might have suggested. If, as Terry Eagleton suggested, suicide bombing is a deliberately shocking act of freedom (the freedom to choose one's own death) that is also a "murderous version of the artistic avant-garde" (Eagleton 2005, pp. 92, 96), then the exclusion of *God is Great* in the aftermath of the London bombings would appear to represent the ironic defeat of art at the hands of its wicked impersonator or travesty.

The controversy surrounding the exclusion of Latham's *God is Great* could plausibly be understood as a simple problem of interpretation, highlighting the gap between the artist's rather utopian intentions and the gallery's misrepresentation of the piece as a possible affront to religious sentiments. Yet, it would be far more fruitful to engage with the deeper *mésentente* that the work itself expresses, possibly in spite of the artist's intentions. It is a 'disagreement' which resonates with strong Mediterranean undertones, witnessed by the three monotheistic religions that the artist refers to and the religious and socio-political connotations that inevitably surface when faced by works like this. Since around 1990, Latham had been preoccupied with these three faiths and the way each religion "proclaims important features that are mutually exclusive, so that laws, cultures and customs to be followed are found mutually unacceptable at critical points" (Iles and Elliott 1991, p. 115). Even though the ensuing decade was described by Latham as a period during which "Arabic Muslim militants were simply getting at anybody who wasn't into their ideas" (Hunt 2005, p. 29), he clearly did not consider his work to represent anti-Islamic views. Quite the contrary, his thoughts aspired toward a

rather idealistic social scenario in which the world would be relieved of the religious or ideological “divided state disease” highlighted by the actions of suicidal fundamentalists (Moorhouse 2005). According to Latham, life presents us with a single reality that has metamorphosed into different interpretations, political ideas and faiths over time, and he saw his art as an attempt to re-establish a connection with the original point of departure. In fact, given that Latham linked his own artistic ideals to a transformation of human life in which “all the peoples of the world should subscribe to a single model of reality” (Walker 1995, p. 165), it is perhaps not surprising that some critics have compared his utopian outlook to the work and ideas of Joseph Beuys (for example, Hunt 2005, p. 30), or even that some have remarked that Latham’s emphatically modernist position makes him “the last avant-gardist” (Walker 1995, p. 3).

In *God is Great*, Latham’s single point of origin together with his desire for a more inclusive society are articulated by the pane of glass on which the book segments are attached. When I asked about Latham’s use of glass during my interview with the artist, he passionately described it as “a primary impulse, which we call God, or Allah, or whatever...a genetic background which is giving the instructions...the source of all the events that we spin stories about” (Vella 2006, p. 127). He went on to explain that for him this ‘negative’, colourless material pre-dates the white canvas, and is therefore comparable to—yet even more minimal—than Malevich’s ‘zero of form’. However, despite Latham’s convictions about the absolute necessity of re-discovering the simplicity as well as the strength of origins, it is precisely around this transparent sheet of glass that the *mésentente* in *God is Great* revolves. Latham assumes, optimistically, that starting from the same basic assumptions will help to achieve a more unified world view and hence liberate humanity from the fragmentation of knowledge that the many books in Latham’s works of art can be seen to represent. For Rancière, however, “the “common” is always contested at the most immediate level” and cannot be deduced from a human so-called ‘invariant’ like language, as Aristotle (wrongly) assumed. In his words, “the world presupposes a quarrel over what is common”, while some form of egalitarian understanding can “occur only through a forcing, that is, the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an egalitarian logic” (Rancière 2004, p. 5). In other words, consensus is not a ‘norm’ afflicted by perverse situations like political upheaval, fundamentalism, and conflicts that reflect an older way of thinking, but its logic is actually their cause. The logic of consensus is not politics at all; it is the reinterpretation of politics as a managerial task, in which every conflict is quelled and every person is assigned his or her ‘proper’ place in the name of some sort of political emancipation. Seeking a consensual point of origin in a neutral spatio-temporal dimension, therefore, as Latham seems to do in *God is Great*, represents a position that risks aligning itself with the policing side of power. The existence of politics, on the contrary, depends on disruptive forces or disorienting reconfigurations of the sensible or ‘natural’ order of things. Rancière calls this force dissensus, which is a “dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we sense something is given” (Rancière 2010, p. 69).

In Latham's work, this "given" is the sheet of glass, which signifies for the artist the possibility of a deeper unity and hence, also signifies a possible emancipation from religious and political divisions. It is not a coincidence that the artist has associated his artistic aims with the aims of education—traditionally conceived as the surest method for achieving emancipation from human ignorance. When I asked him how he compares his own destructive actions carried out on books with similar actions carried out by religious fanatics and political dictatorships, he replied very succinctly, stating simply that the artistic variety is "an educational act which is to inform, the other is to prevent education" (Vella 2006, p. 129). Yet, this pedagogical mode that 'informs' its listeners or spectators where and how to achieve emancipation assumes two direct relations: firstly, the relation between the artist's intentions and the public's experience of the work (a pedagogy that 'informs' assumes that Latham's intentions are transparent to all, much like the glass he uses), and secondly, the relation between the work of art and emancipation as such. Rancière stresses that an "art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops *wanting* to emancipate us" (Rancière 2007a, p. 258). He also reminds us that the use of works of art or literature to raise consciousness about social issues or injustices cannot guarantee the mobilisation of people in the name of greater social justice: "There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action" (Rancière 2010, p. 143). Indeed, one cannot measure or predict with any degree of accuracy the effect a work can have on its audience.

Therefore, the parameters of Latham's interpretation of the colourless 'common' ground in *God is Great* could be problematic for two reasons: first of all, because the sharing of the same point of origin, the same home, the same territory, or the same God does not necessarily provide us with a basis for greater understanding but is actually the root of different forms of contestations or *mésententes*, and secondly, because the idea of a single beginning should not be confused with a single law for interpreting it (there can be no direct relation between cause and effect). Actually, the power of Latham's glass is probably its open-endedness, its refusal to illustrate and define. The cold, reflective surface as well as its possible destruction can and must subvert all programmed responses. Interestingly, in one of his later pieces (*God is Great #4*, 2005), Latham created an installation with the same three sacred books scattered on the ground amidst thousands of fragments of shattered glass. This loss of the common denominator or death of God is possibly Latham's exasperated, modern equivalent of the broken Tables of the Ten Commandments...and yet, paradoxically (or ironically) the title still proclaims God's 'greatness'. When I asked the artist about the ecumenical failure that seems to be so tangible in this piece, he replied with a question that was directed not so much at me as his interviewer but at a generic audience: "Is this what you want?" (Vella 2006, p. 129)

TRANSLATING THE ‘MEDITERRANEANS’

DIVISIONS AND CONNECTIONS

The force and fragility of John Latham’s glass with its bookish appendages easily become an analogy for a vast conglomeration of lands divided, and simultaneously connected, by an ancient sea—the Mediterranean. Writing about the Mediterranean, Iain Chambers refers to this

simultaneous sense of *division*—in particular, the sea as a seemingly divisive barrier between, on the one hand, Europe and the modern “north” of the world, and, on the one hand, Africa, Asia and the south of the planet—and *connection*; after all, so much of the formation of Europe was, and is, intrinsically dependent upon this negated elsewhere. (Chambers 2005, p. 313)

Latham’s glassy “genetic background” corresponds with this complex sea, which has served as a mode of transportation for centuries as much as it has functioned as a politicised and polylinguistic source of cultural kinships and disagreements. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the Mediterranean, or rather, the ‘idea of the Mediterranean’ has also served as a cultural construct in the European imaginary, mentally and romantically connecting this region to its classical past or to Orientalist discourse (Jirat-Wasiutyński 2007). In reality, it is a sea circumscribed by borders and shared by different ethnicities, national self-images, ideologies and creeds. Its various, recent histories are characterised by political transformations, displacements, revolutions and conflicts in which borders have been constantly drawn and redrawn: from the birth of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the rise of the Palestinian question, the growth of the European Union, the political division of the Yugoslav federation, the plight of African immigrants in European countries and the Arab Spring. These borders do not simply define and separate the mapped territories of different countries around the Mediterranean; they also refer to social and economic boundaries and practices that cut across territorial frontiers, ushering in notions of identity and exclusion and simultaneously coming to terms with various processes of globalisation. As a result of these constantly shifting parameters, the Mediterranean can be thought of as the “transmediterranean”, composed of transversal and diasporic relations that elude a common cultural ‘essence’ and bring forth “dynamic, transformative and heterogeneous figurations that connect back to this geopolitical locus, even as they dis/locate and reinvent its histories, legacies and cultural affiliations” (Pugliese 2010, p. 11). Homogenising narratives persist, of course, and are not confined to specific localities—the Islamic *Umma* is a case in point. But the policing of the borders of one’s identity is increasingly being called into question, and the Mediterranean is in fact a good place to start to investigate the relationship between identity, borders, education and art.

Historically, varying geographical, political and colonial scenarios in the Mediterranean have also left very different impacts on the teaching of art, the status of artists and local cultural productions, and the relationship between artists in neighbouring countries and cultures that are further afield. For example, art education on the island of Malta had an ambivalent attitude toward modernism between the 1920s and the 1950s due to artists’ mixed loyalties towards Italy as a

VELLA

spiritual homeland and Britain as the head of an Empire that Malta formed part of (Vella 2007). On the other hand, art education in Morocco for much of the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by a French cultural hegemony, and this served to downplay the significance of local crafts and forms of art (Irbouh 2005). In fact, the training of artists in various countries with a largely Islamic population in the Mediterranean and beyond seems to have followed largely Western models and aesthetics (Ali 1989, p. xii), and while it would be incorrect to assume that cultural influence is a one-way process, it is true that many contemporary and emerging artists based in different, including so-called, peripheral Mediterranean contexts, tend to develop strategies for locating their work in more global, rather than national, networks. At the same time, paradoxically, artists especially from poorer countries or countries outside the mainstream, cultural 'centres' still seek national representation in large events like biennials because this helps them to gain access to the international art world (Bydler 2010, pp. 390-391). Contemporary art is increasingly a site of exchange and translation of ideas rather than a platform for the celebration of defined or national identities.

To consider the role of cultural learning in the artistic and educational spheres in such a geopolitical context is crucial. Its educational significance could be summed up by asking whether art education in the Mediterranean can afford to restrict its remit to 'problems' within the discipline of art itself or else bring learners in art classrooms face to face with trauma, violence and homelessness—all of which are closely associated with the recent history of the region. Yet, it is important not to interpret this role as a facile call to smoothen out the region's continued relationship with friction, disagreements and fluid identities by simply finding a 'common' ground. It is equally important to discover ways of allowing learning to persist in a state of *becoming* (Atkinson 2012) rather than understand politics in art education merely as an education 'about' politics and identity. How can art in education or an education through art present diverse 'Mediterraneans' in a way that preserves what each Mediterranean lacks? How can it avoid to essentialise roots and identities and remain true to this most Mediterranean of contradictions—the co-existence of proximity and separation, or division and connection?

THE RADICANT NATURE OF ART EDUCATION

Art education approaches that attend to more pluralistic understandings of forms of art and aesthetics often aim for a more expansive recognition of cultural diversity, sometimes by focusing on learners' appreciation of 'national' characteristics like food (for example, Fukumoto 2007) or by using comparative methods that bring two or more very different cultures face to face in the classroom (for example, Shin and Willis 2010). More generally, such approaches are often associated with multiculturalist methodologies that aim to broaden curricula by raising awareness about cultures, values and traditions that exist outside the West or about racist and/or stereotypical views about non-Western cultures and societies (Blocker 2004).

While this struggle against political, sexist, racist or other discriminations and exclusions may be commendable, many art educators feel uncomfortable about

teaching diversity because of the risk of misrepresenting other cultures, while those who do attempt to develop more multiculturalist curricula may ignore the heterogeneous and uneven character of culture (see Gall 2006, 2008). Identity cannot be treated as a static, innate code; rather, much like the cargo containers in the exhibition *Méditerranées*, it is more like an assemblage that is composed and recomposed as new ideas and values are imported, exchanged or negotiated. This does not mean that affiliations based on ethnicity or so-called national characteristics are false, but it "implies that we place less emphasis upon a curriculum that is grounded in representation (of cultural traditions, practices, rituals and values, etc.,) towards one that is grounded in becoming" (Atkinson 2011, p. 144). Informed by Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas about the 'radicant', Atkinson warns against sedentary understandings of the other in art education and articulates a pedagogy in which learners are involved in a dynamic dialogue with cultures and avoid a "metaphysics of the root" (Bourriaud quoted in Atkinson 2011, p. 148). According to Bourriaud, contemporary artists increasingly betray their own roots and desire to be more like active networks. Like a radicant organism that sprouts new roots as it grows in different directions, the artist-wanderer picks up signs from various contexts and transposes them in different environments, displacing these signs by translating them and placing them in new chains of signification. For Bourriaud, artists are translators, taking signs for a walk:

Artists become semionauts, the surveyors of a hypertext world that is no longer the classical flat space but a network infinite in time as well as space; and not so much the producers of forms as the agents of their viatorization, of the regulation of their historical and geographic displacement. (Bourriaud 2009, p. 184)

Thus, in one work by the contemporary Turkish artist Halil Altindere (*No Man's Land*, 2012), for instance, an astronaut finds himself astride a white horse in an Anatolian landscape. In an earlier work by the same artist—*My Mother Likes Pop Art, because Pop Art is Colorful* (1998)—an elderly, smiling woman in traditional dress is photographed sitting in bed as she leafs through a large book on Pop Art with Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* (1964) gracing its cover. These unfamiliar combinations deliberately confuse our expectations about cultural identity and illustrate how artists are now closer in spirit to radicant organisms than mirrors of identitarian affiliations. If this is really the case, then perhaps we need to reflect more carefully about educational policies that urge us to understand the other. In Altindere's images, indeed, who is the other? Is it the woman in Turkish dress or is it the colourful book she holds (from a Western perspective, the book and what it represents becomes the other's 'other')? Should we even attempt to understand or explain this woman's 'identity'?

For Atkinson, this incitement to 'understand' in education "is the liberal fallacy"; instead, we need "to accept the tension between distance and working together" (Atkinson 2011, p. 145). He proposes an anti-identitarian pedagogy that, following Rancière, helps "to create new distributions of the sensible,...new aesthetic translations, new ways of perceiving and experiencing our worlds that

VELLA

dissolve current distributions of interests and identifications" (Atkinson 2011, p. 150). The effects of these re-distributions of the sensible cannot and should not be anticipated by educators, because determining a political outcome (like 'understanding our neighbours in the Mediterranean') runs the risk of reducing education to a series of learning outcomes that essentialise the other and possibly even treating students and audiences as passive onlookers or "poor morons of the society of the spectacle" (Rancière 2007b, p. 28). Moreover, art is always faced by the predicament of being co-opted by the very systems it sets out to challenge. Rather, it is the very rupture that exists between the forms utilised by an artist and their political efficiency that constitutes the force of art: for instance, the gap between John Latham's hopes for a common religious denominator represented by the negativity of glass and the difficulty of directing that primary impulse toward a common, peaceful end. Art challenges us by disrupting our sense of what is 'proper' to a particular situation, by instituting a gap between the preconceived idea that *this* form leads to *that* action or result. As one writer has remarked about Rancière's "pedagogical relation" and politics, "art can be said to have a political effect not when the artist succeeds in convincing the viewer about a political issue or what should be done about it, but rather when art contests the existing order without seeking to prescribe how the viewer should respond" (Ruitenberg 2011, p. 219).



Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi. *GLUB* installation view at Etagji Art Center, Saint Petersburg, Russia, April 16 – June 1, 2010. Photo by Mishaka.

TRANSITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

If art in education really must be 'political', it can only present a site like the Mediterranean as a radicant network of meanings, hierarchies and interpretations, not as a static explanation of different cultures and identities that relies on a single, dominant viewpoint. Art in educational contexts can be political by listening to learners, not by informing them. Whenever a member of an audience or a learner suggests a new position or 'understanding' of the order of things, the pedagogical

relationship between teacher and learner is changed if not reversed altogether, and a new political relation opens up. The political strength of such a pedagogy is derived from a response to various artistic stimuli that are often unfamiliar to those who experience them. For example, a work called *Glub* (Hearts) produced in 2004 by Dutch scholar and artist Mieke Bal and Iranian video and installation artist Shahram Entekhabi, revolves around the gap between a common eating habit among people from North Africa and the Middle East and Western attitudes towards this habit. In a thirty-minute film that forms part of *Glub*, filmed mainly in Berlin, individuals speak about this habit of buying bags of seeds like pumpkin and sunflower seeds in order to shell and eat them during informal conversations with family and friends. Eight monitors with videos that accompany this film show individuals who are largely unaccustomed to this habit as they self-consciously try to consume the seeds. Baskets of seeds were also available at the installation for the audience to consume. Members of the audience, particularly Western members, could therefore choose to watch the film which documented this 'exotic' custom or watch individuals like themselves trying to make sense of this custom:

(T)he visitor must negotiate between two ways of responding: either just to see and hear about a habit that is probably unfamiliar, or to see and hear about a habit that is unfamiliar while simultaneously adopting an unfamiliar way of looking and listening. (Aydemir 2007, p. 307)

It is possible that many visitors to this installation had seen this practice before without actually seeing it, i.e. without actually becoming aware of its being part of the daily lives of so many people and simultaneously aware of its 'strangeness' from their own perspective. Being subjected to a situation where one needed to crack the seeds' shells with one's teeth and spit them out before munching the seeds brought these individuals into a direct confrontation with two phenomena: the other's unfamiliar eating habits, and the inevitable translation of these habits into some sort of recognizable or familiar code by the new consumer of seeds. In fact, it is likely that the new consumer would never fully grasp what the custom really means on the 'other side'; he or she would not be able to disentangle the 'original' or 'native' experience from its various translations. Migrants' 'invisible' eating practices were made visible through direct experience, transforming this work into an example of "migratory aesthetics", which "suggests the various processes of becoming that are triggered by the movement of people and peoples: experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself into new modalities, new art work, new ways of being" (Durrant and Lord 2007, pp. 11-12). Coming to terms with new practices like this is not so much a question of 'understanding' but a question of listening and becoming, particularly the latter, because translation does not only transform the original practice; it also transforms the translator.

VELLA



Zineb Sedira, *Mother Tongue* (2002). A – *Mother and I* (France); B – *Daughter and I* (Angleterre); C – *Grandmother and Granddaughter* (Algérie). 3 plasma screens, 3 headphones, 3 videos. 5 min (each video). © Zineb Sedira.

Courtesy Zineb Sedira and Kamel Mennour, Paris

Importantly, this “transition of experience” should not be interpreted as a move from one definite position to another (opposing) position, like a straightforward internalisation of the other’s experience. A pedagogy of the Mediterranean, if such a pedagogy can be said to exist at all, cannot be founded on a simple transmission of knowledge about others’ cultures, norms or political ‘problems’, but must take into account the fact that learners are engaged in a radicant process of becoming that also makes themselves and their closest ones ‘unknown’ to themselves. The journeys of a contemporary Ulysses do not bring people into contact only with

foreign lands and cultures, but help them to discern an inner mobility and sense of dis/location within themselves.

This fractured situation is embodied in the work of many contemporary artists, but we can use the work of a single artist with a Mediterranean heritage to expand on it. Zineb Sedira was born to Algerian parents who had emigrated to France, then went on to study in different art colleges in London, where she still lives. Her work in video, photography and installation often highlights her fascination with the sea: for instance, her photographic *Shipwreck Series* (2008), or her single screen projection *MiddleSea* (2008), where we see a lone man on a deserted ship crossing the Mediterranean between Algiers and Marseille, telling a silent story that has been told from time immemorial—the story of a departure, a transition of the self. Yet, this problematic sense of diaspora and shifting identity is probably nowhere more in evidence than in Sedira's earlier triptych of videos entitled *Mother Tongue* (2002). On the first screen, the artist and her mother speak about their school experiences. The mother uses her mother tongue, Arabic, and the artist replies in French. In the second video, the artist speaks about schooling with her own daughter, who was brought up in England. Here, the spoken languages are respectively French and English. Despite the use of different languages in these two videos, communication is still possible, because both daughters can understand their respective mothers' mother tongue. Yet, in the third video, the artist's daughter meets her grandmother in Algeria, and it becomes painfully clear that the English-Arabic combination is much less successful and is punctuated by long pauses. The grandmother turns her eyes to the camera and whispers in Arabic that she can't understand.

In a deliberately juxtaposed, documentary format, the three videos in *Mother Tongue* bring to the fore a number of inter-related issues that have been discussed in this paper. Like the glass in John Latham's *God is Great* series, consanguinity in *Mother Tongue* is a fragile bond that cannot guarantee 'understanding' between the three players (three books in *God is Great*, three family members in *Mother Tongue*). We can discern some physical resemblance between these three representatives of different generations in Sedira's work, but the women and girl also have different linguistic roots and experiences of schooling that express the singularity of each person, rather than some shared identity or 'consensus'. The absence of subtitles in the videos also confronts many viewers with very direct feelings of foreignness, because it is likely that many will not be fluent in all three languages. Viewers are put into a disorienting situation where they constantly need to reconfigure their linguistic and cultural frameworks. They are faced by the "simultaneous sense of division...and connection" that Chambers associates with the Mediterranean sea and by the need to re-negotiate their understandings of family, ethnicity, and learning. They simultaneously feel the necessity and the challenge of translation: the need to make the other's words yours and the challenge of accepting a new in-between location as translator. Art is experienced as a precarious and transitory moment; what it shares with translation is that it is "an act of displacement" that "causes the meaning of a text to move from one linguistic form to another and puts the associated tremors on display" (Bourriaud 2009, p. 54). A work like *Mother Tongue* invades your certainties with a sense of

VELLA

bewilderment, for what it makes you come to terms with is not just the fact that there are others in the world, but also that you probably barely know yourself and your closest relatives.

This sense of doubt can, and perhaps should, invade a pedagogy that wants to make sense of a complex region like the Mediterranean. In Sedira's third video showing the Algerian grandmother and English-speaking granddaughter separated by a bare, white wall, neither of the two individuals dominates the screen or conversation. Due to linguistic barriers, a pedagogy of information or explication will not work in this context. Neither of them will 'emancipate' the other. Like Joseph Jacotot's Flemish-speaking students in Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), Sedira's daughter and mother will learn by 'translating', using the same intelligence that helped them to grasp their own different mother tongues during their childhood. There will be no master pedagogue, "no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text"; there is no need for the master's language because "(u)nderstanding is never more than translating." (Rancière 1991, pp. 9-10) You can only emancipate yourself by developing practices that disrupt established frameworks of knowledge and understanding, including the "explicative order" of traditional schooling, and this can be achieved by accepting the idea that learners will translate thoughts and forms from various, even unfamiliar, sources: from the centres and the peripheries, from neighbouring and opposing shores, from mother tongues and languages spoken by others. If a 'new world' can be imagined through art education, it will not be determined in advance; we can only learn about it as we proceed step by step, learner by learner, shore by shore.

REFERENCES

- Abulafia, D. (2005). Mediterraneans. In Harris, W.V. (ed.) *Rethinking the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 64-93.
- Abulafia, D. (2011). *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ali, W. (ed.) (1989). *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*. Amman: The Royal Society of Fine Arts.
- Atkinson, D. (2011). *Art, Equality and Learning: Pedagogies Against the State*. Boston: Sense Publishers.
- Atkinson, D. (2012). Contemporary Art and Art in Education: The New, Emancipation and Truth, *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 31(1), 5-18.
- Blocker, H. G. (2004). 'Varieties of Multicultural Art Education: Some Policy Issues', in Eisner, E.W. and Day, M.D. (eds.) *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education*, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 187-199.
- Bydler, C. (2010). The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art. In Filipovic, E., Van Hal, M. and Øvstebø, S. *The Biennial Reader*, Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, 378-405.
- Durrant, S. and Lord, C. M. (eds.) (2007). *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making*. New York: Editions Rodopi.
- Eagleton, T. (2005). *Holy Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fukumoto, K. (2007). Art Lunch Project: an international collaboration among art teachers, *International Journal of Education through Art*, 3:3, 195-209.

TRANSLATING THE ‘MEDITERRANEANS’

- Gall, D.A. (2006). Multicultural Reservations, Hybrid Avenues: Reflecting on Culture in Art Education, *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 26, 105-131
- Gall, D.A. (2008). Navigating a Way through Plurality and Social Responsibility, *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 27(1), 19-26.
- Hunt, A. (2005). Event Horizon, *Untitled*, Summer 2005(35), 28-33.
- Iles, C. and Elliott, D. (1991). *John Latham: Art after Physics*. London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer.
- Irbouh, H. (2005). *French Art Education in Morocco 1912-1956*. New York: Tauris Academic Studies.
- Jirat-Wasiutyński, V. (ed.) (2007). *Modern Art and the idea of the Mediterranean*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1990). *Duchamp's TRANSformers*. California: The Lapis Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F., Parret, H. & Buci-Glucksmann, C. (2009). *Karel Appel Un geste de couleur/Karel Appel A Gesture of Colour*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Moorhouse, P. (2005). *John Latham in focus*. Exhibition catalogue. London: Tate.
- Pugliese, J. (ed.) (2010). *Transmediterranean: diaspora, histories, geopolitical spaces*. Brussels: Peter Lang.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, K. Ross (trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, J. (2004). Introducing Disagreement, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, trans. Steven Corcoran, 9(3), 3-9.
- Rancière, J. (2007a). Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière, *Artforum* 45(7), 256-269.
- Rancière, J. (2007b). *The Future of the Image*. London, New York: Verso.
- Rancière, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. S. Corcoran (trans.), London: Continuum.
- Ruitenberg, C. W. (2011). Art, Politics and the Pedagogical Relation, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 30, 211-223.
- Shin, R. and Willis, S. (2010). An intercultural learning of similarities and differences of rituals and customs of two cultures, *International Journal of Education through Art*, 6(3), 361-380.
- Smith, R. (2005). Artist hits at Tate ‘cowards’ over ban, *The Guardian*, 25 September, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/sep/25/arts.religion> (last accessed 6th April, 2013).
- Vella, R. (2006). *The Unpresentable: Artistic Biblioclasm and the Sublime*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of the Arts London.
- Vella, R. (ed.) (2007). *On Art and Art Education in Malta*. Valletta: Allied Publications.
- Walker, J.A. (1995). *John Latham: The incidental person—his art and ideas*, London: Middlesex University Press.