

How to represent Nation 25 at the Venice Biennale

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The constitutive process by Federico Simonti

(The invention of the frontier)

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* Freedom of motion, need to depart, right of asylum and safety of migrants are topics that are strongly invading daily life in Italy and Europe today. The fact that crowds of people from many countries are escaping war and extreme poverty by sea or by desert forces us to better understand how European frontiers work. As United States and other powerful countries had done, European Union started seeing itself as an impenetrable fortress, but did not think that walls into the sea can't be built. Embassies often deny visa and asylum, thus many people can only choose to leave by sea or by desert, where tragedies can always happen. The notion of frontier has always been linked to the identity of societies and it is now more than ever an important key to examine modern society. 'Frontiers, be they material or mental, made of bricks or symbolic, are at times battlefields but are also the creative workshops for the art of living together, the terrain where the seeds of future forms of humanity are scattered and grow', as Zygmunt Bauman wrote. If we are going to accept what our frontiers allow us to be, the future doesn't look reassuringly positive, given that everybody has a propensity for barricade themselves behind impassable and hyperprotected walls. And yet everybody should be aware that how we treat our frontiers will be the proof of the highest degree of our culture. We should be aware that mare nostrum's bloodstained waters are the proof that we have taken the wrong direction.

* One usually departs to escape from war, hunger and disease, but one may also depart to find their lost freedom. I think that deep understanding passes through practice, and that is why I like to remember a specific episode. I was traveling by one of those old buses connecting Teheran with Turkey and it was many hours after we had started our journey and right after we had passed the Iranian frontier that I saw something which really impressed me. A beautiful Iranian woman aged approximately 50 years told her daughter to take off the veil she was using to cover her long brown hair. That woman had clearly grown in Persia before the Islamic Revolution for she turned without weaving to me, a European man, asking me to reassure her daughter. 'Please, tell my young daughter who has never left our country before that she has nothing to fear, for once we have passed the frontier we are free to publicly show our features. She can take her veil off and she can wear those skinny jeans I gave her as

birthday present as well'. That moment in the summer of 2008 changed my perspective. It was the time for me to start thinking about the impact of frontiers on the lives of those people who cross them looking for their lost freedom. This episode was the genesis of my latest work called 'The invention of the frontier' and I've found now the best opportunity to continue my study on this topic thanks to this laboratory of ideas. We are all sitting here because we believe that we should start to represent this immense number of people who have got the status of refugees and are now living here with us.

* The intellectual and the artist's task is creating a reconsidered and shared 'us' where all these heterogeneous stories we live with could find their place. What is happening now is not an exodus, but rather the arrival of few lonely lost frantic people at a time who don't know much about their landing place. But if the feeling of loneliness of each individual could take comfort from the similar stories of people who had lived the same situation and if this incoherent swarm revealed a shared soul, it would be possible to think of a state for the stateless. Numbers prove that. The nation of refugees would be the 25th nation today due to its dimensions, and its demography is increasing continuously and relentlessly. This crowd is not cohesive because of a common language, but rather because of the shared distressing experience of losing their home and moving to other people's home. 'Other people's home' is a short story by Silvio D'Arzo and is the potential starting point for a new life. 'We have all been said that we seem to live a period of life which doesn't really belong to us. But suddenly our day comes and we have a rebirth. It's only from then on we will really live our unique life'.

* After many centuries, Pesach (פסח) is still the opportunity for Jews all around the world to remember that distant crossing through the desert to escape Egypt and slavery. Why can't this example of shared memory be our starting point? A community having formed on the road from a multitude of different tribes that the long walk made supportive to each other doesn't forget that it could potentially be a nation and still remember its past as if freedom was achieved as recently as yesterday. Only when that crowd of runaways was in the Sinai desert, they could count how many they were and become a nation. If Judaism is considered a neverending gestation which never sees its birth (according to Levi Della Torre), why can't we use that thousand-year old experience to explain the events of today? Jews 'could become a city, a whole country, a continent and conquering nothing' wrote Elias Canetti, twenty years before Israel was born. They are citizens of the world as much as the Armenians and the Kurds, or at least those between them who don't ask for an independent state, but the right to be a nation between four different states.

* Working on the theory of walking community means that a seed will bring hope for the birth of a new form of humanity. To do that we must find an adequate representation of what I like to call the 'third space', meaning the hybrid space par excellence. Every form of culture has a process of continuous hybridism, and yet what is important is not finding its original moments, but rather the reason itself of the third space which allows other positions to arise (Homi K. Bhabba). Today the idea of the state is intertwining itself and is losing credibility and links among people are improved by globalization, even though it makes the gap between north and south of the world getting wider everyday. And our society has to deal with another serious crisis: our megalopolis are characterized by a superficial multiculturalism which produces an increasing disdain towards the diverse and towards who is sitting next to us on the metro. When hate doesn't prevail, the diverse are asked to conform themselves. There is no room for understanding. The sense of closeness among people is getting rare instead of getting common, as it would be if the idea of 'us' and the idea of 'you' were open. The more we stop talking to each other, the more our neighbor slowly becomes the diverse and are excluded from our horizon until they got invisible. On the one hand global economy imposes their presence to us, on the other hand our societies and our dusty institutions banish them to disdain and forget them. Switzerland beckons Muslim workforce, but there is no room for the long minarets of mosques in the unspoiled Alpine landscape. Thus the other disappears from our horizon and stays closed into the restaurant kitchens late at night. We must divert this tendency.

* Who wants to fight this fake multiculturalism wants to know how to represent this presence and reads Jacques Derrida, who states that hospitality starts welcoming without asking questions. Hospitality is something one gives to the other before they have the chance to tell who they are. Let the other be the other, that is the lesson we should start again.

What could we do to create the basis for the third space? We could be guests in other people's homes and we shouldn't make the mistake of creating a new home so as to enclose it within defensive walls. I think we should choose the threshold to introduce ourselves because we give our best at transition points where we are neither inside nor outside. The threshold, forgotten national places and the frontier are places where we can behave almost freely. History confirms the effectiveness of this theory. For instance, at the beginning of the XIX century a free zone was built next to the Wall of the Ferme générale in Paris to avoid barriers and tolls. It was kind of a cour des miracles and Oriental bazaar where wine sellers and theatricals congregated like the 'swarming scenery' glorified by Baudelaire's poetry. The most active theatres and pubs of the city are set on that invisible line today. Let's try again

that experience.

* If the nations' doors remained ajar, if not open, so as we could enter, we could put at the centre what has been confined at the edge. We need new bridges, new humanitarian passages to ease the entrance. As the red wedge did, a tunnel will help the invisibles in entering the bowels of the national state. We want this breach to assert that the nomad choice works as much as the permanent choice.

The perspective of those who are living a diaspora gives us a useful tool to deal with the crisis of the narrow corral built by Western society. We should never forget that our purpose is making possible a reconciliation between Cain and Abel and avoiding that one could prevail against the other.

By creating cracks on national walls, we are able to highlight that the 'affirmative' Identitarian movement which is the base of the national state is failing in many ways. National states refuse to truly accept the other's presence, but this presence is actually a reality. We can learn how to listen to the others and live peacefully with them only if we reconsider who we are. Our challenge is hard and insidious, but we are ready to take that challenge because we are aware that the changing identity is the only viable identity today as it goes through any possible barrier. We have to walk a long way, but we may seek a star now. We believe that by walking on the fence between dream and reality the chance of a nation for the stateless arising in its whole frantic beauty.

(translator: Marta Ruggieri)