

EXHIBITING *MESTIZAJE* IN PARIS¹.

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Paris, with its famous exhibitions and galleries, is the most visited city in Europe. The blockbuster shows like Kandinsky, Alexander Calder, Picasso-Manet and Jackson Pollock were visited by a lot of international and European

audiences in the last years². The art museums are still the most popular institutions, and it is difficult to make criticism - from decolonial aesthetic standpoints - when the cultural system legitimates the masterpieces, made by the key male names in the history of art. Paris contains the largest collections of public interest in France. The museums missions are:

“[...] to preserve, restore and study collections, to make them open to the public, to operate educational actions and to give equal access to the culture”³.

We can find different categories of cultural institutions like art museums such as Louvre Museum, Orsay Museum, the Centre Pompidou, the Guimet Museum of Asian Art, we can also find biographical museums like the Natural History Museum, the Immigration Museum, the Museum of Sciences, the Navy Museum, the Museum of Music, and the Post Office Museum. But recently, the museums of civilization became more visible and controversial. This is the case of the Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea (MUCEM), who opened its doors in the city of Marseille in 2013, and the Quai Branly Museum (MQB) inaugurated in 2006 and dedicated to the arts of Africa, Oceania, Asia and Americas. However, it is more interesting to study controversial exhibitions that show subjects like colonialism, ethnicity and *mestizaje*.

The perfect place to study this kind of anthropological and social exhibitions is the Quai Branly Museum. This institution is situated at the heart of a tourist Paris, at only three blocks from the Eiffel Tower. The museum uses an address name because it was difficult to talk about the art of non-western people without using words like wild, primitive, native, aboriginal or barbaric. One

possibility for the name was Museum of the arts of the first peoples, but this did not translate to the contemporary French cultural policy and the new museology of the otherness. It was necessary to find the right words and remove polemic names like Museum of Primitive Arts. According to Michel Daubert, the collection of the Quai Branly Museum represents the historical, cultural and scientific sedimentation of Other's knowledge as seen by the West French nation. He underlines the following words by Stéphane Martin, President of the Museum:

*"The character Universalist and pluralist of the museum, a spirit of opening and cultural dialogue corresponding to the fifth French Republic"*⁴.

The museum project set out to the long period of colonial ethnography. It was necessary to overcome the practices of dominant representations and to stop seeing non-European peoples with prejudice. But there is a paradox in the contemporary permanent show. The museum represents the non-Europeans heritage as separate cultures organized by geographical borders. We can find four geographical zones that divide the collections. They correspond to the continents represented in museum. We can recognize them by the colors of the ground: yellow for Africa, orange for Asia, red for Oceania and blue for the Americas. But how is this museum changing the ancient colonial perspective and gaze?

Between 2008 and 2009, the Quai Branly museum displayed a show with the name *Planète Métisse : to mix or not to mix*?⁵ This exhibition was presented in the dark area of the first floor of the museum. It displayed two hundred three objects, pictures, statues, historical documents, films, music masterpieces and fashion clothes. The preparation of the show took thirty months. Serge Gruzinski directed the scenario and he explained that the idea to build a show about *mestizaje* appeared as a challenge launched by the President of the museum. As Council Scientist of the museum, Serge Gruzinski has always been critical towards this institution. One day:

“[...] the President said to me: listen. You have another idea of this Museum, so do it. You can make an exhibition and show all what you want to show... because you are never satisfied... do it by yourself”⁶.

At the time, there was a kind of institutional consciousness about the necessity of making something different. Gruzinski, as an experienced researcher in history, explained that in the nineties, the *mestizaje* and the mixed-blood relationships in France was a taboo. In 1992 the French Cultural Ministry asked Gruzinski to do something about this matter. He organized some conferences with African Americans and *Mestizos* coming from all across the Americas, but at the time it was “forbidden” to use the category *métissage* on poster communications. The socialist government, as well as the liberals were frightened with the idea of *mestizaje*⁷. According to Gruzinski, the cultural directors in France saw in this word a kind of danger which could disturb the political class. The socialist party (PS) thought that speaking openly about interracial relations could provoke the discontent of the French people which were ready to give their votes to the radical liberal party (FN). The reasons the liberals offered, even if they were more complex, obeyed the same principle: the fear of otherness. But according to specialists, behind all the discourse, there was a deeper reason to refuse the usage of the word *métissage* in the public space. The reason was absolute ignorance and indifference from the political class which prevented them from seeing the deep transformation process that the French society was going through. For Gruzinski:

“[...] the problem is that they (politicians) used to live in a white world, for them the world was always been white and they did not realize, that the French society is not any more what it has been during a big part of the twentieth century. (In the nineties) it was better not to speak about this kind of fear, about the stranger...”⁸.

In 2007 the *mestizaje* subject started to seduce liberals. The mixed cultures and the idea of diversity started to be defended as a good principle. The *Mestizo* planet exhibit was a cultural choice and a political message coming from the liberal government. The exhibition looked to show

an original policy of creating meaning, but not of creating a radical transformation in the politics of display in the museums. Some objects from the collection of the Quai Branly Museum served to integrate historic messages. It was necessary to build a show for French and European audiences living in the complex racial relationships of everyday life. The *Mestizo* planet was questioning the stereotypical racial world, which did not accept the values and the melting-pot cultures of today.

For Gruzinski all of this is a historical subject. The mestizaje process that took place in the Americas is over, but with the current mestizaje process in Europe the challenge is to overcome the tension that European people feel with the presence of the Muslim world, the Indian and East Europe workers and the African presence." The exhibition displayed that crossing and interracial relationships is not something new. This perspective tried to lift the European awareness about other powerful continents. The curator demonstrated that the current history of civilizations is connected, in a complex way, to the real life exchanges. The *Mestizo* planet exhibition tried to reflect on a harmonious image between the crossroads of people, imagination and the different forms of life coming from all continents. Exhibiting *mestizaje* in Paris intended to offer visitors abstract and cultural tools to think about the cultural identity borders that we live in today. The global message of the show explained that:

"[...] societies, individuals, groups and social classes are in confrontation and get involved by exchanging or by imposing fragments of their own heritages⁹".

For that reason, the messages of the exhibition were not built to speak only about the current interactions. The objective was to show that mixed cultural heritage has an impact on present cultures." It was important to show how civilizations and continents have historically participated in the crossroad global movement. The curator said:

"[...] we are not going to explain to people what it is happening in the subway of Paris or in suburbs, it will be absurd. They know very well what it is happening¹⁰ ".

The idea of the exhibit was to show that the *mestizaje* phenomena in Europe started a long time ago, and somewhere outside of Western culture but with their participation. It emphasized that *Mestizaje* is now present in Europe, not only in France but all over the world, even if the global process started in Latin America in the sixteenth century. The idea of the show was not to say that mixing cultures is a good or a bad thing, the mission of museums is not to replace axiology. The museums and exhibitions exist to display a part of history that is normally not explained in the French schools. To defend this vision, the exhibition displayed objects and images like puzzles, not in a timeline way but a deconstructed guideline crossing cultures. The objects from the exposition came from the Quai Branly Museum collection, the Louvre - the Greek antiquities and Islamic art departments -, the Museum of Asian Art, the Popular Folk Arts Museum, the collections in Vienne, Spain, New York, the Cinema Museum, from fashion houses like Chanel, and Jean Paul Gaultier, and from film enterprises like the *Warner Bros Pictures*. The *Mestizo* planet exhibit displayed the visual effects of the European colonization. Even if the message of the show tried to harmonize the colonial tension using an attractive, creative, instructive and entertaining direction, we found ironical and critical objects performed by old and contemporary subaltern artists. This tendency to display *Mestizaje* in a positive way reveals new negotiations from Europeans towards the colonized peoples, but it also hides the critical agency of the exhibition and its capacity of criticism. Nevertheless, the last message of the *Mestizo* planet exposed the contemporary and global connections constructed in the United States and Asia by the film industry¹¹. Obviously, the huge and contemporary machine will be a very popular mass media like the cinema or the Internet. This phenomenon invites us to think that the mixed future relationships will be cultural, ethnic or racial, and also technical. Tomorrow the *Mestizo* planet will be mixed with machines and this post-human circumstance will open new social and cultural paradigms and challenges for the whole world.

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¹ This paper were presented in the table « *Issues in Museum and Exhibition Studies* » at the International Congress *Crossroads in Cultural Studies, France 2012*. To find an extended case study of the Mestizo Exhibit in Paris, see Cristina Castellano. *La construction du sens dans les expositions muséales*. PhD Dissertation, ANTR Press, University of Lille 3, France, 2013, pp. 245-299.

² Audience for Kandinsky exhibit: 702 905, audience for Alexander Calder exhibit: 473 800, audience for the Picasso-Manet exhibit: 444 883, audience for the exhibition of Jackson Pollock: 387 000. See "L'offre culturelle en Europe, fréquentation des 15 premières expositions de Paris et des métropoles européennes" in *Repères 2010*, Edited by *Comité national de tourisme*, France, 2010, pp. 68,69.

³ Mission of "La Direction des musées de France".

⁴ Michel Daubert (texts) and Philippe Apeloig (design). *Musée du Quai Branly*, Edited by la Martinière and by Quai Branly Museum, France, 2009, p.18.

⁵ *Planète Métisse* can be translated as "Mixed-blood Planet" but in English the term mixed-blood decodes only genetic mixed relationships and not cultural ones. In this article, we decide to translate the term as "Mestizo planet" because the exhibition was inspired by the history of Mexico Mestizo. The second part of the title remembers the Shakespeare existential dissertation *to be or not to be?* It was a kind of open question launched to audiences.

⁶ Interview with Serge Gruzinski in Cristina Castellano. *La construction du sens dans les expositions muséales*. PhD Dissertation, ANTR Press, University of Lille 3, France, 2013, see annexe C, answer 20, p.62-63.

⁷ *Ibid*, answer 1, p.57.

⁸ *Ibid*, answer 2, p.57.

⁹ Serge Gruzinski, "Planète Métisse ou comment parler du métissage", in *Planète Métisse*, Catalogue of the exhibition, Edited by Quai Branly Museum and Actes Sud, France, 2008, p.17.

¹⁰ Interview with Serge Gruzinski in Cristina Castellano. *La construction du sens dans les expositions muséales*. PhD Dissertation, ANTR Press, University of Lille 3, France, 2013, see annexe C, answer 5, p. 58.

¹¹ *Ibid*, answer 36, p. 66.