The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum *charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.*

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Köz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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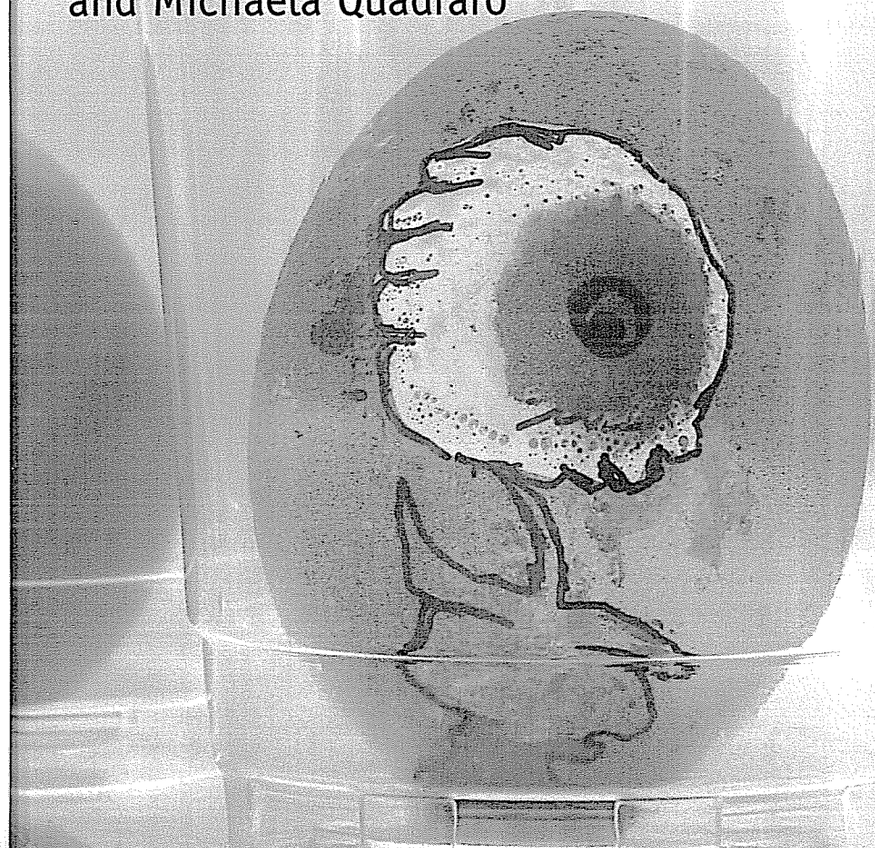

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MeLa is an interdisciplinary programme aimed at analysing the role of museums in the contemporary multi-cultural context, characterized by an augmented migration of people and ideas, and at identifying innovative practices and strategies in order to foster their evolution.

The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

RF01: Museums and Identity in History and Contemporaneity
examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.
RF02: Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernity and Museum Practices
transforms the question of memory into an unfolding cultural and historical problematic, in order to promote new critical and practical perspectives.
RF03: Network of Museums, Libraries and Public Cultural Institutions
investigates coordination strategies between museums, libraries and public cultural institutions in relation to European cultural and scientific heritage, migration and integration.
RF04: Curatorial and Artistic Research
explores the work of artists and curators on and with issues of migration, as well as the role of museums and galleries exhibiting this work and disseminating knowledge.
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fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how 'bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation' (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary 'expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety' (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of 'progress' and the racist ideology of 'white supremacy' imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 14

Orientalism and the Politics of Contemporary Art Exhibitions[1]

Alessandra Marino

In an interview on the conception of *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said recalls his early reflections on the unbridgeable divide between the experience of being an Arab and the artistic representations of Arabness.[2] Eugène Delacroix or Jean-Léon Gérôme's paintings present some of the stereotypes Said decided to investigate. Their images of sensuous women in the harem and of lazy Arab men smoking hashish inaugurated a stream of representation crystallising the East as eternal and incapable of any development, as 'the other' of European progress. *Orientalism* questions the creation of these imaginative geographies and defines orientalism both as a field of knowledge attempting to map the East into a Western understanding and as a political strategy of control sustaining imperialism.

In the catalogue of the exhibition *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, the then directors of Tate Britain and the Yale Centre for British Art, Stephen Deuchar and Amy Mayers, affirm that one of the stimuli for organising the event was Said's apparent disregard for the visual image, since his specific interest lay in textuality (Deuchar and Meyers 2008, 6). On the contrary, I maintain that for Said, images were as important as texts, and a novel reading of orientalism can be fruitful to discuss the political implications of contemporary artistic trends.

'Orientalist art' commonly refers to the specific production of images of the Middle East in the nineteenth century; but orientalism is a more pervasive strategy of subjugation and subject-creation that remained active beyond the imperial period. Its logic determines the reiteration of a cultural dichotomy between East and West, promoting the inferiorisation of the Orient. Filtering obliquely through different artistic fields, it can surface in their modes of display. In this chapter, I will explore three recent art exhibitions, held in Germany, Britain and Italy in 2011 and 2012, to follow possible traces of orientalism emerging in their conception and organisation.

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1 The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013)/ERC grant agreement no. 249379.

2 The video interview in which Said traces the history of the conception of *Orientalism* is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwCOSkXR_Cw (accessed 27 April 2012).

The first exhibition is *Orientalism in Europe: From Delacroix to Kandinsky* (Munich 2011), proposing a journey through the historical formation of orientalist aesthetics since the nineteenth century. *Migrations: Journey into British Contemporary Art*, at Tate Britain in London from January 2012, is the second one. It displayed a heterogeneous range of productions from immigrants who lived in the UK across four centuries. Orientalism here surfaces as a means to construct Britishness through rearticulating images of migrant others. In the third and final case, I turn to *Open 14* (Venice 2011) to zoom in on the Bangladeshi artist Ronni Ahmmed's installation *The Tomb of Qara Köz* (2011), curated by and staged in collaboration with Ebadur Rahman, which challenges the orientalist binary of East and West and displaces the link between identity and belonging.

Orientalist Art: Passé or Not?

In 2011, the Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung in Munich hosted *Orientalism in Europe: From Delacroix to Kandinsky* (January–May 2011), one of the largest recent exhibitions on orientalist art. The show, later transferred to Marseille (May–August 2011), was only one of the events focusing on 'the East' that were scheduled across Europe in 2011. The Musée d'Orsay in Paris at the same time dedicated an entire exhibition to the contested orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose colossal canvases also occupied a relevant place in Munich. The recent proliferation of events about 'orientalist' art reveals a renewed interest in the relation between East and West and in their historical construction. The development of this wave was encouraged by the Tate's exhibition *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting* (2008), following on over twenty years later from the famous Washington exhibition *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse: European Painters in North Africa and the Near East* (1984).

The exhibition in Munich proposed a journey through orientalist art and its sublimation of the East. Images like Gérôme's *Moorish Bath* or *Turkish Bath* (1889–1890), where the exposition of a woman's nakedness places agency in the capturing eye, expose the quest of the Western gaze trying to unveil Eastern beauty. Alternating domestic spaces, views of deserts and exotic architectural cityscapes, orientalist art displays a solid realism and a meticulous attention to detail. However, the painters who acted as ambassadors of Western rationality were also directly involved in the proximity and difference of Arab culture. The artists' personal experience of migrancy sustained the legitimacy of their role as witnesses of a radically different culture.

Fatema Mernissi (2008) defends this standpoint when she focuses on the British painters' experimental representations of night scenes and dreamy landscapes.[3] She

3 She refers to the concept of 'Samar' to underline how the experience of darkness and mystery gave rise to a source of creativity that was indebted with the Arab culture. The artists' suppressed dreamy side was nurtured by the conquered.

refers to John Frederick Lewis's prolonged stay in Cairo to highlight the liminality of painters as subjects living on the borders between cultures. Their attempts to penetrate Eastern cultures, for Mernissi, cannot be grasped if one looks at their work through the lens of Said's idea of orientalism, which creates an unbridgeable divide between East and West (Mernissi 2008, 34).

Mernissi's point of view is fascinating. Her attention to the condition of migrancy zooms in on individual agents of imperialism to stress how colonisation is far from being a coherent project. On the other hand, this accent on personal experience cannot conceal the effect of Lewis and Gérôme's art in promoting the superiority of the West. The political implications of their celebratory works are the main objects of my interest. Rana Kabbani's 'Regarding Orientalist Painting Today' (2008) is fundamental to grasp how British representations of the Middle East enabled an orientalist understanding of the region. She states:

> Delicately, if disingenuously, nineteenth century British Orientalist painting papered over its connection to the rough designs of the Empire. It depicted a world unnaturally emptied of politics, airily overlooking the highly charged events of the period – strikes, riots, rebellions, repressions and blockades; the impoverishment and famine; the communal hangings and massacres – that were the marks of Britain's colonial 'moment' in the Middle East. (Kabbani 2008, 40)

The representation of static worlds and landscapes not only fixed oriental subjects in a timeless frame, creating rigid stereotypes, but also deprived them of any political agency. The paintings avoided representing contexts of war and struggle; they became catalogues of the splendour and the properties of the empire. The apolitical dimension of the Orient emerges together with its 'lure': 'orientalism is nothing if not seductive' (Kabbani 2008, 40).

Since the acknowledgement of oriental fascination is inseparable from the drive to conquer and dominate, the exhibition of these works triggers a reflection on their significance in contemporary European culture. Looking at specific examples, I ask whether and how orientalism, as a strategy of creating and fixing otherness, surfaces in recent displays of orientalist art and art from the East.

Orientalism in Europe promises to unveil images of the Middle East, North Africa and the Islamic Orient displaying 'magnificent' works by European artists from the nineteenth century onwards, including Eugène Delacroix and Auguste Renoir. It traces the origins of orientalism in the French campaigns in Egypt and the resulting Egyptomania, but it also follows 'orientalist' motives in modern works by Vasily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Timeless stereotypes of oriental subjects clearly emerge through the tropes of lascivious women (Benjamin Constant's *Odalisque*), ecstatic men or aggressive Muslim soldiers (Jean-Baptiste Huysmans's *The captive, christian woman kidnapped by the Druze in Sidon*, 1862). On the other hand, their creation is not addressed as a form of power that supported imperial actions. The meticulous comments accompanying the paintings make no mention of Said's works of 1978 and 1997, nor of the critical discourses seeing Islam

and Orient as categories manufactured via Western representations. The political classifications in play remain unquestioned, and the borders of Europe and France appear natural as well as fixed.

One of the rooms dedicated to 'scientific orientalism' connected the birth of anthropology to the need for representing veritable features of African subjects. But the museum space, filled with statues representing Moroccan or Somali people, did not make room for highlighting or troubling the role of the scientific classifications of human species that were supporting Italian and French colonial enterprises. Although the exhibition provoked critical comments on the political correctness of showing these works, these responses were neutralised by recalling the historical and aesthetic importance of the paintings. The fame of Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapal* or Gérôme's and Klee's oriental spaces determined the popularity of the art exhibition. But what understanding of orientalism did this event support? Although the growing awareness of colonial histories raises general interest, this does not necessarily translate into new reflections on the impact of imperialism and orientalism on common perceptions of Orient and Occident.

In Munich, the seduction of art was under the spotlight, but its political effects were not. The quasi-objective descriptions of the artworks re-directed any possible political criticism towards an appreciation of the techniques of European artists. The spell of the beauty of orientalist art managed to efface the orientalist logic of imperial culture. With the emergence of a new political interest in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, mainly due to the so-called 'Arab Spring', the show declared orientalism to be a two hundred-year-old Western drive to map and represent the Orient. However, the existence of an oriental essence, to be sublimated through art,was not problematised.

Travelling Art, Migrating Bodies

As Mernissi underlines, orientalist artists were migrants whose liminal subjectivity surfaced in their own artworks representing non-Western societies. If the show in Munich displayed these zones of cultural encounters, its complementary double was represented by Tate Britain's *Migrations: Journeys into British Art*. Instead of dealing with Western trips to oriental sites and their exotic depictions, this show presented the reversed gaze of migrants on the British nation.

Taking its starting point in the sixteenth century, *Migrations* viewed British art and identity as the product of a continuous dialogue with Europe, the Americas and the ex-colonies. From Marcus Gheeraerts, Dutch painter at the court of Elizabeth I, to contemporary artists from former imperial territories, the show ambitiously proposed to reveal how migration has shaped British art until the present. In the preface to the exhibition catalogue, the current director of the Tate Britain, Penelope Curtis, discusses the significance of the title *Migrations*, referring to its elasticity. 'Migrations' may refer to travels taking place across space and time,

as well as forms and genres. This indicates the transmutation of aesthetics, the plurality of contexts of production and artistic fruition.

Its path through contemporary video art includes *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Film Collective (1986), Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988) and Zineb Sedira's *Floating Coffins* (2009). *Handsworth Songs*, on the Birmingham riots, dislodges orientalist and racist stereotypes of migrants as apolitical or criminals, creating a platform where they speak as British citizens. Its aesthetic innovation of the language of documentaries constitutes a social and political intervention. Combining personal accounts, news reports and other footage, the narration counteracts prejudicial and mainstream media representations of other cultures and identities.

In Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, the overlapping of Arabic writing, photos and English commentary provokes a similar destabilising effect. Dealing with the exile and relocation of Palestinians in Lebanon and Britain, the video questions the very possibility of a unitary national identity. None the less, even though single artworks provide ground for calling into question particular histories and global powers, their display in a single exhibition and under a unifying theme diminishes their impact.

The organisation of the collection in rooms condensing the essence of entire centuries and following one another in chronological order makes all the works merge into the overarching theme, betraying their enormous differences. The various genres, times and places displayed stretch the word 'migration' in its plural connotations, with the effect of raising doubts on the very purpose of the exhibition. The gathering in a single space of very diverse works organised in chronological order produces a homogenising effect: it neutralises the disruptive messages of some works in favour of portraying a linear development of artistic trends. The juxtaposition of Flemish or Italian painters migrating to Britain for art training, such as Marcus Gheeraerts, with Indian and Caribbean artists, including Avinash Chandra and Sonia Boyce, obliterates the colonialist background and favours a multiculturalist genealogy of Britain.

The equation of different migratory routes and contexts crafts an image of Britain as a warm and welcoming 'hub' for artists since the sixteenth century. This background preludes the transformation of the country into an adoptive mother for the former colonial subjects. A blurb commenting on the works of the twentieth century points to the freedom gained by those who moved to Britain and came in contact with the international language of modernism. While sounding a positive note on migration as cross-cultural exchange, this statement is orientalist and unidirectional: marginal cultures have to be directed towards the centre to access European knowledge.

In this show, orientalism works in three ways. First, the decontextualised display of migrants' artworks, simply inserted in a chronological timeline running parallel with British history, has the effect of anaesthetising their political potential. Second, the variety of positions the artists assume as political subjects is reduced

to their condition of migrants. Third, the exhibition posits the host country as a pole of attraction and a warm hub for international artists. Continuing briefly with the second point, it is clear how the removal of the contexts of war and political turmoil in orientalist paintings supported the diffusion of images of oriental subjects as apolitical. Similarly, in the Tate exhibition, the erasure of specific contexts of travel and migration minimises the political impact of the works in the context of their production. This juxtaposition ends up creating an archetype of the migrant as a bearer of a distinctive form of subjectivity.

Sudeep Das Gupta warns against the theoretical codification of a migrant aesthetics that generically accounts for any migrant position. Voices and stories told by the subjects themselves risk being silenced by the very framework in which they find a space. Das Gupta writes:

> Can one talk about a migratory aesthetics in the ontological sense of its political value, even if one recognises its variegated styles? I don't think so. Rather one might ask how a close reading of an intensely personal story, told in first person, migrates through multiple voices and across multiple spaces – and what that reveals about the ways in which we situate the migrant, enclose him within our own theoretical protocols and make him the subject of aesthetic reflection. (Das Gupta 2008, 200)

Ironically, creating a continuous narrative flow on subjects and ideas migrating to Britain, the exhibition itself does not absorb the lessons proposed by the very works it contains. For John Akomfrah, the fragmentary aesthetics of *Handsworth Songs* shows the fictitiousness of homogenous cultural and national identities, which are open archives to be reconfigured by marginal narratives.[4] Instead, showing that there have always been migrants, some of whom have positively contributed to the growth of the country, the exhibition simplistically integrates migrants within the master narrative of the nation.

Art De-orientalising Culture?

Arguably, the problem with the exhibition *Migrations* is the framing of different works in a collection that presents itself as coherent and cohesive. The unity imposed by a restrictive chronological logic linking the rooms exposes the structural limit of the museum, whose space cannot convey the heterogeneity of the artworks.

4 Akomfrah affirms: 'The archival goes to the very heart of how identities are constructed and how they circulate in any culture because diasporic identities, in the absence of monuments that attest their existence, have repositories of what they mean in the very thing that's supposed to deny their existence' (Akomfrah 2012, 106).

This classic model of the museum space, however, is not the only existing one. Various art exhibitions and travelling fairs, such as *Manifesta*, have developed new conceptual frames and reinvented modes of display. A less prominent, but interesting, example is the Venetian exhibition *Open*, which reached its fourteenth edition in 2011. It invites artworks to be displayed in the streets of the Venetian island of Lido. The lack of a central structure suggests a resistance against any rigid logic of art display, so that the audience walking outdoors can stumble into installations that blend within the fluid texture of the maritime city. *Open* is structurally and thematically dedicated to mobility. In the same period of the Biennale, where the disposition of artworks follows a national rationale, *Open* proposes to look at the lagoon as a metaphor for travels and cultural innovations.

Against the crystallisation and labelling of art in relation to the nation, *The Tomb of Qara Köz*, featured in *Open 14*, proposes a dialogue between fluctuating historical memories and ambiguous cultural constructions (see the cover of this book). The tomb is dedicated to the Mughal princess Qara Köz, central character in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), where she appears as a courtesan at the Medici court. The installation consists of a pyramidal structure made of Plexiglas, each level of which is filled with plastic cups containing painted eggs. The eggs are decorated with various representations of the princess's life in films and literature and depict a variety of intertextual references. The transparent materials used (plastic and Plexiglas) do not block the view, and promote the integration of the work within the Lido. The eggs, carrying fragmented stories, seem to float in a chaotic order, and reflect the fluidity of Venice and its history of East–West encounters.

The presence of the Mughal princess Qara Köz at the Medici court constitutes a story of hybridity at the core of the Italian Renaissance. Against the discourse identifying the early modern codification of Italian language and revival of Roman history with the birth of a national identity (an argument instrumentally reactivated by fascism in the twentieth century), the memory of Qara Köz reveals an ancient cultural and economic bond with the Orient.

The Tomb of Qara Köz stresses the importance of revising hybrid histories to counteract the current reinforcement of local identity claims, as in the case of the anti-immigration party the Northern League. Paying homage to the work *Fairytale* presented by Ai Weiwei in *Documenta 12*, when 1,001 Chinese people were brought to Kassel to become the audience for the exhibition, Ahmmed and Rahman invited Bengali immigrants to Venice to record memories of their journey of migration. The aim was to reconfigure the city as a space of overlapping voices of migrants and texts, including Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

In Calvino's book, images of Venice filter through all the represented cities. In the main palace of Fedora, for example, every room contains a glass sphere with a miniature of the town in an ideal form. The citizens of Fedora can choose their favourite miniatures and imagine living in their dream-town: on the shores of a canal that does not exist any more or in the streets reserved to those elephants

banned from the 'real' Fedora. The structure of Qara Köz's tomb is reminiscent of Calvino's description of this palace. In the installation, each painted egg carrying the fragment of a story is an instrument for imagining a new relation with Venice and its representations. Interestingly, Calvino highlights that the palace with the small-scale reproductions of Fedora is a museum. Seen in this light, Ahmmed's installation also deals with new possibilities of art display. It envisages an image of the contemporary museum as an archive to be constantly reactivated in relation to the audience.

The night before the exhibition was officially opened, people stole some of the eggs and broke them against the floor and the adjacent walls. Every time the installation was restored, it was damaged again.[5] Some persons asked if they could keep one egg, activating a wide range of intimate and personal reactions with the installation. The public interacting dynamically with the artwork counteracted the fixity of the traditional concept of art fruition in the museum space. The reference to Fedora re-signifies the museum as an open archive. It challenges a view of the museum as a collection of works ordered by a sovereign rationality. Rather than burying or consecrating national histories, the envisaged museum, postcolonial and intercultural, could provide tools to reflect upon society and cultural change in a less structured and more interactive way.

With its stress on simultaneous temporalities and trans-border encounters, *Qara Köz* questions the power play initiated by capturing the subject in predefined frames, but it also promotes a process of de-orientalisation of the fictionality of dominant narratives defining East and West as monolithic blocks. The complex overlapping of narrations, autobiographies and images opposes the unilateral power of colonial domination and nationalism. A wider range of encounters highlights unexpected circumstances of travel and the creation of new aesthetics. In *Open*, Ahmmed's installation allows continuity between spaces and times that are too often compartmentalised in museum rooms and exhibitions. The city of Venice is revitalised by imagined and witnessed stories of migration, resisting fixed subject positions and inherited aesthetic forms.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed three recent art exhibitions, *Orientalism in Europe: From Delacroix to Kandinsky* (Munich, 2011), *Migrations: Journey into British Contemporary Art* (London, 2012) and *Open 14* (Venice, 2011), to trace a relation between the recent rise of interest in migrant art and the renewed attention to orientalist art in Europe. It indicated that emphasising the liminal subjectivity of orientalist and migrant artists could lead to romanticising the condition of migrancy and to effacing the colonial or imperial context of production of the

5 A tomb made of eggs strikes us as an apparent contradiction; built of living material, it points out the continuity between life and death, deconstruction and recreation, fixity and movement.

artworks. Moreover, the extensive catalogues of orientalist paintings on display in Munich and the British migratory art exhibited in London expose the limits inherent in more classical forms of museum exhibitions: the homogenising force classifying artists and their work in relation to their belonging appears orientalist.

On the other hand, the third exhibition presents a different trajectory. The dispersed site of *Open* in Venice suggested an alternative to the linearity of the museum exhibition. In that context, a close look at Ahmmed's *The Tomb of Qara Köz* pointed out the possibilities of exhibiting art after orientalism. In the fluctuating space of the lagoon, this mausoleum incorporated fictional and historical narratives to perform overlapping identities and the deconstruction of binary oppositions of East and West.

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