

passages

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Switzerland's Cultural Worlds

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Switzerland has always represented a unique mix, an amalgamation of more than four cultures, divided and united by obstinacy and openness. An intersection of winding paths that often originate from regions far remoter than we suspect. From a cultural standpoint, the frontiers between the country's inner diversity and globe-spanning roots have long been blurred. Migrants and artists would be particularly eloquent in telling us about transitions rude and fluid, and about thriving, or just surviving, in a permanent Elsewhere. Be it out of necessity or choice. The very name of the artist whose video stills run through the following pages speaks volumes: Ingrid Paula del Carmen Wildi Merino.

This issue of *Passages* kicks off Pro Helvetia's two-year programme SWIXX. The subtitle, *Switzerland's Cultural Worlds*, reflects the Arts Council's desire to sharpen perspectives on contemporary work being done in music, the theatre, literature, dance, the visual arts and the culture of everyday life – in recognition of the fact that, the longer the more, this work owes its existence to the encounters and wide-ranging artistic input of individuals of very diverse origin.

While some pay tribute to the "dance of cultures" in the global village and welcome liberation from the false myths of origin so easily co-opted for political purposes, others speak of the emergence of a new arbitrariness. There is no question: as the horizons of cultural citizens of the world expand, the blind spot in their – our! – eye grows as well.

With this in mind, the SWIXX issue of *Passages* trains the spotlight on the cultural crossings and nerve centres that provide impulses for creative forms of living and artistic works and existences. The resulting panorama reveals that art and cultural exchange do not live on artistic and political far-sightedness alone: they begin where unprejudiced interplay typifies day-to-day life. The Editors

Pro Helvetia *Passages* editorial staff: Andreas Langenbacher (Managing Editor and Editor, German edition); Anne Maurer (Editor, French edition); Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (Editor, English edition).

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Threshold Realms Migration, culture and art

Hans-Rudolf Wicker

Every language has words with very imprecise meanings. "Art" and "culture" are two of them, and they have recently been joined by "migration" ¶

What these three words probably have in common is that, the closer one tries to get to their essential meaning, the vaguer they become. So there are good reasons why culture, art and migration should not be fully explored as concepts, because if they are, they lose their indefinite character. Any attempt to analyze what culture is, for instance, soon leads in two different directions. The one line of enquiry indicates something "sublime" that is set apart on a higher plane. This understanding of the term reflects meanings that go back to the nineteenth century, when middle-class elites distanced themselves from the uneducated masses by trying to appropriate culture – in other words education, literature, theatre, music, painting and much else besides – for themselves. The second line of enquiry leads in the direction of "difference". In this second pattern of meaning, culture is spoken of in the plural. Cultures are depicted as opposed to each other and mutually exclusive. Seeing one's own culture as completely different from "foreign" cultures is just as debatable here as is the loose designation of specific cultures, for example Chinese, Indian or French culture. The idea suggests that cultures are unique, homogeneous and coherent, and that they are distinguished by shared and universal systems of symbols, values and norms. The attractive feature of this kind of designation of human creations consists in not normally having to bother about definitions, as clarity about what is meant and what is being defined is presupposed. However, any attempt to describe such unique cultures often founders on the fact that there is considerable intracultural variability. From the point of view of semantic meanings, art has a lot in common with culture. Apart from the

fact that the two terms are often used as synonyms, neither in culture nor in art can that essence be found that makes them what they are supposed to be. The 1922 edition of the Brockhaus dictionary defines art as a skill based on a special aptitude that is to be further developed through practice. According to this definition, works of art are distinguished by the element of "specialness" contained in them. What the distinguishing element contained in painting, music or the performing arts consists in can only be sensed, not defined. Consequently, what makes a work of art – be it a Bach fugue, a Mozart opera, a Rembrandt painting, a picture by Francis Bacon, a novel by Gabriel García Márquez or a Japanese painting of the Yamato School (11th-13th cent.) – is not so much the special something incorporated into the work, but the process of interaction between the artist, his work and the general public. The general public stands for those "bystanders" who represent people at large and who notice, admire and comment on works of art. By thinking that they sense the certain "something" that the artist has worked into his creation, they award it the status of specialness. But what have culture and art to do with migration? At first glance not much, perhaps, but at second glance quite a lot: in so far as artists and migrants venture, consciously or unconsciously, into liminal areas, threshold realms in which ambivalence and the crossing of both mental and physical borders are pre-programmed. As anthropology established a long time ago, in those liminal areas that in tribal societies are created by means of rituals and in modern societies by means of performative art – for example by theatre, concerts, poetry readings, carnivals – cer-

Ingrid Wildi, ¿Aquí vive la señora Eliana M...?, video 2004





Ingrid Wildi, *¿Aquí vive la señora Eliana M...?*, *Carcel de Hacha*, video 2004

tainties are exploded, set images are deconstructed and re-interpreted, and symbols, signs and metaphors are taken apart and also regrouped. Consequently, the liminal area is where everything banally described as creativity happens. Despite currently fashionable assertions to the contrary, creative activity is not greatly in demand in everyday society because it is linked with deliberately exposing oneself to uncertainty, fear, suffering and pain. In addition, simply entering that liminal area in which guiding norms and structures are not given and creativity becomes an obligation does not guarantee success. There is no telling in advance who will be acknowledged as an artist by the critical public. Usually the number of those who wait in vain for recognition all their lives far exceeds the number of those who receive it.

It is not surprising that modern European artists are themselves often "nomads" in so far as they confront what is their "own" with what is "foreign" and thus create "new" things. Eugène Delacroix used oriental motifs. Puccini set Turandot partly to oriental melodies. Gauguin, Van Gogh, Ravel and others gained inspiration from the foreign cultures on show at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889. Debussy was inspired by Javanese gamelan and Picasso by African sculptures. Emil Nolde drew from motifs that would today be assigned to tribal cultures. Not all these artists went abroad and lost their shadow, symbol of their home, as Adalbert von Chamisso – a widely-travelled migrant living in exile as a refugee – interpreted into his alter ego, Peter Schlemihl.

To look at it the other way round: in how far are migrants also artists? Those transnational nomads who already saw themselves as artists in their country of origin certainly are. One example would be the Moroccan band living in Paris, who

will soon be singing and playing not just for a Moroccan expatriate community, but also for a wider French or even international audience. Another would be the actor and producer born in Northern Iraq who in 1994 was awarded first prize at a Kurdish theatre festival. Now living in Switzerland and making overtures to Peter Weiss and other Westerners involved in theatre, in the meantime he is working at a transit centre for asylum seekers. A third would be the Colombian who went to drama school in Kali, studied mime with Marcel Marceau in Paris and finally ended up in Switzerland, where he now works as an artistic animator in homes for problem teenagers, in schools and for aid organizations. Writers should be mentioned, too: for example Ibrahim al-Koni, who grew up in a Tuareg tribe in the Libyan desert. He has been living in Switzerland since 1993, and his novels and short stories are of extraordinary literary quality. There is almost no limit to the examples that show that artistic activity has a lot to do with "transnational mobility" and little to do with "staying put" in one country. Just like artists, transnational nomads enter a liminal area. Some leave their countries voluntarily; others are forced to do so by political or economic conditions. Some succeed in putting down roots abroad, others don't. Some are stranded as illegal immigrants or asylum seekers; others succeed in gaining a foothold in the low-wage sector. Only a small group will be able to say that they are successful. Migration manifests itself, too, in an initial readiness to give up what is familiar and safe in the form of social relationships, everyday reality and identities, and to subject oneself to radically new experiences. Migrants have as little certainty as artists that liminal experiments will have a positive outcome. The avenues of migration are paved with insecurity, uncertainties

and fears. Initial hopes are often destroyed on the way and turned into disappointment. There is a reason for calling emigrants the lost generation. What is meant is that immigrants can hardly ever become so well established in the host country that they are able to climb the social ladder and gain the acknowledgement of the host society. It is almost always only the second or third generation that sees itself as successfully integrated, while the first generation remains in a state of being tugged to and fro between the old world and the new.

One expression of this to-and-fro state is the linking of creativity and hybridity. Just as the artist has to free himself from a given framework of identity, to open up to what is new, migrants are forced to free themselves from fixed identities, and often from cultural restraints, in order to get by in the host country. They nearly always have to learn new languages – not only the spoken language, but also the body language and language of symbols – which enable them to get by in a new social environment and to communicate. In contrast to children, young and adult immigrants with an already firmly encultured native language usually find it hard to learn languages of the host country perfectly. First-generation immigrants will thus be branded “outsiders” just on the basis of their inability to speak the language(s) of the state they are living in. That is just as true of Tamil refugees who have settled in Switzerland as it is of the German manager employed as CEO in a Japanese company, or of the Swiss aid expert working for a development organization in Ethiopia or Tibet. It is this outsider existence – another word for existence in the liminal area – and the effort involved in trying to

belong and find acknowledgement that links migrants and artists. An additional point is that migrants in this state are likewise forced to be creative, at least if their stay in the host country is a lasting one. That is shown, for instance, in their not simply replacing old by new identities, but constructing hybrid identities out of the fragments of disintegrated ones and the range of new identities on offer – those of the host country. On the level of language acquisition, something similar may be observed. In immigrant milieus “hybrid languages” often evolve, which are constituted of grammatical, lexical and syntactic fragments of various languages and themselves signalize belonging to specific migrant milieus. An analogy between migrants and artists is shown not least in their creation of their own milieus, in which existence as a social outsider is coupled with creativity and hybridity, and a sense of community is created in the form of common feeling. The general public often encounters such a sense of community with suspicion, as people who frequent liminal areas are suspected of questioning ruling structures and posing a threat to “normality”. The threat disappears the moment they leave the liminal area and achieve success: the artist in being granted longed-for acknowledgement in the art market, the migrant in being awarded another form of acknowledgement, the status of a full member of society with equal rights. —

Translated from the German by Joyce Bachmann-Clarke

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Ingrid Wildi – Mauricio Gajardo – Kontinuum I – interview with Francisco Osorio, «Heimatfabrik», Expo02, Murten 2002

