

Bridges of Creation and Intercultural Dialogue

“In times of crisis, only imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Albert Einstein

“Imagine there’s no countries

It isn’t hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace.”

John Lennon, *Imagine*

During the pandemic, in late 2020, the Barcelona Process was twenty-five years old; a process that, since its inception, has involved the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean to cooperate and lend civil society a voice. The online speeches made on this lacklustre anniversary, motivated by the impact of Covid-19, acknowledge that not enough has been done to achieve the plan. Aspects such as wars, the economic crisis, lack of understanding and vested interests have made it very difficult, and the situation has worsened with the pandemic. Therefore, it is of great urgency to find promising narratives and act according to the 2030 Agenda, in a commitment that involves all of us, whether we are from the northern or southern hemisphere, and especially if we belong to the Euro-Mediterranean area.

However, in commemoration of the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) has declared 28 November International Day of the Mediterranean, an excellent idea that invites us to reflect on this “middle sea” between the two shores. In Arabic, the Mediterranean is also called *al-bahr al-mutawasit* (البحر المتوسط), the sea in the middle, which has the most important stories of shared civilisations throughout history. A great connecting bridge but also a terrible grave for those who have lost their lives trying to cross it.

In this issue on “Art and Creativity: Bridges of Intercultural Dialogue” we will visit, through the contributions of artistic creators and specialists in cultural and academic events, the bridges and safe ports, as well as the reefs and blockades we encounter to achieve the desired recognition that unites us within diversity. Although information

and communication technologies place artists in an ideal transnationalisation, this is not always possible, given the difficulties in obtaining visas that facilitate mobility. Art and culture maintain their own creative value very well, starting from the premise that cultures are dynamic and, therefore, integrate mixing, especially artistic. However, there is a value of economic or political domination that can marginalise or create spaces considered peripheral, until these are observed and related to each other. Cinema, theatre, audiovisuals, the different visual formats, flow before our gaze when we manage to establish a channel of communication and dialogue. Faced with intolerance and cultural stereotypes resulting from ignorance, art is more effective than politics when it comes to creating messages and generating empathy between senders and receivers.

Mercedes Giovinazzo's text opens this publication with the following question: "We are all asking ourselves what the year ahead will bring after the pandemic, and, more specifically, if as citizens we will be able to preserve our rights and remember that the ultimate goal of governments is to create a better and more egalitarian world." The Director of Interarts continues: "In such an uncertain scenario, it is also reasonable to ask about the role of art, as it has always been an instrument more or less politicized by the structures of power and only from the modern era began to be considered as the individual expression of an artist." Undoubtedly, a great effort of imagination and tenacious work by civil society.

What role does art play in creating bridges of dialogue? It is the artists and scientists who build the bridges of dialogue in the communicative process that humanity undertakes when trying to go beyond words. The power of the image and the word has a value that helps us communicate. "In the beginning was the Word": this is how the Bible begins, the given word in the Gospels and in the Koran, full of metaphors that are the expression of meanings that are difficult to understand.

A decade ago, the anthropologist Néstor García Canclini, in his work *La sociedad sin relato*, argued that the task of art is not to attach a story to society to organise its diversity but to value what is imminent, where dissent is possible. In addition to offering iconographies for coexistence or manifestos for ruptures, artists can participate by symbolising and reimagining disagreements. Today, the most interesting ways to ensure that form prevails over function are not the conformist design of marketing and political advertising but rather experiences to sublimate memory without negating the drama and enjoyment of new modes of access.

The boat that appears on the cover of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* seeks to tell us a story. It is a work by the Egyptian artist Yassin Harraz on Burullus beach, a bright and exquisitely calligraphic boat that we can imagine ready to embark on a journey in search of a meeting, just as the artists who meet and create in Burullus have done over several years. Thus, thanks to the will of the renowned Egyptian painter and printmaker Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen and the foundation he presides, a small coastal fishing village becomes one of those happy points of convergence, thanks to a wholly original proposal, where, year after year, creativity reaches surprisingly beautiful heights. Cairo, Luxor,

Alexandria, Minia or Aswan, among other places, from the Mediterranean coast to the border with Sudan, are transformed every year into an agora of work and exchange between creators from all corners of the globe, in order to promote sustainable local development through art and culture.

The metaphor, the image of the bridge, is powerful in all cultures and, therefore, is used so that dialogue intersects separate positions. It is an access road. In the *Etymological Dictionary of the Catalan Language* – which is a Romance language – the philologist Joan Corominas states that the word *path*, which in most Indo-European languages is *ponti/pontho*, in Latin became a *bridge*: “For Hellenics, the great sea was the sea that united Ionians, Dorians Aeolians, Attics and Achaeans, separated from each other by the Aegean or Ionian Sea. Hence Πόντος was the name of the sea that was sailed, and Θάλασσα, the sea seen from the land.” Ulysses, Sinbad, Ibn Batuta or Marco Polo feature in stories of travels through lands and seas where they encounter other people and other cultures, stories that always arouse human curiosity about knowledge, challenges, otherness and the introspection of the traveller. In *L’infinito viaggiare*, Claudio Magris writes on one of its pages: “To the people on one shore, those on the opposite shore often seem barbaric and dangerous, full of dangers for them. But if we start to go from here to there on a bridge, mingling with the people who pass along it and going from one shore to another, until we do not know exactly which part or in which country we are, we rediscover benevolence towards ourselves and the pleasure of the world.”

In this publication, the visual artist Selim Birsal tells the story of his journey of several years through various Mediterranean places marked by war and violence (the Turkish Syrian border, Northern Cyprus, inland Lebanon) in an effort to discover the environment and, by interacting with it, to make a work of art emerge from the encounter. Thus, the creative process is triggered by the curious gaze of the artist, who walks, talks with locals and other artists or works with students. In this way, Birsal builds a work that always dialogues with the environment that inspires it, as a response to the emotions and thoughts that arise in the interaction. Thus, the artist cultivates his own garden, which is but a reflection of everything that surrounds, moves and provokes him. They are walks where the artist, in a geography and presence of others, stimulates his own creation.

For this reason, there is a great need for initiatives such as the Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée, an international network that offers young artists an opportunity to develop their creations, travel and exchange knowledge with other artists in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The journey enables mobility to create communicative bridges of awareness and understanding. By effectively assessing the artistic experiences arising from the meeting, fluidity and multiplicity achieved in the Euro-Mediterranean framework, Professor Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio points out in his academic article the importance of creating spaces to establish ties with the different dimensions of society, to interrogate the public space and to practise cooperation, exchange and co-creation. In this respect, based on the experiences carried out in

Barcelona by the Jiwar association, which in Arabic means neighbourhood, throughout its eight years of existence mentoring creative processes and opening spaces of exchange and dialogue, Mireia Estrada gives us concrete examples of how the closeness between artistic disciplines and the shared work within the residency between artists with different languages is added to the notion of geographical and cultural neighbourhood of Mediterranean peoples.

Perhaps creativity stems from the need to explain and resolve what may seem like an enigma, and, in this respect, the Mediterranean is a long-term laboratory where stories affect the imaginary of its people. “The exploration begins from the seed of the imagination and develops thanks to the skills of the creator, whether artistic or scientific,” says Lebanese playwright and great creator of cultural events Abdo Nawar. But the seed must be grown and not drowned, as we see in Lebanese art, subject to great lacks of creativity in almost all artistic fields, according to Nawar. Its development in recent decades is closely related to the different phases of the war endured by the Lebanese, which has had serious consequences in these artistic fields. From a geography close to Nawar’s, Tina Sherwell, coordinator of the Visual Art Program at Birzeit University, writes: “The Palestinian art of the last forty years appears inevitably conditioned by the history of the country’s occupation, which is why it has emerged as a form of expression and creation for the defense and protection of national identity, even when Palestinian artists work in many and very varied settings, often in the diaspora. Although, in recent years, the opening of new art teaching and exhibition centers, exchange programs with other artists and technological tools has greatly improved the situation of Palestinian artists, there are still many obstacles that hold back and determine their work, such as the difficulties of mobility and dissemination.”

Women and Youths Take the Floor

Jiwar and other artist residencies in the north break social stereotypes through the works and presence of women creators from the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. Esther Fouchier, from Forum Femmes Méditerranée, has been creating spaces for dialogue between women for many years, going beyond their political and religious differences. These women, mostly migrants, establish written and oral dialogues that offer them the possibility of showing themselves as they are, finding common ground and recognising themselves in the Other.

Due to the changes and revolts that have occurred in Arab countries in recent years, the artistic disciplines have undergone an evolution in keeping with the new times. It is worth highlighting the work of a whole generation of Arab film directors who provide a unique and innovative look at the societies portrayed in their films. Henda Haouala, Tunisian professor in audiovisual techniques, warns us: “For these women filmmakers, creating a film consists of being able to go through those difficult, uncertain, moments

in which you feel unrecognised, fear to speak about the Other, your own country; while reporting and criticising, you paradoxically assert your own freedom of speech.”

Continuing with the vision of women or about women, the researcher Nesrin Karavar tells us about the interest in Turkish soap operas in Europe, streamed on platforms such as Netflix. Some of the best known series are written by female Turkish screenwriters such as Hande Altayli and Aisçe Kutlu, who take the problems of subordinate groups very seriously and present topics of public interest, such as the existence of single and strong women, while they act as a social mirror that reflects and feeds conversations and public debates of great importance for much of the population. For their part, the cultural studies researchers Meritxell Joan and Itzea Goikolea-Amiano analyse how trans-Mediterranean writings reveal languages and traditions and show the erasures, breaks and silences to which history has subjected them. The creation that circulates through the Mediterranean is closely linked to population movements and their diversity. In the examples offered by these researchers, they range from contemporary authors such as Najat El Hachmi and Alice Zeniter to poets and writers who, in the middle of the last century, promoted journals such as *Al-Motamid* or *Ketama* during the colonial era.

Giving a voice to young people involves harnessing a driving force to change narratives and contribute to a culture of peace and security in the Euro-Mediterranean region. This is precisely the objective of the project “A Sea of Words”, created in 2008 to help promote cultural dialogue and the exchange of knowledge and experiences of young people through the writing of short stories. Organised by the IEMed in collaboration with the Anna Lindh Foundation and its national networks, 2,839 young people from both shores of the Mediterranean have participated in the thirteen contests held since the beginning. In this publication we offer the three winning stories of the 2020 edition, dedicated to “Young People Faced with Climate Change in the Mediterranean and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. Faced with such a challenge, young people have shown great commitment, as their immediate future is at stake.

The Need to Meet and Recognise Each Other

One of the intangible heritages of great communicative value is music, which, thanks to successive cultural tides, makes the Mediterranean one of the most heterodox and complex musical ecosystems known. Susana Asensio, anthropologist from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), argues that one of the curiosities of Sephardic music is that its persistence over time and in all kinds of spaces has made it accessible to many non-traditional audiences: “The new space-time of the Sephardic tradition is now a third place between tradition and modernity, between the homeland and the host, between the inherited culture and learned cultures, but it retains enough identity elements to be recognised internationally as a reference, influence and source of inspiration.”

We have noted the need to hold meetings of young creators and seasoned artists jointly creating in different spaces. In the latest Intercultural Trends Survey (2020) of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, targeted at five European countries and five from the southern and eastern Mediterranean, when asked: “What are the most effective methods to prevent and treat hate speech and polarisation?”, the responses have been overwhelming: education, which comes first, is followed by artistic and cultural initiatives. This represents more than 80% of Europeans and almost 90% of the responses from southern Mediterranean countries. In fact, this demand for initiatives, recognised for its empathic value in promoting the organisation of multicultural events, has been made frequently for years thanks to a series of meetings devised by civil society and, later, supported by administrations. Driss Khrouz, who has extensive experience in the associative and cultural field, and is currently the General Director of the Fondation Esprit de Fès, describes in his article how the Festival of Sacred Music and its forum are spaces and opportunities to interact between people, societies, religions and the meanings that they give to their lives, a project “rooted in the dialogue between cultures through awareness, listening and traditional exchanges of knowledge, beliefs and modes of life. In this way, the common issues and questionings that are conveyed through the chants, music, tales, set designs and dances featured in the forum lectures take on the form of debates that provide conclusive ideas, arguments and contradictions. Listening to and respecting others and recognising oneself in them prevail over trying to dominate them or convert them to one’s own beliefs.”

During the pandemic we have seen how artistic creativity has continued and, unable to get together, artists use social networks to show their most interesting new creations. Thousands of artists do so around the world, as in the case of the great online meeting promoted by the Jordanian painter Hilda Hiary, who opened the Facebook page “Black & White Sketches In Quarantine”, which had the participation of about four thousand artists from many countries. It is a public and open page where interesting works can be appreciated, and a catalogue is currently being prepared.

The Commitment to Reality

The two interviews in this issue focus on two committed people, who sometimes go against the tide of the societies in which they live, trying to improve them so that they are more open and fair. The journalist and art critic Maria Elena Morató interviews Mohammed Guiga, a Tunisian painter and designer. Guiga is an artist who works away from the media, focused on discovering and revealing through his creations and his work as a university professor the contradictions and injustices of our societies, aware that art cannot eschew social commitment. With this interview, we explore not only his personal work, but also the challenges that have affected Tunisian art in recent decades. The second interview that we present is conducted by Sergi Doladé, Director of the International Association of

Independent Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED), with the Israeli documentary and filmmaker Nurit Kedat, a person determined to understand the human soul, as she has shown throughout her career, overcoming conventions and profound disagreements between enemy parties in a conflict and in the community itself. She is, therefore, a true fighter, with her camera and her indefatigable will to reveal the truth as the only weapons in that fight.

Finally, in Cultural Overview we sought to touch on two major topics: urban tangible heritage and intangible heritage and, more specifically, minority languages, presented by two renowned specialists in heritage issues. Karim Hendili, Head of the Maghreb Culture programme, encourages us to consider the work carried out by UNESCO in promoting the heritage and diversity of cultural expressions, which enables the opening of a field of experimentation to invent a new development culture and create employment. Today, the activities and projects launched to promote and develop the application of the recommendations in the different regions of the world have demonstrated the relevance of implementing the approach focused on the historic urban landscape. This, integrated into territorial development policies, enables answers to the problems of management and conservation of urban heritage today. Tassadit Yacine, an anthropologist at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris, offers us a cultural-political analysis of the Berber language, still spoken in North Africa despite having suffered since its beginnings the domination of several conquering peoples and survived the languages that constitute great symbols of knowledge, such as Greek, Latin and Arabic. As regards the oral Berber language, it is still very much alive today and is characterised by very dynamic artistic and literary creation (poetry, music, architecture). It has millions of speakers, both in the southern Mediterranean and in the European (France, Spain, Belgium, Holland or Germany) and American diaspora (Canada, United States), who, whether they openly defend their language or not, are discriminated because of it, despite the fact that all these countries claim to support diversity.

We close this issue with “Six Reflections on the Pandemic”, conducted by the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka, in which he deals with temporalities, the hypothesis of mutation, digital modernity and the germs of a political future entailed by the pandemic. In his reflection on cultural matters, he states that “it is not enough to recognise the very real difficulties of the pandemic, and the injustices in everything related to the performing arts, sports, artistic life, tourism, leisure or access to culture and education. It is necessary to take into account the actors who, collectively, have been able to move and even strengthen themselves during the pandemic, generally combining cultural affirmation and a call for democracy, justice, respect and truth. This is the case, among others, of feminist or anti-racist mobilisations, which have not diminished at all. On the other hand, the pandemic has prompted an investigation of meaning, and of reference points, which has found important answers in the concern for nature and the mobilisation against climate change. Therefore, we can assert the vitality, in several countries, of the political voices that invoke the environment and ecology.”

Culture is a very broad concept that, in our time, requires a good education system that forms critical, democratic, free citizens, with a plurality of views. We need artistic creativity, which is associated with imagination and the ability to generate ideas and new ways of seeing the world; scientific creativity, which creates opportunities or solves problems; technological creativity, which improves tools and production processes; business innovation, which drives cultural industries. It is not a question of looking at traditional knowledge in the most common meaning of the term, that is, in its sense of legacies, heritage and knowledge: it is about exploring the cultures, practices, and arts and crafts that make up a series of everyday behaviours and ways of life, as well as the relationships that are passed down from generation to generation and also the mutations that renew those cultures. In a globalised world in full transformation, creativity, innovation and cultural development are key factors for bringing about social change, economic and technological development, job creation and social cohesion. Therefore, it is necessary to advocate culture as an essential service for the well-being of citizens.

Maria-Àngels Roque

Anthropologist and Editor-in-Chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*