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Session: Immigrant Artists in (We)stern Cities

Title of paper: “Carlos Capelán: caught between cosmopolitanism and periphery. Locating immigrants in Swedish artlife.”

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At last year’s graduation shows the audience saw among other things a study by Juan Pedro Fabra Guemberena set in a typical Swedish summer landscape brimming with Scandinavian light – but also studded with military recruits in camouflage. The public was also confronted with a demand for passport documents, presented by Dejan Antonijevic from former Yugoslavia.

To an outsider these examples may sound like regular stock scrutiny of national identity, but within the Swedish art scene it is in fact news. A new generation with immigrant background graduates from art schools and start finding its way to the art scene. With its entrance in the mainstream domestic art scene, this generation brings a new perspective on established representations of Swedishness.

This paper is focused on the changing situation in Sweden for artists with immigrant background. I show how institutional reception varies with respect to emigration country and education, deciding whether the artist is connected to a “foreign” aesthetic or not. The discussion centers on Carlos Capelán, perhaps Sweden’s most internationally exposed artist since the late 1980s but still lacking due domestic recognition. His case is contextualized and compared with present changes in art schools and galleries.

International attention to Swedish artwork conforming to the official aesthetic of geometric-rational modernism, IKEA and blond wooden design is promptly reported back home. On the other hand, the Swedish art press has hardly taken any notice of Capelán’s active participation in the international art life.¹ A post-colonial analysis of conditions in Sweden – like Capelán’s – is conspicuously absent in the critical debate. In view of this, what we see now could be the first

¹ Jan Hoet’s decision to include Ulf Rollof’s in Documenta, 1992, was greeted as if the first international attention given to a Swedish artist, even if Capelán had showed many times in Havana and with Latin American artists in the Venice biennial in the late eighties.

successful attempt by artists born in Sweden to raise questions of cultural hegemony in the mainstream of Swedish art life.

The hegemonic Swedish self-representation is an image of a homogeneous population in a country that has not received much immigration until the mid-twentieth century. The ethnic minority in the north, the Saami, is obviously shunned from this image in order that this be true. After the colonisation of the north in the seventeenth century, no longstanding relations that can be described as colonial have brought immigrants to Sweden.

But the immigration there is, is always patterned as urban sociologists like Saskia Sassen remind us. Accordingly this forms special relations with emigrant countries and people. The special bond between Sweden and Finland illustrates this. The countries were separated in 1809, when Finland turned a province of Russia, but still today, 93 percent of all emigration from Finland goes to Sweden. Important international relations to Sweden from the 1960s on were shaped by labor demand, development projects, tourism et cetera, and people arrived in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s as adopted children, labor or refugees hoping to find a friendly socialist haven. They came from countries like Argentina, Chile, Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, Korea and Turkey. Later, in the 1980s, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Gambia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and in the 1990s the former Yugoslavia became important emigrant countries.

Looked at through sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory,² Swedish art life is a semi-periphery that has relied on a global market for avant-garde art centered in Germany, France and the USA successively. The global post-modern – including the post-colonial – is now an hegemonic aesthetic and interpretative frame in Sweden. In view of this, and considering the perceived immigration influx, it is not surprising that Swedish artists, critics and curators have become interested in post-colonial theory.

Immigrants in Sweden have, however, been absent in the cosmopolitan art scene and worked in local paradigms. The exception is Carlos Capelán, who has gained wide international reputation. Capelán was born in 1948 and escaped military dictatorship in Uruguay only to be jailed by the junta that overthrew Allende in Chile. He came to Sweden in 1973 and in 1978, he entered an engraving school in the southern part of the country. His breakthrough came in 1984 when Capelán participated in the Havana Biennial, and was mentioned by *Art in America*. The prize at the biennial took him to the US and to France. Particularly in the US, his imagery changed and he has

² The world-system is international relations effected by another historical system, the capitalist world-economy that changes cyclically, as originally argued in 1974 in "The Rise and Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis", reprinted as Chapter 1 in *The Capitalist World-Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

since worked in environments-installations on themes like cultural identity, authenticity and legitimacy. Capelán continued his career, besides in Havana, at the show *Ante América* in 1992 and biennials in Santa Fé, Johannesburg, Kwangju, Caracas and São Paulo. However, Capelán is still not represented in the Modern Museum in Stockholm, nor by any Stockholm gallery.

Capelán's case is similar to others: a sideshow at the Venice Biennial strengthened the position of Gustavo Aguere, born in Argentine. Among his later prominent appearances with his Swedish partner in the FA+ group are the Buenos Aires Biennial (2000 and 2002) and a co-curatorship at the Ideologia Biennial in Gothenburg 2003, Sweden. Curators, too, have bypassed the domestic art scene and turned to international arenas. For his biennial *Eventa 2000* that took place in a rural place outside the town of Uppsala, Luciano Escanilla from Chile invited curator Orlando Britto Jinorio from the Centro Atlantico in La Palma, the Canaries, along with several artists of international standing. This event went unnoticed in Sweden while it was covered by the Spanish magazine *Lápiz* and Escanilla appeared on a panel to present his exhibition at the Havana Biennial later the same year.

Now, what can cause this marginalization of immigrant artists in Swedish art life? Is there nothing that the artists themselves can do? If the nature of contacts between sending and receiving migration countries shapes relations between people in the immigration country, Swedish sympathy and development work in Tanzania, South Africa or Chile lead us to expect the same benevolent attitude towards immigrant artists once they have arrived in Sweden.³ But in fact national policy is to "assimilate" immigrants, a well-intended erasure of cultural difference. Also Carlos Capelán made an effort to integrate, to speak Swedish without accent. The incentives were such that he was suggested by four different galleries that he change his first name to something more Swedish like "Karl" since he was "too good to be a Latin American artist".⁴ In fact, safeguarding so-called Swedish heritage permeates the cultural scene so much that the blond ethnically Swedish artist Peter Johansson received violent reactions from public and municipality for a project that involved covering an old small town cultural house with a temporary Moslem facade.

Perhaps the fact that there is no colonial authority to target has made it more difficult for immigrant artists to form interest groups and take action on their own, against seemingly benevolent but never the less discriminatory structures. Where there has been conflict between

³ And I use the word *benevolent* in a sense similar to the way Gayatri Spivak has used it, c.f. "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 1988.

⁴ Sarah Boseley, "Strategy of the self", *The Guardian*, February 25 1993. Also "Carlos Capelán in conversation with Gavin Jantjes", in Gavin Jantjes & Rohini Malik (eds.) in association with Steve Bury & Gilane Tawadros, *A fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with artists on internationalism*, London: INIVA, 1997.

immigrants and authorities it has touched for example gendered violence in “cultures of honour”, informal banking in Moslem communities and Moslems right to carry veil in public capacities. These scattered issues are no particularly stable basis for collective reaction.

If it is true that the sending country influences the reception in the Swedish art world, we must ask what kind of background older and younger artists have. If we look at different nationalities’ visibility in the cosmopolitan art scene and local paradigms on the domestic scene, we have for instance, in the mid-career generation, Mahdi Khaki from Iraq, Juan Castillo from Chile, Charles Njau from Tanzania, Lefifi Tladi and Azaria Mbatha from South Africa and Gambia-born Ismael Fatty. Jin-Sook So, who was born in Korea, is one of very few women artists of this generation. Asian artists in general are few. Africans like Fatty are worse off than are Latin Americans like Castillo. Both groups work within ethnic enclaves, but the Latin Americans have access to some exhibition spaces through the curators among themselves.⁵

The institutional structures seem to be benevolent, as I said. Still, students with immigrant background have been a rare sight in Swedish art schools. Of the artists I mentioned, only Njau and So graduated from the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Incidentally, they are also the ones who can live off their art. Njau has actually received several commissions for public art. Institutional support is thus one important factor in the course of events. We should, however, be careful to note that without formal art school education, it is very difficult to receive state funding and media attention also for ethnic Swedes.⁶

Today, art schools in Stockholm and Malmö attract students of more varying descent. Maria Heimer Åkerlund’s installation with copulating aircraft received much attention last year. Sirous Namazi with Iranian background and immigrants from East and Central European countries like Dejan Antonijevic, Dorinel Marc and Arijana Kajfes are unquestioned parts of the Stockholm art scene. However, Kajfes and Marc make no reference to ethnicity in their work. Picking up on the thematic end, Loulou Cherinet has showed photo work made at the art school in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, with references to Frantz Fanon’s *Black skin, white masks*. Mattias Olofsson at the Umeå University College of Fine Arts reenacted the experience of an unusually tall ethnic Saami woman who toured Europe around the previous turn of the century in his performance *Stor-Stina* (1999-2002).

It should be underlined that this change in the art schools is a very important improvement and that it has involved these students in valuable professional networks. But I have never seen these

⁵ Not only Luciano Escanilla, in the Stockholm area there is also Ricardo Donoso, director of the Upplands Väsby Konsthall.

⁶ E.g. the art writer Staffan Schmidt, who has an experimental collaboration with artist Mike Bode, has not been able to receive funding from Konstnärnsnämnden on the basis that they support only artists.

young artists discussed together, as a group sharing a certain predicament in their professional lives. Critics and writers have struggled with their work to find an interpretative frame that is not too challenging to the export image of a Modernist Scandinavian-Swedish art. Of course, they desire to be up to date concerning post-colonial theory. The results range between benevolent exoticism and serious examination of the mechanisms on a semi-periphery in the global art scene.

Seeing Sirous Namazi's ceramic work, reviewer Dan Jönsson immediately associated to water pipes, which he explained with the artist's Persian background. But in a news article on Dorinel Marc, one in an up-coming artists series, Lars O. Ericsson (arguably Sweden's most influential critic) typically passed the occasion to discuss the possible meaning of Marc's Romanian background. Marc has even made a work called "Romanians". Reviewer Susanne Pagold's only observation related to Jin-Sook So's Korean birthplace is that works resembling Korean *pojagi* bundles are less interesting than her civilization critique. Writing on Ismael Fatty, Stefan Helgesson refers to the artist as a suburban exception to all Swedish artists of African descent who never get a chance to show their work. In Helgesson's view, immigrant artists are identified with a specific culture associated with low Bourdieuan cultural capital rather than universal artistic quality. But this does not explain the immigrant's predicament, because ethnically Swedish artists in suburbia suffer the same lack of attention. Ethnicity is problematic only where it converges with low-income audience groups. What could perhaps save Fatty is allegiance to a globalized aesthetic standard. But this is taught and circulated at the ethnically almost white art schools, in Stockholm City center galleries and networks.

When discrimination of immigrants in Swedish art life is discussed, it is almost mandatory to lament the case of Carlos Capelán.⁷ When Lars Nittve was director of the Rooseum Konsthall in Malmö (who later became director of the Louisiana, Copenhagen, and Tate Modern, London), he stated his confidence in the art system's capacity of finding important artists – at least in western societies. But he admitted that it had failed in the case of Carlos Capelán's lack of recognition in Sweden and Scandinavia. Nittve blamed this on xenophobia, and gave voice to his hope that people has learned from this case. He did this without future commitments, and he seems to have lost the thread since this observation was made in 1995.⁸ Capelán is still not represented by a Stockholm gallery or in the collections of the Museum of modern art in Stockholm, where Nittve is now director.

⁷ The art critic Kristian Romare who had more contact with the Spanish-speaking international art world than his Swedish colleagues in the beginning of the 1990s wrote several articles e.g. in the magazine Paletten with the message that Capelán deserved a more prominent place in Sweden. See e.g. Kristian Romare, "Dialog med Latinamerika", Paletten, nr 3, 1992, p. 40-42.

⁸ Lars Nittve in interview with Oscar Hemer, "Det sker förbannat mycket just nu", *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 1995.03.19.

We here see the analogy between Wallerstein's world systems theory and the world system of art. Both exist in a single global capitalist economy, where they connect peripheral and semi-peripheral elements with a number of nodes in the system. In the art world system, New York is one such important node (or core) and Sweden is a semi-periphery. Connections from core countries directed to semi-peripheries are more frequent than communication in the reverse direction. Peripheries are connected to the semi-peripheries in a similar fashion. In this model, we see that established critics and institutions in Sweden fail to support immigrant artists because these critics and institutions address the cosmopolitan world system of art. An artist that is officially sent out to represent her country, does so also ethnically.⁹ Indeed, what incentive would there be to launch art or even interpretations that investigate and compete with the coveted international taste for the officially Scandinavian. Sweden would be hard pressed to export an image of itself as a grand fiction shattered by post-modernism and migration. Hardly any active private or state funding have reached beyond the typical national identity. The ethnically Swedish have been thought of as a homogeneous minority in global post-modernity, and art institutions have refrained from investigate the variety covered by blanket Swedishness. Instead, agents of Swedish mainstream art (artists, art historians, curators and critics) hijack and emulate a minority position in an international context as it were for themselves.

Immigrant artists, the periphery within the semi-periphery, have rarely been around in art world power networks to pick up a proper aesthetic accent or to develop a post-colonial analysis of their own conditions. It thus seems like the Swedish art scene is too peripheral to let through the periphery within itself. Instead, within the national borders, art critics and curators invite already established "post-colonial" artists from other countries to attract interest and sanction relevance of this topic. In effect, they construct themselves as pioneers of the post-colonial (and yes, in a sense I can be counted among these). This is only one of the paradoxes in this game.

Then is there a remedy? One strategy to connect with the mainstream that has suggested itself to immigrant artists in Sweden is to chance on the international arena, where they obviously belong to the mainstream cosmopolitan position even if they are not officially sent out by national institutions. In the end this leads to drainage of cultural capital from peripheral countries to core areas. Another strategy is adopting official Scandinavian aesthetics and remaining silent about topics like ethnicity, national culture, cultural hegemony et cetera, and try the official way. Most

⁹ Deviations from this norm is usually noted, e.g. in the case of who gets to be the US representative in the Venice Biennial.

important for the younger artist generation seems to be the social network and aesthetic codes that they acquired in art schools.

Of course the story does not end here. Carlos Capelán has spent a certain time in Costa Rica, Spain, and presently he is settled in Bergen, Norway, where he teaches at the art school. He still keeps one foot in southern Sweden and in late 2002 he opened a one-man show at BildMuseet in Umeå, north Sweden. The space is known for its international (or even post-colonial) profile; Okwui Enwezor showed his exhibition *Mirror's Edge* here in the year 2000. Capelán has put himself in a position in-between. He continues to explore the semi-peripheries of the art world as a professor at the art school in Bergen, Norway. Most important, he still appears in the Swedish as well as the international cultural debate.

Swedish art life is still ethnically defined. Immigrant artists can rarely legitimize an aesthetic or a post-colonial analysis of their own. Capelán looked beyond Sweden to find leverage. Now, young art school graduates like Dejan Antonijevic, Loulou Cherinet and Maria Heimer Åkerlund appear on the mainstream scene to challenge the official aesthetic of blond modernism, IKEA and question cultural hegemony within domestic art life. With growing international awareness, art schools are vital points in this legitimization process. Critics must now find an alternative to the export image of Swedish art, and institutions must start buying.