

# THE NEXT FUTURE

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Can we intervene in the future, in the coming future? We certainly can. Not in the sense of determining, shaping or prophesying it, or running aground in a utopia or dystopia. But we know that in our daily decisions, acts, episodes, in the fictions that we construct, in the updating of reality that we produce, each of us incidentally, or all of us together, are interfering in the future. And, in some cases, and for the most immediate future, we are even qualified to make forecasts, or, in other words, to construct rationalised extensions of the present, representations of varying degrees of optimism depending on the assessment that we make of it and the wish that we have to intervene in order to take precautions against it. The future exists and, in spite of its unpredictable or accidental nature, we can intervene so that not everything will amount to information provided without any immediate recipient, an activity without any desire to realise it.

Modernism, which continues to be an archaeology of the present day, invented the cultural notion that it was possible to be speedier than the future itself; together with its use of technology and science and with its breaking free from the canons, it sought to submit time to space, generating an unusual form of creative energy. In turn, post-modernism was to slow that energy down and add to it the diffusion of time and space, bringing an end to the great narratives and greatly insisting on the present and the actual moment, which acquired the status of a category that affected projects and programmes, as well as the operativeness of concepts. Made fascinating by its contrasts, post-modernity took everything to the extremes and, in its contradictions, relegated all possible visions (!) about the future to the level of the market and to the spectacular nature of images. Guy Debord was right before his time, Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" was a visionary film, and the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur embody the obsession with breaking records, with going beyond what already exists, while Bill T. Jones's Still/Here was a choreography about the victorious struggle against death; all of these stand as testimonies to the urgency that has been imposed on the human condition in this particular period of history.

We already live in the 21st century, this is an indisputable fact; globalisation is another fact. And to these two facts that mark out the boundaries of our present-day life – countries, the economy, cultural practices, the dissemination of the arts – and that have completely altered the world as we previously knew it some twenty years ago, we must add yet other facts that provide a framework for both contemporary time and space. A small group of these facts, listed by Fareed Zakaria in *The Post American World* (2008), tell us about how the 21st century is another kind of century: in 2006 and 2007, for example, 124 countries grew at a rate of 4% or more, a number that included more than thirty countries in Africa, which together represent two thirds of the continent; at the same time, of the 25 most promising enterprises, four of them are, respectively, from Brazil, Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan, three are from India, two are from China, one from Argentina, one from Chile, one from Malaysia and another from South Africa; while the world's largest shopping mall is now to be found in China. Together with this set of indicators enumerated by the editorialist of *Newsweek*, many others might also be invoked, such as the change in the producers of the media, the spread of objects, brands and music from Japan and China, as well as from Brazil, South Africa or Nigeria, the emergence of new art collectors – Mexican, Brazilian, Russian, Chinese – accompanied by the emergence of contemporary art exhibitions by artists from countries lying outside the traditional circuits of artistic production, such as China, Brazil and the Middle Eastern countries, which occupy prestigious exhibition spaces in London, Berlin and New York. Some of the best and most innovative theatre companies, such as the Handspring Puppet Company, come from cities such as Johannesburg, while the world's third most important city in terms of film production is Nollywood, in Nigeria. People are forever on the move, their flows and those of goods are now a permanent feature of our lives, increasing every day and with their directions constantly changing: currently, there are more Portuguese emigrating to

Angola than there are Angolans coming to Portugal. Chinese shops are to be found not only in Lisbon, but also in Maputo and Mindelo, and most of the highly regarded artists exhibiting at the art galleries in Chelsea are those originating from the Latin American, Chinese and Middle Eastern diasporas.

The world is different now and this implies a greater responsibility for those who have the capacity to intervene within it. There is a character in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* who says: "There's something getting into my eyes and I haven't yet managed to see what it is." Even so, or for this very reason, it is essential to be prepared for whatever may come, in its strangeness and unpredictability, and crises are crucial moments for interventions that can change, alter and rephrase the central questions. It was thanks to this inquiring spirit that post-colonial studies became fully established as a subject in universities, now freed from the burden of a certain pamphletism that it necessarily had at its outset and making it possible for us Europeans to rediscover ourselves in the construction of other fairer narratives about history and, above all, in the possibility that is now afforded to us of benefiting from memory and reconciliation. And it is here that the new narratives – which, in the case of the Latin American and Caribbean countries began a long time ago and, in the case of Africa and some Eastern countries are more recent – are of crucial importance for any action in the coming future. Generally speaking, even in the most disturbed situations, these new narratives arising from the independence gained by these countries bring with them a rare energy and vitality. They have been drawn up by the populations and creators of countries seeking to build their own new identities and, with them, new forms of representing and experiencing the world. They are not perfect, or even paradisiacal, countries. In many of them, there is war, corruption, racism and xenophobia, even amongst Africans, or resentments amongst Latin American peoples. But, what do we know about their realities and their reasons that can allow us to sit in judgement of them so hastily, as has generally been the rule? We know very little, and it is crucial that we should know much more. The Next Future is a Gulbenkian Programme of Contemporary Culture, planned to take place between 2009 and 2012, at different rates of intensity. In some ways, it has grown naturally out of the "Cultural Forum: The State of the World" and the "Distance and Proximity" programmes, as well as from other initiatives directly related to the themes of the mobility of people and international artistic creativity. Since it is being held after the tabling of some questions that were already raised by the previous events, this programme will not focus exclusively on interculturality, because this theme was placed on the national agenda at the appropriate time by the Calouste Gulbenkian, and, in this way, it became part of Portuguese sociological, political and cultural reality, within the boundaries that were possible. But, even though this question is not referred to explicitly, it nonetheless culturally permeates all of the daily or seasonal activity of the Foundation's contemporary artistic programming, involving such issues as globalisation, or the effects of digital technology and mass communication. However, an excessive focusing on the question sometimes perverts the good intentions of the programmers and can either render the theme banal or imprison it in a ghetto, which is even worse.

The Next Future, which, just like many other programmes, curatorships and biennials, has chosen time as the essential basis for its activity, is a cultural programme of foresight and intervention. In this sense, it has its own very particular objectives: to reflect upon what contemporaneity is today and to consider how it is both expressed in and influences the representation of artistic and cultural production; to contribute to the redefinition not only of identities, but also of the new flows, both of goods and people, and the new centralities, in particular the definitive importance that cities inevitably acquire in this age of transnationality. To this end, this programme has chosen amongst the important cultural areas of visibility, but not exclusively so, the relationship between contemporary production and creativity in cities of Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Two main avenues of work will be drawn up: one based on theoretical research and production, through workshops, seminars and major lectures to be held in collaboration with Portuguese and international Research Centres of excellence; while the other will be based on artistic production and programming, capable of establishing tensions or understandings, or sometimes just promoting the visibility of actors from these cultural regions.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation – at its headquarters in Lisbon, and at its branches in London and Paris – can in this way act as a European platform for a new knowledge and set itself up as a benchmark institution within the international cultural constellation. In order to do this, it will intervene in the coming future in terms of the production of knowledge and the creation of what we believe is yet to come. Intervening does not necessarily imply making a revolution; sometimes the efficacy of a small, but subtle change will suffice. Nobody is better equipped to explain this subtle change than Walter Benjamin, in this version of the parable about the other world: “The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Now let us begin to work on our research and theoretical production, and we will be able to enable others to see the strangeness and joy of the arts.

[1] Quoted by AGAMBEN, Giorgio - *A comunidade que vem*. 1st edition. Lisbon: Presença, 1993, p. 44.