

Re-Framing the Human Condition.

Mario Rizzi in conversation with Dorothea Schöne

With the overwhelming presence of media images about and around conflicts and uprisings in various parts of the Middle East and North Africa, these geographic and cultural regions have become increasingly present in our everyday news stream, socio-political awareness and cultural discourses. With that - and even before it - came the apparent need for broadening discourses and diversifying the understanding of the complexity of each and every situation and context. For the past twenty years, Italian artist Mario Rizzi has set his thematic focus on this region. In the attempt to define what Giorgio Agamben named the "bare life" of a human being, he places the individual in the center of his work and its narrative. He portrays and depicts those getting the least attention in our medialized world - the marginalized, the underprivileged, and the homeless. In a moment of time when thousands of Syrian refugees cross borders to neighboring countries, his work seems even more timely. Yet he rejects being labeled as "activist", believing that the human condition goes far beyond momentary political discourse. For his work *Out of Place* (2005), he was awarded the Best Artist Prize of the Sharjah Biennial. His films were selected twice for the Berlin Film Festival: in 2008 he presented *impermanent*, the portrait of a 96-year-old charismatic Palestinian doctor recollecting the memories of his life, and in 2013 *Al Inthitar*, the intimate portrait of Syrian refugee camp inmates. In 2010 the Museum of Modern Art in New York bought his film *Murat ve Ismail* (2005) for their permanent collection.

DS: What is your actual professional background?

MR: I was originally trained as a psychologist. While studying, I slowly realized that something was missing in my mostly theoretical formation. I was really eager to learn about the unconscious motor of human behavior, but not only in books. The outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia had a strong impact on me and changed my way of looking. On the other side of the Adriatic Sea, people were dying because of their ethnic or religious identity. I was not trying to understand the complex factors playing into the conflict; my wish was simply to give my human support. I went there a few times as a volunteer, to bring food, blankets and medicine, and to spend some time with the patients of the Sarajevo hospital. And that experience, that proximity, deeply changed me. Little by little photography became the tool to express my need to get closer, to research the world of intimacy in human relations, the essence of our lives. Life that bears unexpected beauty within itself. I was already filming and photographing a lot. But I was missing a proper education as a photographer. I began to take photographic courses at the *École Nationale de la Photographie* in Arles, in the South of France. During my studies I met a Czech photographer, who was working in fashion. I was his assistant in Prague for a while. But I became upset and annoyed quickly with the way models were treated in the business. I was successful - I even photographed Ann Scott for the cover of *Jardin des Modes* in France - and it was an intense time, but also a very short one. Then I began working independently on my own visual research. At an opening of a show of my photographs in Amsterdam, a curator from the Mondriaan Foundation asked me "Are you a photographer or an artist?" It was a key question, which required an answer I wasn't yet prepared to give.

DS: So coming from a psychological and photographic background, what happened then?

MR: The curator of the Mondriaan Foundation, Suzanne Oxenaar, invited me to "The Fifth Season", an artist residency in a closed pavilion of a psychiatric clinic near Utrecht and I decided to interact with inmates of the psychiatric judicial facility, the so-called TBS, i.e. those committed to an involuntary treatment determined by the Ministry of Justice. There I was confronted with an ethical and personal conflict. I was living most of the time with them, sharing their activities and intimate moments. But I still was "the patient with the key"; I could choose when to leave. I soon realized that I would have never been able to portray their real selves. And I couldn't bring their faces out into the public where they would be labeled and discriminated against. Also, observing the concomitant work of the art therapists got me questioning myself about my own role there. I discovered the difference between the epistemological aspects of my work and the ontological ones, the embedded meaning of it. I gave the inmates disposable cameras with which they could decide what to do - they could sell, destroy or use them to photograph whatever they liked. They would receive all the photos back plus one, which was enlarged and framed. And a new disposable camera. Fifty-five photographs became a book, entitled "They tell me I am sick, but I function good", a phrase I was told once by an inmate, and which became my guideline through the five months of the residency.

DS: In a sense, there is a similarity in the way you worked in Utrecht to your most recent work *Al Intithar* (2013), where you spent a lot of time with the residents of the Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. While the reason for being there can of course not be compared, your way of interacting with and examining the very intimate circumstances of life and living conditions somehow shows parallels.

MR: Indeed, *Al Intithar* (in English *The Waiting*) follows the life of a Syrian refugee and of her three children in Zaatari Camp throughout a period of seven weeks. Narrating their everyday was my way of exploring the emergence of a new civil consciousness in the Arab world and looking at the social implications of the end of post-colonialism in these countries. But this attention to the poetics of noticing, to the intimacy in the mundane, has always been a relevant aspect in my work. For example, in 2006 with the piece *nextdoor* I focused on another experience of seclusion and homelessness - that of the prisoners at a maximum security prison in Ireland. In this case, as well as in my other work, I wasn't at all interested in the reasons why they were there, but about who they were, their feelings and their identity.

DS: So when did you change from photography to video as your predominant medium to work in?

MR: I have liked to film in Super8 since I was a teenager, but never thought that those little films would have any value or dignity for art purposes, and I have never shown this material in public. Then the advancing of video technology allowed me to experiment further with visual translation of my ideas. I began asking myself how I could focus on the lives of the people I dealt with, with an aesthetic quality. Both for this introspective reason and out of technical curiosity, I started experimenting with two-screen video installations,

where I put the memories of two different individuals in dialogue with each other. This visual research went on for many years. In 2005 I was invited to a residency in France at the *Cité Internationale des Arts* in Paris. There I began exploring the condition of being a second-generation immigrant and the identity issues it causes.

DS: You are talking about the six-screens video piece *Out of Place* (2005) – a title borrowed from Edward Said's autobiography. You intersected the lives of French citizens with very different backgrounds, paralleling the complexity of their living circumstances.

MR: Given that second-generation immigrants are born in the host country, most often they hold its passport, but more than their parents they ask who they are, where they belong and why they are not fully accepted here nor there. When you come to a foreign country as an immigrant, you try to comply with the new society you live in and become unnoticeable, so as not to be prejudiced against. So in a way you hide your original identity. And with that I don't mean only your personal identity, but also your religious, political and cultural ones. Second-generation immigrants feel instead that they should be considered equal to those whose ancestors were born in the country for many generations. Yet at the same time they know they also belong somewhere else. It is this idea of belonging that I am particularly interested in. So in Paris I decided to narrate the everyday lives of these citizens to focus on their psychology, and on how they bridge the gap between two cultures. And when Jack Persekian, whom I had been working with since 2000, invited me to the Sharjah Biennial, I proposed showing this piece.

DS: In the same year, Vasif Kortun invited you to the Istanbul Biennale.

MR: Yes, and this was a key moment, a real turning point in my artistic career. The theme of the Biennial was *Istanbul* and I intended to work on different social microcosms which, in their combination, could convey the changing identity of the city, both in terms of its neo-liberal drift and of its loss of Atatürk's original laity. That was at least my preliminary idea. As I had no financial backing from Italian institutions, the curators decided to support my project with the biennial funds, but this obliged me to cope with a very limited budget. I consequently chose to concentrate on a single family-run shoemaker's shop and to work on a mono-screen piece instead of a multi-screen installation; a real narrative film, from the beginning to the end, based on the recording of reality. This opened up a totally new form of expression for me, which since then has become the focus of my visual research, both technically and conceptually. *Murat ve Ismail* runs for one hour. As the nature of the relationship between the father (Ismail) and his son (Murat) gradually emerges, we realize the different value systems they represent. Although tied together by the love and loyalty of family and familiarity, they constantly clash, make up and clash again, endangering the continuation of the shop itself. The film depicts two lives caught in the economic transformations ripping through Istanbul and records the hopes and fears of people who are subject to forces beyond their control.

DS: This wasn't the only time you addressed problematic political topics. For the past two decades, you have focused primarily on the geographical region of the Middle East. This naturally evokes the impression that you are driven by a socio-political interest in this

complex and much-debated context and region. How do you respond to the politically charged circumstances you are working within?

MR: I strongly believe, to use Hannah Arendt's words, that "the conflict between art and politics should never be resolved". If "political" refers to its Greek etymology, the *polis*, then I have no problems with its definition, as I believe that art should affect a change in people's minds. But because this adjective is often associated with taking sides, and setting up dogmatic flags, within a conflict or debate, I take strong issue with this label. At the same time I keep my distance from all artistic expressions that detach one from life and only focus on the enjoyment of aesthetics. I believe that, particularly when dealing with epochal events like the actual uprisings in the Arab world, the so-called Arab Spring, the role of an artist is fundamental. As Marx wrote, referring to "the Spring of Nations" in 1848, the role of the artist is, "showing to the world what it is fighting for, and consciousness is something that the world must acquire". Logically this requires the independence of an artist from the political power, whichever it is and whichever instances it represents. So I prefer to define myself as an "engaged" artist. And my interest in this region, in the Muslim world, probably derives from my first encounter with that culture as a volunteer in Bosnia. The fact that we pretend to own and export democracy, that we perceive ourselves as the "old world" where instead our world has colonized and oppressed the other, has always shocked me - though not as a political topic, but more as a social and cultural one.

DS: One of your earliest works that engages with the Middle East is *The Gift* from 2001.

MR: Yes, indeed. I was invited for a residency in Israel. Back then my approach was pretty much "relational". I used to involve a group of people in a concept. We would discuss the criteria and fix the frame around the project, with complete shared authorship throughout its realization. This took form as an exchange of gifts between 37 Jews and 37 Palestinians. I met them in their everyday lives, on a bus, in the university, in an office, and asked them to choose an object which was not connected to their ethnic or religious identity, but with their personal history. They had to explain in a text to the receiver of their gift why this particular object mattered to them. I chose the receiver of each gift at random.

DS: You named the project after Marcel Mauss' book *The Gift* in which he examines the social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange.

MR: I had read the book and was fascinated by Mauss' thorough analysis of the economic practices of archaic societies. He states that gift-giving is a moral act: by giving, receiving and returning gifts, it establishes a moral bond between the persons exchanging gifts. The obligation to give gifts (by giving, one shows oneself as generous, and thus deserving respect), the obligation to receive them (by receiving the gift, one shows respect to the giver, and proves one's own generosity), and the obligation to return the gift (thus demonstrating that one's honor is equivalent to that of the original giver). I received and forwarded the objects, breaking these obligations through mediation, and rendering the gifts totally gratuitous and spontaneous in donation. Therefore the focus was on the act of giving and on the meaning of the object itself for the giver. The explanatory texts were of incredible beauty and poetry and were published in an artist book by the Jerusalem Center for the Visual Arts. The project ended with two "Haflas" (a word meaning

"gathering" both in Arabic and Hebrew) in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, where all the participants brought dishes, cooked according to previously exchanged recipes from the culinary tradition of the other.

DS: The Middle East also encompassed Turkey for you. Both your film *Murat ve Ismail* (2005) and *Kazın Ayağı* (2012) result from your profound interest in the country, which brought you to visit it many times. The latter piece addresses the growing gentrification process in Istanbul, and consequent displacement of entire populations. Sadly, this is increasingly prominent in the news due to the recent Turkish uprisings and the occupation of Gezi Park.

MR: Since my participation in the Biennial in 2005, my understanding of Turkish history and its social structure has constantly grown. *Kazın Ayağı* was one of the first artworks to address the neo-liberal exploitative transformations dramatically affecting Istanbul and a large part of its citizens. It is a film based on the homonymous play, performed in SALT Beyoğlu in September 2011. The screenplay is structured around a new Karagöz shadow theater script, and is inspired by histories and memories of displaced people living in Istanbul neighborhoods going through top-down urban transformation. In the first phase of the project, these personal narratives were recorded with the aim of voicing less noticed situations of social distress, using the language and the idioms of the protagonists. This process allowed for deeper insight into the population dynamics of these neighborhoods and the ways in which displacement affects the lives of single individuals, the urban texture and the interrelation of gender, ethnicity and class. Through the conflicting dynamics and the equilibrated coexistence between the two main characters, Karagöz and Hacivat, two different ways of approaching common sense emerge. Karagöz theater allowed for elaborations on the notions of power, authority and submission that are based in the humorous possibilities of rudimentary situations, characters and costumes.

DS: In the last years you have often adopted the language of film as your tool of expression and you apply a lot of cinematic techniques to your work. Where do you draw the line between video art and documentary?

MR: By using film as an artistic medium I have the chance to reach a larger audience. I am aware that a film will read differently when shown at a film festival or in an art institution. But reaching out to an audience, which is typically unfamiliar with an art context, gives me an entirely different kind of feedback, which I consider to be very valuable for my visual as well as aesthetic research. At the same time straight documentary comes with too many constraints. On the contrary, I feel totally free to narrate my own stories and write my own plots, while adhering to reality. I have been told that my filmworks look pretty much fictional anyway. This is the result of my creative approach to post-production, where I reframe life and create a new narrative, my own narrative. In a way this is also the result of the influence my education in Italian Neo-Realism has had on me. I ask my protagonists to put their own lives on stage. Reality is much more rich and diverse than fiction is, as it has no frames or rules to respect. Fiction follows a script, no place for the unexpected there.

DS: Meeting Eduardo Coutinho, the important Brazilian documentary filmmaker, was a defining moment in your career: you discovered a lot of similarities in your understanding of the individual and the protagonist.

MR: I felt annihilated by Coutinho's recent death. Coutinho was a revolutionary. I believe that there's not one documentary filmmaker under 60 who was not heavily influenced by his work. While documentarians often corner, judge or convey superiority to their interviewees, Coutinho was unable to set traps for those he met. He loved studying human nature, seeking beauty in the mundane and extracting poetry from the everyday life of his ordinary characters. I felt that we had a lot in common in our poetics and vision of life. I met him at a film festival in Lisbon in 2008. At that moment I had already watched *Edificio Master* (2002) and *Jogo de Cena* (2007) and admired his humanistic approach and the way he could empathize with his protagonists, distillate their memories, reveal the sense of nostalgia and loss brought by a cheesy song, without invading their private space. Even during our first meeting, he proved his love for stories: he asked me to talk about myself and my motivations, since he could not open up himself without knowing who was in front of him. He invited me to Rio and we spent 15 wonderful days together. I filmed many hours of our conversations, which I have never edited, as we were planning to meet more times. I am now thinking of watching this footage again, to find a way to work on it, as a tribute to a man who changed and enriched my human approach to the other.

DS: Coming back to your interest in the Arab world: as far as I know, you don't speak Arabic. When you do not understand the person, how do you avoid a post-colonial gaze, the "latent" Orientalism as Said described it, or a predetermined perception of the people you work with.

MR: I can probably never avoid it completely. I am always aware that I am Italian, Western, and Catholic. But my work is a game of approximation to others and attempts to see life from their point of view. Ultimately, I try to make their point of view mine - not to change my own perspective, but to respect theirs so much, that it enriches mine. This can of course never be fully accomplished. That is why I call it a game of approximation. At the same time, not knowing the language spoken by those I film allows me a closer attention to their body language, to the human interactions, to the endless tiny details that can tell me much more than any spoken word. Probably understanding their language would otherwise compromise my perception of these hidden psychological details. Finally, before I decide to begin shooting, I spend months reading, researching and meeting, precisely because I am perfectly aware of the dangers of an Orientalist gaze.

DS: While you need to fill a gap and try for approximation, you also need to ensure that you are leaving the private sphere of your protagonists intact.

MR: Yes, and this is always a fundamental ethical challenge for me. I am constantly trying to become part of a community as a person, not as a filmmaker. And I try to never cross that thin line, where closeness results in an intrusion in the private sphere. Also, I keep in contact with my protagonists after shooting, as a responsibility to the need for presence that I created, which cannot be subtracted all of the sudden. And the first people to see

every film I make are those who have participated in it. They always maintain the right to erase those sequences they don't feel comfortable with.

DS: The majority of your works deal with refuge and homelessness. But naturally, a work always carries a certain individual aesthetic of the artist. What is your definition and understanding of aesthetics in your working process?

MR: I try not to identify with a specific aesthetic and I don't refer to a certain aesthetic consciously, although I do of course have many references in mind I could mention. The choice of an aesthetic goes hand in hand with the hidden meaning of my work. I am very aware of the risk of aestheticizing. But, since I am afraid of this risk, I am even more relieved when the protagonists tell me that they recognize themselves and confirm that my aesthetic matches their situation. So I am always trying to fulfill my own aesthetic needs by not compromising the topic of the project and the situation of the protagonists.

DS: Your thematic focus is very much on geographical regions and socio-political situations which tend to change very fast. This raises the issue of contemporaneity in your work.

MR: When talking about contemporary art and contemporaneity, one has to make careful distinctions: increasingly there is a recurring reference to an abstract category, with self-referential canons that are only theoretically apt for the white cube, and not for what's really happening outside, in the public sphere.

The question here is - what is contemporary and not what is contemporary art. When something is contemporary, in a way it doesn't lose actuality. Otherwise we would throw a lot of art history in the garbage. If we look at most art, it has originated from the interest in something that matters to people. When you look at the key current events today - Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the protests in Gezi Park - there is a common factor, despite all the profound differences. It is the rejection of neo-liberalism and the struggle for more democratic structures, again the approximation to a poetic justice.