

***Artists and the memory of slavery:
Resistance, creative freedom and legacies***

Concept Note

The Slave trade has devastated the life of millions of men and women snatched from Africa and precipitated into the horror and sufferings of slavery. Under the yoke of the most brutal oppression, these men and women have defended their cultural traditions, their values, their beliefs and their crafts, which, associated to an immense creativity and an undeniable ingenuity, have given birth to unprecedented contributions in the arts. These constitute today singular cultural expressions which are characteristic of numerous contemporary societies.

This tragedy has greatly and lastingly transformed the modern world. Alongside, it has generated deep and varied cultural interactions in between people of Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Middle-East and the Indian Ocean region. By the capital accumulated during and through the trade, which highly contributed to industrialization and enrichment of Europe and America, by the common heritages at the source of the principal modern artistic creations, and by the struggle against slavery which has deeply influenced the civic rights movements and enabled to redefine the very notions of humanity, dignity and freedom, this history has all in all participated to the emergence of modernity.

The complex processes of *interculturality* and *transculturality*, sprung from this history have significantly transformed cultural practices and representations as well as constituted new creolized communities and identities, a distinctive feature of the contemporary world. Today these legacies have become common heritages epitomizing the identity of certain nations as well as a fertile source of cultural diversity and pluralism in the world. These legacies continue to considerably influence artistic creation which has grown passionate for hybridizations, exchanges, contrasts, and fusions resulting from what today has come to be defined as globalization.

Martin Luther King, in a speech he addressed at Berlin Jazz Festival, pointed out that: "When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument". The civil right activist further acknowledged that "Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music. It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms when courage began to fail. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down".

The creative action has a liberating power: it enables to disconnect from the infernal cycles of exploitation and offers spaces for a breath, for recreation and re-humanization through language, body performance, chant, rhythms, spirituality... The creative process in the arts further allows the overcoming of the condition of victim in order to "no longer be a slave of slavery" as Frantz Fanon has put it.

Generations of artists have, ever since the abolitions of slavery, seized, revisited, rehabilitated, and transmitted, when their turn came, these esthetic legacies in diverse areas of creation. They have also taken over the historical, political, social, and identity questions inherited from colonial history as to draw new horizons to individual and intercultural relations.

Even more so today, these legacies speak to our present and continue to inspire artists from all origins.

The increasing interest of artists/creators for this history/memory testifies of the proteiform relation that this tragedy continues to keep with the contemporary. The artistic accounts of the slave trade and

slavery present the considerable advantage to appeal to other modes of narration and comprehension that enable to link us in a sensitive and subjective way to this past by transcending the usual cultural barriers. Artistic creation - which is complementary to scientific research - also enables to better grasp the consequences of this history, notably the tenacious poisons of racism and racial discrimination of which still suffer today in our societies the people of African descent.

These other ways to figure in the present tense our relation to this past open up new aesthetic and political stakes. Returning and resorting to this history-memory invites to rethink in a tangible way the dialectics between cultural resistance and artistic creativity, between social marginalization and the claim for civil rights, in other words between political discourse and artistic expression.

To address these issues, the present seminar offers a plural reflection on the relation that contemporary artists hold to the history and memory of slavery. How does this tragic history, still ill-known on the scientific field of research and marginalized by the media, feed artistic creation in its most contemporary forms? Does artistic creation enable to voice and crystallize new viewpoints on this complex phenomenon as well as to generate unprecedented overcomings?

How do artists draw inspiration from, refer to, and carry this painful memory but also transcend it so as to achieve universality?

It is to carry on with and deepen this debate that UNESCO's Slave Route project in collaboration with the cultural association "Fait à Cuba" and Vallois gallery organize an important event from 4 to 11 September 2015 at its headquarters. This event consists of three main activities:

A seminar "Artists and the memory of slavery: resistance, creative freedom and legacies"

It will gather on 4 September from 9.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. in room IV at UNESCO's headquarters artists, academics, and cultural experts alongside with a broader audience to discuss the multiple artistic influences generated by slavery as well as the varied creative processes that draw inspiration from this common legacy. The seminar will be divided into four sessions which will each address one of the following expressions: literature, visual arts, music and dance (cf. program attached).

A presentation by an academic or an artist will introduce each session as to remind the particularities, the evolution, and the stakes at play in the artistic expression evoked in the panel. These enlightening perspectives will be followed by an open discussion with other artists, participants, and the audience.

First session – Literature

What singular possibilities does literature offer to tell history and contribute to the memory of slavery? Is language capable of grasping simultaneously art and protest, revolt and sensitivity, singularity of an individual life experience and universality of the human condition? Is literature able to muse and mend the wounds caused by history?

Second Session – Visual Arts

Visual arts have come to form heuristic and demonstrative propositions to engage with slavery and its relation to the contemporary world. In turns proof, metonymy, chimera, relic or tale, the image offers countless possibilities to explore identity, memory, legacy, and encounter.

Third Session – Music

How did music gain from intercultural encounters and societal transformations brought about by slavery in order to transcend and renew repertoires and genres? To what extent did music encourage the perpetuation of a bond, imaginary as well as factual, bringing together people of the African continent and Diasporas as the Great Black Music concept of the Art Ensemble of Chicago may have exemplified?

Fourth Session – Dance

How has dance established a powerful cultural element and a determinant social bond for the people that were reduced to slavery but has also offered an unequalled space of grace, relief, and resistance? How does memory become a body, the body movement a story, and a story memory?

Exhibition “Temps Modernes” from September 4th to September 11th 2015

Fifteen contemporary artists from Africa and the Caribbean open up an unprecedented space of dialogue through their in situ installations of monumental format in the hall Ségur of UNESCO's Headquarters in Paris, in the frame of UNESCO's Slave Route project and the International Decade for people of African descent (2015-2024).

These artists present exclusive artworks, created in the context of this celebration, and exhibited for the first time to the public's view. They explore the formal, thematic, psychological, and social links that relate their creation to the memory of slavery and the slave trade but they also conceptualize new forms of alienation and issues of the contemporary world in works full of polysemy.

From 8 September to 3 October 2015, the exhibition will continue at Vallois Gallery with paintings and sculptures by the same artists and on the same theme.

« Oggun Today »

The opening of the exhibition in Hall Ségur on September 4th at 6 p.m. will be marked by an original performance entitled “Oggun Today”. Also revealed for the first time to the public, it will offer a reflection on tradition and modernity through dance and music.

The bass player and composer David Jacob, Dj and composer Erik el Chamaco along with the singer Anaïs Vathelet, percussionist Coki Sarria and the dancer Santiago Herrera Quesada, in a fruitful interaction, will explore an unprecedented manifestation of a contemporary syncretism.

The diverse actions of this program are run in the frame of the launching of the International Decade for people of African descent (2015-2024) proclaimed by the United Nations in December 2014. They result from the efforts of UNESCO's Slave Route project, Vallois gallery, the cultural organization “*Fait à Cuba*”, and the *Comité National pour la Mémoire et l'Histoire de l'Esclavage* (CNMHE) to contribute to the implementation of some recommendations formulated in the program of action defined for the Decade, namely:

- Promote greater knowledge and recognition of the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent as well as their contribution to contemporary societies,
- Foster recognition of the impact and consequences of the slave trade and slavery and of the cultural heritages that sprung from these tragedies,
- Combat the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance faced by people of African descent.