XAVIER TOUBES
DESCRICIÓNS SEN LUGAR

DESCRIPCIONES SIN LUGAR
Texto en castellano

DESCRIPTIONS WITHOUT A PLACE
English text

Rebeca Pérez Sánchez-Montañés

FUNDACIÓN LUIS SEOANE
COLECCIÓN NON DISPOÑIBLE

Xavier Toubes, Exquisite Nomad

written
by
Rebeca Pérez Sánchez-Montañés

I. Identity: a state of in-betweenness

"It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond…The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind the past. Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."[1]

Homi K. Bhabha

Western civilization has articulated its history in terms of categories and limits, by means of clear beginnings and even more distinct ends. In our persistent search for order and integrity we have become fascinated with the opening and concluding edges and obsessed with the finality of all things. The material between the origin and the end cannot be exploited, as long as it is *in between*, evolving. Only when it has come to an end and become what we label as past we are able to deal with it. Then we write history treatises and all sorts of commemorative publications. It is true that temporal and spatial distance grants us the clarity and lucidity which proximity restricts, or is it? Do things ever stop evolving in order to obtain resolution? Modernity seems to be obsessed with continuously imagining the future, fearing and disregarding what happens in the here and now and hoping that the same time that provides legibility will take the burden of the present off our shoulders. To our consternation, there are issues and situations that only gain in complexity with time, a complexity that all of us create in our daily and continuous present. Perhaps it is not distance that we need but instead close observation.

More and more is being said and written about globalization and a new internationalism. The world is becoming a much smaller place and the implications of globalization extend beyond economics and reach into the realm of culture. We are witnessing migratory movements of unexplored consequences that transcend the domain

of politics and concern the field of art. We are finding more artists working at an international level for whom art and culture cannot be arranged or understood in terms of national categories. The traditional correspondence of cultural and national identities, which has long served as a form of endorsement, of authentication, fails to illustrate these artists' enterprises. Moreover, art, according to humanist principles, is the expression of the individual. What happens then to art when the individual is questioned? We need to find new ways of understanding and constructing a definition of identity that can still validate the project of these new international artists by focusing on the concept of "the beyond" offered by Bhabha. As author Gavin Jantjes explains many artists today "feel at home in the realm of 'the beyond' "[2]. The concept of "the beyond" has most commonly been employed in relation to post-colonial discourse which has found that traditional Euro-centric interpretations of history and culture are not sufficient to rationalize the transition and transformation the migration from the old colonies to the metropolis entails. Traditional internationalism, that is the exportation and imposition of Western cultural values to the rest of the world, is being gradually replaced by a new internationalism that attempts to involve a vital participation of all parties.

I find, however, the beyond can be employed *beyond*, and explain the situation not only of the post-colonial migrant but of any migrant, exile, or nomad -people for whom defining home has become an increasingly complicated task, affecting life and identity at its very core, for whom the historic and sanitized correlation between nation and culture fails to explain their projects. These are the people that make up this new internationalism, not understood as a concept that obliterates any form of identity. Instead any construction of internationalism and identity, personal or cultural, should focus on the space in-between, on the process of becoming rather than on the state of being, and aim at wearing down the limits without completely negating the beginning.

The idea then becomes defining identity not in terms of where we are or where we come from but in terms of what we do.

Artist Xavier Toubes (A Coruña, Spain, 1947) answers to that description. For Toubes being an artist is a "way of understanding and being in the world, a tool to knowledge"[3]. He is the paradigm of the eternal student. He has made a continuous exploration of his life and work, and has adopted the creative experience as a fundamental means of living in and knowing the world. His life and work are intimately connected, each serving as an analogy for the other. Toubes envisions them, rather than as fixed concepts, as an assemblage of situations full of potentiality to explore, innovate, and transform in which the creative and researching process is far more engaging and fulfilling than the final result. Similarly the notion of a defined identity, cultural or artistic, the state of already being, becomes devoid of possibilities for the artist, thus his need for movement from place to place as an evolving process.

Although Toubes has worked on photography and painting, he considers himself a sculptor and clay is his preferred medium. As the artist explains, "I spend long periods of time when I don't work on ceramics at all and then there are other times when I do it intensely. This has something to do with the fact that I don't stay in the same place for long, and this is odd because, there is something metaphorical about clay that makes it sedentary and fixed which completely opposes my lifestyle. I have never owned a studio. I don't want to, the idea frightens me", and continues, "ceramics has this condition of being fixed, and I often find myself in situations where I can't work on ceramics or sculpture. When this happens, I do other things, I paint, I read, I write, I do photography. This is how I started painting, from the lack of and the need to"[4]. His approach to ceramics radically challenges any preconceptions we may have about ceramic materials and their traditional employment in the field. Toubes is not particularly concerned with

being called a ceramicist or not. Instead, he is an artist in an explorative journey to negotiate rules and discover what lies beyond the borders.

The idiosyncrasy of ceramics strongly relates to conventional notions of identity. Ceramics is a form of art making that, throughout its history, has built a firm and defined sense of identity, almost becoming a close system with a very confining set of norms and working procedures that until recently have resulted in predetermined shapes and purposes. Toubes's ceramics have a function as well, but a function of a different character. "Xavier makes poetic ceramics which is the most practical and functional because it helps us live and understand"[5], says Toubes's friend and mentor, Teresa Barro. Yet, the qualities of Toubes's work do not simply occupy the realm of the immaterial. He aspires to make them tangible and visual, to confer a great sense of materiality to his pieces. In this sense, protesting the detachment between mind and body in the identity of the artist and the art process today has been consistent in his production.

Light plays an important role in his work, or rather light possesses an important space in it. For Toubes, light inhabits and occupies space, materializes and defines the landscape, a landscape "without limits and descriptions"[6]. This metamorphosis from immaterial to material allows light to almost become a medium in Toubes's work. It appears as if he could enclose it within the object, as identity seems to be within the body. "My intent and motive as a sculptor is to give shape to the invisible, with something as rudimentary as baked mud"[7], declares Toubes. The artist has always been fascinated with the changes in light, as he has moved physically, geographically. Our sense of identity also becomes affected by these changes. The migrant comes to the realization of the great deal of fictional content involved in shaping the notion of identity. What could be a painful revelation for those who find themselves in these circumstances

becomes a situation full of potentialities for Toubes. Rather than fictional, identity becomes contingent, transforming in time and space.

Among the pieces created by Toubes we find *Nómadas Exquisitos*, a series of heads that continues to reappear in his investigation. These heads learn from their surroundings, from the detachment of their solitude. These shapes, or rather skins, contain inside the stories of many places and many times. Space has historically defined our identity. Our geographical origins reveal who we are and where we belong. The migrant, however, brings another dimension into the definition of identity -time. Toubes has explored the genre of *still life* as a contradiction in terms. For the artist, space does not exist independently of the time in which we experience that space.

Practically, most of Toubes's career has taken place outside of Galicia and Spain, in England, where it began in the late sixties, then continued in the United States and later in the Netherlands during an intense decade in the European Ceramics Work Center (ECWC). Today he is back in the United States. However, the artist has a history of exhibitions in his *home*land, Galicia. Some critics seem to perceive a Spanish quality in his work. Is there some truth to this kind of analysis or is this rather the easy critique that looks for the exotic, and thus not modern? After thirty years away from Galicia and Spain, has Toubes retained something of his roots? Moreover, is he interested in doing so? Is it possible to maintain that connection personally but not artistically? What would be the implications of a rupture between cultural identity and the making of art?

Much has been said about a new Internationalism that opposes the traditional Internationalism of the twentieth century, which simply translated into a Euro-American artistic invasion and hegemony. Can artists work today outside of that hegemony, or even, without bringing something of their own cultural tradition into their production? In this sense, it should be interesting to explore the decade Toubes spent in the Netherlands

as artistic director of the EKWC. The Center functions as a workshop for adult established artists from all over the world, where the ideas of continuous learning and knowledge as contingent have been stressed since its inception. Can an institution like the EKWC operate as a truly international center?

The account of Toubes's career is presented chronologically. Yet, rather than being the narration of a continuum, it is the story of many presents in the life of Toubes, where his identity as a person and as an artist takes a new forms and new means of expression.

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

[2] Gavin Jantjes, ed. *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism,* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998), p. 11.

[3] Xavier Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 December 2000.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Teresa Barro, "Matter and Spirit" in *Xavier Toubes: Luz do Norte,* Ourense, (Spain: Galería Marisa Marimón, 23 January-27 February, 1999), p. 16.

[6] Xavier Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 29 January, 2001.

[7] Ibid.

II. *The nation's margins and the migrant's exile*[i]

Through personal experience, I have concluded that beyond political and economic factors, there are, in many cases ulterior, almost visceral, motives that make individuals choose to abandon their countries and resolve to leave home behind. Migration can become almost compulsive, like a craving. Of course, the specific reasons behind this choice vary from person to person and determine the type of emigrant one becomes, the class which he or she belongs to. Jantjes establishes three categories: "You are either an immigrant, an exile or a nomad…Exile is about looking back to a glorious past and the migrant is someone who is in a state of arriving in an incomprehensible present, while the nomad uses strategies to infiltrate, collapse, and inscribe their own particularities in the new space before moving on."[i] Perhaps of these categories, the exile is the one with less of an alternative, feeling his or her departure as the beginning of an uncertain absence. I would take those categories further and regard them not as different types but as different stages in the process of migration. The belief in new horizons and possibilities beyond one's familiar boundaries is always present in the three, many times unconsciously. This realization however comes with the disturbing price of abandoning the comfort of the group, questioning your loyalty, your authenticity and your sense of belonging. As Czeslaw Milosz writes, "exile is morally suspect because it breaks one's solidarity with the group."[i]

Toubes left Spain in the late sixties mainly due to political reasons. He first decided to go to Paris, being familiar with the political turmoil in France, but the local authorities advised him otherwise. Toubes left for London, not fully predicting the

duration of his journey but already intuiting the extent of his decision. Toubes explains, "I began to sense that there were other possibilities, and this sensation came painfully because in some ways it conflicted with a very important part of me that had to do with my political militancy and the responsibilities I felt at that moment with a group of people with whom I shared those political affinities. Yet, I decided to move to London where I continued that militancy though it became more complex. It was then that I began to mature politically and personally and to find ways to negotiate the complexity of being in the world today."[i] Facing this complexity and being caught up in the contradictions of maintaining his allegiance to the group while at the same time questioning how to fit in his new surroundings, it was only a matter of time before Toubes began to examine his sense of self, his identity. As a member of a large group and inscribing to larger ideals, the individual almost dissolves.

Outside the historical, cultural and spatial circumstances that gave rise to Toubes's political militancy, he was now part of a strange group whose language, English, he was not even acquainted with. Toubes, amidst the disintegration of recognizable coordinates, felt his solitude, his own existence and presence. He felt himself trying to strike a balance between commitment, social and political, and remain at the same time open to this new place full of new possibilities. It was in this context when Toubes began to explore art as one such possibility, as a tool to negotiate the contradictions emerging in his life. His relationship with art began in London, but somehow, in a less specific way, he had always felt the need to be active, and to materialize his ideas. As Toubes explains, "I have a lot of energy and I was finding myself in situations where I wasn't using that energy."[i] The nomad knows that there is more beyond the comfort of the familiar circle. The decision of leaving

the safety and soundness of his career in a bank, which began in Spain, and briefly continued in England, came as the result of not just an intellectual process but of a deeper physical, bodily dissatisfaction. The awareness of this mental and physical discontent forced Toubes to reconsider his professional activity in the midst of an already troubled personal and social experience. Art became ground zero and being an artist was the only identity he could rightfully claim.

The beginning steps were years of exile, of looking back at a place and a time where and when everything seemed clearer and the enemy was identifiable, when Toubes's self was social and political, a group self and the ground on which he stood was firm. During these early years though, he did not leave his social and political commitment behind but as an artist, this commitment took a different form and in 1970 he co-founded the *Grupo de Traballo Galego en Londres* (Galician Work Group in London) The *Grupo de Traballo Galego en Londres* was comprised of six Galicians that had come to live in London for a variety of reasons, among them, Teresa Barro and her husband Fernando Pérez Barreiro, who would affect Xavier's life profoundly. The purpose of the group was to meet and discuss the different political and cultural currents of the moment and how those tendencies could occupy a pragmatic space in the daily lives of the group's members. Understanding the roles of education and creation was a chief concern in the pages of the newsletter published by the group. In a more specific sense, they were also interested in defining their roles as Galicians in their surroundings. "We wanted to give a destiny to our search and Galicia became it. We felt that in the context of that time, speaking and writing in Galician meant something"[i], Toubes explains. The very idealist pursuit of the

group had a precise and practical objective: remaining attentive to their cultural patrimony.

Gradually though, Toubes's decision to leave these alliances behind grew stronger and more resolute. His sense of isolation from the familiar became as intense as his curiosity for the new world around him. In 1974, Toubes enrolled at Goldsmiths' College University of London. Like most art institutions at that time Goldsmiths' was being swept by minimalist and conceptual trends. Toubes found himself at odds with the emphasis these movements placed on the conceptual process that drove art into dematerialization and the object almost into extinction. Toubes's approach to art, without neglecting its intellectual nature, aims at implicating the body, at "overcoming ignorance by mere agitation of mind and body."[i] The artist explains: "I find it a narrow-minded mistake to try to annihilate a part of the creative process."[i] I have already stated that Toubes's coming to art was not simply an intellectual decision but a physical response to a need for activity. "I needed to use my mind and my body differently, and this came as a very unique revelation because what followed was not just a mental process but a deeper one where my mind and body began to realize an existing fracture between them."[i] Art became the tool with which to bring them together. Toubes understands the creative process as more than an intellectual activity. Questioning his own identity not only happens at an external level (I versus the group), but internally as well. Is the self-made of pure conscience? How does the body participate in the construction of self-identity?

Toubes chose ceramics for its rudimentary character and found Goldsmiths' the perfect place to begin because despite the artistic battles being fought at this time, the school still represented a very broad concept and because being an older student with

very clear goals, he was allowed the freedom he required. Toubes then finished his degree in 1977 and, instead of trying to situate himself in the circles of power within the art world, he moved out of the city and to the countryside in Winchcombe, Gloucestershire. Placing himself in the limits of the art's narrative, Toubes's "cultural exile is followed by an artistic exile."[i]

From exile to nomad

The seventies were troubled times for the arts. Sculpture was undergoing a crisis when the strict partition between disciplines was being dismantled. The focus was placed, as I mentioned before, on the thinking process, rejecting the touch of the artist and the object as final. Toubes, on the other hand, chose a marginal material removed from any weighty artistic discourse. The nature of ceramics claims the hand of the maker and Toubes desired that contact and the physical challenges that art could offer. Manipulation, to transform matter with one's hands, is essential in Toubes's understanding of art as a tool to knowledge. Knowledge for the artist is both rational and visceral and it happens through a complicity of mind and body. Knowledge is performative, it shapes and defines the self. Thus, for Toubes, to exist in the world, to be, is to be *in active*. The self is not until it acts. When commenting on his previous situations at Goldsmiths's, Toubes says "I had a very different attitude from those around me. Their search was different from mine although I remained attentive to it. I think now that our objectives greatly coincided but we chose diverse paths. In my search, the making process remained important, so I decided to leave for a place where this was still so, where creating an ordinary object and where the intimacy of

the hand were involved and significant", and continues, "of course, a place like this would be at that margins of any discourse of power in the art world."[i] Winchcombe became such a place.

Winchcombe dates back to the twenties, when a group of people, among them a pioneer of studio ceramics Michael Cardew, decided to leave the academic world of Oxford for the countryside. The idea behind it denotes a rejection of urban life and the devastation of the post war, and a search for what they considered a more proverbial life of simplicity, beauty and work. There is a utopian, even a leftist, dimension to their endeavor. They approached their craft as a sincere way of life, as a path to spiritual and physical development through social commitment and manual work. The type of ceramics being produced at Winchombe was highly traditional and functional, an "antithesis", as Toubes describes it, of what was being made at Goldsmiths'. He felt very much enticed by this notion of functionality and of making objects with such a defined sense of purpose: "I find that we can extract a form of valid knowledge from this type of search."[i] His artistic inquiry has centered largely on the investigation of why people continued to be interested in making objects and assign them certain purposes and meanings. His work lacks any notions of material utility but is concerned, and this remains throughout Toubes's career, with art and cultural creation in general, as work, as an activity of production. The emphasis on processes and learning about different clays attracted Toubes from the beginning and he took part in the making process as a way of learning and investigating the possibilities of the material. Winchcombe represented for Toubes the end of a method and a history of making ceramics and of a way of understanding why and how to make objects.

Around this time, artist Robert Morris characterized art as "an activity of change."[i] Toubes adhered to this philosophy because it became the most fitting activity to assimilate what he was slowly discovering about life and the self, that they are both contingent, in a constant state of ambiguity and transformation. He went to nature where "transformation is visible and present."[i] Although Toubes was brought up mostly in an urban environment, his family has always kept strong ties with the Galician countryside, and in the years of Toubes's childhood and youth, the modern division of urban and rural spaces was still practically unknown in Galicia and most of Spain. The artist describes the Galician countryside as a place of intense beauty and intense labor. The countryside, and in this sense Winchcombe becomes Galicia, is a place where Toubes learns but most importantly, sees and observes. To look attentively at your surroundings is "to be". The self is an active being capable of sensing, conceiving, producing. The countryside is the territory of the inconstant and the unstable, where the idea of cycles is distinctly visible and manifest, where nothing remains fixed. Winchcombe seems to be a place where Toubes was still holding on to the past, to a lost truth. There Toubes served primarily as an apprentice to Raymond Finch and also helping to catalog, archive and photograph, during a year, as the artist describes, of intense solitude and austerity, which are some of the reasons that drove him there in the first place. His experience came to an end in the summer of 1978 when the artist left for the United States, where he would pursue his art training at Alfred University in New York

What began as a discovery gradually became a more solid and complex realization –life in exile, being an exile. What does that mean? What are the implications of not knowing where one belongs? Toubes found the need to

differentiate himself from what he believed to be a very homogenizing society. He lacked the distance that difference from the other provides. Only by placing and defining himself against those around, Toubes felt he would be able to understand what his status of exile meant.

The pieces that came out of this period were viewed as archaic and primitive. Against the strong influence that American culture and art placed upon him and his work, Toubes became more preoccupied with delimiting his parameters trying to avoid being swallowed into oblivion by the artistic trends existing at that time. He began to search for his own "narrative of cultural diaspora", his "poetics of exile."[i] As the artist states, "I wasn't particularly interested in the notion of the primitive. Instead I was looking for the possibility of discovering a personal vocabulary, to externalize the poetic possibilities of my internal paradox."[i]

Guerreros is a series of figures that emerged out of this dialogue. Massive, "materic", unadorned and neglecting details, they reveal some of the formal properties that Toubes will continue to explore in latter works. These *Warriors* are missing their extremities. Their arms and legs are fused in one large anthropomorphic shape. They stand isolated, unable to reach out and relate to others, incapable of tangibility or seizing their surroundings, lacking any member of the body that would allow a sense of movement or physical direction. Toubes deprives some of them of a pedestal that would demarcate a territory of their own. When the pedestal is included , it consists of a brick base that frames the piece, further eliminating any possibility of movement and activity. Trapped in their own skins, all these "guerreros" can do is look ahead, at a mythical future, powerless to manipulate their present. "With *Guerreros* I was interested in maintaining a sense of

independence and in giving these pieces a root as peripheral as Galicia. I was interested in questioning the past, not to repeat it but to understand it instead"[i], states Toubes. *Guerreros* represents then, not a return or a tight grip to the past, but an examination of it. The shocking encounter between Toubes and this radically new culture meant a rupture between a historical and ideal past and an undeniable present, more so than England, because in many ways and through close ties, England felt like a chapter in a story whose reasonable ending sequence would have probably anticipated a return to Galicia. After all, Winchcombe was also the territory of exiles who had left the city for the countryside. Outside of a group, however, that shares a sense of displacement, the exile, Toubes, risks facing negation.

Indeed, Toubes's early days in the United States became a whole original present, unforeseen, when detecting any ties with the past became a difficult and wearisome task. Moreover, this past turns, in many ways, obsolete and inapplicable, and shifts from an actuality to an idea, from a reality to a representation that Toubes struggles to use in his new environment. This was "a time of splitting and resistance"[i] when Toubes's sense of totality was shattered. Toubes had to strive to find a new language, a new form of self that could exist, and therefore create, in this new context; he needed to invent a form of being for which previous rules and traditional knowledge were not pertinent. Forced to speak, he wanted to be heard loud and clear, which conceivably explains the massive size of these "fighters" and of a great deal of his later production. Perhaps Toubes chose to isolate them to effect their/his independence by granting them a secluded space for self-examination. Furthermore, it justifies why it is in the United States and not in Wichncombe when he makes his first critical pieces. The so-called "archaic" language of *Guerreros* aimed at tracing

back some familiar, but now impossible to duplicate steps. Toubes wanted to recycle the past, not counterfeit it in the present. *Guerreros* was an exercise of memory, of putting the mechanism of retrospection to work to bring forth and fuse what remained valid from the past into the present, to make the past performative in the present and not just an obstructing and impairing archive.

In 1983 Toubes moved again, this time to work as an art professor in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I think it is necessary to pause briefly and examine what this new relocation meant in Toubes's life and work.

There are two factors of Toubes' exile that make it different from more traditional forms of artistic diaspora. It is important to point out that, to a certain degree, his decision to leave home was voluntary. Moreover, he became an artist *after* migrating. With this, I am not interested in establishing categories of grief in the exile experience and conclude that Toubes's was less distressing. What I find important is that his work soon abandons the need to look at the past, to be retroactive. As Joseph Brodsky comments, "retrospection plays an excessive role in the exile's existence, overshadowing his reality."[i] Based on the stages in the migration process that I presented at the beginning of this chapter, I argue now that the exile's work insists on reinforcing the notion of home and the lack of authenticity of his expatriate experience since "the entire self depends upon the definition given to it by the state."[i] To be ignored by or to situate oneself outside of the state is to be a fake or, worst, to be a nonentity. The nomad instead discovers genuineness in this new and anomalous life. Identity ceases to be the fixed self and becomes a strategy. In the course of migration, the nomad describes the stage during which the displaced recognizes the transient as the only *state of being*, whereas the exile lives in schizophrenia, between

the pretended normalcy of the past and the fictitious security of the future. Or, as in the three alternatives enumerated by Nikos Papastergiadis, the exile may opt for "madness, defer homecoming to an idealized future, or find a substitute home in the here and now."[i] The nomad chooses the latter.

The move to North Carolina represents the strange and contradictory realization for Toubes of the possibilities contained in his new environment, of the initial shock and resistance to believe that one is able to perform and create outside of known spaces. This realization, that life continues outside familiar conditions and creation is possible beyond national traditions, is what defines the nomad, whose sense of culture and home multiplies. The nomad disrupts the division of time into absolutes –past, present and future- and transforms his or her life into a multiplicity of presents, "into an awareness of simultaneous dimensions."[i]

The series of heads *Nómadas Exquisitos* first appeared during this time and it has become a tool the artist continues to apply. "In my work there are themes that I rework, repeat, like the heads, an infinity of times. They are propositions, offerings. It never occurs to me when I make them to think about tradition or the past. They are very immediate and present for me."[i] These heads, these "cabezones", stubbornly reappear as the concrete manifestations of a thought or emotion, as the corporeal response to a specific situation or encounter, as the "fragments that signified the quality of a lived experiences"[i] shaping the autobiography of the displaced. In this sense, *Para el Camarón* (1993), *Para el Bosco* (1993-94), or *Namorados da Lúa* (1996-97) are part of this series of nomads, which have become material answers to immaterial and actual questions or circumstances. They are the containers of many narratives, lived and heard. These series stage "the scenography of an event" which

is how Toubes describes his work during the eighties. Adopting the notions of reiteration, seriality and persistence is consistent with Toubes's interest in cultural creation and art as work. Although it may seem contradictory with an understanding of life and identity as contingent, what the heads represent is the continuous necessity to acknowledge and respond to the present.

Nómadas Exquisitos is the first of these responses whose name and conception were inspired by the writings of the American poet Wallace Stevens, particularly a poem titled "Nomad Exquisite", whom Toubes began to read profusely around this time. Toubes let himself be provoked by stimuli from his present rather than search for it in the past and found inspiration in a culture that had previously felt hostile. The keen alertness of the outsider in a foreign terrain is appropriated by Toubes's monumental heads, which appear confident in their transient condition. They stand firmly on the ground even if that ground is moveable and mutable, like on their pedestal on wheels, observing their surroundings, but this time without the apprehension and anxiety of their predecessors, *Guerreros*. Both *Guerreros* and *Nómadas* seem to contradict the artist inasmuch as their bodies are useless or omitted from the learning experience. They embody adjusting steps in Toubes's growing need for presence. Their unusable or missing bodies are that of the exile who constantly feels inadequacy, fragmentation or, worse, absence until learning how to articulate identity as twofold, as reality and fantasy, replacing totality with duality or multiplicity, acknowledging the legitimacy of their new habitat.

What the spectator immediately discovers about *Nómadas Exquisitos* is their gaze, their painstaking and scrutinizing exploration of the world enclosing them. As author Jantjes writes, "humanity's primary way of knowing and naming the world is

through looking and seeing."[i] The eye informs the "I". One of the most fascinating possibilities of always being the nomad and the outsider is the capacity to observe attentively, with curiosity and a certain degree of objectivity, always ready to absorb new knowledge. This capacity for observation, for abstracting, allows for a greater awareness not only of your surroundings but, more importantly, of your own self, your own existence and presence. It unfolds what Papastergiadis refers to as the "ambivalent experience of the stranger" who endures an "accelerated experience of intimacy" while erecting at the same time "sharper barriers of indifference."[i]

The massiveness of these heads engages the subject who finds it impossible to ignore them as they stare back. Their gaze reminds the beholder of his/her own corporeality. These are not portraits. Their bold surfaces, built up with clay crumbs and other forms of waste, contribute to their anonymous and schematic character. These nomads are not indifferent or detached. They are listeners, observers and commentators. It is in the latter sense that *Nómadas Exquisitos* could be perceived as self-portraits, in their condition of witnesses, in their penetrating learning of the world in quietness and solitude. They are the representatives of a new demography. Every head represents a fragmented sameness, made up of multiple accents, looking for intercourse and intimacy with one another and its audience, searching for recognition in relation to each other and to its viewer and detecting otherness in the self. These thinking observant heads will slowly assemble the manifold scraps of the being.

Toubes builds ceramics with a narrative quality, like painting, photography or video, to utter the words of the displaced. Toubes's nomads are simultaneously storytellers and protagonists. Like most figurative sculpture they are absence and presence, the absence of what they symbolize and the dominating presence of their

materiality, enacting the experience of the stranger, never quite inside, always outside, fitting everywhere and belonging nowhere.

Perhaps the distinction between exile and nomad is not crucial or final and is often interchangeable. What I do want to stress, though, is that I find *Nómadas Exquisitos* belongs to a different level of sensibility and awareness of personal and cultural transformation in Toubes and his work. The work of the nomad, as Papartegiadis states, "should not be considered simply as a representation of the place of origin or the place of arrival, but as a metaphor for the process of travel."[i] It represents more than any other piece until that point, the acceptance of his condition and most importantly, the possibility of *being*, without having to situate himself in the past, without continuing to "renew hell"[i], but by employing new material from his in-betweenness. As in the title of one of Stevens's poems, Toubes refused to be an "idea about the thing, but the thing itself".

III. Toubes and the European Ceramics Work Center: the nomad's restlessness

"Uprooting can be habit-forming, the only constant in a life defined by inconstancy. The sharpened sensitivity that one experiences after the first displacement is addictive,"[i] writes Marc Robinson. These could be the words that Toubes had in his mind when in the early 1990s he moved to the Netherlands to launch one of the most singular and intense projects of his career and life –the creation of the European Ceramics Work Center (EKWC) in the town of Hertogenbosch. I do not intend to sound triumphalist and declare that the artist came out victorious from the migrant battle. The struggle remained but rather than becoming a consequence of it, Toubes was determined to be the source for action. Teresa Barro describes the artist as someone who refuses to "fall into the veneration of what has already been –a path into ineptitude and inertia- nor does he permit himself that superstition of the future, which is no more than the vanity of the present."[i]

The idea behind the Center was directly connected with Toubes's own vision. Not only he continued to reinvent himself; he embarked in a more ambitious project –to reinvent ceramics. Working in the Center[i] as artist in residence in the late 1980s, during a sabbatical from Chapel Hill, he soon found out that it had received an ultimatum and its alternatives were to either dissolve or undergo a radical conversion. To Toubes this unveiled a great opportunity to put into practice an idea for an art learning institution. A team was formed, that consisted of Adriaan v.d.Spanje, Yvette Lardinois, Anton Reijnders and Xavier Toubes. In the first stage of the Center, Adriaan v.d.Spanje and Xavier were the motors of the policy and organization. In the second stage of the Center, Anton Reijnders and Xavier sustained a very intense dialogue to maintain the creative

spirit of the Center. This proved a very demanding pursuit. Xavier Toubes became artistic director of the Center in 1991 and, as the artist himself puts it, "the idea of being a sculptor and of making things manifested itself clearly from that moment on."[i]

The making of ceramics has retained a strong sense of identity, employing a very limiting and fixed code of reduced semiotics that not long ago determined its function and place in the world of art and the larger context of culture. Throughout its history, ceramics has been considered a craft. To learn this craft entailed acquiring a set of presumptive rules and skills that once mastered would allow the craftsman to continue generating the same results. The only margin for variation was in the amount of training and practice. Today an economy of rapid mass production has come to inform everything that possesses functionality. As the artist explains: *"*The need for a structured and efficient society is well proven given our recent history… To understand the consequences of such uninterrupted focus on the instrumental function of society is becoming an urgent inquiry."[i]

From early on in his career, even in the midst of confusion, Toubes, searching for a balance between the object and the art practice, had two very clear purposes in mind for ceramics. The first one would involve the use of technology with a goal other than keeping repeating the same traditional forms over and over. Secondly, to produce objects that functioned differently or did not function at all, in other words, the pursuit and examination of art as something marginal and useless. "From the beginning, the Center as a project has been a place as much for the making of ceramics as for the stimulation of a language that presents a different view of ceramics, as well as its debate and presentation."[i] Toubes and the Center came to undo its sense of selfhood, to "destabilize its secure situation"[i] by confronting it with analysis. The 20th century turned out a variety

of artists working with ceramics such as Peter Voulkos, attempting to revitalize the material. Yet, their work remained essentially a sort of sculptural ceramics which exploited the expressive and personal dimension of the maker. Toubes was working to engage ceramics not as a specific object or outcome with *a priori* meaning but as a medium, to revisit the relationship between the materials, process and what could result from that relationship. His involvement was not concerned with promoting ceramics from craft to art but instead with channeling conventional ceramic procedures, materials and tools into the production of the unnecessary.

Identity ensures authenticity. Our meaning is our purpose. The best way to answer the question of who we are is by answering what we are for, how society needs us. To be useless is to be not. The exile grieves at the loss of a role in his/her original society and at his/her nullity in the adopted home. The nomad finds, or more precisely, devises a prospect for him/herself not from predetermined intentions but from renewed meaning. "The restlessness of the nomad has greater purpose than the wanderings of the exile."[i]

"Art making is an activity that does not solve anything. It is not based on need. It is not natural. To be an artist is a choice and a labor,"[i] declares Toubes. Art fabricates itself a purpose to define its identity and thus its genuineness. In principle, however, art is a personal undertaking that satisfies no public necessities. Just like the nomad's, art's usefulness is *a posteriori*. Art resides *between* the artifact and the artifice. Consequently, this production of the needless does not and cannot seek to eliminate the object as a commodity, as a trade item, since everything that has a market value has invented itself a function. Toubes is not interested in analyzing the appetite and fetishes of the art

consumer. Instead, he looks at this pursuit from the perspective of the artist as the agent engaged in it.

What drives a person to dedicate his or her life to a gratuitous activity? The EKWC does not aspire to provide answers or solutions. Rather it emphasizes process over product and offers a framework where this dedication is viable, in this case, with something as marginal as ceramics for which the interest of museums and galleries is virtually none. But "marginality has become a powerful space,"[i] the only one where interrogation and metamorphosis are always possible. Hence, by eliminating ceramics' traditional functionality the door was opened to "inject inquiry into a system that was so attached to its own identity,"[i] to reinvent itself even if that entailed a great deal of self-destruction. Manual dexterity had already ceased to be the focus of the vocabulary of ceramics. The contribution of the individual was complemented in the Center with the research of the collective. The technological replaced the artisanal, while the Center sought to negotiate a compromise between the idealist space of the studio, where concepts originate, and the materiality of the working place. Toubes wanted to animate the intellectual content of the artist's identity by exploiting the discipline and structure that the use technology and the participation of a group impart as well as by implicating the body.

Art is labor, according to Toubes, and the artist is a laborer. In all my conversations with the artist, he firmly stressed the importance of structure and planning in order to generate freedom: "I believe that freedom comes with organization. To conquer and maintain independence requires a great effort. Modernity grants us license to be free but to do what you want has little to do with being free," and continues, "the EKWC didn't offer us anything because it did not exist (as it is today) before us, in the

same way that the future doesn't exist, we fabricate it. The Center didn't exist, we *existed* it. The technological possibilities were not there, we made them possible. The creative process too requires work and a space."[i] Toubes proposed not just mere reaction to the past but most importantly action, as the only means for change, and left a limited role to chance. As artistic director he wrote: "The goal of the Center is to stimulate the process of search and investigation…combining a maximum of freedom with good organization and support."[i] The Center became an intricate network of private and public, abstract and practical affairs.

Lucy Lippard defines space as an impersonal and sanitized location that transforms into a place through the articulation of social, cultural and economic relations. Space is the idea, the representation, preceding interaction, while a place is real. Space is thought of; a place is lived in. Like identity, the definition of place is dialogical. The EKWC could only be a reality if its concept gave fruits. In this sense, I would like to examine now how the space of Toubes's vision developed into a place for work, first affecting his own output and furthermore, assuming a new role as an international art agency.

Process and duality: the object becoming

It is almost a cliché to ask the exiled writers or artists how their different residences have directly influenced their work. In Toubes's case, and this is most evident during his time in the Netherlands, is not the geographical conditions or the cultural

particularities as much as it is the resources. "A way of learning for me is to be in a place I know nothing about, …where resources have to come out of an unusual spot."[i] During his time at the Center, the exceptional facilities allowed Toubes to shift his direction and turn his investigation to sculptural and technological problems. The more expressive and figurative nature of his early works disappears to make room for forms that reveal a greater interest in procedures over results by confronting structural problems and focusing on repetition and simplicity. The artist abandons the irreconcilable nature and finality of figurative sculpture for the continuity of the object in the process of becoming.

Toubes always works on several pieces at the same time. He completes some while others crumble, shatter or fall into oblivion in the vacuum of the studio. The intense palette of works like *Nómadas* retreats to give way to a chromatic rigor of dominant, stark whites and other glazes of unusual luminosity over distilled surfaces that convey a great cohesiveness to the group. These pieces do not form a series, nor do they share the same concept, but they all possess a sort of formlessness, the fragmented character of shapes that are still evolving and undefined, waiting to be identified. I would like to turn now to a number of works that come out of this investigation.

Médula is a sort of installation of undetermined and biomorphic shapes, emphasizing the idea of the irregular and of the object evolving. Two appear to be clouds, always mobile and in constant mutation, reminders of the unconfined nature of space and reality. The other two look like vessels enacting a paradox, for one is upside down, trying to fill up its own hollowness by entrapping the space in it, while the other manages to retain nothing, suggesting the idea of skins that wrap around air or allow their interior to be permeated by all sorts of substances, like bodies enveloping a flow of

experiences. And yet, their name, medulla, suggests something entirely different, antagonistic. They insinuate the notion of a core, the presence of an essence, presumably immaterial. Is Toubes suggesting the existence of something essential in all things, including us and our identities? What becomes of that essence when its body repository relocates or perishes? Maybe *Médula* implies that idea and matter are never separate. These pieces seem to exist between a thought and a final form since finality is a chimera. *Augas*, or waters, is too a play of dualities, a yin and yang composed of two pieces, one standing and vertical, the other, in a horizontal axis.

The notion of duality, illustrated by the idea of opposites that interact, yin and yang, pervades Chinese thought, and, in this sense, seems to have formulated a more pragmatic, and poetic, interpretation of reality than Western metaphysics. We abandoned the pre-Socratics and Heraclitus's *panta rei* for the idealist reasoning of Plato. Even the dialectic of Hegel concludes on a final form, a synthesis. Most recently, Adorno's response to it ends in negative absolutes. Western philosophy replaced the intercourse of two for the realm of the one, the contingent for the absolute. Our reality shatters when we discover that identity is never finalized but situational instead, when we learn that the self does not exclude "the other", because self and other inhabit the same territory, our bodies. We have emphasized idea over matter, the mind over the body, and in the process, we have situated ourselves in the realm of the puritan and discarded copious amounts of sensual and sexual substance and satisfaction from our daily lives. Phenomenology is one branch of Western thought that reclaims the participation of the body in the learning process. We are what we experience and we experience through our senses. Phenomenology has been used in relation to minimalist art, which required the active role of the viewer in the visual experience. Physical activity around the piece was

part of "learning" the object and, in this activity, we became aware of our presence, of ourselves. As I argued in the previous chapter, knowledge is performative and since knowledge shapes us, now I propose that the self too is performative. But phenomenology has mostly been applied in art relative to the audience. What about the artist? How does he or she learn? During the last decades of the previous century art displayed a proud prudery and chastity, especially in the making process. Toubes rejects all that and adopts materials and working methods that force him to bring his body to work. For many of his pieces produced in the Center he chose porcelain, which he likes because it possesses certain "peculiarities that make reference to the body as sensual and sexual, as generator and regenerator."[i] The sexual act disintegrates the rigidity of identity. The process of procreation is an intercourse of bodily fluids, of "augas", that reveal the formless nature of the self. *Augas* retains, more than any other piece during this decade, anthropomorphic insinuations. These pieces look pregnant, stretching to penetrate their surroundings, revealing what Barro calls "feminine energy."[i] They share the imposing dimensions of *Guerreros*, not as the result of a search for a mapping device but as a practical challenge. "We usually associate porcelain with small objects. I enjoy working in large scale,"[i] says Toubes. Large proportions demand bodily participation in the making as well as the latest technology, the hand and the machine. This dichotomy extends beyond the process to the piece itself.

Everything flows, like the space between the hollow interior and the exterior of these pieces, through the open pores of their organic surfaces, the pores from which we "lose" ourselves, the orifices from where fragments of us dissolve with our surroundings. Is the spit spewed on the pavement a part of us? The drops of sweat on the paper, is it still me? Are we trading our-selves when we exchange bodily fluids? Do I flush my-self

down the toilet again and again? The boundaries between container and contained decompose to break the principles of exclusion and inclusion, body and landscape connect in the work of Toubes; they are what the artist observes from within and from without. The landscape becomes activated by our presence in it. We create and recreate the landscape with our labor, our doings and our framing. Lippard describes labor as "the mediator, between nature and culture,"[i] and history and culture as "what defines space and its meaning to people."[i] Both culture and history are not static but instead becoming through time. Could this mean that time and space are not two separate absolute dimensions? The notion of *Ma* in Japanese aesthetics denies that interpretation by making time and space coalescent, very different, in this sense, from Western understanding of these same concepts. Time and space are "correlative and omnipresent;"[i] time is conceived to "exist relative to spaces and movement."[i] The opposite also holds true: the definition of a place, the reality of a landscape, is contingent to the time in which we experience it. Only when we move does home become an issue.

The idea of landscape reappears in another of Toubes's works: *Feixes de Luz*, a series of rectangular shaped pieces. In fact, Toubes describes *Feixes* not as things but as places, as "landscapes". In his "strolls around the world", as he calls them, he has always been captivated by the visual effects caused by light. To capture these effects has traditionally been the job of the painter, not the ceramist. Toubes protests the interpretation of *Feixes* as paintings. "They are flat and hang on the wall but their making process is radically different and much more complex" he argues, "…my body contributes differently."[i] Also, the high temperatures to which clay and porcelain are subjected have a much stronger transforming power. Toubes's fascination with light has to do with an investigation of his surroundings, of how objects exist in space and how

light delimits and describes them. Light comes to define the infinite landscape, while exhibiting its own protean nature. By changing from place to place, from instant to instant, light is both bounding and bounded by time and space. There is also an interest for manifesting the immaterial, in giving shape to the invisible. Light is not tangible and yet brings a sense of tangibility and corporeality to everything visible. These pieces perform the opposite effect by looking as though they are restraining light underneath a shell of porcelain. They are light containers, "sheaves of light". As Toubes explains, "*Feixes* is about the idea of mixing different materials to produce something that seems immaterial."[i] Toubes takes the role of the alchemist to experiment and transmute certain materials into new and different materials, but instead of base metals into gold, he transforms porcelain and glazes into light. He wants to give shape to the invisible. "I have always been interested in the notion of landscape and later in my career this landscape has become an interior one. I aspire to give materiality to this interior landscape."[i] Scientists speak about other dimensions of reality that light is able to reveal. "Landscape is not only what my eyes see, but also the structures invisible to the eye, the "fields" that scientists tell me are fundamental in comprehending reality."[i] From the meaning of "fields" as things that are invisible to the eye, and yet very much a part of reality, comes a very solid and visible piece bearing that name. With *Field*, Toubes wanted to bring sensuality to these scientific notions and to humbly intervene in the continuous transformation of matter. He imagined and constructed this "almost impossible" fight with gravity, this horizontal plane marked by transparent waves of porcelain. "Once you have proven a possibility, you open a new path of knowledge,"[i] advocates Toubes.

Physics rather than metaphysics has disrupted our feeling of comfort by atomizing our secure and rigid notion of reality, by learning through proximity and telling us that distance, like the kind the historian needs, is deceiving. *Field* is like a state of being, which is never static but always evolving, like the constant exchange of particles in a quantum field. The closer we come to this 'field" the better we can sense it. As Vincent McGourty explains,

> Many scientists have proposed new ways of looking to our notion of autonomous self; and in doing so have suggested that we can see this density, which we call our individuality, instead as a constant motion of atoms. If even this idea of an inviolate body, most personal of symbolic enclosures, is an illusion, where does that leave the concept of the vessel? By multiple piercing of the vessel there is an attempt, in the work of Toubes, to drain off the fixity of what we accept as the identity of vesselhood; thereby spiking the very sanctum of moribund assumptions. The flow is paradoxically both ways because the holes allow us to access the inner space of the vessel, which at the same time they render void.[i]

Field is a vessel trying to condense reality in one block that is not as solid and impenetrable as it appears when we first encounter it. It surprises for the translucence of its material and possesses "the ambiguity of being very real, fixed, when in fact, *Field* is nothing,"[i] nothing concrete and yet a very concrete nothing. It plays with the contradiction of being still and yet alive, if we believe what science tells us, trying to actualize the boundaries between presence and absence. *Field* is a bed, is a counter of activity and change, where the artist places a still life. Toubes explains, "I am also interested in the idea of the work table as the place where the *still life* exists, like on a surgeon's table, where the investigation, the learning, as observation and practice, takes place.[i] Here again is the idea of gaining knowledge by seeing and doing. Toubes is not far from the Dutch painters of the 17th century, for according to Svetlana Alpers, the tradition of Dutch still life and painting in general were closely linked with British

Empiricism and advances in the field of optics taking place at that time. Empiricism, similar to Phenomenology in the 20th century, placed emphasis on sensorial over intellectual activity in the experience of reality. In fact, Toubes acknowledges to have always been captivated by the work of another strong tradition of still life painting in Europe during the Baroque, the Spanish school, particularly Zurbarán's *bodegones*.

Observation and movement reject instantaneity. In a still life, object and artist engage in a rapport with time. The artist tries to extract time from the object, to freeze it for all eternity, between thing and poetic, between reality and representation. But nothing exists outside of time and everything, and that includes identity, is as temporal as it is spatial. For too long we have overlooked the temporal component of our identities. The West has insisted on understanding the self as timeless. But as Toubes says, "the notion of the still life is a beautiful paradox."[i] The still self is also an impossibility.

Although many of the pieces that Toubes worked on during the decade of the 90s look into the idea of time shaping the identity-form of the object, there are a number of pieces that are classified under the rubric of still life. Their most obvious trait by comparison to the other pieces I have written on so far is their small and "intimate" size. *Pia Mater* and *Dura Mater* belong to this group, which continues to explore the idea of the object becoming. These pieces witness the origin, the beginning of things, when in reality, "everything is a beginning."[i] We could imagine trees bursting forth, minute hands emerging to the surface, balloons about to blow up or perhaps thoughts materializing, since pia and dura mater are the names of the thin and the hard membranes that enfold the brain. Mater, mother, the brain as agent of regeneration from which ideas, desires, intentions and beliefs, informed by our senses, spring. The head, the brain, reappears here as shell, as container of the liaison and confrontation that memory and

forgetfulness act out and which give birth to the creation of new meanings and narratives. Recollection and oblivion are both dwellers of our mind, forging new forms of the self through the cycle of continuation and disruption.

Toubes's work professes a belief in the suggestive power of art by confronting contradictions, exposing ambiguities and playing with the double nature and meaning of all things, and reminds us of the impossibility of finality. His intention is not to provide answers but instead possibilities. At the same time, however, he requires that his working conditions be very methodical and organized. "I am a nomad but a nomad that acts with very structured processes."[i] Many of the pieces that I presented here became possible only in the context of the Center and its technological possibilities. From this need and from a critical respect given to the environment where the artist learns and works, Toubes in collaboration with a group of other artists, derived the idea of the EKWC and, as artistic director for eight years, vitally contributed to its concept and purpose. The Center has two objectives, one specific that searches for a new language for ceramics to bring the process to the forefront and thus demystify the identity of the artist, and a second that involves the need for a space with the material possibilities for that search to take shape. I will take now a closer look at this institution that has gone from designed space to working place, becoming a very complex project where method and freedom, group and individuals interact within the intricacy of social as well as economic factors. Toubes was seeking for a work and an environment that is both "effective and affective."[i]

The EKWC: a new form of art agent

The idea of the Center focuses specifically on the investigation and analysis of ceramics. But as an art learning institution offers a series of possibilities that Toubes hoped could extend to the study of art in general. "He believed in the larger potential of the Center: of the added dimension to creative dialogue- of small interactions, the accumulation of these social participations without the intervention of ideological platforms and the usual limitations of time or geography directing discourse. "This is part of the Center's potent constituency,"[i] writes Vincent McGourty in one of the EKWC's bulletin. His previous job as an educator in North Carolina allowed him to bring experience and understanding to a situation with great promise.

Continuous learning

Among the main missions to be carried out by the Center from its inception, is providing a place where the adult artist can continue his or her learning. This idea, radical and challenging, has lured artists and designers like Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg, Hella Jongherious, Tony Hepburn, Rob Birza or Jun Kaneko. It works in two opposite directions. It offers the opportunity for those with a desire to learn outside of traditional institutions and with the latest technical developments (Anton Reijnders, the workshop coordinator has made an ongoing investigation into ceramic materials and processes which will be published in the near future). By doing so it confronts the established artist with the reality of there always being something to learn and that the knowledge and unearthing of resources is not reduced to a few years of their lives. The average age in

the Center is forty and most of its constituency is built by artists who are entirely unfamiliar with ceramics, giving the research greater depth and persuasive soundness, and arriving at solutions and concessions with fiercer contention. Our traditional systems of education follow a pattern that understands the shaping of identity as something final, according to a very precise period of time and very specific institutions. Stuart Hall defines identity as "a structured representation, which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative."[i] Translating this in terms of the self and the other simply means that we are what others are not and vice versa. But perhaps more poignant and tyrannical is the idea that by already being, that is, by being something complete we cannot evolve into anything else, anything different.

When we are young we are given the tools to function in the world and produce, for others, and then set free. This means that our identities are shaped and finally fixed early in our lives, with nothing more to discover. What distinguishes the EKWC from similar institutions in the Netherlands and abroad, is "creating a place that responds to a very profound need in society that still at this stage in modernism is infatuated with the young and the idea of youth as the only source of the new."[i] Conventional learning takes place from the teacher to the student, emphasizing instruction rather than experience; it reinforces the learning process as a rational activity. This, of course, implies first, a dogmatic structuring of identity and second, that our only device for learning is our mind and our bodies and senses simply follow along. Contradictorily enough, when our bodies start to show signs of ware, we are bluntly discarded as useless. Old age, and other "anomalous" manifestations of the self, such as the exile experience, could be classified under the label of the *ego interruptus*, the fractured "I".

Traditional education is also characterized by homogeneity and neutrality, which are essential in giving birth to the capitalist subject, the consumer. As artist Susan Hiller expresses, "a lot of effort of education in our system is to discourage people from thinking outside of categories, thinking in-between places."[i] We consume knowledge like we do everything else. Education commonly answers to the goals of the political group, which by reducing differences in taste, opinions and preferences and by fabricating a single, common, official position, also reduces questioning, demand and skepticism. A cultural and educational system planned and granted by the state needs to forge and finalize its subjects in order to complete the cycle of production. Education can be applied as a tool to counter desires, intentions, objectives and thoughts. Many art schools and institutions live obsessed with "inventing, or worse, dictating the future", as Toubes explains, with discovering the next best thing. "This obsession is indicative of a very traditional sense of life,"[i] he argues, in which knowledge can be an instrument of oppressive and manipulative power. Our learning process culminates in our ability to produce capital, but not in our ability to produce in the sense of devising, creating or making directly for our needs, no matter how "impractical", and for ourselves. "We are given the tools to survive, when in fact what we should be doing is learning how to create."[i] The Center intends to recuperate the meaning of these pursuits and of continuous practice. It emphasizes the importance of technological innovations as a driving motor in the course of art making. But instead of passing on static ideas, the Center transforms the artist studio into not just a working, but a learning place, into a laboratory where investigation and physical engagement are necessary. The studio becomes a place where the individual attempts to find a compromise between the object and the art process, individual work and cooperative research. The Center conceives the

self as empirical, stealing the protagonist role from critics and curators in the shaping of the art practice, allowing the individual to act upon knowledge and recuperating sensorial activity for the learning process. "To be is to exist with others, to exist is to perceive oneself as being-in-the-world, as being-with-others."[i] Teaching, learning, and thus identity never take a final form. Through performance, the self at once penetrates and recreates the domains of the cultural and the social, it fabricates a new context in which to operate and create meaning, and acknowledges the subjective nature of the object's reality. Academies lack students that arrive at them with the innocence of ignorance and the courage to question and doubt. In many instances, schools have become places where one arrives not to learn but to confirm and frieze what one presumes to know, looking for those instructors from whom to devour "wisdom" and proceed. The Center is based on opposing premises. Its patron is the untrained student who comes to acquire a language, ceramics, whose traditional meaning the Center has expunged to make the learning process poetic, for its capacity to suggest, and pragmatic, for its ability to generate shifts and difference. The Center encourages creativity as the only, or at least, as the most effective engineer of change, of shaping our landscape, our history, personal and collective, and our culture. Toubes writes, "the Center is in the process of creating cultural symbols…It confronts because traditionally symbols belong to a group, are a cultural property, a matter to be defended", and concludes, "when the Center creates, it becomes a destabilizer. Without rules, without style, without authority, a group of individuals well versed in the demands of modernity, deal with the most internal and public of the exchanges and actions."[i]

The Center as international art establishment

Why the need for an international institution like the Center? Art and other cultural symbols have inherently been the property of the nation. The cultural group has historically corresponded with the national group. But after the twentieth century national categories cannot define the art community and, most importantly, its production. How then do we define them? If art ceases to be a public engagement, would the alternative become a form of art exclusively private? Who should bare the responsibilities of this undertaking? Who should be implicated in art's project? Toubes hints at some of the answer when he affirms: "The state is involved in too many and too very complicated matters to acknowledge many of the needs of the public. Much less when this public is made up of individuals with needs other than functional requirements. The problem is obvious and we probably are in a stage in the development of democracy and society where new agents (other than conventional organizations of state, church, educational institutions) should take on the initiative and the project. Agents that have the passion to do the 'archeology' of the situation…"[i] Although partly subsidized by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the EKWC is a private institution.

In many ways, the Center came as a reflection on the cultural wars and debates of the seventies and eighties. First, as I have been insisting throughout these pages, it became a means to reclaim the physical participation of the artist, to "recuperate the possibility of *making* and of learning how to make."[i] But most significantly to confront the hegemony of certain cultural and artistic trends and practices dominating the art scene in the late part of the 20th century. The Center proposed a backdrop for alternative

answers. This is what author Catherine Ugwu alludes to regarding new ways of representing and interpreting art when she writes: "We must find ways to leave room for individual responses and interpretations while producing appropriate framework… The legitimization of practices by institutions is part of the process of increasing the visibility of marginalized artists and cultures."[i] The EKWC breaks the duality of center and periphery because it situates itself in the margins within the center. It questions the location of the margins. Namely, it welcomes recognized artists among its constituency to partake in the deconstruction of meanings that they themselves have helped to create as members of the center of culture and art, and to face a medium, ceramics, that in many ways still retains national peculiarities. But if the EKWC lacks a "centered" position, does this make it international?

As I mentioned previously, its patronage consists of established adult artists that come from the Netherlands and elsewhere. Browsing through any of its catalogs or newsletters of the nineties, the reader discovers that resident artists are listed in connection with more than just their country of nationality, distinguishing multiple points of origin for the artist and his or her work. Although this is not unique to the Center, it is indicative of the impossibility to classify this production under national compartments. National identity has ceased to correspond with cultural identity. Artists are not borrowing exclusively from the exhausting and exhausted confines of the nation. The working place, the locality where the artist produces, whether or not it coincides with his or her birthplace, has become a more valid definition of home. Or, as John Berger writes, "home is the place from which we become cognizant of the world and in which we construct meaning."[i] The question remains. Is the EKWC an international institution? It

is supranational and therefore international, but to this reasoning I would also add that the identity of the Center is infranational as well, it is *local*.

I contrast both the local and the international against the national because the latter has ceased to be the appropriate framework to confront the conditions and appreciate the assets of cultural production. How can the state directly take up the responsibility of answering to the demands of a group of individuals, the artists, who do not produce anything of direct material value, who do not "solve anything"? Art long ago gave over the role of biographer of national virtues and triumphs and is now the voicing instrument of dissenters and decentered segments of society who do not fit the description of the traditional national subject. The phenomenon of migration has only accelerated and intensified this trend. Culture today cannot help the nation "gain a clear image of itself."[i] Instead it has to confront the cultural ambiguity of its fastest growing demographics, the migrant, the nomad, artist or otherwise. The crux of the migrant is too particular to possess national interest, or so we believe, and yet at the same time, it transcends the limits of the nation. But does this undermining of the nation mean that internationalism has then become the current representative of art's project. That seems to be the alternative some propose. What exactly do they mean by "internationalism"?

For many, internationalism simply means the exportation of Western values to the rest of the world, and according to this interpretation, globalization has become the implement by which this cultural uniformity has been expedited and strengthened. But is this really a one-way process? The migrant has come to disrupt the unidirectional character of internationalism. Until recently, *the other* was nothing more than the product of orientalizing practices. *The other* was an illusion, a representation that was everything that the Western self was not. But *the other* is now an actual presence that has

arrived in the form of the migrant to live next door and to remind us that the so-called West has all along been the counter-illusion that never responded to a concrete reality. To accept the West and a Western tradition is to presume a single origin and an enclosed and consummated entity. How then can change take place? Are the actors of change, wherever they may be located, part of the same Western tradition they contribute to disrupt? If so, the possibility of inclusion and exclusion becomes impracticable. What the West has come to signify is not a geographical location, that was always arbitrary to begin with, or a philosophical system. The West simply translates as an instrument of power and whoever possesses it, situate themselves in the "West." Power then never shifts; it is always in the West, wherever this may be.

There is another version of internationalism advertising an alleged universalism that stands behind a shared fundamental nature and argues that our differences can be settled or, at least, overcome, through these essential qualities. This argument is dangerous because, as Stuart Hall indicates, it identifies the global with "that sort of lowest common denominator stake which we all have in being human", and continues, "in that sense, I'm not a humanist. I do not think we can mobilize people simply through their common humanity."[i] This search for and progression toward the universal hides behind a bourgeois humanism that encourages conformity and aspires to preserve the status quo. The recipe that equates the global with the universal is also preposterous because the nomad exposes the arbitrariness of the signs that dictate our lives and because we humans thrive in conflict. Antagonism is the medium in which we blossom.

Before returning to this statement it should be interesting to point out that these two versions of internationalism correspond largely with what Anthony King has termed cultural homogenization and cultural synchronization respectively. But there is yet a

third variant that King describes as cultural proliferation, which would acknowledge the local(s) and the lack of uniformity and homogeneity that defines identity. In this sense, the global would illustrate Hall's definition of it as "something having more to do with the hegemonic sweep at which a certain configuration of local particularities try to dominate the whole scene, to mobilize the technology and to incorporate, in subaltern positions, a variety of more localized identities to construct the next historical project."[i] This is, in other words, what we have known so far as the "West." But as I declared previously, the West, the "dominant particular", has less to do with a one-origin, one-direction reality than with a historical construction that justifies the influence and control of any commanding group longing homogenization. Globalization understood as cultural proliferation however admits of necessity the existence of other locals that through assimilation and resistance feed from, reject, challenge, decompose and recompose the hegemonic local. The EKWC is one of these other locals and consequently one of the new agents Toubes proposes. In the Center, the artist confronts problems privately and yet, within a shared context, within a space of international, "multilocal" origins. The learned explanations and practiced mechanisms the participant artists assign to known and new issues are challenged by the solutions presented by their colleagues. Toubes explains: "It is new for many artists that the dialogue in the EKWC is not set in terms of issues and established discourse. They welcome a situation with pluralistic proposals, a dialogue that is not structured, nor does it have fixed concepts and definitions. The dialogue, in a situation like ours, has to come from need and intellectual curiosity. It requires the courage and intelligence to navigate in different waters and the construction of real tolerance, which denies the authority that success wrongly often assumes."[i]

The "dominant particular" is always contested and thus recreated. The EKWC is a model of how to solve very specific, local concerns. When the investigation of ceramics is not facilitated by many other institutions, the Center comes to rescue and reconstruct what once was an expiring pursuit. It is an example of how a community created artificially can thrive and produce results that are valid for and applicable in a larger collective. Via artificial means is after all how all communities come to exist. It is not an essential proclivity or a manifest destiny but the artist's personal and direct intervention that consciously and meaningfully acts upon his or her environment. Only the learned landscape, the experienced context can acquire meaning and create difference.

The local is the only space which humans can experience visually, physically as well as intellectually, whereas nations are not more than ideas, representations. Lippard writes that a "sense of place does indeed emerge from the senses. The land can be experienced kinetically, or kinesthetically, as well as visually."[i] The concept of the nation must remain objective, must be finalized, whereas the local, the regional is "subjectively defined."[i] The author offers Michael Steiner's definition of a region to illustrate her reasoning: "the largest unit of territory about which a person can grasp 'the concrete realities of the land', or which can be contained in a person's genuine sense of place."[i] The Center situates itself as that kind of territory, where meaning can be forged, creating a space that through the participation of the artist who brings lived experience and experienced knowledge transforms it into a place charged with personal and cultural significance. The nation works as a stabilizer while the local attempts to recover the meaning of *being* as a continuous unfolding, a state of flux in which identity endures in disruption, recurs in change. The self never grows towards wholeness. It overlaps

sequences instead. Each "phase of the growth" is complete in and of itself. Identity is constant movement but in this movement, we come around building certain patterns as a mapping device. We have come to know these landmarks as traditions and rituals. This explains the sharp alertness of the nomad, whose signposts are unfixed and ephemeral. Furthermore, when we find invulnerability and salvation in the fabrication of traditions, we forsake the possibilities of curiosity and what follows is asphyxiation. The ambiguity and arrival of the nomad can, in this situation, become significantly disrupting and positively agitating. Only in the local can the outsider leave his or her mark, interrupt its existing inertia and homogeneity and overthrow the narrowness and obstinacy of cultural purity. When this happens the local ceases to be a generator of regionalism or "parochialism"[i] to be a place that continuously reenacts itself. The local does not fundamentally refer to a unit of land smaller than the nation-state. I use this concept instead as the space we can come to know physically and therefore penetrate and reactivate, as the space within and without the nation where change and exchange are always possible. Globalization is the condition under which the local(s) transacts today. This transaction however is never finalized, never *synthesized* into one conclusive and exclusive cultural form. The nature of the local is a dynamic one where the nomad performs as agent of repetition and difference.

The EKWC does not seek solutions but inquiry and contention. It is "not merely a place for the production of things,"[i] but to recover the "futile" purport of something as local, as insular as ceramics and art, and to invent new possibilities for the suggestive force of the visual. The role of the artist, in and outside of the Center, is to negotiate his or her work between redundancy and renewal and to remind us that the particular is still today a valid target. The condition of art is that of the migrant: too specific, too intimate

to be of consequence to the political group, yet its necessity and inevitability surmount national boundaries. The Center offers to mediate between the individual and the group, the private and the public, the local enterprise and the global machine.

[i] Marc Robinson, introduction to *Altogether Elsewhere,* p. XIX.

[i] Barro, p. 14.

[i] Formerly known as the Post-Academy Ceramic Work Center.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 20 March 2001.

[i] Xavier Toubes, "Archeology" in *A New Expression of the Earth: The Experiences of the European Ceramics Work Centre.* (Galicia, Spain: Fundación Luis Seoane, December, 1997-January, 1998), np.

[i] Xavier Toubes, "A Thought" in *EKWC Bulletin*, no. 1, 1993.

[i] Vincent McGourty "Hot Matter, New Constituency" in *EKWC Bulletin,* September 2000, p.13.

[i] Robinson, p. XIV.

[i] Toubes, "Archeology", np.

[i] Anthony King, ed., introduction to *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity,* (London: MacMillam Education Ltd., 1991), p. 14.

[i] Toubes, "Archeology", np.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 20 March 2001.

[i] Toubes, "Archeology", np.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 December 2000.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 January 2001.

[i] Barro, p. 19.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 January 2001.

[i] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society,* (New York: The New York Press, 1997), p. 8.

[i] Lippard, p. 11.

[i] *Ma: Space-Time of Japan,* (New York: Cooper Hewitt Museum, 1978), p. 12.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 29 January 2001.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Xavier Toubes, "Luz do Norte" in *Xavier Toubes: Luz do Norte.* Ourense, (Spain: Galería Marisa Marimón, 23 January-
27 February, 1999), p. 12.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 29 January 2001.

[i] Vincent McGourty, *Xavier Toubes: New Worlds-New Vessels*, Art & Perception,N44,2001 Sydney,Australia
[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 29 January 2001.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 20 March 2001.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 December 2000.

[i] Ibid.

[i] McGourty, "Hot Matter, New Constituency" p. 13.

[i] Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global" in *Culture, Globalization and The World System,* p. 21.

[i] Xavier Toubes, "A thought" in *EKWC Bulletin*, no. 1, 1994.

[i] Susan Hiller, *A Fruitful Incoherence,* p. 31.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 18 January 2001.

[i] Valentin Ives Mudimbe, "Diversity and Meeting Worlds" in *Global Encounters in the World of Art,* p. 85.

[i] Toubes, "A thought" in *EKWC Bulletin*, no. 1, 1994.

[i] Toubes, "Archeology", np.

[i] Toubes, interviewed by Rebeca Pérez, tape recording, Chicago, 20 March 2001.

[i] Catherine Ugwu, "The Art of Conflict" in *Global Encounters in the World of Art*, p. 75.

[i] John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos,* (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), p. 55.

[i] Papastergiades, *The Turbulence of Migration,* p. 122.

[i] Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities", in *Culture, Globalization and The World-System,* p. 67.

[i] Ibid.

[i] Toubes, "A thought" in *EKWC Bulletin*, no. 1, 1994.

[i] Lippard, p. 34.

[i] Ibid, p. 35.

[i] Ibid, p. 34.

[i] In his review of S.A. Mansbach's *Modern Art in Eastern Europe,* James Elkins distinguishes three "species of regionalism": regionalism, provincialism and parochialism. "Regionalism" explains the case of artists concerned with the exploration of their own cultural particularisms despite their awareness of outside trends. "Provincialism" takes place when the artist's interest in outside influences and movements is impeded by economic or political affairs. Finally, "parochialism" is the term Elkins uses to "describe the case of an artist who knows something is happening in some other region, but is afraid to find out too much".
[i] Toubes, "A thought" in *EKWC Bulletin*, no. 1, 1994.