

**A REPORT ON E.M.W.A.P.
(EUROPEAN MIDDLE WEST ARTS PROJECT)
FESTIVAL IN ISTANBUL**

by the debators:

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Thoughts and Evaluations on E.M.W.A.P (European Middle West Arts Project) Festival

by Ata Ünal

European Middle West Arts Project, as we can see through our perspectives of mere spectators and “debaters”, is a project driven by both a conceptual and pragmatic approach and motive, closely related to a kind of research of the creative process of the artists from various disciplines and backgrounds. From its brief documents we see that it had passed through a number of phases prior to its presentation within the framework of a festival in Istanbul between March 17 and April 5, 2015. These phases are stated to include Research and Production followed by the Presentation of which the festival in Istanbul comprises a leg. Besides incorporating artists from diverse backgrounds, meaning various disciplines, different countries, and different styles and different approaches to their craft and art, EMWAP involves a number of partners and supporters from different countries, holding the quality of a true European project; multiculturalism, multidisciplinary, multi approach at work!

The project and the festival invoke interesting implications through coining the term “European Middle West” in its name, as a response to the associations, engagements and preconceptions of the cliché of “Middle East”. It was defined as “a hybrid space between East and West”. In this sense, actually it also implies through terminological subtlety the need for closer and more frequent contact, true communication, artistic dialogue, collaboration and partnership without borders of any kind, support for creative process and promotion of hybridity of all kinds which supports and enriches the artistic process and product. In this regard, EMWAP tries to create a medium as a project and facilitate all these as a festival.

As an addition to the festival, and as a layer with the intention of providing an informative medium between the audience, debaters and the artists about the creative processes behind the works in the festival, a debate / aftertalk held after each performance. These debates were also intended to provide a perspective for critical evaluation and diverse observation possibilities for the audience, the debaters and even the artists towards the works. Also these aftertalks / debates served as an observation, research and evaluation basis on the preliminarily declared approaches of the project, mentioned in the conceptual framework of the festival.

Before moving further, some words on the double terminology I used above: The people who are in charge of the festival's production and management used the word 'debate' mostly and 'aftertalk' less frequently, in their introductory documents and conceptual framework, for the talks we carried out after the performances. Though both words imply coinciding functions within the context of what we did after the performances, they also have diverse connotations or implications. So I must mention in advance that, what we did can be considered as aftertalks in terms of format regarding its immediate following of the performance and its taking place in the same venue with the performance, involving both the artists and the audience. They can also qualify as debates in terms of content and context regarding the interest not only in the visible product on stage or in the performance realm but also in the creative process and the background conceptual and pragmatic associations and relations and production phases and their effects on the artistic product. So apart from the terminology preferences, what we did can actually be regarded as conversations with the intention of a kind of artistic research with the artists and the audience. So I will also use both words through out the document, but will mostly prefer to use the word debate, as written in the conceptual framework document, as a debater.

Since a main objective of the debates was a kind of artistic research within the conceptual framework of the EMWAP Festival, as mentioned above, it is decided to constitute a debate team which is able to encompass the interdisciplinary and hybrid

characteristics of the works presented. So three artist and/or scholars from different backgrounds, namely theater & performance, dance & performance and visual arts were assigned as 'fixed' debaters, whom served as debaters for all of the aftertalks after the performances. Also an additional debater who only involved in a specific performance's debate, joined the fixed team as a 'specialised debater'. This extra debater, who changes for each performance, was an artist, academic or a researcher from the field or discipline which that specific performance is considered to mainly include the characteristics of and/or a person who is familiar with the work or the artists' prior works.

Below are the names and fields of work of all the debaters. The titles of the performances of which the specialized debaters actively participated in the aftertalks are also mentioned.

Fixed Debaters

Elmas Deniz, Visual Arts

Berna Kurt, Dance & Performance

Ata Ünal, Theater & Performance

Specialized Debaters

Deniz Gul, Visual Arts (Curating Space)

Zeynep Gunsur Yuceil, Dance & Performance (Schwalbe Cheats)

Bengi Bugay, Sceneography, Stage Design (Autonomous Scenography)

Gurur Ertem, Dance & Performance (We Need to Move Urgently)

Basak Ozdogan, Scenography, Stage Design (Holy Holy Holy)

Pieter Verstrate, Theater (Shrapnel: 34 Fragments of a Massacre)

So this approach and the people chosen for the aftertalks as debaters, were a consequence of the issues and topics at stake mentioned in the motives of the EMWAP and the EMWAP Festival. I must mention that the debaters, specially the fixed ones, also served as facilitators of the aftertalks, and mediators between the artists, audience and the debaters themselves for an intended productive conversation and also in triggering a sort of moderated brain storming on the subject matters, their associations, other issues inspired by or related to the discussions.

As can be seen above, six aftertalks took place after six works presented in the EMWAP Festival. The debates were carried out in English and Turkish, with a consecutive translation to and from both languages, mostly by the debaters. I also functioned as the facilitator/ moderator of the debates, initiating them, doing the introductions, asking the triggering questions to the artists, other debaters and the audience, and wrapping up at the end.

These post performance debates approximately lasted between 45-120 minutes, mostly determined by the active participation of the audience.

One point that we should not omit to mention is that, before every performance the permanent debater team had a brief introductory meeting with the guest speaker (or the 'specialised debater') for that specific work, sometimes including the artist(s) where possible. These meeting helped getting familiar with eachother, having a preliminary information on the production and creative process of the artists, and exchange views on how to conduct the after talk congruent to the nature of that performance, will of the artists, and the intended function of the debates. That was not always an easy to reach agreement.

The immediacy of this confrontation actually did not always allow to follow the rough path agreed upon before the performances, but enriched and diversified the debates with the spontaneous and improvisational character of the conversation. So this presented the opportunity to invoke different associations and inspirations besides the

predeclared central notions of the festival. The readers of this document might observe the traces among the three different parts, penned separately by the three fixed debaters.

The works which took place in EMWAP were produced in the last two years, with the collaboration of four production partners, many artists from diverse backgrounds, different countries of origin and / or residency, various disciplines, different cultures and approaches. As the effects and consequences of this kind of collaboration, diversification and working culture would probably be visible and identified in the resulting productions, the primary notions of the EMWAP Festival were declared to be 'Variability' and 'Hybridity' which bring 'uncertainty', versatility', adaptation, flexibility, diversity, mobility, participation, local/global oximoron relationship along with them. The above notions were to be considered not only for the content, context or form of the works themselves but also the position and status of the artists and production modes and facilities they operated in. We must add that also the profiles of the debaters from different disciplines, backgrounds, ages and artistic approaches contributed to elaborating on these notions by adding another layer to addressing the issues with the catalyst effect of an actively participating audience in the debates.

This project focuses clearly on the contemporary European art scene and on the migration movements that are active within that scene; not by approaching it from a social point of view, but according to a contemporary vision on interculturality taking the influence of the modern nomadic status on the artist as its main focus.

Curating Space (Erki De Vries, Pieter Huybrechts, Kris Delacourt)

Curating Space presented as an exhibition and a performance actually resides more on the side of a performative installation, I would call. It is simply an installation of frames and frame like objects, supported by a sound installation and reflected photographs taken in advance mostly in Istanbul and photographs taken during the exhibition, during

present time in the exhibition space, sometimes very close to real time imaging. The place and position of the frames and also the simple announcement speaker is being constantly changed but in a slow pace by the artists, all along the day.

The profiles of the artists, a photographer, a musician and a scenographer contributes a lot to the hybridity of the work along with the time they spent in Istanbul and Antwerp, not only in different socio-cultural environments but also in different means and modes of production. Since they also experimented on the material they used during the residencies, especially different resources and facilities they were able to and not able to reach had a remarkable effect on their work. So this research period on material also points out the 'variability' facilitated by the possibilities and means present or not present in a city, with a wider perspective in a geographical and socio-economical environment. Further more, as its name strongly emphasizes, the physical space itself, where the installation is 'performed', is a main parameter of this variability. Hence, Curating space was the work which implied variability the most, within this context in the EMWAP Festival.

Schwalbe Cheats (The Schwalbe Collective)

The performers have a very strong presence on stage during the performance and this presence moves back and forth between fiction and reality staying mostly in the transitional zone in between. So the performance brings into question transgression between fiction and reality despite its pre-implied fictional character through a game setting / play making process, rule by rule, step by step. In time the stage show opens up into a fun and then transforming slowly into a violent game. Interestingly enough, the audience's perception and feelings towards the performance incorporates both of a fictional and documentary one. Integrating the concept and act of cheating actually supports this seemingly paradoxical but actually very truthful performative 'double entendre'. The stage is a play ground and a battle ground at the same time, which also

brings into mind historic and socio-anthropological link between sports, olympic games and war. The performance creates through pure action, a realm as naive as childhood games and as violent as human fights and wars, and as inevitable as struggle to survive.

Though it seems to have an approach to avoid representation, for the 'specialised debater' Zeynep Gunsur, and also in a way for the artists and some of the audience, it is not possible for this kind of I would say 'refined through action' performances, to escape from representational 'reading of the stage'. Actually the human mind have a tendency to interpret or associate what they encounter on stage given the frame of the stage, the characteristic of the performance, setting up rules, cheating, etc. So emphasizing the presence of the performer, through action that sometimes incorporates immediate response on stage on one side, did not avoid, but rather stimulated the audience's imagination and opened associative spaces for interpretation. This implies a representational processing of image (action, word, etc).

The double pattern of rules & cheating (transgression) was supported by the performance, such that it was in many parts hard to guess if it was rehearsed / planned or improvised. Besides, even if the line between the performers and the audience was very clearly drawn in terms of physical space, this line became more and more vague and indistinct in the minds of the audience as the performance proceeded. And this happened without any attempt of interaction between the stage and the audience.

I think the success of Schwalbe Cheats lies not only in its layered structure, which incorporates a 'performative double entendre' at almost every level it creates, but also in its simple and refined dramaturgy. The Schwalbe Collective is able to tell about a lot of things, stimulate imagination, invoke diverse feelings through pure action supported by a very functional lighting, in probably one of the most simplistic and refined ways, that a lot of distinguished people from various disciplines could do through expensive productions, flamboyant films full of stunning effects or long, hard to shoot documentaries.

Aside from the hybridity of the group as a consequence of the different countries of origin of its members, there was no explicit emphasis on the motivational notions of EMWAP, but rather a subtle implication of almost all of them, embedded in transitional zone between the presence of the performer and the inevitably representational realm they create.

Autonomous Scenography (Meryem Bayram)

Autonomous Scenography was probably one of the most interesting performances of the EMWAP festival, if not the most. By definition and initiation, it was a performance out of pure scenographic approach to the stage or space, also incorporating two very good performers of quite different characteristics. The performance on stage also implied an experimentation with the material, form and action in a very organic way, which took place before and on the venue, in front of the audience. Speaking of the material, as Bengi Bugay mentioned, it was cardboard (paper), which is a very 'warm' material with which almost all of us were familiar from childhood, by doing many things with it. It was also an very 'earthly' material which accomodates many possibilities for simple but creative utilization. The atmosphere created on stage by the two performers Gaetan Bulourde and Clément Layes, along with the visual artist Pol Matthé who did his first ever lighting design, and the sound designer Charo Calvo was remarkable. Another remarkable characteristic of the work was using a single and simple material, and employing mainly two simple actions, folding and detaching, which unfolds a world in front of an audience. Actually we must say there were two worlds. One was Clément Layes's more mechanical, repetitional and geometric realm, which implies a more distanced, closed and self-contained and abstract one, and the other was Gaetan Bulourde's non repetitional, curved realm, which implies a warmer, , softer, more communicative , open and spatial one. But as performance progresses these two worlds get in touch in a slow but effective pace. The performers dealing with the cardboards

invokes in mind a number of unexpected associations such as the relation between the stable 'figure' and 'figuring out' an action. The performers shape the space while the space shapes them back. And this is just pure playing also, like playing a childhood play. So the relationship with the material and form and the space you create yourself in comes into consideration in a very inspirational way.

The visual realm created recalls a reference to the famous painter and art theoretician Kazimir Malevich's suprematism and to the constructivists. One can also see an association with the approach of Sol Lewitt, as Clément Layes mentioned in the debate.

Light and sound also plays quite an important role in the performance. Light is actually performs as not a unifying but more as a binding, interconnecting element of the two distinct worlds created by the two performers. In doing this, Pol Matthé employs a distanced, abstract but balancing approach to lights' function. Charo Calvo utilizes sound in a non-descriptive manner, which creates space for personal interpretation of the audience. This approach was also supporting the abstract characteristic of the whole work.

Autonomous Scenography, inspired by the 3D pop-up childrens books, employs figures but is a non figurative and non illustrative work in essence. So in the end evoking a garden of associations, it actually creates an abstract realm which is able to open up worlds without telling a story. In this realm, the scenographic object of the familiar world of the stage, becomes the subject itself, rendering the performers objects.

Autonomous Scenography is a very good example of hybridity, muticulturality, multidisciplinary, not only involving a scenograph, a dancer and choreographer, a performance artist, a visual artist of different countries, but also employing different and interesting approaches to the creation of a stage performance in this sense.

We Need to Move Urgently (TalDans)

We Need to Move Urgently is a work with an obvious main theme of Gezi Park demonstrations which took place in Istanbul Turkey, in the summer of 2013. The work itself can be defined as a kind of catalog of the images and events of Gezi Park demonstrations, documented in terms of movement, sounds and objects. It actually bears both a documentary and an installation like character.

The performance starts and ends with an apple, which has a vast link of connotations in many cultures, including its implications to knowledge, forbidden acts, forbidden desires, its being a symbol of disobedience, etc. These all actually conform with the initiative motif of the work, which is closely related to the Gezi Park demonstrations, but it actually is a rather obvious one. Action starts with the transgression of a white line, the movements, dances, iconic objects, barricades, sounds and some of the notions of the Gezi demonstrations were transferred onto stage, sometimes with direct references, sometimes through a level of abstraction. While trying to set up a historical connection, the work actually in a way alienates Gezi, as a consequence of the archival utilization of the objects.

A long scene of the performance involves throwing the objects, and gathering them at the other side randomly, forming a barricade on stage. So this scene creates a dynamism on stage, and a very effective usage of the 'found objects'. A very questionable choreographic element in the piece was the appropriation of Halay (a form of Turkish folk dance which people performed a lot during Gezi demonstrations) to symbolize and even emphasize solidarity. Since it did not reflect or even evoke the contextual affection, it seemed to be a utilitarian employment of the distanced figures of the dance.

The use of light in a very simple, minimalistic and functional way, which is not seeking effectiveness out of the atmosphere created, supports the performance on stage very modestly and successfully.

We learn during the debate, from the core Taldans duo (Mustafa Kaplan and Filiz Sızanlı) and their collaborator performer Vania Rovisco, that the research phase of the work started with the a lab like investigation process of the relation between the artist and the scientist, but than it coincided with the Gezi demonstrations in Istanbul and took a completely different route with the life outside they were subject to. This of course emphasizes the notion of variability and ability of re-orientaion of the artists. Their visit to Gezi Park actually changed the route of their research phase towards what they call resistance body, resistance spaces. And through this updated notions for their work, Vania and Taldans met at a common ground, which they can bring material from their own personal and public experiences. So we also learn that ‘the catalog’ on stage was the result of an attemp to list or create a sort of encyclopedia of things they witnessed and associated with through their experiences, mentioned above.

Holy, Holy, Holy (Copycats)

In the debates we learn from the artists that “Holy, Holy, Holy” was the second of a trilogy by Copycats, first of which was “Countdown” that was staged in Istanbul in 2012. With this piece, the theme moves from ‘confession’ to ‘belief’.

In Holy Holy Holy, we are supposed to be a dream like atmosphere supported by quite a big tube like baloon that almost covers most of the performance space. It has the colors red, white and blue, recalling the flag colors of U.S.A. And the left spaces are being used by the performers depicting iconic figures of fairy tales, history, movies and of desires and obsessions through movements with as if they are floating, coming up and sinking back. The speaking of the performers in groups of two, following an alphabetical order of objects, notions, phenomena, etc. in the constantly emphasized sentences starting with “I believe...”, is elaborated with a rhythmic sound effect, creating a an expressive vocal atmosphere. Performers İlyas Odman,Christina Flick, Kimmy Lgtvoet ve Melih Gencboyacı are moving in the installation that Kaleb De Groot created. Interestingly

enough, Kaleb de Groot utilizes the same kind of 'material' which is used in "Curating Space", a symbol of the urban identity of Istanbul, for a foreigner, at first sight. In "Holy Holy Holy", it is the gray metal panels which hide construction work behind.

I must mention that, "Holy Holy Holy" was the piece, which mostly gave the impression that there is crisis of creativity on stage. Even taking into account their approach which their name Copycats implies, this performance was the least remarkable. Using iconic figures, using a vocal 'coreography' of an alphabetical structure actually recalled the works of Robert Wilson in cooperation with Christopher Knowles in the 1970's. So "Holy, Holy, Holy" was a revisiting of the 70's aesthetics and stage dynamics with an inferior quality of work. And also the whole 'dramaturgy' seemed to be bad copy of a better copycat, in a way, Robert Wilson.

"Holy Holy Holy" was I guess far from invoking new realms, instead it presented a rhizome like shallowness, as in the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari.

The only element integrated to the performance, at least at some point, related to 'variability' due to where it is performed, was collecting some words from the audience, in written form. These words were supposedly expressed what the individual members of the audience believe in.

Shrapnel: 34 Fragments Of A Massacre (Arcola Theater)

"Shrapnel: 34 Fragments Of A Massacre" was probably the only piece in EMWAP festival which can be categorized as a 'theater play' in the classical meaning. It is about the Roboski massacre which took place at the south east border of Turkey in 2011, yet still very lively in terms of debates it caused in the society and in the memories of the people. The play was written by Anders Lustgarten upon the director Mehmet Ergen's telling the story and him spending time in Turkey, at the region. The play is being performed by 5 British and 1 Turkish actor who lives in Great Britain. The play has 34

episodes, with an implication to the 34 people who died in the massacre. The episodic structure recalled the Brechtian staging techniques for some, including Peter Verstraete (specialized debater for this performance), but actually its approach did not employ any characteristics which we may call Brechtian. On the contrary it was more on the side of creating an atmosphere which we can identify with the characters in the play, which would be subject to or witness of a massacre.

The staging seemed cinematographic because of the videos and visuals used, and the fast pace of changing scenes. Employing flashbacks and flashforwards contributed to this seemingly cinematographic aesthetics. Though, I must mention that it was presentational rather than cinematographic, presentational as in a presentation made using Power Point, etc. to a customer, or so. So the transitions between episodes was more like the transitions from a page of presentation to another.

The play was touching to a very important warfare issue, trying to reveal the facts behind a massacre, the media's response to this and the people's lives who really live through it. But many factors, including the costumes, acting, the writing of some of the characters in an Americanized way, also contributed to the unavoidable orientalism of the piece. So it actually missed the opportunity to get a real and global grip on the real issue.

One of the most important issues related to this performance was the approach of Mehmet Ergen, the director, stating "We British think that the function or duty of the director is to stage loyally what the playwright wrote. So we do not like to and want to argue about how this piece is done, but what is being told through it. Theater audience in Turkey, approaches a play in a so called intellectual way which I do not agree and like." Actually this statement crippled the debate, rendering it almost unnecessary from that moment on.

From the perspective of EMWAP's main notions which are conceptually underlined in the short manifestation of the project, we just see a collaboration between a theater company Arcola Theater, and the festival.

Some Reflection Points

Most of the works in EMWAP Festival emphasized, presented, implicitly advocated, and favored some main characteristics, such as:

- Trying to avoid or escape “representation in favor of “presence” of the performer. (Not always successfully though)
- Audience participation (in a way)
- Hybridity of various versions in research and performance
 - Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity at a conceptual level
 - Collaboration of artists from different disciplines and experiences (at a practical level)
 - Collaboration of artists from different countries, different cultural backgrounds
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- Variability (at a lesser degree than hybridity)
 - Different research and creation phase experiences in different residencies (for some of the works) which refers to:
 - availability of different materials (e.g. Curating Space)
 - being subject to sociological and significant events that can even change the initial motive of research and main theme of the piece (e.g. We Need to Move Urgently)
- Political stance on stage, not only through vocal but also bodily manifestation

- Conceptuality vs. Virtuosity
- Autonomy of the composing parts of a performance
 - Scenography and scenographic elements (e.g. Autonomous Scenography)
 - Different, functional but non illustrative use of stage objects
 - Non representational use of space

The use and emphasis of these approaches or notions, in some works seems a bit outdated, sometimes implying a crisis in the creative process.

From the point of the organisation of EMWAP Festival, we see that the leading organization 0090 plays a significant facilitation role for a productive artistic collaboration and collision of many kinds not only at the presentation / performance level, but at the research phase and all along the creative process. It is clear that the artists contributed a lot to themselves by working together with artists from different disciplines and in different ‘settings’ geographically and socio-economically. The consequences and the contributions are to be observed not always directly but in a more subtle manner creating harmonic effects.

LOOKING at and THINKING about the AFTER TALKS

in EMWAP FESTIVAL

by Berna Kurt

Between 17 March and 5 April 2015, in Istanbul, e m w a p (European Middle West Arts Project) Festival presented six productions ranging from performance to dance and theatre and six after talks in the form of debates with the artists on the works they presented.

We, three people working in the areas of theatre, dance/performance and visular arts were the three ‘fixed’ debaters of those after talks. With other six guestspeakers/debaters as the ‘experts’ on each of those six performances and spectators, we talked with the artists and had discussions on the performances. Those debates have been arranged just after the performances and lasted approximately from 45 to 90 minutes. The predetermined and announced central notion that should be concentrated on in those reflexive debates was the notion of ‘variability’ leading to intertwined notions such as ‘uncertainty, flexibility, adaptation and versatility / diversity’. The productions presented in the festival were realized by the collaboration of four international partners:¹ they were made in the last two years by creators who worked in different countries, who are from different countries or who tackle issues from different countries. Therefore some of our questions should have been concentrated on those changing contexts’ influence on the artworks and creative processes, the results of collaboration of the artists with different backgrounds, hybridity of those productions, spectators’ or public’s reactions to the works in relation to the context of where they are performed etc. Meanwhile,

¹ (*Platform 0090*/Belgium, *Arcola Theatre*/United Kingdom, *Productiehuis Rotterdam*/Netherlands and *Talimhane Tiyatrosu*/Turkey)

during the festival, our themes of discussion weren't always related to such concerns, they went beyond the festival's frame stated above. Having been organized 'just after' the performances and having had very active/participant spectators, they functioned as the channels of creating multiple questions around the performances.

After talks, debate(r)s?

I consider the after talk as a kind of collective brain storming form just after the performance. Bringing together different questions and approaches of the artists, researchers, scholars, producers, spectators from different disciplines and backgrounds, it enriches the ways of looking at the performances and gives rise to an elaborated aesthetic experience of artworks.

The debater can be considered as a kind of mediator between the artist(s) and the spectators. Sometimes pointing out to broader contexts, making comparisons with new artistic developments, experiences and tendencies, s/he has a chance to expand the audiences' or the artists' perspectives. His/her role as the critical thinker and generally the first question asker on performances is a crucial one in terms of the construction of the debate contexts. S/he has a risky business as s/she can easily fall into a trap of the creation of power relations; distanced and academic languages, meta-discourses etc. One way of avoiding such position can be attempting to consider the artists' intentions and priorities rather than making a priori personal judgements.

Ideally, the debates can provide some channels for the analysis of the artworks from broader perspectives. Reflecting and commenting on the artistic productions and processes, evaluating them in broader social, historical, artistic etc. contexts, making connections and comparisons, they can contribute to the knowledge and discourse on the arts. Such contribution may also endorse the art making conditions in general.

As such ‘mediator’s, three (fixed) + one (changing) debaters of the e m w a p Festival, we did collaborate with the artists before those talks and organized them according to theirs’, ours’, the festival organizers’ priorities and the venues’s conditions. Because of the existence of non-English and non-Turkish speakers, our dual (English/Turkish) language speaking/translation during the talks was both necessary and compelling: it extended the talks’ duration, thus many questions in minds couldn’t be asked. The main themes, contents and organization of the debates varied vastly: despite our preparation and collaboration with the artists, we always had to ‘improvise’. Thus somehow, we also have been part of the ‘variability, uncertainty, flexibility, adaptation and versatility’ notions of the festival!

I would also add that my personal experience as the ‘debater’ was a strengthening one for myself: I had the chance to learn from a variety of perspectives and analyze myself via those different ways of looking at the artworks.

Hybridity?

As stated above, the central notion of the debates haven’t been ‘variability’ but different configurations of ‘hybridity’ was remarkable in the creative and performative processes of the festival productions. Referring to dance researcher/ethnochoreologist Gediminas Karoblis’ discussion of the concept of hybridity, I can state a connotation of the term as follows:

“Oxford English Dictionary notes the biological roots of the term of ‘hybridity’ and refers to many connotations associated with the word: for example, hybridity is “[a] term used in contemporary postcolonial studies to theorize and to a certain degree

celebrate a global state of mixedness – a mixedness of cultures, races, ethnicities, nations, and so on” (OED, 2011).²

e m w a p Festival was also ‘celebrating’ this idea of ‘mixedness’ of disciplines (or inter-disciplinarity), creative processes and backgrounds. Many of the performances presented during the festival were the results of the collaboration of the artists from different disciplines, experiences, countries and/or social backgrounds. And finally we, the debaters from different backgrounds also benefited from this diversity, plurality, mixedness or hybridity.

Some reflection points?

The performances of the festival were representing some experimental approaches to reflect on and compare with for curious art-lovers, spectators and debaters. Like iDANS International Contemporary Dance and Performance Festival organized between 2007-2013 in Istanbul –which broadened my perspective on dance and performance-, it revealed out some trends in European art scene and provided some grounds to make comparisons with the local context(s). I can state some reflection points (some of which being very new to myself) after seeing those performances:

- Breaking the ‘fourth wall’, audience participation
- Politics in the stage
- Scenography having its own tools, language and autonomy
- Functional use of the space and objects on stage

² Gediminas Karoblis, “Trial of the Concept of Hybridity: Halling and Dance Studies” (prefinal draft: final version published in *Dancing Mosaic: Issues On Dance Hybridity*. 2012, Malaysia): 3-4.

- ‘Presence’ of the performer in stage
- ‘No’ to virtuosity

Lastly, I want to make a reference to the historical roots of the emphasis on the performer’s ‘presence’ and the denial of virtuosity –both seeming to be reference points for some performances I’ve seen in the festival. Performance theoretician André Lepecki who analyze the contemporary European dance scene, makes reference to the legacies of two very important choreographers in dance history, Yvonne Rainer and Pina Bausch:

“... Of the general characteristics of the contemporary European scene..., I would consider that distrust of representation, and an insistence on the dancer’s presence, are Bauschian legacies; a suspicion of virtuosity and the reduction of unessential props and scenic elements are Rainer’s legacies; and the deep dialogue with the visual arts and with performance art, and a politics informed by a critique of visuality, are legacies from both choreographers (albeit each have dealt very differently-with these elements).”³

³ André Lepecki, “Concept and Presence, The Contemporary European Dance Scene”, in **Rethinking Dance History, A Reader**, ed. Alexandra Carter, 2004, Routledge: 174.

Thoughts on European Middle West Arts Project: Istanbul representation phase

by Elmas Deniz

Introduction

I attended the EMWAP project, Istanbul as one of the three debaters. With Ata Ünal from theatre and Berna Kurt from dance fields, we brought up questions to the performers/artists after each show —together with an invited professional guest for each performance. I am an Istanbul based visual artist. My practice evolves within the sphere of contemporary art, politically engaged art in particular, which find space into *exhibition* spaces. I mostly produce video, objects, installations and drawings and I write.

Initially, the focal point of our research was mainly on the production process; especially how their production was effected by being in specific places (countries)? What changes in relation to the places at production and representation phases?

I understand my task in writing as a kind of experimental watching—observing not only final art productions but curious on the conditions of production processes. So, this text is eclectic, including some thoughts on the concept of the EMWAP project, the performances and the content of post-performance debates.

On the EMWAP project

European Middle West Arts Project represents works that are self-contained separate productions with separate themes; *Curating Space*, *Schwalbe Cheats*, *Holy Holy Holy*, *We Need to Move Urgently*, *Autonomous Scenography* and *Shrapnel:34 Fragments of*

Massacre. In all of these *works* the core element is performativity. Each work weighted in one capitone discipline; as installation, dance, theatre or performance.

Each produced by people from various disciplines, defining themselves such as musician, photographer, sculptor, performer, dancer, writer, dramaturg, scenographer, stage designer, visual artist. Participant artists are from Europe; mainly Belgium, Britain, The Nederland's and Turkey, with different country of origins., They are living and working in European cities. Reffering to the EMWAP description, 'nomad' is not an imaginary status but a true one.

Therefore the festival concept, does not address what is *in* the works, but directly to the participant artists' status.

The Middle West, is derived from or rather made up, out of a geographical term that is not heavily loaded with preconceptions, restricted meanings such as "Middle East". "Middle West" i is defined as "a hybrid space between East and West". EMWAP organizers are aware of acknowledged, heavily criticized notions of 'east-west bridge' or 'bold geographic center –periphery' divisions. EMWAP instead underlines hybridity, a hybrid space.

Thoughts on Hybridty

a. Homi Babbha's introduction of the term hybrid from biology into the cultural field was in 1994. Where "*Cultural assimilation turns into cultural globalization...one of Bhabha's points is to look beyond the dichotomy of the West/the rest, by paying attention to what lies in between, to the notion of hybridity, and the socalled Third Space of renunciation.*"ⁱ For the last two decades, contemporary art production from other regions of the world, lets say non-western, find itself place in these non-representative ground. Mainly it was a result of the criticisms; on art historical cannons, euro centrism,

postcolonial studies, queer studies, inclusion of other possible modernities into the field of art among many other issues.

“However, the concept of hybridity is not unconditionally accepted as a moment of the new international process of articulation, since it is sometimes interpreted as just another idea that clusters everything non-Western together under the same name, and, despite their communal untranslatability, considers them to be the same... According to Coombes, the notion of hybridity is a strategy that is used to neutralize tensions and conflicting political interests between the West and its former colonies. By displaying the visual evidence of cultural meetings, such meetings are rendered interesting but unproblematic. Coombes argues that ‘hybridity’ is always considered to be a matter of meetings between Western and non-Western cultures and never applies to the ‘other within’, the diaspora in Western metropolises.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I find it very compelling to think about EMWAP revolving around previous debate about the new-internationalism which is specific to contemporary art discourse. It seems suitable to bring it into theatre and performance. Especially performances that are non-script based and has the qualities addressing contemporary visual arts such as installation making.

b. The production is hybrid as participant artists’ country of origin and as well as the mixing of different disciplines. For example, this mixture is very visible in terms of artistic experiment in Autonomous Scenography, where distinct fields merge into each other. Otherwise in the entire EMWAP performances interdisciplinary mix could be also defined as contributions of the experts, bringing their fields of expertise into the production.

Autonomus Scenography’s debate come to mind as one of the performers of this field play, Gaëtan Bulourde commented informally on local theatre versus international. To me all the performances has this internationalization of the production, especially the use of language gives a clue. Performances that do not necessarily demand a native language

become accessible to an international audience. In *Anonmyus Scenography* there were parts where one of the actors has a small piece of verbal performance with a made-up language— one can find slight familiarities with English and Dutch, which appeared to be decided all together with creator Meryem Bayram and both of the performers.

c. EMWAP, suggesting hybrid space, underlines a non-representative notion for its Turkish contributors, but can not prevents the self-exoticization, especially *Shrapnel*. Apart from discipline-centric concerns, such as subversion of history of performance and theatre, artistic stills and decisions, for whom was the play produced? I participated long ago an exhibition series titled *Normalization*, at Platform CAC in Istanbul. It was a series of exhibitions questioning ‘art for export.’ international elements of the entire festival, thinking in terms of *place* and *production dynamics*.

What is the essence that someone brings into a hybrid mix? What to mix?

Defining an equal being from somewhere to the global ground. Therefore Instead of the symbolic references, local or cultural differences has more delicate ways to interfere in the works, in more sophisticated ways. I think where articulation would be beyond my reach in this text. National identity alone is not enough to define artists but still has huge impact, however more unfolded.

Also education has great importance, especially for those who has migrant background, when I asked Gurur Ertem, one of the guest speaker for Taldans’ event; she commented that ; education wise, contemporary dance field in turkey is based on individual initiations which is quite different from the European peers. Mainly, producers migrate to the European cities where they can find better infrastructure, support and non-traditional approaches are available.

If all is global, where is Authentic?

It seems “authentic” can be found in cultural unique events, such as Gezi Protests. Also conflict zones in the world become an interesting subject. How artists render these subjects in their work, for sure, differs. These are the moments where we need to apply our luggage of ‘local-global’. *Shrapnel* can be an example. The writer of the play was not present at the debate but director Mehmet Ergen and performers from the Arcola Theatre were present. Performers stated that they did not know the situation about Roboski before they read the script. About the events between Turkish government and Kurdish guerilla activity, in the play, there were events reflected truly but historical mismatches and bringing international warfare makes Roboski massacre an example, example of “art for Export” However the play has certain derailment from the core of real events it still works, as a conflict zone story. There is a very thin line between making a performance approachable by a wider audience even a global one and making it exotic. The play including an emotional tone, didactic at some points, nicely contributed to the festival. As in the after talks, Director of Arcola, criticized Turkey’s theatre and performance scene, mentioning that ‘theatre and performance barely touche on political issues’ in Turkey.

Global artist vs. local spectator

An opinion has risen out of debates that cultural differences comes into play not because of the participant artists cultural backgrounds (where are they from originally, where are they based, where they live and work) rather are effected by more of the conditions of the local environments (where physical production takes place, where they represent the work) Especially, when I asked to *Curating Space* if they had any concerns about the local environment, they immediately mentioned about the production of the material.

Artist are not necessarily thinking of geography or cultural backgrounds and produce accordingly, the knowledge that they carry embedded with them, their contribution remains hidden at first sight. Usually cultural producers have had chances to produce in international environments, in different countries with different artist who all have different countries of origin. However local staff, local audience, ordinary life has quite a different setting and even though those masses travel for touristic reasons they are mostly not effected from the visited environment.

Especially through the festival this is once more proven, artist usually developed further skills to 'work together'. For example, Taldans' two dancers from Turkey, Filiz Sızanlı and Mustafa Kaplan collaborate with an artist from Brazil, Vania Rovisco and they share similar worldview and find explanations on their collaboration methods. At the debate; Vania Rovisco was asked about to comment on this local event, Gezi Protests. She mentioned about her own experiences in Brasil. This approach is an example, artists are willing to 'merge' or 'blend' instead of 'underlining differences'. This positive attitude also brings some homogeneity in the artistic production in general, to me entire festival has formally global. To put it simply, EMWAP can take place anywhere in the world, any civilized society, and would reach an audience without trouble.

Looking for interesting

Contemporary art as Arthur Danto's terms, "Contemporary art is too pluralistic in intention and realization to allow itself to be captured along a single dimension."ⁱⁱⁱ Visual arts has long been merged into other disciplines (after leaving fine arts) Still, performance, film, theatre are considered as distinct fields, regarding their institutional histories. Even though after 1960's visual art become more theatre and performance oriented (1960's democratization of the artistic production opened up possibilities) also visual arts, become more inclusive to performative practices and theatre. However,

because of the institutional structure (and subverting their own traditions) these fields still considered very distinct. As in the EMWAP productions, one could detect those inner-disciplinary decisions.

These are the historic acknowledged facts, however in art circles, there are many interest groups. These interest groups create their own knowledge blocks, their own discursive ground. Each production in the EMWAP project, has visible concrete agenda and some crucial matters to deal. That might be political subject of Arcola Theatre, Schwalbe's intention of demolishing the power structure between the audience and performer, cross disciplinary concerns of *Autonomus Scenography*, creating immediate visual experience of *Curating Spaces* can be examples of such various approaches.

Discipline sensitive discourses and attempts to subvert

Schwalbe Cheats, a game about human violence instincts, ambition and its limits. It aims to avoid the audience-performer hierarchies. Thematically Schwalbe's general approach to human condition, has itself universal qualities. *Schwalbe Cheats*, a game about human violence instincts, not only European or any origin, but belonging to human species. Supporting this international tendency as it can be seen in the collective that speak in Dutch among each other but they produce in English. On my inquiry about the production phase, there are very little concern about the local environment. Electricity cuts in Istanbul has profound effect on the artists then the local political concerns.

Where also *Holy Holy Holy* has similar approach thematically, not entertainment since adaptation, appropriation and subjective passages through visual culture; duping, Disney characters, astronaut, drag queen, club culture; another attempt to be close to its audience. *Holly Holy Holy* is mainly relating to contemporary urban culture. However the subject of the play is 'Belief' this ideological and political subject also moves into a more generalized abstract point.

The local embedded knowledge especially meanings of visual elements become important for producers when they travel. For example, *Holy Holy Holy*, invited sculpture artist Kaleb De Groot, he commented on the stage/installation element, huge airfilled striped fabric column, the material commonly called as “Turkish bag” in Europe, which is Dutch flag colours become something else in Istanbul. He wanted to choose colors for the final sculpture, which has not a special meaning for the local audience —such as orange means for the Dutch. He used colors that are not engaged to an ideology and bounded by a precise meaning for Istanbulers. Interestingly, Kaleb De Groot uses the same construction material, with *Curating Space* at Salt. The urban identity of the city of Istanbul, especially what you get from the first sight, is the material of the ongoing construction metal panels were apparent.

Anonymus Scenography, by Meryem Bayram, developed with and performed by Gaëtan Bulourde and Clément Layes, was one of the most visually diligent performance of the festival, where scenography/stage become the main element and object of the work. They avoided completely cultural elements, rather having a lot of art historical references.

Curating Space is placed in a non-theatre space among the festival events. Only this work was in a gallery environment. However, such work was “theatrical” precisely because it depended upon the presence of the spectator in order to be complete.

Audience

The notion of audience is always problematic, in many senses. However, Festival venues also determined the audience, where Salt forum space is an quite hectic street of Istanbul that has annual 400 000 visitors, Moda Sahnesi is self-sufficient focused on theatre, stage arts, smaller scale D22 and Talimhane theatre in a residential district. Variation between the spaces, and their regular visitors also changes the audience structure and

therefore responses. The interest to the festival was high, also local art producers joined the audience. Therefore after-debates include not only questions of regular audience, also gained a very professional tone. Spectators forge an independent sense of an experience; they bring their own subjectivity, desires, history and cultural experiences into play, as its creators.

Support and Collaboration

EMWAP, is very important in terms of including production and research, not a mere gathering featuring existing productions. Instead takes the risk and fulfills its aim. Urgent need to support for production, commissioned new works through artist residencies and mobility has great importance.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Philipsen, Lotte: Globalizing Contemporary Art- The Art Worlds New Internationalism, Aarhus University Press, 2010 Page. 64

ⁱⁱ Page.64

ⁱⁱⁱ Danto, Arthur C.: After the End of Art, 1997, Princeton University Press