

Day 1

In different groups we walked in a line through the streets. We followed other people who guided us to see works made by ~~students~~ the young artists of Amsterdam Theaterschool at their houses.

Since the beginning of the day few words were on the air: the domestic domain, ~~the home~~ as the actual site where the artistic practice and work happens, the ~~communal~~ space of peers, the market and the civil space. All these concepts were thrown at the welcome speeches and disposed me on a particular direction of how to consider things for the rest of the day setting the tone and clipping for my thoughts like fragmented bits of information between intertwined conversations I had with other people strolling by my side and the street activity along our way. This text will probably unfold in the same crumbled manner too, pointing out details without providing a particular context of each situation described, articulating ~~questions~~ nuances I came across in relation to what I saw and which I try to connect now in this rapid recollection of events.

In our walk towards the student's houses there were a lot of construction work and billboards illustrating how the area we were walking through will be in a near future, certainly not for students who come to this city for a short term but for people able to ~~buy a flat~~ inhabit the neighborhood in a different manner.

At our arrival to the Cost Effective Student Housing of Sparndammerbuurt neighborhood we were re-organized in different smaller groups to look at the different circuit propositions prepared for the day. The different projects from the participants made at their domestic spaces, so to say where they sleep, eat, think, have their daily rituals and start to connect with their interests in order to make their ~~work~~ existence tangible to the world.

Walking through galleries and paths connecting the units of this big living complex with all the amenities of a campus but actually not really a student campus, I entertained myself tracing imaginary possible futures of its actual population. I wished to have the ability to really imagine ~~promising~~ and intelligent scenarios for all of them, but I only managed to stay on a level of collecting moments of impact of my visit there. An activity that kept me quite engaged as ~~spectator~~ a witness during almost two hours.

Coming inside one of the buildings, I walked up a metal stairway arriving at long corridor with doors, on one of the walls there was a poster with a mother holding a kid in her arms, below it a caption saying: "*Give this ~~kid~~ student a chance*"

Next to this poster there was a cardboard sign with the word DIRECTOR on a door and a written proposition for the visitors to enter the space and occupy a chair and perform a sentence in front of a camera. The sentence to be performed was: *Hello, I am the director of (institution), and I will* (each visitor could fill in his/ her own content to complete the sentence).

After each of us got the opportunity of pronouncing this statement for the group and for the camera, we all got invited to exit through the window future.

Our guide took us towards the next station, another block, another domestic space in which a young artist asked us, the visitors, to help her removing all the stuff she owned found necessary to have around in order to live there outside her space unit. At the corridor we looked at her things, reorganizing them, talking to her about the possible combinations she could assemble with these 12 objects she lived with. The floor of the room from where we removed all her belongings was covered with sand and as I asked about it she said that this was the best material she could think of to transfer the feeling transitorily atmosphere she had while living being at this place.

Then groups dissolved, the casual conversations found certain continuity while slowly the panoramic view of the Houthaven remained behind us. I walked back in company of others towards where the conference would continued, surprisingly nobody commented about the presentations what we just saw.

Few thoughts came to me later about what I got to see experienced and that happened while following the next part the program: actually the real directors of some institutions talking for real in front of us and saying things like:

"We need to find together with the students new strategies of leadership"

"Underground: a term given today to the condition of art or to the circumstance of doing art"

"Which one are the artistic projects that the different students have in mind, now? by shaping this clearly we can tackle the problem of inexperienced audience".

"If you don't have a chance, just take one!"

"We are in a moment of transition right now"

"How can we explain what you do to a market?"

"If I would have the chance of buying more studios for my school to provide everyone with an unlimited working time in a space I would do so"

Confronting these sentences collected at the discussion that followed the young artist's propositions it seems to me quite difficult to trace correspondences between the needs that both parts appear to have. Perhaps is now the moment where institutions and students have the task to start formulating common questions in order to deal with the present conditions. How to apply the idea of chance towards a set of adverse given conditions?

Re-purposing goals at the work, manufacturing the contexts that today's practices, artistic concerns and discourses needs to have around to flourish.

Students should be able to make room for these concerns to become visible and institutions could support and articulate a sustainable context that acknowledges the present circumstances as something to work with and not against it.

The effort for the coming time should be put on the possibility to create a bit more of a "manoeuver space" within the present circumstances.

This is where we are now. I mean, I am not referring to the direction of time. I am thinking, rather, of the psychological perception of this present moment.

Cecilia Vallejos

Day 2

“Since the modernity the demand of crossing boundaries or transgression has become the center of art. Anyone who transgresses the rules constantly has to defend themselves publicly and theorizing is an important aspect of this defense”. (fragment from the article by Pascal Gielen “Artistic Praxis and the Neoliberalization of Educational Space”)

Through the program of the second morning of the conference although certain aspects were well presented in a record time the dynamics of sharing landmarks for articulating every topic and its contexts pushed conclusions in an extremely rapid manner. As a listener, I perceived that different circumstances aligned in a kind of synthesis that left me with an unsatisfactory state of mind, perhaps because of the short time to digest all the given information, maybe as well for the unavoidable attempt I made to conciliate each case exposed in relation to the position of culture in today’s state of affairs.

We saw a presentation of Heben und Brachen by Florian Wüst from Berlin, a group that battles for reconfiguring public funding for culture, then a cultural worker specialized in mediation that exposed the case of Brussels within the bigger picture of how Belgium operates in its divided governmental structure and to close the session Michiel van Iersel an urbanist-curator pointing out the case of Amsterdam as a city that is currently loosing its position of being a place where “the vanguard feels at home”.

After two hours of listening and trying to keep the pace of the session I found myself searching for values to understand ideologically and as much as possible “objectively” the nature and characteristics of each case exposed. The panel entered a circular mode of reflecting upon themselves since the tendency of everyone engaging in the discussion aimed to compare between cases. And tracing analogies between different contexts can be a perverse pattern of observation at times, unless there is a common interest on consolidating a ground together with a particular purpose. Other than that comparing different voices of almost similar but by the end distinct problematics leaves a discussion on a constant level of wonder, a fact that ultimately delays accuracy on filtering the singularities of what is being communicated, pushing away any possibility of mutual understanding.

It became clear to me that the desire of mapping points of view on a basis of shared concerns and topics pertaining to the three cities in question BER- AMS- BXL was a genuine one, but I found the dynamic in which the speakers got to interact between them misleading. Actually, mapping is a good method for displaying information, not doubt about it, but orientation remains a more solid notion when attempting to outline a position in relation to certain circumstances or even similarity between different things dealing with a problem. As a matter of fact orientation depends on how one encounters ways of grasping a certain proposition, finding the space and the time in which any kind of praxis enters in contact with a specific knowledge about it.

At the morning session the connection between praxis and theory was in some cases well founded while in others, it left gaps or it appeared slightly forced in the way of corresponding an existing situation with a sort of theoretical analysis around it. These hazy moments in some of the positions I heard, made me ponder on a core aspect related to understand oneself in today's discussion about culture (it uses, its practices, its production) and this aspect has to do with clearing out the issue of whom are you working for at each given moment. And with this I am mean determining whether your work-practice and its theory are engaging at the art's system or disengaging from it, operating autonomously or collectively, for a kind of public you have something in common with or not, being supported by whom, just to name few parameters that come to my mind while pondering on this point I came across listening at the speakers and their mutual comparisons.

Off course, there might be contrasting answers on this issue for every one, but I think is a valid cross-examination point that in today's work reality it doesn't seem to be considered carefully. Perhaps it is simply an aspect that nobody dares to deal with because it might narrow the possibilities and the scope of our work and practice?

Personally I believe that freeing this core aspect from ambiguity and holding ourselves to a sense of sensible orientation put in the practice and at work is quite crucial at this moment, for setting ideas into motion and advance on alternative forms of responses towards the recent budgets cuts and its disruptive consequences.

Creativity might be at certain extent formatted, due to new tools for communication as well due to the interaction between the four domains we recognized thanks to Pascal's generous descriptions of what is domestic, what means space of the peers, how the market space could behave, and with the awareness of looking at civil space as a site that could hold specific freedoms, but there is a big range of forms on how to deal with these four spaces, within or along them. For instance finding problems and solutions where our values come to tension with the limits of these four spaces, negotiating with it, reversing dynamics, slowing time, not particularly defending ourselves but rather responding to it with a sort of integrity.

And all this can already take place, before and mean while we undertake the task of connecting the contemporary art praxis (most of the times restricted or withdrawn from processes) with the theory (sometimes lacking an empirical knowledge to prove itself).

Cecilia Vallejos

Symptoms #1

A brief reflection

Visiting the containers of the SNDO-students, one could experience their living conditions which are marked by architectural isolation; a materially prepared ground for a mute “student” class, whether they are artists or not. One could say that this lack of communal space is an urban symptom of a hegemonic crisis of political representation. In the wrap up session, Marijke Hoogenboom addressed this issue and asked how educational institutions could play a role in the negotiations with a city council and a government about the improvement of study and living conditions. It seems that these living conditions, which were supposed to be a free haven before professional life starts, already completely incorporated the living conditions of most professional artists/workers.

One answer to that question pointed at the limited space to maneuver, even when one is head of one of these big educational institutions; a generation of young - and I guess especially - upcoming artists is expected to face the institutions (be it cultural or governmental) with a master plan, a vision for the future. But where does this retraction of responsibility come from? Who is responsible for what and who should prepare the ground for whom? It's fairly easy to have proper requests and desires and it's even easier to dream of Utopia; another thing is to formulate these requests and desires into undeniable claims. Beneath the layer of pragmatism, the crisis of representative democracy hides. Two questions that so far stayed historically unresolved penetrate a long list of complaints coming from a myriad of voices: who speaks for whom and who *should/could* speak for whom?

E.T.

A quick spotting of a way out

When going through the notes of the afternoon session in the second day of Berlin-Amsterdam-Brussels Conference, it is hard to find a point of departure for a text. Most of them are formulated as questions or notate short statements heard from some of the speakers in the circle of the “Space of Peers: The Collective Unknown”. They would make a chaotic graphic of dispersed points, some of them structured around each other, others – standing singularly somewhere and potentially they might relate to others but also might not.

As the whole conference is structured around specific concepts of distinguished types of domains within artistic practice, the afternoon session yesterday was supposed to give a framework for exercising a “space of peers”. And the inevitable question afterwards was – what kind of space was actually produced in the course of the discussion? Within the selected (how?) participants (why?) there were groups of peers among each other, collectives and groupings, and individual presences, all active in the cities mentioned in the conference’s title. Brought together on the basis of their vocation of being artists, what was taking shape in the course of the discussion might not necessarily be termed as a “space of peers” but foremost a discontinuous reflective space of multitude perspectives, languages of speaking of individual positions and practices and quite unstable common base. If some of the voiced concerns were basically shared it happened quite often that they were quite differently or (mis)understood. And that’s way several times came out the insistence to clearly state from which perspective and on what layer one speaks. A question that actually searches the self-legitimizing in a more intensive relation to the social space and context.

One of the interesting sides in the “Haben und Brauchen” campaign of the Berlin-based independent scene was that it became strong exactly throughout bringing together knowledge and positions of various artists in a process of specifically defining the own place in culture and society and made a *space of peers* emerge around very specific goals and needs to voice them publically.

Angelina Georgieva

How *domestic* is the domestic domain?

One of the concerns that occurred to me while coming across some descriptions of the notion of the artistic domestic domain was related to the impression that as if the private space was framed in a new way in the name of kind of “right” productivity”, though still informal, that was seemingly recognized in it and which could be fostered by following certain prescriptions. So I was quite curious how the SNDO students would approach the notion of domesticity and curate their day at the Berlin – Amsterdam-Brussels Conference and see if this concern is shared or perhaps it is not grounded at all. During the walk from rooms to rooms with installations and talks, it appeared embedded in a whole complex set of problems that came out on the surface.

A group of tens of people was cleverly structured and guided through the private rooms of Houthaven containers. What quickly became quite obvious was however the fact that there was almost no space for “domesticity” in there. Domesticity was installed as a terrain where relations coming from other functional domains cross over – the market and the communal one, if we stick to the vocabulary, proposed by Gielen. Or in other terms - the urban planning, the educational institutions system, market strategies, discourse...

The students claim to have used the proposal to curate their day as a possibility to display the *instability*, *temporality* and *nomadism* which indeed define now the living conditions of artists and art students internationally. And the Houthaven containers exemplify them in an extremely direct way. But what is more important is how the reduction of the private space to the very minimum and letting it be, on the other side, at the maximum isolated, becomes a “tool” to subject the domesticity to other conditions.

Unfortunately, In this short text I will be not able to reflect on all the approaches the each of our hosts applied towards the perception of domesticity. I just would like to mark some questions that popped up for me at this terrain research.

What is at stake in incorporating the studio or the theatre house into the domestic domain by reproducing in it the same mode of showcasing work typical for the market contexts? Of course the working process on a piece does not consider divisions of domains, but a mode of communication could do so. And we were put to be spectators and were shown ready productions where there was not “playfully experimented or discussed as Gielen’s text makes us expect. Is this a symptom of an advanced isolation of art works from social contexts and therefore claiming that it has become a part of the domestic world, or the idea was to use every possible way to promote your self (trajectory: market place)?

On the other hand there was also a kind of “authority orientation” and domination of its discourse through inviting into the domestic the figure of school director in order to discuss with

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him standpoints to what an art school should be (at least the discussion I witnessed was about that). Or by setting up a whole Director's room where everybody was free to fantasy what ideas these figures could defend.

It seems that the positivist idea that the “domestic domain is where artists design their own environment” was quite shaken by the reality of it as a domain of “domesticated” dependencies with very limited options of resistance.

One of it's possible ways glittered, without a specific intention probably, in the “Don't touch” signs on a few floors where some of our hosts had hidden personal belongings. Perhaps exactly this vulnerability and restraint of a full personal exposure could be actually power for “domesticating” more freedom.

Angelina Georgieva

Symptomatic Dialogue

X: The past three days we've been confronted with a variety of positions and viewpoints. If we would wrap it up, what would you consider as one of the main points or problems that echoed throughout the conference?

Y: One issue that was always present and only sometimes discussed was the issue of taking care and of hospitality. In a conference that was addressing issues of "how one can improve conditions of artistic practice" we experienced compromises being done in terms of adequate payment for the participants, of there not being enough time for preparation or rehearsals etc. How do we deal with these very practical issues and problems that we encountered during the conference, taking into account that our hosts are inviting us to talk about these issues but in a more abstract level? Do we lose faith in them and put ourselves in the position of the 'victim'?

X: If you are talking about hospitality, you are talking about both actors involved: the guest and the host. Which roles are they acting out in this event? On the one hand I would say that I see a host that is very willing, a host that does everything possible with the means available. If one likes to be taken better care of, I think one has to think what that would mean on a production level for the host or organizer. If you would like to have better practical conditions, one easily can draw the relationship to the workload of people, and if one wants to decrease workload, one needs more money to or buy time or buy extra workforce. I think this is about transparency and communication of what one can give and what one can expect to take. On the other hand I think the guests also take a particular position. I remember very well Siegmar Zacharias' statement on the condition of taking part in the artists' panel: "I am at work and I am not paid, but I love it to be here with you." Do you recognize this desire?

Y: Yes, of course! I think the comment of Siegmar Zacharias was very useful. She revealed the situation as it is without feeling guilty about seemingly perpetuating the position of precarity that artists are continuously forced to take. What she did was to make transparent the choices we make, being faced with situations that at present we cannot change. When we talk about improving the communication of the artists' needs and wants to the institutions that are supposed to represent them, this is a possible first step. This does not mean that we should constantly make compromises or that we are not taking our work seriously enough. It just means that within the framework of taking ourselves seriously but also of wanting to collaborate, we make certain choices. And these choices should be made transparent.

I connect this to what Ana Vujanovic was saying about immunity as being the backbone of neoliberal society. Instead of insisting on our independence and "immunity" to the financial struggles that the artistic scene faces everywhere, which would lead us to saying no to many things, we could embrace our will for collaboration and dependency instead. However we should make transparent what this collaboration implies and what choices it brings with it.

X: Yes, that's what I understood under her notion of topological solidarity. I just question if we can make these different topoi and their conditions clear enough in order for them to enter in a stage of solidarity. Berlin, Brussels and Amsterdam seem to have actually very different cultural politics, apart from the fact that they are all facing the dark side of neo-liberalism. Okay, that problem is everywhere around us and we don't even take into account a broader scope of other countries that face this crisis even more directly and explicitly. What do you think these cities could learn from one another?

Y: Well, those different cities have different institutions with different functions and different agendas. However, judging from the podium discussion on the market, I felt that the Flemish institutions were much more interested in listening to the needs and wants of artists in their different carrier stages, constantly negotiating and re-negotiating what is needed and what is possible, than their German colleagues. The German institutions seemed to me much more insistent on the condition of scarcity, mainly the scarcity of finances, of course. This position of "this is how things are, sorry (take them or leave them)", which implies a justification for closed doors and closed ears, does not bring us any further. It's interesting, for example, that Aenne Quinones talked about HAU as a brand, implying a corporate structure, while Barbara Raes talked about Vooruit as a possible coop.

X: I think this is a very interesting proposal, but at the same time I wonder how far the actualization of that proposal can go. One can be inspired by this form of organising socio-economic relations, but at the same time I see the difficulty of *being* a coop. There is a difference between aspiration and actual organization. I'm extremely happy to still see people so enthusiastic and captivated, but I think we should also be patient. Let's not make this coop into a new buzzword or a new brand.

Y: I agree. It also still seems unclear how a coop on the level of an arts institution, which in and of itself doesn't make profit, but rather loss, could work. However, what is important in the idea of the coop is the shared ownership that it implies, as well as the shared responsibility. This might sound somewhat utopic, but nonetheless, to come back to Ana Vujanovic's argument, in a time of crisis a "communitas" can appear, a discourse of sharing the commons within the situation of precarity that we find ourselves in. As Bojana Mladenovic put it, one of the key questions the conference raised was how to share the struggle for survival, which results directly from the neoliberal condition.

X: That sounds great, but I think we are running out of time...

Tom Engels & Marialena Marouda