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How to overcome geographical attributions of art practice OR How to construct a whatever-community*

Questioning the established will to categorize art practices along the artist's geographical or national indication, did not appear on my agenda all of a sudden on a sunny Sunday afternoon.**

The history and practice behind the will to define, describe and categorize, schematize and classify can be linked to the transformation of anthropology in the 18th century, which was dominated by the urge and reality of colonization.

This paper will not go through the historic assessments of researching the roots of national identity or nationalization of practices. Nonetheless, this paper aims to answer the two titling questions and to elaborate the meaning space, which emerges where they coincide.

It will be proper to begin with citing the term 'culture', which is a product of the mid 18th century produced by the British Empire to define the strange, exotic series of manners, words, rituals and customs taking place in various other geographies, which the colonial invaders came across with in the course of their journeys. Leaving three centuries behind, the will of today and the mode of life in general are being structured around 'multi-cultural societies', in big cities. As spatial metaphors have become a predominant means by which the social life is understood, 'theoretical spaces' have been explored, mapped, charted, contested, de-colonized, and everyone seems to be 'travelling' under the influence of epochs of simultaneity, juxtaposition, the places near and far, side by side and dispersed. The mode of travelling has been highly classified and regulated in the means of establishing orientation. That is to say, the exoticism of globalizing the form of living has resulted in the categorisation of categorisation of categorisation of … categorized entities, feelings, experiences, and understandings. Recalling Zizek's rejection of a multi-cultural society, which threatens to embrace the Other with hostipitality***, 'today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism is an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness'[1]. The Other is regarded as absolutely negating the self, rather than forming the third space, or the necessary and sufficient factor of constructing the subjectivities. The trend to attribute a concentric world of national societies as a multi-cultural global village plays a significant role in producing/reproducing of the Other, the enclosure/disclosure of the stranger. Through that means, the diversity that is of n-dimensions is projected upon two-dimensional platforms. In other words, the sensation of being together is brought on a thin line and togetherness is experienced on a give-take basis where involvement in a dialogue is shattered.

Disciplinary generalizations of, mimetic narratives on, homologous time attributed to the Other, should be rejected

on the basis of the statement that every other subject is an other to the self (i.e. every other being than myself is an Other for me). Between being and meaning, between conscious and unconscious motives, between instinctive categories and conscious rationalisations, between little acts and traditions, the space of inter-relations is defined by emotional resonance. That is where intentionalist strategies of the modes of representing otherness are brought to redefine their foundations. 'The experience of thought that is here in question is always experience of a common power. Community and power identify one with the other without residues because the inherence of a communitarian principle to any power is a function of the necessarily potential character of any community...We can communicate with others only through what in us – as much as in others – has remained potential, and any communication (as Benjamin perceives for language) is first of all communication of not something in common but of communicability itself.'[2]

Multi-culturalism, the antagonism of mobility – moving between/beneath the structures of nation, race, religion, etc-, the issues of Otherness and locating, defining the Other, the cultural plurality and the difference are significant terms in order to construct the description of whatever-community. At this point, before constructing the norms of whatever-community, it is important to cite how Giorgio Agamben positions whatever-being: 'The coming being is whatever being. In the Scholastic enumeration of transcendentals (quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum – whatever entity is one, true, good or perfect), the term that, remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others is the adjective quodlibet. The common translation of this term as 'whatever' in the sense of 'it does not matter which, indifferently' is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: Quodlibet ens is not' being, it does not matter which,' but rather 'being such that it always matters.' The Latin always already contains, that is a reference to the will (libet). Whatever being has an original relation to desire… The whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in it's being such as it is. Singularity thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal.'[3] Whatever-community, then, is where active involvement, constant revelation of positioning take place; where the protagonists of such being are being as such and perform, activate and affirm their realms of understanding in a togetherness which replaces as-if dialogues supporting the dominant monologues by conversation. The absorbed artifice of the experiencing of the other is replaced by the significance of experience in an absolutely unrepresentable community, where the coming to itself is reflecting each singularity, its being whatever, i.e. such as it is. The condition of singularity/multiple singularity flourishes from the 'whatever' being of the community and vice versa.

For every form of a community, the notion of belonging is at stake. Only, for each form of a community the modes of social belonging, the dynamics of constructing sense of belonging differs. 'Such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-such, for belonging itself. '[4] In order to establish a social structure that is in a constant flux of inter-relations, that structure should be based on acts of contributing to the social realms rather than mere act of imagining those realms. The relation between contribution and realms must be such that the contribution is not merely an integration of singularity into a pre-established structure, but that this structure is constantly open to its transformation through and by the singular contribution. Let us imagine the realm as constantly expecting and awaiting the contribution. The contribution: the way in which singularity and realm simultaneously come to being.

The base of coming to being is the presence of all participants without assigned hierarchy. An actively involved community based on multiple singularities, as Lefebre says: 'as object opposed to subject, as res extensa opposed to, present to, res cogitans, space came to dominate, by containing them, all senses and all bodies, no limits at all have been set on the generalization of the concept of mental space, no clear account of it is ever'. Thus, the enunciation of difference becomes the lovable in a face-to-face collectivity. Such a state of belonging/togetherness can be possible only if the Other is affirmed as the lovable rather than the vulnerable****. That is to say the Other is not vulnerable since he/she recalls death but lovable since he/she recalls sensations.*****

'A global cosmopolitanism… readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multi-nationalism affirm their commitment to 'diversity' at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees political exiles, or the poor.'[5] In reaction to or in resistance against such attitudes art is a discourse about the necessity of recognizing what is omitted or avoided in the realms of social structures. Through sharing, turning into a recognition of otherness, positing beyond the representable, the captured, the known, art has the vital capacity of proposing change. As art produces perceptions, each encounter with an art work is performative. That is to say, the act of coming across defines a space of interaction of thinking, understanding, evaluating, producing meaning and especially feeling. The art practice that is defined by pre-given

ethnic or cultural traits on the fixed tablet of expectations stands in an a priori meaning. The meaning that is formed through the presuppositions, presumptions of such and such national, racial, geographical understandings. That meaning of the artwork is on the very first hand endangered under the label of belonging to here and there, telling of this and that: Scandinavian art is about sound and light, Turkish art deals with identity and land, Balkanian art is about blood and conflict… The generalization of an art practice not only produces the cliché, but also transforms the artwork into a cultural product that can be put in trade. Where, the question of cultural codes (the experience of other cultures) becomes a hermeneutic project for the restoration of cultural ' essence' which, sooner or later, results in the 'loss' of a meaningful cross-culturalism.

The attempt to emancipate the practice of art from the national, racial, geographical attributions is an attitude towards receiving art works as products that have been produced by singular whatever-beings. The innovative and crucial act to bring out is the need to think beyond narratives and to focus on the moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of art practices. The re-instantiation of an artwork through experience****** provides the overlap and displacement of the domains of difference. The art that posits whatever'ness, being as such and expressing as such provides the space of communication, which is in the emergence of interstices. To paraphrase Agamben, the omnivalence of whatever being is neither apathy, nor promiscuity, nor resignation. These pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. [6] Art can be such an example through which the unrepresentable can nevertheless be referred to, thus communicated upon. The state of perceiving art works, then will be of another dimension. A dimension that is defined through the relation that artwork structures and produces by itself. The newly announced dimension will be, surely, a proposal of a new attitude and approach to establish understanding. Not only this, but as art is the sphere of possible challenges and representations of the unrepresentable, it can also be regarded as the first step to form tendencies of whatever-communities.

'Whatever is the figure of pure singularity. Whatever singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an idea, that is, to the totality of its possibilities. Through this relation, as Kant said, singularity borders all possibility and this receives its omnimoda determinatio not from its participation in a determinate concept or some actual property (being red, Italian, Communist), but only by means of this bordering. It belongs to a whole, but without this belongings's being able to be represented by a real condition: Belonging, being-such, is here only the relation to an empty and indeterminate totality. In Kantian terms this means that what is in question

in this bordering is not a limit that knows no exteriority, but a threshold, that is, a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty.'[7] Whatever-community does not position a single unique community, but functions as a common term in order to define variety of being as such. Art taking the first challenge to perform itself 'as in the Klein bottle or in the Mobius strip where exterior and interior in-determine each other'[8], will influence an awareness that results in transforming the multi-cultural society and posit to go beyond the normalized state of individualities and community. The structure of an artistic act is an example of the contribution that extends the realm. For the realm that art produces spheres of meaning to resemble its potentiality, and vice versa.

*The term whatever-community suggests an application of Agamben's idea of the coming community and his term whatever-being.
**My enthusiasm stems from past and especially current experiences: I have been invited to curate a video festival of Turkish contemporary artists' in Stuttgart and in Berlin. My aim to avoid the cliché approaches to nationalistic representation of art practices and attributed geographical indications of artists and the dynamics of their production made me produce a concept rinsed of these attitudes. Thus, although the festival is composed of works by artists who are in some ways related to Turkey, it does not aim to create disciplinary generalizations or mimetic narratives of '`Turkish Art'.
Nonetheless, the reinterpretation of the concept by the hosting institution (through translation!) resulted in a misconception of the whole frame-work and the content and the reproduction of some of the very attributions I was trying to avoid.
***Hostipitality is a term produced by Derrida, makes reference to the duo condition of the hosting condition where hospitality and hostility are at stake, simultaneously.
****Vulnerable is the positioning of the Other by Emmanuel Levinas in his essay titled Ethics as First Philosophy. That essay is on the reading list of Core Course A.
*****Sensations can be of any sort, not only the good feelings and best intentions but also the envy, hatred, the challenge…
******Experience of art can be of: coming across, reading a review, listening a comment, searching from a source…

Photo: Tobias Hering

[1] Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the desert of real, 2002, Verso, p. 10

[2] Giorgio Agamben, means without end Notes on Politics, 1996, theory out of bounds, Volume 20, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.9-10

[3] Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, 1990, Translated by Michael Hardt, Theory out of bounds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p.1

[4] Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, 1990, Translated by Michael Hardt, Theory out of bounds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p:1-2

[5] Homi Bhabba, The Location of Culture, 2004, Routledge, Classics, Routledge, preface to the Routledge Classics Edition, p. 14

[6] Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, 1990, Translated by Michael Hardt, Theory out of bounds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p:1-2

[7] Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, 1990, Translated by Michael Hardt, Theory out of bounds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p:68

[8] Giorgio Agamben, means without end Notes on Politics, 1996, theory out of bounds, Volume 20, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.25