

## **Erratic Moves from the Borderland: Contextualizing the Independent Contemporary Dance Art Scene in Turkey**

Working paper by

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A body of hybrid practices that self-identify as contemporary dance appeared in the late 1990s and 2000s in Turkey. Until then, dance as an art form was identified mainly with classical ballet or highly stylized spectacular forms of folk dances. That is, contemporary dance in Turkey is a relatively young and small art field. Although there are some obvious mutual influences among people who work together, the productions are as diverse as the individuals who create them. There is no overarching aesthetic approach or an identifying trait that is “Turkish” about the works. Granted that, they are still the products of their local circumstances often marked by inventive solutions to deal with scarce financial, structural and intellectual resources.

It is difficult to trace a linear and cumulative history of contemporary dance in Turkey. Preceding dance practices, institutions, and aesthetics constitute isolated points, lost tracks or aborted attempts that do not lead smoothly to the current scene. The field comprises of erratic moves—regarding aesthetic references, inspirations, and structures—without predictable sources *of* and courses *for* action.

The history of the art of dance—not only in Turkey but in general—consists of cross-cultural borrowings, appropriations, mutations and hybridization, rendering claims of cultural purity untenable. They hardly ever conform to boundaries that nation states impose. Wars, commerce, and migrations have been transmitting cultural influences for centuries even before the advent of globalization. Nonetheless, the political instrumentalization of culture and to present it as a bounded monolithic entity is equally

ancient. However, with the emergence of nation states the instrumentalization of culture for building a distinct identity around an “imagined community” entered a new phase.

In the first part of the following paper, I will talk about how the process of the creation of a modern national identity in Turkey went hand in hand with the production of bodies and the regulation of their movement through the appropriation and stylization of folk dances. I will also discuss the establishment of classical ballet as part of the state-led “civilizing” and westernizing approach to culture and arts education. I will then outline the struggle for the institutionalization of modern dance training in the conservatory system and the parallel emergence of the independent contemporary dance scene.

In the second part, I will discuss the internationalism of the field, and address the impact of transnational networks, namely, the EU-supported project networks. Instead of focusing on individual choreographers and aesthetics, I would like to provide here some historical and sociopolitical context.

### **Dancing into Modernity**

Before the Second World War, in most parts of Europe, the dominant paradigm of movement was based on a vision of bodily emancipation, influenced by rhythmic gymnastics, drawing on the work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, Rudolf Laban, and Isadora Duncan. As I will demonstrate, in the first part of the 20th century some Turkish intellectuals, sports officials, and pedagogues were aware of these movements as they often traveled abroad to study and research. They aspired to integrate similar notions of the body and training to the social and national imaginary of the newly established pro-western secular Turkish nation-state.

After the Second World War, ballet and folk dances became the predominant norm throughout Europe, either to express social collectivity or national identity. In

Turkey, although the country was not totalitarian in the sense of its socialist counterparts of the time, ballet companies and folk dance institutions were established as state-led social engineering projects to construct the westernized national subject at a corporeal level. Physical education was geared towards the principle of “healthy body, healthy nation” as reflected in the mass spectacles of the young republic’s newly invented holidays.

The Ottoman Empire ruled across the Mediterranean world between the 13th-20th centuries and collapsed after the First World War, resulting in the declaration of The Republic of Turkey in 1923, which distanced itself from the Ottoman heritage orienting towards a comprehensive westernization program. The founder of the modern republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, instituted a modern state and bureaucracy, a new capital Ankara, the Latin alphabet, Western style dressing, secularism in education and the courts, and new legal rights for women. However, most importantly, the success of the process of modernization in Turkey, as elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> could not be based on legal reforms alone, but required that the people subject themselves to modern “techniques of the body.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, a series of westernization and modernization reforms had already begun in the Ottoman Empire as early as the late 18th century with the “New Order” of Sultan Selim III, followed by the Tanzimat reform era (1839-1876). Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that modernization began with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. However, the Republican reforms were distinct from previous efforts in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Norbert Elias’s classical sociological work *The Civilizing Process* (1939) where he traces the historical development of the European habitus (the psychic structures, bodily comportment, etc., molded by social attitudes). Elias outlines how post-medieval European standards regarding bodily functions; sexual behavior, violence, table manners and forms of speech were gradually transformed by increasing thresholds of shame, working out from a nucleus in court etiquette.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body”

unprecedented totalizing and homogenizing nature of the new regime and the extent to which it intervened in the details of daily life of its subjects.

During Ottoman times, there were two types of dances based on the performance contexts: court dances and folk dances.<sup>3</sup> Dance as not differentiated as an artistic realm on its own, but mainly fulfilled ornamental and social functions. Throughout much of Ottoman history, the sultans supported professional dance troupes that performed at the court, in palace celebrations, and the social events of the wealthy. Professional male and female dancers were organized under elaborate guild systems. Although Ottoman dance practices were highly diverse, they were structured by an Islamic gender system that valued gender segregation and homo-social networks.

Besides professional dancing, both the non-Muslim (Greek, Armenian, Levantine) and Muslim populations of the Empire were performing their own dances in small towns and villages in settings such as weddings, engagement ceremonies, and spring rituals. These native dances were the basis of what would become the folk dance repertory of the new nation-state.

### ***Folk dances and nation building***

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Ottoman dance historian Metin And, there were three types of court dancers: *çengi*, *köçek*, and *curcuna*. *Çengi*, who originally included both men and women, but in later times came to be women only. The *çengi* dancers held a type of castanet known as *çarpara* in their hands, and sometimes also handkerchiefs. Their costumes were highly ornate, concealing every part of the body apart from the face and hands. Some *çengis* whirled china plates on the tips of their fingers while they danced, and were then known as *kâsebaz* or “dish jugglers.” The *köçek* were male dancers and usually wore skirts and imitated women in both appearance and demeanor. The *köçeks* gave public performances, while *çengis* performed for audiences of women only. *Curcuna* dancers resembled clowns and danced with jerky movements. They generally wore comical masks and costumes, resembling those of Harlequin, the witty and cunning servant who features in the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. *Curcuna* dancers also appeared in the improvised comedies known as *ortaoyunu*. For further information see:  
 And, Metin. 1959. “Dances of Anatolian Turkey.” *Dance Perspectives* 3.  
 ————. 1976. *Turkish Dancing*. Istanbul: Dost Yayınları.  
 ————. 1982. *Osmanlı enliklerinde Türk Sanatları*.

The discovery of dance as a potential source of national identity came at the turn of the 20th century—way before the establishment of the nation state—in the texts of some figures such as Selim Sırrı Tarcan and Rıza Tevfik who were part of the Young Turk movement. They were associated with the Committee of Union and Progress that came to power with the 1908 revolution establishing the constitutional monarchy in the Ottoman Empire. In the Young Turk ideology, the emancipation of women was crucial for promoting the idea of a strong and healthy nation, a vision that continued after the founding of the Republic of Turkey. The Young Turks considered many aspects of Ottoman culture as decadent and backward and promoted a European approach in culture and the arts. Consequently, some writers focused on the issue of health, dance, and sports, and wanted to teach women how to exercise to keep a healthy body.

For instance, Selim Sırrı Tarcan<sup>4</sup> focused on the process of refining folk dances to accommodate the tastes of the urban bourgeoisie. In particular, he was committed to refining the *zeybek* dance of the Western (Aegean) Coast of Anatolia, to invent a new national dance.<sup>5</sup> Tarcan had studied at the Higher Institute of Physical Education in Sweden around 1910 and admired the way Swedish folklorists had disciplined folk dances to form a repertory of national dances. He wanted to adopt the same approach and envisioned a kind of *zeybek*, which men and women would perform in a social setting similar to a ballroom genre.<sup>6</sup> While the authentic versions of *zeybek* were based on

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<sup>4</sup> Selim Sırrı Tarcan also founded the Turkish National Olympic Committee. He worked as an instructor for physical education at various high schools until the proclamation of Turkish Republic in 1923. Thereafter, He was promoted 1931 to Head Inspector of Physical Education in the Ministry of National Education. He initiated the establishment of annual gymnastics festivals in 1916, which were the basis of May 19th celebrations for the Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day.

<sup>5</sup> See Arzu Öztürkmen's "Modern Dance alla Turca" for a detailed discussion of the writings of the father and daughter Tarcans in *Dance Research Journal* Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer, 2003), pp. 38-60. Also see Öztürkmen's Dissertation *Folklore and Nationalism in Turkey* (PhD Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1993) where she discusses in exquisite detail the relationship between the reinvention of folk dances for modern nation building.

<sup>6</sup> See Danielle J. van Dobben's (2008) MA Thesis titled "Dancing Modernity: Gender, Sexuality and the State in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic" where she discusses the role of

improvisation, Tarkan set out to choreograph it in a formal way with predetermined figures and movements because he believed that dance and music needed to have a fixed form in order to be transmissible and teachable across the nation.<sup>7</sup>

In the early periods of the republic, folk dances were performed and taught at the People's Houses, which were established in small towns to promote and disseminate republican reforms as well as to conduct research on local folklore and history. In the 1960s, these dances started to be taught in urban contexts, gradually spreading to high schools and colleges in the 1970s. A boom in college associations of folk dances ensued. The repertoire included a vast array of refined and stylized regional dances such as the *horon*, *halay*, and *bar*. The practice of this repertoire gradually led to a hybrid form of folk dancing, which borrowed some authentic elements from the regional dances, dramatically transforming them into a new movement system. I think the process of reinventing folk dances illustrates the entanglement of politics, power, and choreography almost in a literal sense. It underscores the notion of "choreography as an apparatus of capture,"<sup>8</sup> that involves the organization of a set of principles, movements, and gestures as a series of imperatives to be executed in perfect obedience across time and space, producing docile bodies and subjects.

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ballroom dancing performed by the new cadre of military officials and bureaucrats at the Republican balls of the late 1920s and 1930s on constructing the normative social values regarding gender and sexuality. Van Dobben demonstrates that the impact of modern reforms in Turkey was experienced not only politically and socially, but also bodily and illustrates how ways of being modern were both constructed and performed on the dance floor.

<sup>7</sup> A singular national dance that Tarkan envisioned as the ultra-stylized *zeybek* could not actualize because on the one hand, institutional and formal settings where it could be performed were lacking. On the other, the Turkish state was more interested in displaying regional dances in their diversity rather than fixating on a single genre where regional dances were framed as national dances, becoming important in the construction of a national identity.

<sup>8</sup> André Lepecki, "Choreography as an Apparatus of Capture" in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 51, Number 2 (T 194), Summer 2007, pp. 119-123

### ***Modern dance for modern women***

While her father sought to derive a national dance form, Selma Selim Sirri (Tarcan) discovered modern dance simultaneously with the rest of the world. She wanted to establish dance as art, and wanted to upgrade it to a respectable place.<sup>9</sup> Selma Selim explored the idea of modern dance for Ottoman women in a booklet titled “The Aesthetic Dances of Miss Selma Selim” (*Selim Sirri Hanim’in Bedii Rakslari*), which she wrote in 1926.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on her education in rhythmic gymnastics in Berlin, Selma referred to a concept of “*mevzun raks*,” (rhythmic dance), a genre embellished with narrative elements. With her sister, she choreographed two such dances both inspired by European history and literature rather than a local/national references. In the footsteps of Isadora Duncan, Selma Selim despised the displays of leg-raising, back-bending virtuosity of acrobatic forms and articulated her definition of aesthetic dance as a staged artistic performance that reflects the poetry and the harmony of the soul. She considered ballroom genres and social dances as mere amusement to be consumed and advocated the notion of creative dance as serious art. Selma Selim’s vision of aesthetic dance, however, did not have much impact. Although the first ballet school was founded in 1948 in Turkey, modern dance training was only to begin in the mid 1990s.

### ***The institutionalization of classical ballet***

Atatürk commissioned the first Turkish Opera, based on the notion that the genre was the most refined form of performing arts. The first national operas demanded the creation of a conservatory for training, with music and theater as the priority areas. In 1936, the government opened the Fine Arts Department under the Ministry of Education in the new capital of Ankara, which later in 1940 became an entity of its own with a new

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<sup>9</sup> Arzu Öztürkmen, “Modern Dance alla Turca,” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer, 2003), pp. 38-60.

<sup>10</sup> Arzu Öztürkmen, “Modern Dance alla Turca,” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer, 2003), pp. 38-60.

name as the State Conservatory. It consisted of theater, music, and ballet departments; however, the ballet department remained inactive for some time. In 1948, in collaboration with the British Council, the government invited Dame Ninette de Valois, the founder of the British Royal Ballet, to establish a school in Turkey. Modeled after the Sadler's Wells Ballet School in London, de Valois first opened a school in Istanbul, which later moved to Ankara to become part of the state conservatory in 1950. For the first twenty-five years, British teachers led the training. The introduction of a new art form as an educational model was a big social project, and initially, they could not find students but had to recruit them.

De Valois was highly influential on the development of ballet in Turkey. She staged productions of the traditional classical repertoire as well as some contemporary ballets, including her creations. In 1965, she produced and choreographed the first full-length work created for the new Turkish State Ballet titled *Çeşmebaşı* ("At the Fountain").<sup>11</sup> Further productions followed, and the ballet company continued to develop. In the 1956-57 season, the first graduates of the Ankara State Conservatory of Ballet started dancing in opera and theater productions; however, it was only in 1970 that a separate ballet company was founded.

The first cohort of Turkish choreographers such as Sait Sökmen, Geyvan McMillan, and Oytun Turfanda appeared only in the 1970s, and almost all of them had problems with the State Opera and Ballet in their search of a subjective aesthetics. In other words, although there had been some innovations within the classical ballet tradition in the 1970s they did not culminate in a larger, continued impact.

### ***Modern dance education in the conservatory system***

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<sup>11</sup> The ballet was the first to feature music composed by a Turkish Composer, Ferit Tüzün, and its movement vocabulary incorporated elements of Turkish folk dance. It is therefore known as the first Turkish ballet.

The first official modern dance department was founded at the Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts State Conservatory in 1992, in large part due to the efforts of Şebnem Selışık Aksan. After training in a private ballet school in Ankara, Aksan studied at the Julliard School in New York in the late 1960s at a time when the dance scene there was at its most vibrant. Aksan was impressed by the dance environment in New York and observed to her surprise that opposites could coexist, and ballet and contemporary dance communities were not hostile to each other!

There was nothing in Turkey about modern dance in the '60s when Aksan returned in 1968 for her first official post at the Istanbul State Conservatory. Neither was there any discussion or debate about the shortcomings of the dance scene. There was a nationalist resistance to inviting teachers from abroad as well as institutional and bureaucratic constraints to do so. In 1974, she was appointed as the head of the ballet department of the Mimar Sinan State Conservatory; however, her primary objective was to establish a modern dance education because she believed that ballet felt very alien to Turkish bodies. Aksan thought that international standards in the performing arts could not be reached by imitation but could be possible only by a unique approach and a free body, which could be achieved only through modern dance education. Conservatory system yielded only technically able dancers for state ballet companies and lacked the vision to foster creative and critical thinking. Furthermore, the particular relation with state authority subsidizing ballet brought problems related to power, leadership, and responsibility. The endless discussions on the concept of national identity and national ballet made things even worse.

Between 1981-87, Aksan informally integrated some modern dance and somatic training classes in the ballet department and ran the school based on temporary and improvised solutions. At that time, Aydın Teker, now an internationally well-known auteur-choreographer, returned to Turkey following her studies at SUNY Purchase and Tisch School of the Arts in New York. Although Teker was more interested in choreographing, Şebnem Aksan persuaded her to teach some modern dance classes at the

ballet department. Instead of weekly gymnastics classes, for instance, Teker held some modern dance classes where the students freaked out when they were asked to move around barefoot and lie down on the floor.

Following a series of investigations, Aksan was fired from her post as head of the ballet department in 1988. Afterward, she started teaching a class on dance history at the Bosphorus University's Department of Western Languages and Literature. These classes provided the opportunity for more intellectually inclined students without prior formal dance training to encounter dance.

When it first opened the modern dance department had only three students, including Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna, who is currently the chair of the department. Gradually, and due to some developments in popular dance and entertainment business, i.e., the proliferation of Riverdance-inspired commercial dance companies such as "The Fire of Anatolia" and the "Sultans of Dance," the number of students, especially male students, increased.

Initially, the modern dance department lacked qualified trainers. To this end, Şebnem Aksan, as the chair of the modern dance department, invited numerous dancers/choreographers from abroad, mostly from the United States, based on the recommendations of the Julliard School, North Carolina School of the Arts, and the American Dance Festival. As there was no budget allocated for the school for such endeavors, Aksan accommodated these teachers at her apartment. To help cover the travel expenses of the guest teachers, she opened the workshops to aspiring dancers from outside of the school. These workshops provided a fruitful context for the encounter and training for the emerging cohort of independent dancers and choreographers.

Until 2011, the Modern Dance Department at the Conservatory lacked its space and facilities and rented a private ballet studio to run the classes. In 2011, the Department moved to its current premises that include three training studios and one black box stage.

(However, it is difficult to organize events or to use the studio outside of class purposes, for bureaucratic reasons).

Another person who I think was influential for the development of the local modern and contemporary dance scene in Istanbul is Geyvan McMillan. She operated at the fringes of the conservatory system with a vision to establish modern dance training. After studying at the Ankara State Conservatory, McMillan trained abroad with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham. She was inclined towards the expressive features of modern dance and explored in her first pieces ideas regarding “localness” and “Turkishness.” She founded and directed the second modern dance department in Turkey at the Yıldız Technical University in 1999. Zeynep Tanbay, who studied dance in New York in the 1980s and danced with Martha Graham Dance Company, taught at the Yıldız University Dance Department upon her return to Turkey. Tanbay also established her company “Zeynep Tanbay Dance Project” in 2000 as a privately funded independent initiative.<sup>12</sup>

Geyvan McMillan and Aydın Teker were also influential in the development of the independent scene as they conducted a series of workshops at university settings in Istanbul throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, stimulating the emergence of choreographers outside of the conservatory system such as Mehmet Sander, Ziya Azazi, Zeynep Günsür, and Mustafa Kaplan. Some early works of Sander, Azazi, and Kaplan share a task-based and forceful physicality, perhaps partly due to their educational background in engineering.

The mid-1990s saw the emergence of several project-based initiatives such as the Turquoise Dance Company (founded by Aysun Arslan), Yeşil Üzümler (founded by

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<sup>12</sup> Zeynep Tanbay Dance Project was active between 2000-2011. The private bank sponsoring the company withdrew its support based on some vague justification.

Zeynep Günsür),<sup>13</sup> Dance Factory (initiated by Aydin Teker's students), among others, which did not live long.

The Asos Performing Arts Festival, which was launched by Hüseyin Katırcıoğlu in the Aegean coastal town of Asos, was one of the most important contexts for the development of the independent dance and theater scene. It was an international festival that took place annually from 1995-97 and featured interdisciplinary site-specific works.

Not surprisingly, experimental theater and plastic arts scenes were more receptive to innovative practices in dance than the ballet world. For instance, the Theatre Research Laboratory (TAL) that was founded by the two pioneering theatre-makers, actors and scholars Beklan and Ayla Algan within the Istanbul Municipal Theatre invited Mustafa Kaplan to choreograph some pieces for their work. Kaplan was employed at TAL on an intermittent basis and gradually gathered around him in a collective learning and project-based creation environment a newly emerging generation of aspiring dancers from different educational backgrounds—including many of today's contemporary dance artists such as Filiz Sızanlı, Ayşe Orhon, Sevi Algan, and myself. The self-organized collective's efforts culminated in the establishment of the ÇATI Dance Studio and Association, which is still active and hosts and organizes events and workshops in an informal and semi-professional setting.

In 1997, in Ankara Middle Eastern Technical University (METU), Şafak Uysal and friends started an organization called METU Contemporary Dance Days. The organizers of "METU Contemporary Dance Days" were also students who were not from any given dance or theater department but rather coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, and they were trying to learn the art on their own. It was a context where the newly emerging independent field and also the modern dance departments found a platform to

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<sup>13</sup> The dance scholar and choreographer Zeynep Günsür re-established an all-women project-based initiative Movement Atelier in 2010. Their creations are often based on a dance-theatrical style that explores the entanglement of individual and collective histories.

perform and to see each other's works. Ilyas Odman, who is featured here in the Body Double program, for instance, is a graduate of METU.

## **The Local Independent Scene as Part of the Transnational Contemporary Dance Art World**

### ***iDANS Festival***

iDANS Festival, which was organized annually between 2006-2013 by Bimeras, a private not-for-profit organization, was crucial in the articulation of the local dance scene with the larger dance-scape of Europe. iDANS also exemplifies how agents of the independent scene took the development of the field into their own hands.

Aydin Silier started Bimeras some fifteen years ago as an agency to support the international training, promotion, and touring of some Turkish innovative choreographers such as Aydin Teker and Taldans (Mustafa Kaplan, Filiz Sizanli) to stimulate to the local field. Later on, Aydin Silier and I initiated and directed a festival series named iDANS, which became the primary activity of Bimeras. During the IETM Network's annual plenary meeting in Istanbul in 2006, Bimeras responded in a very unusual way to IETM's call for a showcase of local artists. It organized instead an international festival named IstanbulREconnects. The idea was that presenting local artists could only be meaningful on a platform of international exchange and collaboration. In the program, artists from various European countries were featured with a particular focus on the neighbors of Turkey, including the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria. For that time, this was a brave and politically significant move. IstanbulREconnects series evolved later to become the iDANS Festival.

iDANS was the first festival of its kind in Turkey. There had been some international dance works featured in Istanbul Cultural Foundation's theater and music festivals. However, these often included risk-free mainstream works —such as Pina Bausch, Mark Morris, Robert Wilson—appealing to a large, culturally and economically homogenous audience. Aiming to contribute to the perception of choreography as a salient artistic and theoretical field, each edition of iDANS brought together challenging artistic practices of the scene in Istanbul. Furthermore, it supported the endeavor with organizing and implementing discursive activities such as talks, publications, and workshops, as well as promoting, facilitating, and presenting staged performances and public interventions.

iDANS was one of the rare contemporary dance festivals in Europe, if not the only one, that was issue based and framed around a curatorial concept determined through a research process. The artistic program was realized in consultation with professional colleagues and the artists previously invited to iDANS, deliberations with prospective artists and local institutions and independent initiatives.

Every year it hosted some 30 projects that included staged contemporary dance and theater performances, public space performances and installations, site-specific performances, talks, symposia, seminars and community projects. As well as featuring existing works from the European scene and beyond, iDANS also presented its commissions and co-productions. Since 2010, public space performances started to take up a larger portion of festival events. We decided to discontinue the organization of the festival in its current format after the biggest public space performance of modern Turkey, the Gezi Uprising, erupted in June 2013, followed by the rapid downward spiral of the country into a kind of dictatorship.

iDANS was invited to join several European dance networks since 2007 such as “Europe in Motion,” “Jardin d’Europe,” and “DEPARTS.” The motivation for joining these networks was mostly for supporting the international touring and visibility of local contemporary dance artists with new productions. Through partnerships with networks

iDANS co-produced around 25 new works. We also thought that the EU support could contribute to lobbying to local politicians for the recognition of the independent contemporary performing arts scene in Istanbul. However, partly due to the increasing suppression of any form of oppositional culture that does not fall in line with the governing party's ideology, and partly because of the lack of any artistic vision by the inherited system of institutions from the Republican era, the attempts for structural recognition were not met. The case of iDANS demonstrates the significance of local political constraints in non-EU member countries for being part of the larger dance-scape of Europe via networks.

As in most parts of Europe now, the contemporary dance scene in Turkey is entirely independent.<sup>14</sup> It is generally marked by collective or individual project-based work with a shifting constellation of collaborators, often made possible by international collaborations, co-productions, and residencies. It does not have a stable environment with its own institutions and venues. The inherited system of cultural production, namely, the state and municipal/city theatre system and conservatory education has been out of synch with actual practices, new forms of research, production, and presentation.

Initially, the situation of being outside of the existing system had both advantages and disadvantages: While on the one hand, the lack of infrastructures, funds, and instruments to support the development of contemporary dance prevented a dynamic and sustainable growth of the field, on the other, it allowed actors themselves to fill the void, to introduce new modes of working, and articulate inter/transdisciplinary approaches. In that respect, the work of artists has been pioneering in its own right. There was little in terms of venues, knowledge, discourse, audiences, financial support,

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<sup>14</sup> There is one ensemble called "Modern Dance Company Istanbul," but that does not fall into my categorization of the independent scene as it is linked to the Istanbul State Opera and Ballet. It is notable that although there never was a modern dance department at the Ankara State Conservatory, with the initiative of Beyhan Murphy, a modern dance company within the Ankara State Opera and Ballet was founded in 1993. Murphy launched a similar company in Istanbul in 2011 as part of the Istanbul State Opera and Ballet when she became its director.

recognition systems, and critical discourse. It has been artists who have been the main drivers of the cultural scene. They established their own structures, however informal they may be, and strove to create a context and audience for their practices. A problem with that is that everyone became a multi-tasker, and the roles and distances between critic, dramaturge, artist, choreographer, manager, etc., collapsed, marking a shift from everybody doing one thing (representing the nation in a mass spectacle) to each body doing everything!

### ***The work of transnational dance networks***

It is also the independent scene that plays an important role in international cooperation. With the work of international festivals and networks, artists and organizations from Turkey often remark half-jokingly that they entered the EU before their country did. It brings me to the next part of my discussion on the implications of exchange programs and European contemporary dance project networks for the growth of the local scene.

I think the stimulus of European dance project networks, international exchange and cooperation has been more significant for peripheral countries (Former East countries, the Balkans, and Turkey). As a phenomenon that got developed and institutionalized in Western Europe in the 1980s and 90s (Flemish Dance Wave, the Critical turn of the French dance, etc.), contemporary dance aesthetics, discourse, and organizational forms further developed in Turkey via international festivals, networking activities, exchange, and travel programs for education and training.

Cultural professionals from Western sought partnerships from Eastern Europe and Turkey for various reasons, including genuine curiosity, mere opportunism for meeting the funding criteria, for talent scouting, etc. Agents of the independent cultural scene and artist from the peripheries, where there had been no previous recognition of

contemporary dance, welcomed these partnerships because by being part of these networks they could find the opportunity to show and circulate their work, meet artists, get training, etc. Performing arts, especially innovative forms of theatre, were presented in international theatre festivals earlier, but it has been primarily through the work of networks and international collaboration that artists and organizations found the chance to engage in the *co-production* and presentation of *new work*.

Currently, in Turkey, independent cultural operators often approach foreign governments or agencies for support under a project label if it has a link or partnership with artists or organizations in the relevant country. Alternatively, or complementarily, they pursue partnerships with international networks. For non-commercial performing arts that do not appeal to large audiences, that is, if they do not have entertainment value, private funding is unavailable. There has not been much to expect from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism where almost all annual budget goes entirely to tourism, and only a small percentage is reserved for state cultural institutions such as theatre repertory ensembles, several opera and ballet companies and around fifty museums. They are trying to even eliminate that miniscule budget as well. By the way, the annual budget I am talking about is less than 0.5% of the national budget while the military budget is around 50%. Furthermore, decisions for support are based on political and ideological agendas and censorship is a major possibility.

The absence of local cultural policies and vision, the lack of continued public support for contemporary dance in Turkey renders the scene more fragile to the potential withdrawal of international interest. Furthermore, although organizations from Europe's peripheries have been able to participate in transnational contemporary dance networks and exchange programs as *co-organizing* partners, they have not been able to initiate and coordinate partnerships as *leading* organizations. Because the EU funding for culture is not a full grant but a co-financing agreement—that is, organizers and network partners need to raise the remaining 50% of the project budget—partners from Turkey find it

difficult to initiate or join projects because they don't have the matching resources from the local context.

### ***Homogenization or emancipation?***

While most artists and organizations from Turkey embrace transnational cooperation and exchange, others voice their concerns about the potential homogenizing and hegemonic effect of Western European institutions and aesthetics. For instance, some argue that contemporary dance is written from the point of view of the West. To be able to enter the market, as some contend, artists must apply the discourse about art and philosophy preferred by Western programmers and curators. They argue that professionals of international art festivals tend to evaluate performances from the fringes of Europe as “old fashioned” or “passé” based on the canonized key works of contemporary art in the West. In that sense, contemporary becomes a political category more than an aesthetic one.<sup>15</sup>

In the earlier days of networking with Eastern European and Turkish artists and organizations, Western cultural agents found dancers and choreographers from the East as either too old-fashioned or not “Serbian,” “Romanian” or “Turkish” enough. In an exchange program of French and Turkish artists in Istanbul in July 2005, regarding the performance *Solum* by the Turkish choreographers Mustafa Kaplan and Filiz Sızanlı, a French dance critic commented that he could have seen this performance in France, and wondered what was “Turkish” about it. The paradox here is that, while on the one hand there is criticism about dance aesthetics imported from the West and why only those influenced by the so-called “conceptual” dance are the only ones supported, on the other

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<sup>15</sup> Annamaria Szoboslai, “Communitas and the Other: On Hungarian Dance after 1989,” in *European Dance Since 1989: ‘Communitas’ and the Other*, ed. Joanna Szymajda, (Routledge, 2014), 123-134.

hand, those who work along the lines of, say, some French choreographers, are labeled by some Western programmers as lacking anything specific.<sup>16</sup>

I think such encounters mark the difficulties and ambiguities of a model of European integration based on culture alone. While activists of the European platform have been trying to do away with essentialist definitions of culture, they still often confront the normative framework in which culture is used as a referent of difference in the anthropological sense.<sup>17</sup>

Despite contrary goals of the cultural agents and artists, the EU cultural policy programs run the risk of reinforcing the distinctions between “art” and “ethnic cultural production.” When invited to cultural exchange programs those for example from Turkey do not find themselves in the position of an international artist with individual preferences. For example, dance and performance artists from Egypt and Lebanon in a meeting titled “Arab Caravan” at the Tanzmesse (Dusseldorf, August 2014) were questioned by the audience (which consisted mostly of the professionals in the field) about the culture and politics of their region, put in a position to speak about and give information on topics that they were not particularly concerned with in their artistic work. Although they depart from positive intentions, such transnational exchange and cooperation programs run the risk of fostering cultural stereotypes and leave intact the “topos of Western European moral superiority.” The practice of collaboration alone is not sufficient to change the framing of artworks and their perception.

Nevertheless, it is again through encounters, cultural exchange, collaboration, and intense networking practices that the stereotypes of non-Western artists began to dissolve gradually since the first cycle of the culture programs. Cultural operators from

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<sup>16</sup> For a similar discussion, see Anna Vujanovic, “Not quite-Not Right: Eastern/Western Dance on Contemporary Dance in Serbia” in *European Dance Since 1989: ‘Communitas’ and the Other*, ed. Joanna Szymajda, (Routledge, 2014), pp. 55-66.

<sup>17</sup> Banu Karaca, “The Art of Integration: Probing the Role of Cultural Policy in the Making of Europe,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16 (2) (2011): 121-137.

the West began to see that Turkish artists were also pursuing their individual artistic aesthetics and questions similar to their Western counterparts. While there were festivals built on the idea of national representation where each country had a participant artist, there were also curators who did their research and extended invitations based on individual merit and criteria.

### ***Keeping the “borderland” alive***

Contemporary dance is not a part of the larger public culture in Turkey at the moment and its potential to be so is even further constrained by the current authoritarian, unlawful rule of the Justice and Development Party based on a conservative vision blending political Islam with ruthless neoliberal capitalism. Oppositional culture is marginalized, and the potential of dissidents to create alternative public spaces is inhibited. Therefore, contemporary dance runs the risk of further (self-) ghettoization; I think it is at this point that cultivating international solidarity becomes most urgent.

The cultural sociologist Elzbieta Matynia introduces the topos of the borderland regarding its promise and potential for the creation of a new kind of community that is not reducible to a nation, or other in-group, or a nation-state.<sup>18</sup> As she writes, borderlands are more fluid and permissive, however, not without tension, with “dramatic encounters yielding unpredictable outcomes.” Similar to Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space,” a location in-between-cultures, borderlands are sites of contact enabling negotiation and hybridity. “As a highly transnational, pluralistic, and hybrid phenomenon since its onset, contemporary dance can be exemplary in framing and facilitating borderland practices. It involves initiating a conversation about each other’s worlds and unsettling and questioning the given order and the taken for granted. We need to keep alive, contemporary dance as a borderland practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Elzbieta Matynia, “The Promise of Borderlands,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Volume 24 (2011): pp 75-81.