

Field Notes on Instituting

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Today, I'd like to tell you a bit about iDANS Festival that I co-founded and co-directed with Aydin Silier. And, I'll tell you about why we decided to suspend it. I'll also talk about the directions of our new adventures. Then, I'll conclude by walking through storytelling as an extended metaphor for art and instituting practices. Because I'm not a very seasoned storyteller, I'll be reading most parts of my talk. It's titled "Field Notes on Instituting."

So, iDANS was an international contemporary dance and performance festival in Istanbul. It took place annually between 2006-2014. For the local dance community, iDANS was an important platform where they had the opportunity to see and present new works. At the same time, it constituted an example of how actors from the scene took the matter of developing the field into their own hands. In that regard, one could consider it as a case of self-organization. The letter "i" in iDANS stands for Istanbul, independent, international. And, the word "dans" is the way we spell dance in Turkish. But, many people pronounced it as "I dance." And, some colleagues from abroad who know Aydin thought it was literally "Aydin's festival". So, it was truly self-organization, they thought!

iDANS was the culmination of a decade's research and immersion in the local independent dance community. It was organized by Bimeras, an initiative that Aydin had founded in 2004 to support the touring, promotion and training of some local choreographers. The first edition of iDANS was launched in 2006 as an international marathon program during the IETM Network's plenary meeting. Instead of the network's regular call for a showcase of

local artists, we organized an international event. The idea was to challenge notions of cultural purity. From that time onward, iDANS became an annual event featuring around 30 works, including co-productions, commissions, conferences, site-specific works, adaptations, concerts, seminars, publication launches, public space interventions. Well, I won't go into the details of our programs because you can see for yourself by browsing our online archive.

iDANS was the first festival of its kind in Turkey. There had been some local performance art festivals, which, however, did not last longer than a few editions. There were also some international dance performances sporadically programmed in Istanbul Cultural Foundation's theater and music festivals. But, these often included what I could call risk-free, mainstream, already consecrated works. They appealed to a large, culturally and economically homogenous audience. iDANS was also unique in the sense that it focused on a research question for its each edition.

Between 2007-2014, iDANS partnered with the European dance Networks "Europe in Motion," "Jardin d'Europe," and "DEPARTS." Through these, it co-produced around 25 new works and organized educational programs, conferences, debates and seminars. To be honest, we thought the EU support could contribute to lobbying to local politicians for the recognition of the independent scene in Istanbul. But, partly due to the increasing suppression of oppositional cultures and partly for the lack of any artistic vision of the existing public theatre system, our attempts for structural recognition were not met. Or, in fact, it was met but in an almost too literal way: One day we received a letter from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism that read: "We recognize and thank you for your efforts!" Was this supposed to be a performative speech act, we wondered, but apparently it wasn't, and the letter ended up as wall decoration at our office.

Since 2010, public space research and performances started to take up a larger portion of our program. And, we decided to suspend the festival after the biggest public space performance of modern Turkey, the Gezi Uprising. In the aftermath of Gezi, we experienced the rapid downward spiral of the country into a dictatorship of sorts. We witnessed numerous instances of political trauma and violence. That is, times are now different than the optimism of the times when we first started. Existing institutions were not under such pressure. Neither had we anticipated the extent to which the resurgence of nationalism, cultural essentialism and majoritarianism would evolve into such a scale. Besides economic and structural precarity, the independent scene has also undergone political precarization. For instance, last summer, the government decided to withdraw from the Creative Europe program. It was important for the already small independent scene. Because, it was mainly through being part of the European dance networks that it could be articulated to the larger dance-scape.

I'd like to note, though, our decision to suspend the festival was not an abandoning of our involvement in the arts. It was, rather, what one could call an "active withdrawal." We needed to recalibrate and process, first for ourselves, the unfolding of the events. Of course, to be able to do so was also because we are an alternative institution. That is, we are not accountable to anyone but ourselves and to our own networks and communities. My preferred means of processing the developments was retreating into my researcher self. So, I started a series of investigations in two main clusters. In the first, that I call "Cultures of Protest and the Body," I've examined some instances of protests to rethink the relation between the aesthetic and bodily dimensions of the political. I've also comparatively analyzed some practices that defy the boundaries of the body and the state. I've explored how the phenomena of suicide bombing, necropolitical forms of resistance and nonviolent protests differ in their attitude to bodily

vulnerability. It's, in fact, an ongoing research.

The working title of the other strand of research I've started is "The Lived Body Under Fascism." With this, I focus on a different yet not less important dimension of the relations between the body and politics. My interest was also prompted by all kinds of psycho-somatic symptoms I developed—such as paroxysmal positional vertigo—while I was witnessing the unfolding atrocities. Anyways, while there is abundant literature on biopolitics, necropower, and necropolitical forms of resistance such as self-immolations and hunger-strikes, there is not much attention to the everyday dimensions of living under authoritarian regimes. With this research, I study the more subtle, everyday dimensions of political trauma by focusing on a group of political dissidents and artists in Istanbul. I compare those who left and those who stayed. One key line of my inquiry is: how artists bear witness to and document the history of the present. So, we, as Bimeras, are in the process of transforming our structure to an international research center to address these questions.

For me, the festival format stopped providing a meaningful interpretation of our current world. I started to think if this form is contemporary in the sense of being *representative of the times*? I wondered how could we imagine a new format that is contemporary in the sense of Agamben's use of the term. That is, contemporaneity as having a profound experience of dissonance with the present.

I think it's important to know when to let go and not fetishize institutions, formats, and structures for their own sake. Institutions are important not for their walls, but for the programs they build. For the imaginations they set in motion. If it fails to help produce an interpretation of the particular world it's situated in, it gets superfluous.

Now in Turkey, some institutions, small structures, theater initiatives, and festivals are

trying to survive. They're preoccupied with saving the day in an environment where any substantial discussion and debate on artistic programs and the purpose of institutions became unfeasible. On the one hand, there are arts organizations and festivities supported by corporations that are known to be the drivers of mega urban projects, which are key nodes in the nepotistic network of the government. I find it problematic that artists, curators, and institutions don't question their complicity with the government on this front but keep complaining about it nevertheless. Their argument is that, well, there is nothing else, and it is the last castle we've got to defend. It's also sad for me to see that some choreographers and theater makers are very much involved in what I could call "selfie-performances". For the most part, I notice that many artists have not learned much from the Gezi experience, although they were quite active and visible during the events. On the other hand, there is an assault on the values we hold dear. Dissidents, mostly leftists, are purged from the academia and other public sectors. Journalists are jailed in a routine fashion. The most promising collective mobilizations are aborted by force. For instance, the co-chairs and 10 other parliamentarians of the HDP – People's Democratic Party, who represent at least 13% of the voters in Turkey are in prison. There is a situation of extreme polarization. Both sides frown upon institutions and public persons who try to remain critical without taking sides. But, the task of an arts institution is to proliferate the gray spaces, not to declare what's black and white.

Well, I'm sorry if I painted a grim picture. I'll try to make up for it now. There are also some overlooked, quiet, and hopeful developments that may help us to carve spaces where the imagination is not colonized by this neoliberal, nationalist, and militarist siege. These are not necessarily in the art world but could offer insights about it. Sometimes communities, through mobilizing their self-resources, provide more meaningful interpretations and coping strategies

with the current conundrum. It became necessary for me to understand how, despite the direst of circumstances, people can still find meaning and purpose in their lives. It became important for me to explore these questions not in a philosophical manner but through ethnographic modes of research, paying close attention to the life worlds of our contemporaries. To explore their intellectual, practical, imaginative and affective strategies to make lives livable.

One such endeavor I came across is the storytelling movement. More and more people have taken up storytelling, and more and more organizations are popping up. I asked, hey, what's going on here? Why are more and more adults, as well as children, coming together on long winter nights to tell each other fairytales, legends, and so on, invoking both the rich traditions of Anatolian sages and bards (the *dengbej* and *meddahs*) and collecting and passing on international repertoires? The first national storytelling conference took place recently at the Yildiz University. I was struck when I went there to understand what was going on. People from all scales of the political spectrum were sitting in an "assembly of fairy tales," and they were smiling! It also struck me that while some journalists, the truth tellers, are being jailed, politicians who are jailed are turning into storytellers. Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of the People's Democratic Party, penned three short stories while in jail since last November. I think they are quite successful from a literary point of view.

Storytelling can be envisioned as an extended metaphor to illuminate how and why art still matters and how we can reimagine instituting practices. Storytelling is a practice of socialization and community building *par excellence*.

Anthropologists point to fire as the spark that ignited human evolution and institution building. One of the most profound benefits of fire, as the anthropologist Polly Wiessner studied in her groundbreaking research *Embers of Society*, is that it sparked our imagination through

storytelling. She did a study comparing the daytime and fireside conversations of a group of Bushmen people of South Africa. She found that while the daytime talk was focused almost entirely on economic issues, land rights, and complaints about other people, 81% of the fireside conversation was devoted to telling stories.

In *The Human Condition* (1958) the political philosopher Hannah Arendt addresses the question of how storytelling speaks to the struggle to exist as *one* among *many*, preserving one's unique identity, while at the same time fulfilling one's obligations as a citizen in a new home country. Much of she wrote after she went to the USA in 1941 as a refugee bears the mark of her experience of displacement and loss. And it is at this time when she offers invaluable insights into the (almost) universal impulse to translate overwhelming personal and social experiences into forms that can be voiced and reworked in the company of others. Arendt considered storytelling as a mode of purposeful action (*praxis*) that simultaneously discloses our subjective uniqueness and intersubjective connectedness to others, as well as to the wider forces to which we're all subject.

Numerous anthropologists of violence point to storytelling as a vital strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. It is no wonder that storytelling is often prompted by some crises, loss of ground in a person's relationship with the other and with the world. It is, of course, not a substitute for wider collective action; rather, it is a supplement to be used where action is restrained. Please note that the emphasis here is storytelling, not the stories. What I mean is the entire social process rather than the product of narrative activity.

It was, perhaps, Walter Benjamin who first detected the demise of the art of storytelling as a symptom of the loss of the value of experience. In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller" he uses

the work of the 19th-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov as a ground for reflection on the role of storytelling in community building and the implications of its decline. He observes that with the emergence of newspapers and the journalistic jargon, people stopped *listening* to stories but began *receiving* the news. With the news, any event already comes with some explanation. With the news and our vertiginous timelines, explaining and explaining away replaced assimilating, interpreting, understanding and storytelling.

Stories also have a different relation to temporality than news. Focusing on the news also kills the historicity of the events. Connections get lost, leading to a kind of amnesia, which leads to pessimism and cynicism, because it also makes us lose track of hopeful moments, struggles, and victories. The power of the story is to survive beyond its moment and to connect the dots, redeeming the past. It pays homage and shows responsibility to different temporalities and publics, that of the past and the future as well as today's. Benjamin asserted that it is precisely in their obsolescence that narrative forms such as fairy tales, legends and stories have their critical power today.

To sum, the phenomenon of storytelling is interesting for me in several respects: It is an oral, artisanal form of communication; it is an excellent community building practice; it is therapeutic; it creates and passes on wisdom instead of disseminating more and more information. Also, because of its seeming political neutrality and as a commoning practice it has the potential to trespass social and political fault lines. *More importantly, it can incorporate the past to project a future while speaking to the present.* The question is, whether institutions are willing to lend an ear to communities and be the campfires of the 21st century. Sometimes, instead of focusing on how to increase visitors to our venues, it's more rewarding to take our imagination to go visiting.