

Hatice Utkan: *During these turbulent times, how did you find the general art scene environment in Istanbul?*

Andrea Pagnes: Last August we had the chance to stay only for two weeks in Istanbul, invited as guest teachers and performance artists by IPA. We spent the first week holding an intensive workshop on performance art praxis, the second one working and preparing the IV performance of our 2013 performance cycle 'Thou Twin of Slumber', which then we presented at Mixer Gallery, under the title 'Pupae'. We hadn't much time for further meetings with other Turkish artists, besides the ones, which were part of our 'temporary community' there, nor to visit museums and art galleries. Notwithstanding, by our acknowledgment and past experiences, what we can surely say is that Istanbul has an increasing international contemporary cultural significance, which has grown exponentially in the recent years. Places such as Istanbul Modern (the Museum of contemporary art) and Salt Galata are outstanding venues not just to exhibit, but also to produce art. Istanbul Biennale has become undoubtedly one of the most prestigious among the many around the globe. Istanbul Contemporary, the international art fair, already counts on the presence of some of the most important exhibitors in the art world.

To comply its historical and geographical position, this densely populated vast huge city is unique: it represents the crossroads of East and West since centuries. Here modernity and tradition come together to the point that something unexpected, different if not new, can always happen at any moment. We regret that we can say much on which measure these turbulent times, due to the crucial socio-political issues which we all know, effected the city art scene environment in general. To advance careful consideration on such theme, we should have had more time to research properly. However, the Turkish artists, art collaborators, hosts and friends that we have been working together during our staying, gifted us of their many worries and concerns specifically: we recognized in all of them a common urgency of facing openly and radically those problems, and how they can be rendered through their own work, in order to stimulate positive effects on the society where they live. This is, however, a big task, a mission almost. Two young Turkish performance artists, which truly impressed us for their enthusiasm, and more, determination, have been Burçak Konukman and Çiğdem Üçüncü. Nevertheless, being hype-enthusiastic and determined to produce whatever kind of art in response to specific socio-political issues, with the a priori declared intention of triggering some changes in the modes of thinking of the other people, should always be considered a double edged sword, if you are not well methodologically prepared

and organized: you can create a sporadic consensus in the here and now of course, but you can also end up in an unwanted, sterile isolation.

Nevertheless, we think that the actual crisis can be highly fertile for the city (and the country) cultural scene: it is exactly in these moments that new cultural movements can take birth, but, for it, it is important to trigger effortlessly continuous dialogues and collaboration among the different generations, be it with or without the support of the local institutions, which are too often ruled by authoritarian logics aimed to preserve establishment positions. However, the openness demonstrated by Salt Galata and Istanbul Modern towards IPA platform is desirable for future developments in this direction, as it is even on such basis that new languages of expression can improve and find their adequate space to exist.

HU: How was your approach as performance artists to Istanbul performance art scene and IPA? What have you seen here and what would you like to see more or how it should be developed in an environment, like the one of Istanbul, where is difficult to interlace cooperation?

AP: We decided to come to Istanbul for three main reasons: the given opportunity of being part of IPA wearing the double hat of performance artists and workshop facilitators, being IPA an excellent platform of time based art practices; the esteem and affection we have for its founder Jürgen Fritz. And Istanbul of course, a vibrant city, harsh and splendid at the same time, with its perennial conflicts, continuously coexisting on the edge of precariousness, and where history is perpetually licking into the present. We came of course also for the possibility of listening, seeing, speaking with the people that have lived in first person what started in May.

On the other hand, we must frankly say that we didn't meet with what you define 'a performance art scene in Istanbul', meaning it in a broad sense. The venues where the event took place were unquestionably outstanding, but we expected at least few more Turkish performance artists participating at IPA. We refer here to the fact that IPA Istanbul could have been an occasion to invite, for example (even just to give a lecture), one of the seminal performance artists in Turkey, such as Sükran Moral, which, with her work, has always challenged the position of women in society, denouncing courageously the violence against women or other underrepresented groups. We say this, not just for the ethical value of her art, but also because, due to the recent socio-political events, her presence, as a militant, experienced artist, would have surely triggered different dynamics inside and outside the event itself. We refer also at the renown 'Standing Man' of Taksim Square, initiated by Erdem Gunduz, whose lone demonstration sparked a form of protest, becoming a silent durational collective civil action, a static social revolutionary act, which blurred the edges

between art and life. This to say that, perhaps, by involving more the Istanbul artist community, and assign to the event a more precise curatorial line, choosing artists (locally and internationally) whose work respond more poignantly to an actual occurring situation, the possibility to develop the cultural significance of the event itself are greater. To forge a strong identity is also due by the choice of right strategy and decision.

To answer your question more specifically, we must say that art cannot changes society in the short term: it never did and maybe never will, but it can gradually produce some kinds of effects on society. To think to performance art events, in essence, as gathering reunion where people converge to share ideas and give birth to process led actions is already a good starting point.

We perfectly understand that this is a very fragile topic for you, but this is for many others also. To cooperate healthily is a key-factor, but putting people together it is not an easy task at all. Thus the culture of dialogue is fundamental, a fruitful dialogue arises only when clear and grounded are the arguments of discussion, when many are committed to the cause and strong is their belief: this is a matter of consistency that comes with time and practice, and consistency can exist without fragility. IPA Istanbul is still a young creature: it needs its time to grow, a constant dedication, scouting new ways of possible collaboration, because these are the kind of events and operations that carry the new and an intellectual freshness within.

***HU:** When an artist make a performative work with his or her own body to demolishing the clichés of society and the art world, it is seen just as a ‘presentation’ to the audience or to the people involved in art. The approach and the perception to performance art is not changing, rather than being seen as an artwork of expressing oneself. People just see it as a way of presentation and never judge it or question it.*

AP: It is not a problem of the audience itself, rather than of the performance artists and the organizers of performance art events: this is crucial a point, and it is increasingly detectable everywhere, not just in Turkey. It is presumptuous to expect always a so-called ‘super audience’ that come to see a performance, ready and prepared to question what they have seen in the way artists and organizers would like most of the times. The debate on how to change radically the perception of the audience, on how to educate the audience to look at art with different eyes has always existed, and it will exist always, because the times and generations are always changing. Art and theatre history are full of examples in this sense, we think for instance to the experimentations of the Living Theatre during the 60s/70s, or to a text such as ‘Offending the Audience’ by Peter Handke, just to cite two phenomenal examples. Today, with the re-flourishing of performance art,

there are some other fundamental factors to consider: first it is clear that if performance art becomes spoiled as a *lieu d'habitude*, "a commonplace in a society over time, it will be impossible for it to stir an ethical or political reaction." (Anatoly Osmolovsky). But there's more: when an artist uses art (and its tools, his/her own body) animated by the good intention of facing socio-political issues, s/he usually ends up in producing just another arid statements (which most of the time the majority of the audience doesn't need or care). In this way, it is like losing the plot, because the artist is not anymore concerned nor focused in making art – good art – but he chooses to use an art form for other purpose, sometimes even without being first adequately skilled or trained. It is a very delicate and complex question to find ways of how to balance art and concept in performance art. However, a good performance art speaks always by itself: it will be always able to produce some effects on the audience, no matter how nor which. The first thing that a performance artist has to do is to demolish his/her egocentric position (which is almost impossible), and it's not enough yet, because there are other problems to consider and solve. In fact, often in performance artists there is a lack of critical thinking, of questioning constantly and honestly themselves while venturing in front of whatsoever audience.

You are giving me the occasion to quote and re-elaborate for the purpose some fundamental questions pointed out by two eminent scholars of critical thinking such as Dr Linda Elder and Dr Richard Paul (Their essay: 'Learning the Art of Critical Thinking'), which we all ought to have always in mind while considering performance art. Therefore, here some: what have I learned about performing? Did I ever? What do I know about how processing well a performance piece? What do I really know about how to analyse, evaluate, outline, express or reconstruct a concept in a performance art piece? Where does my urgency to perform come from? How much of what I'm going to perform is of "good" quality? How much of it is of "poor" quality? How much of my way of performing is vague, muddled, inconsistent, inaccurate, illogical, or superficial? Am I, in any real sense, a performance artist, or am I just attempting to be? Do I know how to test myself in this sense? Do I have any conscious standards for determining when I am performing well and when I am performing poorly? Have I ever discovered a significant problem in my way of thinking of/making performance art, and then changed it consciously? If anyone asked me to teach them what I have learned, thus far in my life, about performing, would I really have any idea what that was or how I learned it? And in addition to all this: Am I abusing the gift of freedom, which is at the base of performance art practice? Am I authentic, sincere, honest, trained, and humble to be ready to perform at my best, or at least to try to? Am I driven truly by a pulsating urgency to tell my concerns through a performance piece, and at the same time acknowledged of my physical, mental and spiritual limits? Do I emanate a radiant energy when I perform, or I perform just to look for

consensus, or whatsoever reaction of the others (audience) to feed my ego and get merely some sort of illusory personal satisfaction? Am I right, clear, stick to the point, skilful, functional to the cause/concept, or I just narcissistically presume to be so? Is my necessity to perform worthwhile, real, and profound? Am I capable of drawing from the source of my emotional intelligence when I perform, or when I perform I only produce just what I personally presume to be a new statement over other statements? When was the last time I changed my mind because someone gave me better reasons for his/her views than I had for mine? Am I truly an original creative person? What does it mean, for me, to perform? What does it mean to perform for the others? Do I really love what I do? Do I doubt? Is it my reason of life?

It is important to realize that to perform – as anything in life - is a very serious thing. We believe essentially that the role of an artist to continue to work at his/her best, for what s/he can, sustained by a profound belief, and being conscious that the constant learning processes and confrontational but positive discussions, are the foundations on which to base fruitful research, letting the audience free to take their own conclusion, without asking for too much, and then let's see what happens.

Istanbul, 2013