GB11 Curatorial QA – On Defiance

Curatorial Q&A: Azar Mahmoudian, Ahmet Öğüt and Dora Garcia

Azar Mahmoudian: One of the strands of GB11, which offers possible readings of the various projects, practices and works within the Bienanle, is “defiance” - ways that challenge the powers that be.
Let’s begin with the vast term “defiance”: this loose state of significance is likely to be picked up as a privilege within the context of contemporary art that welcomes open-ended interpretations. But defiance in this case is neither adamant resistance nor shunning withdrawal, although it might imply both of them during our conversation. How do you narrow down the concept of defiance in the context of an effective political strategy? How does it reverberate in your own artistic practice?

Dora Garcia: I am just thinking aloud. To me I’d say defiance implies a more active and assertive role. If we would use as a model the history of the gay liberation movement, defiance is what starts with the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969. We do not want to resist, we do not want to be left alone or tolerated, we want to be proudly present and active. As one could read in demonstration signs: “Stonewall means to fight back,” “Where pride began,” “We’re queer and we are here.” This is what is beautiful – we do not just want to be tolerated or left alone, we want to be defiantly and joyfully present.

I relate to these concepts in my life, and therefore in my artistic and educational practice. We never can escape a certain dose of melancholy and spleen, a certain wish of solitude, we indeed find it hard to believe in heroic narrations because we know how frail and corruptible human nature is. But this should not take away an ounce of courage and energy.

Ahmet Öğüt: There is a lot of antagonistic demand and negotiation that happens in my practice. But I wouldn’t call it a form of Defiance with a capital D, if we understand that as a kind of bold disobedience. It’s in fact demanding what should be already there but is not there yet. Especially in radical pedagogic practice, demand and negotiation is always present in order to transform the institutions, which might lead to several consequences: sets of achievements, social protocols, social contracts, or even withdrawals. But before we talk about solidarity networks, it is important to understand where our personal motivations come from and in which moment human

bonds start to take shape. Growing up in circumstances of cultural and political isolation in Diyarbakır where speaking, listening, learning, and even whistling in Kurdish in public space was banned, me, myself, I am coming from a place where I learned the importance of genuine collective consciousness.

AM: In shifting your practice toward defiant strategies, you increasingly get involved in more politically explicit approaches. What are the triggers for this involvement?

DG: Anger. This is the feeling that drives towards more explicitness, towards spelling it out. This anger is healthily balanced with melancholy, which is very present as well. Melancholy is what brings poetry in, that feeling of nostalgia towards what has not even ever been there, which the Portuguese call *saudade*, and I am told the Koreans call *han*. So anger is the trigger and saudade is the shaper of the work.

AÖ: The conditions – crisis, human tragedies – of the current sociopolitical climate have been dramatically changing, therefore all of us are shifting directions. I started my practice with very personal motivations, I was more like a prankster using humor a lot, slowly I became more like a romantic conceptualist, then a demanding negotiator, but I've never given up on humor, it's still present somewhere deep as a way of fighting back for principles while keeping learning. I've been asking myself how my general interest in social relationships can learn from grassroots movements, how my general interest in public space can involve itself in ongoing struggles like urban solidary platforms that fight for reclaiming the city, how my other interests in institutional criticism turn into instituent practice. I've been thinking about art education in connection to radical pedagogy, how to shift from short-term engagements to long-term commitments. While I try to learn how to act in a time-sensitive way and be ready for any crisis, or tragedy, it is important for me to find a way to preserve my first, genuine motivations.

AM: You already mentioned the affective immediacy and volatility of political climates today that propel strategies that take on the form of straightforward civil defiance. However, such volatility and its demand for prompt responses seems to also dominate the neoliberal economy, advertising, social networking, and also the art world. Specifically, the structural fast-paced temporality of making contributions to a biennale platform, which seems to be equally demanding of the commissioned artist to be time-sensitive or flexible, to be context-specific in an immediate sense. How do

you see this relationship? What do you think then about durational projects or down-tempo responses as an alternative strategy of defiance?

DG: I will never see myself as an activist, even less as an agent of the neoliberal economy. I cannot be an activist or an agent of the neoliberal economy because I should then presume that I know what the issue is and how to address it. I do not know at all. I envision each new project as a learning process, where I just locate and aim at something that I would like to understand, I initiate a device to help me to understand it – in this case, a bookstore – and I do my very best to create the conditions for this device to have a life as long as possible, by itself, independently of my presence.

Many projects that I have initiated live on to this day after ten or fifteen years. I am not the only author – I have involved many people on the way and they are part of the project, and therefore it does not need me to exist. It is not a collective endeavor, but rather an authorless one. The author is diffused. By letting go of this authorship I allow the work to exist on its own. Sometimes I pick them up again, after five or ten years. Their independence from me is a great sign of defiance; they even defy me, my pretentiousness as an author. I enjoy observing my work as an outsider, and this stepping outside, after having been an involved and passionate initiator, is what places me outside the role of activist or neoliberal entrepreneur.

AÖ: I agree with Dora, I wouldn't feel comfortable to call myself an activist. I am always surprised when someone calls me an activist artist. What would be the opposite of that, a passivist artist, or Kafka's hunger artist? Often activists criticize artists for not being present enough. And what many artists understand from activism is awareness activism: an act just to bring attention to an issue that is not being properly addressed. I disagree with both approaches. We have to learn how to initiate encounters that last in the long term, beyond our presence and beyond ownership. We might start as initiators, or authors, but we will need to learn how to be guests in our own initiatives.

AM: Soon after the Istanbul airport attacks, as we talk in late June, short pedagogic videos were published by news media that further disseminated what police officials advised people to do in case of a terrorist attack. Ahmet, your recent work for the Biennale, which advises people what to do in case of police brutality, adopts similar

means and formats but reorients them toward a less similarly addressed subject, a strategy practiced by certain strands in contemporary art that unites well with sociopolitical activism. How do you think art can go beyond practical effectiveness, beyond critical didacticism that serves as a response to “What does art do?” and take full advantage of its potential for disidentifying with official agents in order to reflect on a confusing situation where similar means of practice are being constantly and reciprocally seized and effected by distinct and occasionally opposing forces or practitioners?

Ahmet: Yes, practical effectiveness is important, but how we reach that information that is beyond what is provided by official means is more important. I remember when YouTube was banned in Turkey for the first time in 2007, shortly after that everyone was already able to use various VPN services – securely encrypted tunnels to a server outside the country, allowing for uncensored internet access. Improving our ability to use encryption will certainly strengthen our ability to continue our work without oppressive surveillance. I also remember in the ’90s how people creatively installed their satellites to be able get the right signals to watch banned Kurdish TV channels. During the two weeks of the Gezi revolt, many heard for the first time about offline tweeting, because all the phones were blocked in the park. There were a lot of offline and online strategies that we keep learning. But we need to keep creating new platforms to share that knowledge. I believe as artists we have much more access to use and transform many different platforms in collaboration with everyone engaged, which could bring immediate recognition without the need for waiting for authorization.

AM: Dora, your proposal for reconstructing the Nokdu Bookstore is similarly set against the saturated backdrop of numerous monuments to the May 18 Uprising erected all across Gwangju as over-institutionalized attempts of commemoration. Your project tries to reimagine the capacities of the same means for representing the subaltern/suppressed through an alternatively reenactive approach. What do you find at stake in restaging memories of that specific site in the current context of state dominance over the format of symbolic reminders?

DG: The original Nokdu was already a place to vindicate and claim a number of figures, it inscribed itself in a symbolic heritage that went beyond the thirty square meters of that bookshop, which was not even specialized in politics. The name

Nokdu was an homage to the leader of the 1894 Donghak Peasant Revolution. The bookshop claimed for itself this heritage. As well, the week before the May 18 Uprising there was a workshop in the Wild Fire Night School (Deulbul Yahak) on the 1871 Paris commune. There in 1978 the women-run organization Songbaekhoe was born. In this sense, the original Nokdu was already a place of memory and heritage, not physical – it was a very modest bookstore – but symbolically; the symbolic weight was huge.

By claiming this symbolic line of Nokdu – this is what *Nokdu Bookstore for the Living and the Dead* (2016) does – I contextualize my position and try to create a tool, not a monument, for understanding the present in Gwangju and Korea, and the world indeed. But also, I would like to construct a horizontal heritage as well, with other contemporary movements and thoughts, as well as point out the lineage with literature and the arts, and accentuate the associations with death as a form of political presence – nobody is more present in politics than the dead.

From what I read the official governmental memorial line for the Gwangju Uprising is not appeasing the discontent of the protagonists nor of their families. For many people, 5.18 is not over yet. There is a parallel memory and a parallel way of honoring 5.18, linked to the old cemetery and to the song “March of the Beloved.” Many authors think there is an official line of acknowledging 5.18 only because the government has no choice, but it is not a truly felt apology for the atrocities. And in many recent events, like the tragedy of the sinking of the ferry MV Sewol, the people do not feel acknowledged nor protected by the government. So history continues to be written, and it does not completely correspond to the official line.

AM: Uprisings are not only followed by victims, but are themselves triggered by an unjust death, by an extremely affective moment that focalizes a defiant community beyond the principle of consensus. Therefore, summoning the dead beyond their state of victimhood is compelling for the formation of ephemeral communities, future subjectivities, who come to reenact or restage the forces of defiance. What do you think about opening up a space for the agency of mediums or mediators that request the presence of the dead, whether through the animism inherent in the act of reading and in reassembling archives, or through the invocation of avatars that hauntingly share their knowledge?

DG: I am constantly being haunted. I think, like many people, that I live with the dead. To me reading is a form of communication with the dead, but not only then, they are present all the time. When there is a multitude of them, then you can feel it even if you never knew them. But in the case of the Gwangju Uprising, typically considered an uprising of the people without leaders, there were inevitably some charismatic leaders, the undisputed heroes being the protagonists of the March of the Beloved, Park Ki-sun, who died on 27 December, 1978, and Yun Sang-won, who died in the Uprising.

We feed on language, language as a carrier of meaning, we need it as we breathe. When there is no input of language, no perception of any kind in an adult, like in sensory deprivation situations, then we create these perceptions, we hallucinate. I am thrilled by that. Generations of people have accumulated an enormous amount of knowledge, and the urge comes naturally to preserve it, also to be able to read it – to translate it into a language that can be understood today. The Borgesian library is a clear image of that, a curse and a blessing, we have on our shoulders all that was ever there as language – we need to carry on an endless labor of translation. That is education.

AÖ: I try to shed the prototypical presentation of history and enable the reconstruction of history with information that is otherwise socially repressed in the depths of our personal memories and does not appear as important at first glance. Memory is not dead, but it's often comatose. In Simon Critchley's words, the individual who is disillusioned, in despair, due to the injustice in the world, transforms the anger s/he experiences into an ethical demand. I believe that feelings such as despair, devotion, anger, justice, pain, and the consciousness of the individual, who takes action for ethical demand, can play an important role in transforming the historiography of the powers that be. I wouldn't say in my animation it's the knowledge of the dead that is being shared. It is not another memorial.

On 9 June, 1987, Lee Han-yeol was demonstrating with his fellow students at Yonsei University, Seoul, against the Chun Doo-hwan regime in South Korea. A tear gas canister fired by riot police penetrated his skull. His friends rushed him to the university's Severance Hospital, where he remained in critical condition for a few days. On 5 July, he died of his wounds at the age of twenty-one. Enes Ata, was an eight-year-old primary school student when he lost his life on 20 March, 2006, two

days after he was hit by a tear gas canister fired by riot police in the Kuruçeşme district of the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır. They are both narrators giving us a few tips on how to protect ourselves from tear gas, but with a geographic twist: Lee will be the narrator in Istanbul and Enes will be the narrator in Gwangju. It was my time-sensitive response to work on this project after a recent deal between the two countries, Turkey and South Korea, was just done so that in 2015 South Korean tear gas grenade manufacturers, including Dae-Kwang Chemical Corporation, exported around 1.5 million tear gas grenades to Turkey.

As Walter Benjamin emphasizes, in classic historiography the historiographer sympathises with the victorious. Such history consists of a narrative passed on from one victor to the next. The question is to find a productive way to encounter human tragedy without victimizing the victims, beyond the simplification of mourning, awareness activism, or empathy. I could see the need to challenge a populist iconography of sadness that makes all of us feel uncomfortable without being productive. Visualizing the victims is a tactical decision for learning. One side of me believes that Enes and Lee are still with us. I wanted to imagine their presence as a joyful resistance.