

Feedback report: Critical Practice: **BER-AMS-BXL – *An investigative conference on the conditions and responsibilities for flourishing artistic biotopes in the city***

Participant: Tom Engels

To Whom It May Concern:

It was my pleasure to be part of the Critical Practice program during the BER-AMS-BXL conference in Amsterdam and to share three days of intense thinking on artistic biotopes together with the keynote speakers, the artists, the students, organizers and other critical practitioners.

I think the idea of having a program like Critical Practice is extremely valuable for people to engage in different environments, tune into events and let their writing practice develop in relation to them. The group of writers that gathered was a group of enthusiast people, coming from various backgrounds, which made it an interesting place where very different opinions and viewpoints could be shared. The conference itself was a fertile ground for many ideas to appear – I rarely experienced a conference where the problems and issues dealt with where as present off stage as much as they were on stage. The program of the conference was fully packed, which left us, the writers, a short amount of time to actually write the texts and unpack rather complex issues that were addressed in the conference. This led me to questioning what Critical Practice actually could be and if the words ‘critical’ and ‘practice’ shouldn’t be treated with more care.

When one wants to establish a practice, one also needs the time to do so. The conference program was so full that we had the choice to either write in lunch or dinner breaks or late at night after the program had ended. Although our mentor, Konstantina Georgelou, did a great job by trying to keep us together and create a common working space, there was constantly the feeling of ‘running out of time’, paradoxically reproducing the dynamics that were critiqued during the conference by several speakers. This lack of time didn’t allow us to enter in a feedback mode, both with the other participants and the visitors of the conference. This might be a desired and legitimate approach, but I want to highlight that this working method produces a certain kind of texts that are much more marked by immediacy rather than thorough reflection. I would strive for more space for interaction, where the participants of the program can meet, discuss and exchange their thoughts, writings and analyses. In that sense the critic wouldn’t stay someone on the outside or the margin of the event that is taking place.

That being said, I think there is a lot of potential in the development of this program. Just as writing is a practice, setting up these environments is one as well. I sincerely hope this initiative continues and grows so that it can truly become a critical practice.

All my best,
Tom Engels

I wanted to take part at the Critical Practice session at the BER-AMS-BXL conference from the position of a performing arts critic and cultural operator. What are the conditions and responsibilities for flourishing artistic biotopes is a very urgent question also for the Bulgarian cultural field, where I am active in, although the level of the discussions on it is still in a very embryonic phase. It is mainly a subject of advocacy campaigns and a mission of dispersed artistic circles and independent cultural operators in the face of a cultural policy that favours traditional theatre institutions and practices, whereas the independent performing arts scene (if we still stick to this notion and term) still needs to be structured. So for me it is important to keep track and relate to the debates on these issues on a broad European scale (represented in this case by the three cities), in which, on the other hand, I am also active as organizer and/or participant in international projects and observe the performing arts scene. The Critical Practice session offered a very good chance for that. It gave the participants not only the opportunity to follow in an engaged way all the panels of the conference but also to discuss them on a meta-level. As the whole conference was structured around Pascal Gielen's concepts of four domains of the artistic practice that he distinguishes, the Critical Practice module was apparently supposed to perform the "public/ civic" domain, to be related to the functions of a public forum. But it suffered some unclarity about on what level to articulate critical discourse on the discourse unfolded within the conference, what was actually expected from the texts we had to produce, whom they were addressed to, since the conference panels were quite closed in themselves.

Pressed by the lack of time and the pre-set orientation to propose written texts rather than to focus on modes of processing criticality, we had to come up with ad hoc solutions and mine was to react with more or less journalistic reflexive reporting. It was challenging since I found myself confronted with a very complex network of problematics of contexts that I was not in depth familiar with. My interest was mainly how the concepts which the conference was built upon were practically inhabited and what symptoms around the problems they were addressing this brought up. A limiting condition was that actually we didn't have enough time to exchange

not only with the other participant of the conference, but also among each other in the CP group. And here the proficient moderating by Konstantina Georgelou was very helpful.

As a whole I believe that the immediate reflexive/ critical responses written by the CP group had their function. They were sensitive not only to the content that was produced within the conference, but mostly to the question how the discourse on the conditions of contemporary artistic practice is being organized, what power relations and positions are being inhabited within.

Angelina Georgieva

MARIALENA MAROUDA

03.10.2013

REPORT ABOUT PARTICIPATION IN CRITICAL PRACTICE PROGRAM

A short introduction

I participated in the critical practice program less as a “critic” or a “theoretician”, but more as an extremely concerned theater practitioner, finding herself at both ends of the “maker” vs. “thinker” dichotomy. My great concern regards the precarious conditions of life and work that I am faced with after my quite long and extremely intense studies at prominent universities. After some time of feeling scared, isolated and broke, I realized that the way to go about improving my “condition”, would be to share my experience with others. Hence my motivation and my enthusiasm for being able to participate in BER-AMS-BXL as a writer and have the chance to take in and record discussions that concern exactly the living conditions of young artistic workers like myself.

BER-AMS-BXL and its problematics

In the course of three days, the conference juggled with burning issues faced in the field of contemporary dance and performance and succeeded in presenting those challenges and dilemmas from different points of view. It was clear to everyone from the outset, that the goal of the conference would not be to propose solutions but, rather, to name the problems as accurately as possible and to try and find their source. By doing this, possible solutions could start to shimmer in the horizon.

This act of unmasking problems, of making them appear, was present throughout the conference. Sometimes this unmasking was done consciously, and **others** the problematics were inherent in the very structure of the conference, in its modus operandi. We talked about responsibility and the fact that it is often not taken by those who have the political power and the obligation to help. For example, we heard directors of schools claiming that it is very difficult to demand from the city better housing for their students. The students should fight back on their own by making themselves even more precarious than they already are. We heard directors of art centers admitting that not only the responsibility of finding financial support, but also the responsibility of finding audience is now handed over to the artists themselves.

We heard members of juries saying that the level of the art that is produced is deteriorating. I connect this statement to what I recently read in a well-known German theater journal about contemporary performance art becoming more and more conservative, less and less daring. I wonder – and this is not a cynical comment –, what one expects, in a situation where so much of an artist’s carrier depends on the opinion of a handful of experts, at a time where many houses and their directors refuse to take any risks at all. Directors of universities and art centers, board and commission members, the very people that represent the supporting pillars of independent artistic production are now often denying this responsibility, usually because of lack of funds: what we see is a neoliberal development in the field of the

arts. This problematic was performed in front of us, at the same time as it was thought about, discussed and criticized.

The panel discussion on the second day, concerning the peer space of the artists, made clear, that while we more or less agreed on what we want to criticize, it was much more complicated to agree on what we want to praise. And here is also clear what Paolo Virno described as the outcome of neo-liberalist modes of production: the artistic community is a “multitude” and not a “nation”. Ann Demeester’s question, about whether the artistic community should not formulate common demands in order to take a political stance and gain greater public awareness, remained unanswered. It became clear that the reason why it is so difficult to formulate “our” demands is because we do not identify with a collective “we”; we are rather a multitude of “Is”.

A critical practice needs time

The “Critical Practice Program” was an opportunity for the writers to participate in the conversation on the problematic modes of artistic production by finding our voice and raising it critically on issues that concern us. From the point of view of the organizers, this program was the attempt to incorporate the writers as critical voices within the conference, and to present BER-AMS-BXL as a platform, a forum of exchange. As participants of the “critical practice” program, we were tasked with crystallizing a critique – a reaction to the multiplicity of opinions presented.

However, during the course of the conference’s three very busy days, I found it extremely difficult to formulate a written critical statement amongst such a highly complex network of utterances. The end of the conference left me feeling that I was unable to meet what I think was expected of me.

Still, one is not critical a priori. Criticality needs thought, and thinking takes time. It was as if my colleagues and I were called to fill the gap of the public forum, for which there was no time within the conference itself. However, if there is hardly any time left for discussion, there is also no time for the development and writing down of thoughts. Or for making alternative voices heard.

Some suggestions as to the form and content of critical practice

An alternative way to integrate the critical practice program within the conference, could be to organize it as a discussion, or a workshop. By giving it time in the mornings before the conference starts, for example, and opening it up to every participant of the conference, “critical practice” could be a time to discuss the issues that came up in the previous days. After all, BER-AMS-BXL was about the exchange of experiences of professionals from different cities and with different functions, each of which help shape the field of the performing arts in Europe. What a better way to be critical than to establish a space for discussion and exchange? These open morning sessions would ideally minimize hierarchies of age or rank and would allow for individual experiences, opinions, visions and aspirations to be heard. A “speaker” would not represent a particular city, institution, or group, but would simply present their experiences and opinions.

Writing can, but must not necessarily take place during these thinking and discussion sessions, even though it could. Alternatively, instead of presenting a

finished text, the task of the “critical practice” participants could be to formulate questions that would start these morning discussions. The discussions could be recorded and made accessible during the conference as a podcast, for example.

I imagine the actual writing to take place after the conference itself, ideally during a short (one-week) residency of the group of writers. During this time they could gather their impressions, thoughts and questions from the morning discussions, and start writing them down. A short residency would create a space of concentration for the writers, in which written ideas can be put forth and exchanged with each other. The texts could either be made available online on the blog of the theater or venue, or published in a printed catalogue.

Time can also be given by making the “critical practice” program a long-term project with a growing and recurring pool of participants. This would allow for a building up knowledge and experience about how best to be critical in the course of such intense events as are conferences or festivals.

Report on AMS-BER-BXL conference:

As guide of the Critical Practice I experienced the conference from a particular point of view: that of trying to quickly understand (quickly because of the lack of time to absorb and to reflect) standpoints articulated by the diverse speakers and participants in a critical way, in order to be able to respond and reflect on different propositions and ideas that were discussed in our daily meetings with the writers (which was, admittedly, a great team of people!).

From this perspective I believe that the conference was at times challenging and at other times very fruitful because of the formats that were introduced and employed. In order to reflect on that more specifically, I will briefly revisit each day.

The SNDO and HZT students mostly curated the first day of the event. This I considered a great 'risk' and investment on behalf of the conference organizers and led me to consider how excluded the 'youngs' are from the organization of such events. What I found lacking though was the actual engagement of the school directors who were present on that day. I expected to hear them seriously discussing the 'domestic space', namely art education, its current status and the problems that are encountered therein. I believe that a joint and equal participation and nourished dialogue (between students and directors) could have contributed greatly for arriving to more concrete – nonetheless small-scale – observations and positions.

The second day of the conference was the most troubling from my perspective because there did not seem to be enough 'space' for articulating standpoints. Gielen's lecture was clear in what and how it argued but its methodological difference (in comparison to artistic theoretical discourses) was not enough capitalized on for leading to a fruitful contribution. In other words, the responses did not operate as 'responses' in my opinion. They worked more as presentations of different projects without engaging with and challenging enough Gielen's methods and propositions. As for the 'peer space', in which I've also participated myself, I think that the format was problematic (too many voices that did not really know each other, in the presence of an audience). It was quite brave to experiment with this format but it did not facilitate any peer-practice for me.

The last day was the most fruitful as it enabled me to agree, to disagree and to formulate questions without too much confusion. I believe that this happened also because of the more traditional formats that were at work (discussion and panel). It would have been beneficial to involve politicians and policy makers, which would make the discussion even more 'heated'.

As a guide of Critical Practice I believe that we (meaning, the writers and myself) could have been involved in the conference in other ways as well. Since the tight schedule was often putting pressure on the participants - creating a journalistic approach to writing - there could have been allocated times to 'practice

criticality' in ways that are not bound to writing (e.g. discussions, responses, questions etc.). However, it needs to be acknowledged that this pressure also created more sharpness in how different themes and aspects of the conference were approached.

To conclude, I would like to point out the significance of a 'critical practice' in this context, which goes in line with my proposition for a more involved participation of cultural theorists and critics in such events. By drawing attention to topics, methodologies and conceptualizations, critical voices can contribute greatly to generating connecting links and to problematizing the issues at hand. This practice can help gathering, exposing and probing the 'knowledge' that emerges in conferences that experiment at the borders of theory and practice, which is also to say that it can produce knowledge in its own right by posing questions and articulating suggestions about what seems to be urgent and how to go about it.

Konstantina Georgelou

REPORT ON PARTICIPATION IN CRITICAL PRACTICE PROJECT

The invitation to join the Critical Practice Group for the conference came in my case as accidental as timely at a moment where I have an increasing interest to reflect in a written manner about the field I've been working on for quite some years now. The reasons surrounding this particular desire mainly respond to be willing to track the rapid reorganization the cultural sector is undergoing since the institutional cuts were implemented here in The Netherlands. However to short cut explanations that might not be so essential for this report my intention on participating at this project was to investigate in a reflexive manner the synergies and rhetorics that the present political and economic circumstances are provoking on different sections of the art field. And on this regard the BER-AMS-BXL conference opened up the possibility to get a closer look at the state of the current conditions for artistic developments, evaluating problems and working models of the city of Amsterdam in association to Berlin and Brussels.

Anticipated spectators

In terms of how we functioned as a group there were only few preceding principles defined at the first day, something which soon resulted to be not the most effective settings for writing a text in less that two hours after the program of activities. A kind of criteria on how to apply our observation was missing, I don't mean this needed to be a rigorous plan presented before hand but rather a set of few rules and parameters to work from. Having this from the beginning (and I say this, now after revising several times the texts I wrote back in the day) it would have helped us a lot to modulate our observations more steadily through the event.

On a very pragmatic level this lacking criteria affected the way we approached the practice, for instance we got a bit overwhelmed on selecting the aspects to write about and by this taking longer then the step into starting to think critically on the chosen issues got delayed. I believe that any hint given in advance would had contributed on anticipating our focus and like this advance perhaps more fluidly through the process of writing.

The group attempted to follow the conference with an analytical view on the presentations, avoiding as much as possible a journalistic approach on the way of addressing thoughts as written responses to be shared with the rest of the audience. We were four participants that accepted the challenge of reacting with certain immediacy to what happens day by day. The task was perhaps highly ambitious but not impossible to be tested as a blueprint that could be improved or instrumented differently in the future.

Apart we were together

Unfortunately we as a group didn't have many chances for exchanging views between each other, and that was something that for me limited the prospect of our individual processes. Actually a dialogue between the participants for this project needs to be considered quite central in further opportunities. The few times that this took place it has been useful for outlining the particular angles of the discussions or lectures each of was interested to refer to.

Definitely meeting few days in advance the actual event would have been ideal to draw explicit lines of action and interests from everyone involved at this practice. Besides that, by doing so the format in general could have become more reciprocal for all the parts involved (the curatorial team of the conference, the critical practice participants and our guide during the three days).

In this sort of project which gathers autonomous practitioners is not a must to create a ground for collaboration although it is quite convenient to be able to negotiate positions, find parallelisms or radical oppositions for the seek of resolving approaches and fulfill goals in a more progressive way. The question is then how to find a realistic balance in making the time and the conditions for a fertile exchange that every participant could benefit from during the project.

Time and time again(st)

I guess the issue of time was a considerable obstacle for everyone involved at the conference and certainly for this subproject running in simultaneity with the event.

The condensed program of these three days anyhow sheltered a number of issues and derivative problematics which are now a bit more exposed but still, if I try to contrast this to what came out of our practice about these issues and problematics I don't think any of the texts produced by us succeeded in making a profound reflection around it.

This is simply because to be able to formulate in written form things one needs to fundament and bridge thoughts carefully and this can only happen with the necessary time to apply your own skills and knowledge in tailoring ideas with precision, shaping them not only intelligibly for the reader but as well attaining a constellation of thoughts that can resonate with a special quality. Like this opinions and points of views can keep on being discussed, questioned or revisited afterwards.

Of course every situation always produces something, but in the case of this particular project of the Critical Practice I think the formulation of texts could have turned into being less ambiguous than what it was, in another words the project could have been utilized as a tool to produce a singular discourse on what took place.

For instance the Psi Lexicon is already a clear gesture of how a discursive practice deals with a particular purpose, that of leaving a trace on terminologies, known words re-combined to explain new things regarding the performance field. We could have aimed to conceived a system similar to this model, for example gathering the questions that were left unanswered, extracting concerns of some of the sessions as clear comments.

Overall I believe this project has many possible directions to grow and because of this it could be potentially understood as a "time-base-residency" for participants that are willing to confront and review their own interests by linking them with the topics that the event commits with.

Definitely I found the concept of the project very stimulating and right now calling for further testing situations where more adequate conditions could be given. Perhaps conceiving it as a long term trajectory, with the same or new participants, in any case with practitioners willing to engage themselves on the task of putting in words things that otherwise remain volatile.

On the role critic should take in today's art field

As knowledge is becoming the one “judgement factor” of production, repeatedly one might find oneself in a pure state of paralysis in between several possible hypothesis. Today's art field is not an exception on this, specially coexisting in a system with policies that question its presence, value and function incessantly. If I try to find alternatives to this disagreeable state of affairs I come to think that the role critic needs to assume in today's art production and practices is to be more of an agent for a breeding ground than an instrument to legitimize its end results.

Enabling critic to appropriate such a pivotal function for a while could cooperate effectively in overcome the shortage of discourse that most of the times the art field appears to have.

As a matter of fact the idea of utilizing discursive practices more compromised with disclosing which things and premises the field is (pre)occupied with, is closely related to tackle the symptoms produced by the actual moment we are moving with.

As stated in one of the pages of the conference folder: *This crisis (of the credibility of art in the public domain) might also be a chance (*)*

Cecilia Vallejos
5/10/2013

(*) quotation from Marijke Hoogenboon foreword text: “Towards the third space”