

AsTide - Art for Social Transformation and Intercultural Dialogue in Europe NETWORKS

Hello,

This **review** is a description of my past involvement in ASTIDE. From a very subjective perspective, I reflect upon this involvement and engage myself in a non-judgemental discourse addressing open questions concerning actual tendencies in art, society, networks, intercultural dialogue and Europe.

In Cittadellarte, Italy, during my UNIDEE residence, I was invited together with an other belgian artist, Lieven Paelinck, to participate in the ASTIDE project. ASTIDE is a 3 year project supported by the European Union, initiated by Love difference, the main project of the politics office, an operative nucleus in the Cittadellarte bubble.

Cittadellarte is constructed by M.Pistoletto, embodying a dogmatic vision on art and the role of the artist "in order to achieve a responsible transformation in human civilisation". This very ambitious mission in a postcolonial, postimperial and postsacral time era, reads as a white, male, western, paternalistic perspective instrumentalising art. It understates any historical awareness and undermines the existence of humans as an organism (permaculture). Because who is defining what is responsible pr responsibility? And what does civilisation means? Development and progress? Is that transformation?

By staying 4 months in this north Italian "postindustrial" postcard, a gated art community, I got a little sceptic about imaginary communities that are based on authorship and ruled by structure, hierarchy and devotion, proclaiming art as a missionary. Maybe in this intense experience, my knowledge of old italian traditions and its stereotypical image, influenced my thinking and drifted me off. Although, the operative structure of Cittadellarte refers directly to a historical Italian model of organization. The bubble (see logo) is conceived as Offices, Uffizi, dealing with art, communication, economics, ... This systematic approach is probably conceptualized in analogy to the Florentine Uffizzi art museum, the former administrative offices and state archive of the art collection of the Italian de Medici family who combined banking, art and politics. For me, this model signifies old notions of power and control, defining art as craft and connecting it to its economic reality. Was Cittadellarte (Pistoletto) mirroring this model? And declaring the distribution and expansion of this model as its mission in this global society?

ASTIDE would be for me a new opportunity to examine these questions. On paper, the project had the same objective as what I was dealing with during these 4 months of my residency. Art for social responsible transformation? ASTIDE would broaden up the question to art projects as tools for intercultural dialogue and socio-economical development and consolidate it in an European network of partners: cittadellarte, hangar, nextkunst, sjcav, deburen,... Biella, Barcelona, Graz, Malta, would soon meet in Brussels (deBuren). I was curious...This time: Art as tool? As a political instrument? With Europe as a nation?

The event was scheduled for February 2008. Anyway, the date is not important but the fact that it changed 4 times and ASTIDE was playing around with agendas was. I tried to organize my timetable of 2008 but there was almost no practical dialogue about what was going to happen. Only a wiki website with an abstract of the project proposal. On a practical level for the Brussels edition, a working group would be compiled with some representatives of the European network and interested people, reacting on an open call issued by ASTIDE. deBuren hosted the working group with coffee, tea, fruit cookies, lunch and dinner breaks. The conditions for the working group were ideal, a private meeting room with all the latest presentation tools. A temporary extended bubble office of the Cittadellarte network?

Unfortunately, diverse positions and future involvement in the ASTIDE project were not openly articulated in the working group. The partners are involved in the longterm ASTIDE project and are paid (fee and accomodation); they will be hosting 1 event and be present in the partner meetings. (The hotel rooms were in 4 star class hotels, on a 3 minute walk of our meeting "office"- expensive and unnecessary). Besides the partners (and representatives), an open call motivated people to engage voluntary. Others were present because of their involvement in the next UNIDEE residence project. For Lieven Paelinck and me, it was part of an after-programme of our residence (which included a budget of 5000 euro and some concrete output-project). These mixed intentions made the group's existence, the bubble, non-transparent.

The methodology of Love difference, the initiating partner, was bizarre. After a brainwashing video of Pistoletto, Who are you, we were introduced to art group games - the kind of games companies use for team building and to create a corporate spirit. And I believe, yes, or I feel a certain spiritual energy but this doesn't mean a specific religion; certainly not the one of the neo-liberal corporate, creative industry. So having Cittadellarte in my mind, where I already did a couple of these excercises, I felt trapped. You participate because you have to. The group pressure leads to a communal experience of creative expression of the self and gradually binds the individuals to the group. So, apprantly these games work. Filippo, who was leading these introduction games got excluded, he became the scapegoat of the group dynamics. His power position was questioned ... why did he involve "us" in these games? Was this not a waste of time? We built a team, yes, but what was our company's mission? What were we "image" building?

I must admit I really liked some of the games like, e.g. the other presenting you, or finding objects to tell your story.... It reinvents typical individual profiling and transposes your individuality in the other. It focuses on direct representation (release) rather than presentation (control), on the group rather than the ego. But if the group has no reason, or no objective for a future existence, the whole idea of building a team becomes irrelevant.... So, was it a network event, breeding temporary togetherness? A moment without concrete future plans? Except documentation and archive?

Photocameras ready? Lieven Paelinck and me organized a day trip, outside of the headquarters of deBuren, into Brussels city. After our residency in Cittadellarte, the collaboration with deBuren continued. We were offered a little budget for an exhibition in deBuren to resume our residency project. Finally, because of construction works, there was no possibility to exhibit and instead we were invited to do a walking tour during ASTIDE. Proactively recruited?

The guided tour was conceived as a post-colonial tourist trip, a collaborative critical research in the contextual premises of the ASTIDE project. Both non-residents of the Capital of Europe, we prepared an exploration of known and unknown places relating to initiatives, artists, experts, citizens ... who are actively rethinking Brussels. By introducing notions as legality, supra-legality, illegality, ... power structures and social hierarchies became visible in the streets of Brussels. Being outside of deBuren office, created a field of action, terrain vague...

The trip could have been an exploring tour for a future ASTIDE project. Another meeting in Brussels, de Buren, was scheduled at a later stage of the ASTIDE project. So, our involvement as a working group would have been more interesting if we had been invited to do something by then. Instead of focusing on a website and newspaper as final outcome of the ASTIDE meetings, we would have had a practical working objective to create content with the working group. Not just feeding the bubble with our presence. It introduced a practical referential framework to the group , not an esoteric, philosophical discourse.

deBuren introduced an other format, lecture sessions. In the morning they invited 8 very interesting guest speakers from different working fields (sociology, diplomacy, curatorial practice, economy, religion, theater,...) . Each of the guest addressed openly the thesis "an artist in a world of numbers" from their position. The diverse backgrounds of the speakers uplifted the art and economy discourse to a wider discussing platform. 60 min. each guest; the program was dense. There was almost no time for exchange. For me, the relation of these lecture session to why we were gathering became unclear. Listening to all this representatives, I was asking myself what was the person sitting next to me, do

in life? Discussion is a verbal expression and immediately shows your ability to lead and follow the language of conversation, the jargon. Okay, everybody speaks English, but not so fluently... And suddenly we were not all talking together anymore...

As result, at the end of the working week, we had to present a story about "our experience". Spelling mistakes and the barrier of language was distracting us. We got stuck in establishing a common vocabulary - a sickness of most international temporary groups. After all linguistic discussion, stress more the formation of 'a group' rather than articulating answers or statements to a certain question. But what about our story? Seemingly the group wanted to pass on our questioning to the partners, which were there to discuss the future enrollment of the ASTIDE project (in an afternoon private session). So, we organized an the action (demonstration/strike) walking with a banner outside of the deBuren office, while our murmuring of previous discussions, was playing in deBuren meeting room. When everybody reassembled there after the public intervention, we re-enacted one of the conversations together with the partner organizations. Discussing, talking, it was how it started and how we ended...

Reflecting on the whole experience, from an inside perspective, I was glad that I was involved on a constructive level; by organizing the tourist trip. The collaboration with Lieven Paelinck was very interesting and resulted in a good first draft of questioning together our experiences of ASTIDE, UNIDEE, cittadellarte and more.

On a practical level to work together with ASTIDE, was difficult. We didn't really discuss about what was going to happen. Each of us projected her/his own story into the bubble. And I find this an interesting strategy to make things happen but it works only, if there is some moment of reflection on how to proceed. It is important to create some continuity. To meet people is only the starting point....

What I suggest, is hence not to conclude.

mvd.