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GRANT SCHEME FOR COMMON CULTURAL HERITAGE: PRESERVATION AND DIALOGUE BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EU-II (CCH-II)
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PLATFORMS FOR CULTURAL COLLABORATION (CO-LAB) PROJECT

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How should we cope: environmental speculations regarding the relations between design and production

The invitation that I received, after five years spent in Germany pursuing a higher art education, to take part in a collaboration with young designers, moreover, in the city where I was born and raised, in a han located immediately opposite the school where I learned German, gave me ample opportunity to reflect on both what I had left behind and what I strived to go after. Among these thoughts, my endeavour to grasp the current state of the means of production occupies perhaps the first rank. The northern Marmara basin, the heart of Turkey's industry and trade sectors, the labour market, dependence and frailties are among the topics I am the most eager to discuss and debate with people who produce "objects". Therefore, when I was offered to give an open lecture within the framework of the *Camekân* project, I immediately decided to seize this opportunity in such a way as to address these issues.

We made a visit to a production facility located in a place that, at the time when the visit was planned, belonged to Istanbul's periphery, but has almost become one of its centers as of now. This visit was intended to pave the ground for a reflection as to how western european design and production habits and standards are challenged by the production conditions that exist in Turkey. This journey for the participants from the (touristic) centre of Istanbul towards its periphery (although in the meantime it had become one of the city's new centres), aside from the spatial experience itself, gave us the opportunity to observe how the chains of production are constantly reshaped, how traditional structures are rearranged as a result of new conditions. We also caught glimpses of an industry that actively, closely follows world trends as they fluctuate, manages to meet current demands with aggressive speed, relying on precarious and cheap labour, and competes with extraordinarily low profit margins.

As the participants' propositions started to take shape, as the first outcomes of their research materialised, the following formed the framework out of which our questions emerged. Under which conditions do the people who produce the sequences we design work? Which supply chains are they a link of? How do production conditions shape their ways of living? How do production, urban space, and the spatial experience of those who assume the weight of production intersect and coincide? How much can designers isolate themselves from these questions, or rather, how invisible are these questions made in the framework of the negotiation designers have to sustain with the conditions generated by the market?

Clemens Lauer and Jannik Lang produced a spatial experience, whereby they endorsed a model of urban design which, despite its makeshift appearance, is actually highly efficient, sustainable and operational, moreover deeply affected by the aforementioned conditions. While searching for peace of mind and quiet, Pia Matthes designed a web where the metropolis' brutal uncaniness and the fear of an always imminent earthquake coincided. The collision of orientalist representations against the reality of the city brought about by Kathi Rüll gave birth to a chromatic space stripped of a representational regime. Kusay Tatlı's immersive experience unfolded as a manner of warning against the labour processes made invisible by big data. Elif Sarıgüzmen's multi-layered chromatic experience manages to translate a historiographic question regarding how urban memory can be made collaborative into a visual language. Through her research on the edges that separate blessing from leftovers, Hanieh Fatouraei extends an invitation to a substantial debate as to whether to refunctionalise or pay tribute to a found object, heavily loaded with metaphysical discourse. As for the rug rewoven by Yılmaz Şahser after he collected pieces of clothing that belonged to the participants, as many "adhesive objects", loaded with

their owners' memories, only to unravel them, turning them into warps for a new design, it manages to grant visibility to the extraordinary contradiction that besets labour in the framework of anonymous production mechanisms, while producing an extraordinarily powerful rationale, without reducing his purpose to a gesture or a theatrical performance.

This one-month-long research process with participants whose personal and methodological backgrounds were highly heterogeneous unfolded as a school, yet not a school, rather a non-hierarchic open studio where two artistic and design-oriented pedagogies well established across Turkey and Germany were deconstructed, where assumptions were either cast aside or genuinely reexamined. Undoubtedly, such an experimentation will present fruitful perspectives for those subjects who long for a new methodology amid a creative and productive environment that has lost its footing, its stage, and struggles to establish a proper dialogue with those it appeals to. With all its transparency and inclusiveness, *Camekân* has already settled within memories as a modest incubator of such dynamics.

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The mentors' luggage

As I pack my suitcase for Istanbul, I think: what will be my contribution to the *Camekân* project?

Will it consist of the (critical) observations, advice, questions or even answers that I will formulate? As a curator and concept developer, does being in the mentor's position already during the working process possibly involve danger? Why danger? A look at the terminology of curatorship, from a Western European point of view, actually shows it quite clearly: coming from the Latin verb CURARE, curating means caring, looking after. This seems to be something that young artists and designers can also make good use of



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during the creative phase... But in what way would I (white, Western, German) influence the intention and appearance of the artworks created in Istanbul? If one looks beyond the frameworks provided by Western Europe and North America, one can see that CURARE has a much broader meaning than just caring or looking after. In South America, CURARE is the strongest neurotoxin of all. So is it a question of dosage?

How do I avoid becoming a poison, or do we need a little of that, I ask myself in the plane, as we cross a landscape where curved water lines shine across vast fields. Upon my arrival at the airport, I carry my suitcase and my self-critical questions to the taxi and drive into the city, whose abundance and size immediately take me in, perhaps even swallow me up. In the following days, I get to know the group of young designers and artists who have already been here for a fortnight. With some of them, dialogue is very easy from the start: we speak the same languages (English or German) and have the same academic background. What is striking here is the self-confidence of the German-speaking participants regarding their own works, the freedom from fear of a possible “failure”, the joy of conception, and, last but not least, the clearly visible trained ability to talk about one’s own work before it is even completed. The understanding of site-specific works or the expectations as to an exhibition opening at the end of the month are clearly similar. Too clearly?

In the first days of my arrival, however, speaking in group discussions with all participants develops into a welcome stumbling block. An imbalance becomes apparent. From the perspective of the Turkish-speaking participants, the expectations as to the project seem more reserved, more hesitant, more modest about their own work. Is this really due to the language, or is there a different awareness here, a different attitude towards art production and art presentation, a more sensitive, and, not least, an unbiased approach to art. After we are able to sit down together with the help of a translator, it becomes clear that there are different expectations regarding the project within the group. Joy and uncertainty at the same time. Where is the

journey leading to? What will be shown in the end, who wants to show anything at all? What is the significance of conveying a concept? Our conversations lead to questions about collectivity and singularity, questions about a possible audience, about the red thread that could be drawn between the newly emerging works. These dialogues in turn lead to reflection: who is appropriating something from whom here, what does the exchange within the project actually consist of? What structures enable an exchange at eye level, a “real” transnational encounter from which new things emerge and established narratives are broken? What are the tools we bring with us? What do we return with? On the following days, we spend a lot of time together. We walk through the city, take ferries, visit canteens and restaurants, markets, drink raki, smoke too much, collect impressions and objects from colourful and restless Istanbul. The participants carry these impressions into their studio. We talk to each other using translation programmes on our mobile phones, question our observations, draw each other’s attention to things. Over time, a mutual trust develops between the participants, at least I believe I can observe it, a collective self-assurance. Although the works that will culminate in an exhibition (with an opening!) on 26.02 in Barın Han are to be understood as singular positions, they all speak one language. The common experience, the many observations are transferred into non-verbal associative spaces. They all contain recognisable traces of the past four weeks.

Yılmaz Şahser asks the participants to provide their favourite piece of clothing and weaves a carpet from these mechanically-produced textiles, using traditional weaving techniques. Pia Matthes, who originally wanted to conceive a work of silence, ultimately addresses the fear of earthquakes through an intensive examination of the city by making tea sets vibrate loudly. In her multi-part work, Hanieh Fatouraee questions Turkish culture’s relationship to bread and, as an opening moment between the participants, involves her colleagues in a ceremony. Clemens Lauer and Jannik Lang find the connecting thread and enable a social-artistic component: they build a small tea shop from found

materials collected on the streets and, for instance, shape the metal sheets omnipresent in the cityscape into stools. The inviting gesture of drinking tea forms the entrance into the exhibition and, at the same time, marks the end of the project. Exhibits and installations remain on site, but the participants will, I am sure, carry in their luggage formative memories, moments of critical reflection, approaches to work that found their beginnings here.

What about my own suitcase? It actually got lost at the Istanbul airport. Perhaps a small reminder, I think to myself: in the future, I will think carefully about which contents and tools I pack and which ones I consciously leave at home. If only, to leave more space for what we (German, Western, white) can learn from others.

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Smoke and mirrors

or a visit to the *Camekân* exhibition, with works by Kathi Rull, Pia Matthes, Yılmaz Şahser, Hanieh Fatouraee, Clemens Lauer, Jannik Lang, Kusay Tatlı and Elif Sarıgüzmen (from top floor to basement).

A few square metres of crumbled bread, a trembling tea tray, untangled worn sweaters woven into a frankensteinish panel, metal sheets hammered into cubical seats, walls smeared with pastel colours, optical illusions and lights projected on the walls that make you feel as though inside a mad man's head. What sounds like elements of a horror movie are actually the contents of *Camekân*, a site-specific exhibition showing the outcomes of eight designers who worked for a month from the city of Istanbul. The practices of these individuals are gathered like a patchwork in various vacant rooms scattered over four floors of a building in the vibrant Turkish city. A semi-lit staircase takes visitors from room to

room. Opening each of the doors or entering the darkened spaces, the spectator is led to the works of four Turkish and four German makers and thinkers, gathered for the occasion of a residency held by the Istanbul Design Biennial, in partnership with HfG Karlsruhe.

With an endemic society seemingly in sight --the Zombies resurfacing on the face of the earth-- project spaces, museums and temporary exhibitions start popping up again. International art and design tourists are slowly picking up the pace from a few years ago, but the visitors' experience has changed and the new normal brings about an otherworldly one. While in public transport, uncertain of having to wear a facemask in this foreign place, while searching for the venue, trying to keep a distance and avoid bumping into people in the crowded bazaars, arriving to the *Camekân* exhibition felt slightly like trespassing into an office building that went bankrupt over the corona crisis. The show provides a mixed emotional experience, a simultaneous serving of fear and enjoyment. A kind of recreational fear runs throughout the exhibited works. There isn't one particular jump scare moment, but rather a constant buildup of uncanny moments and materialisations that await those who enter the building.

That curiosity is often aroused when individuals see their expectations violated to a just-right degree, and several accounts of play stress the importance of just-right doses of uncertainty and surprise, explaining why play feels so enjoyable. This mental mechanism makes you want to keep looking further into the installations exhibited in the show, despite reading titles like ‘Rabbit Blood’ (referring to an expression of the colour of ideally brewed Turkish tea) or ‘Sofreh’ (a meal-serving custom). With a growing sense that something is not quite right, you keep walking through the building. Until you suddenly realise that curiosity is the motivational drive for exploring and investigating the unknown and making new discoveries. It is as essential and intrinsic for survival as hunger. It probably is what kept the eight participants going during their residency month and build up of the show.

Fear is typically viewed as a negative emotion, an adverse reaction that keeps us on our toes with regard to potential dangers in our environment. But human beings also tend to seek scary movies, horror novels, or haunted houses—and not just during the Halloween season. Visit the *Camekân* show, take a peak and indulge into a haunted attraction of smoke and mirrors, eloquently put together by the artists and designers in residence in one of Europe's largest cities.

Jules van den Langenberg
(Ornamenta 2024 Curatorial Team)

