

Artistic Interactions and Intercultural Competences in the Mediterranean

Jerneja Rebernak and Islam Muhammad. Euro-Med Young Artists Network

Can young artists contribute to achieving intercultural dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Will the new approaches of the newly-established Union for the Mediterranean be able to create and support platforms for the young artists of the region to innovate and interact? Are the current cultural policies being carried out by both the governmental and non-governmental institutions in the Euro-Mediterranean region creating a haven to foster and encourage creativity of the young artists in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Based on the work of civil society and with an almost zero budget, the Euro-Med Young Artists Network has developed some good practices on how young artists have been able to contribute to achieving intercultural dialogue.

A stable informal process of (cultural) policy exchange can find a compromise amongst the political, social and economic diversities across regions by managing a process of dialogue that has the power to transform democratic societies. Fostering creativity across borders, enabling cooperation, building common frameworks and understanding, and sharing experiences and knowledge are all mechanisms that contribute to a peaceful conviviality and become key factors for intercultural dialogue. Learning from the acts of minimizing classifications and segmentation within artistic approaches, and the process of transformation itself, artists recreate practices for positive integration and cooperation mechanisms in their everyday work. Therefore, art as a practice for cultural dialogue integrates naturally into political processes and becomes a vehicle for positive changes in society. However,

what are the current cultural policies being carried out by both governmental and non-governmental institutions in the Euro-Mediterranean region in creating a haven to foster and encourage the creativity of young artists?

This article will be an attempt to showcase key cultural initiatives and artists' programs created by and for youth, which are currently reinforcing artistic development in the Euro-Mediterranean region. There has been recognition of a strong need to highlight current endeavors undertaken by civil society in the field of arts and culture as a step to trigger further reflections, which will accompany the second part of this article. There we will try to summarize key documents as recommendations for new media art policy and artistic mobility for the future.

As recommended during the previous Euro-Mediterranean Culture Ministers meetings,¹ it

1. Conclusions of the Athens Culture Ministerial Meeting: http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/docs/culture_concl_0508_en.pdf.

is essential to establish elements to encourage and sustain the creativity of the young artists of the region and to maintain concrete partnerships with civil society. However, there is still a considerable gap between the levels of development for mechanisms of cultural policy implementation among non-EU countries if compared to the EU countries. The need to develop active cultural policy in the non-EU Mediterranean countries is essential to match the level of EU countries and to create a joint Euro-Mediterranean cultural framework.

Were the Past Approaches of the Barcelona Process Successful in Paving the Way for a Constructive Collaboration between Young Artists of the Region?

The Barcelona Process has produced a number of programs that facilitate cultural exchange between the countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region. The collaboration of the young artists of the region was mostly supported within these programs. Outside these frameworks and when it comes to direct collaboration between young artists of the region, obstacles of mobility and funds for young artists from the south still remain an issue.

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Such initiatives and programs have encouraged us to establish the Euro-Med Young Artists Network (EMYAN),² with more than

60 member organizations from all over the Euro-Mediterranean region, which is now entering its third year of activity. The general objective of the network is to provide valuable networking opportunities within the field of young artists' empowerment, promote the value of artist-driven initiatives, and serve as a voice for the young artists in forums that debate issues of cultural policy. This network comes as an initiative from the south to increase the sense of ownership for the non-EU members to represent their contribution in reinforcing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. With an almost zero budget, EMYAN has achieved almost all of the general aims and objectives on its own in the past three years.³

Will the New Approaches of the Newly-Established Union for the Mediterranean Be Able To Create and Support Platforms for the Young Artists of the Region To Innovate and Interact?

By looking at the conclusions of the last Culture Ministerial Meeting, we understand that there is an intention to create such a framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation and positive mentalities, focused on conflict prevention and cultural/artistic exchange. The Ministers of Culture of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership have met and discussed the creation of a joint Euro-Mediterranean cultural strategy. However, the conclusions of this meeting should be actively integrated into a modus operandi and not be left on paper. There is still a long road ahead in order to create continuous programs and exchange among the young artists of the region.

2. <http://www.emyan.org>.

3. EMYAN Aims & Objectives: http://www.emyan.org/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=143&Itemid=160.



Sofia Jagbrant.

A number of key factors have to be taken into consideration when drafting a new concrete cultural and artistic strategy approaching the needs of the young artists of the region and their efforts in creating a sustainable peaceful space for creativity and innovation. Hence, the importance of establishing a cultural program, which would support and build capacities of young artists, young curators and cultural activists of the Euro-Mediterranean region promoting intercultural dialogue through professional exchange. Such a program would need to stimulate cooperation among civil society members, educational institutions and involve the community by offering capacity-building and networking processes among the cultural operators.

The Education Factor: Informal Education

Practice and experimentation are incubators for expression mechanisms and should be regarded as part of the artistic process of creation. The process of creativity needs to be stimulated and appreciated as much as the final performance or art exhibition. Often, arts education institutions are limited to wealthy students and act as gatekeepers of creativity. In the peripheral fields, art is being supported via informal structures of art practice in communities based on traditional knowledge, but also open to new potentials of creative development. Through experience, diversity and creativity, a slow process of self-recognition at the margins flourishes through

a constant activity and readiness to develop artistic formats through grassroots capacity. Furthermore, using the arts and intercultural learning creates inspiration for a culture of peace and hope and teaches non-violent alternatives to create a sustainable, equitable and harmonious society.

The New Media Factor

New media tools have created a global communication phenomenon, which has expanded rapidly in the past few years. Subsequently, mobile and new media technologies are transforming the reception of the creation and interpretation media. One of the main infrastructural disadvantages between the countries in the Mediterranean is still access to media and digital technologies. Communication technologies are enabling connectivity that creates a de-isolation factor in the cultural arena of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Thus, the field of artistic practice is connected more than in any other context.

One of the reasons the EMYAN network has chosen to focus on new technological tools and social networking platforms is their extreme popularity among youngsters. Stepping aside from formal education models of knowledge exchange, the informal communication processes of the Internet has proven to create a fast-paced learning society. Somehow attempting to leap the literacy divide, the oral traditions also benefit from the range of visual and aural materials made available online. While EMYAN attempts to become a voice for the young artist in the Euro-Mediterranean region, it also wants to see itself as a reference space where debates on cultural policies can move in parallel with the policy-makers. By creating an Online Arts

Festival⁴ and integrating networking sites as platforms for showing artworks, the EMYAN network has established itself as an initiative enabling access to a different expression, often invisible in the arena of public media.

Individual youth expression is not the sole objective the Online Arts Festival but rather it aims to contribute to the arena of cultural cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The idea of the Online Arts Festival is to nourish the values of social and cultural coexistence of the cultures of the Mediterranean via new media technologies. One of the fundamental aspects of enabling a platform where young artists can participate with their creativity within the Mediterranean arena is the fostering of knowledge, values and perceptions of each other in the region. EMYAN has provided a good example in the field of virtual mobility and the use of new media in creating and promoting artistic works by young artists of the Euro-Mediterranean region by annually organizing this Online Arts Festival with an almost zero budget.

The idea of the Online Arts Festival is to nourish the values of social and cultural coexistence of the cultures of the Mediterranean via new media technologies

The arena of new media policy is still a somewhat new terrain, which should be integrated into current cultural policies. One document which can be helpful to Ministries of Culture is that of the new media arts policy recommendations presented by the Asia-Europe Foundation in collaboration with the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies.⁵ Both intergovernmental organizations have joined hands, organized a

4. <http://www.emyan.org/onlinefestival>.

5. http://www.asef.org/images/stories/publications/documents/ce_2009_minisummit2008policyrec.pdf.

meeting with experts and opened the arena of new media arts policies for the future.

During the process of drafting the recommendations, it has been recognized that “there is an urgent need to bring new media arts funding and support mechanisms to a sustainable level locally, and to substantially increase the support for international collaborations through events, networks, residencies, and productions.” One of the key perspectives coming through such endeavors has been to also recognize the localized needs for new media arts based on each countries’ social and economic conditions. EMYAN suggests that these recommendations would be further endorsed by the Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Programmes and lists two key recommendations here:

- Media arts and cultural policies should be sensitive to the diversity and the long-term impact of networks and organizations and, accordingly, recognize their funding needs as being long-term and strategic rather than project-based. To foster sharing amongst trans-locally based initiatives, while founders are endorsed to participate in helping to build “common platforms” for the documentation of knowledge, ethical codes, terminology, resources, training and education, and policies and practices to inform and promote intercultural and transnational exchange, dialogue and policy-making. This could also be done through supporting collaboration between existing platforms.
- Policy should recognize the creative tension between independent and primarily state-supported practices, to ensure that marginalized voices find a space, and that practice that challenges the existing frameworks of knowledge generation and exchange – within and between national-cultural contexts – finds adequate support. Often in these situations the role of foundations that operate across borders has been crucial.

National funding bodies should collaborate with, and learn from, these foundations.

The Mobility Factor

Even if they are available, national programs for mobility are not transparent or easy to access, therefore creating a blind spot – both for the governments and civil society. Due to lack of regional and inter-regional incentives, artist mobility and cooperation is at stake in the Mediterranean region. Initiatives such as the European Cultural Foundation Step Beyond program, Roberto Cimetta Fund and Safar Arab Mobility Fund have enabled practitioners from the cultural sector to move across borders. However, funds aimed at artistic cooperation and cultural productions do not find themselves rooted in stable mechanisms. In this light, EMYAN as a network has shown that as an alternative virtual mobility could also be treated as an inclusive practice, but should also be reflected in the sector where networking opportunity, capacity-building and models for cultural interaction should be undertaken as programs and activities of and for the civil society.

The European countries need to make visa and work permit procedures and the general access to the European market for artists more flexible, transparent and homogenous

One of the challenges is being mobile, which is a constant challenge for cultural and artistic professionals from the south. We hope that the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) can establish a new approach to finding solutions for the mobility problems. A challenge for the EU: if the European countries are serious about honoring their ratification of the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity

and the support for the successful establishing of the UfM, they need to make visa and work permit procedures and the general access to the European market for artists more flexible, transparent and homogenous.⁶ The ERICarts Institute carried out a six month study entitled “Mobility Matters”⁷ for the European Commission between April and October 2008 on mobility incentives in the cultural/creative sector in Europe. This study has resulted in a pilot program for mobility. The study also has a number of recommendations which are very interesting and can be adapted to the Euro-Mediterranean region to establish productive cultural mobility programs which it can be useful to highlight here:

- Adopt a developmental approach to mobility.
- Adopt a cultural diversity dimension to the overall mission and activities of mobility programs and grants.
- Pursue mobility programs and schemes that support productive mobility experiences.
- Re-examine cultural diplomacy/international cultural cooperation programs.
- Concerted efforts to address mobility at the European level.

Can Young Artists Contribute to Achieving Intercultural Dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean Region?

Art provides an insight into how people communicate their perceptions, responses and understanding of the world to themselves and to others. It is a window into the continuous development of the individuals to intuit, symbolize,

think and express themselves disregarding the barriers of languages and background and with smart and intelligent methods of approach. Art is not only contemplation, it is also an act, and all acts change the world, at least a little. It is really important for art to be developed as a tool for changing the reality not only of artists but also people touched by art. Youngsters who absorb diversified forms of art will, in one way or another, change their perspectives of things (even if most of the time it is a really small change, it is still really important); it is way of looking at things, at life and at society.

Art is a window into the continuous development of the individuals to intuit, symbolize, think and express themselves disregarding the barriers of languages and background

Artists are of great importance and their artistic productions have a noticeable impact on their communities. Being young offers lots of opportunities to learn, express and share. Being young makes you the key to change: if not now, then certainly in the future. Seeing the world with their own eyes and forging their identities. Being able to communicate and understand with the ability to adapt new techniques and methods, widening their horizons for creativity. Art has been and will be the most understandable and common language between different cultures. Here we present a list of some of the good practices by young artists in contributing to the achievement of intercultural dialogue:

- Cross Border Arts Project:⁸ The Cross Border Arts Project aimed to promote inter-cultural dialogue in Lebanon, Palestine and Israel through the participation of four artists/

6. Freemuse White Paper on visa issues, Europe & artists' mobility. <http://www.freemuse.org/sw30346.asp>.

7. <http://www.mobility-matters.eu>.

8. http://www.euromedalex.org/sites/default/files/Project%20Description_CXB.PDF.

performers from the Euro-Mediterranean in an endeavor to explore the possibility of using artistic expression as a means of dealing with experiences of conflict and war and – whenever possible – trying to establish constructive relations within and among the involved communities.

- Don't Border Me:⁹ The Don't Border Me Project aimed to establish solid bridges for cultural exchanges and collaborations between creators committed to an artistic, positive and unifying endeavor, but separated by rigid geopolitical borders, making the circulation of individuals and their ideas both complex and essential.
- Mare Nostrum:¹⁰ Youths from 11 countries on both sides of the Mediterranean came together in Ghar El-Melh, a Mediterranean fishing village in Tunisia. The youths met to share the different cultures and heritages of the people of the Mediterranean. Participants discussed the similarities and shared influences between Mediterranean cultures, in order to achieve intercultural dialogue between the people of the Euro-Mediterranean region. They also discussed ways

of making local communities more aware of their environments and able to protect it. The interaction between the participants of this youth exchange and the local communities were visualized in artistic workshops consisting of painting, photography, theatre and sculpture and improvised music.

- Biennale of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean:¹¹ The Biennale is one of the biggest cultural events in the Euro-Mediterranean region. BJCEM is a traveling biennale which has taken place every two years in one of the Euro-Mediterranean cities since its beginning in 1985 in Barcelona. The Biennale is a multidisciplinary event that proposes creations of seven different artistic disciplines: visual arts, applied arts, show, music, images on the move, literature and gastronomy. The event lasts for 10 days, during which exhibitions, concerts, dance shows, theatre pieces, gastronomy, performances, urban events and literary readings follow one another and where young artists from all over the Euro-Med region come together in a multicultural atmosphere.

9. <http://www.dontborderme.net>.

10. <http://marenostrum.emyan.org/en>.

11. <http://www.bjcem.org>.