

RENEGOTIATING THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AT BE FESTIVAL's –Visual Arts Programme 2011

Isn't it a characteristic of the age we live in that everyone is in a way a migrant and a member of a minority? We all have to live in a universe bearing little resemblance to the place where we were born: we must all learn other languages, other modes of speech, other codes; and we all have a feeling that our own identity, as we have conceived of it since we were children, is threatened. (Amin Maalouf, 2007, p. 37)

In 2010, I co-founded with Mike Tweddle and Miguel Oyarzun BE FESTIVAL (Birmingham European Festival), a physical theatre, dance, performance, action, and live art festival, that brings companies from across Europe that can cross disciplines and linguistic borders. In 2011, and with the aim to explore the shifting boundaries or liminalities between performing and plastic arts, I curated BE FESTIVAL's Visual Arts Programme (BE-VA), including Anne Bean, Nihad Kresevljakovic, Behjat Omer Abdulla and Natasha Davis. To complement BE-VA I organised a series of talks and chaired discussions to question the nature of identity. In addition, everyday were held feedback sessions between the artists and the public in order to encourage engagement, participation and debate. All this led to an exploration about the use of language and symbols within cultural identity, concepts such as 'transnational' and 'translational', the construction of discourses, history and national identities, and the steps we must do to reinvent politics today. I found that the incorporation of visual artists in the context of the festival worked as a provocation that went far beyond my expectations. It not only achieved the preliminary aim of creating a 'social sculpture', but also built a space for discussion, renegotiation, and reflexion; a state of 'in-betweenness' that engaged with the historical present.

For a more complete understanding of the scope of the project, I recommend two complementary documents: BE FESTIVAL'S VISUAL ARTS PROGRAMME: 'MOMENTS OF BEING' IN THE SPACE, which explains in detail the project since its conception to its production; and the DVD named CONSTELLATIONS, that following Benjamin's montage-like method 'thought-images' assembles image and sound recordings that transmits the 'moments of being' experienced during BE-VA 2011.

Isla Aguilar

Community of communities

BE FESTIVAL is an *in-between* time and space, with many gaps and holes which allow its threads to be constantly reweaved into a transient communal identity; a forum to debate, renegotiate, and give room to particular and alternative narratives and voices. It is a space to create new forms of languages and knowledge; new channels for critical experimentation. It is an on-going project which gathers artists, audiences and volunteers from different cultural backgrounds together in a unique atmosphere, encouraging them to share, discover, re-think, and celebrate both each others' differences and similarities.¹

When Joan Scott wonders "who gets to define what counts as knowledge?", in her essay *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity*, she points out that most discussions about multiculturalism avoid this question.² Then Scott quotes S. P. Mohanty's asking whether we "could afford to have 'entirely' different histories, to see ourselves as living –and having lived– in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces",³ and she explains that his answer is obviously no, because "we" all share. In asking these questions, she suggests that our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organised. She keeps arguing that:

*If Mohanty's solution seems obvious to many of us, we are in a clear minority, as the struggle over multiculturalism unfolds in the contexts of prevailing ideology of individualism. Individualism is the language of the conservatives' critique of multiculturalism, of the liberal universities' accommodation to its newly diverse populations, and of identity politics of minority groups.*⁴

BE was built upon the idea that "we all share". It is a temporary community of communities. Artists are required to stay for the whole festival, hosted in Birmingham residents' homes in order to involve both

¹ BE FESTIVAL is based on a common current concern which Jacques Raci re captures when he declares "We must *reinvent* politics today". See Ranci re 1995, p. 70; and my IRP-B, pp. 3-4: about the metaphorical structure/model for BE, inspired in Tomas Saraceno's installation *Galaxies Forming along Filaments*, Venice Biennale, 2009; and Bruno Latour's ideas regarding the principle of connection (Latour, 2011, p. 4), and his "Compositionist Manifesto" (Latour, 2010, p. 473).

² Scott 1995, p. 8.

³ Mohanty 1989, p. 13; see in Scott, 1995, p. 8.

⁴ Scott, 1995, p. 3.

the community and visiting artists. BE gives the visiting artists not only the opportunity to perform their work, but also to see other artists' work, participate in workshops, debates, and open feedback sessions. All this create a unique environment of exchange, and builds up a strong artistic community.

On the other hand, communal dinners took place every night during intervals allowing audience members, artists and team members to break the bread together while drinking wine and talking in "a real hang-up with food", recalling Gordon Matta Clark whose intentions with FOOD were "to restore the art of eating [in a search of] a culinary communion as the modern world has forgotten."⁵

The format of BE stimulates the exchange of experiences, allowing us to be challenged, moved or provoked, and have fun together, creating a fully conscious community engaged in the historical present that Walter Benjamin refers in his Theses XVI.⁶

This unique format which gathers audience members and artists allows those "moments of being" – recalling Virginia Woolf⁷ – to happen. Woolf asserts that there are two kinds of experiences: 'moments of being' and 'non-being', and, it is the intensity of feeling, one's consciousness of the experience, that separates the two moments. A 'moment of being' is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of her/his experience and connection to a larger pattern unseen behind the daily life. Unlike 'moments of non-being', when the individual lives and acts without awareness, performing acts in a mechanical way, the 'moments of being' open up a hidden reality. These flashes of awareness reveal a pattern hidden behind the thick cotton wool of daily life. For Woolf all human beings are connected: "we all are parts of the work of art." The individual artist is not important. Instead, Woolf insists, "We [everybody] are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself".⁸

⁵ See Barbican 2011, pp. 54-67, Matta-Clark's letter explaining his intentions to open a restaurant named FOOD, in New York. FOOD was a hub of creativity, where artists motivated each other.

⁶ "The notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop." Theses XVI in Benjamin, 1999a, pp. 254. Jürgen Habermas relates Benjamin's historical present with his concept of "undecidability", see note 18, p. 6.

⁷ Virginia Woolf first mentions the 'moments of being' in her essay, "A Sketch of the Past", in Schulkind, 1985. They are vividly recalls of memories and sensations from the past. These memories and sensations are so strong that when you recall them they become more real for you than the present moment. See: Urquhart, 2011; Gudz, 2008.

8

"A Sketch of the Past" in Schulkind, 1985, p. 72.

Social Sculpture

Joseph Beuys viewed society, not unlike Woolf, as a whole great work of art to which each person could contribute creatively. "Only on the condition of radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power."⁹ Based on his beliefs that every human being is an artist, in every decision we make, we should be contributing to building up "a social organism as a work of art."¹⁰

As I am writing this essay, there are many discussions in the media about the recent August riots in England, which demonstrate existing racial prejudices. This confirms the necessity of openly talking about some concepts such as border, identity, historical narratives, in order to reinvent cultural politics today. Britain is one of many societies in which questions of cultural and ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, nation and identity have come to the fore in recent decades. Central to this process has been the challenging of hegemonic narratives of history. As the writer Gloria Yamato has argued, "Work on racism for your sake, not 'their' sake!"¹¹ It is an opportune moment to take responsibility, and inform ourselves about the minorities oppressed, in order to create a vibrant, diverse society in which different is enriching.

Chantal Mouffe predicates that we need to envisage a form of commonality that respects diversity and makes room for different 'subject positions', constructed by a diversity of discourses. However, the kind of pluralism she is advocating "requires the establishment of a common bond, so that the multiplicity of democratic identities and differences do not explode into a separatism that would lead to the negation of the political community".¹² **BE-VA** brought together artists from different cultures and backgrounds.

⁹ *Beuys*, 1974.

¹⁰ *Idem*.

¹¹ Yamato 1990, 23; see in Weedon, 2004, p. 159.

¹² Mouffe, 1995, p. 44.

"A State of *in-betweenness*"

The political community, ties in with Jacques Rancière explanation of how the 'political' is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes: the first entails creating community consent, and the second is a process of equality, which is the only 'universal' in politics.¹³ He goes on explaining that the process of emancipation is the constant verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.¹⁴ "Equality is not a value to which one appeals; it is a universal that must be verified and demonstrated in each case."¹⁵ The construction of equality is not the enactment of an identity; but a process of subjectivization, which is the formation of one that is not the self but is the relation of the self to an other.

BE-VA explores works in-between names, disciplines, politics, identities. The 'uncertainty' and 'undecidability' that Jürgen Habermas suggested in not be able to be firmly established or refuted.¹⁶ "Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality by people who are together in the extent that they are *in-between*. It is a crossing and exchanging of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of the group to the name of no group, a being to a non-being or a not-yet-being."¹⁷ This network has a noticeable property: it always involves an impossible identification, an identification that cannot be embodied by s/he who utters it. Rancière explains that the 'political culture of conflict' is defined by the logic of 'wrong' names: "that it is to say, we could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume."¹⁸ In the

¹³ Rancière, 1995, pp. 63-64.

¹⁴ Rancière, 1995, p. 63.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 65.

¹⁶ "The undecidability – not being able to be firmly affirmed or refuted – represents, as Habermas suggests, the central ambivalence of the structure of knowledge in modernity; 'unconditionality' is the Janus-faced process at work in the modern moment of cultural judgement, where validity claims seek justification for their propositions in terms of the specificity of the 'everyday', and it is built into the factual process of mutual understanding here and now, in a specific context. Habermas illuminates the undecidable or unconditional as the epistemological basis of cultural specificity, and thus, in the discourse of modernity, the claim to knowledge shifts from the 'universal' to the domain of context-bound, of everyday practice. See in Bhabha, 1995, p. 52.

¹⁷ Rancière, 1995, p. 67.

¹⁸ When Rancière says that the French in the 60's were 'all German Jews', he means it within the logic of the 'wrong' names, in the political culture of conflict: "That process of subjectivization had no proper name, but it found its name, its cross name, in the 1968 assumption 'We are all German Jews' – a 'wrong' identification, an identification in terms of the denial of an absolutely essential wrong [...] Certainly we were not; we are not all German Jews. But what follows from this is an ability to draw consequences from a 'being' that is a 'not-being', from an identification with an-anybody that has no-body. In the demonstration of equality "we are and are not". Rancière 1995, pp. 68-69.

process of equality it is helpful to articulate the gaps as a relation, the non-place as a place, and hence create a space for a polemical construction. He alerts us to the risk that the process of giving 'correct' names leads to the downgrading of the political form¹⁹:

*Identity is first about fear: the fear of the other, the fear of nothing, which finds in the body of the other its object. And the polemical culture of emancipation, the heterological enactment of the other, was also a way of civilizing that fear. How are we to reinvent politics?*²⁰

In times of economic instability principles such as collaboration, participation and exchange are deeply important, and it is my political responsibility as a curator to put them into creative practice. It is important to build meaningful connections between people of diverse backgrounds. Through recognition, suspicions and fears associated with the 'unknown' and the 'foreign' are dissolved.²¹

History plays a key role in the construction of what Benedict Anderson has termed the 'imagined community' that constitutes national identity.²² This term reflects on how collectives of people imagine their ideal nation. History and tradition are articulated and mobilised through rhetorical strategies to promote particular values and hence one particular imagined community. Those values are grounded in dominant narratives of history and culture, and the forms of identity that they encourage often function to exclude, silence, and stereotype or render invisible those who do not fit with the hegemonic narratives.

As a curator my interest is in giving a voice to those who have historically been in silence, and invisible, and in doing so, making the silence visible. Within **BE-VA** a space for a new imagined culture was created, one where all of us involved had the possibility to be represented by proposing counter-narratives of what identity means to each of us. However this could only be achieved by finding or creating a common language.

¹⁹ "It is the demotion of the political form, of the political polymorphism of other, that creates a new kind of other, one that is infra-political. The new racism is hatred of the other that comes forth when the political procedures of social polemics collapse. The political culture of conflict may have had disappointing outlets. But it was also a way of coming to terms with something that lies before and beneath politics: the question of the other as a figure of identification for the object of fear." In Rancière 1995, p.

²⁰ Rancière 1995, p.

²¹ See in my IRP-B, pp. 2-4: TJ Demos, and Bruno Latour Compositionist Manifesto.

²² Anderson, 1991, pp. 24-25; see in Weedon, 2004, pp. 24-25.

In the symposium about 'The Identity in Question', Jacques Rancière wondered what language should be spoken in his conference "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization"²³, arguing for the necessity to create a new specific one, an *in-between* language: "that carries no identification with any group." As Louis Althusser explains in *On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, the speaker is never the author of the language. Language pre-exists and produces subjectivity, identity and meaning. On top of that, often, the pre-established common language is the hegemonic language of those who tell History, imposing meaning, narratives and identifications.²⁴

Rancière insists: "Only an *in-between* dialect constructed for the aims of this discussion and guided by the idea that the activity of thinking is primarily an activity of translation, and that anyone is capable of making a translation. Underpinning this capacity for translation is the efficacy of equality, that is to say, the efficacy of humanity."²⁵ This utopia ideal was a catalyst for debate in **BE-VA** and in particular within the debate about identity.

BE-VA also worked as a space to articulate difference, a place for empathy. Judith Butler refers to performativity as the repeated assumption of identities internalised in the course of daily life.²⁶ As individuals inserted within specific discourses, we repeatedly perform modes of subjectivity and identity, and when this is broken, it sets the basis for dis-identification or counter-identifications which involve a rejection of hegemonic identity norms. In their performance/action, Anne Bean and Poshya Kakl gave voice to women who are dis-identifying with their given identity. The language of action, of enactment, creates new identities and hence by creating a space where these actions can take place a common language and identity can appear.

²³ 'The Identity in Question', symposium held in New York in 1991.

²⁴ According to Louis Althusser, the subject can no longer be seen as unified, since he/she is split between the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken, as a result, identities' categories can be understood as attempts to mask this gap. Language *constitutes* rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of experience and identity. It is in the process of using language that we take up positions as speaking and thinking subjects and the identities that go with them. The speaker is never the author of the language. Althusser argues that the 'haling' process is fundamental for the constitution of the individual as subject within language and ideology, which is elementary to societies. This implies the process of recognition by the individual of herself or himself as the one addressed by the call to recognition *interpellates* the individual as a subject within ideology. Althusser, 1971, pp. 121-173; in Weedon, 2004, pp. 5-6.

²⁵ Rancière, 1995, p. 63.

²⁶ "Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results", Butler 1990, p. 25; see in Weedon 2004, p. 7.

Moreover, as Stuart Hall argues, we might usefully see identity as a 'production'.²⁷ Identity from this perspective is never complete, it is always in process, and hence identity becomes an effect of culture. In this regard, cultural practices produce identities through the process of representation and as Beuys says, we have the responsibility to aim towards a reality in which all invisibles or silents are represented.

Following Benjamin's concept of constellations, **BE-VA** tried to effectively and efficiently propose a space where multiple identities were presented creating a discourse that goes beyond the analysis of these identities individually. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin presents the constellation as symbol of the relationship which emerges when the historian places a number of apparently unrelated historical events in significant conjuncture. The constellation links either past events among themselves, or links past to present events; its formation stimulates a flash of recognition, a quantum leap in historical understanding.²⁸

The cultural practices proposed in **BE-VA** appeared like a constellation where artists and audiences challenged their identities linking the different actions, performances, installations in an enriching and hopefully emancipating debate.

BE-VA's artists and works selected

From the start, **BE-VA** opened a door for transparency and equality through an open call for artists that worked as a flexible model coherent with Rancière's utopia because of its organic structure and its democratic character. This created a sense of equality at the start of the festival between participants and it enabled openness towards the other, accepting 'the capacity of translation'. For detail information about the open call for artists see my IRP.

²⁷ "Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, [...] we should think of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, the representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' lays claim." Hall, 1990, p. 222.

²⁸ Rollason, 2002, p. 262.

BE-VA happened outside a conventional art space with the aim to present culture as a strategy of 'cultures of survival'.²⁹ My curatorial decision is both *transnational* and *translational*. It is transnational because it is rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement. It is translational because such spatial histories of displacement raise the question of what is signified by *culture* and how. This implies forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow the otherness. The very act of articulating cultural differences "calls us into question fully as much as it acknowledges the Other... neither reduc[ing] the Third World to some homogeneous Other of the West, nor [...] vacuously celebrat[ing] the astonishing pluralism of human cultures."³⁰

The Un-knitted lives of young women (performance/live art, 2011), by **Anne Bean** (UK, born in Zambia) & **Poshya Kaki** (Kurdistan-Iraq)

Kaki's film *Knitting Iron* (2009) was the seed for this collaborative project between Anne Bean and Poshya Kaki. The film shows Kaki visiting young Kurdish-Iraqi women inside jail for refusing marriages arranged by their families. In her documentary Poshya brings bags of colourful wool to these imprisoned women in order to decorate the fence that both confined them and makes them feel safer. Some music is played as they weave the fence, transforming it into a beautiful tapestry, and one by one the women tell their particular narratives about love, unfairness and despair.

The performance *The Un-knitted lives of young women* took place in **BE-VA** while a simultaneous action led by Poshya was happening in Erbil (Kurdistan, Iraq). One by one, each audience member got into a long and high pavilion at AE Harris, where a fence had been erected in the middle, dividing the space, and forcing the audience to choose a place on either side of the fence. During the screening of Poshya's film on two large screens hung on both sides of the long industrial space, a mix group of male and female participants/performers (including two Kurdish-Iraqi men), costumed in dark eye make-up, started knitting on the fence from the bottom and working upwards, while a Kurdish-Iraqi musician

²⁹ "Various contemporary critical theories suggest that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking from those who have suffered the sentence of history. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objects d'art* or beyond the canonization of the 'idea' of aesthetics, and thus to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, and produced in the act of social survival", Bhabha, 1995, p. 48.

³⁰ Fernández, 1971; see in Bhabha, 1995, p. 50.

played music and a Polish performer sang. Other two performers on each side of the fence crossed several times the room, laying a web with different colour wools on top of the audience heads.

The Un-knitted lives of young women worked as an intense Action. We witnessed breaking the prison's fence in the most powerful way. Its power resided in opening up an historical present for a moment of empathy, a glimpse into other beings' realities, in giving them voice and giving the audience ears to hear their stories, in sharing with the women an action and making a work of art together. Despite the fact that there were thousands of kilometres *in-between* **BE-VA** and the prison in Erbil, 'we', altogether, built up a unique and beautiful moment of awareness and connection with other people, a demonstration of equality and emancipation. Its immediacy led me to an unstoppable stream of images, thoughts, and feelings.

Putting the audience on both sides of the fence raised questions on what freedom means for these women. It was a metaphor of the notion 'on the fence' and 'the border line'. *The Un-knitted lives of young women* was a memorable 'moment of being', an allegorical way of breaking boundaries and creating an empathetic *in-between* space and time for a communal live action.

With this piece Anne and Poshya enacted the importance of 'talking back', which enabled these women to be recognized and rewrite the history of what and who they are, to explore their existing identities and to create new ones, as well as to connect in an equalitarian action with other beings. Moving from silence into speech is for those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that makes possible some kind of hope in a new life and new growth. The women act of speech, of 'talking back', was not a mere gesture of empty words. It was an action of dignity and not of victimhood, as 'knowing subjects' that speak and act in the world with the right to signify.

Anne Bean, also offered a public talk about *PAVES* a collaborative project with other four women around the world, based in their actions/reactions against visa-issues, borders and the impossibility to take Poshya out of Iraq. Also, she conducted a workshop leading to her performance specifically conceived for **BE-VA**.

'Do you remember Sarajevo?' (documentary, 2002), directed by **Nihad Kresevljakovic** (born in ex-Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina)

Nihad Kresevljakovic is a film maker, whose practice deals with different ways of documenting collective memory and search of identity. Paradoxically enough, in a festival where the ethos is the one of crossing borders, Nihad could not arrive on time to introduce his documentary because of visa problems at Birmingham's airport. However, he managed to arrive to the Q&A, after the screening of *'Do you remember Sarajevo?'* (2002). During the siege of Sarajevo, between 1992 and 1995, several hundred citizens of the city recorded everyday events on their video cameras. It was the first time in History that European warfare had been documented this way: the citizens filmed their domestic life, their shelters in various parts of the city. Compiled from these materials, the film presents the story of ordinary people in an epoch of genocide and sophisticated technology.

After the end of the Balkans' War, Nihad and his twin brother gathered thousands of films recorded during this particular conflict, with the aim to create an archive that could give voice to the particular narratives that usually sink into oblivion in the hegemonic narratives of history. *'Do you remember Sarajevo?'* is the enactment of the 'right to signify' action, the 'practice of equality' as human beings explained by Rancière.³¹ Since the film articulates the right of common people and often silent voices to speak, it is an example of identities in work in progress, History under construction, a production of new cultural forms. It also explores inter-cultural and cross-generational conflicts. The film opens up Benjamin's historical present, the timeless moment, characterized as a present that is not in transition, but in which time stands to still and has come to a stop"³². It incorporates the daily narratives and the 'unconditionality', predicated by Habermas,³³ according to which knowledge shifts from the 'universal' to the domain of context-bound everyday practice. This new way of documenting collective memory, challenges the hegemonic history, and works the 'social sculpture' referred by Joseph Beuys.³⁴

In the chaired discussion about identity the other panellists were talking about personal experiences of displacement. On the contrary, Nihad told a revealing anecdote about the borders changing around him without moving from his family house, in Sarajevo. He explained how his family kept the passports from the past five generations. Despite staying in the same land where the house was initially built, the

³¹ See pp. 5 and 6 in this essay.

³² See p. 3, note 7 in this essay.

³³ See p. 5, note 16 in this essay.

³⁴ See p. 4 in this essay.

members of his family kept on changing nationalities: Otoman, Turkish, Austro-Hungarian, Yugoslavian, and Serbian. Finally, he stated that he did not want to identify himself with what Europe has meant historically, and take the responsibility for all the abuses of its dominant hegemonic power. As Stuart Hall pointed out, "Belonging is a tricky concept, requiring both identification and recognition."³⁵

After watching 'Do you remember Sarajevo?' it is easy to acknowledge the words of Cornel West when he says that identity is built on desire and death:

*Desire for recognition, quest for visibility; the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association [...] We are beings toward death, and is because we have given our inevitable extinction, to come up with a way of endowing ourselves with significance [...] National identity –which is very different from having a nation-state– is one of the most powerful means of constructing desire and death in our moment.*³⁶

This documentary shows death and desire during the siege of Sarajevo, but fundamentally, it shows the desire of people with broken national identities to grasp life every day.

Suspended (2010), by **Natasha Davis** (born in ex-Yugoslavia, Croatia)

With *Suspended*, Natasha explored the process of subjectivization as a process of disidentification,³⁷ a subject in an *in-between* state. 'Liminal', from Latin *līmen*, means 'threshold', or "in between two different existential planes." According to Arnold van Gennep, this term is used to "refer to in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes." Such liminalities are core to the Croatian artist – based in London.

This interdisciplinary piece mixed elements from installation and live art, and was performed as a site-specific promenade, moving audiences around, following the artist in the search of her personal identity. *Suspended* connected symbols from apparently unrelated events in the form of images,

³⁵ Hall, 2000.

³⁶ West, 1995, pp. 15-16.

³⁷ See p. 8 in this essay.

words, sounds, objects, and rituals that recall Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical images' in constellations.³⁸ For Benjamin, such moments of dialectical recognition are monadic structures that bind together time and perception/knowledge in a non-repeatable 'constructive moment'. The dialectical images were performed in a contemplative rhythm creating a metaphorical space in between realities. This tempo provoked the public to reflect upon what they were seeing allowing time to go back to installations already used by the artist in the performance or some that were to be revealed. Some audience members felt uncomfortable because of the space that was conferred to their act of reflection upon identity and others were drawn empathise with the artist's experiences in an act of intimacy.

Suspended had one of the most powerful images of the whole festival. Surrounded by a mechanic soundscape, the audiences got through a black curtain into a smoky faintly lighted industrial space, and were confronted with an intimidating vision. The artist was suspended in the air, attached by her hair to the ceiling, sitting on a ladder which was hidden under her long dress. Once one got closer, her majestic figure vanished into a fragile, worried, and shivering woman. She then offered to the audience a big pair of scissors to cut the strings that trapped her. Once she was liberated, she carefully climbed down the ladder, helped by her protective assistant. Afterward, she started her displacement around the space in a metaphor of her life migrations. During the promenade, she encountered various objects displayed as installations. Each of them revealed itself, triggering unveiled stories. Her work explored the body's physicality as a cultural signifier of memory, identity and migration, suggesting that the process of migration undoes a person at the seams. This rootlessness was substantial to her work and evident in the fragility of her performance.

In the chaired discussion, Natasha explained her personal displacement from a country (Yugoslavia) which eventually would disappear and fall apart while she was studying abroad. She suddenly found herself without a passport or national identity; in limbo for six years that eventually led her to sue the Croatian government for the denial of her citizenship. Wandering around has influenced and shaped her work, and constructed her personal identity. Natasha's work poetically unfolds showing the lost of belonging. She is trapped in between identities.

³⁸ Idem.

In Limbo, New Place of origin, by Behjat Omer Abdulla (born in Kurdistan -Iraq)

A conversation with Behjat, held in AE Harris when he came to install his works, revealed how language is charged with different significance and symbolic value depending on personal experience. We were in front of the gate that leads into the space where lunch and dinner would be served during the festival. He noticed an old sign: "Lorries must not enter this shop". From my point of view, it was just an old sign, painted on a board. But for him, it really meant something else. He insisted he wanted to install part of his series of drawings in that space, because that sign made him feel safer. Later, he explained that himself and many others Kurdish, arrived to the UK hidden inside lorries. This was an example of enactment of the process of translation that led to a common language, a place of equality.

Behjat's ideas of working with the notion of identity have developed and grown for many years, since he was first caught up in the absurd battles for identity recognition in the UK. He finally won the battle, but only thirteen years after leaving his native land, Kurdistan-Iraq. His journey took him to many different places where he was asked to provide a recent identity picture; one that could identify him in an ID card. Subsequently he has now his own collection of 'self-ID portraits'.

The Kurdish-Iraqi artist explained in his application form how being in exile became the source of his inspiration. "My work developed directly from investigation into ID cards, people's origins and how they are presented through governmental processes. I use drawing to listen to people's specific psychological dramas, with the work aiming to show a point of struggle between thought and appearance. I am trying to question the effects and the outcomes of the categorization in the system we live in. It is shocking to see how codes and numbers have classified and shaped us within a system that is almost invisible to us."

In Limbo (2010) is a series of 16 portraits in pencil and graphite powder drawings on paper, 110 x 75 cm / each, plus 5 of 183 x 153 cm / each. They are portraits of people who have escaped their homeland and arrived to the UK and to other parts of Europe as asylum seekers. Behjat recalls that "the chosen participants were asked to perform as if they were sitting for an ID photo for a document that may determine the course of their life. I took a number of photographs. I chose the photo I thought best captures the person's core, framing their true identity. The moment captured within the photograph encapsulates an impression of the subject being absent from their own life, absent from misfortune, raised from the misery and anger caused by their destiny being held in the hands of a

disengaged authority. In fact my drawings are of photographs rather than of the subjects themselves, mimicking the format of an ID picture as well as reinforcing a uniformity of appearance.”

This series was divided across **mac birmingham** and AE Harris. With the aim the public a first view of the drawings from the distance, the three portraits displayed at **mac** occupied the far wall at the end of the Arena Gallery. The rest of the series were displayed all around the AE Harris factory. 8 drawings were displayed in the form of two sets of four in a print of photo booth ID pictures, plus another big drawing. These faces observed the audience from above as much as they observed them, as if roles had been inverted. Their confrontational attitude was a reaffirmation of their identity. In Behjat words, he tries to make visible the invisible.

New Place of Origin (2009) is a video installation showing 64 frames of portraits of 11 people. It was part of a screening show in Oslo (2009); *HEP (Human Emotion Project)* Portugal (2009), and London (2010); and Staffordshire University final degree (2010). “It is the result of hours of filming performers in a dark space and taking thousands of still images. The flash from the photo camera is the only light, which the video camera would pick up to record in the dark room, and it is also the main sound in the installation.”

Through his work, Behjat would like viewers to get a glimpse of his experience: “It is quite surprising and rather fascinating to see that we expect photographs to be a clear sharp mirror of who we really are, when they only represent a superficial side of our identity.”

View/function/object/target by **Matthew Foster** (British)

“Where is the line between the framing of an action and the creation of a sculptural object which contains activity? Should a stage separate performers from an audience or physically form a link between the two? How near to an object in its own right can a stage get before it fails to enhance the performance?” In **View/function/object/target**, Matthew Foster proposed a performative container that hosted the musical component of the festival. Exploring the idea that a stage can be an object without a performance, this object shifted from day to day, drawing on elements of historical architecture and spatial design, to more abstract concepts of an object which defines a space for performance. These propositions existed for one night only. Through an approach of repetitive construction and deconstruction of appropriated modular and flexible structures, Matthew assessed the worth of designed spaces for performance.

Matthew's fluxus and ephemeral installations, with all its connections, intersections, and spheres of coexistence operated as a metaphorical model of the structure of **BE-VA** physically built in the space. This recalls Bruno Latour's idea, quoted in my IRP: "Every container or sphere is either inside another local one or 'inside' the network of outside connectors. But that's the point: networks have no inside, only radiating connectors. They are all edges. They provide connections but no structure. One does not reside in a network, but rather moves to other points through the edges."³⁹

Matthew's installations worked at the space of **BE-VA** as new model for social interactions. Conceived by the artist as a daily-changeable organism, under construction during the day, and a ethereal scenario that not only did not block the space but also created links between spaces during the evenings. This structure helped to integrate and host music bands that played every night at the festival. An architecture that visually constituted a network of relationships, exchanges and connections between the musicians and the audiences. Matthew built an ephemeral in-between space, with many gaps that embodied the spirit of **BE-VA**.⁴⁰

Finally, the **European Visual Artists in Residency, Federico Sancho & Mikel Nieto** started a dialogue with the space and with its inhabitants based on their proposal **AE Harris Security Devices**. This project will carry on to next year's festival. The project looked at the relationship between the workers' real factory and the festival venue, an old factory now in industrial disuse. To do so, they crossed the road and visited in several occasions the factory still in use, interviewing workers and creating an archive of sound and image which analyses the working machinery. Their methodology poses a research of the unique aspects of the space. The analysis of its memory, people and historical evolution, proposes a broad understanding of the identity of the factory. In Federico's words, "the project AE Harris Security Devices aims to analyse the processes of control in regards to security matters which we daily assume in an almost mechanical or automatic way. The objective of such an analysis is to translate this common symptom into participative action where humour and irony replace discipline and control." In relation to the issues addressed by Fede, Benjamin explains that it is basic to understand the relationship between the mechanical process in a factory (machine) and its control mechanisms (security), and the impact on us when introducing them in a cultural event, his main interest being in how to do it.⁴¹ To answer this question, the artists are generating an archive (available online)⁴² with

³⁹ Latour, 2011, p. 4.

⁴⁰ See p. 2, first paragraph of this essay.

⁴¹ Benjamin, 1999b, pp. 211-244.

information from the two factories relating them through the activity developed around the time of the festival.

In addition, Fede & Mikel provoked a group of performers from different companies participating in the festival and gathered in another experimental project named BE Mix. With this collaboration, AE Harris Security Devices crosses the boundaries between the industrial activity and the cultural events. From different backgrounds (theatre, puppetry, dance, mime, drawing, painting, video, sound design, even acrobatics), languages, cultures and countries (UK, Italy, France, Belgium, Corea, and Spain), this group worked on a devised piece, over the festival's period and over five days after the festival. BE Mix took the residents provocation in the form of drawings, sounds recordings, videos, objects and the theme of security devices as a point of departure and inspiration for their new piece. At the end of the devising week, BE Mix presented at mac Birmingham a scratch of the piece: "The elephant in the room". This title was inspired on an anecdote from one of the interviewed workers, which became the thread and live-motive of the performance, that was made of a collage of 'thought-images'.

All participants showed an enormous openness, respect and recognition towards each other making BE Mix a process of enactment and equality of the empirical incompleteness of a group of people that come together to give form to a specific identity engaged in time and space. The visual artists' provocation set the basis for this to happen. BE Mix was built upon a critical and collaborative spirit that blew-up into a unique 'constellation' of dialectical consciousness.

This year's BE-VA's experiment opens up the possibility for a political community in order to renegotiate and create new cultural identities in progress, within BE FESTIVAL's community of communities.

Isla Aguilar
MFA in Curating
Year 2 (30/8/2011)

⁴² See: www.security-device.org

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALTHUSSER 1971

Louis Althusser, "On Ideology and ideological State Apparatuses. Notes Towards an Investigation", in *Lenin and philosophy and Others Essays*, London, 1971, pp. 121-173.

ANDERSON 1991

B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991.

BARBICAN 2011

Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark: *Downtown Scene. New York 1970s*, exh. cat., Barbican, 2011.

BENJAMIN 1999a

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, London, 1999, pp. 245-255.

BENJAMIN 1999b

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London, 1999, pp. 211-244.

BEUYS 1974

Joseph Beuys, "Public Dialogues with Willoughby Sharp" (1974).

FERNÁNDEZ 1995

Roberto Fernandez, *Calibán*, México, 1971.

GUDZ 2008

Nataliya Gudz, *Concepts of Time in Virginia Woolf*, London, 2008.

HALL 1990

Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in J. Rutherford (ed.) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, London, 1990, pp. 222-237.

HALL 2000

Stuart Hall, A Question of Identity (II), The Observer, (15-10-2000)
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/oct/15/britishidentity.comment1>

LATOUR 2010

Bruno Latour "An attempt at a 'Composionist Manifesto'", *New Literary History*, vol. 41 (2010), p. 473.

LATOUR 2011

Bruno Latour, "Some Experiments in Art and Politics", *e-flux journal*, 23 (March, 2011), p. 4.

LATOUR 2011

Bruno Latour, "Some Experiments in Art and Politics", *e-flux journal*, 23 (March, 2011), p. 4.

MAALOUF 2003

Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, London, 2003.

MOHANTY 1989

S. P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (Spring 1989), 13.

MOUFFE 1995

Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic, Politics and the Question of Identity", in *The Identity in Question*, [ed. by J. Rajchman], New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 33-45.

RANCIÈRE 1995

Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivation", in *The Identity in Question*, [ed. by J. Rajchman], New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 63-70.

ROLLASON 2002

Christopher Rollason, "The Passageways of Paris: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Contemporary Cultural Debate in the West", in *Modern Criticism*, ed. Christopher Rollason and Rajeshwar Mittapalli, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 262-296.

SCHULKIND (ed) 1985

"A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind. 2nd ed. New York, 1985

SCOTT 1995

Joan W. Scott, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity, in *The Identity in Question*, [ed. by J. Rajchman], New York, 1995, pp. 3-12.

URQUHART

N. Urquhart, *Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf*,
<http://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/urquhart.htm> (10-8-2011)

WEEDON 2004

Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, Maidenhead, 2004.

WEST 1995

Cornel West, "A Matter of Life and Death", in *The Identity in Question*, [ed. by J. Rajchman], New York: Routledge, 1995, p