

Talking to the artist, G. Drivas¹

Eleni Butulussi²



Eleni Butulussi: Well, good morning. We are so glad that you have accepted our invitation and you are now with us! We have thirty minutes for a discussion. Do you want to say something first, or should we start with some questions? We have been working on the project a lot, as I have already told you. Now, we are working on exclusion in school, but as we know, all kinds of exclusion are somewhat similar to one another, whether we are talking about cells or the "Suppliant Women" or students at school. According to this, we are on the same page. Is there anyone who wants to start with a question?

Student (female): Yes! I would like to know what your motive was, in the first place, for the project that you presented in this major exhibition. Why did you choose to show it there?

George Drivas: The question was: What was my motive to work on the project? Or, to present it at the Biennale?

Student (female): Well, both but first for the project.

George Drivas: First, the project. Great! Look, this project was the result of a series of discussions, which I had with my curator, Orestis Andreadakis; it took us a long time and, more specifically, it took us about a year before we decided to submit the official proposal.

The starting point was a suggestion by my curator: "How would it be if we could go back to the "Suppliant Women" observe it from another point of view and turn it (...) into an installation? That is how our debate began; namely, how we could reexamine older texts in a new way and see how we could bring them to the here and now, see how contemporary they can be, how they could be re-read in the contemporary context. This discussion had multiple variations. At some point, after changing from time to time, and becoming constantly different, we finally came to the conclusion that this "thing," formed here, could be a very decent national representation to present at the Biennale. It is a dialogue, which brings a significant Ancient Greek text up to the present, and builds something universal right next to it.

¹ The conversation via Skype took place in-class, in the Seminar "Identity and Exclusion in education: Discourse Analytic Studies," at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 27.4.2018.

Transcription of the Conversation: Stratos Politis (student), Transcription editing: Eleni Butulussi, Translation in English: Stratos Politis, Michail Paraskevas (students). Translation editing: Vivian Pavlopoulou.

In the transcript, some elements relevant only to oral speech were deliberately left out so as not to hinder comprehension. Sentences were punctuated according to written speech format conventions.

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Student (female): Well, then, why did you want to represent Greece in the exhibition through this project? Did you have the intention of drawing the attention of the people abroad to your project; to leave a message, maybe?

George Drivas: Oh, yes, yes, yes! Uh, obviously. I thought the issue presented by Aeschylus, and therefore, my artwork is worth discussing and being discussed anyway. That is an important point. It is not just a Greek matter; it's how one stands against the unknown, against the alien. What it is, what someone can risk based on their values and ideals are human dilemmas, and these do not concern just Greece. For this specific reason, I was thinking, we were thinking obviously, that this was worth showcasing in such a big arena as is the Great Arena in Venice, which hosts 86 countries and hundreds of artists to start a conversation. What an entire society (or even just a person) does in such moments when there is a dilemma between one's beliefs, whatever those are, and the need to make an urgent and practical decision, jeopardizing something of what it has. How prepared are we, as citizens and as societies, to take this one step further? That is why, I think, we ended up recommending it to the Biennale.

Eleni Butulussi: Another question? Yes, Maria.

Student (female): Yes, hello, Mr. Drivas. With the "Suppliant Women," there is, in essence, a reference to democracy. What is the purpose of this reference? Did you choose "Suppliant Women" for this reason or some other reason?

George Drivas: Look, this is an interesting question. There is a connection to another question. I would like to say that about Aeschylus, in various texts that I have read afterward, there is this opinion expressed. That is, the issue emerging from the project has to do with decision-making and whether this decision-making should be done in whichever way it is done. Let me explain.

In the second part of the tragedy, which is not saved but we know pretty much what was going on, the Egyptians come to Argos; they cause a short-term war, and then they take back the Danaides. So, Argos loses the battle. It has, therefore, been suggested by some of Aeschylus' analysts that it is not clear when Aeschylus says that the people will decide that he is indeed in favor of such a decision-making process. Perhaps he asks a question at that part too, "who should decide and how?", because in the first part of the tragedy, it is the people who decide. Let us not forget, though, that not everyone could be a part of this decision-making. Those who made the decision were only the citizens, no women, no strangers, and so on. So we could say that it was a democracy restricted only for a few. But in any case, those who did decide were not vindicated, if you prefer it, historically, mythologically. Because in the second part, they lose; they have to pay for the decision they made.

So Aeschylus could also be saying that democracy is an issue, or he could say that democracy means to fight for what you believe in at any cost. We do not know what Aeschylus had in mind, but I can say that you by posing this question, you are essentially asking him where his tragedy (the text) stands concerning democracy.

Student (female): Why did you choose the cells as a metaphor? Does it play some unique role that cells are a part of the human body and, by extension, of the human being in general?

George Drivas: Yes, of course! What I wanted was something living, and, at this point, let me refer to something that I never had the chance to mention before. When I started writing the script, I had thoughts of combining it with the "CERN Experiment," the lab in Switzerland. I was thinking of basing the project on physics and talk about atoms, neutrons, protons, and all these experiments they do at CERN.

Still, at the same time, I thought that it was not exactly a living organism, and I was very interested in something living, to be as close as it can be to humans, right? We did not want a vague entity like protons and neutrons. For this reason, I ended up with a biological experiment. Of course, I wanted the connection to be more direct; that is, we are talking about something living when we are told to decide.

Student (female): Yes, but you chose the human cells specifically. You did not choose, say, any animal cells. Was there any reason for that?

George Drivas: The experiment happened like this. The scientists experimented on a human cell to transplant it afterward to humans. Right? So, we are interested in humans, and I wanted to make it as intense as possible and as close to us as possible - to stress us out, even more, that is.

While writing the script, I did some research on how different European countries treat immigrants. So, I realized that the way they accept the foreigner, especially the immigrant, differs variably depending on how close the problem is to them. For example, if you ask a Swede, "Should Europe accept more immigrants through the Mediterranean Sea?" 90% would say, "Yes." However, when the problem comes closer to them and that same person is asked: "Should Sweden accept more immigrants?" the percentage of positive answers falls considerably. Of course, at some point, the interest subsides, showing the role of the human factor in all this because, at times, when the problem comes closer, humanity reawakens. Then again, the percentage would slightly change in favor of those who would accept them. Would you help someone who is asking for help on the street? You would probably say, "Yes." I want to stress that the closer the problem practically is, the more it affects our response.

So, I wanted to find an experiment that is close to humans; like a human cell that concerns us, it is close to us; it is hepatitis. It is a disease that we can get, something we have heard of before, something our father might have had or something from which our relatives or we have suffered. I wanted it to be something straightforward, specific, and close to us at the same time. I did not want it to be like an excuse.

That is, I did not want it to be something entirely theoretical and difficult to understand. In any case, something that would not concern us that much, you know. No! Not this one! That is a cell that has been found and is going to help humanity fight the disease of hepatitis; something that we all know. Do you say

"Yes" or "No"? That is it. It is right there in front of you, and you have to make a choice.

Eleni Butulussi: Great. Thank you. Any other questions?

Student (male): Yes, you were just now talking about what you wanted and the goal you have set for the project. We see that in the first place you make some social, let us say political comments. Now, being here, can you see the extensions in other fields such as linguistics? How do you feel about it now that it has left you, and it has taken on different paths? Do you have any influence on it? How would you respond toward that?

George Drivas: First of all, I had discussed this with Prof. Butulussi that I do not necessarily believe that there is only one interpretation. Let alone if this interpretation is mine. For example, I do not believe that if someone does not understand my work the way I have thought they might, he/she is wrong. On the other hand, I believe that this is a basis for discussion. First of all, as you all know, the last scene has an open ending. In other words, I do not want to give an answer. I am not looking for a ready-made answer to impose on people. I would rather they figured it out themselves. So, either way, the project ends without giving any answers, but instead, it sets the basis for a conversation.

I especially liked that Prof. Butulussi sent me a text that had several phrases that inspired me. One of them was a quote by Ranciere, if I remember well, saying that the teacher does not impose his knowledge on his students but helps them to create their knowledge instead. I want to say that you, at this moment, you may know more about the project than me. Meaning that you have analyzed, you have seen this moving to other paths that I have not thought of. And perhaps, if this comes back to me (as feedback and as discussion), it might point me to another direction and possibly to another project. For me, this is what art does, this perpetuity of conversation and clash, if you will, in conversation generally. So, obviously, I am pleased about it.

Let me pose another issue now, which somehow has a lot to do with that question. On the one hand, some decisions are not made only based on given data; there are decisions made without it. When I refer to the clash of the two influential people of the table, the scientist professor and the director, who- let us say- is the conservative one, she gives some information that the cells are this and that, etc. Further, into the discussion, she poses questions like: "What will happen if we accept them?" "Are they dangerous?" "Are they capable of destroying our experiment?" There is no answer. It is unknown. So, another issue that the project raises is what we do when we do not have any data. How do we cope with the unknown? That is what motivates me most in a meta-discussion of the artwork if you like.

One issue is how the data is interpreted and how one decides about it. So, we hear a few things, and anyone can interpret them thinking about their values that lead them to make decisions. Great, we know that for a fact. A second issue that has to concern us is how data works, and I am quite interested in this. We are aware that from statistics, we know how exactly the data is being interpreted and how we can draw conclusions based on the interpretations made by that data. It is worth mentioning that there is a question about how the

data works. Not what is searched for, but how the decisions "what they are looking for" are made. Are there any other people behind the one who decides? Right? How and what exactly is he/she looking for? How does the data function? And, in the discussion to conclude, how do we put ourselves in front of what we do not know? In front of the unknown? So, what we can say, in a meta-discussion, is that someone sees the unknown as a must-take opportunity, whereas another one as a threat.

That is where there is another level, a meta-level of discussion, another level of ideology that is worth thinking, and I sum up with your question that there is not only one answer. There are plenty of interpretations. The point is how we manage all of them.

It is said that thinking is like walking into a labyrinth from where we may never escape, but we might find 300 breaches on its walls. Having this thought, I had the following question: How do I handle something I am not aware of, and that I don't know if it is dangerous or not? In the end, I say: "Do I have to understand something and then accept it or accept it first and then understand it?" That is the essence of my artwork. They are two different and opposing ideas. On the one hand, we first need to know what the unknown is precisely, that we can control it (...) and then accept it. On the other hand, it is something that we put in a context of coexistence, and then as long as we can coexist, we make our decision.

Eleni Butulussi: It is interesting that in Education generally, the prevailing view is that we first have to learn what the unknown is, and then accept it, while in psychology, that the coexistence with the unknown creates understanding and acceptance, etc.

I liked this piece of art and chose to bring it to my seminar because you elaborate on the "dilemma." E.g., in the last discussion before Easter, some students said, "I am scared when not in control," while others said, "I am scared but not so much." Out of that discussion (for your artwork), new thoughts were created for both the not-very-afraid students and the very scared ones. If you do not open this up for discussion, or if you gave an answer to your work, the quest would stop.

Of course, anyone could justify this. OK, they could say he made a decision based on the data at hand. However, you are the artwork; that is, you are expected to give a general message. No one could claim that Drivas said this or that on this particular case. However, instead, they would say that he provides a very general response. Therefore, you are doing the right thing of not telling us anything and leaving us with the dilemma and the process of finding and meeting the contradictions by ourselves. That is why the last dialogue is excellent; precisely because everyone, including many humanitarians like us, is skeptical and waffles back and forth. And till we reach the end, one way or another, which is actually the course of thought, moving from side to side, thus making us create something new. Obviously, at a practical level, you have to decide on one of the two. The action does not include both, but what you choose in the end will be very creative and elaborated.

George Drivas: The point is, through this discussion, to understand each time why you decide what you decide, and to cover the whole range of arguments. Not to say something just by reacting, automatically, let us say, not to repeat clichés. Think about why you did this or that at the time, what was at stake and what was lost. It is essential to know the whole color palette.

Eleni Butulussi: Is there any other question?

Student (female): May I ask you about your next art project?

George Drivas: Look, I am very concerned with the whole issue of information nowadays and based on what has recently happened with Facebook, as you may have noticed. How does information diffuse, who has it and who gives it? I am trying to work on that. However, I do not want to say much more. You could make a presentation in the next semester about it. That is what I am interested in right now. "How information is collected nowadays?" "How is it diffused?" "Who has it?" "Who gives it?" "Why does he have it?" "Why is he giving it?"

Eleni Butulussi: Nice! Another question?

Student (female): Well, I would like to ask you about the "Laboratory of Dilemmas." About how this issue addresses the Greek society, or whether it refers to a global issue affecting society. Also, whether you believe that the spectator of your work will reach catharsis through your art?

George Drivas: Yes, naturally! I would like to say that the project is not just for the immigrants, right? The art talks about the unknown and the alien. Therefore, it refers to any society of any century and any person. So, I undoubtedly believe that it has to do with the global society and the way that pushes it to whatever challenge comes on its way. How society controls the challenge and how it integrates it or not.

Furthermore, I would like to say something because I liked the word you used "catharsis". That is very interesting. I think that catharsis, for me, is like a point that comes out of the groove of thoughts, and the individual has a more specific interpretation of the current situation. That, of course, can change anytime, right? Because daily in our lives, we have to make decisions very often. All these decisions are made continuously, not just once. So, if you connect something with the project, it is to be able to "see" through the labyrinth of dilemmas and preferences. While going home, you should have a more apparent point of view of what it is. In the end, the spectator gets to know him/herself better through this process.

Eleni Butulussi: One last question. A short one!

Student (male): How can you create connections? That is, in one piece, you are connecting science, art, social commentary, and various interconnections with one another, which cannot stand alone, and we can see in your work because it is art, after all - but not just art!

George Drivas: There is a mechanism called re-contextualization. I do not care, and I do not like talking about anything on one surface-level only. I love creating a different symbolism, a parable, as it were, an example saying something else. Precisely because I want to create a distance and some

relaxation of the spectator concerning what I say so that he/she can overcome the first safety valves he may have.

So, he/she enters the artwork and observes, let us say an experiment. Oh! OK, he/she says “it sounds a bit boring, it is a biological experiment.” At some point, the spectators start to realize that this is not about cells, but we are talking about humans. That has social implications, so we are talking about a social phenomenon, and in the end, it is something existential. Generally, from beginning to end, as a spectator, you wonder what you would do were you sitting at that table. So, these reductions interest me a lot, and that is why I create dialogues between the different fields. That is, it is an artwork written as a scientific experiment. I am very interested in this.

And one last comment on what contemporary art is. Uniting different fields and creating dialogues across specific domains is the power of contemporary art nowadays; Art with Science, Art with Law, Economics with anything - literally, any combination you want - with maths, with linguistics, with whatever you want - and then creating other things. That is what I believe.

Eleni Butulussi: Thank you very much, and we wish you a pleasant trip to your thoughts.