

Centres, peripheries, and the surprises of an elusive mobility

Eliana Otta

I've been living in Athens since last March, together with eleven artists of different nationalities, as part of the artistic residency Capacete. Originally from Rio de Janeiro, Capacete is a project that has existed for nineteen years now, based on offering time to those who take part in it. Time for whatever one needs or desires: to think, to investigate, to know, to enjoy, to experiment.

The residency has been characterized by its hosting of many European artists, those with greater possibilities of paying for the time for which the residency doesn't pay, since even if it still offers lodging and an ideal scenery to develop work and affective links, it doesn't have the resources to pay for tickets or travel expenses. This year its director, Helmut Batista, proposed to invert the situation, bringing Latin-American artists to Europe. The selection of the place had its motives: the particular historical moment Greece is going through, then the spark of the crisis and its failed attempt to leave the European Union, its complex role in welcoming thousands of refugees, and that *documenta 14* elected the capital as its headquarters under the controversial title *Learning from Athens*. In its declaration of principles, the famous German institution proposed itself as a platform for reflection upon North-South relations, which was one of the interrogations launched by Capacete to those who answered their open call: How to understand this dynamic from "our" south?, How marked is it by a colonial logic and how can we answer critically to it through art, if we can?

Five Brazilian artists, one Chilean, one Uruguayan, one Mexican, one Argentinian, one Peruvian, and two Greeks were selected to live together in this interesting context, invited to dedicate ourselves above all to know it, think it and "to do nothing". A first surprise was to acknowledge that among the group I was the only one who arrived with a three-month visa. Brazilians had a six-month one, the Chilean a one-year one and the other ones had been living in Europe long enough to have achieved or started the process of obtaining different citizenships. Thus, I saw myself obliged to start the formalities to obtain the permission to live there right after

arriving, facing a bureaucracy I didn't know, in a city and in a language also unknown.

Fortunately, besides the privilege of taking part in a residency that offered me time, I could count on the help of supportive Greek friends. If even with their help the formalities proved heavy and endless, I can't even think the nightmare they must be to those who can't count on someone to accompany them every morning from office to office, translating and intervening with the employees, not really eager to comprehend a cultural exchange not filed under some bureaucratic formality. Even less, obviously, can I imagine what it means to go through something like that when what's at stake is life, one's own or that of loved ones, and when the cost of each unexpected formality risks alimentation or rent money.

Those who visit the Athenian immigration office have provenances as varied as those who live in this city or pass forcefully through it. And the process to accomplish being listened to is as slow and chaotic as other local dynamics, those which from the start gave me a feeling of familiarity that smoothed my adaptation. Those who talked to me in those offices were kind, even if that didn't really guarantee them being clear about the information I needed. I lost money and time with unnecessary formalities to obtain my residence permit. Translations of all kinds, writing letters, exchanging e-mails, calls and coordinations helped me seal the process, even if I couldn't help losing the plane tickets to Kassel I had bought, because of the extended waiting period, in which I couldn't leave the country. The first ticket had been bought by Capacete, as part of our activities for that year, which included a group trip to the historical location of *documenta*.

It was clearly a very important opportunity to know the origin of the institution that had come to shake up the Athenian artistic and activist environment (whose streets bore posters and graffiti against the event, which in addition to the low attendance by the Greek public, confirmed the rejection which inspired the deployment of resources and good intentions). It was also important because it would be the first time that I go to Kassel and *documenta*, widening my incipient experience in an artistic event of that caliber. I mention this because it never ceased to surprise me the way in which the people I talked to took for granted the possibility of accessing them, as well as choosing not to go, being able to do so.

I suppose that, as in the case of the visas, we Peruvian artists are in a very

different position than those who come from countries that have been part of the international art circuits for longer.

In my 36 years of life, besides the Lima Biennials that I visited when starting my education, and that Luis Castañeda eliminated when he became mayor of Lima, the only events of this magnitude that I had visited were the São Paulo Biennial and Manifesta, both in 2016. This clearly marks a difference, from the start, from those artists who grew up in countries with institutionalized biennials like Brazil, or in countries like Mexico or Argentina where the access to culture and art, promoted by the State, are much more democratic. If this is my case, that of an artist from the cultural elite of Lima in a centralist country like Peru, one can imagine how hard it must be to access this kind of experience for artists in less privileged contexts from my country.

So my residency companions travelled to Kassel. While they saw the shows that left gaps in the museums here (many pieces that were on display in Athens travelled to Germany, leaving eloquent empty spaces in their place), I alternated my constant handling of papers with the activities proposed to me by my new community. The impossibility of travelling allowed me to deepen my link with the city I was living in, generating bonds beyond the residency and the intense routine that the *documenta* schedule offered.

In that week I could go to the presentation of Gregory Sholette's book *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, in the occupied theater Embrós, a space that's run by people who actively took part in the assemblies in Syntagma square during 2011. Sholette is known for his participation in important collectives that reacted, in 1980s New York, to gentrification and real estate speculation, urban phenomena that he dedicated his time to think about in the next decades. That day he presented his current lines of investigation, centred on processes such as the constructions of branches of museums like the Guggenheim in the United Arab Emirates, who are making efforts to become the artistic centre of the future at the expense of migrants working in prison conditions. In this speech I saw for the first time an audience that seemed to have both people linked to the arts and those more linked to activism, groups that usually move through very different territories and whose biggest common point, at least recently, seemed to be the shared rejection of the German institution.

That week I also attended the celebration of the Gay Pride Parade, organized for the first time in Syntagma square, joining the group of members of the LGBTQ Refugees assembly. Its members were mostly Syrians, who sang and moved their hips with much rhythm, summoning many foreign reporters to cover the event. It was undoubtedly the most colourful and cheerful group in the parade, because their smiles and looks were as seductive as the movement of their bodies, as it was the first time they had taken part in such an event. Probably as important for them to express themselves in a public space was that such a public space as that particular one welcomed them, the Greek streets and squares being eminently masculine spaces. So masculine, above all in the lower class neighbourhoods, that our constant question during those months was: where are the women?

In those days I took part in another interesting use of public space, a colourful street carnival in Metaxourgeio, a former industrial zone that is nowadays a mixture of a perfect example of gentrified neighbourhood, junkie refuge, and red-light district. Many people that I knew as regulars at my favourite bars and cafés gathered in a little improvised park, a friendly earth patch with some tents and a kiosk of wood and wicker. From there we followed a truck that carried a Balkan music band, while throwing paint around and getting muddy from the falling rain that surprised us on that summer afternoon. The potholes in the roads became puddles, and soon people stopped protecting themselves from the rain to form a human mass, as joyful and wet as it was blurred.

The following day I went to the poetry recital of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, part of a festival of literature in Spanish, in which, besides being moved by his reading, I was surprised to be informed that the translation of his poetry presented that day had exchanged its vulgar expressions for less offensive ones. Talking to friends increased my curiosity about their affirmation that there was hardly any example of a Greek poet, modern or contemporary, that used vulgar expressions or that wrote with the insolent impudence of the Peruvian poets from the 1970s and '80s.

Little by little, my Capacete friends returned from Kassel and told me that I hadn't missed much. That yes, it was interesting to see how Documenta functioned there as a correct white cube, as the external context to the exhibitions was so little stimulant that it allowed one to fully concentrate on the art without questioning its pertinence to a given space and time (like one inevitably does here). Some pieces

were better understood there, where one could access the complementary information that was generously displayed. The most interesting was listening to Paul Preciado publically refuse the possibility of developing with depth his ideas in such a big institution. Anyway, I expected to form my own opinion of the event, but then I didn't know yet that I wouldn't be able to use the ticket I rescheduled - this time, paid with my own money.

The weeks went by, and despite checking the Immigration Office webpage daily, the only answer was that "there isn't enough information". The last time I had gone to deliver the missing paper required to seal the visa formality, a handsome employee offered to put my folder on top of the others so that I wouldn't lose the flight to Germany, which, as I had told him, I was trying to avoid. The employees attending to the public are all young, because, so they told me, the State prefers young people who accept precarious short-term contracts. The boy seemed to be a nice person, even if I changed my mind when I got home and noticed he had added me on Facebook. The following days, while I revised the results on the Immigration website hoping to find the solution to my problems, I couldn't avoid a feeling of harassment while I doubted whether I should accept his friendship request in order to ask for the card that was taking so long. Meanwhile, the card wouldn't come, and once again I lost the flight to Kassel.

Nevertheless, that week I had access again to experiences that made me thankful for not having gone. One of those was the art festival Art Panegyri, organized in Corinth by a friend of Nikos, the Greek artist from the residency. His friend Kalí had decided to move to Germany some twenty years before, after having finished her studies and gotten married there. Her parents couldn't accept that she wanted to immigrate and decided to build a big house to convince her to come back. While Kalí went ahead to Berlin with very little resources, without help from her family, the house grew and became filled with decorative elements, including mementos from Greek statues and a bathroom with mirrors on the ceiling. A little while ago the parents accepted that their daughter wouldn't return and live with them and she accepted that it'd be healthier if they could all spend more time together. So she decided to spend her summer vacations in Corinth and enjoy her big house to host artists, making it into a gathering point. She started to organize a residency and festival in the garage next door, combining her interests linked to critical reflections

about and from contemporary art, with those of her immediate community, where culture is experienced especially through theatre and dance.

For this edition, she decided to approach the relationship between centres and peripheries, taking into account the context of Corinth and its lack of linkage to Athens, and taking advantage of the fact that anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, whom she knew from Berlin, would be passing through there. With help from her parents and friends Kalí set up a varied two-day programme that included a photography show, a lecture by a Dutch anthropologist about Documenta, a mini-procession with wooden figurines that incorporated Barbies and a kind of totem representing the academic institution, as well as presentations by local theatre, dance, and salsa groups. The second day evidenced the many interests of the attending public, composed of families, children, older people who for the most part didn't speak English, which prompted Nikos to improvise the role of translator in order to save the intervention by the Dutch anthropologist and ease the participation of the renowned Arjun, whom most part of the attendants probably didn't know.

Appadurai knew how to quickly read the situation and decided to summarize complex ideas in a few phrases, simple but acute ones. In response to Kalí's invitation to speak about the relationship between globalization and contemporary culture, he argued that to be there, in Corinth, made him think that one must not forget that "the centres of yesterday are the peripheries of tomorrow, and that the peripheries of today are the centres of tomorrow". Therefore, faced with a question by Nikos about what relationship artists should have with activism, he answered that it was necessary to avoid the extreme notion of an individual genius, disconnected from the codes of his time, as well as the notion of the artist that's totally dedicated to the task of transmitting the messages of a community. That somewhere in the middle of these paths was the art that could significantly intervene in our time.

After his intervention, it was the turn of the group who danced salsa, and so many of us found ourselves drawn to the dancefloor, including the special guest star. That night his enthusiastic dancing aroused in me almost as much tenderness as seeing Kalí's parents carrying chairs and tables, offering water and wine to the assistants, and putting in place the projectors with videos about speculation and the international art market.

The following week, Nikos again gave meaning to my forced Athenian stay,

this time by taking me to his parents' house on the beach. This day I experienced the Greek hospitality again, and even if it was hard for us to understand each other, with my still precarious Greek, the affection of his mother, evident through the generosity with which she hosted and fed us, connected immediately with a certain kind of Peruvian affection, which I identify especially with my father's family who are of provincial and rural origin.

Walking through the streets of Corinth, Nikos called my attention to the posters on the public light poles inviting anyone who wishes to attend the funerals of the recent dead. Funerals in Greece, especially in the peripheries, are massive events that are open to all, as opposed to funerals in places like Amsterdam, where he told me that one would only attend after receiving a personal invitation letter. These are extremes of public and private with which he deals on a daily basis, since he immigrated there more than ten years ago. Extremes of the ideas of hospitality and respect for the limits of the other, that constantly intersect him, as he had to get used to repressing an inherited generosity that reaches the point of hiding money in wallets or in other people's cars so they'll let him pay his share of the tab.

My condition of being immobile in this country made me deepen my affective bonds with its people and ways, while I started to accept that I'd be the only one in my group that wouldn't know Kassel and one of the most emblematic events in global contemporary art. I proceeded with my daily routine of clicking on the immigration website, waiting for another "There's not enough information" notice, until I decided to go there in person, since the thirty days they had asked me to wait were over. Again, three-hour lines under the sun, people arguing and trying to agree, the same lawyer approaching with dandruff on his shoulders trying to convince you that the process will be torture without him, the same cursing guard who answers in Greek every question I ask him in English.

It doesn't matter, by then I already knew the numbers in Greek and understood all that he mumbled at me with disdain. But I might not have progressed that much in the language, because when it was my turn they told me that my license had been ready for days and that the Greek phrase that I thought meant "There's not enough information" actually meant that I had not filled in the forms correctly on the website. I couldn't translate their page to English because it constantly crashed—like an employee told me in a very relaxed manner, "the page

crashes, like any other”.

Finally I had the long-awaited residence card in my hands. I should have felt glad and relieved, but I felt dizzy—if I had had it as soon as it was ready I could’ve reorganized myself to travel. Now there’d be no time and any ticket would be crazy expensive. Why hadn’t I paid more attention to the form? Why hadn’t I exhausted the possibilities of how to fill it in and translate it? Maybe subconsciously I longed to stay in Athens instead of going to Kassel?

These questions haunted me, torturing me for the rest of the day. Nevertheless, a little after that I realized that this peripheral citizen, deep down, didn’t feel bad about not reaching, this time, one of the centres of the art world.