

Kimchi & Cappucino

Sally De Kunst

In December the first edition of Monsoon took place in Seoul, South-Korea. Sally De Kunst, who organises the European-Asian exchange project together with Arco Renz, reports.

In his essay *The Idea of Europe* George Steiner defines Europe by using five axioms. One of them is coffee houses. According to Steiner, Europe is shaped by café's. These vary from Pessoa's preferred coffee house in Lisbon, over the café's in Stendhal's Milan, Casanova's Venice, or Baudelaire's Paris. However, there are no old or meaningful coffee houses in Moskow, nor England or North America. No pubs, bars or tearooms, but coffee houses are inextricably bound up with Europe's cartography, in Steiner's nostalgic, elitist discourse. "Draw the map of coffee houses and you'll find one of the characteristics of the idea of Europe."ⁱ

The culture of coffee houses as a metaphor for the united Europe. It's just how you look at it... I very lively remember the perplexed look on the face of my German friend, when he received in Brussels a smooth dab of whipped cream, instead of the expected layer of steamed milk on his cappuccino. Travel around the coffee houses of Berlin, Amsterdam, Madrid, Paris, Rome or Brussels; besides the question if they are places of political or artistic recognition, we can ask ourselves: "Is a *latte macchiato* really the same as a *Milchkaffee*? Is it enough to order a *lait russe* to receive the perfect *café au lait*? Having a coffee in different cities of the united Europe can cause miniature culture shocks. Drinking coffee as a metaphor for small cultural differences. Even within Steiner's axiom. What a relief.

However, what happens when an experienced cappuccino-with-whipped-cream-drinker goes to South-Korea, for an exchange project between European and Asian artists, and is confronted there with a culture of heated cans of 'latte'ⁱⁱ which are sold over the counter of the round-the-clock shops Buy the Way?

When choreographer Arco Renz approached me in the end of 2005 with his idea to set up an exchange project for European and Asian artists, there was little more than an intention and a name. The intention was to create a meeting place for dialogue and experiment for European and Asian artists. Since the early nineties Arco had frequently been travelling to and working in Asia, and his meetings and collaborations with several Asian artists inspired him to start up *Monsoon*. For he had realised that there were only few initiatives

within the field of performing arts that stimulated an exchange of work, knowledge or experience between European and Asian artists. In most cases this exchange exists of a short-term import or export of productions at festivals, without the necessary contextualisation of the work, or without a space for dialogue for artists from different backgrounds.

Myself, I had often seen performances from other cultures at festivals in Belgium and its neighbouring countries. And I had been guilty of a dose of cultural relativism that went along with that. Could I be critical about a performance of a maker whose cultural, social and political context was unknown to me? Could I judge performances in a normative way? Maybe this question had more to do with the assumption that I would make mistakes anyway, rather than with a belief that all cultures are equal. Keeping in mind the coffee.

During my visit at the Bangkok Fringe Festival of curator Tang Fu Kuen in December 2005 I had noticed that the participating artists from Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore were very interested in presenting their work in Europe. And that they were in general much better informed about the European art scene, than the other way around. They had been studying in Europe, had been on tour as performer in a company and one of them had even, forced by circumstances, found political asylum there. And of course Jérôme Bel had already colonised Asia with *The Show Must Go On...* But what did I know about their practice, their background, their context? Choreographer Dick Wong undermined all my preconceptions in the second part of his piece *B.O.B.* in a witty way. In his solo he questions in an ironic way his position as a dancer and choreographer on the Hong Kong market. In a wonderful scene he demonstrates how he, as a somehow unconventional looking performer, does auditions for established companies. And how every time he's asked to do a few classical dance steps, although he knows nothing about classical Chinese dance. Also in Asia artists are struggling to survive and make art in an artistic field with certain traditions and expectations.

Despite this conclusion the Bangkok Fringe Festival stayed a world of differences. How do you as a cappuccino-with-whipped-cream drinker for instance read a contemporary Malaysian performance that is based on the *Wayang Kulit* shadow play? 'Translation' is anyhow an ambiguous concept. In other places in the world the frame of perception and of reference is different, the *performativity* is of another nature, as is the relationship to the audience. Choreographer Jochen Roller, participant of Monsoon #1, delivered during a discussion a good metaphor for this. He referred to the

movie *Hollywood Ending*, in which Woody Allen plays a film director on his return, who gets appointed a big Hollywood job. However, on the film set he becomes psychosomatic blind. With the help of a Chinese economy student, who works as a translator for Allen and his Chinese cameraman, he succeeds in hiding this. Finally the blind edited movie turns out to be an incoherent disaster, and is a gigantic flop in Hollywood. The French however call the film the "greatest American movie in fifty years"...

Which brings me back to the normative question. Which discourse can I use to judge a contemporary Asian performance? If I say something like: 'It's a good piece, rather conceptual in nature, but...' is that then thought too rigidly from within my Euro-centric coffee house frame? Or is it allowed, because in the mean time the necessary de- and re-territorialisation of European conceptual art has happened within the Asian dance and performance field? Judged maybe by the invention of the *Green Tea Frappuccino*...

To put the question in a broader perspective: how do artists deal with the production and presentation of work in a globalised cultural context?

So, for different reasons Arco and I came to the conclusion that there was a need for a flexible work and research frame on a long term that could enhance a European-Asian exchange. It should emerge from a dialogue with the artists, who within this frame could enrich their transcultural and transdisciplinary practice, without the pressure of a finished product. A frame that would allow us to develop of a discourse, starting from this practice. Besides that it is also important to think about the bigger picture: the organisers, producers and festivals. How can we support the development and contextualising of new work and collaboration models between European and Asian organisations? How can we build bridges?

And so Monsoon was set up. The name refers to the Asian connection. In the West the word monsoon is often connected to romantic images of an exotic Asia, whereas this same natural phenomenon is a harsh everyday reality in the regions actually concerned. A monsoon is a large-scale wind system that seasonally blows in opposite directions and determines the climate of large regions in Southeast Asia and India. Commonly the word depicts any period of heavy rainfall.

In the context of a European-Asian research platform, however, the monsoon is the period, or the temporary territory, in which diverse, often contradictory creative practices and ideas meet. Often blowing in different directions, indeed, and constantly questioning one

another's preconceptions. Monsoon is also a time when not only the boundaries between different cultures will be crossed, but it tries to build up a dialogue that reaches over the boundaries of disciplines. Rather than merely putting the 'exotic' and the cultural differences between Asians and Europeans at stake, Monsoon wants to focus on the 'suspension of difference' or better: temporary understanding and suspending the differences. We want to avoid the multicultural attitude – that puts artists next to each other, to enhance a fusion of different practices and cultures, by creating for each Monsoon a new frame within which a dynamic interaction between artists can take place.

Concretely this means that Monsoon organises a platform, in collaboration with a network of partners, in Asia and in Europe. In general this exists of a two-week practical research with an informal output. A group of fifteen mature and curious European and Asian artists are being invited to collaborate and discuss within that frame. The development of each platform is a creative process, which starts from the artists' practice to develop a frame that is questioning the actual situation of the transcultural and transdisciplinary artistic field. It is also a common process, namely the result of a collaboration between Kobalt Works vzw, the company of Arco, and a European or Asian partner organisation or curator, who helps designing each specific edition from within his or her context. And it is an ongoing process: as the artistic practice is not a static given, this kind of platform should be an open and flexible framework, which allows transformation, depending on the context and artistic input of each edition.

Transculturality demands a mutual dynamic learning process. In his book *Theatre and the World. Performance and the Politics of Culture*, Rustom Bharucha uses the movement of a swing as a metaphor for interculturality. Based on this thought, Monsoon is an evolutionary project, which has to be designed over and over again, each time depending on the context, and the existing knowledge and experience.

The Monsoon-swing started moving for the first time in August 2006, when the South-Korean curator Seong Hee Kim and the Gyungi Foundation invited us to organise a first edition in Seoul in December of the same year. Despite the incredibly short preparation time and the limited budget, we decided to accept the invitation and test our ideas in the practice. A group of artists from different fields was chosen: Kang Dal Bae (theatre maker, South Korea), Jin-Ah Choi (theatre maker, South Korea), André Erlen (theatre maker, Germany), Mervin Espina (writer, Philippines), Paul Hendrikse (visual artist, Netherlands), Chul Seong Lee (theatre maker, South Korea), Seulgi Lee (visual artist, France/ South

Korea), Jochen Roller (choreographer, Germany), Joned Suryatmoko (theatre maker, Indonesia) and Daniel Yeung (choreographer, Hong Kong). Instead of inviting the expected dramaturge, we decided to invite two 'moderators', as outside eyes and instigators of the dialogue: one from Asia and one from Europe. They would have to deal in their specific practice with the same problems as the artists, in questioning the 'suspension' of difference, with an interaction between European and Asian discursive and work models.

The thematical frame for Monsoon was decided in collaboration with the moderators Helly Minarti (Indonesia) and Florian Malzacher (Germany). We decided to focus on the idea of 'negotiation': how do artists negotiate in a group about the different working strategies they would like to use? A few weeks before the actual start of the project a weblog was activated to give the artists the opportunity to propose their strategies, and go into dialogue with each other.

The organisation of Monsoon #1 with regards to practical things and content however was difficult. Already during the preparations we bumped into the obstacles of transcultural communication. There were weeks of silence from the Korean side. They never said 'no', this was suggested in an implicit way. The selection of the Korean artists took place only at the last minute and two of them didn't speak any English... Transculturalism may be a trademark, according to a certain Claude Grunitzky, but the reality of an artistic exchange project is miles away from the much talked about dj's or photo models in his book *TM Transculturalism. How the world is coming together.*ⁱⁱⁱ Were you born in Togo or Sweden, did you then study in Cambridge or Berkely and do you now have a cool career that brings you alternating to Paris, Tokio or New York? Yep, then you're a transculturalist according to the book! And luckily the latte has globalised along with you...

Be it in strange forms. Like heated cans of coffee in South Korea. Which is maybe a metaphor for a culture that on the one hand is rooted in the Confucianism – with a strong vertical hierarchy and codes as a consequence – but on the other hand completely Americanised and oriented to the West. After the cease-fire in the Korean War between North and South Korea – officially the countries are still in war, as a truce has never been signed – South Korea's economy boosted in the sixties, and turned the country from an agrarian society into a prosperous feasible industry with a big tertiary sector. Economically South Korea played a more and more prominent, important role. With as a climax the Olympic Games, which were organised in 1988 in Seoul and which were the

start of a new period of extended democratic reformations. These fast developments make the South Korean culture into a schizophrenic mixture of well kept traditions (*Kimchi*^{iv} in the first place) and an extreme pressure to perform and consume. A culture that values art mostly in relation to the prestige of a project, and in which a few players – like curator Seong Hee Kim and the Gyungi Foundation – try to turn this tide, but inevitable bump into existing codes and expectations and fall back into the same habits.

In other words, a cultural exchange has lots of different levels. Or as Monsoon #1- participant André Erlen expressed it: 'You need many dictionaries at the same time'. For me as an organiser Monsoon was in the first place about the double practice of *glocalisation*: trying to find a balance between the local and the global. And about how we have to partly let go of our expectations. But also how it is maybe good to, within the commonly created context, stay in our own role, of course with the necessary respect: to, as cappuccino drinker, clearly say 'no', and not try to incorporate the local, indirect codes of behaviour. Because, how can you know how much eye contact you can have with person X in the hierarchy if you don't have the sixth sense called *nunchi*? How can you feel if someone has the right *kibun* to tell him some bad news?^v

I was for that matter not the only one who was struggling with the transcultural communication. During the work process I noticed how some artists were dealing with it too. For Monsoon #1, we decided to install a work procedure during which artists were arbitrary put together in small groups that had each day had to develop a new work strategy for the rest of the group. That strategy had to build further on what had happened the previous day. The idea was that there would be a constant negotiation and renegotiation, based on the found material. In dialogue with the artists this methodology was modified after a few days. They started working in groups they chose themselves, towards an informal presentation. At that moment the obstacles of transcultural communication came to the surface in one of the two groups. For example, two Korean artists expressed on decisive moments that 'hey had to think about it', and catapulted the whole process back to the starting point over and over again, this to big frustration of a few others.

Probably Jochen Roller was right when he said that everybody had been too polite to each other during Monsoon #1. Or is that a merely western view on the matter? Was it not only the European artists who in their evaluation one after the other pointed out that not enough risks had been taken? That they had preferred more friction, because this leads to good art. None of the Asians mentioned this issue. They on the contrary stated that a process

oriented, non-hierarchic way of working was a new, sometimes baffling, but refreshing step in their trajectory. Maybe this dialogue from *Hollywood Ending* summarizes the transcultural communication in an ironic way: Chinese translator who in despair describes the blind Woody Allen a scene that has just been filmed: 'I must say Sir, there is a strange sense of incoherence.' Allen: 'Incoherence? That's great!'

'Transcultural exchange' is in other words a combative term that demands an ongoing discussion and research. Instead of fitting cultural diversity into a doable concept, we have to emphasise its continuity. We have to create a limited, but still flexible context, in which artists and curators can articulate the local or their personal practice, and can connect this each time again with a changing global agenda. With *Monsoon #1* the first stone has been laid. The format has been installed, the introduction has taken place, the critical evaluation too. We are ready for the next step.

ⁱ Steiner, George, *De idee Europa*, Nexus Instituut, Tilburg, 2004, p.17.

ⁱⁱ The term 'latte' which is frequent in English speaking countries, is an abbreviation of and a reference to in origin Italian 'caffè latte' or – at least originally – 1/3 of coffee with 2/3 of steamed milk.

ⁱⁱⁱ Grunitzky, Claude (ed.), *TM Transculturalism. How the world is coming together*, True Agency, Los Angeles & New York, 2004.

^{iv} *Kimchi* is a traditional Korea dish dat exists of fermented chili's and pickled vegetables. It's being served with nearly every meal.

^v There is no English equivalent for *nunchi*, which more or less is the capacity to judge someone's *Kibun* or state of mind. As Korean relationships are based on harmony, it is important not to hurt someone's *Kibun*.