

Beauty and Truth

Aylin Vartanyan Dilaver



*Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.
Voyager, there are no bridges; one builds them as one walks.*

—Gloria E. Anzaldúa

About five years ago I had a *near death* experience in Saas-Fee, on this very special mountain-island where the European Graduate School is situated. What was supposed to be an inauguration to a doctoral program for me turned out to become an unlearning experience, a kind of detoxing of my mind and soul. I had to revisit all the information given to me under the pretext

of “truth” up to then and surrender to a new way of experiencing the world through the repetitive creation of alternative worlds by our inspirational professors/guides. Each CAGS session involved the creation of liminal spaces through painting, dancing, sculpting, crying, raging, questioning, silently walking, photographing, laughing, shouting, playing, writing, staging, contemplating, singing, daydreaming, drumming, breathing—and sometimes doing them all at once without being afraid of embracing the chaos. One enters these ephemeral liminal worlds without hesitation in the CAGS program. We were blessed with “one of a kind” professors, we trusted each other in our special “holy” community/class, and we also trusted the process of art-making and playing.

One of the first things I unlearned in this program was the perfectionist and high-achieving attitude fostered in most educational settings as a *sine qua non*. Since I come from a traditional learning environment, being in this horizontal setting where we all had a voice was liberating. Here judgment was replaced by aesthetic response and art-making was encouraged through the motto: “low-skill high-sensitivity.” I must admit that at the very beginning of the program I experienced a moment of distrust in this way of experiential learning, as it looked “not serious and brainy” enough (even the cows watching us through the windows of EGS seemed to be suspicious of our “academic” ventures). Yet the more I started to slide through several modes of art-making within the community and the more I allowed images, shapes, dances and ideas to emerge unexpectedly, the more

I felt I was getting closer to truth through beauty. Catherine Grenier, writing about the French artist Christian Boltanski, says that, “In art a lie is constitutive of truth and the truth attainable only through lying.” The aesthetic path introduced in the field of Expressive Arts invites us to find our own truths through the most joyful form of lying: play and art.



For our very first task in the philosophy class facilitated by Stephen Levine we were asked to reflect upon the following four questions as a way to introduce our *own* philosophy in life and work:

- What does it mean to be human?
- What is art?
- What is suffering?
- How may art respond to suffering?

I can't tell how much these four questions guide my teaching experience at EGS and also my teaching approach at Bogaziçi University in Istanbul. I always go back to these questions, sometimes with the students, to explore my being in this world with others in the direst circumstances. These questions are very humbling. They do not make any arrogant claims such as; “art saves the world” or “we can erase all the pain and suffering in the world through the arts.” The first question is the hardest one to answer for most people without being reductive. Each time I go back to these questions, I come up with a new way of responding to them, and I am reminded how every conflict is unique and requires a careful, sensitive tending. Only through a “not knowing” position can one relate genuinely with oneself and the others in a conflict situation. This is what I keep searching for in each and every ses-

sion I facilitate or attend: a turn of breath experience that would give me the courage and resiliency to wipe out everything I think I know and start all over again.



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