

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

February 2016

The Spanish night fever...a story of the TIE annual meeting and conference...

Memories and reflections on Taos Institute Europe (TIE) Annual Meeting & Conference on Social Construction and Design, Madrid, January 22-24, 2016.



Hen Wilkinson

Hen: We stood in an atelier, looking at large canvases stacked against a wall. “*Turn it sideways*” suggested one of our group members at the conference, visiting this artist in his studio thanks to Nordine Lahlou another TIE participant. I felt myself agitate, wondering if this was really ok for the artist. “*Ask him,*” someone said – so we did. Did he (the artist) feel concerned that his work, his vision, had been appropriated, messed with, turned on its head? No, he did not. For him, what we made of the work was our business – he had offered his view, and his ownership of it ended there. And between us, in conversation with the artist and ourselves, a new sense of the work and ourselves was born.

Lenka Formánková



Lenka: What a lovely moment! To me, this was the moment when the meaning (of the piece of art) is negotiated and co-created together (between the piece of art, the artist and us, the audience). The artist has his own vision, own explanation of his artefact, but is in the same time open to other visions and explanations. He does not ‘own’ the meaning of his own work as we, the audience, do not “own” the meaning of the words we have already said. In a way, in this moment, we switch our roles - we are artists creating a meaning and the painter is ‘audience’ for our ideas. The task is then not to create a dead-end explanation, consensus not to be questioned, but the piece of art is the reason to open a dialog. The same is true of the conference for me – a whiteboard to reflect on ideas, a space to open endless dialogs. A possibility to create and change the common understanding of what social constructionism is, what is design, what are the burning issues in current Europe, what is our practice about, what last but not least, what is and should be Taos Institute Europe and our position within it?

Hen: Over the days of the conference, there were moments of elation, fun, exhaustion and despair. At times I thought we had all wandered way out of our comfort zones and into a space of – what? Constant talk? Endless small sandwiches? Not enough water? But by the end, I was interested to see that despite its fuzziness and inconsistencies, we (and by that I mean mostly conference coordinator Maria Munoz-Grandez) had managed to provide a beautiful venue in the heart of Madrid and a space for people from across Europe to gather and regroup, while thinking about the mind-boggling subject of challenges for 21st century Europe. Connections were made, ideas were sparked, and fun was had – although, as people pointed out, these were often in the ‘down times’, rather than more formal, structured sessions.

Lenka: The atmosphere of the event was indeed very open and informal. I learned how much one can get to know about social constructionism not only during the workshops and conference panels but during talks one gets engaged in at the coffee breaks, dinners and pub crawls! And the cultural differences – this conference made me aware how strongly they shape our potential being together. This presents one of

the main challenges of 21st century Europe ... but is also such a source, such a potential. For example to learn something. Also to learn something about oneself when put in an out-of-norm(al) context ... as I was. I did not know I can have five course dinners at ten at night and closing a bar at four in the morning and still be all fresh the next day in the morning (without coffee, which comes at eleven in Spain) to attend the amazing sessions about research, practice and design.

Hen: The theme of the conference was design thinking – and some wondered out loud why the shape of the conference hadn't been more carefully designed. My impression was that on the whole, they were thinking about consciously applying appreciative inquiry approaches to one of the tasks of the conference - to envision the future shape and purpose of Taos Institute Europe – and were frustrated that a clear action plan wasn't reached. But for me, what was (perhaps unintentionally) 'designed' about the conference was the space it left for emergence. The more organised we are, the less room for spontaneity, messing with the rules, seeing what arrived in the room and going with that. On a personal level, unexpected connections and synergies meant that I returned from Madrid with enormous clarity about my own Ph.D. work. I also brought back to the Netherlands a sense of urgency about finding ways to share the basic but vital understanding that social constructionism highlights: that life is there for us to make of it what we will, moment by moment, whether we are 5 or 95.

Lenka: Friday evening we saw a flamenco performance. Spanish traditional dance. First, the guitar player comes to the stage, alone. Plays a song or two. Then a singer comes and they perform together a bit. Later three dancers come – one man and two women. Each gives his/her own performances while the others sitting and clapping their hands, cheering and applauding. The conference streams remind me of flamenco dance performances. We all do our part in respect and in constant relating to and positioning to others. The floor is ours for dancing the best we can ... hoping the others will cheer for us or join us. To me, what I learned is how nice it is when we can co-exist – or as Sheila McNamee mentioned in her speech – dialogically dance together.

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