

Interview with AMOQA – Athens Museum of Queer Arts

"Being queer or feminine is not safe, regardless of where you come from"

Nihan Kuzu

ABSTRACT

Nihan Kuzu converses with AMOQA on queer arts and activism in a period defined by borders, borderlines, identities and migrations across worlds.

KEYWORDS

Queer activism, Queer arts, Safe spaces, internationals, AMOQA, LGBTI+



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ATHENS MUSEUM OF QUEER ARTS

As neoliberal capitalism and the patriarchal mode of everyday gender relations have unfolded throughout the twenty-first century, public spaces are emptied and left to the ever-expanding intimacies of private spheres. Our public appearances faded into the solid shades of walls, us forgetting that we are actually parts of nature, to what is natural. With the forgetting and disremembering of gender, gender identities and sexualities, sexual desires are locked into intimate relations, in other words into the same walls in whose shades we fade away.

As such, feminists and queer people search for rooms, rooms that might offer safe enough spaces for individual existence not only in solitude but also under the gaze of other. There is a thread here, starting from Woolf in search for a room to write and to be present on one's own to Butler in terms of the ceaseless endeavor of being through performance.

But here is AMOQA, reminding us of the very fundamental need for a public space where we can restore ourselves not in-between the walls, not in singular rooms, defined by the doors that are closed but by spaces that are defined by diversity and openness. Public/open spaces are where we can realize/actualize ourselves - as women, men, gays and lesbians, and trans people - autonomously and collectively, free of prejudices, fear, and so-called social roles. AMOQA does this by offering us the safe enough space that recalls our nature, the natural and diversity of our states of being.

AMOQA is a community that has been trying to exist in Athens since 2015. The community does not give up on this effort. There are a few elements that distinguish it from its counterparts: it is a strong weed that was formed in the cradle of the so-called western civilization, and at the same time, despite everything, it does not drop the liberating spirit of resistance and struggle.

Nihan Kuzu – I met AMOQA in my first year in Athens. I would like everyone to know this form of togetherness since I consider it as a space of memory – as space is memory itself – and as a space of and for collective endeavors. With those of us in the same geography, face to face; with those on distant continents, through this interview, I would like to hear about you- by the hope of re-establishing this space-: Who is Amoqa?

AMOQA - Athens Museum Of Queer Arts- AMOQA (2015/2016) is a hybrid space for the research and promotion of arts and studies on sexuality and gender. Up until the 2019 global pandemic, it used to host special nights and festivals of performance, screenings of documentaries on gender politics, as well as experimental queer films, technology workshops, lectures on gender topics, queer music gigs and more. At the same time, it had initiated the building of an LGBTQI+ archive, bringing together collections, artworks, zines, interviews, films, photography etc., in an attempt to trace a cartography of greek LGBTQI+ movements.

Right now, AMOQA is in search of a new shelter, which means most of its activities have been temporarily put on hold. Taking into account various accessibility issues that the pandemic has brought about, we decided to look for an open-air space where the local queer community will be able to learn from and experiment with eco-practices of collective care and self-sustainability.

The individuals behind the founding of AMOQA come from different professional backgrounds and places, and have been actively involved in queer, feminist, and in some cases, anarchist movements for many years. Some have traveled and lived or come from abroad, while others have stronger ties to the local political scene. Our diverse team included an art teacher, a former shipbuilder, an experimental performance duo, a kindergarten teacher who also works at a women's co-op, a translator, two anthropologists specialized in gender and sexuality, a museologist, a pharmaceutical factory worker, a jewelry designer, two sound artists, a performance duo, a German teacher, a performance and visual artist, two clothing retail employees, an accountant, an unemployed interior designer, a nurse, and many other unemployed individuals. The relationships between us are also diverse, with many members being friends, sexual partners, activists, ex-lovers, ex-friends, potential friends, and/or project partners.

The core group of AMOQA is responsible for the maintenance of the space as well as the hosting and organizing of events. While these activities generally require the privilege of spare time, most of us were in fact unemployed or only employed on a part-time basis, financially sustained by our families, finishing our doctoral studies and/or working in other professional fields from those we had initially studied or aimed for. Due to our different levels of privilege, there are uneven power dynamics between members of AMOQA, and these determine our level and type of involvement within the space.

NK- What is your intention/objective to be a safe space and of course how do you describe "the safe space"?

A- AMOQA would like to act as a meeting point for the networking of researchers and artists that work on body politics, aiming at the creation of new projects as well as the exchange of ideas and

thoughts. The space of AMOQA is also a safe place for different feminist queer activist groups to meet and organize their events.

A safe place means a place where its users are alert and sensible in defending the space and its habitants against any racist, transphobic, sexist abusive incident that could occur inside the community. By defending, we mean to have elaborated tools that could restore and make us accountable -at some measurement, of the hurt that we ourselves might have inflicted. In the macro political frame, the concept of safety is in constant elaboration for us. We are always trying to keep track of the chronic but also, the current challenges that emerge in today's political reality. As neoliberal governmentality and its adjacent necropolitics always find ways to adjust themselves to the present time, we are also called to respond each time by elaborating new approaches and inventing new tools to defend our community.

Having queer survival as a main topic, means that the group intends to connect transfeminist theory with struggles for the defense of our environment against its continued exploitation, against borders' murderous politics, privatization of commons, fragmentation and geopolitical abuse.

NK- Who are the participants in AMOQA? Or maybe it's better to ask as "Whom does AMOQA exclude?"

A- AMOQA has created different alliances and connections with different activist and artistic groups through the years. The people that participate in AMOQA's events and/or use its space come from the diverse genealogies of the local queer, LGBTQI+ and feminist communities and the artistic scene. As it happens in every project of this kind, these people do not necessarily constitute stable groups of users but are in constant flow. Only, fascists, macho, homotransphobic, sexist, racists and any other abusive attitude are not welcomed at AMOQA.

Currently, AMOQA consists of a limited group of five people (Maria, Lara, Nuri, Alberto, Lucía) who are trying to find AMOQA's new shelter. Once the space is found, AMOQA intends to open up to new members.

NK- How do you cope with the pressures and oppressions that you encounter in Greece? Also briefly, would you draw us the boundaries of AMOQA?

A -The people that form AMOQA at this moment are all greeks. In the past the group consisted of people from europe, middle east, and participants from all around the globe like latin america and brazil. AMOQA used to function as a kind of safe venue for many of its refugee and migrant participants, not only as a space of socializing but also as a safe space for solidarity events and "labor" (e.g. through hosting art events and open buffets, language classes, handcrafts bazaars, etc.), generating, in this way, some income output for those in need. And also the use of the term "internationals" has actually been chosen by the lgbtqi refugee people/groups that have been circulating around AMOQA, as an alternative term against their very stigmatization.

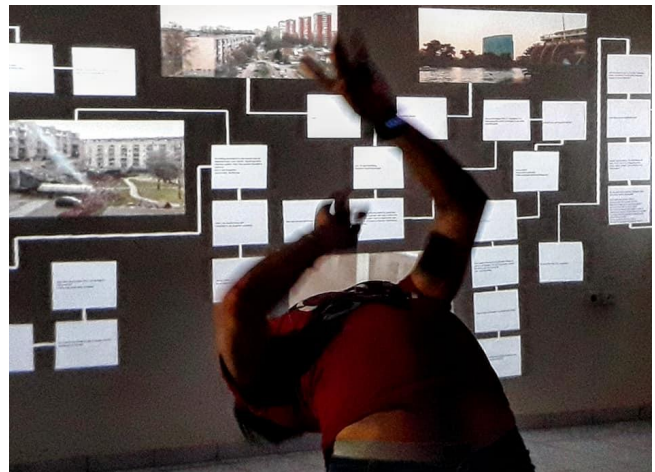
Nevertheless, the multi-cultural background of the core group administrating the space has resulted in complications sometimes. The language barrier was especially difficult because the ability of

the participants to communicate was often bounded to their class background. This led to the groups' dysfunctionality because many of the participants did not have the time and energy to invest in the administrative meetings and thus the administration's composition gradually lost its polyphony.

Even so, currently, AMOQA is a work in progress which means that some of these issues have not been fully figured out yet. By re/naming ourselves from a museum into a park we start to give shape to our new desires and respond to the new emergencies that appear.

During this pandemic, AMOQA had to reinvent itself. From the start the problematic that AMOQA wished to respond upon was the lack of space. The mere existence and maintenance of a safe (enough) space for us, be it a queer park or a queer museum, is a gesture of restorative justice, restorative towards queer lives and towards the environment that we are part of.

So one can tell that the constant topic of AMOQA is the invention of survival tools that correspond to our actual ever-demanding realities. Not only defending ourselves against homotransphobia, sexism, gentrification, and neoliberalism but also defending our right to an accessible city after two years of traumatic lockdowns and forced social distancing.



On the other hand, AMOQA has been one of the very few, if not the only, collective DIY space in Athens that tried to convert its museum premises and events accessible for as many as possible queer people through building accessible toilets, offering sign language interpretation, translations in other languages, and organizing transnational and transgenerational events.

So, from a queer museum that collects story tellers and produces community knowledge while also providing a space for community life, our survival modes nowadays brings us upon the urgency of occupying an exterior public space in the format of a park, being visible, against any historical erasures making a swift in discovering more earthly queer-friendly ways of co-existence.

The pandemic added a multiplicity of new parameters on what it means to run a community space, on how we can assemble gatherings, on how we can meet collectively and in safety. The various restrictions posed upon public gatherings, the issues of safety of gathering in groups made it difficult for AMOQA to imagine

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having a home with the same characteristics as before. What new direction the project will take is still unclear, but we hope the park will give us the ability to meet again and figure it out collectively.

Emotional and Physical Exhaustion after two years of quarantine, remote-work, and fear of coming together, also, in light of the new measures that the government forced upon us with the excuse of the public health crisis, our social vulnerability has been even more accentuated, as the increased presence of the police on the streets converted public circulation and public meetings into a source of stress, rather than joy.

At the same time, economic and social precarity has delimited our capacities to engage with social life and activism because the struggle for survival became so pressing that work ended up consuming most of our time and energies.

Opening a public space in a period when repressive politics restrained our movements in the city, in public and private spaces with the excuse of COVID19 is not easy. One of the reasons we opted for an open-air space is because we didn't want to assume a "police officer" role where we would have to be checking certificates, ids, etc. and deciding who is and who isn't allowed to participate in AMOQA's events. AMOQA needs to continue being accessible for every-body.

NK- The fact that AMOQA has now only Greek people, does it mean that it can exist safely in Greek society/state? What is it like to be a foreigner/other in one's own country and how to deal with it? Do you have concerns about being visible and/or being recognized in society or by the state?

A- Being queer/or feminine is not safe, regardless of where you come from. In "Greek society/state" with a capital "G", queer people

are certainly considered aliens. This is also why AMOQA exists, to challenge these very frames of national normativity and create a space where we can breathe, share, and grow with safety. Considering the necro politics that have been reigning the national agenda these last years, and especially the various aggressions against queer people that we have been witnessing lately, -through direct murders such as the one of our beloved friend [Zak Kostopoulos](#), or through the stigmatization and direct targeting of academics that work on sexuality and gender in greek Universities by alt right politicians that sit inside the greek parliament, or even by the space that the state allows to the orthodox church to preach against abortions and intervene in the sphere of human rights-, there is an urge to defend ourselves and visibilise the ways through which systemic violence inscribes itself on our bodies again and again while public accountability remains absent (as, for example, is the case for normative/mass media) and justice is not being rendered. The fact that AMOQA has no migrant/ international people in the core group at the moment, doesn't make it less solidary and attentive towards the injustices and murderous border politics of greece and the EU.

Nihan Kuzu

Feminist Asylum