

## Global Exhibitions and National Contexts: Case Study Istanbul

– Beral Madra

*This text outlines how a non-Western and notionally Islamic nation—such as Turkey—positions itself within the parameters of the “global” contemporary art festival circuit. It also examines how local conditions of artistic production and reception negotiate this condition, while considering the putative dissolution of center and periphery alongside the recent boom in the international art market. Such a case study sets the institutional function and development of the Marrakech Biennale into relief.*

**Wir sind alle für Kommunikation engagiert, weil wir unser Dasein zum Tod nicht annehmen können. Wir müssen die Unsterblichkeit im anderen suchen, sollen wir das Wissen vom eigenen Tod ertragen. Aus diesem Suchen nach Unsterblichkeit ist die kodifizierte Welt (die Welt der Kultur, des Geistes, der Bedeutung, der Verneinung der Entropie) entstanden. —Vilém Flusser<sup>1</sup>**

In this text, I would like to examine the developments and structures of contemporary art in Turkey, the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central Asia from the mid 1980s until today, when the rupture from modernism set in, the Cold War world started to collapse and so-called globalization emerged.

The main contemporary art environments to be discussed in this text are Istanbul, as it has become the major contemporary art production and distribution center in its geographical sphere since 1990, and also other city-based contemporary art scenes in the aforementioned regions. For me, the main aspiration of this retrospective thinking about contemporary art is the need to find common and solid ground, visions and goals that may contribute to better and more profitable communication and relations between these art scenes.

During the last three decades, this region has gone through political and economic transformations, local wars and cultural shocks, all of this making the societies and individuals suffer, revolt and, hopefully, break through. It has been a blistering process, which recently culminated with the so-called Arab Spring. Indeed, this text is being published during a critical moment for the region, when people have become aware of their power and are initiating a promising democratization process which is changing the status of states and governments. As such, it is quite unrealistic to expect contemporary artists and their critical production to be a priority engagement of these societies. However, the accumulation of visual art theory, practice, and material, cunningly permeated into the appreciation and consciousness of the people. Egypt, one of the countries under the stress of this upheaval, surprised the art world at the 54th Venice Biennale by devoting its pavilion to Ahmed Basyony, who was killed at only thirty-two years of age in Tahrir Square on January 28, 2011. It was the first time that we have viewed a non-official presentation in this pavilion.

Here, I would also like to mention my conviction about the influence of contemporary artists on their traditional societies—implementing new ways of thinking, democracy and freedom of expression through their multi-disciplinary strategies and forms of art making. Even if they are not so visible in the official culture policy of their countries, their contribution is beyond doubt.

Within this socio-political and geographical context, it is noteworthy to look at three topics: the awareness and perception of the public in matters of contemporary art concepts, forms, and

aesthetics; the approach and attitude of the local and international art experts and institutions towards each other; and to the contemporary art infrastructure, systems, and the phenomenon of these emerging culture-industries, that currently illustrate all the peculiarities of Adorno's *Enlightenment and Culture Industry* or Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* interpretations.

### **Istanbul: the quest for international achievement**

Turkey's position in this geography is emblematic in the sense that, for almost two hundred years, it has been going through modernization, democratization and a notable transformation from traditionally verbal to Postmodernistic visual culture. Perspective drawing lessons introduced to the school of engineering in the eighteenth century and the emergence of photography—starting when Sultan Mahmut II ordered his portraits to be hung in official buildings in 1830s—mark the beginning of this process, along with the consequential epistemological rupture of the Islamic dictum prohibiting representation of the human figure. Modernism, in tune with some movements such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Social Realism and Abstract Expressionism—which has been a programmed achievement of a generation of artists under the nation-state utopia—lasted until the mid-1980s. This production can be seen in state painting and sculpture museums, as well as in some selective official and private collections.

### **1980s: The Decade of Transition**

The military intervention and its anti-democratic constitution in the 1980s did not forestall Turkey's enthusiasm to dissolve its national homogeneity and break with state capitalism. Liberal economic opportunities, the emergence and boost of electronic communication technologies—tv broadcasting started in the early 1950s—and constant immigration from rural areas to the cities has changed the Modernist and elitist class structure—from middle class bourgeoisie, worker class, and rural populations to a more heterogeneous structure mainly of rural origins, and with eager responsiveness to consumerism. This created a new amalgamation of culture, shifting popular culture, mass-media, and the entertainment industry to the fore, shadowing Modernist high culture presentations and productions. The new urban class population experienced a dilemma of either giving up their traditional culture, ethnic identity, and naïve life, or resisting the demanding conversions of the rapidly expanding city; evidently, resistance created its radical forms of extreme conservatism and religious fundamentalism. From 1960 to 1990, two generations of artists, writers, and performers have experienced the end of modernism in various degrees of intensity and the dawn of Postmodernism with the revival of tradition, popular culture, nostalgia, kitsch and the blending of styles.

Until 1990 Turkey had no significant cultural communication with its eastern and western neighbors due to political polarization—even if in Soviet Russia and ex-Yugoslavia the transition from modernity to Postmodernity took place almost in the same three decades, and the foundations of Postmodernism and the transition to globalism were laid in the context of conceptual art, installations, and performance art. Moscow Conceptualism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Conceptual Art was blossoming in the West. It was the first Soviet art movement that resisted official art, questioning the status quo, social life, and nationalism.<sup>2</sup> In ex-Yugoslavia, the movement started in the 1970s in Croatia and in the 1980s in Slovenia.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, conceptual art in Turkey is simultaneous with and displays similarities to its Soviet bloc neighbors. In Turkey too, Postmodern production took place outside the political order ruled by a junta, a confused social consensus and a very traditional way of seeing and perceiving art. In this period, Turkey was the only Islamic country to experience contemporary art forms and the visual transformation from modernism to Postmodernism; in the Islamic world, conceptual art, installations, and related art forms emerged as late as the 1990s.

In the above mentioned geography, because of the prohibitive conditions implemented by political authorities, this change was neither sufficiently documented nor was it presented to the masses. Polarized global conditions meant that the development of a theory that embraced and assessed this non-Western production was delayed until the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, both local societies and the First World-bound international art experts failed fully to appreciate the developments in Turkey and its Soviet neighbors. In this context, we must thank everyone who documented this production with their essays and research.

### **1990s: The Winds of Globalization**

The international art scene showed interest in the arts of the countries of the so-called periphery only after 1990, when the First World Postmodern philosophers, scholars and theoreticians succeeded in changing Modernist discourse, Eurocentric thinking and the center-periphery dichotomy. Ethnic identities, local cultures, protagonist and subversive activities, and post-media production that examined different styles of everyday life became attractive.

When the winds of globalization reached Turkey in the mid 1990s, the art scene was already prepared to deal with the change. The Istanbul Biennale, which started in 1987 with a new concept, focused on the artist and the work, rather than on national presentations. During this period, the contemporary art institutions in EU countries that had considerable minority populations initiated a change in their policies by including non-EU artists and curators in their programs and opened new funds for projects that supported a multi-cultural presence. After the disputable “Magiciens de la Terre” exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989, in which the tension between center and periphery was still pulsating, there followed initial attempts to include the periphery or the other into contemporary art history. These were the “Europe Unknown” exhibition in Krakow, curated by Anda Rottenberg in 1991, “Aperto 93” at the 45th Venice Biennale curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, and the “Modernities and Memories, Contemporary Art from Islamic Countries” exhibition produced by curators from the Islamic world at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997. These exhibitions heralded the disappearance of the concepts of the center and the periphery, the exhaustion of modernistic models, defending the presence of so-called “local cultures.” In fact, communication and appreciation through contemporary art pioneered, leaving Modernist eclecticism behind and entering into a global relational reciprocity. A new complex artist and art expert profile emerged out of this change, covering contradictory vocations of itinerant, entrepreneur, explorer, activist, analyst, lobbyist, and authority.

Artists and a few curators and galleries, all based in Istanbul, could overcome Modernist dichotomies that ruled the system of art making and realized international communication and collaboration only after the transition from state capitalism to liberal capitalism in the mid 1980s, in spite of military rule and a non-democratic constitution. A group of dissident artists from Mimar Sinan University and Marmara University—the only two universities with art faculties at that time—appropriated conceptual art, minimal art, object art, and installations, and through a series of exhibitions entitled “A Section of Vanguard Turkish Art,” they initiated Postmodern art forms and opened the way for not only new concepts, forms, and aesthetics in interdisciplinary collaborations, but more decisively for freedom of expression and subjectivity. This production, completely cut off from the official culture system and public funding, was supported by a few galleries (Maçka Sanat, BM Contemporary Art Center, and Gallery Nev) and a few sponsors. During the 12th Istanbul Biennale I curated an exhibition to revive this 1980–1990 production.<sup>4</sup>

### **2000s: The Rise of Contemporary Art as an Enterprise**

We have to consider that contemporary art scenes are mostly identified with their cities rather than their countries. Even if the global economy and politics are omnipresent, the cities with their

heterogeneous populations create a fertile ground for contemporary art. Istanbul is no doubt one of the most significant cities within this context. The artists find inspiration and themes to analyze, scrutinize, and interpret in daily life, in the continuous transformations, in the ever present aggressions of this complex city and belief that they are contributing to the awareness of the people or to the democratic processes.

In relation to the aforementioned background, Istanbul has two faces, one of which is turned towards the global culture-industry, and engages it with enthusiasm and force of enterprise. This positive approach is fostered by the unshakable economic value of art works in local and international markets and by contemporary art events and collections that signal high quality for the companies and business people involved. The physical material—museums, galleries, collections, exhibitions, and events—shows the progress of this endeavor.<sup>5</sup>

The other face can be observed in socio-political and economic realities, and perceived and acknowledged in the artworks of three generations of artists from 1980 onwards. In local art and culture criticism, academic criticism, and in reports that have been published since then, one of which is Istanbul's *Cultural Constellation and its European Prospects*—a report commissioned by Lab for Culture.<sup>6</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1990s until today, in tune with global transformations in economies, politics and communication technology, the contemporary art scene in Istanbul has gained a new content and expansion, as a result of the interests of liberal capitalism, private enterprise, and collaborative projects with EU art centers. Through this process, Istanbul has become one of the non-EU capitals to claim priority in building its infrastructure for an interdisciplinary art and culture exchange which found its most rewarding effects in the Istanbul Biennale since 1987. Throughout these years, not only in Turkey but all over the region, art making has profited from cross-border activities, and even through legal or illegal immigration. The will to discovery of vast numbers of artists, curators and institutions from EU countries, and currently the investment and job possibilities of an expanding culture industry are other reasons for interest.

Artists from Istanbul with their mostly dissident art-making forms and aesthetics—dealing with ethnic identity problems, nation-state ordeals, gender problems, human right violations, honor crimes—were invited to prestigious institutions and galleries in EU countries and even contributed to the alteration of the Eurocentric gaze to a more emphatic one. Germany is the leading country in this respect due to its well thought-out cultural politics of respecting the culture of its large Turkish emigrant population. In turn, curators frequently visited Istanbul out of curiosity and for inspiration, and motivated artists and artist initiatives towards cultural exchange. The most significant example of this exchange is the Berlin Senate Istanbul residency scholarship started in 1987. I have been mentoring this residency program since 1995, hosting over sixty artists.<sup>7</sup> Since 2005, other EU countries have established permanent or temporary art residencies in partnership with institutions such as Platform Garanti (until 2010) and Manzara Perspectives with their *A room for the young art scene in Istanbul*.<sup>8</sup>

The aesthetics of these artworks conceal a certain resistance to existing micro and macro political and economic imperatives. When we consider art making and culture industry manifestations within the context of European integration processes at the local and regional levels, we can still see that there are borderline conflicts in history, tradition, memory blocks, in ethno-cultural frontiers and in the art and culture systems. Despite the mutual empathy and partnerships between local and international artists and cultural experts, there is much pretense in the integration and recognition structures that does not correspond to the reality of a still developing culture industry, which has an emphasis on corporate art and branding rather than public programming and the support of creative individuals. The existing infrastructure of art and culture, such as art and design education, the Biennale, corporate and private galleries, the local art market, publications etc.—still

lacks intensive and sustainable communication with their EU equivalents. They need support from the state in their attempts to engage with the international competition.

### **The Phenomenon of Women Artists**

Women artists have progressed since the beginning of the 1980s into having a noteworthy presence in the current art scene. Their image has been highlighted since the 1990s when Turkey claimed integration with the EU. General opinion on the image of women in Islamic geographies classifies women as veiled and non-veiled. In 2001, I realized an exhibition with women artists in Sofia, Bulgaria on the occasion of International Women's Day on the 8th of March. Even there, people were surprised to see women artists making dissident works. My last exhibition with women artists was realized in 2009 on the occasion of the Berlin-Istanbul partner city celebrations with the title, "I want the world under my feet, not the paradise!" and presented the most radical works of fourteen established artists.<sup>9</sup>

The majority of works produced by women in Turkey, and in the region, reflect the impossible position of women in totalitarian and patriarchal societies. The expansion of Postmodern thinking and behavior to at least two generations of people is not sufficient to change modernist elitism, the traditional status quo, and stereotypical judgments. Women have to continuously move forward. For marginal groups of women—Roma women, prostitutes, human trade victims, and even women in rural areas and workers—the activity of women artists with their semi-documentary or fictional works has great importance, even if these groups of women cannot be their audiences. The content of their works, questioning and scrutinizing the status quo and the dissemination of this content through visual language has become a conceptual tool for democratization.

### **Istanbul 2010: European Culture Capital**

Within this context, Istanbul 2010 ECOC project presented a model of collaboration between state, local government, private sector, and civil society through model projects. The Visual Arts Directorate presented a model policy providing a stable and sustainable infrastructure for professional artists and the arts sector. The model chiefly targeted the ongoing problem of culture industries being more focused on exhibiting than the production of artworks, so the financial resources were therefore diverted to the creative individual. Excellence and diversity in creativity, connecting people and the arts, and supporting the arts sector were the main objectives of exhibition, workshop, conference and seminar projects. During 2008–2010, the Visual Arts Directorate developed all the projects planned by universities, cultural NGOs, private sector art centers, galleries and artist initiatives. This involved providing studios, materials, and essential technologies for interdisciplinary art production, and introducing public programming for communities of all backgrounds to give them the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the broadest possible range of artistic experience. Two projects were successfully executed: "Lives and Works in Istanbul" hosted six renowned artists from EU countries—Remo Salvadori, Antoni Muntadas, Victor Burgin, Peter Kogler, Danae Stratou, and Sophie Calle—who were invited to live and work in Istanbul, collaborate with local artists and produce works. "Portable Art" distributed contemporary art exhibitions and activities to the forty districts of Istanbul, using the existing infrastructure of the district municipalities. Eleven curators and over two hundred artists were commissioned to produce exhibitions, performances and workshops.

Throughout the years of making Istanbul Culture Capital of Europe (2007–2010), these configurations have been the subject of over six hundred projects, which have been exclusively funded by the state, as an investment in the integration process to the EU.

### **Contemporary Art and Culture Industry in Amman, Athens, Baku, Beirut, Belgrade Cairo, Ljubliana, Sofia, Tessaloníki, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Zagreb**

In Turkey, the most significant moments of contemporary art production and its infrastructure have happened in conjunction with developments in main stream art events such as the Biennale or similar international art exhibitions, residency programs, networking, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary projects, and the nomadic movement of artists under the shadow of socio-political and economic realities since 1980. Similar developments in the South Caucasus, the Middle East, South and East Mediterranean, and Central Asia occurred in the 1990s, after the first Gulf Crisis and the fall of the Soviet Empire. In the 1990s, Istanbul was almost ready to communicate and collaborate with its neighboring cities with contemporary art potential such as Amman, Athens, Baku, Beirut, Belgrade, Cairo, Ljubliana, Sofia, Thessaloníki, Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Zagreb. Indeed, collaborative exhibitions, episodic residencies, workshops, and conferences organized since the end of the 1990s created a network, even if the art scenes in these cities were just coming out of a state controlled and determined system of production and the collaboration or exchange could mostly be realized between the individual artists and experts through mutual altruism and courageous initiatives. Ex-Yugoslavia went through a dramatic break-up that divided the country into ethnic and culturally independent republics, and only at the beginning of the 2000s, mainly under the sponsorship and guidance of the Open Society and with individual initiatives and undertakings, a contemporary art production based on the conceptual movements of the 1980s could be borne out of this trauma. At the same time, the transition from state capitalism to liberal capitalism has influenced the concepts, forms and aesthetics of art making, so that the artists found a new position in the society as trend-setters, as entrepreneurs, as creative individuals serving the needs of the culture industry. Furthermore, the artist's quest for truth, human rights, alternative thinking and for the spiritual and mental welfare of the society had an impact on the intellectual milieu of their countries. Most of the visual art initiatives established from 1998 on have achieved international recognition and are distinguished by their sustainable and visionary programs. New Art Union, Caravansarai and Aristerium in Tbilisi; Aliminium, the Biennale of Baku and the Summer School for Curators in Yerevan; Darat al Funun and Makan in Amman; Homeworks, Zico House and the Beirut Art Center in Beirut; The Townhouse Gallery and The Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo; Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF) in Alexandria, and the Issa Touma Photography Festival in Aleppo are the major, pioneering initiatives.

### **The Essence and Effects of Global Exhibitions**

For my point of view, which incorporates twenty-five years of experience of networking and exhibition-making geographically and culturally in an in-between territory—Southeast Europe, South Caucasus, Middle East, East Mediterranean—starting from zero communication ending up in international curating, the so-called multi-cultural international exhibitions have contributed immensely to the networking and exchange between very differently structured art scenes. The distribution of these kinds of exhibitions into region or city based locations has also played a role in reducing the authority of modernist and bureaucratic exhibition structures based on local national state ideologies and systems and twentieth century Eurocentric proclamations.

Within the conditions of globalization, artists and artworks are constantly on the move—as much as visa restrictions allow—and the mediation possibilities of virtual space—the internet—contribute to this exchange of visual and creative thinking and production. For almost a decade, the exhibitions and related events such as symposia and workshops organized in southeast Europe, the Middle East, and South Caucasus in collaboration with EU institutions and funds significantly reflect this necessity of communication and appreciation not only between the creative individuals

seeking new audiences and markets but also between different cultural systems that are exposed to political and economic transformations, seeking new allies and partners to tackle and succeed with the magnitude of this task.

The intense art exchange across the region of which Istanbul is the center of early accomplishments in a Western dominated culture industry system consists of multilateral exhibitions, symposiums, and artist residencies. These have been initiated quite early by forward-thinking local and curious international curators with the support of the institutions of the EU. Here I have to indicate that these interactions are being realized between the official or semi-official EU institutions and individuals and private or civil initiatives of the aforesaid regions. While the state cultural policies in the region are still under the spell of modernist bureaucratic ideologies, the highest levels of the international art market still have their reservations about engaging with these countries. Yet, one cannot say that the art market is not influencing the curators in their endeavor to curate exhibitions there. Even if curating the Istanbul Biennale under conditions of tight budgets and lack of infrastructure is not an easy task, nowadays it is very fashionable for an artist or a curator to exhibit in Istanbul.

For the time being, the exhibitions have become both more sophisticated and safeguarded, due to the support and interest of sponsors, corporations, and collectors, who utilize press and media to promote their investments. If we convert this into the international exhibitions of the last decade, evidently we cannot deny that the international exhibitions—biennale or major institutional shows—that have been organized by EU and US curators have definitely served the absent countries in being part of the game. However, at the same time, these exhibitions have been labelled “multi-culti communication” or “ethnic marketing,” which in turn has been fiercely disputed by curators and art critics of the region.

In her inspiring speech in 1994 at the AICA Congress in Stockholm and Malmö, Julia Kristeva indicated that contemporary art is at the heart of speculation, commercialism, the show-business society, and what since the fall of the Berlin Wall, has become known as the New World Order.<sup>10</sup> How can we evaluate this, after ten years, in conjunction with the international exhibitions?

We cannot dispute the advantages of the New World Order in liberating and increasing artistic and cultural exchange between territories that could never communicate with each other. Evidently, there is an ever-growing temptation to discover new and unknown art scenes. This likely stems from the heritage of Orientalism, and the strange ferment caused by contemporary art making and the art market all over the world. However, in the New World Order or in the age of globalization, of multi-cultural allegiances or ascriptions and of total electronic image penetration, the interaction between artists, official and private institutions, galleries, dealers, and the public who are under the spell of all these dispositions, is extremely complicated and their relationships often strained and ambiguous.

Kristeva further signifies that the situation is where “the essential aspect of European culture and art, the culture and art of revolt, is under threat” and says that “we are submerged by entertainment culture and performance culture.” I think the reason for complicated dispositions and strained relationships is this *submerged position* of the art and culture of revolt. Revolt, which also incorporates resistance, is still the essence of art making and aesthetic experience interpreted by art criticism for the public. Kristeva further says that “revolt is an integral part of the pleasure principle; and without this pleasure, we cannot be content with shows and performances.”

In this connection, when the standardizing entertainment and or culture of spectacle, which has an immense economic value within global capitalism, interferes with and manipulates the art and culture of revolt, the public will not experience pleasure, aesthetic perception, and visual contentment. The paradox is that, nowadays, art making, in the sense of critical visual thinking, is

highly dependent on private enterprise, which tends to use/abuse it as standard promotion material or as part of an event culture.

Therefore, contemporary societies seem to value art with a small “a.” It values culture only when it plays a practical or entertaining role in people’s lives. In fact, many societies in our region seem to have a big problem with the idea of art for its own sake, or culture for its own sake. The public appreciates art and culture as significant only when they serve some other purpose, such as economic advance, social education or therapy for the individual. Similarly, works of art are prized for their investment value rather than for their inner merit.

As nothing much has changed since Kristeva’s speech, in the sense that the entertainment industry has never withdrawn its claims on art and culture, and the world is enduring the worst kind of transformations since the Gulf War, 9/11, Iraq War, and now Arab Spring, we must re-think and re-form the content and form of international exhibitions within these dispositions. We have to find more down-to-earth, artist-friendly strategies to revive the power of art to mediate between different cultures and existing culture policies. As curators and art critics, we have to determine the limits of the art market by our practice within the current politically, culturally, and ethically correct discourse. In this context, we have to work and collaborate with artists as well as with theoreticians. As curators and art critics from the Islamic world, we should not forget that our work depends on the democratization processes, which in turn means that we have also the task to be in communication and, in the end, in collaboration with political parties and politicians.

- 1 Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1998), 230. (We are all engaged in communication, as we cannot accept our existence towards death. We have to search for immortality in the other, in order to endure the knowledge of our death. The codified world (the world of culture, of spirit, of meaning, of negation of entropy) has emerged out of this search for immortality.), translated from the German by Beral Madra.
- 2 See <http://conceptualism.letov.ru>.
- 3 See “Pioneering As a Life Style: A Conversation with Dunja Blažević,” <http://www.bifc-hub.eu>; “Marina Grzinić’s Answers on Open Questionnaire,” <http://www.chtodelat.org>.
- 4 See <http://www.pluversum.blogspot.com>.
- 5 See <http://contemporaryartsinturkey.blogspot.com>.
- 6 See <http://www.labforculture.org>.
- 7 See <http://bmsuma07.blogspot.com/>
- 8 See Garanti Platform,” <http://platformgaranti.blogspot.com>.
- 9 See <http://www.pluversum.blogspot.com>.
- 10 Julia Kristeva, “What Good are Artists Today? Strategies for Survival-Now” in *The Swedish Art Critics Association Press*, ed. Christian Chambert (1995): 25–37.