

## Contemporary Art in Turkey: The Effects of the Istanbul Biennial

For the session iTriangular Mutteringsi

Tomur Atagök and Susan Platt

There can be little doubt that the Istanbul Biennial constitutes an increasingly radical intervention in the contemporary art scene in Turkey. That intervention has both positive and negative aspects. In general the positive aspect is to bring contemporary art from other countries to Turkey. In a country that still does not have a single contemporary art museum, this is a crucial contribution. Also positive is the fact that inclusion in the Biennale provides the possibility for artists to then be selected for other international exhibitions. The negative aspects include the concentration of resources in a single event, the focus on the part of very young artists to be discovered for an international exhibition, and dwindling participation by Turkish artists and the general public.

All Biennials share the ideology of the iworldi of contemporary art in general; they are based on valuing a Eurocentric modernism which consists of an arbitrary assessment of iqualityi and a colonized internationalism. In addition, Biennials adopt a concern for imulticulturalismi i.e. a token inclusion of non white artists from Europe, or any artist from Asia, the Middle East, India, and the Americas who represent iotheri cultures.

But that representation is subtle. Multiculturalism is not as obvious in its prejudices as the orientalist exoticism of the international expositions of the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A certain amount of culturally specific content is eagerly sought after, but it must ifit ini with curatorial perspectives. To be more understandable, many artists from Asia, the Middle East, India, and Africa, emigrate to London, Paris, New York, or Frankfurt, where they can shed enough of their iothernessi to be acceptable. Shirin Neshat, for example, went to graduate school in the United States and currently lives there. Her photographs of herself entirely covered in black play to euro centric preconceived ideas about Iranian women, rather than being a nuanced examination of the complexities of present day Iran. The Turkish artist Kutlu Ataman iWomen Who Wear Wigs video, which was the only Turkish art shown at the Venice Biennial in 1999, emphasizes head covering, a dominant issue in Turkey, but in a way understandable to a non Turkish, non Muslim audience. By focusing on wigs rather than scarves, Ataman included issues of hairlessness from illness, transvestitism, as well as fundamentalism, thus couching a highly charged issue in Turkey in terms that an international audience can digest.

These parameters are a part of the ideology that governs the Istanbul Biennial as it intervenes within the contemporary art scene in Turkey. Artists from Turkey who speak only Turkish, who reside only in Turkey and who are not working in accepted international formats or issues are regarded as too iotheri to be included in the world of international culture. Turkey has finally been accepted for candidacy in the European Union, but it remains deeply separated from Europe by political and cultural differences that pivot on the issues of religion, law, and economics. There is an ongoing and unresolved heritage of iorientalism in which Turkey is still defined in terms of the erotic, the alien and the dangerous iotheri that is threatening to Europe. Most recently, that perception of Turkey has been combined with an expectation from outside curators that artists address human rights particularly in relationship to the Kurdish problems. These issues have been directly explored by



the artist Gülşen Karamustafa in her work *Presentation of an early Representation*, in which she recycles a sixteenth image of a slave bazaar with questions like *How should I define myself as a woman from Istanbul? Why do I have the feeling that I am always going to be questioned? Will I be questioned again about women and Islam? Do I have to explain that my relationship with Islam bears complexities? As an artist am I responsible for my government politics?*

As suggested by Karamustafa's work, colonial conflicts and anxieties are not all on the side of the Europeans. From the time of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 by Kemal Atatürk, the state policy of Westernization included the cultural and artistic life of Turkey. As part of the crucial secularization process that created modern Turkey, Atatürk privileged Western European art forms in music, painting, and theater. Hundreds of years of Ottoman Islamic culture were marginalized. Only recently have contemporary Turkish artists themselves begun coming to terms with many aspects of their own cultural history.

The change from Islamic to Western conventions in Turkish art began even before the Republic, as part of the modernization process during the last century of Ottoman rule. As early as 1843, military school curriculums included linear perspective as a means of depicting the spatial aspects of battle strategies. Artists trained in these military schools also began to paint Western style landscapes, interiors and portraits under the influence of French Orientalist artists living in Turkey, although one pupil of Gérôme, Osman Hamdi Bey turned Orientalism on its head with his dignified self-representations of Islamic teachers. In the period after the Republic, impressionism, post impressionism and fauvism dominated, continuing the emphasis on French painting styles. Cubism's affinity with the spatial relationships of miniature painting made it popular in the mid twentieth century. From after World War II until the 1970s, French art informel with its visual resemblance to Islamic calligraphy was widely practiced. Only in the mid 1970s did the focus on France come to an end partly because of the suspension of the Turkish States sponsorship of fellowships to France.

Already in the nineteenth century Westernized artists in Turkey played an active role in all aspects of the cultural life including curating exhibitions, and producing histories of modern Turkish art. Founded in 1883 the State Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul (today known as Mimar Sinan University), dominated the organizing of art exhibitions, as well as the teaching and writing on both modern and contemporary art. Other venues included the Peoples Centers from 1932 to 1951 and State-run galleries in 10 different cities. An Annual State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition which began in 1938 continues to the present day. Alternatives to French aestheticism began to appear. Figurative, representational art, social art with a message, and Anatolian based subjects, emerged as a nationalistic form of opposition to internationalism.

By the 1960s, banks and other private sector funders strengthened their support for new galleries, juried competitions, exhibition spaces, collections, and publications. Artists sought educational opportunities in Germany and the United States and embraced the art traditions from those countries. These same artists began agitating for more international and conceptual perspectives in art and shaking up traditional academic programs. In the 1970s, Turkey, like so many other countries, was going through major economic and social tensions. A military coup in September 1980 led to a new constitution that included severe human rights restrictions. But the eighties were also a period of rapid economic development. It is against this contradictory



background that the first juried exhibitions of Turkish artists within an international context developed as the 'New Trends' series organized by the Academy of Fine Arts between 1977 and 1987. 'New Trends' took place at an international art festival organized and funded by the Fine Arts Academy that included symposia with titles like 'Art Towards the year 2000'.

Starting in 1979 the privately sponsored Association of Museum of Painting and Sculpture organized a juried competition, called the 'Contemporary Istanbul Artists Exhibition,' as part of the Istanbul Festival of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, the same organization that would later start the Biennial. Between 1984 and 1988 a group of artists led by Tomur Atagök and Yusuf Taktak initiated five curated exhibitions with the title 'A Cross Section of Avant-Garde Art' in the context of the Istanbul Festival. These shows focused on new concepts in painting, installation, and Neo Dada approaches for the first time in Turkey.

The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts created the first official Istanbul Biennial in 1987. Beral Madra, an Istanbul based curator organized the first two Biennials. For the first Biennial, she was asked to coordinate it after negotiations broke down with Germano Celant over budget. On a very small budget and in a short time, Madra managed to organize, with significant support from foreign cultural centers, an international exhibition called 'Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces.' This exhibition took place in the Byzantine church of St. Eirini, and the St. Sophia Hurrem Sultan Bath designed by the sixteenth century architect Mimar Sinan. It included artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio in St. Eirini and Turkish artists who had lived abroad such as Sarkis (who was based in Paris) and Bedri Baykam who had just returned from many years in America, in the Hamam. In addition Madra invited exhibitions from Austria, Switzerland, Canada, Poland, France, and Yugoslavia, a serendipitous selection. Finally, following the guidelines of the local committee to invite as many Turkish artists as possible, she included many other Turkish artists, under the sponsorship of Turkish galleries, and an historical exhibition of early twentieth century Turkish art.

There were two unique aspects to this first Biennial that have survived to the present day. One is the use of historical structures for contemporary exhibitions. The second is the concept of venues throughout the city. Thus, from the beginning, the City of Istanbul itself, arguably the most spectacular city in the world, became part of the Biennial. On the other hand, another characteristic, which is less positive, is the sense that some Turkish artists 'fit' an international exhibition, and others did not. While Madra included a lot of Turkish artists, the status of the international exhibition was much higher than that of the exhibitions sponsored by art galleries. These displays were held in pavilions in the Military Museum, far from the rest of the Biennial. In the same venue, there were 'national exhibitions' organized by medium: ceramics, printmaking, sculpture, for a total of 150 Turkish artists. According to Madra's riveting account of the organization of this first Biennial, one Turkish artist, Bedri Baykam, strenuously objected to the separation of international artists from those living in Turkey, but Madra comments that she had great difficulty in convincing the Western European artists to show in the Biennial, and she did not want to risk showing 'unknown, local,' artists with them. (Beral Madra, *Post Peripheral Flux, A Decade of Contemporary Art in Istanbul*, Literatur, 1996, p.25).

In 1989 Madra curated the second Biennial exhibition with more confidence. As she put it, 'A rupture was in the air; consequently some people would be descended from



their thrones, some would be enthroned, the dimensions of art production would be expanded, old myths would be destroyed, new ones established. She also states that the goals were to present a cross section of the contemporary art, to bring together internationally renowned artists, to educate the growing art audience in Turkey for the appreciation of the art works of today and to open new opportunities for the Turkish artists to participate in International exhibitions, ( PPF, p. 45, 46). Her focus was now on the 80s. She worked in collaboration with consulates and cultural institutes, and featured nine artists from Berlin in a single exhibition at the main Painting and Sculpture Museum in Istanbul. In addition to Germany, the international component Italy, Spain, Greece Yugoslavia, Austria, and the U.S.S.R..

She also expanded the number of venues to include more historical spaces, and works done in the streets of the historical Hagia Sophia district of Istanbul as well as elsewhere in the city. The Military Museum again hosted an exhibition of other Turkish artists, some categorized as young, but the galleries now held shows in their own spaces, rather than as part of the Biennial. These shows were dispersed throughout the newer parts of the city and were almost impossible to find for the non-Turkish visitor.

Between 1989 and 1992 Madra also curated the ABCD exhibitions which selected only conceptual artists from those who had shown in the 'Cross Section' exhibitions. These shows favored artists who were inspired by Joseph Beuys and Arte Povera and established a preference that continues among the internationally oriented curators to the present day. In addition Madra organized Turkish pavilions in Venice, as well as other international exhibitions. The result has been a bifurcation of the art scene between the artists who create works within the 'international conceptual' mode and those who do not, or who are perceived as for some reason, not part of that mindset. Also sidelined were the works of many seventies and eighties painters who were doing innovative conceptual work, but who were not functioning within the preferred type of avant-garde formats.

Berals assistant in the second Biennial, Vasif Kortun was invited to curate the third Biennial. It was held entirely in the Feshane, an old fez factory, which was being converted with the patronage of N.F. Eczacıbaşı into an art museum. It had been used as one alternative space in the previous Biennial and it fit the international taste for converting industrial warehouses into art exhibition spaces. Kortun included only five Turkish artists in his biennial, a drastic reduction from previous years. He had exhibits from fourteen other countries, including an exciting selection from the New York New Museum (which was curtailed because of complaints from the US consulate that it was too radical). The total number of artists was sixty-five. In limiting the Turkish selection so radically, Kortun was governed by his own immersion in the international aesthetic of modernism and postmodernism. He adopted an 'outsider' perspective to his own country.

In 1995 after a break of three years, and with greatly increased funding, a full time administrator, and a newly simplified purpose, the German gallery director, Rene Block, enters the picture of the Istanbul Biennial as the first non-Turkish curator. The newly stated goals were to encourage young emerging artists as well as established artists with radical works, the focus was on an 'international dialog.' Block redefined the exhibition as thematic rather than national and therefore made the exhibition more obviously shaped to his own particular curatorial bias. The theme of 'Orientation' suggested the crossroads of Istanbul, and the crossroads of the contemporary art world, as artists so often migrated from one city to another.



Installation art dominated and the exhibition was a huge success, including many artists who would soon be renowned internationally. Although based in a new space, a former customs warehouse on the Bosphorous, (the contemporary art museum plan had fallen through because of local politics), he also expanded the exhibition to once again include historic sites throughout the city. The beautifully produced catalog in English and Turkish further expanded the exhibitions visibility and success. Block included nineteen Turkish artists, twelve who lived in Istanbul, one in Ankara, one in Izmir, two in Paris, and two in Cologne out of a total of 119 artists. Several of them had been included in previous Biennials.

That pattern of a curatorial theme, an international emphasis, and a small Turkish presence continued with Rosa Martinez in the fifth biennale of 1997. Only eleven Turkish artists were included out of a total of 86 artists, one of them a famous opera singer who painted as a hobby. Two others were part of a discussion/performance group of artists called iKulturî. Martinez also used the city dynamically, expanding even further the number of sites, and emphasizing younger women in the selection of artists. Many of these artists were now part of the accepted international circuit. No longer did Istanbul have to beg artists to come to Istanbul, but as the exhibition increased in prestige and isuccessî it was losing sight of its focus on support for Turkish art. While its dispersed sites brought in a wider public in Turkey, that public was still a narrow spectrum of the population.

The most recent Biennial, the sixth, curated by Paolo Colombo, has followed a more conservative pattern aesthetically, and included an odd selection of ten Turkish artists, several of whom have appeared in previous Biennials. It took place in only three venues, with a small component of public art. The original plan to include art on the public ferry boats had to be canceled because of the earthquake. The crew of the Biennial helped with earthquake rescue up until one week before the opening. The separation between the art world and the real world had never been more dramatic than when these crews returned to their job of constructing white walls after they had spent three weeks helping to rescue dying people from fallen buildings. One piece of public art, *Classics Bid Farewell to the People*, by Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev, two artists from Kazakhstan, performed in the busy pedestrian street in the center of Istanbul broke down that separation and engaged the general public. Their wax candle replicas of classical sculptures could be lighted and melted down by anyone with a pocket lighter.

After Vasif Kortuns abrupt reduction of the Turkish artists in the Biennale from over one hundred to only five, outside curators have hovered at fewer than twenty artists from Turkey for the last three biennials. The methods of choosing the Turkish artists have varied, Block listened to the Turkish advisers and chose younger artists, Martinez asked for proposals: young people presented projects while the older artists thought it was beneath their status. Colombo visited about 80 artists. In spite of the different methods of selection, there have been frequent repeats of the same artists, and many artists who have never been included.

There are several problems with the Biennial process as it currently exists:

1. There is an increasing emphasis by young artists on the type of art production that fits the Biennial formulas. According to a Turkish artist who teaches in one of the most prestigious programs in Turkey, students focus on the Biennial as a passage to foreign lands.

2. There is a lack of funding for other local initiatives and exhibitions and a competitive atmosphere for dwindling resources.

3. The general public and market for contemporary art is contracting rather than expanding in Turkey, as the Biennial becomes increasingly colonial in its process.

Thus, far from establishing and nurturing contemporary art in Turkey, or engaging in an international dialogue that gives new respect to Turkish artists, or educating the general public in Turkey to understand contemporary art, the Biennial is primarily a predetermined event that allows narrow stereotypes and biases to continue unchallenged. The original mission of the Biennial, that of encouraging contemporary Turkish artists, has been reduced to predictable eurocentric parameters. The complex history of culture in Turkey, as well as its unique geographical location, makes it possible to construct a unique Biennial that presents a provocative picture of new directions in contemporary art in both all of Turkey and all of Asia. Why should Istanbul settle for less?