

VOLATILE SPOT* ISTANBUL

Jubilation Decade

The joy of Istanbul being “hot spot” of contemporary art in between two continents (Europe and Asia) during the first decade of 2000’s occurred because of the apparently expected positive developments regarding the political and economic image of Turkey. A 2014 paper clarifies this impression: *“Turkey went through a period of high growth when all the money was flowing and we were told that those structural reforms were done. But, now, we see that those reforms were not fully done, otherwise we would not be seeing these current vulnerabilities. So, Turkey currently does not have a sustainable growth model.”* (1)

Likewise, by sending relational-aesthetics loaded exhibition packages to satisfy the audiences particularly in EU cities and by realizing Istanbul Capital of Culture in 2010, politicians, local governments and the private sector have jubilantly advertised a success that actually needed credible local justification. Actually, already during the fabulous decade (2004-2014) it was apparent that the contemporary art productions of Turkey could not reach either the people in 80 cities of Turkey or to the audiences in five continents. The art audiences in Istanbul, in EU countries with immigrant populations from Turkey and the visiting artists and art experts had the privilege to see and appreciate the dissident contemporary art production.

During this decade the existing infrastructure, with its Modernist roots and underdeveloped Post-modernist local structures evolved primarily into a Neo-capitalist culture industry programme serving mainly the needs of private sector, of creative industry investments, evidently of artists, culture producers and entrepreneurs. However, the resonance that should be expected of a dissident contemporary art production could not develop consistently, as it could not infiltrate into the awareness and deep subconscious of the majority. The number of contemporary artists and curators who have gained international recognition was encouraging, but without a sound and sustainable local appreciation and support it was a misleading conviction.

Considering the geo-political turmoil in the region and the Islamist and neo-liberalist positioning of the official cultural policy of AKP government, we should re-question the current success of this process and for the sake of the existing art scene find out the truth concealed behind these manifestations of jubilation.

Through the cold winds between EU and Turkey and during my recent participation in Soul for Europe November 2016 Forum in Berlin I had the opportunity to justify the ongoing power of contemporary art production within the current non-democratic process as follows:

Contemporary artist, art experts producing artworks and art and culture actions and activities in Turkey and the private institutions or individual initiatives are determinedly effective in fulfilling the cultural aims and intentions such as a clear and unbiased vision towards democratic transformation, freedom of expression and communication, respect to pluralism, human and gender rights, responsibility on ecological problems, development of public awareness. All these principles are currently struggling towards democratic processes and resisting the upcoming totalitarian regime. Visual artists with their aesthetically qualified, conceptually competent artworks are widely and strongly enriching the visual production and women artists are on the front of this production. But, how the artist profit from their production or rather how they survive, is a crucial and leading question. Most of the artists work in the universities, in graphic design companies or open art studios for the public; with any luck a small number of artists have family support or private income. Private galleries occasionally employ curators; the museum or private sector art and culture quantity is not enough to meet the employment demands, besides they prefer to run their institution with low-wage.

The EU Strategy Paper had arranged the priorities for EU financial assistance for the period 2014-20 to support Turkey on its path to integration. This was supposed to be sustainable and help Turkey's creative people and groups to meet the accession criteria within the EU culture policy. Evidently the art and culture production and its global dissemination could only achieve the necessary progress under the aegis of this integration process. Under the shadow of the abrupt exit from the EU Creative Program due to the political dispute this might not be so easy (2). In particular, in the fields of creative industries, contemporary arts production, the project supports allocated by EU funds without doubt supported employment, social policies, education, promotion of gender equality, and human resources development and regional and territorial cooperation.

We are aware that under the current political and economic conditions

in Turkey and in the region, it might be difficult to continue and strengthen the socio-cultural and artistic endeavors and productions; however the existing infrastructure which could develop communication, collaboration and partnerships through the provision of millions of Euro investments since 1990 and through the İstanbul 2010 Culture Capital project is more than prepared and determined to continue its quest for creative production, even if the political environment may not be so supportive.

Recent Context

In three out of 39 local municipalities of İstanbul, namely Beyoğlu, Şişli and Beşiktaş, and in the skyscraper district north of İstanbul there are the substantial private investments. Kadıköy, which currently seems to be a stronghold for freedom of creativity and laicism gives no hope for and suitable development for contemporary art infrastructure. The competitive art fairs and auctions with their relatively local collector profile and market, continuously displaced art galleries from one district to the other, two private collection museums (Sabancı and Pera) in stabile activity, one private museum (İstanbul Modern) waiting to move to its temporary space in Karaköy and one highly anticipated private museum (Ömer Koç Museum) under construction in Dolapdere are the highlights of the scene. In juxtaposition to these private sector investments there are a few independent and interdisciplinary spaces founded by artists, curators or art experts, mainly financed by themselves or with occasional sponsors. İstanbul Biennale and the three Anatolia Biennale (Çanakkale, Sinop, Mardin) provide the international recognition and networking for artists and art experts. 2016 Sinopale and Çanakkale Biennale were postponed after critical political interventions.

All the municipalities have official culture policies according to their political parties. CHP municipalities carry on their Semi-modernist - Post-modernist populist programs while AKP municipalities follow AKP government culture policy towards an Islamic, conservative art and culture production, shaping art forms in tune with its propagated traditional arts revival programme.

The government also talks about another matter. Galleries of Fine Arts, in 48 cities in Anatolia – a Soviet Model of art and culture distribution - under the direction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism are devoid of any function to serve the requirements of contemporary art whatsoever. There is, once again, no intention to inject meaning into them. The government prefers to hand over that modernist cultural leftover to individuals or private

organizations intending the exploitation of them in a way that we can call cultural McDonaldization or cultural Islamization. This development package contains no investment for the benefit of creative people that produce today's art and culture despite the fact that there are art and design faculties in the universities of many of these cities and there is a related demand for art centres.

The pivotal privatisation of the cultural infrastructure and the ambitious sponsorship code as well as the official cultural policy creates an oppressive and impoverishing environment both for the established and, in particular, the up and coming generation of artists. The establishment of a public, modern, contemporary museum or center with intentions to serve the artist concerning his/her needs for project funding and exhibitions and to serve the public with motivating programming seems to be a remote possibility.

Predicaments of Art Production

If we take a look at the culture and art packaging for the purposes of corporate art and the cultural publicity presentations through contemporary art, it is easy to see a blend of high and low culture - in other words, the residual and stereotyped "high culture" formations and media and consumption-oriented "mass culture" moments.

Artists who seriously and consciously dedicated to criticizing and dissident contents and forms aside, since 2000 contemporary art production is passing through a Neo-capitalist blender, and turning out easy-to-digest fodder for the society of spectacle and its cool artwork consumers. Art fairs and local auctions of variable attractiveness are the main manipulators of this ongoing spectacle. Three relatively significant art fairs in İstanbul (Contemporary İstanbul, Artİstanbul, TÜYAP) were founded with the prospect of attracting prestigious local and international galleries and enthusiastic and well-informed collectors. After the unexpected 15July putsch Artİstanbul has cancelled its 2016 fair; the other two were realized, but are reluctant to declare their revenues. As a token, in TÜYAP a large group of young curators and artists initiatives have gained space for a non-profit, alternative show, which surprised and agitated the middle-class art-alien fair visitor with provocative works.

What I would like to stress is that, in this privatized package for the society of spectacle, there is limited critical approach to or manifesto for Turkey's ongoing cultural dilemmas and problems related mostly to nation state ideology, racism, religion, gender and

ethnic discrimination. These problems are evidently related to the position of Turkey within the global state of affairs currently deprived of freedom and democratic charms and spells... In her interview for Cairo review just after 15th July coupe (3) Judith Butler comprehensively evaluates the ongoing socio-cultural crisis in Turkey and makes a wide-ranging interpretation: *I think that the future of critical thought is really at risk. And critical thought not just as something people do in universities, but critical thought as the term that links, say, academic freedom and democratic freedom—a kind of crossing of the right to dissent and the right to criticize.*

Does a culture/art package lacking political, social and cultural criticism differ significantly from a nice box of Turkish delight? After all the Post-orientalist discourse, this is not plausible. The target audience in the EU during the two decades of 1990-2010 could not be attracted to a short-range, surface and submissive representation. One of the first and significant attempts to have a sustainable introduction of contemporary art from Turkey was Tanas, Berlin (2008-2013), but even that fairly met optimistic expectations. Shouldn't Turkey's contemporary art entrepreneurs – if they had been resolute enough to untie the purse strings in this respect -, have invested in scholarships, residencies and sustainable institutions for creative individuals? There is now only one effective example of this kind, founded by a younger generation of private sector entrepreneurs, namely SAHA (4)

We are aware of the fact that Turkish society has uncontrollably taken giant steps towards becoming a society of the spectacle, as Guy Debord once said: *The whole of life is an accumulation of shows and the materialistic approach has succeeded fully to invade social life.* (5) This accumulation is additionally and dangerously invaded by religious dogma. According to Debord, the more the audience watches, the less they live; the more they concede to find themselves within the ruling images of consumption, the less they understand their own existence and desires. Turkey's political, economic, social agenda has become such a hysterical show that the mass does not live at all but even devours up its desire. It is precisely this society of spectacle and religious manipulation is alarmed to see socio-political realities and disturbing allusions to memory in the dissident representations of contemporary art works.

In other words, the underprivileged classes of the population, obviously the true target public of the dissident and activist artists are not only deprived of the education and information provided by contemporary art but also restricted to appreciate it by the political and religious dogma. Whereas the handful of indecisive and insensible art investors, willing the realization of their own dreams -

from content to form through to management and programme - rather than leaving things in the hands of the professionals, are thus going through cycles of self-satisfaction – to which is certainly attributable to their long-term failure to erect autonomous institutions, be they modern, post-modern or contemporary art museums or centers.

The younger generation of artists finds inspiration and themes to scrutinize in daily life, in the continuous transformations, in the ever-present aggressions of this complex city and believe that they are contributing to the awareness of the people or to the democratic processes. The aesthetics of such art works conceal a certain resistance to the existing micro and macro political and economic orders. However, the guidance of the artist by galleries and collectors is a fact against which potential artistic resistance would have a considerable importance. The fact that artists, art associations, art experts may be forced to remain submissive, and against such demanding developments, is a conflict that needs to be resolved through new modes of co-operation and methods of collaboration.

Since the 80s, art critics and curators have underlined the fact that the capitalist system that nourishes art simply demands subtle images. The freedom of the artist is markedly restricted and is in fact a deceptive one. The artists are engaged so as to convince the public that they are “free” and “independent”. When people are even incapable of dreaming about possible improvements in the systems leading them to destruction, let alone desiring those improvements; when the boundaries between what is art and what is not are blurred, these important terms should be taken seriously. Since societies – in Turkey and many countries in the region – may be unaware of these boundaries, they are also incapable of analyzing the complex socio-economic relations limiting the freedom of the artist. When we consider art making and manifestations of the culture industry within the context of European integration processes at the local and regional level, we can still see that there are borderline conflicts in history, tradition, as well as memory blocks along ethno-cultural frontiers and in discrepancies in the systems of art and culture.

There is an intense clash between the decorated presentation of art-like productions and simulations exhibited in art fairs and currently marketed online. The Neo-capitalist system and the culture of consumption generate different methods for mistreating the notion of art and the artist, according to its interests, and, in particular, when society should be distracted. One of the banal purposes is to gain income, profit, reputation, promotion via the

work of art; and it means presenting the work of art as a smart and eye-catching product for the high-income segment that are distant from it through ignorance and conservatism even if they are aware of its good lucrative benefits. It is presented in a way to convince them that the artwork is a possession among other products for consumption. There is no doubt that for this purpose the artwork should stay at a minimum level of intellectual reflection, and in such a way as not to disturb that affluent minority, keeping them away from serious matters. This is a well-done and creditable job for the cultural entrepreneurs that are incapable of building the above-mentioned institutions.

If Cornered?

Contemporary art scenes are mostly identified with their cities rather than their countries. Even if the global economy and politics are omnipresent, cities with their heterogeneous populations create so-called hot spots for contemporary art. Istanbul was, no doubt, one of the most significant cities within this context, but after traumatic events and economic recession gradually losing its glory. The establishment of a modern or contemporary art museum or centre – more in line with a Kunsthalle model – has seemed, for a long time, the key to all the problems in Istanbul's (as well as Turkey's) art and culture dreams. This deficit is clearly reflected in the de-territorialized position of the Istanbul Biennial, with each version seeking venues to reach wider audiences. For many years it has been discussed how an institutional infrastructure should be established, yet irrespective of how it is formed. After part of this dream was fulfilled by private sector collection museums with their diverse contents, concepts and intentions, it is yet to be answered how right it is to establish such institutions in Turkey replicating European or American models, though in a hybrid style. We should be aware that these institutions, dependent on public money or mixed-budgets, would always have difficult management and financing problems. If, for the purposes of establishing a modern/post-modern/contemporary museum or centre in Turkey, we neglect to assess local facts, figures and requirements – that is to say, if we do not conduct creative research and establish a new model of how to build a visual memory system for a country lacking a modern and post-modern museum or a contemporary art centre – we should be aware that we would just be trying to import a factory which is out of fashion...

After the hot years, in tune with global economics and the local economic cul-de-sac, with the hegemony of art fair-auction market manipulations and the gap between the mass of the public and dissident art production, now, and evidently after the Gezi uprising

and the Syria-Iraq-ISIS war and the uncontrollable refugee crisis in the region, the current state of art was at first “**frosty**”, but now “**volatile**”. Time has come to face the missteps and find realistic solutions. The art scene is in between two sayings “as you sow, so you shall reap” and “better lose the saddle than the horse”!

Above all, in the local and regional cultural industry system and political developments the opinions and ideas of bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen should not have the power to determine the concepts, contents and programs of contemporary art institutions or organizations, their essentials and function. How to confront this mutilation? The alleged theoretical and intellectual consequences, deficits and benefits of this volatile moment should be discussed among artists and art experts in communication with international partners and supporters. This dialogue is even more important if it is based in the program and activities of the existing independent NGO’s and not to be handed over to a branded consortium of public and private funding which would not be very reliable in accepting the absolute freedom and independence of the artist and art experts. The problem here is the fact that even if the artists are able to unite for artistic projects, they are hesitant to create a determined collective concept that would interfere in the decisions of private investments. They should get rid of this fear and unite! They should be aware of the fact that - if they want to empower their investment - the private sector should adopt the updated the global contemporary art system, restructured from the 80s on requesting dedication to ideas, concepts and creative visions of artists and art experts rather than events and shows for the desires of the society of spectacle, over and above with a “mutilated gaze” (6).

Beral Madra / January 2017

After 2014 article:

https://www.academia.edu/10057502/ISTANBUL_FROSTY_SPOT_OF_CONTEMPORARY_ART

* “volatile” = liable to change rapidly and unpredictably, especially for the worse

1. <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/turkeys-economic-transformation-in-the-2000s-and-going-forward/>
2. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor Scott MacLeod interviewed Butler in her office at Berkeley on July 21, 2016.
3. <https://www.artforum.com/news/id=63923>
4. www.saha.org.tr
5. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>
6. Daryush Shayegan, *Le Regard Mutile*, 1996, p. 143.