

OVERVIEW

“The Digestible Other: The Istanbul Biennial” 1999 ¹

©Tomur Atagök and Susan Platt first published in *Third Text*, Summer 2003.



Kutluğ Ataman “Women Who Wear Wigs,” 1999

4 DVDs, each approximately one hour

four-screen video installation with variable dimensions

Edition of 5

Produced by The Institute for the Readjustment of Clocks, Istanbul

The Istanbul Biennial is a radical intervention in the contemporary art scene in Turkey. In a country that still does not have a single contemporary art museum, the Biennial looms large². It uses up most of the local resources for international art exhibitions, it encourages very young artists to make work that will be discovered by a visiting curator, and it brings to Istanbul the latest trendy international brand-name artists. Those names have been accredited by their willingness to successfully work in the carefully structured international art world. The international artist is, like global capitalism, increasingly living in a meta-world that has only tenuous connections to actual geographical locations or the conditions of local cultural production.

¹ Parts of this first essay, co-authored with Tomur Atagök, were first presented at the 2000 Conference of the International Association of Art Critics, Tate Gallery, London, September 2000

² This is no longer true (2007). There are now several modern museums in Istanbul.

Biennial artists participate in a type of ex patriot colony. The price of admission if they are not white Euro Americans is that they accept the rules of inclusion. International biennial culture 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 'fit in' 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 'otherness' 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, to give an early example, play to Eurocentric preconceived ideas about Iranian women, rather than being a nuanced examination of the complexities of present day Iran. The Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman's *Women Who Wear Wigs* video, who 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 could digest.

This digestible 'otherness' presented through trademark issues and preferably in an homogenizing high tech format is an important aspect of the current international art scene that has taken over the Istanbul Biennial. Artists from Turkey who speak only Turkish, who reside only in Turkey or who are not working in accepted international media or issues are regarded as either too 'other,' or not 'other' enough, to be included in the world of international culture. Turkey has finally been accepted for candidacy in the European Union, but it remains distinct from Europe. As part of the process of joining the Union, Europeans are now busy dictating political and economic policies to Turkey, much as they did in the late nineteenth century. Turkish workers who move to Western Europe are deeply oppressed and stigmatized. There is an ongoing and unresolved heritage of 'Orientalism' in which Turkey is still defined in terms of the erotic, the alien and the dangerous 'other' that is threatening to Europe, at the same time that it holds valuable resources that Europe is eager to exploit.

These issues have been directly explored by the artist Gülsün Karamustafa in her work 'Presentation of an early Representation,' in which she recycles a sixteenth century image of a slave bazaar with questions like 'How should I define myself as a woman from Istanbul?' (see below) As suggested by Karamustafa's work, identity 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. That Westernization meant the privileging of European art forms in music, painting, theater and elsewhere and the marginalizing of the many complex forms of Ottoman culture such as calligraphy (the Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic). Atatürk also celebrated the pre-Ottoman Anatolian culture as part of the secularization process of modern Turkey. Only recently have a few young artists in

Turkey felt free to re-explore and interrogate the Ottoman era as well as Atatürk's own ideological programs.

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. Ironically, it was French military advisors that introduced linear perspective in order to enhance the spatial aspects of the planning of battles. After they retired, these "soldier-artists" painted Western style oil paintings of landscapes, interiors and portraits under the influence of French 'Orientalist' artists living in Turkey. Thus as Western artists immersed themselves in the 'exotic,' they simultaneously dominated the art scene with their own techniques, a process that is strikingly similar to the contemporary international Biennial curators in Istanbul.

After the founding of the Republic, artists pursued French styles even more eagerly. 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 State's sponsorship of fellowships to France, around the same time as the international student uprisings.

These same Westernized artists, many of them teaching at the State Academy of Fine Arts (today known as Mimar Sinan), played an active role as curators, as historians of modern Turkish art and as art critics. Because of Atatürk's populist side, though, there were also 'People's Houses,' places where peasants and workers could learn to read, write and paint. Figurative, representational art, social art with a message, and Anatolian-based subjects, emerged as a nationalist alternative to the French international style. Ten cities had State-run art galleries and every year the government sponsored a national painting and sculpture exhibition.

By the 1960s, banks and other private sector businesses began to fund Western style private galleries, juried competitions, exhibition spaces, collections, and publications. Artists began to go to Germany and the United States, rather than France and when they returned they began shaking up traditional academic programs as 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 Sultan’s Bath. 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 through thematic and historical exhibitions. These displays were held in pavilions in the (dauntingly named and well-funded) Military Museum, far from the rest of the Biennial: there was a clear separation between the artists accepted into the international exhibition areas and those relegated to distant pavilions. Some artists were clearly seen to be part of the international arena, and others were identified as local.

There were two unique aspects to this first Biennial that survived through eight Biennials. 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. At the same time, the seduction of the city and the spaces chosen for the exhibitions, such as a huge underground Cistern, and the resonant Saint Eirini overpower the works shown and become themselves the major memory for outsiders in a rushed visit expecting the usual metaspace of contemporary art. These ancient structures underscore the “exoticism” of Istanbul.

In 1989 Madra curated the second Biennial in collaboration with consulates and cultural institutes. She 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 included 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 a visitor relying on a traditional tourist map.

Between 1989 and 1992 Madra also curated several conceptual art exhibitions as well as the Turkish pavilions in Venice, and other international exhibitions. The result was a bifurcation of the Istanbul art scene between the artists who created works within the “international conceptual” mode and those who did not.

Beral’s 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.³ 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” (one might even say Orientalist) perspective to his own country.

In 1995 after a break of three years, and with greatly increased funding (although it is still paltry compared to other international exhibitions), the German gallery director, René 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) the exhibition once again included 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.

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

³ N.F. Eczacıbaşı is a prominent businessman with a deep commitment to contemporary art in Turkey in all media. He created the Istanbul Foundation of Art and Culture, an umbrella organization that sponsors annual series of international culture in music, film, theater and visual arts.

called “Kultur”. 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 “success” it was losing its way and becoming just another Biennial.

The most recent Biennial, the sixth, curated by Paolo Colombo took place in only three venues, St. Eirini, the Cistern, and the Dolmabahce Palace Kitchens (which were converted into a traditional white-walled space). It had a very 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. The Biennial came very close to being cancelled because of the general sense of its meaninglessness in the face of the huge disaster of the earthquake.

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 engaged the general public. Their wax candle replicas of classical sculptures could be lighted and melted down by anyone with a pocket lighter, and everyone that passed by was caught up in the process. Primarily though the Colombo Biennial emphasized traditional modernist and late modernist work including a lot of familiar artists, some of whom were even afraid to come to Istanbul because of the continuing after-shocks. It included only ten Turkish artists, several of whom had appeared in previous Biennials.

After Vasif Kortun’s 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. Not surprisingly, the Turkish art public is gradually losing interest in the Biennial as it is increasingly stunted by its own procedures.

Thus, far from nurturing contemporary art in Turkey or introducing Turkish and other Middle Eastern artists to international audiences, the Istanbul Biennial has increasingly become an event with predictable Eurocentric parameters. The complex history of culture in Turkey, as well as its unique geographical and political location as a point of intersection between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe could enable the presentation of provocative new perspectives. Why should Istanbul settle for colonization by international curators who are mainly pursuing their own careers within the superstar art market? The answer lies in the ignorance of Europeans about the wide range of impressive artists who are working in Istanbul, elsewhere in Turkey and throughout the

Middle East. In order to be accepted as a contemporary art center, Istanbul has chosen to participate in the most conservative, established mainstream discourse, rather than to stand up for its own strengths. That is not to call for a nationalistic agenda, but simply to ask for a thoughtful exhibition of the many highly sophisticated artists who have been producing work in Turkey for decades, as well as to the presentation of comparable artists from all over the Middle East and Asia.