

ISTANBUL'S INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL: THE CITY AS CONTEXT – OR CONFINEMENT?

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The Grand Tour has extended beyond anybody's means! Today, the "art person" – whether s/he is an artist, curator or writer – has to travel from city to city to view huge international exhibitions, sometimes to places never imagined before as having the slightest potential for contemporary art. But we are now faced with the question: the art or the city? Today, every city arouses an interest being a city *per se*; each and every city is interesting because it is different from the other, each and every city – however "civilized" or "uncivilized" – offers the possibility of discussion for matters that the art world has come to deem of considerable importance. The framework for all those matters seems to be drawn around the idea of cultural identity. The modernizing experience of global culture is perhaps best observed in each and different city because it shows how mutually opposed identities clash, but simultaneously create a new place, and a new way of life in that place. Needless to say that this interest is the outcome of what has come to be called cultural globalism, a phase in which all "others" have been going through in trying to understand each other.

Since the early 1990s, Istanbul, greatly owing to the Istanbul Biennial, has written itself on a map that can be considered the new Grand Tour of the contemporary art world. This map has Venice on it, and Kassel; but it also has Sao Paulo, Cairo and Tirana. Each of these cities has a different identity, and each offers a different experience of viewing art. In the context discussed above, it is interesting to observe the ways in which different cities, which are newcomers to the world of international exhibitions, deal with these exhibitions. I believe Istanbul is a particularly interesting case, given its past associations.

I have written in the past that Istanbul as a "concept" has always been, and always will be an interesting forum for artistic, cultural and social discourse: It is less Western than Western, less Eastern than Eastern; older than many cities, but then younger than many cities, it is surely on the borderline, on the fringe of both what "was" and what "is". It is what a great many cultural differences look like. In this sense, I think it is very difficult and perhaps impossible to fully comprehend. (Not only by others, but also ourselves, the Turks!) Perhaps this is why, in trying to understand it, to define it, to talk about it, we always start off with past or present clichés. But perhaps this is also why it is so interesting, because it offers a challenge and a chance at least as a possibility, to try and understand the dynamics of difference beyond clichés. Istanbul is, after all, a historical jumble of preconceived ideas and reflections.

Today, a population of nearly 15 million inhabitants surrounds the heart of the past's heritage; and the "old city" where many and orientalist fantasy finds its object is very distant from poor shanty towns, rich "satellite" towns or any actual reality. Still, the Istanbul biennials have always been confined to the old sites and nostalgic citations of Istanbul, the romantic city said to "inspire" foreign curators conceiving this international exhibition. Let us note that it is quite interesting how concepts considered passé for artists can be used quite comfortably in some curatorial contexts. Curators of the Istanbul biennials have generally stated openly that Istanbul has inspired them. You don't usually find artists talking about inspiration today!

Setting off with the definite goal of trying to find a place for Istanbul in the global map of the contemporary art world, the biennials in Istanbul didn't really mind being a part of tourism, and its official agenda was (and still is), "to be in the same league with Venice." So much is the interest towards the international showcase that soon, we will even have a chance to visit Rosa Martinez's Venice Biennale exhibition here in Istanbul. However, the latest edition of the Istanbul Biennial seemed to have wandered off from that agenda. Almost an ironical reference to all past biennials seeking the poetry of the city, the ninth biennial sought to address the idea of Istanbul as a post-postmodern city, beyond its nostalgic or romantic aspect. It tried to show the

city growing like an organism despite itself. It didn't use the sites all tourists have an affinity with, but sites that only a curious wanderer, eager to map out the "psychobiography" of a city would come across, perhaps only when lost... In this sense, it was, in many aspects, a kind of homage to the ideas of the International Situationist. It definitely tried to change the agenda, or at least create an agenda. The concept, as you can imagine, was "Istanbul" itself.

In the Istanbul AICA gathering of 2003, I had certain questions regarding the biennial of my city. I was curious, for example, as to what the Istanbul Biennial hoped to achieve beyond a comparison with the Venice Biennale. I wanted to be able to situate the biennial within the context of world biennials according to some idea, agenda, or discourse. I kept on wondering why a critical thinking of our local subjectivities or a greater representation of local art couldn't be reflected in this biennial. Then this year, in 2005, just before the ninth Istanbul Biennial, I had some other questions: now that the title was Istanbul in quotation marks, what would we see? The bewildered reflections of contemporary tourist-artists, or deep reflections into the current problems of a city trying to deal with the problems of any big city on the margins of the Western world? Would the city again confine artists to its exhausted past or present clichés, or would it succeed in proposing itself as a model for other biennials that focus on the context of cities? Would it be context, or confinement for art?

Wandering in the streets of Istanbul during the biennial, I got the answer to some of these questions: unfortunate for artists perhaps, but the city itself offered a much more interesting 'exhibit' than many of the works on show. The two curators had cleverly planned a map in which spectators walking from one site to another would see facets of Istanbul never shown to a tourist, pointing to the really interesting places situated at a crossroad between what used to be 19th century minority culture and 20th century immigrant culture. This was Istanbul's nearer, but still past "past". In one of these interesting sites, Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov showed his *Art and Life*, stating within it that his surroundings were definitely more interesting than his artwork, which was an installation of the empty space itself. Solakov had captured the essence of the biennial, creating his work's context out of that very confinement.

The ninth biennial had overcome "tourism" perhaps, but was still stumbling under the weight of the city. Take Austrian artist Karl-Heinz Klopff, who pinpointed in his *Mind the Steps* the run down public staircases he had found interesting. Or Finnish artist Pilvi Takala, bewildered by the masculine culture in our men's traditional coffee houses it seems, filming herself with some women friends playing cards in one of these places before the curious looks of locals. Or, Iranian artist Solmaz Shahbazi, interviewing people who had created for themselves a rich, sterile "westernized" world in outer city satellite towns. These works exemplify for me what I will call Istanbul's confinement syndrome. Based on a form of bewildered observation, this kind of approach seems to me to be a "neo" form of orientalism, and therefore a contemporary form of cliché when looking at Istanbul. Framing, but only framing such local peculiarities, is no more than pointing at how "Western" or "non-Western" things are in this part of the world. Pointing to these differences may be of some interest to a foreigner, but says nothing to me as an insider. This sort of approach appropriated by Turkish artists is all the more surprising, because it implies a neo-orientalizing of the self. Of the more persuasive works linked to Istanbul, I can quote Phil Collins' *Dünya dinlemiyor* [*the world isn't listening*] a video showing Turkish fans of The Smiths singing in a foreign language. The psychological depth created from a material seemingly so superficial was interesting to watch. Collins' work said a lot about the future generation of Istanbul, captured the spirit of a city's youth and invited viewers to think about the spaces in between when cultures clash. This approach is very different to the mere framing of difference.

Considering the work on show at the ninth biennial, it can be argued that the city definitely took over; and the interest directed towards the city surpassed the art. Despite the move from touristy sites to seemingly more anonymous spaces, the city was no mere context, but again an area or rather "idea" confining the limits. But then, the title was *Istanbul*, wasn't it? It seems that what was on show at the ninth biennial was a curatorial project rather than the works exhibited. Overcoming the city's confinement syndrome by merely reflecting it, did more to change the agenda than any other biennial in Istanbul, and was very much like an artwork in itself!... Using the idea of Istanbul in a different way compared to all the other biennials was the first step.

Using alternative sites and inexpensive exhibition solutions to show the work, thus creating a rather more avant-garde “look”, was the second step. Inviting curators, sociologists, historians and architects to theorize about Istanbul and publishing their writings rather than a colourful, expensive coffee-table catalogue focused on the artwork was the third step. While these three steps – alongside the fact that this was a much younger biennial in terms of artists invited – can be considered as a clue to a possible new direction and a new agenda the biennial is taking, it is interesting to view how a city can still create a Catch-22 situation in which nothing can be done despite it : both for artists and for curators, be it through inspiration, or conceptualization!

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