

From Zero to One

It has been almost a year since Proje4L took off with its inaugural exhibition "Becoming a Place." It was a grueling year for everyone. The whole country was (and still is) on life-support. Years of populist and inexcusable ways of governance could no longer be endured. To start up a museum in these times - as the saying goes here - is like "selling snails in the Muslim quarters." Fortunately, the last year disproved the cliché as our visitors and associates were overwhelmingly supportive of the museum initiative.

A few years ago, I edited a magazine query, which discussed the issue of creating a contemporary art museum in Istanbul. Bart de Baere, a curator colleague had deftly answered, "(while) a contemporary art museum may not be necessary for any culture, it is certainly a most efficient tool." He was right, and the arrival of Proje4L has helped stimulate the contemporary art scene in the city. In addition to exhibitions and performances, Proje4L was able to host lectures by some of the most prominent makers of contemporary exhibitions, and contribute to the normalization relations between here and there.

There are however many issues to consider, other than having a shelter for contemporary art. What are walls and floors after all? A building is just a shell. So, how do you operate a contemporary art museum in a city that has not had an operational modern museum? Do you take the great divide with the past as a historical fact not worth negotiating? How do you cope with the pressures of not having institutions that bear witness to the memory and reassessment of its resident production? How do you reimagine a museum in a city where the idea of a museum is about stockpiling cultural artifacts, predominantly for tourists? In short, how do you make a museum in a city, where museums were mausolea? How do you explain that a museum need not have a collection of artifacts, but cannot do without a collection of exhibitions and ideas? Finally, how do you pursue the complex negotiation of rethinking the museum's existence as both a cosmopolitan institution and its placedness, to its immediate as well as distant community, with novelty, dedication and professionalism?

At a time when companies brand their cultural initiatives under corporate identities, Proje4L did not originate under the founder's name. Nevertheless, the unwavering support of our founder was and still is critical. The trajectory of the institution embraces a family of supporters in the near future to maintain a secular program because we have a responsibility to present work that is critical of the society and/or not in line with populist and neopopulist notions of art, or accepted and favored truths. Institutions must act as specific filters between the work and the public, but the filters must be solely for the necessity and distinction of the artistic proposal. We do not distinguish between national and international, local and global. We only hope to foster openness to new ideas and art without dogmas about what is correct or acceptable, and encourage experimental curatorial approaches to the way the contemporary visual arts are presented. Institutions like ours must support the arrival of anti or proto-institutions and initiatives instead of keeping them at bay. If contemporary art is to prosper and become much more inclusive in this city, it will become so with amicable collaboration.

I can only be grateful to our family of initial and ongoing supporters as well as the supporters of our exhibitions.