

13th ISTANBUL BIENNIAL 14/9-10/11 2013

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## **“Mom, Am I Barbarian?”**

The notion of the public domain as a political forum will be the focal point of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. This highly contested concept will serve as a matrix to generate ideas and develop practices that question contemporary forms of democracy, challenge current models of spatio-economic politics, problematize the given concepts of civilization and barbarity as standardized positions and languages and, above all, unfold the role of contemporary art as an agent that both makes and unmakes what is considered public.<sup>i</sup>

The idea of the public domain has diverse historic, philosophical, theoretical and geo-political roots and definitions. No matter how many interpretations exist, they are fueled by questions of democracy, related to equality, civic rights and political debate. From the existence of an artwork to the freedom of social media and the designation of urban spaces as public, the notion of public domain can cover a vast area where social engagement and political public debate are possible. It is this potentiality of public domain discourse that the exhibition aims to articulate.

### **Fragility: Am I Not A Citizen?**

The title of the Istanbul Biennial “Mom, am I barbarian?” is a quote from the Turkish poet Lale Müldür’s book of the same title.<sup>ii</sup>

As a critique of the highest form of civilization and rationality, which has produced a world of barbarity in its negative sense (through colonial injustice, inequality, repression and violence), many artists of the Western tradition have advocated historically for what was primordial, primitive and irrational (Romanticism, Primitivism, Fauve, Dada and Surrealism for example). This is also true of today. In the face of excessive production, connectivity and complexity in the world, the simple and direct (and their opposites, the over-complicated and convoluted) are espoused as an expression of the desire to start anew. Against the alarming incompetence of cities, governances and regimes, there is an increase in retreats to the countryside to start anew, develop new communities (new collective living experiments) and alternative economic systems.<sup>iii</sup>

The term “barbarian” originates from the ancient Greek word “barbaros”, which referred to non-Greek people and meant “foreigner/stranger”; those who cannot speak the language properly. In the Middle Ages, it also denoted non-Christians, later on non-Westerners. Today it mostly refers to unorthodox behaviors in a specific culture. Certainly, the etymological origin and historical and contemporary meanings

of the word are loaded with strong connotations of exclusion. Strikingly in this context, in ancient Greek, barbarian was the antonym of “polis”, the “citizen”, coming from the polis, the Greek city-state. It is a term that relates inversely to the city and the rights of those within it. What does it mean to be a good citizen today, in Istanbul for example? In the midst of the ongoing urban transformations – the “battleground” – does it mean to conform to the existing status quo or take part in the acts of civil disobedience? Neo-liberal urban policies advocate the implementation of free market parameters that lead to socio-economic Darwinism, which in turn, creates a wilderness, where the powerful beat the weak. Can’t we imagine another social contract in which citizens assume responsibility for each other, even for the weakest ones, those most excluded?

In the current context, what does it mean to be a barbarian? After all, galvanizing the limits of the civilized, the “barbarian” reflects the “absolute other” in society, circumnavigating the frames of identity politics and multicultural discourses. But, what does the reintroduction of barbarity as a concept reveal today? Is it a response to an urge to go beyond already existing formulas, towards the unknown? It may refer to a state of fragility, with potential for radical change (and/or destruction), thus, to the responsibility to take new positions. Through the unique interventions of artists, the biennial exhibition aims to explore further such pressing questions and will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of “publicness” today.

### **Spatio-Economic Justice: "How Is It Possible To Be 'Rich' In A World That Is Steadily Growing Poorer?"<sup>iv</sup>**

The financial crisis that started in 2008 has increased the pressure on the majority of the world’s population, which in turn, mobilized many people and propelled political uprisings and new social movements. Alongside the growing discontent with existing regimes, and frustrations about their governance and ideologies, urban public spaces – streets, squares and parks – have become the stage for the expression of conflict and unrest as seen in ongoing protests all over the world, especially concentrated in the Arab world. In the Western world, the radical anti-corporate social movement Occupy epitomizes such reactions. Although it is not clear for now if these are rehearsals, reformist movements, parallel systems or revolutionary attempts, it is clearly understood that they reclaim the squares and streets for social and spatio-economic justice and equality.

Struggles over rights to public spaces are central for any social movement to challenge the status quo. However, the question remains: what is the specific role of spatial dynamics vis-à-vis the progress of social movements? Do urban public spaces function as a spatial component of the democratic apparatus by aiding or abating critical masses that fuel debate; collective public action; or provide a platform to exercise civic rights? Or are these events very singular experiences? In the current climate, is it possible to imagine social change through open resistance demonstrated on the streets?

These tensions resonate with the growing reactions and protests in Istanbul against its ongoing urban transformation, especially against the modus operandi through which urban transformation is taking place.

### **Agoraphobia: "Istanbul Is Ready, Target 2023"<sup>v</sup>**

"(In ancient Greek) freedom was understood as being manifest in certain, by no means all, human activities, and that these activities could appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them. The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together—the agora, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper."<sup>vi</sup>

The dream, expressed through the "Istanbul Is Ready, Target 2023" slogan, which began in the 1980s to assume a global corporate style, was tinged with the spirit of an Ottoman revival starting from the 2000s and projects Istanbul's future as the center of the Islamic world, to be achieved by the 2020s. This foresees Istanbul as a conflation of styles resulting in a visual and urban culture in between Dubai and Singapore.

Urban transformation in Istanbul began as a drive to carve out a place in the new globally shaped commercial and financial geography.<sup>vii</sup> It corresponds to the adaptation of a neo-liberal economic model following the 1980 military coup d'état. Promoting 'survival of the fittest', the vision and model for Istanbul has been fashioned in line with free market ideology and global trends.<sup>viii</sup>

Creating economic vitality and extra employment, the regeneration of the cities and transformation of the housing sector has been an antidote globally for ongoing financial crises. However, in each crisis, Istanbul has become not only physically bigger, but also more densely populated through increased immigration waves.<sup>ix</sup>

This period saw the legalization and transformation of gecekondus (the ad hoc settlements of the immigrants/non-citizens or "barbarians") into multi-storey blocks (repeating the same construction qualities of the 'gecekondu' houses) and their incorporation into the formal real estate market. These neighborhoods have become the epicenter of neo-liberal urbanism.<sup>x</sup>

Currently, there are approximately 48 mega urban transformation projects in development including a "crazy" canal project next to the Bosphorus (two new cities, each to inhabit one million people are planned), a third bridge across the Bosphorus and further opening up the forest, agriculture and water basin areas in the north of the city for new settlements.<sup>xi</sup> Two of the projects are emblematic of the spatial politics underlying the whole transformation process, and have been the direct focus of political demonstrations: the transformation of Taksim Square and the construction of a new assembly ground for political rallies at Yenikapı,<sup>xii</sup> the designs of which suggest a fear of the assembly of people, an agoraphobic policy.<sup>xiii</sup> Does this translate to a fear of public speech, freedom of expression and fear of alternative political public forum?<sup>xiv</sup>

Taking Istanbul, and especially certain neighborhoods, such as Tarlabası, Sulukule, Fener-Balat or Başakşehir as a case study, commissioned projects in the biennial will explore such transformation processes, which provided very little room, if any, for grass roots, or ground-up negotiations.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Public Domain As A Battle-Ground: Conflict Or Consensus?**

The conception of a unified and consensualized public domain facilitated by a homogenized single public united under a common will, which was articulated by Jürgen Habermas, has been revisited, revised and criticized for several decades. New concepts such as “multiple publics”, “counter-publics”, “proletarian public sphere” or “civic space” have been coined since to redefine the term “public” and “public space” in a contemporary context. Despite the differences, most of the models highlight the importance of consensus between diverse minorities, communities, networks and societies. Contrarily, Chantal Mouffe unfolds the role of “dominant consensus” in the conception of public domain by instead proposing an “agonistic” model: “public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.”<sup>xvi</sup> Consequently, art can play a role “by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities. (...) According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, which makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”<sup>xvii</sup>

In response to the perceived consensus, is the *raison d'être* of an art project in the public domain to add more conflict to a specific context in order to make this “battle” and the conflict visible? Taking democracy as an attitude questioning the “certainty of the foundations of social life” rather than a governance model, we see the task of democracy as “not settling but sustaining the conflict”.<sup>xviii</sup> Thus, today, can we claim that any artwork in the public domain should be able to situate itself critically, challenge the status quo, and specifically unfold the ideological structures we all are living in? Is it possible that art can provide another way of experiencing the world outside of what is presented as the norm, or the only possible alternative?

### **Between Agency And Action**

In the face of urgency, many artists joined the Occupy movement and many others support the struggles and reactions especially (but not exclusively) against neoliberal urban transformation (i.e. Sulukule Studio, Taksim Platform in Istanbul or Right to the City movement in Hamburg). Simultaneously, the discussion around the autonomy and instrumentalization of art has gained a momentum. But how can art be a part of this process of rethinking freedom and equality spatially, in terms of spatio-economic justice? Does art-as-public-domain and activism share the same goal of changing society? In the face of urgency, can art and its institutions be mobilized as a useful political tool? Or will art lose its power in the collision?<sup>xix</sup>

Current artistic practices expand from hybrid trials to radical extremes, experimenting with unorthodox (even barbaric) languages, forms and processes,

sometimes acting as “oxygen bubbles” in reality or as inter-subjective agents acting in the symbolic realm. Many aim to create critical hubs in society. However, there are no ready-made formulations. In each case, a new formula or alchemy is needed. The Biennial will be the site for such experimentations.

From aesthetics (i.e. ‘creating a beautiful neighborhood’) to civility (i.e. ‘for a more civilized urban life’), the humanistic discourses of art and democracy have been appropriated, utilized and abused as the legitimization for all kinds of violent actions by the authorities (such as the removal of low-income citizens from the central locations of the city).<sup>xx</sup> The exhibition aims to scrutinize the overarching ‘common’ interests, ‘win-win’ situations and politics of representation to create a public domain, autonomous to official slogans and discourses, in order to be able to discuss the way we are governed and forced to live. Furthermore, it will reflect on ways art can act as an autonomous field and yet interfere with the social, political and economic changes in society.

While artistic practices that claim public domain become more prevalent, simultaneously under the spell of privatization, art institutions have become dependent on private funding and commercial support. As this increases, it has generated growing pains: in certain cases, the contemporary art world serves as the epicenter of the distribution of neoliberal culture and mechanisms. Our research for the Biennial extends to an investigation of how the “booming” art world, specifically its market, functions in Istanbul and elsewhere, and what traces of this impact we might find.

### **Public Alchemy : Public Programme**

“And yet, we are all in the same boat, or at least same flotilla. To use Neurath’s metaphor, the question is how to rebuild it while we are cruising on it. Or rather, how can we make it navigate when it is made of a fleet of diverging but already intertwined barges? In other words, can we overcome the multiplicity of ways of assembling and disassembling, and yet raise the question of the one common world?”<sup>xxi</sup>

Together with transformations in governance and ideology globally, the concept of “public”, and alongside, the role of art and its institutions has shifted drastically. The public programme of the Biennial will focus on this shift, especially on the notion of “making publics”, and will pose the question of “one common world” in a contemporary context, as raised by Bruno Latour.

Being an integral part of the exhibition, the public programme will bring artistic production and knowledge production together almost 7 months prior to the exhibition to create an open platform. Artists, architects, planners, theoreticians, activists, poets and musicians will come together to unfold these critical issues for discussion within the context of Istanbul. There will be an online platform and a workshop for emerging art critics on criticism and writing. (See the public programme for further information)

Additionally, there will be a special Biennial programme in the Istanbul Film Festival that will be held in April 2013, articulating the concepts of barbarity, civic awakening and the city (See the film programme).

### **Rendering Live: Venues**

Focusing on urban public spaces in Istanbul, the Biennial will use public buildings left temporarily vacant by urban transformation. These may include courthouses, schools or military structures, post offices, former transportation hubs like train stations, ex-industrial sites such as warehouses, dockyards and the very contested Taksim Square and Gezi Park. Furthermore, the hallmarks of current urbanism such as shopping malls, hotels and office-residential towers are considered as sites for artistic interventions. Due to the uncertainties related to the highly speculative nature of urban transformation in Istanbul, the allocation of these spaces is quite precarious. In this sense, the Biennial will share the common experience of precarity that the city's dwellers experience everyday. Whilst art functions in the symbolic realm, it can also directly interfere with reality, the concurrent urban transformation of Istanbul.

Certainly, biennials have been criticized for being catalysts of these transformations in the name of city branding and marketing. Or they have drawn criticism for being sites of political struggles and representations. Yet the open format of biennial exhibitions has the potential to produce new understandings and experiences of the public domain and forms of "publicness". The 13th Istanbul Biennial will take this challenge to activate a public forum to open up new avenues of thought and imagination.

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<sup>i</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche coins this much needed term, "spatio-economic" in the field of urban politics and human rights. She brings together related but structurally two different fields in *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press (1996).279.) to create a tool to situate spatial politics economically.

<sup>ii</sup> Müldür, Lale. *Anne, Ben Barbar Mıyım?* (Mom, Am I Barbarian?). Istanbul: L&M Yayınları (2006). Müldür posed this question in the text with the same title, in which she discussed and responded to the criticism of Turkish poetry after the '80s that she identified with 'their existential time when Turkey was caught by the center of gravity of the West, from which it may never come out again'. Referring to the idea of synthesis in the ongoing discussion, she finalizes her text with the same question: "Mom, am I barbarian? I wish I would have had no records in the archives! - If you don't understand the light and the high salons of the 'Orient', yes!" (115, 117)

<sup>iii</sup> While scholars like Manuel Castels together with other researchers like Amalia Cardenas and Joana Conill are working on the networks of alternative practices that are creating a sustainable, decentralized economy of solidarity, Laura Burkhalter, an architect at the Institute for Bionomic Urbanism in California, and her friends created their own communes in the countryside to start an alternative collective living model that recuperates the critiques of the '60s communes.

<sup>iv</sup> Franco Berardi asked this critical question while he was articulating the issue of how the Autonomia (the social movement active in Italy in the '70s) can be reassessed today. He is positing this question together with "how is it possible to be peaceful and happy in a world that is increasingly caught up in violence and war?" Unfortunately, the second question includes an explanation for the first one. (Van Weelden, Willem. *Erotic Uprising, or the Schooling of the Body: An Interview with Franco Berardi*. Open 23: Autonomy.23. (2012).34.

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<sup>v</sup> This phrase has been used as the official branding for Istanbul by the State and Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul.

<sup>vi</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books (1963).30-31.

<sup>vii</sup> The decline of the authority of nation states along with the phenomenon of economic globalization has led to the emergence of cities as centers of the new world order and their rising autonomy. "Global Cities" like New York, Tokyo, Sao Paulo and London have surpassed their geography and nation-state and have become the heart of a new commercial and financial geography realized in the midst of the digitalization of knowledge and the information revolution and became centers of arts and culture as well (Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions 1: Personal Geographies, Global Maps Conceptual Framework. (2002). In reference to Saskia Sassen, "The Global City: Strategic Site/ New Frontier". Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City. Engin F. Isin, ed.; Sassen,Saskia. "Whose City is It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims". 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997).

<sup>viii</sup> The relocations within the present urban structure, re-placement and the development of new areas (especially aimed to meet the new functions emerging from the finance,service, consulting, information technologies,media and tourism sectors) led to the restructuring of business, finance, media and transportation centers of Istanbul,besides the construction of radically largescale urban projects (new dockyards, ports,airports, bridges, boulevards, highways, underground subway systems, etc.). In order to educate a workforce to serve Istanbul's new 'global' identity, many new private universities and institutions were added to the city's repertoire. Accompanying these structural innovations were five star hotels, fancy street cafes, specialized restaurants, designer stores, clubs playing world music, gigantic shopping malls, movie theaters, private museums, art galleries and institutions, festivals and international art exhibitions designed with expectations to meet the life styles of the global elite and specifically the investors (Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions 1: Personal Geographies, Global MapsConceptual Framework (2002)).

<sup>ix</sup> In the '80s, the population of Istanbul was around 3 million (2,772,708), today the population is officially around 14 million(13,624,240). "End of 2011 Results of the Address-Based Population Record System".TÜİK. <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaber-Bultenleri.do?id=10736>. Dec. 2012. "1980Population Census". TÜİK. <http://kutuphane.tuik.gov.tr/pdf/0013683.pdf>.1980.Dec. 2012.

<sup>x</sup> Over the past 30 years, the widening gaps between social strata led to the formation of disparate living spaces co-existing within the city. The urban middle and upper socio-economic groups built satellite cities(gated communities) in the newly developing Istanbul suburbs, lower socio-economic groups migrating from rural Turkey developed provisional living spaces constructed from found or affordable materials creating gecekondus both in the suburbs and also in the most exclusive parts of the city. These informally populated areas were developed in addition to the already existing settlements in industrial areas, which were built by Anatolian immigrants, who came to the city in the late '50s to work in the newly established industries. As industry has been moved out of the city centers, these slum areas have consequently become some of the main sites of gentrification.

<sup>xi</sup> The legal ground has been prepared through amendments to the Constitution using the earthquake as a pretext for all. 2B Law for The Transformation of The Forest Areas has just been issued in 2012.

<sup>xii</sup> Taksim Square is the center of the centers, the most vibrant social, cultural and entertainment hub of the city hosting two million pedestrians daily. But more strikingly, as a part of its symbolic value throughout the Republican period, Taksim represents a history of political gatherings and protests nationwide. It is thought that the new design, in which the vehicle traffic will be transferred underground with a complex system of viaducts and tunnels,will limit drastically the pedestrian access in and out the square. Additionally, a gigantic shopping mall including a cultural center, most probably a city museum, has been planned to replace Gezi Park, a very social green zone, which provides a retreat for the city dwellers from the intense tempo of the city. The neo-liberal formula of the new shopping and cultural center is imagined as the revival of the Ottoman Artillery Barracks that was located at the current place of Gezi Park till 1940 when Proust proposed a city park instead. Recently, the park has been hosting political gatherings and picnics of diverse activist groups under the umbrella of Taksim Platform, reacting against the transformation plans of the square and the park. This plan not

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only sees the commercialization of this highly 'political' space, but also supplies a spatial control mechanism that limits the gathering of people. The plans of the new 'agora' at Yenikapi, which will be constructed on the reclaimed land from the sea in the form of a mini peninsula, whose borders are defined by the contours of the sea, seems again spatially designed to control the access and mobility of any demonstrators.

<sup>xiii</sup> The ancient Greek term 'agora' can refer both to an assembly of people and to the place of assembly, depending on the context in which it is used. Paul Carter discusses the use of agoraphobia (fear of crowd or fear of open space) by psychiatrists and urban critics: "If the psychiatric tradition emphasizes the crowd, the phenomenologically inclined urbanists stress the place where crowds gather." (Carter, Paul. *Repressed Spaces, The Poetics of Agoraphobia*. London: Reaktion Books. (2002).16.)

<sup>xiv</sup> With the same token, many internet sites like YouTube are restricted and censored by the State.

<sup>xv</sup> After the 2001 crisis, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ), the main protagonist of this process, became the sole state authority to allocate planning rights, where they enabled the selling and building on previously designated public land through partnerships with private entrepreneurs. Since then urban transformation in Istanbul has been controlled by very few but very powerful agents, who manage almost the entire decision-making process relating to urban space. (See also İlhan Tekeli's unpublished article "Türkiye Yürürlüğe Konulan Kentsel Dönüşüm Üzerine Konuşmayı Sürdürebilmelidir" ("Turkey Needs to Sustain the Discussion on the Urban Transformation").(2012) in which he articulates the modus operandi of the urban transformation.)

<sup>xvi</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, *Art & Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*. 1.2 (Summer 2007) <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>. Jul. 2012.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> See endnote 1. pp. 270, 272.

<sup>xix</sup> Also see: Phillips, Andrea, Erdemci, Fulya, eds. "Actors, Agents and Attendants II, Social Housing- Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice". Amsterdam/Berlin: SKOR and Sternberg Press (2012) and Thompson, Nato, ed. "Living As Form, Socially Engaged Art From 1991 – 2011". New York/Cambridge: Creative Time Books/MIT (2012).

<sup>xx</sup> From the Sulukule neighborhood, 300 Roma-origin families were moved to Taşoluk, which is 35 km far from the center, and only two families were able to survive in that neighborhood. The Istanbul 4th Administrative Court has canceled the Fatih Municipality's renovation project in Sulukule neighborhood, finding that the project is not beneficial to the public, on the 13 June 2012, just a few weeks before the new villas were distributed to their new owners. The ruling, which said the construction of new villa-style houses must be halted, came after a four-year court case brought by the Istanbul branch of the Chamber of Architects, the Chamber of Urban Planners and the Sulukule Roma Culture and Solidarity Association.

<sup>xxi</sup> Latour, Bruno. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik – or How to Make Things Public". Reader of Bucharest Biennale, Pavillion 15 (2010).213.