

Art Info Interview:

1)- What triggered your decision to focus on "the public domain as a political forum" for the 2013 Istanbul Biennial?

Globally, there is an increase in the reactions and protests against the existing regimes, governance models and ideologies especially after the 2008 financial crisis that sharpened the limits and raised the pressure on the majority of the world's population. This triggered the political uprisings and new social movements globally. This is also true for Istanbul: for instance, the ongoing urban transformation, and especially its modus operandi, leaves almost no room for grass root, bottom up negotiations, which in turn increases the tension and reactions. Collective expression of the unrest and discontent in the streets turned urban spaces to a stage, more significantly, to a public domain where social engagement and political discussion is possible. However, in most cases, the political public forum is dominated by hegemonic discourses and projects that repress the voices of the weakest, the most excluded ones (as articulated in Chantal Mouffe's 'agonistic' model of public domain [i]).

In the face of urgency, locally and globally we take this highly contested concept of public domain as a political public forum as the focus of Istanbul Biennial to be able to discuss the new forms of democracy, current politics of spatio-economic justice, the given conceptions of barbarity and civilization and the role of art in this context. Thus, the 13th Istanbul Biennial aims to open up the question of creating (taking) new positions and the possibility of construction of new subjectivities to be able to disrupt the dominant hegemony and activate a public domain, a public debate, where "giving voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of existing hegemony" is at least a possibility.

[i] Chantal Mouffe, Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces, Art & Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods, Vol.1 No: 2, Summer 2007

2)- How much is this thematic approach informed by the current situation in Turkey? In the Islamic world at large?

The theme of the biennial is certainly informed by the current situation in Turkey and the 'Arab world'. However, this fragile condition that carries the potentiality of a radical transformation but also a radical destruction is not unique to this geo-political region or to the so-called 'Islamic world'. The political protests and reactions in the Greece, Spain or the USA (Occupy movement) exemplify this global situation.

3)- Can you tell me about the title "Mom, am I barbarian?"

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.

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. Hence, the given conception of barbarity and civilization implies strong exclusion and binary oppositions between different cultures. In Muldur’s line, with the aid of the apparent naivety of the question, the word ‘barbar’ is stripped off the standardized geo-political positions and the progressive evaluation of cultures/civilizations and becomes a personal question. We can transcribe this to other questions such as “Do I have a language? Am I being heard? Understood? Do I have a say?”

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, immediate 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 experiences) and alternative economic systems.

But, 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? Through the unique interventions of artists, the biennial exhibition aims to explore further these questions and will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of “publicness” today.

4)- Could you share with our readers some of the biennial's flagship artist projects?

It is too early for us to uncover artists’ projects at the moment, but I can draw the very broad lines of the exhibition: The 13th Istanbul Biennial includes indoor exhibitions and site & context responsive interventions and performances in the urban public spaces. It will feature current experimental (barbaric) practices that point out to a new formulations or alchemy, but also, will present the historic positions that opened up the discussions on art practices articulating urban and architectural interventions and art-in-public-domain in the 70s.

As an integral part of the biennial exhibition, “Public Alchemy”, the public

program will research and open up the main questions of the exhibition to discussion by bringing the knowledge and artistic productions together starting from February 8th and finalizing in November the closing week of the biennial.

5)- The last edition, curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa, experimented with the idea of a biennial freed from an overarching theme. You've gone back to an earlier model. Do you believe it is the most effective format a biennial can take?

The earlier editions of the Venice Biennials (before 1972) did not have any overarching themes. So, with the exception of elimination of the national pavilions from most of the models, I don't subscribe to a 'progressive' understanding in the models of the biennial exhibitions. Furthermore, I see the theme of the last Istanbul Biennial, "*Untitled(12th Istanbul Biennial)*, 2011", based on the Felix Gonzales Torres' oeuvre a very strong statement (a return to art as its reference). Besides, the exhibition was highly organized (also spatially) around strong sub-themes like "*Untitled (Abstraction)*", "*Untitled (Ross)*", "*Untitled (Passport)*", "*Untitled (History)*" and "*Untitled (Death by Gun)*".

For me, different models co-exist without signifying an advanced or outdated approach. Open format of biennials in general, but specifically, of the Istanbul Biennial proposes diverse possibilities that the curators can employ in accordance with their aims.

My preference to elaborate a thematic approach for the 13th Istanbul Biennial comes from the necessity of creating a close dialogue with the participants; artists, poets, activists and other players of the city to intervene and comment on a live situation. Rather than being a commentary on an already past situation, the upcoming Istanbul Biennial is precariously rendering live concurrently with the ongoing urban transformation in Istanbul. For activating the dialogue with the participants and facilitating debate and anchoring at the specific junctures, the theme and conceptual framework serve as a working paper that we can work collectively through different expressive means.

As mentioned before, the overarching theme "Mom, am I barbarian?" is a quote from a poet's text. I specifically aimed to quote from literature, an artwork, to start the communication through a poetic invention to open up third space between the theoretical and practical axis of the conceptual framework.

6)- Your statement of intent includes an investigation of the way the booming art market functions in Istanbul and elsewhere. Could you summarize how much it has changed, and how you plan to tackle this issue within the biennial?

In the last couple of decades, together with transformations in governance and ideology globally, the concept of "public", and alongside, the role of art and its institutions has shifted drastically. Many art institutions have lost their privileged

positions in the society that allowed their alternative ways of operating and existing and have been subjected to the conditions that set by the free market parameters, thus, have become more corporate in their administration culture and marketing oriented in their relation with the diverse audiences. This situation not only had an impact in their acquisition policies, programs but also selection criteria, thus, the production of art. Many established museums and art institutions feel obliged to advocate 'block-buster exhibitions' to be able to compete for audiences as well as for their year-end reports. This may be seen as a democratization of the distribution of art since such popular exhibitions might attract larger publics, however, this question persists: whose tastes are being distributed, why and to whom? So, the so-called 'booming' is not only related to the market but the art world proper in general. Similarly, art markets in different geo-political regions have promoted the professionalization of the art production and begun to replace the function of 'art community' with certain exceptions such as Argentina and Poland for instance.

In Turkey, specifically in Istanbul, the picture is quite different than the other places, especially in Europe. As there was no structural public funding for art in Turkey, the formation and expansion of the market and corporatization of the institutions have worked for the favor of the art world to a certain extent. While the sustainability of art institutions was secured through private or corporate sponsorship, new collector profiles have been added to the scene. Most importantly, together with the expansion and globalizing of the market, some artists have gained a financial ground to sustain their livelihood. However, these favorable developments have their setbacks, too. The same problematic conditions that emerged in certain European, British and American cases have their counterparts in Istanbul. The professionalization of art production and corporatization of modus operandi of the art institutions and market also lead to uneven developments in the structure of the Istanbul art world, and in the final analysis, have an impact on the marginalization of the out-of-market artistic ethos, practices and experiments.

Certainly, we are aware of the depth and complicated nature of this topic. For that reason, the "Public Capital", the third public program event of the biennial is solely spared to articulate this subject. Likewise, in the exhibition, there will be works and performances by the artists who specifically concentrated on this subject.

7)- You were among the first directors of the biennial, between 1994 and 2000. How has it changed as an institution?

I started to work in the Biennial in 1994 when the Istanbul art world had already begun to go through a series of transformations. The establishment of the model (single curator selected by an international advisory board) and funding program (a hybrid model consists of private/corporate sponsorship and international funding) of the Biennial has realized during this time. Such structural changes have been culminated in the institutionalization of the Istanbul Biennial after

2000s. While the Istanbul Biennial has become one of the most important art events globally, the results of the ongoing influence of Istanbul Biennial on the dynamics of local and international art scenes have become visible in the 2010s.

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