

## **Timeout**

**1-The decision to take the concept of the public domain as the theme for the 13th Istanbul Biennial now seems to have been a very prescient one. Have the protests and other recent political/social developments in Istanbul shaped the content or presentation of the biennial? Did they influence the decision to make the biennial free of charge this year?**

When we were presenting the biennial conceptual framework in the first press conference of the 13th İstanbul Biennial on the 8th of January, I mentioned that this is a draft, a departure point and a conversation piece for the discussion with the artists and will be evolved further in due course. For me, this was a methodical process of any conceptual frame for any exhibition. Certainly, I didn't expect such a radical shift as the Gezi resistance that transforms the whole reality.

What is happening in Istanbul and Turkey right now is larger than life and certainly, it is not comparable to any exhibition or art event. We are all very surprised and full of hope again. The 'agonistic' public sphere, which was merely a question of probability before, has been split open with such a creative energy that the streets have begun to talk, sing, dance, walk and interact. The questions posed in the conceptual framework of the İstanbul Biennial—which is directly related to public domain as a political forum and urban spaces as the spatial component of the democratic apparatus—have alchemically unfolded and entered into the domain of experience.

When we re-read the conceptual framework of the biennial after the Gezi events, we can see that such issues have been already articulated in it. Besides, the art works and projects were selected in accordance with such considerations and criteria. However, after the Gezi occupation, the biennial has been reflecting on such issues. For the 13th İstanbul Biennial, we had focused on the most contested urban public spaces in Istanbul such as Gezi Park, Taksim Square, Tarlabaşı

Boulevard, Karaköy and Sulukule neighbourhood that were not threatened with the risk of further gentrification through the presence of the biennial. Before the Gezi protests, we had planned to carry out a number of projects that would intervene in urban public spaces. However, when we questioned what it meant to realize art projects with the permissions of the same authorities that do not allow the free expression of its citizens, we understood that the context was going through a radical shift that would sideline the reason d'être of realising these projects. Accomplishing these projects that articulate the question of public domain in urban public spaces under these circumstances might contradict their essence and purpose; we are thus convinced that 'not realizing' them is a more meaningful statement than having them materialize under such conditions. Therefore, we decided to move away from the urban public spaces. When I was structuring the exhibition before Gezi resistance, I never intended to commission or include the spontaneous protest interventions and performances that happen on the streets, as I believe that they shouldn't be domesticated or tamed in the institutional frames to which they are reacting. However, I was thinking that it was possible to highlight them if they were there already. So, I believe that by withdrawing from urban public spaces, thus marking the presence through the absence, we can contribute to the space of freedom, to the creative and participatory demonstrations and forums, instigated by the Gezi resistance.

Our moving away from urban public spaces led to a serious challenge regarding venues, but we were able to overcome this in a short time through establishing collaborations with art institutions such as ARTER and SALT Beyoğlu, and an independent artist initiative, 5533. Furthermore, from the outset, our aspiration was to open this edition of the biennial to everyone. With the decision to withdraw from urban public spaces following Gezi events, we have managed to make this edition of the biennial free of charge with the hope of creating a publicness, which is in line with the conceptual framework of the biennial.

## **2-How do you think the recent events in the city will affect the way visitors respond to the biennial and the work that will be on display?**

I can imagine that the audience will be quite surprised how the works in the biennial are fostering the new debates that become public together with Gezi. I believe that certain art works (including poetry or other forms of literature or film, etc) have the capacity to create such a transformative experience opening up the possibility of utopic moments in our daily routines. So, I believe that such art projects may have paved the road in the formation of collective imagination and action that we have been experiencing through Gezi resistance. However, I don't think that we can compare art projects' impact with activism. Though they may have the same aim of changing the society in the face of urgency or learn from each other, they cannot be evaluated with the same criteria or the form of impact.

The high level of energy, tension and conflictuality has been in the air for such a long time, much before the Gezi resistance broke out. For that reason, the selection of the works and the development of the new projects were realized in such a context. However, certain projects we needed to rethink and revised. Actually, I didn't want to ask artists to comment on Gezi directly as it is too early to digest or react, and thus, might lead to premature outcomes. And yet, some artists have already hinted or foreseen such questions in their works, and like to extend their ideas to connect with these new political questions raised by Gezi resistance such as Annika Erikson, Hector Zamora, Halil Altindere, Maider Lopez, Christoph Schaefer and others.

Furthermore, as I mentioned briefly above, "barbarian" refers to languages, especially the ones that we don't know or yet to invent to call a new world that has just been appearing in the horizon. We all feel that the existing theories and formulas fall short to define new ways/models of living together and governance, but art can open up the possibility for the collective imagination. Therefore, art works in the biennial exhibition that are calling or intending to create novel

unorthodox languages (or learn the unknowns ones) can help to understand the new collective culture and languages of the Resistance that have been appearing like a nebula.

I believe that the biennial exhibition can function, not as a tool for an immediate change, but as a process of thinking, besides all, as a possible way of constructing new subjectivities symbolized by the 'barbarian'.

**3-The biennial has made what seems like a strong effort to engage with and critique the urban transformation of Istanbul, but the organization has itself been criticized for its sponsorship by Koç Holding due to the company's construction-business interests. Do you think this sponsorship presents a potential conflict given the biennial's focus? If so, how have you been working to navigate this, and how have you responded to the criticism?**

We cannot assume a totally abstracted, 'clean' space for contemporary art or any other forms of art like cinema or even literature. The art world is a part of the system and functions within the same parameters that all of us are sharing. We all have smart phones or computers that maybe in their production child laborers are working. But, this doesn't stop our using smart phones, even to organize the protests.

As an established art institution with an independent international advisory board structure, Istanbul Biennial is able to create a free zone for curatorial practices and concepts. And that is how I was able to bring out my critical reflections in the biennial concept and selection of artistic practices. I took biennial machine as an apparatus that one can use for different reasons. In my case, I used it as a critical machine questioning and unfolding such systems from within.

As I mentioned in the conceptual framework of the biennial, we see that 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. Our research for the Biennial extends to an investigation of the relation of art and Capital, furthermore, how the “booming” art world, specifically its market, functions in Istanbul and elsewhere, and what traces of this impact we might find.

For artists, the negotiation with the institutions and the sponsorship systems is a part of their exhibition making practices. I invited artists such as Hito Steryl and Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Hieremans, who even extend this practice into their artistic productions. Hence, they will share their critical assessments on the relation of art and Capital, such risky grounds without giving up their political positions.

**4-Initial press materials indicated that disused urban public spaces would serve as venues for the biennial, but the venues disclosed thus far are more traditional art spaces. What problems cropped up in finding or working with abandoned spaces as potential venues? Will any such spaces be included among the final biennial venues?**

In the first question, I answered this one, too.

**5-Why did you decide to include the "Writing on Art" workshop as part of this year's program? How would you characterize the current state of art criticism in Turkey? What needs to be done to develop it further?**

I think we need to bring out a critique of criticism. Most of the time, the art criticism is misunderstood or taken literally and thought that it should bring out what is ‘wrong’ or ‘not working’ in an artwork or exhibition. But first of all, art criticism is about to unfold what the art work or exhibition intends to deliver. For that reason, we should develop tools and learn the research methods for a close reading of the works and exhibitions in specific contexts to be able to bring out a critical edge to them.

Briefly speaking, my proposal is to move away from the clichés and stiff formulas.