

In the “Urban Field Speakers” programme organized by Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, I would like to focus on the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial<sup>i</sup> that overlaps with the most striking –and unique- civic awakening that we have experienced in the Summer of 2013 in Istanbul and other cities in Turkey. They do not only overlap in terms of time but the questions posed by the biennial on the public domain and the cities as the spatial component of the democratic apparatus lie in the center of the Gezi resistance that was triggered by the plan to transform the Gezi Park in Taksim Square to a shopping mall in the form of Ottoman Military barracks.

The title of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, “Mom, am I barbarian?” is a quote from Lale Müldür’s book of the same name.<sup>ii</sup> The conceptual framework I developed under this heading is constructed along three axes: The theoretical axis asks how we can rethink the concept of multiple publics and public domain as a political forum in the light of current conditions. We know that it is not possible to speak of a homogeneous public or of people uniting under a single will. Departing from this point, in the conceptual framework we had asked how these different; and in fact, often contradictory, multiple worlds could come together, coexist, and act collectively. In this sense, the Gezi experience – within a short period– translated this utopian question into the field of experience on local level.

We had proposed to treat the concept of public sphere – proposed by Jürgen Habermas and revised, critiqued and reformulated since the 1990s – as a political forum, and to define any medium which would enable this as public domain: from urban public spaces to social media and works of art. The Gezi experience was prolific in this context. In addition to the forums that are continuing in neighborhood parks, the nebulous culture of Gezi is being discussed in theoretical and intellectual fields as well. The visual manifestations of this culture are also included in the exhibition.

As the praxis site of the theoretical axis, we focused on the spatial components of the democratic apparatus: by investigating urban public spaces in Istanbul, and especially the ongoing, unbridled assault of urban transformation, we considered the spatial manifestations of the concept of freedom together with the concept of agoraphobia. The Gezi resistance, and the public protests exposed that the authorities suffer a strong sense of agoraphobia. Instead of listening and responding to the desperate voices in the streets, they preferred to violently repress these voices by police force (thousands of people were permanently injured and seven people died). For this reason, we began to question what it means to realize art projects in the urban public spaces with the permission of the same authorities that do not respect their own citizens’ freedom of speech.

Drawing on the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, in the conceptual framework we put forward that the *raison d’être* of any art project in the public domain is to open up the conflict and to make it visible and debatable. However, Gezi had already opened up the conflict and made it public. To collaborate with the authorities would have given them the opportunity to regain their lost prestige and legitimacy after Gezi. This would have led to the instrumentalization of art in favor of the authorities. In order not to collaborate with these authorities, we decided to withdraw from the urban public spaces and to continue the discussion in the exhibition venues. In this way, like John Cage’s silent composition *4’33”*, we aimed to point out presence through absence: by asking the audience to listen to the voices of the streets.

Müldür’s title “Mom, am I barbarian?” fits into the third axis, which is the sphere of the imagination. It reintroduces the concept of barbarian in today’s context. From a linguistic perspective, ‘barbarian’ is a definition that marks those who cannot speak the Greek language, and therefore, those who are not citizens. In fact, phonetically, the word barbarian was an onomatopoeia for a language that people in ancient Greece did not understand. In other words, a language they did not comprehend, the language of the ‘other’, the alien, the most excluded and suppressed. From another angle, it is the language of those who are

marginalized, illegal, and aspire to debunk or change the system: the recluse, outcast, bandit, anarchist, revolutionary, or artist.

In the exhibition, out of 88 artists, 50 artists are from non-Western geographies -and histories- including the Eastern Europe. This was not out of courtesy, but, was an outcome of my attempt to anchor the exhibition spatially in time.

Like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, approaching the future without losing sight of the past can be a method to mark the temporality of the exhibition. In the context of the Istanbul biennial I endeavored to crack open a historical aperture between today and the end of sixties and seventies, in terms of social change, urban transformation and artistic practices.

The most significant common denominator between these two periods is the quest for 'another world'. These decades also witnessed artists developing new artistic practices challenging urban transformation and gentrification processes in cities such as Paris, New York and Amsterdam. Therefore, for this exhibition, novel artistic practices from 60s and 70s were brought together side by side with more recent practices such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles with Amal Kenawy; Gordon Matta-Clark with LaToya Ruby Frazier; and Stephan Willats with Jose Antonio Vega Macotella. Furthermore, through the practices of Academia Ruchu in urban public spaces and specifically Jiří Kovanda's performance Theatre (1976), it became possible to contextualise the current performative protests like Standing Man by Erdem Gunduz within the art historical backdrop of the 1970s.

Geographically speaking, due to the education and governmental policies and support, artists from the North America, England and Northern Europe have more possibilities and experience in the field of art-in-public domain. However, when we look what is problematic in the cities and in the urban public spaces in last couple of decades, mostly the Southern hemisphere and the Eastern part of the world appear on the map: Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, India, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, etc. Hence, in order to reflect the geo-politics of the globe at present and anchor time spatially, in the exhibition I privileged these geographies where the question of public domain and transformation of cities has been a burning issue for the last couple of decades.

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<sup>i</sup> For the conceptual framework, please see: <http://13b.iksv.org/en>

For the e-guide which includes my intro text and documentation on participating artists, please see the website/publications: [http://cdn.iksv.org/media/content/files/13BGuide\\_final.pdf](http://cdn.iksv.org/media/content/files/13BGuide_final.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> "Anne, ben barbar mıyım? / Mom, am I barbarian?", L&M Publishing, 2006, Istanbul.