

Turkish Art Has Its Own Politics

Recently at Istanbul’s Rodeo gallery, artist Banu Cennetoglu presented a work titled “20.08.2010”: a six-volume set of books comprised of virtually every newspaper printed in Turkey on that chosen day. An image repeated with different headlines immediately brings to mind Roland Barthes’ classic essay “The Photographic Message”. Appearing blunt and simple, the work is an idea rendered in a specific form, yet its relevance is difficult to understate. Turkey, as threadbare as it might sound, is made up of a fascinatingly complex set of contradictions. Its printed newspaper dailies are vast in number and often working in many veins of propaganda. Against this, Banu’s straightforward approach is perhaps the only effort that nears a true daily record of events and viewpoints. Here a commentary is set forth that is not involved in pushing an agenda but rather on evaluating issues, allowing them to be viewed from multiple angles. Following the events of September 21, 2010, in Istanbul’s Tophane district, “20.08.2010” proved its relevance as an “objective” stance and demonstrated that the job of art as a tool for social critique is a delicate if not infinitely complicated task.

THE HATE HITS THE FAN

The evening of September 21st was the season’s gala event for a handful of art galleries that recently opened in Istanbul’s Tophane district. Hundreds of hipsters paraded into the neighborhood and gallery hopped with wine in hand. What turned out to be a pre-meditated and loosely organized mob of up to 40 men from the neighborhood attacked the gala attendees. Frozen oranges were thrown, pepper spray was discharged, and broken bottles were wielded. Even those in upstairs apartments joined in, throwing buckets of water on the “art goers”. Five in total were injured and several windows were broken. At that point, the social and political converged with contemporary art in a much more intimate sense.



the West much stronger than in Turkey, and this history should instill the sobering element of critical evaluation which is absent in Turkey. The prestige of institutional canonization for Europe and America is one that should be called into question. What Istanbul leaves out of the equation is art’s ability to come out of organized efforts by the artists themselves. Turkish artists have a hard time fathoming the power in their hands.

This brings us back into the realm of art’s relation to the social and political – the attitude of accepting art only under certain preordained conditions has its own political dimension. A strange set of rules is in play, in which artists often resign control and allow commerce to dictate the course of art. That there is little history of self-organized shows and art spaces in Istanbul helps reinforce society’s rigid codes of acceptance. The importance of New York’s downtown gallery scene over the second half of the 20th century relied much on its cross pollination and dismantling of social borders for its success. This is a history not yet understood in Istanbul. That a cultural revolution is more likely to ferment in an environment conducive to diversified social interaction remains an elusive concept.

POLITICAL ART MAY NOT SERVE A FUNCTION BUT IT SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT ITS POSITION IN SOCIETY

As Turkish artists struggle to make works that comment on their society, there must be reflections on the relationship between where and for whom their work is presented and the statement they wish to present. Banu Cennetoglu’s show “Sample Sale/ 2010 BC” at Rodeo was very conscious of this relationship. As the press release states, “Cennetoglu’ plays with the possibilities in the production of art, the system of the art market and acts as an ironic gesture within her own practice, while at the same time it is expanding the traditional limits of exhibition making.” The conceptual underpinning of the show profoundly reflected on the dynamic of presenting political work at a commercial gallery. She understood that to present works that deal with Turkey’s political framework, she must also evaluate the framework in which her work is presented. The obviously politically inclined show at Gallery NON states in the press release “Extrastruggle has no political views,” which seems to suggest it is simply making inflammatory statements. The art works were presented to an audience that evaluates it as art. If Extrastruggle is interested in the tired subjects of women with head scarves or Ataturk’s waning relevance, whether he has political views or not, then it might be asked why he chose not to further the discussion. Granted, countless articles

have been written on these issues and it would be hard to imagine a work of art that could contribute any further to the dialogue. In this case we see political art functioning within a closed circle, continuously chasing after itself.

In an article by Sam Williams published on Frieze magazine’s webpage, Williams, referring to the violence that took place on the evening of September 21st, wrote, “What happened outside the gallery was a brilliant performance of the exhibition inside.” This is as a gross misunderstanding. First, it was not a “brilliant performance”, it was a horrid act of violence that I consider to have roots in fascist logic. Second, what happened outside the gallery has far more to do with the gallery than the works inside. That Gallery NON is sponsored by companies involved with city development that are at odds with progressive logic is in itself a topic much more politically telling. The system at work is obviously much larger than the works of art.



- Mark Van Yetter, 2010
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TURKISH ART'S PARADIGM

In Turkey, contemporary art is prone towards social and political themes. Strictly formal aspects of art making seem to find fewer advocates within the burgeoning contemporary art scene. This might stem from a reactionary attempt to break old norms. Inside Istanbul's main art university, Mimar Sinan, the dinosaurs still roam the halls, apparently hardly an art teacher has changed since the last military coup in 1980 and students leave the school bombarded with years of rigid academic training. On the opposing end is Platform Garanti, a bank sponsored art organization and something approaching a monopolizing force behind contemporary art in Istanbul. Their programming, which includes an artist residency, centers on social/political art making and provides heavy influence over Turkey's young artists. As a result of these two extremes a paradigm is formed. What art "is" dominates discourse: either art is a political tool, a visual form of commentary, or a visual object that belongs in a museum. There is a true dividing device at play. It seems, artists are torn between respecting the idea of art cosmically or creating work that comments on the society they live in. Often the latter results in making loud statements.

This proved to be the course for Gallery NON, which turned out to be one of the main targets in the wave of violence. Their exhibition by an artist that uses the name "Extrastruggle," which opened the night of the attack, was filled with works exclaiming incendiary and obscured statements. Often the pieces seem painfully naive: a sculpture of Ataturk with wings, apparently fallen from the sky, rests head first on the floor. The image suggests so many interpretations; many sides could take up arms on different issues. But ultimately the piece is a cliché that does not want to be questioned as one. Extrastruggle was the center of a previous scandal — his show at now-defunct "Hafriyat Karakoy" gallery a few years back took attention for its title "fear of Allah", which caused outrage from a pious segment of society. Police security was hired to guard the show and the title was at some point changed to "fear of police". Such acts of showmanship are rarely interesting but certainly provide a basis for attention mongering.

Extrastruggle may have received a showering of press due to the recent attack at his Gallery NON debut, but he certainly cannot take credit as the direct cause — the works shown did not inspire the ensuing violence. The violence stems from an acute social and economic gap between the gallery attendees and the local com-

munity. In many regards the situation is not unlike any poor minority neighborhood experiencing rapid and extreme levels of gentrification. The parallels that Tophane's situation shares with countless other cities around the world are numerous.



THE NEIGHBORHOOD

For Istanbulians the name Tophane, previously known as an area of prostitution, drugs, and poor immigrants, lingers with the odor of history. Squeezed between the old seedy center of nightlife and the port, Tophane reflects its diverse influences and quick succession of socioeconomic changes. Greek, Armenian, and Jewish minorities have left their statement in the architecture but have long since disappeared due to waves of violence, tax hikes, and government orchestrated exodus. Poor Anatolians, including many Kurdish, took up residency in the wake of the minority explosion. Today the neighborhood's ethnic make-up consists of a large population of Arabic speaking, religiously conservatives who began settling in the neighborhood around 25 years ago. They claim to have "gotten rid" of the Kurdish, whom many in the neighborhood speak of as a pledge of undesirables. This very tight-knit community that predominantly migrated from Siirt, a small city in Eastern Anatolia, holds the cultural norms of its village

virtually fully intact. Arranged intermarriage between first cousins is still a common practice which further illustrates the sense of family and togetherness this community shares. In sharp contrast to this community is a moderate size Roma population that, although not socially integrated with the community from Siirt, appears to peacefully coexist within the neighborhood. The Roma offers a refreshing balance; most notably, at least visibly, in their leniency on patriarchal dominance. Thanks to the Roma there are local women that leave their homes with free will. They appear as a mirage in a sea of men gathered usually in groups of 5 to 20 aimlessly dwindling away their time with tea and cigarettes. What constitutes the smallest community is a group not easy to categorize. They are the artists, foreigners, students and generally just outsiders like myself who have taken up residency in Tophane.

MY UNWITTING POSITION

It was a little over one year ago that after relocating from New York City, I opened a gallery below our house in the center of Tophane with my partner who is an Istanbul native. We immediately understood the fragility required to operate within the community, but it was not long before a mutual respect between ourselves and the neighborhood developed. What turned out to be the greater difficulty was forming a cordial relationship with other galleries in Tophane, which generally present themselves in as corporate a manner as possible and take pride in their professional façade. This attitude might be seen as a symptom of issues that run deep within the social fabric and that may ultimately lie at the root of the violence. The gap between those with and those without is massive — the prejudices of the so-called "elite" appear to quantify an equally drastic scale. To say the educated elite are prone towards attitudes of superiority is frighteningly bold; however it remains an undeniable reality that a sharp separation between the educated elite and an uneducated unprivileged class is in play. It is not hard to understand from where the anger stems. The rents in the neighborhood have gone up 5-fold in 2 years and the new residents have little regard for the original community. The New York Times article written by Ceren Kumova about the recent attacks allowed a voice to be heard that was not from the "art-goers". Their quotes from a neighborhood resident said a great deal, "....We have always known how to live together, but there was never such intolerance and a 'you are scum' type of attitude in the elite." Another voice the Times allowed to be heard from the local community said "that the newcomers were seen as snobbish and disruptive." Within the art scene the discourse concerning the attacks is centered on a self-pitying, bemoaning "isn't it so awful". To raise the debate above this seems to decry heresy.

It is hopeful that some artists and intellectuals are trying to raise the debate into something more constructive, but there remains an unfaltering attitude among many to separate the issue into extremes and accuse any one critically evaluating the issue of having sympathy with the attackers. This attitude finds consolation in the wider debate of art, as it is an attitude that ignores critical evaluation.

Turkey's art scene is so young it remains that critical writing on art is virtually non-existent. The few contemporary art publications in Turkey are mostly concerned with promoting the existing identity of a contemporary art scene in the country. Generally the writing denotes the content in terms of market and statistics, such as information on the sales of Turkish art or the founding of high profile art museums. These represent only topical evaluations. Likewise the cultural sections of Turkey's dailies prefer to print articles that inflate national pride and tout a healthy contemporary Turkish art scene to rival Europe, but naively highlight their ineptitude between each line. Recently a popular Turkish newspaper published an article on one of the power figures behind Turkey's art system, Beral Madra, calling her the one "who was responsible for bringing the term 'curator' to Turkey". The article was written in a way that apparently hoped to enhance the image of Turkey's art scene, yet gravely illuminated its infancy.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY FOR ART

Turkish artists attempt to build an art scene in what could be described as a damning twilight. There is little idea what it means to be an artist. The term 'artist' shares something with 'curator': it is a recent occupation one can claim and it remains one that should not be spelled out to us in a newspaper article. It must be the artists that set the foundation. The institutions that are formed to promote and ultimately institutionalize art would be hollowed structures without the artist's creative efforts. In Istanbul there are large amounts of private money dedicated to contemporary art — several high profile museums, cultural centers and galleries have sprung up over the last few years. They are there to confirm Turkey's cultural position. The artists do not know what to do with themselves, wondering if now they might go around acting like businessmen. The shadow created by the country's unique social and political history leaves artists scrambling to the brightest lights, often flashing with emptiness. What is being cultivated is a scene drunk on the glamour of prestige. Arguably Turkey is only emulating the West's cult of celebrity, but there is a history of this drunken state in