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Istanbul Appraisal (Local Time)

Istanbul and its contemporary art scene are now the focus of significant international attention. This growth in overseas interest has coincided with the rapid expansion of the city's arts infrastructure. While it might appear as if the proliferation of art galleries, museums, project space and research institutes in Istanbul is an attempt to capitalise on the recent hype in the international media, this is not in fact the case: Istanbul's arts scene has of course its own particular history, and its own unique dynamic. By way of an introduction to the city's visual arts landscape, the following text offers a brief chronology of the events and institutions that might be said to have shaped it over the past decade.

The Museum

Around about the turn of the century, a spate of new privately funded art museums opened across the city. On the shores of the Bosphorus, a mansion belonging to the Sabancı family was reopened as the Sabancı Museum in 2002; the Eczacıbaşı Foundation financed the development of the Istanbul Modern (2004); the Pera Museum started in 2005; and within the Golden Horn campus of Bilgi University opened the Santralistanbul in 2007.

While the emergence of these museums were a welcome indication of an emerging arts infrastructure, their hermetic programs offered very limited support to the development of a local arts scene. At that time, the only organisation that offered any support to Istanbul's contemporary artists was Platform Garanti, which opened in 2001. Funded by the Garanti Bank, and under the directorship of Vasıf Kortun, Platform Garanti organized exhibitions, conferences and events, hosted an international residency program, and maintained an important library and archive of contemporary art.

The Project Space

In response to the conservative curatorial programmes of the museums and the continuing dearth of exhibition opportunities for young artists in Istanbul, a number of artist-run initiatives and project spaces began to appear. Artist Selda Asal's 'Apartment Project' had in fact been running since 1999, but was joined from around 2003 by, among others, 'Hafiyat', 'K2' (an arts collective from Izmir), 'Pist', 'Bas', 'Alti Aylık', '5533' and 'Black Door', a temporary project run by artists visiting Turkey from abroad. The mid-2000s also saw the emergence of innovative new

exhibition formats like 'Masa', which uses a special table as a mobile exhibition space, and very recent Bandrolsüz, a publisher of artists' books, who use small temporary book fairs as a means of artistic distribution.

Many of these initiatives have proved difficult to sustain for financial reason: these projects have no access to public funds, and organisers generally found it hard to secure sponsors. Additionally, the gentrification of Beyoğlu, the district in which most of these projects were based, meant that permanent exhibition spaces became increasingly impossible to afford.

The Biennial

Founded in 1987 by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts, the Istanbul Biennial, has arguably been the most significant influence on the development of the city's contemporary art scene - bringing contemporary art to Istanbul from all over the world, and promoting Turkish artists on the international stage.

When, in the 1990s, the Istanbul Foundation began inviting curators of note from Europe and North America to take the helm, the success and the international visibility of the Biennial began to increase. The 'breakthrough' came with the 9th Biennial in 2005, when curators Charles Esche and Vasıf Kortun abandoned the tradition of showing contemporary art in Istanbul's old city, and instead exhibited contemporary art where contemporary art was being made - in the warehouses, apartments and offices of the district of Beyoğlu.

Thus the 9th Biennial effectively inaugurated Beyoğlu as the capital of the Istanbul art world - a position that was consolidated not long after by the move of not only the Biennial's funders (the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts), but also 'Depo' (the cultural centre of Anadolu Kültür), and 'Rodeo' (a commercial art gallery of international standing) into some of the 9th Biennial's former venues in the area of Beyoğlu known as Tophane.

The Commercial Gallery

Attracted by the combination of cultural kudos, low rents and central location, Tophane has since become the home of Istanbul's commercial art scene, drawing in galleries from all over the city. Of particular note are 'Outlet', 'Pi Artworks', 'Daire Sanat' and 'Non', all of which show the work of emerging artists; all of which have opened since 2008.

The commercial galleries have banded together to market Tophane as Istanbul's gallery district. And while the 're-branding' of the neighbourhood has in some ways been successful, the rapid process of gentrification (of which the galleries are part) has been extremely difficult for the area's inhabitants, who are mainly poor and socially conservative. The conflicts and tensions

between the locals and the incomers finally reached boiling point in September last year, when audiences attending gallery openings in Tophane were violently attacked by local residents. Things have quietened down since, but there has been no truce and nothing has been resolved. But as a result of the attacks the role of Istanbul's art scene in the gentrification of the city has become the subject of much internal discussion and debate.

The Institution

Since the 1990s, Istanbul's financial institutions have been sponsoring exhibition spaces on Istiklal Avenue, Beyoğlu's main thoroughfare, but in the last few years they have finally started opening permanent institutional spaces.

The Borusan Corporation funds the Borusan Music House, which opened a new building in 2009. As well as providing a concert hall and rehearsal space for the Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra, the Music House also programmes annual series of highly regarded art exhibitions, showing works from the Borusan Collection as well as guest curated shows, and exhibitions by young local artists participating in the Borusan Artists Residency Programme.

Opposite the Borusan Music House is Arter - an exhibition space opened by the Vehbi Koç Foundation last year, whose collection, which includes the works of highly regarded Turkish artists, and important works by artists associated with the Fluxus movement, was compiled by the German curator Rene Block. Arter actively seeks to support the development of new work, and is channelling funds into commissioning young Istanbul artists. And additionally, to promote these young artists beyond Turkey, the Koç Foundation has opened a satellite exhibition space in Berlin.

But the most significant player to emerge in the last few years is SALT - a new institution funded by the Garanti Bank that was borne of the merger of Platform Garanti (a centre for contemporary art), Garanti Galeri (a gallery dedicated to architecture and design) and the Ottoman Bank Archive and Research Centre (a research institute for social and economic history). Founded to explore 'critical and timely issues in visual and material culture' in Turkey and the surrounding region and to 'cultivate innovative programmes for research and experimental thinking', SALT opened its first space in Beyoğlu in April of this year, and has timed the opening of a second space in the former headquarters of the Ottoman Bank in Galata to coincide with the 12th Istanbul Biennial, which opens in September 2011.

Mindful of the pitfalls of established institutional models, and keen also to secure their place at the cutting edge of cultural management, these new institutions are adopting a highly strategic approach. They are looking critically at the state of the Istanbul art scene, and seeking to

implement initiatives that will both support its development and help to establish the city as both a regional and global player.

So whereas, for the past ten years, the contemporary art scene in Istanbul has been a hive of somewhat chaotic activity – the city's many cultural workers have been engaged in a range of initiatives, exploring diverse trajectories, moving in different directions, collaborating and interweaving as they go - now the scene seems to be achieving a degree of stability and equilibrium. But (thankfully) without losing its dynamism and flexibility.

Kristina Kramer, 2011

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