

# Güçlükler Üstüne ya da İstanbul'da Melekler Bulmak

## *Difficulties or Finding Angels in İstanbul*



Despite the pessimism that flows into contemporary thought, there are still many impulses and reasons to try to build a more egalitarian, tolerant and therefore habitable world. We sense forms of beauty that have still to be created. We know there are other possibilities for life which have still to be discovered. And we resort to language, art and other forms of representation to account for, interpret and transform reality.

As it enables us to talk of something which is not present, language is inextricably linked to absence and to

an awareness of death. Its capacity to make the absent object symbolically present allows for its reconstruction, giving birth to new interpretations of and new shapes for our experiences and beliefs. Through the acquisition of language we become subjects but, at the same time, language "subjects" us to its laws.

Until quite recently a secret correlation was believed to exist between language and reality, and art or poetry were expected to reveal it. Now we are aware of the arbitrariness of linguistic links, because every language

establishes them according to different rules and conventions, and we also know, as psychoanalysis has taught us, that there is a bubbling magma of concealed connections beneath the apparent clarity and coherence of our discourses. If Modernity has been promising us a world of light and progress, the shadows of that project have now dashed the illusion of universal reason and we are learning to feel the rhythm of other languages, to perceive the existence of other orders, and to live in a more fluctuant

Rebecca Golden Horn,  
"Melek", 1997.

Rebecca Golden Horn,  
"Angel", 1997.

world. This relativity facilitates the transit between identities and removes us from the monolithism of the fundamentalisms that uphold a rigid truth.

In the 20th century, art has been shifting dialectically between two main poles: the ideal of absolute autonomy and the desire to merge with life. The ideal of an artwork as an independent entity was extremely useful in the process of secularisation at the heart of Modernity. It provided another domain, other than the religious sphere, for projecting our spiritual needs and also helped to emancipate creation from submission to its traditional patrons –the Church, the aristocracy and the State. However, this independence could not free it from submission to the laws of a new god: the Marketplace.

Nowadays, the ideal of autonomy has lost its strength and art no longer serves the spurious purposes of religious or government propaganda. However, it cannot be divorced from political reflection, because ideologies penetrate even our most intimate spaces. Norms regulating guilt and pleasure, the divisions between domestic and public roles, the extreme violence of rape or massacres, the frantic rhythm that production and consumption impose on us, discrimination of the way we live our sexuality—all this is ruled by strict, unformulated laws which must be called into question. Art today targets other objectives in its attempt to reconcile its desire to create beauty with its function as a fundamental element of a pragmatic, "relational aesthetic" that converts the artwork into a bridge between language and reality. As far as it contributes to modifying our perceptions and prompting our interpretations, art might also change our individual attitudes and become an essential element in transforming our social behaviour.

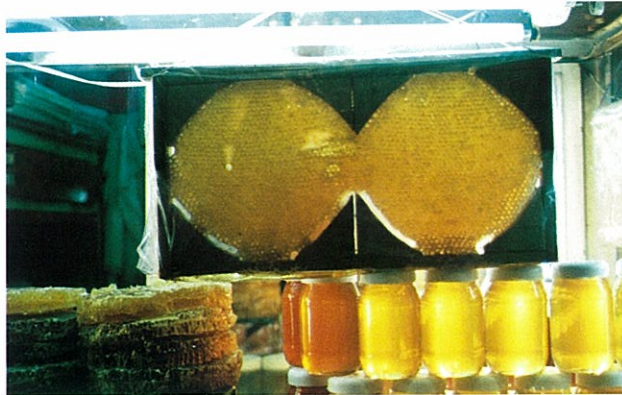
Aware of this, the artists taking part in the 5th International Istanbul Biennial have created works that act

as bridges to confront and interpret the many anxieties and uncertainties of the contemporary art scene. They are attempting to forge a common language that respects both the individual and social differences, and to engage in an ongoing analysis and simultaneous translation in order to relate to a new paradigm in which transnationalism, deterritorialization and hybridisation are fast becoming new realities.

In a context of marked social change, one of the main challenges facing contemporary culture is how to reformulate the concept of individual and cultural identity. There is a need to call into question the dogmatism that annihilates individual peculiarities, to balance globalisation and the survival of local cultures, and to redefine the displacement associated with the speed with which new technologies

of global, architectural and urban planning. Identities mix in synchronic, endless effervescence. Life develops with a forcefulness that defies difficulties.

Bearing in mind these fluxes and the complexity of the setting, the 5th International Istanbul Biennial has decided to challenge the difficulties of including the city itself as a part of the exhibition by developing one of the metaphors traditionally associated with its character as a "door" that is, its calling as a gateway between East and West, as a symbolic bridge linking Asia and Europe. That prompted the decision to use the Atatürk international airport, and the Haydarpaşa and Sirkeci train stations, as city gates and as walkways for identities. The areas in question are not merely buildings, but small virtual cities traversed by thousands of passengers, where chance



Jeff Bilt, "Batarya", 1997.

Jeff Bilt, "Batterie", 1997.

emerge, as well as with migration and the global reorganisation of cultural markets.

Istanbul is a privileged setting for perceiving and analysing these changes. With its superimposed cultural strata, its population of over fifteen million inhabitants, its multiple, coexisting centres and its endless peripheries, Istanbul is a place where chaos finds its order. Buildings grow, collapse and rise up again, more as part of an ongoing, anonymous process of do-it-yourself than as part

encounters and multiple exchanges take place. There, incessant traffic is disrupted by discontinuities, and diversity, beauty and speed coexist in a mixture that defies interpretation.

In addition to those places of passage, other points as magical and meaningful as the Maiden's Tower or the Women's Library have been billed to host artistic projects. The choice of these two venues responds to the significant presence of women in the poetic imagination, as well as to the desire to call into question

their being kept under control and forced into submission. The inclusion of one of the ferry-boats that crosses the Bosphorus and connects Istanbul Asian's banks to its European ones likewise responds to the will to stress the importance of those non-places, to the "heterotopias" alluded to by Foucault, and to analyse their sexual connotations and their functions as islands of otherness.

Apart from these dynamic, mobile focal points, the triangle linking Hagia Eirene, the Yerebatan Cistern and the Imperial Mint embraces the broadest number of proposals by participating artists. The austere enclosure of Hagia Eirene will host delicate, intense artworks reflecting the strength of the feminine, the desire to live out fantasies and to reinterpret the symbolic phantoms of childhood, as well as the will to create links between separate shores, and to reaffirm the need to call into question the regulations norms of established authority. The dark, damp atmosphere of the Cistern will house artists seeking silence and water to explore

the meaning of light and shadow, and of slowness and speed as ways of understanding the rhythms of pain and beauty. The narrow streets and variety of houses of the Imperial Mint provide a maze-like itinerary along which we may approach a myriad of reflections about identity, communication, experience and dreams.

In addition to staging their works, the artists of the 5th International Istanbul Biennial have been invited to participate in a project called "readymades in Istanbul". This consists of taking snapshots to capture instants, situations or displays of objects in the city, to show how art has taught us to perceive life in another way, how beauty dwells in the poorest, simplest everyday events or how the sublime can emerge from the chaotic flux of the contemporary metropolis. These artists, together with the Biennial team, have devoted their energies, their effort, their anxieties and their pleasure to the 5th International Istanbul Biennial. On more than one occasion and despite all the obstacles, they have made me feel surrounded

by angels, and together we have been trying to overcome difficulties, to find new ways of interpreting the present, to create narratives in order to reach others, and to built up spaces where translations witness how in life and in art there are processes mainly inspired by the strength of love. Love is the force that falls back, grows and is reconverted to materialise in a work of art, an exhibition or an experience, because, as Semiha Berksoy puts it, "there is such a thing as translation in love". And, at times, one's love for a person, or one's passion for a city, has to be transformed into the energy necessary for artistic creation as a primordial way to continue interpreting and inventing the world, in order to render it less violent, more just and more habitable.

Rosa Martínez



Larry Nibble, "Blues", 1982.