

THE PASSION AND THE WAVE



Antonis Diamantidis was born in Arnavutköy, a suburb of İstanbul, in 1892. He began to sing professionally at the age of 16 and had a relatively successful career in Turkey and in Greece until the mid-1930's, dying in Athens in 1945. During the first half of this century, he was one of the great voices of İstanbul—along with Hafız Burhan—and the photographs that remain of him show a dandy, who was elegant and well-groomed. His voice was considered by many second only to Caruso, though he never followed a strictly operatic repertoire; instead, he mostly sang *amanédhes*, the long, drawn-out melodies related to the Turkish *gazels* that are composed of couplets and that are interspersed with the interjection *aman*—meaning “alas” or “mercy”—for improvisational purposes and as an emotional outlet.

Diamantidis sang under the stage name of Dalgas or Dalga, which means “passion” in Greek and “wave” Turkish. He chose it because he thought that no other word could convey the intensity of his music, the rhapsodic flow of his voice, his multi-lingual heritage but also to indicate a particular sense of place—that of the city on the Bosphorus which was his birthplace as well as the source of his inspiration.

“A navel is a knot that seals a birth. The world has but few, scattered along its inhabitable latitudes.”⁽¹⁾ This city may well be one. Its intellectual borders extend deep into Europe and Asia, into the north as well as into the south. It is a capital marked by kiosks and by gardens and it is graced with its location, its architecture, and its people. It is a city whose history spans centuries and continents. It thrives on the energy, on the fervor, on the generosity of its inhabitants and on the myriad cultures that compose it. It is beautiful, chaotic, and giving—a real chest of treasures—and it is the city par excellence, as its inhabitants have called it throughout the centuries.

The title of this biennial is an homage to this city, through the name of one of its great voices. It indicates the exhibition's conceptual matrix but also a profound interest in individual histories. It announces the slant of its vision, which is to emphasize each invited artist's singularity of viewpoint. Working closely with the artists, my aim is to make legible the temperament of each work in the exhibition and to focus on the sensory qualities and the degree of emotional intensity that are the cornerstones of any personal output. The title alludes to a celebration of place and is reminiscent of the spirit of Alexandrine poetry; that is, brief expressions characterized by conciseness, clarity, and short bursts of emotion. It presumes a kinship between the artist and the viewer as well as a spirit of community that I hope will echo that of the diverse populations that constitute the city of İstanbul.

As with all events that attempt to capture a given moment in time, the 6th İstanbul Biennial will inevitably reflect the consciousness of our own contemporaneity: the rapid changes, the technological advances and the clash of cultures that are central to our experience of the world today. And, besides holding up a mirror to the times in which we live, I hope that it will emphasize those specific qualities of art and that it will gage the power that art has to effect our lives.

Through its form and its substance, art speaks of the individuals who make it, of their perceptions of the world, informed as they are by a given place and time. It voices concerns that are crucial to the

lives of those who express them. And, while art may convey a wealth of information about the norm, I prefer to think that it privileges the exception, for art itself is exceptional. Therefore, rather than deferring to art strategies founded primarily on theoretical platforms, I instinctively turned to those artists who practice a kind of self-analysis and who expound feeling and sensibility: in brief, those who seem to adhere to the marriage of image and emotion.

In a world that is moving closer towards globalization, I have noticed a powerful undercurrent that draws large segments of the world's population closer to an affirmation of individual identity and specific perspectives. The sweeping utopias of the 1970's and the belief, during the 1980's, in a society of limitless growth have given way to a new skepticism about overtly assertive artistic gestures and their ability to make significant and durable marks on an ever-shifting social texture. Rather than an avowal of defeat, however, this attitude resulted in the opening up of new means of expression.

In recent years, artists have employed strategies born as much from the global highway as from traditional artistic method in order to express their personal points of view. As a consequence, the overriding presence of the media and of new technologies have forced many artists to return to the primacy of the image not as a nostalgic vector for ideas within a pictorial tradition, but as a part of an easily transmissible and readable visual text, free from the necessities of space that characterized much of the installation art of the past decade.

Breaking the boundaries between "high" and "low" art, and the hierarchies between different art categories and genres, artists today have created a fertile field for discussion of subjects as diverse as psychological disorders and political activism. The lack of a dominant ideology has spawned a wide array of responses, all characterized by a highly personal take on the challenges of the present. Within this framework, "The Passion and The Wave" will raise the question of the significance of personal histories and of the weight of emotional investment in the contemporary world, as a growing number of artists offer us poetic catharsis rather than pragmatic solutions to political and social problems.

In an article titled "Flight from Byzantium", which was written about Istanbul, Joseph Brodsky states "...an awareness of time is a profoundly individual experience. That in the course of this life every person sooner or later finds himself in the position of Robinson Crusoe, carving notches and, having counted, say, seven of them or ten, crossing them out. Such is the origin of ornament, regardless of preceding civilizations, or of that to which this person belongs. And these notches are a profoundly solitary activity isolating the individual and forcing him toward an understanding, if not of his uniqueness, then at least of the autonomy of his existence in the world."⁽²⁾

It is this idea of "notches" and "ornamentation" that guided me through the selection process of this exhibition. My affinities went to those artists who make art as an instrument against the homogenization and the indifference of the world; those who use it as a way to re-establish the value of plurality and a way to postulate one's own heterogeneity. Any biennial, especially one geographically situated at the crossroads between cultures and at a specific moment in the century,

can be considered a photograph of its time, a “period of accounts” that will indicate the changes that have been and the transformations that are yet to be.

This biennial acknowledges the sphere of the individual as much as the narration of emotions. As such, the image that has accompanied it through the past few months—that of a clown sleeping on the bottom of the sea—is its visual echo. It is an image that, like Watteau’s Gilles, expresses the melancholy of the private persona in a public setting; or, it alludes to the Shakespearian fool, that of a marginalized visionary who is a truth-sayer and a spinner of tales. But it also calls to mind the image of “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead”⁽³⁾, and points to our lives, which are still complete with “the cry of gulls and the deep sea swell and the profit and loss”⁽⁴⁾.

Paolo Colombo

Curator

6th International Istanbul Biennial

⁽¹⁾ Erri De Luca. *Una nuvola come tappeto*, Feltrinelli, Milan: 1985.

⁽²⁾ Joseph Brodsky, “Flight from Byzantium”, *The New Yorker*, 1985.

⁽³⁾ T.S Eliot “The Waste Land and Other Poems”, Faber and Faber, London, 1940.

⁽⁴⁾ *Ibid.*