

## The World is Yours

The 9th İstanbul Biennial is not a survey. It is not an attempt to sum up the state of art today or to represent certain tendencies in contemporary practice. It is a series of artistic projects made for and selected with the city of İstanbul constantly in mind. This city, which has formed the backdrop to every İstanbul biennial since 1987, becomes the actual environment within which this biennial is constructed and to which viewers will return during and after their visit.

The best art makes us think something we could not have thought without it. In the tradition of both modernist and avant-garde practices, art serves as a tool to challenge existing models and propose alternatives. While modernism was arguably more concerned with aesthetics, it is the avant-garde tradition, with its hermeneutic role of questioning meaning, out of which much of the work in this biennial emerges more directly. The 9th biennial understands itself as a forum for proposing meaning out of the signs of a particular place and time. Those propositions are made in the personal and intimate terms that define the relationship between individual artist and city, as well as the proposed relationship between artwork and viewer.

Amongst the projects, there is a necessary variety of topics and responses. Around half of the artists live in or were invited to İstanbul for a longer period of work and study. Some came with existing ideas and proposals; others let the city brush against them before deciding on the general direction of their work. The artists were selected in large measure because, as curators, we knew and trusted them and their ways of working. We had no idea what would result from the invitations and will not really know before the opening day. Alongside these new commissions, we took it upon ourselves to select largely existing work from artists working in related ways in other places in the world. We did this in order to broaden the variety of ways in which visitors could read the biennial and avoid a kind of dumb İstanbul essentialism. Yet our hope is that these works will also reflect on İstanbul, through visualising what it is not, or offering a confirmation of the similarity between different geographic, cultural and social locations.

It is important in this process to understand that an İstanbulism without humility becomes very problematic not only given the city's own past as the centre of a conquering empire but also because the transformation of the city produces a range of new inequalities that are often hidden in a process of celebrating dynamic change. To counter this tendency, the biennial positions İstanbul as a real, lived place and not a label in the race of competing marketable cities. This biennial is not a tool for selling the city to global capitalism but an agency for presenting it to its citizens and others with eyes awry.

From passing remarks and chance meetings to intimate portraits of individuals, the biennial unfolds as a series of encounters with the real and imagined city. As the most populous city in Europe, and as one of the pivotal conurbations in history, there is far more to İstanbul than this biennial can capture. It is in their specific and precise address to certain subjects that the artists working in İstanbul stake a claim to

say something about this place and its people. Whether the biennial succeeds or fails will be marked by the degree to which the works allow others familiar with the city to see new visions and ideas of what it is and what it could be.

### **The biennial as a tool**

All major biennials are important interfaces between art and a larger public. We are conscious of the fact that they have become privileged agents in the planetary redistribution of art and that they have also served to launder cities in preparation for the new economy of the 1990s. They are created in large part by international freelancers in the knowledge industry – in this case, independent curators. The latter are thrown into so-called free-market competition with each other seeking similar funding sources, artists and critical spaces. Hence, they are by definition do-or-die post-dictatorial events, and often substitute the conscience of an urgent present for a painful past. They divulge and obscure at the same time, but hardly reveal their own machinations at all.

They also exist out of a demand from cities to be part of contemporary culture and share its fruits with their populations and tourists. This is an aspect to emphasise because it contains within it the seeds of an educational and informative possibility. Biennials can also demand more attention and press response simply by virtue of their name, and this can also be used to encourage a wide spectrum interface with a potential local audience, perhaps introducing the idea of critical art practices to people for the first time.

However the interface role of the biennial is a less interesting description for this event. Instead, its description as a tool through which art can shape the world and have purchase on its viewers has had much more influence on our use of the structure. While 365-day-a-year institutions have a more vital role in local situations, the biennial can identify and define a position for art in the public consciousness and create the conditions from which it can be further explored. In shaping this curatorial vision, it is this analogy with the tool that provides the most useful comparison – a tool to energise vision and discipline the imagination. In this sense, İstanbul is not only the subject of this biennial but also its operational field. İstanbul, as a city in radical flux, has become a rectified bride on course for a ruthless marriage with privatisation. In the process, it has been attracting exhibitions of scale, new museums and media-savvy sports events. Therefore, to locate the promise of the biennial outside event culture has been a daunting task. To resist it in part, the biennial, and through it, the city, has to provide the artists with a set of conditions to which they can respond personally. This leaves open the possibility that artists can create new visibility for marginalised or hidden elements that are not usually considered suitable subjects for cosmopolitan celebration, with the resulting artworks then placed back into the city to incite further reaction.

The tradition of the biennial in İstanbul was also a formative influence that we sought to divert a little. Previous iterations engaged the use of either former national industrial sites waiting to be opened to the experience economy, or opted for the Byzantine past in the historical peninsula. If the first took its cues from global economy and signified a transition from hard production to the soft sectors of service and tourism, the latter banked on enveloping the artists' production in the physical matter of history as a way to heighten the work's connection to its locality, exhibition after exhibition. From another perspective, it became very evident that within the new

master plan of the city, the tip of the historical peninsula had developed from being the press and media centre of İstanbul to a zone dedicated solely to tourists. Hence, to re-propose this zone for the exhibition would be tantamount to regarding each viewer as a potential tourist, constructing a relationship between viewer and artwork that relied on passive observation of an already sanctioned contemporary culture. Perhaps more importantly, it also led to the wresting away of the project from the urgency of the everyday city by locating the artists on alien turf.

Our efforts to find vacant sites – often former factories that reflected upon the development of the city in the 1950s – were luckily met with frustration. We lost the spaces sooner than we found them. At some point along the way, we realised that the city was privatising faster than the process of our exhibition, and this was not a development to which we wanted to give succour. Instead, we decided to disappear the exhibition into the city, choosing relatively anonymous and everyday buildings that would give the artists an unflamboyant ground for their work.

One of the crucial tasks we have as curators is to shape all the encounters that are involved between artists, city, architecture and viewer, and to leave their potential responses as open as possible. The title of ‘İstanbul’ should therefore not be understood as a theme, but rather as a platform from which all parties can launch themselves into the exhibition and its relation to the city surrounding them. Particularly where the delicate process of commissioning and presenting a new work is concerned, it is important that the artists have free space to negotiate their own position. Ambiguity is, after all, an essential characteristic of an art that makes new thoughts possible and it is always through contact with something unknown or uncertain that fresh possibility materialises – a statement that applies to artist, curator and viewer alike. For viewers unused to such uncertainty, the challenge is to open oneself willingly, hopefully driven by a desire to see what these artists have made of their city. We must all be aware that the security of fixed meanings and established quality only emerges over time, something that contemporary art by its nature excludes.

Aside from creating this platform for the protagonists, we also felt compelled to take a position with regards to the context of the biennial as a global exhibition model itself. This event seeks to contribute to a greater variety of ways of dealing with the structure of these two yearly exhibitions. The burgeoning phenomenon of the biennial since 1989 has driven much of the art world’s global expansion. In the wake of socialism’s collapse and global economic growth, artists could suddenly reach out to the free market in order to sustain themselves and their practice. Biennials became the central vehicles through which such work was validated in the art circuit and began to acquire value. In itself, there is not anything categorically wrong with this. The circulation of art has always been quite a pragmatic affair and opportunities were offered and taken by artists in the process.

The danger is more long term. Firstly, there is a homogenising effect on the events themselves through their reproduction. It leads them to tend towards cultural versions of collective, global product launches, sending out new ideas into the art field in the hope that some will survive market testing. It could be argued that to see biennials turned into similar events from Venice to Sharjah, or Sao Paolo to Gwangju, interestingly undermines the old idea of distinction that marked classical art out as different from other human activities, thus fulfilling certain avant-garde ambitions. But it does so, not with the avant-garde’s wish to integrate art and life but rather in the

name of the total consumption of art by the global free market. Art as a product, even a purely intellectual one, cannot be sustained as art in any of the senses that we understand it from modernist and avant-garde tradition. Instead, it would become a conformist decoration, subject to political goals and little more than propaganda. Indeed, art in this mode would bear close comparison to the forms of approved social realism under real existing socialism in Europe. As a footnote, it might help to appreciate the significance of art to alternative ways of thinking by remembering how most dictatorial societies find a need to control its creators strictly, for fear of small, contrary ideas 'infecting' society at large. It must be true then that only an art that is pluralist and heterogeneous in its modes of conception and reception contributes to an emancipatory dialogue with the world. We therefore need difference in our celebrations of visual culture in order to feed difference more generally - and to be able to imagine what kind of creativity might challenge the free market conservatism that dominates our present economic and political imagination.

There is a second danger that biennials might represent to the idea of art as a forum for alternative thinking. This is that, through their apparent complicity with the dominant doctrine of the market, they could lose the trust of the public. Biennials, like many other art institutions, are part of that which remains of the fragmented public sphere today. While privatisation is apparently successful in economic terms, its application to urban space and cultural activities threatens the vital notion of the public interest, as a countervailing force to the private forces of capital. If art as a field becomes overly connected in the public imagination to issues of ownership and market value, or overtly attached to the identity of wealthy individuals, then it loses its possibility to effect the public sphere discourse and weakens its trust in the eyes of its potential public. This might ultimately threaten the kind of undisciplined knowledge that art can claim to produce or at least its credibility would be sorely tested by its attachment to vested interests.

### **Relocating the Biennial**

The 9th İstanbul Biennial attempts to tackle these issues in its structure and presentation. Deciding that the biennial would be made for and about İstanbul was an important gesture in locating the projects within a public discourse, or simply pointing out some imaginative possibilities to which the public discourse in the city could respond. Inviting the artists early, providing residencies and organising talks throughout the year prior to the opening, were further ways in which we believed that the final exhibitions would connect sufficiently with the city to be meaningful for its public. The venues themselves are distributed within the Beyoğlu and Galata districts of İstanbul. These districts, which greatly expanded in the late 19th century, became the most critical trade and commercial hub of the city, and were the first manifestations of the İstanbul public sphere with massive minority populations, consulates and places of worship. From the 1950s on, business in the Beyoğlu district was violently Turkified and Galata became host to small sweatshops and home to immigrant populations. Since the late 1980s, the district has been redesignated as a culture and entertainment zone, the results of which are evident everywhere. The municipal policy of the area is to remarket the aura of the late 19th century city through the promotion of the area name 'Pera' as a marketing tool. We approach this area from leftfield so to speak, eliminating any reference to this semi-colonial period by using smaller sites

and spaces and literally allowing the exhibition to be swallowed by the fabric of the neighbourhood. We hope to demonstrate a modesty of scale by operating with the principle of 'just enough', eliminating white-cube solutions wherever possible and using the routes between sites for discrete projects.

Shifting from the historical city centre to the Beyoğlu and Galata area also marks a change in the direction of the event's address. Pointing it less towards the interests of sophisticated historical tourism and more towards the contemporary reality of the city. We again needed to locate the Biennial outside event culture. This is not only İstanbul's problem but also the problem of tourism's role in the economy, and how the city is normalised, regulated, demarcated and its local undesirables made invisible. Since the cultural sector has always been good bedfellows with tourism, the practice and distribution of contemporary art has always run the risk of instrumentalising itself as an affirmative force. To undermine this to some extent, we were quite aware of the location of the exhibition and sought to avoid investing in the zone of tourism, as well as inverting the relationship of the individual visitor to the site.

Sidestepping the free market is, of course, a much less easy manoeuvre than reconstructing the conditions in which artists make and show their work. Besides, we do not seek to avoid the commercial art business that has an important place in the ecology of art production and distribution. It is rather the wider complicity with the free market that is more troublesome, though no less unavoidable. If we cannot avoid engagement however, we can suggest that art has more to it than that. What might emerge is a surplus, over and above the market value, in all senses, attributed to each piece. This surplus takes the form of public experience, discussion and memory, among other possibilities that will emerge as the biennial is visited. Fortunately perhaps, we do not have easily distributed systems to transmit such conditions internationally, so they resist consumerisation. The long translation and background knowledge required, save it for the free public spheres of hearsay and rumour. To create the maximum surplus of this kind, we chose to concentrate on the city where the biennial is based. Hopefully this will lead to a recognition of the public value of art and the importance of having an audience that feels able to take a position in relation to the work - that position being as citizens of İstanbul.

### **Is there a target?**

The roles of art under current capitalism are variegated, but there is a real and present danger that art, in adopting an agenda for alternative thinking, actually fulfils an oppositional need within the system and becomes a harmless outlet for dissenting voices. After all, the current economic system is relatively good at maintaining the fiction of free speech without endangering efforts to impose a single version of globalisation that mainly benefits the rich minority.

Avoiding the implications of this is a task beyond any single art event, but there are certain strategies within this biennial that optimistically suggest methodologies for turning harmless into harmful, or at least pointed, critique. The position of İstanbul itself is, of course, a huge benefit to any such strategy. Being placed on a perceived borderline in many senses (perceived at least from outside) gives the city a particular character and responsibility that charges the works in the biennial with stronger meaning than would be the case elsewhere. The control systemology of capitalism is less secure here, brand name products are copied relatively freely, the

micro and macro-scales of the free market live uneasily side by side, and the conflicting interests of citizens and capital are generally more visually obvious than in western Europe. The art projects commissioned in İstanbul all include some of this reality within their boundaries, sometimes almost invisibly, but it is never entirely absent. In bearing witness in this way, they make a demand on our critical resources in broad terms, asking us to relate what is inside the exhibitions to the conditions outside the door.

Provoking these critical resources is necessary because, although there is a single economic consensus on all sides, there is no obvious target to oppose or organised network of resistance to join. We have largely to work things out for ourselves. Global capitalism itself has developed a terrifying internal logic based on the mechanism of shareholder value and profit that excludes individual exploitation in favour of a kind of blind pseudo-religious faith in the inevitability of the market to be the 'best' system of distribution. Most operatives of the market system, and even at a very high level individual capitalists are merely operatives, neither evil nor blind. They are simple pragmatists who have faith in their system as 'better' than any other in terms of economic growth, wealth creation and other targets that capitalism has made for itself and then successfully fulfilled. Its failures, and therefore the ways to address its inadequacies, lie at the level of personal disconnection and the lack of social solidarity and shared values that many of us feel. Any attempt to change that, or to start to suggest alternative 'targets' for social and individual fulfilment, needs to address the qualities of intimacy, desire, aesthetic satisfaction and quixotic personal contentment that art speaks to and about - and that are emphasised in our selection for the biennial.

Probably the terms of the relationship between art and political change can never be causally linked, and even those affected at an intimate level to think differently, will not be fully conscious of these origins. Yet, this moment in our history presents a particularly grim outlook for thoughtful human development and, in its face, we need the force of the intimate imagination of possibility more than ever. Art in general, and this biennial in particular, can zero in on this target, not through opposition but through the proposition of things otherwise than they are. The propositional strength of art freed, as it should be, from political responsibility or actual power, is one of its greatest assets. This biennial is full of proposals for different views of the surrounding city, and many other cities to which it is related. What they share, apart from a desire to communicate in images, is a modest scale that relates not to the mass media but to specific situations and individuals that the artists have encountered along their ways.

### **Searching for an outside**

Throughout this book, art is seen to be one of the flawed mechanisms through which such possibilities could be developed and communicated. The essays in general provide some outlines of the political possibilities confronting us in cosmopolitan urban environments. While written from very individual standpoints, the texts do suggest a tenuous thread linking them, while also connecting the words here with elements of the works in the biennial.

That thread involves a common search for an effective space outside the current economic and political consensus. It has sometimes been suggested that there is no outside position from which to understand and analyse global capitalism but, if

that were really so, art and all other critical faculties, would be reduced to mere window dressing. The space outside the current common discourse is certainly fugitive, uncertain and temporary but its existence is essential in order to allow for the dynamic continuity of human life. Making this slippery outside visible, is of course, a demanding and often impossible task. Nevertheless, we believe that at certain moments in the biennial, this outside should emerge into the light. This happens when the artists succeed in constructing a temporary community around their work, or reflect the existence of such communities through active participation in them.

The key text here is Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*. Agamben's proposal of a future community is a hard one to fully comprehend but close reading offers much in the way of thinking about human life and aspiration. Its outline may also just be visible in this biennial and in all its contradictory, human potential, through the projects of artists working inside and outside İstanbul. If the 'coming community' is to be built, it will be from the singularity of each citizen confronting another person as simply human. This confrontation is what some of the best of the biennials offer sudden glimpses of. Their significance lies in what they suggest about how the cities of the future may be constructed. If the tool of the biennial performs well, it will allow us all to be aware of the world outside ourselves, and the ways we can renegotiate our relation to it, as well as point to the potential of a space outside the system that will one day lead to the emergence of a real and viable alternative.