

Nightcomers at the 2007 Istanbul Biennial: revolution or counterrevolution?

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Nightcomers at the Textile Traders' Market (IMÇ), opening night, September, 2007.

The 9th Istanbul Biennial took place in 2005 under the title *Istanbul*. Curated by Vasıf Kortun and Charles Esche, it was widely acclaimed for its break with previous biennials' use of the city's historic venues (Hagia Sophia, the Basilica Cistern, Dolmabahçe Palace) as exhibition spaces. As the first Istanbul Biennial to “leak” into new areas of the city, it drew visitors into the old factories, crumbling apartment buildings, and former shops and office buildings of the Galata and Beyoğlu neighborhoods – as well as to the less-traveled Istanbul streets linking these locations. Following the previous year's model, 2007's 10th Istanbul Biennial, *Not only possible but also necessary: optimism in the time of global war*, also worked to call attention to sites outside of the historic district which can nevertheless be considered ‘historic’ in their own right. Head curator Hou Hanru, however, went far beyond the previous Biennial's efforts to engage with with Istanbul's recent history, and with the city itself.

Transforming urban reality

The 10th Istanbul Biennial was organized by the private Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), and was sponsored by the Koç Group. Hou's biennial aspired to be a giant

intervention. If the 9th Istanbul Biennial had pointed to the wonder and chaos of the metropolis, the 10th wanted to *touch* it, to cause ripples in the rhythm of the city. Two themes intertwined throughout Hou's framing discourse. The first was the importance of transgressing the boundaries between art and everyday space. The second was a vehement outcry against 'neo-liberalist capitalism' as a destructive force which subjects the non-Western world in particular to economic and social domination. Combined, and set in the context of Istanbul, these themes translated into an outcry against the forces of gentrification which increasingly transform down-and-out neighborhoods from ghettos (home to Istanbul's millions of dispossessed inhabitants) into prime real estate for the ascendant middle class, forcing out less affluent residents.

The majority of the exhibitions and related 'special projects' addressed these concerns directly. Working fully in the spirit of the biennial, Turkish artist Burak Delier aimed not just to take capitalism as a subject for his work, but to critique it from the inside. Best-known for his iconic 2005 poster of a wide-eyed woman veiled in the EU flag, Delier this time created an ad hoc company which produced, promoted, and sold a 'lynch-proof' jacket with pockets for political pamphlets and spray-paint cans, and protective layering against police batons. If used as intended, the product would have undermined the same system of production and consumption that enabled it to appear at first sight as a well-marketed and innovative piece of clothing, rather than part of an international art festival. At other locations, Madrid-based collective Democracia presented video 'documentation' of the destruction of an imaginary shanty-town by a giant backhoe emblazoned with the words 'Welfare State,' and Justin Bennett layered sound recordings from the Istanbul streets in what he noted as an attempt to access an underlying 'well' of sound.

Artworks were housed in a series of venues that reflected some of the main trends and challenges of urban planning and cultural programming in Turkey throughout the past 100 years. Three in particular formed a striking constellation. Antrepo No. 3 is a former warehouse whose neighboring twin building now houses Turkey's first modern art museum, an overtly political project that opened in 2004 just before the European Union held a vote on Turkey's potential membership. The Atatürk Cultural Center is a boxy, modernist performing arts center built of glass and light in the spirit of a republican utopia. SantralIstanbul, a former power plant erected under the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed V, now hosts an extravagant contemporary arts venture that opened simultaneously with the Biennial, unhindered by its careless production values.¹

While these locations called attention to unique aspects of Istanbul's modern history and, for the most part, served beautifully as exhibition sites, only two segments of the biennial directly engaged with the urban landscape. At the Textile Traders' Market (IMÇ), artwork was displayed in empty shops interspersed with functioning retail outlets: locals would inevitably interact with the artwork, and the visiting art crowd, in turn, could hardly avoid engaging with vendors in the vast concrete bazaar complex that housed their shops. But it was *Nightcomers*, a series of five-minute videos projected across scattered Istanbul neighborhoods, that truly acted on the idea of integrating art into the city's public spaces. As the portion of the biennial which retained the most significant link to the city itself, *Nightcomers* also maintained a unique – and problematic – relationship to the biennial's central discourse against urban gentrification.

Street art in Istanbul

With *Nightcomers*, the Istanbul Biennial entered the domain of ‘street art,’ art which leaves the shelter of conventional exhibition venues such as museums, historical sites and converted buildings for display within public, most often urban, space. The video program was inspired by the concept of *dazibao*, a Chinese term referring to citizens’ widespread use of posters as an anonymous method of expression during and after the Cultural Revolution. While initially encouraged as a means to rouse revolutionary spirit, the continued use of posters to criticize China’s communist party after the Cultural Revolution exposed their capacity for the expression of a plurality of voices – voices which could be fundamentally at odds with each other, as well as with current official state policy.

In this sense, *dazibao* was the ideal mode of expression for what Chantal Mouffe termed ‘agonistic’ public spaces in the second issue of this journal – spaces ‘where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus.’² As with *dazibao*, where the aims of party cadres and protesters came in direct conflict with each other once they began to overlap in the realm of street art, a diversity of works must lack a uniting cause in order to effectively take a role in the creation of these ‘agonistic’ public spaces. Only by retaining the potential to criticize one another as much as they criticize a representative figure of the dominant consensus (such as the communist state) can artworks function at the level of Mouffe’s ideal standard. Mouffe cautions against mistaking a group of practices to be an effective manifestation of ‘agonistic’ practice simply because of their critical nature: ‘Clearly those who advocate the creation of agonistic public spaces, whose objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus, are going to envisage the relation between artistic practice and their public in a very different way than those whose objective is the creation of consensus, even if this consensus is seen as a critical one.’

By choosing to use video in the street in lieu of posters, the five *Nightcomers* curators Adnan Yıldız, Övül Durmuşoğlu, Marcus Graf, Borga Kantürk, and Pelin Uran hoped to showcase a distinctly contemporary artistic phenomenon that nevertheless retained *dazibao*’s ability to accommodate fundamentally conflicting viewpoints. Like *dazibao* posters, contemporary street art practices are not united in, or against, a common object. In a recent article, writer Arlen Dilsizian points out that divergent approaches – ranging from video projections, to graffiti, to the use of stencils by corporations such as Nike in ‘guerrilla marketing’ strategies – often have directly conflicting aims.³ In many urban centers, artists who hope to ‘take back the streets’ by using the city walls as their canvas express resentment at more commercial uses of the same methods and spaces.

As an eminently public medium, street art practices are met with varying degrees of censure on the part of city authorities, a trend which compounds divisions between genres and plays a key part in determining their opposing roles in the public sphere. Dilsizian notes a crucial difference between ‘graffiti’ (spray-painted ‘tags’) and ‘street art’ (stencils, wall paintings, posters, video projections within public spaces). Graffiti, he points out, is associated with crime and urban decay; taggers often come under fire from local municipalities. Street art, on the other hand, is frequently associated with ‘urban hipness.’ In October 2007, the Paris stencil artist who signs his works as Jef Aerosol spent an entire afternoon spraypainting figures on public walls in the 5th arrondissement, followed by a

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<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/smith.html>

camera crew, without drawing negative reactions from local police walking by (this despite the prominence of '*défense d'afficher*' signs throughout the neighborhood). Street art of this sort often attracts well-heeled students and yuppies, drives up rents, and forces less affluent residents to move. In other words: street art can act as a gentrifying force.

In Istanbul the street art scene has only become prominent within the past three or so years. Commercial campaigns appear rarely, if at all, and graffiti is nearly non-existent. Posters are a more common form of street art: pasted on city walls (often in multiples), they cohabit a space populated mostly by concert advertisements and political posters. Arriving upon the scene unannounced, they cover up preexisting images, only to themselves be torn down or covered in turn. In general, street art posters take part in the same accelerated cycle of creation and elimination that characterizes the commercial and political publicity they compete with for wall-space. Burak Delier's 2005 street poster of a girl veiled in the EU flag gained a longer lease on life by changing its status as 'art' to 'political poster,' and back to 'art' again, in a chain of events which testifies to the progressively complex relationship between the realm of the street and the realm of the gallery. When galleries failed to show interest in exhibiting the image – originally a photograph – the artist independently printed and hung it as posters in the street. Tensions were running high on the topic of Turkey's potential EU membership, and Delier's image touched a nerve. It was not until it had drawn widespread international attention as a poster in the street that Delier's work was seized upon by the artistic community. It was later displayed in the 'Free Kick' section of the 9th Istanbul Biennial.

Stencils are increasingly pervasive in the city. Undeniably associated with processes of gentrification, they tend to follow rather than act as a precursor of an upswing in a given neighborhood's quality of life. They proliferate in the chic neighborhoods of Beyoğlu, Galata, and Çukurcuma, concentrating most densely along the outdoor walls of the hip Urban Cafe, a favorite hangout of Istanbul's international art crowd. (These areas are separated by a single boulevard from Tarlabası, a neighborhood that is currently home to a large Kurdish and Gypsy population, and whose handsome residential buildings, having fallen into disrepair, are now the object of a number of restoration and building projects initiated by private capital and encouraged by the Istanbul municipality.) For its spring 2007 exhibit, one of Istanbul's oldest artists' collectives, Hafriyat ('Excavation'), invited local street artists to cover its gallery walls with their stenciled designs. In the following exhibit, which was timed to coincide with Turkey's presidential elections, Hafriyat layered its spray-painted walls with alternative election posters designed by local graphic designers and artists. This accumulation of imagery echoed the cycle of production going on in the street.

'Nightcomers': Hit and run gentrification

With significantly stronger financial backing than other local artists or group initiatives also involved in the production and exhibition of street art, *Nightcomers* ventured to extend the reach of contemporary street art where no artist, let alone Western-European tourist, had set foot before. As curators put out an open call for video submissions, the artist couple Bik Van der Pol scouted over 30 locations in neighborhoods city-wide to find locations for screenings. Though undoubtedly intended for planning purposes, the notes they left behind in the public domain indicate both the extent of the artists' efforts to engage with Istanbul's urban spaces, and the utter heterogeneity of the social realities those spaces accommodate.⁴

To complement the variety of physical sites, *Nightcomers*' curators had hoped to receive video submissions from an array of sources ('professionals to amateurs') whose diverse backgrounds would ensure a heterogeneous body of material. However, as Marcus Graf notes in his catalog entry for the program, the majority of the 780 submissions were sent by young artists and art students, most of them from the Western hemisphere. Unfortunately, curators' choices in presenting the videos did little to improve the situation. Arranged as a largely indistinguishable string of moving images broken only by awkward jumps in volume, language, and force, the video material which was intended to shock visitors and locals into a new political awareness was singularly ineffective.⁵

Video art is a relatively new medium, whose visual vocabulary is changing at the same furious rate that thousands of videos are added daily to Youtube, so *Nightcomers* may be forgiven its lack of intelligibility. A more serious failing, however, becomes visible when *nightcomers* is seen in the political and economic context that made it possible in the first place. While it did succeed in altering the current of the city more effectively than any other segment of the biennial, it did so in direct conflict with the exhibition's defining ideological stance against the processes of gentrification at work in cities like Istanbul worldwide. The Istanbul municipality's enthusiastic endorsement of the Biennial's expansion throughout the city was hardly a coincidence. As Dilizian points out, in capitalist societies, the forms of street art most often tolerated in public spaces are those that can contribute to attracting investors and driving up rents in impoverished urban areas. That this year's Biennial was sponsored by the Koç Group, a hugely significant financial and industrial presence in Turkey which invests heavily in the tourism and construction industries, must be seen in the same light.

Whatever their other aims or results may be, it has long been acknowledged that a central goal of the growing number of worldwide art biennials is to promote local artists and encourage tourism in an effort to stimulate economic growth and improve the general quality of life of a given city, region, or country. Though the Istanbul Biennial is no exception to this rule, 2007's *Not only possible but also necessary: optimism in the time of global war*, sought to critique the very forces of neo-liberal capitalism which both initially engendered and continue to sustain the biennial itself. By remaining open to all potential contributions, and being projected within a public urban space, the *Nightcomers* video program was intended to encourage an *acting out* of the Biennial's critical thematic framework, in the same way that artist Burak Delier sought to get 'within' an economic system rather than simply to muse upon its shortcomings. The 10th Istanbul Biennial's *Nightcomers* video program was meant to punch through the Biennial's restraining institutional and economic structures in order to create latitude for the unregulated, the unplanned, and the dissident. Yet rather than expanding the Biennial's ability to serve as a democratic platform, curators' co-opting of street art had the reverse effect: produced and distributed with the support of two groups that would benefit directly from its role as signal of urban regeneration, *Nightcomers* reconfigured the status of street art in Istanbul. From a symbol of free expression, street art was transformed into an active (if inadvertent) participant in the very processes of gentrification which the exhibition's curators and artists criticized.

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1 See Sarah-Neel Smith, 'Managing Utopia Can Santral Istanbul realize its grand ambitions?'

http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/islamic_world/articles/2007/santralistanbul

2 Chantal Mouffe. 'Artistic activism and agonistic spaces.' *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts, and Methods*, <http://artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>. 2007.

3 Arlen Dilsizian. 'Seeing beyond rebellious artistic practices.' *Re-public: Reimagining democracy*, <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=177>

4 A Search on Google maps shows the scattered sites across Istanbul's topography, along with comments: '+40° 58' 50.58", +29° 9' 44.28" P19. Corner of Buyuk Bakkalkoy Yolu, Ferhatpasa and Kemal Pasa Caddesi. Here is a good wall with nice view, on a building near the mosque with strange Starwars-like architecture. Very conservative and religious area. Nearby is Yedpa, this building is owned by big family, lots of small business in one huge building, access for cars.'

5 There were moments of lucidity during the program when a distinct narrative would emerge within one segment, or strong graphics would grace the screen. But for the most part, even initiated members of the international art crowd expressed incomprehension at the majority of the 5-minute works.