

2009 Istanbul Biennial

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Walking through this year's Istanbul Biennial felt a bit like free falling into another time. The vaguely Soviet-style graphics, the red stars surrounding the question mark on biennial material, the images of Lenin that appeared in various places seem to have little to do with the ironic gestures that I, as a North American, have come to expect from such political symbolism. Curated by the Zagreb collective What, How & for Whom (WHW), comprising Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović, the biennial's theme was "What Keeps Mankind Alive?," taken from Berthold Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*.

The Brechtian theme reflects the curators' interest in reengaging with Marxist thought and in underlining the links between current conditions and the world economic collapse of 1929. The curatorial statement reads:

Brecht's analysis of pre-WWII developments bears alarming resemblance to contemporary times. "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" will serve as a trigger, as well as a certain script for the exhibition. Even a quick look at the lyrics will discover many possible themes, such as the distribution of wealth and poverty, food and hunger, political manipulations, gender oppression, social norms, double morality, religious hypocrisy, personal responsibility and consent to oppression, issues certainly "relevant" and almost predictable.

The curators lived through the collapse of state socialism and the establishment of a free market economy. As well, many of the artists exhibiting in the biennial are young, in their 20s and 30s, part of a generation which came of age after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Eastern European focus of much of the work means that political questions will resonate differently than it would in North America.

For the curators, as for most of the world, the promises of capitalism have not materialized. At first, the idea of art engaging with political reality seemed exciting, a way around the sterility of so much contemporary art. But what is that reality? The biennial guide included statistics on participating artists, their budgets, and the material conditions under which art is made. Important, yes, but perhaps too easy. For me the real question is: do Marxist concepts still work? Are Marxist analyses of production able to account for the movements of international capital, new conceptions of the nation-state, the rise of the religious right, environmental collapse, and the effects of the digital revolution? With the exception of one panel, these questions seemed not to be asked.

As I walked through the show, I remembered the moment the Berlin wall came down in 1989, and I thought of the millions of people in the last century who engaged with the dream of revolution, who passionately believed in the struggle, who fought over doctrinaire points, and who died for the cause. I thought of the difficult relationship artists have had with revolutionary societies, and of Doris Lessing's depressing novel, *The Sweetest Dream*, which underlines the failure (and fatuousness) of much revolutionary discourse in the West. It is easy to be cynical in retrospect—how could anyone have supported Stalin?—but it is important to remember that earlier generations did do their best to make these visions of social justice come to fruition.

In all three biennial venues, crumpled red paper is strewn on the floor, like garbage or writer's pages abandoned in frustration. I opened one up: one side is in Turkish, the other in English. The paper is part of a manifesto on women's participation in education, health, and media. Agitprop? Not exactly. This piece, by Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, titled *Turkish Report 09* (2009), is typical of many of the biennial's exhibits in its combination of a conceptual look and explicit political message.

One of the most interesting projects is the installation by the Russian collective chto delat/ *What*

is to be done? This installation, for me, exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of the biennial theme. *What is to be done?* includes artists, writers, and philosophers based in Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod, and generates initiatives called “art soviets,” referring to early revolutionary councils. They publish a newspaper in English and Russian and have a website in both languages (www.chtodelat.org). In the installation for the biennial, they present a special newspaper, wall drawings, and a video component, which includes *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008–9) and *Post-Yugoslav Songspiel* (2009).

In the *Perestroika Songspiel* video, formally dressed singers express the ideals of change in verse, while archetypes act out the forces underlying the collapse of the Soviet Union; the capitalist makes promises, the nationalist rails against foreigners, the communist encourages the others to attend workers’ demonstrations, and the feminist, whom everyone tries to shut up, calls for women’s participation in the political process. The formal quality of the choruses derives from classical Greek theatre, and employs a European, high-culture style of singing to express the aspirations of the people. The *Partisan Songspiel* engages with Serbian history, and here we see four oppressors (Mafioso, Oligarch, Nationalist, Woman Politician), and four heroic characters (Roma Woman, Lesbian, Worker, and Invalid Veteran). As these act out their yearning for social change, the Chorus of Dead Partisans intervenes to sing:

Our children killed each other
 In a bloody war!
 In an unjust war!
 Our children! In a bloody war!
 SREBRENICA! SREBRENICA!

By the end of the piece, the four heroic characters come to understand each other’s aspirations.

Although I liked this installation very much, it is an example of how, as with politically engaged art, less might be more. My own feeling is that the videos

work very well on their own, while the historical material on the walls between the video rooms is less effective, although reasonably interesting as information.

In the “Great Method” edition of the newspaper produced for the biennial, *What is to be done?* includes mission statements and articles by Antonio Negri and others. Of particular importance is Brecht’s *Me-ti*, a practical philosophy based on fables and aphorisms that brings insights of the I Ching together with a dialectical method of affirmation. As I read the newspaper articles, the old debates of the Left flowed back in all their fusty glory: Lenin, Plekhanov, Lukacs, all were cited, all familiar from the imperialism study group I attended back in the day. Now, as then, the old debates seemed little more than an intellectual exercise, far removed from the realities of the present. In the past, these disputes fractured the Left, with unfortunate results. And I saw the old tendency to dismiss environmental issues, for instance, we read a quotation from Brecht: “Thinking is a form of behavior of people to other people. It is far less concerned with the rest of nature; because man only reaches nature through a detour via man.” I’m not so sure.

My problem with the historical material on the installation’s wall illustrates the question that arose in much of the work in the biennial. The elements that worked on a visual level—in this instance, the videos—do not need texts to explain them. But for *What is to be done?*, art is part of a larger intellectual project of which the videos are only one component. For me, Artur Zmiljewski’s *Democracies* (2009) and Hrair Sarkassian’s *Execution Squares* (2008) worked well because they allow the viewer to engage with the work at a purely visual level, through which one can more readily make links and construct meaning from one’s own experiences.

In *Democracies*, Zmiljewski presents video footage of public demonstrations throughout the world, including Poland, Germany, Palestine, and elsewhere. Although these demonstrations have different political agendas—for example, in Poland we see striking electrical workers hoist and carry a large cross—what

is compelling is the nearly identical emotion on the faces of the participants, rightist and leftist alike. The feelings that seemed to be expressed in these gatherings, regardless of the politics of the demonstrators, makes one wonder about what precisely is being served by public manifestations. Demonstrations are intended to communicate specific messages to the world, but seeing these together shifts the focus to the internal, intense emotional state that is discharged by the public event.

Sarkassian's photographs of public squares in Syria in which executions have occurred evoke something very strange. These seemingly neutral spaces are entirely empty of people, and yet are sites where people, willingly or not, gathered to witness acts of state violence and the attendant anguish and, for some, exultation. One thinks of Bataille's work on sacrifice, and the kind of intense emotional states that are generated by such events. Yet as *Execution Squares* reveals, such emotions are transient; the spaces remain, empty until filled again with the public performance of vengeance, always overlain by the permanence of death.

Some works took a more personal perspective.

In performance artist Rabih Mroué's video, *I, the undersigned* (2007), he apologizes for various transgressions during the Lebanese civil war, most of which are small, personal misdemeanors. This work speaks both to the desire for public apologies, and to the emptiness of such gestures as Australia's "Sorry Day" and the recent apology to First Nations in Canada. Yet the Mroué apology also raises the question of accountability and the desire to forget past wrongs on the part of those responsible. Mroué speaks directly into the camera with a look of utmost sincerity, and, in his apology, he also speaks about his relation to art, opening up categories of political transgression. The piece included a signed letter placed directly on the wall beside the video, which, in my view, was entirely too large. The piece did not need it (although I am told that in another show this statement was presented differently).

The collective decolonizing.ps, consisting of Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Eyal Weizman, deals

with what they call the "architecture of occupation" in Palestine, asking what happens to spaces that are left behind, here the Israeli-built structures, after an oppressor withdraws from occupied territories. In *Returns* (2009), we see images of demolished buildings, the "evacuated structures" of occupation. I was mesmerized by the images of collapsing buildings, perhaps less so by the manual that accompanied the images given the gallery context. But the questions raised by the work are compelling: can these buildings be re-appropriated; should they be used at all? How does one return to a place that has been built on?

Other works that stood out were Nevin Aladag's videos, *City Language I, II, III* (2009), in which Istanbul itself becomes the agent of the narrative. *City Language I* deals with sound, showing musical instruments seemingly abandoned on the street. One hears subtle sounds, and begins to realize that these instruments are being played by the wind or by pigeons. Danica Dakic's video *Isola Bella* (2007-08) is the result of a collaboration with disabled residents of a former children's home in Sarajevo in which residents perform in masks, creating a formal, yet intimate, atmosphere. Here, the staging of social roles is explicit and takes place against antique wallpaper that depicts a natural paradise. In *Celestial Objects (Istanbul)* (2009), Trevor Paglen shows images of night skies punctuated by surveillance satellites in which traces of the satellites appear as bright streaks against a black background. As in his piece at last summer's "Universal Code" exhibition at The Power Plant, the result is both beautiful and extremely spooky.

Many of the exhibitions seemed to have a distinctly didactic undertone, which begs the question, why make art at all when an essay or political tract can do the same job? It is difficult to fault the enthusiasm of the curators and their efforts to tie contemporary art to the movements of capital, but I think part of the problem is the question of what art is, and why and how is it different from text. This, of course, brings us to aesthetics and to the material qualities of the work of art. The most compelling work uses images to

enable the viewer to link ideas in a new way. The great political works of past artists (I am thinking of Goya, among others) were driven by a powerful aesthetic vision that only strengthened the political message, as well as a deep humanity that transcends the particular event being portrayed.

For me, one of the most urgent issues of this millennium is environmental collapse. As the biennial art parties got underway, people in parts of Istanbul were dying in the floods that were the result of heavy rains, apparently the effect of climate change. I was disappointed that "What Keeps Mankind Alive" did not include more work addressing the relation of social change to the environment. For me, this absence underlines what can be a narrow sense of the political, where politics means human beings rather than a larger sense of Earth as a whole.

The biennial's curators hoped to provide an alternative to the art fairs that are, in effect, industry trade shows, and to separate the content of the biennial from the specificity of Istanbul. In this way, they sought to challenge the tendency of art biennials to promote a kind of cultural tourism in the cities in which they take place. But this is difficult given the reality of Istanbul. In truth, it is one of the most interesting cities in the world, with a deep, layered history. The sea views, the street life, the architecture has a way of overshadowing everything else. The problems with the biennial's set up—one venue was not particularly easy to find or to get to, and there were no places to sit over coffee and think about the work—may have been the result of this unwillingness to engage with the city itself.

The complicated political terrain of Turkey, which includes questions of national identity and modernization, militarism and contested histories of marginalized groups, also speaks to the issues the curators raised in the biennial. While the global agenda of the biennial was admirable, at times, this agenda seemed to undercut the specificity of place in a way that was disorienting, and, in the end, I am not convinced that transplanting debates from other places into the

Istanbul context is a particularly useful exercise. It makes more sense to engage with where you are, lest the city be reduced a backdrop and, thus, become even more touristic.

There were many art openings in Istanbul the first biennial weekend, which seemed to me to be more interesting than much of the biennial. At the Galeri Nev, Hale Tenger's *Strange Fruit* (2009) reflects the artist's engagement with the destruction of Earth. We walk through a dense wall of feathers to an alternative world, a darkened room illuminated by moving stars in which a globe hangs, then into another room with an upside down globe, with geographical names printed right side up. Ethereal music filled the gallery, evoking an experiential quality in which Earth itself becomes a strange fruit, suspended and tormented. Also addressing environmental issues was Selim Birsell's photographic work, *Villas with Water Tank View, Bahrain* (2009), part of the C.A.M. Gallery's Backwords exhibition. In this work, expensive villas recently built in the arid landscape of the Persian Gulf overlook the reassuring sight of an enormous water tank. Also showing at Galeri Nev was Inci Eviner's *Harem* (2008), in which videos of contemporary women engaged in a range of odd, indefinable tasks are superimposed on an old engraving of a harem. It is Eviner's intention to simultaneously undo Orientalist fantasies and depict women as subjects. This piece works well precisely because of the enigmatic quality of the women's actions.

In Galeri Non's group exhibition *Unsound Reason/Adequate Cause*, Tayfun Sertaş' work *I Love You* (2009) speaks to the assassination of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink by Turkish nationalists in January 2007. Dink had been prosecuted for "denigrating Turkishness" in his discussion of the Armenian genocide, an extremely fraught issue in Turkey. He had also published a report that Sabiha Gokcen, the famous aviatrix and adopted daughter of Turkey's founder Kemal Atatürk, may have been of Armenian ancestry. The sculptural piece *For Sabiha Gokcen* is a

marble tomb with the words “I Love You” carved in Armenian, words she was reported to have spoken.

There are many ways to engage with political issues. For instance, Osvaldo Romberg’s maze-like installation at Sabanci University’s Kasa Gallery addresses what he calls the macro-political. In *Building Footprints* (2009) Romberg mixed transparent elements from classical and modern architecture to express layers of time, and to ask us what is remembered and what is being forgotten.

I came away from Istanbul feeling that it was the work outside the biennial that was “political,” yet very subtle and effective.

ART

53rd Venice Biennale

“Fare Mondi/Making Worlds”
curated by Daniel Birnbaum
June 7 – November 22, 2009

Christopher Eamon

The 53rd Venice Biennale, like many of its predecessors, seems doomed to displease, the result perhaps of a syndrome of aiming to please everyone. It is revealing that after continuous expansion born from its aspirations for inclusion, more could be learned about the state of global contemporary art at Art Basel than at the grueling and difficult-to-manuever Venice Biennale. What most visitors tend to expect from biennials is the ability to grasp an overview of contemporary art presented by a specialist in the field. Anything else like conceptualizing the works selected in a way that enlightens or, better, changes, one’s view or

understanding of the works, is an added bonus. In recent history at the Biennale, neither has been the case.

If Documenta is the Olympics of contemporary art, then the Venice Biennale is its Academy Awards. It was the first of its kind in 1895. It maintains the status of “mother of all biennials” even now that it has been followed by greater numbers and ever-more-specialized biennials and triennials taking place all over the globe. But the birthplace of the modern biennial may be in the long run also the place of its end, if this has not already happened at least symbolically. Born in the golden era of World Expositions so famous for leaving behind their landmarks—London’s Crystal Palace, the Eiffel Tower, Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, among others—the Venice Biennale first exhibited decorative and applied arts at its inception. The landmarks of its history can be found in the Giardini, where the pavilions are trenchant reminders of the colonialist context of the fair’s birth and subsequent growth as a mainly Eurocentric yet international venue for contemporary art. Over the decades it has worked to rectify the situation of not adequately representing non-Western nations by adding new national representations in off-site pavilions and expanding the main exhibition greatly with the addition of the enormous Arsenale exhibition space in 1980.

This year, the broader Biennale boasted seventy-seven national pavilions, including representative artists from the Republic of Gabon and the Union of Comoros, and forty-four collateral exhibitions, exhibitions not organized by the Biennale organization, but which are welcomed under its umbrella. Even the Arsenale had been greatly expanded. The main exhibition pavilion formerly called the Italian Pavilion has also been enlarged and renamed the Palazzo delle Esposizioni della Biennale. Collateral events included interesting digital works by John Gerrard at the Island of Cortoza, as well as a context-sensitive exhibition of recent works by Mona