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A conversation with Fatos Üstek

interview by Isil Egrikavuk

Last summer, I ran into Fatoş Üstek at a cafe in Istanbul. We had known each other for a long time but somehow lost contact. As we spoke about what we were doing, she mentioned an alternative gallery space, which she was involved with at the time. I visited PiST/// (which means dance floor in Turkish) the week after and talked to its coordinators, Didem Ozbek and Osman Bozkurt. It was very exciting to see the space and what they were doing. They were not only showing work, but also organizing discussions with artists, curators, and other non-mainstream spaces and organizations. Later, I became part of their exhibition series "Reserved." The whole process of being involved in PiST/// felt more like a collaboration, which I found appealing. The text below is a conversation between Fatoş Üstek and myself via email.

Isil Egrikavuk Fatoş, I would like to start this dialogue with a question that will require an informative answer more than anything. How visible are alternative spaces in Turkey's art scene?

Fatoş Üstek I have been thinking of how to start with your question. I would like to include alternative acts, events, and happenings into the "alternative space" category in Turkey. What is "alternative" is broadly defined in the Turkish art scene as the non-mainstream. What is non-mainstream is that which manifests itself through the realization of events at those spaces or at spontaneously transformed common places. There has been a rapid movement in new places in the recent years. Turkey does not have a long history of contemporary art. What is being thought in art academies and private art schools is more on the level of classical training through established media; thus exhibitions of Impressionist paintings and sculptures have been mainly occupying the venues. If I could shortly mention the history, contemporary artists were mainly living or exhibiting abroad at those times.

There was a rush of togetherness in the 90s, which brought many artists together who shared the urge of producing together, thinking together, sharing together, acting together. Hence, the 90s was the time of having large-scale group shows, and a variety of groupings on various art production levels. The 90s not only led artists to enlarge the awareness of art production by other artists, but also enabled the realization of events, and exhibitions together. In the aftermath, the time of individual acts and individual participation replaced openness. Currently, the Turkish art scene functions through the questioning of forms of togetherness and active ways of participating in society. This can be one of the main reasons for the opening of new collectives and art spaces as well as the realization of art events. Istiklal Street, as the main center of events, is not the only place where art events take place. There is a large group of artists (approximately 250 members) who are realizing public events and exhibitions in Kadikoy, on the Asian side of Istanbul. There is an artist-run space in the form of a shop on the street in Tunnel, called Bas, which supports the production of artist books; and PiST/// in Pangalti realizing events and exhibitions. So, the spread of venues has also led society to come across contemporary art. Speaking in minor terms, in the locality where the space is functioning, we can talk about the visibility of these spaces; however on a major scale the lack of support of the media fragments information on those spaces. Therefore, the visibility is mostly on the scale of the neighborhood and passers-by, as well as among the art scene.

I.E. You mention PiST///, an alternative space, located in quite a marginalized area in Istanbul. As far as I know, you have been involved in the curatorial and organizational practices of PiST/// since its opening this year. One thing that is quite interesting about PiST/// is that it is not only functioning as an exhibition space, but also a catalyst for a dialogue among other artist run/alternative spaces. Rather than being

a closed box, PiST/// seems to be functioning as an open platform, where artists, administrators, curators get together and discuss. From my experience talking to artists, it occurs to me that artist-run spaces are facing so many more financial difficulties that discussions center more around defining the problems, rather than creating constructive solutions. How do you think this unification structure could function better?

F.Ü. Yes, I have been involved in the founding and opening of PiST/// Interdisciplinary Project Space. The lack of city or state funding kind of defines the state of alternative spaces and also the artists who have the need to sustain their production. Private funding is a slippery condition; also, since one could become a product they would like to put in the market, instead of being able to realize one's own agenda. Hence many spaces prefer to have funding without interacting with the sponsor. Mostly they end up not finding one, or finding a temporary one who could end the agreement any time.

I.E. Now, the audience outside of Turkey is familiar with the names of several Turkish artists, such as Kutlug Ataman, Huseyin Caglayan or Esra Ersen, since they are not only significant figures, but also they are represented outside of Turkey through galleries, museums, and biennials. I would like to ask you what you think about the contribution of alternative spaces to the recognition and representation of young Turkish artists, both in the national and international art scene? In other words, is an alternative gallery enough of a criteria for international recognition?

F.Ü. Definitely. There is a need to open up exhibition possibilities for young artists and curators as well as a need to support continuing production. And this pool in the coming future will play an important role in the international scene, by its very nature.

The question of recognition for alternative spaces within the international scene has actually many answers. For instance, Sparwasser

ducing? Or will it only satisfy the desire to be marginal?

F.Ü. This is a really good question. Besides all the naïve positions on alternative spaces and despite the best intentions for realizing events, opening up dialogue, and discussing and experiencing and changing—there is an art market—not only biennials and large-scale exhibitions but also galleries, collectors, dealers, which all have a big influence on art making. It would be super naïve to recall the days of "Art = High Level of Social Reform," but could it be proper to focus on a local scale, to define the dynamics of your art production, and to be open to renewal or change the dynamics: to interact or to choose not to interact... I would rather propose to have the definition of "alternative" in relation to a static means of understanding. And we should not forget that every, single collaboration is destined to repeat the structures they have been against at first. That is to say, their presence can take the form of institutions that have already established a path with the hierarchical positioning of every element that is included, which would be the problem of those formations in the long run. So, I think it is very important for a collective or a group or an alternative space to define their norms of independence, where they stand, their aims and the meaning of those aims, their expectations, their attitudes, and their means of getting a hold of their art production. Today, I don't see a defined path for becoming a "star," a well-known artist or a well-known space. It comes down to relationships, connections, but not at a very high level. What you produce is much more important, at least in my naïve approach.

I.E. We can question how we look at the alternative, or what we consider alternative to be. Is every artist-run space alternative? Is alternativeness comparable with the means of administration, or the quality of work that is shown, or the positioning of the space within the art market? Perhaps all of them together are a quality of marginality...

And what about the artists? I think what you are saying in terms of having definition is also applicable to them. Knowing how your work can be perceived according to its site or compared to the politics of the site is quite important and influential on the mode of production. I feel like we have thrown the ball to the spaces so far. What about the role of the artist in this cycle?

F.Ü. I feel uneasy to use the term marginal... It is one of the most depicted, challenged, and consumed words... But I think you use the term in reference to the unfamiliar. Until now we have mostly talked about structures and the best form to be attained—and you are right to ask about the role of the artists. Spaces, in general, without strong artistic practices could not be as strong as we have made them out to be. And of course, every artist-run space is not alternative from their first moment, or the title does not give them the function of being alternative. Is it possible to not care about the art market, and the celebrities, and the mainstream, and the major scale? Will that uncaring attitude define the art practice as alternative? Maybe yes maybe no; and also, art practice totally surrounded by the dynamics of the art market can be alternative. Hence, there is not a formula of defining the scales of alternativeness.

Every form of understanding has a tendency of categorization, especially today where our spheres of movement have been charted, defined, and mapped; thus, there is an effective attitude of concretely defining geographies, dynamics of art production, artistic realms. And of course this attitude positions the artist and the production, the perceptions. Hereby I will not give a list of what the role of the artists could be, since that would be falsifying myself, and I try to avoid straight schedules. At least, I could state that I think it is important for the artist to be aware of her/his production and the means of its position and possible outcomes, interpretations, and strength. **BP**



I would like to add, supporting an art event is also very unclear for the sponsors, not only because there is less space in the media for art events, but also because of the insecurity of what the benefits will be. Thus, many events that are not connected to institutions come to be realized by individual initiation; either you spend your income on your project, or find a small budget for a temporary period. Funding is a necessary fact for every event, so the duality of finding money and structuring projects creates hesitation and tiredness. I agree that finding constructive, concrete solutions is necessary for the improvement of projects content-wise. But the limited number of sources leads to either focusing on funding and imagining the best possible projects, or realizing the project on a smaller scale with the resources you have. The unifying structure could function better if there were a pool of funds open to anyone who would like to realize a project. That pool should be initiated by private companies who agree to give a portion of their taxes. This would also require the confirmation from the State and support from the media in all terms. So that, for instance, for five years the pool will be open to anyone who would like to apply for a budget, without a selection process. I believe that good and bad projects alike have to have the same opportunity to be realized, that this will empower the project initiators, and the public to go through a process of coming across various events, and lead to an understanding of what the stake of art could be.

HQ in Berlin, and Para-Site in Hong Kong are independent alternative spaces that are known worldwide... Also, in the last years independent collectives have been invited to biennials, large-scale shows, etc.... Alternative spaces with a strong standing point are needed for art production. These spaces do not only function as an experimentation platform, but also as a political positioning. Specifically for Turkey, the coming biennial, which will be curated by Hou Hanru will open up the possibility of international recognition for artist-run spaces.

I would like to add that the dynamics of internationalization can differ according to the geography, the events taking place, the international curiosity focused on that specific place, and the events themselves.

I.E. Fatos, so far we've considered the positive aspects of alternative spaces and their contribution to the Art world: representation of the marginal or the unheard, the inclusion of new artists... On one hand, there is great interest in unifying towards these goals, but on the other hand, achieving these things will not be as naïve and revolutionary as it sounds.

Let's be more specific here. What do we want from an alternative gallery? Collaborations, getting rid of rigid administrative structures, new names, new artworks... The list goes on and on. Do you think this will really increase the quality or the mode of thinking and pro-