

Guest Author of April 2013: Fatos Ustek

Fatos Ustek is an independent curator and art critic from Turkey, based in London. She is a member of ICI (Independent Curators International), AICA TR (International Association of Art Critics Turkey, UK representative of Federation of Women Associations, Turkey; currently guest tutor at Vision Forum, Linköpings Universitet, Sweden; regular writer for magazines such as Camera Austria, RES Art World, contributor to exhibition catalogues and publications. She is a member of OuUnPo, leads [La Duree](#) with Per Huttner, [INFRA](#) with Anna Gritz under the framework of Vision Forum. Ustek is editor of *Unexpected Encounters Situations of Contemporary Art and Architecture since 2000* (Turkish Only, 2011; English Only, upcoming), author of *Book of Confusions* (2012), and founding editor of [Nowiswere](#) Contemporary Art Magazine (2008-2012, with Veronika Hauer).

Besides her international span of projects, Ustek has been closely working with the contemporary art scene in Istanbul and Turkey since 2001. She has given lectures, curated video days and exhibitions, written extensively on the condition of art in Turkey, locally and internationally. Recently, she has realised a two-legged seminar in collaboration with CAS, UK in Istanbul and London and biennial tour for members and patrons of CAS, UK in 2009; compiled a guide for Istanbul including 1, 2 and 3-day tours as an application for iPhone in 2010, published the book entitled *Unexpected Encounters* on contemporary art's current conditioning of the architectural with the commission of Zorlu Centre in 2011; curated a group exhibition at Galerist, Istanbul in 2012.

Istanbul's Contemporary Art Scene in Three Parts:

A Star is Born, The Glorious Pursuit, The Real Stripped Bare

A Star is Born

Istanbul lies between Sao Paolo and Hong Kong, Moskow and Abu Dhabi. This reconfiguration of the geographical marking is significant in understanding and articulating the current strata of Istanbul's artistic landscape. It is no longer the door to the East - as the East is reinitiating its own self, nor it is a bridge that commensurates two distinct positions and world-views such as East to West, and North to South. Istanbul operates along the streamlines of these newly introduced finance capitals; as recently gained strength of financial power in the aforementioned cities play a significant role in the repositioning of power dynamics in global scale. Naturally, poignant state of the labour force (in mass production) and new conditions of trade alongside the recent Western financial crisis shift the theocratic model of distribution of power towards a rhizomic model of organisation. Indeed, the new condition is not about production of a polarity, but a situation with refreshed set of parameters. For instance, newly introduced sources of (economic) power does not replace the former whilst it necessitates another equation with unexampled variables in a way in which no linearity can be traced: Chinese Banks start to operate in Brazil or the affluents from Arab Emirates control 20% of the real estate market in the capital of UK. The current condition of the art world overtly displays an akin transformation where an English art dealer sells work of a Brazilian artist to a collector from Hong Kong in Switzerland. Due to the post condition of the economic crisis that dominates the cultural atmospheric of the West, the West opens up to other sources of artistic/cultural production where a (financial) flux is initiated. While the cultural operations are being set, cities rather than countries are amplified. The accurate geo-political significance of the location of Istanbul currently succeeds its condition of emerging as a finance capital. Like Abu Dhabi of Arab Emirates or Hong Kong of Far East Asia, Istanbul is benefiting from its *nouveau riche*, who not only invests in the cultivation of its infrastructure, but also the proliferation of its cultural texture. Under this influence, Istanbul surfaces as an island that stands out alone, it is an emerging commodity, a brand, let alone a tale. It is a city that is undergoing a high level of mystification as well as an extensive transformation. One of the highlights of the ongoing change embodies itself in the accelerated increase of the quantity of art venues, galleries let alone museums and private institutions. Not to suffice, the two art fairs (with addition of the Classic and Modern Art Fair starting in April 2013, thence adds up to three), newly initiated art prize, collections, artist residencies and lastly artist run initiatives, produce a perplex picture. It is a buzzing state for a buzzing city. Within the span of last 10 years, the number of commercial art galleries have quadrupled, new museums have opened and new patrons for arts have emerged. The genre of contemporary art has gained visibility across the societal realm, recognition in daily press, let alone the financial domain. Not only the artistic landscape grew but also its fruits have ripened. The pace of production acceleratingly increases as the demand, which reflects itself upon the quantity of

artists, let alone artworks. Every member of the scene is at work for something, while new candidates show up at different fronts. The young and newly graduated have, now, more possibilities of engaging within the contemporary art scene. That is to say, commercial condition produces its own set of artists while the alternative scene works on formulating new positions. The impact of the Istanbul Biennial via attracting thousands of professionals from all over the world triggers liveliness while each and every front is busy with realising a collateral project. The city is continuously being remapped according to the art events, the media coverage of arts is reactivated everyday by speculative circumstances that an artist or an artwork causes, artists from Turkey gain international recognition... Could this be a cultural renaissance? Will Istanbul become a cultural hub like New York, or London or even Berlin?

The Glorious Pursuit

The last decade of Istanbul's artistic landscape displays quite a striking picture of itself. What has been taking place and the pace of events are beyond the possibly expected. It is almost the embodiment of the unimaginable. The small and self-contained condition of the art scene unfolded onto an extensive set with variant components. Not only the starting up of new institutions and spaces for contemporary art, but also the rapid inflation dominating the operation of the art market and the sumptuous amounts of financial value adhered to artworks, have been significant in reshaping the visual arts ecology in Istanbul. Today, the players of the scene is a multitude, from independent curators to directors of institutions, commercial gallery owners, patrons of collections and private museums, art critics and collectors, that shift the operational system of the 90s, let alone the beginning of 2000s. There is no longer the omnipresence of the biannual festivity of welcoming international artists and curators from abroad, nor the singular position of bank supported art venues, nor the commercial front denoted by Galeri Nevⁱ, Macka Sanat Galerisiⁱⁱ and Galeristⁱⁱⁱ. Today, Istanbul Biennial is in the international agenda of festive encounters to attend, and Istanbul is a city to visit at all times. The biennial still holds an irreplaceable value, although there are other initiations such as international conferences, art fairs, and cultural events that draw attention of the international art professionals, hence introduce a continuous flux of visitors to the city. Unlike a decade ago, there are many new spaces varying from commercial galleries to artist run venues that provide possibilities for visibility of art production. The filtering of visibility is mostly dependant upon the choice of the gallerists, or collectors or patrons of these venues, unless it is an initiative of some form. The condition of the scene is unbalanced in this respect, in a way in which there is only a handful of initiatives and artist run spaces operating on a continuum in Istanbul, while some long existing ones operate without a venue.

Apartman Projesi^{iv} is one of the first artist run spaces in Istanbul, which recently relocated to Berlin. Oda Projesi^v one of the long standing and internationally exposed initiative has lost its venue in 2006 due to the rapid gentrification taking place in Galata district. After losing their location, the artists continued their production through a radio programme and publications for couple of more years. Another long standing collective formed of artists who each pursue an individual practice, Hafriyat^{vi}, managed a space in Karakoy district for three years exhibiting work from the members as well as commissioning artists for group shows with socio-politically conscious agenda. 2005 – 2006 have been quite significant years in the emergence of new initiatives, Alti Aylik^{vii}, PiST Interdisciplinary Project Space^{viii}, and BAS^{ix} all started off in this period which can be marked as the emergence of visibility of art from Turkey abroad. In other words, the ongoing relationship with international arena, in the years between 2005 and 2007 has increasingly grown where artists from Turkey started to exhibit widely in Europe. This expansion is also due to the post 1989' condition of Europe and its quest for exploring other positions and other perspectives. Though, the exhibitions organised in those years abroad urged to proliferate the geographical attribution to artistic production, hence thematically explored the potential of representing art from regions deriving distinctions of centralising around themes such as identity, land, belonging... The first wave of international interest has been effective in triggering an urgency for togetherness and collaborative forms of being within the art scene. Some of these initiatives still continue their production, while new initiatives with spaces and collectives have entered into the arena such as xurban-colective^x, 5533^{xi}, MASA^{xii}, AtilKunst^{xiii}, and Hazavuzu^{xiv}. Amidst, a new configuration has emerged; Sanatorium^{xv} started as an artist collective running a space for art, followed by becoming a commercial gallery whose artists are composed of some of the initiators of the collective.

These initiatives and collectives play different roles and attain variant modes of production, mostly structured around a political positioning of the artistic. Whereas, the commercial galleries mostly

focus on object-oriented domain in order to full fill the increasing demand on collecting arts. There are young galleries with a strong agenda of proliferating a position through their selection of artists, while some other galleries operate on the saleability of the works, hence compile an unlikely list of names where each artist would appeal to a collector than another. The gallery system in Istanbul is also receiving interest from the international dealers, where some galleries, like Rodeo^{xvi}, sell most of the works of its artists (90%) to foreign collectors at international art fairs. The interest in the scene is not omni-directional, where international galleries, for instance a New York gallery, might open a project space/side venue in Istanbul. Moreover, a collector may start a gallery in Istanbul and involve herself in the art market with a selection of young and established contemporary Turkish artists (see: Rampa^{xvii}) and place an international list of names together (see: Galeri Mana^{xviii}). Another gallery only focusses on Turkish and Kurdish artists with a political agenda (see: Pilot^{xix} – former Outlet), or supports conceptual approach to art production with an international outline of names (see: Galeri Non^{xx}), or focus to meet the perspectives of the primary art market (see: Pi Artworks^{xxi}), or focus on the local scene (see: Galeri X-ist^{xxii}, Galeri Merkur^{xxiii}), or only on photography (see: Elipsis Galeri^{xxiv}), or start two venues - one for established the other for young artists (see: Galeri Zilbermann^{xxv} and CDA projects). These various models for commercial art galleries portray rather an extensive positioning – even more than the artist run spaces. In other words, the role modelling of the art scene in Istanbul is currently in flux. Commercial front is experimenting with producing a stance, hence a position within the art market, let alone the cultural ecology of Istanbul. The first art fair – Contemporary Istanbul, has been taking place in late Autumn, while the second one -inaugurated this year will be scheduled to coincide with the opening of the Biennial. The latter fair, unlike the first one (which for its first two editions was sponsored by Deutsche Bank), is initiated and cared by the former director of Art Hong Kong. The art fair veteran -named by international press, Angus Sandy is launching ArtInternational Istanbul^{xxvi} after the sales of Art Hong Kong to Art Basel. Additionally, another art fair is emerging this year which will focus on traditional and classic Turkish, Islamic and Ottoman arts and antiques^{xxvii}.

Besides art fairs and commercial galleries, Istanbul is also accumulated by private museums, art institutions with private corporate sponsoring. Borusan Contemporary^{xxviii}, founded by Borusan A.S., provides three venues for art, displaying commissioned exhibitions and selections from its collection at its central offices; hosting traveling shows at another venue on Istiklal, and a residency for young artists. Sakip Sabanci Museum^{xxix}, on the other hand, provides a fusion of classic and traditional Turkish and Ottoman art with solo shows of modern masters such as Picasso, Dali and established Western artists such as Sophie Calle. One of the established corporate families in Turkey, Koc Holding, sponsor art venues in Istanbul and Berlin, ARTER^{xxx} and TANAS^{xxxi}, respectively. Each member of the family builds a private collection on art or antiques and as the corporation Koc^{xxxii} is the main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennial from 2007 until 2016. Currently, they are also initiating a museum to be erected in the Golden Horn. In addition to major stakeholders of financial strength in the art scene, Istanbul's collector scene is acceleratingly growing. Today, if the speculations are rightful, there are 500 collectors registered. The relationship of collectors to the art scene does not only consist purchasing artworks, some of the collectors either individually or as groups provide support for continuity of art production and the discursive crystallisation of the relationship between art work and artist, artwork and audience, artwork and collector. For instance, the venue of New York based non-profit organisation Collector's Space^{xxxiii} initiated by Haro Cumbusyan in Istanbul hosts solo displays of artworks from a reference-worthy private contemporary art collection, as well as artist talks and discussions around the practice of collecting. A recent initiative of collectors from Turkey, namely SAHA^{xxxiv}, aims to contribute towards the presence and visibility of contemporary art from Turkey and offers its support to artistic projects working in line with its vision. Acting like a public funding body for supporting the visibility and distribution of art from Turkey abroad, SAHA promises to full fill a lack that many artists and curators sought for a long time due to nonexistent State funding in arts. Additionally, recently CDA Projects (linked with Galeri Zilbermann) initiated a grant of 10.000 Euros for artistic research projects, and AR Group Companies initiated the first art prize^{xxxv} for contemporary art with the sum of 25.000 TL. Lastly, another initiative from the collector front manifests itself in education in a way in which SPOT^{xxxvi} provides short term courses and classes for collectors who are keen to expand their knowledge on contemporary art.

This momentum in the arts, amidst its glory is infantile. That is to say, the first museum of Modern art, namely Istanbul Modern^{xxxvii}, only opened its doors on December 2004. The museum, although it received Stately support, especially before its opening by President Tayyip Erdogan, functions as a private/public museum. The family Eczacibasi who are patrons of IKSv (Istanbul Culture and Arts

Foundation)^{xxxviii} exhibit their collection within the premises of the museum whilst displaying works of local artists in group exhibitions and hosting traveling international shows. Istanbul Modern also full fills its duties of public responsibility, hence generates public programmes composed of screenings, talks and workshops for different age groups. Its mode of operation falls in line with any other European Museum where one expects to see a selection of local art with an international touch. Santral Istanbul, on the other hand, opened its doors in 2007 and closed down in 2013. The venue, belonged to a private university, Bilgi, and located within the campus of that university by the Golden Horn. With the change of hands to an American University, the venue's destiny has been reshaped. The art institution will leave its premises to a boutique hotel and possibly to a Michelin star restaurant while the significant but small collection of Bilgi University was about to be auctioned. The latter created a big stir in the scene, leading to an international petition^{xxxix} seeking signatures from art professionals. The current condition is, the petition proved to be successful as the auction is cancelled, the collection will stay within the public realm. The shifting and changing ground for art institutions, in the realm of privatization, is not a singleton: Proje4L^{xl}, which started off in 2001 as a nonprofit space for art hosting solo and group exhibitions of artists from Turkey (first directed by Vasif Kortun, followed by Fulya Erdemci) reopened to public with the private collection of Can and Sevda Elgiz in 2005. Currently, Proje4L displays selection from the collection on the first floor, commissions young Turkish artists and hosts curated exhibitions on the second floor. More recently, Proje4L has dedicated the adjacent roof terrace of their venue to host large scale open-air exhibitions of sculpture and installation.

A short travel in time juxtaposed with the conditions of now, brings us to one of the most internationally well-known art institution in Istanbul and its grotesque expansion. If a linear narrative can be employed, the seeds of SALT^{xli} have been planted in 1998, upon the return of Vasif Kortun to Istanbul from New York. The small-scale research center and exhibition venue, soon transformed into Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center^{xlii} with the corporate sponsoring of Garanti Bank in 2001. Platform introduced international artist residencies in Istanbul, hence acted as a catalyst for the international flow of artists and curators, while strengthened Istanbul's visibility through nation-based collaborations with international art foundations and institutions. For six years, operating quite extensively in exhibition making, conference hosting Platform ended its venue program and gradually closed down in 2010 incorporating into the uttermost body of SALT. Besides the financial cost of renovations and building the archive and the library, SALT operates at three different venues, two of them in Istanbul and one in Ankara, focussing on research and archiving than exhibition making.

The conundrum of today's active scene owes a great deal to the Biennial initiated by IKSIV in 1987. In relation to all the institutions and formations the biennial is the oldest and the most stable event taking place in Istanbul. Although the first two editions curated by Beral Madra were akin to medium scale group shows with international contribution, the successor editions display an accumulative growth in many levels. That is to say, the scale of the biennial, its reach of public and recognition from the international arena has shifted with the introduction of 'well-known' curators being commissioned to proliferate the conceptual framework of the biennial. Since 1995, Istanbul Biennial has been working with world-wide known curators from various countries in the world; and only Vasif Kortun (in 1992 and in 2005 with Charles Esche) and Fulya Erdemci (in 2013) curate the Biennial who are from Turkey. The international line up follows as Rene Block, Rosa Martinez, Paolo Colombo, Yuko Hasegawa, Hou Hanru, Dan Cameron, WHW, Adriano Pedrosa & Jens Hoffman. One of the specificities that prioritizes, or rather allures the professional art scene to visit the biennial, is its close-knit connection to the city. Either thematically or architecturally Istanbul has been nominated as charming where life as it is, keeps on roll while a large-scale art event is taking place. Livening up the city with visitors is not the only affect of the biennial. The biennial also influences the local art scene and its mode of production. Through the thematic and curatorial approaches, the biennial brings together a wide breath of artistic production, hence artistic positions into the city and to the realm of art scene in Turkey. Especially, since the 1990s and early 2000s, that is to say before the expanded use of world wide web, the biennial was the only source for the local scene to feed on the international discourse, as mobility was dependant on financial and political constraints. Some of the artists only recently gained their right to travel abroad due to their political alignment in the 1980s. As the world becomes smaller via internet and trans-cultural exchange, the biennial's position shifted from bringing in juxtapositions of artistic stance towards more theme-oriented curatorial project. In parallel, the city growingly gives birth to collateral projects, events and happenings in the course of the biennial. For instance, the listing of all side events during the 9th Biennial only occupies three pages in the catalogue, whereas the 12th biennial

almost dedicated one fourth of its catalogue pages to the listing. The quantity of these projects are important as it is also an indication of the increased visibility and activity of the local scene who are not currently participating in that edition of the biennial.

The Real Stripped Bare

As listed above, Istanbul is on its verge of attaining a multitude, if possible, a plethora of voices. The pronounced significance -and the exoticism that comes along, of Istanbul's, let alone Turkey's artistic landscape is receiving support from within. The recent investments in the domain of arts, from opening new museums to art galleries upgrades the conditions in which the scene used to operate. Moreover, new players are introduced regularly and the whole structure of the distribution of power in producing a stance is continuously shifting. There is not mono-directional shaping of the scene anymore, unless the dominating tendencies of the art market. It is a brand new world, where more artists are making a living from their practice, curators are needed for institutional positions and art takes more prominent state in the public realm. Moreover, artists from Turkey are exposed internationally, either exhibiting at prestigious art venues, biennials and museums or traveling for residencies, or residing abroad.

Although, the scene is still very small even the quantity of the players have increased acceleratingly. The patrons of the arts function as board members for various art institutions, or funding bodies. The usual suspects represent positions from the scene, and generate projects. On one hand, the independent scene is shrinking due to the demand from the institutional and commercial front; on the other hand new opportunities are born. In this respect, the current condition is not a stasis, but a form of becoming. This very condition of becoming makes the scene fertile and fragile at the same time. The financial backing allows an increased level of art production while disseminating the source to various receivers. Though, the content production of the art scene has slightly shifted interest towards the meta-value of art, in a way in which the saleability of the artwork influences their production. At this point, it is rather urgent to question what is being produced and its inflicting parameters when the artwork is under an evaluation. The young support on the continuity of artistic production is significant, but seizure of what is being produced for what reasons are also important. Hence, the speculative mode is contagious and might end up producing a rupture rather than an articulate expansion in the means of the creative act. The scale of art production is still small in Istanbul, and the budgets for production are under the international strands.

If Istanbul is a new model for Europe or the next New York or London does not behold an answer, right now. It will all depend on the building up on its infrastructure and strengthening its relationship with the tradition of relating to art. The intentions and the production of critical distance are all necessitated facts for a healthy art scene, regardless of the monetary value of the arts works it generates.

- i <http://www.galerinev.com/en>
- ii <http://www.mackasanatgalerisi.com/>
- iii <http://www.galerist.com.tr/>
- iv Apartment Project is an initiative founded in 1999 by artist Selda Asal, hosted solo exhibitions, performances and workshops. For further information: <http://istanbul.apartmentproject.com/>
- v Oda Projesi is initiated by Secil Yersel, Ozge Acikkol and Gunes Savas. For further information: <http://odaprojesi.blogspot.co.uk/>
- vi For Further information: <http://www.hafriyatkarakoy.com/>
- vii Altı Aylık, named due to the rent period of their space for the duration of 6 months, is organised by Bengü Karaduman, Kristina Kramer, Öykü Özsoy. For further information: <http://altiyalik.blogspot.co.uk/>
- viii PiST/// is initiated by Didem Ozbek, Osman Bozkurt and myself in May 2005. Ozbek and Bozkurt have been running the space since August 2006. For further information: <http://pist-org.blogspot.co.uk/>
- ix Artist Banu Cenneto İu has been running the space BAS* in İstanbul where artists' books and publications are collected, displayed and produced, since 2006. For further information: www.b-a-s.info
- X Functioning as an international collective with core members Guven ncirlio İu and Hakan Topal since 2000, xurban_collective has members located in Izmir, İstanbul, Linz and New York City. For further information: www.xurban.net
- xi Founded by Nancy Atakan, Volkan Aslan and Marcus Graf, 5533 opened in February 2008, is currently run by Atakan and Aslan. The venue was used for the 10th İstanbul Biennial curated by Hou Hanru. For further information: www.imc5533.blogspot.com
- xii Initiated and designed by artist Vahit Tuna, MASA is a special table that operates as a mobile exhibition venue. The project has been realised in collaboration with Onder Ozengi over the last years. For further information: www.masabout.blogspot.com
- xiii Atilkunst started as an artist collective in 2006 with the initiative of artists Gulcin Aksoy, Yasemin Nur Toksoy and Gozde Ilkin. The members of the collective also pursue their individual production while coming together for feedbacking the strata. For further information: <http://atilkunst.blogspot.co.uk>
- xiv Hazavuzu is an artist collective, started as a music group steadily involving the performing arts in its body of production. Güne Terkol Güçlü Öztekin, Mert Öztekin, Özgür Erkök, and Emir Özer have been involved in the endeavours of the collective since 2005. For further information: <http://hazavuzu.blogspot.co.uk>
- xv Sanatorium started as an art initiative founded by eight artists in 2009, and operates with a gallery since 2011. For further information: <http://www.sanatorium.com.tr>
- xvi <http://www.rodeo-gallery.com/rodeo/>
- xvii <http://www.rampaistanbul.com/>
- xviii <http://galerimana.com/>
- xix <http://www.pilotgaleri.com/en/homes>
- xx <http://galerinon.com/>
- xxi <http://www.piartworks.com/>
- xxii <http://www.artxist.com/lang-EN/exhibitions/>
- xxiii <http://www.galerimerkur.com/>
- xxiv <http://www.elipsisgallery.com/>
- xxv <http://www.galerizilberman.com/>
- xxvi <http://www.istanbulartinternational.com/>
- xxvii <http://www.allartsistanbul.com/en/>
- xxviii <http://www.borusancontemporary.com/homepage.aspx>
- xxix <http://muze.sabanciuniv.edu/anasayfa>
- xxx <http://www.artter.org.tr/W3/>
- xxxi <http://www.tanasberlin.de/>
- xxxii http://www.koc.com.tr/en-us/Media_Center/PressReleases/Press_Releases/10.09.2009_en.pdf
- xxxiii <http://collectorspace.org/>
- xxxiv <http://www.saha.org.tr/en/>
- xxxv See: Full Art Prize. For further information: <http://www.fullartprize.org/>
- xxxvi <http://www.facebook.com/SPOT.Contemporary.Art.Projects>
- xxxvii <http://www.istanbulmodern.org/en>
- xxxviii <http://www.iksv.org/en>
- xxxix For further information: <http://www.change.org/petitions/douglas-l-becker-laureate-member-bilgiuniversity-must-keep-its-art-collection-in-the-public-realm-laureateintl>
- xl <http://www.proje41.org/>
- xli SALT explores critical and timely issues in visual and material culture, and cultivates innovative programs for research and experimental thinking. <http://saltonline.org/en/>
- xlii <http://platformgaranti.blogspot.co.uk/>