

# RED THREAD

issues 1–3  
2009–2011  
a selection

**Şükrü Argın** **Shrinking Public, Politics Melting into Air  
and Possibilities of a Way-out**

**Jelena Vesić** **Politics of Display and Troubles With  
National Representation in Contemporary Art**

**Keti Chukhrov** **The Soviet 60s: Just Before the End of the Project**

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The project Red Thread is envisioned as an active network and platform for

exchange of knowledge and collaboration of artists, curators, social scientists, theorists and cultural operators from the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, North Africa, and beyond. It aims to create and widely disseminate new knowledge about paradigmatic socially engaged art practices in a wide geopolitical context, thus challenging the predominance of Western narratives in official art histories and exhibition making. Through initiating research, meetings, panel discussions and an active online site for exploring both historical and contemporary approaches that deepen and challenge broader relations of art and society, Red Thread intends to reopen the issues of joint modernist legacies and histories between various so-called “marginal” regions, and attempts to create new approaches to deal with questions of auto-histories, self-positioning and reinterpretation of art history.

The title of the project indicates a critical cultural and artistic engagement that has been present in the peripheral zones of the European modernistic project in different conceptual manifestations since the 1960s, when the crisis of the project of Western monolith high modernism in its relation to ideas of social progress became apparent. The metaphorical meaning of the expression ‘red thread’ suggests not only the way out of the labyrinth, but also a fragile, elastic link between different intellectual, social and artistic experimentations that share a desire for social change and the active role of culture and art in this process.

Red Thread is conceived as a possibility for starting a long-term communication and establishing new international platforms for artists and cultural workers from the regions considered to be part of supposedly shrinking but still corporeally very real geographical margins. Even if today one feels that there is no region excluded from the international art circuit, there still remains the issue of control, the unresolved and continuing play of inclusion and exclusion. In that respect, focusing primarily on regions of the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and North Africa, the project is conceived as an active site for rethinking the questions of production, definition, and presentation of the artwork and the artists’ identity in the globalized (art)world. It explores the rules of conduct established in the Western art system, and questions how the circulation and reception of information is regulated and how we can (and can we really) challenge it.



## Issue 1 (2009)

EDITORS: PRELOM KOLEKTIV  
(DUŠAN GRILJA • VLADIMIR JERIĆ • JELENA VESIĆ)

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As the editors of the **Red Thread** e-journal we are faced with a certain heterogeneity. This heterogeneity is, on the one hand, requested by the project, since it is expected to involve people from certain geographies (i.e. what is known as South East and Eastern Europe or, more precisely, the Balkans, the South Caucasian region, the Middle East and North Africa, while Turkey seems to be the provisional center of this geography). On the other hand, it is precisely this heterogeneity that could prove to be productive in terms of "broadening the picture" and establishing connections between our respective regional networks of collaborators. By this we don't mean the usual "networked" networks almost exclusively created for fundraising, but precisely a set of encounters, friendships and, finally, collective endeavors meant to jointly deal with various issues that these geographies have in common, thereby rendering this seemingly incomparable heterogeneity quite easily surmountable.

This heterogeneity can become productive precisely through an exchange that exposes the common ground -that the local constellations are embedded in the context of neoliberal globalized capitalism. Now, speaking of what do we all share in this given geography immediately calls to mind the often violent conflictuality present in our respective regions and the lack of "a political will to resolve conflicts in a civilized manner." It is precisely this *locus communis* of the "Western gaze" that this e-journal strives to problematize. The image of the

geographies in question constitutive of the Western political imaginary consists of ethno-nationalism, religious fundamentalism and so-called oriental despotism which gets perpetuated illicitly underneath the auspices of the official ideology of multiculturalism. Dealing with various political (re)articulations of intellectual and artistic, i.e. cultural, production, the journal challenges the separation and the specific (re)unification of "identities" within contemporary neoliberal politics of culture.

The questions that this first issue specifically tackles could be put as: How does contemporary art as subject (both as a topic and as a manifestation of different artists, curators, art critics and theorists) get positioned within the broader field of cultural and sociopolitical contexts (between global neoliberal multicultural policies and local national cultures)? Do we, as the actors in the field of contemporary art, intellectual production and culture in general get stuck between those two positions, unable to escape being attached to either one of them? Furthermore, how could practices of resistance and/or intervention in culture be imagined and realized? How do we relate to "reality" that is under constant reconstruction by the technologies of neoliberal capitalism? How do we re-appropriate the damaged concepts of "left" politics? In other words, how could artistic and cultural productions be *political* within the current crisis of representation both in art and politics?

PRELOM KOLEKTIV

# Shrinking Public, Politics Melting into Air and Possibilities of a Way-out

Şükrü Arın

**Neoliberal hegemony could bear the adjective “collective” only when it denoted a corporate form; it would not and did not allow any space –especially one which “belongs to everyone or belongs to no one”– to stay out of its own gunshot range. Accordingly, “public space” not only fell from grace as an idea, but was also attacked physically. Avenues, streets and squares in cities ceased to be the public spaces of the citizen community and became glittering commercial showcases of the consumer community in a very short time.**

Since the late 1970s, we have been living under neoliberal hegemony. The most obvious aspect of this globally influential hegemony is, inarguably, the constant and violent attack of the “private” on the “public.” Moreover, by exploiting the existing overlap between the terms “public” and “state,” or in other words, by activating available associations between the two terms, neoliberal ideology is able to present its attacks on the “public” as if they target the “state” and “state intervention.” By doing so, it manages to present itself as a sincere and loyal pursuer of the deep-rooted libertarian tradition of classical liberalism and, therefore, to conceal its special tie to the state, and at the same time corners its opponents right from the beginning into a position of allegedly defending the “state” and “state intervention.”

All the adversities and afflictions caused by the “welfare state” in the West, “state socialism” in the East and the “anti-democratic state structures” in the Third World were employed as a pretext for destroying the “public” and turning its ruins into a game reserve for private enterprise. First, the “spiritual –“cultural,” “political”– presence of the “public” was targeted, then its “physical” –“social”– spaces were bombarded one by one.

In the course of the establishment and institutionalization of neoliberal hegemony, not only all kinds of –whether republican or socialist– positive (defined inclusively) notions of public space based on the idea of common good, that is the notion of a “public space declared to be the common property of everyone,” but also all kinds of negative notions (defined exclusively) of public space based on the idea that everyone is free to choose and live according to “their own private good,” that is the notion of a “public space declared to be no man’s land,” have come to be labeled obsolete, conservative, and even “reactionary,” and have been degraded as a result.

Neoliberal hegemony could bear the adjective “collective” only when it denoted a corporate form; it would not and did not allow any space –especially one which “belongs to everyone or belongs to no one”– to stay out of its own gunshot range. Accordingly, “public space” not only fell from grace as an idea, but was also attacked physically. Avenues, streets and squares in cities ceased to be the public spaces of the citizen community and became glittering commercial showcases of the consumer community in a very short time. From then on, the pulse of the city started to beat not in “agoras,” or squares, but in agoraphobic shopping centers.

Streets used to remind those, who live private lives in private homes, and work in offices built as fortresses of private property, of the “public” in every step they took. The very same streets which bear deep traces of a tormenting “common” history that made those private lives and the building of those fortresses possible eventually lost their public identities and became the private labyrinths of the “world of commodities.”

There are many significant consequences of the constant and violent attacks, or rather invasions of the “private” on “public space.” However, I maintain that the most important of these is what we can call “the melting of politics into air.” Here “melting into air” refers to two different but related conditions. The first is very clear: the shrinkage of “public space” naturally gives way to the distressful state where politics and political subjects are uprooted.

For one thing, as we mentioned before, city squares are ceasing to be the property of the “residents of the city.” This claim has one very material implication: we no longer have “squares,” or “agoras” as physical spaces where we can come together; or to say the least, they are decreasing in number. Spaces where citizens can gather, meet and encounter each other are rapidly melting into air.

We are well aware of the fact that this “melting into air” is actually a product of the all-encompassing “commodification” process. Therefore, speaking of a blatant “invasion” might be more appropriate. Squares are no longer the “empty” spaces for citizens to meet because now they have owners. Now, there are many places you cannot stroll as a citizen, where you would be admitted only if disguised, only with the identity of a consumer.

Without doubt, the physical structuring, or more precisely re-structuring processes in cities also tend to increasingly restrict public spaces. The residents of cities surrounded by intricate webs of highways and roads are no longer the pedestrians. They can become a part of the city only by means of and to the extent allowed by their cars.

This constitutes a grave problem, especially for opponent radical movements. In such kinds of privatized spaces, you can only organize a “pirate” demonstration with your citizen identity, which eventually is another indicator that citizens cannot go about in their own cities unless they are disguised. There is a growing tendency to sanction political demonstrations solely in “allocated” places, “reserved for this purpose,” and most often located somewhere “far” away from



the city center. These signal that politics has been banished from the “polis,” the real arena of politics, and exiled to the peripheries of cities.

Accordingly, demonstrations are becoming strangely *invisible*. You are going to have a demonstration, but in an “isolated” space; so, to whom are you going to demonstrate? Isn’t it the aforementioned process that turns political demonstrations into dull rituals, silent “shows” like football matches played in stadiums without spectators?

Inarguably, at this very moment it is possible to say that squares, streets and the like which have been invaded by the “private” were the traditional spaces of politics, but contemporary “public spaces” have taken on a novel and utterly different form; so now, especially today, it is more correct to speak of the expansion rather than shrinkage of “public space.” The argument is valid; as a matter of fact, the second condition implied by “melting into air” is related to this phenomenon.

We already know that nature dislikes absence! Naturally, the absence of city squares was rapidly replaced by something else. I think we can say that the media has claimed the former political function of “squares.” Of course, this not a simple replacement; it has dire political consequences. For one thing we can say without hesitation that even the presence of a political movement in real squares has come to depend on its visibility in the media in one way or another. I had read that the IRA used to postpone any bomb attacks, if they were not going to make the BBC primetime evening news. Is the conclusion that today this irony has become our daily reality too far-fetched?

Some writers claim that “media-dominated” republics are transforming into “media democracies,” and we need to reflect on this. I presume what this implies is that the media is becoming one of the main institutions of the democratic process for a significant part of present day societies. Parliaments and political parties –almost everywhere– have been subjected to a rapid and constant process whereby they have lost the confidence of their citizens. This, together with the above mentioned factors like the shrinkage and melting into air of “public spaces,” have radically transformed the main function of the media as a *medium of communication* between political institutions and citizens. Today, the media is no longer a *medium* of political communication; it has gradually become the main

*site* where this communication takes place. In other words, today the media is not only the site where politics makes its presence, its debut; but it is also where politics takes place, and maybe to put it correctly, where politics is structured. Without doubt, the media is still where real public spaces are seen. However, in the absence or shortage of other means of visibility, and hence their ineffectiveness, the initiative of determining how and how much these spaces are going to be visible ceases to be an initiative and becomes de facto power. We can say that this power makes it possible for the media to become the *unique* “square” through which all squares can be seen, and this must be what is referred to by the phrase “media democracy.”

This, undoubtedly, has extremely complicated and significant consequences. It is impossible to touch upon all of them here. However, we can point to two issues related to the concept of “structuring” noted above. First, like we said before, today politics has to reshape itself in relation to the gaze of the media. Real politics or professional politics put aside, even “amateur” political demonstrations are increasingly employing “temptation” strategies which will attract the media. The “cunningness” of football spectators who carry the logo of the TV channel broadcasting the match to make sure that they will appear on TV is reflected in the behaviors and attitudes of political activists. Accordingly, political demonstrations are transformed into “shows,” and perhaps more dangerously, this is so because the media “formats” these demonstrations despite the intentions of the activists. And this is the second issue I would like to raise: media reshaping politics.

The issue concerning the “images” of real squares in the media is self-evident. Nevertheless, this second result, that the media reshapes politics, is much graver. Without doubt this is about the media becoming the only real square for politics. The transformation of politics into a commercial strategy; the reduction of political propaganda to a marketing strategy; and consequently the transformation of politics into a non-political business, a kind of “performance,” a kind of “showbiz,” I believe, are the trademarks of the reinvention of politics by media. Or let’s put it this way: this is the inevitable end of politics which makes a play for not the “squares” but for the “media” as a last resort...

## POLITICS MELTING INTO AIR

In order to find the key to politics playing out strictly on screens, we have to look away from the screens to the real world... For instance, Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes: “The real powers that shape the conditions under which we all act these days flow in global space, while our institutions of political action remain by and large tied to the ground; they are, as before, local.”<sup>01</sup> In other words, here Bauman points to the paradox articulated by Manuel Castell: “increasingly local politics in a world structured by increasingly global processes.”<sup>02</sup>

This is a serious paradox indeed. Bauman writes: “Because they stay mainly local, political agencies operating in urban space tend to be fatally afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played.”<sup>03</sup> That is, according to Bauman our political organizations have remained outside “politics.” Yet, we may ask: outside which “politics”? The answer we can gather from what we have read so far will no doubt be: outside the main “stage where the drama of politics is played.” However, Bauman continues: “Another result, though, is the dearth of politics in extraterritorial cyberspace, the playground of powers.” Therefore, we can conclude that our political institutions are not excluded from the political scene; rather, “the political stage” itself has been restructured; so to say, the thing called “politics” has been gradually depoliticized. I think this the reason why Bauman talks about “real powers” and “the playground of power.” Now, we are face to face not with political powers in the classical sense, but with “naked” powers and forces, and this is the core issue. That is, politics has actually been transformed into a “show”; it is a screen business now not a square business.

In fact, at first sight, it seems like politics has been unleashed in the streets, but only like a bull unleashed in the streets of Madrid for show purposes... Bauman goes on: “Evicted from and barred access to cyberspace, politics fall back and rebounds on affairs that are ‘within reach’, on local matters and neighborhood relations. For most of us and for most of the time, these seem to be the *only* issues we can ‘do something about’, influence, repair, improve, redirect. Only in local matters can our action or inaction ‘make a difference’, whereas for other admittedly ‘superlocal’ affairs there is (or so we are repeatedly told by our political leaders and all other ‘people in the know’) ‘no alternative’.”<sup>04</sup> “Our political leaders and all other ‘people in the know’” interpret the “global” as “natural” and because of this, again in Bauman’s words, “Even matters with undoubtedly global, far away and recondite sources and causes enter the realm of political concerns solely through their local offshoots and repercussions. The global pollution of air and water supplies turns into a *political* matter when a dumping ground for toxic waste is allocated next door, in ‘our own backyard’, in frighteningly close, but also encouragingly

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**01** *Liquid love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 100.

**02** *Ibid.*, 101.

**03** *Ibid.*, 100.

**04** *Ibid.*





‘within reach proximity’ to our homeground.”<sup>05</sup>  
 The sources and causes of all these matters are –undoubtedly!– *natural* and therefore outside the reach of politics. Undoubtedly, what we can conclude from this is rather obvious: since politics is assigned to find local solutions to global matters, it is only authorized to manage the insoluble. This is the role cut out for politics in the restructured “political stage.”

It is apparent that this situation will lead politics to a serious legitimacy crisis: what would then be the function of political institutions and organizations which are “afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played”? And in whose name are they going to take over this function? When problems are naturalized and dragged out of the sphere of politics and therefore, insolubility is acknowledged, what will be the function of politics? Furthermore, as the notion of the “public” has been destroyed both spiritually and physically, who and what will give politics the legitimacy and the right to take over the responsibility of solving, or better, “managing” problems? These questions, undoubtedly, take us right to the core of the problem referred to as the “crisis of representation.”

The prevalence of the attitude so-called “political cynicism” is evident almost everywhere in the world –whether “developed” or “underdeveloped,” “West” or “East,” “neoliberal” or “post-communist.” A regime which reduced politics to a form of “management” both for those who govern and for those who are governed, and placed the notion of “citizenship,” and more importantly, its own presence and own promises inside quotation marks; elections turned into hollow rituals; decreasing voting rates; bizarre parties which do not have “partisans” or supporters and therefore try to win the floating votes in every election period; and a system that does not have a “left or right”... All these can be considered to be the manifestations of the phenomenon called the “crisis of representation.”

Among the representatives, the “crisis of representation” leads to a condition where they “lose their foothold.” Thinking about the difference between classical parties that represent the interests of the “people,” or to make a narrower and more realistic definition, the interests of “classes,” and parties that have no concerns whatsoever other than seeking the “favor of the voters,” may help us to understand this “condition.”

“Interests” are relatively stable references of representation; on the other hand, “favors” are similar to speculative reference points which are too instable to make the “representation” relation possible; they may be said to be “metaphysical” in character. In such a system, parties do not represent the will behind the votes they receive, but they own it. The key to understanding the

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obviously cynical attitude of present day “voters” is maybe right here. Why would you take a system seriously if your only vote is no longer yours at the moment you cast it?

Then the following can be claimed: the manifestation of the “crisis of representation” within the context of those represented is a state of “groundlessness.” We could also say this is the need of “belonging” not being fulfilled. Citizenship ceases to be a stable right and is reduced to a duty, an extremely instable “favor” you demonstrate in recurring elections. Thus, naturally you cannot feel “at home” within any party or organization, or even in the whole political system since you are excluded from the system in which you have to live in.

To sum up: “crisis of representation” is the name for the lost contact between parties, organizations and even systems without any foothold, and groundless citizens, or to put it correctly, people at large. And without doubt, this is a rather general crisis. That is, it is an all-encompassing crisis impacting not only establishment parties and organizations but also and especially anti-establishment ones. For, within the present system, “having no foothold” is not an outrage but a blessing for establishment parties. It has an “extenuating” effect for them since when they lose their foothold they can ascend in the system. On the other hand, the opposite is true for anti-establishment parties and organizations. They experience the same thing as an increasing burden; when they lose their foothold they hit the rock bottom because they cannot reach the summit and are pushed to the margins of the system. Thus, I think we can make the following conclusion: the “crisis of representation” comes down to a matter of “management” for establishment parties and

organizations; yet, it is an “existential” matter for anti-establishment parties and organizations.

We have mentioned before that the “crisis of representation” manifests itself as a “crisis of legitimacy” among the representatives whereas it manifests itself as a “crisis of belonging” among those represented. I presume now we can add the following: no doubt, the two crises are interrelated, and they mutually trigger each other, but, it is the “crisis of legitimacy” for establishment parties and organizations and the “crisis of belonging” for anti-establishment parties and organizations that has more importance. In other words, it seems like for establishment parties and organizations the issue is to overcome, or defer the “crisis of legitimacy” and for the others it is to overcome the “crisis of belonging.” I think we can even say provisionally that, the main concern for anti-establishment parties and organizations is to deepen the “crisis of legitimacy” and thus to make it “unmanageable” for establishment parties and organizations; and on the other hand, to urgently do whatever is possible to overcome the “crisis of belonging,” to find ways of overcoming it before it is too late.

To explain the issue more clearly and to point to possibilities of a way-out I would like to give three concrete examples: two of these are from Russia, and the third one is from Turkey. I believe these examples coincide with instances when the shrinking public took a breath and politics melting into air got a foothold even if momentarily. Accordingly, I maintain that we have to reflect on these examples at length and urgently imagine and implement similar ones... I will start with possibilities of a way-out that emerged in Russia and finally I will finish by pointing to a possibility that momentarily appeared and disappeared in Turkey.

<sup>05</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

In an era, when “the enemy,” better to say, “the real enemy” is rather ambiguous, hence an addressee cannot be determined, this lack of an addressee would –naturally– lead to an inevitable state of “lack of direction” in the political sphere –and again would naturally erode the political subject itself in the first place: If I do not have an enemy, who is my friend, and more importantly, who am I?

#### POSSIBILITIES OF A WAY-OUT

Recently I have read a quite interesting article by Irina Aristarkhova<sup>06</sup> that examines the manifestations of the crisis of representation in post-soviet Russia in the 1990s. Aristarkhova points to the anti-representative attitude that is commonly observed among oppositional movements in post-soviet Russia. She quotes the following from an influential article published in 1998 by Anatoly Osmolovsky, who coined the name of and was a forerunner of the political-artistic movement called *Moscow Actionism*:

the absence of true knowledge of the world, the collapse of homogenous social structures and subcultures, and the impossibility of developing a logical behavior inevitably make us deny one of the main political principles of social governance –the principle of representation.<sup>07</sup>

Aristarkhova claims that this anti-representative attitude or persistent avoidance of “speaking in the name of others,” which is commonly observed in especially the left-wing opposition, can be considered a product of an implicit reaction against the superficially “politically correct” behavior of the West. However, without doubt, this attitude has many dimensions and goals that cannot be reduced to such a reaction. Anyway, Aristarkhova makes this very clear when giving examples of political maneuvers developed to overcome the crisis of representation. Aristarkhova emphasizes two examples. The first of these is the ironic election campaign which was devised and implemented by the above-mentioned group, *Moscow Actionism: a Campaign Against All Parties*. The second is, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, an organization which resembles the Saturday Mothers who organized an influential protest campaign in Turkey.

Aristarkhova writes that the *Campaign Against All Parties* had an ironic contribution to the election process. The campaign let itself be heard mainly through street demonstrations, publications and exhibitions. In addition to these, it planned and managed to be a participant in the elections as a “side against all sides.” Hence, Russian voters had the option to vote “Against All Parties, Groups and Candidates” along with the existing options. The participation of this group in the elections had an ironic character because it had a serious aim quite distinct from the “cynical”

attitude of not participating in elections, which is very common in Russia and in many other places. For one thing, according to the current election law in Russia, if other parties or candidates get fewer votes than the “Against All” party or if the party itself gets more than fifty per cent of the total votes, elections are canceled and all other parties and candidates lose their right to take part in the following election. Consequently, the preference to be “Against All” had literally positive outcomes as opposed to not voting or casting an invalid vote; this is the possibility of stating your preference actively by erasing all the other alternatives, instead of stepping aside and staying silent.

Aristarkhova states that this campaign was not very successful in the early 1990s, but became increasingly influential during the years to come. Besides its success, it is clear that the campaign was able to generate the effect we previously mentioned, that is, it exacerbated the crises of legitimacy while assuaging the crisis of belonging. This presents a possibility for a form of organization where people who feel they don’t belong anywhere experience a feeling of belonging, even if only temporarily, and therefore the horizons opened up by this form of action deserves to be examined thoroughly.

The second example Aristarkhova gives, as we have already stated, is the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (CSM). Established in 1989, the Union works in domains related to military-political institutions and struggles to reshape them. It tries to supply the families of soldiers who died during their mandatory military service with financial and legal support; publishes data and information about death incidents in the military; conducts lobbying activities for amnesty legislation and military reforms in the Parliament; etc. CSM was one of the organizations in Russia which opposed the war on Chechnya actively, and was awarded the Dean McBride Peace Award in 1995 for their efforts.

All these set aside, what Aristarkhova writes about the political significance of this organization is extremely interesting and important. She maintains that the CSM manifested a rather authentic and interesting way of overcoming the crisis of belonging, which is worth commenting on. According to Aristarkhova, in an era when common goals and principles evaporate, differences of opinion

become more and more visible; in a world where the representatives’ claim to “representation” are seriously challenged, where it is becoming all the more impossible for people to commit themselves to a cause, to a party, that is to devote all their energies to a common struggle in the name of the same ideals with their “comrade” party members, the CSM constitutes a concrete example for overcoming all these problems.

Aristarkhova thinks that belonging is a natural need directly related to the notion of “friendship,” to feelings of loyalty and friendship which divide the world into two camps: “friends” and “enemies.” Thus, she acknowledges that the lack of a clearly defined enemy can mean the absence of a base or support in terms of political struggle, and in order to confirm this once more, she quotes the words of Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, where he critically analyses the famous, classical “friend-enemy” formulation of Carl Schmitt: “the loss of enemy would imply the loss of political ‘I’.”<sup>08</sup>

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The political alternative Derrida offers to this dazzling state is the construction of a new political understanding based on the reformulation of the notions of “friendship” and “fraternity” beyond the “friend-enemy” distinction. Aristarkhova, moving on from the CSM experience, proposes a different alternative which can be called “motherhood based politics.” According to her, this political alternative goes beyond the dualistic logic of the “us-them” distinction. Consequently, as can be seen clearly in the CSM example, the absence of an “enemy” does not hinder the political activity based on the notion of motherhood because the CSM does not designate anybody as the other. For one thing, people who can be designated as “enemies” also have mothers and CSM addresses not the “enemies,” but their mothers. Therefore, motherhood takes sides not through “exclusion” but through “inclusion.” Secondly, a mother’s interests and convictions do not need a Program, a Code or a Law. On the contrary, they are self-

<sup>06</sup> “Beyond Representation and Affiliation: Collective Action in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>07</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>08</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.





That “will,” or “conscience” that seemed to appear momentarily after Hrant Dink’s assassination illustrated that a participatory solidarity which is not based on representation but, on the contrary, threatens the legitimacy of “representation” was still possible. We know that this “state of solidarity” was ephemeral; still, it was encouraging.

legitimizing and do not need to be legitimized by another source.

And finally, the CSM experience suspends the very idea of “representation,” so it is worth quoting Aristarkhova verbatim as her words are directly related to the issue we are addressing here:

When one represents another, he positions himself on the same level as that other. Sameness is the basis of representation and the experience of difference usually undermines representational politics. The more one is the same as those whom he represents (in class, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, etc.), the more he assumes the right to represent others. All of this changes with the Soldiers’ Mothers. They do not represent other mothers who love their children, they represent those who are radically different from them, but with whom they are connected through the *symbol* of motherhood –any actual or potential soldier.<sup>09</sup>

Aristarkhova still speaks of “representing,” but I presume we have to use the verb in quotation marks here since it seems that, if there is a “representation” in this case, it is not the representation of an entity, say of a people, but the representation of a “value,” a human value called “motherhood.” After all, Aristarkova, too, with a reference to Levinas, stresses the altruism embodied in the notion of motherhood, which is an “existence not for itself, but for the other.” This makes it clear that we have entered a radically different domain of politics than politics based on representation.

Finally, the third example is from Turkey. I propose to take a closer look at the “social will” embodied in the crowd gathered on Halaskargazi Street on 19 January 2007, in the hours following the assassination of Hrant Dink, a journalist of Armenian origin and the editor-in-chief of Agos newspaper, who was shot behind the head in front of the offices of the newspaper on this street. What was the nature of the “social will,” the “social conscience” which appeared and disappeared there like a ghost?

First of all, it was defying darkness. It showed how an inconsolable and irreparable grief can bring people together. Of course, at the same time it showed how streets can regain their “public” character.

Secondly, it seems to me that, it was able to gather everybody together with one of the most radical slogans throughout the history of Turkey which explained the situation in a nutshell: “We are all Armenians!” No doubt, this slogan is loaded with infinite meanings which cannot be consumed through interpretation. Thus, we can list only a few of them here.

To begin with, this slogan was the expression of a political cry that had no “enemies.” The slogan is sure to have enemies, and it actually did. It even aroused an angry outcry. However, the slogan itself was not directed at any enemies, and as a result, it caused the enmity directed at it to inevitably miss its target and fall into void. For, in this slogan the phrase “we are all” was not a totalizing or “totalitarian” quantifier, like the word “every” in the slogan “Every Turk is born a soldier.” Namely, this “we” was not a comprehensive “we” meaning “we are speaking in the name of the others,” but a participatory “we” meaning “we, who all endorse this slogan.” Therefore, when someone objected to the slogan saying, “I am not an Armenian, I am essentially a Turk!” it only meant “I don’t agree with you,” and this person naturally ceased to be the addressee of this “we.”

Thirdly, most of the people who gathered there did not represent anyone or anything but were present there *personally*. I say most, not all, because certainly there were some people who came dressed in attire disclosing their ethnic background or carrying banners revealing their political identity. However, the majority, if I may say, came there bare-naked because the incident was too harrowing to become a pretext of something else. Therefore, what is called “politics” was mostly absent as a name, but the political character and attribute of everything was out in the open.

Jacques Rancière once said that the slogan “We are all Algerians!” voiced by French radicals in 1961 in Paris as a protest against the oppression of Algerian immigrants “by the French police in the name of the people of France” had nothing to do with a wish to *identify* themselves with Algerians.<sup>10</sup> It could not even be interpreted as an attempt to empathize with them because this would not be possible in the first place. According to him, rather than forming a prospective identification, this slogan was intended to break apart an existing one. Those who cried out the slogan, at that very moment, did not wish to be Algerians but rather

wanted to express that they were ashamed of being French, more precisely, they were ashamed of the things done in their name. In other words, they did not want to take on another identity, and consequently have the right to speak for Algerians. On the contrary, they wanted to tear apart and get rid of their existing identity, and in Rancière’s words, hoped to have the possibility to express themselves quietly in the “crack” or “interval” between “two identities neither of which they could identify with.”

This was what people did after Hrant Dink’s assassination, and that “will,” or “conscience” that seemed to appear momentarily illustrated that a participatory solidarity which is not based on representation but, on the contrary, threatens the legitimacy of “representation” was still possible. We know that this “state of solidarity” was ephemeral; still, it was encouraging. After all, even in the form of a rebellion against a form of belonging, it created a possibility to satisfy the human need of belonging. ●

TRANSLATED FROM TURKISH BY NALAN ÖZSOY

<sup>09</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Siyasalın Kıyısında* [Aux bords du politique], trans. A.U. Kılıç (Metis Yayınları, 2007).



# Politics of Display & Troubles With National Representation in Contemporary Art

Jelena Vesić

**Umbrella of internationalism shelters the same old process that is unfolding underneath since the presence of the artists is still being primarily determined through the mechanism of national representation, especially in the cases of artists from “the periphery.” While the universal paradigm of contemporaneity remains to be the undeniable privilege of the artists of the Western countries (whose national identity seems to be unimportant, as the funding for their participation is almost never in question), the “periphery” on the other hand, appears as the “otherness,” in this way serving its role of completing the multiculturalist image of the “peoples of the world.”**

**T**he idea of the exhibition *Exception – Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina*,<sup>01</sup> the network of collaborations surrounding it, and the relation between the curatorial idea and the artworks is not a straightforwardly simple matter as it may seem from what is so far being said about it. Here I refer especially to the “case” of its violent closing. One of the main motives for this exhibition to happen maybe lies in the local interest of Belgrade’s contemporary art circles in the young and vibrant Kosovo art scene, which “officially” emerged after the year 2000. Another interesting aspect is that this sudden “flourishing” of local contemporary art scenes in the “Western Balkans” was, and still is, in most of the cases connected to the significant influx of money from various foreign foundations.

This was precisely the case in the second part of the 1990s with the Soros Fund for an Open Society, when the Center for Contemporary Art in Belgrade was established. Although there was, approximately at the same time, a pretty developed contemporary art scene in Kosovo, the appearance on the international scene of the youngest generation of Kosovo artists had to wait until the year 2000 and owed its international visibility, almost exclusively, to the programs of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and, especially, the *Missing Identity* project.<sup>02</sup> Certainly, this always happens in relation to a wider geo-political agenda, which is in this case the official assignment of culture to become a part of the processes of “democratization” and “normalization” in the so-called post-conflictual societies. However, such geo-political

**01** This text is one of the three texts published in the first issue of *Red Thread* and dealt with “the case” of the exhibition *Exception – Young Artists from Prishtina* and its violent (non)opening in Belgrade in February 2008. For an introduction to these texts and a chronology of the events surrounding the exhibition see: “Exception – The case of the exhibition of Young Kosovo Artists in Serbia,” *Red Thread* no. 1 (2009), <http://www.red-thread.org/en/article.asp?a=21>.

**02** According to the word by organizers – Contemporary Art Institute EXIT, Peja, in cooperation with the Laboratory for Visual Arts and the Center for Humanistic Studies Gani Bobi, Kosovo – *Missing Identity* queries the attempts to establish a unified national identity and propagates the protection of difference. The project also seeks to create an artistic reality of what is experienced as absent in Kosovo: cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. See [http://www.projekt-relations.de/en/explore/missing\\_identity/index.php](http://www.projekt-relations.de/en/explore/missing_identity/index.php).

constraints did not mean that the situation could not be used for other more progressive and emancipatory goals (as both cases of the Belgrade and Prishtine scenes clearly show in a number of ways).

Also, simultaneous with the activities of the aforementioned foundations, a certain local interest in the new Kosovo art scene started to arise in Belgrade art circles. This probably has to do with a certain kind of nostalgia for something that is seen nowadays as non-existing, or as having faded away – namely, a virile and potent contemporary art scene, one which could generate not only a substantial quantity of art production, but is also perceived as politically engaged, humorous, as well as fairly organized and networked both locally and internationally. This nostalgia is directed, seemingly paradoxically, towards the second half of the 1990s, and, especially, to the activities of Belgrade’s [Soros] Center for Contemporary Art.<sup>03</sup> The dominant perspective within those circles appears to be that after the Yugoslav

**03** Centre for Contemporary Art - Belgrade was established in 1994 with the aim to promote and support the production of arts and culture in Serbia and the Balkans by organizing exhibitions, conferences, presentations, screenings and lectures. The Centre for Contemporary Art succeeded in creating a new cultural community and in promoting a new generation of artists, mostly through establishing the institution of “annual exhibitions” which often included budgets for new art production. However, the art production in Serbia between 1994 and 1999 rarely took a political direction, and mostly resigned in what is referred to as active escapism – the option bordering with political conformism and social apathy chosen by numerous social and cultural subjects who, faced with a catastrophic social environment, resolved the imposed dilemma of “withdrawal or participation?” by retreating to “inner habitats” (more about active escapism in: *Art in Yugoslavia 1992-1995* [Belgrade: RadioB92, 1996] and *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989–2001* exhibition catalogue [Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005]). After 1999, the Centre took a more concrete critical-political direction with the project of alternative education embodied in the activity of *The School for History and Theory of Images*. The work of the School produced a new community of critical artists, theorists and curators, comprising of both professors and the students, and also led to the establishing of *Prelom – Journal for Images and Politics*, active since 2001.



Nikoleta Marković,  
*The Image*, fragment of the  
conceptual installation/  
exhibition

COURTESY OF THE THE ARTIST



Biennial of Young Artists in 2004<sup>04</sup> –as the last project of the CCA– the Belgrade contemporary art scene died out or, at least, dissipated in various directions.

The situation from the year 2000 on, after the “change” brought on by the October 5th events, allowed for many actors to find their way into the official cultural institutions. On the one hand, one of the epicenters became the Museum of Contemporary Art, serving the function of constructing the recent local art history and organizing big international shows. On the other hand, the majority of the art institutions have turned to a market-driven eclecticism of sellable object-art, commercial design, corporate art and cognitive entertainment –the approach taken by Remount Gallery, Zvono Gallery, Ozone Gallery and various other art and multimedia centers. This was the context in which the Kontekst Gallery started operating. One of the first activities of the new gallery was taking care of the Mangelos prize for young artists which was previously part of the program of CCA Belgrade. This meant accepting the role of an institution in charge of direct engagement with young artists and emerging art –or, in other words, this represented the symbolic continuation of the activities of the CCA. Therefore, Kontekst gallery came to the fore as the place for socially engaged art. But, here we can pose the question: in what way exactly is this concept different from the usual civil-democratic politicization of art, based on the idea of the representational public sphere under its negotiatory and discussional guise? Maybe it is precisely the analysis of the case of the exhibition *Exception – Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina*, opened and closed on the same day, which could point to some of the problems embedded in this cultural-political approach.

**04** Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists was held in Rijeka (Croatia), but at the beginning of 1990s when war started, it was moved to Vršac (Serbia). Its main institutional function was breeding and promoting new generations of young artists. The Biennial in 2004 under the title *Untitled (as Yet)* have, among other things, explored the idea of “peripheral” biennials and their role within the art system. This was the first Yugoslav Biennial which was realized as an international exhibition and the last Yugoslav Biennial ever. The new city authorities of Vršac broke with this tradition and removed all the documentation available online along with the entire Biennial website hosted on the city servers.

**W**hat we see on this image (underneath the “intrusion” of the Albanian flag) is a reproduction of the *Monument to Kosovo Heroes*, a public sculpture in the city of Kruševac, central Serbia, built by the academic Đorđe Jovanović in 1910, and a typical colonial object of the École des Beaux Arts, mixed with national romanticism. In the year 2003, the artist Nikoleta Marković proposed this image to be exhibited as a serial repetition around the walls of the gallery as a part of the conceptual installation. She used the Albanian flag in place of the flag of the Kosovo hero –Boško Jugović (a character derived from Serbian epic poetry which belongs to the cycle of “Kosovo Battle”). The event of the exhibition was Nikoleta Marković’s solo show in the city of Kruševac, but it was cancelled by the director of the National Museum. The work also caused problems in the “37th. Winter Salon” in Herceg Novi (Montenegro). The exhibition curator, Branislav Dimitrijević, was accused of approaching the exhibition with “a surplus of politics and the deficit of art” and consequently quit as the curator. ●

**At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the Kosovo myth replaced the socialist ideology of “Brotherhood and Unity” as the new cement of social cohesion.**

# The ethno-nationalistic myth of the heroic sacrifice of the Serbian people in defending the “gates of Europe” and the Christian world from the Ottoman invasion is phantasmagoric and anti-historical, and exactly as such it appears in a large number of works situated in the official discourse of the politics of the 1990s.

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One of the central issues questioned through this exhibition is the relationship between contemporary art and national representation. The form of the exhibition was based on a certain modality of diplomacy – that is, on the visit of Kosovo artists to Novi Sad and Belgrade and the exchange with a local public interested in cultural-artistic affairs. As the curators themselves wrote,

Serbia today does not know the Albanian culture and society in Kosovo, as it was the case in the past decades [...] The project presents both women and men artists, theoreticians and people active in culture who will discuss art, culture and society in Kosovo focusing especially on artistic and cultural relations between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>05</sup>

In the colloquial speech of contemporary art, exhibitions based on national representation are usually connected with launching of new trends based on national artistic scenes (e.g. the New French Art, the British Art Today, etc.). Although those are in fact national projects of culture organized from “above,” supported by national funds and institutions and promoted by diplomatic cultural representatives and cultural centers (confirming thus that the representation of a national culture is an affair of the State), such projects are unquestionably not being brought in connection with notions of “nationalism” and the “national question.” The universal language of Western contemporary art in these cases takes over the place of (and in advance prevents the use of) the tag of “cultural imperialism.” The common phenomenon of the modern nation states was to build the cultural relations based on exchange between nations and it was often the

**05** Vida Knežević, Kristian Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, Introduction to catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnička scena Prištine / Exception: Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina*, 19, [http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf\\_08/odstupanje.pdf](http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/odstupanje.pdf).

case that foreign contemporary art was presented in the state museums and galleries of the socialist Yugoslavia.

Then again, nowadays, the context of cultural exchange is mostly international and presented through thematic and review-type shows of different formats and scopes. Moreover, to make an international show is today a kind of dictum of contemporary literacy in culture – an exhibition is not “contemporary enough” if it is not an international one. Nevertheless, this umbrella of internationalism shelters the same old process that is unfolding underneath since the presence of the artists is still being primarily determined through the mechanism of national representation, especially in the cases of artists from “the periphery.” While the universal paradigm of contemporaneity remains to be the undeniable privilege of the artists of the Western countries (whose national identity seems to be unimportant, as the funding for their participation is almost never in question), the “periphery” on the other hand, appears as the “otherness,” in this way serving its role of completing the multiculturalist image of the “peoples of the world.”

According to Rastko Močnik, identity is an ideological mechanism and as such it has its material existence above all in state regulations:

National (cultural) identity then legitimises the state intervention into the field of culture, and eventually justifies protectionist measures, as the quota and the like. It is interesting that EU has introduced a “European” quota and has been, to a certain limited extent, slowing down privatisation and commercialisation of cultures in the name of “cultural diversity.” It seems that “diversity” actually refers to “identities” as they are seen from a more comprehensive European perspective. And yet, at a closer look, both notions seem misleading: they share the presupposition that cultures are homogenous blocks, an understanding that seems to be a kind of simplified version of the 19th century folkloristic enthusiasm promoted by nationalist intellectuals.<sup>06</sup>

Therefore, to understand better the background of the (unsuccessful) diplomatic activity conducted by the exhibition *Exception*, we should give a closer look to the singular developments of the Kosovo and Serbian contemporary art scenes, not only in relation to issues of cultural identity and national state agendas, but also in relation to the wider European context.

The contemporary artists from Kosovo produced numerous artworks which, on the conceptual and representational levels, directly hosted actual “national questions” present in the real-political field of both the under-construction Kosovar State and of the supra-national political bodies in charge of resolving the issue.<sup>07</sup> One of the examples can be the work *Fuck You* by

**06** Rastko Močnik, “Identity and the arts,” in *Contemporary Art and Nationalism*, ed. Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik (Prishtina: Institute for contemporary art “Exit” / MM - Center for Humanistic Studies “Gani Bobi,” 2007).

**07** For additional information regarding this issue see: Sezgin Boynik, “Theories of Nationalism and Contemporary Art in Kosovo,” in *Contemporary Art and Nationalism*.

*Sokol Beqiri* (2001) which presents a group of people standing in a line from the oldest to the youngest, holding up small Albanian flags and spelling the expression “Fuck you” by using the semaphore flag signaling system (often mistaken for “naval signals”). Edi Muka has pointed out that “this work articulates the difficult position in which the artist finds himself – caught between nationalism on one hand and the invisibility of his people in the international political arena on the other.”<sup>08</sup> Another example would be Erzen Shkololli’s “comical” montage of the image of an astronaut placing the Albanian flag on the surface of the Moon (*Albanian Flag on the Moon*, 2005). This “event” is dated to the June of 1999 – the moment in which NATO ground troops entered the territory of Kosovo, remaining stationed there ever since. Also, several artworks on this topic were produced by Albert Heta. Within the context of the Cetinje Biennial in Montenegro, he performed the tactical action of placing the Albanian flag on the building of the old Serbian Embassy in Cetinje (*The Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo*, 2004). This work was censored by the citizens, the media and art institutions and discussed many times in various intellectual and artistic circles in Belgrade and Prishtine, judged as both progressive and reactionary in the aftermath. Only a year later, the artist used e-flux news to promote the non-existing Kosovar Pavilion in Venice. In this media hack, Heta appropriates the work of Sislej Xhafa who exhibited in the Albanian Pavilion, playing thus with the lack of distinction among the international art community between what would be the Albanian Pavilion and the Kosovo Pavilion. We can add to this group of national-identity statements the famous work *Hey You* by Skhololli (2002) – the video in which the popular folk singer Skurte Fejza is singing the following lines:

... *Hey Europe I'm addressing you a letter | As Albanian of Old Albania | How are my sons | You know well that they are in emigration ... | Do you remember my territories? | Do you remember Albanians in one homeland ... | How did you cut off the borders! | My brothers and sisters were left outside... | You cut off the eagle in two parts ... |*

The Serbian, or more precisely Belgrade libertarian intellectuals observe those questions related to national and State-building themes in contemporary Kosovo art mainly through the optics of the “movement for independence,” interpreting them as a struggle for de-colonialization, or as a process of “liberating” the new nation states. In the framework of the dominant ideology and its binary choices (where any statement is weighted by whether it is *for* or *against* the independence of Kosovo), the critique of those artistic statements as “nationalist” seems to be entirely impossible. Any critique would be interpreted as a reflection of Serbian nationalism/patriotism, while any affirmation of it would be (at least on the local level) deemed as an act of treason.

Artists from Serbia also dealt with issues of national identity and with the project of State-building within the framework of contemporary art and in the context of the post-Yugoslav crisis, but it seems that they less frequently resorted to

**08** See: <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1455>.



The persistent denial by the official national historiography to explore in a critical manner the question of the political causes and constellations of the 1389 battle of Kosovo contributes to the alignment of this myth to the order of greatest national taboos.

Dragan Malešević Tapi,  
*The Death of Murat*, 1982.

COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART – BELGRADE

an affirmative approach, at least within the field of so-called critical art. Raša Todosijević in his work *Gott liebt die Serben* (1989 onwards) parodies the freshly resurrected national myths of the 1990s, identifying them precisely as a constituent part of the clero-fascist politics of the ruling ideology of the Serbian state (the slogan “God Loves the Serbs” is in this work related to the image of swastika as the symbol of fascism). Another example might be the work by Milica Tomić *I am Milica Tomić* [...] *I am a Serb, French, Korean, German, etc.* (1998), where the notion of national identity is being examined in the context of globalized society, within which the artistic subject is perceived as a “citizen of the world.” But, and despite this, Milica Tomić in her statement underlines that the basic drive behind her work is the impossibility and the rejection to speak out or pronounce clearly her nationality as a consequence of the political circumstances of nationalism, war and violence in the official Belgrade of that time.<sup>09</sup>

On the other hand, the myth of Kosovo during the 1990s becomes the flagship of the nationalist and fascist politics of Milošević’s and post-Milošević’s Serbia, resulting in renewed interest in artistic representations which thematize, and consequently, revitalize this national myth. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the Kosovo myth replaced the socialist ideology of “Brotherhood and Unity” as the new cement of social cohesion. In the sphere of real-

<sup>09</sup> “The statement *I am Milica Tomić. I am a Serb* in the context of state policy, which produces the hallucinatory effect of a collective identity, loses the meaning of self-determination or intimate choice and becomes a ‘ticket’ into the club of the dominant ideology. The paradoxical choice to publicly deny my national and religious identity is inversely proportional to the very paradox that lies within a national identity: it is a totally artificial product, but on a personal level it is still experienced as completely natural and necessary, so every community is an imagined one, but only imagined communities are real.” Milica Tomić, “Artist statement 1998,” in *Inside/Outside, Independent Artists from F.R.Yugoslavia* (Warsaw: Galeria Zacheta, 2000), 22.

politics, it was revived on the occasion of the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo at Gazimestan in 1989, the event after which Milošević definitely grasped complete control over power. Ever since that moment, history becomes the active force in defining national roots and in the “grounding” of national identities. The ethno-nationalist myth of the heroic sacrifice of the Serbian people in defending the “gates of Europe” and the Christian world from the Ottoman invasion is phantasmagoric and anti-historical, and exactly as such it appears in a large number of works situated in the official discourse of the politics of the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Some of the paradigmatic examples of this tendency are the paintings *The Death of Murat* (1982) by Dragan Malešević Tapi and *The Battle of Kosovo* (1985) by Olja Ivanjicki.

Moreover, the eclectic discourse of post-modernism uses its gravitational force to attract this representation to the field of the “new image,” as exemplified by the work *Kosovo Maiden* by Predrag Nešković (1991) or *Final Solution* by Čedomir Vasić (1999). In both examples, it is a case of the remixing and recycling the Kosovo myth, mediated through its academic-sentimentalist representations from the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1945). More concretely, both images refer to the painting *Kosovo Maiden* by Uroš Predić (1919) which portrays the heroes of ethnic epic poetry: the wounded but surviving knight – a “hero of Kosovo” – and a beautiful and merciful local girl, who walks the battlefield in the aftermath, nursing the wounded. Observing the digital manipulation of the image in the work of Čedomir Vasić, which erases the mythical representation of the battle, leaving the landscape (the field of Kosovo) completely deserted, we can hardly avoid the allusion to the “ethnic cleansing” of the Serbian population in Kosovo

<sup>10</sup> More about the revival of the Kosovo myth in the Serbian art of nineties at: Zoran Erić, “Recycling of National Myths in Serbian Art of the Nineties,” *Umelec International*, 2003, <http://www.divus.cz/umelec/en/pages/umelec.php?id=1007&roc=2003&cis=3#clanek>.

after the NATO intervention of 1999. The fact that the landscape stares empty at the viewer after the Serbs have left is, at the same time, both the negation of the existence of the Albanian population, and the melancholic picture of the loss of territories, that is, of all that fits into the nationalist State ideology of the Republic of Serbia.

Yet, the most active and most functional power of mobilization, in the political sense, we can find in the movie *The Battle of Kosovo* (1989) by Zdravko Šotra. Shot in a very short time, without any regard for historical facts, mythological narration and cinematic culture, the basic message it communicates is the inevitability of war. The protagonists of the battle are being portrayed as a kind of kamikaze-crusaders<sup>11</sup> – they readily and without any question rush to their deaths, for the sake of defending Christian honor from the Muslim infidels, apparently with no political agenda whatsoever. Through a special broadcast of this film on national television the evening before the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 started (the event which itself was promoted as “the second battle for Kosovo”) the direct political

<sup>11</sup> Or it can be said that they were being portrayed as a sort of ancient suicide bomber squad, in a similar manner to how the “fundamentalists” of today are being represented: as the group of people who are underpowered in their battle against what is perceived as the “oppressors” or “invaders” but who decide to make up for this disadvantage by investing their own lives in the battle and using the tactics of acting “undercover,” locating their “reward” not in this life, but in “the eternal one.” Another paradigmatic example is the myth of the assassination of the Ottoman Sultan and Chief-in-command Murat (a historical figure, Murad I), who was according to this epic stabbed by the Serbian knight Miloš Obilić (not confirmed as the historical figure according to the data available), who managed to approach Murat by pretending that he came to surrender to the Sultan himself. The myth states that Obilić was slain at the very spot of the assassination and that he announced his intention to sacrifice himself for Christianity at the dinner arranged by the Serbian Chief-in-command Lazar the night before, the event which resembles the Biblical myth of The Last Supper.



The cover of *Bijelo dugme* (unofficially known as *Kosovka djevojka*), the seventh studio album released by Yugoslav rock group *Bijelo dugme*. Due to *Bijelo Dugme*'s usage of the famous painting by Uroš Predić for the album's cover, the most widely used name for the album is *Kosovka djevojka* [*Kosovo Maiden*], despite it officially being a self-titled album.

Čedomir Vasić, *Final Solution, Post Scriptum*, 2007

COURTESY OF THE CULTURAL CENTRE OF BELGRADE (KCB)



Predrag Nešković, *Kosovo Maiden*, 1991  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

**In the framework of different Balkans-oriented shows, the exchange between the artists from Serbia and Kosovo was mainly curated through the “politics of EUropean integrations,” that is, through the discourse of “truth, responsibility and reconciliation” or of overcoming the consequences of conflicts by means of art and culture.**

instrumentalization of this film was once again manifested (as had been the case before with its utilization in shaping public opinion in the wars in Bosnia and the oppression of the Albanian population in Kosovo).

The persistent denial by the official national historiography to explore in a critical manner the question of the political causes and constellations of the 1389 battle of Kosovo contributes to the alignment of this myth to the order of greatest national taboos.

Here it is also important to pay attention to the formal transformations the Kosovo myth went through during the period of Yugoslav socialist modernism –the cultural and political project which represented the form of emancipation from the Stalinistic dictate of soc-realism, after Yugoslavia broke with Informbiro [Cominform] in 1948.<sup>12</sup> At the Sao Paulo Biennial, the Yugoslav painter Petar Lubarda exhibits his series *The Battle of Kosovo* (1953) as an example of “high modernism” –the myth is here de-nationalized and subjected to the universal politics of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, the weak against the strong, which, in the given ideological setting could be read as a “pre-figuration” of the class struggle and the battle against fascism (that is, of the battle of Yugoslav partisans against the more powerful enemy).

<sup>12</sup> As argued by Ljiljana Blagojević, socialist modernism was built upon a double negation: on the one hand, on the repudiation of the between-the-two-world-wars modernity, e.g. functionalism and constructivism as the supposed products of capitalism, and on the other, on the distance towards the Soviet model exemplified by the aesthetics of “formalist eclecticism.” Ljiljana Blagojević, “High Hopes, False Premises, and Bleak Future: The Case of New Belgrade,” in *Modernity in YU* (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 5.



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The exchange and mutual introduction of artists from Serbia and Kosovo, which according to the words of the curators and organizers of the exhibition is one of the cultural-political goals of the *Exception* project, was happening mainly “outside,” in the so-called international context and not through the forms of (inter)national exchange on the local level, in between and within the very two societies themselves. The exception would be the exhibition *Përtej*, held in Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade at the end of the 1990s, which displayed the works of the currently active generation of artists from Kosovo and which, because of the place of the exhibition and its modest format, somehow went undetected, passing underneath the radars of nationalist politics of the official Belgrade.<sup>13</sup> Considering the reactions in Kosovo, here it is worth noting the recollections of the artist Sokol Beqiri:

I do not know about the organizers, but we were prepared for various kinds of reactions. The reactions were not devastating, however. The worst that happened to us was that we were branded as traitors. A Professor of the Art Faculty in Prishtina did it publicly, through a newspaper.<sup>14</sup>

In the framework of different Balkans-oriented shows,<sup>15</sup> the exchange between artists from Serbia and Kosovo was mainly curated through the “politics of European integrations,” that is, through the discourse of “truth, responsibility and reconciliation,” or of overcoming the consequences of conflicts by means of art and culture. The images of the “belated modernity” of those societies, of a cultural lagging behind, ethno-nationalism and national struggles typical for the “Imaginary Balkans” – as conceptualized by Marija Todorova<sup>16</sup> – were selected to confirm the given cultural-political agenda. The position of the artist in this exhibiting context has been reduced to the task of a “context translator” or “an illustrator of cultural difference who reflects and reinterprets the paradigms and stereotypes of the cultural milieu s/he works in.”<sup>17</sup>

**13** The exhibition *Përtej* was set up during June 1997 in the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade. Exhibited were the works of Magzut Vezgishi, Mehmet Behluli, Sokol Beqiri and the composer Ilir Bajri. The curator of the exhibition was Shkelzen Maliqi and the organizers were the Center for Contemporary Art, Fund for an Open Society and CZKD. (“*Përtej*” in Albanian means “above, across the, besides, at the other side.”)

**14** *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989–2001* exhibition catalogue, 369.

**15** “Balkans Exhibitions” are: *In Search of Balkania*, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria, 2002, curators: Peter Weibel, Roger Conover and Eda Cufer; *Blood & Honey, The future is in the Balkans*, Sammlung Essl Kunst der Gegenwart, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, Austria, 2003, curator: Harald Szeemann; *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 2003, curator: Rene Block.

**16** Marija Todorova, *Imaginarni Balkan* (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2006).

**17** Erden Kosova, “The Problematic of National Identity and Social Engagement in the Contemporary Art Practice in the Balkans,” in *Nationalism and Contemporary Art*, 177.

Differing from such an approach, the Kontekst Gallery profiled itself from the very start as a place for art-activism and politically engaged artistic practices, putting the emphasis on exhibitions dealing with the problematics of different minorities and covering a wide range of issues – from lesbian and feminist issues to collaborations with various counter-globalist groups and projects and, finally, to the debate about the “art of the periphery.” Already at the beginning of their work, in the first months of 2008, the Kontekst curators organized a series of lectures, discussions and screenings which included a number of theorists and artists from Prishtina and Belgrade and which raised no visible turmoil or conflict in the public sphere. Those events were, at the same time, a prelude to the exhibition of the young artists from Prishtine.

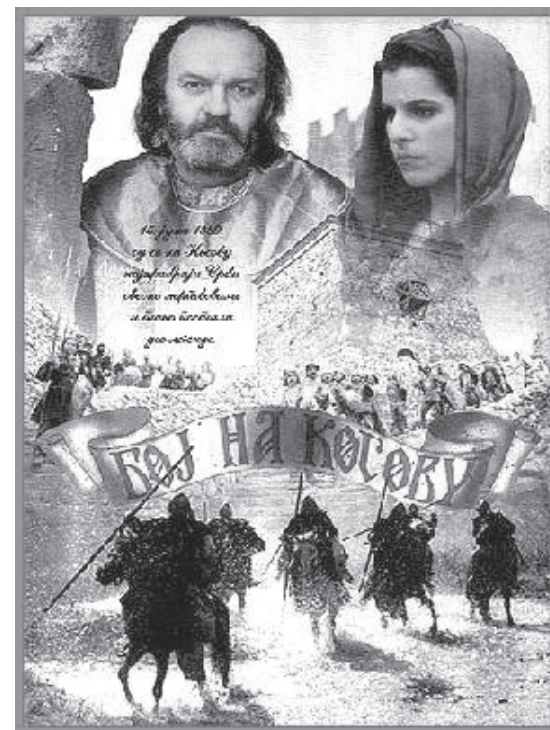
The exhibition *Exception* itself, according to the curators, consisted of two conceptual units: The first is about the critical interventions of the artists from Kosovo in the fields of global art representation and the art market dominated by the West; the other unit encompasses the artworks that deal with the problems of Kosovo society and the state [and the State!] of being “under construction,” focusing on the problems of national and gender identities.<sup>18</sup>

My aim here is not to deal directly with the events surrounding the exhibition, but to investigate the exhibition itself, since all the social critique that came out as a reaction to the act of the violent closing of it was already present in the curatorial conception, as well as in the questions raised through the artworks exhibited. After the closing of the exhibition, it seems that the curators and the artists, and actually their whole joint effort, were being in a certain way sanctioned in a two-fold manner: by the fascist organizations and the repressive apparatuses of the state, but also by the professionals, the audience and the informal groups which appropriated this event through the “ban” on the discussion of the content of the exhibition until it opened in a proper way.

One of the problems of the Young Art scene in Kosovo, the one that the exhibition *Exception* clearly shows, is the number of works which are approaching uncritically the problems of establishing the Kosovar state and the formation of the new national identity, in this way avoiding tackling the more urgent problems of unemployment, “wild” privatization and the general economical dependence on the international donations and investments. The most obvious example here is the media work [www.pavaresiaekosoves.com](http://www.pavaresiaekosoves.com) (translated as [www.independenceofkosovo.com](http://www.independenceofkosovo.com), the work seems to be offline now) by the young artist Artan Balaj, which shows a schematic group of figures: a teaching figure stands for the international representative of the bureaucratic machine in Kosovo – UNMIK – and the student figures stand for representatives of Kosovo society, while the clock stands still at the time 12:44. This

**18** Vida Knežević, Kristian Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, Introduction to the catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnicka scena Prištine/Exception: Contemporary Artistic scene from Prishtina*, 20.

One of the problems of the Young Art scene in Kosovo, the one that the exhibition *Exception* clearly shows, is the number of works which are uncritically approaching the problems of establishing the Kosovar state and the formation of the new national identity, in this way avoiding tackling the more urgent problems of unemployment, “wild” privatization and the general economical dependence on the international donations and investments.



The Battle of Kosovo, Zdravko Šotra, 1989



Petar Lubarda, *The Battle of Kosovo*, 1953 • COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART – BELGRADE (MSUB)

number is representing the UN 1244 Resolution upon which a temporary UN management was sent to Kosovo and thus initiated what is being considered from one side to be the process of the institutional constitution of the new state, but this resolution is also interpreted from the other side as to further consider Kosovo to be a part of Serbia, hence maintaining the status of the province to be “in between” any permanent solution. According to the curatorial claim, this rare new media art piece from Kosovo does not make a move forward in relation to the thinking of the “under construction” government of official Prishtine –what it does is to merely repeat it in a tautological manner.

Also, the group of feminist works by artists Fitore Isufi/Koja, Alketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja clearly show that the issue of feminist emancipation is still considered to be strongly linked to the issue of national emancipation. They repeat the similar strategy of involving the national symbols the flag, the emblem and the anthem, just like the older generation of their male colleagues whose works have been discussed in this text before. However, these national symbols appear in the form of “detourned images” –as the demonic-backwards singing of the national anthem by the naked woman (Nurhan Qehaja, *The Flag*, 2006), as the flag of conservatism and patriarchalism

embodied in the stain of blood of the virgin on white bed linen after the first wedding night (Fitore Isufi/Koja, *Japan*, 2006) or as the national-ethnic emblem of the double headed eagle on shorts, the only piece of garment on a naked woman-lamp, which outlines the decorative position of women in the nationalist-macho society (Alketa Xhafa, *Baby Doll/The day After*, 2007). In spite of their critical attitude towards the status of and the representation of women in contemporary Kosovo, they are situating their critical observations within the framework of nation state-building, thus in a paradoxical manner standing in line with the very society they are trying to criticize.

**The exhibition *Exception* was made as “the national selection,” obviously and first of all because it was the only format through which it could assure the funding for its realization –paradoxically, it is precisely the platform of such “assuring of the production” which is being radically denied through the act of the violent closure of the exhibition.**





Additionally, placing such works within the context of the exhibition-as-the-national representation shows not only how the tools of contemporary art such as media art, interventionism, or feminist criticism can be limited to the pragmatic goals of the legitimization of the official national identity, but also how conservative politics can appropriate and utilize contemporary art for its own purposes in general. However, the world is based on paradoxes and it is difficult to fight with each and every one of them each step of the way, in attempting to anticipate all the outcomes and contexts of circulation possible for the original message. Maybe the works by Fitore Isufi/Koja, Alketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja would function differently in some other possible context of an exhibition which would, for example, give a historical overview of the position of women in the post-colonial struggle –but in this curatorial narrative their emancipatory potential stays limited, encompassed by the boundaries of the program of diplomatic exchange between Serbia and Kosovo.

However, some of the works included in the exhibition do clearly point to the problems of national representation and to the troubles within contemporary art in general. The work by Lulzim Zeqiri unambiguously settles these aforementioned paradoxes within the very field of contemporary art, showing how the international positioning of the artist dictated by the politics of national identity and neoliberal inclusivism go together, “energize” and “feed” each other as in the concept of Yin and Yang. In his video *Heroes* (2003) he presents an image of typical village interiors with traditional furniture, where male members of the Albanian (patriarchal) society in Kosovo spend their evenings singing and playing *shargia*, the local mandolin-like instrument, performing oral-epic songs about heroism. Within their particular song he interpolates the new heroes –the famous protagonists of the contemporary art scene of Kosovo (according to some claims, young Kosovo society was very proud that eight artists from Kosovo participated in Balkans exhibitions,<sup>19</sup> in a similar manner to how in most societies people are proud of the large number of their teams participating in the Olympic games or in different football championships, etc.). The folk singers sing the epic about the heroic gestures of Kosovo artists –their appearances at important international events (Manifesta, Istanbul Biennale, Kassel Exhibition), therefore alluding to the national cultural development, advancement and modernization of the Kosovo “under construction” state.

This work seems to make another point as well –one which says that the national identity of the artists from Kosovo is instrumentalized from two sides: first within the general tendency of building the new national cultures in post-Yugoslav states

(in other words, each state needs its contemporary art to serve the purpose of contributing to the building of the State),<sup>20</sup> and secondly within the international art scene as institution where the quality and thematic scope of the artistic work is not enough, but the signifier of “from Kosovo” is needed in order to confirm the vaunted image of “all-inclusive internationality.” The artistic statement does not reveal much about the personal position of the artist Lulzim Zeqiri with regard to what I read in his work (his other work titled *White Map* presents the timeless image of the Balkan conflicts and fulfills all the tasks of its stereotypical representation), and I can only guess the position of the curators when placing this work in the terrain of the exhibition (besides their dedication to reviewing in a comprehensive way the young art scene of Kosovo). But my observation would be that inside this particular exhibition Lulzim’s *Heroes* has the same function as Duchamp’s *Pissoir (Fountain)* –they point to the exhibitionary order and institutional context in which they are momentarily placed, discovering at the same time their own ideological function.

The abovementioned artwork *Heroes* also shows that the issue of the nation, or of national identity, is very much international (within the hegemonic representation of the contemporary internationalism), and that the national identity of an artist from the “periphery” is always already inscribed into the dominant model of exhibition making and the contemporary art system. That may be the reason why the curators decided to dedicate significant space to the chapter *Artist, curator, market* and to analyze the art system structure, its hierarchies and the balance of power in relation to it... I would add to this the concept of (national) cultural representation. In their criticism of the art system, the curators of *Exception – Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina* mostly focused on Balkans exhibitions which, according to them, played a certain role in Euro-Atlantic integration and in the preparation of the ground for global capital in the so-called region of Western Balkans. That is, the curators and artists have shown their positions and opinions about the production of the mythologized and commodified representation of the Balkans conflicts.

They also raised the issue of the famous Western curators playing the role of discoverers of new and yet unrealized marketplaces as (re) sources of talents. The examples of the works which are dealing with this topic are Jakup Ferri’s *Save Me, Help Me*; Driton Hajredini’s *The Uncles*; *Waiting for a Curator* as the joint work by Hajredini, Ferri and Zeqiri; and *Free Your Mind* by Alban Muja. While Driton Hajredini utilizes the American national symbol –the figure of Uncle Sam– to speak of the power of Western curatorial experts for Kosovo/Balkans/East European art (replacing

<sup>19</sup> See Sezgin Boynik, “Theories of Nationalism and Contemporary Art in Kosovo,” 218.

<sup>20</sup> According to the dominant art historical narrative, there was no contemporary art in Kosovo before the 1990s. For example, in the interview for the catalogue *On Normality...*, Sokol Beqiri says: “The Kosovo art scene of today – I think it has great success and energy behind it. I could also point out that I totally agree with Branko Dimitrijević in one of the meetings we had, when he said: There is a sense in which the young Kosovar artists start from zero-point, which liberates them from the chains of any tradition and which puts them in the position of “total contemporaneity.” *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989–2001* exhibition catalogue, 379.

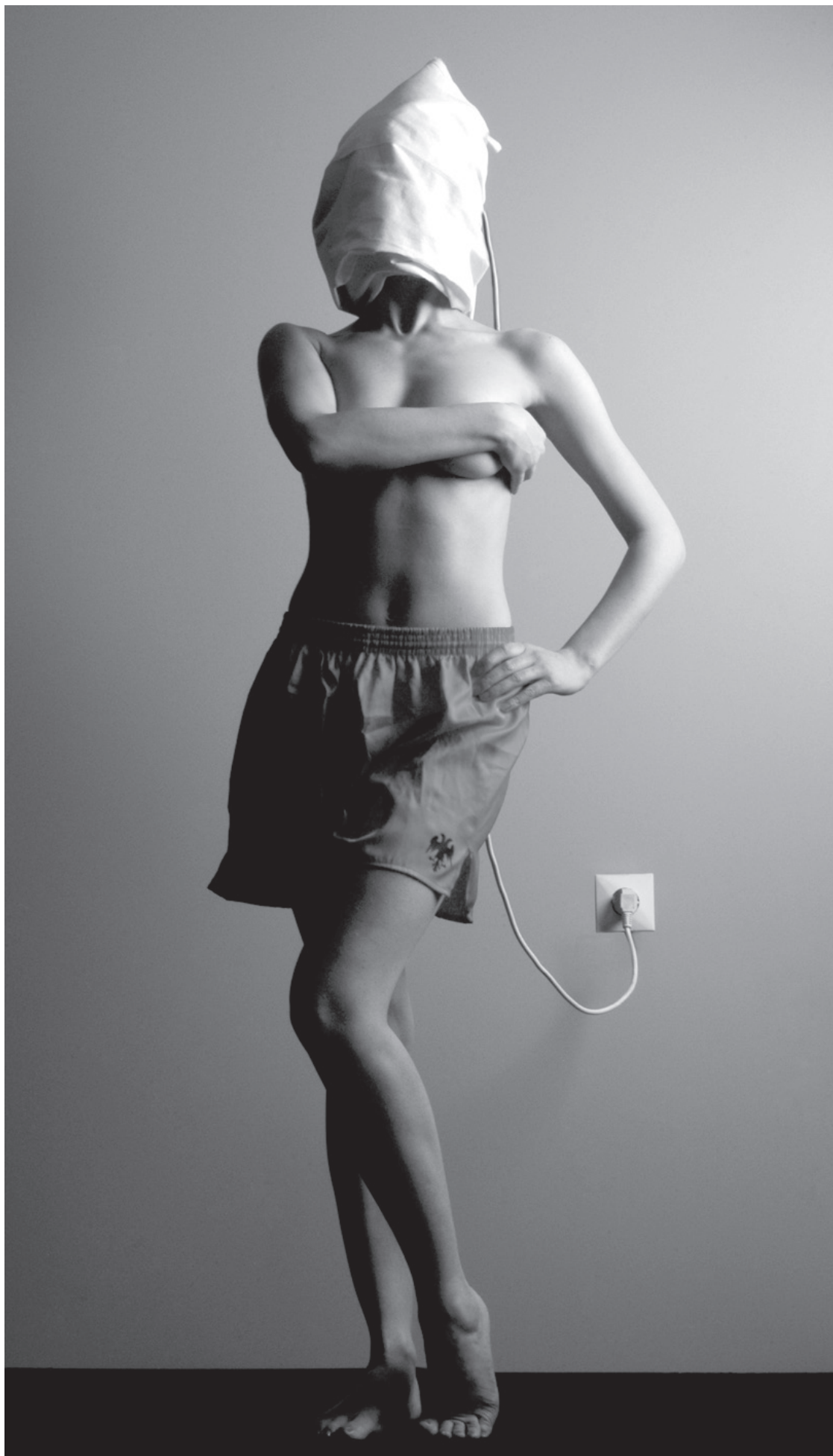


Artan Balaj,  
<http://www.pavaresiaekosoves.com>  
 COURTESY OF THE THE ARTIST  
 AND KONTEKST GALLERY

Would the exhibiting of, for example, critical works dealing with the place and role of culture in “peripheral zones” and representing the collective problems of all the artists from the region, including the issues of nation-building we all witnessed during the past decades [so, an exhibition which is not based on the principle of “otherness,” but the principle of “sameness”] have brought about different effects?



Fitore Isufi/Koja, *Japan*, 2006  
 COURTESY OF THE THE ARTIST AND  
 KONTEKST GALLERY



Alketa Khafa, *Baby Doll/The Day After*, 2007  
 COURTESY OF THE THE ARTIST AND  
 KONTEKST GALLERY

the famous sentence “I want you for US Army” with “I want you for Contemporary Art Army”), Jakup Ferri points to the logic of investment in art from the East which, according to him, “is based on the potential that the artist’s fame is the factor that multiplies the value of the merchandise.” All these works are based on a strategy of “subversive affirmation”<sup>21</sup> – the tactic that allows the artist/activist to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously keeping a distance from what is being affirmed. It destabilizes such an affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

This approach is characteristic for the large part of the production in the region of former Yugoslavia and is based upon the experience of conceptual art and its transformation from the production of the “representation/object” to delivering an “attitude/statement.”<sup>22</sup> In this light, the purposeful naïveté of these works manifests itself as an ironic tool that is utilized to challenge the enforced identification with the liberal Western *Weltanschauung* [world view]. In all the cases the artists appear as “peripheral subjects” whose national origin is undistinguishable from their personal names whilst appearing on “the art scene”; so it can be said that their very possibility to act is already determined and limited by these designations.

This is the framework in which we can read the work by Driton Hajredini titled *Sin*. The video presents a document of an event performed in a Christian church in Münster and recorded with a hidden camera, in which the artist (Driton Hajredini) enters the confessional booth and confesses to the priest. He asks him unorthodox questions such as: *I am actually a Muslim but I wanted to ask if it is a sin to be an Albanian born in Kosovo? Can it be called a sin, in a way?* The confused priest replies with: *No. Not a sin. Sin is something we, people, do of our own free will, and something which is opposed to the God’s commandments.* Or, ironically speaking, we may draw the reverse conclusion that national identity and nationalism are not dependent on free will and thus are in accordance with the God’s commandments.

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It is the standpoint of the curators, which was repeated by many others later, that the *Exception* project is about a certain kind of getting-to-know the Albanian-Kosovar culture –in other words, that it is about the “otherness” to which we are to be introduced for the very first time. This diplomatic strategy in the field of art fits entirely into the political guidelines of the European and international foundations, according to which

<sup>21</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance,” *Maska* (Ljubljana) vol XXI, no. 3-4 (98-99), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Some of the examples are the artworks *How to Become a Great Artist* by Vladimir Nikolić and Vera Večanski (Belgrade), *Choose Life* by Nikoleta Marković and Zsolt Kovacs (Belgrade), *Explosion* by Primož Novak (Ljubljana) and many others. All of these works (like the works by young artist from Prishtina) are using a similar strategy to express their ironic stance towards the obsession with marketing, self-promotion, and obsessive networking in art –all of which being the phenomena that accompanies the artistic production of transitional societies.





Lulzim Zeqiri, *Heroes*, 2003  
COURTESY OF THE THE ARTIST  
AND KONTEKST GALLERY

Through choosing the form of the national representation of the artistic scene, the exhibition *Exception* limited its scope to being *pro-* or *counter-* in relation to the question of the independence of Kosovo and thus corresponded with the given framework of the existing choices in the field of realpolitics and its existing social polarizations. In that sense, in the local context it proved no more than the confirmation of the expected state of affairs: the Serbian fascism towards Albanians on one side and the condemnation of the violation of the politics of human rights including the right to public expression on the other... And it is the task of art to think beyond, and to discover “the possibilities undiscovered” which are certainly to be found outside of given choices imposed by the dominant politics of culture.

culture serves the social program by “introducing the other” in order to respect “cultural difference,” and this all leads to the final “reconciliation of the sides in conflict.” The programmatic text “Using of Culture and Art in Conflict Resolution in Contemporary Times” may serve as one of the indicators of dominant prejudices related to the negotiation techniques and “use value” of contemporary art. It states: “While political talks and diplomatic activities are going to reduce the tension between the two countries, the exchange of artists including painters, musicians, film makers and others will bring about cordiality and amity.”<sup>23</sup>

Curiously enough, the violent closing of the exhibition and the accompanying media rampage which mediated this event, empirically challenges such a standpoint and rejects this kind of approach of the institutionalization of artistic practices. The exhibition *Exception* was made as “the national selection,” obviously and first of all because it was the only format through which it could assure the funding for its realization –paradoxically, it is precisely the platform of such “assuring of the production” which is being radically denied through the act of the violent closure of the exhibition. Returning to the beginning of this text, here we can again raise the question of the form and the format of the exhibition. That is, of the way in which the curator acts within the apparatus of production. Would the exhibition, if envisioned to be unfolding in a different and “autonomous” field, one which does not take on the role of diplomatic mediation between two

national cultures,<sup>24</sup> have had a different outcome or have opened up a more productive space for discussion? Would the exhibiting of, for example, critical works dealing with the place and role of culture in “peripheral zones” and representing the collective problems of all the artists from the region, including the issues of nation-building we all witnessed during the past decades (so, an exhibition which is not based on the principle of “otherness,” but the principle of “sameness”) have brought about different effects?

From this perspective it seems to be the case. The exhibition *Exception* carried very concrete critical potentials in itself but it was the choice of the form that effectively prevented the very possibility that such questions could be raised for public examination and discussion. Through choosing the form of the national representation of the artistic scene, the exhibition *Exception* limited its scope to being *pro-* or *counter-* in relation to the question of the independence of Kosovo and thus corresponded with the given framework of the existing choices in the field of real-politics and its existing social polarizations. In that sense, in the local context it proved no more than the confirmation of the expected state of affairs: the Serbian fascism towards Albanians on one side and the condemnation of the violation of the politics of human rights including the right to public expression on the other... And it is the task of art to think beyond, and to discover “the possibilities undiscovered” which are certainly to be found outside of given choices imposed by the dominant politics of culture. ●

<sup>24</sup> In this case the curators have defined the field of art in a completely different way and through a direct link with the representationalist politics: “The field of art is a place where, among other things, people talk about something that has to be talked about publicly, in media and parliament, and this is the issue of the past and the issue of the future of co-existence in this area, the issue of the very subjects.” Introduction to the catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnicka scena Prištine/ Exception: Exception – Contemporary Art Scene of Prishtina*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> This text currently appears to be offline – or at least no search engine can find it.

## Issue 2 (2010)

EDITORS: RUBEN AREVSHATYAN • GEORG SCHÖLLHAMMER

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This issue is the product of a collaboration between Red Thread e-journal and SWEET 60s project. Red Thread has provided a theoretical platform for SWEET 60s, a long term experimental, curatorial, scientific and educational research project that investigates the hidden territories of the revolutionary period of the 1960s through contemporary artistic and theoretical perspectives, which has developed around itself a wide international network of interested and cooperating individuals and institutions.

The curatorial and artistic focus of SWEET 60s lies on "post ideological societies" (in post-Soviet, post socialist, Eastern European, Middle Eastern, West and Central Asian as well as North African countries and in a second phase in China and Latin America), in making a comparative analysis and contextualizing the historical developments in the arts, culture and societies of the 60s and 70s and researching their subsequent effects on contemporary socio-political and cultural situations.

The project mainly concentrates on the still underexposed global cultural shift in the 60s and its effects in countries that were omitted in the historical explorations of that particular revolutionary period; situations that were developing beyond the, so to say, "Prague Line." The general perception of the 60s period is still associated with Western culture and with the formal fragmented replications of Western processes in the "peripheries" and "outskirts."

Despite the differences in their geopolitical and sociocultural contexts, the political, social and cultural processes ongoing in countries in West Asia, the Middle East, the Southern Caucasus and North Africa (including the Arab world) since the mid 60s were tightly interconnected with each other and they played a momentous role in shaping subsequent developments on both a regional and a global scale. The effects and the logic of the political, social and cultural paradigms and constructs that were established in that period can still be traced today when we also witness the culturalisation and aesthetization of this epoch of "rebellious euphoria."

The project explores the differences and similarities of that turbulent period in the aforementioned countries through a comparative analysis of the important (from the contemporary artistic or critical points of view) symbols, expressions, and developments in the social, cultural,

political and economical fields (like social/political movements, significant works and trends in architecture, literature, visual arts, cinema, pop culture, mass culture, subcultures, etc...).

In the early 60s, a hopeful spirit of modernism had moved into the private ateliers in many art-scapes that were then conceived as peripheral or provincial. In the so called Soviet Bloc, the existential fears risen in the period of the Stalinist dictate of realism had already elicited initial counter-reactions after 1956, leading to a reenactment of extreme subjectivism. In the totalitarian and colonial art-scapes of the Arab world and North and Central Africa as well as West and Central Asia, new groups and positions that emerged joined an international artistic spirit of late modernist universalism and were able to feel accepted again in the international canon with their kinetic objects, light works, and their structural-geometric abstractions. In the second postwar decade, a generation of neo-constructivist artists on both sides of the Iron Curtain and the former colonies had formed a kind of international association.

During these years, the loosening of the repressive climate created more freedom regarding artistic means of expression -and also enabled a new approach to aesthetic work. In a way, neo-constructive modernism, the new abstraction, functioned not only as a sign of the end of an era, but also a kind of repression machine: the new modernism was also a substitute for the errors and oversights of fordism and socialism and their models of social modernization; it criticized mass culture and its everyday objects, placed artistic work in an abstract space of work on the form, and was the vanishing point of the real world of the Cold War. The era of the neo-avant-gardes left their traces around the globe. Yet it is still the neo-avant-gardes of the centers that have been canonized.

In contrast to the currently accepted master narratives and historical canons, the project considers the processes of the 60s not as an eruption of a volcano generating echoes in the rest of the world, but as a general sociocultural, political, economical condition which evolved in a global context and determined the development of parallel modernities interrelated with the development of diverse sociopolitical and cultural radical processes in every part of the world.

RUBEN AREVSHATYAN &  
GEORG SCHÖLLHAMMER

# The Soviet 60s: Just Before the End of the Project

*We dissolve in the human quantities,  
in your spaces the Politechnical...*

A. VOZNESENSKY

Keti Chukhrov



Lidia Masterkova,  
*Composition, 1967?*,

COURTESY OF STATE TRETYAKOV  
GALLERY

**I**The Soviet 1960s represent a very contradictory thesaurus of narratives. On the one hand, this was a period of the famous Thaw and of political expectations about the Soviet utopia's breakthrough. On the other hand, the 1960s prove to be a decade of harsh disillusion ending up with the Prague Spring of 1968 and entailing the recession of democratic revival and cultural development. The contradictions are evident: the flight of Gagarin to outer space (1961) and the erection of the Berlin wall (1961); emergence of international venues and festivals and the notorious censorship of the *Manege* exhibition by the government (1962); severe prosecution of "Western," "formalist" modes of expression in art and everyday life; censorship of artists, filmmakers and musicians for their "anti-Soviet" activity (e.g., the case of Daniel and Sinyavsky in 1965<sup>01</sup>) and the resurgence of avant-garde narratives and strategies in film, poetry, visual arts, and music.

It is generally considered that despite the Thaw (1957-1964), the art and culture of Soviet Russia in the 60s remained detached from the world procedures of modernization, as well as from the neo-avant-garde currents in art, not to say anything about the political resistance in Europe and the US. This is probably true if one takes into account the degree of the subversive intensity of art and politics in the Western 60s. There could have been no such thing under the governance of the Soviet party bureaucracy. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Soviet literature, art and culture reaching the West since the end of the 1950s were mainly dissident and anti-governmental, but their criticality towards the Soviet regime didn't presuppose their being avant-garde or politically subversive. On the contrary, despite being resistant to the party authority, such literature and art often happened to be conservative or even reactionary and traditionalist.

In other words, the West didn't have the chance to know the modernizing tendencies ostensible

**01** Soviet writers Andrei Syniavsky and Juli Daniel were condemned to 7 years of imprisonment for publishing their works abroad under the pseudonyms Abram Terz and Nikolai Arzhak.

often rather in the non-underground, or even the so-called "official" Soviet milieus (architecture, science, film, music, theatre, art, social engineering); this is the reason why these layers of culture remained internationally unaccepted for being "Soviet." The year 1962 – when the exhibition *Manege*<sup>02</sup> including works by various generations of Soviet artists underwent a severe censorship of Khrushchev – marked the split of culture into the official and non-official (or non-conformist) realms.

As it is known, the main cause for the party criticism was the "abuse" of modernist, abstract and formalist methods in art. This ban on formalism and abstraction remained intact despite the gradual discarding of the socialist realist canon and lasted until Perestroika. On the other hand, except for the ban on abstraction, there had been no other specific prohibitions in visual culture. Hence, all abstract art of the 60s appeared to be non-conformist and was often taken for the "great" unacknowledged art, as was the case with many exhibitions at the Norton Dodge Collection (Rutgers University Zimmerli Art Museum) consisting predominantly of Soviet underground art.

Ilya Kabakov, in his *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow*,<sup>03</sup> calls the art of the 60s extremely personalist – a tendency that, despite it eluded Soviet propagandist art, could not have been considered progressive in terms of international tendencies. Kabakov makes it clear that the split in the artistic intelligentsia of the 60s was beyond a division between party conformism and anti-Soviet non-conformism; i.e., part of the "non-official" artistic intelligentsia tended towards rethinking the Russian avant-garde's aesthetic methodologies. For example Lev Nusberg and his group *Dvijenie* [Movement] emerging in the 60s were relying on the constructivist ideas of Naum Gabo. Although quite detached from the official art-nomenclature, Nusberg, nevertheless, called himself a Leninist utopian and characterized his work as the aesthetic organization of the environment. Researching the potentialities of kinetism, Nusberg took interest in investigating the anthropomorphic background of mechanic

**02** See Juri Gerchuk, *A School for Art Scandal: Khrushchev in the Manezh on 1st December 1962* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).

**03** Ilya Kabakov, *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).



movements and the mechanic traits of human behavior.

The interest in avant-garde futurology and synthetic artistic practices, and in the interrelation of the mechanical and the natural was ostensible in works by Viacheslav Koleichuk –another member of the Dvijenie group (who later founded his own creative project Mir) as well as in works by Fransisko Infante. Infante invented in the 60s photographic projects combining geometric objects and natural landscapes, and he called them artifacts. But, unlike Nusberg and Koleichuk, his motivation was completely devoid of any utopian background or projections of constructivist design. Interestingly, the above-mentioned practices (often abstract in form) were not censored –unlike the more conservative painting of non-conformists like Julo Sooster, Eduard Shteinberg, Oscar Rabin and Vladimir Nemukhin – probably because they intersected to a considerable extent with the format of architectural design, scientific experimentation and cybernetics. The abstractionist artists appearing by the late 50s and later –Yuri Zlotnikov, Oleg Prokofiev, or Boris Turetsky – were probably not persecuted because of the same reasons. Many abstract paintings by Zlotnikov were meta-artistic and interdisciplinary researches on the psychophysiology of signal systems, study of mechanisms and the procedures of perception, and were often based on his knowledge of mathematics and cybernetics. In this case abstraction served as research on the objective languages of communication and the study of the material features of the environment. Despite all that experimentation, it is still a question whether the above-mentioned groups were the avant-garde movements of the 60s in their own right, and not just replications of the forms and ideas of the 20s (e.g., Kabakov characterizes these groups as the delayed utopianism).

As for the dissident non-conformist groups of the 60s, such as for instance the Lianosov group (Eduard Shteinberg, Oscar Rabin, Evgeni Kropivnitskiy, his son Lev Kropivnitski, Vladimir Nemukhin, Lidia Masterkova, Genrich Sapgir, Igor Holin and others), they indulged in an escapist aesthetics which they called anti-aesthetics, and appeared as the complete reverse of the socialist and communist recreation project of the 60s. The Lianosov group members were the first to launch the tradition of utmost hermetic commonality as the means of artistic communication and production.<sup>04</sup> They deliberately rejected reflection on any issues related to social life or political debate, reduced artistic issues to personal metaphysics and viewed reality as a whirlpool of dispersed epiphanic phenomena –the stance that was called “concretism” and influenced to a certain extent Moscow conceptualism. Juri Zlotnikov called such a stance “a metaphysical salon of the underground.”

Although there is a big difference between the two tendencies of the “unofficial” art –the dissident and the neo-avant-garde undergrounds– what they had in common was a certain

**04** On the non-conformist Soviet art of 50s–80s see Karl Eimermacher, *From Uniformity Towards Diversity* (Ruhr: M., Lotman Institute of Russian and Soviet Culture, 2004).

indifference towards reality, which for the Soviet intelligentsia in its frequent elitist attitudes represented nothing but a simulacrum of the ideological discourse. Hence such a preoccupation either with esoteric and metaphysical matters or scientific abstractions...

It was only later in the 1970s that conceptualist art-experiences (in works by Eric Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, Andrei Monastyrsky, Dmitry Prigov) produced an analytical review of and a critical reflection on Soviet ideology. Unlike the Western art space of the 60s –in which the notion of contemporary art had already become the embodiment of contemporaneity– the 60s in Soviet visual arts cannot be considered as the realm of a wide-ranging reflection on modernity. Contemporary art practices –taken as the continuity of the subversive and radical art-strategies– emerged in the visual art space only with the first attempts of the Moscow conceptualists to subversively question the languages of cultural production and “socialist” propaganda. Such a semiological analysis of the reality enabled an escape from the quasi-modernist symbolism of the 60s and a deconstruction of the rigid rhetorical carcass of the worn-out images of utopia. At the same time, (as was the case with Kabakov) the conceptualists produced the inner heterotopias, the “other” spaces –the worlds which were too absurd and poetic to be digested either by the state apparatus, or the pathetic aspirations of the fine arts, still so relevant for the art generation of the 60s.

## II

Meanwhile, the question is why, when it comes to tracing avant-garde strategies, it is only contemporary art that is mainly regarded as its subject and center. In its genesis, avant-garde cannot solely be reduced to renovation of artistic or even cultural means, but aims to reconsider life and politics in general. Therefore what was politically important for the avant-garde could as well be sought in life-styles and self-organized collectivities.

If we consider avant-garde as a certain innovative artistic methodology (i.e., if we view it from the point of view of contemporary art history) Moscow conceptualism of the 70s is more avant-garde than the previous 60s. But, reconsidering avant-garde in terms of the spirit of life production and open spaces for social intersection, in terms of the emergence of free creative time as common good, make the 60s demonstrate a stronger and broader effort for bringing an avant-garde spirit into political and artistic activities even in comparison with the conceptualism of the 70s.

Therefore, it may be productive to rethink the Soviet 60s as a potentiality which is not reduced to the linearism of art history. To witness the atmosphere of change and the promotion of the ideas of socialist modernization, we have to take the aspects of the Soviet 60s not connected directly to contemporary art. Despite ideological domination, these features were evident: the rise of lower social layers, the changes in urban spaces and the modes of inhabiting them (e.g., in the 60s peasants were granted passports and the freedom to migrate to cities and receive higher education), urbanization of rural areas, and the emergence

of neo-Marxist themes in philosophy, literature and cinema that almost disappeared in Stalinist cultural politics.

Interestingly, in the post-Stalinist Soviet 60s, mass propaganda often overlapped with the democratic processes. The paradox of such an overlapping was the following: in many cases the official ideology with its social program proved to be more democratic than the “anti-totalitarian” strife of many underground artistic circles, of the dissident intelligentsia which manifested its detachment from people of “non-prestigious” professions, workers and farmers, thus demonstrating an elitist attitude towards the proletarian social layers.

This means that despite the mainstream party ideology, the “new,” “fresh” currents even within the so-called “official” culture interpreted the hitherto forgotten avant-garde project as the expansion of the October Revolution and its legacy rather than a formalist methodology. This was the case with the films of Marlen Hutsiev and his melancholy for the communist utopia in *July Rain* (1966), or *The Gates of Ilych*, (1964); with Genadi Shpalikov and his screenplay on Mayakovsky, who was also the scriptwriter for Khutsiev’s above-mentioned films; with Larisa Shepitko and her film *Wings* (1966), where she manages to combine a poetic attitude towards machines and technical achievements with the commemoration of World War 2 heroism and criticism of the emerging interest in consumer society.<sup>05</sup>

Devoid of control, for a very short period of time in Soviet history the social space of the 60s acquired features that were probably even demanded and fought for by the revolutionary generation of the Western 60s: the acceptance of all social layers into universities, criticism of the hierarchy in cultural spheres, attacks on the bourgeoisie appropriating the common good values of art, science, and public sphere. In other words, the party’s hostility to certain aesthetic features, considered abstract or formalist, could have been combined with the living spaces of social equality and non-segregation. On the other hand, wasn’t Greenbergian and Adornian modernist purism (adored by the Soviet artistic elitist intelligentsia), as well as consumer culture’s spectacular attractivity (adored by the Soviet “stilyagas”<sup>06</sup> and forbidden in Soviet universities) criticized by the generation launching situationist or feminist practices in the West of the 60s?

The paradox of Soviet socialism, which is definitely a mutant socialism, is the following: it arose from an immature capitalist system and all those freedoms that had to be attained within the developed bourgeois society –individual rights, civil society, high standards of living and consuming– were missing in it. But strangely, lacking the technical and economic maturity indispensable for socialism, Soviet socialism developed certain features amounting to

**05** See <http://youtu.be/IDMdg3xOWp0>.

**06** A subculture that emerged in the USSR at the end of 50s and followed a Western way of life, demonstrating a deliberate anti-political attitude towards life and a negative attitude towards Soviet ethics. *Stilyagas* talked quasi-English slang, indulged in entertainment (music, dance) and wore grotesque outfits in contrast with the Soviet way of life, its minimalism and uniformity in style.





communism's mature humanist aspirations –manifested in open education, high estimation of science and culture and free creative time as one of the main common goods. The society that in the Stalinist period retained the non-class parameters due to the economic and political control, devoid of the authoritarian interference since the late 50s combined until, maybe, the late 60s both: the non-class dimension and the relative freedom from the harsh proletarian labor of the previous two decades. The non-class society in this case was not a forced condition but a real disposition in the society –not yet having the gentrified layers and still being based on the proletarian negligence to life standards, commodities, fashion and quality consumer values.

Returning back to the above-mentioned films by Marlen Khutsiev and Larisa Shepitko, they are just a few cases reverberating the main social and cultural conflict emerging in the Soviet 60s and dividing the society by the beginning of the 70s. The conflict was: how to preserve fidelity to the radical social change that the October Revolution accomplished, and at the same time not identify Stalinism with the socialist project; how to refer to the project of proletarian heroism and its historic legacy, its positioning of the communism's avant-garde in the conditions of the transition to late industrial or post-industrial society; how to make culture an open space for the majority with still a considerable amount of peasantry on the one hand and the emerging depoliticized learned and cultural elites on the other; and how to remain democratic within the closed borders and the Cold War regime.

Marlen Khutsiev, in both of his classical films from the mid 60s –*July Rain* and *The Gates of Ilych*– reproduces the non-ideological spaces of everyday life, contingent crowds and the flaneurship of a new post-Stalin generation. At the same time, he observes how the dimension of everyday serenity gradually becomes a stance of complacency –which is ethically and politically loose and undemanding in terms of the further promotion of the communist project. This was, to a considerable extent, a double bind, a dilemma of the Soviet 60s: whether the socialist ideals can endeavor in simple everyday life without struggle or heroic sacrifice.<sup>07</sup>

The 1st of May labor and solidarity demonstration becomes, in *The Gates of Ilyich*, a site where personal melancholy and private life are transcended, a site where the individual story and the collectivities overlap, or rather the individual event can only emerge from the collectivity: love, friendship and social aspirations for the future take place at one and the same space. Such multiplicity of people is different both from Antonio Negri's and Paolo Virno's multitudes. For Virno, the commons and multitudes do not have to constitute any gathering, or a space of common joy. The main thing is the relation between individuals motivated by concrete productionist goals. This is only natural for the post-Fordist capitalist society where the multitudes have to subvert the spaces of capitalist production. In this case "the common" is understood as the general intellect shared by means of immaterial labor. Such common general intellect, when it

<sup>07</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTV574EldIU&feature=related>.



Oscar Rabin, *Bani / Baths/*  
(*Smell L'eau de Cologne 'Moscow'*), 1966

is not general for all or shared equally, should be subtracted in the act of exodus by multitudes. In this case "the common" is understood as a civil potentiality and is not necessarily experienced as such. The collectivity of the *Gates of Ilych* is different. It is not based on concrete relational proceedings and is not even productive. The day to celebrate the labor solidarity is a day-off – a free non-working time. "The common," "the general" here is an experience that exceeds the concrete utilitarian trajectories and goals of exchange and amounts to sensing together the space of non-exploitation and equality in the already achieved non-capitalist society (no matter whether it was a really achieved stance or not). Free egalitarian labor is in sensing together the excess of that very time that is free from labor. Such free time has a progressive purport only in the presence of others or as a time spent for the general good. As soon as it is experienced in private solitude or for personal utilitarian aims, it generates melancholy and doubt about it being lost for nothing.

This is why the social narrative of the 60s brings forth the clash between two protagonists: one is a collectivist, a heroic participant of World War 2, or maybe even remembers the revolutionary past, usually not so well educated but politically precise; the other is a young individualist, already fascinated by entertainment, well informed and educated, slightly bohemian and fed up with the fidelity to the ethical super-ego and communism as its satellite. Both Shepitko and Khutsiev solve this dilemma through introducing into the narrative a character combining a revolutionary romanticism and a participatory attitude towards life and labor. Like the former pilot and the World War 2 heroine who becomes a school director in Shepitko's *Wings*; or like the young student and worker who, in *The Gates of Ilych*, scandalously leaves his girlfriend's bohemian party, just because the guests mock the lifestyles of peasantry and workers. In the

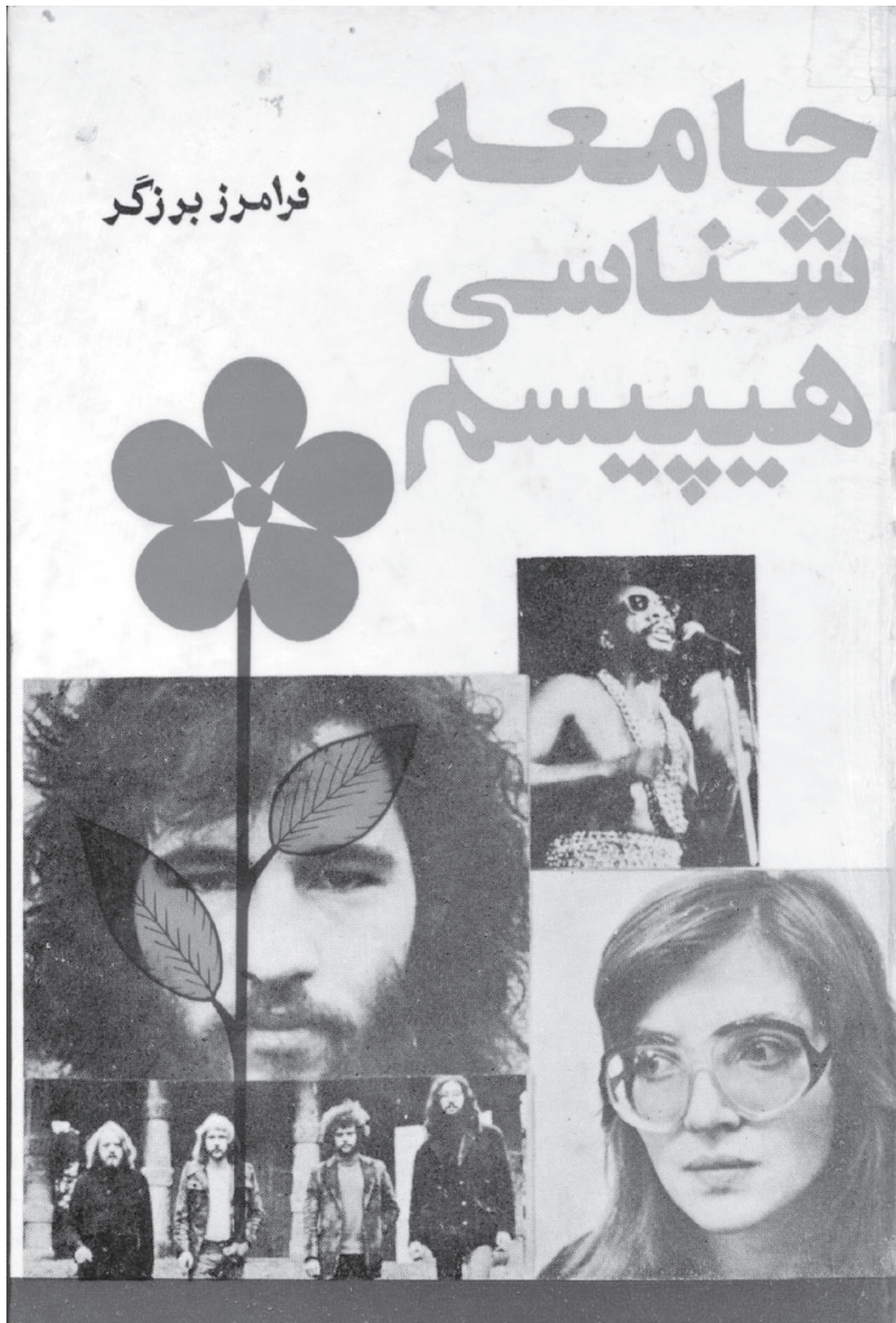
narratives of the 70s, such a character is still highly anticipated, but is already seen by the majority as an idiot or as an exception to the rule.

★ ★ ★

In his article "On the General"<sup>08</sup> written at the end of 60s, the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilienkov develops a Marxist interpretation of this notion. He claims that the General is neither a metaphysical idea suspended over reality or imposed on it, nor a category of the positivist logic that considers the general as an abstract invariant. It is something that being common to all is at the same time present in each of all. In other words, the General is only unraveled via objective reality, the material phenomena and their occurrences. But only those occurrences attain the General whose specific feature, whose eventuality is in becoming the General. This parable of dialectics tends to show that what is common to all (or even the universal) is neither distribution or expansion, nor speculative abstraction. It is, first of all, experienced and sensed, and evolves from the material world, and not vice versa. Moreover, it has to be confirmed by living through it. Therefore, whatever seems to be an ideal is generated by life and doesn't contradict it as in case of Christianity. While the Soviet 60s still preserve such a continuity between universalist aspirations and lifestyle ("continuity between the thoughts and deeds" as the protagonist of *The Gates of Ilych* puts it), the early 70s already reveal the irretrievable rupture. Referring to the General occurs to be just reduced to language, detached from life and deeds –the rupture that gradually brings the end of the Soviet socialism project. ●

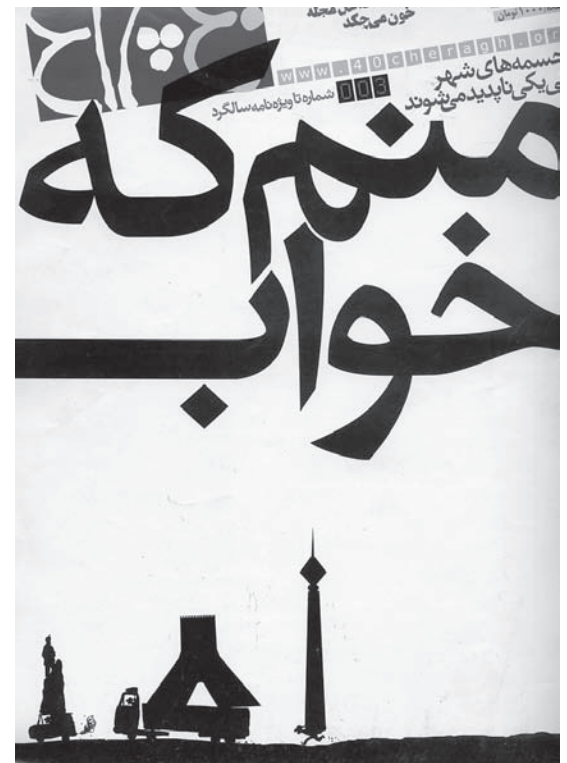
<sup>08</sup> Evald Ilienkov, "On the General," *Philosophy and Culture* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoi Literaturi, 1991), 320-339.





Book cover, *Sociology of Hippieism*, Farmarz Barzegar, 1972

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF NAZAR PUBLISHING HOUSE, TEHRAN.



Chelcheragh magazine cover, April 2010  
[an appeal to the values of the sixties]



Zendegi-e Ideal [Ideal Lifestyle]  
magazine cover, April 2010  
[generations of hip]

**This impression of the 60s as a Western wonder is not limited to conservative social scientists. Leftist and counterculture thinkers, too, saw it as an unprecedented decade in which idealism reigned supreme and the society moved towards challenging the capitalist order. They seldom, if ever, pay attention to the creative power and theoretical foundation of commercial culture. Through them, we also tend to overlook the global implications of a commercial apparatus that thirsts after channeling desires.**





# Narratives of the 60s

Sohrab Mahdavi

**I**t is significant that the question of the impact of the 60s on the non-Western world is always framed as the struggle of intellectuals and artists from the lesser nations to come to terms with their own sense of artistic or intellectual inadequacy. The art scene in Third World countries had always lagged behind, it seemed, trying to catch up with a tectonic force that had swept the globe with unbound youthfulness and energy. The pressure was on the Third World artist to surrender and to produce.

For the Iranian visual artist of the decade the main preoccupation was always two-pronged: How to be modern in an age that demanded non-conformity, rebelliousness, and breaking away from tradition, and how to preserve a distinct identity as the only way to lessen the pressure of measuring up to an ideal of Western art whose site of origin was always elsewhere. It is the pull between these two forces that constitutes the zeitgeist of the 60s for the Third World artist. At one end, values of the decade were being harangued as revolutionary, groundbreaking, unprecedented, and universal. The youth rebelled against state domination in all aspects of life, against the one-dimensional organizational man, the shackles of conformity. The Vietnam War became a pretext for questioning the status quo as well as the power structure. At the other end, the Third World artist was facing another challenge, one that his 50s' predecessors, for whom "originality was submerged in the effort to absorb new outlooks, and to learn and master new techniques"<sup>01</sup> didn't concern themselves with. It was a time when the question of originality was posed with increasing passion and urgency.

It was the Armenian Iranian Marcos Grigorian who, having graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, returned to Iran in 1954 to open a gallery and to prepare the ground for modernist artists in Tehran to explore their own roots.<sup>02</sup> In his Galerie Esthetique in Tehran, alongside works of modernists, he put on display works of traditional artists like *qahvehkhaneh* painters.<sup>03</sup> He was also one of the organizers of the 1st Tehran Biennial in 1958.

**01** Ehsan Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," in *Highlights of Persian Art*, ed. Richard Ettinghausen and Ehsan Yarshater (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 363.

**02** Feresteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, ed. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 48.

**03** "Coffeehouse" painters were known for the religious themes of their *pardeh* or drapes that told in pictorial form the story of religious legends. When hung on one of the walls of a coffeehouse, these drapes would become the backdrop of a one-man theater where a reciter of epic poetry would tell the story depicted on the drape for the clientele.

Grigorian was an influential teacher at the University of Tehran's Fine Arts Academy. He encouraged his students to look for elements of their own popular culture. This was in direct contrast to the universalist orientation of 50s artists like Jalil Ziapour, who embraced Western mandates in an age when this was seen as an acceptable means to progress. Grigorian's works inspired many 60s Iranian artists, notably Hossein Zenderoudi, to look for and make use of native materials and themes. In one painting Zenderoudi copies, scene-by-scene, the theme of a *qahvehkhaneh* painting. One must view this newfound interest in religious Iranian elements against the backdrop of an American-led coup in 1953 and the attempt by the Shah of Iran to project himself as heir to 2500 years of civilization. Government organizations only commissioned works that emphasized the pre-Islamic grandeur of Persia.

Indeed a group of modernist artists were increasingly appealing to religious symbolism to bring originality to their works.<sup>04</sup> Art critic Karim Emami called them "*Saqqakhaneh*" artists, to underline their shared sense of religious fetishism.<sup>05</sup> A Parson's School of Art graduate, Monir Shahroudi-Farmanfarmaian was mesmerized by mirror-works in mosques and Islamic architecture, as well as by primitive textile patterns. Also a student at Accademia di Belle Arti in Italy, Parviz Tanavoli came back to Iran to hunt for artifacts—locks, keys, knobs, grillwork, prayers, talismanic messages, tribal rugs and gravestones—not only to collect but to incorporate them into his sculptures. Zenderoudi, educated in Paris, painted elaborate canvases filled with numerological charts, *qahvehkhaneh* themes, and inscriptions on vestments. Faramarz Pilaram brought gold and silver paint to a canvas to depict the Mosques of Isfahan. All invariably made ample use of Persian calligraphy, which opened the door to a whole new set of meanings and interpretations.

This did not mean that they believed in the religious/Iranian content of their works. They saw in these objects, detached from their universe of meaning, the power to break free from the trap of copying the West, and a way to come up with an authentic art movement. In fact, the question of giving wing to a "movement" was probably the reason why "*Saqqakhaneh*" was used with

**04** In conversation with performance artist and writer Jinoos Taghizadeh, winter 2010, Tehran. Taghizadeh maintains that religious codes were used by Western-oriented Iranian artists as a political tool to oppose cultural oppression under the monarchy.

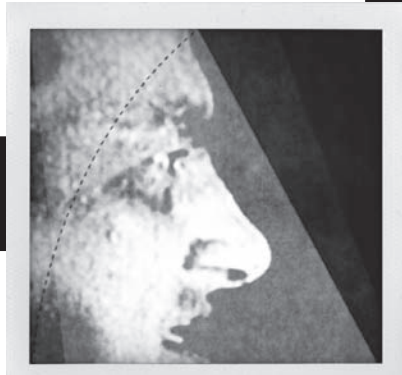
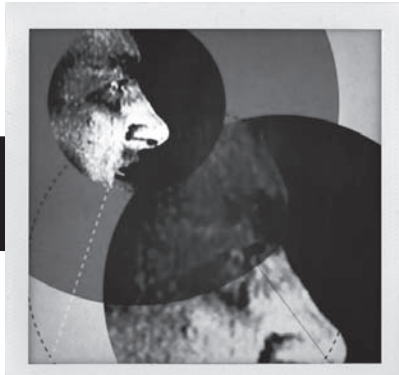
**05** A water fountain, *saqqakhaneh* serves the thirsty in an arid climate. It is surrounded by mementos and objects offered as gifts. Most cities in Iran no longer have these fountains.



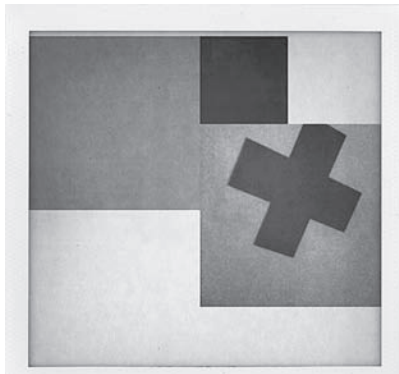
Photograph of Marcos Grigorian



Marcos Grigorian, mud, hay, found objects



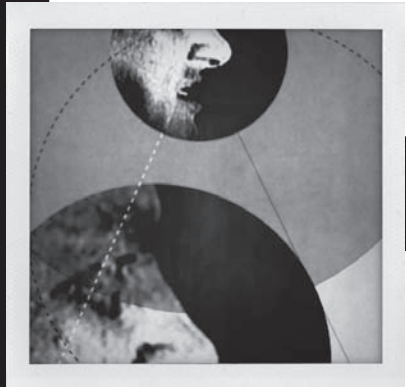
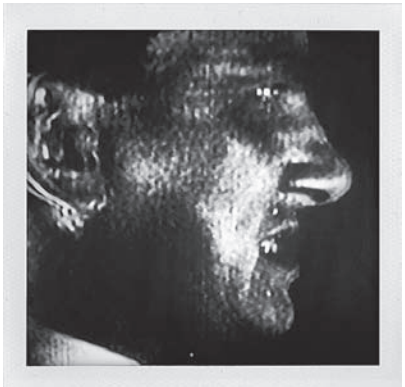
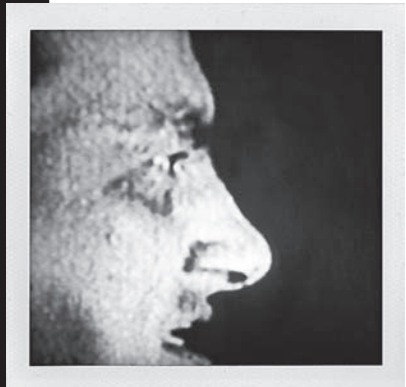
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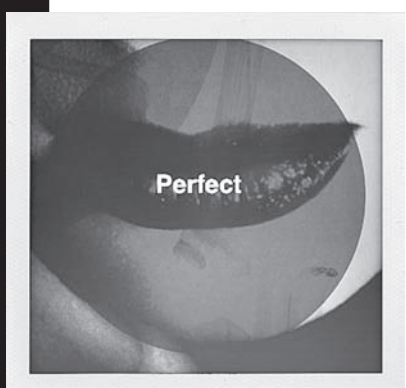
# RED THREAD

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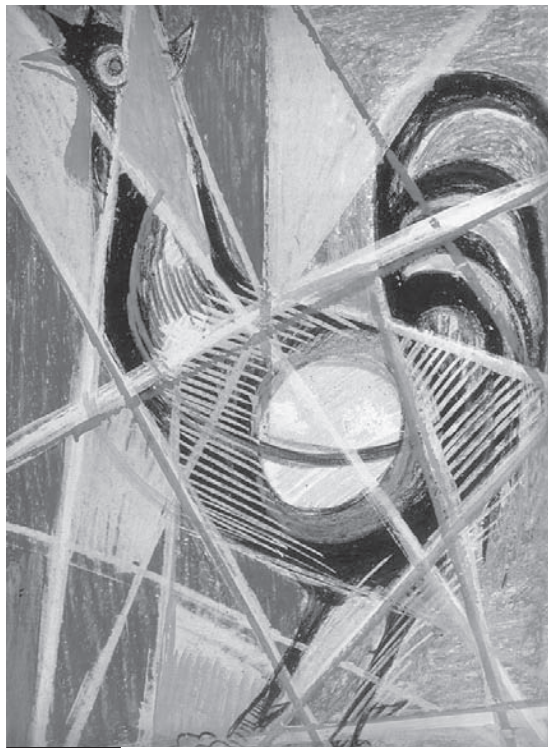




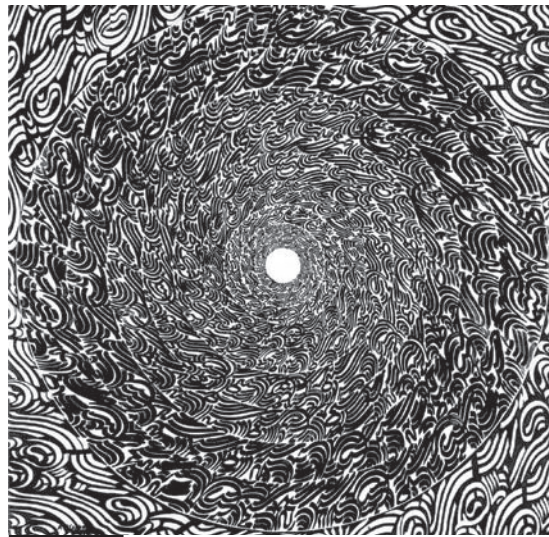
EXPERIMENTATIONS THAT SHARE A DESIRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE ACTIVE ROLE OF CULTURE AND ART IN THIS PROCESS.



<http://www.red-thread.org>



Jalil Ziapour, *Khorus [Cock]*, late 1950s



Faramarz Pilaram, *Untitled*, 1972



Hossein Zenderoudi on his painted car, 1963, Paris

increasing frequency by cultural authorities, because they considered it as the beginning of a genuine artistic movement that could put Iranian art on the Western artistic map.<sup>06</sup>

Outside of modern arts, things were a little different. Blighted by failed attempts during the 40s and 50s to establish a participatory government that would reflect the will of a people hungry for autarky in the colonial era,<sup>07</sup> the Iranian political milieu moved to a different plane in the 60s. The ease in political crackdowns of the 50s (following the 1953 Coup that reinstated the Shah) helped the politicization of the decade. Many intellectuals and writers, who had overwhelmingly formed leftist, secular groups previously, couched the words in religious symbolism because in that way they could voice their demands without being rebaited. This is a period when the call for “going back to roots” is often heard in intellectual circles.<sup>08</sup> In 1962, the same year that modernist Iranian artists stage their first show in the US coinciding with the 3rd Tehran Biennial, Jalal al-Ahmad’s *Occidentosis* was published. According to Al-e Ahmad, the disease plaguing Third World countries, as the title of his book suggests, is their inability to hold on to an independent identity. Instead, he advocates a return to roots presumed lost in the fever of catching up with the West.

During the 60s, the official Center for the Visual Arts in Iran became heavily active and this was in large part due to the patronage of Farah

<sup>06</sup> According to the 60s visual artist Abel Saeedi in a personal conversation, April 2010.

<sup>07</sup> Notably the Constitutional Revolution of 1910 which ended with the strong-arm rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) and the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadeq (1950-53), which brought back Reza Shah’s son Mohammad-Reza to the throne with the help of the US and the UK.

<sup>08</sup> See for example, Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

Pahlavi, the Queen, whose husband did not necessarily share her enthusiasm for the arts.<sup>09</sup> Many of the artists who had studied abroad or had chosen to live in exile in the 50s, were invited to come back to the country with prospects of a lucrative career. The Center commissioned works by many of the young artists of the decade, including Shahrudi-Farmanfarmaian, Abol Saeedi, Ahmad Esfandiari, Mohammad Javadipour, Zenderudi and Tanavoli, Massoud Arabshahi, Manuchehr Yektaei, Sirak Melkonian, and Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam. Their works appeared in urban public spaces as well as in hotels and in the houses of the wealthy; needless to say, these works were void of any political content.

Many of the above-mentioned artists didn’t follow the calling of their *Saqqakhaneh* colleagues to go back to their roots and stayed well within the established Western modernist tradition. In short, there is not a single thread that can connect all the various artistic activities that were taking place within the country in the 60s. Few among them, like Hanibal Alkas, harbored revolutionary sentiments but these never caught on until the late 70s. Because of the official support, the visual arts thrived. Tehran Contemporary Art Museum under the tutelage of Kamran Diba, who was a relative of the Queen as well as the Museum’s architect, acquired works of notable Western artists like Alberto Giacometti, Umberto Boccioni, Frank Stella, René Magritte, Joan Miró and Alexander Calder, and in this way built a reputation for the Iranian modern arts establishment.

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The dominant narrative regarding the 60s as a revolutionary decade tends to overlook several developments that preceded and ran parallel to the decade’s subversive potentials.

First, the youth rebellion owed a great deal of its intellectual vitality to the liberation movements inside and outside the West. The Third World “Project” unleashed a tremendous wave of dissent across the globe and against the violent legacy of colonialism and Cold War brinkmanship. Coming in the wake of the Indian Independence movement and inspired by the

<sup>09</sup> Conversation with Abel Saeedi, April 2010.

Gandhian non-violence philosophy, the three major leaders of the former colonies joined hands in the Javanese island of Bandung in 1955 to denounce the hegemony of the West.<sup>10</sup> They ultimately established a force that refused to abide by the bipolar mandates of the Cold War. It is this very force that, aided by Third World artists and intellectuals, inspired the rebel youth in Western countries to stage their own opposition to the power structure. Within the US, the Civil Rights Movement broke ground for a critical evaluation of racism and its relationship to the power structure upon which the Empire was built. It was Oakland, rather than Berkeley, that in the 60s became the site of the struggle against imperialism. Both the Civil Rights and the Third World Movements created a great wave of questioning the dominant ideological hold of Western nations.

Second, the 60s is thought of as a unique decade, unmatched in the way it unfurled its colors, the way it incited the creative energies of Western boys and girls, the way it fought the powers that be. We are told that the 60s was an irregularity, an anomaly, a schism in the history of Western Civilization. For American conservative politicians and scholars like Alan Bloom, Newt Gingrich, and Robert Borke, the 60s was infested with hedonism and bad faith. They scolded (and still do) its tendency to ignore the foundations of Western Civilization and they decry an educational system that fails to teach students classics of Western literature and arts. To them, the decade, and its remnants was a disgrace to high-browed values of the white man.

This impression of the 60s as a Western wonder is not limited to conservative social scientists. Leftist and counterculture thinkers, too, saw it as an unprecedented decade in which idealism reigned supreme and the society moved towards

<sup>10</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 33-114.



challenging the capitalist order. They seldom, if ever, pay attention to the creative power and theoretical foundation of commercial culture. Through them, we also tend to overlook the global implications of a commercial apparatus that thirsts after channeling desires. The same cultural revolution that took place on the streets in the West in the 60s – anti-Vietnam War protest, sexual liberation, student rebellion, Rock ‘n’ Roll, Hippie-ism, Woodstock, avant-garde-ism, non-conformity, and rebelliousness – was echoed in the commercial world: “American business was undergoing a revolution in its own right during the 1960s,” argues Thomas Frank in *the conquest of cool*, “a revolution in marketing practice, management thinking, and ideas about creativity.”<sup>11</sup> Frank lists several books (*The Organizational Man*, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, *Up the Organization*) in which business pundits laid out their manifesto: the thrust of New Business values and their antagonism to the fetid air of the 50s.

The 60s is the site of a major explosion in visual culture and nowhere is this more evident than in the commercial world. While we tended to locate the social movement within intellectual and artistic activities, European and American managers, graphic designers, and marketing agents were busy finding new ways to construct desires and to influence their audiences on the streets and in homes. Advertisement shifted gear to stage an uprising against mass society. New ads mocked and made fun of the Square culture. The “Cola Wars” between 1960–63 is emblematic of this shift in public relations. Pepsi cast itself as the soft drink for “those who think young... a modern enthusiasm for getting more out of life.”<sup>12</sup> The 60s managers emphasize creativity, non-conformity, rebellion, individualism, being hip, and thinking young. TV sets comfortably lodged in suburban homes, ad agencies in full feather, the public is treated to an increasing number of visual registers whose power and impact remains yet to be analyzed by social scientists for whom the power and influence of the commercial culture is seldom a topic of interest.

Yet, it is simply enough to look at our surroundings and realize how successful the Marketing and Advertising Revolution of the 60s has been. “Design” has now become the ultimate art form and our visual space is inundated with signs and images that determine not only what we should buy but also how we should be. In a sense, selective values of the 60s (*Think Young*, *United Colors*, *Do It!*, *the Revolution Will Not Be Televised*) were kept alive by the new managers and ad agencies that built their edifice in the “Sweet 60s.”

Of the few Iranian books written on the decade that found their way into the market, one is by journalist Faramarz Barzegar. *The Sociology of Hippie-ism* is a travel account of the writer to the US. “The strongest, most exciting, most colorful encounters and events, and at the same time the most peaceful and interesting social, political, artistic and literary movements took place in this decade. But there is a single thread that runs through all of these: a fresh, totally new, and socially active element that human civilization has never seen in its thousand years

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.



Tehran Contemporary Art Museum, inaugurated in September 1976, architect Kamran Diba

of evolution in such magnitude, diversity and power. And this element was called the ‘youth movement’ and included 55 to 75 per cent of the world and manifested itself under every circumstance.”<sup>13</sup> The book is a singsong to the 60s not because it is void of strong, emotional criticism of the decade’s anarchic tendencies, rootless rebelliousness, and fascination with the spiritual power of an imaginary East but because of it. Its overall tone is supportive of the youth and their struggle to unleash the creative powers of the Social. It reflects the views of such figures as Henri Lefebvre, Stanley Kauffmann, and Herbert Marcuse, the latter in a personal interview. It offers an enthused analysis of the musical *Hair*, the avant-garde production *Oh! Calcutta!* and a profile of 60s activists like Angela Davis, Jane Fonda, and Mohammad Ali (Clay). But nowhere do we see in the book a connection between commercial culture and visual culture. The same tendency exists today. The 60s for us is still the story of the counterculture.

*The Sociology of Hippie-ism* shows how fascination with the “youth culture” was in full swing in Iran during the same period. The youth culture inspired dozens of periodicals aiming to cater to the demands of a young population whose government and notorious security apparatus did not tolerate the remotest forms of protest. Hence, many of the modernist artists of the decade in Iran found another way of expressing their concerns – through using a religious language that ultimately culminates in the 1979 Revolution. “In the cultural lexicon of Iran, the ‘West’ did not simply represent a higher model to be emulated, but an imposing presence on its national autonomy,”

<sup>13</sup> Faramarz Barzegar, *Jame’e-Shenasi Hippie-ism* [“Sociology of Hippie-ism”] (Tehran: Bongah Entesharat-e Arman, 1972), 3.

maintains Shiva Balaghi, “Their works suggests that modernity in the Iranian context was a complex field of negotiation and accommodation – and not a simple act of imitation and mimicry.”<sup>14</sup>

For the Iranian artists of today, the question of originality is still as strong a preoccupation as it was for those of the 60s, as is also the enigma of combating the Western ideological and commercial stranglehold. Three decades into a revolution that sought to establish a new identity for Iranians, artists are now trying to divest themselves of the religious symbolism that characterized the works of their predecessors. Almost all *Saqqakhaneh* artists of the 60s left the country after the Revolution.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the state is happy to open the country’s doors to a rainbow of products that construct desires through an aggressive visual language. Our cityscape is studded with increasingly taller and wider billboards that flood our field of vision with impunity. In the midst of this circus of messages and visual assaults, the daunting task of artists is how to come up with a visual language that can be heard above the din of commercial culture and the clamor of originality. ●

<sup>14</sup> Shiva Balaghi, “Iranian Visual Arts in ‘The Century of Machinery, Speed, and the Atom’: Rethinking Modernity,” in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, ed. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hossein Zenderoudi left Iran for France in 1960 and chose to remain there until today. Monir Farmanfarma left Iran immediately after the revolution and returned only a decade and a half later. Parviz Tanavoli migrated to Canada in 1982 and comes back to the country for special events.



**Moscow Cinema Theater  
open air hall, 1965**

SOURCE: A. GRIGORYAN AND M. TOVMASYAN, *ARCHITECTURE OF THE SOVIET ARMENIA* (MOSCOW: STROYIZDAT, 1986).

**Stalin's monument in  
Yerevan (1950–1962)**

SOURCE: G. ZAKOYAN, M. SIVASLIAN AND V. NAVASARDIAN, *MY YEREVAN* (YEREVAN: ACNALIS, 2002).

**Demonstration of  
students and intelligentsia  
demanding the recognition  
of the Genocide of  
Armenians in 1915 in the  
Ottoman Empire,  
Lenin Square, Yerevan,  
April 24, 1965**

SOURCE: NIKITA ZAROBYAN, JAKOV ZAROBYAN AND HIS EPOCH (YEREVAN: RAU – RUSSIAN ARMENIAN (SLAVIC) UNIVERSITY, 2008).



# Blank Zones in Collective Memory or The Transformation of Yerevan's Urban Space in the 60s

Ruben Arevshatyan

## MOSCOW CINEMA THEATER OPEN AIR HALL (PART A)

**T**he beginning of 2010 in Yerevan was marked by an unprecedented activist movement which began right after the Armenian Government made certain changes in the List of Historical and Cultural Monuments of the City of Yerevan. The changes concerned the open air hall of the Moscow Cinema Theater, a bright example of the late modernist architecture of the 60s, which was taken out of the list with a subsequent commission that it should be destroyed and the church of St. Poghos-Petros (St. Paul and Peter) that had been destroyed during Stalin's antireligious campaign in the 30s should be constructed in its place.

The decision provoked an immediate and quite unexpected (in its scale) reaction. A Facebook group called "SAVE Cinema Moscow Open Air Hall" was formed and 6000 members joined the group in a short period of time. In addition, an activist initiative that organized various types of actions, public discussions, etc. was formed. One of the most effective actions was the signature campaign that was held for a week during which more than 26000 signatures were collected for preserving Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall. Different professional unions, NGOs and other public institutions also supported the initiative. The campaign started to gain wide public resonance, shifting the discourse to broader socio-cultural and political levels, which was rather unexpected and unwanted for the government and for the church. After hot debates in the press, TV, radio and the internet, the church, as well as the government decided to pull back and suspend the implementation of their plans for a while. They announced that the question was being considered by different commissions, which could either mean real discussions or it can be the usual tactic employed to stagnate the problem by freezing public attention.

The problem regarding the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall is actually more complex than it may seem at first sight. In a strange way, it ties up the epoch when it was built, with its tensions, emancipatory energies and paradoxes, to the neoconservative context of neoliberal socio-political and cultural actuality.

The open air hall was constructed between 1964 and 1966 by architects Spartak Kndeghtsyan and Telman Gevorgyan. It has been one of the best examples of the revived functionalist approaches in post-Stalin Soviet Armenian architecture that were developing parallel to the

intensive urbanization of the city of Yerevan. Architects masterly transformed a constricted backyard between two buildings into a rationally used space where the combination of concrete forms with developed superfluous spaces mixed with integrated natural elements created a distinguished ensemble in the very heart of Yerevan.

An amphitheater with an extensive foyer underneath, it used to be one of the most popular and active cafés in the city. The wide terrace that united the amphitheater with the sidewalk broke the rigidity of the given topographical geometry by intervening with and obeying it at the same time and allowing the trees on the sidewalk to grow through the firmness of its concrete and in this way created many new perspectives for observing the surrounding reality as well as the very architecture. But one of the most important features of this architecture (as well as many other architectural forms created in the very same period in Yerevan and Armenia) that I would like to focus on is how it formed certain surplus spaces in the urban environment which could be regarded as kind of blank or so to say "extraterritories"; territories that shaped new perceptions of urban space, new urban cultures and politics, the formation of which was tightly intertwined with the appearance of the qualitatively and essentially new public spaces in the city terrain. However, since the middle 90s those specific spaces have been vanishing from the urban environment either by being destroyed or corrupted beyond recognition. It could seem that in a newly developing post-ideological society these constructions and spaces have remained as examples to or reminders of something else/different that could hardly fit in the economy and politics of a new sociocultural paradigm. The tendentious demolition of these structures and spaces was evolving with the reconsiderations of historical narratives, and the occupation of these "extraterritories" of the city in a symbolic way was an erasure of certain zones from collective memory; a phenomenon that, in a paradoxical way, juxtaposes that certain trend in the period of the 60s to form blank spaces in the urban environment with the formation of blank spaces in collective memory. Thus, we are dealing with a forced or natural collective amnesia the symptoms of which could be traced back to the very 60s.

## COLLECTIVE AMNESIA AND/OR BLANK SPOTS OF THE 60S

Reflecting on the Soviet 60s nowadays, we are dealing with such an enormous amount of



Monument of Mother Armenia (1967)

SOURCE: <http://www.mayrhayastan.am/images/Mair.jpg>



Construction of the memorial for the victims of the Genocide of Armenians in 1915 in the Ottoman Empire (1965-1967)

SOURCE: NIKITA ZAROBYAN, JAKOV ZAROBYAN AND HIS EPOCH (YEREVAN: RAU – RUSSIAN ARMENIAN (SLAVIC) UNIVERSITY, 2008).

information, images, personages and narratives as well as their interpretations that (both during the Soviet and post-Soviet times) there have been only few subtle reconsiderations connected with changes in the political and cultural paradigm. The connection between these elements may seem quite contradictory and sometimes really forced as if you are trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle knowing about a certain image, but the pieces either do not fit or compose other/different fragmented pictures leaving extensive blank zones in between.

Despite the fact that the epoch of the 60s is firmly stamped in the collective memory of ex-Soviet societies as an extremely important part of their histories that conditioned, in many senses, the subsequent development of their cultural, social and political environments, it is also possible to follow how this memory is fixated on certain events and data which are associated only with the established local historical master narrative which is mainly being called up to rationalize the present state of those societies. Scarce publications about the period mainly focus on certain subjects and mostly deal with them in quite narrow and individuated contexts. But as soon as you try to step beyond the trite and general stories about the “thaw,” “*khrushchev*kas,” dissident culture and politics, revived national

self-consciousness, and just talk to people of the 60s about the 60s, quite often you may confront an interesting but at the same paradoxical situation where a very slight allusion to that period rouses an intensive flow of fragmented private memories intertwined with scrappy but at the same time bright images and emotions which are generally interrupted by a deep impenetrable spotty memory effect. It might seem that the selective processing of private memory is constantly correlating personal data with the junctures inscribed in the timeline of the historical narrative (believed to be a collective memory) as well as with the contemporary context which seems to be in total opposition to the paradigms of the “romantic rebellious epoch.” And whatever does not fit in the narrative is self-censored, ignored or just deleted from memory.

Exploring the transformation of Yerevan city in the period of the 60s, I discovered a very interesting case of collective memory loss that concerned the change of the most visible symbols of the city.

In the beginning of the year 1962, the monument of Stalin that was “watching” the city from the heights of one of Yerevan hills, was displaced and the roof of the World War 2 Victory Museum’s building that used to serve as a huge podium for the monument remained empty till

1967. After a 5 year break another monument, *Mother Armenia*, was put on display to substitute the “Father of the Nations.”

Though it might sound ironic, it took quite a long time and a lot of effort to figure out the exact date the monument of Stalin in Yerevan was displaced. Despite the fact that it was one of the biggest and most well-known monuments in the Soviet Union made by Sergey Merkurov, its displacement hasn’t been covered well enough neither in books nor in documentaries.<sup>01</sup>

For some people, the date the monument was taken down was associated with the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 where Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes and the “cult of personality.” Or there was another fixation that the monument had been removed in 1967, right before *Mother Armenia* was installed in the same place. The only thing that got imprinted in collective memory

**01** It was also impossible to find any archival photos with a missing monument, but taking family photos with the monument of Stalin and then *Mother Armenia* in the background was popular. I am still in the process of looking for such an image, but at the same time, it is clear why such images are missing: it did not occur to anybody to have a picture taken in front of an empty podium – a missing icon.



was the case about the two workers who were killed during the removal process.

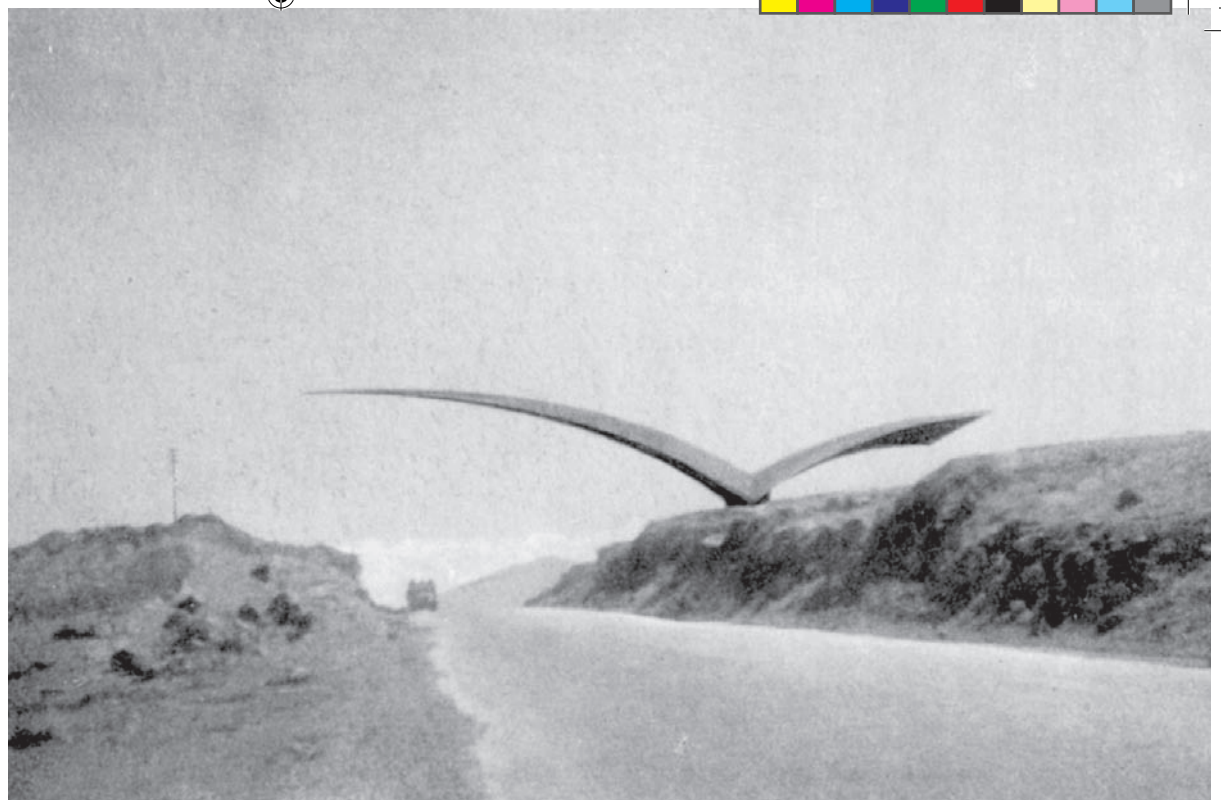
In the book about **Jakov Zarobyan** (the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Republic of Armenia in the period of 1960-1966) written by his son **Nikita Zarobyan** there is a very interesting detail that describes the whole political context of the period when **Stalin's** monument was displaced in Yerevan. This was in fact one of the latest displacements of **Stalin's** monuments in Soviet capitals, and the son of the former first secretary describes the reason for this delay as a form of hidden diplomacy between Armenia and Georgia. And this story is also connected with another veiled and/or forgotten episode from the Soviet past.

Spontaneous large-scale demonstrations took place in Tbilisi as well as other cities in Georgia (Gori, Sukhumi, Batumi) right after the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where the offended demonstrators were trying to defend the outraged honor of their compatriot **Josef Stalin**. The Tbilisi revolt lasting five days (between 5 and 10 March) that was violently suppressed by military forces (the number of estimated casualties varies from several dozens to several hundreds) could be considered a breaking point and a symptomatic event in Soviet history. Aside from being a painful reaction of a society at the end of the Stalinist myth, it also became the starting point for the development of new nationalist contexts and separatist discourses in Soviet sociopolitical and cultural situations that were being shaped parallel to the evolving social disbelief in the feasibility of a new social order.<sup>02</sup>

The connection between the Tbilisi demonstrations and the late displacement of **Stalin's** monument in Yerevan is explained in the memoirs about **Jakov Zarobyan** to be the very concrete and simple intention of the first secretary of the Armenian Communist Party of that period to keep good neighborly relations

**02** In his book titled *Unknown USSR – the Antagonism Between Society and the Power System* Vladimir Kozlov wrote about the development of the Tbilisi outbreak in 1956 among many other small scale and big scale outbreaks in the Soviet Union during the Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods and identified it as one of the most symptomatic outbreaks as its start had quite a symbiotic character where advocacy for Stalinism was intertwined with a nationalist background, which at the end (on the 4th day of manifestations) turned into appeals concerning the separation of Georgia from the Soviet Union, unbelievable for that period of time. The author of the book thinks that even if those appeals had a fragmented and particular character, their effect on the subsequent development of the socio-cultural and political situation in Georgia as well as in other republics of the USSR and the Socialist Bloc was tremendous.

Владимир Александрович Козлов НЕИЗВЕСТНЫЙ СССР. ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЕ НАРОДА И ВЛАСТИ 1953-1985 Глава 7 ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ВОЛНЕНИЯ В ГРУЗИИ ПОСЛЕ XX СЪЕЗДА КПСС [http://krotov.info/lib\\_sec/11\\_k/oz/lov\\_va4.htm](http://krotov.info/lib_sec/11_k/oz/lov_va4.htm) Издательство «ОЛМА-ПРЕСС» 129075, Москва, Звездный бульвар, 23 «ОЛМА-ПРЕСС» входит в группу компаний ЗАО «ОЛМА МЕДИА ГРУПП» Подписано в печать 22.11.05



“Seagull” road mark at the northern entry of Yerevan

SOURCE: V. HARUTYUNYAN, M. HASRATYAN AND A. MELIKYAN, YEREVAN (MOSCOW: STROYIZDAT, 1968).

with Georgia.<sup>03</sup> Although this description might seem really unsophisticated it also signified another important contextual shift: the peripheral republic decided to pursue its own autonomous politics by defining its strategic priorities connected with the future development of the relations with its neighbors with a clear understanding that the regulation of national questions is no longer under the same authoritarian control of the center as it used to be during the **Stalin** period, which, at the same, time supposed the advance of the individualization process that started to develop in the socio-political, economical and political situations in every one of the 15 Soviet republics.

The Tbilisi riot, as well as many other insurrections that took place in the Soviet Union in the **Khrushchev** period (Murom 1961, Novocherkassk 1962, Sumgait 1963, etc.) had a very complex, multifarious and intertwined character (pro-**Stalin**, social, political, anarchistic) where there could be big discrepancies between the essential motivations and the final demands. Demonstrations in the early **Brezhnev** period were gaining a more specified character in the sense of raising concrete political demands (Yerevan 1965, Moscow 1965, etc.). But, anyhow, all those important historical episodes of public upsurges were strictly tabooed during the Soviet period. They remain only in the memories of the local participants in those rebellions, but fade away by being mythologized and losing contextual particularities.

It might sound paradoxical, but even after the fall of the Soviet Union only a minor portion of these historical episodes were just partly unveiled. The multifarious essence of these social rebellions

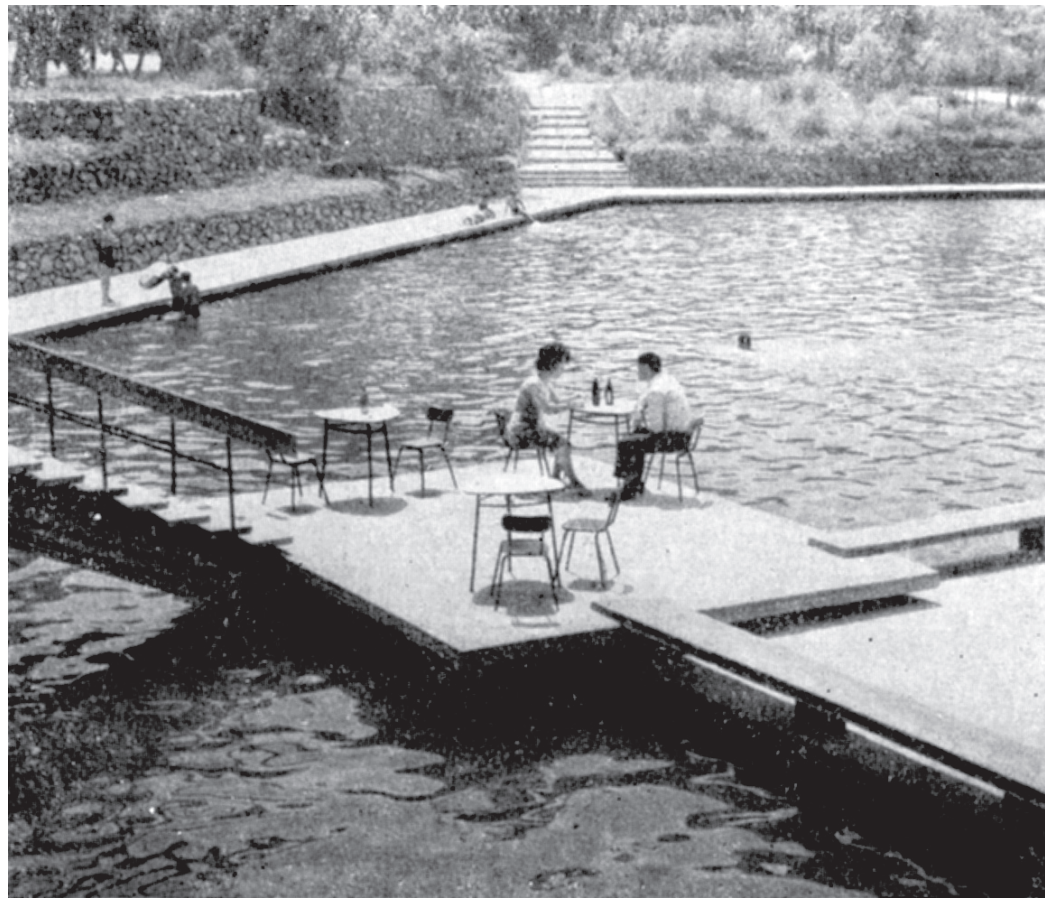
**03** Nikita Zarobyan, “Displacement of Stalin’s Monument in Victory Park,” in *Jakov Zarobyan and His Epoch*, (Yerevan: RAU – Russian Armenian (Slavic) University 2008), 92.

Никита Заробян «Яков Заробян и его эпоха» Ереван, издательство РАУ – Российско Армянский (Славянский) Университет 2008, стр 92 Демонтаж монумента Сталин в Парке Победы

that represented, in a certain way, the ambiguous character of the very epoch was perhaps the main reason why those narratives were retold to the public via selective and fragmented interpretations. The editing of history that started in post-Soviet societies with the revision of the narratives and images (demolition of monuments and symbols) of the communist past, to a certain extent, revitalized some of those episodes that were fitting to the political and cultural contexts of the liberalizing post-ideological society. As a rule, those interpretations obeyed the mythical narration, and what is most interesting, they were mainly deprived of the affirmation of imagery. And according to the same logic, just like there were no images of an empty podium from the interval between the displacement of **Stalin's** monument and the erection of the new monument *Mother Armenia* in Yerevan, a lot of other images that might give some information and/or propose other contextual readings of the phenomenon had been either lost or taken out from public circulation and later on from collective memory.

But coming back to that particular period between 1962 and 1967, that specific temporal “void” that opened wide in the midst of an epochal shift marked by the change between two monumental symbols in Yerevan, which signified different epochs and different political and cultural hegemonies, it is possible to trace how same kind of voids were appearing in the different strata of the socio-cultural, political and even economical reality of that period. And those weren’t just the type of voids that could appear in a confused society that, after losing its leader also lost its belief in the ideas of a “bright future.” Those types of voids were very soon filled by the substitution of the “personality cult” with the “cult of the nation”<sup>04</sup> as a new system of

**04** In the same period of time the monumental symbols of Motherlands were erected in almost every Soviet national republic (Mother Georgia, Motherland Kiev, Mother Belarus, etc.).



Circle basins on Abovian Street

Café Aragast in Yerevan

Sayat-Nova Café

ALL IMAGES – SOURCE: V. HARUTYUNYAN, M. HASRATYAN AND A. MELIKYAN, YEREVAN (MOSCOW: STROYIZDAT, 1968).

controlling a society stripped of ideological bias.

The process was much more complex and multilayered, as complex and multilayered as the society itself. Maybe it is appropriate to mention that aside from that big inter-ideological void there were many other voids of different scales and different characters that had appeared in or were generated by the same society either in order to extend the spatial and ideological (formal and informal, new and old) limitations, or to prolong the temporal void for autonomous reconsiderations of the past, the present and visions of the future.

Actively evolving urbanization of Yerevan and rural areas, intensive development of diversified industries in the whole republic with a gradual shift towards advanced technology products, establishment of scientific institutes, improvement of life standards, intensifying interrelations with the world (in the 60s there was the last big wave of repatriation of Armenians from the Diaspora), and many other progressive developments in the 60s had really influenced the reality by reviving Soviet utopias. Yerevan, as well as many other cities in the Republic, had gained a new modernist appearance that was in contrast to Stalinist architecture. In parallel to the appearance of new environments in the urban space new urban cultures that were also shaping up new images of individuals were emerging. Reintegration (although partial and distanced) with worldwide sociopolitical and cultural processes and a clear vision of its own participation in the big Cold War period

geopolitical setup on the one hand stimulated universalist perspectives though they were considered with a local focus, and on the other hand suggested reconsiderations of the known as well as forgotten narratives of its own history of modernization –like the formation of the first republic between 1918-1920, then the formation of the Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920. In the 60s, Sovietization started to be considered in various intellectual and political discourses as an imported and new form of colonization and this was propagated in society in direct and indirect ways despite the fact that since the beginning of the 20th century, the Caucasus used to be one of the important centers where communist and socialist revolutionary movements were developing.

The other important event in that period which determined the subsequent development of the whole sociopolitical and cultural paradigm was the demonstration of students and intelligentsia in Yerevan on 24 April 1965 (that overgrew into a large scale nation-wide demonstration) demanding the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 –an issue that was strictly banned during the Stalin period. In two years, the Memorial for Genocide Victims was raised on Tsitsernakaberd Hill in Yerevan and it became a unifying symbol for Armenians scattered all over the world.

All those and many other processes and newly developing discourses concerning identity, history, perspectives about the future, etc. have opened new spaces in the collective consciousness and memory. Besides activating

some forgotten segments and driving out others to the zone of oblivion, they have also opened up a space between perceptions about utopias and the doomed constancy of existence, between modernisms and antimodernisms. An open space for contemplation, tensions, confusions, drifting, flânerie... A space that appeared in Armenian literature, cinematography and architecture of the mid 60s.

Artavazd Peleshian, applying in his films his method of “distanced montage” based on a re-definition of the spatio-temporal structure and the relationship between image and sound was creating a certain kind of space between sequences, bringing them closer to or further from each other, and letting the spectator to enter that space and contemplate it, switching in between images of modernisms and antimodernisms. In his short films, Peleshian used his method for structuring the simultaneity of diverse episodes taking place in different temporal and situational contexts, and depicted vanity as the poetics of the modern epoch contrasted to the ontology of existence (presented with images of constant movement, migration, transitions and transmutations, cataclysms, etc.). Vanity was universalized and identified with the notion of eternity.<sup>05</sup>

**05** Earth of People *ԵՄԻԿ* (all-USSR State Institute of Cinematography) produced in 1966, Beginning *ԵՄԻԿ* (all-USSR State Institute of Cinematography) produced in 1967, *ՄԵ* (Yerevan Studio of Documentary Films) produced in 1969.



By the end of the 60s new models of “local modernities” began to appear. They were either big scale representatives of supranational architecture (although it might sound contradictory Armenian late modernistic architecture of the 70s and 80s had also been considered in the Soviet Union as a certain national particularity), or examples of a new national style in architecture that had conceptualized and contextualized structures and forms of traditional architecture inside a modernistic *modus operandi*.

In Frunze Dovlatyan’s film *Hi, its me!* (“Յորաստեյի, ամո յ!” Armenfilm, 1965) young scientist Artem<sup>06</sup> endlessly strolls in and between Yerevan and Moscow, in his own memory space, having a dialogue with his alter ego; he drifts between the past and future, contemplating all the way. His *flânerie* in a certain way becomes the main process and meaning of the whole film that at the end is unexpectedly interrupted, when all of a sudden, the protagonist wraps up his analysis of the past, perceives (as a kind of epiphany) his identity and destiny and leaves the boundless space of idle drifting, going away towards the mountainous landscape in the final scene.<sup>07</sup>

The physical materialization of those blank-open-free spaces could be better observed in the transformations in urban spaces and in Soviet Armenian architecture of the mid 60s, particularly considering the case of Yerevan.

#### EXTRATERRITORIES OF TRANSFORMING YEREVAN IN THE 60S

Yerevan, in comparison to other cities in Armenia, has experienced the most intensive and radical transformations in the 60s that affected the whole character of the city. One of the most important reasons for such an active development of the city was the intensive growth of the city population that was highly exceeding the population growth stipulated by the 3rd master plan of Yerevan city developed in 1951. In 1961, work began on the 4th Master Plan that supposed not only new scales and new strategies regarding the city’s development but was also based on a new philosophy related somehow with Soviet utopias (like Khrushchev’s famous declaration that the Soviet society would attain communism as early as the 80s), but which at the same time was dealing with a social and cultural structuring that was different from the radical visions of early Soviet utopias.

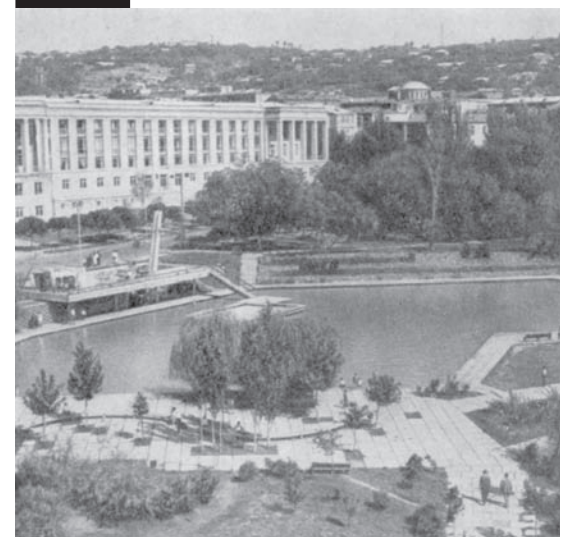
The modernist trends in early Soviet architecture and urban planning that were interrupted in the 30s experienced a revival in the 60s. That was also a period when some of the important architects (like Michael Mazmanian

and Gevorg Kotchar) that belonged to the avant-garde constructivist groupings of the 20s and 30s returned to Armenia from exile and were actively integrated into the architecture and urban development projects for Yerevan, other cities and rural areas of Armenia. In 1956, a group of architects led by Michael Mazmanian developed a residential area plan for the Achapnyak district in Yerevan composed of only prefab houses (so called “*khrushchevkas*”), and in 1971 Mazmanian led another group that developed the master plan scheme of Yerevan according to which the city gained an emphasized modern character and its future *modus operandi* was laid out.

Gevorg Kotchar realized several interesting architectural projects. In the 60s he had the chance to continue and complete some of the complexes and ensembles that he started to design and build in the late 20s. The best example to these is the summer resort for the Union of Writers in Sevan.

Besides those architects that belonged to the early constructivist groupings there were many other architects from the younger generation who had managed to travel abroad, sometimes even for short-term studies or researches. In the 60s, architectural communities throughout the Soviet Union started to organize specialized professional trips and exchanges inside and outside the Union parallel to the activated reciprocal professional visits of architects from Europe, the United States and Japan. That was also a period when some European professional architectural magazines were circulated regularly and the library of the Union of Architects was enriched day after day with professional literature that was coming to Armenia through different ways (professional exchanges, connections with the Diaspora, etc.).

At the time, the Union of Architects used to be one of the important public institutions that, along with the state architectural firms, municipalities and the government, participated in decision-making processes and provided a venue for active discussions on architectural and urban development projects. Those discussions tackled different subjects among which, one of the most domineering ones was the question concerning form-building principles regarded from the perspectives of functionality of architecture and its relation to the specificity of the local context which involved considering not only the relation of architecture to the natural but also the cultural environment. That was, in fact, the continuation of a quite tense discourse that



Pergolas on Abovian Street

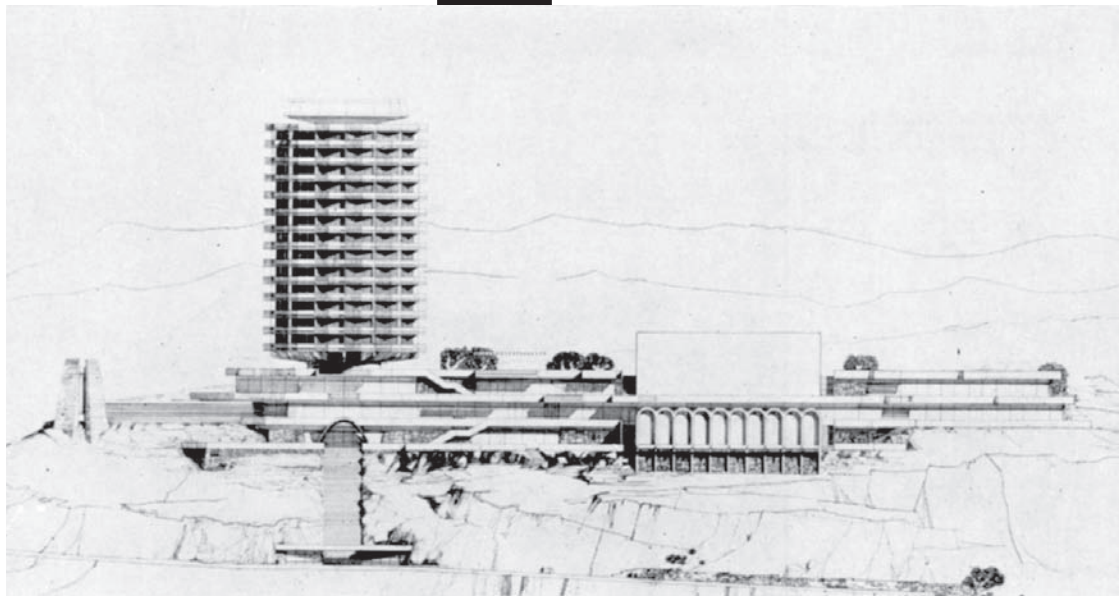
Café Aragast in Yerevan

Bus station

ALL IMAGES – SOURCE: V. HARUTYUNYAN, M. HASRATYAN AND A. MELIKYAN, YEREVAN (MOSCOW: STROYIZDAT, 1968).

<sup>06</sup> The protagonist was based on a real character, physicist Artem Alikhanian, one of the founders of nuclear physics in the Soviet Union, the founder of the Yerevan Physics Institute and the cosmic ray station on Aragats mountain at 3250 m., and one of the creators of the Yerevan synchrotron. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artem\\_Alikhanian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artem_Alikhanian).

<sup>07</sup> See <http://youtu.be/7k3le2E-wNl>.



developed since the 20s and was interrupted in the mid 30s between two major architectural groups/schools (the national school and constructivists) and was revived in the new ideological context of the Khrushchev period that put strict limitations on construction norms, correlating it with restricted financial means.

Dealing mainly with a dull, standardized architecture in the second half of the 50s where it was only possible to make innovations in the field of urban development, in the beginning of the 60s architects as well as local authorities started to find some way outs from the monotonous construction and budget dictates, creating low-budget but extremely interesting architectural forms that imparted new energy and new images to the city character of the 60s.

Coming back to the aforementioned tendencies in the 60s regarding the formation of blank spaces, Armenian architecture that started to develop in that period of time presented perfect examples of such extraterritories, or extra volumes despite the fact that the ideological doctrine of the period was waging a war against excesses in architecture.

There was a story about Khrushchev's visit to Armenia in 1961 when the leader of the Soviet Communist Party got furious (and that anger turned into a big scandal well propagated by the Soviet press of that time) when he saw a small architectural volume resembling the form of seagull displayed as a roadside sign for the northern exit of Yerevan city. That architectural volume made of concrete (actually a really low budget construction) became an object of Khrushchev's hard criticism. His phrase, "That is how you are squandering national money!" became a warning to other republics to keep away from that kind of dissipations.

Though Khrushchev identified that small architectural volume as a squandering, there was an intensive development of new spaces and volumes in urban environments that could be associated with a waste of means, territory and purpose. Without going over budget limits, architects together with local authorities, employed new tactics as well as a new philosophy regarding the organization of urban space. The construction of new streets and avenues (like Sayat Nova avenue that was inaugurated in 1963), the reconstruction of some of the old streets in the city, the improvement of city parks and the development of new recreation areas were imparting to the city a new horizontal character forming spacious zones for pedestrians.

Water surfaces of different scales, and geometrical shapes appeared in the parks and even on the pavements of some reconstructed streets. Next to those basins, quite often there appeared pergola type structures that were either used as open air cafés (new and important public spaces in Yerevan developed in that period) or marked by their presence functionless or multifunctional territories on the pavements. Open air cafés that appeared in Yerevan in the 60s weren't just a new type of public space that formed a new city culture but they were also bright examples of new horizontal architecture where it was possible to see the direct influences of organic architecture as well as some echoes of the concept of emptiness coming from modern Japanese architecture.

The liberation and democratization of urban space in Yerevan paralleled the revival of modernist trends in architecture and the



Youth Palace in Yerevan  
(designed in late 60s  
constructed in early 70s)

SOURCE: V. HARUTYUNYAN, M.  
HASRATYAN AND A. MELIKYAN, YEREVAN  
(MOSCOW: STROYIZDAT, 1968).

Construction of the Youth Palace  
in Yerevan

PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE  
ARMENIAN NATIONAL CINEMATHEQUE.

Deconstruction of the Youth  
Palace in Yerevan (2003-2004)

SOURCE: [http://www.erit.am/images/  
RJCustfW2gc1QjelPszeupSN2x\\_tn.jpg](http://www.erit.am/images/RJCustfW2gc1QjelPszeupSN2x_tn.jpg)





historicist principles of the national style (that since the mid 30s was integrated into the Stalinist style) retreated, opening up a short and temporal gap for free experimentations that were more universalist in their essence. Experimentations that were in contrast to existing national and Stalinist styles in architecture succeeded to shape not only the new character of Yerevan but also a new social, cultural and psychological situation in urban life. That short lasted transformation of the city, which occurred in the time between the replacement of one hegemonic symbol by another, succeeded in giving rise to a new society and to new individuals who had the chance to choose their positions when strolling around the extra spaces of the new city and the new architecture that was free from the aesthetics of the past and did not have direct ambitions concerning the structuring of the future. The functional essence of that architecture that was based on the principles of rational distribution and usage of space also brought forward a discourse concerning other possible functionalities of space that could stimulate a sense of commonality outlined by the simple compositions of concrete forms and structures as well as a sense of individuality conveyed by individual aesthetic and conceptual solutions.

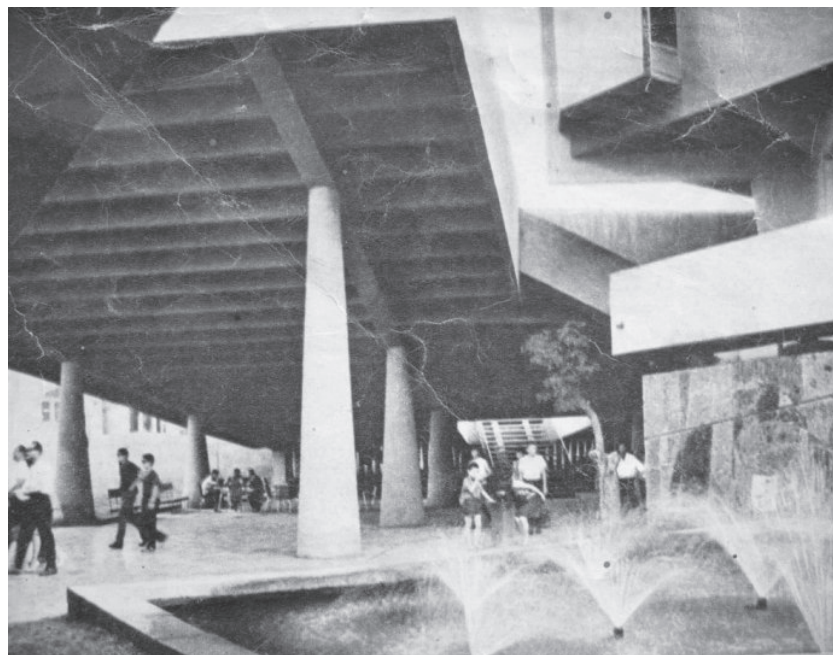
Yet the most important change suggested by these architectural forms was a new correlation between subject and architecture where the extra space provided foremost required the presence of the subject who would modify, articulate and substantiate that architecture. In return, this new feature formed a new but at the same time ambiguous interrelation between subject and commonality, between the particular and the universal. On the one hand, there was great excitement about the self-potency granted by the universalist world outlook which offered an opportunity to shape reality, but on the other hand, it generated tensions related to a fear of being absorbed or lost in the no one's extraterritories of commonality.

The trend changed in just a few years (or let's even say it was developing as a parallel process) and particularity turned into a main principle regulating local social, political and cultural processes. By the end of the 60s new models of "local modernities" began to appear. They were either big scale representatives of supranational architecture (although it might sound contradictory Armenian late modernist architecture of the 70s and 80s had also been considered in the Soviet Union as a certain national particularity), or examples of a new national style in architecture that had conceptualized and contextualized structures and forms of traditional architecture inside a modernist modus operandi.

The short-lived stratum of urban culture with its structures and landscapes was overshadowed by the particularity of big scale representational architecture that continued to develop "excessive" spaces for other functions which were already different from the "extraterritories" of the 60s.

#### THE FATE OF EXTRATERRITORIES AND MOSCOW CINEMA THEATER OPEN AIR HALL (PART B)

Today, the architecture of the 60s in Yerevan is almost completely swept away or has been distorted beyond recognition. The effects of



Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall

THE PHOTOGRAPH IS TAKEN FROM "SAVE CINEMA MOSCOW OPEN-AIR HALL" FACEBOOK GROUP.

neoliberal economics and urban policy were first felt in public spaces, recreation areas, historical centers of the city, etc. Of course, in this process of the violent reshaping of the city buildings and districts that belong to different periods of time were destroyed and each of these destructions had its own history and problems. As a matter of fact, certain projects concerning the radical modernization of the city center (like the construction of the Northern Avenue) were being developed since the very early master plans of Yerevan were made.

And of course, when the city was losing districts developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when symbolic buildings of constructivist and Stalinist styles, and late modernist architecture were partly or completely destroyed or terribly corrupted (Sports Committee Building, Sevan Hotel, former Russia Movie Theater, Youth Palace, etc.), when the continuous green zones and recreation areas of the city were fragmented and were hidden behind the facades of the newly erected buildings, when the problem of the loss of public spaces in the city which is a social problem and a matter of town planning became a burning political issue, questions concerning such "ephemeral" spaces that were developed in the period of the 60s can sound really naïve and romantic.

However, the case of the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall that led to the explosion of such an incredible self-organized public reaction that turned into a serious social movement struggling with the political power and the church in order to protect an architecture that bore, in its structure and form, something that was neglected, covered and forgotten, was really symptomatic considering the complexity of current social, political and cultural processes in Armenia.

One of the keys to understanding the complexity of the situation that developed around the cinema theater can be found in the text titled "The End of the State (or a New Form of Societal Organization)" published in 2008 by Tigran Sargsyan, the current Prime Minister of Armenia.<sup>08</sup> Analyzing the evolution of States in the context of postindustrial societies, Tigran

Sargsyan concludes that "the state as we perceive it today is nearing an end. New forms of networked structures of public organization are coming to replace it."

To summarize his point:

In a postindustrial world, in accord with the new philosophy and ontology, we should first conceptualize our competitive advantages in networked forms of self-organization. We have an opportunity to pull through the periphery of history and create a new networked civilization – the Armenian World. From the perspective of the above described methodology and hypothesis, we can conceptualize Armenians as a network. History testifies that after the loss of statehood, the Armenian people demonstrated an alternative form of self-organization that helped this nation to survive. The church came in to take on that function of self-regulation. As such, the methods and the form of organization the church used were complying with the network logic.

This fragment from the Prime Minister's text could, in fact, serve as a key puzzle piece that will bring together the whole picture. And it deals with the same space/void/tension between modernist visions of universalism and phobias regarding loss of particularity i.e. control over societal self-organization processes.

For the Armenian context and many others, the end of the 60s suggested a simple superposition of these two visions as a result of which particularity had been universalized, revitalizing and universalizing good old institutes of power like the nation and the church.

The struggle for the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall was in fact the continuation of that old conflict where the architecture of the theater (as well as other rare examples of modernist architecture from that period that are preserved) has, in a certain way, turned into an evidence and bearer of other models of universalisms which, till today, were able to encourage a sense of unity and self-organization in post-Soviet fragmented societies. ●

08 <http://www.gov.am/files/docs/217.pdf>.



## Issue 3 (2011)

EDITORS: MELTEM AHISKA • ERDEN KOSOVA

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The third issue of the **Red Thread** e-journal comprises of critical case studies, essays, and interviews that come from the region the journal has been focusing on from its inception, and that discuss the different forms of struggle devised by socialities that can be considered "disprivileged" in economic, social and political terms and the intricate and usually complex relationship of artistic and activist practices to these groups. These muted groups which are either marginalized, displaced, or fragmented through state policies hand in hand with globalized capitalist transformations have their own particular strategies of survival and resistance against dominant politics of visibility and representation, as well as desires and fears that both *disconnect them from* and *connect them to* wider scale changes in urban contexts. Our aim in preparing this issue has been to interrogate a set of interrelated questions at that *interval*: in-between national/transnational spaces of capital and localities of practice, in-between controlled public spaces and public acts, in-between different forms of gentrification and emerging forms of belonging, in-between memory and counter-memory; in other words, in-between forced abstractions and dispersed yet novel materializations.

We find the focus on the *interval* especially productive. The interval exists in-between visibility and invisibility. Visibility and invisibility are usually set opposed to each other, the former implying a more democratic relationship to the community granted visibility. However, in neoliberal times, invisibility inheres in the proliferating forms of visibility sustained by the entrenched yet virtual positions of capital. Disprivileged groups are either turned into objects endorsing research and policy-making, or they are captured within the dominant tropes of representation in the media for visual consumption and surveillance, reminding one the concept of "poverty porn." In both cases they are abstracted from their locality, political efficacy and demands for equality. "What is politics?" then becomes a crucial question for artistic and activist practices that aim to go beyond simply pursuing policies with regard to producing *more* visibility. We consider Rancière's concept of equality inspiring for articulating politics. For Rancière, radically different from *policy* that concerns governing and creating community consent, and which relies on the

distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions, the *politics* of "equality consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains *emancipation*."<sup>01</sup> Rancière claims that the process of equality is a process of difference, but difference does not mean confrontation of different identities. The enactment of equality is not the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question, but belongs to a particular *topos* of an argument -an *interval*: "The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being together to the extent that we are in between-between names, identities, cultures, and so on."<sup>02</sup>

The contributions to this volume attempt, in different ways and through particular cases, first to critically delineate the intervals in the face of current policies and transformations, and also dwell on the possibilities these intervals present for politics. They seek ways to pierce the "rubber wall" in Alexander Kluge's terms, produced by the eradication of common spaces of encounter in politics and that efface the addressees of politics. The cases are particular yet comparable. It is worth the comparison for thinking about new political possibilities that can be embraced particularly by art, activism and interval modalities that are articulated between these two fields -with a call for modesty, persistence and readiness to withdraw in relating to the socialities they interact with (as exemplified in many of the contributions to this edition). Jean Francois Pérouse has said in our roundtable discussion which was part of an effort for collective thinking with potential authors on this issue: "in one way or the other art takes on the responsibility of making sense of our lives, but there are different practices of making sense; maybe from here we can think about a common understanding. Not one sided, like 'I will tell you what happiness is,' but in a reciprocal way."

MELTEM AHISKA &  
ERDEN KOSOVA

<sup>01</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," *October* 61 (1992): 58.

<sup>02</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

# When Duty Calls...: Questions of Sensitivity and Responsibility in Light of the Tophane Events

*But I think that sensitivity is also a good counselor  
when it comes to enforcing one's interests.*

JOHANNES RAU<sup>01</sup>

*Don't worship my hurt feelings, Mr. Intentional.*

LAURYN HILL<sup>02</sup>

Banu Karaca

**O**n the evening of September 21, 2010 the Tophane Art Walk, a coordinated series of exhibition openings centering in large part along Boğazkesen Street in Istanbul, marked the beginning of the art season after the summer break. Shortly after 8PM, a mob of around 20-40 people attacked the galleries and their visitors one by one, undisturbed by the police for the best part of around 30 minutes, if not longer.<sup>03</sup> Tracing the Artwalk almost to a T, they left a trail of destruction, injury, and maybe most importantly – intimidation. Some present stated that they recognized their neighbors among the attackers, but that it were also neighbors who came to their aid, and averted much worse damage than both the visiting crowd and the galleries had already incurred. While a variety of theories explaining the event was quickly at hand – questions related to divergent (or rather clashing) life-style choices of the inhabitants and gallery visitors, local political orientations averse to the thrust of the artworks and the (at least presumed) progressive political stances

of the gallery visitors, conservative elements emboldened by the recent government party-led constitutional referendum<sup>04</sup> violently reacting to alcohol consumption on the street, the inequalities brought on by and underlying gentrification processes – none of them seemed to be able to fully account for the events of that night. While especially the daily newspapers and network TV jumped to fold the Tophane “mahalle baskısı” [lit. neighborhood pressure] into the referendum and, by extension, Islamist conservative politics, it was clear early on that this particular explanatory model not only painted a facile, wholesale picture of a neighborhood and its inhabitants, but also decontextualized the event from the actual place in which it had occurred.<sup>05</sup> After all, this was not the first time that bats and fists (and in this particular instance, pepper spray and frozen oranges) were used in a highly coordinated manner, nor that organized intimidation had made itself felt in Tophane: protestors fleeing from the police, be it on Mayday 2009 or on the occasion of the IMF meetings in Istanbul in October of the same year had been met with similar violence.<sup>06</sup> Özen Yula’s play *Yala ama Yutma* [Lick but don’t Swallow] scheduled to open in February of 2010 at Kumbaracı50, a performance space in the same neighborhood, was cancelled when the Islamist daily *Vakit* rallied against the show, and elicited threats from Tophane as well. This, of course, does not come to mean that the actors in all of these instances were necessarily the same. Still, that the media did not make any of these connections and drew no parallels between these events remains in itself quite notable.

The Tophane attack has left a question mark for some of the arts spaces, about whether not only certain kinds of behavior, but also certain artworks and artistic contents might not be compatible with the neighborhood they were (to be) shown in.

- 01 Quoted from former German President Johannes Rau’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary address to GEMA (Gesellschaft für musikalische Aufführungs- und mechanische Vervielfältigungsrechte), a German performance rights organization. While Rau referred to copyright interests in particular, it has become customary to employ his quote referring to enforcing one’s interests in general. For the full speech, please see [http://nobby-bell.privat.t-online.de/gema\\_rau.html](http://nobby-bell.privat.t-online.de/gema_rau.html).
- 02 Quoted from *Mr. Intentional* by Lauryn Hill from her album *Lauryn Hill Unplugged* (2002).
- 03 Eyewitness and news reports vary in terms of the number of attackers (20-50) and the length of the attack (30-45 minutes), parts of which, it seems were observed by police officers who did not intervene until back-up arrived; e.g. see <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?hn=175432>, Neslihan Tanış, “Tophane’de Yara Sarma Zamanı”, *Radikal Online*, September 25, 2010, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1020654&Date=25.09.2010&CategoryID=77>; “Sanat Galerisine ‘İçki Baskını,’ *CNNTurk Online*, September 23, 2010, <http://www.cnnturk.com/2010/turkiye/09/22/sanat.galerisine.icki.baskini/590408.0/index.html>.

04 The constitutional referendum package introduced by the Justice and Development Party was approved through 58% of the votes, and frequently regarded as a vote of confidence for the governing JDP and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

05 For the background and social context of Tophane see Yaşar Adanalı, “Tophane 2010,” *Birgün Online*, October 1, 2010 and Asena Günel, “Burası Tophane!,” *Bianet*, September 24, 2010, <http://bianet.org/bianet/toplum/125013-burasi-tophane>.

06 For an intervention that connects these previous attacks to the one on the galleries, see Süreyya Evren, “Tophane Saldırısı Ardından Belirlenen Resmî Açıklamanın Bir Reddi,” *Birikim*, October 2010, <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/makale.aspx?mid=669&makale=Tophane%20Sald%FDr%FDs%FD%20Ard%FDndan%20Belirlenen%20Resmi%20A%E7%FDklaman%FDn%20Bir%20Reddi>.



Rather than attempting a comprehensive description or detailed analysis of the Tophane attack (the exact causes and motivations of which are to date still subject to substantial research to be fully understood), I try to offer some thoughts on two strands of discourses that were produced in the aftermath of the attack and the significance they might have within the wider fields of cultural policy (as enacted by the state) and cultural politics (in the sense of

critical cultural and artistic contestations from “below”).<sup>07</sup> The first of these strands is the official reaction to the event, exemplified by the statements of the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, on the day following the attack. The second pertains to the ways in which—at least in some part—debates on the role of arts spaces in gentrification processes were conducted in the weeks after the attack. While this article centers on questions of responsibility in two different but interrelated areas, official cultural policy on the one hand and the cultural politics of arts spaces in a neighborhood such as Tophane on the other, I do not mean to equate these two registers of responsibility. Yet, in order to arrive at more just cultural policies and a politics of more socio-economic equity both of these areas need to be critically investigated.

**Contemporary art in Turkey has developed largely outside the patronage of the state, and maybe even despite the state. It is not only the fact neither the Ministry of Culture and Tourism nor local government agencies have established standing provisions to support independent arts spaces and artistic production through public monies, but that contemporary artists have—by and large—rejected any dealings with the state—including voicing demands for more funding and support.**

**WHEN DUTY CALLS ...: NO ONE TO ANSWER BUT THE SENSITIVITIES OF THE PEOPLE**

In contrast to other incidents in which arts events have been hampered, artworks suppressed, artists targeted and intimidated or outright censorship has been enacted, the Tophane attack markedly differed in that—at least at first sight—the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, took a seemingly strong position on the event, if only by being on site the following day.

It might be a stretch to categorize the Tophane attack as an act of censorship per se, since the structure of the attack made it difficult to discern if and to what extent artworks were of concern to the perpetrators. The fact that according to eyewitness reports some attackers yelled at the gallery visitors that they should “go (back) to Nişantaşı,”<sup>08</sup> seems to at least indicate that the arts crowd, if not the artworks were perceived as undesirable. Publicly available statements from the neighborhood (including from the *Tophane Haber* website—a portal dedicated to news pertaining to this area of the city) seemed focused on the comport of the gallery visitors, specifically during openings when people stepped outside for a conversation and/or for a smoke with their drinks in hand. But as Galeri Non, and its exhibition by Extramücadele featuring among other plays on Turkey’s official iconography a sculpture of Mustafa Kemal as a “tilted” maybe even fallen angle in the gallery window,<sup>09</sup> were the first to be hit, questions lingered if this was due to the content of the exhibition or to its location: Galeri Non is the first contemporary art venue uphill when canvassing Boğazkesen from

the south side. Either way, it is important to note that the attack has left a question mark for some of the arts spaces, about whether not only certain kinds of behavior, but also certain artworks and artistic contents might not be compatible with the neighborhood they were (to be) shown in. That in the months following the Tophane attack police details were present during openings, and visibly so, in front of each art space might have exacerbated this kind of unease and might have had a delimiting effect in itself.<sup>10</sup>

Broadly televised, Günay together with Istanbul’s governor, Hüseyin Avni Mutlu, first visited the targeted galleries before embarking on a tour of the neighborhood and talking to its “people.” The Minister made a series of announcements at different stops. Because there was no singular press release from official sources, I center my discussion on a selection of news clips that have been made available online by the respective news programs. One of the most broadly broadcast statements was the following made by Günay exiting Outlet Gallery: “While we are trying to eradicate terror throughout Turkey, we will not tolerate and allow such a display to be exhibited on the streets of Istanbul.”<sup>11</sup>

Much could be said about the parallelism Günay invokes between terrorism and the Tophane attack, as he takes the opportunity to reference 30 years of war with one single sweep; yet, it is the second part of the sentence that is more important for the purpose at hand. Whereas the media highlighted Günay’s qualification of the event as intolerable and his condemnation of the use of force as evidencing the “tough” and “clear” stance taken by the Minister, it is worth noting that he first chose to point to the display of violence that the event produced. This concern about the visibility of violence and the rupture in or stain on Turkey’s image it produces comes up towards the end of his visit in a clip broadcasted by Kanaltürk. After opening a box of chocolates to be distributed to neighborhood representatives as the symbol of an amicable resolution of whatever grievances or tensions there might have been (a gesture manifesting the literal translation of the Turkish expression “*tatlıya bağlamak*,” i.e. “tying into sweetness” or smoothing things over), Günay stated: “It is by no means acceptable that we punch each others’ faces in front of foreigners or in front of their eyes.”<sup>12</sup> That it was the international visibility of the event, rather than

**10** If previous examples are any indication, police presence at art openings have not made artists feel safer. Quite to the contrary, when the Hafriyat collective called the police after their exhibition *Allah Korkusu* [Fear of God] had been targeted by the daily *Vakit*, the arriving police detail actually found some of the artworks questionable and attempted to open an investigation against them. For a more detailed account of this particular case, see Banu Karaca, “Images Delegitimized and Discouraged: Explicitly Political Art and the Arbitrariness of the Unspeakable,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45 (2011): 155-184.

**11** “Biz Türkiye’nin her yanından terörü silmeye çalışırken, İstanbul sokaklarında böyle bir görüntünün sergilenmesine müsamaha göstermeyiz ve izin vermeyiz”; video clip, Kanal 24, September 24, 2010, available at <http://www.beyazgazete.com/video/2010/09/23/Gunay-kimsenin-siddet-kullanmaya-hakki-olamaz-kanal24.html>.

**12** “Yabancıların veya onların gözü önünde birbirimizin yüzümüzü yumruklamamız katiyen kabul edilemez.”

**07** For a critical discussion of these concepts and their partial convergence, see Mark Stevenson, “German Cultural Policy and Neo-Liberal Zeitgeist,” *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 22, no. 2 (1999): 64-79.

**08** Nişantaşı is a central district of Istanbul, which is both residential and houses some of the most expensive shops, restaurants, cafés, bars etc. in the country.

**09** The work entitled *Melek Atatürk ya da Rodin Kemalist Olsaydı* [Angel Atatürk or If Rodin Were A Kemalist] (2010) can be seen at <http://galerinon.com/extramucadele>.



## That it was the international visibility of the event, rather than the event itself that was troubling to the Minister is not surprising when one considers Turkey's longstanding concerns regarding its perception abroad.

the event itself that was troubling to the Minister is not surprising when one considers Turkey's longstanding concerns regarding its perception abroad.<sup>13</sup> Given the fact that representatives of foreign cultural institutions were present during the attack and that Istanbul as one of the 2010 Cultural Capitals of Europe was even more in the international eye than usual,<sup>14</sup> it stands to reason that these factors contributed considerably to the Minister's quick presence –and some of his stern remarks.

In another televised moment, Günay stressed once more that there was no excuse for the attack, no matter what had transpired as to “provoke” such a reaction in the neighborhood. Another clip features him talking to residents who express that their previous complaints related to the disturbance of public order by gallery visitors had fallen on deaf ears. Here the Minister is seen impressing on them that they have to get in touch with the respective authorities. But we can also find a notable instance in which his statements start to oscillate and take on a particular, relativizing register. Consider the following quote: “No one has the right to impose their Anatolian ways of living to Istanbul, but no one has the right to dismiss the customs and traditions of the people here (meaning: in Tophane) either.”<sup>15</sup> It is the conjuncture, the “but” of this statement and its rationale that is significant. At first-sight it could be categorized as signaling even-handedness, a call for mutual respect and sensitivity in dealing with each other. Yet, I want to propose that when brought together with Günay's and his departments' statements and (in)actions –and those of their municipal counterparts in Istanbul– in other instances when art has come under attack, and juxtaposed with the actual mandate and mission of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, a different picture emerges. To give but two examples: in late 2008 an aid to the Public Relations Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, İbrahim Yazar, threatened to withdraw funding for the Culturescapes Turkey festival organized in Switzerland in 2008

if a scheduled screening of Hüseyin Karabey's *Gitmek*, a film notably funded by the very same Ministry, was to go ahead. In an Interview with Kai Strittmatter, Yazar explained his motion to censor the screening of the film as being based on the film's premise of a “Turkish girl” falling in love with a “man from Northern Iraq,” i.e. a Kurd. Strittmatter tried to explore further what Yazar found objectionable in this relationship and asked if it would not even be desirable for more Turks and Kurds to fall in love with each other. Yazar answered: “Of course, in normal times everyone can fall in love. But we live in times of terror. I am a representative of Turkish sensitivities (sensibilities).”<sup>16</sup>

In Yazar's statement it is again the qualifier “but” that underwrites his censoring motion, and that he takes to represent “Turkish” sensibilities. It emerged quite quickly that Yazar had acted without the direction or the knowledge of his superiors. Yet instead of rectifying Yazar's unsanctioned actions, Günay chose to state that censorship efforts on part of his department were never intended, but in the same breath justified Yazar's threat to the organizers as they had included a text on the film in the program that referred to southeastern Anatolia as Kurdistan –a move, that according to Günay, his department had been unable to remain silent to (“Türkiye'nin bir bölümünün bir başka isimle isimlendirilmesi karşısında sessiz mi kalmalıyız?”).<sup>17</sup>

It is a similar “but” that director Okan Urun encountered when trying to put on the play *Yala Ama Yutma* at Kumbaracı50 in Tophane. After the scandalization of the play by the daily *Vakit* based on the synopsis of the piece in which an angel returns to earth in the body of a porn actress, the troupe first received email threats and then had their space shut down by the municipality, supposedly due to a missing fire escape. Although the space was open to use again shortly afterwards, the troupe had been severely discouraged and intimidated by the events, and decided to cancel the play. Urun describes the appearance of Minister Günay on CNN on February 12, 2010 where he was asked about his assessment of what had transpired at Kumbaracı50: “I am someone who is against censorship, but I also think that artists have to be respectful towards some of the values of society.” Urun noted that if a cultural minister, regardless of having seen the play or not, makes

such a statement, then “the people of Tophane say, ‘mind your step’ to Kumbaracı50: We'll come with bats and feel justified in doing so.”<sup>18</sup>

Notably, no one seemed surprised about the particular inflection of Günay's statements. A few words about the general thrust of cultural policy under the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) governments and since the 1980 coup d'état might be of use, both to contextualize the above examples and to explain further why expectations on part of the art world towards official cultural policy are rather low, if not non-existent.

Contemporary art in Turkey has developed largely outside the patronage of the state, and maybe even despite the state. It is not only the fact neither the Ministry of Culture and Tourism nor local government agencies have established standing provisions to support independent arts spaces and artistic production through public monies, but that contemporary artists have –by and large– rejected any dealings with the state –including voicing demands for more funding and support.<sup>19</sup> This is in part because of long-standing and calcified notions of the arts having to be in service of the state on part of successive governments. In addition, the structural violence enacted by the Turkish state and the systematic oppression of free expression have also engendered a legacy of distrust among artists towards the state. This stance has to some extent softened, most recently in the period of Istanbul Cultural Capital of Europe tenure where funds both from the EU and Turkey were funneled through government agencies. While European sources of support both in the form of funding schemes and of foreign cultural institutions based in Turkey have impacted the contemporary art scene considerably,<sup>20</sup> arts funding has largely come –as more than just a mixed blessing– from the private sector. Entering quite willingly into a peculiar (and mutually beneficial) division of labor with the state by funding arts projects, providing exhibition spaces and opening museums, corporations and industrialists have often patched-up the void in structural arts funding through their PR budgets, all criticisms of the influence of private monies in the Turkish art scene notwithstanding. In comparison to previous governments, the JDP has often been accredited with being more open to at least logistically supporting the contemporary

13 Banu Karaca, “Images Delegitimized and Discouraged.”

14 For news items that specifically reference the event within Istanbul European Capital of Culture tenure see for example: Oğuz Tümbaş, “Kültür Başkentinde Kültüre ve Sanata Sopalı Saldırı!,” *Milliyet Blog*, September 23, 2010, <http://blog.milliyet.com.tr/kultur-baskentinde-kulture-ve-sanata-sopali-saldiri-/Blog/?BlogNo=265893>, Enis Tayman, Serkan Ocak, Neslihan Tanış, Özlem Karahan, “Kültür başkentinde sopalı düzen!,” *Radikal*, September 23, 2010, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDeta yV3&ArticleID=1020346&Date=04.10.2011&CategoryID=77>.

15 “Ama hiç kimsenin de burada ki insanların, örfünü, adetini, geleneğini yok saymaya, görmezden gelmeye hakkı yoktur.” Video clip, Tv 8, September 23, 2010, available at <http://www.beyazgazete.com/haber/2010/09/23/kimse-kimseye-karsi-siddet-kullanma-hakki-yok.html>.

16 “Tabii ki normal zamanlarda herkes aşık olabilir. Ama biz terör dönemindeyiz. Ben Türk duyarlığının temsilcisiyim”; quoted after “Terör Varsa Aşk Yok!,” *Radikal Online*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Default.aspx?aType=Detay&ArticleID=906900&Date=05.11.2008&CategoryID=82>;

17 Ibid.; see also Erol Önderoğlu, “Kültür Bakanlığı ‘Gitmek’i Festival Programından Çıkarttı,” *Bianet*, November 3, 2008. <http://bianet.org/biamag/bianet/110616-kultur-bakanligi-gitmeki-festival-programindan-cikartti>.

18 Okan Urun during a panel discussion entitled “Censorship in the Contemporary Arts” at the Fourth Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop, Istanbul, May 28, 2011.

19 The film sector with its particular financing structure and needs has been a notable exception in this regard.

20 See Beral Madra, “The Hot Spot of Global Art,” *Third Text* 22 no. 1 (2008): 105-112.

## The exclusive retreat to sentiments thus forecloses discussions of rights (on part of the artists) and responsibilities (on part of cultural policy officials), and legitimizes political indifference to different types of repression and –ultimately– violence.

arts, particularly on municipal and local levels,<sup>21</sup> and creating conditions that have led to the invigoration of especially Istanbul's art world. The JDP has also undoubtedly recognized the importance of the arts as an image and marketing factor, especially abroad. The advanced openings of two high-profile locations, the Istanbul Modern Museum (December 2004) and the santralistanbul exhibition complex (July 2007), that perfectly accommodated Prime Minister Erdoğan's schedule –EU accession talks in the first, national elections taking place in the second instance– are just two cases exemplifying how adept the JDP has been in claiming the success of contemporary art from Turkey at strategic points.

Yet, cultural policy officials have seemingly felt uncomfortable with contemporary artistic production and have frequently confined themselves to the rather narrow definition of traditional arts, and –in the past few years– to heritage-based flagship restoration projects. This discomfort might also account for Günay's seeming hesitation –or unwillingness– to identify the attacked venues in Tophane as what they actually are, namely arts spaces. In the publicly available online resources, he refers to gallery owners as “our friends who are opening new businesses here” [*burada yeni işyerleri açan arkadaşlarımız*],<sup>22</sup> and condemns those standing by idly while businesses are being attacked [*burada işyerleri saldırıya uğrarken*].<sup>23</sup> While in another context he might be commended for highlighting the labor of artists and other cultural workers as a legitimate way to make a living [*“burada çalışan insanlar ekmek parası kazanmak için çalışıyorlar”*]<sup>24</sup> or plainly representing productive contributors to society, the complete disregard for the fact that it were indeed art spaces that were attacked is somewhat at odds with his official function –or evidence of his solely functionalist view of the contemporary arts as a “sector.”

But apart from the contentious relationship that the JDP seems to have with contemporary art, the point I want to emphasize here is that whenever art or artists have come under attack, the Ministry and its municipal counterparts have failed, time after time, to step up for the arts as they should by definition and as part

of their pronounced duties. Articles 26 and 27 of the Turkish Constitution guaranteeing the freedom of expression and of the freedom of the sciences and the arts respectively not only have to be understood as protecting the arts, but also as mandating the state to support the arts. Yet neither the government at large, nor the cultural ministry in its different incarnations has taken up the responsibility for this mandate. However, Günay and his colleagues are by no means exceptions: Looking back over the past 30 years, Fikri Sağlar's initiative to lift bans on literary works instated by the military junta stands out as one of the few instances in which a minister of culture has taken a clear stance on suppressed artworks.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to this kind of endeavor, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism remained deafeningly silent when Aynur Doğan was being booted off the stage during a concert in the Istanbul Jazz Festival series in July 2011, for the sole reason of signing in Kurdish. By remaining silent, those whose official duty it is to be advocates for the arts, thus legitimized a discourse in which the usage of Kurdish was equated with terrorism as well as the much cited “Turkish sensitivities” in the wake of the deaths of Turkish soldiers.<sup>26</sup>

When it comes to freedom of expression, Ertuğrul Günay has mastered the skill of dabbling in the repertoire of sentiments instead of clear political positions. This became clear once more when he commented on the banning of journalist Ahmet Şık's unpublished book in March 2011. The Minister proclaimed that he observed the banning of a draft of an unpublished book with “apprehension” [*kaygıyla*] and that he found the situation “worrisome” [*sıkıntı verici*].<sup>27</sup> It is not that these feelings are expressed that is problematic, but the seeming exclusivity with which his statements do not go beyond diagnosing them. Instead of taking a clear stance, and taking up the responsibility of unequivocally defending the freedom of expression, the arts and sciences –which also encapsulates the freedom to publish– as it is mandated by his office, Günay limits himself to a solely emotive stance.

Here, as in his comments on the Tophane event, Günay relied on a frequently employed rationale in Turkish politics, that of deflecting issues of politics and power to that of sensibilities and sentiments. This is not to say that these sensibilities do not exist, but the question remains whose sensitivities and sensibilities are deemed legitimate in political discourse and whose are not.

Is it not, as Pelin Başaran too has recently stated, that when the “sensitivities of the people” [*halkın hassasiyetleri*] are cited as grounds for relativizing the suppression of free expression, artistic or otherwise, that it is the sensitivities of power that are, in fact, at stake?<sup>28</sup> Seemingly veiled in the language of the voiceless, victimized masses whose sensitivities are presented to be violated, and supposedly speaking for them, this discursive mode not only cuts off any further debate but also paternalizes those who are supposedly spoken for. The exclusive retreat to sentiments thus forecloses discussions of rights (on part of the artists) and responsibilities (on part of cultural policy officials), and legitimizes political indifference to different types of repression and –ultimately– violence.

### DEBATING GENTRIFICATION AFTER THE TOPHANE EVENT

On November 3, 2010 an *Açık Masa* event<sup>29</sup> at the arts space Depo dedicated to the “Social dynamics of the city and its relations with contemporary art production” took place. Put together by Pelin Tan and Yaşar Adanalı, the evening focused on the rapid urban transformation and gentrification that Istanbul had gone through in the past 10 years, and also tried to shed light on the Tophane attack. The event thus opened a discussion on the question to which extent art is a conduit of, but also a possible site of resistance against gentrification processes that, in short, goes something like this: Equipped with little economic but much cultural capital, artists and arts organizations repeatedly go into neighborhoods that are marked by disinvestment. Once a “scene” manages to establish itself in a respective area, the mechanism of gentrification starts to set in: restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques tend to follow in the trail of art. A formerly “problematic” part of town gains attractiveness and becomes an object for “redevelopment.” Speculators, developers and investors appear on the scene, converting the artistic allure into higher rents, raising the cost of living in a given neighborhood. Most artists and arts organizations as well as most of the long-term residents are not able to meet these new costs and have to leave the neighborhood to start the cycle somewhere else, anew.

Among the speakers was the late Şaban Dayanan who had been working at Depo, which is also located in Tophane, since the former tobacco warehouse had been converted into an arts space, and who had, in fact, formed a vital link between the arts space and the neighborhood of Tophane. Opening his presentation with the words “I was very surprised to hear that the Tophane attacks were seen to be connected to gentrification,” Dayanan stunned the audience, but also drew attention to different interest groups and power struggles within the neighborhood.

And indeed, over the following weeks and months, while it crystallized that gentrification had a part to play as it had undeniably impacted the social make-up of Tophane, it seemed that

21 Asu Aksoy, “Zihinsel Değişim? AKP İktidarı ve Kültür Politikası,” in *Türkiye’de Kültür Politikalarına Giriş*, ed. H. Ayça İnce and Serhan Ada (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2009), 179-198.

22 Video clip, Tv 8, September 23, 2010, available at <http://www.beyazgazete.com/haber/2010/09/23/kimse-kimseye-karsi-siddet-kullanma-hakki-yok.html>.

23 For an analogous framing of the galleries as businesses by Istanbul governor Hüseyin Avni Mutlu, see “Galeri Saldırısından Yedi Kişi Gözaltında,” *Bianet*, September 22, 2010, <http://bianet.org/bianet/toplum/124971-galeri-saldirisindan-yedi-kisi-gozaltinda>.

24 Video clip, atv, September 23, 2010, available at <http://www.beyazgazete.com/video/2010/09/23/sanata-mahalle-baskini-atv.html>.

25 See Fikri Sağlar, *Ulusalardan Evrensel Çağdaş Kültür* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1992), 34-35.

26 For an extensive collection of news items on the incident please see [http://www.siyahbant.org/?page\\_id=335](http://www.siyahbant.org/?page_id=335).

27 “Endişe Dalgası,” *Radikal Online*, March 23, 2010, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1044146&Date=15.10.2011&CategoryID=77>.

28 Pelin Başaran, “İktidarın hassasiyetleri,” *Bir+Bir* (June-July 2011).

29 *Açık Masa* (lit. open table) is a “sharing platform which has been initiated by artist Mürüvvet Türkyılmaz in 2000.” For detailed information, please see <http://acmasa.blogspot.com/>.

While it crystallized that gentrification had a part to play as it had undeniably impacted the social make-up of Tophane, it seemed that those who had instigated if not coordinated the attack were actually not among those disenfranchised by gentrification, but most possibly among the real estate owners in the area.

those who had instigated if not coordinated the attack were actually not among those disenfranchised by gentrification, but most possibly among the real estate owners in the area. Apart from the opposition of urban planning activists, it seems that it has been mainly these real estate owners and the judiciary that have been in the way of Galataport<sup>30</sup> – a redevelopment project aiming to transform the area extending from the Golden Horn to the outer boundaries of Tophane from a residential neighborhood with small businesses into a shopping and entertainment complex. This group apparently managed to galvanize local discontent that not only centered on crowding sidewalks and drinking in public, but also on stories that inhabitants had been verbally harassed by a group of gallery visitors (one prominently circulating story recounted that a fully veiled woman was heckled as “the reason Turkey does not get into the European Union”). Transcending the focus on the gallery openings (which, after all, happen only once a month or even less frequently, once every two months), the discontent was also geared against the increasing number of hostels, cafés and bars and their clientele, whose behavior too was experienced as disruptive and disrespectful to the neighborhood. While visitors and gallery workers experienced the Tophane attacks as unprovoked and shocking, signs of growing dissatisfaction were found in abundance on the *Tophane Haber* website after the attack.<sup>31</sup> Especially in the sections with readers’ comments, residents voiced grievances on how specifically openings – most probably due to their high visibility – were impacting their neighborhood. Complaints – and threats – to at least some of the galleries had apparently been made before (most notably during an opening at Rodeo Gallery one week prior to the attack). Although this did not come to mean that the residents of Tophane found the attack justified, it made clear that the communication between the arts spaces and other residents of the neighborhood was broken, or, was not as strong as formerly assumed.

**30** Originally opened to bidding in 2005, the project has – so far – not been realized. It is interesting to note that during his opening speech for Istanbul’s 2011 Shopping Fest, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that if the Galataport project had gone ahead as planned “we would not have seen the hideous events of Tophane.” See “Galataport Bitmiş Olsaydı, Tophane’deki Çirkinlikleri Görmeyecektik,” *Cumhuriyet Online*, March 25, 2011, <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?kn=6&hn=228170>.

**31** See “Galeriye Saldırının Şifresi İnternette,” *ntvmsnbc online*, September 22, 2010, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25133807/>, as well as “Tophane’deki Olayı Tetikleyen Neden,” *Tophane Haber*, September 23, 2010, [http://tophanehaber.com/goster.asp?nereye=yazioku&ID=136&tophane\\_haberleri](http://tophanehaber.com/goster.asp?nereye=yazioku&ID=136&tophane_haberleri), and “Tophane Boğazkesen Caddesinde Olaylı Gece,” *Tophane Haber*, September 23, 2010, <http://tophanehaber.com/goster.asp?nereye=yazioku&ID=134>.

In their seminal article “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan forcefully stated that “[i]t is of critical importance to understand the gentrification process – and the art world’s crucial role within it – if we are to avoid aligning ourselves with the forces behind this destruction.”<sup>32</sup> Their call to responsibility on part of arts spaces, artists – and arts audiences – although issued almost 30 years ago, and in the context of the Lower East Side in New York City, still holds true today. To be clear, with this quote I do not mean to make a wholesale and facile critique of arts spaces located in the area. In contrast to the arts spaces of the Lower East Side, those in Tophane never fashioned themselves as urban pioneers and marketed themselves as “warriors at the new urban frontier” who conquered new, unchartered territory as Neil Smith had diagnosed in his essay “Class Struggle on Avenue B. The Lower East Side as the Wild, Wild West.”<sup>33</sup> They have also been much more sensitized to the issue of gentrification in general. But like in the Lower East Side, many arts spaces and artists have gravitated towards Tophane and found refuge there, because they have been out-priced in those areas of Beyoğlu or Nişantaşı that are more centrally located. Artists, arts organizations, and arts spaces, commercial and noncommercial, frequently cite their own precariousness as the basis of their choice for gallery or studio locations, or, for that matter living arrangements, in areas that are still close enough to the urban center to pull visitors, but marginal enough to be affordable. Deutsche and Ryan’s invitation to rigorously analyze the role of art, its spaces, producers and visitors, and the kind of developments that follow in their wake, is also a call to acknowledge the implicit complicity of the art world in gentrification processes; a complicity that is structural and goes beyond all individual intentions.<sup>34</sup> Surely, the independent arts spaces and galleries of Tophane and the impact they have on the neighborhood cannot be

**32** Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara G. Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (1984): 94.

**33** Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 3–29.

**34** Deutsche and Ryan elaborate on the necessity to acknowledge this complicity further by stating that “[f]or despite their bohemian posturing, the artists and dealers who created the East Village art scene, and the critics and museum curators who legitimize its existence, are complicit with gentrification on the Lower East Side. To deny this complicity is to perpetuate one of the most enduring, self-serving myths in bourgeois thought, the myth that, as Antonio Gramsci wrote, intellectuals form a category that is ‘autonomous and independent from the dominant social group. This self-assessment is not without consequence in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import’” (Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 102).



**Burak Delier, *Is There Any Other Possibility for Architecture?* project, May 2009**  
 COURTESY OF CULTURAL AGENCIES  
 AND BURAK DELIER ARCHIVES

**The first *Mobile Vitrine Exhibition*, 2-4 September 2009, Dükkân**  
 COURTESY OF  
 CULTURAL AGENCIES AND  
 ETCETERÁ ARCHIVES

**Who feels like an inhabitant of the neighborhood and who does not? The neighborhood myth is something actively created and also desired and needed in the given urban structure.**



# On Cultural Agencies & Its Possible Effects

Oda Projesi in conversation with Erdoğan Yıldız

In this conversation Erdoğan Yıldız, who has been a resident of Istanbul's Gülsuyu-Gülensu neighborhood for 28 years and a social and political activist in various dissident urban movements, and members of the artist collective Oda Projesi, who took part in the *Cultural Agencies* project realized in the same neighborhood from 2009-2010, reflect on their common experiences.

Oda Projesi [lit. "Room Project"] is an artist collective run by Özge Açıkkol, Güneş Savaş and Seçil Yersel. The project was initiated in an apartment situated in Istanbul's Galata district and invited artists and individuals from different disciplines to the neighborhood to realize joint projects. Inhabitants of the neighborhood also participated in the projects as actively as possible rather than becoming mere spectators. Since 2000, Oda Projesi has been focusing on urban spaces in terms of their different uses, production of relationships, changes and potentials and continues to work on projects questioning what private and public spaces are and to whom they belong.

## THE NEIGHBORHOOD

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** We at Oda Projesi, experienced a neighborhood in Galata for eight years in a rather intensive fashion, in terms of both daily life and the effects of the project, and this turned out to be an experience that profited us in every field in which we became active. It is thanks to our experience in this neighborhood that we are currently reflecting on spaces, their possibilities and the relationships they produce. The neighborhood also became a concept of reference we frequently employed in the two-year long *Cultural Agencies* project. Taking into account both Oda Projesi's Gülsuyu-Gülensu experience and Erdoğan Yıldız's personal experience of Gülsuyu-Gülensu, which practices, would you say, do these neighborhood experiences overlap with and what kind of proposals emerge as a result?

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** "Neighborhood" is now a hotly debated concept in both academic circles and the media, and as such it is critical and deserves attention. To be frank, there is no prototype neighborhood. Istanbul counts numerous neighborhoods with diverse representations, housing internal consistencies and different dynamics, such as Başibüyük, Sulukule, Tarlabası, Gülsuyu-Gülensu and Yakacık. For instance, Başibüyük, a conservative neighborhood, and Gülsuyu-Gülensu, one with an elevated political

awareness and strong solidarity networks tend to produce very distinct reactions. The foundational dynamics of Gülsuyu-Gülensu are very unique. This settlement was born as a typical squatter [*gecekondu*] neighborhood in the 1950s and mainly received immigrants from the provinces of Tunceli, Sivas and Erzincan, with a large majority of Alevis, translating into a political tendency to the left of the political spectrum. Albeit housing a number of different cultures (Alevis and Sunnis, Turks and Kurds, secular-minded people and Muslims etc.), it remained immune to the destructive conflicts shaking up the society at large, and on the contrary, turned into a neighborhood capable of solidarity and common reflexes. This presented a potential for organizational purposes. Here you can find hometown associations, mukhtar's offices, religious communities and various political organizations. The definition of neighborhood needs to be situated in such heterogeneity; singling out a unique aspect and trying to define the neighborhood on that basis would be misleading. On the other hand, the neighborhood can react differently when there is an intervention by the state or public agencies, and when people come to the neighborhood for an art activity.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** In my experience, whenever we talk retrospectively of the period of five years when we lived and produced in Galata, we always use the term "neighborhood" to refer to the indeed rather limited number of people with whom we were in touch with back then. Thus we, too, tend to contribute to the creation of a neighborhood myth as such. Perhaps we attribute a favorable meaning to it. And maybe we tend to interpret the micro scale relationships that we witness as strategies and tactics, and feel a need to relate them to other dimensions present in the city, an urge to expand these relationships across the urban space, or attribute value to situations which we rarely experience in urban life and yearn for. While posing such questions as, what is the stance of the artist in a neighborhood in the context of a rapidly changing urban structure, or how does s/he relate to the space, to the people around him/her, the street, the passers-by, etc., we come to question dichotomies like the people vs. artists: Who feels like an inhabitant of the neighborhood and who does not? The neighborhood myth is something actively created and also desired and needed in the given urban structure. Upon close scrutiny, this structure reveals itself to be very productive and open to creativity. Instead of preserving the myth status



and sticking to such an outlook, I am thinking, what kind of practices does this myth engender when it interacts with daily life –can we analyze that?

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** The neighborhood is in constant flux, it is never stagnant; it constantly generates reflexes, just like a living organism.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** An initiative spread over two years, the project *Cultural Agencies* fused itself with the daily life of a neighborhood, and yielded a formation and an area of influence falling outside the usual rhythm. It was extraordinary in that it was not preplanned to be imposed to the neighborhood as such; it has managed to create its own space and came to being gradually, it has been shaped during the process, and it has taken root in the neighborhood despite having a specific deadline. How can we narrate the short-lived experience of the project *Cultural Agencies* in Gülsuyu-Gülensu? What kind of collaborations and anticipations did this project engender?

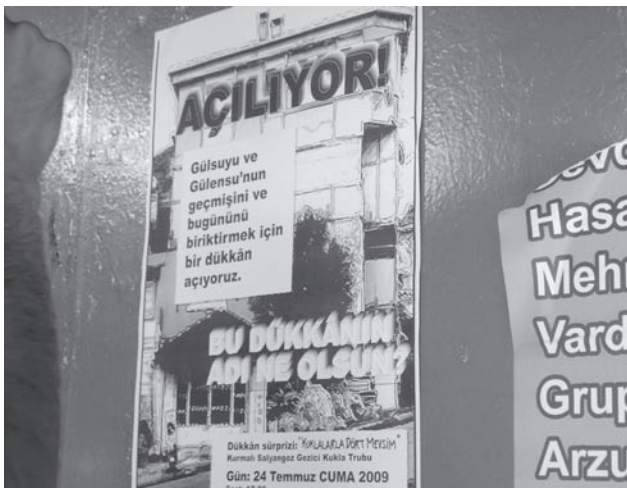
**ÖZGE AÇIKKOL:** The project started off along the conceptual framework formulated by the architects Philipp Misselwitz and Nicolaus Hirsch. The objective of the project was, in a nutshell, exploring how cultural production –which tends to concentrate in the city center, particularly Beyoğlu– would function in the peripheral neighborhoods of the city. Various neighborhoods including Gülsuyu-Gülensu were initially considered for the project. Oda Projesi joined the project team in the next stage. In that period our team consisted of the project coordinator Ece Sarıyüz, project curators Philipp Misselwitz, Nicolaus Hirsch, and Oda Projesi. Gülsuyu-Gülensu was a neighborhood with a high potential for cultural production. It was already a vibrant neighborhood housing cultural events authored by civil initiatives and organizations. We in the project team had a long debate as to whether we needed to join a formation already present in the neighborhood or to launch the project in a completely independent space. In the end, we decided that it would be better to establish our own space, due to the existing political discrepancies among various factions in the neighborhood. We rented a squatter house, and for about a year, strove to bring about its complete spatial and social potential. In the first

workshop, held prior to the rental of the said space, urban planning students from Frankfurt's Städelschule and Mimar Sinan University analyzed the structure and formation of the cultural spaces in the neighborhood. Following this workshop, the structure of a cultural institution was laid out. We evaluated what this structure corresponded to in Gülsuyu-Gülensu and how it could become functional. The said structure comprised the following units: office, library, activities, archive, collection. Although seemingly borrowed from some Western cultural institution, each unit was actually incorporated into the *Cultural Agencies* structure through its presence in Gülsuyu-Gülensu. The neighborhood does not have well-defined cultural institutions that are familiar to us; however, there were traces of cultural institution units, such as "libraries" in the neighborhood associations or hometown associations, or "collections" comprising various items brought from villages; "communication" was maintained through slogans scribbled on houses and plain posters employing a specific language, or sometimes temporary stalls or megaphones; "activities" corresponded to neighborhood festivals, for instance. In this sense, the politically challenging stage of the project was creating a comprehensive neighborhood archive, which had not previously been created due to political reasons, or maybe simply because it was not deemed necessary. For this purpose, we carried out intensive oral history efforts, which led to the formation of a significant oral corpus pertaining to the neighborhood. As for the collection, which we conceptualized as an archive of neighborhood-specific knowledge, we explored the individual archives of the inhabitants and tried to join these together. In fact, the main axis of the project seemed to shift from an analysis of the given structure towards a focus on its past and formation in order to grasp present cultural mechanisms. In keeping with the neighborhood's basically oral culture, on Fridays we held debates bringing together somebody from the neighborhood and a guest.<sup>01</sup> For example, artist and feminist activist Canan Şenol came together with Sevim Şahin, a locally active nurse from the Gülsuyu Health Clinic, to discuss common issues such as gender, disciplining of bodies in fields of power, and being a woman in Gülsuyu-Gülensu. Or, event designer Erdem Dilbaz was invited to get together with the members of a local activists' cooperative. In addition, the artist collectives YNKB and Etcétera and artist Burak Delier worked on long-running projects in the neighborhood. There are vast differences between the first neighborhood experience of Oda Projesi and this one. Looking back to our identity in Galata, upon entering the neighborhood we had acted as "neighbors" rather than "artists." Oda Projesi was established three years after our first step in that district. In Gülsuyu-Gülensu, however, we were there as artists coming to the neighborhood with a team and various financial resources. The difference between our status in Galata and that in Gülsuyu-Gülensu was therefore as large as the difference between a guest and a neighbor. We always had to assume the position of a guest.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** The frontiers of the neighborhood are redrawn with the advent of outsiders –those coming for work, those coming for political organization purposes, researchers, municipal officers, i.e. people who do not reside there. This in turn is closely related to the identity of the newcomer and the relationships she has. In this process, I had the impression that the geographic location of Gülsuyu-Gülensu was very, very important. Gülsuyu-Gülensu is situated on top of a hill, and as such, access is meaningful and possible only for those living or working there. It is not a place of transit, it is a last stop; therefore circulation and mobility do not exist and you immediately become visible once you arrive there as an outsider. Gülsuyu-Gülensu has been the place where I felt like I was in a neighborhood most strongly, perhaps because I had transformed it into a metaphor in my mind. Neighborhood as a large house with invisible gates; that is, a thoroughly autonomous space, well-organized and complete with neighbors, where streets can be conceptualized as halls or maybe even living rooms, and houses as rooms. And indeed this space incorporates certain public elements such as the local market open on Wednesdays, political rallies and gatherings in its streets, minibuses racing by and the shabbiest public buses anywhere in the city. Gülsuyu-Gülensu is indeed redefined with the arrival of each newcomer; its terminology, dress code may change, your smile, gaze or posture might shift.

**ÖZGE AÇIKKOL:** Indeed, Gülsuyu-Gülensu can be said to resemble a "fortress," a structure which we had to contemplate thoroughly during the project. I do not want to make a sweeping generalization, but considering that most art "spectators" in Istanbul are attracted inside an art gallery by its window design, geographically speaking the "spectators" in Gülsuyu-Gülensu had to be the neighborhood's inhabitants anyway. As such, what we have here is a direct, closed-circuit project. In the project, outsiders to the neighborhood somehow became direct participants, rather than mere "spectators." Indeed the project's production level superseded its consumption level. I don't believe that the self-distancing of the inhabitants from the project is caused solely by their discontent with "urban transformation" and the possible damage that can be inflicted on the neighborhood by such projects. It is also due to the problem of creating a common language. These results come about naturally once you incorporate yourself into daily life through a project which is flexible, albeit with fixed boundaries. That is because, there is a large gap between daily life and "institutionality." Besides, the inhabitants naturally feel a certain reserve towards big capital, which finances the project. As such, this attempt to realize a local, small-scale project through the backing of big capital did face headwinds, owing to the tension between the big and the small. This tension is not unique to the Gülsuyu-Gülensu context; this debate, although not so old, does already have a certain history behind it. Is the artist a worker? Is culture an industry? These are issues hotly debated across the world. In this regard, I believe the project could have better shared this common concern with the inhabitants.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** The project *Cultural Agencies* had numerous aspects open to observation and monitoring. For example *Cultural Agencies*, as an



Gülsuyu-Gülensu Dükkan [Shop] opening poster  
COURTESY OF CULTURAL AGENCIES AND ODA PROJESİ ARCHIVES

<sup>01</sup> See <http://cultural-agencies-eventspace.blogspot.com/>.

outsider initiative, incorporates itself into the neighborhood which is a closed phenomenon complete with its own codes and lifestyles, and this initiative experiences a certain “tissue compliance” or “tissue mismatch” with the local relation network; furthermore the artist collective Oda Projesi also joins in this experience.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** There was a large range of reactions. Some of the reasons why the project caused discomfort were: it had EU backing; its financial structure rested on the euro; European and American architects, artists, tourists or foreigners visited the neighborhood on this occasion; the project prioritized “culture” which is opposed to the concerns of the inhabitants related to sustaining their livelihood; the neighborhood’s daily life was recorded as part of the project; photo and video shoots were deemed threatening by those unaccustomed to cameras or disapproving of the police CCTV [“MOBESSE”] and tanks placed in the neighborhood. Besides, who were we to abandon our comfortable houses and existence to launch a project in a politically dynamic neighborhood with a leftist background –even claimed to be home to illegality by the mainstream media–, whose housing rights were currently under threat owing to urban transformation? This project seemed especially peculiar among similar neighborhood projects implemented across Istanbul, or even Turkey. An old squatter house had been rented, we were to stay in the neighborhood for a whole year, and we would work on a research project to be implemented in a gradual rather than snappy fashion. It was a rather peculiar project, which initially raised “doubts,” and establishing trust required time, effort and common experience.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** However, institutions well-established in the neighborhood, such as Sanat Hayat Derneği [The Art & Life Association] and Temel Haklar Derneği [The Association for Fundamental Rights] can also receive similar reactions; the neighborhood might at times remain indifferent to them as well. As such this is not a reaction reserved to outsiders, but a stance stemming from the neighborhood’s internal dynamics. Nevertheless, the said reaction of the neighborhood does not necessarily lead to conflict or tension. To the contrary, the artist Burak Delier’s<sup>02</sup> work, for instance, has been perceived as a kind of artistic activism propping up the neighborhood’s resistance strategy, or its reflexes against urban development plans. When considered as a process in which both sides influence and learn from one another, this space can well become an integral part of the neighborhood and can engender different kinds of production. Nonetheless there remains a certain pitfall: One must avoid nurturing the neighborhood resistance myth, and stay clear from categorizations such as “progressive

**02** In May 2010, Burak Delier, a long-term resident artist of *Cultural Agencies*, set off from questions such as “Can we conceptualize architecture in a different fashion? Which of our desires, wishes and needs remain unrealized due to lack of energy and means in daily life?” in line with the inhabitants’ suggestions and interventions and organized local reunions with them. The resulting ideas and propositions were exhibited at the local Aydın Kebap Restaurant, on dinner tables.



Etceterá... (Federico Zuckerfeld, Loreto Garin Guzman),  
*The name of Victory in children's language*,  
one-act operetta, 2010

COURTESY OF CULTURAL AGENCIES AND ETCETERÁ ARCHIVES

artists.” These are dodgy concepts. An attempt at reading a neighborhood solely through such characterizations would be deceiving. It would be wrong to infer from our conversation that the neighborhood is inherently a center of resistance, and to objectively qualify it as such. This is because totally different individuals experience other types of relations behind the scenes of this resistance. At the present we are going through an historical period as regards the neighborhood’s future. Istanbul is undergoing an enormous transformation since the 1990s and 2000s. Let’s take the Anatolian side, say from Kartal to Kadıköy, along the E-5 motorway: You will be surprised by the large number of hospitals, shopping malls, high-rise buildings and universities on both sides of the road. Cases in point would be the ongoing works of the rail system, the construction of “the world’s largest” courthouse, the upheaval of the Kozyatağı region in parallel with Istanbul’s transformation into a financial hub, or simply, Maltepe University situated in the wooded area behind Gülsuyu neighborhood or Acıbadem University adjacent to the Gülsuyu overpass. Simultaneous with this overhaul is the shift of industrial plants to the outskirts of the city. Accordingly, only a handful of the neighborhood inhabitants work in factories at the present. Large numbers work in service jobs such as cleaning, security, and construction. At this point the critical question becomes: in such an intensive process of transformation and upheaval, how can “old” squatter neighborhoods like ours subsist and preserve their texture of social, cultural and economic solidarity? Can solidarity-based planning prevent the victimization of the inhabitants and their expulsion to the outskirts? Alternatively, can we protect our habitat with

a perspective of the kind “We are pleased with our life in the neighborhood, we created these neighborhoods through resistance and sacrifice, we shall never let outsiders intervene, if necessary, we shall resist with all our might?” –indeed we do have such a tradition, unlike other neighborhoods. I believe that the answers to these questions lie in the oral history conversations that we have undertaken.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** How did the experience of the *Cultural Agencies* Project alter your relationship to your own neighborhood? Prior to the project we were not acquainted. Just before its start, we were hastily introduced to you as a key figure very active in the neighborhood. In time, you played the role of an agent, an intermediary between the project’s objectives and the neighborhood. In fact, you were one of the people we most frequently resorted to, or a kind of consultant, even though you did not have an official title.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** For me, participating in this project corresponded to setting out to rediscover the internal relations of the neighborhood. To give examples, although for years I had participated in political action, I can say that among the Gülsuyu Güleusu Shop activities, the trip to the Istanbul Biennial with the neighborhood inhabitants, the April 23rd Children’s Day events organized with the kids in the neighborhood, as well as the culture and arts conversations held on Friday evenings bringing together diverse interlocutors around a variety of subjects were all very stimulating. On the other hand, every interview part of the oral history study revealed hitherto unknown aspects of the neighborhood. When we first started debating an oral history study in the



neighborhood, two possible drawbacks occurred to me. First, would these records have a negative impact on any current or future “political” action in the neighborhood? Second, would there be any risk of exposing through such interviews any of our friends involved in current political action? However the overwhelming feeling was that, if we did not somehow kick-start such a study right away, it could soon be too late for those inhabitants at 70-80 years of age and with a history of participation in local revolutionary action between 1978 and 1980. In fact, when dear İlhami (Akdeniz) passed away, it felt like bidding farewell to a vast ocean of experience without recording the smallest drop of it. By contrast, when we lost our beloved Muzaffer (Bahçetepe) to cancer, I felt that we were on the right track by recording these interviews. Our objective in launching this study was including everyone who had contributed to the formation of the neighborhood, without any discrimination. Without ever letting our sentiments take over, we invited everyone we could reach. This meant ensuring the participation of people from a wide array of political tendencies, religious denominations and geographic backgrounds. Naturally, we could not reach out to everyone. We truly wish this as of yet incomplete effort to be continued. We, the inhabitants, profited largely from the skills and knowledge of our friends, including academics, urban planners, architects and artists. I can say this much: the establishment of a link between artistic creativity and a local organization is the key to redemption, not only for the neighborhood, but also for the artist.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** The Gülsuyu-Gülensu Shop opened its doors on June 24, 2009, with the primary objective of creating a platform for recording and sharing the neighborhood’s collective memory via a series of interviews initiated just before the inauguration. Our intention was to document individual histories as well as the past and the possible future of the neighborhood through a number of video interviews with inhabitants from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. These interviews, numbering around 50 at the present, shed light on the period from the 1950s to the 1990s. After due editing, these interviews will be brought together in a book and published. In this sense, the project will generate significant feedback to the neighborhood.

#### ART AND URBAN TRANSFORMATION

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** Based on my experience during the one-year period and its aftermath, I can say that the question of the right to housing serves as a unifying, homogenizing platform in Gülsuyu-Gülensu. You share the same roof and the same ground. In other words, people share the same concern despite differing ownership rights and land register statuses.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** It is poverty that underlies this, to a certain extent –I mean, the awareness raising, unifying effects of poverty... Actually I would also like to discuss the question of gentrification at this point. In the eyes of the inhabitants, gentrification corresponds to displacement, because the most direct consequence of this process is urban transformation, which will result in the poor being replaced by the rich and moved to the outskirts of the city. However, if I am

not mistaken, in other countries gentrification concerns abandoned buildings or economically distressed areas artists squat and practice their arts in. And in this way these distressed areas are gentrified. Our case is different. Now, if we take the Tophane incident for example, it looks as if art galleries, their owners and the artists are the agents of gentrification. It is a tricky issue, because it is too important a subject to be limited to the relation between the artist and the neighborhood. On the other hand, art and artists can become active in spaces other than art galleries. For example in our shop [Gülsuyu-Gülensu Shop], on April 23rd, artists held an arts event, during which we got together with local children. As children built their dream houses out of cardboard boxes, they were accompanied by musicians Boris Vassallucci and Louis Coulange. As such, they showed to the children that April 23rd can be celebrated in another fashion. Accordingly, I believe that artists can play an important role in rethinking the whole concept of gentrification, and making references to other spaces.

**ÖZGE AÇIKKOL:** Gentrification can be seen as an urban dynamic. It seems like the Turkish gentrification experience started out as an informal one. Just like the way rural migrants summoned their relatives while building a squatter neighborhood, those who purchased houses in districts of gentrification, e.g. Galata, spread the word to their friends, saying “There is a bargain apartment on such and such street” etc. Although there were many complications as regards ownership rights, apartments were bought and sold. That is to say, this city generated gentrification just like it had previously created squatter neighborhoods, albeit due to different needs. These days, if carried out by the state itself, gentrification is called urban transformation, which is a large-scale, top-down, and therefore more dangerous process, which utterly neglects the grassroots level and people’s actual needs. Gentrification is more of an organic process, and it creates its own feedback. Actually the issue about artists is a rather practical, in other words economic one, because these districts are cheap and somehow “attractive” in the eyes of artists and art galleries. Anyhow, what is important is not their presence there, but rather their relationships with their surroundings or the absence of such relationships... Sure, they are not obliged to establish such relationships, yet contemporary art is intertwined with political questions and as such almost begs for such a relation, from an ethical point of view. In a sense, it is a bit weird to organize an exhibition on problems similar to those experienced by the inhabitants and not to invite them. In any case, if you are in a “neighborhood,” do you have any chance of avoiding all interaction with the neighborhood? What is important here is, as Erdoğan has suggested, unleashing the power of art. Yes, art does have a unifying and transforming power... I am not suggesting here that art should be instrumentalized, but since such a power exists, it is in the artist’s hands to employ it in this “mutual relationship”...

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** Actually the question long since debated by Oda Projesi has once again come to the fore with this project: “How to conceptualize the relationship between art and those socialities

traditionally assumed not to follow art?” The artist is expected to be visible in a certain space; it is a very delicate line, like an unwritten agreement; attempts at infiltrating daily life always lead to question marks and debates. They used to say to us “What do you think you’re doing in Gülsuyu-Gülensu; there is no culture or whatsoever here; go to the city center, go to Nişantaşı”... We received a similar reaction from our own artist friends while carrying out our project in Galata: “Leave the neighborhood alone, don’t confuse the kids,” they said. At this point we could take up the concept “tissue mismatch” mentioned above. What is a tissue mismatch? What can it tell us about the *Cultural Agencies* project? I believe that tissue mismatch is an important source of friction. Anyway, doesn’t hypothetical compliance lead to repetition and mediocre cooperation?

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** The population of Gülsuyu-Gülensu brushes the 50,000 mark and unemployment is a significant concern especially among the youth. The neighborhood history goes back to the 1950s: it had an important left-wing potential in the 1980’s, and still stands out as a very dynamic and vibrant neighborhood, capable of sticking together and avoiding conflicts in every period, despite its cosmopolitan character. It set an example for many similar neighborhoods in the mid 2000s by resisting urban transformation. It brought cases against the municipal zoning plan, collected petitions for the annulment of the plan, managed to transform this process into a grassroots neighborhood organization, and established street-based representative committees and neighborhood assemblies, thus asserting its will as a neighborhood not “in itself” but “for itself.” The main concerns of its inhabitants are poverty and unemployment. Since the people have very limited access to health, education and transportation services, participation in cultural events, eating out, going to the movies or making a journey are perceived to be luxuries. Naturally, this is one critical reason underlying the indifference towards the artists visiting the neighborhood. Nonetheless, I say it would be an exaggeration to talk about a tissue mismatch.

**ÖZGE AÇIKKOL:** I guess tissue mismatch can be countered with various interactions and relations. In a sense, tissue mismatch is fabricated politically... Just like the tension between the urban and rural areas, or between the city’s center and periphery... In Gülsuyu-Gülensu, we encountered two definitions of culture. The first group said “here culture does not exist,” whereas the second insisted “this is our culture.” Although Gülsuyu-Gülensu and similar neighborhoods do harbor a brand new culture owing to the urbanization of different rural cultures, this is not considered to be “culture” as such –which is one big challenge in itself. Actually urban culture is a result of such cross-fertilization; there is nothing such as a purebred urban culture. Or, we could talk about tissue mismatch in the event of gentrification, since dissimilar people start to live together in the same area then; that’s where the possibility arises.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** Actually gentrification has started in the West, and in the USA in particular, much







Etceterá... (Federico Zuckerfeld, Loreto Garin Guzman),  
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future to be directed at artists, arts galleries and ourselves. Because, the language and concepts have now rendered certain things so visible that it is not so simple to merely remain a user. If you say "I moved here because it was cheap" and cut it at that, then you shall miss the opportunity to do something for the future. You do not have to become a local or take refuge under such an umbrella, and can rather stay a nomad, but still become engaged there. There is a great potential there and is worth thinking about.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** As an inhabitant, I believe that if art is to preserve its critical perspective and remain dissident in such a polarization –if such a polarization turns out to be unavoidable–, it must be ready to pay the price of an attack or vandalism directed at art. Wasn't it Edward Said who expressed his belief in the intellectual's duty to side with the oppressed, while throwing stones across the Palestinian border? Secondly, the relation between art and the neighborhood, between artists and inhabitants needs to be enhanced. Here, art and artists need to clarify their stances. For whom do the artists produce their works, and what is the result? This needs to be well thought. On the other hand, there is an urgent need for questioning the distance between the language of art and the language of the inhabitants, and for an alliance that will be born from this. Because, I believe that such experiences can help dissolve the present tension and lead to a serious coalition process. In the final analysis, artists and inhabitants are fighting for the same thing –call it an act of emancipation, a process of becoming human. Across the world, people live a wild and inhuman life. We need to become more human, we need to be emancipated, and I think art, artists and their mutual relationship with the inhabitants can play a crucial role in making the neighborhood heard and visible. I think gentrification is not a humane process, it is inhuman. It makes the artist a prisoner, and forces the inhabitants to close into themselves. In short, the artists and inhabitants need to nurture much deeper relations in the process of emancipation and humanization. If we limit art to the center, the voice of the peripheral neighborhoods will become even feebler.

**ÖZGE AÇIKKOL:** That is exactly where the project *Cultural Agencies* comes in, because, by definition, it provokes thought on being an "agent"... As such it is a criticism of the stern, top-down, "corporate" perspective. It seeks answers to the question "What does it mean to be an artist in Istanbul, or to be a space of cultural production and presentation?" Actually we are pretty much under the influence of the neighborhood since the Gülsuyu-Gülensu project. We had a first-hand experience in Gülsuyu-Gülensu, where joint resistance is not a romantic need, but a concrete and successful initiative. Therefore it is important for art to infiltrate daily life. Gülsuyu-Gülensu provides an achieved example, and we can learn a lot from it. I am talking about the exact opposite of artists going somewhere and "teaching" the locals; I am talking about learning from the forms of resistance present there. ●

TRANSLATED FROM TURKISH BY BARIŞ YILDIRIM

earlier than in Istanbul, and artists there have long since tackled this experience. They have set important examples before us. Artists have seriously debated issues such as, should we express ourselves and share our work in art galleries or instead create independent spaces, and if so, what should such spaces be like? This is a very recent issue for artists in Istanbul, as far as the interaction among artists or the artistic production practices are concerned. There are a number of different spaces evolving in parallel, such as art galleries established by banks, private galleries, or spaces of artist initiatives. Their geographic distribution reveals a certain map, but this map harbors only a handful of examples where work is produced in collaboration with the location. The artist can be said to have the right, desire or need to an existence in an arts gallery, without any outside contact. However, since there are scarce examples of alternative pursuits and there is no platform for debate, artists are frequently blamed and vast generalizations are made about them. They are accused of deteriorating these neighborhoods or triggering change. Let us imagine that artists take the map of Istanbul complete with possible urban transformation areas, and analyze and discuss their relation to these spaces. In terms of urban transformation, Istanbul is home to many practices worthy of lengthy debates; planners come up with numerous alternative plans, and architects come together to work on these issues; however, the transformation the city is going through is a very new issue for artists both in terms of dealing with it and in terms of getting involved. As a result, I consider such events to be very "stimulating" in a search for a new language, and they present an opportunity for a fresh start.

When something comes up, we struggle with its results. There are significant experiences, but these do not go hand in hand with urban transformation and the actual struggles in the city. There are a number of urban movements, which open up a space where artists can feel at home, undertake joint projects and engage in fruitful collaboration (I am not talking about making public art but a conceptual engagement); however, the said space is –though it might sound a bit harsh– monopolized by architects, urban planners and sociologists. Artists are told to do their thing in Nişantaşı.

**ERDOĞAN YILDIZ:** I think I can mention a case in point: last year, we got together as a group of people from the neighborhood and visited the Istanbul Biennial for the first time in our lives. If it wasn't for the *Cultural Agencies* project, we would never ever have done that. And, there we saw that artistic works are created with the manipulation of diverse materials. Instead of using its capacity to make great contributions to neighborhood organizations or grassroots resistances, art prefers to dwell or express itself in the center, and the resulting elitist attitude glosses over –or intentionally avoids– certain opportunities, leading to significant polarization and adversity.

**SEÇİL YERSEL:** This can change only if artists, producers of art and culture feel such a need. Besides, I think that we should also talk about the definitions of being a local, an inhabitant of a neighborhood. Or, what is entailed by living in a given district, and claiming certain rights and thoughts in this regard, versus living there for a limited period and laying claim to totally different rights? All these are questions pertaining to the



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**Issue 3 (2011)**

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**SUPPORTED BY:** Anadolu Kültür

European Cultural Foundation

British Council

Publication of selection of texts from the e-journal *Red Thread*  
<http://www.red-thread.org>

collaboration with Gallery Nova newspapers No. 27

**PUBLISHERS:** WHW • Anadolu Kültür/DEPO

**DEPO**

Lüleci Hendek Caddesi No. 12  
Tophane 34425 İstanbul Turkey  
[www.depoistanbul.net](http://www.depoistanbul.net)

**WHW**

Slovenska 5  
HR-10000 Zagreb - Croatia  
[www.whw.hr](http://www.whw.hr)

**PUBLICATION EDITORS:** Red Thread Editorial Board

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**TEXTS:** Ruben Arevshatyan • Şükrü Argın • Keti Chukrov • Banu Karaca • Sohrab Mahdavi • Oda Projesi & Erdoğan Yıldız • Jelena Vesić

**TRANSLATORS:** Nalan Özsoy • Barış Yıldırım

**PROOFREADING:** Mark Brogan • Ayşe Özbay Erozan

**DESIGN:** Dejan Kršić @ WHW

**TYPOGRAPHY:** Brioni • Typonine • Typonine Stencil [NIKOLA DJUREK • TYPONINE]

**PRINTED BY:** Sena Ofset, İstanbul

**PRINT RUN:** 1500

**SUPPORTED BY:** Anadolu Kültür

European Cultural Foundation

City of Zagreb

Ministry of Culture of Republic of Croatia

National Foundation for Civil Society Development  
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Gallery Nova newspapers are jointly produced by WHW and AGM





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