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Istanbul Biennial Launches in an Uneasy City

by **Berin Golonu**



Hali Altindere,
Harikalar Dişari
(Wonderland), 2013,
video, 8 1/2 minutes,
courtesy the artist and
Pilot Gallery, Istanbul.
Photo Servet Döbler.



The preview week of this year's Istanbul Biennial, "Mom, am I Barbarian?" (through Oct. 20), was a subdued affair. Many of Istanbul's art spaces and museums chose to forgo the customary opening receptions and parties. The extended protests in the city center and the government's violent crackdown against the demonstrators—along with Turkey's tensions with neighboring Syria—have dampened a typically celebratory atmosphere. The mood became even more somber with the news that a 22-year-old protestor named Ahmet Atakan died on Sept. 10, becoming the seventh person to die since the Gezi Park protests erupted on May 31. The night before the biennial's press preview, protestors gathered in Taksim Square in anger over Atakan's death, and the police once again doused the public with tear gas and water cannons.

The Gezi Park protests and the realities of official repression that they brought to light necessitated a rethinking of the biennial's theme and format. Many felt that the public's weeks-long occupation of Gezi Park and Taksim Square was itself the best possible manifestation of the biennial's theme—utilizing the public sphere as a political forum. For various reasons, curator **Fulya Erdemci** withdrew the projects planned for public spaces. Even though the decision to place the entire exhibition within galleries may have significantly hampered the works' ability to address a more broad and diverse public, it didn't inhibit their potential to reflect upon current social and political circumstances. Many projects that were made well before the protests acquired new meanings in their wake.

The exhibition occupies five venues—the Antrepo, a waterfront warehouse; the Galata Greek primary school; the nonprofits ARTER Space for Art and SALT Beyoğlu; and 5533, an artist run space situated in the Istanbul Manufacturers Market. It includes more than 88 artists and collectives from more than 30 countries, a large percentage from Turkey, Europe and Latin America. It's heavy on video installations, with memorable contributions by Jorge Gallindo & Santiago Sierra, Amal Kenawy, Shahzia Sikander, Basim Magdy and Annika Eriksson. Noteworthy sculptural installations and performative environments have also been created by Guillaume Bijl, Claire Pentecost, Peter Robinson, Jorge Méndez Blake, İnci Eviner, Diego Bianchi, and Elmgreen and Dragset.

Themes of confrontation, violence and occupation appeared in works throughout the show, as if to underscore the city's current political context.

At the Antrepo, the exhibition's main venue, visitors encounter Halil Altındere's video *Harikalar Diyarı* (Wonderland), completed in February of this year. A fast-paced and indignant rap video, it is situated in Istanbul's Sulukule neighborhood, a contested site of gentrification. Formerly occupied by the city's Roma population, the area saw many families displaced when the government destroyed their homes to build low-income housing developments. In Altındere's video, rapping Roma youth stand defiantly against bulldozers and security forces, sending a security guard up in smoke. Even though the video was completed several months before the protests, many of the scenes brought to mind images of demonstrators fighting police in Taksim Square that were shared on social media. In addition to their stance against the authorities, the protestors and the actors in the video share the common goal of preserving their right to space within a rapidly commercializing urban environment.

Martin Cordeano and Tomas Espina's installation *Dominio* (Domain, 2011) was on display in a room of the Galata Greek Primary School, a striking structure dating from the late 19th century that no longer functions as a school. Made while the artists were on a residency in Paris, *Dominio* re-created the living room, dining room and kitchen of a modest home, which appeared normal except that every single object inside—from a pair of reading glasses to the kitchen sink—was broken, shattered or ripped. The installation spoke of violence enacted with great force. This could have been a window into the home of a family torn apart by the war in Syria, or the home of Ahmet Atakan's grieving family.

Cinthia Marcelle's video *Confront* (2005), on view in the galleries of the exhibition space Arter, addressed the question of human agency in a more lighthearted manner. In the video, fire jugglers perform for stopped traffic on a pedestrian crossing during a red light. They move to the sidewalk when the light changes, letting the cars pass by. With each change of the signal, the jugglers appear in greater numbers, until they reach a critical mass. At the end of the video, they continue juggling when the light changes, only to be greeted with revving engines and the blaring of car horns. There may not have been any fire jugglers in Gezi Park, but the performance serves as an echo of the ways that protestors in Turkey, Brazil and other parts of the world have used creativity and humor to lift their own spirits as well as those of their fellow protestors, keeping one another from quitting precisely at the moment when they were facing the toughest odds.

Istanbulites' fight for public land in a rapidly privatizing neoliberal urban landscape also impacted the curator's vision. Rather than going ahead with the original plan of commissioning ambitious new projects in public space, the exhibition was scaled down considerably, and smaller installations were realized in tandem with showcasing pre-existing works. Yet in the end, the scale of the show may prove to be a better reflection of a political climate in which many of the ruling party's ostentatious building schemes and development ventures are hotly contested for the social and environmental damage they are doing.

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