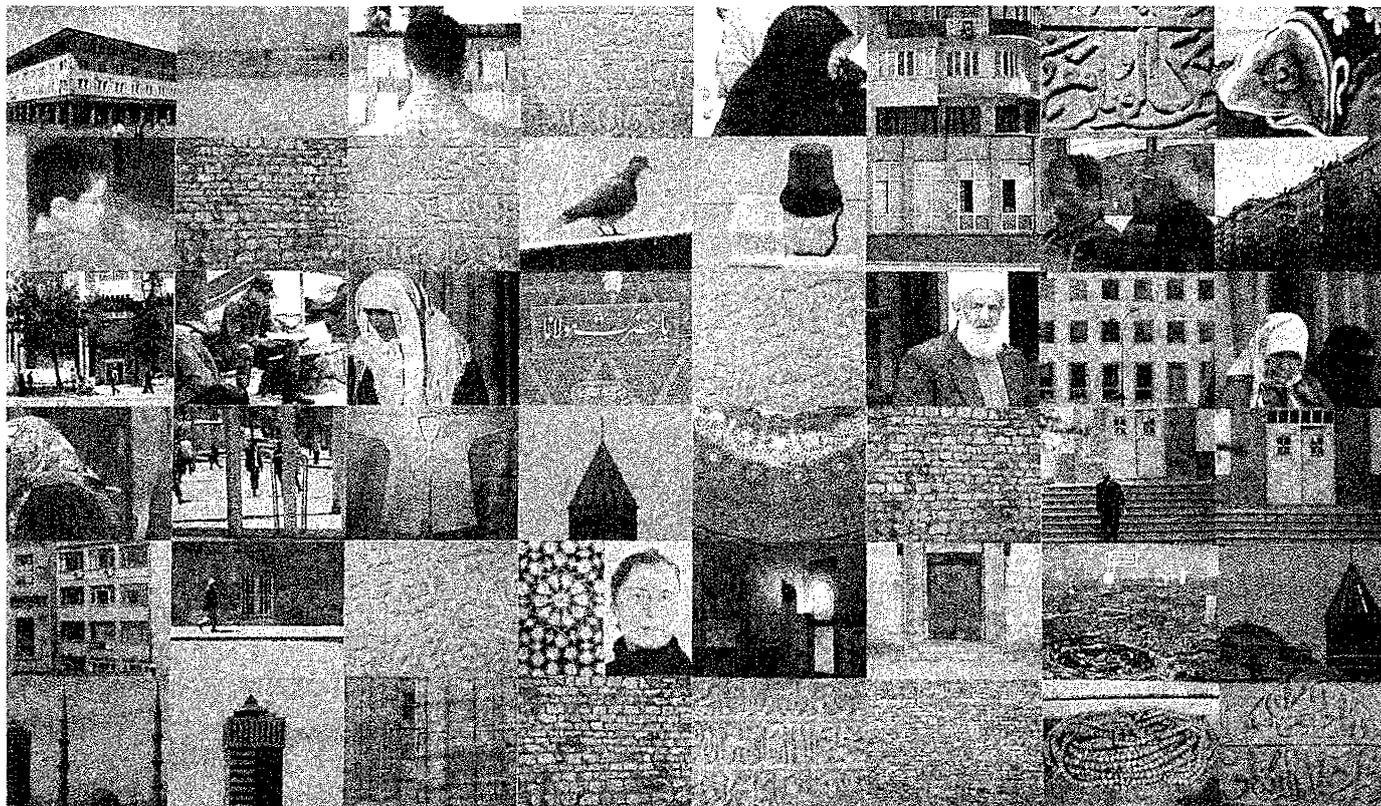


Letter from Istanbul

STEPHEN NAYLOR



Y Z Kami [Iran/USA], *The real beloved is not the form*, 2005, installation of photographs and painting. Photo Stephen Naylor.

My reason for visiting Istanbul this year was under the guise of its Biennial, but in truth Istanbul needs no excuse to visit – it is one of the great cities of the world, poised between the East and West both geographically, culturally and politically.

The 9th Istanbul Biennial is not Venice and does not pretend to be. It has a rawness that initially bothered me; the city itself was so demanding in terms of its energy, teeming populace and of course its East-meets-West paradigm. One quickly becomes aware of Istanbul's historical significance as a crucible of cultures, with architectural features that dominate the skyline and the art history texts. The constant line of ships waiting to pass through the Bosphorus strait is echoed throughout the city as people queue to enter the Grand Bazaar or cross Galata Koprus (the main bridge between the old and new sections of the city), and the largest queue of all seems to be in Istiklal Caddesi (Independence Avenue) of the Galata and Taksim regions, where the cultured elite promenade the one-kilometre shopping, restaurant and Embassy precinct in their thousands.

The curatorial team for the Istanbul Biennial, Vasif Kortun (Turkey) and Charles Esche (Britain), have orchestrated an event designed '... to disappear into the city, to blend in and not race with the changes of Istanbul'.

Part of the challenge in visiting international arts events can be negotiating the geography and actually

locating the Biennial/Biennale headquarters. Correspondence with Istanbul stated that the Biennial was located in the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts in Istiklal Caddesi, and after trekking for a couple of hours we finally discovered it was an office on the fifth floor of a poorly-signed building. (We were not alone in our ignorance as a curator from MoMA in New York had also spent a sizable portion of her 'few hours in Istanbul' searching for the hub of the Biennial.) After gaining a catalogue and a Biennial map the whole show became quite manageable in a few days of foot-slogging. We realised that we had walked past a number of the venues and works of art on more than one occasion, such was the nature of the event, and to some extent such is the nature of Istanbul!

The curators selected fifty-three artists and artist groups for the Biennial, and established a series of short-term residencies in Istanbul for about half of them, where they could experience the city in the context of the twenty-first century. Eschewing the historic monuments of the city the curators offered a range of unusual and exciting venues with reference to the everyday life of the city: an apartment block, a shop, an office building, a

theatre, a customs storehouse. One of the great pleasures of following the Biennial/Biennale circuit is to experience intimate and out-of-the-way corners of urban space in different cities – such as Goat Island in Sydney Harbour during the 1998 biennale of Sydney – and there is great pleasure in seeing contemporary works of art in spaces that enable the artists to break out of the museum. This was certainly the case in Istanbul.

This Biennial had few formal works: many engaged with political and social issues, and with many the aesthetics were raw, immediate and to a certain extent unresolved. As is the case with most contemporary international art events, there was too much experimental screen-based material. Many artists are drawn to this medium, however audiences can feel alienated by a lack of understanding and inadequate language to evaluate this technology. One has to question the validity of placing TV monitors in stairwells with looped dialogue that ranges from mid-stream drama/narrative to endless banality without context. I have given up waiting for inspiration with many of these works, and if I do not engage within one minute I am now likely to move on – this is longer than we often give to static works!

Nonetheless the 9th Istanbul Biennial was not a loud show, and the event offered the opportunity to really engage with the city, and there were some passages of real poetry. Y Z Kami's (Iran/USA) *The real beloved is not the form*, a wall of apparently unremarkable photographs – heads of people, details of architecture, street scenes – is an authentic art experience: poignant, measured, sensitive, beautiful and completely engaging. Other successful pieces were either well-suited to their particular venue, as in the cases of Pavel Bůchler (Czechoslovakia/UK) with his large 1920s Marconi speakers mounted in the Tobacco Warehouse broadcasting passages from Kafka's *The Castle*: '...you are not from the castle, you are not from the village, you aren't anything'. Humour in works such as *Somebody else's car* by Ahmet Ögüt (Turkey), where the artist converts parked cars into police cars and taxis using coloured paper and masking tape; Dan Perjovschi's (Romania) comical graffiti in the Bilsar building and the delightful video work by Sener Özmen (Turkey), which took the mickey out of Gustave Courbet's celebrated painting *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* 1854 by presenting a realist tableaux using Middle Eastern actors fighting over the cause of realism verses terrorism.

Most of the other work had a fairly cerebral quality to it, with lots of discussion about the evil nature of big business and the development and re-definition of urban space. Solmaz Shahbazi (Iran/Germany) produced video works that looked at the enclosed societies in the 'gated communities' on the edge of the city. Other artists such as Axel John Wieder and Jesko Fezer (Germany) focussed on the social and cultural transformations in Berlin since its re-unification, using architectural models and texts.

The Istanbul Biennial acted as a catalyst for other arts events in the city, which in some ways overshadowed the Biennial itself. One of the main venues was a large gutted apartment building overlooking the Modern Museum and the Bosphorus, where the second and third floors were allocated to Biennial parallel projects. Some very powerful works were presented in the *Free kick* show where thirty-five young Turkish artists were given the opportunity to raise political and social issues that have been largely suppressed within Turkish culture, including torture and hostage taking and the terror of the Military regime in 1980. Istanbul Modern (Gallery) hosted *Centre of gravity*, a survey show of notable works of art from previous Istanbul events with a roll-call of artists such as Christian Boltanski, Jeff Koons, Louise Bourgeois, Anish Kapoor and Monica Bonvicini. René Block also curated a show of past Biennial works entitled *Memory Lane* 1995-2005 (which included material by the senior Australian artist Ken Unsworth).

The highlight for me was the unlikely exposure to a show called Istanbul *YaYa Sergileri 2* (the 2nd Istanbul Pedestrians Exhibition), held between Tünel and Karaköy, curated by Fulya Erdemci and Emre Baykal. This project received no acknowledgement by the Biennial and featured nineteen national and international artists/architects and their large-scale projects. To my surprise Australia's Callum Morton's work was part of this impressive show. Two new works were included, a sound sculpture/environment and an outdoor installation entitled *Stonewash*. This work tapped into the international 'branding systems' embedded in globalisation but also played with the space of Karaköy, recognising the significant changes in this once-dynamic financial centre. Morton façaded a derelict building set back from the once bustling shores of the Golden Horn and Bosphorus junction. The pristine shop-front was securely abutted to the crumbling ruins of an old hardware shop now filled with debris and oneiric mementos. Clever, poignant, and very beautiful, Morton's work complemented the exquisite white-walled open building Use house by Ingar Dragset (Norway) and Michael Elmgreen (Denmark), and the challenge put out by Ioannis Savvidis (Greece/Germany) who boarded up the five-metre-high statue of Sinan (the architect who gave Istanbul its dramatic skyline), obscuring his grand vista across the bustling waterway. These works more than any others spoke of the history, place and status of this extraordinary changing city.

The Istanbul Biennial and parallel projects were at various locations throughout the city, from 16 September to 30 October this year.

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