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Curatorial Intensive Istanbul

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25th May 2014

Locatedness and the 13th Istanbul Biennial

It has been suggested that contemporary art biennials have become incredibly self-reflexive about their own articulation and their need to reflect on their own location, place or context (O'Neill). This research takes this idea as a departure point to explore how recent curatorial practices focus on the site of the biennial - urban and rural cities and towns, and specifically their geographical, political, economic and social contexts - as both the theme and the location of the display of art. In particular, I use the 13th Istanbul Biennial as a case study to explore what I have identified as "locatedness" - a process whereby the curator reflects on the location and context of the site of art production and display through working from within that site. This essay is the result of an examination of the differences between the biennial's curatorial intentions and realities, drawing from previous and current curatorial statements, discussions with key figures within Istanbul's contemporary art sector including biennial staff, and my own observations of the biennial itself. Three key elements within the curatorial framework of locatedness will be discussed: the curator's position working from

within the site of production, the curator as negotiator between artist and place and the construction of new localities.

This research builds on the current discourse surrounding contemporary art biennials that highlight the nature of the biennial to re-imagine the ways in which contemporary art is displayed, how it is commissioned (and thus shapes the actual production of contemporary art itself) and how it changes the ways in which curators can participate in both local and global dimensions. Whilst a comparison of all editions of the Istanbul Biennial is beyond the scope of this research, selected recent editions of the Istanbul Biennial are compared and locatedness identified within their respective curatorial approaches. Particularly, when examining the declared purposes of the 9th, 10th and 11th Istanbul Biennials one can see some of the most radical changes towards a focus on the local, within the Biennial's curatorial history.¹ Whilst the 12th edition, curated by Jens Hoffman and Adriano Pedrosa, appears to have taken a break from a located approach in curating, the 13th Istanbul Biennial in 2013 focused thematically on the public domain as a political forum, thus re-connecting with the narrative of the city and addressing specific issues pertaining to the local biennial site. An analysis of the case study data will outline the various complexities of the curatorial intentions and realities of the biennial and will conclude by suggesting ideas for further exploration on this theme.

¹ Here I am referring to a comparison of the Istanbul Biennial's curatorial statements for each of the previous editions available from the archive website: <http://13b.iksv.org/en>, and in particular to what I identify as a shift towards the theme of city of Istanbul as the main focal point in the biennial's conceptual framework.

While no two biennials are exactly alike, one characteristic they share is the ability for curators to challenge the traditional gallery or museum structure and experiment with a choice of venues and physical spaces. Filipovic suggests that most biennials were founded in reaction to non-existent or weak local art institutions unwilling or unable to support experimental contemporary art production ("The Global White Cube", 327). With hundreds of biennials now taking place all over the world, they offer opportunities for curators and artists "to trespass institutional walls and defy the neat perimeter to which the traditional institution often strictly adheres when it organizes exhibitions." (Filipovic, "The Global White Cube", 327).

Additionally, the impact of commissioning work specifically for display in spaces outside the gallery or museum setting has been suggested to have a complex and somewhat contradictory effect on audiences. On speaking about the rise of the international 'scattered site exhibition' during the late 80's and early 90's, Ferguson et al highlight how the now very common curatorial decision to display work throughout cities and towns positions the audience or viewer as 'discoverers': while the making of ordinary spaces extraordinary "can produce results of exceptional poignancy and make more subtle a new exchange between histories and images and between participating viewers/readers, local and otherwise", the act of searching through parts of a

city requires a higher level of engaged commitment from a viewer, in contrast to the equivalent experience in a museum (54). The rise in the number of biennials has also raised questions about the effects of biennial commissioning on art production itself, with some suggesting that cultural tourism and market interests have introduced a kind of "biennial art" (Filipovic 326).

Lastly, the biennial itself is no longer used to only represent a region, host city, or nation and to display an international panorama of contemporary production, but now also forms part of a wider function of curatorial discourse "for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate" (Filipovic 326-7). Yet, if the local environment is taken as a starting point for international art discourse, we must now ask questions relating to curatorial ethics: what is the effect on the local? How can the voices of those from within the local contribute to international discourse? Who speaks on their behalf? How can one participate in, be empathetic to and form solidarity with local issues whilst wishing to satisfy a global agenda? And lastly, how are conditions established for considering biennial art works as 'pertinent'?

Locatedness

In the discourse on international curatorial practice, there is an increasing focus from the late 1990's onwards towards the idea that a location, place or context can function as both the theme and the site of contemporary art

display. The rationale behind this concept is best illustrated by Lucy Lippard in her 1997 publication *The Lure of the Local, Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. There, Lippard proclaims that 'place' is 'the locus of desire'. Inherent in the local is the concept of place: "a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own "local" – entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke" (Lippard 7). Lippard also explains that the local is also a hybrid structure: each time we enter a new place, we become part of it, change it, and in each situation we play a different role (Lippard 7).

As a curatorial approach, locatedness was born in the aftermath of the late 1990's peak of globalisation, post-colonialist discourse and the resulting biennial boom. Writing in 2001 on *Contemporary Art in a Relative Periphery*, Maria Lind suggests that 'the global' had been exhausted as both a curatorial approach and theme within exhibition making, specifically citing methods such as the area study as passé (Lind 172). According to Lind, the identification of the area study as an outdated approach signifies a turn within curatorial thinking towards more appropriate ways to deal with the reality of mass migration, artistic mobility and dismantled definitions of cultural or national identity. It is through Lind's description of previous curatorial methods that we can begin to see the distinction between the curator working from an outside, restrictive and

limiting perspective, rather than the more recent approach of locatedness, which sees the curator working outward from within their location.

Locatedness is evident in the way that curators began to change the way they mediated and supported artistic practices through the development of large scale exhibitions that sought meaningful connections with their site of display. Clair Doherty highlights 2004's Liverpool Biennial, Manifesta 5, and Berlin Biennale 3 as all having developed complex strategies to support visiting artists. She cites residencies and commissions as models used within the development of these biennials "to reimagine place as a situation, a set of circumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda to which the artist might respond" (Doherty 3). Paul O'Neill elaborates on this curatorial approach further by arguing that while curators were responding to the increasing nature of site-specific artistic practices, by 2006 they had also become "the linchpin in negotiations between artist and place" (Doherty, Claire and O'Neill 3). This essential role involves having an active involvement in the production of the artwork; a consideration of the need to work from an informed, embedded position; and being accountable for the commissioning of publicly funded work that must be both locally relevant and internationally significant.

When looking specifically at recent editions of the Istanbul Biennial, locatedness can be identified as an inherent part of the curatorial creative

process. Doherty illustrates how Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun's 9th edition in 2005 simply titled 'Istanbul' distinguished itself from other biennials at that time. Doherty argues that their introduction of a new terminology in which to conceptualise the biennial acknowledged "place as a shifting and fragmented entity, and furthermore a complicity with that unstable location as the defining mode of artistic engagement" (3). Hou Hanru, curator of the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007, seems to draw from Lippard's hybrid nature of the local, when referring to the biennial curator's ability to create new localities: "This vision or reality no doubt implies contradictions, conflicts, and chaotic elements, but it also offers an optimistic and futuristic picture of the local scene" (57-8). On a practical level, Hanru also identifies two points necessary to the invention of that new locality: a project's or artwork's ability to not just respond to such realities, but also to emphasize the real meaning of their engagement with the event; and to articulate the experimentality and vitality of a new locality.

Lippard speculates that the idea of the local is attractive to those who have never really experienced it, and who may or may not be willing to take the "responsibility" to investigate the local knowledge that distinguishes different places(7). Locatedness then, for the international curator, can be defined as the need to respond to a particular locale, to reach out and engage with the various publics within a city, town or place through positioning oneself from within the site of production, operating as negotiator between artist and place and through constructing new localities. It is both a personal response based on

the curator's own lived experiences of that place, and a desire to ask others to respond to that location whether they live there or not. Locatedness, is more complex than just *being local*. The curator works within a space of tensions, embracing both global and local realities, historical and contemporary moments, and abstract and tangible dimensions. Whether this approach is used by an international curator seeking to draw parallels between their own external experiences and that of the local, or a curator "examining one's own house and neighbours" as Lind puts it (172), the appeal of locatedness is its ability to allow a fluid negotiation between these differing dimensions and realities.

Istanbul as a Case Study

In the aftermath of the Gezi park protests and brutal state oppression in May 2013, there appeared an ever widening gap between the curatorial aims and realities of the 13th Istanbul Biennial entitled "Mom, Am I a Barbarian". The following case study explores both this, and how locatedness was used by the curators to position the biennial as a platform for discussion on Istanbul's current social, economic and political challenges brought about by urban development. It is informed by desk research and research in the field carried out as part of the Independent Curators International Curatorial intensive programme both online and in Istanbul during 2013. It draws from a series of analysed texts written on the biennial; a comparison of documents related to its

history, including the curatorial statements of previous and recent biennial editions; analysed discussions with key figures within Istanbul's contemporary art sector, including biennial staff; and personal observations of the biennial. It illustrates how three main elements of locatedness – the curator's position working outward from within the site of production, the curator as negotiator between artist and place and the construction of new localities – responded to this complex situation. While the study draws from a range of perspectives, the curatorial approaches of both the biennial's lead curator Fulya Erdemci and the co-curator of the biennial's Public Programme, Andrea Phillips, form the focus of this analysis.

Working from Within

"If I were not from this city, I wouldn't dare to touch on the most contested subjects. Here, I can do it, because I can open up the Pandora's Box and then, yes, have the discussion. I know the situation" (Erdemci, Presentation).

On hearing this statement from Erdemci in Istanbul in late September 2013 there was no doubt in my mind that Erdemci's position as a Turkish curator gave her an advantage in developing a theme that tapped into the local urban development issues facing the city. It also assisted her in dealing with the reality of the Gezi Resistance – the mass uprising and occupation of contested public spaces by Istanbul citizens in reaction to the state's brutal treatment of urban development protestors - that threatened the very existence of the biennial. She

explained how she drew from her known histories of and personal relationship with Istanbul, but also how she drew from her experiences as an outsider in order to reflect on the situation and produce a concept that would speak to both local and international audiences:

I was working in the Netherlands in the last 4½ years so I was of course coming back and forth, and in one sense I was really embedded here, but in another sense, had also the perspective of an outsider...It's important to have a distance, of course, a basic knowledge, you need to know the structure or have good contacts, but you need that distance to really be able to comment on it all or open to different perspectives. (Erdemci, Presentation)

Embedding herself in the situation allowed Erdemci to see from the inside the potential impact the Gezi Resistance could have on the biennial. She responded by withdrawing the display of artwork from public spaces and by consulting local citizens on how the biennial should proceed. She explained that the urban public domain became simultaneously activated by the citizens and repressed by the police: "...we thought that as a political, philosophical and even artistic gesture we wanted to withdraw from urban public spaces. For that reason we organised two forums after the Gezi event...and I asked: what do you think?" (Erdemci, Presentation). In more than just a superficial study of the local situation, Erdemci's actions in the dual role as curator and citizen denote

the ways in which she approached the local as a hybrid structure capable of being changed by one's very interaction with it.

However, Erdemci's position as a curator embedded within the activities and discourse of the local also brought with it the expectation that she would utilise the biennial to deal directly with the radical transformation of the city brought about by the Gezi Resistance, through some kind of radical curatorial gesture (Ersoy). Erdemci claims that during the Gezi Park forums, people behaved as if she was a kind of "curator the revolution" because the questions underpinning the conceptual framework and Public Programme of the biennial also formed the basis of the Gezi movement (Erdemci, Presentation). Erdemci's lack of surprise to this response from Istanbul residents at the Gezi Forums, along with her willingness to engage in such a local political movement in the first place, suggests both a desire to form solidarity with the local citizens and a recognition of her accountability to a public, or various publics, as the curator of the biennial.

Working from within the site of the biennial meant not only recognising the reality of working within a potentially dangerous situation where suggested radical guerrilla art activities could result in further violence, but also the necessity of developing a meaningful response to the recent civil uprising:

Coming up with a radical curatorial approach – it's not a game, it's not that simple. [...] For me it's an impossible thing and it's unnecessary. For me it

can bring really premature outcomes and it's not a serious gesture. (Erdemci, Presentation)

Erdemci's response to withdraw from public space signifies one of the key differences between her curatorial intentions and the reality she faced. Despite this, by deciding in favour of the absence of artwork displayed in contested public spaces, Erdemci employs locatedness in adopting a perspective from within the local, rather than speaking on behalf of the local. And by participating in the Gezi Forums, she engages in locatedness again to change the local by interacting with it. An examination of Erdemci's position as a negotiator between artist and place allow us to further explore the practical implications of her curatorial approaches and decisions.

Negotiating between Artist and Place

As the rapidly changing conditions in Istanbul threatened the proposed sites of display of commissioned and selected artwork, Erdemci's role as an intermediary between artist and place during the commissioning process, shifted to that of negotiator of the cultural production process itself. The biennial's curatorial statement originally declared that the biennial would make use of a variety of abandoned sites throughout the city:

These may include courthouses, schools or military structures, post offices, former transportation hubs like train stations, ex-industrial sites such as warehouses, dockyards and the very contested Taksim Square and Gezi Park.

Furthermore, the hallmarks of current urbanism such as shopping malls, hotels and office-residential towers are considered as sites for artistic interventions. (Erdemci, bienal.iksv.org)

While the statement acknowledged the precarious nature of the availability of these spaces, the commissioning of artists to develop works with these proposed scattered exhibition sites went ahead regardless. Erdemci explains that many of these projects related to the concept of 'public domain', with some of them directly related to Istanbul (Erdemci, Presentation).

Locatedness is evident here in the curatorial intentions to use the biennial site of the city of Istanbul as the site of production and display of work and in the commissioning of artists to respond to the city itself. However, in facing the reality of a precarious relationship with the local municipality,² and the rationale that the voice of local citizens' were already occupying these spaces as part of the Gezi Resistance, Erdemci's necessity to display art at these sites was rendered redundant. Subsequent commissioning resulted in these proposed sites of display being reduced down to only five venues - established art spaces such as Antrepo No. 3, Arter, Gatala Greek School, Salt Beyoğlu and 5533. Luckily, only a few projects were cancelled completely, such as a proposal by two Turkish writers to place a series of Haiku's on Istanbul's bus stops and in buildings throughout the city. Others, such as Elmgreen and Dragset's *Paris Diaries* which

² According to Istanbul based curator Vasif Kortun "Every time a biennial happens in Istanbul, the government or the local government, always promises spaces. And every time the spaces are taken away. The same thing has been happening for the last 20 years." Kortun, Vasif, Presentation, 2013.

was due to take place in the Marmara Taksim Hotel, Tadashi Kawamata's planned urban intervention throughout contested neighbourhoods and Rietveld Landscape's projected light installation for Ataturk Cultural Centre *Intensive Care*, were redeveloped within the constraints of the established venues.

Central to these redevelopments was the communication process between Erdemci, her curatorial team and the artists. Curatorial collaboration proved crucial for distributing the workload of communicating the local reality to the international artists involved:

The best way was to talk. Because they [the artists] come here, they produce their work, then it's disappearing. But when you talk one by one, you understand that they understand the situation [...] I cannot expect all artists to deal with this specific situation we are going through. 99%, they understood and I am happy that I had many curatorial collaborators. (Erdemci, Presentation)

Erdemci's located approach of active involvement in the production of the artwork was necessary for the final realisation of work originally commissioned for display within public space: had these collaborative negotiations not taken place with the support of a team that were also embedded within the local situation, there may not have been a biennial at all. This embedded positioning allowed Erdemci to reconsider the conditions

necessary for considering artworks as pertinent to the local: it was no longer enough to simply commission artists engaged in new practices responding to urban redevelopment (Erdemci, Presentation), but essential to rethink the display of work in order to avoid drowning out the multiple voices of the local. The located approach of creating new localities provides an opportunity to explore the construction of multiple voices and publics in more detail.

Creating New Localities

How Erdemci sought to create a new locality is interpreted here as the way in which she both positioned and questioned the biennial itself as a *maker of publics* on an international and local level. This is evident in the original curatorial statement:

Together with transformations in governance and ideology globally, the concept of “public”, and alongside, the role of art and its institutions has shifted drastically. The Public Programme of the Biennial will focus on this shift, especially on the notion of “making publics”.(Erdemci, Web)

The Public Programme featured a number of ways in which to explore this theme from a variety of local and international perspectives through formats such as lectures, workshops, seminars, performances, and poetry readings. However, in delivering the programme, the reality of the anti-

biennial protests that twice interrupted the Public Programme³ highlight Erdemci and Phillips' oversight in constructing their own publics. Phillips realised that in delivering a "public" programme, as curators and representatives of the institution, they performed an act of gifting to their own public a potentially unwanted or unnecessary knowledge of capitalism and urban transformation: "...next time, we just wouldn't do it...because in the gifting, we severed the relationship" (Phillips).

Erdemci and Phillips' response to this reality was a radical reworking of the Public Programme which adopted a more 'ground-up' approach. Discursive and educational activities such as workshops, informal talks, presentations and discussions were initiated by the participants of the biennial, such as the Sulukule Platform and Dispossession Network. Erdemci emphasises the importance of the revised Public Programme where participants have the potential to probe necessary and urgent questions and create discussion within Istanbul's community (Erdemci, Presentation). For her, the local became more pertinent than the inclusion of international publics: "It's sometimes not totally for international people and sometimes more for the local people to relate" (Erdemci, Presentation).

³ In her article *Turkish Protests Reach Art Scene*, Ozge Yilmaz points out that whilst biennial protestors were largely opposed to the corporate sponsorship of the biennial by Koc Holding - claimed to be major contributors to the urban development process of Istanbul protestors also felt that the public programme was meant to discuss capitalist structures but failed to say anything critical about the controversial nature of their own sponsors. Yilmaz, Web, 2013.

Maintaining a located curatorial approach, Erdemci and Phillips fully embrace the contradictions, conflicts, and chaotic elements, of developing and delivering a Public Programme on such a contested topic as 'publicness'. Their optimistic vision for the biennial to become a platform for discussion for urban transformation and public space was not halted by the interruption of the Public Programme, but rather inspired by it to find alternative and real ways to engage with various publics. The redevelopment of the biennial and its Public Programme not only responded to the desires of various publics,⁴ but also sought to experiment with new formats of communication to tap into the vitality of a new and radicalised Istanbul.

Conclusions

This essay has illustrated how curators using a located approach work within a space of tensions, embracing both global and local realities, historical and contemporary moments, and abstract and tangible situations. In the case of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, those realities necessitated a response to the rapid changes within the local political and social landscape of Istanbul, whilst maintaining stability and local and international significance of the biennial. It identified a located approach within Fulya Erdemci's curatorial practice used to tap into the historical and contemporary moments of the city, in terms of developing a theme that resonated with the local issues, of renegotiating terms

⁴ On speaking about the atmosphere at the Gezi Forums, Erdemci noted: "People didn't want to hear the most expert people's ideas, but just to come together, to see eye to eye, trying to understand each other and be able to discuss things themselves." Erdemci, Fulya, Presentation, 2013.

and conditions of art production, and also in both Erdemci's and Philips' ability to deal with the complex realities of their relationship with the biennial's various publics. It illustrated how Erdemci grasped both the abstract and the tangible conditions of the site of production by positioning of herself 'in the here and there', which resulted in a questioning of what the biennial could and should do for Istanbul and its citizens during a time of profound change.

This essay demonstrates how locatedness allows a fluid negotiation between the intentions and realities of curatorial work within the setting of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, however it also presents interesting elements within curatorial practice, that would be worthy of further investigation. Firstly, there is the specific question of how Erdemci's curatorial approach will influence future editions of the Istanbul Biennial and to what effect the biennial will have on the city itself from now on. Secondly, is the question of how locatedness has been used in other settings. And lastly, is the question of what the other curatorial methods are, such as curatorial collaboration, that are necessary for a located approach.

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