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Istanbul Biennial 2009 GAME CHANGE

by Carolee Thea

Often dubbed "spectacle," a biennial is a cultural event that contributes to a city's evolution to become a transnational marketplace. But the biennial is also a show, an exhibition, a place where curators experiment with truth and presentation, translate cultural theories and artistic proposals, and provide context and content for the public and the host city. The curators consider the shifts within the exhibition system and the precedents that have defined our relationship to history and culture, as well as the expanding geography and localities brought about by globalization and the information age. And, as *art* is a way of knowing the world, and a distinctive array of social effects often becomes legible in this scenario.

Istanbul has hosted eleven biennials. With a long history of negotiating between cultural, religious, and political influences from both the West and the East, the city is an ideal location for an international exhibition. While the larger postcolonial sphere is marked by institutions of the Western kind, Istanbul leads a life of its own in which there is a disjunction between tradition and change as well as a lively camaraderie amongst its citizens and visitors. The 11th Istanbul Biennial, held in 2009 entitled "*What Keeps Mankind Alive*" was curated by WHW, a collective of four Slovak women who adopted *The Communist Manifesto* and Brecht's epic theatre as a springboard to challenge the status quo. Their politicized exhibition provided a look into a civil majority, or a third-world humanism.

Could you please explain the meaning of the biennial's theme, your group's name (WHW), and the inspiration to form a curatorial collective?

WHW: Some background: In Croatia in 1990 it was as if history began anew—it was a kind of zero year when everything connected to socialism/communism was suppressed. It was as if there were an amnesia concerning a huge part of the country's past and people's lives. Then for the next ten years, as the region became integrated into the global arena while retaining a specific national and ethnic identity, post-communist Eastern Europeans seemed to be getting the worst of both worlds: an unrestrained market combined with ideological fundamentalism.

Our collective came together in 1999 during that period after the war when isolation, nationalism, and xenophobia were being felt in all layers of society and culture. The art circle was small and the people involved in art through different channels usually knew about each other and about the work. You could say that we were looking for each other. What decidedly brought our collective together was a project proposed by *Arkzin*, an important magazine from an independent publishing house. During the war *Arkzin* published writing that criticized nationalism and other issues and events occurring in the region—they were a rare source for contemporary theory, translations, and pop culture. In 1999, on the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, they [re]published the Marx and Engels treatise with a preface by Slavoj Žižek. Because the publication of the book didn't generate much reaction, they asked us to organize a contemporary art exhibition that would trigger public debate on issues related to the *Manifesto*.

CT: What were your parameters for the exhibition?

WHW: The *Manifesto* was not to be thematized or addressed in a direct way. Instead, the exhibition was to take the relationship between art and economics as a point of departure for exploring a wide range of social subjects. Our moniker WHW—which stands for What, How, and for Whom—represents the three basic questions for all economies: What goods and services will be produced? How will these goods and services be produced? Who will consume them?

CT: In the year 2000 Manifesta 3—whose title and theme, *Borderline Syndrome*—was hosted in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The curators considered the traumas implicit in having lived through the wars and the devastation left behind, and the theme was a metaphor for the then—present day conditions in Europe: war zones, identities, feminism, and the psychological results of ethnic cleansing. Communism as politics, nostalgia, or economics never entered the discussion. This was a very different casting point then what you introduce in *What Keeps Mankind Alive*. Can you explain?

WHW: In Eastern Europe, the last stages of the so-called process of transformation out of communism were characterized by a prevailing aversion to the past and the total acceptance of Western models (something often confused with the process of attaining freedom). Obviously we are from a younger generation than that of the Manifesta curators, and so we have some distance from the situation they lived through.

In our investigations we realized that most of Marx's and Engel's analysis of the nature of capitalism is still valid today, and so we shifted the majority of our research in that direction. But we have always considered exhibitions and projects that trigger strong public

reactions, challenge the dominant discourse, and open up issues that are often suppressed. The *Communist Manifesto* exhibition is a case in point, but we also organized exhibitions that dealt with, for example, the Serbian minorities in Croatia. For us, it is most important to create the relationship with an exhibition that will challenge perceptions, disturb without resorting to shock techniques, and make people think about the situation in the world in which we live. Our main objective is to educate, to find a way out of the double bind of global neoliberalism and local nationalism, and to cover everything from global poverty to gender inequality, global change, and the lasting effects of the economic crises.

CT: And so you employ the Brechtian idea of entertainment/exhibition as a strong didactic method capable of provoking social change and inducing emotional reactions. But this could also be a pitfall, because the evolved version of the curatorial role as it is understood today is where the curator retreats from center stage: the curator stands to the side of—rather than thematically in front of—the artworks. As curator/theater director, you've elevated yourselves to teacher and propagandist.

WHW: Given the often subtle ways in which art interacts with and acts upon the social world, the political value and efficacy of art can be difficult to assess. However, when art itself is grasped as a way of knowing the world, a distinctive array of art's social effects becomes legible.

CT: For the Istanbul Biennial, you did not choose artists who are social activists—those who invent solutions rather than illustrate society's ills—and I believe that was a missed opportunity. For example, **spurse** is a collective working within the expanded field of research systems, collective activism, and a commitment to aesthetics. They examine the production and distribution of affect combined with the beauty inherent in complex systems. If some believe that all individuals are alienated under the system of capitalism, **spurse** does not begin with notions of lack; instead, they seek to experiment with the "potentialities" of capitalism. **Tue Greenfort** is another artist who addresses all kinds of environmental issues in practical, impractical, and absurd ways—he once collected rainwater from a gallery roof for the duration of an exhibition, helping the gallery save on their energy costs while satirizing global marketing and production practices. **Pedro Reyes's** *Palas por pistolas* (2007) was created in Culiacán, Mexico (an area with a high rate of handgun violence) where a campaign was organized to exchange weapons for some commodities, such as food stamps; the weapons were then melted and made into shovels used to plant trees in the city. This action has become a model for similar and successful actions in other cities (i.e., Newark New Jersey, USA).

WHW: We hope that our exhibitions will trigger strong public reactions in order to challenge the dominant discourses and to open up issues often suppressed. To this end, we followed Brecht's methodology to invite people to see the world's social and political conflicts, to engage, and to be motivated toward change.

CT: My overall impression of the exhibition? It was dry, didactic, and predictable but at the same time brave and so well choreographed—it allowed some artworks to stand out and engage on other poetic levels.

Housed in three different arenas, the main site, Antrepo No.3, sits on the banks of the Bosphorus. A converted warehouse, the parcours was designed to reflect the nature of the city and addressed issues such as urban transformation, global communication, migration, border-crossing travels, geopolitical conflicts, cultural memory, ethnic and religious differences, gender, urban rebellion, social solidarity, and love. I was struck by **Trevor Paglen's** *Celestial Objects*, {2009} eighteen large black photographs marked with pinhole light dots, a mapping of the international groups of military. reconnaissance/intelligence satellites in the sky over Istanbul. In the center of the room were cardboard models of buildings, toy cars, antennas, fences, and lights by the Palestinian artist **Wafa Houraini**; hints of music emanating from the work gave the added illusion of the real. Titled *Qalandia 2007*, {2009} the work is a future projection, the third in a series of a military checkpoint and refugee camp containing ten thousand people. *Don't Complain*, {2007} an LED sign by the Turkish artist **Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin**, claimed a desire for a more active stance towards social realities. I almost missed the modest *Waiting for the revolution, Alice*, {2009} by **Sanja Ivekovic**, a feminist artist from Zagreb. The work confronts gender patience and politics through seven small identical drawings of a girl watching a frog sitting on a mysterious bundle where from frame to frame and almost imperceptibly, the frog's color changes. **Canan Senol's** *Fountain*, 2000, was another work with a feminist perspective. Hinting of both **Duchamp's** *Fountain* and **Bruce Nauman's** *Self-Portrait as Fountain*, Senol's video depicted a pair of tumescent breasts slowly and incessantly lactating.

In this first room (and in all three of the exhibition spaces, in fact) there were scrunched red papers scattered on the floor; these were printed with phrases describing the position of women in Turkey. On the one hand the papers are dismissed as garbage on the floor, while on the other they repeatedly insist that the issues they discuss be spread and communicated. This work, titled *Turkish Report 2009*, is by **Sanja Ivekovic**. As I roamed the parcours, I found few works as poetic and symbolic as **Hans-Peter Feldmann's** sculpture *Bread*, {2008}: framing absence and emptiness, a slice of French bread with the middle cut out lay atop a conventional museum pedestal. I was also attracted to the Dadaist interactive installation *The Errorist Kabaret*, 2009 by **Etcétera**, a Buenos Aires collective of visual artists, poets, puppeteers, and actors. While this work was charged with black humor, otherwise the show in its entirety was weighted down by its propagandist tone.

WHW: I'm happy you used the word "propaganda." One of our ambitions was to create this tension between a propagandistic curatorial framework and a very classical white cube.

CT: For a long time now curators have moved away from the white cube, but you employ it. Why?

WHW: Well, for us the art is autonomous. It is oppositional to political instrumentalization yet in the service of political instrumentalization—that is, as politics is in the service of the market, of wealth and profit. This tension between propaganda and autonomy was something we tried to play with, but we're definitely not proposing the answer. Further, we don't believe every exhibition has to look like this—this was our experiment.

CT: Maybe art is a critical necessity as long as it fights being a part of the spectacle, aiming to turn the spectacle upside down as it exposes the cultural industry. However, as we know, neither capitalism nor communism has been without fault, and so in the wake of their twentieth-century trials and tribulations, rather than condemn them, why not connect with activist artists whose works may offer viewers ways of altering or changing existing problems?

WHW: How do *you* define propaganda and anti-propaganda?

CT: Art is propaganda the political message dominates the art. When politics and aesthetics find balance, as they do in **Feldmann's Bread** or in *Z32*, a documentry film, {2008} by the Israeli artist **Avi Mograbi**, who employs Brecht's method of interweaving music, politics, emotions, object, subject, and symbol. Also, the Turkish artist **Canan Senol**, in her video work *Exemplary* [2009] where she employs classical Ottoman miniature illuminations and calligraphy as it unravels a narrative of a woman's sexual longings—like poetry, it transcends the politics.

WHW: Women's roles and female desires are difficult to express in Turkey, and as a female collective we wanted to show *questionable* present and historical positions for women.

CT: In another good feminist work, *Beyond Guilt* [2004], two Israeli women artists, **Ruti Sela** and **Maayan Amir**, shot a video in a Tel Aviv hotel room; the artists chose men from an Internet chat room to participate. One man, a former terrorist, spoke of his own shocking activities in the omnipresence of war. Presenting an interesting counterpoint to his words, the terrorist was posed as a reclining nude, as the woman was in *Madame Récamier*, referencing the female gaze.

That you included so many women artists' so many unfamiliar artists and those not traditional to the biennial gang—was laudable. One might say this was an activist gesture, but ultimately it could not override the monochromatic message that defined the entire exhibition. Art may aim at the political as the ultimate means of emancipation and absolute freedom from commodification—if such is still possible—but as brave in intent as this exhibition was, the propagandist predictability with which each artwork conformed routinely disappointed expectation.

The legendary Harald Szeemann boldly reimagined the potential of contemporary art as a vehicle to explore the poetry of everyday life, the politics of art, and the process of creation and more. And so, said Charles Esche, the co-curator for the 9th Istanbul in 2005, "*The political moment in art is not documentary or accusatory, but ambiguous and sensual; it ushers in an instability that enables viewers to effect a transformation in themselves and to imagine the world other than it is.*"¹

1 *On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators* by Carolee Thea (New York: D.A.P., 2009).