

Politics Hot Topic At Istanbul Biennial

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by Carolee Thea

Rarely has the clic that "context is everything" felt more true than in the wake of the terror attacks in the US. This was certainly the case at the 7th International Istanbul Biennial, which opened eleven days later on September 22. Curated by Yuko Hasegawa and titled "Egofugal," the biennial was already conceived around issues of individual and collective cultural practice and coexistence, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, the looming international crisis seemed to give questions of politics added urgency.

This was most immediately evident in the discussions organized for the biennial. On the panel entitled "Collective Intelligence," moderator Okwui Enwezor, artistic director for the upcoming Documenta11, suggested that a curator's job is not simply to describe the various crossings of disciplines and nationalities on the global stage, but also to situate artists and institutions, wherever they are from, within different epistemological frameworks. Turkish historian Rehaamuroglu, meanwhile, sought to explain how understanding differences within Islam can help renegotiate the understanding of the relation between East and West. In Sufism, he explained, the term jihad doesn't mean "holy war," but is rather a more mystical notion that describes things in the moment of formation or crystallization, something akin to the Western notion of formation.

Other panelists included German artist Sacha Haghghian, independent Taiwanese curator Manray Hsu, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Speaking about art in the exhibition, Hsu suggested that Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *Powerless Structures, Traces of Never Existing History*, 2001, a white cube half-sunken in the ground in front of the 1,600-year-old Hagia Eireni, exemplified a cultural politics dependent less on notions of continuity and traditionas embodied by churches and museumsthan upon temporary configurations that resist becoming fixed cultural icons. The work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, he added, tests the vulnerability of our communal and cultural meetings while marshaling our fantasies about such models of participation.

For the biennial, Tiravanija polled Istanbul citizens in local papers about films they would like to see, and presented them *Fight Club*, *Pulp Fiction*, and two Turkish films, *Eskiya* and *Vizontelein* an outdoor multiplex cinema. In speaking about the terror attacks, however, Tiravanija was skeptical that these kinds of collective cultural practices were a panacea to larger political problems. "The bombing of the World Trade Center gave us in the United States a taste of what goes on all over the world, and this reality is confounding," he said.

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