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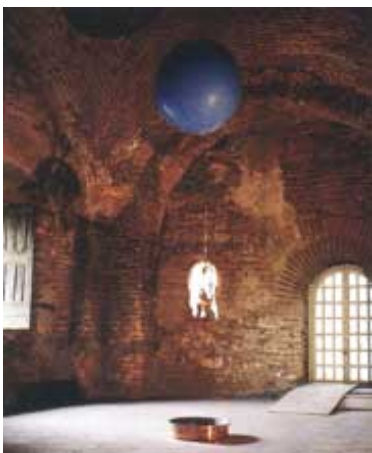
Chris Burden, *Nomadic Folly*, 2001. Metal, plastic, fabric, wooden platform, woven carpets, cushions, and sound, dimensions variable. Exterior view of installation at the 2001 Istanbul Biennial.



Interior view of installation at the 2001 Istanbul Biennial.



Leandro Erlich, *Neighbors*, 2001. Mixed-media installation at the 1995 Istanbul Biennial.



Füsün Onur, *Le's Meet at the Orient*, 1995. View of mixed-media installation at the 1995 Istanbul Biennial.

## Staging the Istanbul Biennial

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by Carolee Thea

As the shift from an industrial to a cultural economy takes place in urban environments all over the globe, the main sites for display and consumption, the cities are experiencing a changing relationship to the world, one that has obliged them to reconsider their own native cultural vitality, their art and architecture, their politics, and their relation to shifting values in commerce and to critiques of consumerism. Biennial exhibitions have become one of the vehicles for this discussion. Through representation, display, and spectacle, the mega-show attracts the international art world as well as the host community into a dialogue on urgent contemporary topics: globalism, nationalism, post-colonialism, the relationship of center to margins, the dissolution of borders, and the fate of Modernist ideals in a post-postmodern world.

The biennial in Istanbul has been among the most successful of its kind, and in the fall of 2001, the seventh edition was launched. Since 1987, the organizing entity, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Art (IFCA), has invited curators from around the world for the purpose of setting up an international visual art exchange. Over the last two-and-a-half millennia, the seaport known as Byzantium, Constantinople, and finally Istanbul has been the site of many of the decisive struggles of modernities between and among ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, Christianity, and Islam. More recently, like many countries, Turkey was a modern military dictatorship looking anxiously to segue into a neo-liberal economy integrated into a new and future world. Looking at the 7th Biennial in the context of the former exhibitions, we can see the evolution of the event and its relationship to rapidly changing times.

As in most biennials, political and world issues parallel the formal and personal concerns of the curators. The Istanbul Biennial has been curated by six individuals over the years: Beryl Madra, Vasif Kortun, Rene Block, Rosa Martinez, Paolo Colombo, and Yuko Hasegawa. Block, a German, who desired a real engagement with Istanbul, was motivated by the uneasy circumstances of the roughly two million Turks who live and work in Germany and by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey. Participating artists included Hale Tenger, Ilya Kabakov, Maria Eichorn, Lawrence Weiner, and Iskender Yediler. Martinez, a Barcelona-based curator, chose Istanbul's legendary romanticism and sensuality to celebrate ephemeral pleasures and mental and physical liberation. In the process, she set contemporary art against the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Over half of the artists were women who employed feminine-identified materials, such as fabric and flowers, and frequently focused on themes of sexuality and the female body. Artists included Kim Sooja, Laura Vickerson, Lin Tianmiao, and Shirin Neshat. The 6th Biennial, curated by Geneva-based Colombo, opened one month after a serious earthquake. Based on Colombo's scholarship in literature and language, the exhibition included many Turkish artists whose works echoed the intensity and the polyglot character of their people: for example, Seva Saglom's *Hitting* and Fusum Onur's *Opus 1*.

The most recent Istanbul Biennial, Yuko Hasegawa's "Egofugal," called for a collective approach to globalist ideas. Just as the 6th Biennial was overshadowed by the earthquake, the seventh opened 10 days after the 9/11 disaster. "Egofugal," a word coined by Hasegawa (chief curator at the Contemporary Art Museum in Kanazawa), derives from "ego the center of one's self and "fugal" from the Latin *fugere*, to flee-- diffusing away from center. She says that the term "suggests a completely new relation between individuals and the collective entity -- the individual and the space." Some pieces were conventional solo works, while others stressed collaboration, invited viewer participation, involved performance, or referred to the architecture. The show was influenced as much by East/West sensibilities as by "relational aesthetics" (a term used by French critic Nicholas Bourriaud), an institutional critique that addresses spaces colonized by mass media, spectacle, and the new economy and investigates how audience and artwork interact and how audiences relate to each other through the artwork. Biennial-goers, thinned considerably by the hazards of air travel after 9/11, found themselves on a



Isa Genzken, *New Buildings for Berlin, No. 1-8*, 2001. Glass, wood, metal, 210 x 50 x 50 cm. Installed at the 2001 Istanbul Biennial.



Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Powerless Structures: Traces of a Never Existing History*, 2001. Installed at the 2001 Istanbul Biennial.



Ana Maria Tavares, *Exit II (Rotterdam Lounge)*, 2001.



Matti Suuronen, *Casa Finlandia Futuro*, 1970. Polyester, 4 meters high.



Michael Lin, *Platform*. (front) Fabian Marraccchio, *IMF Paintant Mirror*. (sides)

treasure hunt for art through a rich mix of historic monuments that included the Cemberlitas Hammam (Istanbul's most famous bathhouse), the Beylerbeyi Palace, the Byzantine-era Yerebatan Cistern, and the Imperial Mint. Today, antique sites with specific histories are often employed to house contemporary and experimental art, as well as to expand the museum space. The revision of these histories is also a way of envisioning the democratization of art, challenging the elitism of the museum, and demonstrating culture's metaphoric clash with or embrace of modernity (utopias and dystopias). Since 1986, former stables in Vienna, the chapel of the Salpetriere hospital in Paris, the palace in the Retiro park in Madrid, the Arsenale in Venice, and many other sites have been enlisted to this end.

For "Egofugal," Hasegawa chose the Hagia Eirene, a fourth-century basilica built by Constantine the Great that has served over the years as arsenal, military museum, and performance venue, as the main site. Many of the works seem to have been chosen as reflective devices for the artgoer while pleading for seeing other points of view. Michael Lin's huge splashy Platform was flanked by Fabian Marcaccio's IMF Paintant Mirror, twin columnar apocalyptic and prophetic abstract paintings. Lin embellished his platform with an enlarged and classic Taiwanese floral motif strewn with camouflage-patterned pillows: showing extremes of decoration-- one inspired by nature, the other designed for protection --coalescing to create a forum, a function to be completed by visitors. Perhaps this "loungable" work echoed the church's history as a meeting place (the Second Ecumenical Council was held there in 381). While resting, one could check out disoriented biennial-goers, who donned helmets equipped with video cameras and visors that doubled as small screens. In this interactive work in which virtual reality and video games entwined, Mathieu Briand played with point-of-view, encouraging viewers to wonder about their own perceptions. Ana Maria Tavares's Exit 11, a precarious platform on a wheeled ladder placed in front of a huge mirror, obscured the apse and gave visitors a bird's-eye view of the architecture and exhibition. Isa Gentsken's *New Buildings for Berlin, No. 1-8*, created an archaeology of Modernist architecture with a kaleidoscope of her Constructivist buildings. The crossover of subjective experience and actual environment is the point of departure for her investigation of the formal categories of sculpture. Depending on the observer, these can be seen as models of skyscrapers; they form a miniature city through which we move. In Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's relational work, *33 Questions per Minute*, viewers typed questions into a computer program; they were then projected onto a narrow balcony, making you look outside of the object for the product. The questions, which received no answers, were also projected on small LCD screens, where they flashed sequentially.

In the famous bathhouse Cemberlitas Hammam (designed by Mimar Sinan, the great 16th-century mosque builder and Ottoman answer to Michelangelo), Slovakian artist Maja Bajevic staged *Women's work*, a performance by Bosnian refugees. Using sewing and washing, Bajevic gave voice to the silent and secondary victims of war. Several (clothed) women stood in the Turkish steam bath washing tattered fabrics embroidered with patriotic phrases from Tito's day. Female colleagues paid the entrance fee, disrobed into towels, observed each other and the performance, and, for a few extra lira, indulged in a full Turkish massage. The 18th-century Imperial Mint perfectly embodies the idea of a city within a city. It is situated inside the first yard of the Topkapi Palace in Sultanahmet. Leandro Erlich (Buenos Aires), Francis Alys (Mexico City), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Bangkok), Yang Fuk-Dong (Shanghai), and Rodney Graham (Canada) placed works in the niches and cubicles. In the yard, Chris Burden's sleeping platform, *Nomadic Folly*, was constructed under four umbrellas draped in silk, with woven carpets, cushions, and straw mats. Like Lin's platform, it gave visitors a place to rest or to talk. Also in the yard was the reconstructed Futuro house, an elliptical flying saucer designed by architect Matti Suuronen. The installation put into question the utopian ideals of 20th-century Modernism. Biennials are part innovative exhibition and part intercultural meeting ground. Two days of panel discussions in Istanbul were concerned with issues of coexistence and cultural practice. Panelist Manray Hsu suggested that works in the exhibition exemplified a cultural politics conceived less through continuity and tradition than through temporary configurations that resist becoming fixed icons, as well as investigating the models for the meeting of cultures.

Hasegawa's *Egofugality* is a model for globalist relations between self and other, the individual and the collective and the individual and space. "In times of unrest and social turmoil," she says, "art deals with values. In quieter times, art can afford to contribute to ornamentation and order. In times of violent psychic upheavals like our own, art is not an escape, not a way out of confusion and incertitude, but a peephole into the churning collective consciousness, the magma of reality in the making. Eagerly we continue to search for meaning."

Biennials as institutions, including the art and the discussions, have considerable resonance. The narratives of marginal and quasi-underground voices have become powerful expressions of a new generation of creative voices equipped with new strategies to confront reality at and after the millennium. Technology, as emphasized in other biennials, is the main engine of a globalized form of capitalism, but it also critiques consumerism and unmoors the traditional dominant coordinates by which we build identity and self. The biennial, always flawed, is one interesting mode for the 21st century artist, intellectual, and artophile to explore and share information.

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