

COMPLIMENTARY COPY NOT FOR RESALE

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[RLH]



'Market Or Die' Diego Bianchi
Performance at the Istanbul Biennale
(2013) (Courtesy Servet Dilber/
Istanbul Biennale)

ISTANBUL

LOOK AT ME NOW, MOM!

This autumn, despite a summer of turmoil and protest in Istanbul, the 13th Istanbul Biennale opened - while new fair ArtInternational also debuted, in the face of some formidable obstacles of its own. So, how did the two events defy circumstances? Bharti Lalwani was there to find out...

Following the wave of public protest this summer, the thirteenth Istanbul Biennale finally opened this September, running for only a month until October 20th at five different venues around the city: SALT, ARTER, Galata Greek Primary School, Antrepo and 5533, bringing together a selection of established and emerging artists from across Latin America, North Africa, the Middle East and Turkey. But how does one begin to contextualise a biennale, as well as the new fair, Art International, during such times of social unrest? How does one assess and re-evaluate the relevance of such, otherwise necessary platforms at a time when political, civic and corporate interests clashed?

'Mom, Am I A Barbarian?' is a terrifying yet introspective theme, borrowed from a quote by Turkish poet Lale Muldur's book of the same name. The word 'Barbarian' itself carries complex connotations of the 'other'. It reinforces notions of exclusion, opposition and in the context of global malcontent with authoritarian governments and corporate giants, the marginalisation of the citizen, relegated to unruly outcast. In her curatorial outline, Fulya Erdemci emphasised the relationship between art and public domain by originally intending to pick venues that represented urban transformation, such as Gezi

At the other end of the spectrum was the new ArtInternational fair which, although plagued with its own set of problems, kept the atmosphere upbeat. The modern and contemporary art fair, which adjusted its dates from a week earlier to 16th - 18th September to coincide with the Biennale, made an attempt to connect the two events while handling a legal face-off with rival art fair Contemporary Istanbul, which takes place in November and posters for which were already all around town. On September 10th, a court hearing took place between the organisers of Contemporary Istanbul (Ikon Fuarçılık) and Fiera Milano Interteks, over an alleged breach of copyright concerning the use of the name ArtInternational Istanbul. Pending a final legal decision, the fair had to, in the interim, remove the 'Istanbul' from its title. This meant that they had to bin all posters, pull down advertising and replace all press material with the truncated title. That would have been enough to fray the nerves of any art fair's debut, except that then another problem cropped up. Just two days before the vernissage, the Prime Minister had a wedding to attend at the same venue, which called for ArtInternational's entrance structure to come down, only to be put back in place the night before the preview - which also left the galleries well behind set-up schedule.

Halic Congress Centre is situated along the shores of the Golden Horn. In spite of its nondescript architecture, indoors, the convention centre made for an unusual booth layout.

A good mix of Turkish and international galleries, 62 in all, participated with some apprehension firstly due to the unravelling Gezi protests and adding to the general sense of unease, the overshadowing (and subsequently unfounded) threat of imminent US intervention in Syria. Back in June, I had checked in with Fair Director, Dyala Nusseibeh, who was evaluating if Art International would be actually able to go ahead, given the circumstances. 'I felt privileged to be working in an environment where, these very difficult circumstances were being dealt with using so much wit, humour music and art,' she gamely asserted. 'I think it opened many peoples' eyes to the strength and depth of the creative culture in Istanbul...'

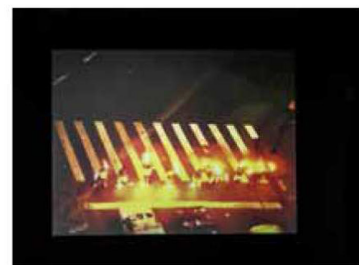
Without focusing on Gezi directly, one of the main objectives was to contextualise the incidents through platforms such as Artistic Projects and Conversations with non-profit spaces such as SALT, collectorspace, SPOT and the Delfina Foundation. The Delfina Foundation highlighted the newly-published book 'The Gaza

Kitchen', which looks at politics and histories through an unusual culinary lens and equally the talks at SPOT focused on art world personalities from the Middle East region which, naturally, has rather had its fair share of political challenges. The 'Alternatives' section, curated by Özkan Cangüven included 13 non-profits and were brought together to produce a dialogue.

Art fairs are (largely) about providing a networking platform, which lead to possibilities, even after the fair is over. Apart from its VIP programme, which connected galleries to collectors, Museum groups who attended the fair included representatives from Tate Modern, Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome, Centre Pompidou, La Maison Rouge and the Royal Academy of Arts. The fair also attracted international collectors such as Lekha-Anupam Poddar, Beatrice Bulgari, Hanan Sayed Worrell, HH Prince Fahad bin Bandar al Saud, Alistair Hicks, Ramin Salsali, Dan Cameron, Nanette Connelly, William Lim and the Thun Hohensteins. Turkish collectors present included Bulent Eczacibasi (Istanbul Modern), Ahmet Kocabiyik (Borusan) Guler and Sevil Sabanci (Sabanci Museum), Sevda Elgiz (Elgiz Museum), Fusun and Faruk Eczacibasi (SAHA), Cigdem Simavi, Omer Koç, Banu Carmikli, Oner Kocabeyoglu, Tansa Mermerci and Atilla and Billur Tacir.

London's Lisson Gallery benefitted directly from the Anish Kapoor exhibition at Sabanci Museum, which showed some remarkable works from the 1980s and early 1990s, after which point, Kapoor becomes synonymous with slick production. Meanwhile, Yvonne Lambert's Olivier Belot appeared jubilant at the gallery's decision to participate. But, big-name galleries aside, a number of dealers felt sales were slow, especially after the Preview. Just as well that the fair tied in with the biennale, as some shrewd galleries were showing works by artists who were also participating in that event. Hosfelt from San Francisco exhibited small watercolours by Shazia Sikander, .artSumer (Istanbul) showed works by Basim Magdy, PILOT (Istanbul) brought Halil Altindere and Ignacio Liprandi from Argentina had Tomas Espina.

ArtInternational looks set to become a fixture on the international circuit, but perhaps the real test of its calibre will be next year when there won't be a biennale - whether most of the galleries return to participate, or if more collectors visit, remains to be seen. **MBA**



(Left) 'Soil erg' Claire Pentecost (2012) (top) Video from the series 'Unus Mundus' 2005 Confront (Both courtesy Servet Dilber/Istanbul Biennale) (Below) Guests at the VIP brunch, Artinternational, September 15th 2013