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*A Coffee-House Conversation on the International Art World and its Exclusions (at the time of the 7th Istanbul Biennial)*  
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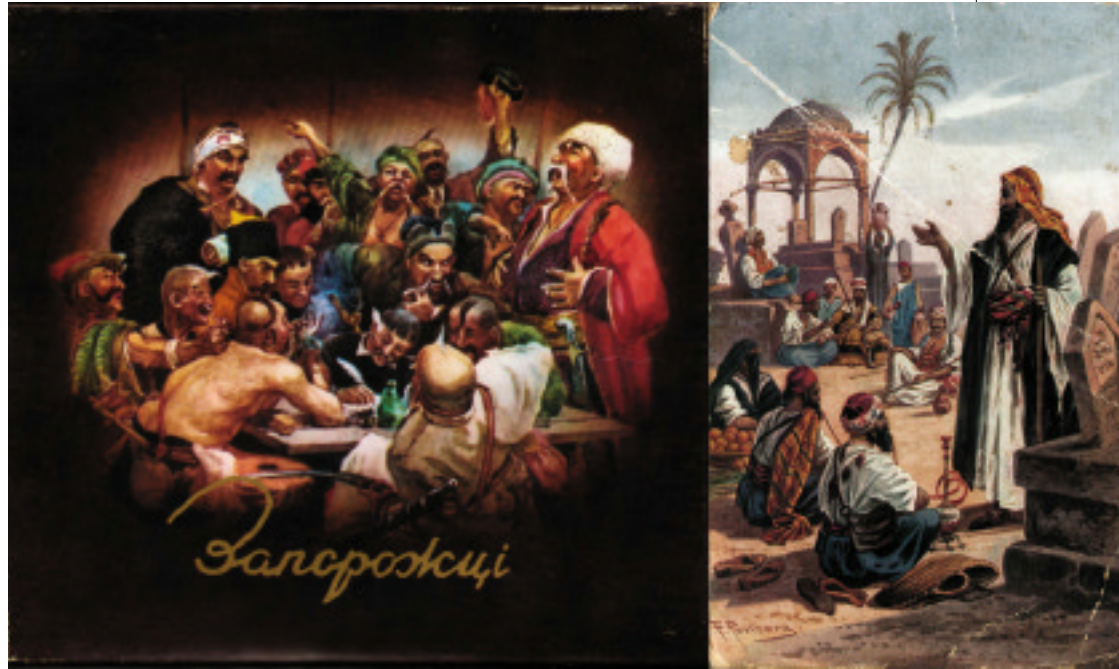
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# **A Coffee-House Conversation on the International Art World and its Exclusions (at the time of the 7th Istanbul Biennial)**



Hüseyin Alptekin, *Guardians of the Threshold* (1999)

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# Preface

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Kahve-Society

"... and what is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations'."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*.

<03>

*A Coffee-House Conversation on the International Art World and its Exclusions (at the time of the 7th Istanbul Biennial)* explores the cultural, economic and political conditions in which art is produced, and more importantly how art/culture is disseminated in an international context. This publication in this form (as an e-book) follows two seminars (or conversations), one in Istanbul (23rd September 2001) and one in London (11th November 2001), programmed to coincide with the 7th Istanbul Biennial (*Egofugal*, curated by Yuko Hasegawa, 22nd September - 17th November, 2001). The idea was to use the biennale as a point of departure to raise crucial contradictions about the reality of an internationalist art scene, asking: What are the conditions in which inclusion or exclusion from the International Art Scene is negotiated?

This is doubtless a familiar question, but one that cannot be simply dismissed as unfashionable or passé. Moreover, this collection of texts approaches the subject with reference to a highly charged and specific context of Istanbul that notoriously bridges Europe and Asia, or more precisely the West and Islam. This is all the more pertinent at this point in time, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. on 11th September, as well as subsequent terrorist attacks on Afghanistan, making on-going ideological

conflicts and hypocrisies all the more visible. In the contemporary visual arts, the ideological and geographical space of the 'Art World' has been variously divided by such inclusive terms as 'Multiculturalist' during the 1980s, in turn described as 'Internationalist' or even 'Transnationalist' in the 1990s - all perhaps serving to deflect attention from nationalism, race and religion. In whatever terminology it is disguised, it must be stressed that these tendencies and the ways in which cultural production is described always has symbolic significance. Although the relevance and significance of these terms has undoubtedly changed since their inception (and become commonplace in artspeak), there is little doubt they are determined by the irresistible forces of globalisation - that are clearly both economic and cultural forces as well as predicated on neo-liberal capitalism.

The project therefore asks: how are inclusion or exclusion negotiated in the age of globalisation? And furthermore: what is the currency for the fashionable range of (post-colonial) terms such as 'translation' and 'hybridity' within this highly focussed cultural context? Zeynep Celik introduces some of these post-colonial debates and terms within a historical framework. Her claim is that the current art scene cannot be understood without recourse to the relationship of Orientalism to modernity. This together with the contemporary global art market provides the necessary backdrop for an understanding of contemporary art production in Turkey. This view draws upon a particular view of modernity, as she cites Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (after Marx), suggesting that this is a view of modernity as one that embraces contradiction. Even if the role of irony is underplayed, as was suggested in the coffee-house discussions in fact, it might be argued that irony requires a thorough historicisation to avoid being dismissed as empty postmodern pastiche. Other problems arise if one simply dismisses the binary oppositions of modernity and orientalism as simply outmoded in both form and content (something an orthodox postmodern position would argue). The conversation implies that modernity contains a reflexive mechanism of (self) critique and operates in a dialectical relation.

<04>

To begin to respond to and extend these ideas, the first part of the book tries to examine the cultural context more fully. Turkey is a paradigmatic example of a culture both inside and outside Western modernity. Its identity as an Islamic and/or secular modern state, stimulates contradictions and conflict, reflecting internal politics as well as global processes. As an example of these kinds of contradictions, Turkey is both part of NATO and at the same time excluded from the EU because of its human rights abuses. It is simultaneously and contradictorily included and excluded from the West. Indeed, it is commonly argued that the

idea of the West comes largely from opposition to the Islamic and Arab World. How would one begin to think of modernisation, modernism and modernity in this context? Meltem Ahiska responds to this question as to the specific character of Turkish modernity through the idea of reification (a concept currently out of fashion). She describes the processes by which not only goods are commodified, but ideas and concepts too. It would be easy to extend this to include critical theory itself, and perhaps most importantly postcolonial theory in particular (as a heavily institutionalised discourse at this point in time). Certainly many Turkish intellectuals and art critics appear to rely broadly on the West and defer to its star system of academies, artists and critics. How much is current theoretical discourse, and so called radical politicised art practice, part of a legitimating strategy of the system itself?

<05> In the context of 'imagined communities' (Benedict Anderson), Kevin Robins raises similar problems with the terminology that we use to describe culture and identity, that he describes as rooted in nationalist discourse. However, the nation-state is also currently being undermined by other forces (such as the EU's drive towards ever more privatisation), and the state might therefore be seen as a flawed but potentially useful overall structure for the common good (herein lies the tension in the anti-capitalist movement too, between open network structures and Statism; between the possibility of new models and better versions of old models if you like). And yet, undoubtedly a new kind of sovereignty has emerged – what Hardt and Negri call 'Empire' (elsewhere) but that is more commonly described as globalisation. As an alternative, Kevin looks to various sources including the Ottoman Empire as pluralistic models, but in what ways is 'difference' being employed and how much is this a romanticised model? There is also perhaps a danger in using the same terminology that neo-liberalism has made so popular. In this connection, Slavoj Žižek has pointed to the failure of identity politics, that has served to distract from the oppressive operations of political economy. In the discussion in Istanbul, someone commented about the shift in attention from the economy to issues around culture. On the other hand, the opposite is true in the UK (at least in a general sense) – after the apparent failure of identity politics, there is a currency for engagement with the political economy (expressed in anti-capitalist movements, not least).

How do these debates impact upon art markets? Here, for instance, there might be a link to the role of biennales, and cultural activity in general, in allegedly regenerating an economy (but must economic regeneration be necessarily thought of in terms of the neo-liberal ideology?). Erden Kosova responded to these issues by demonstrating how contemporary Turkish artists

knowingly play with binaries, often employing irony and engaging fantasy, and the ways in which these strategies are different to those of current 'postcolonial' debates in the West. In his opinion, there is a quite different tradition at work here that is decidedly pre-modern. Even a fashionable engagement with popular culture, takes on a quite different interpretation in this context when a common sentiment would be to reject mass culture on the basis of it as an inherent expression of American imperialism. Whatever the knowing gestures of these artists, one is left wondering about effect in an art scene that is so reliant on private funding structures. How possible is it to build an alternative practice that takes account of class issues, secularism, economic regeneration and so on, especially in the context of Turkey where art is overtly bourgeois?

Building upon these issues, the second part of the book aims to investigate local and global dynamics of the 'international art world' as expressed in the spectacle of the biennale. Whilst the economic climate of London and Istanbul stand in contrast (especially at present), both indicate some of the conditions for inclusion and exclusion in the arts. Whilst London has no biennale as such (the Shoreditch Biennale is a relatively modest affair), the recent drive for social inclusion and the build up to the 'Year of Cultural Diversity' in the UK (2002) are of some relevance and rightly the subject of suspicion. <06> Indeed, how parochial is an international Biennale? Ann Huber-Sigwart traces the imperialist history of large-scale exhibitions in order to understand the contemporary form of the biennial; she describes this as 'somewhere between a carnival and a museum'. The link to imperialist history is crucial to understanding some of the strategies that have been employed by curators in recent attempts to disavow this history and to try to avoid the inherent problems of nationalism for instance (swapping pavilions and such like).

The Istanbul Biennial attracts the great and the good from around the world, and yet has questionable impact on the local art scene. Hüseyin Alpetkin presented a local intervention in the context of what he describes as 'biennial hysteria'. As an alternative model, he outlines *The Sea Elephant Travel Agency* that articulates regional networks, particularly in the Balkans and Black Sea countries. Furthermore, he comments upon the expectation in discussions such as this to typecast artists, to focus on identity issues and 'Turkishness' and the well-worn oppositions of the West and Orientalism, asking how we might conceive of a more local, inclusive, collaborative, supportive agenda for artistic production. As a curator (and former curator of the Istanbul Biennial itself), Vasif Kortun similarly suggests alternative models using a longer time frame,

proposing a distributed local model that engages local networks and active institutions (not using 'dead' ones as is often the case - the biennial takes place in tourist sites not conventionally used for art presentations). The question remains how to best conceive of different models that don't simply sound like the soundbites of neo-liberal democracies again (one such example might be to 'think global, act local'). Art might be a site of questioning and resistance, but for the most part seems to be more complicit, heavily compromised by the forces of neo-liberalism (for instance, by being sponsored by a bank). Is an oppositional art possible under such conditions in a context like Turkey, or anywhere for that matter? If so, what form would its exhibition take? Is it possible to focus attention



productively on the binary of inclusion/exclusion?

As much as we might be critical of the form of biennales, might we be critical of the form of this debate also? It is common to have so-called critical symposia and critical texts as part of the biennale programme, so is this really any different? The idea was to foreground the biennale 'spectacle' by keeping this project relatively low-key, by pointing to issues of social/cultural exclusion (in the UK, currently argued in the positive mode of inclusion without the required criticality of dialectical tension). Who is included or excluded from the debate itself or receiving this set of texts? As an e-book, it

is freely available if only to those with access to an internet connection. With these inevitable problems in mind, we have tried to frame/cast the issues slightly differently. This is expressed partly in our collective name Kahve-Society ('Kahve' is the word for coffee and café in Turkish) - the historical reference to cafés as social spaces that encourage conversation and debate - as well as applying the title itself *A Coffee-house conversation...* (the first of many events that use this introductory phrase). All this builds upon the conceit that the Coffee-House seems to be a perfect analogy for the times, demonstrating issues over the privatisation of public space, the nature of democracy, the ethics of globalisation, and the mixed realities of real and virtual space. Markman Ellis provides more



detail on this history of the coffee-house as a discursive model. Despite the current fashion for coffee-bars and cafés, there seems to be a cultural reluctance to come together, make argument and discuss politics in actual space. Compared to early coffee-houses, have media technologies and symposia in galleries and the like, simply served to limit the function of the public sphere? Neo-liberal democracies suggest open debate is possible, yet regulate and control the spaces in which it might take place. Given the significance of this history, what are the issues around public space and regulation in the context of this publication and subsequent conversations?

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# An introduction to the coffee-house: a discursive model

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Markman Ellis

<09> **T**hat coffee and conversation go together is now a commonplace that does not need repeating. Advertisements for coffee underline the associations coffee has with thinking and with talking; a coffee break allows you to step back from your work and reflect on your progress or the lack of it, or again, coffee provides the occasion for friends to gather and conversation to begin. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the practice of drinking coffee is of comparatively recent origin: it goes back only 350 years in Northern Europe, and only another century or so in Ottoman Istanbul. Before this time, coffee was unknown: neither ancient Rome nor the London of Shakespeare's time had ever tasted the drink. The associations that we have of coffee and conversation are then distinctively modern.

## Historical notes: Coffee-houses in Istanbul and London

Coffee-houses were unknown in Istanbul before the middle of the sixteenth century. According to the Turkish historian Ibrahim-I Peçevi, who wrote in about 1635, the first coffee house was opened by 'two Men, nam'd *Schems* and *Hekim*, the one from *Damascus*, the other from *Aleppo*' in the year 962 in the Islamic calendar (1554/55), during the reign of Soleyman the Magnificent [Süleyman I, 1520-1566]. [1] As translated by the eighteenth-century English historian James Douglas, Peçevi states that

their 'Coffee-House' was situated near the bustling *kapan* or mart near the port and the shops around the Rustem Pasa mosque, and was 'furnish'd with very neat Couches and Carpets, on which they receiv'd their Company'. Schems and Hekem offered their coffee at 'an easy Charge': Peçevi reports that 'a Dish of Coffee cost but an *Aspre*', which Douglas reckoned was 'not an Halfpenny of *English Money*'.

The first coffee-house in London opened just under a century later, in 1652, by a Greek Orthodox servant called Pasqua Rosee, in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill, in the centre of the financial district of the City of London. It was sponsored by merchants from the Levant Company, the trading house that organised and regulated trade with the Ottoman Empire. These merchants had become accustomed to drinking coffee during their extended residences in the Company 'Factories' in the ottoman cities of Istanbul, Izmir and Halep (or Constantinople, Smyrna and Aleppo as they knew them). The coffee-house found a ready public in the disputatious political climate of the English Commonwealth, and survived to prosper after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. By 1708, there were a very large number of coffee-houses in London and the provincial cities (as many as five or six hundred in London and Westminster alone). [2] From the first, these early coffee houses were associated with a certain kind of social interaction – what sociologists might call a sociability – which they as businesses went out of their way to cultivate. <10> The distinctive features of coffee-house sociability were egalitarianism, congeniality and conversation. Although there were important differences between the coffee-houses of Istanbul and London, there were also some intriguing similarities, including the manifestation of this distinctive sociability.

The first coffee-house customers of Constantinople, Peçevi relates, 'consisted most of studious Persons, Lovers of Chess, Trictrac [an early form of backgammon], and other sedentary

[1] See Ibrahim Peçevi, *Tarih-i Peçevi*, 2 vols (Istanbul, 1874-67). The translation quoted here is James Douglas, *A Supplement to the Description of the Coffee-Tree* (London: Thomas Woodward, 1727), pp. 19-21. For a modern translation Bernard Lewis, *Istanbul and the Civilisation of the Ottoman Empire* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), pp. 132-33. The best account of the Ottoman coffee-house and its culture is Ralph Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: the Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985).

[2] The best general account of the English coffee-house are Edward Forbes Robinson, *The Early History of Coffee Houses in England*, with some account of the first use of coffee and a bibliography of the subject (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1893) but see also Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: a history of the coffee-houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

Diversions; and as the generality of the Turks came soon to relish this sort of Meeting-Places, call'd in their Language *Cahveh Kaneh*, the number of them multiplied insensibly.' From the first, then, the *Cahveh Kaneh* were places in which customers found as much society as coffee. 'They look'd upon them as very proper to make acquaintances in, as well as to refresh and entertain themselves.... Young people near the end of their publick Studies; such as were ready to enter upon publick Posts; *Cadhis* out of Place, who were at *Constantinople* making Interest to be restor'd, or asking for new employments; the *Muderis*, or Professors of Law, and other Sciences; and, in fine, Persons of all Ranks flocked to them. At length even the Officers of the *Seraglio*, the *Pathas*, and others of the first Quality, were seen to go openly to the Coffee House; and as this serv'd to increase the Reputation, so it multiplied the number of them to too great an Excess.' [3] William Biddulph, chaplain to the English Levant Company Factory at Aleppo (in Syria) in the first decade of the seventeenth century, noted in a letter written published in 1609 that 'Their *Coffa* houses are more common than Ale-houses in England; ... being full of idle and Ale-house talke while they are amongst themselves drinking of [the coffee]: if there be any news, it is talked of there.' [4] As Biddulph observes, coffee-houses are characterised most notably by their conversation.



The London coffee-house was similarly built upon principles of friendly and discursive sociability. The coffee-houses, a contemporary thought, were the 'most agreeable things in *London*'. [5] A French traveller, Henri Misson, in London in 1698, remarked that the 'Coffee-Houses, which are very numerous in London, are extremely convenient.

You have all manner of news there; you have a good Fire, which you may sit by as long as you please; you have a Dish of Coffee; you meet your Friends for the transaction of Business, and all for a penny, if you don't care to spend more.' [6] Contemporary images of coffee-houses, such as the one reproduced here, from

[3] Douglas, *Supplement*, pp. 19-21.

[4] William Biddulph, 'A Letter written from Aleppo in Syria Comagena', in Theophilus Lavender, *Travels of certaine Englishmen into Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythinia, Thracia, and to the Black Sea* (London: Th. Haveland for W. Aspley, 1609), pp. 31-85. p. 66.

[5] Anthony Hilliar, *A Brief and Merry History of Great Britain, Containing an Account of the Religions, Customs, Manners, Humours, Characters, Caprice, Contrasts, Foibles, Factions &c., of the People. Written originally in Arabic by Ali-Mohammed Hadgi* (London: J. Roberts, J. Shuckburgh, J. Penn and J. Jackson), p. 22.

[6] Henri Misson de Valberg, trans. Ozell, *Memoirs and Observations in his Travels over England* (London: D. Browne et al, 1719), pp. 39-40.

*A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee* (1674) or *A London Coffee House* (c. 1705, British Museum), [7] both by an unknown artists, demonstrate the physical architecture of a typical coffeehouse of the early eighteenth century. The coffee-room was dominated by a long central table, around which the customers assembled. The men depicted in the surviving images are shown drinking coffee, of course, but also smoking their pipes, reading news-sheets and books, writing in their note-books and staring off into space. Those activities depicted are then supplemented by the implication that these men are talking and debating, about issues of note in politics, commerce and the social world (hence the news-sheets). Around the assembled clientele gather the coffee-boys or waiters, bringing pots of coffee and pipes of tobacco to the table. A large cauldron of coffee is set over the fire in the background, with the blackened pots ranged in front. Behind a cubicle or bar sits the manager of the room: a woman dressed in an outlandish headdress. The coffee-woman – a typical sight in most coffee-houses – took care of the management and daily operation of the business: her conversation was also a valued part of the sociability of the business. In this way, the space of the coffee-house confirmed and established the kinds of sociability found there. Beyond coffee, then, the central activity of the coffee-house is discussion, conversation, gossip and talk. [8]

<12>

Coffee-houses occasioned much excitement amongst writers – satirists especially – in the Restoration and early eighteenth century. A great many texts were produced discussing the effects of coffee and kinds of social encounters experienced in the coffee-house. [9] A glimpse of the kind of social life suggested by the coffee house from the following short, and ironic, poem, called 'The RULES and ORDERS of the Coffee-House' published on the broadsheet called *A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing Most Diseases incident to Humane Bodies*.

[7] 'A Coffee-House Scene', *British Museum Quarterly*, 6: 2 (1931/32), pp. 43-44.

[8] Markman Ellis, 'The coffee-women, The Spectator and the public sphere in the early-eighteenth century', in *Women and the Public Sphere*, ed. Elizabeth Eger and Charlotte Grant, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[9] See Robinson, *Early History*; or Steven Pincus's 'Coffee Politicians Does Great': Coffee-Houses and Restoration Political Culture,' *Journal of Modern History*, 67, (1995), 807-34.

## The RULES and ORDERS of the Coffee-House

*Enter Sirs freely, But first if you please,  
Peruse our Civil-Orders, which are these.*

First, Gentry, Tradesmen, all are welcome hither,  
And may without Affront sit down Together:  
Pre-eminence of Place, none here should Mind,  
But take the next fit Seat that he can find:  
Nor need any, if Finer Persons come,  
Rise up for to assigne to them his Room;  
To limit mens expence, we think not fair,  
But let him forfeit Twelve-pence that shall Swear:  
He that shall any Quarrel here begin,  
Shall give each Man a Dish t' Atone the Sin;  
And so shall He, whose Complements extend  
So far to drink in COFFEE to his friend;  
Let Noise of loud Disputes be quite forborn,  
No Maudlin Lovers here in Corners Mourn,  
But all be Brisk, and Talk, but not too much  
On Sacred things, Let none Presume to touch,  
Nor profane Scripture, or sawcily wrong  
Affairs of State with an Irreverent Tongue:  
Let Mirth be Innocent, and each Man see,  
That all his Jests without Reflection be;  
To keep the House more Quiet, and from Blame,  
<13> We Banish hence Cards, Dice, and every game:  
Nor can allow of Wagers, that Exceed  
Five shillings, which oft-times much Trouble Breed;  
Let all that's lost, or forfeited, be spent  
In such Good Liquour as the House does vent,  
And Customers endeavour to their Powers,  
For to observe still seasonable Howers.  
Lastly let each Man what he calls for Pay,  
And so you're welcome to come every day. [10]

From the cauldron of such satires, Augustan literary culture developed a great regard for the principles of urbane sociability encountered in the coffee house. [11] Moralists, reformers and historians from Addison and Steele's *Spectator* to Macaulay's *History of England* lauded the coffee-house as the paradigmatic place of urban refinement. In recent years, this

[10] *A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing Most Diseases incident to Humane Bodies* (London: Paul Greenwood, 1674).

[11] Lawrence Klein, 'Coffeehouse Civility, 1660-1714: an aspect of post-courtly culture in England', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 59, 1, (1997), pp. 30-51.

construction of the coffee-house has been co-opted by multinational coffee chains such as Starbucks, and eulogised by the conservative American community-values theorist Ray Oldenburg. [12] Nonetheless, despite these recent re-appropriations, the sociability of the coffee-house is worth examining in more detail. There were no regulations or rules governing the coffee-houses (those quoted above are an ironic satire on the regulation of behaviour) – but it is clear that there was a kind of implicit regulation that had the effect of channelling discourse in the coffee-house. [13] The primary form of regulation was the expectation of other customers. A customer, when entering a coffee-house, might expect himself to behave differently to the way he behaved when he entered a tavern: a contrast that drinking the primary product only exacerbated (beer made you loud, rowdy and boisterous, while coffee made you intense and talkative). The expected set of discursive practices are reproduced by the coffee-house customers in their own behaviour, immanent rather than explicit, customary rather than constitutional.

## Twelve principles of coffee house conversation

- (i) Openness of the discussion to all comers. It is axiomatic that no one be excluded from the discussion by any quality they bring with them from outside such as status, wealth, power, strength or arms. As such, all speakers are considered equal within the coffee-house (there is an erasure of hierarchy). <14>
- (ii) While entry is open to all, all who enter agree to behave by the discursive rules of the house.
- (iii) The discursive economy of the coffee-house is inclusive: so that all opinions might be heard, even those which are diametrically opposed, unfashionable, unlikely to be persuasive.
- (iv) Nonetheless, debate is not unregulated, but should be rational, critical, skeptical, polite, calm and reasoned.
- (v) Politeness is not observed for the sake of a social propriety that exists outside the coffee-house, but in order for the discussion to be free and open. No-one to be brow-beaten by others into silence. Voices should not be raised. Incendiary rhetoric should be avoided. Each person should be allowed to speak, each person

[12] Howard Schultz, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbuck's Built a Company One Cup at a Time* (New York: Hyperion, 1997); Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe, 1998).

[13] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, 'The Grotesque Body and the Smithfield Muse: Authorship in the Eighteenth Century' in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 80-118.



- should only speak for an appropriate time, limiting themselves to allow for the inclusion of other voices.
- (vi) That the discussion is rational, reasoned skeptical and critical implies that the principles of empirical observation of the eyewitness, of presentation of evidence, and of forensic argument will be adopted – rather than dogmatism, arguments from faith, or attacks on the character of other speakers.
  - (vii) Nonetheless, the discussion should be interesting, relevant, curious, focussed and interesting. Digression is not tolerated but amplification is. Contributors are encouraged to use interesting and diverting examples, but only when they are instructive.
  - (viii) Topics should matter: the issues debated should be ones of topical concern, on issues that engage with important debates of the day, or are informed by important principles.
  - (ix) That the coffee-drinkers have opinions about topics that matter is important in forming public opinion or debate: that is, the opinion of individuals matters in the creation of public opinion.
  - (x) Nonetheless, individual's should give way in the face of superior argument or better information (adopting a principle of anti-dogmatism and anti-relativism).
  - <15> (xi) Gossip and chit-chat should be eschewed, while satire and lampoon are permitted. Conversational commonplaces and irrelevant or inconsequential topics are not tolerated. Idleness (lurking), gabbling, incoherency, irrationality are rejected.
  - (xii) These rules are immanent, unstated, ubiquitous, omnipotent and unchallengeable.

These rules I have elaborated in some detail, much of which is worth taking with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, what I want to point to here is how the coffee-house established an unstated set of relational group dynamics which allowed it to establish and confirm what it did best, which was to create a distinct sociability. In the absence of explicit rules, it was able to define a fluid group management process, and use it to encourage participation in the congenial and conversational world of the coffee-house sociability. This is a lesson that we might apply also to other and similar open-context discussions and the sites or institutions that support them. Some places are particularly associated with discussion of this kind: places where people meet, accidentally or occasionally, where they meet and pass the time undisturbed or are able to pass the time together. A good example would be the kinds of discursive communities that have developed in usenet or email discussion lists on the internet. [14] Anthropologists and sociologists have also offered extended studies of the gossip communities that

develop around the world, including the well or watering hole in Africa, [15] the Tofu business in Japan, [16] or the barbershop in Spain. [17]

### Coffee-house sociability and the public sphere

One of the reasons to be interested in the coffee-house is its privileged status in the work of a distinguished group of late-twentieth century sociologists and political philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas, Peter Stallybrass, Richard Sennett, Terry Eagleton. In the accounts by these philosophers and sociologists, the social life of the coffee-house in the early eighteenth century seems to be a paradigm or model of the important transformations in English society in this period. As outlined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in his early work on the historical foundations of civil society called *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (written in 1962 but not translated into English until 1989), [18] innovative urban public spaces and institutions allowed the construction of what he has famously called the 'bourgeois public sphere'. In Habermas's estimation the public sphere is a distinctive feature of modern society (and as such, delineating its origins in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century helps us understand how civil society operates in the modern era). The public sphere, despite its name, takes place in private, or in certain liminal regions on the borders of the public and private. In this way, the coffee-house is a paradigmatic example, because in it, individual people come together in a space that is intimate and thus private, but also open, and thus public. Habermas notes an array of physical places that share this kind of 'architecture of sociability', such as theatres, debating rooms, and coffee-houses, but also notes the significance of the new infrastructure of social communication, such as the journalistic press, circulating libraries, and the post office. In such places people participate in 'rational-critical discussion', which is to say, rational and critical discussion. From such discussions, individuals are lead to the formulation of a rational, consensual sense of judgement, so

[14] Michele Tepper, 'Usenet Communities and the Cultural Politics of Information' in David Porter, *Internet Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39-54.

[15] A. L. Epstein, 'The Network and Social Organisation', *Rhodes-Livingston Institute Journal*, 29, (1961), p. 44.

[16] J. F. Embree, *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* (Chicago, 1939), p. 53.

[17] D. Gilmore, 'Varieties of Gossip in a Spanish Rural Community', *Ethnology*, 17, (1978), p. 91.

[18] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). See also Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1992).

that they might judge of the effect of actions or opinions on their own private interests but also the public good. The public, in Habermas, are either a discursive concept expressing a normative ideal, or as an actually existing social reality. [19] As a 'normative ideal', the public sphere exists as a concept which is effectually accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime: Habermas talks about how the public sphere might be constructed by individuals communicating in the world of letters (by reading, say, an individual might entertain a discussion in a coffee-house of the mind).

In Habermas's account, the public sphere is founded in its simple accessibility to individuals, who come together without hierarchy in an equality of debate. Through their discussions, first of literature, and later of news and politics, the individuals who assemble in the coffee-house come to form a new public culture. Habermas sees the new moral essays and literary criticism associated with periodicals like *The Spectator* as central to this discursivity. The coffee-house encourages such discussion through its institutional and spatial character, by facilitating a social interaction that disregarded status, fostered a toleration of a broad range of discussion, and was accessible to all. In this account, then, the coffee-house sociability achieves a number of important things: it encourages rational public debate on topics that matter between persons of different social status and wealth. These achievements are central to Habermas's model of the operation of the public sphere in civil society.

#### Exclusionary mechanisms

Before leaving this model of polite discussion, however, it would be well to remind ourselves of some of the many limitations of the coffee-house model. Habermas argued that the coffee-house proposed 'a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing equality of status, disregarded status altogether' [20] - but I think this is a polite fiction, local and impermanent, as hierarchy was translated into new forms. The most notable instance of this problem is shown by the fact that the early coffee-house was not open to women in the same way as it was to men. [21] While women were not explicitly barred from the coffee-house, the regime of the coffee-house made their presence uncomfortable or untenable. Recent research has suggested that that some women did go to coffee-houses: there is

[19] Keith Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France', in Calhoun, pp. 181-211.

[20] Habermas, 'Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', p. 36.

[21] Emma J. Clery, 'Women, Publicity and the Coffee-House Myth', *Women: a cultural review*, 2: 2 (1991), pp. [168]-77.

certainly evidence that some aristocratic women did venture there (perhaps their high status overcame objections). But virtuous women of the middle station who wished to be thought well of would not go to the coffee-house. However, there were, as the image suggests, women in the coffee-house: those who were there as serving staff or employees. Many, if not most, coffee-houses had women serving staff (the coffee-woman behind her bar) - some were even owned by women (especially widows). In short, there were women in the coffee-house, but only under special circumstances, and not as equals. This reminds us that the much vaunted equality of the coffee-house only applied to its customers: and the coffee room was subject to important social divisions and boundaries. Images of the coffee-house record two significant hierarchies: one of status dividing the workers from the customers, and another of gender, excluding all women but the coffee-woman from the coffee-room. The spatial organisation of the room reinforces the hierarchical and gendered structure of the coffee-house: the boys inhabit the space around the table, while the woman proprietor is separated off from the customers in her little booth. It isn't that they are powerless here, just that their power is of a different quality. It isn't that status is disregarded altogether in the coffee house, but rather, that status is codified in new and unperceivable forms. [22] Similarly, the coffee house sociability habitually disregarded submerged costs of their beverage: such as the slaves and agricultural labourers who harvested the coffee beans and sugar in the colonies and Arabia. In this way, even a space that considered itself radical precisely because it was egalitarian, nonetheless established a space which surreptitiously re-encoded forms of hierarchy and prejudice without itself knowing it was doing so.

In this way, then, open-context discussion has more invidious exclusionary mechanisms. This is not the place, probably, to go into them in great detail. But satires on coffee-houses in the eighteenth century often depended upon developing the coherence of different interest groups within the coffee-house, and then playing them off against each other, especially using the foil of an ingenuous outsider (typically from the country, and thus unused to the urbane sophistications of the city). This kind of satire depends on the ignorance of the uninitiated or new-bee. By making fun of the new-bee, such humour we could be seen as an exclusionary mechanism: it suggests ways in which the uninitiated might get it wrong. Other readings might suggest, rather, that new-bee humour has a dual role, not only in forging group identity within the coffee-house, but also advertising the processes and possibilities of new-bee initiation and incorporation into the group. The techniques of

[22] Ellis, 'The coffee-women', p. 22.

group management of the coffee-house or usenet discussion group thus do not have an explicit set of regulations, but rather an un-codified and implicit set of responses, a 'cooperative anarchy' as it is sometimes referred to. [23] Users - whether conversational drinkers in the coffee-house or contributors to internet discussion lists or discussants in a symposium - acquire the knowledge of how the group manages itself by an almost organic or life-like process (a sociology or anthropology of relational community identities).

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[23] Tepper, 'Usenet Communities', p. 42.



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"Köçekli Doğu Kahvehanesi", Türk minyatürü, suluboya, 16. /17. yüzyıl.

# Orientalism and modernity: introduction to conversations

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Zeynep Çelik

<21> **A**s a brief introduction to today's discussion, I will attempt to draw the historic background for the current trends in artistic production in Turkey in reference to Orientalism and modernity. Orientalism and modernity have an intertwined past that goes back to the last decades of the nineteenth century and that has taken innumerable twists and turns over the past one hundred years or so. Within the next ten minutes or so, my goal is to provide a modest glimpse into an enormously complicated cultural scene.

Production of 'Western' (hence 'modern') art forms in Turkey, an outcome of a series of political, economic, and societal transformations, corresponds to the highlight of Orientalism. In their dealings with the Orientalist discourse, Ottoman intellectuals were also coming to terms with modernism. I would argue that their critique of Orientalism also embodied a critique of modernity and, furthermore, offered a redefinition of modernity, one that was taken out of the monopoly of the 'West.' Let me quickly broad brush the Istanbul scene c. 1900.

Orientalism in architecture ranged from the dream-like to the practical. It included spectacularly eclectic 'Islamic' gateways to otherwise simple neo-classical buildings (such as the Military Barracks in Taksim and the main gate of the Ministry of War, now Istanbul University), ambitious bridge projects over

the Bosphorus (with small mosque-like structures terminating its monumental pylons), and, fittingly, the Terminus of the Orient Express. European architects may have found in Istanbul the ultimate stage for their fantasies, but the response from the Ottoman side was cautious and revisionist. Skeptical of the universalisation brought by imported buildings in European styles and critical of the pastiche quality of the neo-Islamic style, Ottoman architects began a search for a learned synthesis between the historic heritage and European trends. As early as 1873, an architectural treatise titled *Usul-u Mimari-i Osmani* (Ottoman Style Architecture) revisited the Ottoman monuments to outline their design principles and to highlight their superior qualities for modern architects. It was argued, for example, that there were three Ottoman orders that neatly corresponded to the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, and that they should be used in new buildings as 'they presented more subtlety than the vulgarly known classical orders.' Award-winning student projects at the School of Fine Arts combined Beaux-Arts principles with elements derived from Ottoman architecture.

In painting, the case of Osman Hamdi is the most familiar. Preoccupied with the obsessions and fallacies of the Orientalist representations, he took on the project of 'correcting' the clichés by using the techniques and the repertory of Orientalist artists themselves. Consider, for example, Jean-Léon Gérôme's irrational and fanatic scenes of prayer Islam and Osman Hamdi's rational theologians, with books in their hands and immersed in discussions. Or, the ever-reclining 'odalisque,' depicted from Ingres to Matisse, and Osman Hamdi's ultimate response: *Girl Reading* (and stretched out on a sofa)... <22>

The generic 'odalisque' was seen as a particularly disturbing misrepresentation of Ottoman women. Novelist and essayist Ahmed Mithad captured the Ingresque formula, which was also being challenged by Osman Hamdi's depictions of life at home:

'This lovable person lies negligently on a sofa. One of her slippers, embroidered with pearls, is on the floor, while the other is on the tip of her toes. Since her garments are intended to ornament, rather than to conceal [her body], her legs dangling from the sofa are half-naked and her belly and breasts are covered by fabrics as thin as a dream. ... In her mouth is the black end of the pipe of a narghile, curving like a snake... A black servant fans her... This is the Eastern woman Europe depicted until now... It is assumed that this body is not the mistress of her house, the wife of her husband, and the mother of her children, but only a servant to the pleasures of the man who owns the house. What a misconception!'

In her important book, *Nisvan-i Islam (Women of Islam, 1892)*,

Fatma Aliye Hanim targeted the European misunderstanding of women in Islamic societies. In three imaginary scenarios she constructed between French women and herself taking place at her home, she addressed a series of key themes, including polygamy, family life, gender segregation, concubines, covering up (tesettür), and related to that, fashion. On the latter, the author expressed her own flexible and moderate attitude: 'I get dressed alaturka or alafanga depending on what I feel like,' she wrote, at the same time criticising both of the extreme positions among the Ottoman ladies.

A collection of photography albums, presented by Sultan Abdülhamid II to the Library of Congress in 1893, also dedicated a large section to women's issues, specifically to their education. Photograph after photograph showed serious schoolgirls, holding onto their books and diplomas, dressed in 'modern' costumes, and looking straight at the camera. They are the younger sisters of Osman Hamdi's *Girl Reading*.

Abdülhamid albums had a clear agenda: to redraw the image of the empire as a modern one. They included photographs of the new architecture, for example, palace interiors that stood in diametric opposition to the imagined serais of Orientalist constructions. They showed factories and educational institutions of all levels, from University buildings to elementary schools, built in 'European' architectural styles. They emphasised commitment to learning and science with views of libraries (showing enlightened religious men, paralleling Osman Hamdi's theologians), and of medical students posing with a cadaver they had dissected.

One hundred years later, the legacy of the Orientalist discourse still dominates Turkish cultural productions to a great extent, but the heady issues that preoccupied the Ottoman intellectuals and artists have turned into tired clichés. At the same time, the relationship to Orientalism seems to have shifted: the critique is now replaced by a submission – albeit articulated in trendy words and form. Granted that this owes a great deal to the 'globalisation' of the art scene, it is intriguing to follow the persistency of the old power structures at work today. To refer to a few examples, a Turkish woman writer, brought up in the secularised Istanbul of the 1950s and 60s, educated in the American College for Girls here, and living in the States, opens her book with the titillating sentences:

'I was born in a konak, the harem of a pasha. I grew up in Turkey, listening to stories and songs that could easily have come from the One Thousand and One Nights. People around me often whispered things about harems...'

A more recent novel by the same author takes a French romantic

dreamer from the courts of the Second Empire to the 'sultan's hushed harem,' in quest of his search for the 'ivory skinned beauty ... of his dreams.'

On the art scene, a Turkish artist, again a product of the ACG in Istanbul now living in New York, describes her work as a confrontation between the 'seemingly impossible dichotomies like the veil and veiled nudity, blasphemy and subjective morality, formalistic faith and mystical reverence.'

Another Turkish artist, whose exhibition 'Acrobats' just opened in New York, describes his involvement with 'his cultural history and tradition' in the following words: 'I come from the East and I love the traditional arts of Turkey like calligraphy, marbles, ceramics, and especially miniatures. I try to give a contemporary expression to them. Before the age of information brought entertainment to the home, acrobatic games were an essential form of entertainment. They have a significant place in the Turkish miniature tradition. In my work, I try to bring this traditional visual experience to the modern world.'

The 'otherness' that is emphasised in such statements is a blatant response to the demand put on 'non-Western' artists by the Western markets. As has been argued in the pages of *Third Text* for quite some time now, there is an 'institutional space' that is exclusively reserved for non-Western artists in Europe and North America. This is the only space that the non-Western artist can occupy within the structures of modernism. It has become quite common to see an artist suddenly turn 'authentic' or 'hybrid' to cater to the market. Most famously, we witnessed it in the work of Shirin Neshat, whose last video installation on women of Islam, for example, replayed every Orientalist cliché.

Today's porous boundaries facilitate the transfer of the norms established in the 'centres' to places like Turkey, revalorising the nineteenth century power structures, but also turning 'otherness' into the norm.

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# The 'thing' of modernity: its circulation and appropriation

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Meltem Ahiska

<25> **T**he conversation in Istanbul focused on the binary opposition of East and West. There were differing views and ways of conceptualisation yet there seemed to be an agreement on the need to go beyond binary oppositions or to resist existing divisions. Young Turkish artists who participated in the Istanbul Biennial this year make a similar point in a newspaper interview. Commenting on the concept of the present Istanbul Biennial, Leyla Gediz raises the question whether it would be possible someday to be liberated from the idea of Istanbul being a bridge between the East and the West: 'I hope this is the last Biennial that oscillates between East and West' she says. Omer Ali Kazma agrees, and says: 'Why can't we just have another concept for Biennial, such as the sea, just the sea?'

These are valuable questions. However, one must see that the significations of East and West still have their captivating spell even in critical approaches. They are not easily unmasked let alone undone in good intentions or in theory. For example, the ongoing war and the political and ideological atmosphere in which it is carried render most of the prior deconstruction of binary oppositions useless. Today even stronger boundaries are erected between East and West. And it influences not only politics but also a whole range of fields including cultural and artistic production. I am not saying this to suggest pessimism but just to point to the complexity of the task of eradicating

historical boundaries.

Yet, I argue that some theoretical constructs become visible and legible in the process of their destruction. They become unfamiliar and lend some of their secrets for analysis. Modernity is such a construct. Frames and institutions of modernity are in a crisis now all over the world. Therefore it is timely that we reflect on the inner contradictions, inequalities, as well as promises of modernity when its normality and taken for grantedness are put into crisis in the empirical world. My intention here is neither to discuss what modernity in general is, nor to assess the so-called Turkish modernity – whether it conforms to Western modernity or if it is an example of alternative modernity or if it embraces multiple modernities, etc. Instead, I will try to give a brief account of how modernity has been experienced in Turkey in relation to the West and how it was cast at the level of social imagination. I offer the concept of Occidentalism to address this specific question.

The ambivalence felt by people in Turkey about modernity can be a good starting point. On the one hand modern culture seems within easy reach, one can have access to modernity through a technological artefact, a mobile phone, or a brand new car. In this case, to be modern is something that is not only possible but it is also fun. One does not have to take modernity seriously. It has to do with compulsions and passions, and it is toy-like. On the other hand, modernity seems to represent the higher ideals or the ratio of the Western world, and Turkish people are made to feel that they are lacking in this respect at every encounter and comparison. They are told that they lack the right kind of mind or ethics, they are not at the right location (only on a bridge between East and West), and they have the wrong past. In this case, to be modern is something that sounds like a duty for which they feel incompetent. The idea, in this case, is oppressive. <26>

The source of this ambivalence has less to do with 'essential' Turkish culture than with the historical context of modernity. Modernity is a construct that emerged within the intertwined histories of nationalism and capitalism. This specific configuration has been influential in shaping most of the features of modernity including political classes and other forms of belonging. The contradiction that lies at the heart of the articulation of nationalism and capitalism is that, the former fixes time and space and molds people by disciplining their emotions, while the latter has the capacity to mobilise everything, destroy the dimensions of time and space, and absorb everything in the light and fleeting sign of commodity. The contradiction produces several dichotomies: material/spiritual,

past/present, here/there - namely the separation of the material from the spiritual, the distancing of the present from the past, and the demarcation of boundaries that distinguish here from there. Hence, progress is associated with the material world while values are to be preserved at the spiritual level. The essence of national life lies in a mythological past but the experience of modernity is severed from the past and is bound today. National citizens belong here but in their belonging they deny the connections that capitalism establishes with the outside; instead, they make an object of the other, turn into an object of both fear and desire.

The ambivalence is even more pronounced in the age of globalisation. National belonging that seeks the essential and archaic contradicts openly with the market culture that only celebrates the present. Space is contained and homogenised, for example in the case of the European Union akin to the homogenisation of national space, but it is also segmented and marketed as seen in tourism. A relevant example from Turkey would be the re-signification of East Anatolia. East Anatolia was once an idealised space for Turkish modernists (Kemalists): it both contained the essence of the nation and the site of the dangerous other - the Kurdish, the Arabic, the Islamic sects. Today we see that East Anatolia is in a process of re-signification. On top of nationalistic meanings add the market values, the historical and geographical riches of this region are re-discovered and marketed within tourism. There appear two different registers, which in fact contradict but operate simultaneously.

The ambivalence of modernity was first experienced in Turkey in the 19th century. While trying to cope with the imperialistic demands and thrusts of the developing world capitalism, the Ottoman elites were in search of formulating a genuine Turkish nationalism. That meant that the Western modernity was both codified as a model of ideas that was to be followed, and a pile of consumer goods. The burning question was: are we going to adopt the values of Western modernity or the techniques and goods? This is the question that contributed to the work of the first sociologist of nationalism in Turkey: Ziya Gökalp. Despite the efforts of Gökalp to harmonise the tension filled concepts of authentic culture, Western technology and Islamic religion, there has been no clear solution to this problem to this day. It would be misleading to think that the formula of Turkish nationalism was either a full devotion to Westernisation and modernisation as some would want to have it, or a systematic resistance to it, as others would argue. The ambivalence inherent in the shaping of modernity that I mentioned before found its repercussion in Turkey in a belated and more openly articulated way. A debate in the national

assembly in 1925 is significant in this respect: I want to refer to an argument between Istanbul MP Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver and Erzurum MP Ziya Hoca. Tanrıöver, known for his strong nationalistic ideas, interestingly makes a sarcastic comment on Ziya Hoca's anxieties about excessive Westernisation. Ziya Hoca had been warning against corruption that is being imported from the West along with some useful aspects of 'civilisation'. He believes that the cultural values of the past should be protected in the process of Westernisation. In his reply, Tanrıöver mocks the emerging dilemma: 'do conservatives think that civilisation should stop at the customs when travelling from one continent to the other? Should we have a committee at the border that would inspect each item one by one? What is this? A locomotive. Let it pass. What is this? Dancing. No, we don't want it.' [1] The debate shows that the reconciliation of authentic national culture and Western modernity was not an easy one for Turkish nationalists.

This indecision about what it means to be modern and national at the same time should also be thought in the historical context of the relations between the West and its Other. The problem of modernity experienced in Turkey is not an independent or isolated one. Modernity is a Western concept very much shaped within Europe's encounters with the other, especially through colonialism. The fact that Europe is already a model of modernity in its domination over others, inscribes a hierarchy between the example of modernity in Europe and those elsewhere. Therefore the West claims the right to represent modernity. It jealously defends the copyright of the model in its specific configuration of time and space. But on the other hand it also preaches that modernisation is possible, that modernity can move in space and time. It offers a model to be copied but of course not the real thing. The split is very much masked in Western discourses while its consequences for the modernising elite in Turkey are much more overtly experienced and expressed, though mostly in confusion. More can be said about the consequences, namely the oscillation between the East and the West especially in relation to Islam and the Middle East, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

I argue that those in power who represent themselves as the West and idealise the so-called Western modernity have forced and is still forcing the non-Westerners to be modern, but at the same time they would never allow them to be fully modern. For example, an outcome of this dynamic is the entrapment of Turkey in what I call a bridge identity: a bridge between East and West. Bridge identity is a frustrating one. Turkey would get

[1] Cited in Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'nin Siyasi Hayatında Batılılaşma Hareketleri*, İstanbul: Arba Yayınları, 1996 (c. 1960), p. 108.

Westernised, would step further in secularisation, it would consume western goods and technologies but would never acquire the 'real thing' of modernity. There is always a lack. This is a recurring theme in the long history of Turkey's negotiations with the European Union. The idea of an irreducible Other, non-West, is constitutive of Western modernity. We know this from Edward Said's account of Orientalism. In dialogue with this discursive limitation, the non-West establishes its own social imagination that entails both a desire to be Western and a contempt for its ills. It does not only get frustrated in drawing the boundaries between what is Western and what is national, but also exploits and manipulates this frustration in governing the nation.

I would like to move to an example that illustrates how the inherent split in Western modernity between the idea of modernisation and the real thing of modernity is speaking to or in dialogue with the ambivalence or the split in Turkish modernising elite - namely the split between an authentic national culture and Western modernity. The British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, has established the world service during the Second World War basically for purposes of propaganda. The Turkish Service was founded in 1939. The concept of propaganda was a matter of debate all throughout the war for the British. The issue was problematised to a great extent and was mingled with all sorts of cultural and technical issues such as the interests of the local audience, the proper use of the Turkish language, the image of the BBC broadcasters, the right topics to be chosen for talks, the significant target group to be addressed, the quality of reception, the level of penetration, etc. The debates on the Turkish Service in the archives[2] show that it was one of the most problematic services. While there was already some accumulated knowledge, which guided policies for the Arabic Service, the Turkish Service had to start from the scratch. It proved that the propaganda to Turkey introduced lots of problems due to the ambiguity of the position of Turkey in the war, but also due to its ambiguous position in relation to the modern world. In the beginning of the 1940's the BBC in collaboration with the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information devised a new strategy for propaganda, the term coined for this strategy was 'flattery'. Mrs. Rice from the Ministry of Information suggested that the Service 'says more about the Turks themselves'. 'The desirability of echoing for flattery purposes cultural and other local events in Turkey' was accepted by the BBC. The assumption was that the Turks wanted to hear more about themselves, especially seen in the eyes of the British, which pointed to a sophisticated psychological

[2] The data that I use in this section is based on my research in the BBC Written Archives, Reading.

mechanism. The attempts of modernisation in Turkey were going to be flattered. But what exactly? The strategy of flattery was afflicted with problems of interpretation. In 1942, Rice informed the Director of Near East Services about an important cultural 'discovery' of hers. She provided the BBC with a poem on Turkish soldiers of the 9th century to be broadcast. The poem read: 'they have tongues of which the mouth never returns to health, it is as if the saliva of death kept dropping from them. They seem to be thirsty for blood...' The director of the Near East Services was not sure that these images applied to 'modern' Turkey and its army. 'I do not think that it is really suitable for quotation in a propagandist context,' he answered. The British felt the need to flatter what is considered to be Turkish modernity but in fact their image of Turkish modernity was not really distinguished from an image of a barbarian.

I dwell on this specific example because it conveys the dialogism of projections. The flattery of Turkish modernity is speaking to the Turkish desire to be modern. However, the indecision on the part of the British about what modern Turkey is, once more introduces the ambivalence of the Western gaze, thus the ambivalence of modernity for the Turkish. How Turkish national and modern identity is shaped in this dialogue is a subject that I have analysed elsewhere. [3]

Despite the vast amount of energy spent on the selection of flattery items in 1940s, the BBC was still perplexed in the case of Turkey in the 1950s. Regarding the suggestion of the British government that Turkish Service should be moved to the European Section for political reasons - namely because 'Turkey regards herself more as a European country and has been recently admitted to the Council of Europe' - the assistant head of the Eastern Services wrote a letter of disagreement. He said, while he could see the chief argument of the government that 'attachment to Europe is Turkish *amour-propre*', there are other significant factors: '1. From the point of view of geography Turkey is overwhelmingly Asiatic. 2. Turkish outlook is still largely based on Eastern and Islamic and not on European and Christian tradition. 3. Linguistically, historically and, to a great degree culturally, Turkey is still to a large extent, part of the Asiatic world, e.g. the popularity of the Turkish service is largely due to its use of Oriental (Turkish) music.'

However the government's concerns of winning the Turks to their side in the Cold War outweighed other factors and the Turkish

[3] For a more comprehensive analysis of the projections of identity between the BBC Turkish Service and the Turkish elites, see: Meltem Ahiska, *An Occidental Fantasy: Turkish Radio and National Identity*, University of London, 2000, unpublished Ph.D thesis.



Service was moved to, not to European, but to East European Section finally. Yet the negative considerations did not disappear altogether. In 1951, the British director of the Turkish Service himself would talk about the 'the Turks' fierce desire to be thought modern', and he names it as a 'pathological desire'. This was a diagnosis that put doubts about the nature of Turkish modernity but it also was helpful to the extent that it could be invested in.

I do not intend to underestimate the material interests in power struggles. But representations are facts and they have a complex role in shaping power strategies. Just as the West has to constantly reproduce the notion of the East to assert its hegemony, Turkey has to reproduce the concept of the West and the East to justify its regime of power in its boundary management of dividing the spheres, regions and people along the axis of East and West.

<31> The concept Occidentalism is helpful in explaining the way the representations of East and West figure in the historical configuration of power in Turkey. Occidentalism refers to the field of social imagination that nurtures power strategies as well subjectivities in non-Western societies. It is not simply an admiration for the West or hatred against it. It is a reified image of the West defined in opposition to the East, and that is utilised in sustaining the existing regime of power, of course by exploiting and channeling the desire of the people. Occidentalism is an answering practice to the constructions of the West. It describes a set of practices, ideas and feelings by which traditions are built against an essentialised and objectified entity called the West. It may produce a resistance to the Western power but operates within its discursive terms to maintain a system of government that endorses its hegemony. The desire of the nationalist elite in Turkey to become both Western and anti-Western and Turkish resonates with the Western desire to see Turkey as a bridge that never crosses the distance between the West and the East.

The reified image of the West for Turkish in this context can be both positive and negative. For example, a government in Turkey may bring the problem of human rights to the agenda with reference to the sensitivity of the West on this issue. However, when confronted with an accusation of human rights violation the same government may say, 'the West has no right to interfere with our domestic issues'. Occidentalism makes the conflicting statements possible by justifying every act and statement with reference to an imagined Westernness. As a theoretical framework, Occidentalism also denotes the subjectivity of the Other in relation to Orientalism. It opens a space for the positivity of the Other - its experiences, utterances and

practices - instead of adopting the often negative definition of the Other in theories of Orientalism. But it also shows how the subjectivity of the Other is encapsulated in the discursive realm of the Other that is denied the real thing of modernity.

Occidentalism at the same time conveys how the West was identified with modernity in the both productive and destructive tension of world capitalism with nationalism, racism and sexism. But it also masks its operations by way of making a fetish out of the concept of modernity and the West. In Turkish history, artefacts, for example a refrigerator has been received with an extra meaning that goes beyond both the exchange and use value of the object. It becomes a modern fetish that signifies Western modernity. In the same manner Western democracy is treated as a modern fetish, almost like a thing. As a result, there is not much difference left between the modern goods you buy in the market and notions like democracy or equality. Just as the significant difference between a locomotive and dancing was hard to make years ago. The thing-like character of modernity puts a barrier to critical thinking. Most burning questions in Turkey today are deferred or made invisible by their displacement in Occidentalism, including human rights violations, political Islam, and supporting the present war.

It is never easy to resist the reification neither at the level of the production of commodities nor that of representations. <32> Yet it is worth the effort. If we can understand and analyse the inner contradictions, tensions of modernity that produces the intertwined histories of Orientalism and Occidentalism, then perhaps we can revive the buried promise of modernity - the practice of critique. In order to do this we have to have a much larger perspective and look at the common sky that structures different horizons especially in today's world.

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# The problem with Europe, the problem with Turkey, and the problem with identity

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Kevin Robins

<33> 'Every identity is also a horror, because it owes its existence to tracing a border and rebuffing whatever is on the other side.'

Claudio Magris, *Microcosms*

## Introduction: Neither Europe, Nor Turkey

In a recent issue of *NPQ-Türkiye*, Halit Refig writes from a Turkish perspective about the long and difficult relationship between Europe and Turkey. It seems to me that Refig poses the question in the right way. 'Just as Europeans have greatly contributed to the formation of the Turkish identity,' he argues, 'so the Turks have also been the cause for the search for a common "European" project.' Europe has appeared to modernising Turks as the place of progress and 'civilisation'; and, for many Europeans, Turkey has long seemed to be a place of relative 'backwardness' or of 'fundamentalist' values. The point he makes is that the two cultures have come to exist in a futile binary relationship: Europe versus Turkey; Christianity versus Islam; West versus East. Each culture has created a mythology around its imagination of the other. And what is clear is that

this reciprocal mythologisation has been extremely damaging. Each culture has suffered, in complex and different ways, as a consequence of its fantasies about the other culture - though we may say that Europe is far less aware of how it has suffered.

How, then, might it be possible to escape from the impasse that the relation between Europe and Turkey has become? This is the question we have to pose. Is there a way forward? In Turkey, where there is a much greater consciousness of what has been destructive about the Turkey/Europe relationship, these are questions that are urgently posed. For some, the way forward means making the case that Turkey has European credentials, that it really 'belongs' to Europe, and that it should therefore finally be given access to the Fortress. For Halit Refig - whose view is surely a minority one - the solution to Turkey's Europe problem is quite different. What he envisages is a strengthening now of Turkey's Asian credentials - the way forward is to be found, he maintains, in 'an Eastern alternative for Turkey'. What he evokes is a future opposition between Asia (including Turkey) and Europe - where 'Asia' comes to stand for the protection of 'nature' and for 'spiritual' values, whilst predatory Europe stands for 'globalisation' and 'money'.

I have the greatest sympathy for Refig's anger about what Europe has come to stand for, and with his protestations about its arrogant stance towards Turkey. But I disagree with what he proposes as the way forward for Turkey. For what he does, through his invocation of Asia and imagined Asian values, is to create yet another mythology (along the same lines as Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilisations*). And what he establishes is simply another binary division: Asia versus Europe. In Halit Refig's propositions, the question concerning the way forward remains caught up in a Manichean worldview - in a way of thinking that divides the world into good and bad, right and wrong, white and black.

What I want to propose, in the following discussion, is a very different way of moving forward - one that is intended to contribute to releasing us from cultural mythologies, of whatever kind. My own conviction is that the problematical relations between Turkey and Europe have nothing at all to do with deep and clashing civilisational values of the essentialist kind that is invoking. I think the issue is much simpler, and has to do with a rather more modern social invention. What I am referring to is the national way of imagining cultures - the idea and agenda of what Benedict Anderson has called 'imagined community'. [1] What is at issue is a particular way of conceiving and instituting cultures and

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso.

identities - a way that was invented in Europe, particularly during the course of the nineteenth century, and finally imported by the Kemalist elites early in the twentieth century. Of all European exports, I would say, the national idea and project has been one of the most problematical and most destructive. And in any reflection on contemporary cultural developments in and between Europe and Turkey, it seems to me that it is this agenda concerning imagined community that has to be urgently and critically addressed.

### The Problem with Imagined Community

Imagined community has been about belonging to a national culture. And about a very particular kind of belonging. Belonging to an imagined community has meant sharing a common identity with all the other 'members' of the community (including those who lived in the past and those who will live in the future); and it has meant having no other shared identity but this one - national identity is an exclusive kind of identity. Imagined communities have aspired to create unitary cultures - there has always been the desire for purity and homogeneity of culture and identity. The imagined community always seeks to maintain its own coherence, and it does this through the elimination of complexity, and the expulsion or marginalisation of elements that seem to compromise the <35> 'clarity' of national attachment. To belong to the community is also to be contained in a bounded culture. The imagined community seeks to distinguish itself from other communities, to draw attention to the threats that other communities and cultures present to its own (imagined) integrity, and to insist on its sovereignty with respect to them. What I want to stress here is that this organisation of cultures and identities on the basis of imagined communities is a very particular and peculiar way of organising them - though it has come, in the modern period, to seem a natural and self-evident way - the only way.

What we need to recognise is that it has been through the history of modern European nationalism that this particular kind of identity thinking has been most fully articulated and realised. Nation states were the pioneers of this ideal of imagined community. And we may say that it is a mark of the success of this national kind of thinking - the mentality of imagined community - is to have become the template for all thinking about cultures and identities. 'Belonging' of the kind I have been describing has come to seem central to any kind of cultural order. In the context of this particular argument, I want to note how central this kind of identity thinking has been in the contemporary imagination of a new European community. The new Europe is being constructed on the same symbolic basis as the nation state - flags, anthems, passports and coins all serve

as icons for evoking the presence of the emergent state. The discourse of official Euro-culture is highly significant: its concerns are all about cohesion, integration, unity, security. European culture is imagined in terms of an idealised wholeness and purity, and European identity in terms of boundedness and containment. What is invoked is the possibility of a new European order defined by a clear sense of its own coherence and integrity. In its most developed manifestation, the logic of this imagination of identity expresses itself in the oppressive form of Fortress Europe (the Europe that wants to keep Turkey out).

This desire for clarity and definition in imagined community is always about the construction of a symbolic geography that will separate the insiders - those who belong to 'our' community - from the outsiders - the others. What is at stake is clearly something more than just territorial integrity: it is more like the psychic coherence and continuity of the imagined cultural community. The imagined community socially institutes the illusion of self-containment and self-sufficiency - and collective passions and emotions are quickly aroused in defence against what is imagined to be threatening to the coherence and integrity of the community.

Imagined in this sense, the community is always - eternally and inherently - fated to anxiety. Its desired integrity must always <36> be conserved and sustained against what are seen as the forces of disintegration and dissolution at work in the world. What is emphasised is what is held in common, at the expense of diversity and difference within the community. Such a kind of identification supposes the elimination or the repression of what could divide. Difference is experienced, and feared, because it is associated with fragmentation. Hence the prevalence in contemporary European discourse of imagery concerned with the fortification and defence of identity.

What is being denied is the reality that particular cultures are constituted in and through their relation to other cultures and identities. For those who 'belong' to imagined communities, the prospect of being changed or transformed through their interactions with others is experienced as a threat. What might happen, they will say, if we give up a certain way of being and belonging? What shall we become? What we have to recognise is that there are always anxieties and fears at the heart of identity - and that the identity politics of imagined communities is always ready to play on these fears. We must be attentive, then, to the institutions through which the collectivity may seek to inhibit change, and to the ways in which it seeks to hold itself together.

We may say that there are two different bonding mechanisms in the imagined community: the memory of a past that everyone can recall; and then, much more primitively, the call to stay together and to survive as a group. The point is that the group, the imagined community, is essentially an arbitrary construct - there is nothing inevitable or necessary about what now constitutes, say, Britishness or Turkishness or Europeanness (what we now have is simply the consequence of multiple historical accidents). And yet the group will conspire to protect and defend its sense of its own necessary and absolute being. 'The group needs this function,' as Daniel Sibony points out, 'to ensure its continued existence, to ensure its love for itself, and to make sure that not "anyone" can become a member. The basis of this function, its core, are the points of silence which make *the group a collection of people who are all resolved to stay silent about the same thing...*' [2] Ultimately, he is saying, it is on the basis of a collective lie that the imagined community is held together.

#### Europe Against Cosmopolitanism

<37> It is interesting to consider this logic of fear and closure in the particular circumstances of the historical relationship between Turkey and Europe. For what has been distinctive about Turkey, it seems to me, has been its capacity to disturb the point of silence at the heart of the European collectivity. Doesn't the exclusion of Turkey from the European community threaten to make apparent the arbitrary basis on which the community of Europeans was founded?

Let us reflect on the stance that Europe has adopted towards Turkey. In one way, we may see the relationship as one in which the community of Europe has exhibited an extraordinary arrogance. From the European perspective, it has seemed that there could be no meaningful possibility of a cultural encounter with Turkey. Europe defined the rules of engagement and treated the Ottomans and then Turks as supplicants. It occupied a position of narcissistic omnipotence. It has been a matter of imparting civilised values, though always, it seems, with the conviction that the Turks will never be capable of learning to be civilised (indeed, if they did, it would be deeply disturbing, for what would then be unique about Europe?). The 'uncivilised' others had everything to learn from Europe and its 'civilisation' - and Europe had nothing to learn from the others beyond its frontiers.

[2] Daniel Sibony, *Le 'racisme', ou la haine identitaire*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1997, p. 248.

This is one way of interpreting what is happening in the difficult historical relation between Turkey and Europe - in which European arrogance seems to derive from its unquestioned superiority, its civilisational advantage, over the Turkish other. But, in the context of the present argument, I want to draw attention to the significance of another dynamic in this relationship, and it is one in which Europe does not display incontestably superior and more civilised values. It is one in which what Europe has stood for, and still stands for, is much more open to question. In looking at this aspect of Europe's relation to Turkey, I think we can see a more defensive stance beneath the surface arrogance of European culture. There was something about Ottoman culture that was profoundly disconcerting for the modern European cultural mentality.

What I want to suggest is that the closure and defensiveness displayed by Europe has been related to its historical project of building nation cultures and national communities. I would argue that the western European creation of the nation state was in opposition to the pluralistic empires on its eastern edges, the empires of the Hapsburgs, the Romanovs and the Ottomans. In the cause of building the unitary national community, the multi-cultural and multi-communitarian model had to be shown in the worst light possible. The European national project required, as the Lebanese historian Georges Corm has argued, 'the collapse of those complex ensembles, and with them their ways of life and a cultural cosmopolitanism that has today faded from people's memories.' [3] And it was requisite because these empires exemplified another civilisational model (though we should note that 'civilisation', for Corm, means something very different from the sense in which Halit Refig uses this term). 'Without exaggeration,' says Corm, 'one can talk of Balkan civilisation for eastern Europe and of Arabo-Ottoman civilisation for Asia Minor, the two sharing many traits in common, being complex syntheses of European, Greek, Slavic, Turkish, Armenian and Arab cultures.' [4] He conveys the sense of what this meant in the Lebanese case:

<38> 'Until 1975, a Lebanese, whilst enjoying the benefits of modernity, could also take advantage of a complex identity that enriched his [or her] personal life and also, through his interaction with the other complex identities of Lebanon, the perception of social life. In Lebanon one could be Arab, Armenian, Palestinian or Kurdish, a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim, Maronite, Shi'ite, Sunni, Greek-Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, from the North or the South, from the Right or Left,

[3] Georges Corm, *Conflits et identités au moyen-orient (1919-1991)*, Paris, Arcantère, 1992, p. 52.

[4] *Ibid.*

from the city or the mountains.' [5]

What Corm is emphasising is the positive value of this cultural complexity, this cosmopolitanism - with all the possibilities that exist for moving freely across different cultural registers.

The Nobel Prize winning writer Elias Canetti was brought up in the Ottoman Empire - 'I always felt as if I came from Turkey,' he tells us in his autobiography. 'Anything I subsequently experienced had already happened in Ruschuk,' he says. 'There, the rest of the world was known as 'Europe', and if someone sailed up the Danube to Vienna, people said he was going to Europe'. [6] Canetti, too, draws attention to the complexity of the culture he first knew, also drawing our attention to an cosmopolitan cultural model:

<39> 'Ruschuk, on the lower Danube, where I came into the world, was a marvellous city for a child, and if I say that Ruschuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it. For people of the most varied backgrounds lived there, on any one day you could hear seven or eight languages. Aside from the Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighbourhood, and next to it was the neighbourhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews - our neighbourhood. There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came Rumanians; my wetnurse, whom I no longer remember, was Rumanian. There were also Russians here and there.' [7]

What Canetti conveys is the formative significance of these early years in the Ottoman Empire. 'As a child,' he says, 'I had no real grasp of this variety, but I never stopped feeling its effects.' [8] It is, I think, very significant that Canetti, who became one of the most cosmopolitan of writers and thinkers when he moved to Europe, speaks in this way about the effects on his cultural formation of Ottoman cosmopolitanism, which existed and flourished even in a small town like Ruschuk.

My point is that Europe sought, in the name of the unitary nation state, to discredit this kind of complex society. From the European perspective, such difference and mixture has been regarded as both scandalous and dangerous. There was closure in the face of the principle of cosmopolitanism that existed to the

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[6] Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, London, Granta Books, 1999, p. 230.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

South and East of Europe - a cosmopolitanism that offered an alternative model for cultural organisation.

I have deliberately focused on Europe's relation to the Ottomans, and on what has been problematical in European culture. But let me just add briefly here that one could also reflect what has been problematical in this respect about contemporary Turkey itself. It is a problem that has arisen as a consequence of Turkey's acceptance of the national model, its assertion of the principle of cultural homogeneity, and its consequent modern fear of complexity within. It has the case, we may say, that its own Ottoman past disturbs the point of silence at the heart of the imagined community of modern Turkey.

### Beyond Imagined Community?

The imagined community implicates us in a relationship to a particular cultural group. But it also implicates us in a particular kind of relationship to identity itself. What I have argued is that the imagined community (particularly as it has existed historically, in the form of the nation state) presents itself as singular and sufficient cultural community. It emphasises the primacy of the elements held in common, at the expense of elements of diversity and difference, within the group. And the imagined community actively works to sustain and reinforce the centrality of those elements over time - thereby <40> elaborating a heritage or patrimony. The perceived imperative is to establish a demarcation between the community and other such communities (and to ensure its right to sovereignty with respect to those other communities beyond its frontiers).

What we have to ask is whether, and how, we might be able to think about identity differently. Is it possible to think about identity in ways that do not invoke the values of unity, integrity, coherence, boundedness, closure? How might the emotional force of the national kind of belonging be dissipated? Can we think of our cultural situation in ways that offer more scope and possibility than does the self-enclosed vision of imagined community? Can we conceive of more complex identities? I now want to put forward some thoughts as to how we might begin to think about identities differently - beyond imagined community.

(1) First, I suggest, we must insist that identities suppose the existence of the other in order to exist and to develop. The affirmation of identity only comes through the incorporation and transformation of foreign elements. Any kind of meaningful identity must depend on the valuation of cultural receptiveness and reciprocity, the awareness that it is only through their 'valency' that cultures revitalise themselves. And we must be

clear that cultural interdependence is not just a reality, but that it must now also entail a value and an obligation. The fundamental issue should not be about the right of imagined communities to exist, but about how the communities that insist on asserting this right will co-exist. In the context of ever increasing interaction between cultures, a community can no longer simply follow the self-interest of its own members: its obligations must now extend beyond itself to the other, both beyond and within its frontiers.

We might then extend our cultural discourses beyond the limited agenda of identity-as-belonging. If cultures are constituted through their interactions with, and appropriations from, other cultures, then we might move to a more relational account of what is happening in identity formation and re-formation. We might begin to reflect on the significance of cultural *encounter*, which involves a continuous process of negotiation between cultures. And we then have to consider the consequences of these negotiations. We may then consider the possibilities of what I would call cultural *experience*. Cultural experience involves the transformation of identity through encounter with the stranger - for experience can only be experience of the other, the unexpected. The question, then, is whether the challenge to identity can be made as satisfying as its confirmation has been.

<41> (2) There is also much to be said for a discursive shift from thinking about identities to thinking about *identification*. In a commonsense way, we tend to think about national identity in terms of something that we inherit from previous generations of fellow nationals. For some it fits well, while for others it may be uncomfortable. But it is something we are forced to carry around with us for our whole life - a kind of tortoise shell (at certain times we can curl up inside it). Such a condition seems to be something that we have little choice about - something we have to accept and come to terms with. As such, identity may be experienced as a constraining force, one that closes down certain avenues of experience. Identity defines a cultural zone in which we are at the same time both located and sequestered, and a zone to which the others are denied access - this is, of course, most apparently the case when the cultural identity is conceived as an ethnic identity.

What I am suggesting is that this kind of cultural ascription may be challenged. I do not say overthrown, because I recognise that some factors of socialisation - those related to language particularly - may be deeply embedded, and also because there can never be a question of escaping from forms of collective belonging. To challenge cultural ascription is to make it more flexible, open and plural. I am suggesting that the shift from thinking in terms of identity to thinking about identifying and

identification may help us to think about what is possible. Identification is something we *do*. In the psychoanalytical sense, the individual infant identifies in early childhood with the mother, in a relationship that is transformative for the infant. Then throughout childhood there is a further series of identifications - with friends, relations, teachers, and so on - and in each case there are further incorporations and experiential transformations. These sequential identifications are crucial to the development of a vital and creative sense of personal identity. As the French psychoanalyst, J.-B. Pontalis puts it 'one could go on forever about the happy consequences of multiple identifications.' [9]

What if we were to extend this principle from individual to collective identity? Would there not be something impoverished about a citizen who had only ever identified with their motherland (or fatherland)? Is it not possible to make more than one collective identification? Can we not think about a plurality of identifications that are significant but not constraining or exclusive? In this case it would be a question of identifications involving different investments of energy and commitment. The advantage of thinking in terms of identification is that it makes us recognise a sense of agency - and therefore openness - in the matter of who we are. And it should lead us to consider that there may be more to gain from these investments than just belonging. The point is that we do not just identify for the sake of identifying, but for transformative possibilities that may come through good identifications. <42>

(3) Third, the experience of plural identifications at the collective level opens up the possibility of moving beyond the restrictive singularity of perspective that has characterised the national imaginary. Again Pontalis makes some suggestive observations that help us to consider identity, not as a 'thing' or a condition, but rather as an intellectual and imaginative disposition and sensibility - one that is sustained and enhanced by complex experience. Drawing on the image of migration and what he calls the 'migratory capacity' ('*capacité migratrice*'), he considers psychoanalytical thought and experience in terms of the productivity of migration: 'From one language - and one dialect - to another, from one culture to another, from one way of knowing to another - with all the risks that such a *transfer* entails.' [10] Pontalis puts a value on the movement between positions, and on the productivity of complex identifications. In his discourse, 'migration' is a metaphor, drawn from collective culture. Perhaps we can turn it back to where it came

[9] J.-B. Pontalis, *Love of Beginnings*, London, Free Association Books, p. 14.

[10] J.-B. Pontalis, *La force d'attraction*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, p. 88.

from, in order to help us think about collective identities in terms of the mobile sensibility.

Such a possibility is not a utopian one. We should recognise that it is the culture of nationalism - and the exclusivist claims of the imagined community - that has simplified the meaning of identity, reducing it to the one-dimensional state of just 'belonging'. Within the European space, it is not difficult to find historical examples of the kind of cultural mobility that Pontalis is invoking. Indeed, there are places that are still reluctant to cede to the homogenising logic of the modern nation state. Slavenka Drakulic describes the attitudes, and the recent actions, of people living in Istria, a place where 'nationality and identity don't necessarily overlap.' Istrianism, she argues, is a challenge and a confrontation to those who are presently inciting neo-nationalist fervour in that part of the world. 'How,' asks Drakulic,

<43> 'can these authorities understand the meaning of Istrianism - the enlarging concept of identity, as opposed to the reducing concept of nationality? To Istrians, identity is broader and deeper than nationality, and they cannot choose a single 'pure' nationality as their identity. Living in the border region, they understand better than anyone else that we all have mixed blood to a greater or lesser extent. They also have suffered from nationalism, and in its worst form - ethnic cleansing - enough to have grown tired of it. Paradoxically, for the first time in their history, at the first elections of the newly independent republic of Croatia, the Istrians felt free to reject the concept of one nation; they felt that the time had come to express what they really consider themselves to be.' [11]

Drakulic's points to what this means in an anecdotal reference to her neighbour, Karlo. 'In the morning,' she says, 'he declares himself a Croat, speaks a bad Croatian dialect, and is prepared to enter any political debate, if he is not too preoccupied by the weather. By then he has consumed several glasses of cognac and enough beer in the local bar to assume his other, Italian identity. Now he is Carletto...'. [12] Instructive, too, is the story that Claudio Magris tells about a certain Reiter Robert, an avant-garde Hungarian poet, who was later tracked down as Franz Liebhard, a writer of somewhat traditional German verse, and living among the German minority in Romania ('he had changed his name, nationality and literary style...'). This man with two names said that he had 'learnt to think with the mentality of several peoples.' [13] These accounts might help to put the national way of belonging into a more relative perspective,

[11] Slavenka Drakulic, *Café Europa*, London, Abacus, 1996, p. 164.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

allowing us to think of nationalism as something other than the culmination of European cultural and political history. We may then see the issue in terms of how we might re-institute the enlarging - that is to say cosmopolitan and mobile - concept of identity.

### Cosmopolitan Possibilities?

In this discussion, I have tried to move beyond the binary logic of Turkey versus Europe and East versus West - a logic that is always encouraging us think in terms of Good versus Evil. I am critical of identity politics in modern European culture; but in criticising European culture, I do not want to end up being an unthinking defender of the cultural order of modern Turkey. What is for me the fundamental issue is the logic of imagined community, which brought with it the very particular politics of national, or national-style, identity. It is a logic that originated in Europe, in the nineteenth century particularly, and was taken up by the new Turkish Republic early in the twentieth century. I have argued that there is a fundamental problem with this conception of identity - a conception that posits the idea of unitary cultures; that works on the principle of inclusion of those who 'belong' and exclusion of the 'others'; and that rebuffs whatever is on the other side of the identity border it has traced. The logic of 'imagined community' is deeply problematical for the way it sets culture against culture. And all the more so because it is asserted that this particular way of thinking about cultures is the best and, more than that, the only way - it is as if there could be no alternative to the national cultural order. <44>

What I have argued is that we have to find alternative ways of thinking about cultural arrangements in the wider cultural space of Eurasia. In part, I think, this should be a question of historiographical revision. As Elias Canetti has ironically observed, 'History portrays everything as if it could never have come otherwise... History is on the side of what has happened.' [14] And this has been particularly the case, I think, with respect to the modern emergence of nation states and national cultures - what is conveyed is an almost evolutionary sense of the rightness of their coming into existence. At various points in this discussion, I have briefly touched on the alternative cultural arrangements that existed in both the European and the Ottoman space before the national order came into place, and which involved the cosmopolitan acceptance of cultural

[13] Claudio Magris, *Danube*, London, Collins Harvill, 1990, pp. 291-292.

[14] Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, London André Deutsch, 1985, p. 124.

diversity and complexity. What we should recognise are the possibilities that were present for coexistence and cultural interaction in the Ottoman Empire. As Cemal Kafadar says, 'Taking one's commingling with the "other" seriously in the historical reconstruction of heritages... seems to demand too much of national historiographies.' [15] Fortunately, there are now revisionist historians, like Kafadar, who are reminding us of the cultural possibilities that were eliminated by national regimes - reminding us of the historical commingling of Ottoman/Turkish and European cultures. Is there not now the possibility of challenging that mentality which portrays history as if it could never have come otherwise?

What we should also take cognisance of are contemporary developments that might challenge the insular mentality of imagined community. What I am particularly thinking of here are the new transnational cultures that have begun to flourish within Europe as a consequence of new forms and conditions of migration. Through these transnational developments, there is now a growing number of people who live dual lives - speaking two (or more) languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders. And what is significant is that 'Turkish-speaking communities' are establishing one of the most extensive and complex transnational networks. On the basis of regular and real-time communication and cheap travel, Turkish migrants are now routinely able to establish and sustain networks across the spaces of Europe and Turkey. These new kinds of transnational networks and mobilities are changing the nature of Turkish migrant experience, and they may be doing so, I suggest, in ways that once again provide the conditions for an enlarging concept of identity, to use Drakulic's phrase. There is evidence to suggest that Turks in Europe are living in a condition that is between cultures, in a condition of only semi-attachment to - and therefore semi-detachment from - Turkey and Europe.

What we are now seeing represents a new kind of cultural complexification within the European space. Writing now as someone who lives in that space, I welcome these developments for what they might help to make possible - and that is a more accommodating and cosmopolitan culture in the broad European space. Claude Lévi-Strauss once reminded us that the achievements of European culture were a consequence of openness and creative incorporations. 'Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance,' he says, 'was the meeting-place and melting-pot of the most diverse influences: the Greek, Roman, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon traditions, combined with the influences of Arabia

[15] Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 20.

and China.' [16] This did not continue to be the case - to the extent that Europe developed a fortress mentality. We need to be clear about what it was that Europe lost when it decided to turn its back on new cultural encounters and experiences.

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[16] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, Paris, UNESCO, 1952, p. 42.



# Edited transcript of first conversation

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<47> [London, November 2001]

Rose Issa:

I just wonder in terms of contemporary visual arts or artists, how do those Turkish artists live those contradictions of modernity? I remember the last time I was in Turkey, a long time ago, I was very shocked to find that in universities and shops and so on, that the young generation seemed completely cut off from their past. They couldn't read any inscriptions in Arabic, they couldn't read what that they were selling, whether it was Allahu Akbar, they didn't know if it was upside-down or not. In universities, they had calligraphic text upside-down and this issue was a total disconnection with their recent past, which was less than 100 years ago when the script changed. This seemed very bizarre. Has there been any questioning or approach towards making a connection or not?

Meltem Ahiska:

I think there are a lot of things like that. I don't agree with your description as bizarre because my whole argument is that it was not a free choice on the part of the Turkish modernist. They were very much under the threat of so-called Western world and they had to do these changes in order to be accepted. So I do not see it as a problematic voluntary act on the part of the modernist. It was within the realm of the force field of

different struggles going on. There really are discussions going on now but we can not free ourselves from what I call Occidentalism, because there is always the concentration of trying to judge everything in relation to the West and how the Westerners see us and it is very much about an imaginary gaze. Maybe the Westerners are not looking...

Rose Issa:

But this was true for the Arab countries [...] and they reacted differently.

Meltem Ahiska:

Yes, I know.

Rose Issa:

You can still keep on with your tradition full of contradictions but in the case of Turkey there is a total cut with the past, I don't think it's only a Western policy or Western gaze.

Meltem Ahiska:

It's not a Western policy but in order to adopt modernity they have to cut the relations with the Arabic world, and that is like the dangerous Other - the positive Other is the Western world but the dangerous Other was the Arabic world. So the nationalists wanted to differentiate themselves from the Arabic [...] to be Westernised means getting rid of Arabic-ness. So that shows how the whole tradition of the past is denied. <48>

Rose Issa:

I'm also talking about the younger generation of artists, of your students, how do they conceive that?

Meltem Ahiska:

There are some critical debates going on especially in the case of artists. There are some really good critical works and the artists would know about it better than me - I am a sociologist but I'm also interested in art. There's some debate but the thing in this debate can only be fruitful if there's some collaboration with Western intellectuals and at the same time a critical reflection on their part - because these kinds of statements really force each other. To be hooked to this idea of the 'Western-ness' is very much reinforced by the West's creation of 'the Turkish are really good, they're modern etc. etc.', so in a way these binaries are being reproduced and reproduced. It's very difficult to get rid of them.

Kevin Robins:

[...] There was a moment particularly in the eighties when there was a lot of thinking about cultures. In fact, I know among German Turks for example, there was this whole notion of being

torn between cultures. That was a very common state - to be torn between cultures. I remember a poem and it said the border runs through the tongue, and that's very interesting because the premise of that idea was a national premise. That she belonged to one culture or the other and that belonging to two was a problematical thing. How the metaphor has such power to persuade in a sense, drawing on this national way of thinking. And in Sibony's work, I remember reading about schizophrenia and again felt that it had that notion - if you went to another culture, it was very difficult.

Rose Issa:

[...] The recent thing is that he believes that only people with a cross cultural reference can create. There won't be any artists that have a national identity. The only ones who are creative are people who are pooled in the positive sense, attracted and that absorb different cultures. I remember [...] the Afghans perceived the foreigners who came and they asked me, 'these guys are from 'Tour-istan'? They thought that there were these other countries called Touristan, so everybody was from Touristan.

Kevin Robins:

<49> I do agree with you about the point about operating across cultures produces creativity. Again, one of the traps of national thinking is that people are like plants in that they are rooted, grounded and that somehow modernity or globalisation has made people more mobile - and we forget, therefore - the notion is that history has developed from people in villages and being fixed to travelling, being more like tourists or more migrant. But in fact, historically, mobility has been an extraordinarily powerful force. You can go back to any point in history and find that mobile people had a very important presence and often the most creative. [...]

Audience:

Do we need to start thinking differently about what constitutes a culture, as in the past it seems to be - from what you're saying - heavily based on religion or language? Maybe all these transactions going on in a global way, our identity, our cultural identity is going to be made up of something that isn't rooted so much in language or religion but in other things, to do with technologies or some other kind of interests?

Kevin Robins:

Culture itself is one of these national terms. A collective culture assumes something homogenous and with Turkish culture you immediately think of something unitary and in fact it's not at all unitary. I was in the Black Sea part of Turkey this year and I was struck by how complex it is in terms of its diverse population. Somebody was pointing out that historically people

used to have much more of a sense of not 'I'm Turkish' but where they come from, a particular place and family. Families are actually much more accommodating. You can say, 'my mother is from the Balkans, my father from somewhere else and my grandmother somewhere else'. These things can appear to be resources you can draw on, in a way that this notion of culture cannot. I mean that culture is something to defend, it's an entity that is bound. I think any term of a collective culture is problematic.

Geoff Cox:

But aren't you writing it off altogether even though there's a possibility of the State existing as positive model?

Kevin Robins:

I was not saying that about states. I was talking about cultures. [...] I think there is a danger that cultures appear to be organised around states and each state has its own culture. That's part of the problem. So in the Turkish context, the Turkish state seeks to police Turkish culture.

Mark Sealy:

Surely that is the point in a sense. Is that what you're referring to? The idea that there isn't a culture that is framed and shifted by the state is in continual contestation with those that see themselves as outside that, outside of these kinds of polymorphic positions. In a sense, it's occupying a variety of different spaces simultaneously. Is that what you're saying? <50>

Kevin Robins:

All that I am saying is that this is the ambition of the national cultures; the national state has become something called a national culture. The education system and everything is geared around creating this national culture. So we have come to think of cultures in one sense [yet] What's happening at the moment is that there's so much mobility that it's becoming more and more difficult to police this. So there are constant attempts to come up with ways of thinking about this. [...]

Mark Sealy:

No one's prepared to actually turn around and say I am this... There are points at which you have to say I am here today. It doesn't necessarily mean that's fixed... in a sense, nobody wants to be defined. [...] Once you get into that position where you are post-definition, especially in a creative circle that you might work within: 'I am, for example, an artist therefore my language is creativity and that transcends everything with regards to national boundaries' is still a very popular position. A lot of artists especially now who are grounded in identity politics are being brought to the table with regards to a curatorial interest in their ethnicity and their production. It's how we

actually frame that outside of artists wanting to be in biennales. [...]

Kevin Robins:

I think we are trying to generally move away from that in literature, and so on. I mean, once there was this notion that you were a French writer or German writer and somehow the literature expressed your national identity in some way. Again your creativity was constrained by being an expression of some sort of national principle. But we are now trying to think about how creativity may not be to do with you articulating the essence of some national principle, but being able to draw on different repertoires. Culture is simply to do with repertoires that you are familiar with, that you know the stories, and so on. You come from this particular culture and perhaps having more than one palate at your disposal is very important, and I do think that multilingualism is extremely important. We have to remember that one of the achievements of many national cultures is to have or to make multilingualism seem to be problematic. Even in British education 10-15 years ago, to be multilingual was seen to be a problem in educational terms because you didn't learn properly. We begin to realise now that multilingualism is a huge cultural resource. So, I would say that one could begin to - particularly as people are these days mobile - to think about cultures as palates you can draw from, but not in some kind of pick 'n' mix way. One has to know the stories and complexities that come out of cultures.

Rose Issa:

In fact I recently went to the Venice biennale and we were talking about the cultural pavilions and the completely international language, which is common to all. I found myself welcoming that and at the same time wishing there were more cultural colour and difference again. I don't know if at the Istanbul biennale there was this overriding international language within the visual arts.

Kevin Robins:

How we think about the colour of difference is the key. Still underneath the internationalism, there is still this national thing - the British pavilion or whatever, we still have a residual [nationalism].

Rose Issa:

[...] They could have been interchangeable, it would have been interesting to do that actually as a curator. [...]

Meltem Ahiska:

I see that there is a tension. It's not a very easy solution, mobility is leading us into something that is beyond

nationalism because even the mobility of so-called transnational, cultural communities may be producing nationalism at a different levels, as in the case of Germany. Turks living in Germany have been denied the right of German citizenship until very recently. This is one factor contributing to their exclusion from the German society and this means that German nationalism is being reproduced on the basis of that exclusion, and that exclusion also means that Turkish nationalism is being reproduced. So this kind of division, giving the examples of war now, despite all these tendencies and globalisation, mobility and the national states, and the sovereignty of national states being questioned etc., the way it works internationally. I think there's also a tendency in opposition to contain these kinds of national identities or the signification of culture within nationalism, the signification of difference within nationalism and that relates to your question about artists and Turkey. Although they may be much more interested in the local cultures, etc. but when they operate in a global market they are allocated a special role or special position within the art market which is part of the international world. They have to produce this sense of difference to take part in that market, but they can not talk about it. I experienced this when I went to Germany to talk about feminism and I was talking about feminist theory and the German feminist did not like my talk and said, 'you're talking about theory why don't you talk about women?' although they were all talking about theory. My position was to produce something local while they were supposed to talk in global terms.

Rose Issa:

I always have this issue. I organise lots of film festivals in Iran. And always the questions are about the politics of the country and not about the art that we are showing. However, I don't know how to perceive your last remark on Shirin Neshat. I think difference is also important. She wouldn't have been selected only because the West wants it, and if she didn't have any new visual material or something new to say which is her own culture, and then she would have to compete with millions of other artists. If she is better than them - fine, but if she can express herself or the culture she knows best better - why not? In those terms you have to compete with your originality: What is your background? Where you come from? What you perceive better than others and that Westerners can't perceive in those images, or through those contradictions? I think there's nothing wrong in exploring and exploiting your own background. [...] I was quiet uncomfortable at the beginning, but I find that in some way she's right because this is what she's strongest about and why not use your strongest talent or energy or comprehensibility or senses or essences to communicate what you want to say? That sense of 'difference', I'm not against at all. On

the contrary, I find it difficult to work with museums who want to acquire artists' work from Iran or the Middle East. It's true they want things from there. It's not only calligraphical works or those images of veils but it is important also to convey your own culture. These differences come through very strongly.

Meltem Ahiska:

And if you don't, you're not excepted....

Rose Issa:

No, no, if you don't you can, but you have to compete with the rest. I mean the market is bigger to compete in but they have to have more talent, or if you have to compete and if you're good, you're good. I think Shirin Neshat is not only good because she uses images from Iran but because I think the standard of her presentation is good.

Zeynep Celik:

She's a good artist and before she turned to that [recent work] it was very good too, but it did not have the same coverage in New York. She was doing very well but not like now.

Rose Issa:

<53> She didn't tell me she was doing well, I don't know, but sometimes you find something that expresses your views better. [...]

Zeynep Celik:

Yes, she hit the market with what was expected I think.

Rose Issa:

I don't think you should undermine the differences. Everybody can be international and different....

Meltem Ahiska:

Differences are usually structured, so that you cannot really be different. In a structure of differences, you have a specific role assigned to you within the world economy of differences. So in order to be really different, to be your self, you have to think about how differences are structured in this world and I think Kevin [Robins]'s concern was to re-signify the differences.

Rose Issa:

We have lots of artists here: [for instance] Jananne Al-Ani, and I don't think she does her work to be promoted internationally.... I don't think artists create something just to be successful, they have something to say....

Jananne Al-Ani:

I think the danger is with artists from [the so-called] 'minorities in the West'. I think the problem for them is that they become representatives of their culture. Then, they're open to criticism, which has nothing to do with the work. I think that's really dangerous when you start holding up artists as examples in a discussion about theory and politics... and start using the work as such to describe or to have those arguments. The danger there is, the work is neglected, misrepresented.... In a way, we are indulging in what I think we are trying to criticise.

Rose Issa:

But if people have questions don't you have to answer them also? I know there is this terrible thing of always artists should answer about Iran or Iraq, or the situation of women in Islam, but if the questions are there, does one have to send them to another (sociological) base....

Jananne Al-Ani:

But of course, we all have opinions about whatever - say about what is happening since September 11th - which I think is quite interesting in relation to what you were saying earlier about national identities. The fact that now Islam is being identified as the enemy, it makes the whole situation much more complex. It isn't anymore as simple as saying it's them because Islam is actually here as well and I think what's interesting about the Islamic question is that it's an invisible enemy because anyone could be a Muslim. I could be a Muslim. It's not as easy to point a finger I think, because of the complexity of the way things really are. Whether or not nations are identified, there's lots more interesting questions than just talking about national identity, which goes back to some of the empires we were describing earlier, like the Islamic empire which became the national empire. They're not necessarily more useful models either in comparison to national identity. <54>

Kevin Robins:

They are not necessarily more useful, what I'm saying is that the national way of thinking is so powerful. It's true when people migrate they don't automatically change. The national agenda is still around. The national ways of thinking are so powerful they reassert themselves constantly....

Mark Sealy:

They don't change but they do aspire, there is a difference there, isn't there? There's a kind of idea of aspiring to somewhere else as well as coming from somewhere else.

Kevin Robins:

What I'm saying is that the national mentality, national imagination is so powerful that we need to find anything we can that allows us to think our way beyond it. And one of the dilemmas is that the national agenda encourages you to think on a very abstract level about something called Islam. And to feel we belong to something called Britishness, which we don't need to specify. I think it's very interesting if you shift the scope for example from the geographical, from thinking about how you pose the questions in a national agenda to how you think about it particularly. For example, to say I belong to Britain is very different from saying I belong to London. In London, we think about cultures in an entirely different way. We think about districts, we think about people we pass on the street and so on. We think about the complexity in a very different way, than if we pose it on the national level in terms of multiculturalism, minorities and so on. It seems much more orderly and neat there.

Zeynep Celik:

<55> [...] Going back to the context of the Ottoman empire and your model of early empire, I find it all very useful, but on the other hand, I think the history of Turkish modernity and modernisation is very important too because it does have a very powerful legacy and you can not delete that [...] It's very much alive in the recent history of other countries in North Africa. I was quite impressed by the references to the creation of the Turkish Republic among North African intellectuals. That is in fact a rather sad story when I think of the position of Turkey vis a vis the independence movements in the 1960s, because Turkey pulled itself away from its Arabic past. And there in Algeria, you have people naming their children Mustafa Kemal, Ismet Inonu all in recognition of the Turkish independence movement, and it still goes on today. So what I'm saying is that there is another legacy of the Turkish history that is about the modernisation of Turkey - and it's very powerful.

Kevin Robins:

Turkey is also a very good example because you can see a nation state coming into existence in the modern era so you see all that goes on.

Zeynep Celik:

So I think it will be useful to use both of them and not just take one away and leave the other one.

Kevin Robins:

Well I'm very conscious of what was sacrificed in order for this to come into existence. There was a cost.

Zeynep Celik:

I understand that and it is the rupture that you are talking about too, I think - cultural rupture. But it has happened and now I think we can not say let's pretend that it has not happened and go back to some other period and drive our models from there because it is very much there - it's with us.

Kevin Robins:

Certainly you can't go back. But the question is to do with how you draw that experience to go forward? For example, there's a whole agenda about what is Europe and what should constitute Europe, which in a way has been closed down as an agenda by the European Union and makes us want to think of Europe [necessarily] as the European community? But there's a whole set of issues of how we might imagine Europe in a more open, more encompassing way and in a much more complex way. I think there's much more to be fought for in the context of Europe, where Turkey can actually be part of that space but not in the way it's [presently] constituted. [...]

Zeynep Celik:

Yes, that's right but when you think of Europe this way you really do take into consideration this complex history, this recent history. I think Turkey has to be thought of in the same way.

<56>

Markman Ellis:

We have been talking about what we construe as community and what we construe as imagination and that phrase 'imagined community' by [Benedict] Anderson. I was assuming he meant a community of people who are not geographically together, so thinking non-geographically as belonging to a community. For example, in a diaspora, you still might belong, you might still imagine a community.

Kevin Robins:

Yes, he uses 'imagined' to evoke a constructivism. In a sense it's to do with a leap of the imagination, which you feel you have something in common with all of these people... the argument is that it's imagined but has very powerful real consequences, such as people go to fight in wars. But I think we should all be aware that it is also a fiction, that there is something extraordinarily arbitrary about this. It's very interesting - I have a student for example from Greece, the area near to the Macedonia border whose father is a very national Greek person, and whose grandfather was a national Slavic person. So across one generation people can change nations. They can feel like they belong to something else. It's completely a fiction, yet it has such enormous consequences.

Meltem Ahiska:

Yet, I should say that it's not all fictitious because there's something [Benedict] Anderson also talks about - the material conditions of imagination and is basically referring to the critical press and the newspapers. So he is talking about the synchronisation of time, activities and homogenous time. The national community is possible on the basis of certain technologies that will allow people to do the same kind of things daily and to read the same kind of newspapers and produce this imagination that they are one of the community although they don't have face-to-face relationships. I don't think it's something that is [only] in the mind of people, it also has to do with the social organisation of things and the technologies and the way they're practised.

Kevin Robins:

But the statesmen then bring in mechanisms to makes this arbitrary thing appear necessary [... expressed even in] everyday things like postage stamps. Whatever you do reminds you that you belong to this particular nation. The state works very hard to try and dissolve this arbitrariness but underneath that it's still there.

Markman Ellis:

<57> Are you saying that technologies can be used to fracture nation/state identity? But you can read a London newspaper in the morning and you make sure you read a paper from a foreign country later on in the day. So perhaps the state doesn't have the control it wants to claim?

Kevin Robins:

When it comes to the more disorderly nature of contemporary society where people live away from the state territory, there is now this increasingly popular notion of diaspora. That the notion of diaspora has become so generalised that anyone who lives away from their state, their nation, their territory are called a member of the diasporic community. Diaspora has of course all of these national associations - that you are unhappily in exile and that you'd like to go back, that your real loyalty is with where you come from. So if we talk about diaspora, our terminology is so imbued with our national way of thinking that we have already decided what the whole issue is all about, just by simply choosing that term of language.

Rose Issa:

Do all the Turkish artists look towards the West and why don't they consider looking towards the South or East? This, I find a very disturbing matter. People are not looking East, towards other cultures and philosophers and writers, and they hardly know anything about, not only the Arab world or Iran but further

on, China, Asia, India or Africa.

Zeynep Celik:

I agree with you, but I think it's changing. I don't know about the artists but the historians are beginning to look at other places than Europe - and it's so important. The same thing happened in North Africa, they kept on looking to the North all the time, yet there is that horizontal East/West thing... It's an important lack and it's changing. The new generation of scholars are learning how to do this. Also a great number of texts are being translated. So there is a consciousness, so it's not as though the rupture is going to be forever.

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- If you would like to contribute to the discussion, please visit the bulletin board at:  
<http://www.kahve-house.com/society/conversations/>

<58>

# What is wrong with wailing?

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Erden Kosova

<59> **F**or the last two decades, contemporary art production in Turkey has retained a distinct political character. The ongoing problematics of political tension between Turkey and Europe has not been left out of the arts practice. Certain issues have contributed to this: the dissolution of an introverted local intelligentsia, which has long been under the influence of a third worldism; comparably richer material conditions for following up global currency in the art world as a result of the neo-liberal economics of the 1980's; the start of the Istanbul Biennial; increasing invitations from European institutions for exhibitions and residencies, etc.

Despite the temporal overlapping with the emergence of post-colonial theory, it may be difficult to relate current art production in Turkey to this new body of theory. The tension between West/Europe/EU and Turkey is interpreted by artists from Turkey through a critical use of pre-modern enmity between these historical entities which would perhaps differ from the current post-colonial debates, grounded on the experiences of colonisation during the 19th and 20th centuries. So, even if the notion of 'belatedness' used by Homi Bhabha is perfectly applicable to some artists' works, it is never executed by cultural comparison but on a very personal level related to the artistic identities of those who are concerned, as a means to levelling a gap in knowledge and tradition. The third aspect in

the schema I suggest, relates to the ways in which some artists use ironical gestures about the issue, in order to abandon it, to avoid thinking through a reductive dichotomy of centre and periphery.

Gülsün Karamustafa's work *A Presentation of An Early Representation* (1998) was the first example of a series of artworks which dealt with the historical European imaginary in relation to Ottoman geography. Karamustafa's initiation aimed to incorporate post-colonial critique to the contemporary discussion on art in Turkey. A general interest in post-colonial theory had surfaced before in various disciplines of social sciences (in parallel to the heated negotiation between European Union and Turkish Republic for an already belated membership), but contemporary art practices did not coincide with this strand of critique despite their distinctively political quality. The main focus in the first part of the 1990s was on the possible employment of post-structuralist theory, particularly the notion of discourse in a Foucaultian sense, and the target of this critical positioning was mainly the repressive policies of the semi-modernist, semi-militaristic state. The use of post-colonial theory could be an enabling means to share similar experiences in other peripheral modernisms. *A Presentation of An Early Representation* was an attempt to produce a required link between the Turkish experience and other cultures that were defined as exterior by an Eurocentric gaze, and to understand the colonised geographies of the last two centuries and Ottoman-Turkey continuity together. <60>

Karamustafa's piece was simply a magnified version of an historical image, an 16th century illustration by a German chronicler who was commissioned to depict everyday life in the Ottoman domain. Karamustafa chose this one amongst others which mainly depicted the sufferings and tortures that Christian communities had to endure under Muslim rule, since she perceived that particular image reflected Orientalist imagery in an untimely fashion. In the image, Ottoman slave dealers have captured decent, aristocratic European ladies and were treating them rudely, checking their bodies in an unrestricted and shameless manner. On the other side of the picture a naked, black female figure is being lead to the front, in pronounced contrast to the European ladies, in her vague, silhouette-like depiction. For Karamustafa, the demonised Ottoman men and the simplified black female were victims of a Eurocentric gaze and its apparatus of representation, not far removed from the Orientalist imagery of the 19th century.

This equation was later found problematic by some critics. They argued there was nothing untimely in the image, as it perfectly reflected the power relations of the day. The Ottoman Empire,



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still expanding towards Central Europe, was an obvious threat for European societies. The Ottoman slave dealers embodied this threat, envisaging enslavement (and through the capture of women), castration and racial defilement. The black female figure, on the other hand, was merely a means to indicate to the extent of derision of the European women; she was a natural born slave, belonging to the enemy as well. The critics argued it was hard to associate the black slave to the dealer, since the statuses attached to them differed considerably.

This critique refers to a historical inaccuracy, to the impossibility of finding continuity between a 16th century European definition of the Other in the East and 19th century Orientalism. But besides that, I will argue, it can be extended to an inaccuracy in geo-political terms, problematising the properness of seeing the late Ottoman Empire (or more exactly Istanbul) as the object of historical Orientalism. Why are there so few references in Edward Said's *Orientalism* to the Ottoman Empire? The more recent Turkish translation of the book came out with a cover photograph in which Pierre Loti, the most known Orientalist figure of the Turks, a French writer, is being welcomed to Istanbul. It is ironic to find only two superficial references to Loti in Said's index. Is Said too Arab-centric? No, he also writes on India. So why ignore the Ottomans, still

an existing power in Middle East, albeit disintegrating? Said's prejudices are not the explanation, rather, his accurate insistence to think Orientalism and the big projects of colonisation together; to connect the racism inherent in Orientalist imagery to the European appetite for possession (and consequently invasion) of the rest of the world. Istanbul, as the capital of an aged sovereignty, remained somehow at the end of the list; it did not experience direct colonisation.

In his book *The Imaginary Orient*, Thierry Hentch extends the analysis of a European production of the Orient to its roots, emphasising particularly the period of the Crusades. His historical mapping aims to expose how a certain type of enmity evolved into 19th century racism. During the Crusades the Other was positioned as an absolute enemy who had the same weapons and the same strength, not less. In his book *Eurocentricism*, Samir Amin testifies to this symmetry of powers, when he says:

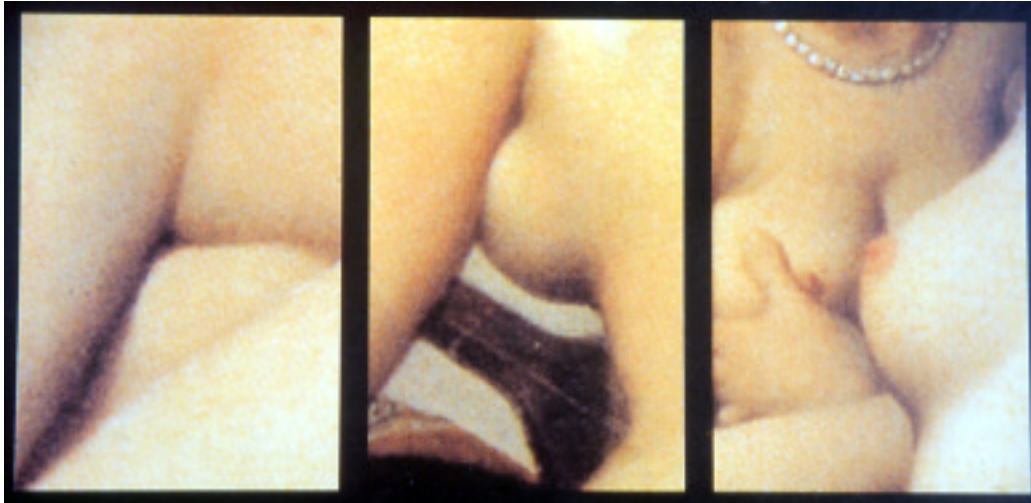
'... That is why the judgements of the Christians at the times of the Crusades are no more "Eurocentric" than those of the Moslems are "Islamocentric". Dante relegated Mohammed to Hell, but this was not a sign of a Eurocentric conception of the world, contrary to what Edward Said has suggested. It is only a case of banal provincialism, which is something quite different, because it is symmetrical in the minds of the two opposing parties.'

<62>

As Amin puts it, Europe started to attribute superiority to itself with the realisation that it was capable of conquering the rest of the world. The contempt of the Oriental Other was first directed at the slave nature of societies living under Ottoman rule. The European gaze distinguished the Ottomans from the other inhabitants of the geography as a sovereign and it was primarily due to identification with this ruler and due to a desire to capture this rival's properties. The inclusion of the Ottomans to the so-called backwardness of Oriental culture happened quite late, just after the collapse of the Empire seemed to be immanent. In the 19th century Istanbul had still somehow a fragile but functioning political agency. It was still 'the sick man of Europe' but still also resisting complete occupation, preserving its intimate space, screening it to the foreigner's gaze.

So, how did Gülşün Karamustafa resume, after taking the argument that closed down the possibility to equate a sovereign and its subjects into account, which pointed at 'the colour-line within the colour-line'? She went to the heart of the problem and started to work with Orientalist images of the 19th century. In her series entitled *fragmenting/FRAGMENTS*, we see decompositions of famous Oriental nudes of Western art history. They appear as if mere illustrations of a theory: namely deconstruction on one





hand, and appropriations of a hardcore porn genre 'close-up' on the other; in sum, a feminist attempt to resignify those paintings through the exaggeration of their fetishist character.

<63> Or, is there something else? Karamustafa denies this first reading. The close-ups have nothing to do with a critique of male gaze, she says. Just the opposite: the fragments reveal the artist's fascination with painterly qualities. In the absence of art museums, the only chance to study western masterpieces was to look at books, which reproduced those works in detail, and she was thus seduced by the figuration in painting (an interest cursed by her professors in the Istanbul Fine Academy of the 1960s). Ironically, the founder of the Academy, Osman Hamdi Bey was a student of a prominent Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. Osman Hamdi pursued the visual language of his tutor but strove occasionally to displace and correct the European assumptions on the Orient. When Gülsün Karamustafa addressed the painting of Gérôme in her series entitled *Double Action Series for Oriental Fantasies*, the second action mentioned in the title was functioning not as a repetition aiming to oppose or negate, but as an affirmative and playful complicity. Any possible identification of the artist with the Oriental female figures in the images was disrupted. The generous criticality in the earlier work, *A Presentation of An Early Representation* was reconsidered, not only because of the ambivalence of Ottoman Empire's historical status, but also because of the distance between those paintings and the artist belonging to present, in what is now a transformed society.

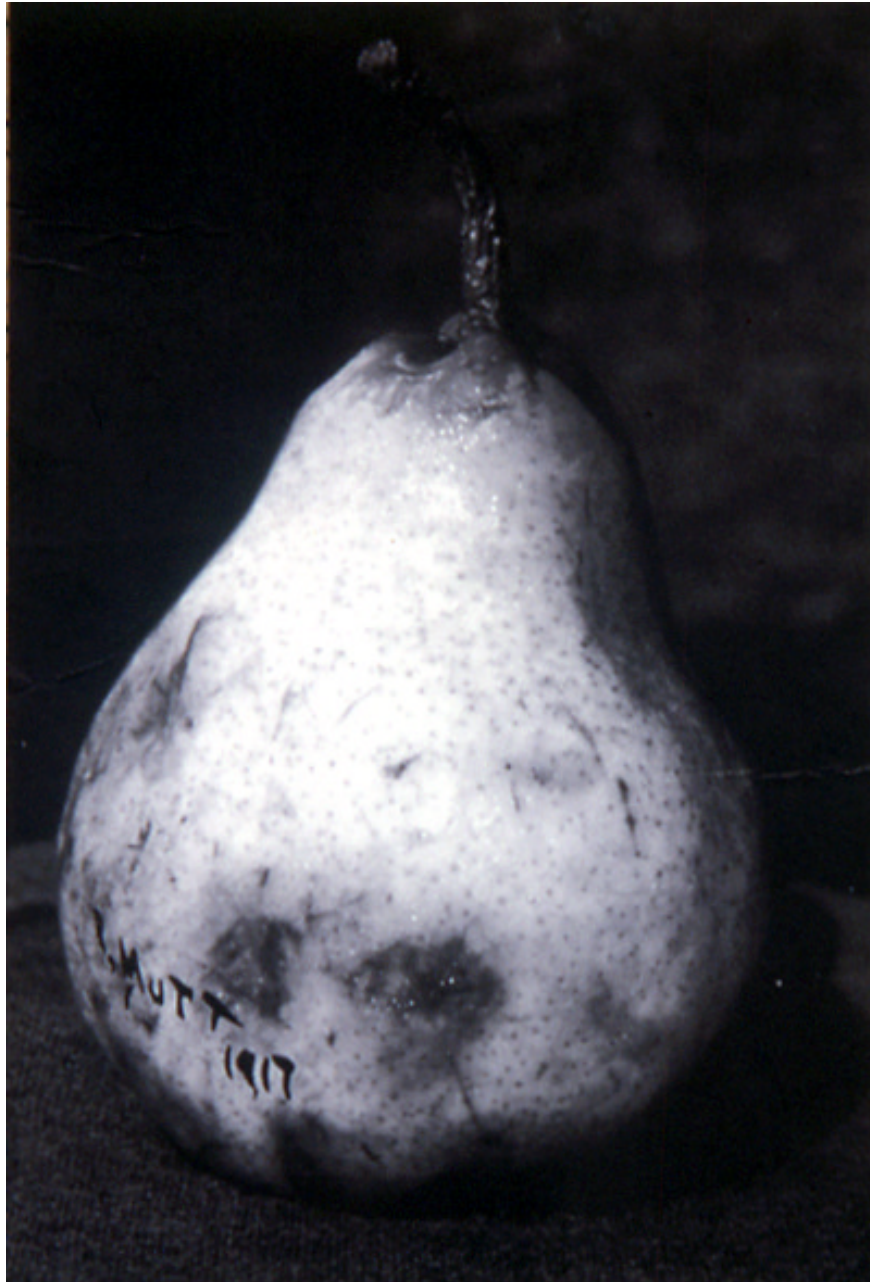
There are many references to the Ottoman past and its antagonism with Europe in contemporary art production in Turkey, and this occupation generally deals with the still-bleeding trauma of the loss of the Empire, criticising the nationalist fantasy that seeks to compensate its current weakness, misery through a reconstructed, heroic past. We could easily read Vahit Tuna's piece *Europe, Europe, Hear Us* as a mockery of the current EU-membership negotiations. The man in the picture is performing perhaps the most difficult and spectacular figure in football - an overhead kick - though the ball in the air is actually a basketball. He wants to play someone else's game. It sounds like Turkish nationalism and an army that utters a formula like 'Turkey will not comply with the rules of EU, but EU will have to concede on the conditions Turkey has to offer'. A slogan attached to Tuna's work, which is chanted in Turkey during matches against European teams, brings the whole issue back to historical enmities: 'europe. europe hear us / hear the march of the turks / ain't no way you can handle them / beware of them, you european faggots'. A fantasised penetration into a holistic Europe (both geographically and sexually), echoing the fearsome expansion of the Ottomans in their rise to power; yet it is also bound to a desire of the Other, begging for it, producing resentment in being rejected.



avrupa avrupa duy sesimizi,  
işte bu türklerin ayak sesleri.  
türklerle kimse başa çıkamaz,  
avrupa ibnesi kolla kendini.

Homi Bhabha refers to 'belatedness' and 'time-lag' as enabling notions, or disadvantage that can be transformed into opportunity for agency. In his conception, subalternity can subvert the discourse of the sovereign through mimicry and repetitions in the quotidian sphere. The question of taking European civilisation as a model started in Turkey more than two centuries ago, for sure. Yet, the slow process of hybridisation and the required forbearance for it has not been visualised in Turkey's contemporary art. This is perhaps an indication to resistance to self-downgrading, which would posit the self as non-sovereign, and this prescription seems to be hard to swallow in Turkey, still.

The problem of time-lag is elaborated on a personal level by some artists. In one example, Vahit Tuna's hand makes the *ARTTODAY* catalogue disappear, as if the summary about global art exists by slight of a magician's hand; a simple witty trick is enough to be involved in that collection, recognised by the Western art



discourse or even to grasp its totality and play with it. In another work, Tuna takes the false signature that Marcel Duchamp inscribed on his *The Fountain*, perhaps the most foundational work of the 20th century avant-garde, and places it on a pear. We can read the autograph of the fictional persona of R. Mutt on a fruit, which formally resembles the urinal as in the original piece. But Vahit Tuna's joke is not merely the echoing of round shapes between the figures of urinal and pear. If pronounced in English the signature of 'R. Mutt' is read just like the name of the fruit of pear in Turkish: 'Armut'. The word in Turkish has some distant associations to clumsiness and roughness, which also reinforces the effect of mockery in Tuna's piece. But Tuna's motive is not a clear-cut one. It can be seen as a subversion of the canonical character that Duchamp's work has attained by a calculated mistake in repeating its model, through a regional deflection; or we can read it as a self-ridicule of Tuna himself, in his fantasised gesture bridging the gap between the modernist art tradition and his own peripheral position, between a vast accumulation and his joke.

A third issue in the discussion of the cultural tension between Turkey and Europe is based on the rejection of binary thinking and a departure from this problematic. The motivation for these closing gestures is derived from a critique of nationalism at home, or the expectations of the European intelligentsia to see something 'cultural' in visual art practices produced in Turkey. <66>

Esra Ersen's work *Hello, where is it?* (2000) is based on conversations between the travellers in three different cars that traverse the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul. In one of the cars, a couple are having one of their usual arguments; in the other, a young man is discussing his anxieties about his unemployment and his coming enrolment in military service; and in the last car, two friends are telling silly jokes to each other about the recent earthquake. The talks are deliberately banal, if not boring, and the audience wonders what the piece is all about. Ersen's intention can be grasped only when the camera shows, at two different moments, the signs positioned onto the both ends of the bridge, one is saying 'Welcome to Europe' and the other 'Welcome to Asia'. The cliché about Turkey (or Istanbul) being a bridge between Europe and Asia, East and West, has been exploited in terms of self-exoticisation. Yet the banality of the talks between the passengers in the cars and their complete disregard of the signs, displaces the official rhetoric about cultural particularity. The bridge crossing, which is nothing more than an everyday act in the urban life of residents of Istanbul, is played against a cultural division (or synthesis). Another work of the artist from the same year uses this strategy for displacing the conception of a whole, homogenous Europe. The artist herself is photographed in the

middle of a farm where there is not a single sign of human presence, and it is impossible to guess the geographical and cultural location. The title of the picture locates the place: *Somewhere in Western Europe* (2000). The act of naming and revealing the geography may seem to be in accord with the cultural dichotomy; it is perfectly possible to interpret the composition as reflection of the solitude of a Turkish artist working in Western Europe. But the rural quality of the surroundings displaces any comparison between the geographies; it could easily be somewhere in Turkey or some other part of the world.

<67> There are a number of artworks which deal with the possibility of getting away from the paralysing and fixing effects of dichotomies, away from the representational traps. A fine example of this type of work was realised by Ayse Erkmen during the group exhibition *Iskorpit* which was held in Berlin and Karlsruhe in 1999. One of the Erkmen's pieces in the show, *Emre and Dario* was a video presented for single small monitor. In the film we see a young man dancing. The soundtrack is the famous song *Istanbul, not Constantinapolis* from the 1950s, written and performed by Dario Moreno, a Turkish Jew who became famous in France. The title reveals a representational tone and it was meant to educate the Europeans about the modern Turkey. Ottoman Constantinople was long ago replaced by the Istanbul of the new state, but there was still global ignorance and lack of interest about this fact and the song set itself the task of correcting this. The same mission was transferred later to some jazz singers such as Eartha Kitt and Shirley Bassey, contracted to the Atlantic record company owned by the Turkish Ertegün Brothers. The songs representing Turkey at the Eurovision Song Contest were perceived in Turkey for a long time as the uppermost representations of the whole nation. In Erkmen's piece the artist's son Emre is seen dancing to Dario's song, though it is impossible to trace any cultural sign on his appearance. He could be Brazilian, he could be Israeli or Iranian. The only social coding on him is his cosmopolitan way of dancing which seems to be informed by a global club culture. The difficulty in relating the dancing figure to the tune, displaces the representational content of the song. In addition to her *Emre and Dario*, Ayse Erkmen displayed a poster showing two bears leaning towards each other. The piece was selected from a photographic series Erkmen had bought from an advertising company which was marketing ready made images suitable for commercial use. Erkmen exhibited these images in some solo exhibitions, but for the occasion of *Iskorpit* she added music to the picture: a slow motion replay of *Istanbul, not Constantinapolis*. It looks like the bears on the photograph are singing the tune in a clumsy and boring style. So, a work which previously problematised the notion of author in relation to the

commercial expansion of the image world, became a means to ridicule the exhibition it was involved in, mocking the self-satisfaction of artists from the periphery who are welcomed to the venues in the centre, including directors and curators of those group exhibitions who feel they have thus accomplished their mission of multiculturalism.

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# Biennales: past or present?

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Ann Huber-Si gwart

<69> **T**his paper is based on a question: biennales, past or present? but it won't offer an answer. I would rather want to suggest ways of thinking about the multiple readings of the present and of the past. It is a short exploration of moments, of exhibitions and of works revealing connections, which are brought to bear on the possible interpretations of the world-wide phenomenon of the Biennale of contemporary art or mega-show. From the insight of theoretical readings and of historical examples, mainly the Venice Biennale, I attempt to imagine the present situation through the past or better, the memory of a past, leading to being now, here. The importance of institutions that influence and codify meaning and often inhibit or condition individual creative initiatives is a crucial aspect to bear in mind as most exhibitions are dominated by pre-given ideologies and ways of visualising the world that surreptitiously have infiltrated the socio-political and the cultural realm. To stand back and to question these relations is thus becoming increasingly difficult and if we are here again discussing the issues of inclusion and exclusion, of imperialism and post-colonialism, it is partly because the terrain remains somewhat nebulous.

Consequently, while my primary preoccupation lies with exploring the intricacies of contemporary power relations and the ways in which large art exhibitions promote a system marked

by the history of imperialism, I am also concerned to indicate some ambiguities underlying the theorisation of a Self and of an Other, a concept which often mediates the presentations of contemporary art. In this context, I hope to unravel aspects of the large international exhibition, a repository of contradictory desires and identities and show how the protagonists are implicated in the construction of narratives of belonging, of inclusion and exclusion. Important works, mainly in the domain of literary studies, which critically analyse the colonial or imperial encounter and suggest ways of working from within a dialectical framework have influenced my approach and my analysis of exhibitions and imperialism.

Here, I will briefly introduce some theoretical elements that seem very relevant to get a sense of the problematic issues underlying the debate of exclusion and inclusion. It is interesting to note that historically, the charged notions of imperialism and hegemony appear to coincide with the project of modernity. Whether one dates the origins of imperialism like Edward Said, as far back as the sixteenth century or only in the nineteenth century with the growing significance of colonial expansion, it continues to determine the ways in which we read contemporary cultural events. [1] In the mid-nineteenth century, the so-called, modern metropolis was flooded by representations or constructions of imperialism as a system, a totality. From Singapore to London, from Cairo to Paris, the impact was undeniably present and unavoidable, mainly through huge urban and architectural schemes that proudly, often at the expense of the locals, restructured the cities according to aesthetic rules based on eclecticism. Flow of capital, of information and culture was facilitated by increased accessibility and for those who did not have the privilege to travel, the wonders of the world were brought to Europe. [2]

Enormous exhibitions such as the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, were organised to supposedly educate the people, but also to display fantasies, success and power, displaying trophies. In a critic of the Paris exhibition in 1855, Baudelaire wrote, that a big exhibition is a compressed journey to Africa and the Orient in a single day. A similar aim the biennales attempt to achieve. The subsequent exhibitions in Paris, Chicago, London again.. emulated the form, expanding their ambit with the creation of national pavilions, which allowed for a more structured and hierarchical reading of the here and there, of the Self and of the Other. [3] A way of showcasing cultural production on the Venice

[1] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London 1994; Frederic Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, vol. 15, 1986.

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1874-1914*, London 1987.

[3] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, London 1995.

Biennale and other Biennales such as Sao Paulo, still rely upon. These exhibitions or fairs conceived along the lines of the 'Cabinet des curiosités', promoted the voyeuristic gaze of the European metropolitan onto the Other, whilst simultaneously introducing or promoting the idea of a self.

This problematic polarisation of identities appears as a necessary and ambiguous partnership with imperialism and has dictated the shape of cultural critic throughout the twentieth century. Edward Said and Frederic Jameson do indeed refer back to the received notion about imperialism, understood as a monolithic or homogenous entity in opposition to the Other, a concept, which has had an insidious appeal on the mystification about identity. While Jameson defines the metropolitan culture - meaning the culture of European and American centres - as single and united in its sensory and existential experience, Said sees it as joined by ideology. Both argue that the need for a unifying sense of identity was fuelled by the desire to compensate for the destabilising effect of the confrontation of new elements coming from outside the geographical boundaries of the metropole or centre. Said goes on to say that the importation of colonial cultural elements lies at the origin of a growing anxiety of the metropolitan subject leading to what is defined as a split identity.

<71> This further leads to what Hannah Arendt describes as the refusal of difference in the biography of Rahel Varnhagen as well as her book *Imperialism*. [4] She discusses an unease leading to the negation of the other, in this case of the Jew, based on the very idea of difference. But by creating this differentiation, even assimilation becomes problematic as this again can be a threat to the identity of the metropolitan self. This means that the concept of the Other is an essential requirement to be able to imagine a social totality mostly based on a sense of belonging. The idea of annihilation, appropriation and even assimilation of the Other, thus only exist as hypothetical goals that cannot or should not be quite achieved. By extrapolation, the notion of hegemony is based on this necessary contradiction inherent to imperialism. Indeed, Hannah Arendt and Gayatri Spivak do examine imperialism in relation to this predicament to maintain difference in order to exercise power, an idea explored again by Slavoj Žižek in recent years. The project of imperialism, Spivak says, has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. Consequently, hegemony is maintained through constant bargain and negotiation between groups, subaltern or dominant. [5]

[4] Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: La vie d'une juive allemande à l'époque du Romantisme*, Paris 1986, *L'Impérialisme*, Paris.

This short detour into the theorisation of imperialism seems crucial to me in order to be able to understand the ongoing conflict that underlies most presentations of contemporary cultural production. Most exhibitions of the scale of a biennale are the ground for tensions embedded in the history of imperialism to resurface, as the encounter between identities is often awkwardly restaged. Interestingly enough, this is appears to be the case in Istanbul and in Yokohama or in Johannesburg as well as in Venice. Arguably, this is the consequence of a presumption critiqued by Masao Myoshi in the text 'A Borderless World' about the continued hegemony of European culture in a post-national world. Myoshi goes on to say that Eurocentrism prevails as the ghost of a Europe which no longer exists, a sentiment the Venice Biennale seems to illustrate perfectly [6].

Walking into the Giardini at the Biennale in Venice at regular intervals, I am always surprised, even shocked by the nostalgic atmosphere. The pavilions and their placement in the gardens are witnesses to the problematic history of imperialism I hinted at earlier. The remnants of the past stand there looming over the present, dictating the shape of the exhibition, still, a hundred years later. The introduction by Harald Szeemann, of an aperto and later of the *dapertutto*, nor the suggestion by Achille Bonito Oliva, to swap pavilions, or further initiatives such as the Danish, the French and the Spanish presentations in 1999 which attempted to metaphorically excavate the rigidity of the site by toying with the idea of cross-national collaborations by showing artists that do not quite fit a truly 'national' paradigm could alter the general feeling of the place. On the contrary, it seems to reassert it. <72>

I would like to quickly outline the history of the Venice biennale in order to suggest parallels with current events. The first Venice biennale dates back to the time of colonial expansion in 1895. The city of Venice, which suffered a threatening lack of interest on a national scale, had to find a pretext to re-position itself onto the map of Italy and to join the race into modernity on an international scale. The celebration of the silver wedding anniversary of the Queen Margarita of Savoy and of the King Umberto the first was perfect pretext to create the biennale. [7] From then on, Venice worked on the mercantile and tourist propaganda, building up a

[5] Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London 1993; Donna Landry, ed., *The Spivak Reader*, London, 1996.

[6] Masao Myoshi, 'A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, 1993.

[7] Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968, From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, 1968.

tradition of culture based on the spectacle of the city and the biennale. The architectural environment of the place, the history of the city and its geographical situation successfully contributed to the construction of the myth, the creation of a place Baudrillard would describe as somewhere between a carnival and a museum; in a similar sense suggested at the Istanbul venue. Other biennales or mega-shows later on played on similar registers and most of them, whether in Havana or in Kassel or Istanbul, share marketing strategies based on a claim of dialogue and internationalism. The expansion of such exhibitions in the nineties, can be read as the continuity of a global economy which pursues the colonial project under the disguise of a now over saturated neo-colonial ideology. And it is often said that the biennales are more about the cities that host the event than about art itself.

The intertwining of the local and the global in all aspects of social organisation is however constantly put under pressure and interrogated. The provocative work by Hans Haacke, along with Nam June Paik's installation in the German Pavilion in Venice in 1993, tried to play a role in this attempt to push boundaries. By addressing a disturbing moment in the history of the biennale along with the overdetermined notions inherited from the past, the tone was set for many more questions in the long run. Hans Haacke did not hesitate to excavate the past by questioning the impact fascism had on the very structure of the still existing Biennale. Before encountering the centrepiece of his dramatic installation the viewer had to face the picture of Hitler and Mussolini on a visit to the Venice biennale in the early 1940's. Behind the unsettling facade, the marble floor of the main room of the neo-classic German Pavilion, built in 1938, the year of the sadly famous crystal night, had been smashed, destroyed and the pieces were lying there, evoking abandon or death. However, two years later, in 1995, Jean Clair, the director of the next biennale, jumped back in time as if nothing had ever been said about the history of the biennale, a strategy already used by the allies after the second world war...

I emphasise this example because I believe it is important to illustrate the connection between nationalism and imperialism, an uneasy topic. Even if theory allows us to unravel the intricate connections and layers of history, it is nearly impossible to accept such subversively negative views as Slavoj Žižek's for instance when he writes: 'Multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a racism with a distance – it respects the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed authentic community towards which he, the multiculturalist maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position'. [8]

The ironic spin of this quote suggest an impossibility to move on, as if nothing could possibly alter the statut quo and perhaps the recent initiative by Harald Szeemann and Matthieu Laurette in Venice epitomises such a thought. A letter to the 111 Governments requesting their presence at the next biennale in exchange of a passport for Laurette was a sign posted at the entrance of the Giardini. This action on behalf of someone who is given a key role in the dissemination of cultural production is disquieting for more than just one reason. The patronising tone set by the text, suggests an unsettling distance between 'them', who do not know anything about art and 'us' – in this case Szeemann – who is most willing to help. Further, in the Arsenale, the exhibition curated by Szeemann offers a similar Eurocentric reading. The title itself, *Platea dell'Umanità* equally points towards the problematic notion of the universal position of the curator and again poses the question about the ability of seeing beyond the European situation.

The continuity of a Eurocentric paradigm always again seems to resurface and even the attempt to restructure the concept of biennial exhibitions along the lines of thematic shows does not offer a satisfactory alternative. More than a survey of contemporary art, the *Documenta X*, marked by the stamp of Catherine David, was a personal arrangement of works by legitimised artists, such as Stan Douglas or Gabriel Orozco, two must haves. Ironically, Catherine David was hoping to move the debate about imperialism forward and was well aware of the issues raised by the frame of neo-colonialism, but her exhibition was criticised for returning to earlier Eurocentric perspectives. Similarly, the three last Istanbul biennials seemed to be unable to bypass the dichotomy inherent to the institutional structures within which the event is inscribed. The ambiguous title of the biennale organised by René Bloch, *Orient/ation*, evoked the whole scheme of imperialist constructions about the self by drawing on the geographical definition of place itself. The positioning of the European at the centre of a world map, looking at the orient presupposes a privileged, or a naively accepted notion of a Eurocentric point of reference which remains inherent even to the idea of seeking for a direction, an orientation. Again the last biennale (2001) curated by Yuko Hasegawa, introduced a concept deeply embedded in western thought with the idea of *ego-fugal*. *Fugue from ego for the next emergence*. Was she meaning to question the ego the 'Uber Ich' from Freud she referred through the idea of a collective unconscious and the universal?

[8] Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, No. 225, Sept-Oct 1997.

The allegiance to an ideal all over arching universality, cannot be reached, it seems, by constantly referring back to inherited notions based on an antagonism which is defined by homogeneous systems. The insidious appeal of the imperial ideology constructed on notions of difference and universality constitutes a handicap to changing views and alternative presentations of works of art. But perhaps even the catalysts of the debate about cultural representation cannot really alter the situation as most of them are themselves caught in a system of thought relying on this very tension or dichotomy between the here and there. However, I would like to argue that the rift between the 'Self' and the 'Other' is not placed along geographical boundaries. Indeed, who could be so naive to assume that the narrative of imperialism, is a narrative, which can fall into clear polarities of them and us whilst we are having a debate here amongst people sharing references and thinking along similar lines. On the other hand, I am tempted to think that it is still more viable to maintain the seemingly incommensurable positions of universality of antagonisms even though the concept is diluted or mediated by so many layers of historical changes.

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# Mutual realities, re-mapping destinies [transcript]

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Hüseyin Alptekin

**T**he project, *Sea Elephant Travel Agency* is based on one of <sup><76></sup> Jules Verne's novels, *Keraban the Inflexible* (published as *Keraban-le-Tetu* in 1883). The novel starts from Istanbul, goes all around the Black Sea and ends in Istanbul. A lesser-known novel of Jules Verne, it is nonetheless interesting. I won't tell you the whole story but it is about somebody from Holland who comes to Istanbul to visit his boss. His boss is a Turkish tobacco merchant and the person from Holland is one of his agents. So the boss wants to take his guest to dinner on the other side, in Üsküdar, the Asian part of the city. They arrive at the port to take a small rowing boat but they then learn that they have to pay a tax to cross over the Bosphorus. Keraban finds this an injustice and he is also stubborn. He has promised to take his guest to dinner on the other side, so they go all around the Black Sea to have dinner on the other side, but there is a time limit. They have to do the journey in two weeks because of a marriage that is going to be held back on the European side. Well, it is a happy ending, because there is a French acrobat stretching a cord between Maiden Tower and Galata tower. Keraban pays a lot of money for the acrobat to take him to the other side. So he does not touch the sea and does not pay the tax as he is so stubborn.

I like this story a lot. I want to turn it into an art project and trace the imaginary itinerary of Jules Verne across the Black



Sea and end up in weird corners of Russia, Romania and the Ukraine. In the project there will be a boat journey and the artists from these countries and from other parts of the world will participate in the voyage. They will realise projects on the boat, which will function as a laboratory, so in each port or venue there will be manifestations and events. Luckily, this project has partners from the region and elsewhere. The distance, the communication and

points of communication are very widespread. When you are in and around the Black Sea you end up in different geographies, as in the Baltic Sea. When you look at the history of the Black Sea, there are many different spaces that are communicating but we have these geographical borders and we have political borders and we have 'mediatique' borders (the borders of media communications). We also have the idea of global utopia. I am very interested in the link and communication between different polarities and points. So, we are looking for different kind of communications as an agency; a travel agency project. We look for and construct exchanges with many towns and seas in the region and not only in the region but in other regions too, like the Baltic Sea and Barents Sea. We are in touch with: NCCA, the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow, Russia; CCA, Centre for Contemporary Art, Odessa, Ukraine; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Sofia, Bulgaria; ICCA, the International Centre for Contemporary Arts, Bucharest, Romania; the Pushkin Museum, Odessa, Ukraine; ICAP, the Istanbul Contemporary Art Project, Istanbul, Turkey; Apollonia-European Art Exchanges, Strasbourg, France; Institut Français d'Istanbul, Turkey; NIFCA, the Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland; The Rooseum Centre for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany. This is not only a regional programme, and fortunately there is Western interest in it.

This project in the Black Sea is looking out there and researching the co-existence and co-habitation of different ontologies in contemporary art in the region. In the region everything is far apart spiritually, although they are very close to each other in terms of actual distance. The artists from these countries and from Turkey go to the West. They travel a lot and it is very easy to go to the West, but it is not so easy for us to communicate and work in the Black Sea region. There is no exchange and almost no solidarity and nobody is interested in projects or in understanding what is going on in the region. But

the ordinary people outside global, mediatic and political networks, are constantly moving and they are making their lives. I am very interested in nomadism and the flux of migration and displacement. That nomadic network of the move is totally out of the media and politics, even that is out of the geographical notion, and a kind of reality that none of the global theory can explain the facts and consequences of that flux and the will to move. So people from the Black Sea region and the Balkans are constantly moving and changing the space. When there are too many borders and too many problems, they just move. I am very interested in such different polarities and some of the sensitive points of this kind of topography. This kind of map is in constant flux by small and big movements, individual and community decisions by the people; where one by one every man and woman takes their destiny in their hands and moves, changes the land, until 'heimat' becomes where they are. We cannot make sense of that fact with economic and global theories alone. All moves and movements reshape the map, like a kind of punch-bag. You cannot draw it; you cannot simply explain how borders work.

I think I have learned something very important through the discussions, that the concept of nostalgia is very significant. I have myself developed a certain kind of nostalgia. And it is quite true that we live a structure and historical rupture that neither knows the Ottoman language, Persian or Arabic, nor reads its history and does not remember the texts in the archives. That world of the past remains like ornamentation for me. When you look at Ilya Repin's painting in my collage *Guardians of the Threshold* (1999),[\*] you can easily switch a sense of image, culture and place. In Repin's painting, *Writing a Mockery (Mocking) letter to the Sultan*, Cossacks are writing a letter to the Ottoman Sultan. Yet, now, we can read it in another way, where the Cossacks could be Turks writing a letter to the European Union. We can always switch the place of origin or of the Other.

The notion of distance is very important in Verne's novel. The hero has no notion of distance. He promised dinner to his guest and they went all around the Black Sea, emphasising distance as an extremely paradoxical idea. For me, Sofia in Bulgaria is very far and Bucharest is very far for some reason, yet going to Switzerland or coming to London is not far in terms of paperwork such as visas, the operation of plane schedules or in terms of links. This is also the same for people who are in constant migration and for whom there are many borders and difficulties through which they move. For them, there is not the same notion of time. They might take a minibus from Istanbul and be in Moldavia in two or three days. And if somebody is sick they take the person to Siberia for a cure with a quite different conception of the distance and time. This is very important in



the novel - very important - that nomadism in relationship to time and space is strange and impossible to conceive of when we try to understand its structure. Within the change of locality and the map of the movement, the model of space becomes a fugitive reality between hospitality and hostility. The notion of guest, visitor, outsider, or stranger changes within and throughout the use of the root-term 'hospes' (from the Latin). The notion of models of space is always omnipresent in my work, especially in my *Hotel* series (1998-2000).

There is always a double trap in the relation of the artist and Western curator. There is a slippery space between expectation and reception for the curator and artist. Western expectation often refers to a certain Other: orient/al, exotic, folkloric, political, female/feminist, bizarre, etc. There are certain traps which artists always gossip about in relation to Turkish group shows: 'She's or he's doing this orientalist shit because they buy that', and that's the trap. The other side of the trap, the Other artist, often consciously or sub-consciously answers and produces according to imagined expectation. Nobody knows exactly how this system works. Are the artists forced to make work in this way for pragmatic reasons? Or, are curators manipulated or manipulate themselves in the search for works or artists to make and reflect otherness? It is a reciprocal structure. We always have gossips whenever there is a Turkish group show abroad, saying: 'he or she is again doing or selling the orientalist thing.' Here the 'orientalist thing' might be anything expected or imagined.

I was going to talk about global recession, western expectation, local degradation, global degradation, and other ontologies, other kinds of expressions, regionalisms, solidarity exchanges, sensations, political networks, other connections, identity, crisis, and the switching of identities. I am very tired of this identity thing. It is the same when there is a debate among the artists from the Balkans. What are we doing? Why do they always make this kind of Balkan or Eastern European shows? Why are we responding to that prepared or imagined or invented Balkan frame or Eastern exoticism? Some artists are debating that structure and one-way exchange, whilst some have no more interest at all. Some fight against such reception, whilst some do not for pragmatic and operational reasons. In both perspectives there is a trap and a danger.

There is considerable hysteria around every biennale, and the Istanbul biennial is a special case. Hysteria is expressed through the selection of the curators, the artists, combined with rumour and gossip around each biennale. The function of the system is both Byzantine and cryptical. The institutional frame of the biennale is getting more and more arrogant and

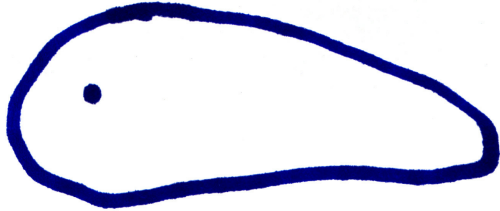
inaccessible. It started off as an interesting international event. By the third biennale we thought we could continue with it in an interesting context specific to Istanbul, among other biennales. But now it has become like one of the Western institutions and biennales. There is both local and global degradation in the institutional manner vis-à-vis the artists, in the reception of local and international artists. There is no free access to the information and the structure. Direction is not clear in local artistic events, nor in organic relation with the artists and their formation. Apart the time of the biennale, the artists from abroad have difficulty in reaching information and exchanging ideas. The structure looks more and more like a programme of international festivity. Artist possibilities are underestimated by curators, due to their operational strategies. Biennale venues cannot go against those with touristique ambience, and as such, they are the wrong choice for creating a context related to contemporary Istanbul and its visions. The venues are in the historical part of Istanbul and Istanbul citizens never go there. This is the tourist part of Istanbul. Thus, the curator's challenge with the city is reduced to dealing with the historical and oriental context, not with actual life in the city. Most of the curators are forced to invent themes on topics in precisely that frame. Thus, biennale concepts barely correspond to the reality of the city.

The Istanbul Biennial, from an artist's perspective, is an exotic career move for the curator, whilst for the artist participating with a ready-made work, it is just another exotic line on their CV. If one day you do Istanbul, next year do you get to do another one? Most of the curators have no notion of the city or the local artists, and guest artists have also difficulties integrating with the city and local communities. It is quite rare for the curators to leave a fruitful trace behind them when a biennale is realised.

We are tired of geographical, historical and cultural connotations: East, West, the Orient, Europe, Asia, North, South, Bridge and everything. We have to forget, to erase this connotations, references, metaphors, symbols or allusions, and look for other sense and sensibilities. Of course a biennale is not the only structure and platform of expressions and exchanges in the region in contemporary art. I believe there are different networks, different ontologies and specific productions. I'm very optimistic for the possibilities and potential of other communities and constellations which produce different resonances with solidarity and real exchange. For example, the *Sea Elephant Travel Agency* has already established a modest but promising network in the region and is developing various links within the other fields and platforms. Another example is *art-ist*, a self-funding, non-profit-making

contemporary art magazine from Istanbul. Both are in search of covering specific perspectives in the contemporary art scene, starting from local and regional energies and events in close relationship with universal networks, within the frame of individual initiatives and reciprocal solidarities.

Sea Elephant  
Travel Agency



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Hüseyin Alptekin is a writer, professor and artist, currently teaching at Bilgi University. He has participated in several exhibitions and symposia extensively in Europe, as well as the 4th Istanbul and 24th São Paulo International Biennales.



[\*] Notes by Hüseyin Alptekin, on *Guardians of the Threshold*, (Odesa-Istanbul) 1999.

-Image on the right (Story-teller) is appropriated from a found postcard: Serie 778. *Orientalisches Volksleben*. No. 4. *Der Marchen-Erzähler - The story-teller - Le conteur de legendes*, printed in Germany. This orientalist image is a postcard from the beginning of the century. The story-teller is the power in the nomadic culture. For them, the story is the reality and the representation of the world. For that reason the story teller is power in oral tradition, he is standing, the rest of the people, nomads are all seated. <82>

-Image on the left (Kozaks) is appropriated from a cigarette package cover from Ukraine: The brand name *Zaporozhtsky* and the image of package cover of the cigarette is appropriated from the painting of Ilija Riepin, titled *Zaporozhtsy: Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan*, (1890-1891). The Cigarette brand, the name on the package is *Zaporozhtsky* that means over the threshold, is a region all that nomads lives. They are called Zaporozhtsky cossacks. The image in that collage is reappropriated by me. Originally, it is appropriated from Ilya Riepin's painting entitled *Writing a mockery letter to the Turkish Sultan* or *Writing an ultimatum letter to the Turkish Sultan*.

The tobacco company took the centre of the painting with the cossacks (nomads), they are nomadic people, riding horses and moving. They are in rebel for the independence, they are willing to write a letter to the Sultan. They don't know to write and read. Only one person who is sitting in the centre of the table and in the centre of the painting knows to write. He is the power. Almost all the cossacks are standing or pending on the table with the conflict and hesitation.

This is a passage or threshold from oral tradition to the scriptum.

# Edited transcript of second conversation

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[Istanbul, September 2001]

[...]

Vasif Kortun:

I was asked [in Turkish] what would be my option as a curator and how would I do a biennale? Firstly, I answered by saying that I can't offer a general model. I don't think you can offer general models for this kind of practice, as it's context and situation bound. Nevertheless, if I was asked to do a biennale I would definitely divide it into 24 months, do a series of small projects, engage local situations and at the end would probably finish off with a discussion platform. I would not create this density of singular events. This also happens in any city not only in Istanbul. Now there's the Istanbul biennial, you see all these dormant institutions, sleeping institutions, these non-exhibition institutions, suddenly jumping on the bandwagon, and doing a series of projects around the biennial. Now, where were they 3 months earlier? Where were they 6 months ago? This means that you're not doing something for the city, you're not doing something for your local community, you're not doing something sincerely. And, I don't think this is healthy for creating an art society or producing an art community, or producing anything.

The last issue was about [...] these cities that don't really have an art context, that suddenly become an art context for 2 months [at the time of the biennale] - not really 2 months but for the first 5 days of the opening - and then nothing happens for the rest of the year and we wait for the next friend or next curator to come and create the possibility or opening, so that you can practically go on with your work. We can't blame the artists for that, I mean it's not their job to create the institutions and the context, and the criticism. It has to come from the mediators. That's what we were talking about.

Ann Huber-Sigwart:

When you curated the third Istanbul Biennial, were you concerned with this issue or not?

Vasif Kortun:

Yes, I was seriously concerned with this issue. How did I get around it? I followed an instinctive model which was first trying to integrate each person into the city fabric - the artists, but not only the artists in the exhibition but also artists around, to formalise the situation and create organic networks and relationships between people, between professionals over there and professional over here and get them to talk a lot, through discussions, lectures, etc. - not only during the first days of the opening but before. Also, I was physically in the exhibition space every single day attending to the people who came in. I tried to think in terms of empowering the artists from here. It did have a very positive result, but in terms of empowering the general community I don't think so.

My exhibition was different, in the sense that I'm the only one who among all the curators in the biennial, refused to put an exhibition in the historical town. I don't think it's appropriate to do exhibitions in the historical city. The historical city is a historical city. We don't go there. We are not a museum culture. We are not a museum people. We don't go there, it's only for tourists. I mean that has to be said over and over again. It's not our town, it's a historical town. That's not the direction of the town. This is also a town that grows inward always, in the direction of the land not in the direction of the water. So I think that whatever way you do it, if you sort of limit your exhibition to the historical city, you are always within a self-orientalising situation.

[...]

Geoff Cox:

We are in a coffee-house situation, trying at least to make historical references to the coffee-house as a place where discussion would be relatively unregulated. I'm just wondering about how you would feel about biennale practices that try to occupy public spaces, with reference to what you were saying

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about the historical city, as a site of tourism. What about other kinds of public spaces? What do you think the possibilities are there?

Vasif Kortun:

I think there are much better people who could speak about what is public space?

Meltem Ahiska:

I was already thinking about saying something about public spaces and I was wondering, this is a coffee-house but there has been conversations going on here for several years, but now we claim to have a public space here because it's a different kind of public space. We come here with our cameras, recorders and everything, and then it is recognised and registers at a different level then it becomes a public space for us. But for the people here [and activities] normally taking place and leading their conversations, it is not recognised as a public space by us. So I think one of the basic characteristics of the public space is how it is recognised as significant. Regarding this, I was going to ask the point about audiences. Who is the audience for debates going on in a certain public space? I was going to ask the question to Vasif: Who is your audience of the art context in Turkey? Who are you aiming to get the recognition of? I think that is a very important issue because we cannot <85> debate about public space, as the public space is not just any space around that is open to the public. It is constructed in a way, by recognition by its registers and its relation to other spheres and power. So I was going to ask: who's the audience?

Vasif Kortun:

Each project reinvents an audience, reinvents a community, each exhibition project has to, I mean not everything is for everybody. [...] Look at the history of public space, the history of exhibitions in Turkey, in Istanbul, then we definitely know that it is an exclusive institutional and exclusionary practice. We are usually not conscious of that - or we keep on saying that, if we do a project in Istanbul with a lot of wall texts, a lot of writing on the walls, with a lot of information, it is bound to fail, because we are not a culture that reads. We don't read, right? So if you want to give your people information by text, you will fail. You have to create other kinds of mediation points where people will not feel excluded - I mean this is a very long story. May I just turn the microphone over to ODA projesi, we're working with them on a project? They can tell us what constitutes their public or how they constitute their public?

ODA Projesi [translated into English by Leyla Ayas]:

It's a project by a group of students, and young artists. They rented a small flat somewhere in an area near the [Galata] tower

which is usually an area where poor people live and is not regarded as a very good area of Istanbul.

Then they tried to organise something with the local people. First, they organised a concert, [...] then they ended up organising a picnic. [...] It was a picnic where people from the intellectual world, and artists came together with the local people - and they had a great time. So it was a project where they managed to get the people who are usually not together, together.

Audience:

Did you get any kind of financial support by government for your project or help from experienced curators?

ODA Projesi [translated into English by Leyla Ayas]:

No, they received no support. The new project in Gultepe is supported by the museum. But previously they did everything out of their own money.

Vasif Kortun:

In brief, when Meltem Ahiska was just saying that art in art situations, in an art context doesn't ask for anything in return - fundamentally, art does what other disciplines, other fields, other situations cannot do. I mean, a mall is free for everybody, you don't have to buy anything, but it is still within the experience of the economy. Or in watching television, <86> you watch things that are squeezed in between commercials. It's the same thing with newspapers, you're unlikely to find something to read because most pages are covered with advertisements, or whatever. Now art offers you something pretty much for free. It does not ask for anything in return. If you take that as a principle, you have to make sure that it doesn't ask for anything other than a kind of space in which you can think, in which you can speculate, a space to which you are invited. Regarding the museum that we just opened a few days ago [Proje4L: Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art], it is between the new financial sector of Istanbul and a working class neighbourhood, so we have to make sure it's open to both and does not exclude one or the other. That's why I went to the ODA projesi, to make my life much easier. [...] Otherwise, the Gultepe audience will not come if I don't make sure that the doors are open and are waiting for them to come in as well - that means not only in the projects inside, the exhibitions inside, but also how to rotate your programme. How do you create a situation which is friendly and welcoming? [...]

[London, November 2001]

Tefvik:

If you look at Ottoman history you can see the influence of writers, philosophers with the Arabic influence at the beginning of the century. Those values in one sense deny modernity.... I have seen work following old Islamic traditions but those artists are associated with certain political groups in Turkey and they represent not only national but some religious politics.

Meltem Ahiska:

It's so interesting this issue because it's coming back to something really crucial that was brought up earlier. You're not dealing with the West necessarily but you're building these local connections that we haven't looked at. And as you [Huseyin Alptekin] say, it's difficult to travel to Sofia from Istanbul and so forth. We have omitted these kinds of studies, and working with these closer networks. [...]



Rose Issa:

I find it difficult - let's say I want to know about Turkish artists. If I go to a bookshop, I don't think I can find any catalogues and get contacts. So there is a problem in you [Huseyin Alptekin] saying you're fed up of having group shows. I don't see any good reading book available in print. [...] I can understand the need for at least minimal research at universities or people who are just curious to find out more... I find it difficult to even make a connection to see what are the similarities between this culture or another culture. And there are a lot of similarities, all these modernist movements started at the same time after the postcolonial period in the 1950s. You suddenly see this all over Africa, in North Africa, in the East, and so on, everywhere, in India, the same kind of movement. [...] At least, if there were five catalogues about contemporary Turkish art then everybody could say we don't want to do it and we want to select by artists, by theme, and so on. There isn't even one at the moment. [...] Are there such things?

Huseyin Alptekin:

Yes, it is just starting. There's one centre called Istanbul Contemporary Art Project. It's now changed [its name] to Platform. There's also Proje4L now, the first contemporary art museum and also they have an office with huge documentation of about 120 artists.

Erden Kosova:

It's again Vasif Kortun's place. He has files about contemporary artists. And although it was functioning before, this time he sees it as an opportunity to organise exhibitions. [...]

Mark Sealy:

So is it official - is the Turkish group show dead?

Huseyin Alptekin:

Well, I don't recommend it.

Jananne Al-Ani:

I just wanted to go back to talking about the actual biennale and its structure, and what Ann [Huber-Sigwart] was saying earlier about its history. I don't know much about the history of the Istanbul biennial but I assume there must have been some local support for the idea of having one in the first place, but it sounds like that in the very short time that it has been going it has somehow [changed, and as a result] that artists feel like it has been hijacked in some way, and that it is no longer a relevant platform for artists to show work in. It sounds like other local initiatives are having to be formed in order to counter it somehow. Is that implying that the structure of the biennial is simply not possible? Is it not possible to save it or transform it into something else? Is it so caught up in its own history that it's not possible to function as a structure?

Ann Huber-Sigwart:

I don't have a feeling that the foundation running the biennale

is interested in having a change. On the contrary, they are quite happy to have it international and have these star curators come in, like you said jumping to a higher board or level, if you can put it into this kind of hierarchy. There are very few Turkish artists in the biennale, well from the third onwards really, that I looked at. The third was a change in a way with Vasif Kortun [the curator] who is Turkish but has got a desire to be more Westernised than Turkish in some ways. [...] Maybe it comes back to who really wants a change? How important it is to be seen on an international level and having all these people coming from abroad to visit Turkey in a very short [period of time], in the first week of the biennale. Does one really want to resist it or not? It's a kind of ambiguity I guess [as also] it is a kind of publicity for Turkey and for the Turkish artists and for the city and Istanbul?

Audience:

It seems to have generated quiet a bit of activity amongst the artists so that's a very good thing and in a way that links it to 19th century phase because they too created a lot of activity around the exhibitions. [...]

Mark Sealy:

<89> Is there a huge sense of exclusion by Turkish artists during the biennale? Is there really a sense of this really isn't for us? Or, is it an opportunity to meet, network, to hangout, a good social event? In terms of benefit, it's interesting to see what the benefits are? What are they? Is it about promoting certain individuals? At some point, somebody still has to make a decision about which artists are going to be on the platform. That, of course, will always engage with local antagonisms about who is chosen to go where. Or, is it about bringing this work to Turkey so that our local artists can see what's 'flavour of the month' [fashionable]? What we have to recognise is that it is all about power, it's about contesting power, which is what I think you're trying to suggest in terms of turning away from that. I wonder how you do operate a position in where you turn away from the institutions and mirror some degree of success with regards to visibility in the art world [...] It's a cycle of resistance but at the same time are we talking about wanting to be included?

[With reference to the *Sea Elephant Travel Agency*] You are, of course, going to have an international select committee?

Huseyin Alptekin:

Yes, I select everybody, I'm the captain [...]

Mark Sealy:

I'm just interested in your process.

Audience:

Will you make them work on the boat?

Huseyin Alptekin:

No, it's an ongoing project and we have these links with the artists, the curators, other people. And so, whenever there are symposia or shows, we can invent a context to see each other and to talk about that project. [...] It's not easy. I don't want to be an organiser. I'm concerned with the conceptual and artistic frame, I want to be one of the artists.

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- If you would like to contribute to the discussion, please visit the bulletin board at:  
<http://www.kahve-house.com/society/conversations/>

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Endnote: *A Coffee-House Conversation on the International Art World and its Exclusions (at the time of the 7th Istanbul Biennial)* e-book is based on two seminars programmed by Kahve-Society in collaboration with Autograph and Platform: Osmanli Bank Contemporary Art Centre, held on 23rd September (Istanbul) & 11th November (London) 2001.