

Event and Counter-Event: The Political Economy of the Istanbul Biennial and Its Excesses

Angela Harutyunyan, Aras Özgün, and Eric Goodfield

In this paper we discuss the production of the Istanbul Biennial, and specifically that of its eleventh edition in 2009, as an event. By looking at the sponsorship, curatorial strategies, and formal aspects of the exhibitions constituting the Biennial, we explore the contradiction between the ideological and economic conditions in which it functions and its ambitious claims to radical emancipatory politics. We argue that the art event operates as a global event in which contemporaneity itself, raised to the level of the sublime, becomes a statement of the politics of aesthetics. We juxtapose the Biennial to its reactions in the form of counter-events set up by autonomous art collectives in Istanbul through which attention was brought to the actual social, political, and economic conditions the event sought to evade and appropriate in its self-construction as a universal signifier of cosmopolitan modernity.

Key Words: Political Economy of Culture, Spectacle, Sublimation, Istanbul Biennial, Politics of Art

In the past twenty years, riding on the winds of Istanbul emerging as a world city as well as the exotic thrill it offers art lovers worldwide, the Istanbul Biennial has become a global art event: an easily consumable product promising to fulfill the exoticized expectations of the touristic gaze. Underlying contributing factors have been the input of material and immaterial resources derived from the massive concentration of finance capital, expanding media and culture industries, and an unparalleled growth of the service economy, all of which capitalize on the city's low-cost labor. In the context of these labor conditions, the Istanbul Biennial proved to be a meticulously designed spectacle, which, from its very inception, primarily aimed at presenting newly established and emerging artists from peripheral contexts in relation to dominant Western European and North American art scenes. The Biennial adopted a so-called global public image which it was nevertheless able to fulfill with

relatively limited resources in comparison to other art spectacles in Western European centers such as Berlin and Venice.¹

In this historical and ideological context, given its conceptual framework and ambitious claims for social change and the real conditions within which the Biennial functions, the eleventh edition raises a number of important questions. What happens to both art and politics, or rather, to the politics of art when art ambitiously strives to revive a historically specific political program—to make it operational under radically different circumstances in order to provide answers to globally urgent questions? What happens when the gap between art's truth content (and subject matter), theory and practice, and claims and results becomes insurmountable to the extent that the only program capable of filling this nebulous semiotic gap is the neoliberal political imperative? While the Biennial's strategic and temporary suspension of the question of content is necessary to render visible and critique the conditions of production, it is equally necessary to look at the ideology of contemporaneity and the separation effect that constitutes the event itself as a sublime object.

In this essay we will discuss the production of the Istanbul Biennial, and specifically that of its eleventh edition in 2009. By looking at the sponsorship, curatorial strategies, and formal aspects of the exhibitions constituting the Biennial, we argue that the contradictions between overt ideological commitments and actually existing economic conditions undermined its ambitious claims to a radical emancipatory politics. We argue that the art event operated as a global event wherein contemporaneity itself, raised to the level of the sublime, became a statement of the politics of aesthetics. We juxtapose the Biennial to its reactions in the form of counter-events set up by autonomous art collectives in Istanbul through which attention was brought to the actual social, political, and economic conditions the event sought to evade and appropriate in its self-construction as a universal signifier of cosmopolitan modernity and contemporaneity. Finally, we argue that the demonstrations that emerged to counter the Biennial assumed the ideological stand of the precariat, speaking in its own voice, demarcating the events' actual ideological exclusion of the masses, and indicating the degree to which Brecht's politics were subverted in form if not in content.

The Political Economy and Value Construction of the Biennial

The Istanbul Biennial emerged in 1987 in a reflection of two primary local and global tendencies: the festivalization of contemporary art across the globe, which reached its peak in the mid-1990s, and, related to this, the expansion of corporate sponsorship for the arts both internationally and in Turkey. Initiated by pharmacist Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı in 1973 along with other businessmen, the Istanbul Foundation for

1. A closer reading of one of the former curators of the Biennial, Vasif Kortun's (2009) appraisal of the 11th Biennial, reveals a strategic "design" process in this respect. While finding the 11th Biennial "as almost enviously perfect," Kortun's assessment does not refer to any artistic content exhibited, but rather points to the strategy behind the planning of the event, the choice of locations, and its publicity in the global context.

Culture and Arts (IKSV) is the organizing and commissioning body of the Istanbul Biennial, along with other film, music, and theatre festivals. Structured along the lines of a modern corporation with a board of directors, management, international projects, and corporate communication (which in turn includes a corporate identity and publications subdivision, information and records center, marketing, etc.), IKSV epitomizes the ways in which contemporary art institutions have reorganized in conformity with the contemporary forces of economic rationalization. With the last vestiges of art without monetary value lost with the decline of the welfare state in Western Europe and the collapse of communism in the former socialist bloc, contemporary art has not only become more hospitable to private funding but has directly borrowed from the vocabulary and operational modes of multinational corporations. It is in this sense that we make the case for the problematic overidentification of the Istanbul Biennial with its corporate sponsors such that the Biennial was framed, organized, and delimited by these presuppositional and highly visible commitments. (See fig. 1.)

With the new wave of corporatization of art as well as the emergence of the drive toward so-called corporate social responsibility, the socioeconomic and political structuring of the Biennial marks the shrinking of the public sphere as a zone for the noninterference of political and economic hegemonies. The economic and cultural agendas of the private sector and the nation-state have come to coincide such that the biennials become a platform for the promotion of private commercial interests under the guise of seemingly autonomous national and aesthetic representational forms. However, this relationship also functions the other way around; private



Figure 1 School desks and questionnaires at the Tobacco Warehouse, 11th Istanbul Biennial. Photograph by Angela Harutyunyan.

businesses sponsor the representation of the nation-state as well. Arguably, the fundamental dilemma of contemporary art lies in the fact that, while claiming an autonomous space for aesthetic production, the very conditions of this space are produced by economic and political interests. Trapped between commercial hegemony and diminished national sovereignties, representational staging in the neoliberal age has become a handmaiden to disembedded economies, and this is what we witness in the case of the Istanbul Biennial. The change of main sponsorship from Eczacıbaşı to Koç corporation, which purchased the sponsorship of the Biennial “wholesale” in 2006 for the next ten years, is a case in point. If the sponsors of previous editions were merely footnoted, during the 11th Biennial of 2009 the exhibition as an art event was a mere footnote to the markedly promotional presence of the sponsors.²

Koç corporation is one of the two major industrial giants of Turkey. It was established and developed after the foundation of the Turkish Republic as part of the effort to create a national bourgeoisie, which, in reality, meant replacing the economic power of non-Muslim minorities. With its massive scale, Koç branches into finance, real estate, tourism, and retail sectors, with its media division being its only underinvested sector. It is also a major art collector. Consequently, starting from the 10th Biennial in 2007, the Istanbul Biennial benefited from Koç’s corporate patronage not only in terms of funding, but also in receiving a different intensity of media coverage and publicity than it had enjoyed during Eczacıbaşı’s sponsorship. With the shift in sponsorship, the tone of media coverage for the Biennial has also changed. The new form of media coverage oriented toward the ordinary citizen adopted a pedagogical tone, and emphasized the importance of the Biennial as an event. Rather than presenting a critical review of exhibitions and artworks, columnists and reporters merely informed the public about the mega-event.

A media event as such has multiple functions and operations, all of which became evident in the case of the Istanbul Biennial. On the one hand, it has a purely economic function in a post-Fordist context: besides the income it brings to the city through the tourism and service profit it generates, it involves a branding operation that elevates the public image of its sponsors and the global image of Istanbul through their being associated with a high-profile international cultural event (Kortun 2009).³ This economic function relies on an ideological operation; the media event registers the social event in association with and in reference to certain lifestyles and social types, and constructs a semantic bridge between the brand and society through an appeal to lifestyle. On the other hand, the media event has a purely political function in a biopolitical context: in order to make the former association possible and fulfill such an economic function, the media event has to generate something that is referred to

2. The sponsors received unprecedented coverage and attention during the press launch to which the chairman of Koç Holding, Mustafa Koç, was invited to give a speech and answer questions along with the curators and IKSIV representatives. In a published statement, Koç declared: “Istanbul will by far become the center of attraction in the global art circles” (http://www.koc.com.tr/en-us/Media_Center/PressReleases/Press_Releases/10.09.2009_en.pdf).

3. Kortun’s assessment testifies to the fact that the “Biennial brings in a considerable number of audience to the city, who has a considerable spending capacity” (2009).

as “brand awareness” in contemporary marketing literature. A new cognitive mapping that connects identity to lifestyle has to be produced. Social subjects have to learn how to participate in this signification process and consume meaning; they have to learn how to be interpellated, look back and respond when they are called “modern individuals” and “contemporary world citizens.”⁴

The formation of social and psychological value in the event as such, and the potential translation of this value into purely economic terms, is a curious and important point since it becomes a hegemonic apparatus in the biopolitical order. This is especially so given the specific context of art events in that these are concerned with the immeasurable value of art. The disconnection between the exhibit as an event and the objects of exhibition (i.e., the art itself) carries out an ideological operation that discloses this form of economic activity. Antoon van den Braembussche argues that the modern notion of “aesthetic value” has never been independent from the contingencies of economic value, although it bears no reference to “use value” (Braembussche 1996, 32–43). He reminds us that, according to Kant, “in any aesthetic judgment we are not judging for ourselves, but for everyone because, if not, there would be ‘no taste whatever, i.e. no aesthetical judgment which can make a rightful claim upon everyone’s assent” (Braembussche 1996, 36). Here the beauty of the object is a result of a pleasure that stems from so-called common sense where the value of an object may very well be contingent upon its shared desirability as established in the social institution of aesthetic judgment and common sense, which are themselves reflections of demand. However, Kant introduced the notion of the sublime as that which transcends aesthetic judgment as shaped through common sense. The sublime is that which is beyond value and part of the affective encounter with a work of art.

While trying to locate and decipher the ambient politics in which the Biennial participates, it seems important to decipher the logic of such a media event and seek out links between what Gabriel Tarde called the “psychological economy” and the concrete “productive economy” (Tarde 1999). Braembussche points to a moment of modern disenchantment when the work of art becomes the absolute commodity. An experience that is “akin to the experience of the sublime” (Braembussche 1996, 40) is involved in the presentation of the commodified object of modern art in reference to its newness, which exceeds any value that a commodity could possibly bear. The work of modern art—as much as it is a commodity that no longer relates to truth, beauty, authenticity, and other similar notions—substitutes the effect of all these by establishing another relation that is beyond measure: the effect of the ephemeral present. It reenchants the world through such newness. All value, all measure belongs to the past, while a priceless newness reenchants the present.

4. A very similar “media event” in Turkey, which took place a few years ago, was the Formula 1 race. The race as a “media event” was not constructed with stories about the race, the drivers, or the cars (or any other issue that a car-race enthusiast would care about). Rather, it emphasized the “edginess” and “contemporaneity” of the phenomenon. It is important to consider the nationalist substance forming around the mediatic celebrations of such events. For a nation that has not been contemporary since the eighteenth century, the capacity to host a global event itself easily becomes a source for national pride.

Yet, post-Fordist capitalism is no longer oriented toward selling commodities; what it aims to sell are brands, events, lifestyles, and social practices constituted and saturated by consumption. Akin to the sublime, the experience of the modern work of art becomes an “absolute commodity” and is reconstituted in a way that no longer has any reference to its status as commodity. The “event” that is present, that constructs the present, carries the effect of the sublime: it is beyond good and bad, it is what is happening now, what has not been and will not be. The social construction of the Istanbul Biennial epitomizes such an economy where the objects of the exhibitions—the works of art themselves—are no longer important, and the event itself presents an effect that is “akin to the experience of the sublime.”

Interestingly, besides the publicity that envelops the Biennial as an event, the discourse of the exhibition itself dwells upon the same sublimation of contemporaneity. Rather than affirming any particular aesthetic tendency or practice, it presents the contemporaneity itself as a statement of the politics of the aesthetic, implying that the political aesthetics of art resides in the mere fact that a particular work has been produced recently. Moreover, contemporaneity here denotes a formal understanding of art defined solely through its medium (video art, installation, etc.) as well as the transnational character of the event. This arguably strips art of its own politics of aesthetics with potentially radical emancipatory effects, on the one hand, and, under the conditions stated above, hands over politics to hegemonic political, economic, and cultural structures, on the other. Thus, the 11th Istanbul Biennial of 2009, curated by Croatian curatorial collective WHW (What, How and For Whom), extends the structural transformation of the 10th Biennial and marks a break from art events understood as art affairs that use private sponsorship with discretion to propagate art, to using art to propagate corporate sponsorship. The choice of WHW as the curatorial team for the 11th Biennial fits perfectly within the context of such an event. WHW is an emerging curatorial team consisting of four women: Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović, who in their previous smaller-scale projects exhibited a radical discourse and produced sharp political statements on the alternative/critical periphery of the European art world. For an event foreshadowing its material content, for a statement that points to taking part in this new world order and which tolerates its many edges, WHW’s edgy image has been highly complementary.

Taking Bertold Brecht’s anti-humanism of the 1920s and 1930s, and specifically his question from *Threepenny Opera* (1928), “What Keeps Mankind Alive?” as a starting point, WHW attempts to translate Brecht’s lessons into the contemporary world of art biennials, fairs, and artistic and curatorial networks. The 11th Istanbul Biennial (12 September–8 November 2009) was spread across three venues: Antrepo No. 3 in Karaköy, a former warehouse overlooking the Bosphorus; Feriköy Greek School in Şişli, an abandoned former Greek academy, which had to close down several years ago due to lack of students; and the Tobacco Warehouse in Tophane. Two of these sites, which were formerly devoted to industrial production, were recently turned into regular exhibition spaces, another symptomatic phenomenon for the art market within the neoliberal framework of converting post-labor space into cultural

centers.⁵ In the curatorial concept of the Biennial, the team declares, “Aren’t today’s questions about the role of art in instigating social changes equally pressing as they were in the 1930s, when the Left confronted fascism and Stalinism? Or do we really consider them today to be solved within an all-encompassing system of cultural industry and its contemporary malformations, confined to art genres, predictable as cultural trends, and profitable for the purposes of marketing?” (WHW 2009).

And this leaves one to wonder whether the ambitious curatorial concept marked a break from the very conditions it was attempting to challenge. In the context of these issues, the fact that the curators chose relatively less known artists from the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc countries, and stressed the validity of voices coming from relatively peripheral cultural contexts, turns into yet another gesture to be different, to mark a break from the politics of the Biennial, and the subsequent repackaging of emergent voices with the tools and the means of the spectacle.

The Return of the New

Since the emergence of aesthetic modernism in the nineteenth century, much art production has sought to legitimize itself upon the promise of the new—upon a fundamental break aesthetic production brings to perception, to politics, and even to the larger society in terms of producing social change. Even if the newness of art is based upon a historical return, it still has to harbor a mark of difference from what has preceded it. And, even if we agree with Boris Groys that during the last decades we have witnessed the contemporary art scene’s virtuous liberation from the tyranny of the new, this nevertheless confirms the domination of the new against which the art world is supposedly struggling (Groys 2008, 23). It is the margin of difference between preceding and succeeding paradigms upon which newness marks its domination in the field of contemporary aesthetic judgment. Even though newness and historical return participate in the same dialectic as the construction of circular time, the very idea of the possibility of return necessarily betrays the original historical moment, even if one can question that there is such a thing as an original historical moment. Perhaps the pressing question to be asked in the case of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial is not whether newness is truly new, but what the conditions that prompt and compel the need for the claim to newness are. We argue that the inner ideological contradictions that the Biennial harbors obviate that answer to this question and expose the complicities that are problematic for the politics of art.

Newness functions not only on a purely formal level in terms of artistic experimentation and innovation, but on the level of the return of the discourse as well, which in turn implies that discourses supposedly disappear and mark a subsequent return with a violent gesture. It is precisely this claim of producing a violent gesture to revive a specific historical discourse and a political program that

5. The next logical step is the raising of property rates through regenerative projects in and around the areas where art centers are located or regular artistic events take place.

the curators of the 11th Istanbul Biennial make within the event's conceptual framework. By mobilizing Brecht, the curatorial team re-poses the questions of the uneven distribution of resources and labor, issues of social injustice and oppression through the prism of a specific political program, communism. In its curatorial concept, WHW declares, "Even a quick look at the lyrics will discover many possible themes, such as the distribution of wealth and poverty, food and hunger, political manipulations, gender oppression, social norms, double morality, religious hypocrisy, personal responsibility and consent to oppression, issues certainly 'relevant' and almost predictable" (WHW 2009). However important and urgent the curatorial striving to instrumentalize art to tackle social, political, and economic issues might seem, Brecht's decontextualized use turns these concepts into abstract categories in which the singularity of experience and their historical specificities are erased and cancelled. The simultaneity of the event's complicity in market and aesthetic capitalism alongside its rhetorical commitment to a communist brand of radical activism effectively neutralizes its ethical agency and perpetuates the very forms of violence and injury the curators explicitly seek to address. As a result, we hold that the liberal capitalist status quo is given sway in this gray on gray, as opposed to the curators' call for a return to the ethical possibilities for reflection and action that the revisiting of Marxist doctrine and thought might offer.

In this light, Brecht becomes an ideological token to advance a particular political program. Similar to the contemporary imperative to organize large art events on the condition that these are sponsored, this Brechtian revival also has its own sponsorship. Here, in this post-ideological paradigm, Koç and Brecht synergistically function as exchangeable signs among the endless circulation of other deterritorialized and decontextualized signs motivated by the production of specific desires. Brecht's lessons in the context of the Biennial become exotic commodities, which help to diversify and repackage goods and products already in circulation. While the curators take up Brecht's lessons with the full realization that pedagogy is itself a political practice, they nevertheless fail to reflect upon the political and economic significance of their own pedagogy.

The Biennial had an overt didactic agenda, which is not only manifest in the specific organization of the exposition venues and the conditioned interaction of the viewer with artworks as part of a learning process, but also in the statistics and figures which appear on the walls under the roof of the Tobacco Warehouse and are repeated in the exhibition guidebook and the collection of texts. On the top floor of the venue, after passing by the total installation of the Russian Chto Delat collective's post-perestroika reflections (*Perestroika Chronicles*, 2008–9), Vyacheslav Akhunov's inverted and skeptical monumental propaganda (*Doubts*, 1976) and Hamlet Hovsepian's minimalist, experimental everyday exercises of yawning, itching, and thinking (*Yawning, Itch, and Thinker*, all in 1975), among other works, the audience is provided with detailed empirical information about the Biennial: sponsorship, age groups, gender statistics, geography, budgeting, and so on. This flood of information about the economy and distribution of money and labor of the Biennial is a politically correct act aimed at affecting transparency, functioning within what Yahya Madra calls a reformist paradigm—existing within the already established institutional structures and trying to navigate within them rather than breaking away (Madra 2006,

525–37). The formal framework of the Biennial is an instance of the way in which Brecht's very questions⁶ function when translated to the world of contemporary cultural production, relying on formal and ideological integration with certain forms of neoliberal distribution of labor. Thus, the break from the latter does not really take place, but is rather simulated through radical postures and claims, which complete and serve as apologies for this integration.⁷ As opposed to its claim for the revival of communist politics, the Biennial rather marks the condition of its defeat or "adaptation." To make sure that the viewer is not merely a passive consumer of art as information, at the end of this political art journey he or she is invited to sit down on school desks and fill in a questionnaire of learning outcomes.⁸ (See fig. 2.) However, unlike Brecht's learning plays in which the learners could get an insight into their ideological conditions and historical situation through *Verfremdungseffekt*, the Biennial audience never transgresses its own naturalized and neutralized position as a mere onlooker onto the spectacle, who would typically try to make the visit worth the 10 TRY (US\$7) entrance fee (see fig. 3).

What the direct translation of Brecht's didactic method, stripped of estrangement, into our contemporary reality implies is an abandonment of politics for the sake of mainstream liberal morality where exhibited works attempt to grasp historical and contemporary events. Similarly, the black, white, and red colors around and through which the exposition in the Biennial's three venues was organized epitomize the reduction of politics to the formality of the institutionalized configuration of sharp angular lines and red and black colors as automatically denoting communism. This reduction of the political importance of the program to the level of the merely aesthetic play of the signified is thus a correlate outcome of this neutralization and conversion of one ideological system's intellectual rigor into another's reproduction.

As an ideology that functioned between its realization in a given historical moment embodied in the experience of the USSR and its unfulfilled or betrayed Utopian potential, communism has certainly been one of the ghosts that haunted both the Left (as a promise, as a posture, and as politics) and the Right (as a

6. "What keeps mankind alive?" or—"Who is the greater criminal: he who robs a bank or he who founds one?"

7. It is not accidental that the Biennial text collection opens with Gökçe Dervişoğlu's article "Corporate Sponsorship for Arts: A Vicious or Victorious Cycle" (for the author, it is rather a victorious cycle) rather than the curatorial concept. Combined with Süreyya Evren's paper "Neither With Nor Without You," a bashing of the Turkish left because of its supposedly negative attitude toward contemporary art, the two serve as legitimizations and justifications for the Biennial. Given that the book also incorporates radical critical texts appearing with the institutionalized play of red and black (with frequent insertion of the red star as a graphic design element between words, sentences, and papers), this corporate apology functions on the same level of signification as quotations from Brecht or reproduction of Vyacheslav Akhunov's poster of Lenin.

8. Reformulating the questionnaire distributed after Brecht's *The Measure* in 1967, WHW poses four questions to the audience (in institutionalized black and red letters). These are "(1) Do you think an event like this is politically instructive for the audience? (2) Do you think it is politically instructive for the artists? (3) To which lessons embodied in *What Keeps Mankind Alive* do you object politically? (4) Do you think our choice of form is right for your political objectives? Can you suggest alternatives?"



Figure 2 Feriköy Greek School. 11th Istanbul Biennial. Photograph by Angela Harutyunyan.



Figure 3 Entrance, Antrepo. Photograph by Eric Goodfield.

terrifying specter). Ideologically and historically, WHW operates against the 1990s paradigm developed at the end of the post-cold war polarities where “the East” used every stereotype of the cold war to characterize its own past “as totally unique, totally totalitarian” while “the West” voiced a standard New Left criticism of capitalism and commodity culture (Morss 2000, 237).⁹ Then, WHW’s project strives to overcome this paradigm by reviving the true lessons of communism, which, in some ways, is a return to pre-1990s perestroika rehabilitation of the ideology seemingly contaminated by the bureaucracy, corruption, and dysfunctionality of the ruling elites and the stagnant state apparatus of the USSR. Nevertheless, within the specific cultural politics of the Istanbul Biennial, this revival is a ready-made trademark for cooptation and appropriation, serving as apologetics of the power structures in Turkey defined by nationalist, economic, and military agendas, on the one hand, and the circulation of signs and values in the international art system, on the other.

In terms of the strategies of display and the formal organization of the exhibition spaces, the Biennial is a total curatorial work of art in which certain design elements are repeated to refer to the curatorial concept and to connect Antrepo to the Tobacco Warehouse and then to the Greek school. This is then extended to include the published materials of the Biennial, such as the guidebook, the collection of texts, and the e-journal, *The Red Thread*. The overarching curatorial concept infiltrates the production of experience and meaning of the artworks and their institutional representation, spills over into the streets of Istanbul through the presence of numerous signs and posters, and finally ends up on bookshelves and desks through the published materials. However, paradoxically, the exhibition as a total work of art makes any possibility of affective or political engagement difficult precisely because of the separation between the form of the exhibition and its content, the audience and the artwork, the material and economic conditions of its production and the naturalized form of display. It was the sense of separation rather than Brechtian distanciation that hovered over the venues, and this implies not only the ontological separation of the artwork from both the viewer and the maker, but primarily the prevention of an affective disidentification of the viewer with the exhibition as a whole. It is this separation that simultaneously undermines the Brechtian curatorial statement at the same time it is being voiced and reiterated.

The Beğenal as Counter-Event

Three weeks before the opening of the Biennial, several posters started circulating online. These posters were prepared and disseminated by autonomous art collectives and artists in Istanbul. They were designed in the same faux-socialist style of the

9. Susan Buck-Morss (2000) discusses several meetings between Euro-American academics and Russian philosophers that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to the author, in these workshops the Russian intellectuals were trying to find affiliations with what was understood as a monolithic “West” while the other side was persistently quoting Marx to bring itself closer to what they perceived as the “East.”

official ads of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, and reflected the *détournement* of the whole spectacle. They mocked the event in the title by replacing the word “biennial” with “beğenal.”¹⁰ One of the posters announced a stage performance on the opening day: 12 September, a date that was pregnant with meaning as the anniversary of the military coup of 1980 that brought neoliberal transformation to Turkey. The participants also mocked the industrial and finance capital that sponsored the biennial by putting up the famous logo of Koç corporation on their faces like mustaches.¹¹ Besides playing with its logo, the posters mocked the name of the Turkish industrial giant by reversing its spelling as “çok,” which means “too much” in Turkish. The title read “çok oluyoruz!” (we are being too much!).

The second poster from the same conspirators mocked the main sponsors of the Biennial. Besides Koç, it mocked “Turkcell” (the largest Turkish cell phone network) by spelling its name as “ürkcell” (“scary cell”); “Eczacıbaşı” (the largest pharmaceutical corporation in Turkey, whose name means “the chief pharmacist”) is spelled as “cezacıbaşı” (“the chief punisher”), and so on. And, in the details, the poster displayed the socialist symbols of the red star and the hammer and sickle, among others, superimposed on the logos of the corporations and organizations affiliated with the Biennial, so as to draw attention to the socialist discourse of the curators and their appropriation of Brecht while producing a capitalist spectacle. A second intervention came a week later in the form of a manifesto/open letter addressed to the “curators, artists, participants of the 11th International Istanbul Biennial and to all artists and art-lovers” and subtitled “The Conceptual Framework of Direnal-Istanbul Resistance Days: What Keeps Us Not-Alive?” Direnal is again a word play, a combination of the root form of the verb “to resist” (diren ~) with the “biennial’s” “~al” suffix (which is also the root form of the verb “to take” in Turkish). The open letter, written in English, read:

We have read the conceptual framework of the 11th International Istanbul Biennial with great interest and a grin on our faces . . . we are writing you to stop collaborating with arm dealers such as Koç Holding, which white wash themselves in warm waters of the global art scene and are inviting you to life, the life of resistance . . .

. . . The curators also point out that one of the crucial questions of this Biennial is how to “set pleasure free,” how to regain the revolutionary role of enjoyment. We set pleasure free in the streets, in our streets. We were in Prague, Hong Kong, Athens, Seattle, Heilegendamm, Genoa, Chiapas and Oaxaca, Washington, Gaza and Istanbul. The revolutionary role of enjoyment is out there and we cherish it everywhere because we need to survive and we

10. “Taste and buy”—a supermarket slogan—sounds like “biennial” in Turkish because of the soft “ğ.”

11. “Koç” means “ram” in Turkish, its symbol is formed by the horns of a ram, and Koç has been a symbol of the state-sponsored national capital building efforts since the early Republic. Just like its philanthropist competitor Sabancı Corporation, it grew by fulfilling the industrial demands of the Turkish state through mass government contracts as well as popular consumption goods.

know that we are changing the world with our words, with our acts, with our laughter. And our life itself is the source of all sorts of pleasure.

Join the resistance and the insurgence of imagination! Evacuate corporate spaces, liberate your works. Let's prepare works and visuals (poster, sticker, stencil etc.) for the streets of the resistance days. Let's produce together, not within the white cube, but in the streets and squares during the resistance week! Creativity belongs to each and every of us and can't be sponsored.¹²

The letter was signed "Resistanbul Commissariat of Culture," echoing and mocking the early Soviet governmental structure.

Finally, two days before the opening of the Biennial, a message was conveyed to the Körtotonomyda collective's e-mail list.¹³ Formulated as an anonymous and collective call, the message urged activists, artists, and Biennial goers in general to turn the Biennial into a radical playground by sabotaging the event, and offered practical guidance on how to disrupt video projections and audio installations, intervene in the exhibitions, and create disruptive social situations. The opening of the Biennial was marked with such disruptive interventions, and alongside the "Biennial events" a coalition of individual artists, artist collectives, political activists, and groups organized a series of performances in alternative venues, and produced and circulated posters, audio/video works, and other forms of intervention that targeted the event by sharply transgressing its rhetoric and style.

It is worth noting that the catalogue of the Biennial, which includes a number of critical theoretical texts on radical politics and aesthetics as well as providing contextualization for these debates in contemporary Turkey, attempted to preempt any possible criticism even before the conception of the event and the subsequent reactions toward it. Apart from posing a simplistic and fabricated antagonism between the "orthodox left" and contemporary art in Turkey, Süreyyya Evren's text entitled "Neither With Nor Without You" attempts to sublimate "contemporariness" in a faux-Adornoesque fashion (Evren 2009). According to Evren, contemporary art is under attack from the orthodox Marxist Left, and the 11th Biennial's conceptual framework is oriented toward reclaiming radical aesthetic practices against the conservatism associated with the nationalism of the orthodox Marxists/leftists. For Evren, references to the political-economic framework of the Biennial, its ties with hegemonic neoliberal political practices, or the economic-political context of the sponsorships are all "excuses" for the orthodox Left to attack the event. However, he warns that the spectator should beware and not be fooled by such dishonest political interventions where the real intention of such acts stems from their underlying conservatism. The reasoning he provides for this is grounded in his claims that the orthodox Left cannot stomach the emancipatory political aesthetics of contemporary practices flourishing on a transnational platform. Waiting for the barbarians, Evren's

12. <http://resistanbul.wordpress.com/2009/09/04/conceptual-framework-of-direnal-istanbul-resistance-days-what-keeps-us-not-alive/>.

13. This outlet has been serving as an influential channel in Anatolian radical culture for more than a decade.

arrogant lecture traverses many false associations and itself strangely ends with a flourish of authoritarian rhetoric: “this is what it is, full stop!”

Despite what circulated in the general public and mainstream media, several weeks after the opening of the Biennial, both the news of the protests themselves and the reaction to the protests dominated subaltern intellectual and cultural media. Among the circles connected to the contemporary cultural and artistic sphere, the protests became the counter-event and imposed an urgency for the subjects in these circles to position themselves accordingly. Two types of reaction toward the protests appeared. One was to interpret them in connection with and as an articulation of the Biennial as an event. According to this interpretation, the protests were stirred and catalyzed by both the content and the context of the Biennial and reflected a healthy/civil/reasonable critical reaction. Hence, it was the success of the Biennial to mobilize a public and spark such criticism. The comments of the curatorial collective as well as that of art critic and theorist Brian Holmes on the protests crystallizes this position.¹⁴ Holmes incorporates any counter-event as always a part of the event, thus cancels the possibility of resistance. This also indirectly offers an apologetics for WHW, who had good intentions but had no choice but to navigate within predetermined economic boundaries. In an interview with art historian Pelin Tan, Holmes explicitly separates the Biennial as an exhibition curated by WHW from its institutional umbrella which was IKSIV: “The content and orientation of the Istanbul Biennial was great, a huge advance over what is normally done, but the frame, determined by other forces, was pure neoliberalism, with an additional national-fascist component brought by Koç” (Holmes 2009). But this position, to define any counter-event as part of the event, in our interpretation undermines the profound negation that characterizes the protests, and does not acknowledge the depth of political engagement and strategy that is manifest in the protests.¹⁵

The second position consisted of the delegitimization of the protests based on the notions prescribed in Evren’s text, that the negation of the Biennial meant the negation of contemporary artistic practice that was “wrong” in the context of radical politics; despite various capitalist formations and structures surrounding the event, it possessed/presented an “aesthetic value,” which was “complimentary” to left/radical politics (Evren 2009). Thus, the total negation of the protests also displayed a negation or ignorance of such value. This position accused the protesters of Luddism and left-wing vandalism, with throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and it questioned the legitimacy of protests in terms of radical politics.

Both positions reflect a misreading of the political conditions, both in a general context and particularly in relation to cultural and artistic production. We hold that

14. <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/>.

15. It seems important to note that a national-socialist left has been formulated on the remains of the orthodox Left in Turkish politics during the past decade, which confronts the internationalist political discourses (which the Biennial event categorically falls into) on the grounds of an archaic notion of “imperialism.” But the position asserted by Evren attempts to associate any kind of criticism toward the Biennial with such vulgarism, and it is particularly symptomatic when we consider the fact that the protesting artists and groups actively positioned themselves in sharp opposition to such national-socialist discourses.

there are several novelties exposed through these protests that are not only vital for evaluating the Biennial/beğenal confrontation, but for making judgments on the state of contemporary artistic/cultural production and contemporary politics. The first position, while undermining the negation evident in the protests, acknowledges an important point that is surprisingly ignored by the second position: the protests did not only simply express a refusal to play the role of a docile audience to the spectacle but performed an alternative to it. In the process of the protests, the protesters produced a series of events, performances, various forms of artwork which often displayed more political potency than the so-called political artworks exhibited in the Biennial. This will be our second clue to follow. But, of course, it would be a mistake to look only at the virtuosity of the so-called artworks produced and circulated within the sphere of protests. The social practices these works were produced through, and the social relations they organized in the process, are of central concern for evaluating politics and art in the context of this event. This should be the third clue. Not only did the protestors penetrate the outside, the street, the unconfined spaces of Istanbul, but in the absence of an administrative apparatus they created and organized an ungoverned social network that was able to produce a formidable counterspectacle and a collective ground for an art of resistance. In other words, what became produced within the process of protests were not only “political artworks” but also social relations, forms, and practices—in short, an alternative form of cultural production and politics.

At this point, then, we have two distinct articulations. On the one hand, there is an articulation of contemporary artistic production to neoliberal political practices. There seem to be many layers at work in this articulation. One layer of this articulation is sustained through structural dispositions, concrete institutional practices, and cultural policies that prioritize cultural production in very specific terms. There is a twofold reason for the prioritization of cultural and artistic production by neoliberal political practices: first, cultural production is a productive resource for post-Fordist economic production regimes; and second, this prioritization provides the neoliberal state with the tools for making direct interventions in the social field for disciplining social subjects. In other words, biopolitical production and neoliberal governance need such articulation. The constructed “contemporariness” of the “event” becomes an ideological capture apparatus for this operation. That is, it acts as a microcosm that “captures” the salient political relations in its very structure. Avant-garde art, through the sublimation of the contemporariness it signifies, becomes reduced to an “effect” in this articulation, as exemplified by the Biennial as an event.

There is another articulation that is more interesting to us because of its political potency. Even the reactions against the protests could not sustain the preemptive legislative decree Evren drew before the event—that whoever considered attacking the Biennial would immediately be called conservative or orthodox and, as such, retrogressive. The novelty of the overall political trajectory that identifies the Biennial as on the same plane with International Monetary Fund (IMF) meetings, the forms of organization the protests deployed, and their discursive constitution clearly show that the protests have nothing to do with the orthodox Left and vice versa.

Through Brecht, the curatorial team of the Biennial recycle the traditional vision of the “artistic avant-garde” (politics of aesthetics) which points toward a “political avant-garde” (revolutionary politics) in tandem. But, post-Fordism transcends the distinction between the “working class” (who bear the types of labor process that were considered “productive labor”) and the cultural producers (whose labor was considered “unproductive” in the traditional critique of political economy) by turning the means, methods, and forms that had been associated with cultural and artistic production into dominant resources of “economic production” (Hardt 2010). Thus, the historical distance between the “working class” and “artists/intellectuals” diminishes; the subject of the new “working class”—the “precariat”—combines both. While the protests against the Istanbul Biennial crystallize the resistance practices of this new subject of the class struggle, they also signify folding of the “political avant-garde” and the “artistic avant-garde” onto each other as such. The protesters were not rebelling “for” the working class; they were rebelling “as” the “new working class” against their exploiters.

Ironically, nothing pictured the confrontation between these two articulations better than the news coverage of the battle scenes in Taksim Square during the IMF meeting in Istanbul, which happened to take place at the same time as the Biennial: tear gas and smoke obscuring the banners of the 11th Biennial (as “sponsored by Koç”) hanging around the square, and Turkish riot police charging the demonstrators underneath them.

“And a Ship with Eight Sails and Fifty Cannons . . .”

Today, artists and cultural producers living in the “free world” are no longer subject to direct and visible forms of censorship, disciplinary and oppressive techniques of social control. On the contrary, they are increasingly encouraged to be “creative,” “critical,” “edgy,” and even excessive, so long as their creative production remains within the system of gallery displays, ensures economic productivity, and articulates to the production/consumption cycles of the global culture industry. While the representational spectrum of institutional politics shrinks and the difference between the Left and the Right becomes reduced to the tone of the same rhetoric, the necessary role of political criticism and opposition gets postponed to the “aesthetic” realm, to the sphere of art and culture. As such, while criticism continues to exist in one distant corner of the public sphere—not in that occupied by necessities versus scarce resources, but in that of profusion and extravagance—it also coheres with the post-Fordist economic structures that maintain neoliberal governmentality. While upholding post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberal politics as such, the 11th edition of the Istanbul Biennial becomes the very front on which the precariat of the art world resisted, the very moment in which the present subject of the story rebelled against the contemporary narrative.

What were they thinking, one feels compelled to ask? A “revolution” of a “new and contemporary” kind, perhaps—not like those archaic ones in which the poor turn into monsters, but a shiny and beautiful one, educational as well as entertaining, well funded and professionally executed, pleasurable for all but especially delightful for

the tourists ... Yet how can one stage “What keeps mankind alive?” and cast out “Pirate Jenny”? If there is one image in *Threepenny Opera* that haunts the impossibly absurd world in which the queen herself pardons the criminal Macheath and makes him a baron, it is that monstrous black freighter with eight sails and fifty cannons. That cold monstrous image belongs to Jenny; Jenny is a prostitute, who serves drunk men at that shabby harbor hotel; when they ask for entertainment, Jenny sings them her song.

And hundreds will come ashore around noon
 And will step into the shadows
 And will catch anyone in any door
 And lay him in chains and bring him before me
 And ask: Which one should we kill?
 And at that midday it will be quiet at the harbor
 When they ask, who has to die.
 And then they'll hear me say: All of them!
 And when the heads roll, I'll say: Hurray!
 And the ship with eight sails
 And with fifty cannons
 Will disappear with me. (Brecht 1928)

It is time to recognize the tune that has been sung all over the place for quite a while. Jenny celebrated New Year's Eve by burning the Christmas tree in front of the parliament in Athens last year; Jenny went to school in New York, California, Vienna, Rome, to refuse her degree and punish her teachers this semester. Jenny was an artist in Istanbul where they were staging *The Threepenny Opera*: she heard that she was neither invited nor denied. Jenny does not accept “neither/nors” anymore; for her it has got to be “either/or.” Jenny is the soulless monster in this world; her problem with this “mankind” is not about how to keep him alive—“All of them!” she counts; the police, the lawyer, the journalist, the art critic ... Hurray!

References

- Braembussche, A. 1996. The value of art: A philosophical perspective. In *The value of culture: On the relationship between economics and arts*, ed. A. Klammer. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. 2000. *Dreamworld and catastrophe: The passing of mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
- Evren, S. 2009. Neither with nor without you. In *What keeps mankind alive: The texts*, ed. WHW. Istanbul: IKSU.
- Groys, B. 2008. *Art and power*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hardt, M. 2010. The common in communism. *Rethinking Marxism* 22 (3): 346–56.
- Holmes, B. 2009. Interview with Pelin Tan. 22 October. <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/10/22/interview-with-pelin-tan/> (accessed 10 July 2010).
- Kortun, V. 2009. İstanbul Bienali mükemmele yakın, biraz klskanlyorum. *Radikal*, 11 February. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalHaberDetay&Date=02.11.2009&ArticleID=962249> (accessed 10 July 2010).

- Kosova, E. 2009. Show bullet II. *Red Thread*, no. 1. <http://www.red-thread.org/en/article.asp?a=26> (accessed 10 July 2010).
- Madra, Y. 2006. From imperialism to transnational capitalism: The Venice Biennial as a “transitional conjuncture.” *Rethinking Marxism* 18 (4): 525–37.
- Tarde, G. 1999. *Monadologie et sociologie*. Ed. E. Alliez and M. Lazzarato. Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo.
- WHW (What, How and For Whom), ed. 2009. *What keeps mankind alive?* http://www.iksv.org/bienal11/icsayfa_en.asp?cid=6&k1=content&k2=conceptual (accessed 10 July 2010).