

the third international art biennial istanbul 1992

The challenges, problems and contradictions inherent in organizing any international art Biennial have traditionally included:

- (A) THE UNDERLYING SOCIO-POLITICAL BATTLES BETWEEN STRUGGLING PERIPHERIES and established art centers in order to re-assert themselves as viable hosts and sites, therefore becoming legitimate heirs and participants of contemporary cultures;
- (B) THE ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS THAT DICTATE SELECTION PROCESSES, WHICH result in the presentation of works by artists who have, more often than not, become members of an exclusive club within an art world. The primary intent of which is to protect the interests of a dominant minority, namely a handful of major private/corporate collectors, high-powered dealers, curators and museums that feed each other or rob one another,

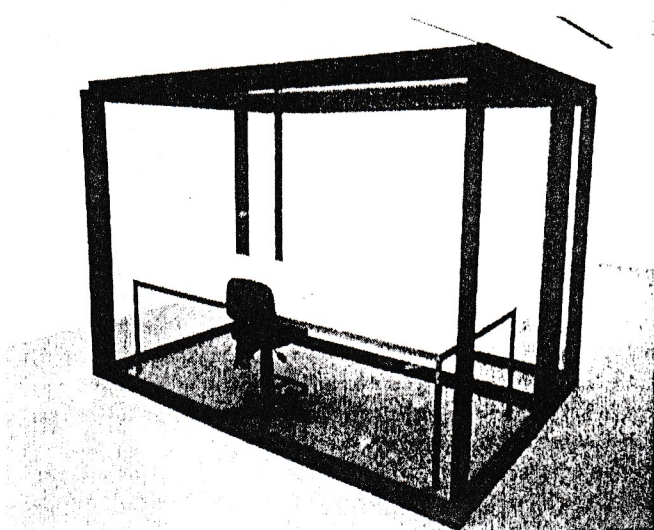
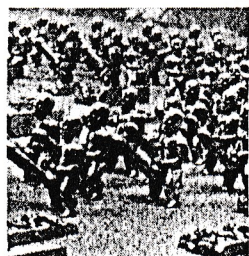
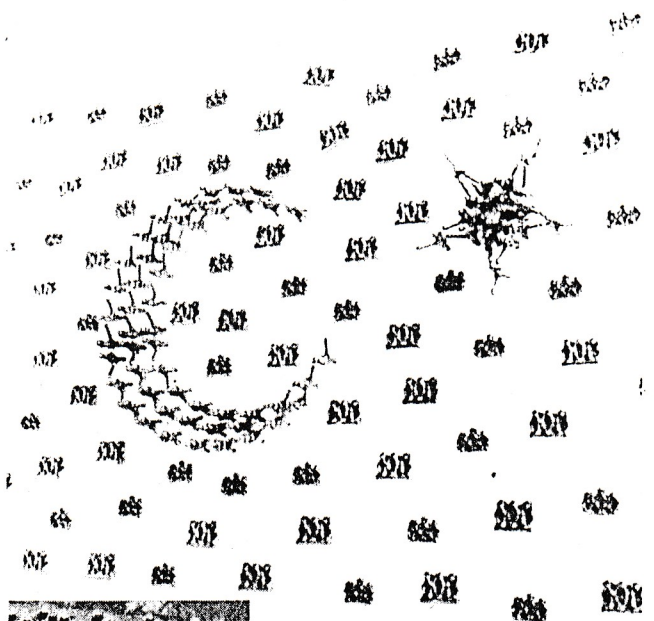
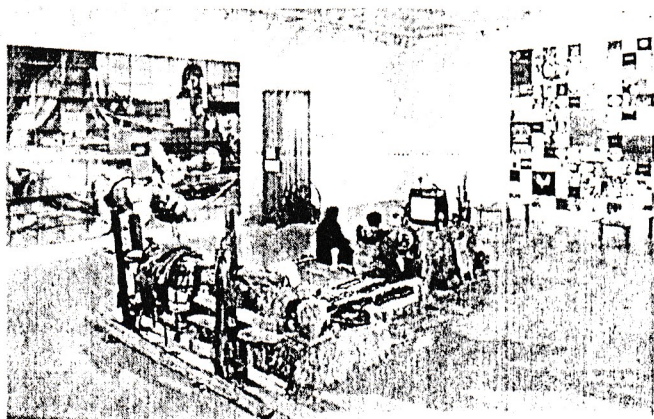
depending on how one views the presently crumbling state of affairs;

- (C) THE SEPARATION OF EXHIBITION PAVILIONS BY COUNTRY, WHILE MANY ARTISTS claim to be trans-nationalists, or are critical of, if not opposed to, their governments. Such divisions exclude from consideration a significant number of candidates who are without or outside their nation of origin;
- (D) THE REPLACING OF THE "AESTHETICALLY CORRECT" ART OF WHAT WAS ONCE known as the avant-garde with the "politically correct" art of the marginalized.

Despite the limitations posed by such factors, the organizers of the Third International Istanbul Art Biennial (Oct. 16–Nov. 30, 1992) did a commendable job of confronting conventions. Both impressive and ambitious in its scope, the Biennial's attempt to introduce change to existing practices, as well as the guiding energy stemming from professional commitment and sheer belief in the undertaking were noticeable throughout the event.

One of the primary aims of the Biennial was to remind the rest of the world that Turkey (the *enfant terrible* of Western civilization and its history) "is not a culturally isolated entity in an all-too-distant 'over here' that is irreversibly divided from an 'over there.' On the contrary,

by Neery Melkonian



the 'here' is simply a part of the ubiquitous 'there.'" This self-legitimization was largely due to the vision and dedication of the Biennial's young, NYU-educated Director, Vasif Kortun, and the will of numerous volunteers who, at a volatile juncture in its history, provided a dream for Turkey by re-identifying Istanbul as a dynamic site—not just a crossroads between the East and the West. Turkey has been both a periphery and a center throughout its existence, or up until Western imperialism usurped its colonizing past and relegated this country, like many others, to a "Third World" status.

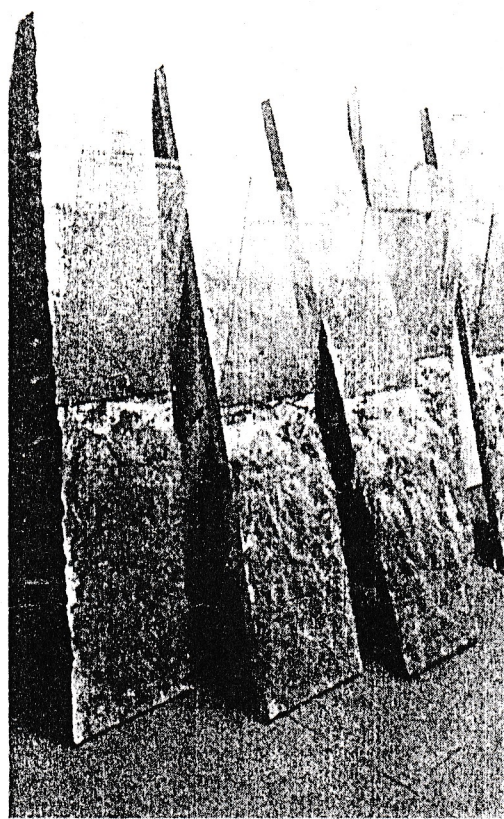
The theme of the Biennial was timely and relevant: The Production of Cultural Difference, which sought "...not merely the proper ratios of various races, ethnic backgrounds, genders, investments in alternative histories, or differences of sexual choice and other such criteria, but the actual works themselves and the ideas a particular work may produce." This factor alone distinguished the event from other similar ones (i.e. the Documenta or the Venice Biennial) which have become little more than extravagant art fairs for the chic and the blue-chip, sadly surrendering their roles as creators or contributors toward a renewed international, cultural dialogue.

In comparison to blockbuster thematic exhibitions, this one was not dictated by the expertise of an elitist group nor the ego of a single curator; rather, it experimented with an umbrella concept by encouraging individual curators from the host countries to present their own interpretation of the given theme.

While the Italian, Israeli, and Russian pavilions appeared to have missed the point or stretched it to fit their own, the rest of the Biennial offered more engaging examples of the overall philosophical premise inspired by Thomas McEvilley's observation that, "Western culture, as it enters the 1990s, is somewhat inchoately seeking a new definition of history that will not involve ideas of hierarchy, or of mainstream-and-periphery, and will offer a new global sense of civilization to replace the linear Eurocentric model that lay at the heart of Modernism."

The pavilion that reflected these inspirations most diligently was that of the United States. Curated by Patricio Chavez of Centro Cultural de la Raza of San Diego, the exhibition called *La Reconquista: A Post-Columbian New World* displayed works by David Avalos, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Richard Lou, Robert Sanchez, Deborah Small, and Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie which dealt with issues of racism, borders and migrant workers, identity, spirituality and self-determination.

Partially due to viewers being accustomed to seeing works by Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, et al, as representatives of



IMAGES THIS SPREAD:

top left, David Avalos, Deborah Small, *Ramona's Bedroom*
large center left, Hale Tenger, *I Know People Like This II*, brass, 1991
small center left, detail from Hale Tenger's *I Know People Like This II*
bottom left, Damien Hirst, *The Acquired Inability to Escape*, steel, glass, table, chair, cigarette, cigarette-lighter, ashtray, 1991
top center, Canan Tolon, *Landscape 3*, acrylic, canvas, marble dust, garment patterns, grass (growing) on canvas, uste and glass,
bottom center, Hannah Collins, *Nomad II*, silver gelatin print archival mounted on aluminum, 1991
right, Absalon, *Cellule*, wood, pasteboard, white paint, neon, Plexiglas, 1991



American culture abroad, and partially because the meanings within such culturally specific exhibits get diluted or suffer from mis-translation when introduced to new audiences, *La Reconquista* disappointed a few. But it offered valuable lessons to countries such as Turkey, which are experiencing the rude awakenings of their own long-neglected voices, and the repressed spirits of a multi-cultural population. It was not surprising, therefore, (just hypocritical) that the United States Information Agency (USIA) decided at the last instant to deny its funding of the American participation unless aspects of the curatorial statement (which in essence disputed Columbus' "discovery" of America) were retracted, because, in their judgment, such considerations "...would not contribute positively to US-Turkish relations... and would conflict with USIA's mission to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and those of other countries." One could not help but wonder if judgments of this nature did not encourage the absence of Kurdish, Palestinian, Greek, Cypriot, and other nationalities from the Biennial, all of whom are in some form of conflict with the troubled, US-backed (both economically and militarily) Turkish government.

The empowering works of three Turkish women artists addressed such ambiguities. Hale Tanger's wall-piece, *I Know*

England's Damien Hirst and Hannah Collins showcased the most striking exhibit at the Biennial. Hirst's witty, well-crafted and complex sculptural constructions proposed re-thinking of the life/death/regeneration cycle with a twist of urban sensibility and genuine cynicism. Collins' monumental black-and-white photographs from the daily life of Istanbul's bazaars (where the trading of unsanctioned goods has been on the rise due to unprecedented migration from provinces and previous Eastern block countries) offered stunning revelations about survival and economic desperation.

One artist whose work left a lasting impression on this viewer was Absalon (France). His futuristic-looking, entirely white wooden habitat called *Cellule* (which was also oddly reminiscent of ancient adobe or cave dwellings) created a conducive environment for one's spiritual and emotional ecology for a change.

Other notables were Belgian Jan Fabre's blue bathtub and glass owl installation in biro ink that drew some interesting parallels between his native Scheldt River and Istanbul's Bosphorus; Willem Sanders, of Amsterdam, whose contemporary landscapes re-invented the lush and lost quality of the Dutch masters; Mariuzs Kruk's (Poland) dinner setting for

Located in the Eyub District (home of Istanbul's fundamentalist Muslim community), the freshly renovated museum (by Gae Aulenti, architect of Musee d'Orsey, who failed to deliver the preferred design which was to recreate the labyrinthine quality of Istanbul's bazaars) was a 19th-century *fezhane* (turban factory). This lovely neo-Classic building was first brought to the attention of the public by a group of anarchists who appropriated the site as an alternative exhibition space, an act which has contributed to the renewed interest in preservation of historic buildings throughout the city.

Members of the same group held an event the night prior to the opening of the Biennial, this time in an old but still-active gas factory, the *gashane*, operating under hazardous pre-industrial conditions. The works displayed at the *gashane* were rows of milk bottles, large portraits of a well-known transvestite, votive candles, and graffiti and banners questioning human rights, genocide, Atta Turk (founder of modern Turkey), and commercialism, created chilling contrasts and parallels between frailty of the outmoded factory and the fate of a country in flux.

Along with two other sites, Gallery Nev and Gallery Beral (where one could find the most experimental art in Istanbul), the *gashane* carried the seeds of cultural change,

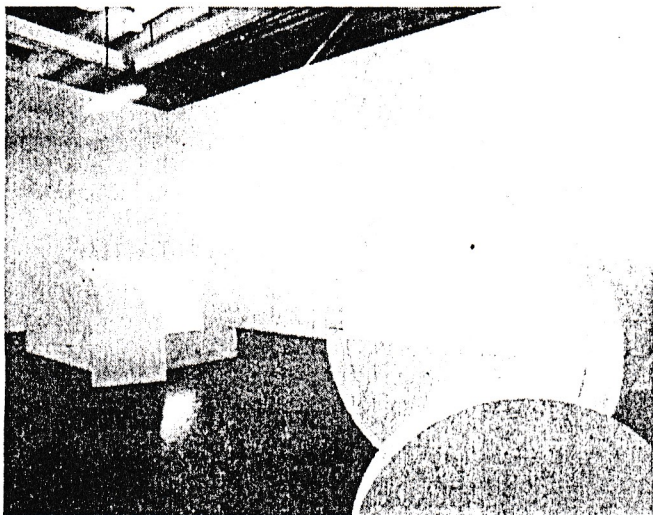
where the art, the gas leaks, and the signs that read "Undrinkable Water" blended in a sub-reality that required this sort of cleansing ritual to ease the pains of a society in transition, from its glorious Ottoman past to the chaos of postmodernity that had been clogged by decades of a military regime, bestowing the country with what felt like a cursed modernity.

Missing were the photo-light installations of Christian Boltanski, (probably the most internationally renowned artist exhibiting at the Biennial), who participated by creating a burial-like chamber which he requested be filled with fresh-cut flowers in the shape of a sarcophagus. Anyone who spends even a short time in Istanbul recognizes the importance of flowers as an integral

part of the city's social dynamics. With its fresh-flower markets, vendors on street corners, and young boys rushing to deliver huge bouquets to funerals, christenings, weddings and official events, flowers are everywhere in Istanbul. On the Biennial's opening night, Boltanski's pavilion attracted hundreds with its seductive fragrance, not unlike the hoards that visit the traces of uncounted civilizations that have contributed to the weaving of the rich cultural tapestry of this beautiful, labyrinthine city where differences have been enveloped and oppositions swallowed for centuries.

As a few days went by and Boltanski's pavilion began to stink with the decay of flowers, it wasn't clear if the artist's intent was to critique the fate of international biennials in general, or to carry a subtler, wiser message to the forces that are denying Turkey's budding creative energies from blossoming fully. Perhaps Boltanski's message would have been more effective had he planted and cultivated the forty-some kilos of flowers himself and left them as an evolving gift to a country that is at the threshold of a renewed democracy.

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People Like This II, depicted the Turkish flag by appropriating two brass figurines that are popular souvenir items available at tourist shops throughout Turkey. One of these represented an ancient Urartian fertility god with an oversized, erect penis, while the other incorporated the universal icon of ambivalence *par excellence*: the three "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil..." monkeys alluding to the effects of oppressive policies within the official state apparatus.

Second, and less blatant, were Canan Tolon's *Landscape 3* series of mixed-media earth works which, upon close examination, revealed the cartography of geopolitical regions under surveillance.

The third, Gulsun Karamustafa's *Mystical Transport*, consisted of ordinary wheeled carts containing colorful quilts. Whimsical in appearance, the piece embodied more meanings than any other seemingly complex work in the entire Biennial. In addition to associations with intimacy, sexuality, and dreams, this mobile artwork spoke about migration (quilts being among the essential items that immigrants from developing countries carry with them wherever they go), inner-city nomadism, and the "baggage" one drags into the future.

four, nailed to the table, was a poignant commentary on the dysfunctional aspect of basic elements in societies; and Canada's Jin-me Yoo's *Souvenirs of the Self* provided a humorous expose of their tourism industry.

The most thought-provoking curatorial statements (published in the Biennial's catalogue) came from Rainer Fuchs (Austria), Luchezar Boyadjev (Bulgaria), Dan Calin (Romania), and Vasif Kortun. In addition to tackling the dilemma of finding the appropriate context for new cultural predicaments, each one of these brilliant essays, as if written with the same breath as the art on display, rescues intellectual endeavor from the trappings of commercialism, as well as divorces it from theoretical indulgence.

The Third International Istanbul Biennial also inaugurated the opening of Turkey's first contemporary art museum. The previous two Biennials were held in the city's rich historical sites, the accessibility of which continue to favor the cultural elite. (The only chance this reviewer got to visit the famous Byzantine Church of St. Irene was by attending the private opening held for the son of a wealthy Turkish industrialist, the significance of whose art, unfortunately, was undermined by the resonance of the site).