

**THE MEANING OF 'BEING POLITICAL': AN ANALYSIS OF 'ARTIST
INITIATIVES' IN ISTANBUL**

**by
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ABSTRACT

THE MEANING OF ‘BEING POLITICAL’: AN ANALYSIS OF ‘ARTIST INITIATIVES’ IN ISTANBUL

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The emergence of ‘artist initiatives’ represent a new form of collective organization in the contemporary art scene in Turkey. In the media, they have acquired news value and framed as a link between creativity and ‘being political’. With the use of culture as a resource in the era of neoliberalism, this thesis aims to analyze the three distinct factors, which lend specific content and meaning to the idea of ‘being political’ in Istanbul’s art scene. Firstly the historical and institutional constitution of the art field in Turkey during the past two decades of neoliberalism; secondly the discursive framings of actors in this field on this subject and thirdly the growing linkages with transnational networks of artists and activists.

ÖZET

‘POLİTİK OLMANIN’ ANLAMI: İSTANBUL’DAKİ ‘SANATÇI İNİSİYATİFLERİ’NİN BİR ANALİZİ

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Sanatçı inisiyatiflerinin ortaya çıkışı, Türkiye’de güncel sanat alanında yeni bir kolektif organizasyon formunu temsil etmektedir. Basında, bu organizasyonlar haber değeri kazanmakta ve yaratıcılık ile ‘politik olmak’ arasındaki bir bağlantı olarak ifade edilmektedir. Neoliberal çağda kültürün bir kaynak olarak kullanılmasıyla beraber, bu tez, İstanbul sanat sahnesinde ‘politik olmak’ fikrine içerik ve anlam kazandıran üç ayrı faktörü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunlardan birincisi Türkiye’deki sanat alanının neoliberalizmin son yirmi yılındaki tarihsel ve kurumsal dönüşümü ikincisi bu alandaki aktörlerin bu konuya dair söylemsel çerçeveleri ve üçüncüsü ise ulus ötesi sanatçı ve aktivist ağlarla olan bağlantılardaki artışlardır.

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INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, on June 14 of 2006 to be specific, a group of artists organized a formal meeting to discuss the formation of what are referred to as “independent artist initiatives” in Istanbul. The meeting attracted large numbers of participants from different fields of the contemporary art scene in Istanbul, including prominent writers, curators, academics, art historians and artist groups. (See Appendix A for the list of participants) On the agenda of the meeting were such issues as independence, autonomy, finance, sustainability that are vital questions for “artists initiatives” and “independent/alternative artist run spaces”.

The emergence of such small scale artist organizations, collectives, gatherings or ‘alternative spaces’, represent a new form of collective organization in the *contemporary* art scene in Turkey.¹ Over the past three years, they have become the focus of a series of debates, workshops and conferences held in Istanbul on art and ‘new’ forms of political engagement. In the mainstream media, they have acquired news-value, framed as initiatives that link creativity in art with protest and activism. The ‘art and culture’ pages of major newspapers invariably refer to *artists initiatives* as reference point in debates on art and politics. In tandem with the growing significance of Istanbul Biennials, both nationally and internationally, imagining a form of *being political* through art has become associated with the emergence of so-called independent initiatives. As the curator of the 10th Istanbul Biennial, Hou Hanru put it, “resistance needs new forms of action which sought to create new networks of relations between artist-run spaces”² and organization of art events, which means more initiatives and collectives that bring together artists, cultural producers and researchers within trans-disciplinary, trans-cultural venues.” The following newspaper headlines exemplify this phenomenon:

¹ PIST, PIST blog,

http://pist-org.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_archive.html#114964145025032134

² Hou Hanru, “Initiatives, Alternatives: Notes in a Temporary and Raw State”, *How Latitudes Become Forms*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, (36-39) quoted in Tan (2008, 131-132).

“A cultural garage [Garage Istanbul] which gives priority to remaining independent, articulating the present, *being political*, being aware and reaching the masses.”³

“(…) This is *the most political* biennial [10th Istanbul Biennial] ever held in the world (…), what the curator [Hou] Hanru means by optimism is the ongoing *revitalization of political sensitivity and criticism which was lost in 90s*”⁴

“Artist Initiatives are the address for total *independence in art*.”⁵

Purpose of the Present Study

My main objective in this thesis is to explore how ‘the political’ is constructed and contested within the contemporary art field in Turkey. Specifically, I want to focus on these newly emergent artists’ initiatives and/or alternative artist-spaces in Istanbul, to understand the meanings associated with ‘being political’, along with such terms as ‘protest’, ‘activism’, ‘independence’ and ‘resistance’ are constituted. More broadly, I will argue that the dynamics, which lend specific content and meaning to the idea of ‘the political’ in Istanbul’s art scene, must be sought in the interaction of three analytically distinct factors, namely:

- (a) Historical- institutional constitution of the art field in Turkey and its transformation during the past two decades of neo-liberalism
- (b) Discursive framings of actors situated in various networks and hierarchies of the contemporary art scene of Istanbul
- (c) Growing linkages with trans-national and European art circles

³ Karaköse, Nayat. “Bağımsız kalmayı, şimdiki ifade etmeyi, politik olmayı, farkındalığı ve kitleselleşmeyi önemseyen bir kültür garajı [Garaj İstanbul]”, *Bianet*, August 11, 2007, Culture. (emphasize added)
<http://www.bianet.org/bianet/kategori/kultur/100891/yeniyle-bulusma-noktasi-garajistanbul>

⁴ Vassaf, Gündüz. “Eleştiriyi Canlandırmak İsteyen Bienal”, *Radikal*, September 09, 2007, Culture/Art.

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=233070>

(…) Şimdiye kadar, (..) dünyada yapılan en politik bienal bu (…), kurator Hanru’nun iyimserlikten kastettiği 90larda kaybolan siyasi duyarlılık ve eleştirinin günümüzde yeniden canlanması”, (emphasize added).

⁵ Hamsici, Mahmut. “[Sanatçı inisiyatifleri] Sanatta Tam Bağımsızlığın Adresleri”, *Radikal*, May 22, 2007, Culture/Art. (emphasize added)
<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=221921>

In order to locate the problematic of this idea of ‘the political’ which extends the art worlds, this study proposes to examine the artist initiatives through social movements perspective. In that sense, before proceeding to explain these three foci of analysis, and the organization of the various chapters around them, I want to mention some of the broader theoretical considerations, which inform my study.

Some Theoretical Considerations:

The relationship between art and politics as a discussion is not a new phenomena for the art world. At times, discussions on the relationship between art and politics occupy the agendas. There is significant amount of attempts to discuss this relationship in the literature through various theoretical and analytical tools. However, little attention has been paid on what kind of ‘political’ all those actors, groups, artists, movements, discussions signify in a specific period of process.

Scholars working on the relationship between art and politics have put a specific period under scrutiny (Platt 1999; Langa 2004; Frascina 1999); have traced artistic mediums employed for political activism, mobilization through artistic practices as well as the what is regarded as “art activism” and “cultural activism” (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007; Yudice, 2001; Flanagan and Looui, 2007); the relationships between art worlds and political institutions, governmental projects, cultural policies or corporate interventions (Wu, 1998, 2002; Yudice, 1990; Winegar, 2006); artists, artist organizations and the urban politics (Zukin, 1982; Sharon, 1979); and have dealt with anthropological accounts of art and cultural politics (Marcus and Myers, 1995).

As shown in these studies, the quest on art and politics is not a new phenomenon in the literature and the form and function of this relationship as well as the type of questions it evokes have changed with the historical transformations and the changes in the art field.

In a discussion of changes in the art scene of New York, Sharon Zukin (1982, 433) describes how the use of “alternative spaces” accelerated as a response to the competitive art market of the 1960s and 1970s. What was originally an attempt to circumvent the dominance of art galleries and museums in defining aesthetics, has since been transformed into an activist movement, becoming an extension of urban political movements which have gained salience in recent decades.

Inheriting from the political movements of 1960s and 1970s, the growing visibility of new forms of activism over the past two decades, have paved the way to what McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (1997) describe as ‘cultural turn’ in the recent scholarship on social movements. They attribute this ‘cultural turn’ to the convergence of a series of factors, such as the rise of student activism since the 1960s, the failure of working classes to rise to the challenge of the post-soviet era, along with a new wave of theories emanating from Europe in the form of Foucauldian social constructivism, Derridian deconstructionism, as well as cultural “misreadings” of Gramsci.

It is also possible to cite the work of authors who greet this ‘cultural turn’ as a welcome development, providing an intellectual space for the analysis of ‘new social movements’ associated with the rise of identity politics. To quote directly from Buechler’s article on “New Social Movement Theories” for instance:

[New social movements theory] emerged in large part as a response to the inadequacies of classical Marxism for analyzing collective action. (...)New social movement theorists have looked to other logics of action based in politics, ideology, and culture as the root of much collective action, and they have looked to other sources of identity such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality as the definers of collective identity. The term “new social movements” thus refers to a diverse array of collective actions that have presumably displaced the old social movement of proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism. Even though new social movement theory is a critical reaction to classical Marxism, some new social movement theorists seek to update and revise conventional Marxist assumptions while others seek to displace and transcend them. (1995, 441-442)

On ‘new’ social movements, della Porta and Tarrow (2005) replace “the by-now tired debate about their intrinsic newness or the search for a new class actor” for those movements, with outlining particular features of “contentious politics at the turn of the millennium”. Rather than discussing what is “new” or what is “old” with these social movements, they find putting forth the characteristics of these movements and the era they emerge, more fruitful to understand “emerging social movements”. According to the scholars, those particular features are broadly “the neoliberal orthodoxy ... with increasing inequalities between North and South...international organizations that enshrined neoliberalism and their actions”. They argue that these dynamics have resulted in “emergent organizations of transnational movements, campaigns...counter summits and boycott of big corporations..., and highly visible campaigns by non-state actors”. With the “new electronic technologies and broader access to them, the capacity for movement campaigns to be organized rapidly and effectively in many venues at

once” have enhanced. Referring to February 2003 global anti-Iraq war movements, della Porta and Tarrow critically emphasize that those transnational movements was not primarily “composed of activists with a global vocation [but] most [participants] were ...ordinary citizens, more commonly involved in domestic politics or movements” (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005, 228-230).

While new theoretical tools, if not the ‘new’ movements, emerged in the 90s, the political culture of Turkey in relation to the transformation of social movements and with the appearance of transnational actors in this period deserves mentioning. In the early 1990s the government moved to a gradual liberalization of the political system where “[In March and April 1991] the cabinet introduced a package of constitutional amendments which dealt partly with the political system (enlargement of the assembly, direct presidential elections, lowering the voting age to 18) but also partly with human rights (Zürcher, 2004, 307). After these attempts of relatively more liberal moves of the government, the following years were marked with armed struggle between Kurdish guerrilla forces and Turkish military forces, assassinations of intellectuals and economic crisis of 1994. There would be a long list because of an attempt to characterize or to highlight the significant turning points of 1990s. Along with “a military dominated authoritarianism coupled with a lack of accountability (...) [where] all attempts at democracy and the rule of law were brutally quashed in the name of national security” (Keyder, 2004, 72); in the public discussions 1990s are commonly characterized as a period of “optimistic apolitical”⁶, or with a “political sensibility that has been lost”⁷. 1990s is frequently referred as an environment where the interest in politics has ended or more specifically the class struggles of the previous periods are said to be cut down with the military coup. The silencing project of the military forces cannot be denied. On the other hand, for this period, it can be said that the connotation of politics has changed or the social struggle did not end but continue to exist in the form of cultural identities (Kentel, 2008, 88). At the same time there was certainly a “search for a new language through which to express the new politics of the 1990s” (Neyzi, 2001, 425). Kurdish

⁶ Vasıf Kortun, Ofsayt ama Gol Blog, “Introduction”, <http://ofsaytamagol.blogspot.com/2007/06/introduction.html>

⁷ Vassaf, Gündüz. “Eleştiriyi Canlandırmak İsteyen Bienal”, *Radikal*, September 09, 2007, Culture/Art.

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=233070>

“Kaybolan siyasi duyarlılık”

movement, Alevi movement, and feminist movement in this period are challenged as “new” social movements in Turkey (see Simsek, 2004).

2003 anti-Iraq War movement in Turkey was critical for the Turkish case as della Porta and Tarrow highlight as a significant moment in history for transnational activism. As a continuation from European Social Forum, “anti war platform” was created and the demonstrations against the occupation in Iraq brought together between 80.000 and 100.000 people on the same day as the parliamentary vote on sending Turkish soldiers into Iraq. When the vote was rejected and this rejection galvanized the movement, it resulted in formation of various coalitions and emergence of different and new social movement organizations (G.Baykan and E.Lelandais, 2004, 521-522).

The introduction of new forms of social movement organizations , tactics, alliances, issues as well as communication channels with transnational networks through Social Forums and global anti war movements, has affected the understanding of politics in the Turkish context especially in Istanbul on an urban scale.

Artist initiatives and/or appearance of this title in Istanbul, corresponds more or less to the same period. Whether the impact of above mentioned transformations in the relationship between local social movements and transnational networks in Turkish context is extended to the contemporary art field in Istanbul or not, studying artist initiatives in Istanbul through social movements perspective is useful for several similarities between this formation in the contemporary art field and “contentious politics of the turn of the millennium”:

- a) “Cultural turn” in the public discourses on politics (exemplified with newspaper extracts in the previous parts)
- b) The rise of identity politics in urban scale and contemporary art field’s increasing interest in representation of those identities such as Kurdish identity, gender identities, and Armenian identity,
- c) Formation of critical stance towards neoliberalism and modernity paradigm,
- d) Increasing emphasize, interest and potential of “new electronic technologies” for art world and artist networks,

Last but not least,

- e) Although artist initiatives do not identify themselves as part of a movement, their framing of ‘being political’ resembles the transnational activist networks’ framing processes. There are similarities between the identities of contemporary

artists and transnational activists, which is identified as “flexible”, “rooted cosmopolitans” with multiple focuses (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005).

Despite the fact that social movements perspective provides significant amount of critical tools for understanding the meaning of ‘being political’ within contemporary art circles in Istanbul in relation to the artist initiatives, there are also shortcomings worth to consider for an analysis of the cultural field.

Attributing a unique and universal autonomous position to artistic field in relation to other social fields differentiates artist groups and art organizations from social movements organizations. In relation to that, the actors’ tendency (even the critical ones’) to designate themselves the role of “socially responsible artist”, who is also regarded as “role-model for society” makes it difficult to scrutinize the mobilization motives and socially constructed meaning of ‘being political’ in this field.

Although the artistic field is attributed with autonomy, Bourdieu’s characterization of the cultural field enables an analysis of artist initiatives as it is “a field of forces but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces” (Bourdieu, 1993, 30). According to Bourdieu, in order to study artistic field of a given period and society, a task for history of art which it never completely performs is set that is constructing the space of positions and the space of position takings in which these positions are expressed. In his words “the space of positions is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits which are at the stake in the field” (Bourdieu, 1993, 30). This is done with a specific form of economy based on particular form of ‘belief’ and “deceptive certainties of the language of celebration”. The virtue of collective belief makes the work of art as a work of art by acknowledging and knowing it as such (35).

Bourdieu’s conceptualization of cultural field is regarded in what Zolberg (1990) illustrates as sociological approaches to study of arts vis-à-vis the humanistic approach. According to humanistic approach, the main concern is the work of art where the scholars of this approach “regard each great work as a unique, meaningful expression of its creator’s being” and they analyze mostly the formal elements that are the techniques, media used, the content, the imagery language and aesthetic influences. For sociological approach, “a work of art is a moment in a process involving the collaboration of more than one actor, working through certain social institutions, and following historically

observable trends” and sociologists have become aware of art’s socially constructed nature (Zolberg, 1990, 2-10).

Although Zolberg calls for a further approach from these two major camps of humanistic and sociological approach, I will stick with “narrow perspectives of social scientific disciplines” (1990, 26) for studying the contemporary art field of Istanbul in this study. This will allow me to underrate the mediums, techniques artists use or the trends and movements they are aspired. At the same time, these sociological approaches in which the art field is regarded no different or autonomous than any other social field, enables me to associate an understanding of ‘being political’ outside of the contemporary art field. In that sense, Bourdieu’s approach for studying the cultural field is significant:

It is the job of sociology to establish the external conditions for a system of social relations of production, circulation and consumption necessary to the autonomous development of science or art; its task, moreover, is to determine those functional laws which characterize such a relatively autonomous field of social relations and which can also account for the structure of corresponding symbolic productions and transformations. The principles of ‘selection’ objectively employed by the different groups of producers competing for cultural legitimacy are always defined within a system of social relations obeying a specific logic. The available symbolic position-takings are, moreover, functions of interest-systems objectively attached to the positions producers occupy in *special power relations*, which are the social relations of symbolic production, circulation and consumption (1993, 140).

“Given that works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized”, in order to conduct sociological analysis of art, the material production as well as the symbolic production has to be taken into account. Therefore, not only the direct producers of the material works such as the artists, but also “the producers of the meaning and value of the work such as critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such” has to be considered for a Bourdesian analysis (37).

These accounts and considerations on the field of cultural production well fit the critical contemporary art field in Istanbul, especially for the construction and contestation of the meanings associated with ‘political art’ or with ‘being political’ in this field. The actors in this field do not fit with what Bourdieu characterizes as “the believers” asserting “the possibility and necessity of understanding the work in its reality as a fetish” but in a disguised form of celebration since they have a critical stance

in the contemporary art field. No matter what the level of visibility of this celebratory voice of virtuous art within these groups, discussions on the issues that those critical artists and ‘political’ artists point out, have a certain agenda and exemplifications.

The kinds of issues raised in debates on culture, art and politics in Istanbul, are broadly parallel to ongoing discussions in trans-national platforms, like the discussions on emerging social movements, where new forms of conceptualizing cultural activism, creative resistance, creative protest are currently on the agenda. Examples such as Guerrilla Girls, Banksy⁸, Reclaim the Streets⁹, Yes Men¹⁰, Missile Dick Chicks¹¹, Riot Grrrl¹², Critical Art Ensemble¹³ and Ad Busters¹⁴ are often common reference points in these debates. Questions of contentious politics and resistance, which are raised through such examples, echo the broader scholarly concerns of the growing academic literature on ‘new’ social movements, collective action, in the sense that they are a part of an attempt to (re) conceptualize the link between culture and politics.¹⁵

Artist initiatives in Istanbul, as unit of analysis, and understanding how they frame ‘being political’ through elaborating historical and institutional transformations in contemporary art scene of Istanbul; discursive framings of actors and the role of transnational networks will be useful to understand the repercussions of those themes and discussions parallel to transnational platforms and the particular forms they take in the Turkish context.

With respect to that, in order to determine “the special power relations” which are the relations of producing the meanings and symbols of ‘the political’, a sociological approach would be useful to understand “the structure of corresponding symbolic transformations”.

These new strands of theorizing and criticism in the literature on social movements are relevant in clarifying the kinds of questions I aim to explore. At the broadest level, my interest resides understanding the emergent political engagements of the neo-liberal era, on an urban scale. More specifically, I am interested in new waves

⁸ Banksy, <http://www.banksy.co.uk/>

⁹ Reclaim the Streets, <http://rts.gn.apc.org/>

¹⁰ The Yes Men, <http://www.theyesmen.org/>

¹¹ Missile Dick Chicks, www.missiledickchicks.net/

¹² Riot Grrrl, <http://www.riotgrrrlink.com/>

¹³ Critical Art Ensemble, <http://www.critical-art.net/>

¹⁴ Adbusters, <http://www.adbusters.org/>

¹⁵ For attempts to conceptualize those groups and works see Duncombe (et al.) 2002; Soar, 2002; Harold, 2004; Ross, 2002; T.Demo, 2008; Rumbo, 2002.

of “contentious politics at the turn o the millennium” and the forms of activism it entails. At the same time, I want to distance myself from romanticized notions of cultural protest and activism, which pervade popular perceptions ‘artist initiatives’ in the Turkish media. Proceeding from the broader literature on social movements, I propose to question the structural and institutional dynamics which inform different conceptualizations and practices of ‘being political’.

Method of the Study

When I first began to formulate the outline of my thesis two years ago, I was planning to work on the ‘big institutions’ that are significant economic actors in the art scene of Turkey. With this purpose in mind, I started out to map the growing numbers of museums, galleries, exhibition centers, art centers (such as Istanbul Modern Museum, Koç Museum, Sabancı Museum, Aksanat, Pera Museum) which were sponsored by large corporations, especially banks. During this process, I came across the names of relatively small networks or groups of artists, whose presence I was not initially aware of. I soon discovered that these artists were in search of alternatives to the dominant institutions of the art world, which I was planning to study at the time. I also followed up the first official gathering of these groups in 2006, after which they began to name themselves as “independent artist initiatives”. This collective designation generated a great deal of media coverage, thus attracting the attention of more established actors in the art scene. Since I was an observer and participant in this dynamic process of transformation while it happened, my research questions emerged during the process of fieldwork itself. To put it differently, my own initial discussions with members of such initiatives focused on the growing dominance of large corporations in the art field in Turkey. As I learned how these groups situated themselves as ‘alternatives’ to the dominance of large institutions, the focus of my research shifted to ‘artist initiatives’ and ‘alternative spaces’.

During the interviews I conducted, my observations as participant in various meetings and talks, pre-exhibition discussions, openings, conferences and seminars as well as in published media accounts and informal talks with various actors in the art field, I came across numerous and repeated references to ‘being political’. Hence the focus of my study crystallized further, and became increasingly centered on the meanings of ‘being political’ through artistic practices.

The search for an understanding of this specific framing of political became the object of my fieldwork between December 2006 and February 2008 in Istanbul. With this purpose in mind, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with artists who are affiliated with ‘artist initiatives’ as well as participating a series of informal talks. The groups that I regard as artist initiatives, whom are selected for interviewing, are the ones who consider themselves as one of those artist initiatives and whose name is relatively more widely spoken. The interviews are semi structured and the questions are formulated briefly around independence, being alternative, being named as “artist initiatives”, what politics is doing with artist initiatives and about contemporary art and current political atmosphere in Turkey.

Apart from interviews, much of the information I gathered for this study comes from newspapers articles, published materials and web documents. Examination of the ongoing discussions in the mass media is very crucial since the mass media is “the most important forum for understanding the cultural impact since they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically” (A.Gamson, 1998, 59). It was not that difficult to collect information in the media that the number of publications on contemporary art and politics in Turkey has accelerated since 2006. So have the materials available on the web. The artist initiatives have their own publications and maintain blogs (see Appendix B) which provide crucial information on their activities. I also became a member of an e-mail group organized by artist initiatives, through which I could follow up ongoing discussions but especially without participating any of them. Since the internet is a good source of networking, it has been crucial in enabling me map out linkages between actors and organizations. As Castells puts it, “without the means and ways of mass self-communication, the new movements and new forms of insurgent politics could not be conceived.” (2007, 249) The translation of Turkish material is done by me unless otherwise stated.

On the other hand, there are some methodological difficulties for studying art field in general, and particularly for the contemporary art field in Istanbul. Especially it is difficult to provide historical background information for art field around a specific notion. The first one is the question on the relative autonomy of the art field and the autonomous position of the actors in this field vis-à-vis other social fields. Attributing an autonomous position to the art field and differentiating it as a distinctive sphere of creativity makes it difficult to locate it socially, politically and economically. Although the actors explicitly reject the role of art as high culture, there is always this tendency to

attribute a special role to art for “projecting the social reality” or “presenting a unique way of engaging with political”. In that sense, artists has compelled to identify and describe what is art doing with ‘political’.

Along with the relative autonomy attributed to the art field in general, there is also a particular difficulty, which I come up with while studying the contemporary art field in Istanbul. This second difficulty is that the critics, writers, curators, artists in this field are both can be accounted as the units of analysis and at the same time they are the sources of historical reference points. Those actors are the ones who are under scrutiny according to how they frame the experiences in the art field and the history of ‘the political’ in the Turkish context. However, at the same time they are the art historians, writers, debaters whose archives and historiography is the reference point, whose documentation is referred for this study. It also complicates tracing the historical transformations from the writings of those actors that their roles are interchangeable. Writers, academicians, curators, artists can replace the role of one and other according to the context. There are writers who have curated crucial amounts of exhibitions and artists have written on the art world for a long time. Despite this difficulty with the writers and other referential actors in this field, it is important to scrutinize those actors and their writings because as Marcus and Myer (1995) argues that “art criticism is partly in the business of producing styles and differences; action/reaction is what structures the whole history of avant-garde”. Like the avant-garde trends in the arts, it is the writings and documentary accounts of those actors in relation to artist initiatives that give the historical account of framing ‘political’ in the field of contemporary art in Istanbul.

Organization of the Chapters

In the first chapter below, I will begin with a brief account of ongoing transformations in the field of art during the past two decades in Turkey. These two decades, associated with the transnationalization of the Turkish economy, have witnessed a major boom in cultural markets, led by the dizzying expansion of audio-visual technologies. My main emphasis will be on how the ensuing changes in the art field, have given birth to a search for “alternative artist spaces”. Then I will explore how a particular understanding of “alternative” informs a broad spectrum of such artist initiatives, by focusing on the prevailing distinction between ‘modern’ versus ‘current’ art. Specifically, I will focus on how this dichotomy is mobilized in the contemporary

art scene in Istanbul, to articulate the difference between the ‘modernist’ canons of state-sponsored art during the earlier decades of Turkish modernization movement, and ‘current’ developments in the art field. In this context, I will document how the notion of ‘current art’ (*güncel sanat*) is valorized by artist initiatives to articulate their ‘political’ standing.

In the second chapter, I will focus on the meanings and concepts associated with ‘political’ in the contemporary art in general. By analyzing the emergence of artist initiatives within this framing of political and how they define themselves, I will try to investigate under which titles this formation is being discussed. In order to examine ‘being political’ for artist initiatives and other actors around these formations, I will employ the framing perspective, and try to elaborate “the discursive, strategic and contested processes” that frames are developed and generated as Snow and Benford (2000) assert. I will turn to the more specific meanings of ‘being political’ as articulated by artists themselves, as well as other ‘insiders’ within the art field such as prominent curators, writers and critics. Departing from these three processes, firstly I will discuss how artist initiatives develop a collective identity through “being political” (*politik olmak*) by constantly referring to artists and networks which are not “political enough” (*yeterince politik olmayanlar*). I will also try to highlight the hierarchies, positions and networks that these meanings, symbols associated with ‘political’ strategically operate.

In the last and third chapter, I will further delineate how the notion of “being political” is articulated through a series of substantive issues, such as problematizing “female bodies” while avoiding an explicit feminist claim; formation of 19th January Collective in order to protest the assassination of the Armenian intellectual Hrant Dink; ; practices of contemporary art in and on Diyarbakır for the problematic of “Kurdish identities” and discussing the role of imaginative “streets” where intervening the “public” and “the street” has been regarded as a political. In this last chapter, by analyzing this formation thorough the ‘political opportunities’ that are available for them, I will scrutinize how “being political” is framed and articulated in the context of transnational networks such as Istanbul Biennials and European Union Cultural Funds.

CHAPTER ONE

ART AND POLITICS IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

Defining what it means to be “political” is akin to “defining both beauty and perfection (...) because, as is the case for many terms of this kind, they lack referents that transcend their social location” (Zolberg, 1990, 7). In the contemporary art scene of Istanbul, the discussions and frames through which ‘the political’ is defined can be broadly situated in the context of neoliberalism. The neoliberal era can be identified as “a hegemonic as a mode of discourse [which] has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005,3). This means that the common feature of ‘emerging social movements’ and transnational activist networks is their mobilization against neoliberal orthodoxy. At the same time however, the themes and forms of contentious politics are shaped by “the neoliberal way of thinking”.

In analyzing art, culture and politics in the neoliberal era, two significant books offer critical insights for examining the Turkish experience. Not only do these two books facilitate formulating questions on the relationship between neoliberalism, politics and culture but also two of them, when combined with the Turkish case, demonstrate the significance of culture as an arena of political struggle in the era of neoliberalism.

The first book, George Yudice’s *The Expediency of Culture*, traces the role of culture in a globalizing world. Yudice illustrates culture as an expedient resource for transnational institutions, political activists, non-governmental organizations as well as activist artists. In the era of neoliberalism, “culture has become the slippery terrain where the change is sought” (2005, 158). In this context, he analyzes an internationally and nationally recognized artist organization *inSITE* which problematizes the border between San Diego and Tijuana, and utilizes “new genres of public art” and “community based activist art projects”. As the author explains, “‘community engagement’ projects in 1997 have their direct predecessors the alternative (feminist ethnic, Marxist, and other activist) practices that by the 1980s began to be incorporated into the bureaucracy of government and foundations art departments” (300). In his study, Yudice highlights how new avant-garde tendencies, the border itself and, its culture serve as a “natural resource”(297) which bring together banking executives,

financial investors and activists on a cultural platform for “social change”. The significance of Yudice’s work for the case of “artist initiatives” in Istanbul resides in his emphasis on “the cosmopolitan character of art festivals and biennials” and transnational collaborations, which are underpinned by power inequalities (299). He also emphasize how the art world demands “exhibitions to come up with something new” (302). This “newness” generates interest in marginal communities, oppressed groups, multiculturalism, and especially “diversity” which constitute a “political experience” for artists in activist projects.

The second book is Jessica Winegar’s *Creative Reckonings the Politics of Art and Culture in Egypt* where she provides an anthropological account of the Egyptian art world in transformation. Winegar focuses on contestations of modernity, in a postcolonial Islamic setting. By investigating individual artists, their works and ongoing discussions in the art field, she raises the following question: What happened in Egypt’s state-centric, nation oriented field of artistic production when the intensified global circulation of art and money pushed for the privatization of the culture industries and the disaggregating of the nation? Her argument centers on how the international expansion of the capitalist art market, triggers different reckonings with the modernity in Egypt. What particularly interesting are the parallels between the Egyptian art scene and Turkish art scene, which highlight as many differences as similarities between those two countries. The growing interest in Egyptian art works as ‘Middle Eastern’, as well as the changing discourse in the Egyptian art world in the neoliberal era where this international interest, consecutively the changes in the cultural policies of Egyptian government and the flow of international capital has great deals of effects in this transformation.

Yudice’s global focus highlights how the utilization, exploitation, and instrumentalisation of culture, which brings together actors and institutions with contradictory affiliations, while simultaneously encourage “cultural activism” projects. Winegar’s observations and arguments emphasize encounters with European understanding of artistic field, and the actors in it with “anxieties of modernization”. Her work, situated in the neoliberal decades of 1980s and 1990s, illustrates the role of local ‘politics’ in discussions on the role of culture in global setting. In the Turkish case,

with similar experiences of modernization¹⁶, as a “Middle Eastern”, “Third World” country, Istanbul assumes the role of a “bridge” in engaging with the global capital. It is through Istanbul as global metropolis “culture as a resource” flows between national and transnational channels.

1.1 Shifting Parameters of the Art Field in Contemporary Istanbul

Istanbul’s art scene has been the nexus of dramatic transformations over these past twenty years.¹⁷ These two decades have been marked by a broad spectrum of market-oriented policies in the wider Turkish economy, aimed to encourage privatization and transnationalization.¹⁸ These macro level changes associated with Turkey’s neoliberal experiment - beginning from the mid 1980s¹⁹ onwards - have been well studied.²⁰ Any attempt to link these ‘market reforms’ at the macro level, to the constellation of changes in Istanbul’s art markets, must take into consideration the followings:

a) Corporate sponsorship of art in the form of festivals, biennials, museums etc., has created an increasingly commercialized art scene. This is a dramatic change from the long-standing association of art with state modernizations project in Turkey. The

¹⁶ At this point it is significant to mention the distinction between the Egyptian modernization and the Turkish case. Özyürek argues that “as opposed to most of the modernization projects in the Third World countries, modernization in Turkey did not start formally in a colonial or post colonial setting. On the other hand, the project of modernization was started by the elite class in the Ottoman Empire and had reached its zenith in the early years of Turkish Republic under the authoritarian regime” (2007, 23).

¹⁷ Before the 1980s in the art world of Istanbul, the artistic organizations and collectives of the years 1960s and 1970s can be characterized as they gathered around the leftist revolutionary ideals and political orientations. In the 1970s, the art field gradually starts to experience the philanthropic activities of wealthy families and small scale corporate interventions and patronage in the art field in Istanbul (see Başaran, 2007).

¹⁸ Neoliberal era in Turkey is characterized with the government of Turgut Özal. In this period, the emphasis on consumerism and parallel lack of emphasis on thrift led to corruption in economy (see Öniş, 2004).

¹⁹ Other major *forces* that characterize the 1980s’ political culture in Turkey are the legacy of three military coups. The cost of the coercion exercised by the military forces at the beginning of 80s was very high. The new constitution of the coup, which is still the binding constitution today with some changes, limited the freedom of the press, the trade unions and the individual rights among many others (see Zürcher, 2004, 293-295).

²⁰ For political economic analysis of Turkish neoliberal experience see Cizre and Yeldan, 2005; Yeldan, 2006; Onis and Aysan, 2000.

concentration of transnational corporations in Istanbul has meant growing significance of art markets in Istanbul with increasing numbers of galleries, exhibitions and ‘collectors’.²¹ According to Başaran (2007), the grounds of those transformations and the increasing importance of culture are “embedded in the economic and socio-cultural practices of neo-liberalism and intensified globalization”. Moreover, in order to understand the rise of art and culture in this period, she claims four motives:

The first motive was the deindustrialization practices of neoliberalism, which contributed to the decline of industrial cities. The second was the decrease of working class capacity and strengthening of the service class as related to the former. Culture has played an important role in meeting the demands of the newly emerging service class. As a third motive, with the sharpening of class differences and deepening of poverty in this period, culture has been put forward as a unifying power to bridge income segmentation. Lastly, following the withdrawal of the state from many social spheres, culture has become seemingly more inclusive and thus, it has emerged as a new area for hegemonic struggle. (p.56)

As the “cultural turn” in social movement studies, corporations also ‘turn’ to culture as an investment opportunity to sustain corporate image and to meet with their target group of urban population.

b) With the new economic liberalization attempts creating opportunities, the Turkish artists living and working in Europe or US had started to turn back to home in early 1990s with accumulated experiences and knowledge.²² The return of artists, curators, writers etc. from diasporas, attracted by the lucrativeness of the art market in Istanbul, and their input, as well as increasing interconnectedness with art circles in Europe that have introduced new trends like the notion of ‘curatorship’. At this point, Beral Madra, who is a curator, art critic and writer, finds it necessary to underline the role of “foreign countries’ cultural centers such as the British Council, Goethe Institute, Italian and

²¹ Relating this phenomenon to Reagan and Thatcher governments, Wu characterizes this period as “the unprecedented intervention of business in contemporary culture; ...corporations ...making contributions to art museums and other cultural organizations; ...businesses had begun to be active participants in the framing and shaping of the discourse of contemporary culture”. According to Wu, the newness in the 1980s “was this active involvement became ubiquitous and comprehensive” (1998, 28-29).

²² Winegar (2006b), in her analysis of the Egyptian state-centric fields of cultural production and the interaction with global circulation of art, she draws her arguments on a similar contestation between “art critics and curators whose professional expertise was formed primarily in Western art and educational institutions and those whose expertise was shaped primarily through experience in Egyptian institutions” (176).

French Cultural Centers [who] were organizing exhibitions to present their culture to the third world countries, and in this process Turkey was practically the first stop”. According Madra, these cultural centers reorganized their programs in the early 90s “when the European Union was taking new shape new cultural policies were introduced” (2008, 32).

With the interaction between transnational networks and the local art scene, leading to introduction of new trends and technologies, the interaction between “social” and “arts” has accelerated in this period. Art sociologist and curator Ali Akay (2008, argues that “this era [1990s] gave birth to the intersection of arts, politics and sociology in Turkey...this formation happening all over the world that is the artists having more effective positions in society in political issues continues to play a role in this process” in Istanbul.

c) Istanbul as becoming a global metropolis was facing developments and transformations that have marked the 1980s. Along experiencing a unique version of casino capitalism and yuppie pleasures, there was a growing fast food sector, increasing number of high quality international cuisine restaurants, boom in the nightlife and entertainment business, annual international film, opera, jazz, classical music, theatre festivals in the city. Also at that time, Istanbul Biennials were already recognized in the international exhibition agendas (Keyder, 2000, 185). Although Istanbul started to grow as a centre of industry after 1950s, according to Yardımcı (2005) the main development activities through being a global urban city occurred in 1980s. Within the structural adjustment program of IMF, import substituted, state centric economic system was replaced with market economy. The consequent privatization program covering state owned enterprises, removal of price controls, implementation of free exchange rate regime and opening up Istanbul Stock Exchange had followed. In relation to those *developments*, the local economy that shifted from production to finance and its effort to attach itself to global economy was felt in many regions, sectors and fractions of Turkey. With the association of local economy and the global economy, the increased foreign direct investment and high number of multinational corporations investing in Turkey, “...there emerged a wealthy transnational professional class who are following the global trends and fashions very closely thus Istanbul became first choice of settlement for them as a result of both the job opportunities and life style in the city” (Yardımcı, 2005, 42).

Istanbul was in a process of becoming one of the metropolises in the 1990s and at the same time global icons, images, sounds, commodities had been invading the everyday lives of each and every segment of people living in Istanbul where cultural distinctions and class hierarchies was melting in a dazzling speed (Öncü, 2003, 118). While Istanbul was facing those rapid transformations in order to engage global cultural metropolises, it is no surprise that the subject of the Third International Istanbul Biennial in 1992 and the 'Istanbul' exhibition (in Taksim Art Gallery) was concentrating on megapolises.

d) While discussing the role of state in the cultural field in neoliberal era, Başaran argues “withdrawal of the state from social spheres” as well as cultural field. Rather than a withdrawal but a transformation in the role of state in the cultural field where “neoliberalism has also instigated new practices of state surveillance over culture producers” (Winegar, 2006b, 178), as well as in many other fields, is what many scholars could prefer to put it that way. But from another aspect, it can be argued that the dominance of state sponsored ‘schools of art’ in public universities, (and their professors) in defining the canons of ‘art’ has been undermined. Beginning with the 90s, as Halil Altındere²³ (who is widely known by his Kurdish identity and ‘political’ works) describes, alternative, innovative art movements and exhibitions were organized by artists in this period (Altındere, 2008, 6).²⁴

Artists and artists’ groups and collectives within this period, as a result of these institutional changes in the contemporary art scene began to emerge which will than lead to the appearance and disappearance of small scale “artist initiatives” in the 2000s.

²³ He is a very prominent figure like Vasıf Kortun when it is the question of art, politics and artist initiatives in Istanbul. He is the editor of Art-ist Contemporary Art Magazine and he is invited to Documenta 2007. Mostly he is known as a Kurdish artist and being regarded as one of the group of artists who have close ties with Diyarbakır. His ethnic background, his artistic works and the exhibitions that he has curated in relation to that, leads to classifying him and his works as “political”.

²⁴ In this period also new techniques and new discussions on artistic trends are introduced to the contemporary art field as well. There has been the continuation of conceptual art in many works and discussions on irony, metaphors and caricaturization has increased. (see Altındere, 2008) Artists began to employ new mediums such as new media technologies, digital art, sonic art, interactive mediums. Painting, sculpture and photography also has played crucial role among other new mediums.

From the beginning of 2000s and onwards, the contemporary art scene in Istanbul²⁵ has been experiencing new forms of collectives and groupings by the artists. With the two consecutive official meetings of those groupings in 2006 (See Appendix A), on new possibilities of “resisting” these “big institutional actors” in the field with solidarity, the name “artist initiatives” began to be pronounced. This name entered into circulation in various forms such as “independent artist initiatives”, “independent artist-run spaces”, “artist initiatives”, “art initiations”, “civil art groups”, and “civil formations” and with some other examples. In a short time, the interest on those formations as well as the number of debates on ‘art and politics’, have rapidly increased.

To sum up, these changes from 1980s onwards have paved the way for today’s discussions on artist initiatives and on ‘being political’ within the contemporary art field in Istanbul. In order to understand this debate extensively and the arts in Turkey in a historical context, it is very crucial to mention the distinction between two different translations of word ‘contemporary’ in Turkish that are ‘çağdaş’ and ‘güncel’ for contemporary art in Istanbul.

1.2 Making Distinctions: “Modern” versus “Current” Art

As the engagement with transnational networks and the interest on the “third world” art has increased in 1980s and 1990s, parallel to that the number of bilingual publications has increased in Turkish art scene as well (mostly Turkish and English). The increase in those publications has made the translation problematic of the word ‘contemporary’ in Turkish, relatively more visible than previous years. Before the mid 1990s, contemporary art has been translated as ‘çağdaş sanat’ in Turkish. Since the word “çağdaş” attributes to the modernization project of Turkish Republic, a group of actors in this field in Istanbul explicitly differentiates themselves by problematizing this modernization aspect, beginning with the mid 1990s. In order to dissociate themselves from “çağdaş” art, those artists, writers, curators introduce an ‘alternative’ translation of the word contemporary, which is ‘güncel’. (From now on, I will employ the word “contemporary” as equivalence of “güncel” if there is not any further notice, for practical reasons. It is also possible to employ “current” for a literate translation of the

²⁵ Later on this will evoke similar transformations in some other cities as well, albeit this Istanbul is still regarded as the center in a center-periphery distinction which is frequently used when talking about cultural events in Diyarbakır.

word “güncel” but this will lead to missing the point, which is “güncel”, emerged as an alternative translation for “contemporary” art.)

The significance of these actors of ‘güncel sanat’ is that, when scrutinizing the formations who position themselves as “alternative” which is the case for “alternative artist initiatives”, the notion of alternative here immediately raises the question of alternative to what. The multiplicity and diversity of groups under the umbrella of “artist initiatives” in Turkey prevents a single understanding of “alternative”. Perhaps the most common frame, in which these groups regard themselves as an “alternative” to, is these “çağdaş” artistic models attributing to the Turkish modernization rooted back from the 19th century Ottoman Empire to the Republican Era. In other words, the formation of artist initiatives emerged within the field of ‘güncel sanat’ with critical stance towards Turkish modernization project as well as its extensions in the plastic arts of modernism.

No matter when was the beginning of modernization project occurred in Turkey, the policies of modernization, westernization has continued for long periods.²⁶ These policies, projects and ideals have long term, vast transformative effects on plastic arts in not only the forms of emulation, aspiration towards European and Westernized art, but they also created its anti-thesis and opponents towards what is called as ‘West’. In addition, opening up print houses (basımevi) and publishing of newspapers play important roles in this period over artistic space. The introduction of Western style art is welcomed through various occasions and affected the formation of an art field in myriad ways. With the new republic, cultural field become one of the carriers of state’s ideology, where the state’s ideology was the sustainability of republican revolution,

²⁶ There is no consensus over which period marks the starting point of the modernization project in Turkey and the modernism paradigm for Turkish plastic arts. (For a historical account of “modern” in Turkish plastic arts and modernism from 1908 to 1954 see Sönmez ,2005). Sending of 12 students of plastic arts to Vienna, Paris and Luxemburg in order to have art education in 1835 is regarded the first attempt to become ‘modern’. Another critical period in history is *Tanzimat* (reforms) in the Ottoman Empire from 1839 to 1871 starting with an imperial edict *Gülhane Hatt-i Şerifi* (the Noble Edict of the Rose Garden) brought a limited cultural revolution next to its administrative and economic transformations. The scribes (by now bureaucrats) with their knowledge of Europe and European languages had introduced a new life style into the Empire (see Zürcher 2004). The Second Constitutionalist Period (*İkinci Meşrutiyet*) of 1908 and without a doubt the formation of the Turkish Republic, beginning with the year of 1923 (for an analysis of cultural policies in general for this period see Öndin, 2003), can be accounted as the ignition of modernist paradigm in Turkey. (For a detailed analysis on the “çağdaş” field of arts in Turkey, see Tansuğ (2003).

modernization and westernization policies. Özbek characterizes the Turkish Republic's project of cultural modernization as "reshaping the tradition as cultural ideology while attributing the definition of 'past' to 'Turkishness' encompassing the Anatolian civilizations...In order to actualize a cultural project of 'welcoming Westernization', revolutionary goals had realized...actions for refiguring the traditional culture and for spreading the Republican ideology had taken"²⁷ (Özbek, 2006, 40).

According to Ayşegül Sönmez²⁸, writer and critic, the period starting with the 1990s with artists gathering under a certain title of the "güncel sanat" demonstrates the freedom of not expressing itself under the title "çağdaş sanat". Sönmez employs the words "contemporary" for "çağdaş" and "current" for "güncel"; and emphasizes the importance of this difference between "current" and "contemporary" art in order to define the *current* art practices that have taken place in Turkey during 2000-2007, corresponding to the period of emergence of artist initiatives in Istanbul. She describes this period and the divergence between two translations of a single concept of "contemporary" with highlighting a leading figure of that period:

Through the emphasis on the present time, current art broke free from the spotlight of the modernizing aspect of contemporary art. Naturally, this freedom caused confusion. It was 2001 when the first current art museum in Turkey was found. As the exact definition of current art continued to perplex, attention was directed to Vasıf Kortun, the director and the curator of the museum and a complete organizer of current art. Kortun who attracted a lot of attention and who would be active during the period 2000-2007 as he had never been before, defined this problem-creating term as follows: "Unlike contemporary art and artists, current art and artists do not draw attention to the modern republic project. This is a break in the intermix/transition between modern and contemporary...Current art does not work on drafting a future; it is involved with 'here' and 'now'..." (2008, 136)

As Sönmez states, Vasıf Kortun has been an important prominent figure in the formation of "güncel sanat" in the 1990s. He was the art director and curator of the 3rd

²⁷ "Kültürel ideoloji olarak geleneği yeniden biçimlendirirken geçmiş tanımını Anadolu uygarlıklarını da kapsayan bir biçimde "Türklük" geçmişine dayandırdığı söylenebilir.(...) 'Batılılaşmaya evet' diyen kültürel projenin gerçekleştirilmesini sağlayacak devrimler yapılmış (...) geleneksel kültürün yeniden biçimlendirilmesi ve Cumhuriyet ideolojisinin yaygınlaştırılması yoluna gidilmiştir".

²⁸Sönmez also characterizes the current art practitioner of that period as "Current Turkish artists producing artwork under headings such as sex and assimilation, violence in all aspects of life, exile, new urbanization, language, history, and memory, objects of everyday life and metaphorical objects..."

Istanbul Biennial in 1993.²⁹ With his directorship, biennials said to gain an international context with Kortun's invitation of artists from ex-communist countries (Altındere, 2008, 6). According to Halil Altındere (2008, 6) "this radical change resulted in him finding himself confronted by many artists, critics and gallerists from the local art environment who had formed the majority of the participation in previous biennials". As one example, Bedri Baykam, famous artist mostly known with his left nationalist³⁰ Kemalist stance and prevocational appearances in the public, harshly criticizes Kortun for his claims to "bring *güncel sanat* to Turkey by himself":

In Vizon Magazine (December 1, 2004) Kortun, by saying that "I brought the concept of Güncel Sanat in Turkey 10 years ago", proves that he doesn't recognize any boundaries including falsification of art history and counterfeit, in order to feed his personal world of greed. Proje 4L, Garanti Güncel and now by adding up the Istanbul Biennial in his list, Kortun, who brought hundreds of art men in the country, did not refrain from exhibiting Turkish "çağdaş-güncel" art as a small start beginning with him by using simultaneously or consecutively the financial resources of those three institutions...He ventures to ignore the development processes of Turkish Modern and Çağdaş Art, and the artists who paid the costs of bringing conceptual art, multi media art and any form of risky start years ago before him. Nobody has the right to insult Turkish Art Scene and Turkish Modern Art as such..³¹

²⁹ Another point that is significant about Kortun in relation to the formation of "güncel art" is the founding of ICAP Istanbul Contemporary Art Project. ICAP served as an archive, library and discussion platform and hosted a series of contemporary art seminars from 1998 to 2000. Also, Altındere underlines that "unity and energy at ICAP enabled the future emergence of projects Such as: Resmi Görüş, art-ist Contemporary Art Magazine, Oda Projesi/Room Project, Tabela Sergileri/Signpost Exhibitions and the Internet magazine Nihayet İçimdesin/You Are In Me At Last (2008,8).

³⁰ Left nationalist refers to "Ulusalçı Sol"

³¹ Baykam, Bedri. "Vasıf Kortun'a Yanıt", *Türk Solu*, January 10, 2005, Karakutu 73, <http://www.turksolu.org/73/baykam73.htm>

"1 Aralık 2004 tarihli Vizon Dergisi'nde "Güncel Sanat kavramını Türkiye'ye 10 yıl önce ben getirdim" diyen Kortun, kişisel hırs dünyasını beslemek için, sanat tarihi tahrifatçılığı ve kalpazanlığı da dahil olmak üzere, hiçbir sınır tanımadığını böylece herkese kanıtlamış oluyor... Gerek Proje 4L, gerek Garanti, Güncel ve şimdi de İstanbul Bienali'nin listeye eklenmesiyle, eşzamanlı veya sırayla 2-3 kurumun mali gücünü kullanan ve bu süreçte, yüzlerce yabancı sanat adamını ülkeye getiren Kortun, tüm bu insanlara "tek adamlığı" aktarmış, Türk çağdaş-"güncel" sanatını onunla daha henüz başlamış bir küçük çıkış olarak göstermekten kaçınmamıştır... Türk Modern ve Çağdaş Sanatının gelişim süreçlerini de, kendisinden yıllar önce, tüm bedellerini ödeyerek ülkeye kavramsal sanatı, multi-medya sanatı ve her türlü risk içeren çıkışı gerçekleştiren sanatçıları da yok saymayı göze alabilmektedir...Hiç kimsenin Türk Sanat Ortamını ve Modern Çağdaş Türk Sanatını bu şekilde aşağılamaya hakkı yoktur".

These encounters make the distinction between those two camps “çağdaş” and “güncel” in the art scene more visible, although except a little account on these two distinct camps, it is not easy to find credible accounts and explicit references on this distinction. On the other hand, the relatively high volume of discussions on modern art, “çağdaş” art, “güncel” art points out the significance of the period of 1990s.

When the 1990s is in quest, Şener Özmen, artist and writer whose ties to the city of Diyarbakir is widely known, argues that the 1990s is not the beginning of *güncel* art. Rather he describes this period that is “when the ones who think that art cannot be controlled from a single center and who put on weapons against a group of art elites of ‘çağdaş conservatives’”.³² Özmen while criticizing the negative attitudes towards contemporary (güncel) art practices in Diyarbakır, explicitly refer to those as “çağdaş” while defining art in Diyarbakır as “güncel”:

The ones, who associate themselves with Yurtsever Cephe, have begun to search for something else behind the güncel art practices in Diyarbakır. Kurdish art typology has fully been created and the ones who have done this were not Kurdish but it is a paranoid gift of Turkish çağdaş art world to us, güncel artists from Diyarbakır.³³

Within the same period of 90s, artists’ interests in “güncel” theories allow them to incline from the humanist tradition to a sociological perspective. According to Erden Kosova, writer and curator, turning back of art sociologist Ali Akay from France to Turkey, who has been a student of Giles Deleuze, had a grater impact on the güncel art field by “bringing up his accumulation of knowledge in *güncel* art scene”. Within this period, artists are said to pay attention to “expansion of the concept of difference towards the fields of gender, ethnic identity, historical memory...migration, deterritorialization and belonging...as well as employing techniques of photography, installation and using everyday objects and to the changing feminist, politicized, post-colonial art environments in America from 1980s” (Kortun and Kosova, 2007). According to Kosova, the repercussions of these developments in this period have also

³² Kılınç, Ali Rıza. “Interview with Şener Özmen”, *Evrensel*, October 5, 2007, Books, via <http://sener-ozmen.blogspot.com/2009/02/evrensel-kitap.html>

“Çağdaş muhafazakarlar’ olarak tanımladığım bir sanat elitine karşı silahlarını kuşanıp sanatın bir tek merkezden yönetilmeyeceğini düşünenlerin çıkış yaptığı bir döneme tekabül ediyor”

³³ *Ibid.*. “Kendilerini Yurtsever Cephe’yle ilişkilendirmiş olanlar, Diyarbakır’da güncel sanat pratiklerinin altında başka şeyler aramaya başladı, Kürt sanatı tipolojisi tam anlamıyla yaratıldı, üstelik bunu yaratanlar Kürtler olmadı, bu kimlik Türk çağdaş sanat dünyasının biz Diyarbakırlı güncel sanatçılara paranoid hediyesidir.”

been affected with Birikim Journal (monthly socialist magazine of culture³⁴) and the opening of publishing houses following the same line, which are İletişim, Metis, Bağlam ve Ayrıntı, as well as autonomous projects of Bilar, Bilsak Atelyeleri ve Tarih in the 1990s.

There have been several events linking art, sociology and the social during this period in Turkey. Among them are the translation of Foucault's, Deleuze's and Guattari's books into Turkish; the 'Art and Sociology' meetings organized by the Mimar Sinan University Department of Sociology (the first one took place in 1993, the second one in 1994) and the 'Memory-Recollection' exhibitions curated by Vasif Kortun (Akay, 2008, 53-54). Next to those above, Akay adds that The 'Ret' (objection) exhibition in November 1994 was questioning the dynamics of the system and grasped art in political dimensions. The 'Political Scandal' Railway station exhibition (1995) would always be remembered as an incident that bound art and politics according to him (2008, 53-55).

For the last quarter of the 1990s Altındere salutes The Youth Activity exhibitions (Genç Etkinlikler) (1995-1998) at TÜYAP Tepebaşı under the roof of the International Plastic Arts Association as “the most exciting and democratic activities of the 90s broking with all established art hierarchies, created a field of freedom for young artists”. He continues with defining those exhibitions as:

It would not wrong to define The Youth Activity exhibitions, as fields where the 'new' in artistic terms was tested and applied. The young artists taking part in these events not only broke with the given aesthetic approach of the art institutions they were trained at, they also managed to reflect in their products the data of the intense political environment Turkey was going through at the time. These exhibitions also witnessed a break with Istanbul-centeredness and initiated the exhibition of sharp, provocative, political works (Altındere, 2008, 7).

In short, Şener Özmen reviews 1990s in relation to the formation of ‘current’ art as such:

The first quarter of the 1990s was colored by a democratic ascendancy capable of overthrowing the autocratic regime with neo-liberal art reforms which forwarded agendas. This formation speedily expedited the sensitivities of contemporary art to mainstream youth’s desire to produce art and its ‘constant art’ strategy that overtly declared ‘anyone could exhibit anything’. This was a novel development in terms of contemporary art and created the possibility of producing or referring to many spaces of high ‘risk’, such as the Kurdish issue, democratization, otherness, gender

³⁴ <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/hakkimizda.aspx>

politics, militarism, torture, the police, power, identity, war, terror, popular culture, the media, homosexuality and so on (Özmen, 2008,120).

According to Halil Altındere “güncel sanat, especially after it could not justify its position vis-à-vis conventional art in the 90s, with the power of media, become a current issue in the 2000s”.³⁵

The actors in *güncel sanat* field who benefited and nourished with those new issues, topics and problematic in the field, criticize the modernism and modern art on one hand, as well as problematizing the Turkish modernization project on the other hand. Very recent discussions on Turkish modernization in the art field appears in relation to the exhibition of “Modern and Beyond” in Santralistanbul between 09.09.2007 and 15.06.2008. Levent Çalıkoğlu invites to discuss “who the ‘modern artist’ is”³⁶ and posits a question “Should the modern artist own an identity which affects the environment around him and the period after him?”³⁷

Ömer Uluç, “painter 'known with his harsh critiques to Modern ve Ötesi” exhibition, put his criticism forth with reference to Turkish modernization as such:

“It is obvious that the Turkish Modernization is tied to the official ideology. Modernism is a piece of Westernization ideology of Turkey. Like Kemalism, which is continuation of a desire of modernisation, it was same with the visual arts. Like modernism followed by a program attached to the official ideology, the period after modern is also followed by an ideological stance although it was oppositional to the official ideology. In the end, they both are ideologically attached. One of the weaknesses of this exhibition is this parallel both in its texts and classification. Another thing is that the aim to state a linear process which goes to a happy ending. You would say that why the opposition could not be natural and ideological in arts which appears to be natural in social and political issues. It could not, since the art is not the mirror of life or something. It had already showed it or it will show its consequences and thus it is

³⁵ Gençay, Gökhan. “Halil Altındere: Sanat hiçbir zaman özgür olmadı”, *Birgün*, November 3, 2007, Birgün Sunday, http://www.birgun.net/sunday_index.php?news_code=1194104003&year=2007&month=11&day=03

“Özellikle 90 sonrasında konvansiyonel sanat karşısında varlığını meşrulaştıramamış güncel sanat, 2000’li yıllarla beraber medyanın da gücüyle gündeme oturdu.”

³⁶ “Esas tartışılması gereken ise 'modern sanatçının' kim olduğu meselesi”

³⁷ Çalıkoğlu, Levent. “Modern sanat 50’lerde mi başladı?”, *Radikal*, October 30, 2007, Culture/Art,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=237246>

“Modern sanatçı aynı zamanda çevresini, kendisinden sonrayı etkileyen bir kimliğe mi sahip olmalı?”

ideological but not in the sense that the intellectuals would want to understand.³⁸

The fields of *güncel* and *çağdaş*, the actors using any of these definitions or the critics of modernization are not necessarily generates and perpetuates a binary opposition between *güncel* and *çağdaş*. Fulya Erdemci's, who is one of the curators of "Modern and Beyond" exhibition, answer provides an example for this fluidity or confusion of term contemporary to the questions for "is the term *çağdaş* art a must? Should it be replaced with *güncel* or as Madra suggests with 'hemzaman'?"³⁹

It should not be replaced. It is the correct It should not be replaced. It is the correct translation. Maybe it would not be understood when translated into other languages. The word *çağdaş* is bothering like in 'çağdaş women' but I use the term *çağdaş* in 'çağdaş sanat' as I use 'cubism'. Since cubism is the name of a modernist movement and not about cubes, *çağdaş* is the same. It is the name of the experimental laboratory like environment after the criticism of modernization. That is all. Associating meanings to it seems to include what has been criticised as *çağdaş*. The militancy of not saying *çağdaş* resembles the militancy of *çağdaş* women.⁴⁰

³⁸ Sönmez, Ayşegül. "Uluç'tan eleştiriler: Akademi düşünce morgu", *Radikal*, January 17, 2008, Culture/Art,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=244687&tarih=17/01/2008>.

"Türk modernizmi açıktır ki resmi ideolojiye bağlıdır. Modernizm, Türkiye'nin Batılılaşma ideolojisi içinde bir parça. Nasıl Kemalizm de 250 yıllık bir modernleşme arzusunun devamıysa görsel sanatlar alanında da aynı şey yaşandı. Nasıl modernizm resmi ideolojiye bağlı bir program izlediyse, modern ötesindeki süreçte, bu kez resmi ideolojiye karşı çıkan ama gene de ideolojik bir çizginin izlendiğini görüyoruz. Eninde sonunda ikisi de ideolojik bağımlılar. Ve tabii ki bu serginin bir zaafı, hem metinlerinde hem de tasnifindeki bu paralellik... Gayri tabii olan bir diğer şey, çizgisel, mutlu sona doğru bir gelişme olduğunu yazmak, göstermeye çalışmak. Bakın, sosyal ve politik meselelerde tabii gibi görünen karşı çıkma niye sanatta tabii ve ideolojik olmasın diyeceksiniz. Olmaz çünkü sanat, toplumsal gelişmelerin aynası filan değildir. Onu ya önceden göstermiştir ya da sonradan sonuçlarını gösterecektir... Dolayısıyla ideolojiktir ama aydınların anlamak istediği anlamda değil."

³⁹ Sönmez, Ayşegül. "Erdemci: Takip eden geride kalır", *Radikal*, October 26, 2007, Culture/Art,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=236888>

"Yılların bitmeyen tartışması, çağdaş sanat terimi zorunlu bir deyim mi? Güncel sanatla ya da Beral Madra'nın önerdiği gibi 'hemzaman'la yer değiştirmeli mi?"

⁴⁰ "Hayır, değiştirmemeli, doğru çevirisi bu. Hem başka dillere çevrildiğinde anlaşılabilir. Çağdaş sözcüğü, 'çağdaş kadın' gibi, çok can sıkıcı ama 'çağdaş sanat'taki çağdaş ben tamamen 'kübizm' gibi kullanıyorum. Nasıl ki kübizm, modern bir hareketin ismidir ve aslında küplerden söz etmez, çağdaş da öyle, modernizmin eleştirisinden sonra ortaya çıkan deneysel laboratuvar ortamına verilen isim bu. Bu kadar... Ona anlam yüklemek çağdaşlık adına eleştirilen ne varsa onu içeriyor gibi geliyor bana...Çağdaş demeyelim militanlığı da çağdaş kadın militanlığı gibi nihayetinde."

One other example that these two distinct translations do not evoke a binary opposition is that the tendency to contextualize the distinction between modern and the current in a progressive manner, a transition from the former to latter. This tendency sometimes takes the form of a transition from the conventional methods to new means of artistic production. It has been said that the conventional “2 dimensional canvas” has been left for the new methods of installation, video or digital arts or “that the visual arts swiftly moved away from the *modern* and embraced the *contemporary/current*, which also facilitated the deconstruction of established mentalities” (B. Kahraman, 2008, 33). Although the term “çağdaş” do not fully correspond to modernist art in the discursive field, it is hard to say that art scene is experiencing a linear progress from one to another.

Lately, some artists expect from *güncel sanat* to move one-step further than those discussions. For example, Ahmet Ögüt defines his understanding of *güncel sanat* as:

It has the potential to move one-step away from the trends of Modern Art and Avant-garde Art: It can move out of the artistic context and survive there. The demand for freedom should be understood beyond the remaining of modernism that is the desire for civilization and the complex of under-developing or national quests.⁴¹

With respect to this recent expectations from *güncel sanat*, according Kortun “the discussions should not take place among *güncel* art producers and the modernist circles as it was before, but it should have done among the ones in the *güncel sanat* field”.⁴² With these expectations in the 2000s, the title for artist groups as artist initiatives have began to emerge.

⁴¹ Gençay, Gökhan. “Ahmet Ögüt: Güncel sanatla karşı bir dil üretilebilir”, *Birgün*, April 21, 2008, Interviews, http://www.birgun.net/report_index.php?news_code=1208737887&year=2008&month=04&day=21

“Modern Sanat ve de Avangard Sanat akımlarının bir adım daha ötesine gitme şansı olması: Sanatsal bağlamın dışına çıkabilmesi, sanatsal bağlamın dışında da var olabilmesi (...) Özgürlük talebini, modernizmin kalıntısı olan uygarlaşma arzusu, geri kalmışlık kompleksi ya da ulusçu anlayışların ötesinde düşünmek gerekiyor”

⁴² Kortun, Vasıf. “Halil Altındere’nin Gerekliliği”, *Resmi Görüş*, No:0, 1999, via Vasıf Kortun blog,

<http://vasif-kortun-trk.blogspot.com/1999/10/halil-altnderenin-gereklilii.html>

“Tartışmanın, eskiden olduğu gibi, *güncel sanat* üreticileri ile modernist çevre türevleri arasında değil, *güncel* alanda faaliyet gösterenler arasında yapılmasının gerektiği ortada”.

In relation to that, these encounters of the art scene from 1990s in Istanbul and the reasons behind the formation of a different field, which needs to differentiate itself from the conventional message carried out for a long time, also paved the way for ‘the artist initiatives’ to emerge within this field. For example, it is not a surprise that one of those initiatives, Hafriyat group problematize modernization in similar ways as listed above, while talking about the common features of group members of Hafriyat:

Neriman Polat: We have a same stance towards the Turkish modernization project; we meet in a common ground on this subject.

Hakan Gürsoytrak: This is the critical stance of modernism towards modernity. We did not produce future references in this project rather we look at what we have.⁴³

In this chapter, in order to understand the social location of “being political” in relation to contemporary art in Istanbul, I have tried to trace the historical roots of the formation of artist initiatives. This chapter has also been an attempt to parallel these historical accounts with the institutional transformations in the Turkish art world. Also, I have illustrated the meanings associated with two distinctive translations of the word ‘contemporary’ for the contemporary art world in Turkey which these different translations determine both explicit and implicit positions of those actors in the field. In the following chapter, I will move further to elaborate around which keywords and symbols this notion of ‘being political’ is framed and I will try to demonstrate the themes which fall under this framing of political in the contemporary art field of Istanbul.

⁴³ Platform Garanti blog. “Açık Masada Hafriyat”, May 08, 2007 via: <http://platformgarantienglish.blogspot.com/2007/05/ak-masada-hafriyat.html>. Açık Masa meetings at Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, May 08, 2007, via video recording. “Neriman Polat: Türkiye’nin modernite projesine aynı yerlerden bakıyoruz, ortak bir zeminde buluşuyoruz. Hakan Gürsoytrak: Modernizmin moderniteye bakışı bu, eleştirel bir gözle. Bu proje içinde geleceğe dair önermeler üretmedik ne varsa ona bakıyoruz.”

CHAPTER TWO

‘NOT POLITICAL ENOUGH’

The categorization of ‘small scale’ artist groups as ‘artist initiatives’ in Istanbul, can not be divorced from the broader institutional changes which swept across the art field during the neo-liberal era. Bound with these changes, was a reframing of what it means to be ‘political’. In this chapter, my purpose will be to analyze this reframing process.

Below, I will begin with what have been referred to ‘core framing tasks’ (namely diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing) in the recent literature on social movements. Also relevant for my purposes here, are notions of discursive, strategic and contested framing processes. Through these concepts, I will analyze how different strategies of framing are employed in constructing a collective identity of ‘artist initiatives’. My main emphasis will be on how different framings of ‘the political’ enunciate both hierarchies and positions in the art field.

Charles Tilly defines a social movement as a kind of campaign that demands a righting of a wrong suffered by a well-specified population ranging from a single individual to all humans (1998, 467). He also argues that “social movements involve collective claims on authorities” and characteristics of social movements since the early nineteenth century included “creation of special-purpose associations, lobbying of officials, public meetings, demonstrations, marches, petitions, pamphlets, statements in mass media, posting or wearing of identifying signs, and deliberate adoption of distinctive slogans” (469-470).

‘Artists initiatives’ do not conform to the definition of social movements given by Tilly above, since they are loosely organized and do not have explicit or concrete claims on authorities. Nor do they claim to be a part of a political movement. However, they frame themselves as oppositional initiatives against the institutional transformations ushered by neo-liberalism and the Republican ideals of Modernity. They are also mobilized around issues of identity, engaging in protest activities, petition campaigns as well as being a part of transnational activist networks. So in

understanding their way of framing and engaging with ‘politics’, recent studies on ‘new’ social movements are relevant.

Approaches to ‘new’ social movements center on “struggles around questions of race, gender, environment, religion, and so on, which cannot be fully encompassed under the rubric of class struggle and which play out their demands on the terrains of the body, sexuality, language, etc., that is, those areas which are socially constituted as comprising the "private" sphere” (Flores and Yudice, 1990, 58). Yet, as Flores and Yudice reminds us that employing the perspective of new social movements

is not to say that the inequalities (and causes rooted in relations of production) referred to by class analysis have disappeared. On the contrary, from the perspective we adopt such inequalities (and their causes) can be seen to multiply into all spheres of life. Capitalist society does not cause racism any more than it does linguistic stratification; it does, however, make all these differences functional for the benefit of hegemonic groups. (58)

Keeping this reservation in mind, the emphasis of the ‘new’ social movement literature on cultural framing and meaning construction (Benford and Snow, 2000, 614) can be very useful in trying to understand the interpretations of ‘being political’ which motivate and mobilize artists and cultural producers. As Benford and Snow (2000, 614) point out:

...movement organizations-as well as other organizations-must keep a distinguishable identity; that is they have to “exclude” others. There are, therefore, also processes of what we can define as frame alignment that is processes that involve boundary framing or “attempts to situate one’s own organization in time and space in relation to other groups” (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994, 193-194). From this “interactive” character of frames the need follows to study contemporaneously the evolution of the frames of the different actors who intervene on the topic of protest and policing (della Porta, 1999, 69).

The ‘frame alignment’ processes as defined by Benford and Snow above are very important for understanding the collective identity of ‘artist initiatives’

2.1 Framing ‘Political’

Goffman defines “frame” as “a schema of interpretation” where each framework “allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of

concrete occurrences defined in its terms” (1974, 21). “As a particular case of the ‘labeling’ effect”, Bourdieu describes the hierarchy of legitimate arts and genres, that “people see a face differently depending on the ethnic label given, so the value of the arts, genres, works and authors depend on the social marks attached to them at any given moment” (1986, 86). This period in the history of the contemporary art scene, specific identification of “being political”, apart from what it invokes or calls for action, is on the agenda and exists as a legitimate genre. In that sense, the concept of political is “the social mark” attached to the artistic works, artists, and genres differentiating themselves by being “independent”, “alternative”, “resisting” actors.

Frame analysis of social movements builds upon Goffman’s definition of “frame” where frame “organizes more than meaning, it also organizes involvement” (1974, 345). Borrowing from Goffman’s frame perspective, Snow and associates articulates an analysis of social movement organizations’ (SMO) participation and denotes the concept of frame alignment that is “the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary” (1986,464). Similar to those SMOs described by those scholars, artists who have similar ways of problematizing several issues around their framings of ‘being political’ “organize involvements” as artist initiatives or as some may call it “civil formations” (Çalikoğlu, 2007,15). Those artist initiatives are not necessarily group organizations or collectives. For example BAS is “initiated” by artist Banu Cennetoğlu, Apartment Project is initiated by artist Selda Asal. Whether organized by a number of artists or a single artist, the formation of those groups engage in a framing process of collective action which is similar to SMOs as part of a “movement of movements” (della Porta, 2005, 178).⁴⁴

According to Hunt et al., collective action frames “focus attention on a particular situation considered problematic, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, and articulate an alternative set of arrangements including what the movement actors need to do in order to affect the desired change” (1994,190). On this conceptualization of framing processes, Snow and Benford define three core framing tasks for problematizing a situation, attributing who or what to blame and articulating alternative arrangements. Those core framing tasks are “diagnostic framing” which refers to

⁴⁴ della Porta (2005) employs this notion of “movement of movements” borrowing from the newspaper statement of general secretary of neocommunist party in Italy in order to stress the flexible organizational formats (178) and the complex nature (180).

problem identification and attributions; “prognostic framing” that is the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem and “motivational framing” which denotes to rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action (1994, 615-617).

Based on the historical account discussed s given in the first chapter of this thesis, the main problematic of the contemporary art field as “identified” by these groups can be briefly listed as: The modernity paradigm; the era of neoliberalism, the repercussions of neoliberal set of policies leading to privatization of culture and the concomitant rise of large scale cultural centers, and art institutions. These problematic could be designated as the “diagnostics” of framing ‘the political’ in contemporary art field in Istanbul.

Prognostic solutions to these concerns can be illustrated by Ahmet Öğüt’s argument that contemporary art has the potential to move one step further from the discussions of modern art and avant-garde art;⁴⁵ Kamil Şenol’s call for attention to the failure to incorporate class struggle in the ‘politics’ of contemporary art field (2006, 41-46); or the emphasis Erden Kosova and Süreyya Evren put on the possibilities of art as a language for the young activists (2006, 1-20). This listing points to the collective strategies of artist.

“Motivational framings” of those actors are concentrated around particular themes, which are similar with what has been studied as “new social movements” in Turkey (Şimşek, 2004).⁴⁶ Issues of Kurdish identity, Armenian identity, gender, religion, modernity, everyday life, environmental issues and the problematic of urban are particularly attracted “ameliorative” action in artistic terms from these artist initiatives and actors.

Institutional changes in contemporary art scene of Istanbul are “diagnosed” as one of the problematic in the field and emerging “independent artist initiatives” appear to be “proposed solutions” to these diagnostics. Sharon, by looking at “artist managed galleries in San Francisco and Santa Cruz” argues that “those alternative galleries emerge and organized in response to particular constraints of the present gallery-museum system” (1979, 3) which is similar with the case of Istanbul contemporary art scene characterized as “established, clumsy institutions that are not able to move, react,

⁴⁵ Gençay, Gökhan. “Ahmet Öğüt: Güncel sanatla karşı bir dil üretilebilir”, *Birgün*.

⁴⁶ Şimşek (2004) provides a brief theoretical account “new social movements” and a compartmentalized analysis of “new social movements” through what Şimşek names as “Islamism, Feminism, Alevism and Kurdism”.

or catch the “knowledge production” in contemporary art; also, not able to understand and present other forms of process-based art projects” (Tan, 2007, 41). It is said that because of this kind of institutional trend, it invoked discomfort in the contemporary art field. As Erden Kosova describes:

It is evident that the ongoing trend toward the institutionalization of current art practices in Turkey has become a source of serious concern in Turkey. The synergic productivity which was generated before the period of institutionalization has been seriously blocked by the proliferation of new institutions which claim to provide infrastructure (Kosova and Evren, 2006).⁴⁷

Kosova articulates the “institutional trend” as a matter of concern and he formulates his proposed solution as the need of “independent art or culture centers, collaborations among differentiating individual projects”.⁴⁸

Next to those “clumsy” institutions, neoliberalism is also widely criticized in contemporary art works and discussions. In an interview with the group Xurban, they problematize the policies of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher in the late 70s and at the beginning of 80s. Xurban group articulates on their objectives as a group:

Our aim here is not to produce a new criticism of institutionalization, but (to emphasize) that all the products generated and offered by intellectual production are in a similar dead end, which is the neo-liberal system itself (Delier, 2006, 93).⁴⁹

Deriving from the problematic of institutions and neoliberalism, actors and initiatives claim that they are alternative to big scale, “clumsy and established” institutions that are galleries, museums or culture centers.⁵⁰ Even artist Halil Altındere, as an artist, is described with his “stance as opposed to galleries, museums and the ossification of modernism having hegemonic power”.⁵¹

⁴⁷ “Türkiye özelinde güncel sanat pratiğinin bugün izlediği kurumsallaşma eğrisinin pek çok kişide ciddi bir rahatsızlığa yol açtığı aşikar. Kurumsallığın olmadığı dönemde oluşan sinerjik üretim verimliliği, altyapı sunduğu iddia edilen yeni kurumların çeşitlendiği bir ortamda endişe verici bir şekilde tıkanmış durumda”

⁴⁸ “Bağımsız sanat ya da kültür mekânlarının açılması gerekliliğini yeniden dillendirebiliriz burada; kendini ayırıştıran, kopuşmaya açan tekil projeler arasındaki ittifakların gerekliliğini...”

⁴⁹ “Buradaki amacımız yeni bir kurum eleştirisi üretmek değil kuşkusuz, ancak entelektüel üretimin gerçekleştirdiği ve sunduğu tüm yapıtlar benzer bir çıkmazın içerisinde, bu da neo-liberal düzenin ta kendisi”

⁵⁰ e.g. İstanbul Modern Museum, Pera Museum, Aksanat, various galleries.

⁵¹ *Birgün*. 2006. Halil Altındere’ye baba aranıyor, July 23.

Several years later, on framing perspectives, scholars Snow and Benford, by reviewing the literature on frame development and frame innovation, come up with three overlapping processes that “frames are developed, generated, and elaborated not only via attending the core framing tasks but also by way of ...discursive, strategic, and contested” processes (2000,623). For an analysis of artist initiatives in Istanbul and their framing of ‘political’, these overlapping processes of framing provide useful analytical tools in addition to the previously discussed “core framing tasks”.

“Discursive processes refer to the talk and conversations-the speech acts-and written communications of movement members that occur primarily in the context of, or in relation to, movement activities” (623). As part of the methodology of this study, the examination of newspaper articles and interviews, blog pages, e-mails through the initiatives’ emailing group⁵², participant observations in talks and meetings is helpful in order to understand the discursive process that framing ‘political’ is generated and developed.

Strategic processes “are deliberate, utilitarian, and goal directed: Frames are developed and deployed to achieve a specific purpose-to recruit new members, to mobilize adherents” (624). Moreover, since the movement framing as a process of contestation, there are the contested processes where “a variety of challenges confronting all those who engage in movement framing activities” (625). Contestation and confrontation occurs in every stage of framing processes of political. In every stage of meaning construction, actors in the contemporary art field confront and contest not only with the non-members of this field, as it was mostly the case with the modernity and ‘çağdaş’-‘güncel’ debates. Those actors also confront with each other, within the networks and among members of contemporary art field.

Through these framing tasks and framing processes, the issue of ‘being political’ is formulated and framed in contemporary art field in Istanbul around the concepts of independence, resistance, and opposition In the following part I will try to categorize the meaning of ‘political’ in contemporary art scene of Istanbul in general departing from additional “framing processes” and later on I will focus on the significance of this framing perspective of ‘political’ particularly for artist initiatives.

“Galerilere, müzelere karşı oluşuyla, hegemonik güce sahip olan modernizmin kemikleşmesine karşı”.

⁵² <http://groups.google.com/group/inisiyatifler/topics>

2.2 'The Political' for Contemporary Art Scene of Istanbul

There are numerous usages of “political” as a characterization of an artist, a group, a work of art, an exhibition or a personality. Ayşegül Sönmez, refers to the latest exhibition by Vahit Tuna in Hafriyat Karaköy, as political and ironic⁵³: “He is on the scene in well shape, with extremely political and ironic exhibition”. Serdar Akinan, names his video in the “All About Lies” Exhibition in Apartment Project, as “Politics (multi-faceted) = LIE”.⁵⁴

The contemporary art per se is also characterized with somehow inheriting a form of being political by definition. Erden Kosova, while writing on the 1990s, characterizes the practice of contemporary art as follows:

I remember how in the mid-90s, a group of artists in their twenties felt suffocated by the violence and lack of tolerance internalized by wide masses, and gave very strong reactions. For these artists, current art practices offered a new space, one that allowed for a new kind of politics, beyond the limits set by an exhausted Left.⁵⁵ (Kosova and Kortun, 2007)

He also argues and at the same time criticizes that, with the recognition of artists in that generation in the international arena; the number of collective works and explicit references to political field has decreased.⁵⁶

Ahmet Öğüt, in interview, answers the question of “how you render the fact that most of the Biennial audience is limited to an elite segment”⁵⁷ as such:

⁵³ Sönmez, Ayşegül. “Efsane geri döndü”, *Radikal*, May 1, 2008, Culture/Art, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=254489&tarikh=01/05/2008>

“Gayet formda, gayet politik ve ironic bir sergiyle karşımızda”. Vahit Tuna answer the question on the choice of the exhibition venue that it was because of Hafriyat Karaköy being a civil place”.

⁵⁴ Apartment Project All About Lies Exhibiton Catalogue, Istanbul, 2006.

⁵⁵ “90lı yılların ortasından itibaren yirmili yaşlarına girmiş ve kültürel bir dışavurum gereksinimi hisseden bir küme sanatçının, içinde nefes al(ama)dıkları iyice bunaltıcı hale gelmiş ve geniş kitlelerce içselleştirilmiş şiddet ve hoşgörüsüzülük ortamına sert yanıtlar verdiklerini hatırlıyorum. Güncel sanat pratiği geleneksel solun yorgunluğunu taşıyan diğer disiplinlerin dışına çıkan, yeniden tanımlanmış bir siyasallığa izin veren taze bir alan olarak belirmişti bu sanatçıların önünde.”

⁵⁶ “Ne var ki, 90lı yılların sonunda Türkiye’deki siyasal ortamın birden normalizasyon sürecine girmesi ve bahsettiğimiz genç kümenin yurtdışında tanınırlık kazanması ile birlikte, müştereklik zayıflamaya, siyasal ortama yapılan doğrudan göndermeler silinmeye başladı.”

⁵⁷ “Çoğunlukla Bienallerin seyircisinin elit kesimle sınırlı kalmasını nasıl yorumluyorsunuz? AÖ: Güncel sanatın hareket alanı şimdilik bir muamma gibi, herkese ulaşamıyor, hatta bazen bir üst dil kullanıyor gibi gözükebilir, ama şu çok açık, sanatın

The range of movement of contemporary art field nowadays seems like a mystery. Not everyone can reach it and even it seems that a metalanguage is being used. However, it is for sure that we have a chance to politicize art and to create new spaces of freedom. The language of contemporary art is available for that. This is a process and a process, which will go beyond its own community.⁵⁸

Beral Madra's definition of contemporary art practice is related to cultural resistance that is "contemporary art practice is the location of [this] cultural resistance and it needs genuine reciprocal communication rather than one-sided interest" (Madra, 2008a, 108).

The perspective of framing contemporary art field and the practices with this form of being 'political' is associated with resistance, opposition or being protest. Those are the common keywords when implicitly or explicitly attributing a work, an act or a person a meaning with "political" connotation. Being political associated with resistance is also exemplified with a project that is supported by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality parallel to 10th Istanbul Biennial that is "Designed to Resist! Patterns Istanbul" by Bernardo Giorgi and Cinzia Cozzi.⁵⁹

One of the members of *former* artist initiative K2 in İzmir formulates the "resistance" on artist initiatives being "political" *by nature*.

Since these kinds of initiatives are essentially shaped by some kind of resistance, the actors who initiate them by nature carry on a political stance. They are important since they provide new alternatives to authorities and hierarchies provide a ground for such alternatives.⁶⁰

siyasallaştırılması ve yeni özgürlük alanları yaratabilmek gibi bir şansımız var. Güncel sanatın dili buna bir hayli müsait. Bu bir süreç ve zamanla kendi cemaatinin ötesine geçecek bir süreç"

⁵⁸ Arslan, Müjde. "Sanatın Dönüm Noktası Göçerlik", *Evrensel*, September 5, 2008, Culture,

<http://www.evrensel.net/05/09/28/kultur.html>

"Güncel sanatın hareket alanı şimdilik bir muamma gibi, herkese ulaşmıyor, hatta bazen bir üst dil kullanıyor gibi gözükebilir, ama şu çok açık, sanatın siyasallaştırılması ve yeni özgürlük alanları yaratabilmek gibi bir şansımız var. Güncel sanatın dili buna bir hayli müsait. Bu bir süreç ve zamanla kendi cemaatinin ötesine geçecek bir süreç."

⁵⁹ From the project's postcard flyer.

⁶⁰ Deniz, Elmas. "Küçük toplulukların alternatif alan açma denemesi olarak K2", blog, April 8, 2007,

<http://elmasdeniz.blogspot.com/2007/04/kucuk-topluluklarn-alternatif-alan-ama.html>

"Bu tür girişimler temelde bir Bu tür girişimler temelde bir tür direnme ve direnç gösterme üzerinden şekillendiği için inisiyatif alan kişiler başlattıkları oluşumun doğası gereği politik bir duruşu da taşıyorlar. Otoriteye, hiyerarşilere karşı ya da alışıldık

Contextualization of resistance in contemporary art field occurs around the existence of artist initiatives as ‘resisting actors’. An article displaying efforts to “draw a map of contemporary art practice in Istanbul today”⁶¹ names a chapter as “Individual Areas/Territories and Resisting Mechanism” in which the so called resisting mechanisms refers to artist initiatives. In the same piece, writer also posits a question to Pelin Tan⁶² that is if there “is any relation between the concepts of “resistance” and “autonomy” and the artist initiations being opened in Istanbul recently”. According to Tan, the practices of those initiations are simply forms of resistance and autonomy although the starting point of them is not directly related to this discussion. (41)

Next to resistance, for the actors and their works in the field, being opponent or opposition is also widely used, in another Ahmet Ögüt interview, Gökhan Gençay, the interviewer defines this interview as “focusing on the wide range of values of oppositional artistic energy”.⁶³

Halil Altındere, in a very famous and for some others infamous interview of his with Ahmet Tulgar for *Birgün* newspaper, Tulgar characterizes the works of Altındere as follows:

Now the authoritarian, mythological and commercial art has replaced with democratic, dynamic, art practice that puts forth the dynamism in the class struggle rather than freezing the power and the moment. In addition, the young artists who are not shaped by the hands of power and who disrespect money, peel off the myths of life, make fun on the hegemonic classes and disfunction the power structures.⁶⁴

formatlar yanına yenilerini koymaları buna ortam hazırlamaları, faaliyet alanına göre değişiklik göstermekle birlikte önemliler”.

⁶¹ Yıldız, Adnan. “Macro Micro Focus İstanbul: Institutions and Individuals”, *Res, Art World, World Art*, September 2007, 40-47.

⁶²The topic of artist initiatives is one of Tan’s research interests; she has several works and she has organized several talks on this topic as well.

⁶³ Gençay, Gökhan. “Güncel Sanatla Karşı Bir Dil Üretilbilir”, *Birgün*, April 21, 2008. “Muhafif sanatsal enerjinin değer yelpazesine yoğunlaşan bir söyleşi”

⁶⁴ *Birgün*.. 2006. “Ben plastik sanatların piçiyim”, July 18.

http://www.birgun.net/report_index.php?news_code=1153240246&year=2006&month=07&day=18

“Artık otoriteryan, mitolojik ve ticari resmin yerine; demokratik, dinamik, iktidarı ve anı dondurup sağlamlaştırmak yerine sınıf mücadelelerindeki dinamizmi ortaya koyan bir sanat üretimi geçti. Ve iktidarın tezgâhında forme olmamış, parayı (şimdilik) elinin kiri sayan genç sanatçılar, sanat üreticileri, estetik olduğu kadar politik de olan ürünleriyle hayatı mitlerinden sıyrıyor, iktidarların çarkına çomak sokuyor, egemen sınıfların statü iddiasıyla dalga geçiyor”

In the same interview, Altındere defines his and his friends' understanding of art as "the art me and my friends are interested in is an artistic understanding that is directly fed from the everyday life and politics as well as the irony of it in the everyday life"⁶⁵ and he adds that the most critical respond to his exhibitions is that those exhibitions too much political and do not include metaphorical images. For the question of "can we regard your works and exhibitions as political acts"⁶⁶, Altındere gives the answer as following:

I too perceive my works as "humor" and as works of containing protest notions when I see them on paper. However when I enlarge them for exhibitions, I realize that those works' power of provocation and subversion is supreme. They make an effect of political activism. Thus sometimes when I see them in the exhibition I feel frightened. It also happened in our latest exhibition. The exhibition catalogues are collected by the police forces. So many books have been collected in this country but an exhibition catalogue is collected for the first time.⁶⁷

Altındere is regarded as an opponent figure (muhalif) and also he is characterized as 'political'. In another interview for *Birgün* newspaper, Gökhan Gençay defines the exhibition "Gerçekçi Ol İmkansız İste"⁶⁸ in *Karşı Sanat* curated by Altındere as "with dynamic and oppositional works, it constitutes the focus of this liveliness"⁶⁹. He also claims that this exhibition, providing optimism over the radical oppositional potential of contemporary art, serves with a cheerful "protest synergy".⁷⁰

⁶⁵ "Ben ve arkadaşlarımla ilgilendiği sanat direkt gündelik hayattan ve gündelik hayattaki politika ve bunun ironisinden beslenen bir sanat anlayışı"

⁶⁶ "Sizin yapıtlarınızı ve sergilerinizi politik eylemler olarak görebilir miyiz?"

⁶⁷ Ben de yaptığım işleri kağıt üzerinde gördüğümde "humor" ve protest içeren şeyler olarak algılıyorum. Ama bunları sergi için büyüttüğümde hem tahrik hem de tahrip gücünün çok yüksek olduğunu fark ediyorum. Bu haliyle politik eylem gibi bir etki yapıyorlar. Ben de ürkü-yorum bazen sergiyi gezerken. Son sergimizde de oldu bu. Sergimizin katalogu toplatıldı kolluk kuvvetlerince. Çok kitap toplatıldı bu ülkede ama sergi katalogu ilk kez toplatıldı"

⁶⁸ A very famous quote from Che Guevara that is 'Be Realistic Demand Impossible'. www.karsi.com/sergi/gercekci_ol/halil_gercekci.doc

⁶⁹ "Dinamik ve muhalif işlerden mürekkep yapısıyla bu hareketliliğin ilgiyi en çok üzerine yoğunlaştıran odağını teşkil ediyor"

⁷⁰ Gençay, Gökhan. "Halil Altındere: Sanat Hiçbir Zaman Özgür Olmadı", *Birgün*, April 11, 2007, Culture.

"Gerçekçi ol, imkansız talep et" sergisi , güncel sanatın radikal muhalefet potansiyeli üzerine iyimser düşünmemizi sağlayacak düzeyde yaratıcı ve yer yer yırtıcı işleri, bu

In this specific set of frameworks, in order to identify a particular understanding of ‘political’, some meanings and themes are associated to the concept. The answers on the quest for particular significance of this form of being political in order to understand these associations and their functions, point out three critical functions of framing political as the way contemporary artists do as social movement actors. That are a) defining a collective identity, b) determining the networks within the contemporary art field in Istanbul and among artist initiatives as well as with the transnational circles, c) mobilizing actors in the contemporary art field in Turkey around this notion of political and for the claims this framing of political necessitates. In the following part, I will try to analyze the formation of a collective identity as “artist initiatives” which is also valid not only for those artist groups, but for the actors in the same field as well. In addition to the collective identity of those groups, I will try to put forth how this framing of ‘political’ determines the hierarchies and signifies the positions of the actors. The specific issues which these groups mobilize and the opportunities provided for these mobilization strategies, as well as the framing of those opportunities will be analyzed in the third and the last chapter.

2.2.1. Collective identity

Framing processes of this “legitimate genre” of political, construct and contest a collective identity of artist initiatives in the contemporary art map of Istanbul where “social movement organizations-as well as other organizations-must keep a distinguishable identity; that is they have to “exclude” others” (della Porta, 1999,69).

From the first years of the republic to 1950s, artist collectives, groups, *cemiyet*, *birlik* had been organized around occupational and professional (*mesleki*) goals and principles. Most of the groups, who had positioned themselves vis-à-vis the society and the state, can be regarded as another model of desire for Western style artistic production (Çalikoğlu, 2007, 8). Despite their desire, they were far away from having avant-garde tendencies like their Western counterpart of that period. This is mostly because state as being only introducer of new trends and funding to the art field.⁷¹ The

işlerin kendi aralarında paslaşmalarından doğan neşeli bir muhalefet sinerjisiyle sunuyor.

⁷¹ For more information on these groups see Sezer Tansuğ, *Çağdaş Türk Sanatı*, 1993.

multiparty period of 1950s in Turkey can be read as an attempt to democratization and liberalization. From that period and on, industrialization, the growing service sector, the changes in the orientation of state policies and the transformations within the society and at the same time state's withdrawal of support from art and culture lead to changes in the organization model of artists and their goals they have organized around (Erbaş, 2005, 31-35).⁷²

In the early 2000s, contemporary art field, which has been interested in “the intersections of art, sociology and the social”, began to discuss collectivity, coexistence and new organizational forms for artist groups. An idea of ‘artist initiatives’ has entered the field with the talks of guest speakers from Europe⁷³ and with the visits of several artist initiatives from European cities.⁷⁴ In this period when the term “artist initiatives” wasn't encountering this much popularity and media coverage as today, Garanti Platform Contemporary Art Center appears as a prominent institution on these “mediums of alternative knowledge production”.⁷⁵

With the introduction of the European model of “artist initiatives” in 2004, along with the institutional transformation discussed in the first chapter, artist groups and individual artists have begun to use the term “artist initiatives” for their localities in Istanbul. Halil Altındere describes the atmosphere that paves the way for the emergences of “independent formations” as follows:

It is hard to talk about a generation who makes money from painting as in the 80s. They mostly earn money from graphic design or from a secondary job. Up until the second half of 90s, there was a war of existing in the market. Since the second half of the 90s, different from all previous periods, the students form the Fine Arts departments of universities reject the aesthetic and political values of both market and the academy. They produce works they transform from the outside with their own visual language. At the

⁷² For a historical account of those organizations beginning with 19th century, see Erbaş (2005).

⁷³ For example Gordon-Nesbitt's talk in Garanti Platform Contemporary Art Center on artist initiatives in Paris and Glasgow (18 March 2004)

<http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/262165.asp>

⁷⁴ For example the visit of Berlin centered “artist initiative” Sparwasser HQ in Garanti Platform Contemporary Art Center (11 March 2004-17 April 2004)

<http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/260659.asp?cp1=1>

⁷⁵ Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center is directed by Vasıf Kortun and said to be the institutional support behind those artist initiatives in Istanbul. In the interview with Kortun, he also bears the circulation of naming those groups as “artist initiatives”. “Biraz biz fişıkladık, benim hatam, neden yok neden yok derken, bunlarda olsun istedik, 3 yıl önce hegemonyaydık, herşey bizim üzerimizden geçerdi, insiyatif insiyatif diyorduk”. Interview, with the author, 5.12.2007.

end of 90s, they won some sort of a war in this context. In the midst of all this, we witness a very different independent formations which do not have any relationship with approximately 200 galleries that we talked about; they hardly get in touch with banking institutions because of the difference of the visual language and the political discourse and they do not have an exchange relationship with private galleries or any form of institutionalization.⁷⁶

According to Altındere, the collective spirit of the 90s left its place to more individual searches in the 2000s. The major events of 2000s which are crucial for *güncel sanat* are the opening up Proje 4L Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum which is said to be Turkey's first contemporary art (*güncel sanat*) museum founded in 2000 under the administration of Vasıf Kortun. The opening of contemporary art centers, which are Osmanlı Bank, Platform Contemporary Art Centre (now the Garanti Platform Contemporary art centre), Aksanat, Borusan and Siemens with private capital investment, also corresponds this period. Last but seems to be not the least, “the opening of Sabancı Museum (in 2002), Istanbul Modern (in 2004), and finally Santral Istanbul (in 2007) reveal that contemporary art will now follow a different course. Parallel to this rapid institutionalization, artist initiatives and artist-controlled spaces formed on a local scale and independent from capital, reveal that contemporary art can survive without large financial resources”(Altındere, 2008,8 - 9).

The name artist initiatives have actualized in early 2000s. Some of those groups have already been in this field but the official recognition of term “artist initiatives” for such an organizational model occurred in two consequent meetings in 2006. The first meeting was hosted by Altı Aylık and the second one is organized and hosted by PIST.

⁷⁶ Halil Altındere, interview with the author, 07.11.2007. “80lerde olduğu gibi resim yaparak para kazanan bir jenerasyondan bahsetmek zor, daha çok grafik tasarım yaparak, ikinci bir iş yaparak sanatçı kimlikleri sürdürüyorlar. 90ların ikinci yarısına kadar bir şekilde pazar içinde kendini var etme savaşı. 90ların ikinci yarısından itibaren de daha önceki hiç bir dönemde olmadığı kadar üniversitelerin güzel sanatlar fakültelerinde okuyan öğrenciler hem piyasanın hem de akademinin verdiği bütün değerleri, estetik değerleri, politik değerleri, kendi görsel dilini oluşturdukları ve kendi dışardan geliştirip dönüştürdüğü yapıtlar üretiyorlar. 90ların sonunda bir şekilde bu savaşımın kazanımını elde ediyorlar ve tam da bu sırada bu bahsettiğimiz 200e yakın galeri varsa, bu galerinin hiç biriyle ilişkisi olmayan banka kurumlarıyla zor ilişki içerisine giren çünkü hem görsel dil hem de politik söylemi farklı olduğu için ne kurumsallaşmaya ne de özel galeriyle flört etmeye gidecek/yetecek bir şeyleri yok alışverişleri, tam da bu dönemde bir çok farklı bağımsız oluşumun ortaya çıktığı görüyoruz.”

Altı Aylık, in relation to the closing down of its locality of the artist initiative, manifests the meeting as follows:

There is a need for collective effort and exerting pressure on official cultural politics. Our intention in initiating a discussion at Altı Aylık is to seek solutions to practical problems and to exchange ideas on what kind of a collective strategy can be adapted within a framework of mutual awareness, an independent space for sharing and creating a platform.⁷⁷

In the second meeting held in PIST, with the title of “Artists initiatives and the independent / alternative the artist run spaces”, the agenda was built upon the questions such as “what is an independent / alternative space; how can the relations be established between municipalities and state institutions; to become a foundation and become institutionalized, is it impossible not to happen” and a few similar others in addition.⁷⁸

Since the appearance of the artist initiatives and media’s interest in them, there have been various attempts to conceptualize and characterize those groups. Nearly all of those conceptualizations have consensus over independence, autonomy, resistance, being alternative as common features of artist initiatives. In time, this consensus defines the necessities, boundaries of being an “independent artist run alternative civil initiative”. İnce posits that:

Initiatives, in a manner of awareness as expected from their names, have began to meet in order to know about each other, to enlarge their sphere of influence and to share their experiences (...). In international literatures, these formations are regarded as artist-run spaces (in a very sterile manner) which signify the places run by artists (maybe managed by artists). On the other hand the word initiative is mostly used in the third world countries. That is because the dictionary meaning of this word is ‘the power of shaping and directing the life-the ability to move with one’s own decisions’ and it also means ‘freedom/independence’. This choice of word for defining these new art formations seems pretty appropriate because of its activist content (İnce, 2006, 41).⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Altı Aylık, blog,

<http://altiyaylik.blogspot.com/2006/05/tartmaalternatif-sanat-mekanlarinn.html>

⁷⁸ PIST, blog,

<http://pist-org.blogspot.com/search/label/Artists%27%20Initiatives%20Meeting>

⁷⁹ “İnisiyatifler, adlarından beklenir bir bilinçlik içerisinde bir araya gelip, birbirlerini tanımaya, etki alanlarını genişletip, tecrübelerini paylaşmak üzere buluşmaya başladılar (...) Uluslararası literatürde bu oluşumlar en genel (suya sabuna dokunmayan) kullanımla artist-run spaces, yani sanatçılar tarafından yürütülen (belki de işletilen) mekanlar olarak anılıyor. Ancak inisiyatif kelimesi (ki onu bile yanlış yazıyoruz) daha çok üçüncü dünya ülkelerinde kullanılıyor. Çünkü kelimenin sözlük anlamı ‘yaşamı yönlendiren, şekil veren güç-kendi kararı ile hareket edebilme yeteneği’ olmasının yanı sıra ‘özgürlük/bağımsızlık’ demek. yeni sanat oluşumlarını tanımlamak için bu aktivist içeriğiyle kelime “yerinde” bir seçim gibi duruyor”

Yardımcı, with same derivations, regards artist initiatives promising since “they promise a new variety of media, intentions and commitments; a new sense of ‘modesty’ and a much more welcoming attitude than mainstream cultural institutions” (Yardımcı, 2007). Beral Madra⁸⁰ refers these recently “emerging groups” as a solution to coping with limited resources of local art scene “thus the artists who could not take part in the international exhibitions, could not become part of global circulation continue to produce work” (Madra, 2008a). She defines those groups as flexible, nomadic, free flowing, using streets as exhibition spaces.

The name “independent artist initiatives” has been questioned, transformed, evolved with the meanings it carried. The most concrete example of this transformation of naming those groups is “the LIST Contemporary Art Field map” and the list of events for the month, prepared by PIST. The title of the part where those groups of artist initiatives are listed is printed as “independent artist-run spaces” (bağımsız sanatçı inisiyatifleri) in the first and second issues; although the English name stays the same in the third and fourth issues as “independent artist-run spaces”, Turkish translation appears as “bağımsız sanat mekanları”⁸¹.

Most of the media coverage on artist initiatives refers to the characteristics of those groups as having an independent and alternative structure. Even the actors in this field can be characterized as alternative or independent as individuals.

Collective identity of those artist initiatives as political, independent, alternative is perpetuated by a series of events and meetings on those formations. While referring to a series of meetings called “Kültür-Sanatta Yönelimler, Girişimler, Politikalar ve Sözler” (“Trends, Initiatives and Policies in Culture-Art”) under the title of “Perspectives”, the participants PIST, Hafriyat, BAS are referred as “independent initiatives”⁸². Suma Çağdaş Sanat Merkezi, which is founded by Beral Madra is described as:

The mission of the place [Suma Çağdaş Art Center] is to provide an alternative to monopolies and limitations in the field of contemporary (çağdaş) art. The concept of ‘independence’ which Madra underlines

⁸⁰ It is important to mention a new place founded by Madra that is BM Suma Contemporary Art Center which is described as “a new independent platform and space for contemporary art” curated by Beral Madra; with the collaboration of Avrupa Kultur Derneği, Nuova Icona, Gelecek Kültürü ve Sanatı Vakfı.

⁸¹ <http://www.istanbulartlist.net/>

⁸² <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=238865&tarih=15/11/2007>

persistently is valid for the organization of the center as well as for the mission.⁸³

Artist initiatives are regarded as independent from binding sponsorship agreements or big amounts of funding with limitations on works or market relations; thus they are differentiated from “huge galleries” as being independent. An independent structure is described as “...nothing like the huge galleries, it is [was] without a sponsor...”⁸⁴ Autonomy is also associated with the non profit feature of an artist.⁸⁵

Independence is also discussed as a distancing from the state. Although a question of independency from state is a contradictory topic where the lack of state support and funding is a complaint shared with many actors, becoming a civil initiative is staying away not only from the state and capital but the art field as well.⁸⁶

Independence can also be criticized by the artists who appropriate the strategies of “providing the alternative for what we complain about and to what bothers us” as such:

We cannot ignore the necessities of the everyday life when we take the existence of artist in the culture industries and biennials into account. We have to admit that even producing the most radical words without attributing cleanness outside the system, we have ties to the system. In the system of sponsorship this is an inevitable reality. In fact art has never been free! Artists have never been independent in any period of history; all of the trends are developed around the hegemonic classes.⁸⁷

⁸³ Atmaca, Efnan. ““Sanatın kurtuluş yolu sivil alan yaratmak””, *Radikal*, September 04, 2007, Culture/Art,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=231882&tarikh=04/09/2007>

“Mekanın [Suma Çağdaş Sanat Merkezi] amacı Türkiye'nin çağdaş sanat alanındaki tekelleşmeye ve sınırlamalara bir alternatif yaratmak. Madra'nın ısrarla altını çizdiği 'bağımsız' olma kavramı mekânın misyonu kadar iç yapısı için de geçerli.”

⁸⁴ Gaye Boralıoğlu describing the “All About Lies” exhibition in Apartment Project, interview with the artist, Exhibition catalogue, 2006.

⁸⁵ Gençay, Gökhan. “Ahmet Ögüt: Güncel sanatla karşı bir dil üretilebilir”, *Birgün*.

“Bir sanatçı sanat sistemi tarafından içkinleştirilmiş-meye başlasa dahi, bir yandan da kar amacı gütmeyen otonom yanını muhafaza etmek zorundadır.”

⁸⁶ Kosova, Erden, Kortun, Vasıf. “Ofsayt Ama Gol”, blog..

“Buna koşut olarak sanatçılar sadece devletten ve kapitalden uzak durmakla değil, varolan sanat ortamından da uzaklaşarak sivilleşmekteydiler”.

⁸⁷ Gökhan Gençay, “Halil Altındere: Sanat Hiçbir Zaman Özgür Olmadı”, *Birgün*.

“Kültür endüstrisinin ve bienallerin içinde sanatçının kendini varetmesini ve dolaşımını gözönüne aldığımızda gündelik hayatın gerçekliklerini de görmezden gelemeyiz. Kendimize sistemin dışında bir temizlik atfetmeden en radikal işleri yaparken bile sistemle bir bağımız olduğunu kabul etmeliyiz. Sponsorluk sistemi içinde bu kaçınılmaz bir gerçektir. Zaten sanat hiçbir zaman özgür olmadı ki! Tarihin hiçbir döneminde sanatçılar bağımsız olmadı, bütün akımlar egemen olan sınıfın etrafında kümелendi ve gelişti”.

2.2.2. Hierarchies and positions

The label of ‘being political’ in the contemporary art scene does not only determines and posit a collective group identity. The particular “label” or “social mark” of someone or something as political and the associations within it, determine the networks and the hierarchical structure within these networks as well as the positions of the actors in this contemporary art scene of Istanbul. The higher the rank of the actor in this hierarchical structure, the more he or she has claims over the definition of political. The higher ranks in Istanbul art scene are the gatekeepers of local and transnational art circles such as writers, curators, critiques and some others.

In contemporary art field, especially for the ones who have a critical stance and political agenda, the aesthetic decisions “cannot be based on established criteria” which is different from figurative art (Greenfeld, 1988, 903). As contrast to this traditional field of figurative art where “individual judgment prevails in “gate keeping” choices”, for the contemporary art field, “such decisions are sought after in the “social reality” of the inner circle of avant-garde” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, since gatekeepers in contemporary art of Istanbul cannot formulate their aesthetic decisions on their individual choices or on a predefined accepted criterion as Greenfeld argues, they establish their own criteria of “social reality” which is framed as “the political”. Thus, the artists and artist groups who problematize the social reality with avant-garde tendencies become the political artist or independent, resisting artist organizations through the definitions set by those powerful gatekeepers.

There are several examples of those gatekeepers, prominent actors defining a political work or a political artist. Erden Kosova discusses the role of activism and artistic practice in Turkey:

When I talked about the role of being political in the practice of contemporary art in Turkey, Suzana Milevska righteously asked me the linkage between political activism and this practice. There was no linkage. For an understanding of art which deals with activism, it necessitates spatial expansion. It seems to me that there are a lot of things that should have be done in an environment where even the performance works are weak and where activism signifies an exhausted avant-garde stating the end of art for many times.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Kosova, Erden, Kortun, Vasıf. <http://ofsaytamagol.blogspot.com/2007/06/politik.html> “Türkiye’deki sanat pratiğinde siyasallığın rolünden bahsettiğimde Suzana Milevska bu pratiğin siyasal aktivizmle olan bağıını sormuştu haklı olarak. Bağ yoktu. Aktivizm ile ilgilenen, ona yaklaşan bir sanat anlayışı için öncelikle mekânsal bir açılım gerekiyor.

Kosova, in relation to this political, underlines the need for independent collaborations and collective initiatives and characterizes those collaborations as:

There is a need for projects run by artists themselves; spaces where people who directly identifies oneself with being political can stand next to each other and a need for independent initiatives who stay away from being sterile, who take the risks of a casual presentation and of standing without the help of 'funds'.⁸⁹ (ibid).

According to Halil Altındere, a political work is a piece which "the galleries and museums could not exhibit or they are afraid to do so". As he suggests, it is the role of these alternative spaces of artistic production which is "the artist initiatives who could and should be exhibiting those *dangerous* art works."⁹⁰ He also categorizes some works as "not political enough to be regarded as artist initiatives".

In addition to Kosova and Altındere, Vasıf Kortun criticizes some artists that they "suddenly became so interested in politics although they weren't as such political years ago"⁹¹. He defines a political work and the activism of artist initiatives as such:

A work can be political in so many ways-for example for its relationship with the urban; it has to look for its own medium audience and participant. These [artist initiatives] are not activist projects, lets not fool ourselves. One by one they can be activist people but non of these projects are activist and they do not have a single claim on this. These are nice institutions opened up by Western guys, nothing more.⁹²

This label of political also determines the positions in the local arena. Also within the local scene, comparisons of how much political the artist initiative is differentiates the groups as "not political enough" or "most political". This process of framing a

Performans bazlı çalışmaların bile zayıf kaldığı, aktivizm sözcüğünden sadece sanatın sonunu bilmem kaçınıcı defa ilan eden nefesi tükenmiş bir avangardizm türünün anlaşıldığı bir ortamda, yapılacak çok şey varmış gibi görünüyor"

⁸⁹ "Sterillikten uzak duran, salaş bir sunumu, yanılma olasılığını, riski ve 'fon'suzluğu göze alabilen, bağımsız kolektif inisiyatiflere, sanat dilini kullananlarla kendilerini doğrudan siyasallıkla tanımlayan kişilerin yan yana gelebileceği mekanlara, sanatçıların kendileri tarafından işletilen projelere gereksinim var."

⁹⁰ Halil Altındere, November, 11, 2007, interview with the author

⁹¹ Vasıf Kortun, interview with the author, December, 5, 2007.

⁹² *Istanbul dergisi*. 2004. "Istanbul Sanat Özel Dosyası", via:

<http://vasif-kortun-trk.blogspot.com/2004/10/erden-kosovayla.html>

"Siyasal olabilecek bir iş bir çok geniş anlamda siyasal olabilir- kentle ilişkisinde örneğin, kendi mecrasını, kendi izleyicisini, katılımcısını aramak durumundadır. ...Bunlar [sanatçı inisiyatifleri] aktivist projeler değil kimse kendini kandırmasın, birer birer aktivist insanlar olabilir ama bu projelerin hiçbiri aktivist değil en küçük bir iddiaları da yoktur bunlar güzel hoş batılı çocukların açtıkları iyi kurumlar, ötesi değil"

distinction among artist initiatives is an interactive process, which the meanings associated with being 'political', is negotiated, contested, defined and redefined by the gatekeepers, transnational audience and by the local conflicts. As it is the case for the artist initiative group Hafriyat.

Hafriyat group is regarded as "one of the most political artist initiatives"⁹³, "Turkey's most active independent art collective"⁹⁴ and as "the most influential independent artist initiatives"⁹⁵. It is also possible to state that "the name of Hafriyat with its reputation and its character constitutes a legendary discourse: Hafriyat legend or discourse" (In Çalıkoğlu, 2007,40)⁹⁶. Almost in each interview, artists or authors found a way to differentiate Hafriyat group in relation to their position and association with this political.

This degree of being political not only signifies positive connotations for the contemporary (güncel) artists as in being "the most political" but it also contributes to confrontation between conflicting actors in the scene as well. Those positions of actors confront with the actors beyond the art circles as well as within the contemporary art field. The debate over one of the exhibitions of Hafriyat group called "Allah Korkusu" ("Fear of God") exemplifies the former case. In short, Hafriyat group, in the opening of the exhibition, feeling intimidated by pro Islamic newspaper, had called in the police protection from the municipality and surprisingly (or maybe not) the police force whom were in the exhibition area on the day of the opening had put an legal investigation process into action; the reason behind this need of police group for calling legal investigation was that they felt uncomfortable with some of the posters depicting an

⁹³ During the interviews, most of the informants exhibit a tendency to describe and differentiate Hafriyat as somehow more political than other initiatives or more protest than others. Also in the media this tendency can be observed. One of the artists in Hafriyat group, the artist who calls himself 'Extrastruggle' is regarded as 'the most political mark of political Biennial':

Altan, Ertan. "'Politik Bienal'in en politik çizgisi: Extramücadele'", *Yeni Şafak*, October 18, 2007, Sunday. <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Pazar/?t=18.10.2007&i=74822>

⁹⁴ *Sabah*. 2007. "Denize düşen sanatçı polise sarıldı", November 18.

'Türkiye'nin en etkin bağımsız sanat kolektifi olarak geçen grubun...'

<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2007/11/18/pz/haber,A157DE91EA3F4F5FBCD8555477D0FCBF.html>

⁹⁵ Saymaz, İsmail. "Yağmurdan Kaçarken", *Radikal*, November 14, 2007, Culture/Art, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=238788>

'Hafriyat ülkenin en etkili bağımsız sanatçı insiyatifi olarak biliniyor'

⁹⁶ 'Hafriyat kendi adıyla, kendi ağırlığıyla ve karakteriyle, efsane türünde konuşulan bir şey, bir söylem oluşturmuş: Hafriyat efsanesi ya da söylemi'.

Atatürk figure without a face where it reads “Kemalizm bir ibadet biçimidir” (“Kemalism is a form of worshipping”).⁹⁷ In a newspaper Hafriyat groups is being discussed as “one of the most influential independent artist initiatives” as mentioned above but in another newspaper the group is criticized on the very same basis:

The independence of the Turkey’s most effective independent art collective is shattered and maybe vanished with this exhibition [Fear of God]. A theme such as ‘Fear of God’ is addressed in such a shallow and crude way like the way they do in caricature magazines but without connecting comedy and intelligence. So the group is promoted to become the most effective police-sided group with ‘fear of god’.⁹⁸

One of the examples of confrontation within the contemporary art circles is the debate between Halil Altındere and Beral Madra over writing the history of contemporary art in Turkey and over “memory of art and art knowledge”. Halil Altındere argues that:

When we look at the tradition of plastic arts in Turkey, even in the most turbulent periods, painters, sculptors prefer to stay in their ivy towers. There have been political theatre, political cinema and political literature. On the other hand, the plastic artists contented with dogmatizing in the *raki* tables. So, there is no political tradition in plastic arts. The reason that the plastic art circles have become suddenly political at the end of 90s is that they do not have to pay any cost.⁹⁹

On the other hand Beral Madra opposes this view harshly by criticizing him as such:

⁹⁷ For whole discussion in the media (in Turkish) see:

<http://open-flux.blogspot.com/2007/12/yazmadm-da-derledim.html>

⁹⁸ *Sabah*. 2007. "Denize düşen sanatçı polise sarıldı", November 18.

<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2007/11/18/pz/haber,A157DE91EA3F4F5FBCD8555477D0FCBF.html>

“Türkiye'nin en etkin bağımsız sanat kolektifi olarak geçen grubun bağımsızlığı, bu sergi sırasında yaşananlarla sarsıldı, belki de tarihe karıştı... 'Allah korkusu' gibi bir temayı, son derece yüzeysel, adeta bir karikatür dergisi hızında ama bir karikatür dergisindeki gibi zekâ ve mizahı birleştiremeden, ham ve çığ bir şekilde işleyen grup, Türkiye'nin en etkin ilk polis yanlısı 'Allah korkulu' grubu olmaya terfi etti galiba...”

⁹⁹ *Birgün*.2006. “Halil Altındere’ye baba aranıyor”, July 23. http://www.birgun.net/culture_index.php?news_code=1153661521&year=2006&month=07&day=23

“Türkiye'de plastik sanatlar geleneğine baktığımızda, Türkiye'de en yoğun politik çalkantıların olduğu dönemlerde bile ressamlar, heykeltıraşlar fildişi kulelerinde kalmayı tercih ettiler. Politik bir tiyatro, politik bir sinema, politik bir edebiyat üretildi. Ama plastik sanat yapanlar rakı masalarında ahkam kesmekle yetindiler. Yani plastik sanatlarda böyle politik bir gelenek yok. 90'ların sonunda plastik sanat ortamının birden politikleşmesinin nedeni artık suların durulmuş olmasıydı. Artık bedel ödemek zorunda kalmayacak olmalarıydı.”

Altındere, parallel to the image he created in the international art circles seems to bear the role of writing the art history for a while. for bir süredir sanat üretmekten çok, uluslararası sanat ortamında oluşturduğu imaja uygun - ya da kendisinin öncülük ettiğini ya da babası olduğunu varsaydığı bir kuşağa uygun - bir yakın geçmiş sanat tarihi yazma işini üstlenmiş görünüyor. Or maybe he arrogates the process of transformation in the art scene to himself. Altındere misinforms the public by benefiting from a structural deficit, the fact that there is lack of public knowledge on artistic production or it is not common to have memory on artistic production and the lack of a contemporary (çağdaş) art museum which shows the whole process.¹⁰⁰

Altındere passes judgment on the artists from previous periods about “being political” and Madra, in defense of those artists by argues that painting could not irritate “the state or the society”.¹⁰¹

This debate is formulated over referencing and identifying the emergence of radical artists and each actor in this debate defines her/his own understanding over “provocative works” and “radical political artists”. These conflicts and oppositions determine and perpetuate the field of “political” art. The debates also expose the power struggles over the knowledge of art history.

¹⁰⁰ “Altındere bir süredir sanat üretmekten çok, uluslararası sanat ortamında oluşturduğu imaja uygun - ya da kendisinin öncülük ettiğini ya da babası olduğunu varsaydığı bir kuşağa uygun - bir yakın geçmiş sanat tarihi yazma işini üstlenmiş görünüyor. Ya da sanat üretiminin değişim sürecini kendisine mal etmeye çalışıyor. Altındere burada yapısal bir boşluktan - kitlenin sanat üretimi konusunda yeterli bilgi sahibi olmamasından ya da sanat üretimi belleğinin yaygın olmamasından ya da bütün üretimi gösteren bir çağdaş sanat müzesinin olmamasından - yararlanıp toplumu yanlış bilgilendiriyor”

¹⁰¹ Madra, Beral. “Ana babasızdılar ama dayıları vardı”, *Birgün*, July 22, 2006, Culture, via: <http://www.ebenzin.com/sayi2/1.asp>

“Dolayısıyla görsel olarak ifade edilen şey ne denli 'radikal' olursa olsun- ki bugün de görsel uyarı/saldırı içeren post-medya üretimler hâkim önünde etkisiz olarak nitlendiriliyor ve aklanıyor - ne devleti ne de toplumu rahatsız etmektedir. Dolayısıyla, resim görselliğinin devlet ve toplum nezdinde etkisi zayıftır; açıkçası değeri yoktur!”

CHAPTER THREE

“BEING POLITICAL IS *IN*”

“Sizi benzersiz yapan o tek parça bazen bir çanta ya da kemer, bazen de bir kitaptır. Rockstar felsefeci olarak da anılan Slavoj Zizek’in Türkçe’ye en son çevrilen kitabı bu yaz düşüncelerinizi dalgalandırıp stilinize yepyeni ve bambaşka bir yön veren o tek parçalardan biri olabilir.”¹⁰²
ELLE Fashion Magazine, July 2008

“Being political is *in* and fashionable” is the most striking, though simple answer for my queries about what does it mean to be political in contemporary art circles of Istanbul. A friend of mine, a younger artist, had claimed that being regarded as ‘political’ makes it easier to be accepted in the Istanbul contemporary art scene. It is, by being known as ‘political artist’ that a “Third World” citizen Middle Eastern woman from Turkey can find a place in the international art world. She claimed that it is nearly impossible to organize an exhibition with a collection of naïve works since “being political is *in*”.

There are various answers to the question of what is it that makes an artist political. For Canan Şenol, *the* feminist artist, the personal is [still] political¹⁰³ whether you are an artist or not. For Erden Kosova, the answer for being political artist in “the current circumstances” can be sought in their previous political engagements¹⁰⁴, for some others the artist nurtures from the current social and the political atmosphere of where she lives; for an artist living in and nurturing from Turkey, it is unavoidable to be political.

In this chapter, deriving from the more abstract categorization of the meanings associated with ‘being political’, I will try to focus on the particular themes that artist initiatives and the actors mobilize around this notion of ‘being political’.

¹⁰² “The one thing that makes you unique can be a bag or a belt, or a book. Rockstar Philosopher Zizek’s latest book can be the one thing which waves and directs your thoughts newly and differently in this summer.”

¹⁰³ Canan Şenol, Açık Masa Toplantıları, Platform, from video recording.

¹⁰⁴ “...biz güncel sanat ortamına siyasal bir angajmandan yola çıkarak yaklaşık en baştan bu yana oradaydık”. Erden Kosova, Art-ist november 2006, issue 5

3.1. Mobilization

Framing a set of issues under ‘being political’ and through the networks that those artist initiatives engage with, enables those actors to mobilize campaigns, demonstrations, petitions as well as engaging and supporting campaigns organized by different groups outside the artistic field.

There are various examples of artist initiatives or artists in those initiative networks engaging with different campaigns. The issues those groups protest and stand in opposition to vary from urban renewal projects to assassination of intellectuals. One of these examples is the campaign protesting the urban renewal projects in Sulukule district. Artists in these networks of initiatives collaborated with the organization Sulukule Platform¹⁰⁵, and artists in these networks organized workshops in the series of activities Sulukule Platform organized.¹⁰⁶

Artist initiatives, with the name of the initiative or as individual artists, signed the declaration of “Pippa Bacca’yı Koruyamadık” by “independent artists and art workers” for protesting the murder and rape case of Italian performance artist Pippa Bacca in Istanbul¹⁰⁷ where it reads:

In Turkey, a contemporary art practice which criticizes the system is a huge necessity; because, peoples’ mental and spiritual worlds are stuck with the contemporary politics and politicians infertile narratives of their own sake. Art practice opens up spaces for thinking, interpreting and criticizing. In this context, art production should be supported by government and local administrations. The death of Pippa Bacca should be on the agenda who came to our country as a visiting artist.

Pippa Bacca is a woman artist. And, we are face to face with a reality that women are killed by men everyday in Turkey. The darkness of masculine hegemony is set upon our country. Pippa Bacca is one of the latest victims of this perversion.

Art world is a deep despair and grief. We never forget this and we are going to continue the necessary actions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ For protesting gentrification and urban planning campaigns in the neighbourhood where the most of the population living in this area is consisted of Roman people. For a critical network analysis on the gap between transnational mobilization through Sulukule platform and local mobilization see Yolacan, 2008.

¹⁰⁶ <http://40gun40gece-sulukule.blogspot.com/2007/10/40-days-40-nights-sulukule-summary.html>

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.savaskarsitlari.org/arsiv.asp?ArsivTipID=9&ArsivAnaID=44863&ArsivSayfaNo=2>

¹⁰⁸ “Turkiye’de gunumuzde ozgu, duzeni elestiren sanat eylemi yapmak buyuk bir gerekliliktir; cunku insanlarımızın zihinsel ve ruhsal dunyasi guncel siyasete, siyasetcilerin kendi cikarlari dogrultusunda surdurdukları kisir ve kisitlayıcı soylemlere

The importance of collaborations between artist initiative networks and various social movement organizations or actors is that the model of artist initiatives does not operate just as an artistic organization but also they engage with other networks outside the art field for mobilization purposes.

Assassination of Armenian intellectual Hrant Dink, right after his death, mobilized millions of people from different affiliations. In the contemporary art field, there have been numerous activities in memoriam of Hrant Dink as well as series of protest campaigns. One of the interesting examples of those artist initiatives mobilizing for “activist” purposes before artistic concerns is the case of 19th January collective.

3.1.1. Assassination of Hrant Dink 19th January Collective

19th January Collective is an example of this form of collective actions organized and mobilized by contemporary artists consequently after the assassination of Armenian intellectual Hrant Dink which “spurred discussions on the nature of politics in the Turkish contemporary art scene” (Evren, 2008, 35). The January 19 Collective, referencing to the date of Hrant Dink was shot dead outside his office, organized right after his death and “sensed the demands of a past whose voice had been suppressed”.¹⁰⁹ 19th January collective is the first example of artist initiatives forming a collective group, which is formed in order to protest a single issue rather than artistic purposes. It is also important that 19th January Collective, in order to protest the assassination, mobilize artistic practices by recalling the validity of the intersection between art and the political field, they arrange an exhibition:

With this event, the contemporary artists and writers who form the January 19 Collective, which has been meeting regularly for a year,

kilitlenmistir. Sanat eylemi insanlara dusunme, yorumlama ve elestirme kapilarini acmaktadir. Bu baglamda gunumuzde ozgu sanat uretiminin ve eylemlerinin devlet ve yerel yonetimler tarafından her yonden desteklenmesi gerekmektedir. Ulkemizde konuk olan sanatci Pippa Bacca'nin oldurulmesi olayinin gundemde tutulmasi gerekmektedir.

Pippa Bacca bir kadin sanatcidir. Ve biz bir gercekle yuzyuzeyiz. Turkiye’de her gun kadinlar erkekler tarafından oldurulmektedir. Bu kadinlari yok etme kararliliginin arkasindaki ilkel erkek egemen duzenin karanligi ulkenin uzerine cokmustur. Pippa Bacca bu sapkinligin son kurbanlarindan birisidir.

Sanat ortami derin bir uzuntu ve infial icindedir. Bu olayi unutturmayacagiz ve gereken eylemlerimizi surdurecegiz.”

¹⁰⁹ <http://thejanuary19collective.blogspot.com/>

meticulously investigated the records of these past murders which have been covered up, and faced their own personal memories. We refrained from turning the event into a rigid memorial exhibition. The act of commemoration was imagined as a stance, an action. Today, contemporary art is being refined as a cultural field to decorate Turkey's shop window facing the outside world. We want to reiterate that the radical intervention of contemporary art to the present and the social is still possible.

The collective also highlights their position and equal distance to the marginal groups in Turkey as follows:

Human beings are forgetful but at the same time have the capacity to remember. What he/she forgets or remembers is directly related to the context he/she living in. Isolation is a cliché that is manipulated in the last 27 years of history since the September, 12 military coup in Turkey. The fractions which can not be embodied in the whole body of power, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, transsexuals, gays, lesbians, unemployed people, immigrants, refugees and other ordinary people are exposed to violence of micropower mechanisms of different political organizations. This activity has an equal stand toward any form of murder by these mechanisms.¹¹⁰

For Hrant Dink's memory, there have been some other activities as well. In February 2008, another exhibition is organized in "BM Suma Güncel Sanat Merkezi" in which pieces coming from Armenia on Soviet Propaganda Art are exhibited. Also one of the major events in January 2008 was the 'Tililili' Sound Installation which is the sound recording of Dink's writings read by famous actresses and actors and exhibited in artist initiative locality, Apartment Project.

¹¹⁰ 19th January Collective, "Münferit", exhibition catalogue.

"İnsan unutkan ama aynı zaman da hatırlama yetisi olan bir varlık. Neyi unutup neyi anımsadığı onun içinde yaşadığı zaman ve bağlamla doğrudan alakalı. Türkiye'de son 27 yıllık geçmişinden, yani 12 Eylül askeri darbesinden bu yana, devletin yetkili ağızlarının manipülasyon amaçlı olarak sıkça başvurdukları klişe bir ifade, münferit. İktidarın ana ve kutsal gövdesine giremeyen ve sürekli dışlaştırılan kesimler, Kürtler, Ermeniler, Rumlar, Yahudiler, travestiler, geysler, lezbiyenler, işsizler, göçmenler, mülteciler, Afrikalılar veya herhangi sıradan bir insanın maruz kaldığı şiddet; aynı şekilde mikro iktidar mekanizmaları olarak değişik siyasal örgütlenmelerin şiddetine maruz kalıp meçhule bırakılan bütün cinayetler bu etkinlik çerçevesinde eşit bir mesafeyle ele alındı"

3.1.2. Feminism as “another form of discrimination”

“The F Word”¹¹¹

There are several similarities between the interviews I conducted in the field on gender issues and the interview of Katthy Deepwell with Marina Abramovic ¹¹², Yugoslavian radical performance artist working on the limits of physicality of the body. The interviewer underlines that the works of Abramovic and her experiences which can be characterized as “[the] idea of exploring the self or questioning the self”, can be identified with “the feminist project”. In contrast to this underlying statement, Abramovic intentionally avoids to be called as feminist. Katthy Deepwell, the interviewer, gives a warning by pointing out that “it is however necessary to overcome the almost-automatic dismissal of feminism”.¹¹³ This interview exemplifies the “automatic” dismissal of feminism in the contemporary art circles surprisingly among the ones who problematize the gender, body or in other words the ones who have similar concerns with “the feminist project”.

The contemporary art field of Turkey portrays unfortunately not so much difference than what Abramovic says in this interview. With this dismissal of manifesting feminism, there are various characteristics of contemporary artistic practice in Istanbul in the context of gender. Feminist analysis of Istanbul’s contemporary art scene with actors and their works resembles Flanagan and Looui’s analysis of feminist art activism on internet:

In our review of websites, we encountered difficulty locating women artists who are producing theoretically challenging and technologically “cutting-edge” websites that are also explicitly feminist. Indeed, even women known for their feminist activism seem to be altering their creative practices. We found that some feminist artists who once worked alone are now working in allied collectives; others are creating websites and web-accessible video documentation of work not explicitly named by the artist as “feminist.” (2007, 182)

¹¹¹ ‘Reinventing the "f" word: feminism!’ is the motto of Guerilla Girls.

¹¹² An interview with Marina Abramovic with Katy Deepwell - from a conversation with Marina Abramovic at her home in Amsterdam in September 1996. N.Paradoxa: Issue 2- February 1997

¹¹³ Abramovic, in that interview, also equates being powerful with a role in military when she gives the example of her mother who worked in military and Abramovic associates her mother being very powerful with her job in military. She also does not hesitate to say that “women were totally equal in Yugoslavian society after the revolution. I came from this kind of background and I always thought the women were much stronger and more powerful than many men”.

What is different with their analysis of cyberfeminist art activist networks with the women artists in Turkey is that, women artists in Turkey do not form networks or alliances on the bases of gender problematic where it is really hard to find explicit manifestations of feminism in this field. Platt, on women artists in the contemporary art scene in Istanbul, describes her experience with similar observations as follows:

Most of the women artists I met pursue scholarly research (some of them have doctorates), teaching, writing, curating, as well as making art. I found no groups, networks, or cooperatives, with the exception of two short-lived alliances of young artists. Alliances of women artists, so common in the United States, are absent in Turkey (Platt, 2003, 35).

Platt, who has been interested in the “Middle Eastern” art criticizes the lack of alliances and surprised by this fact. The surprising thing women artists in the contemporary art scene of Turkey are that those artists have been prominent actors in this field with their womanhood. According to Vasıf Kortun and Erden Kosova, the critical language of the contemporary art scene is said be formulated as a result of the existence of a group of prominent artists that Erden Kosova and Vasıf Kortun (2007) name as “the mothers”. They posit that the backbone of Turkish contemporary art is constituted by the ‘mothers’, in a context where there isn’t a ‘father’. According to these writers the importance of these “mothers” for “the critical stance in contemporary art is that the field described as contemporary art (güncel sanat) is liberated and gained more speculative and experimental language rather than other forms of cultural production because of the existence of these ‘mothers’” (Kosova and Kortun, 2007).¹¹⁴

Another characteristic of contemporary art scene in Istanbul is the actors’ tendency to associate gender discrimination and violence against women with the “east”. In interviews, many artists (especially women) claim that war is everywhere in the world and of course it damages the lives of women but for artists themselves, the war in Turkey is in the East and the “real” violence against women is exercised there. For them, the urban life of Istanbul for an artist is relatively more safety.

The gender problem in the contemporary art scene is thus located far away from the field itself where violence and discrimination against women is portrayed as a

¹¹⁴ “Güncel sanat olarak tarif edilen alan kendini bu 'anneler'in varlıkları sayesinde özgüleştirebilmiş ve diğer kültürel üretim biçimlerinden daha deneysel ve spekülatif bir dili edinebilmişti.”

problem of the “East”. With the transnational networking among the contemporary art circles, it is not surprising that the one and only thing Guerilla Girls mentioned on their website about their views in relation to their participation in an art project conducted in Istanbul Modern, is the honor crimes done in Turkey.¹¹⁵

For so many of the artists in this field , violence through honor killings and *berdel* necessitates urgent action before discrimination within artistic communities if there is any, since some artists claim that they never experienced discrimination on the basis of gender as an artist. Platt, who is also another actor in these transnational networks, notes a similar observation:

Not only do some Turkish women perceive feminism as a type of Western imperialism, but they also claim that they have experienced no gender-based discrimination in their careers. They mischievously point out that non-Turkish speakers cannot tell from their names if they are male or female, so they are not discriminated against outside of Turkey (Platt, 2003, 35).

However, Canan Şenol, who explicitly identifies herself as feminist activist artist points out the initial discrimination against women in artistic field where they are differentiated as “women artists” as opposed to naming male artists only as “artists”. She also adds that “the façade of any exhibition will seem considerably egalitarian on the gender basis but the process of organizing this exhibition in question itself is under the domination of masculine hegemony; where they first choose the “artists” to include and then to prettify the façade they decide on which “women artist” to sprinkle down”¹¹⁶. Canan Şenol defines her critical stance as feminist artist as such:

I am criticizing the sexist oppression hidden under the veil of being ‘çağdaş’ and ‘belief’. The way of living as we define as ‘çağdaş’ is sexist like the way of living what we call as ‘secular’. Modern and anti-secular life standard are sexist. Although, the system is built upon on sexist policies, women are mistreated by so-called defenders of ‘women rights’.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵“The Dish on Discrimination Fall 2006”
<http://www.guerrillagirls.com/hotflashes/index.shtml>

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, 2008, interview with the artist, 8 January.

¹¹⁷ <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=236021>

“Laik ve antilaik kesimler tarafından 'çağdaşlık' ya da 'inanç' örtüsü altında gizlenmiş cinsiyetçi baskının eleştirisini yapıyorum. Çağdaş diye nitelendirdiğimiz yaşam biçimi tüm kurumları ve ilişki biçimleriyle cinsiyetçi, ve antilaik diye tanımladığımız yaşam biçimi de öyle. Sistemin cinsiyetçi politikalar üzerine kurulu olmasına karşın, tarafların sinsi bir şekilde 'kadın hakları' savunuculuğu üzerinden politika yapması, örtülü ya da örtüsüz tüm kadınları mağdur ediyor”.

The contribution of the “mothers” of contemporary art in Turkey as in the form of “relatively more experimental and speculative language than other cultural production forms” is undeniable in artistic works which problematize gender inequality, violence against women and gender discrimination. At the same time, the salient gender awareness embodied in the works, texts and discourses of most of the actors in the field point out familiarities with what feminist artists do share according to Carolyn Korsmeyer that is “a sense of the historic social subordination of women and an awareness of how art practices have perpetuated that subordination” (Korsmeyer, 2004,118). That perpetuation, as Korsmeyer argues has been accomplished by many things such as objectifying women’s bodies, sexual exploitation of women, exclusionary criteria for women’s works and similar to what Şenol puts forth, ignoring women’s work. Although the shared experiences and feminist senses are similar in contemporary art scene with what Korsmeyer describes, critical artists and artist initiatives do not manifest feminist stance and intentionally avoids articulating their critical stance towards the problematic of gender within the perspective of feminism, also for some of the artists discrimination is also another form of differentiating individuals on the basis of gender.

3.1.3. Diyarbakır, a site of ‘being political’

Heaney and Rojas articulate the significance of sites for social movements in relation to the framing processes as follows:

Places are symbols in the discursive repertoires of movements that are readily accessible during framing disputes. The influence of place on the dynamics of social movements thus matters directly to framing...Invocation of symbols visibly associated with a place enhances the effectiveness of actors in using place to project a frame. (2006, 482)

The city of Diyarbakır in the East Anatolia region is geographically, historically, culturally and symbolically significant in relation to the Kurdish movement. The basic reference point of the public space in Diyarbakır is the ‘Kurdish movement’ or ‘the Kurdish identity’, and the city has accredited with a symbolic load and nourished from discourses of dichotomies¹¹⁸ (Ahıska, Genç and Kentel, 2007, 125-127). The overlong

¹¹⁸ ‘Kürt meselesiyle ilgili bakılması gereken en önemli yerlerden biri, kuşkusuz Diyarbakır’dı. Bu şehir bütün bölünme söylemlerinin beslendiği ve sembolik bir yük

armed conflict between the Turkish military forces and guerillas of PKK (PKK-Partiya Karkêren-i Kurdistan- Kurdistan Workers Party) and the “dichotomies of society/state and PKK/Turkish state/army” (Gambetti, 2004, 11) put forward the symbolic role of Diyarbakır as ‘the capital’ of the Kurdish movement or as a still standing, resisting ‘castle’.

Kurdish writer from Diyarbakır Şeyhmus Diken’s statements to Şener Özmen, artist and writer, about Diyarbakır exemplifies the symbolic role of the city and the meanings associated with it such as opposition and resistance in relation to Kurdish identity:

In the end Diyarbakır, the city which is *raison-d’etre* for most of us, is a symbol when we look at what we have come through. There is something in this city that never surrounds to the governing ones. This rebel side is what attracted me.¹¹⁹

With a set of changes in the city, the cultural significance of Diyarbakır began to increase from 2000s onwards. Gökalp underlines “the takeover of metropolitan municipality of pro-Kurdish party in 1999 and increasing democratic tolerance towards practicing Kurdish culture in Turkey” leading to a cultural revival in Diyarbakır (2007, 125). In addition to the election of DEHAP to the metropolitan municipality, Gambetti emphasizes two more factors leading to this change in Diyarbakır which are “the unilateral ceasefire declared by the PKK in 1998 (...) and the December 1999 Helsinki

atfedilen bir kentsel mekan özelliği taşıyor (125)...Diyarbakır’da kamusal alanın temel referans noktası “Kürt hareketi” ya da “Kürt kimliği”dir’. (127).

¹¹⁹<http://sener-ozmen.blogspot.com/2008/03/esmerde-yaynlanmt-haziran-2007.html>

From the interview with Şener Özmen, contemporary(guncel) artist and writer.

“Sonuçta Diyarbakır dediğimiz, çoğumuzun varlık sebebi bu eski şehir, yaşananlara baktığımızda aslında bir simge. Öyle bir şehir ki muktedirlerin diline, dayatmalarına “eyvallah” etmeyen bir “asiliği” var bu şehrin. Ben amiyane tabiriyle işte bu “asiliğe” tav’ım. Beni berceste kılan işte şehrin bu muktedirlerin iktidarına direnen teslim olmayan, fiziki yapılarını bile bu duruşa göre inşa eden tavidir. Şehrin elbette böyle bir dili ve duruşu ile ruhu vardır. Diyarbakır bugün hâlâ birçok açıdan “ben varım” diyen bir kentsel varoluşa sahip. Bu sadece kentsel eski, antik mekânlarıyla ben varım diyen bir varoluş değil! Çünkü bir çok şehir geçmişinde saydığım izleri taşıyor olsa bile bugün iktidarların kölesi olmak, muktedirlerin kendilerine üleştirdiklerini “suspayı” olarak kabul edip ona göre mevzilenmek gibi bir “resmi varoluşa” teslim olmuşlar gibi. Diyarbakır bütün böyle yapılmak istenme gayretlerine rağmen “diren(g)en” bir şehir. Bu nedenle de bu şehirli olmayanlar bile her fırsatta “İyi ki Diyarbakır var” diyorlar, boşuna edilmiş bir kelam değil”.

Summit, officially accepting Turkey as a candidate for full European Membership”¹²⁰ (2004, 5). Also according to Gambetti, “the cultural explosion that was initiated by the municipality and the subsequent softening up of such polarized dichotomies as society/state and PKK/Turkish army was accompanied by two developments: the emergence of new actors on the political scene in Diyarbakır and the transformation of the previously agenda-setting actors themselves”(2004,11). As a result of this cultural revival or ‘cultural explosion’ in Diyarbakır with the emergence of local artists and artists from the contemporary art world of Istanbul as new or transformed actors, the city “has emerged as the second liveliest art scene in the country” (Oren, 2008, 13) and “turned into something of a focal centre for art having previously been on the periphery” (Akay, 2008, 101). The contemporary art scene’s increasing interest on Diyarbakır has actualized with opening up new art localities and organizing exhibitions in the city. Also artists known with their Kurdish identities and backgrounds rooted in Diyarbakır emerged and subsequently their visibility with these identities has increased in Istanbul as well as in the international art scene.

Halil Altındere, the “Kurdish Artist”, is described as “provocateur” and “the ‘bad boy’” of the Turkish contemporary art scene who exhibited in the 5th Biennial, came from a Kurdish village evacuated by the army” (Oren, 2008, 7). With the frame alignment between the “provocateur” Kurdish identity and the “resisting” artist groups, supported by the resources of Biennials and international collaborative projects, new nodes of “community” is formulated through art as Gambetti articulates as follows:

The legitimization of the Kurdish movement through the municipal elections and EU politics allowed for the opening up or the conquering of different spaces which allowed for the performative contestation of pedagogical authority. Kurdishness per se continued to operate as a signifier that called for a joining forces, but the shift toward a depolarized form of politics meant that new nodes of ‘commun-ity’ could be established. These nodes such as ‘culture and arts’, ‘women’s liberation’ and ‘civic activism’ have started bringing previously antagonistic groups in touch with each other. The emergence of these nodes and the possibilities they offer for collective action are indicative of the future transformation of the ‘Kurdish problem’”. (Gambetti, 2004,11)

As Gambetti argues, “Kurdishness as a signifier” also continues to operate in the critical contemporary art circles, which is associated with the city of Diyarbakır. In the public discourses on the contemporary art practice in Diyarbakır or on Kurdish identity,

¹²⁰ The role of Turkey EU relationship on the cultural scene is discussed on the previous chapter.

Kurdish artists or artists dealing with Kurdishness are marked with “Diyarbakır born artists”¹²¹ or “Artists from Diyarbakır”, “Artists with roots in Diyarbakır”. In order to signify a protest identity, a critical position in relation to the Kurdishness, Diyarbakır as the symbolic city of Kurdish identity becomes both the site of framing and the object of framing simultaneously. One step further, Diyarbakır represents the “Eastern” identity in Turkey. One of the exhibitions curated by Altındere, “Seni Öldüreceğim için Çok Üzgünüm” is characterized, in a newspaper article, with the increasing attention paid on the Eastern artists” where it follows with the names of the artists’ and their cities of origins in eastern region of Turkey. Author underlines that “the works of contemporary artists of Eastern origin draw attention”.¹²²

3.1.4. “Public Space”, “Street” and “Intervention”

The latest discussions on “public space” in relation to democracy and ‘politics’ in social sciences literature, have transformed and invoke several questions on “space” and “site” in the cultural and artistic field as well. The problematic of “public space” (*kamusal alan*) has debated extensively with certain connotations for the contemporary art field in Istanbul. Problematising “the space” where the artistic production takes place and the effect of artist on this space is especially formulated around the formation of artist initiatives since the formation itself is said to be emerged as a response to this problematic of space (*mekan problemi*).

Santralistanbul, the latest major contemporary art project with a museum, and several other facilities which is actually a renovated electric power station located within a university’s complex, serves as the “heart” of these discussions. Santralistanbul, from the opening up of this physical locality, is associated with the problematic of “public space” and transforming this space. In relation to that, the first project operationalized in Santralistanbul was “Public Space and Contemporary Art Practices” which was a joint project with European Union in EU Culture 2000 Program. The project and Santralistanbul is described as follows in a newspaper:

Art has bounced to ‘the public space’

¹²¹ ‘Sanatın dönüm noktası göçerlik’, “Diyarbakır doğumlu sanatçı Ahmet Öğüt”, <http://www.evrensel.net/05/09/28/kultur.html#3>

¹²² “Sergide özellikle, Doğulu güncel sanatçıların yapıtları dikkatle izleniyor”, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=81203>.

SantralIstanbul which defines itself as ‘public space’ of art, will host exhibitions, panel discussions, conferences and seminars. And, it will contribute to the formation of a more civilized art scenes. This international project has includes a series of events on the transformative power of public space and democratization of public in relation to the art practices.¹²³

In the same piece, Asu Aksoy, the director of international projects of Santralistanbul lists their agenda as such:

“Our topic is one of the most criticized topic in contemporary arts on art and public, how new publics are created, the relationship between arts with social topics and how artists explain the social issues.”¹²⁴

The discussion on “public space” not only concentrates on the transformation of the public space but on the meanings of it and the artistic practices in “public space” as political acts or “interventions”. Consecutively, artistic practices that are said to be done in “public” take the form of “political act” by intervening “the public”. Kosova states that:

Contemporary art practice is based on ‘urban guerilla’ practice. Right after its hit, it goes inside of itself again. It can carry this sharpness to the public. Because of that it can not open up its content to discussion and it can not negotiate with the public.¹²⁵

¹²³ <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=583905>

“Sanat 'kamusal alan'a sıçradı!

Kendisini sanatın 'kamusal alanı' şeklinde tanıtan Santralistanbul, ev sahipliği yapacağı sergi, açıkoturum, konferans ve seminerlerle sanatın hayatla olan ilgisini gündeme getirecek ve daha sivil bir sanat ortamının oluşmasına katkıda bulunacak. Uluslararası nitelikteki projede, kamusal alanın dönüştürülmesinde ve kamusal hayatın demokratikleşmesinde sanat uygulamalarının yönlendirici rolünün irdeleneceği bir dizi etkinlik yer alıyor”

¹²⁴ <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=583905>

“Bugün güncel sanatın tartıştığı konuların en önemlilerinden biri olan sanatın, kamuyla nasıl ilişki kurduğu, yeni kamuları nasıl yarattığı, sosyal konularla sanatın, sanatçının yeni sanat pratiklerinin nasıl bağlantı kurduğu, sosyal meseleleri yeni şekilde nasıl anlatmaya çalıştığı gibi bir gündemden hareket ettik.”

¹²⁵ <http://ofsaytamagol.blogspot.com/2007/06/space.html>

“Güncel sanat pratiği ‘urban guerilla’ pratiğini model alıyor. Vuruyor ama kendi içinde doğru geri çekiliyor ertesinde. Bu keskinliği kamusala taşıyamıyor; sokağa çıkmayı beceremiyor; bu yüzden içeriğini tartışmaya açamıyor; kamuyla müzakere edemiyor; ve aslında ilginç biçimde müzakere etmediği için kendi hücrelerinde sert ve angaje kalabiliyor”.

“Space, whether as a terrain to be occupied, an obstacle to be overcome, or as an enabler to have in mind, matters in the production of collective action. Space is sometimes the site; other times the object, and usually both the site and the object of contentious politics” (Auyero, 2006, 569). ‘Street’ as an imaginative public space represents a site of contentious politics take place and at the same time an enabler of ‘political intervention’ where ‘intervening to the street’ is framed as political protest activity. How street becomes the object of contention is that, among artistic circles “intervening the street” or in another formulation, “intervening the public” by appearance and/or by definition is directly associated with the ‘political’, political engagement, and protest activity of recent emerging potentials of the intersection of art, culture and politics in the form of “street art”.

The major the concept of “street” is framed, formulated, discussed, associated and described in many different ways in contemporary arts. With the latest discussions on ‘public sphere’, increasing interest in “public art” projects, increasing urban scale grievances and with the increasing popularity as well as media coverage on urban renewal projects, an understanding of “street art” completes the major framework of what is it to be political in the contemporary art field of Istanbul.

One of the most known examples for this potential and the form of “street art” is the group of Reclaim the Streets (RTS). As the both theoretical and public discussions increase on these new forms of ‘activism’, the case of RTS is subjected to writings and researches. RTS being “anti road” pretests in England in early 90s spread to other parts of the world and RTS is regarded as aesthetic street parties turning into “ephemeral festivals of resistance” (Jordan, 2002, 352). For RTS, the street is “a symbol and a symptom of the solid and ecological nightmare that state and capitalism create”.¹²⁶ And by incorporating aesthetic mediums with “acts of resistance, close the road of traffic and opening it to art of living” RTS and similar “direct action” networks and DIY (do it yourself) protests “singles out as a historical turning point in the current of creative resistance” according to Jordan (2002, 348).

When it comes to the discussions of “street art”, politics and creative resistance in Turkey, without surprise, RTS appears to be a welcomed form of “creative resistance”.¹²⁷ In other words “street” is regarded in a similar way to RTS, a symbol

¹²⁶ www.gn.apc.org/rts

¹²⁷ A daybook published by Metis Publishing which has a theme of “Creative Resistance”, (2008). Also a column on newspaper thematize “creative resistance” and

where “intervening” it becomes the ultimate political act per se. Even, Hafriyat Group organized an exhibition called “intervention” where they call “street artists” for “intervention”.

There is also another problematic of space in relation to the framing of political. It is the space where the artistic production takes place. According to those definitions of political, a political artistic practice takes place in “independent spaces” or in the “streets” which corresponds to the “political” that is “interesting for the international art tendencies”. What Madra proposes here is that:

Since the field of institutional and financial art is very narrow and shallow, the artists always have to create spaces/localities for themselves. The art that is said to be done on the street happens in independent and free localities in order to fill the gap of private sector, state and local governments. It has to be done this way because of international art trends suggest that art in independent spaces is interesting and artists prefer to get the attention by doing so.¹²⁸

Those artists, as Madra argues, who are in need of “independent spaces” practice “art” that has been said to be done on the “streets”. That is to say, artist initiatives and the artists in these circles also directly related to the “street art”.

In another example, apart from where to “intervene”, art itself is being defined as a field of direct political intervention. In Art-ist contemporary art magazine, Burak Delier who is famous with his “political” works mostly with the photo of a woman wearing a head scarf made of European Union flag has made an interview with Xurban group.¹²⁹ Xurban group defines art as “the space where the credible intervention takes place” (85).¹³⁰

Artist initiatives, since the formation itself emerged as a response to the lack of “localities for artistic practice in Istanbul”, are the one who problematizes “the public

the problematic of “street” thematized on RTS.
http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek_haber.php?ek=cts&haberno=7096

¹²⁸ “Türkiye’de kurumsal ve finansal sanat alanı çok dar ve sığ olduğundan, sanatçılar her zaman kendilerine bir alan/mekân yaratmak zorunda kalmıştır. Sokakta oluyor denilen sanat gerçekte özel sektör, devlet ve yerel yönetimin bıraktığı boşluğu doldurmak amacıyla bağımsız ve özgür mekânlarda gerçekleşiyor. Gerçekleşmesi gerekiyor, çünkü uluslararası sanat eğilimleri bağımsız alanlarda oluşan sanat türlerinin ilginç olduğunu öne sürüyor ve sanatçılar da bu yönde çalışmalar yapıp dikkatleri üstlerine çekmeyi yeğliyor.”

¹²⁹ Art-ist, November 2006, issue 5.

¹³⁰ “Sanat, politikanın denendiği zemin değildir, kayda değer politik müdahalenin gerçekleştirildiği alandır”

space” most. Among all artist initiatives, Oda Projesi especially focuses on “experimenting with alternative ways of using and producing space”.¹³¹ Framing the discussions on “public space” and the role of artist initiatives in intervening it is best exemplified in the following part:

Artists’ initiatives can be regarded as young generation’s fresh breath. However, one has to be careful talking about this generation. Born within the eighties trauma, taking time to find their political identity, they crashed “public space” discussion of art. This generation for whom streets are for open air concerts and party places, learned about the borders of public space by experiencing and trying it (Tan, 2007, 46).

3.2. Opportunities

3.2.1. The Myth of EU funds

Tarrow posits the relationship between the opportunities available for social movement actors and the contention as follows:

Contention is more closely related to opportunities for-and limited by constrains upon-collective action than by the persistent social or economic factors that people experience. Contention increases when people gain the external resources to escape their compliance and find opportunities in which to use them. It also increases when they are threatened with costs they cannot bear or which outrage their sense of justice. When institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims. When combined with high levels of perceived costs for inaction, opportunities produce episodes of contentious politics (Tarrow, 1998, 71).

The following parts will discuss the role of European Union Cultural Funds not only as a material opportunity but a symbolic and mythical framing which affects the repertoires and the mobilizations of artists in the contemporary art field.

There is no doubt European Union became an important actor in the Turkish economic, political, social and cultural life parallel to the changes of this relationship. The discursive field accommodates itself as well in relation to these processes. Diez, Agnantopoulos and Kaliber call this process as ‘discursive Europeanization’ referring to Europeanization of public discourses that is the public claims making reference to EU, specific European actors or policies, and how this has changed over time (2005,). In the contemporary art field, those references are mostly focusing on EU cultural funds and

¹³¹ <http://odaprojesi.org/lang-pref/en/>

the ways to deal with them. Apart from European Union as an institution, the funds which have been provided by EU transformative power over the artist groups claims and the artistic works. Specifically for artist initiatives, the organizational structure can be transformed, the content of the works can be decided on according to the agendas set by European actors or the choices of which one of the group exhibitions in Europe to join is said to be done according to the possibilities of obtaining those funds. In order to understand what kind of a mythical role those funds have for artist initiatives, it is necessary to remember this relationship between Turkey and the European Union and the transformations very briefly.

The relationship between EU and Turkey is said to be a journey that is “long, difficult and tortuous” (Casanova, 2006). Probably the most recent pessimistic obstacle or a disappointment for the Turkish political elite and the public was the Luxemburg Summit in 1997, where Turkey was excluded from the list of countries of full membership negotiations. Paradoxically, two years after the Luxemburg Summit, at the Helsinki Summit of 1999 Turkey became a full membership candidate which is regarded as “a drastic u-turn in Turkey EU relations generated a new wave of optimism concerning the future course of democratization and economic reforms” (Öniş, 2000).

From the beginning of 1990s there have been several changes in the art field in Istanbul in relation to the candidacy of Turkey in EU and the EU’s approach towards “culture”. Öniş argues that EU’s interpretation of democracy has become much deeper and there was tremendous change in the nature and direction of European integration project, where the political element becoming more important than the economic element since the 1980s and 1990s. Also, according to Öniş, “an inclusionary project for Turkey appeared to fit rather well with the growing vision of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Europe which the new wave of social democrats (...) in Europe are firmly opposed to Turkey’s exclusion on purely cultural or civilizational grounds”(2000). In those years artists in *güncel sanat* scene employed this process in their works; “benefiting from the scholarship and residence programs initiated by the multi-culturalist politics of the European social democracies that came to power in many countries in those years, some representatives of that generation referred to the love and hate relationship between Turkey and the EU, or more generally, the problematic relationship between the centre and the periphery” (Kosova, 2007,50).

Whether it is purely on cultural grounds or economic factors that triggered the candidacy status for Turkey; the relevancy of Öniş’s argument for this study lies in his

propositions as the benefits of Helsinki Summit for the relationship between EU and Turkey: a variety of community-wide projects available in educational and technological field and the shift in international relations from state-to-state interactions to transnational networks. According to Madra, art field in Turkey experienced these projects and networks first on an individual networking level gradually developed into “institutional relationship, mainly between private museums, fine arts faculties, artists associations and other NGOs, mostly funded by EU resources, furthering the rupture between Istanbul-based contemporary art productions and Ankara-based cultural policy” (Madra, 2008)¹³².

With respect to the premises of “available projects”, cultural funds and the transnational networks, those funds, having a mythical power rather than providing practical solutions, perform as a powerful social actor. As a result, those artist initiatives has been inclining towards becoming “dernek”, obtaining a legal status, thus gaining the legitimate recognition to apply for funds or at least to take a step in this process. Başak Şenova from NOMAD group exemplifies their experience as such:

In the year 2003, when we had money from European Cultural Foundation and some other institutions in Turkey, we defined ourselves as non profit organizations. But we didn't have any legal entity actually we are a non-profit organization. We didn't have any legal entity until 2005. In 2005, especially with the arrival of EU funds, we faced with something like that: If you are not a legal entity than there is no money. I can't even obtain money from Turkey.¹³³

On the other hand, Didem Özbek from PIST complains about the bureaucratic obstacles in the form of documentation and reporting in order to get those funds underlining the middle agent problem where artists could not handling with all those¹³⁴. In addition to the problem of institutional legitimacy of the artist initiative as a legal

¹³² Madra argues that EU funding has in fact opened doors to numerous projects in important EU art institutions which in the past were unimaginable for an artist outside the West. Many projects of inter-cultural dialogues, networking and residency programmes have frequently been funded by the Mondrian Foundation, Prince Claus Fund, European Cultural Foundation, Roberto Cimetta Fund and Anna Lindh Foundation, (2008).

¹³³ Basak Şenova, interview, 30.12.2007, Istanbul.

“2003 senesinde European Cultural Foundation'dan para aldığımız zaman Türkiye de başka kurumlardan da para aldığımız zaman biz kendimizi non profit organization olarak tanımlıyorduk ama hiçbir legal dayanağımız yoktu ama non profit organization'ız hakkatten de. Hiçbir legal dayanağımız yok gerçekten ve bu 2005e kadar devam etti. 2005te özellikle EU fonlarının gelmesiyle biz şeyle karşılaştık: siz legal bir entity değilseniz para yok. Ben zaten Türkiye'den para alamıyorum.”

¹³⁴ Didem Özbek and Osman Bozkurt, interview, december 2007, İstanbul.

entity, the complexity of funding application to EU leads artists and artist groups to withdraw from these applications. Mostly they incline towards collaborative projects where actors in the art fields of member countries who already have the financial support from one or more of the cultural institutions of EU invites Turkish artists to join collaborative projects without bearing any bureaucratic responsibility for funding or other forms of easiness.

These joint collaborative projects confronts with criticism as well as celebration in *güncel sanat* field. Tan betrays those criticisms in the context of *güncel sanat* as such:

Unwilling to cooperate or engage with the state in any way, artists and curators hesitate to request funding for their projects. Most get financial support for their independent spaces or projects from private sources.(...) Turkish institutions can now apply to the European Cultural Foundation for the funding of collaborative international projects however, it is often believed that internationally funded projects yield multicultural exoticism while they conform to socio-cultural populism and that ultimately; they are instruments of cultural normalization whose sole purpose is to shape contemporary art policies. Spaces of resistance against privatization, statism and cultural conservatism; artist-run spaces seek to usher in critical, independent practices. With so little support, and the shrinking of the public sphere brought about by gentrification, the branding of the city of Istanbul as a cultural capital, and the EU negotiations, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain this independence while reaching a broader audience. In an effort to develop locally impactful strategies, Istanbul's contemporary art collectives and artist-run spaces recently began to share their experiences, to discuss their problems, and to plan for the future (Tan, 2007,130)¹³⁵.

Critiques of joint collaborative projects with European artists concern the position of the Turkish artist. Artists from Hafriyat groups explain this as following by referring to one of the exhibitions they join in Germany:

Hakan Gürsoytrak: They have an idea about us coming from Istanbul. What we bring with us to there and their idea do not correspond with each other. They think that from Turkey only a male artist can go there. They have a 40 percent orientalist gaze.

Antonio Cosentino: Using the language of contemporary art, the artist believes that is how he becomes one of the world artists. After a while the artist realizes that he is not a subject of this history but an object.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Pelin Tan, 2007, user manual.

¹³⁶ "Açık masada Hafriyat", Platform Garanti, 08.05.2007.

"HG:İstanbul'dan gelmiş olmanın verdiği kafalarında bir fakir var. O fikirle bizim oraya getirdiğimiz çakışmıyor. (...) Zaten Türkiye'den gelse gelse erkek sanatçı gelir gibi bir şey de karşımıza çıktı. Yüzde kırk oryantalist bakışları var.

The expectation towards portraying the “culture” of Turkey which is regarded as “the real other of EU” coincide with the transformation of artist into ethnographer since the 1990s as Foster posits. According to him, “the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles (...).The quasi-anthropological artist today may seek to work with sited communities with the best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression, only in part to have this work recoded by its sponsors as social outreach, economic development, public relations....or art” (Foster, 1995). But for the ethnographer artists in Turkey, the situation complicates itself with the artist already being “the ethnic other” for European art scene. This complexity brings dilemmas for the contemporary artists: Whether to parallelize the artistic works or provide works with parallel contents for the inviter of the collaborative project in order get financial support and appearance in the European art scene as well as facing criticism in the local arena to some extent or on the other hand rejecting the projects, exhibitions.

For some artists like Canan Şenol, they have been already in the same critical position with a certain agenda (in her case she is mostly known as the single artist who explicitly refers herself as feminist artist) from the beginning. Thus the certain expectations from the works in order to commensurate “the other” from the European organizations should not result in the artist giving up her priorities. But at the same time the artist should keep the critical distance as well.¹³⁷ Selda Asal of Apartment Project diverges from this stance. She claims that, in order to continue artistic production she accepts such collaborations. Since she likes working hard, she accepts many invitations from European counterparts.¹³⁸

In this process where according to Kosova in this expansion process of EU, a political interest has come into being for the socialites in the position of foreigners, geographical others or the marginal cultures in Europe (2007b). Especially following up “the Biennials casting international spotlight on some artists, they have been invited to exhibit or awarded with scholarships for further studies in Europe where Germany, with

AC: Çağdaş sanatın dilini kullandığında bütün dünya sanatçıları arasına katıldığı gibi bir hisse kapılıyor insan. Bir süre sonra da o tarihin öznesi değil nesnesi olduğunu fark ediyor insan “Açık masada Hafriyat”, Platform Garanti, 08.05.2007. (video recording)

¹³⁷ Canan Şenol, interview, december, 2007, İstanbul.

¹³⁸ Selda Asal, interview, december, 2007, İstanbul.

its large Turkish immigrant population, has shown particular interest in Turkish art and artists” (Oren, 2007, 3). A Turkish artist, Nasan Tur, living in Germany for long years complains about this interest on him:

I don't find myself to such interesting as coming from such a place. Germans want that so much. They want you to tell how hard your life is living in between two cultures. I have never been trapped in between such two cultures but you tell me that I have.¹³⁹

The agenda of this interest is best exemplified in an action plan and measures for cultural proposals to be supported by EU cultural policies in the member states:

- i) cultural initiatives that contribute to the production of critical public spheres activate and pluralize public debates,
- ii) cultural initiatives that actively deal with issues of democratic politics such as equality, gender, migration and citizenship,
- iii) cultural initiatives experimenting with new forms of public access and models of participation in the cultural field, also, but not only, in the field of emerging technologies¹⁴⁰

One could also argue that the mythical funds fulfilling those expectations and encourages critical and experimental works whether they have transformative powers or not. On the other hand, Shore suggest that “the invention and expansion of EU-wide policies towards "culture" is in itself a measure of the development of a new type of rationality of government; or what we might call, to adapt a term from Foucault (1991), ‘EU governmentality.’ In this sense, the study of EU cultural policy should be treated as part of what Foucault terms the ‘diagnostics of power.’” (2006, 9). Thus, deriving from this point, he explains the increasing interest in culture is thereby substantially enlarging the EU’s sphere of governance (2006,16). Also from the evidence, he defines this

¹³⁹ <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=238185&tarikh=08/11/2007>

“Ben kendimi böyle bir yerden geldiğim için hiç ilginç bulmuyorum. Almanlar bunu çok istiyor. Hadi anlat bakalım ne kadar zor bir hayatın oldu, diye anlatmanı istiyorlar. Ne kadar zorluklar yaşadın iki kültür arasında kaldın, diyorlar... Ben hiç öyle, iki kültür arasında kalmadım. Siz kaldığımı söylüyorsunuz.”

¹⁴⁰ Monika Mokre, “European Cultural Policies and European Democracy”, <http://eipcp.net/policies/dpie/mokre/en>

“following measures that have been taken out of a position paper on "Post Culture 2000" (eipcp 2003) are thus rather examples than a real action plan for European cultural policy”.

“cultural action” and EU cultural policy providing instruments and legitimation for increasing European level intervention into the social (2006, 19).

Very recent large scale funding from EU Culture 2000 to *güncel sanat* scene is the “Santralistanbul renovation Project” in Silahtarağı Istanbul which includes renovation of The Silahtarağa Power Plant and transformation of the site “into a museum of contemporary arts, a museum of energy and a cultural and educational facility on the juncture between Europe and Asia. In doing so, the project promoted intercultural exchange by creating an international cultural venue that draws in influences from both sides of this border” as it is expressed in Crossing Borders Connecting Cultures the EU Culture Program 2007-2013 Brochure. It also follows up as such: “It will also play a key part in 2010, when Istanbul will become one of Europe’s Capitals of Culture. The completed site will also offer a library and documentation centre, artists-in-residence programs, recreational areas, and an “arts street” – a place alongside the Silahtarağa Power Plant where artists, architects, designers and craftsmen from Turkey and Europe will work side by side, developing programs involving the local community”. Istanbul is regarded as a bridge of cultures promoting “intercultural exchange” according to the goals of this project. But for Turkish art scene “Istanbul is no more the border or the bridge but a ‘complex’ transmitter of EU culture eastwards” (Madra, 2008a) and the artistic production is now being conducted for “the attention of a group of curator whom are interested in art in Turkey and beyond.”¹⁴¹

3.2.2. Optimism, Global War and the Biennials

Most of the studies on the axis of Istanbul Biennials and international scene concentrate on the Istanbul’s urban transformation and festivalism regarding the city as a centre that is being marketed through biennials, festivals and cultural events. Sibel Yardımcı’s work in this same axis is one of the prominent ones among those studies. In relation to the notion of *the* political in this thesis, Istanbul Biennials plays a crucial role. Biennials and “the political” mutually transform each other, benefits from each other and functions hand in hand with each other. Yardımcı argues that:

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http://www.birgun.net/culture_index.php?news_code=1153528674&year=2006&month=07&day=22
“Türkiye ve ötesindeki sanata merak saran bir grup kü-ratörün dikkatine”

Culture is now totally instrumentalized by politics and capital. This situation necessitates rethinking on the transformative power of festivals and biennials. The display forms what Schjeldahl called festivalization now has replaced the festival as an arena and instrument of challenge. This model provides a perfect mixture of softcore political discourse lack of a radical stance and amusement. It does not necessitate brain beating and contemplation and invites the audience to consume what is “interesting” (Yardımcı, 2005)¹⁴².

Biennials today, is defined as “.very effective on the contemporary art and intellectual world. Biennials focus not only on artistic issues but also on social topics and open up discussions on those topics.”¹⁴³ Also biennials provide the grounds for international communication or in other words “cast upon light on local artists in the international scene”. In numbers that are cheerfully highlighted:

In order to follow up the 10th Istanbul Biennial, approximately 600 press members more than 3000 curators, collectors, museum and gallery administrators from abroad had come to Istanbul. During those 2 months period, the Istanbul Biennial had been visited nearly by 6000 foreign guests. The 10th Istanbul Biennial which is visited by approximately 600 press members from 35 countries had found a large media coverage in international media.¹⁴⁴

Biennials “concentrating on social topics”, explicitly points out an interest on what is regarded as “the political” in the contemporary art scene. The 9th Biennial had given the signals of an incline towards a political orientation, “analysis of Turkish artists groups within the 9th Biennial, such as Oda Projesi or Xurban, would turn up additional avant-garde parallels” (Oren, 2006); the 10th Biennial has been regarded as “the most

¹⁴² “Kültür artık hem siyaset hem de sermaye tarafından tam anlamıyla araçsallaştırılmıştır. Bu durum, festival ve bienallerin dönüştürücü gücü üzerine yeniden düşünülmesini gerekli kılıyor. Bir meydan okuma alanı ve aracı olarak festivalin yerini, artık, Schjeldahl’ın *festivalizm* olarak adlandırdığı sergileme biçimleri almıştır. Radikal bir tavır almaktan kaçınan [*softcore*] siyasi bir söylemle eğlencenin mükemmel bir karışımını sunan bu model, kafa yormayı, tefekkürü gerektirmez; izleyiciyi “ilgi çekici” gösterileri tüketmeye davet eder. Kültürün araçsallaşması, festivallerin ve bienallerin farklı seslere kulak vermelerini ve eleştirel konular yaratmalarını hemen hemen imkansız hale getirmiştir”

¹⁴³ 10th International Istanbul Biennial, September –November, 2007, brochure.

“Güncel sanat ve düşünce dünyası üzerinde büyük etkisi bulunur. Sanatın yanı sıra kültürel ve toplumsal konulara da odaklanır ve bunları tartışmaya açarlar.”

¹⁴⁴ 10. Uluslararası İstanbul Bienali’ni takip etmek üzere yurtdışından 600’e yakın basın mensubu ve 3.000’den fazla küratör, koleksiyoner, müze ve galeri yöneticisi geldi. İstanbul Bienali açık olduğu iki ay süresince toplam 6.000’e yakın yabancı konuk tarafından izlendi. 35 ülkeden 600’e yakın basın mensubunun gezdiği 10. Uluslararası İstanbul Bienali yabancı basında da büyük yankı uyandırdı
<http://www.arkitera.com/sa21896-10-uluslararası-istanbul-bienali-sona-erdi.html>

political Biennial”¹⁴⁵; and according to some, “the 10th Istanbul Biennial, with its ideological references and the conceptual framework determined by curator Hou Hanrou made a great deal of PR and turn out to be a network of political relations.”¹⁴⁶ This notion of “being the most political biennial ever is also analyzed in various forms by the actors in *güncel sanat* scene. For the question on the 10th Istanbul Biennial’s acceptance as the “the most political” and whether it is being just a global imposition on the local scene, he answers as following:

HA: Hanrou [the curator of the 10th Istanbul Biennial] in my opinion has succeeded fundamentally in two things: First displaying the works in localities having neither identity nor history which has also started with the 9th Istanbul Biennial as well. And secondly, he went deep into the contemporary political conditions of this land as alternative to the cliché interpretation of Istanbul as ‘a bridge connecting east and west’.¹⁴⁷

The 11th Biennial points out a connection between artistic collectivity and politics that it is going to be curated by a curator’s initiative from Zagreb called WHW known with “their search for autonomy outside the art world”¹⁴⁸.

Here, what concerns this study is that the role of biennials and the agendas set for the content of the works. Since, being political is mostly associated with artist initiatives in the form of critical works, organizational structure, parallel to the

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=233070>

¹⁴⁶ “10.Uluslararası İstanbul Bienali, Hou Hanru’nun belirlediği kavramsal çerçevesi ve bunu delillendiren sunuş metninde yer alan ideolojik göndermelerden ötürü, belki de hiç yapamayacağı kadar “PR” yaptı. Ama bu “PR” gerçek bir halkla be hakla ilişkiler gösterisine dönüştü. Hatta bienal, bir tür *Political Relations/Siyasi İlişkiler* ağı haline de geldi”

http://www.birgun.net/culture_index.php?news_code=1191766269&year=2007&month=10&day=07

¹⁴⁷

http://www.birgun.net/sunday_index.php?news_code=1194104003&year=2007&month=11&day=03

“GG: Sürmekte olan bienalin öncekilere göre ‘en politik’ bienal olduğu yönünde bir genel kabul var. Sence de öyle mi ve böylesi global bir üst okumayla yerele - bir nevi dayatılan- ‘politiklik’ değerli olabilir mi?”

HA: Honru’nun bugünden Cumhuriyet ‘in kavramsal kökenlerine yönelik çizdiği perspektifi, mekânlarla kurduğu ilişkiyi gayet olumlu değerlendiriyorum Hanru , iki şeyi başardı esas olarak: birincisi; 9. Bienal’de de başlayan kimliksiz, tarihi olmayan yapılarda izleyiciye işleri sunması, ikincisi; yurtdışından gelen bir küratörün bir-iki ay gezdikten sonra yanlış analizlerle İstanbul ‘u ‘doğuyla batıyı bağlayan köprü’ şeklinde klişe bir tarzda okumasına alternatif olarak bu toprakların güncel siyasal koşullarının özüne inebilmesi”

¹⁴⁸ “Sanat sisteminin dışında özerklik arayışıyla tanınıyor.”

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=245526>

increasing interest of biennials in what is so far referred as “the political”, the role of the artist initiatives as “alternative, independent, critical” spaces increases as well. Curators of the last couple of biennials also has said to be interested in artist initiatives; “Charles Esche, co-curator of the 9th Istanbul Biennial, favored artist-run spaces while ignoring museums and galleries when he co-curated the Kwangju Biennial in 2002” (Oren, 2006).

In short, artist initiatives referred as by definition, if not by assumption “political” so that the importance of the role they are expected to perform in relation to biennials increases. This is a mutual process working vice versa as well, that is since the biennials or the organization committee cares more about critical works or specifically artist initiatives, the number of groups and organizations regarding themselves as artist initiatives increases at the same time:

I have a concern on the formation of artist initiatives. I believe their good will and sincerity but most of those initiatives are formed during biennials or during some big budgeted activities in order to be integrated.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹“Sanatçı inisiyatifleriyle ilgili şöyle bir derdim var, niyetlerine samimiyetlerine inanıyorum ama bu inisiyatiflerin çoğu bienaller sırasında ya da bienaller olmasa da bir takım büyük bütçeli etkinlikler sırasında o büyük bütçeli etkinliklere entegre olabilmek adına kurulan inisiyatifler. Bazıları dağıldı hatta, bir anda mantar gibi inisiyatif olalım ama bunlardan çok sağlam şekilde devam edenler de var.”
Başak Şenova from NOMAD, interview, 30.12.2007, İstanbul.

CONCLUSION

*“Politik olmakla ilgili kafam karışık”
An artist, from an interview in newspaper¹⁵⁰*

When you walk along the Istiklal Street in Taksim district in Istanbul, you will be hearing and seeing (if you are lucky) a mixture of urban sounds of costers of various kinds, slogans of demonstrations if they are able to continue to shout out loud, industrial working machines which never stops to “renovate” the pavement of the street accompanied with the dominant tunes of ‘world music’ from music markets and book shops as well as out loud voices of shouting young men and women selling leftwing newspapers of their leftwing affiliations with a sullen face and dark colored outfits. If you take a turn towards the side alleys you will find the graffiti and stencil covered walls of old buildings where these images are more than welcome to contribute to the hip atmosphere of the café’s, clubs, bars and “urban outfit” style shops and “independent art spaces” which are mostly known as “artist initiatives”. Images of stencils with their “political” contents, accompanying world music tunes, people walking around with a “street style” fashion wearing t-shirts with a “political” content in the side alleys of Istiklal street along side the romantic and poetic *Pera* restaurants of *fasıl* will not be enough to describe the livelihood of the district which is in itself accommodates all the possible meanings, symbols, images even the sounds of what is “revitalized” as “the political”. Artist initiatives in this scene, serve the purpose of understanding this “political” in the artistic field where most of these images and symbols are produced and (re)produced, the issues in the political agenda of the public discourses take an aesthetic shape and define a genre of “political art” or “political artist”.

An artist who is problematizing Kurdishness in his photographic works can be popular as “Kurdish artist with very political works”. Another group of artists organizing exhibitions on consumption or alternative election posters can be valued as “highly political” on the other hand some other groups can be devalued as “not enough political” as a result of their collaboration with curators, galleries, sponsors or museums. Artistic works problematizing gender issues can be highly valued or in other words seen

1 <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=242140> 'Politik olmakla ilgili kafam karışık', Ayşegül Sönmez’s interview with Güçlü Öztekin.

as “very political” while a refrain from the word feminism or a fear of being regarded as feminist taking place.

In my research, I have tried to elicit how these politics /the political is framed within the puzzle like intersecting space of art, politics, social movements and culture. In order to delineate the meanings associated with this ‘political’, I have examined the formation of “artist initiatives” in the contemporary art field in Istanbul where the formation is itself discussed around “being political”. In order to understand the framing of “political” in this field I have suggested employing social movements approach through three lines of analytically distinct sets.

I have examined the historical- institutional constitution of the art field in Turkey and its transformation during the past two decades of neo-liberalism as a beginning in the first chapter. I have highlighted the historical dynamics and institutional transformations “in this era of neoliberalism, where culture is a resource already targeted for exploitation by capital” (Yudice, 1998, 353) in the Turkish “field of cultural production”. Focusing on the transformation in Istanbul, I have examine the process where culture becomes a “resource” circulating from Istanbul to transnational networks since for cultural producers outside Turkey, “in contrast to work by many contemporary American artists, Turkish artists almost always address political and social issues that concern the entire country, or draw on Turkish history and myth. Only rarely do they paint private stories or psychic traumas” (Platt, 2003,21) which makes this cultural production interesting for “Western” eyes. In relation to that in the last part of this chapter, I have put forth the distinction between “çağdaş” art and “güncel” art which is more than a simple translation difference. Which signifies a “reckoning” with the modernity paradigm in the Turkish art scene, I have employed this distinction in order to show the positions of “being political”.

In the second chapter, by looking at the discursive framings of actors situated in various networks and hierarchies of the contemporary art scene of Istanbul, I have revealed the specific meanings with which ‘being political’ is framed and by employing a framing analysis of social movements. Through the “core framing tasks” of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing and the discursive, strategic and contested framing processes I have delineated the collective identities and the positions in the field that those groups construct with their diagnosis of the contemporary art field and the prognostic solutions they propose. I have explained how these artists and artist groups position themselves as independent, autonomous and ‘political’ in the

contemporary art field and as resisting actors to the big institutions, museums and galleries. I have also highlighted how their positions determined by their engagements with this framing of “political” and how they encounter and confront with the actors in this field as well as the actors outside this field.

In the third and last chapter, I have delineated and listed the issues and themes that are employed under the major frame of being political. These issues are, related to what has been studied under the rubric of “new social movements” or any form of social movements study pointing out the emerging forms of protest, being the assassination of Hrant Dink and the mobilization of the contemporary art field of Istanbul after his death; gender issues and the perception of feminism; the case of the city of Diyarbakır where “being political” on the Kurdish issue means an organic relationship with the city and the discussions of “public space” where “intervention” to public or to “street” is understood as a political act itself. In the second part of the chapter by analyzing the relationship between contemporary art scene of Istanbul and the transnational networks through European Union and Istanbul Biennials, I have examine the ‘political opportunities’ that are available for these formations of artist initiatives as “political” actors from ‘Turkey’.

The main reason behind this attempt to scrutinize the contemporary art filed in Istanbul is first and foremost to (take a snapshot) picture (of) recent forms of political engagements in Istanbul’s urban scene. Among with that, my secondary reason is to make a critical analysis of forms in which politics and art, activism and art is being discussed around the “artists of the younger generation [who] are more concerned with issues of the global economy and politics than with the social problems of underrepresented local communities and groups.”(Milevska and Kosova, 2003). By doing so I have tried to introduce a current form of “being political” mostly popular among the upper middle class young urban population. Artist initiatives, as being only one of the side of the story, best illustrates the process through which even the oppositional voices are incorporated and accommodated into what they have been opposing in the first place.

On the theoretical level, this study is an attempt to conceptualize these forms of political engagements in a local setting very different than the Anglo Saxon counterparts like RTS, Guerilla Girls, Banksy and similar others emerged. Since this label of political is negotiated and (re)articulated by the gatekeepers as well as the transnational actors, who are very curious about this “political” artist or work in Turkey as a “Middle

Eastern” this study provides an elementary analysis of the processes that the meanings attached to “political art” is articulated through these transnational networks of uneven power relations; since “aesthetics was never indifferent; it ideologically pretended such egalitarian indifference when in fact it favored certain classes, genders and sexual orientations, races” (Yudice, 1990, 142). Jessica Winegar formulates international art scene’s particular favor of “Middle Eastern” art by basing her arguments on September 11. She argues that especially after September 11 “art became the next hot commodity” (pp.181). As a result:

The events of 9/11 have sparked widespread curiosity about the Middle East, as evidenced in the endlessly repeated questions “who are they?” and “why do they hate us?”. Curators have both responded to and promoted the idea that the Middle East can be better understood through its art. Many use art to combat the stereotypes of Middle Easterners as barbaric and inhuman and to promote a more friendly vision of the Middle East and Muslims. Funds for launching exhibitions of Middle Eastern art have also increased, especially in Europe (199).

Apart from the opportunities enabling this form “political” in the art field, this study however, is not an attempt put judgment on the works or artists as if they are “political enough” or not; not just because methodological concerns but the visible challenges to artistic field “even the harshest challenges to its institutional framework, so long as they continue to nourish the frame”, are not the ones which are excluded challenges that dispense within the frame itself; “because that is the most effective means to dissolve it, thus opening up aesthetic practice to decisions over which the institution would have no control”.(Yudice, 1990,129-145.)

What is missing in this study is deeper ethnographic analysis for each case and argument presented here. Within the limits of analyzing the meanings and discourses that construct an understanding of “political” through three distinct, yet vital lines of thoughts, this thesis is more likely a picture of actors, their affiliations, historical backgrounds and the structural changes in the field. In that sense, although there would a long list of complementary analyses, an additional analytical quest would be fruitful to grasp the most of the idea on what is allowed to be “political” today. An analysis of the encounters with the actors in this field and the actors of other networks like leftwing groups would be one of them. An example will be helpful to illustrate the significance of this analysis:

A publishing house (Metis) prints annual organizers with a different theme each year. The theme for 2008 is called “Creative Resistance”. What included in the organizer is no surprisingly Banksy, Guerilla Girls, Yes Men, Reclaim the Streets and some other similar forms. In a periodical, Handan Koç (Mesele, Feb, 2008, 31) criticizes these selection criteria by questioning the meaning of “creativity” here and she attributes to this annual as “çokeksikli”. She also juxtaposes and provides some other examples and questions the understanding of creativity in this organizer. However, what she didn’t put into account that the topics of the organizer are the popular topics of “creative resistance” discussed for quite a long time which was o surprise for someone who is familiar with the subject to be introduced with those actors and groups as the representatives of “creative resistance”.

In sum, what has been discussed in the umbrella of art and politics in relation to emerging social movements, are the concepts of creative resistance, cultural activism, culture jamming and similar others. These concepts, in practice and theory, coincide with the transnational artistic networks. Artist initiatives, in these networks, operate similarly like social movement organizations in transnational activist networks. The notion of ‘being political’ in that sense, signifies the strategies, themes and mobilizations of these groups in an urban setting.

Appendix A

The content and the participants for the first two meetings of “Artist Initiatives”

The Meeting in PIST¹⁵¹

Artists initiatives and the independent / alternative the artist run spaces will come together on Wednesday, 14th June, 2006 at 18:00 at PiST/// Interdisciplinary project space.

PiST/// believes that the dialogue beneath the artist initiatives is necessary. Instead of experiencing the difficulties without acknowledging what the other goes through, PiST/// wants to share the possible ways of solving these difficulties and having a faster process of these struggles. The platform or the network that we will form together, will continue itself on the meetings held in different initiatives and with these meetings it is clear that we will be gaining strength and power.

As you will recall, the meeting Altı Aylık arranged just before they are closed down, has enabled us to start up such a collective act. We have announced you that Pist would be hosting the second leg of these meetings.

Below you will find the questions we have prepared to be discussed in our meeting. Maybe we will lack of time in order to discuss every issue in detail but the discussion can continue on the other meetings. If there are issues you would like to add and want to be discussed, please send us an e-mail to pist@pist.org.tr; thus we can use the meeting time more effectively. You can also keep track of the meeting through the web address <http://www.pist-org.blogspot.com/>. We are willing to publish the meeting on Wednesday. It is a necessary and sufficient condition for us to be in contact and to act together in some needed circumstances.

We are expecting to see all the artist initiatives and the interested audience to Pist at 18:00.

Looking Forward to seeing you,

Agenda:

- 1) What is an independent / alternative space? Can we talk about independence as such?
- 2) Will the increase in the number of independent spaces effect the art production and its quality? And how will these spaces survive, continue their projects?
- 3) How can the relations be established between municipalities and state institutions? Which one you choose? Municipality, state or private organization support.
- 4) Is Turkey only of Istanbul? Are there other artist initiatives outside of Istanbul? Is there anyone among us who is in contact with such initiatives? Is it easier to have an international togetherness rather than a local collectivity? How large is our capacity of

¹⁵¹ <http://pist-org.blogspot.com/search/label/Artists%27%20Initiatives%20Meeting>

local togetherness? What is happening here, there, on the north, on the south, on the west, on the east?

5) Are we the only audience for our projects? Who is our audience? Who is curious about us and who keeps a track of our projects? How can we increase the number of the audience and their perceptual variety? Will the fact that artist initiatives have space increase the number of the audience?

6) Can the alternative art practices and the spaces maintained only by artists? Art production or maintaining a space?

7) To become a foundation and become institutionalized, is it impossible not to happen? Can we just be alternative spaces and continue our being in that means?

8) Do the laws produced according to the EU criteria, include us? Is this important for us? What can we do?

9) What corresponds to the word Independent Artist-run Space in Turkish?

10) What kind of togetherness can we form? Can we become an art scene that supports each other? How can we improve this concept and make it function?

11) Istanbul 2010?

12) Who would like to host the next meeting? When?

Toplantıya katılan sanatçı inisiyatifleri / Initiatives joined the meeting

ALTI AYLIK / Öykü Özsoy
APARTMAN PROJESİ / Selda Asal
BAS / Banu Cennetoğlu
GALATA PERFORM / Deniz Aygun
HAFRİYAT / Antonia Cosentino
HAFRİYAT / Hakan Gursoytrak
HAFRİYAT / Mustafa Pancar
K2 / Ayşegül Kurtel
K2 / Elmas Deniz
NOMAD / Başak Şenova
NOMAD / Erhan Muratoğlu
ODA PROJESİ / Özge Açıkkol
PiST / Osman Bozkurt
PiST / Didem Özbek
PiST / Fatoş Üstek
VİDEA / Banu Onrat
BOBİN YAYIN / Emre Akyüz
BOBİN YAYIN / Sezin Eker
BOBİN YAYIN / Batu Bozoğlu

Diğer Katılımcılar / Other Participants

Halil Altındere
Özge Ersoy
İnci Furni
Murat Musull
İpek Kuran
Derya Özkan
Reneta Papsch
Nermin Saybaşılı
Ani Setyan
Deniz Şener
Canan Şenol
Pelin Tan
Aycan Tüylüoğlu
Azra Tüzünoğlu
Adnan Yıldız

*The Meeting in Altı Aylık*¹⁵²

Sustainability of Alternative Art Spaces
4 May 2006
18:30-20:30 Discussion
20:30-22:00 Music and drinks

Altı Aylık opened last February as a democratic project space aiming to foreground communication between artists and everybody who has an interest in contemporary art. The space in Karakoy was a psychical extension of our initiative. Unfortunately and unexpectedly, Altı Aylık is closing down on May 6th due to its location inside the gentrification zone extending from Galata to Karakoy; something we could anticipate, but perhaps did not want to acknowledge. Yet the initiative will continue to exist on another level.

Before we leave the space we would like open to discussion the issue of the sustainability of art initiatives and alternative art spaces within a context of oppressive and suffocating official politics. We will be happy to see all initiatives and artists among us.

The intensity of the experience of this transformation is especially strong in Istanbul. While Istanbul - as Oda Projesi has remarked – has a structure that brings together impossibilities, the city is overwhelmed by a conscious politics of homogenization. Through this process art venues become privatized, institutionalized and they acquire bureaucratic and static structures – hence the growing inclination towards large-scale museums. This situation makes more difficult the survival of flexible art spaces promoting new production practices and the experience of alternative communication strategies. The outcome of most individual efforts to resolve the problems we are faced with is disillusionment. It is for this reason that there is a need for collective effort and exerting pressure on official cultural politics.

Our intention in initiating a discussion at Altı Aylık is to seek solutions to practical

¹⁵² <http://altiyaylik.blogspot.com/2006/05/tartmaalternatif-sanat-mekanlarnn.html>

problems and to exchange ideas on what kind of a collective strategy can be adapted within a framework of mutual awareness, an independent space for sharing and creating a platform.

During this initial meeting at Altı Aylık Pelin Tan, who is a research assistant in the Art History Department at Istanbul Teknik University will contribute with her project on art initiatives and the sound recordings of the discussion will later be published on a weblog. Our goal is to continue with these meetings in different locations.

Address:

Altı Aylık

Mumhane Str. No:162 2nd floor Karaköy

(In Tophane Square, take the street between old hammam and Alpet gas station, turn right at the end of the road, opposite of Gulluoglu baklava)

Appendix B

Short list of 'Artist Initiatives' (in alphabetical order)

The Apartment Project “was initiated by Selda Asal with the aim of providing artists the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and hosting their own exhibitions. Since its opening in 1999, it has been host to various performances, installations, exhibitions, happenings and events. Some of these projects have traveled to other locations, and projects traveled to exhibit at the Apt.”¹⁵³ The Apartment is on the Istiklal Street in Taksim which is regarded as the heart of Istanbul where nearly all of the public events, art events, pubs, shops, and cafes are located; in the Taksim district, the end of Istiklal Street combines with the historical peninsula of Istanbul known as the Golden Horn.

BAS, “is an artist-run space initiated in 2006 by Banu Cennetoglu which collects and produces artists' books and printed matters. BAS, while willing to create awareness with its growing international artists' books collection aims as well to generate a new platform for Turkish artists to explore printed matter as an alternative space.”¹⁵⁴ BAS, which is now a legal association has a fixed space at the end of Istiklal Street, is Taksim district.

Galata Perform, as its name suggests, mostly organizes performance events. Visibility Project is one of them. Deniz Aygun, the program coordinator defines Galata Perform as an artist initiative as well and Yesim Ozsoy Gulan, the artistic coordinator who had started the project of Galata Perform in 2003 suggests that the team of Galata Perform, developed a character, had their objections about art and independence and wanted to be everywhere and preferred to exist with their attitudes, opinions and voices. She adds that they have created an independent space for themselves in Galata a neighbourhood located at the end of Taksim Square.

Hafriyat, with its exhibition area *Hafriyat Karaköy*, a small place in Karaköy district which is in the historical peninsula of Istanbul close to Taksim district, is one of the prominent figures in the formation of IAIs. Hafriyat group defines their position as a common platform and conception realized by a group of artists, collectively organizing exhibitions for ten years. Hafriyat, as the group suggests, is an effort to graze from the rigid, sterile, conservative, commercial and academic isolation constituted by the sphere of galleries, artists, collectors and audiences. Hafriyat claims to have a permanent sociological sensitivity. The group of artists living in Istanbul is problematizing the tragic and ironic manifestations and signs of the Turkish modernization project as they call it that way.¹⁵⁵ Hafriyat which is known as “an independent civilian group movement...” said to be “putting its name to series of strikingly unique initiatives.”¹⁵⁶

NOMAD was founded in 2002 as an independent formation and registered as "association" in 2006. The group consists of designers, engineers, architects, curators and writers and targets to produce and experiment new patterns in the digital art sphere

¹⁵³ <http://www.apartmentproject.com/apartment.asp>

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.b-a-s.info/page8.html>

¹⁵⁵ <http://hafriyatkarakoy.com/>

¹⁵⁶ “Home of Art: PİST”, GALERIST SEPTEMBER 2007, Issue 6 pg: 34.

by using various lenses of other disciplines as they suggest. NOMAD is known with its international Ctrl_alt_del Sound-art Festival.¹⁵⁷

Oda Projesi (Room Project) is an artist collective composed of three artists Ozge Acikkol, Gunes Savas and Secil Yersel. Members of this collective describe Oda Projesi as an art project realized in 2000 with a decision on renting and sharing an apartment as a private studio and share an apartment as a private studio in Galata district. According to them, the apartment “started to be evolved into a multi-purpose, and public space, with a shift in the usual role of the audience in the contemporary art scene”¹⁵⁸. Oda Projesi is mostly problematizing the notion of neighborhood and they weren’t only evicted from the apartment due to the process of gentrification in the neighborhood but also open up discussion on this specific topic of recent debates.

PIST defines itself as an interdisciplinary project space and considered as one of the independent artist initiatives. Didem Ozbek and Osman Bozkurt, the two artists of this formation, actualize many projects since 2006 in their fixed place in a district rather than Taksim which is very crucial for the dynamics of this formation. The significance of PIST does not only grow out of the location of the space but also they are the ones who organized meetings with the other so called IAIs on the mechanisms of this formation of independency, being alternative in the contemporary art field. These meetings, later on, provided a common perception on IAIs and have been contributing to a collective identity of artist initiatives.

Xurban: “Functioning as an international collective since 2000, xurban_collective has members located in Izmir, Istanbul, Linz and New York City. Imam and Pope's [two of the members] transatlantic collaborations take the form of on and offline new media projects and installations. Xurban_collective's mission is to instigate the questioning, examination, and discussion of contemporary politics, theory, and ideology. Documentary photography, video, and text are often combined in an effort to render visible the multiplicity of informative layers inherent in the subjects or situations explored”¹⁵⁹ Xurban, “uses the experimental means of verbal/visual/textual interventions in a ‘social reformist’ framework”¹⁶⁰

There are some other groups and organizations being recognized or define themselves as independent artist initiative.¹⁶¹ Those discussed above are selected because of their significance in the formation of IAIs and their explicit definitions on their role as alternative although they are not characterized as activist groups. The information above is gathered through web pages and media. From the interviews that I had conducted with the artists in those groups, writers, and curators, challenges and internal mechanisms, as well as inter group relations provide more solid grounds for understanding their relationship with “activism” and the “social”.

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.nomad-tv.net/>

¹⁵⁸ <http://odaprojesi.org/lang-pref/en/>

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.xurban.net/>

¹⁶⁰ art-ist Contemporary art magazine, Year: 3, Issue: 5, November 2006, pp(87).

¹⁶¹ See <http://www.istanbulartlist.net/LiST02.pdf> a list of organizations in the contemporary art field in Istanbul

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