

Istanbul's Alternative Art Spaces

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Abstract. Establishment of alternative exhibition spaces began in the 19th century in Europe through shifts in the art authorities. The paper summarizes this process and its effects in Istanbul-Turkey and provides brief information on the transformation of art spaces after 1990s in Istanbul. Redefinition of art spaces in the urban context and the authority managing them provokes the spectators to intertwine with the art work and appropriate the urban space through experience, thus make it public per se. Two art spaces from Istanbul which are good examples of setting the art space in the urban context through creative participation are discussed in the paper. These models depict the role of contemporary art as a publicizing agent, both for the spectators as well as the artists.

Keywords: public space, art space, urban space, Istanbul

1. Introduction

“Gallery; the exhibition hall of artworks or any commodity¹”

Art galleries can be defined as spaces where works of art are exhibited and sold, beginning from 17th century in Europe and from 19th century in the USA. The bourgeois families tendency towards arts, beginning with the Renaissance Period in Europe, through supporting the artists via patronage system (kind of a sponsorship), was very important in the emergence of art galleries. In general, it can be said that art was realized under the monopoly of a certain group; it was produced and consumed according to the demands of the church and the aristocracy until the 18th century. One of the most important breaking points of this monopoly and an important moment in the development of a relationship between art production and consumption and public sphere is the Salon Exhibitions, a kind of a public biennial organized by Louvre Museum-Paris. By this event, public encountered with art for the first time [1]. In this context, 18th century art can be defined as the era of Salon Exhibitions, the beginning of a new exhibition style/tradition and also a period of enlightened people's art debates. However the most important impetus for the formation of private galleries took place towards the end of the 19th century. The rejection of the art and the artist of the modern times from the Salon Exhibitions and Academia – judges that decide which is art and which is not –, initiated a new situation reckoning with traditions and triggered a crisis between artists and Academia. These factors provoked establishment of alternative exhibition spaces, which are the predecessor of art galleries of today.

2. Galleries

2.1. First Phase

First half the 20th century was the era of "new art" exhibited in "new galleries". Artists started to exhibit their works in private galleries, breaking the bonds with the tradition by fleeing from museums, Academia and schools. From that time until now galleries, located mostly at the city centers or in densely populated areas, are important factors to revitalize the urban environment. In this process, institutionalization of the art galleries started when the artists opened their own galleries and made specific agreements on the rights to acquire and prepare a catalog for the artists exhibited and to introduce them to the public and the press. By this institutionalization, galleries were able to have all kinds of archive material related to the artist. Eventually it can be said that galleries were transformed into a brand that takes the responsibilities of its

¹ Meaning of *Gallery*, based on Dictionary of Turkish Language Institution

artists, explores the brand-new artists, and makes the world wide art shows; which is a situation that led to a new kind of patronage system undoubtedly. Therefore, galleries which were considered as an alternative location established another authority.

This kind of authority developed a critical attitude which is very important for the process of contemporary critical thinking. It can be said that the 20th century is not only the era of galleries, but also the era of a gallery crisis. In this context, one of the most important critical attitude was developed by an art critic and artist, Brian O'doherty (he also used the name Patrick Ireland) " in his paper called: *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*" published in 1976. O'doherty/Ireland, defines the 20th century art galleries as the White Cube that refers to cubic, sterile, white walls, floors and ceilings and neutral places, and he emphasizes that the antiseptic walls of galleries determine the meaning of modern art itself [2]. Thinking that the art work's relation with the space it is exhibited inside exists only within the museum or the gallery that surrounds it; the architecture and the spectator being present in the defined exhibition space and this space pointing to the *ideal*; lead up to reckoning with this neutral white cube [3].

In late 1940s, private galleries in Turkey met with this idea of the white cube. The first galleries were located mostly on Nişantaşı-Maçka-İstiklal Street axis which is considered as Istanbul's city center. The art galleries' positioning on this axis is still valid today. These private galleries located at the city center can also be considered as public spaces. Art activities and spaces which these activities take place, provide opportunities for people to socialize, to come together and exchange ideas and to appropriate themselves to a community.

Especially in the context of Istanbul, in addition to short or long term galleries, some private banks' art galleries, contemporary art centers and galleries which are in relation to municipalities and schools are opened in the second half of the 1980s. Main reason for this situation can also be seen in Turgut Özal² and his government's free market economy that resulted in excessive and luxury consumption and the reflection of the dynamics of the post-1980's liberal capitalist order to art and culture after the military coup in 12th of September in 1980 [4]. This period is also known as Turkey's acquaintance with popular culture and media and a period that Turkish artists expanded abroad with international scale exhibitions held in Turkey. In this context, the most important event that accelerated the change in the contemporary art in 1990s was the organization of "Istanbul Modern Art Exhibition" also called as the 1st Istanbul Biennial. Debates on "who is the organizer of an exhibition" and debates concentrating on "curator" and "curatorial studies" commencing with the first biennial, prepared important headlines that helped the transformation of art sphere of 1990s.

2.2. 1990's: Redefinition of art spaces in the urban context

The Istanbul Biennials starting with the Istanbul Modern Art Exhibition, the city of Istanbul and artists from Istanbul becoming active on international art platforms, curated and conceptualized exhibitions, the tension between canvas and installation, the change in the material of art, the intellectual background of artists and therefore their artworks can be listed as the reasons of the change in 1990s. Artists' contact with topics of such as social criticism, tradition, locality, dichotomy between east and west, sub-culture, urban issues and a group of artists ridding themselves from the role of enlightened artist and their search about form and content have started the discussions that come from 1990s up till today.

These discussions and the intellectual platform produced by art along with relations with other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, architecture, etc. give way to a different critical kind of thinking. In this context, starting in 1990's, art galleries -meaning a place for exhibitions- became a space more than this: what artwork brings to the space, what the space adds to the artwork -as anything can be the subject of art- how any space can be the exhibition place of art formed the main aspects of an exhibition space.

During the 90s as the art spaces evolved into transforming public spaces, the notion of art itself was transformed into a publicizing agent. Apart from the public art, it was now possible to talk about art as a public space and art in the public interest. Place-making is one of the key issues in contemporary art. The art

² 8th President of Turkish Republic and 45th and 46th Period Prime Minister.

community tends to disclose particularities of a place and question the forces that re-define the space in the urban context. [5]

The city today, with its multi-layered structure and specific challenges caused by the coexistence of different cultures, goes through serious transformations producing new space forms. Accompanying it, artists try to provide an alternative to the ordinary, pre-defined city life. They try to create spaces that the citizens can criticize the social practices and experience the urban space. In order to build platforms for interaction and communication networks, art came out of the traditional forms and contexts (like galleries and museums) and set itself within the realm of the public sphere. Thus, artists became active in alternative publishing, educational works, local TVs, street culture and internet. This new genre of art which manifest itself in creative participation enables the spectators to intertwine with the art work through experience. Especially in the last decade, such alternative artists' spaces started to be established in Istanbul as well. Two examples of such spaces that still function will be described and the effect of their autonomous motives in the urban space will be discussed below.

3. Cases from Istanbul

3.1. Hafriyat

Hafriyat was opened in 2007 in Karaköy (Fig. 1), as an intellectual platform by artists working on ironic visions of the Turkish modernization project. The place is set as an open space that would function as a studio, archive and a communication platform. The most significant aspect of the space is that it is located out of the main art axis of Istanbul, within a commercial district. The group adopts a chaotic exhibition system, with their own words. They make an announcement to public for setting up an exhibition, without determining the number of artists or an exhibition method. In this context, they share the space with public.

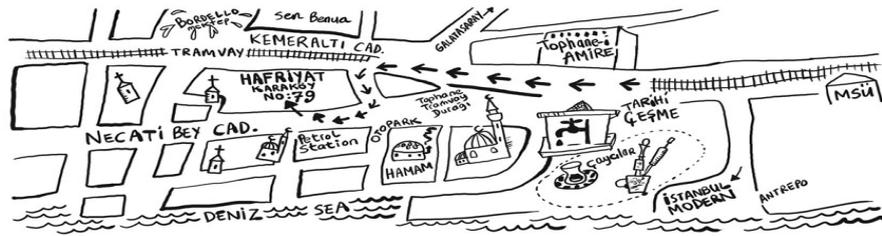


Fig. 1: The location of Hafriyat (hafriyatkarakoy.com)

As Gürsoytrak, one of the group members, phrases it Hafriyat heads for subjects, places or traces that are kept out of sight because they are insulted or labeled as wrong by the art authorities. In this sense, Hafriyat is an underground movement theming concepts set back by the Turkish art and exchanging galleries' sterile environment for streets [6]. Other than their extra-ordinary concepts and exhibition methods, another feature of the group is that they want to relate to a group of spectators that the art community ignores. Hafriyat aims to be a public space located at the street and accessed by everyone. With their provocative art work, the group had set another agenda in a place with a strong commercial character. The users of the district met a diverse vision of the city and distinct expression methods.

3.2. PİST

PİST (Interdisciplinary Project Space-Istanbul) have chosen to settle in a withdrawn district like Pangaltı that stays out of the social interest. The location of the artist initiative is at the central region of the city, however has a residential character. The residents are mostly well-educated non-Muslim citizens and they spent their leisure time in Beyoğlu or Nişantaşı. Thus there are no cafes or similar facilities in the district. However, there are nearly 20 pavilions³, 'ocakbaşı's⁴, 'birahane's⁵. While the owners and workers of the

³ It is a type of night club unique to Turkey. It is a place with loud music that serves men while hostesses stroll around. The hostesses are there to entertain the customers, sharing their table and drinking with them. The customers are from all economic and social groups. Pavilions, which are open till the morning, are important elements of the underground night life of Istanbul. They are regarded as one of the uncanny places of the city.

⁴ It is mainly a grill restaurant with an open fire pit in the middle; however what gives its characteristics is that it is mostly a place where men go in groups to drink and enjoy themselves at nights. It is part of the arabesque culture that is introduced to Istanbul after the massive immigration from Anatolia.

shops use the streets during the day time, the pavilions' customers belonging to various socio-economical groups are seen at nights. [7]

Their location is advantageous since it is in a place where communities from different socio-economical and cultural class live together. This diversity makes various meetings and interactions possible. [8] The artists, Didem Özbek and Osman Bozkurt, chose this location through their experience as the residents of the district. The artists were influenced by the inhabitants' existence in the public space: the tea seller strolling around with the tray in his hand, the car park's keeper establishing his own order, quarrels at the street etc. [9] Being apart from the main art axis of the city, PİST aims to generate an alternative contemporary art center [8].

PİST space consists of three adjacent shops set on a street, which helps it to have direct contact with the daily life. PİST does not aim to function just as an exhibition space, but they share their experiences with everyone through internet and their own publications. The initiative welcomes the neighbors and other artists every Sunday under the name PİST OPEN, since 2006. Also between 7th and 24th of every month, they establish display window exhibitions that can be viewed 24 hours for 7 days, under the name of PİST/// Half. This project gets attention of the inhabitants of the quarter and the passers-by. People stopping to view this display window introduce a diverse dynamic to the neighborhood. Another way that PİST communicates with the community is the POST newspaper that is published three times a year and distributed for free and the yearly book PAST. [8]

The most important project that made a tremendous impact was the Artist Information Project they realized during the 10th Istanbul Biennale. In order to compensate the lack of information on Istanbul's contemporary art, they established an information center in their own space. [9] It did not only have an impact on the art community, but in the quite neighborhood that was visited frequently by foreign artists and art admirers. As an extension of this project, they publish a paper called LİST once in every two months that contains the art events and news on Istanbul.

Another important project they set up in the neighborhood was the Turkish Pavilion (Fig. 2). The project made use of the homonymy of the word pavilion: 1. a certain type of night club open until the morning that addresses men only and where women work and music is loud, 2. an exhibition space like the ones in Venice Biennale that houses foreign artists. PİST established an event in Golden Gate Bar which is a pavilion near the artists' space. They had superposed images from Venice and Istanbul and caused the night club pavilion to encounter exhibition space pavilion. As they put into words, "What are compared are the similarities of two different pavilion perceptions and the fact that both of them exist by exhibiting something. While Turkish Pavilion refers to the art world, it jests at the representation of national identity. Or it compares the entertainment facilities of the lower class to the exhibition practices of a city famous for its festivals, departing from a homonym." [10] Simultaneously at PİST's own space, a video projection took place and the guests were served drinks. Thus, the whole event was spread to the whole street. [7] Due to the crowd the cars could not pass from the street. Bozkurt wanted to apologize from the neighbors for this and he was told that everyone was so pleased with the event that there was no need [9]. Inside the pavilion and the artists' space and on the street, the customers of the pavilion, the art community, the inhabitants of the neighborhood and the passers-by had come together. This event constituted an environment for all of these different groups -that otherwise would not come together- to meet and get to know each other.



Fig. 2: The video projection of PİST's space and Golden Gate Bar during Turkish Pavilion [10]

⁵ It is basically a beerhouse; however these places are mostly used by men with low income.

As a non-profit organization and an initiative that is in contact with its environment 24 hours a day, PİST is different from other art spaces in Istanbul and it has become a part of the district [9]. Its most important feature is that it is an organization that is regarded as a stranger, but can be qualified as a neighbor. It is a place that anyone can pop inside and participate in an event. This dynamic PİST created is not limited with its space, but it is dispersed to the street as well. PİST brings together groups of people that normally keep their distance, points out varieties in different perspectives of the society and does all of this in an urban space. Their works related to the metropolis and their mixed followers aim to observe and make everyone to explore the city with a new perception. On the other hand, the publicity they have injected to the withdrawn texture of Pangaltı has created a new dynamism in a quarter with its own traditions. They proved that other life styles can leak into this area and further than just finding itself a place, can unite with the environment and change it. Thus, the PİST experience shows us that the urban space is flexible and it is possible to create a public dynamic even in a densely defined texture and to unite a group with the “other”; and that an artist space has a transforming effect.

4. Conclusion

Starting from the 17th century, the art spaces' history is a story of liberation. Freeing itself from the church and aristocracy, art is bound with the decisions of bourgeoisie. The more it liberates itself from these authorities and becomes autonomous, the more it relates itself to the public. Following the shifts in the developments in 1990s, especially in Istanbul, art and its relations with authority, society and urban space becomes significant. Biennials and artist-owned spaces help these intellectual developments. The artists taking the management of their spaces in their own hands and positioning their spaces not only in the main art commerce centers of the city, but at spots that give them a chance to communicate with the residents, help them to relate themselves more to the urban context.

Two art spaces from Istanbul which are good examples of setting the art space in the urban context through creative participation are discussed above. These models depict the role of contemporary art as a publicizing agent, both for the spectators and the artists. They do not only allow different artists participation in the exhibitions/events, but they also encourage the spectators to be a part of this environment. They displace the residents of the district they use from being just a spectator to being an active user of the space and nearly a part of the work of art. The urban space thus does not only serve as a place that art works are exhibited, but a place that is made public by the artists. It can be said that during its journey, art became one of the key elements of the city life. It is one of the major elements that give a meaning to the space and connect the citizens with the city. Contemporary art does not only transform itself, but it transforms the urban space as well.

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