ETC

The Biennial and becoming
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Çinga Su

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ISTANBUL : THE BIENNIAL AND BECOMING

« Personne n'est, au fond, plus tolérant que moi. Je vois des raisons pour soutenir toutes les opinions; ce n'est pas que les miennes ne soient fort tranchées, mais je conçois comment un homme qui a vécu dans des circonstances contraires aux miennes a aussi des idées contraires. »

STENDHAL, « BROUILLON D'ARTICLE »

Curators, Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and Vasif Kortun, director of Platform Gallery in Istanbul, took a new direction in the structure of 2005's Istanbul Biennial in Turkey. Their approach in choosing the venues, artists and subject matter being more socio-politically oriented than ever before. In previous years the historical peninsula that houses famous monuments such as the Aga Sophia, Blue Mosque and Cistern was the core location of the Biennial. This year however, the venues that were chosen spoke more of post-industrialism, modernity and consumer economy, making the Biennial more of an exploration into the politics of everyday living.

The title of the Biennial was Istanbul. Artists were invited to delve into the epistemology of this ancient city and to render forth works that expressed what it currently means to live in this metropolis of mixed ethnicities and belief systems. The aim of the Biennial was to explore the city's history, the possibilities of its future and its current stance in the world. Esche and Kortun organized a residency program where selected foreign artists were hosted in Istanbul for a three-month period to produce their work while interacting with the public. Given Istanbul's rich history and current importance on today's world political platform, the Biennial opened a window on the importance of cities and how influential they are on the politics of nations as a whole.

'The bridge between the east and the west' is how many have referred to Istanbul for many years. Despite the fact that there actually is a bridge that connects Europe to Asia via the Bosphorus, this phrase is more political than it is geographical. The streets of Istanbul force you to question the political, historical and sociological dynamics of the city. Without ques-

tion, the influence of western values on this Middle Eastern city has created a hybrid of what the east and west can truly form. With the acceleration of global terrorism, the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Iraqi war and, as a consequence of all these, the increase in immigrants seeking refuge in Istanbul and other cities of Turkey, this year's Biennial was very politically charged. Add to this the probable EU membership of Turkey and it could be said that Turkey and, by extension, the city of Istanbul, is currently bound in the most complex and far-reaching political issues in the world. It's a big statement, but the stakes being played for are bigger, just witness the countries who are currently trying to influence Turkish internal and foreign policy – Saudi Arabia, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Austria – and it becomes apparent quite quickly that Turkey is at a political crossroads that is as important as any in its dramatic history.

Stressing the importance of looking at all points of the compass, the curators invited artists from Eastern

European, Middle Eastern and South East Asian countries. Among others, Pristine, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Tehran, Zagreb and Jakarta were represented. The artists of these cities often voiced discourses of resistance to their own country's governing politics. Whilst doing this, they often linked or compared such issues to movements, resistances and collaborations in Turkey's political landscape.
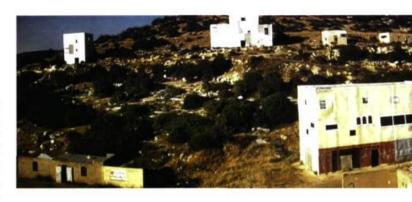
The pace of transformation that Istanbul has gone through over the past 100 years is astonishing and it seems that in the blink of an eye, new systems, good or bad, have evolved and found their place. It has

only been 82 years since the formation of the Turkish Republic and, as I read about current issues, it becomes apparent that what is currently being structured in this city are the extreme positions of religious fundamentalism from the far-right leaders of the government along with the more 'western' values of Western Europe and the U.S.A. I often ask myself how much of my surroundings in Istanbul are constructed from the results and habits of a population's everyday living and how much is manufactured to coerce said population into adopting religious and economic habits that support those who are currently politically and economically empowered.

Istanbul is a city that is beautiful and deceiving in equal measures. For instance when I see a woman wearing a head scarf, yet at the same time wearing tight jeans, a sweater that displays an overtly feminine sexuality and a trademark handbag, I don't know whether she is a part of the population that covers her head because she is paid to do so by the religious parties or whether that is her own belief and she is a reflection of a truly cultural hybridization. Cultural deception, simulation and confusion have become concerns to many, including artists, writers and directors. Illusory and deceptive scenes, looks and props are used by the media, politicians, the entertainment business, the police force and the military. An early example of the use of such strategies occurred during World War II, when rubber tanks and canvas airplanes were designed by a movie studio so that the Nazis would be mislead as to where the Allied invasion would take place.[1]

A number of artists at the Biennial reflected upon the issues of trickery, deception, fictional constructs and the sense of artifice that city life, world politics and cultural differences bring about. One of the most striking works was by Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah who produced *Palestine before Palestine*, a faux museum that investigated his land's anthropological history and the subsequent effects on natural systems. The exhibition was dedicated to the 100-year anniversary of The Palestine Museum of Natural History and Humankind. Rabah's museum exhibited a collection of fossils, bones and other artifacts all crafted by him from every possible part of an olive tree. The museum had displays and installations that explored the history of our planet, including a screening room that examined an enormous catastrophe on Earth explaining the remnants of the 'wall zone.' In addition, the museum had a café, a gift shop, an archival area and a research room. When you entered the exhibition you weren't sure whether this was a real museum and whether the videos and archives you watched were factual or fictional. This was a

purposeful and effective work fabricated by Rabah that has many other references in contemporary art practices.

In spirit, Rabah's work has connections to a number of other artists' strategies, of which the etoy and the KIT collectives are pertinent. In 1999, KIT set themselves up on the Internet and on the site of the LeBretton Flats in Canada as a housing-development company called Borderline Developments who were constructing a new site called Greylands. Company merchandise such as mouse pads and pens were produced, as were billboards and on-site porta-cabins. 'The aim of the company was to design structures; architectures that could be built in polluted sites around the world's cities via online/on-site projects'[2]. Borderline Development was so convincing because it covered every detail of producing an artificial company and sold it to the public, whilst also questioning the ecological and political climate.

Another reference, also very different in aims and process yet similar in its strategies of deception is the collective known as 'etoy,' a group of artists who set themselves up online as a corporation in 1994. They use the corporate structure to maximize cultural value. For etoy, the problems of globalization, global markets and economic exchange that drive companies, culture, individuals and politics are solved by sharing risk, resources and seeking to explore social, cultural and financial value.[3] Etoy (www.etoy.com) offer jobs, internships, company shares and many other characteristics that a real corporation would offer. It is a good example of how online artists' projects have aimed to create a difficulty in differentiating between what is factual and what is not. And, although Rabah's work is made for the 'physical,' it is equally as deceptive.

Yaron Lesham, from Jerusalem, had a similar concept in mind with the above-mentioned works as he also created a 'faked environment' for his biennial project. He presented a light-box image of an army-training village that was constructed by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in order to prepare soldiers to fight in Palestinian villages. The image, named *The Village*, looks like a real photograph, but when one looks closer, you notice that it is a collage of 50 pictures Lesham took of other villages. As a result, the light-box image becomes a prototype of an Arab village that does not exist, a nonidentifiable place akin to the faux villages

constructed by the Israeli military for training their soldiers in combat against the Palestinians. Accompanying the *The Village* was Yaron's CNN project, a series of mock reports from Iraq during the second Gulf War. In one of the CNN reports, the fake houses and streets from the *The Village* appear as if an incident had just taken place. By combining supposed war scenes from different countries, making the urban points of friction interchangeable, and through the use of fictional streets in nonexistent towns and villages, Lesham proposes that the filmed locations and issues are only as real as the media networks allow them to be.

Lesham's biennial project reminds one of the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, a story that talks about the 20th and 21st century media-driven society. In the film, Jim Carrey grows up and lives in a fake town full of actors and only after reaching his 30s does he realize that his life is a fabricated TV show in which he is the unknowing protagonist. The landscape Carrey lives in can be seen as a very direct metaphor of our own media-saturated landscape where news and advertising is often duplicitous and deceptive. More than ever before, due to advances in media technologies, we find it difficult to distinguish the real and the simulated. Reconstructing the real is not a new concept in contemporary culture : Witness still, the legions of Elvis look-alikes along with the wax museums that exhibit replicas of famous faces and bodies. *Hunt for the Unabomber*, by Swedish artist Ola Pehrson, utilized a strategy of fictional reconstruction. In his documentary film about the famous bomber Theodore John Kaczynski, Pehrson constructed his own interpretation of Kaczynski's life by creating 120 3-D and 2-D objects. He selected a series of stills from the original documentary and then modelled them into clay, drawings and paper cut-outs. The handmade recreations were then integrated back into the original documentary, generating a new work. While some of Pehrson's creations were his own interpretation of Kaczynski's life, some of the models were very precise look-alikes, rendering the viewing process a confusing and ambiguous one.

Given that western culture has a strong bias towards the illusive – adverts, special effects and animation in films – 3-D and photoshopping models for magazine covers produce a psychological economy where people trade in the technical virtuosity of their deception. What matters now is how well people can fake things and how good their techniques are. Pehrson in his low-budget intervention into the documentary, plays with our notions of the deception by making it an overt act. A successful metaphor for the way simulations are being used to manipulate the public is represented in the book *The Futurological Congress* by Stanislaw Lem, a Polish science-fiction writer. Lem created a future society where humanity sees an illusory world directly through its own manipulated experience. A pharmacological dictatorship sprays drugs into the air that cause everyone to hallucinate a world of luxury and modern convenience when, in fact, the environment and people's actual physical integrity are in a state of collapse.[4]

When we look into the origins of deception and stimulation and illusory environments, we see it in our natural habitats. Many deceptive appearances are present in insect and mammal lives and have a strong base of camouflage for survival reasons. Fish transform themselves into rocks, and insects can look like branches and leaves. Humans have also been using camouflage and deceptive techniques for survival reasons, from protecting crops by creating scarecrows to having soldiers wear leaves to disappear into the natural habitat so they are not seen by the enemy. As technology advances, the techniques of deception improve and get more sophisticated. As we well know by now, the 'real' is no longer a viable term, and 'the authentic' became an outmoded modernist fossil a long time ago. So where do we locate our dreams and desires, our perspectives and projections? With the changes brought around by technology, we have had to learn how to navigate new landscapes, of which we are not sure, more quickly than ever before. Istanbul is now at a point in time and space where it is having to speed up its reactions to such changing landscapes as more western technology and attitudes influence relationships and cultural dynamics that were once governed by tradition, family and religion. The Istanbul Biennal, rather than championing the coming together of cultures, raised an acute awareness about the illusory nature of what it means to become hybrid, of what it means to come together, especially when one partner is at a very different stage of industrial, technological and economic development.

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[1] http://www.transparencynow.com/confusion.htm
[2] Windfeld, Erik. "Toxic Homes for Sale" , *Canadian Forum Magazine*, August issue, 1999, Canada.
[3] http://www.etoy.com/
[4] Sanes, Ken. "Faking It. From the Age of Simulation and from the Focus" section of *The Boston Sunday Globe*, October 18, 1992.