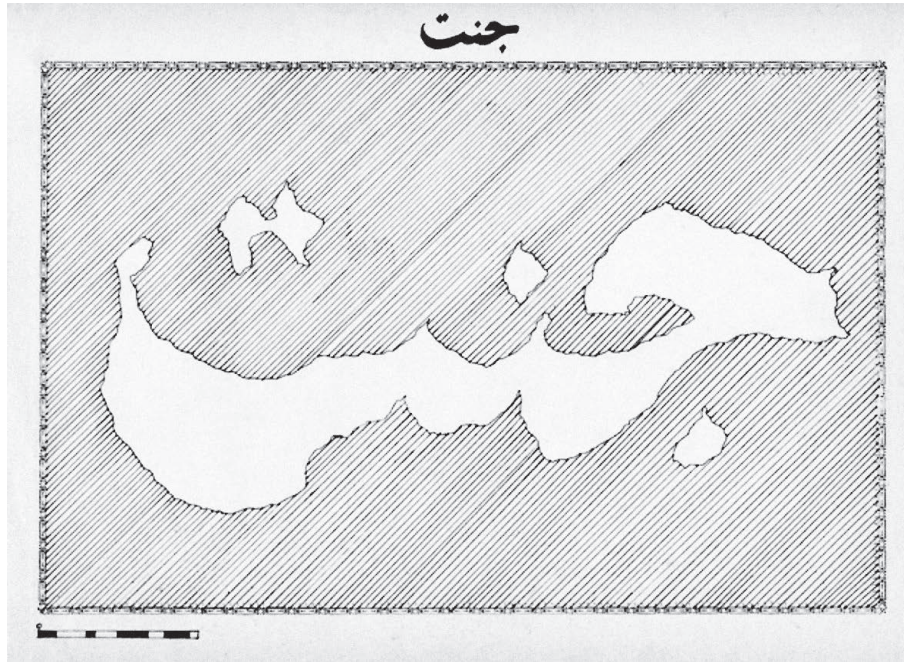


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The Grey Zone: *Censorship Disguised*

“It is not obligatory for art or the artist to seek for acceptance from anyone. Nor we have the right to label any artist under the categories of honoured or dishonoured”. Taken from the statement issued in September 2016 by Municipality of Çanakkale concerning the cancellation of the 5th *Çanakkale Biennial*, this inference, more or less demonstrates the current line of thought that provokes and underscores current instances of censorship in Turkey. The gravity of this particular event could be considered a litmus test in order to understand how censorship operates, through Machiavellian methods such as social media outrage, public condemnation and alienation, and institutional targeting.

The events concluding in the cancellation of the 2016 *Çanakkale Biennial* began with a statement issued by AKP’s (the ruling Justice and Development Party) Vice-Chairman and MP Bülent Turan, in which he condemned the Çanakkale Municipality’s support of the *Biennial* because of Beral Madra’s assignment as the Artistic Director. In his statement, Bülent Turan claimed that Beral Madra’s “support of” the HDP (People’s Democratic Party), which is at odds with the AKP on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, and her previous social media posts rendered her unsuitable for the position. Calling upon the Municipality, under the direction of CHP (Republican People’s Party), to withdraw their support of the *Biennial*, Turan went on to accuse Madra of being an ally of the failed coup attempt of 15 July, 2016:

*Beral Madra, who is appointed as the artistic director of the Biennial, had posted pro-coup statements via her social media accounts, since the coup attempt happened in 15 July. She blatantly compared the Yenikapı meeting, a first in Turkish political history as it was attended by both the ruling and the opponent political parties, with Nazis’ Nürnberg meeting in 1937. What would CHP supporters, whose leader was also present in that meeting, say about this? Would they preserve their silence on the presence of this disgrace, and hide behind the excuse of right to free speech? Or would they engage in joint cause to dismiss this person, who had insulted their own leader, from the Biennial?*¹

In response, Beral Madra, who had been the Artistic Director since the *Biennial*’s inception in 2008, announced that she had resigned for the sake of the security of the event. She wrote;

*In order to fix the problems that were caused by the distortion of my thoughts, I have declared via my social media accounts under my right to free speech—which is still relevant in Turkey to a certain degree—to maintain that the Biennial survives and to prevent any pressure inflicted on the Biennial team, I hereby declare that I have submitted my resignation to authorities.*²

Even though Madra declared that she wished the *Biennial*, which was to have opened in 24 September, 2016 would commence as planned, the Çanakkale Biennial Initiative (CABININ) decided upon cancellation. Thus, the *Çanakkale Biennial* was cancelled for the first time in its history, the gravitas of such an outcome becoming a common occurrence when other recent cases are taken into account, through pressure inflicted in a way which does not exactly fit into the definition of censorship, as the state chooses not to be seen to be directly involved, but maintains its presence through such nebulous concepts as public indignance and offence.

Of course, it should be noted that the state of emergency announced after the July 2016 coup attempt has the capacity to change the course of all events, considering the state’s increasingly direct pressure over freedom of expression. The subsequent detention of novelist Aslı Erdoğan and linguist/writer Necmiye Alpay on the basis of their advisory work for the daily newspaper *Özgür Gündem* (*Free Agenda*), known for its extensive reporting on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, provides us with a definite perspective on the future of freedom of speech in Turkey. Additionally, at the time of writing, it was announced by Turkey’s Ministry of Education that more than eleven thousand teachers working in

the heavily Kurdish populated southeast of Turkey—including artists Şener Özmen, Cengiz Tekin, Servet Üstün Akbaba, writers Kemal Varol, İlhami Sidar, Murat Özyaşar and poet Lal Laleş—had been suspended due to their alleged ties to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). However, the nature of measures taken to regulate the public presentation of artworks prior to the coup attempt suggests a relation with the aftermath of those events, as well. It would be fair to say that tension has long been a part of Turkey's art scene, no matter the source. And as the source each time becomes harder to determine, the fight against restrictions to the right of free speech and freedom of artistic expression have as a result become a problematic and compelling burden. It has become critical to determine if the case at stake is an issue of direct censorship or not. What occurred in Akbank Sanat, an arts centre located in central Istanbul and financed by one of Turkey's major banks, Akbank, at the beginning of 2016 exemplifies this dilemma.

"I intend to stay in the grey zone." This is how art critic and internationally recognised curator Başak Şenova responded when asked about the unexpected cancellation of the exhibition *Post-Peace*, scheduled to open in March 2016.³ *Post-Peace*, as a response to "how war and peace appear today", was the winning project of the International Curator Competition of Akbank Sanat, and curated by Russian curator Katia Krupennikova, who stated that the title was "a term that is a possible name for our difficult and confusing present". However, the hosting venue cancelled the exhibition due to "the delicate situation in Turkey" after terrorist attacks in Ankara in October 2015, Sultanahmet in Istanbul and again in Ankara, 17 February 2016.⁴

Surprisingly, the ensuing discussion among the participants was whether this was an act of censorship or not. Krupennikova posted the news of cancellation on her Facebook account, claiming the event to be "a case of censorship". The exhibition contributors and artists followed Krupennikova with a statement protesting about the short notice of cancellation (the announcement was emailed to Krupennikova and the jury members of the competition four days prior to the opening on 1 March), in which they also drew attention to the growing "climate of fear and paranoia" in Turkey. The artistic director of Akbank Sanat, Derya Bigalı, had pointed out the freshness of the memories of "tragic incidents in Ankara" as one of the main reasons for the cancellation. Akbank Sanat had described the decision to cancel the event as a result of the institution's "responsibility in the Turkish contemporary art scene" in their statement. Finally Şenova, the founder and director of the competition, announced that she rejected taking the matter into account in a "black and white" manner.

*We are going through a phase where we are forced to take a stance as if everything is either black or white. Throughout the period I have preserved my silence on the matter, observing such an understanding gaining prominence was as hurtful as witnessing the cancellation of the exhibition for me. I intend to stay in the grey zone in order to reach a productive conclusion concerning the matter at hand and I will not hurry while doing so.*⁵

Given the unclear nature of recent instances of artistic suppression, it would be fair to present Şenova's concept of "grey zone" as a key consideration regarding current freedom of expression. Hence as *Siyah Bant*, an initiative that aims to document and investigate instances of censorship in art, demonstrates on their website, in a majority of cases, interference is implemented by agents other than the government. *Siyah Bant* (*Black Belt*) is a platform established in 2011 to research and document cases of censorship in the arts in Turkey and to defend artistic freedom of expression.⁶ In doing so, they gather claims from a variety of sources in order to render them visible through their web page. In twenty-six cases that the initiative has documented dating back to 2000, two exhibitions have been closed down,

and one artwork has been removed from an exhibition due to the potential damage to the reputation of the organising institutions. In four cases, complaints of attacks on “moral values” were effective in the cancellation of, or attempts to cancel, events. Where the state is concerned, more intricate methods, such as threats to withdraw financial aid or approaching the issue as a marketing or image management matter, supersede direct intervention. In several additional cases, unexpected pretexts, such as supposed violations of environmental regulations have provided the justification for suppression. There have also been several instances where the source of intervention remains unclear, due to multiple conflicts amongst the parties concerned. Throughout the 2000s, the aggregate of censorship cases in Turkey has proven to be a complicated development, which justifies Şenova’s intent upon staying within a “grey zone” of impartiality.

Given that institutions which provide artists with exhibition spaces act upon status quo values, and their viewing publics exert pressure upon art and artists through complaints for whatever reason, the wheels of the greater censorship mechanism have become increasingly difficult to discern and evaluate. As the cases documented by *Siyah Ban’ın* reveal, freedom of speech remains a disputed concept due to the constant shift within political stances and the idea of public space. For example, the earliest case in *Siyah Ban’ın* documentation is the removal of Canan’s (then Canan Şenol)⁷ and Vahit Tuna’s outdoor signs, a striking example of how the indefiniteness of the concept of public space is reflected in issues related to contemporary art. These (billboard) signs were exhibited as part of the Istanbul New Art Museum’s outdoor exhibition *Outdoor Signs*. Canan’s sign proclaimed the dialogical statement, “Finally, you are inside me” (even though the sexual connotation was hard to miss, Şenol was addressing her unborn daughter), while Vahit Tuna’s sign, with the words “Don’t forget to buy bread before coming home”, were removed, following an official complaint—filed by a resident of the apartment building that hosted the project—addressed to Istanbul’s Provincial Directorate of Environment and Urbanisation. Another case in point was the blackout of YAMA screen, a public art site located on the roof of the Marmara Pera Hotel, in May, 2016. Işıl Eğrikavuk’s video, *Time to sing a new song* (2016), was shut down by the Municipality on the basis that it caused “visual pollution”. However, the determination behind this cancellation proved to obscure much more complex issues. The artist claimed that she was informed by the hotel management about threatening phone-calls, given the work’s satirical take on a religious myth, of Eve eating an apple.⁸ However, several days after the incident, the official decision was revealed to be a requirement of the measures the Istanbul Municipality takes regarding outdoor signs in order to prevent so-called visual pollution. As a further complication, YAMA screen’s status as a public art site also became part of the controversy.

The non-profit YAMA initiative, founded by Kağan Gürsel, then the chairman of the Marmara Hotels group, and curator Sylvia Kouvalis in 2006, was a venue for providing contemporary artists with a public site to exhibit their art. As a giant screen located on top of the Marmara Pera Hotel in Istanbul’s famous Beyoğlu district, YAMA screen hosted videos developed as a part of ongoing art projects by artists. After a three-year hiatus caused by Kouvalis leaving Istanbul for London, the project was relaunched under the administration of curator Övül Durmuşoğlu in 2015. YAMA screen had previously been subject to several interventions, mainly due to its location in one of the most densely populated sites in the Beyoğlu district. In 2006, Ahmet Ögüt’s video *Light Armoured* (2006) was shown during a time when Turkey’s military support to the war in Lebanon between the Israelis and Hezbollah was being heavily debated in parliament, and was subsequently shut down following the police’s warning the hotel management that its imagery might “prompt terrorist acts”.

Durmuşoğlu drew attention to the hotel management intentionally not having any say in the content of the works being exhibited. Management's absence in the decision process was crucial, as most artists had used the venue's accessibility in their attempts to highlight or subvert concealed conflicts within Turkish society. Eğrikavuk's *Time to sing a new song* was a rallying cry for women at a time when the patriarchal nature of society had become increasingly more dismissive. A previous artwork, Pilvi Takala's *Workers' Forum* (2015), presented various imaginary employee chatroom conversations which were apropos given the countless cellular phone users in the immediate area of Beyoğlu. However, in spite of its relative freedom from the hotel site, the YAMA case reveals that the increase in the art world's ties with private industry makes new censorial procedures possible, if not inevitable. Susceptible to intervention and repercussion from multiple sources, the private sector easily turns towards self-censorship to avoid any conflict with either government or the public. When the institution's business principles and sustainability are at risk, self-censorship conveniently becomes a matter of public relations demarcation. For example, as Özge Ersoy demonstrated in *Siyah Banl*'s meeting on freedom of speech in the art world in May, 2016, one of the problems with Akbank's situation with *Post-Peace* was the excessive involvement of public relations professionals in the overall process.

Analysis of censorship outcomes initiated as matters of 'public relations' or marketing is undoubtedly a result of the inconsistencies within the concept itself. In her article 'The Myth of Familiarity', where she discusses the aftermath of the attack on the cartoonists and the editorial team of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Banu Karaca defines freedom of speech as a field of struggle:

*...rather than presupposing that free speech is a clearly defined "thing in itself", a determinable endpoint, it might be helpful to see it as a terrain of struggle in which freedom of expression is in constant need of discussion in terms of power, place and history. It is in this struggle, in creating the conditions for debate along these parameters, that freedom of expression is located.*⁹

If one investigates deeper into the background of this context, it is inevitable that the game-changing coup in Turkey of 12 September, 1980 emerges as the point of departure for the shift in politics of the art world, which is no surprise for anyone who has studied the dynamics of contemporary Turkey. Clearing the way for neoliberal economic policies to prosper by suppressing all dissent and political opposition, including unions, the decade after the 1980 coup was the most effective factor in determining the direction of Turkey's political climate, from which derived a paradigm shift in the 1990s art landscape. The emergence of identity politics as a response to the eradication of any possibility of organised political opposition in 1980s became the driving force behind contemporary art practices' response to the core values of 1990s state ideology, such as 'nation' and 'borders'. Being an arena, where since the beginning of the Republic ideology was both contested and developed concurrently, the art landscape witnessed this new impetus, with the emergence of artworks and artists engaging with concepts of nation, secularity and religion in a challenging way, along with new modes of censorship and suppression.

An example of such censorship *modus operandi* during this period was the presentation of Hale Tenger's artwork *I Know People Like This II* (1992) for the 3rd *Istanbul Biennial* in 1992. Her installation purportedly referenced the Turkish flag, composed of brass statuettes of Priapus, the Greek god of fertility (with an oversized phallus), forming a crescent in a background of multiple statuettes of the 'three wise monkeys', generally attributed to such concepts as indifference and detachment, imputing current political realities of Turkey. Tenger was prosecuted by the authorities, prompted by columnist

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Beşir Ayvazoğlu's mention of the artwork in his column in the right-wing daily newspaper *Türkiye*. Ayvazoğlu stated that such a work's creator should "suffer the consequences" and a criminal complaint filed by an anonymous citizen from Çanakkale ensued. Tenger stood trial for violating the penal code and "insulting the Turkish flag", the latter of which is a serious crime. Having been acquitted one year later she claimed that her work did not target the Turkish flag; rather it drew attention to universal violence against women. Even though Tenger was exonerated of these Kafkaesque charges, she refused to exhibit her work in the following years, due to the impact of the lengthy trial process upon her.

It is no coincidence that most of the censorship cases in the 1990s and 2000s were attempts to prevent perceived insults to "Turkishness". As art critic and writer Erden Kosova pointed out, this became a period where the core ideology of Turkey, Kemalism, was being challenged as its intrinsic fault-lines became more evident. Thus the notion of nation as an institutional element was placed into question and contemporary art provided the viewer with the terrain where the cracks and conflicts within official history were rendered visible. Even though it was not an episode of censorship, prominent art critic Sezer Tansug's infamous article on Turkish-Armenian artist Sarkis, published in the art magazine *Sanat Çevresi* in 1991—where he criticised him on the basis of his ethnicity—is an exemplary case of the problematic reception contemporary art practices incited in this period. In his article titled 'About the Meatball Seller...', Tansug accused Sarkis of participating in Armenian propaganda for his own benefit. A petition condemning Tansug's article followed, which was signed by many writers, artists and academics. Some years later, Sarkis was again at the centre of controversy. On this occasion indirect censorship became the issue because of the catalogue text accompanying his

work in the Turkish Pavilion for the 56th *Venice Biennial*. Exhibited during the centenary of the 1915 mass killings of Armenians by the Ottomans, Sarkis' work *Respiro* (2015) featured rainbows as a symbol of transition and shared human experience. However, as the catalogue text—written by Rakel Dink, widow of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink (who was assassinated in 2007)—featured the word “genocide”, the Turkish Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, who were both supporters of the Pavilion, blocked the distribution of the catalogue. Nevertheless, Sarkis and the Turkish Pavilion curator Defne Ayas found a solution to overcome this ‘undefined’ act of censorship by placing a full coffin of undistributed catalogues in the exhibition space.

Is it possible to detect a direct link between new methods of censorship and the constant crisis of concepts such as national identity and public space in Turkey? As the state's interference relies upon more intricate methods, the operational platform beneath artists has become slipperier, which in effect makes functioning in the grey zone continually precarious.

Notes

¹ Anonymous, ‘MP of AKP responds to Çanakkale Biennial’s Artistic Director Beral Madra, 3 September, 2016; <https://haber.140journos.com/ak-parti-milletvekili-çanakkale-bienali-sanat-yönetmeni-beral-madraya-tepki-gösterdi-afaa080c2083#.r18gs7aqv>

² Anonymous, ‘Beral Madra: The cancellation of Çanakkale Biennial is alarming’, 5 September, 2016; <http://kulturservisi.com/p/beral-madra-canakkale-bienalinin-iptal-edilmesi-kaygi-verici>

³ The project was selected by an international jury consisting of Bassam El Baroni (independent curator and theory tutor at Dutch Art Institute, Arnhem), Paul O'Neill (curator, writer and Director of the Graduate Program at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York), Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ (directors of the Württembergisch Kunstverein Stuttgart). Developed and coordinated by Basak Senova, the competition is intended to provide support for emerging curators, reinforce interest in curatorial practices, and encourage new projects in the field of contemporary art; <https://art-leaks.org/2016/02/29/post-peace-exhibition-cancelled-in-istanbul/>

⁴ According to Katia Krupennikova the official explanation letter stated the following reasons: “...over the course of our preparations, Turkey went through a very troubled time. In particular, the tragic incidents in Ankara are very fresh in people's memories. Turkey is still reeling from their emotional aftershocks and remains in a period of mourning. Therefore, many events, including—but not limited to—exhibitions, concerts, and performances, are being cancelled every day.” Krupennikova continued in her post; “I, along with the artists in the show, believe this to be a case of political censorship. I fully recognise the tense political atmosphere in Turkey right now, and the reasons why Akbank Sanat may not wish to be associated with the exhibition. But this is also why it is essential to have open discussions and a place for people to engage with different perspectives on issues relevant in the Turkish context and beyond. This situation is a very complicated one, and that is why I am currently in discussion with several institutions in Istanbul to host conversations about the ethics and responsibilities of art professionals working in tense political and social environments”; <https://art-leaks.org/2016/02/29/post-peace-exhibition-cancelled-in-istanbul/>

⁵ Basak Senova, ‘After The Cancellation of Akbank Sanat’s International Curator Competition’; http://basaksenova.com/postpeace_tr.html

⁶ <http://www.siyahbant.org>

⁷ The artist had refused to use her family name after getting divorced, on the basis that the law enforcing women to change their surnames was a patriarchal imposition

⁸ The video animation projected the slogan, “Eve, finish up your apple!”; <http://hyperallergic.com/297665/turkish-government-censors-video-projection-and-youth-biennial-artworks/works/>. An anonymous complaint was made about the work insulting “religious sensibilities”; <http://isilegrikavuk.net/press-news/>

⁹ http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/real_democracy/19_the_myth_of_unfamiliarity