

# Parergon

In the conceptualising of this journal in 2016, I invited acclaimed Turkish curator Fulya Erdemci, to contribute to its inaugural issue, as a follow-on text to our previous exchange in 2014,<sup>1</sup> of issues related to her 2013 Istanbul Biennial: ‘Mom am I barbarian?’ and the Gezi Park protests earlier that year, and the Biennial’s (if not Turkish contemporary art’s) subsequent challenges and conflicts; the former, of the curatorial hypothesis of ‘what it means to be a good citizen’ in engaging concepts of the public domain as a political forum, contemporary forms of democracy, perceptions of civilisation and barbarity, and contemporary art as agent to the making/unmaking of the consideration of ‘public’; and the latter, of issues related to corporate sponsorship of the arts, in this particular instance, of Istanbul Biennial’s long-term sponsorship from Turkey’s largest industrial conglomerate, Koç Holding (owner of a diverse range of companies, from weapons manufacturing, oil refineries, mining and shipbuilding, to supermarket chains, real estate, banking and hotels).

On 13 July 2016, Fulya Erdemci wrote:

*Dearest Alan, so sorry keeping you in the dark! Many things have happened (... at the very same time of the airport attacks...) and I sincerely came to the verge of thinking the near Future seriously. Though we are strongly attached to Istanbul and don't want to move out, at the same time, we began to think...*

*Though it has been such a turmoil in the last couple of weeks, I also started to think subliminally on the periodical... it is good [for my contribution] to have a title that refers to my geographic and cultural coordinates and proposes an oblique perspective layering current concerns and urgent issues in relation to art and culture. My proposal is “Bar bar bar bar” as it refers to the sound of the unknown languages that the Ancient Greek people didn't understand and thus called the people who spoke these languages, barbarians. I think, it is open and inspiring, giving a historical reference to the iconic relationship between the East and West. It also points to the unorthodox languages, in its largest sense, appearing on the horizon but not yet legible.*

*I am thinking around the issues of art and activism again, the urgency to think around the issues of art, reinstating itself, against the background of urgent political issues and protests. Taking for instance two examples from Ai Weiwei (his photograph as the drowned Syrian refuge laying on the coast) and Ahmet Öğüt's last sculptures (bronze casts of the people who were attacked by the police dogs during the Gezi demonstrations), we can examine these two current responses, but at the same time, through these examples, we can think around the very issues of Art such as the ambiguity and the uncertainty factor... something like that, stating the crisis of art in midst of the whirling social struggles and international politics... These are the initial thoughts...*

On 25 July 2016, Fulya Erdemci wrote:

*Dear Alan, since I received your last mail, every morning I woke up, thinking to write to you. So sorry, but, I shut down, closed down the shutters to survive... I am not certain if I can put my elements together, if I can concentrate on anything specific rather than the post-coup attempt pressure...*

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Earlier this year in July, Fulya Erdemci sadly died at the age of sixty, not having succeeded in our aspirations to engage these issues—firstly, in consequence to the 2016 post-coup attempt in Turkey, followed by her then relocation to Denmark as curator at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces, and subsequently the 2020 global pandemic. In the first issue of this journal Turkish writer and researcher Erman Ata Uncu, in his text ‘The Grey Zone: Censorship Disguised’ analysed the direct links of post-Gezi protests/coup attempt state and governmental methods of censorship (including artist self-censorship) and the constant crises of concepts of national identity and public space, in response to Erdemci’s Biennial and its consequent developments. In this issue, as a bookend perhaps, Erman Ata Uncu returns with a further appraisal of those events and Erdemci’s legacy, of her radical vision of art’s role in the conflict between multiple publics, narratives and histories; as she wrote in her statement for the 13th Istanbul Biennial, that the poetic power of art might “imagine another world and to envision what is to come, [that] we need to invent new languages and learn the languages of the most invisible, repressed and excluded.” As a preface to his text, the following is an edited version of the aforementioned exchange, ‘Art Does Not Come from a Clean White Room’, the one duologue we did manage to put down in ink on paper, that might perhaps might operate as a modest *in memoriam*.

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Fulya Erdemci visited Sydney in the aftermath of the 2014 Transfield-Biennale of Sydney corporate sponsorship drama, that saw a small group of artists withdraw in protest at the commercial links between that company (sponsor of the Biennale as Founding Partner since 1973), and the then Australian government’s policy of mandatory offshore detention of refugees, the Biennale initially standing its ground in its association with Transfield, then capitulating after the dramatic resignation of the Biennale Board Chair (also director of that company). Extensive and polemic views were expressed in the media and arts sector about the outcome of these events, the opportunistic mixing of minority group politics for political gain with the vexations of government and corporate funding of the arts, the impulsiveness of the protesters and their apparent mimicry of similar events (the recent 2013 Istanbul Biennial), a coercive if not threatening government response, the sponsorship cessation seen as an own goal-Pyrrhic victory and the uncertain impact upon the corporate realm’s desire for future funding of the arts without being caught up in similar political complications.

Many pages of *Broadsheet* magazine focused on a spectrum of issues, of a dilemma of amplifying proportions for not only the Biennale of Sydney and any other Australian arts institution with or seeking major corporate sponsorship, but for the future relationship between art, corporate goodwill and government scrutiny. The Biennale of Sydney was not alone in finding itself in the middle of an unasked sponsorship and credibility dilemma. The Istanbul Biennial, of which Fulya Erdemci was artistic director in 2013, in the lead up to its presentation experienced its preliminary programming and performances interrupted by activists protesting against Koç Holding, and the influential main sponsor of the Biennial and the İKSV (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts). In responding to my interrogatory regarding the relationship between corporate sponsorship of art and “dirty money”, Erdemci responded categorically that, “art does not come a clean white room.”

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FULYA ERDEMCI: Actually, art's relation with power is a historical one. Just to take a look at the Italian High Renaissance – art's interconnectedness with the Church, Medicis or the Monarchs – indicates this long-term relationship. What I am trying to articulate is that the production relations and representational regimes of art cannot be abstracted from the systems that it realises itself. It takes form in the middle of the systems/economies/societies that it responds to. However, unlike many other fields, art has the capacity to unfold critically the systems – from within – that it takes part in. Since 1970s, artists such as Hans Haacke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Andrea Fraser or more recently Hito Steyerl have been working around the issues in connection with art, capital and institutional critique. Along with neo-liberal funding policies, art institutions have become more dependent on private funding and commercial support globally, and have thus been criticised, protested and boycotted for serving to whitewash 'dirty' money, as well as for being the epicentres of the distribution of neoliberal culture and mechanisms. Because of its funding sources, a group of activists protested against the 13th Istanbul Biennial starting from the first press conference in January 2013 onwards, while the 19th Biennale of Sydney was boycotted by the participating artists just before its opening date for the same reason and the *Biennial* responded to the protests with the resignation of its Chair. In a way, biennials have become more politicised international platforms and the target of protests to bring crucial issues to the attention of larger publics, while through the art projects examining the art system(s) critically; they have also become the prime sites for institutional critique. For instance, Hito Steyerl's *Is a museum a battlefield?* (2013) a lecture-performance and videowork produced for the 13th Istanbul Biennial is exactly unfolding the relationship between art institutions and power. Unfolding the historical alliances of art spaces and museums with power, she alludes to the nature of art institutions as war zones. With the same token Steyerl asks what potential connection exists between the funders of Istanbul Biennial and the military industry.

EDITOR: In an online interview with Creative Time Reports in April 2014, artist Ahmet Ögüt, one of the protesting Biennale of Sydney artists who, having initially withdrawn in protest then returned to exhibit, in response to the question how artists might have the most impact on a political situation, either through their participatory artwork or by their withdrawal, responded;

*Since I make no distinctions between art and life, I don't see a need to choose one of these two options. I rather see it as fusion of both. For me, the argument [is] that 'all money is dirty' should not be used as an excuse to deliberately compromise social responsibility. Simply providing space for criticism is an attempt to place all the responsibility on the shoulders of the artists. Institutions and curators should share this collective responsibility by being critical, in a creative way, of their own administrative structures and bureaucratic agendas. Artists have a right to act, when necessary, beyond the body of their works – if the institutions and their funders undermine their social values and basic human rights.<sup>2</sup>*

Publicly voicing one's opinion is not in dispute, but it would seem inconclusive in this context that a minority influence might presume a validity if not defendability to materially disrupt and/or economically subvert a significantly larger cultural entity that professionally represents more than their composition? As a sporting example (perhaps somewhat anathema to The Arts in Australia), it is commonly held that 'the game is bigger than the individual' who professionally plays it (and receives significant remuneration), with contractual agreements and codes of behaviour. Even sports people, no different from other citizens, though seemingly removed from the perceived intellectual

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certainty of The Left and The Artworld, equally have the right to a moral determination and expression, as did one team of professional basketballers in the USA (at the time of the original text in 2014) against their owner for his racist remarks, but their public group action did not economically sabotage (even by default) the event-platform that professionally supported them.

That biennales are becoming more politicised rostrums, over an extended period your Biennale, though hindered by protests and rupture, nonetheless provided an extended citywide platform for conflicting dialogue—Hito Steyerl's *Is a museum a battlefield?* video and performance was a specific example of an artist exercising a 'right to act' by occupying a resonant place within that discourse, rather than not at all. Perhaps more intriguingly, and one might wonder how the following might stand up in Turkey and other countries experiencing similar issues, was a comment made on a local news website at the time of the Biennale of Sydney-Transfield issue, that the actions of the artists were predominantly about distancing themselves from being "magically contaminated" by their exposure to "dirty money", that it was an instance of either believing that purity is art's natural state or in striving to cleanse itself from the perceived filth of [the sponsor], art just wants nothing to do with the "dirty world."

FULYA ERDEMCI: Today many artists experiment with art and activism to question the limits between these two—perhaps related but different—forms of resistance. Here we can see different shades and grades of experiments and attempts in the practices of mostly socially engaged artists. Artists have creative potentialities unlike many other fields of activity that are disadvantaged by their absence. Being detached from such potential I see as a missed opportunity, as through their creative acts, artists can create a deeper, long-term impact upon society and its issues, as in the case of Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), that remains one of the most resonant examples in relation to urban usurpation and gentrification, as well as institutional critique. The project presented documentation and photographs of 142 properties in the lower East side and Harlem in New York in relation to the ownership and control of urban space and was originally conceived for Haacke's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The project was cancelled by the director of the museum. This example also points out that even simply providing space for criticism is not an easy task for art and cultural institutions that are functioning in the midst of the dominating economic, social, and political coordinates of their time.

This particular work of Haacke not only established a reference point for gentrification and control of urban public spaces, but it also inspired a new generation of artists and activists today. For instance, *Networks of Dispossession*, an online collective data compiling and mapping the capital and power relations in Turkey initiated by the artist Burak Arikan as a part of his practice, but developed further by activists, journalists and lawyers during the Gezi resistance. Having been triggered by similar concerns about the unjust transfer of land through urban transformation, *Networks of Dispossession* compiled data on the protagonists of urban transformation in Istanbul and Turkey—being mainly the developers, government and media, to create maps that highlighted the relationship between them. As one of the projects in the 13th Istanbul Biennial it included three maps, of mega projects such as the third bridge across the Bosphorus, airports and dams in Turkey, another of the protagonists and processes that deprive minorities of their properties, and the third on urban transformation projects in Istanbul that included one of the sponsors of the Biennial.

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Certainly, I can understand the impulse of artists to divorce themselves from ‘dirty money’. However, this search for purity – a church of art – has also a dangerous essence in itself and refuses to take the challenge that life poses for us.

In my talk ‘Impotence of Action and the Search for the Poetic Act’ in Sydney March 2014, I mentioned that I learned of the connection between the main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennial and the military industry through the protests, starting from the very first press conference of the Biennial in January 2013. Some people asked afterwards that if I knew about this information before accepting the position of artistic director would I have become involved with the Biennial? I said at that time, yes definitely, because either we have an extensive international platform to make such situations visible and debatable, or not. I contended that this was an opportunity, through the power of art, to convey such critical issues to public scrutiny and consideration. I believe that it is an urgent task for the art world to open up discourse on such burning issues and start institutional critique from within the system for change.

In my Sydney talk I stated that in wanting to discuss with the artists, activists and others the course of action after the Gezi Park protests – being the withdrawal of the Biennial from urban public spaces – we made two public announcements to meet in the Cihangir neighbourhood park, where we were expecting those protesters to join us, or to react against us. However, they didn’t attend these forums. Similarly, we opened the 13th Istanbul Biennial on the 14th of September to the public without any official ceremonies or cocktail parties that by nature necessitate inclusion and exclusion. Again, we were expecting protests from the same group, or others; however, there were none. Nor were there during the whole period of the Biennial exhibition. There may be three major reasons for this. In the Biennial exhibition, there were two activist groups/collectives from Istanbul – Sulukule Platform and the Networks of Dispossession – and this may be one of the reasons. The Koç Group – the main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennial, that is involved with the military industry – curiously came out of the Gezi Park protest as one of its supporters by opening up the Divan Hotel (located next to Gezi Park) to the protesters seeking refuge from the police attacks. However, even more importantly, I believe that the Gezi resistance presented the phenomenon of unexpected coalitions and collective actions of multiple publics, even contrasting ones – the anti-capitalists Muslims, Revolutionary Muslims, nationalists, leftists, anarchists, revolutionaries, women’s rights movement, environmentalists, syndicates, chambers of lawyers, architects and medical workers, and even inimical football fans of competing clubs. Instead of an antagonistic, polarised public debate, there were attempts to create an agonistic public sphere. So, I believe that such a radical, almost utopian experience, even though only for a very short time, may have mutated the psyche of the Biennial protesters as well. The political agenda in Turkey has reached such extremes that they may have chosen between other diverse urgencies and avoid the Biennial in the meantime. So, this was a rather more complicated issue than it looks in retrospect.

I believe that art can be political per se – by proposing subjective transformative experiences, thus opening up those utopian moments in our daily rhythms – without being thematically political.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Visual Art+Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2014. Published by the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, I was editor from 2000 to 2015

<sup>2</sup> <https://creativetimereports.org/2014/04/01/editors-letter-april-2014-ahmet-ogut-biennale-of-sydney/>