

On the boom and value of contemporary art scene in Turkey

By Zoltán Somhegyi

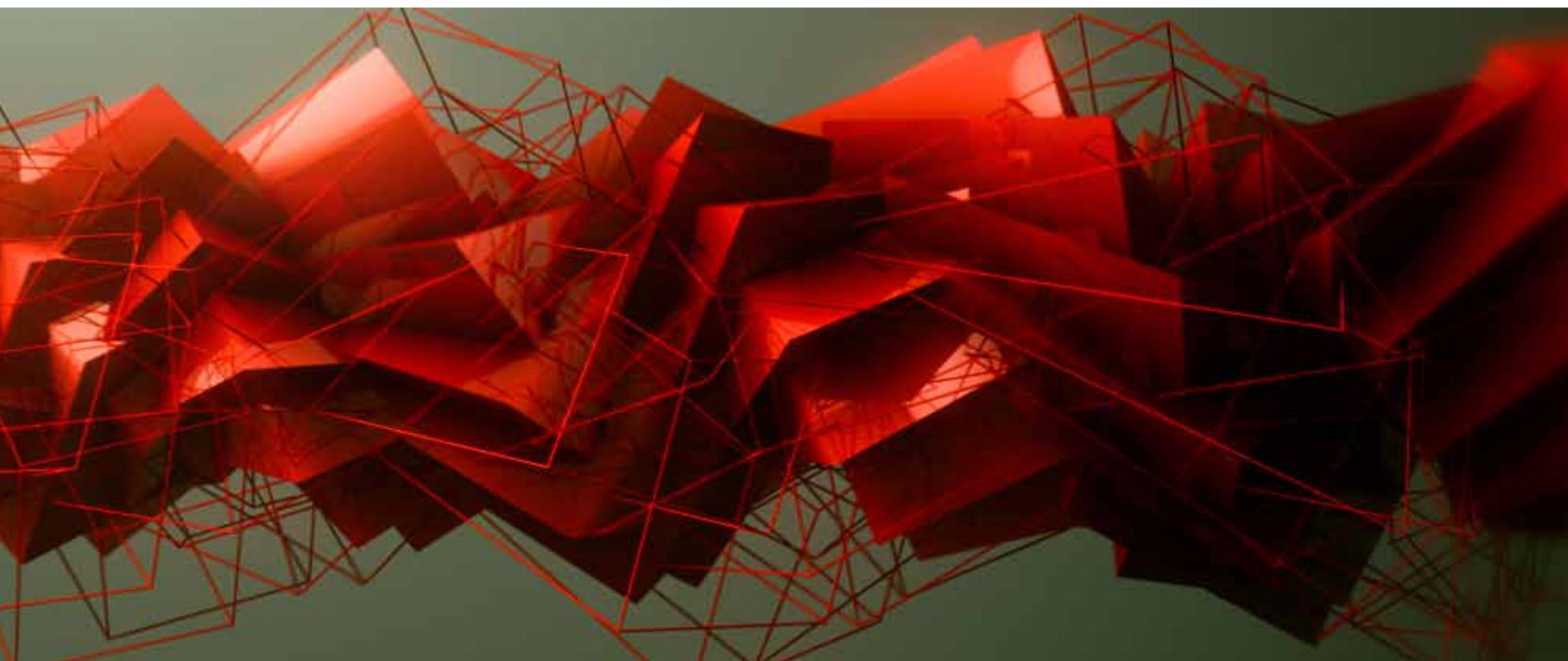


Candas Sisman, Flux, 2010, Animation video, Courtesy of the artist and Kurye Video Organization.

In the following essay I would like to show some characteristics of the development and dynamism of the contemporary art scene in Turkey. Besides my experience, local observations and the professional literature on the topic, my opinion is also based on the affirmation of some local specialists whom I asked about their ideas and that I sometimes directly quote here. Since Turkey's becoming an art center has many reasons and factors, naturally the selection, listing and analyses here cannot be complete.

It has already become widely known that Turkey, and especially Istanbul, is a new art center, or, better to say, a kind of hub in the contemporary arts' world map. We can observe the rapidly growing attention paid by the international art world to the Turkish scene in recent years. Naturally there is nothing new in the fact that there are art centers and that their locations shift from time-to-time. Regarding the history of arts, we can mention important centers from each period, like Rome and

Venice in the 18th century, Paris from the second half of the 19th century until at least the II World War, Berlin in the 1920s, New York from the 1960s- on, London in the 1980s and Berlin again in the 1990s, then the boom and/or hype of contemporary Chinese and Indian art. Art lovers and professionals started to pay particular attention to the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia) scene from 2000 on. Many artists or groups of artists, regions and media have already reached a high level of aesthetic and economical appreciation of the art from this area. As an example we could mention contemporary Arab and Iranian photography – that was the special guest of Paris Photo 2009, one of the world's leading fairs dedicated to photography. Naturally, this is combined with further joint exhibitions like the one on the 165 years of Iranian Photography at the Musée du quai Branly, under the artistic direction of Anahita Ghabaian Etehadieh, and curated by Bahman Jalali and Hasan Sarbakhshian. Another spectacular example is



the success of the Edge of Arabia; an independent, non-profit initiative for the development and appreciation of contemporary Arab art, with a special focus on Saudi Arabia, which saw exhibitions in important cities like Berlin, Dubai, London, Venice (during the 54. Biennale in 2011) and Istanbul. In fact, we have to count Istanbul among the newest and most important centres and focal points for art. The contemporary art scene in Turkey, and also in the wider region, in the Balkans and in Central Asia, has rapidly developed in the last couple of years. This development is not only in its institutions, museums, biennales, art fairs and galleries, but also often in the aesthetic quality of the artworks, in the free and vibrant experiments of the artists, in the way of incorporating international influence while at the same time synthesizing it with inspirations coming from local traditions. Finally, we cannot ignore development evident through the rapidly increasing prices. As it is often said, the leading role and the reason of a growing

interest towards a new place in the art world is not only acquisition of money. Some cities or regions are attractive because of their rich cultural tradition, long history of artistic creation and patronage, their open social-political ambiance, international and cosmopolitan atmosphere. For example, Berlin artists and galleries often complain about the lack of a real circle of high-end collectors. In this case, the city is not attractive because of the economical richness but because of the cultural diversification and open climate. In fact, Berlin is a very good example of how well-planned, cultural city-marketing can help in becoming a center of art by the conscious support and promotion of contemporary art platforms, despite the poorer economical circumstances when compared with other German cities; as Berlin's mayor, Klaus Wowereit, put it in an interview, "Berlin is poor but sexy."

Istanbul is in the lucky position of having not only a few, but all, of the important historical, cultural and

social-political factors needed to become a hub for creativity and contemporary arts. Of course, it is a city with very impressive buying potential since Turkey became the fastest growing economy in Europe in recent years. But, besides the finance, the traditional historical values of the city also play a very important role: the overlapping of Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman history and tradition, layers and traces of different centuries right next to each other, incorporated within the eye-catching evidence of the recent economic boom (especially in architecture, town-planning and design). This often-quoted and often-celebrated historical peculiarity naturally went hand-in-hand with the cosmopolitanism of the city and the openness of its people towards the new, the creative, the unfamiliar and even to the critical – characteristics that are essential to the evolution and appreciation of contemporary art. Still, as an important factor, we can mention the ideal geopolitical situation of the city, Oriental and Exotic for Western art lovers, but European for visitors from the MENASA region and the Far East. It is this feature, i.e. connecting “The Eastern” and “The Western” world, that absolutely determines the city and its art scene to become a territory to be discovered. The megapolis with its 16-million inhabitants and very young population, with the wide offer of sights, became a trendy attraction not only for the short-stay tourists, but also for artists, galleries and curators to settle down for longer periods – of course, the foreign-friendly and pro-business attitude is also advantageous. New art and design quarters were born, e. g. Nişantaşı, with galleries, fashion and design studios, boutique hotels and superb quality restaurants. All these elements create the ideal circumstances for the emerging market. If we look at the recent history of the evolution of this scene, one of the most important steps seems to be the foundation of the Istanbul Biennale in 1987. It became a much awaited and leading event in the international art world and brings a lot from global art values and energy to the city’s scene. Even the dynamism of the art and art market in Turkey can be partially considered as a result of the Biennale. Ever since its establishment the country’s scene developed in an accelerated way. Moreover, the foundation of this biannual presentation of artworks had a double effect: it directed the attention of the world to Turkey,

and also directed the awareness of the local collectors and soon-to-become-collectors to the values of contemporary art, both Turkish and international. Besides the institutionalization, also the development of a managerial class in the contemporary art field mediated the internationalization of the local art scene. Another key event shaped the art scene and the market in the recent years - the Contemporary Istanbul art fair that has its 8th edition in 2013. The yearly gathering of Turkish galleries, complemented with foreign ones, is very influential in creating a strong international context, especially since the percentage of foreign participants is increasing. In fact, in 2012 the number of non-Turkish galleries (57) overcame that of the local ones (45). The fair has approximately 70.000 visitors, thus, even if it is not a non-profit entity, it has a significant role in the institutionalization process of the scene. We can affirm that the non-profit and commercial sectors developed in a parallel way. In 2001 Proje4L/Elgiz Museum was founded by the renowned architect Can Elgiz. Elgiz constantly aims to exhibit Turkish and international artists together, thus creating a global context for the outstanding local masters. In order to show his preferences, and at the same time to also offer variety and opportunity to as many artists as possible, one part of the museum is dedicated to the permanent presentation of the collection while the other half exhibits temporary shows, often in smaller spaces which have been created for experimental presentations. Another very striking example of private-to-public museums is Istanbul Modern. Although opened in 2004, the idea of its foundation is much older and is related to the success of the Biennale, thus illustrating that, in the art world, everything is connected with each other... Already in 1987, “motivated by the interest shown in the event (the Biennale) and the dynamism it contributed to the Istanbul art scene” , Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı planned to establish a museum, but only after more than two decades was its final place found – an old warehouse on the Galata pier, that hosted the 8th Biennale in 2003. Apart from the permanent and temporary exhibitions of modern and contemporary Turkish and international arts, the museum offers additional services, workshops, film screenings, social programs, art educational and museum-pedagogical



Burcu Gökçek, White Room, 2004-2011, Video, - Courtesy of the artist and .artSümer Gallery, Istanbul

activities for the future generations of art lovers and collectors,. The museum became an important factor in the city's art scene, defining Karaköy district a new art destination, not only because of the museum but also because other private galleries settled nearby.

Art centres and exhibition spaces founded by banks also got an important position in the Turkish contemporary scene. As an example we can mention is Akbank Sanat. Its center in Beyoğlu hosts a wide range of events, including fine art exhibitions, music, theatre and dance performances, film screenings, workshops and festivals. Akbank's activity is highly focused on promoting the international opening of the Turkish scene, in both directions, thus helping Turkish artists' presentations abroad, and showing international art in Turkey. These kinds of supporting efforts and sponsoring activities certainly help in bringing together the interested and art

loving public and the creators of the newest tendencies. Besides these institutions, private galleries have an important – even if different, but certainly decisive – role and function. When listing their important tasks, we cannot stop at saying that their only work is showing artists and nurturing the local market. We have to add another crucial task – or, better to say duty – : to participate in international art fairs, to present Turkish artists to an international audience, work that even the biggest museums cannot fulfill since art fairs are for the participation of galleries. This international commitment and competition will then positively influence the local art scene and art market, and will also contribute to the diversification and sophistication of the taste, offer, request and pricing of art.

In fact, evaluation in both the aesthetic and economic sense seems to be a crucial question in the still emerging



Lale Tara, Innocent Surrogates series, 2010, photography edition of 3, 180x120cm -
 Courtesy of the artist and gallery x-sit, Istanbul.

Turkish contemporary gallery scene – a scene that is relatively young: a high percentage of galleries were founded in the last 10-12 years in parallel with the growing interest in contemporary arts by local and international collectors. According to the experience of some of the leading galleries, the growth of the economy has helped the financial success of young Turkish artists leading the market to reach its peak around 2010. This may have led to a smaller kind of a hype since prices constantly increased, not always exactly reflecting the real quality of the works, hence leading local collectors to continuously juxtapose price and quality in a global

overview. As Asli Sümer, founder and director of .artSümer Gallery in Istanbul, summarized it, “Many collectors are now looking at international art and comparing the local situation with the international. I think that in the next few years there will be a rise in the quality of art produced here while the prices are readjusted. It’s a good time to start buying again.” Certainly, in an emerging market, situation prices need time to stabilize because between conscious speculation and unconscious inaccuracy, overvaluation can occur. This was the case around 2000 when the demand for art rapidly rose and many more galleries, artists and art

dealers entered the scene. At this point, the number of people who invested in art purely for monetary gain increased, but the real long-term collectors took a step back. Initially it seemed that all the actors in the market could benefit from the quick buyers who regarded contemporary art as a new form of investment to increase the range of their financial portfolios. But, the move later turned out to be rather harmful to the whole market as the unnaturally quick increase in prices in auctions, and the constant reselling of works in secondary market platforms, led to a boom in commerce. Yasemin Elçi, director of Gallery x-ist, Istanbul, also experienced the difficulties that this quick process caused: “The quality of an artwork became harder to communicate as the real-collectors started holding a prejudice against all kinds of artwork priced above a certain level, fearing that the price was inflated and undeserved. Unfortunately, unrealistic pricing for short-term profits harmed the whole Turkish market and shifted the interest of the Turkish collectors towards international artists, which is of course a positive step for the collector, but a negative sign for the present state of the market in Turkey, because the main trigger of this change was/is the loss of long-term trust in the domestic market and its components.” Thus, the next step forward seems to be the refinement of the scene, which should also result in regaining the interest and support of those local collectors who initially helped the art market grow to an international level. Also important is not allowing good and innovative work to be labeled as “overpriced” by people who only judge quality by the rate of return in a fast paced secondary market.

Of course, we must not forget that canonization, the discovery and identification of the authentic and long-term values of art, is a constant refinement process, even though it is always influenced both positively and negatively by the actual state of the market. During boom-time, considering only the economic development, the aesthetic value may seem to be adumbrated by the financial one. However, sooner or later the two will become more synchronized. This can be considered as a learning period for the market, which is really useful, as Moiz Zilberman, founder of CDA - Projects and Galeri Zilberman, formulated it: “We have at least three generations of artists whose works are becoming

part of collections both nationally and internationally. A growing number of collectors prefer to buy locally, which enables the production of more qualified work as well as a lot of artworks produced for the market. As the collectors become more knowledgeable and works survive the test of time, it will become clearer what is relevant from the boom period.”

Diversification and sophistication can also be aided by the emergence of alternative platforms that are extremely important not only for the wider variety of offers in the art scene in general but also for providing a space and way of self-expression for those artists, groups or media that, due to their experimental character, are not always the first in the line of interest of the commercially-driven galleries. This attitude is explicitly emphasized in the case of Kurye Video Organization, a platform dedicated entirely to video art that, according to their statement “has developed a stance against the system of curators and galleries that separates the art world into those who choose and those who are chosen.” Kurye team is therefore organizing screenings, on- and offline exhibitions, festivals and further events for the promotion of this specific media, often still underestimated by art lovers and underrepresented in private and public collections.

A similar pioneering position is taken by Pilevneli Project. They are pioneering not because they specialize in a certain medium but in certain critical topics, and a particular way of showing and mediating artworks. Instead of functioning as a traditional gallery, Pilevneli Project defines itself as a new kind of platform, concentrating on creating bridges between the different actors of the contemporary scene, i.e. linking emerging artists with institutions, museums, galleries and of course with collectors, curators and art writers. As the director of this new formation, Burcu Fikretoğlu argues, in the last decades “a whole new language started to form, and we encountered a concept that includes issues such as social theory, politics and ethnicity”. Since many collectors are interested in works discussing these issues, it is worth creating a platform where the offers of the new and often critical artists meets the demand of the specialized collectors. Even the creation of the interdisciplinary exhibitions (often combining arts with architecture, design and fashion) is unique due

to the collaboration and documentation of the creative process. When talking about the Turkish scene, we normally concentrate on Istanbul as the obvious center of contemporary arts in Turkey. But, of course, further initiatives can also become very notable and offer the possibility of further growth, thus making their host cities important new centres. As an example, we can mention the Biennale in Izmir whose first edition was organized in 2011, and which incorporated the rich local tradition of the Mediterranean city. In the 2013 edition of the event, besides the cultural heritage of the location, the organizers are planning to concentrate on the analyses of the personality, role and responsibility of the artists as protectors of respect, understanding, free thinking and creativity, i.e. the works selected will also deal with current social-political issues.

“Boom and value” as I wrote in the title of this essay, and both present in the Turkish scene. The rapid development of the art market, partly in connection with the economic improvement of the country, helped the institutionalization of the scene allowing both non-profit and for-profit sectors to establish very important institutions. Speculations might happen, but artists, art professionals and art lovers understand and agree that the key to long-term development is the conscious rather than opportunistic concentration on the aesthetic rather than the financial qualities of contemporary arts.

About the writer

Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi is a Hungarian art historian based between Budapest (HU) and Bologna (IT). Dr. Somhegyi is active as an independent art historian, art critic and writer. As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he specializes in 18-19 century art and art theory, having written his PhD-dissertation on German Romanticism.

Apart from being an art historian of classical arts, his other fields of interest are contemporary fine arts, art market trends and art communication, with a special focus on the arts of Turkey and the MENASA region. He curates exhibitions, participates in international art projects, works as an art consultant, and is the editor of a series of publications presenting art collectors. He is the International Relations Manager of Art Market Budapest – International Contemporary Art Fair. Currently he is Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Szeged, Hungary. He is the author of three books, twelve catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews.



Nazım Ünal Yılmaz, Nature Morte, 2011, oil on canvas, 160x130cm -
Courtesy of the artist and Pilevneli Porject.