



# Being in Neighbourhood

by Yahya M. Madra

*“Neighbours in Dialogue” can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to develop an alternative mode of engagement, an alternative mode of production and circulation of art that side-steps the global-local dichotomy that has long dominated the contemporary art practices.*

The terms of this worn-out dichotomy is now well-known. On the one hand, there are the Biennials that showcase the mainstream of contemporary art produced in the core (mainly New York but also London, Berlin, etc.) in the post-peripheral metropolises (Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Sharjah, Singapur, etc.). Without doubt, the Biennial model that emerged as a global form for the circulation of contemporary art practices has its advantages. At their best, Biennials enable the dissemination of the most recent and cutting-edge specimens of contemporary art to a wider audience. Moreover, they also have the potential for being portals for the art practices and discourses produced and articulated within the extended hinterland of these post-peripheral centers to insert their perspectives, concerns, and agendas into mainstream conversations. In short, the Biennials have the potential to serve as platforms for genuine dialogue between the core and the (semi-)periphery.

Yet so far, the Biennials have failed to deliver on this particular promise. Rather than being platforms for genuine and reciprocal dialogue, they have quickly become a prestigious component of a process that can best be described as the festivalization of arts. It is no coincidence that the Biennials are almost always named by their host city. The terms of this exchange is clear: The commodity under consideration is a particular edition of the Biennial; the producers who supply the event-commodity are the foundations, the institutions, the curators, and the artists; and the buyers of the commodity are the sponsors and the city governments who enjoy the publicity that shores up their brand. In this process, the art (regardless of its critical content) does not only become an instrument for commercial gain, but perhaps more than that, a “spectacle” in the Situationist sense of the term.

Without doubt, a genuine alternative to this model of global circulation of art cannot be a return to a form of localism.



This is not to say that contemporary art practices cannot or should not situate themselves within their immediate local context. On the contrary, perhaps the most interesting works of art are those that step outside of the white-box and succeed to resonate within a broader public without compromising from their subversive propositions. Yet, the challenge is to be able to translate this local resonance to wider audiences beyond its immediate context.

“Neighbours in Dialogue” proposes a new model by stretching the boundaries of the local beyond the confines of the city or the nation-state. Salwa Mikdadi opened her intervention at the launching of the collection of essays (*Neighbours in Dialogue*, edited by Beral Madra, Istanbul: Norgunk, 2005) during the 51st Edition of the Venice Biennial by noting that we have to rethink the term “neighbourhood” (“mahalle” in Turkish) as a metaphor for the region that stretches from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Caucasus. Transposing a term that invokes the possibility of immediacy and familiarity within the anonymous structures of modern metropolises to a regional scale makes it possible to reconsider another cognitive mapping of the world. Rejecting both the core-periphery model of the Biennials and the post-colonial partitioning of the Eastern Mediterranean geography into nation-states, the concept of “neighbourhood” enables us to imagine and articulate artistic practices and critical discourses that are simultaneously transnational and local.

The groundwork of the project, initiated by the invitation from Enver Hadjiomespahic, founder and director of the ARS Aevi contemporary art museum in Sarajevo, began with the edited volume (mentioned earlier) that brought together writers from Armenia (Ruben Arevshatyan), Azerbaijan (Leyla Akhundzadeh), Egypt (Khaled Hafez), Georgia (Shalva Khakhanashvili), Iran (Tirdad Zolghadr), Lebanon (Saleh Barakat), Palestine (Kamal Boullata and Salwa Mik-

dadi) and Turkey (Nermin Saybasılı). The conversation that began in this book was culminated in an exhibition curated by Beral Madra in Istanbul (March 2007) and subsequently donated to the ARS Aevi to be included in the museum’s collection. The artists produced their contributions while living and working together during a 10-day long residency in Istanbul. During the entire process that stretched over almost 3 and half years, the artists, curators, and art critics from the neighbourhood began to develop and produce various side-projects and collaborations (e.g., “A Consumption of Justice”, a show curated by Beral Madra in Diyarbakir in 2005 featured some of the artists and writers participated in the project). In short, rather than submitting itself to the demands of the political economy of spectacle, the project realized itself by taking its time and languishing over a long gestation period.



DILEK WINCHESTER, *On Reading and Writing*. Neighbors in Dialogue. Photograph by Atif Akin

Inevitably, the cognitive mapping that is implied by the concept of “neighbourhood” refers to a common Ottoman legacy that continues to structure the region in certain ways. But the works of art that were produced for this exhibition do not romanticize this common legacy. On the contrary, they encircle around the traumatic kernel of this legacy. Dilek Winchester’s work “On Reading and Writing”

takes its point of departure from the first three Turkish novels published during the late Ottoman Empire. Even though the books were in Ottoman Turkish, they were printed in Greek, Arabic, and Armenian alphabets, respectively. Taking this practice as her point of reference, Winchester transcribes three short paragraphs that narrates the experiences of a little child as she encounters with this grammatical difference for the first time. The text of these short paragraphs are in Turkish but they are transliterated in, again, Greek, Arabic, and Armenian alphabets and inscribed on three small, portable blackboards with white chalk. This installation immediately invokes the iconic photograph that depicts Kemal Atatürk as he introduces the new Latin alphabet on



a portable blackboard. From the perspective of the official discourse, this iconic image has served to mark the Republican break from the Ottoman past. In contrast, Winchester's work, by quoting from this iconic image of the Republican Cultural Revolution, underscores the complicity of the Republic with the late Ottoman genocides. The texts inscribed on the blackboards, by narrating the experiences of a little child who feels sad because she cannot understand the letters that her father wrote to her mother or is utterly surprised when she learns that not all kids speak different languages at home and in school, re-enacts the trauma of the post-Revolutionary erasure of the multi-lingual past from the perspective of an innocent child.

Winchester is not the only artist who encircles around the trauma of late Ottoman genocides and the Republican modernism that rose out of its ashes. x-urban's genealogical meditation on Anatolian monuments, by juxtaposing the images of the foundations of the Great Altar of Pergamon (the Altar itself is currently in display in the Pergamon Museum, in Berlin) with those of the Security Monument located in the center of a very prominent square in Ankara (produced by the official sculptor of the Third Reich, Josef Thorak in 1931), directs our attention to the destruction that preceded the modernist reconstruction of the

Republic. The Security Monument, with its fascistic depiction of muscular workers, farmers, and soldiers, clearly designed to support the Republican Cultural Revolution and its foundational myth of a break from the Ottoman past. The fact that it refers to a Hellenistic past is no coincidence. The monument, built by a German architect with Nazi pedigrees, ironically replaces the Altar of Zeus which was in turn excavated and shipped to Berlin by German archeologists during the last days of the Ottoman Empire, only a few years before the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

The theme of destruction continues in Vahram Aghasyan's





“Ruins of Modernity”, a minimalist video of concrete heaps and ruined concrete masses, and in Lamia Joreige’s diaries from the 2006 Lebanon War. Aghasyan’s ruins are contemporary architectural forms, but they are abstracted from their concrete contexts—their sculptural form suggests that these

are also monuments but ones that negate their own monuminality. In Joreige’s photographs of Beirut, we don’t see the destruction that befell on this country as a result of the Israeli Defense Forces’ attack on Lebanon. Instead we find uncanny and eerie images of a deserted Mediterranean city. Andrej Djerkovic’s contribution, on the other hand, encircles around another destruction, the Srebrenica Massacre of 1995. In this spectral work, the names of the slaughtered are displayed in Brail alphabet, white on white.

It is indeed noteworthy that the stories that these artists chose to tell each other and to us are all about destruction. Farhad Moshiri’s work provides us a clue as to why this is so.

Probably the most humorous of all the works included in the show, the installation consists of a slew of little black toy cars (found in Istanbul) spilling down from the wall and forming a black puddle on the floor. Looking a lot like an oil leakage when viewed from a far, the work reminds us that we aren’t



really alone in the “neighbourhood”. Following the disastrous dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, first the British, then the US continued to regularly intervene and claim a stake (when deemed necessary with violence) in the region in order to control the flow of black gold. As attested by Joreige’s diaries of 2006 Lebanon War and Djerkovic’s book of genocide victims, the violent re-organization of the borders are still continuing. Steve Sabella’s subversion of stamps, an important marker of the sovereignty of a nation-state, suggests us that the proper attitude toward the post-colonial partitioning of the region is to think beyond it. By transposing the profile images of each participating artist onto a stamp of another’s country, Sabella proposes that we need to think and act beyond the nation, as a part of the neighbourhood.

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