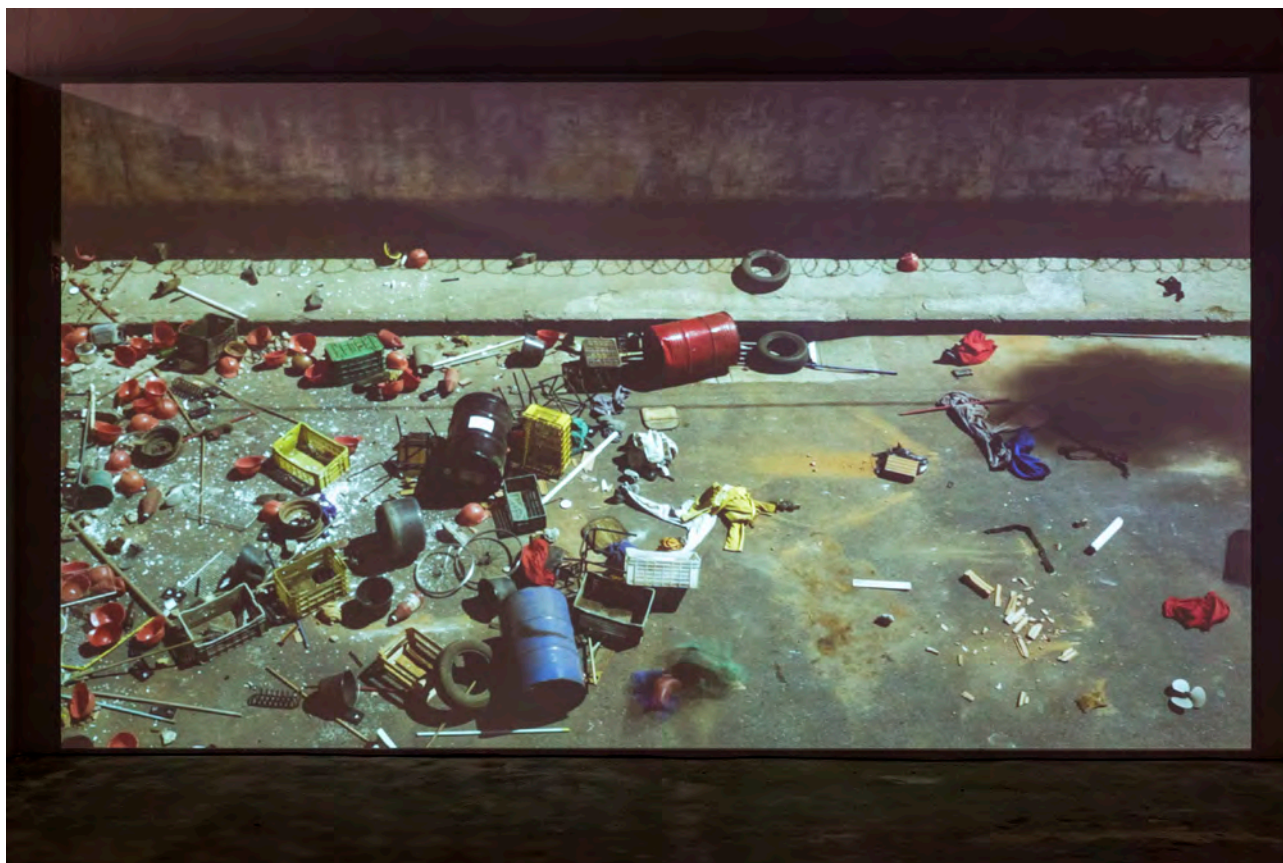


Barbarians instead? - Fragile dichotomy at the 13th Istanbul Biennial 2013

By Zoltán Somhegyi



Ayşe Erkmen: *bangbangbang*, 2013 a crane and a buoy, crane approx. 20 metres, buoy diameter 85cm. Courtesy of Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin and Galeri Mana, Istanbul. Photo: Servet Dilber



Cinthia Marcelle and Tiago Mata Machado: *The Century (O Século)*, 2011, video, 9:37 min. Courtesy of the artists and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo
Photo: Servet Dilber

Seven young men are writing their journals and diaries every day; some quickly, some more calmly, letting their own rhythm of thinking guide their pen. They come every day to fill their notebooks with reflections on the current situation in Turkey. This performance was the work of the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset. The installation was not in the center of the 13th Istanbul Biennale, and not even in the main venue, but on an upper floor of the Galata Greek Primary School. Nonetheless, it summarized and symbolized very well some of the focal points of the event: the urge for reflection on the private and social status of the individual, the necessity of thinking over new ways for the creation of personal and national identity, and considerations on the radical changes in the actual political situation in Turkey. Within the work, it is perhaps less important what the young men write, more significant is the demonstration of their activity

itself – highlighting the importance of critical thought. In today’s hectic world, we tend to manage all aspects and issues related to our life and environment in a quick, superficial way, not taking into consideration the multifaceted character of the problems we encounter. The performance demonstrated, in an elegant way and with really minimal tools (curtained windows, dimmed light and simply some lamps on the desks focusing on the blank papers), the importance and the necessity – or perhaps we should directly call it “the must” – of reflective thinking and of self-consciousness, the qualities that distinguish, or should distinguish, mankind. The 2013 edition of the Istanbul Biennial had a very acute title, both straightforward, leading visitors towards the most important issues of the event, and also poetic, leaving enough space for personal considerations, evaluation and appreciation of the single works and of the entire series of exhibitions. The title, “Mom, am



Elmgreen & Dragset: Istanbul Diaries, 2013, performance installation where seven young men come to the space every day to update their personal diaries, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Servet Dilber.

I barbarian”, is a quotation from Lale Müldür’s book “Insert Title of The Book”, and it incorporates many layers of significance and also tonalities. Firstly, literally, given the first word with which the title starts: Mom – it reflects our insecurity when, during our education, and especially during the early stages of our intellectual and emotional development, we try to ask the opinion of our elders, most often the guidance of our parents. The second part of the quote then refers to our constant wish to better understand ourselves and our world: “am I”? Am I this or that, am I so or so? Can I and/or shall I be something else? Different? Something more? Do I have to be and do I want to be different at all? Shall I be satisfied or strive for something else, something more and higher? Development and progress, or maintenance and stagnation? And if the one or the other, with what means and at what cost? Here we arrive to the third element of the question, part that zooms in on the

concrete topic of the Biennale: the word barbarian in this case is not a simple definition, noun or adjective, and evokes not only a group of people or behavior, but denotes a fragile dichotomy. A dichotomy, with two opposing sides which are pressurizing us towards selection, but we cannot easily – or sometimes, cannot at all – decide what to do and what would be the best. The disadvantage of complexity does not make for an easy selection. What are these oppositions incorporated in this fragile dichotomy that the word barbarian refers to? For example: civilization or barbarity in society, sophistication or primitivism in (life)style, democratic or authoritarian guidance in state, development or stagnation in the direction of context and environment etc. – but what makes the question more knotty, and what the different artworks presented at the Biennial also clearly demonstrated is that our preferences in choosing between these categories is not as easy as it may seem.



Carla Filipe: Rorschach Installation, 2011-2013, 10 untitled books eaten by bookworms, on plexiglas shelves, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nuno Centeno, Porto and Galeria Graça Brandão, Lisbon. Photo: Servet Dilber

Normally we tend to choose and prefer the first options (civilization, sophistication, democracy, development etc.), but who can be sure that what we call development for instance is really the best solution, achieved with the best tools, for the benefit of every member of the society – including the poor, the minority, the underprivileged and unfortunate too? Hence the fragility of the current situation indicates our insecurity that what we do might as be equally civilized or barbarian.

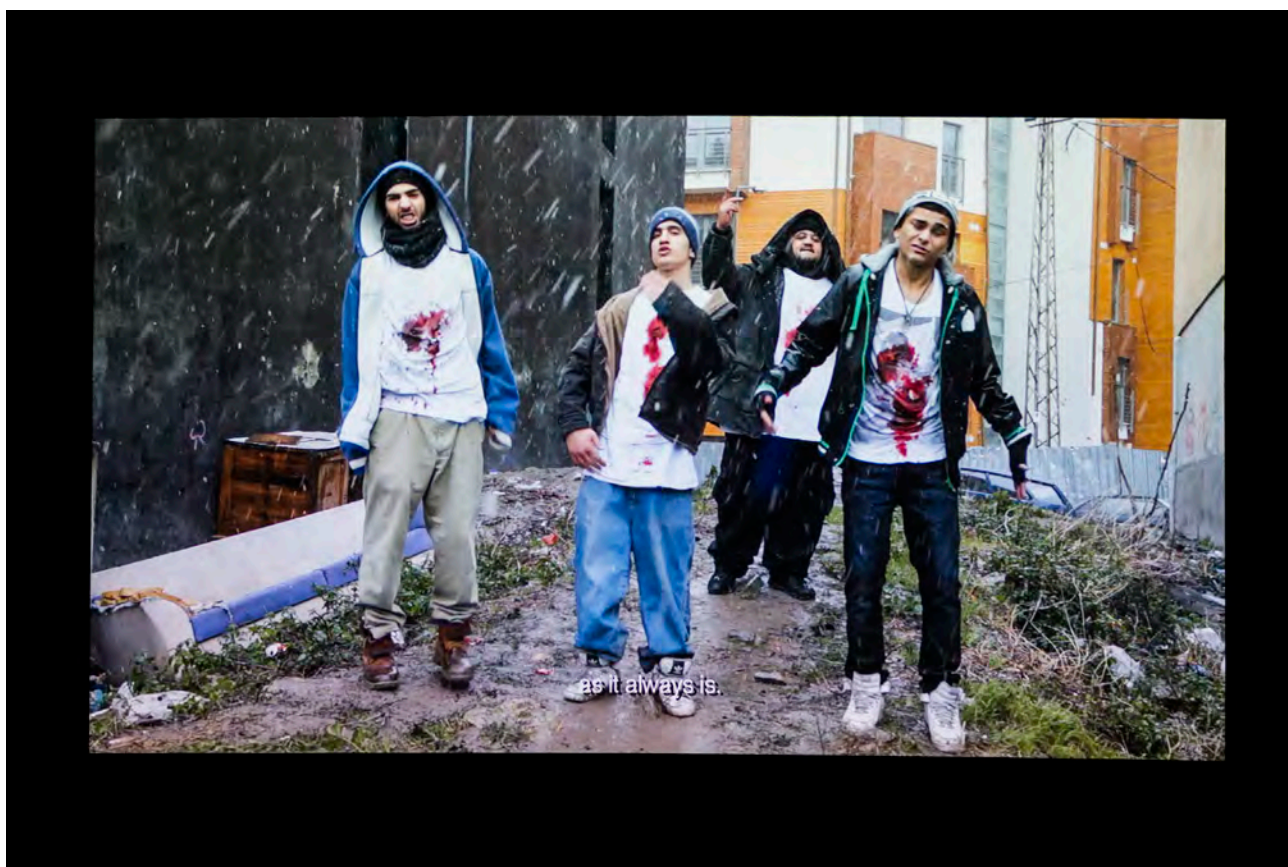
Many of the works selected for the Biennial reflected on these questions, directly or indirectly, and also dealt with the notion of “barbarian”. The term is traditionally considered negative, both in the context of “nations” and as a form of “behavior”. But what does it mean today, what exactly is a barbarian act? As we can read in the curator Fulya Erdemci’s “Conceptual Framework” of the Biennial, written in the summer of 2012 and published at a press-conference at the very beginning of

2013, i.e. well-before the Gezi-protests: “As a critique of the highest form of civilization and rationality, which has produced a world of barbarity in its negative sense (through colonial injustice, inequality, repression and violence), many artists of the Western tradition have advocated historically for what was primordial, primitive and irrational (Romanticism, Primitivism, Fauve, Dada and Surrealism for example). This is also true of today. What does it mean to be a good citizen today, in Istanbul for example? In the midst of the ongoing urban transformations – the battleground – does it mean to conform to the existing status quo or take part in the acts of civil disobedience? Neo-liberal urban policies advocate the implementation of free market parameters that lead to socio-economic Darwinism, which in turn, creates a wilderness, where the powerful beat the weak.”¹ This is how the polis (ancient Greek: citizen) becomes the antonym of barbarian (again an

ancient Greek term), but we start to lose our security if the barbarian really is undoubtedly the negative part. Is the “un-normal” automatically a failure to be repressed? When we transfer these considerations to(wards) the public space, we can immediately think of the protesters (not necessarily limited only to those of Istanbul itself, but more globally to consider protesters from the last year(s) throughout the world. These groups of protesters) who were quickly labelled as nonconformist, rebellious or anti-governmental, thus setting instincts against these barbarian features in motion – take the public space in occupation. But is occupation really a barbarian act? As Tuba Parlak observed in a previous edition of this journal: “According to the ongoing urban transformation practices, those in power seem to be envisaging an Istanbul of their own with little consideration for what the public needs or wants. With such exclusion from the municipalities’ grandiose schemes, all Istanbul residences become barbarians.”² What the protesters on the streets directly, and the works on the Biennial indirectly – or, in fact, sometimes not even so implicitly –, cross-examined is the question of exactly what is more barbarian: not taking in consideration every aspect of large-scale decisions and making numerous groups of politics automatically accept these radical changes, or protesting against them in the places of the public? Or, as Catherine Milner formulated the question in her review of the event in *ArtAsiaPacific*: “Who are the barbarians – the people tidying up our cityscapes or those trying to stop them?” And that is why Istanbul seems to be an exciting place to observe how people are dealing with these questions: the rapid urban transformations led to heavy protests, where not only the changes themselves but several collateral sub-questions related to urban and public space were also questioned, also the methods and tools of these changes were thoroughly criticized. It seems important to understand these curatorial considerations and to grasp the ideas that can be further developed from them because many of the works can be read from this perspective. Let’s take Ayşe Erkmen’s work, titled *bangbangbang*, as an example. Her large installation was inescapable as it was placed right in front of the *Antrepo nr. 3.*, the vast warehouse in the port, that contained a large part of the exhibition and that was

often considered as the “main” building, even though the Biennial had four other venues: the aforementioned Galata Greek Primary School, two spaces on the lively Istiklal Street Arter and Salt Beyoğlu, and a project space named 5533 on the other side of the Golden Horn. Ayşe Erkmen’s installation consisted of a crane that lifted up a huge ball, very similar to those that are used to destroy entire buildings. The only difference between those destroying balls and the one on the artwork was that the latter was made of light plastic. The ball regularly hit the building not only because of the crane’s working but because it was made of a light material and even a slight wind could make it swing towards the wall. This constant oscillation then served as a kind of metronome that persistently reminded the visitors of the complicated questions of building and destroying, leaving intact or erasing (even if this wiping out can serve as making space for further and new constructions) or, in fact, leads us to recall the dichotomy of civilization or barbarism. We would define construction as the activity of civilization and destroying as that of barbarism, but the visitor, who had seen the work in the center of Istanbul might easily get the impression that at the end it is not as clear cut as it initially seems. The work may as well refer to the dilemma of whether “in the name of culture” we should always think of clearing away anything that is in our way, or if this tendency turns out to be a new form of barbarism? But besides the general reference to the issues of success of culture and progress in civilization, the work also gained a very clear local actuality because the building itself is also in an area where urban transformation is planned. Maybe this very building is in danger of being erase? Even if not, it was still symbolically a very fortunate choice to place the installation at that edifice that “contains culture”: several dozens of works from the Biennial.

The reference to the drastic change of urban landscape – including the transformation of both private and public spaces – was maybe even more explicitly discussed in Halil Altundere’s video that was both expressive and ironic. The video had a curious genre. As observed by Dino Dinçer Şirin, it “features the artist using a new cinematic language that oscillates between a video clip and video-art”.⁴ The style, speed and editing technique was definitely reminiscent of a mass-culture video clip,



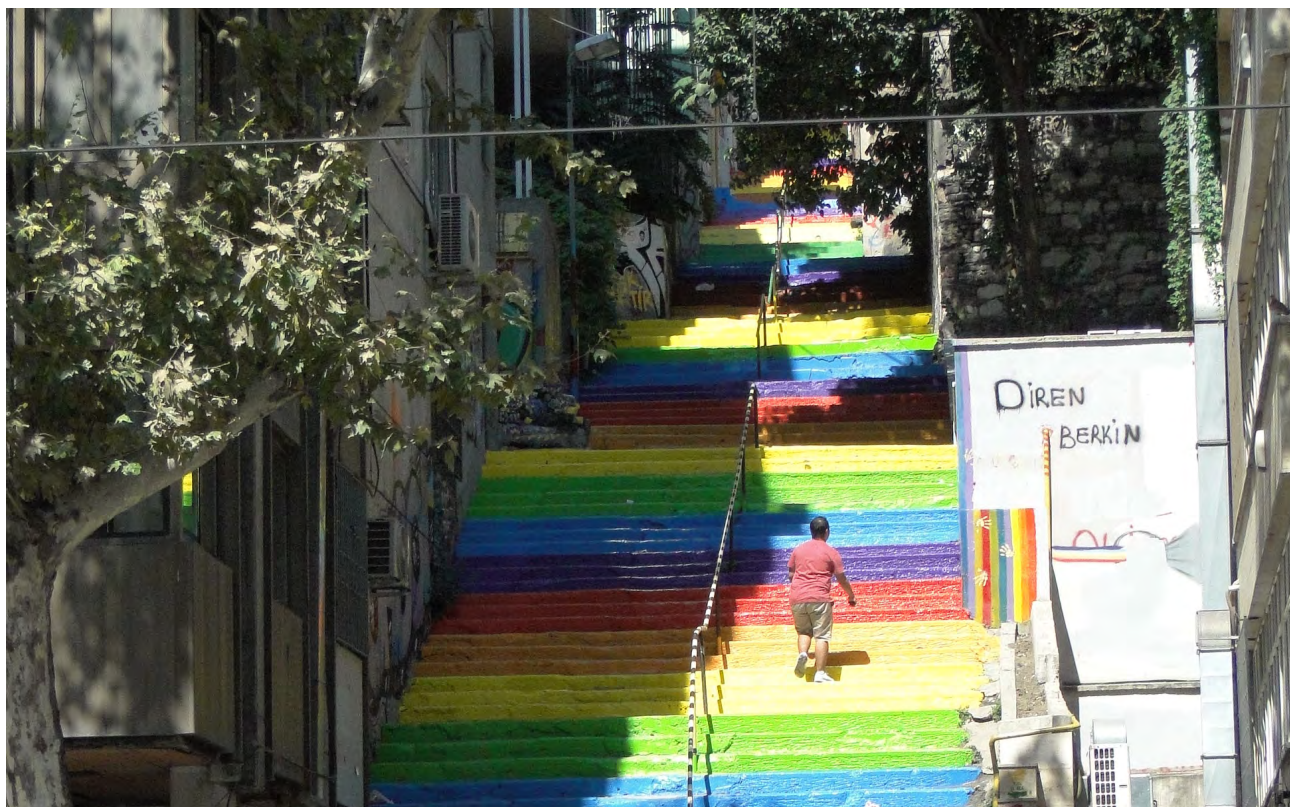
Halil Altındere: *Wonderland*, 2013 February. video, 8:25 min. Courtesy of the artist and Pilot Gallery, Istanbul. Photo: Servet Dilber

while the narrative character and the critical examination of pivotal issues made it a highbrow artwork. In the approx. 8-minute work, titled “Wonderland”, the inhabitants of Sulukule district of Istanbul are seen protesting against the demolition in the neighborhood, which for six centuries hosted the Roma population of the city. Ironic and dreamlike, satirically critical and magically funny situations are altering, while visual and musical elements of hip-hop and Roma (sub)culture are finely synthesized in the artwork. We have to add another important detail however, while many visitors interpreted the work from the perspective of the Taksim events of summer 2013, the piece itself was produced much earlier, in February 2013. Close to the hip-hop-style music of Halil Altındere’s work, the strange sounds of another video, created by the Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle and filmmaker Tiago Mata Machado, titled “The Century”, also filled apart of the exhibition space.

Attracting visitors to watch a short film on the odd oscillation of political powers – an oscillation that in a way defines, or at least heavily influences our everyday life - the video starts with a clear, empty street from above, and suddenly a large number of objects (metal sticks, oil barrels, plastic helmets and wooden crates) are launched from the far right side of the screen – so far right that we cannot see who or what throws them in to the middle. We can only observe how this debris, dirt and powder fill the public sphere of the street in less than five minutes. But the video lasts double this length, it is because after the filling of the space, with a short break, it starts again in reverse: the image is inverted like in a vertical mirror, we see the same street empty again, and the same objects arriving in the same order, but this time from the left side. Christina Li argues correctly that this change refers to the political division of right and left,⁵ and we can add to this that at the

same time the video also reflects the bizarre manner of appropriation of the public space during clashes. From the point of view of the normal use of the public space, every demonstration or clash, origination any political side leaves their rubble as a necessary consequence of the confrontation. In fact, we can even mention a phenomenon in Istanbul that approaches the question exactly from the other direction, showing a positive appropriation of the public space. I call it a phenomenon because some may not consider it a proper artwork. It was not part of the Biennial, still, it is both impressive and runs parallel with the concepts of the event, it was also very close to the exhibitions, both in time and space. The nearly 200 steps of stairs in the Fındıklı-Cihangir neighbourhood were painted rainbow-colors by an Istanbul local, Hüseyin Çetinel, with his assistant Volkan Tecimeroğlu on 27 August 2013, less than three weeks before the opening of the Biennial. Two days later they were painted over in grey – by Municipality workers, according to some witnesses quoted in the media.⁶ But after the outcries of locals who welcomed the colorful steps and disliked the re-greying of them, the Municipality granted permission for the project and again, two days later, the steps were repainted. This time, however, it was a common social event, which was announced on platforms of social media, and through the invitation of locals: “Take your brush and come”⁷. From the point of view of the positive appropriation of the city, this third painting (after the first color and second grey) is the most important because local inhabitants worked together on the project. This communal act could perhaps be interpreted as a collective urban art work that appropriates the public sphere, making the inhabitants feel the district is something that really belongs to them – as well as making them feel greater belonging to the district – also due to the collective work of the embellishment. Our context directly and multi-sensorial influences our existence, and the inhabitants’ preference for the rainbow stairs is a spectacular and concrete example of this. On a (public- and social-) art-theoretical level however Stephen Willats has been investigating these questions since the beginning of the 1960s. That is why it was particularly interesting to observe (after climbing the rainbow steps...) his works in Arter, like the photo print titled: “What made me like

I am – Trying to understand me as a social product”, where he examined the phenomena and factors that construct our socio-cultural identity. Consciousness of our cultural identity and critical thinking leads to more responsible management of our life in the fragile dichotomy of civilization and barbarity – that is, as we have seen, fragile not only because the passage from one to the other might easily happen, but also because more and more often we are not even sure which is better. Perhaps we should start trying to over the separation? As the curator Fulya Erdemci mentioned as one of the aims of the Gezi protesters in the Curator’s text (written between the Gezi-protests and the opening of the event): “These people (the Gezi-protesters – Z. S.) rejected the established practice of politics based on polarization, and rather chose to come together around their demand for basic freedoms and rights, and formed a communal practice on a micro-scale which proved that significantly different, even clashing worlds could coexist, and act together.”⁸ Therefore, responsible management involves not simply having care of our own life, but also of being able to create responses. The constant need to redefine our position, finding new answers to the newly emerging questions of our existence thus emphasizes the importance of culture – as one of its most common symbols of this quest, the book was brought into focus in Carla Filipe’s installations, titled: “If there is no culture, there is nothing”, a film on the artist’s favorite antiquarian bookshop and its owner, facing the difficulties of surviving in today’s long-lasting financial crisis. In another work of hers, titled “Rorschach-installation”, open books (taken from the same shop) contained fine-shaped lines caused by bookworms, but the same hole-lines also appeared symmetrically on the facing pages thus referring to the accidental forms of the Rorschach-tests. Allusion to the examination of the mental state (but in this case not only on the level of the individual, but of the whole society) is then put in connection with the urge to provide greater care of culture. The fragile dichotomy seems to be constant in our life. The works at the Biennial thus showed that the manner in which we are trying to defend and to make progress in our civilisation sometimes leads to less civilized solutions, whose result is that we might prefer to be(come) barbarians instead.



Rainbow steps. The steps of the nearly 200 stairs in the Fındıklı-Cihangir neighbourhood were painted rainbow-colours by an Istanbul local Hüseyin Çetinel with his assistant Volkan Tecimeroğlu on 27 August 2013. Photo: Zoltán Somhegyi

About the Writer:

Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi (1981) is a Hungarian art historian, teacher and writer and currently based in İzmir, Turkey.

As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he specialized in Eighteenth and Nineteenth 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 and art market trends, with a special focus on the arts of Turkey, the MENASA region and Central Asia.

Dr. Somhegyi curates exhibitions and participates in international art projects using his expertise to demonstrate and transfer the art practices and scene in the countries of regions he cover to the international art arena.

He is also an independent consultant of Art Market Budapest – International contemporary art fair. Currently he holds the position of an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture of İzmir University in İzmir, Turkey.

He is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews in different international art publications.

End Notes

1. See the full text on the Biennial's website: <http://13b.iksu.org/en>; last accessed on 20 December 2014.

2. Tuba Parlak: Istanbul Biennial: to problematize local urban transformation practices.: Contemporary Practices. Vol. 12.

3. Catherine Milner: Istanbul Biennial. : ArtAsiaPacific Vol. 86.

4. See Dino Dinçer Şirin's text in the Guide of the event: Guide to the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts – Yapı Kredi Publications, 2013 p. 131.

5. See her considerations in the Guide of the event: Guide to the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts – Yapı Kredi Publications, 2013 p. 83.

6. See more details at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbuls-rainbow-stairs-painted-grey.aspx?PageID=238&NID=53528&NewsCatID=341>;

7. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/rainbow-steps-return-after-beyoglu-mayor-vows-colorful-era-in-istanbul-bohemian-neighborhood.aspx?PageID=238&NID=53588&NewsCat>.

8. Fulya Erdemci: Mom, am I barbarian. Curator's text. in: Guide to the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts – Yapı Kredi Publications, 2013 p. 23.