

Fragile Affinities - (re)strengthening international artistic collaboration



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Panel Focus Turkey

Achim Wagner (poet and translator, Berlin) – Selda Asal (artist, Apartment Project, Berlin/Istanbul) – belit sağ (videomaker/visual artist, Amsterdam) – Necmi Sönmez (curator, Düsseldorf)

No space to breath. The situation in Turkey since 2013

Achim Wagner, poet and translator based in Berlin, gave a fast overview of the protests and the political developments in Turkey since 2013. That year demonstrations and civil unrest began, initially to contest the urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. The peaceful protest was followed by violent conflicts; supporting protests and strikes took place across Turkey, protesting a wide range of concerns at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, of expression, to assembly, the authoritarianism of Erdoğan, the war in Syria, ... – the Turkish government in general. The range of the protesters encompassed both right- and left-wing individuals, 3.5 million people are estimated to have taken part in demonstrations across the country. But: Nothing changed and 'now people are tired', Achim Wagner stated.

In August 2014 Erdogan became the country's first directly-elected president. In July 2016 the government survived an attempted coup and Erdogan declared the state of emergency, which applies until today. The authorities subsequently detained thousands of judges, soldiers, teachers, journalists, intellectuals, artists etc. on suspicion of involvement in the attempted coup. The country faces a diplomatic crisis.

Since that time the Turkish art scene has been seeing closed museums and galleries, cancelled biennials, censored art works, attacks on exhibitions, imprisoned artists, curators, and art critics. Hard to believe that Istanbul was elected European Capital of Culture in 2010. Necmi Sönmez, Düsseldorf based independent curator, painted a gloomy picture of the current situation: Museums and creative institutions are mainly privately owned by powerful families and are concentrating on decorative art. Also the Turkish biennials see harmless artworks, which seems to be the only kind of pieces that finds its way to the public. There is no real conversation about contemporary art and no art magazine that can be taken seriously. Thus and due to a general atmosphere of fear, many artists are practicing self-censorship. Support for Turkish young artists generations is poor, e.g. all the residencies in Turkey are open for foreign artists only. A one-way mobility can be stated, which goes hand in hand with the fact that it is difficult for Turkish artists to get visa at the moment. The art market is characterized by intransparency; written agreements between artists and institutions are seldom. As a consequence many artists and intellectuals have left the country. The lack of reaction to the current situation will most probably lead to a loss of cultural memory.

Protest through artistic work has become dangerous or at least difficult. Ways of how to continue have to be rethought. Artists who stayed in Turkey as well as Turkish artists and intellectuals in exile are searching for ways of protest against the political situation and the changes in civil society. Necmi Sönmez pointed out the need to defend the right of free speech, to continue with cooperations and to maintain an open-minded dialogue as well as to stop self-censorship. And Achim Wagner posed the question 'how to deal with the situation?'

How to continue as an artist?

Translating what can not be said

Selda Asal, artist and initiator of the [Apartment Project](#) in Berlin/Istanbul, focused on the question how artists can proceed with the artistic practice. She mentioned that almost everyone in Turkey can talk about imprisonments in the personal environment. Sometimes it seems to be enough to be famous and to be on the opposite side to be in danger. Fear is used as a political strategy.

In 1999 Selda Asal founded Apartment Project, the first artist-run space in Istanbul. Later, in 2012, the Apartment Project moved to Berlin. The platform is primarily engaged with art in different political contexts as well as with interdisciplinary and experimental art and arts education. It has realised numerous projects in Turkey, Germany, the South Caucasus, and Iran.

Selda Asal talked about the project 'SİS – In the blink of a bird'. In 2016 artists from Istanbul, Izmir, and Mardin came together and spent one month together, living and thinking. As a result the framework of the initiative 'SiS' (Turkish word for 'fog') was set up that focused on questions of visibility, taking a position or not, or mobility. Topics like violence and tonguelessness or the question how oppression and censorship will transform what is to be produced and said today were tackled. Therefore zines, manifestos, directives etc. were used and collaborative films produced. Speaking indirectly through the arts – a method that might be workable for artists who aim at reflecting the current political situation in Turkey.

Speak out loud

belit sađ, video maker and visual artist now living in Amsterdam, talked about her own experiences with her art being censored in Turkey. As part of the group exhibition 'Post-Peace', curated by Katia Krupennikova, her work 'Ayhan and me' was planned to be shown in Amsterdam. When the curator applied with the exhibition concept for the Akbank Sanat International Curator Competition 2015 and won it, 'Post-Peace' was supposed to move to Istanbul.

belit sađ's video work 'Ayhan and me' is about Ayhan arkın who was part of the Turkish Security Forces active in mass executions of the Kurdish population in the 1990th. He later confessed that he led operations that killed over 1,000 Kurdish people. Videos of the confessions were shown on television and were available on the internet. belit sađ looked into the subject and developed a work about arkın's personal transformation and on how to think about the term 'evil'.

Her work, which was a written proposal at that time when Krupennikova won the competition, was then censored by Akbank Sanat. Their conclusion 'we cannot commission this work' was never officially explained. Following this incident belit sađ, together with the curator, made a second proposal for the exhibition. But finally, only one week before the opening, 'Post-Peace' was cancelled/censored in total.

belit sađ talked about her experience of feeling alone and isolated in such a situation. She got in contact with the initiative Siyah Bant an organisation that documents censorship examples of art in Turkey, helps artists with dealing individual cases, and fights for defending artistic freedom of expression. The initiative makes visible what really happens in cases of censorship, as people usually do not talk about it. belit sađ published her censorship story in an open letter and, as a personal consequence, decided to live outside of Turkey for an indefinite time.

Discussion

The following discussion stated that the issues of censorship in Turkey are going down, first of all due to the fact, that people are afraid of making critical and relevant works. Questions of self-censorship become part of self-interrogation. A pessimistic mood is prevailing, characterised by fear: due to the state of emergency rule nobody knows what will happen. Almost everybody knows someone who got arrested or imprisoned. Worst of all, people might fall into oblivion while being imprisoned.

Selda Asal described the necessity to 'translate' through the artistic work what is happening in Turkey. This is what she is doing, together with other Turkish artists, with the Apartment Project in Berlin. Asked why artists are speaking indirectly through the arts instead of speaking out loud what is really happening and thus are being accused of conspiracy or condoning of the system, she said that 'it is not the time to be a hero'. It is a personal choice to decide where one wants to be. She decided to stand outside, to search refuge and to continue with her work.

belit sađ made clear that she is not that pessimistic about the situation as artists usually find ways to continue. She posed the question 'how it can be possible to talk about censorship not as an disadvantaged position' (in contrast to being arrested or being killed etc.)? And she pointed out the need to speak out collectively. Even in Turkey there are ways of showing political art.