

Great Expectations Great Concepts: Challenge of The Istanbul Biennial with Popular Discourses of Global Art World

Büyük Umutlar Büyük Kavramlar: İstanbul Bienali'nin Küresel Sanat Dünyasının Popüler Söylemleri İle Mücadelesi

Nevin YALÇIN BELDAN 
Muğla Sıtkı Koçman Üniversitesi,
Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi,
Muğla, Türkiye



ABSTRACT

The international mega exhibition Istanbul Biennial, which was first held in 1987, presents an unconventional exhibition model which has been structured with a choreography dominated by the curators' discourse. Within the framework of different concepts and themes determined by the selected curators, various venues specially designated by the curators were used in each exhibition to clearly reveal and characterize the artists' attitudes towards the subject. In this paper, the concepts and titles of the Istanbul Biennial held between 1987-2019 are scrutinized and the themes put forward by the curators for the exhibition are summed up in a certain categorization. This categorization is discussed under the three main headings: 'global metropolis', 'political and cultural issues and borders', and 'ecology and human activities' and the exhibitions are dealt under these headings. Based on the analysis of these topics, a question occurs: "Did the curators of the Istanbul Biennial try to manipulate the concepts of the themes?" In addition, it has been discussed how much the Biennial titles and concepts contribute to the idea of being a part of the global mainstream, which points to the initial founding goals of the Biennial.

Keywords: İstanbul Biennial, Contemporary Art, Global Art World, Exhibition, Concepts

Öz

İlki 1987 yılında gerçekleştirilen uluslararası mega sergi İstanbul Bienali, küratörün söyleminin hakim olduğu bir koreografiyle yapılandırılmış, geleneksel anlayışın dışında bir sergileme modeli sunmaktadır. Seçilen küratörler tarafından belirlenen farklı konsept ve temalar çerçevesinde, sanatçıların konuya ilişkin tutumlarını net bir şekilde ortaya koyabilmek ve bu anlamdaki tavırlarını karakterize etmek için her sergide küratörler tarafından özel olarak belirlenmiş çeşitli mekanlar kullanılmıştır. Bu makalede 1987-2019 yılları arasında gerçekleştirilen İstanbul Bienali'nin kavramları ve başlıkları irdelenmiş ve küratörlerin sergi için ortaya koyduğu tema ve konseptler belli bir kategorizasyon içerisinde ele alınmıştır. Buna dair yapılan sınıflandırmada 'küreselleşen metropolis', 'siyasi ve kültürel meseleler ve sınırlar' ve 'ekoloji ve insan faaliyetleri' olmak üzere üç ana başlık tespit edilmiş, sergiler bu başlıklar altında ele alınmıştır. Buradan yola çıkarak elde edilen saptamada "Küratörler temaların kavramlarını manipüle etmeye çalıştılar mı?" sorusu ortaya atılmış ve bu soruya yanıt aranmaya çalışılmıştır. Ayrıca, bu çerçevede Bienalin başlangıçtaki kuruluş hedeflerine işaret eden Bienal başlıklarının ve konularının küresel ana akımda yer alma fikrine ne kadar katkıda bulunduğu tartışılmıştır

Anahtar Kelimeler: İstanbul Bienali, Çağdaş Sanat, Küresel Sanat Dünyası, Sergi, Kavram

Geliş Tarihi/Received 01.01.2024
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted 30.03.2024
Yayın Tarihi/Publication Date 31.03.2024

Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author:
Nevin YALÇIN BELDAN
E-mail: nyalcin@mu.edu.tr

Cite this article: Yalçın Beldan, N. (2024). Great expectations great concepts: Challenge of the Istanbul biennial with popular discourses of global art world. *Art Vision*, 30(52), 24-32.
<https://doi.org/10.32547/artvision.1413224>



Content of this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Introduction

The Istanbul Biennial has both an important and prestigious place in the international art world in contemporary art. This importance has been emphasized especially in foreign publications on biennials, the curators who organize these biennials and conceptual exhibitions, and it has emerged as one of the indispensable points of contemporary art in terms of both its exhibition approach and the concepts it deals with. The journey of the Istanbul Biennial began in 1973 as a part of the International Istanbul Festival initiated by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.

The festival management aimed to draw international attention to the plastic arts in Turkey, to showcase the country's artistic tendencies and to highlight artists who have contributed to contemporary art. In the longer term, the main principle was to ensure the emergence of new trends and movements or to create an infrastructure for this and to keep international art exchange alive (Madra, 2003, p. 13). Turkey had not yet had a modern art museum when the first Biennial, which was organized in 1987 under the title "Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces", was opened. The biennial team and curators, who had to wait for the 2000s for this to happen, realized that the lack of such a museum was due to the fact that few artists had been sent to central biennials such as the Venice Biennale, the Paris Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale, and in short, that Turkey had a small number of artists in the international art scene.

Especially with the 4th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, foreign curators were hired and the Biennial entered a new era. With the 4th Biennial curated by Rene Block, the approaches to organizing exhibitions, determining space and concepts have constituted an important turning point in the history of the Biennial. Since its inauguration in 1987, the idea of using historical spaces as venues has been attractive for both artists and viewers. Especially in the first exhibitions, historical spaces have been used more frequently. The concepts determined for the Istanbul Biennial have been in a way to facilitate its further articulation to the global network with the 4th edition. Therefore, the titles and subjects that put the local under the magnifying glass have been moved away from. However, despite the shift towards global concepts, Istanbul's very strong and influential substructure full of concepts, topics and historical and political narratives, and its geographical location opening it up to other concepts, did not prevent almost all the concepts and sub-headings proposed by the curators from being opened to Istanbul. At the core of what was called Metropolis was actually Istanbul. Politics was an integral part of it and ecological issues were affecting artists and curators all over the world.

The first two Istanbul Biennials were "Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces" directed by Beral Madra; "Production of Cultural Difference" curated by Vasif Kortun in 1992; "Orient-ation-The Image of Art in a Paradoxical World" with Rene Block in 1995; "On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties" with Rosa Martinez in 1996; "The Passion and the Wave" curated by Paolo Colombo in 1999; "Egofugal - Fugue from Ego for the Next Emergence" with Yuko Hasegawa in 2001; "Poetic Justice" with Dan Cameron in 2003; "Istanbul" co-curated by Charles Esche and Vasif

Kortun in 2005; "Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War" with Hou Hanru in 2007; "What Keeps Mankind Alive? "; "Untitled" with Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffmann in 2011; "Mom, am I Barbarian?" curated by Fulya Erdemci in 2013; "SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms" with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in 2015; "A Good Neighbor" curated by Elmgreen & Dragset in 2017; and "The Seventh Continent" curated by Nicolas Bourriaud in 2019.

With all these concepts and subjects, the Biennial has taken an important step towards creating a memory for both Istanbul and contemporary art. The most important purpose of this article is to contribute to this memory formation by following the Biennial concepts.

Methods

As a result of a long-term study on the exhibition model of the Istanbul Biennial, it was determined that one of the two main actors of the exhibition is the space and the other is the concept, and this determination led us to such a study. The starting point of the research was the on-site examinations of the last eight Biennials starting from the 10th Istanbul Biennial. Special files were created for each Biennial and in these files, every review of the exhibitions, including panels and conferences, was recorded. In addition to the on-site observation of the Biennale, the literature review constitutes a very important part of the working process of this article. The most basic source in the literature review is the Biennial catalogues. Apart from that, Biennial criticism and exhibition reviews from local and foreign sources have an important place here.

Results

With the 4th edition of Istanbul Biennial, Rene Block initiated a new and important process in the history of the Istanbul Biennial, both in terms of the exhibition model, determining and presenting the functioning of biennials and artistic approaches in a global context, and in terms of addressing the concept. Especially with this Biennial, the idea of being a part of the mainstream, which was targeted, has become much closer. Another important finding is that the concepts dealt with in the Istanbul Biennial are in the same pot with the concepts determined by other central biennials such as the Venice Biennial. These concepts are part of the general approach of curators circulating globally and the Istanbul Biennial works with these curators. Therefore, with its concepts and selection of artists, the Istanbul Biennial has created a space where contemporary art is discussed worldwide and new artistic approaches are exhibited.

Global Art and Its Literature: "Non-Traditional Renaissance of The Local"

In her book on Biennials, Sabina Vogel recalls a specific term, "world literature" which has been used since the Enlightenment. The term referred to literature beyond national borders. However, in 1827, Johann Wolfgang Goethe alleged that "world literature" also refers to a wide range of works that carry a supranational and cosmopolitan spirit. So, it is primarily related to a broader world of art with its themes beyond national borders. The term "world art", on the other hand, is used for the first time in the 1930s in "Weltkunst", the German art journal (Vogel, 2010, p. 69). Hence biennials are the visual shows of this "world literature" and "world art". It must also be pointed out here that Bernd Wagner used a brilliant term for global art: "non-traditional renaissance of the local" for global art. (Vogel, 2010, p. 70). According to Groys, "...every biennial can be seen as a model of such a new world order because every biennial tries to negotiate between national and international, cultural identities and global trends, the economically successful, the politically relevant" (Groys, 2009, p. 65). Hans Belting does not completely show appreciation of this hegemonic global art world. Belting states that "There is no universal conceptual scheme for the diversity of cultures because each conceptual scheme is shaped by culture, in particular in the West where one still believes that one can cite other cultures because one has invented the idea of humanity" (Vogel, 2010, p. 70).

Exhibiting Istanbul: A milestone for Turkish Contemporary Art

The Istanbul Biennial which has been organized since 1987 by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) is one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art. The first two exhibitions were held in 1987 and 1989 and the general coordinator for them was Beral Madra. The title of the first two Istanbul Biennials is "Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces" and the second one is titled "Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces".

Initially, the exhibition was modeled on the Venice Biennial. Starting with the third edition of the Biennial in 1992, IKSV decided to adopt a solo curator system. The title of the 3rd Biennial is "Production of Cultural Difference". It was postponed by one year due to the Gulf War and the next Biennial also emerged one year later than planned.

Yet, the foreign nations were invited by the director Vasif Kortun to showcase the countries. The 4th edition in 1995 did not exhibit in the form of national pavilions which are individually curated as it is in Venice, nor did it include artists selected by the curators determined by the

participating countries. Instead, the curator Rene Block announced a model based on a theme and artists invited by the curator as the sole organizer of the exhibition. Therefore, the criterion in the selection of artists is directly related to the curator and the title of the Biennial, not the initiative of the nations. The Istanbul Biennial favored a model whose structure created a great single show that is thematically connected and spread over the places and venues throughout the city. With this exhibition model, the Istanbul Biennial's curatorial practice is rather different from that of the Venice Biennial.

Global Aspects vs. Local Paradigms

We can agree with Nicolas Bourriaud when he says "Every contemporary art exhibition champions a concept, an idea of contemporary art itself. It is set up under the aegis of an image, generating a cloud of ideas and sensations" (Bourriaud, 2019, p. 24). Thematically framed exhibitions started chiefly with Harald Szeemann's great show in 1969. Through those new thematic exhibitions, a fresh approach appeared in the art world. Daniel Buren's remarks in the Documenta 5 Catalogue emphasize the importance of themes of exhibitions. According to Buren artists and audiences try to focus on the show from a specific viewpoint offered by the director of the exhibition. Thus the exhibitions have started to be exhibited as works of art by an exhibition with a thematic context (Bismark, t.y.).

The curator James Meyer argues that starting with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Pompidou in 1989, 'globalization' began to be used as the main theme of the shows (Griffin et al., 2003). Dan Cameron, the 8th Istanbul Biennial curator, emphasized the importance of this exhibition in terms of global art exhibitions. He admits that "From 1989 forward, for example, I have never done a survey exhibition that was not dedicated at least in part to examining the premises beyond global art practice (Cameron, 2011, p. 151). According to Meyer Documenta 10 for the first time addressed globalization directly using urban questions. And then Documenta 11 was exactly shaped by postcolonial theory. Meyer explained that "The most recent Venice Biennial similarly underscored the importance of "global" themes. Now that these exhibitions have occurred, and a certain discourse has developed around them, it is well worth addressing the phenomenon of the "global exhibition" itself" (Griffin et al., 2003). Okwui Enwezor also believes that these large-scale exhibitions are precisely influenced by these issues "even if we may never be in complete agreement about what they add to the critical discourse of globalization" (Griffin et al., 2003).

The Istanbul Biennial, as well as many other biennials in the world generally try to address global issues. In this concept

novel proportions were raised by the curators and site-specific concepts disappeared as we had in the first two biennials. The beginning of this international organization-when we look at the history of the biennial- is exactly parallel to the political, economic, and cultural strategies of the Turkish government. Beral Madra underscores the importance of this process while explaining the aim and vision of the Biennial. According to Madra creating a dialogue between the local and international art scene and becoming a part of the international network of global art are the fundamental means of the Istanbul Biennial (Madra, 2003, p. 13-14). Consequently, the global discourse was supported by the Biennial from the very outset.

The thematic context of the Istanbul Biennial can be examined under some categories as key or central themes. One of the popular central themes of this mega show is 'global metropolis' which covers topics and issues that particularly revolve around Istanbul itself. 'Political and cultural issues and borders' can be another category that refers to geographical and cultural links and also implies the loss of sovereignty of nation-state associated with the political and economic issues of globalism. Some of the other themes can be classified under the category of 'ecology and human activities'. Admittedly all these categories mentioned above do not receive equal emphasis for each biennial. Curators lead the direction of the views around one of the categories and build the exhibition.

Global... Political... Ecological...

The intention of the Istanbul Biennial is perfectly summarized by Sabine Vogel in her book titled *Biennials-Art on a Global Scale*, "Istanbul Biennial was supposed to assert or reinforce the geographical and cultural links between Europe and Asia" (Vogel, 2010, p. 47). The unique and marginal geopolitical position of Turkey, particularly Istanbul attracted curators' choice of concepts and themes for the Istanbul Biennial.

Some concepts of the Biennial emphasized Istanbul's multinational character which is characterized by an urban culture presenting a rich range of intellectual and cultural multilingual center. The 9th Istanbul Biennial curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche proposed the concept and title "Istanbul". This conceptual framework was directly related to the theme categorized as 'global metropolis'. Esche and Kortun noted that the title of the Biennial, "Istanbul", should not be taken into consideration only as a theme, but rather as a platform. This platform is a place "from which all parties can launch themselves into the exhibition and its relation to the city surrounding them" (Esche & Kortun, 2005, p. 26). Thus while they were shaping their curatorial

vision, they did not want the title "Istanbul" to be understood not only as the subject of this Biennial, but they also planned a metropolis that referred to an "operational field". In this sense, they chose ordinary buildings so that the exhibition would not be too conspicuous in the city. According to the curators, these anonymous buildings would give the artists unflamboyant places for their works (Esche & Kortun, 2005, p. 25).

Vasif Kortun also curated the 3rd Biennial with the title "Production of Cultural Difference". In the catalog of this exhibition, he tried to explain the term "megalopolis" meaning "a great city". In Kortun's words, Istanbul as a megalopolis is "a non-space" without any boundaries. Severing Asia from Europe and between the North and the South it offers no center (Kortun, 1992, p. 212). All the curators of the Istanbul Biennial have regarded the city of Istanbul for their exhibitions, but it can be claimed that Kortun, Esche, and Colombo were the curators who directly wanted the artists to analyze Istanbul as the main theme as a global city with its global vision and local sources. Hou Hanru, the curator of the 10th edition, for instance, was one of the curators who scrutinized Istanbul in his criticism of globalization with his concept "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global World". Considering a search for new venues within the city for the Istanbul Biennial for about two decades, Hou Hanru declared that there had always been an organic connection between the conception of the Istanbul Biennial and the search for sites for the exhibition. He also affirmed that Istanbul was a local center (Hanru, 2007, p. 26). On the contrary, the curators of the 11th edition titled "What Keeps Mankind Alive" did not try to use the local features of Istanbul to draw the features of the global. They were aware of the historical wealth and cultural references of the city and they did not underestimate the value of such references, but they refrained from using them. Instead, they had given rise to questions about the distribution of wealth.

Hanru, on the other hand, thought that the Istanbul Biennial was an "urban event" creating a new locality. Even though the title of the 10th Istanbul Biennial was global, Hanru drew attention to the local identity of Istanbul and he stated that "Exploring the urban and architectural conditions of Istanbul has hence become a starting point and a central reference for the conception of this Biennial" (Hanru, 2007, p. 26).

The decline of nation-state nationalism was one of the major sub-themes of the Istanbul Biennial. Within the scope of this subject the political elite and their authority, the discourse of nationality, and the decline of major

ideologies had been questioned. Rosa Martinez, the 5th Istanbul Biennial curator, who proposed the title "On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties" underscored the problem of this authority as well and the participating artists were supposed to question "the regulations and norms of established authority" (Martinez, 1997, p. 31). Vasif Kortun criticised the elite too in the catalogue of the 3rd Istanbul Biennial. He claimed that "The 'others' meanwhile are postmodern by definition and in actuality. They easily transport the phantasmagoric succession of identities from a pre-modern to a postmodern condition with great ease and consistency. The renovations modernists, however, with their short-term memory of the republic remain a colorless elite" (Kortun, 1992, p. 212). "Who are the others?" Fulya Erdemci asked this question with her title and concept "Mom, am I Barbarian?" for the 13th edition of the Istanbul Biennial (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

13th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul Modern, Photograph: Nevin Yalçın Beldan

The title was borrowed from a book and the conceptual framework went around the word "barbarian" which refers to 'the other'. She tried to examine the place of 'the other' in society, but before doing this she tried to analyze the definition of 'barbarian'. "...the language of the 'other', the alien, the most excluded and repressed. From this angle, 'barbarian' may refer to the language of those who are marginalized, illegal, and perhaps aspiring to debunk or change the system: the recluse, outcast, bandit, anarchist, revolutionary, poet, or artist" (Erdemci, 2013, p. 29). As such, while examining the political and cultural borders many curators focused on the problem of identity.

The phenomenon 'collapse of universal ideologies' was also one of the leading themes of the curators of the Istanbul Biennial. Rene Block, the curator of the 4th edition, created an inclusive environment for an effective discussion with his leitmotif "Orient/ation". In the press release of the Biennial, the gap created by the failure of political and ideological methods was emphasized and within the

framework of the concept presented by these Biennial artists who got rid of these ideologies were expected to produce and present their approaches (Block, 1995, p. 46). Inspired by the selection of the Beuys' works, he stressed the importance of cleansing the wrongly interrupted ideologies (Block, 1995, p. 31). Yuko Hasegawa, the director of the 7th Istanbul Biennial titled "Egofugal-Fugue from Ego for the Next Emergence" criticized the collapse of ideologies too. In her text for the Biennial catalogue she stated that "Eagerly, we search for meaning. Our values have been shaken by a rapid succession of ideological bankruptcies: by communism, Nazism, existentialism, Marxism, socialism, capitalism, consumerism, Freudism, New Leftism, Thatcherism, Reaganism, hippies, and yuppies" (Hasegawa, 2001, p. 15).

Contrary to Rene Block, Rosa Martinez, the curator of the 5th edition believed that ideologies are not dead. Norms and ideologies are still part of our lives, but artists are independent and art no longer serves for religious or government propaganda. Thus those ideologies should be questioned by them (Martinez, 1997, p. 29). Paolo Colombo, the curator of the 6th edition, focused on the topic of the absence of dominant ideologies, contrary to Rene Block and Yuko Hasegawa, and he stressed the significance of specific and local situations.

Hanru of the 2007 edition directly addressed the impact of globalization on society and culture and the loss of sovereignty of the nation-state. Hanru criticized the project of Turkish modernity and stated "The backlash from the populist classes seems to be inevitable. Populist political and religious forces have managed to recuperate and manipulate their claims from the 'bottom' of the society and have turned them to their own favor" (Hanru, 2007, p. 23). Even in searching for venues for his show, Hanru tried to look for locations that would reveal different parameters of the modernization process and symbols of the political project of the country (Hanru, 2011, p. 189). Rosa Martinez also declared the failure of the modernist project. According to Martinez modernism provided another area for art free from the traditional patrons, the Church, aristocracy, and the State, but created another "new god: the marketplace" (Martinez, 1997, p. 29). WHW, the curatorial group of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, focused on two important themes: politics and economics. They underscored the multiplicity of modernisms in the global age and criticized "false dichotomy of centre and periphery" (WHW, 2009, p. 103).

The 8th Istanbul Biennial was also based on the political and historical background of Turkey. Dan Cameron, the curator, admitted that "...when I was asked to come and do

the 8th Istanbul Biennial, one of the first requests I made was to go to different corners of the Ottoman Empire to trace the pre-modern roots of the conflict" (Cameron, 2011, p. 151). Istanbul with its roots and history attracted many curators. Istanbul appealed to Hanru too. He was attracted to a "beautifully complex and contradictory" city. That is why his title was also long, and complicated: "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global World". He explained that "This title was intended to reflect the complications of the city of Istanbul. I was totally excited and lost, facing this wonderful city" (Hanru, 2011, p. 187). He did not only want to romanticize and poeticize the city but also he wanted to make a connection between the biennial activity and the people living there (Hanru, 2011, p. 187).

Cameron, on the other hand, admitted that he was a "political junkie". He also explained that he was extremely interested in politics and he followed politics not only in his country but everywhere in the world (Cameron, 2011, p. 151). So the title and concept of the Biennial "Poetic Justice" came from those interests to address and deal with some of the political ideas.

The 12th Istanbul Biennial curators were also susceptible to political earthquakes and identities. It was held in 2011 under the title "Untitled" with the directors Jens Hoffmann & Adriano Pedrosa. The works of the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose works were the amalgam of the personal and political, was the main reference for the title and concept of the Biennial. Torres mostly titled his works of art "Untitled" using a description in parenthesis. Hoffmann and Pedrosa used the same method as Torres when naming the Biennial. On the other hand, Torres was such a strong reference that it almost overtook the exhibition because the main way to understand the purpose and the very meaning of the theme of the Biennial was to understand Torres (Başarır, 2011, p. 80). The curators categorized the Biennial into five sections each has its group exhibitions. Each section was themed as "Untitled (Abstraction)", "Untitled (Rose)", "Untitled (Passport)", "Untitled (History)", and "Untitled (Death by Gun)". Although the theme of the Biennial did not refer to a specific reference at the first stage, it was quite wise to express current political issues and socio-political subjects whilst acting as a storyteller of very personal lives starting from the life of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Hoffmann and Pedrosa stated that "The 12th Istanbul Biennial explores the rich relationship between art and politics, focusing on works that are both formally innovative and politically outspoken" (Hoffmann & Pedrosa, 2011, p. 23). They wanted the Biennial to keep track of the political biennial exhibitions around the world

over the last two decades and were not so eager to follow aesthetic concerns" (Hoffmann & Pedrosa, 2011, p. 23). Through the lens of Bige Örer this Biennial is extremely political and based on the fact of living in Istanbul. She expresses in the catalogue text of the Biennial that "The contradictory experience of living in Istanbul brings to mind Felix Gonzalez-Torres's constant reminder through his works that the political is also personal, and the personal is political" (Örer, 2011, p. 19).

The theme of Fulya Erdemci was political as well. Revealing the concept "Mom, am I Barbarian?" for the 13th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, Erdemci (Figure 2) was going to create a political forum in public spaces with some exhibitions. However, she could not achieve her end due to protests in public spaces that started before the opening of the Biennial. The exhibition tried to make visible "the hostile urban transformation taking place in Istanbul through the relationality of art and politics" (Örer, 2013, p. 17).



Figure 2.

Fulya Erdemci, the curator of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, is talking to reporters in the central venue of the exhibition, 27.09.2013, 16.55, the 13th Istanbul Biennial, Photograph: Nevin Yalçın Beldan

The concept "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms" was proposed by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the director of the 14th Istanbul Biennial. The Curator used both European and Asian sides of Bosphorus and she emphasized the theory of thought forms using a visual vocabulary referencing history, culture, and politics. As McGarry stated the curator used "saltwater" as a medium to link "visual abstraction and symbolic and psychological content" (McGarry, 2015). Bakargiev wanted to visualize her political initiatives and "visual abstraction" as McGarry stated above over salt water by spreading the works of art almost throughout the city, particularly Büyükada, an island in Istanbul (Figure 3).



Figure 3.

"The Most Beautiful of All Mothers", Adrián Villar Rojas, 2015, mixed media, installation view, Büyükkada, 14th Istanbul Biennial, Photograph: Nevin Yalçın Beldan

The 15th İstanbul Biennial in 2017 was curated by the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset and the conceptual framework of the exhibition was "A Good Neighbour". A metaphor, for instance, 'submarine' can be used for this exhibition with its title and leitmotif. Ostensibly "A good neighbor" was a civil discourse so it asked simple questions such as "Are you a good neighbor?" but it slowly revealed an unpleasant historical identity issue that emphasised these questions. This Biennial also questioned the phenomenon of immigration. At first, it focused on the concept of home, which is our micro living spaces, and then we were directed to analyze the phenomenon of a neighborhood, and finally, the audience found themselves at the borders of countries. These approaches created an extremely political biennial and it focused on "personal stories" as Bige Örer stated. She points out "...individual freedoms have been forced into a corner, the 15th Istanbul Biennial has chosen to follow personal stories" (Örer, 2017, p. 23). The curators put forward that "Issues around the loss of a safe home, in a physical or emotional sense, and the ensuing migration are also dealt with...". They continued to argue that "Physical and social barriers are a result of speculative urban development, where big capital is the big winner" (Elmgreen & Dragset, 2017, p. 47). By addressing the phenomenon of migration together with the issue of identity, the curators ensured that the issue was handled more sensitively. This is stated in the catalogue "The preparation period for the 15th Istanbul Biennial has reminded us that, in the tumultuous time through which we are passing, one of the things we miss most is living together without having to forgo our identities" (Örer, 2017, p. 23).

Nicolas Bourriaud curated the 16th Istanbul Biennial and put forward a concept titled "The Seventh Continent" (Figure 4).



Figure 4.

16. Istanbul Biennial, Mizzi Mansion, Büyükkada, 2019, Photograph: Nevin Yalçın Beldan

Exploring a new continent. Bourriaud dramatizes the new geological era with the effects of the 'anthropocene'. He is rather pessimistic about the future of nature and global life. He generally focused on non-human inhabitants and he made us aware of nature and human activity over nature.

Venues also played an important role and they helped the concepts in designing the Istanbul Biennial. It is hard not to agree with Örer when she says "Since 1987 each Istanbul Biennial has forged a unique relation with the city, built from different angles. The common denominator in an embrace of the city, the establishment of an intimate connection with audiences and the identification of the spaces that support the conceptual framework of the exhibition" (Örer, 2015, p. 24).

The aim of re-creating a new orientalist discourse through the biennial was manifested in the choice of venues that aimed to conduct new excavations in the memory of the historical peninsula. This lasted from the very beginning of the Biennial to the year 2005. This can be summed up as creating a field for global aspects in the atmosphere of the very local. Starting with the 9th edition in 2005, the Biennial managed to leave the historical areas and buildings and started to become integrated into the real life of Istanbul as a metropolis.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The founding purpose of the Istanbul Biennial is not based on aggressive revolutionary intentions. On the contrary, rather than focusing on fundamental peripheral and local problems, it determined its basic program as being a part of the global art world as Madra stated above. As such, considering the references that discuss the history of both the Istanbul Biennial and the other peripheral and central biennials in the world, it is possible to say that the Istanbul Biennial, as one of the peripheral biennials, is a part of the

same program as the central ones and therefore has achieved its formation goals decisively having an organic connection with the global art world within the line of its development.

On the other hand, the global response to the idea of being a global periphery of the art world which was susceptible to misunderstandings by exhibition-makers worked like a razor's edge. Therefore, unfortunately, the Istanbul Biennial could not keep itself away from the Western world's passion for orientalism, nor did it avoid postcolonial global approaches. Thus, the themes of the Istanbul Biennial generally reawakened orientalist feelings and emphasized the eastern identity of Istanbul which the Biennial has never requested. In re-creating a fresh orientalist discourse, historical venues also assisted curators. However, even renouncing historical places did not indicate that some curators had completely moved away from orientalist approaches as it was in the 14th edition. 'Revisiting the past' for curators and artists could be open to misunderstandings. It is generally interpreted or remembered by the accounted mainstream of history. It can be critical because "Our views of the past have changed, in part, because mental attitudes about the present have changed..." (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010, p. 131).

The concepts of the Istanbul Biennial faced two fundamental problems: The first one was the danger of getting stuck on the same theme or concept that revolved around a certain global movement and falling into repetition. The other problem was trying to define and protect the local out of the global and the difficulty of keeping the balance between them.

It can be concluded that the themes of the Istanbul Biennial are more central to promoting the mega exhibition from the local narrative to the global perspective. Because the artworks created and exhibited within the conceptual framework allowed streams of data all around the globe instead of keeping it within certain limits. Instead of site-specific topics of the 90s, the curators, especially over the past three decades, developed concepts around the topics of global issues. On the other hand with the effect of its strategic location, Istanbul did not have difficulty in connecting to the global network of the art world and did not break away from its local codes.

Maybe the main challenge was using global art concepts whilst staying in a local art world like many other peripheral biennials all over the world. The curators of the Istanbul Biennial generally seemed to focus on global topics with the political, economic, and cultural codes of Turkey. It is a bit confusing because the Biennial seemed to try to bridge

the gap between global and local, but it also drew a line between the Western and non-Western art world. The themes were global but they originated from local references and values. Curators of the Istanbul Biennial, on the other hand, were lucky to have great references already in determining a curatorial discourse for this mega-international show. Artists also had some stimuli to develop new strategies to express their perspectives on these themes.

The concepts put forward for the Istanbul Biennial in the 90s differ from the biennials in the 2000s in terms of proposing more poetic themes rather than dealing with social, political, and environmental problems. It can be stated that the most important and at the same time dangerous feature of the Istanbul Biennial for the curators and their unique themes was the city itself. Because Istanbul solely was a title and topic for the curators. So the main character of the themes in general revolved around the city with its everyday challenges and its affluent history. For the most part, this lets visitors learn stories from the city's memory. But at the same time, it created poor weather conditions for this mega show which targeted to narrate a supranational catchword for itself.

Maybe the main question must be: Did the Istanbul Biennial ask interesting questions? The purpose of curators generally needed to ask questions rather than give answers to global issues. These questions, most of which subscribed to contemporary art, created a dialectical framework during the show.

The other question is: 'Were the curators of the Biennial able to create a crucible for hundreds of artists and dozens of cultures?' The answer should be "yes". One of the most important things is that the Istanbul Biennial with its topics created a kind of political and cultural forum for the art world. All in all, it presented hybrid concepts and themes that connected memoirs and narratives of the local to the perspectives of the global. Therefore, it must be considered that the curatorial discourse of the exhibitions of the Istanbul Biennial can be seen through the framework of a kind of duality in which curators were within and against the local values and global hegemony simultaneously. The curatorial perspective which cannot help mentioning the story of the locality of Turkey took risks with its approach to local elements in ensuring the balance between local and global in the functioning of the concept.

Yet, in a way, notwithstanding all the criticism of the concepts and topics, the Istanbul Biennial, I would argue, is a great contribution to the centers of the Western art world and it has livened up to the requisites of producing contemporary art of the global art world.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Yazar Katkıları: Fikir-N.Y.B.; Tasarım-N.Y.B.; Denetleme-N.Y.B.; Kaynaklar-N.Y.B.; Veri Toplanması ve/veya İşlemesi-N.Y.B.; Analiz ve/veya Yorum-N.Y.B.; Literatür Taraması-N.Y.B.; Yazıyı Yazan-N.Y.B.; Eleştirel İnceleme-N.Y.B.; Diğer-N.Y.B.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazarlar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazarlar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Concept-N.Y.B.; Design-N.Y.B.; Supervision-N.Y.B.; Resources-N.Y.B.; Data Collection and/or Processing-N.Y.B.; Analysis and/or Interpretation-N.Y.B.; Literature Search-N.Y.B.; Writing Manuscript-N.Y.B.; Critical Review-N.Y.B.; Other-N.Y.B.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

References

- Başarır, G. (2011). İsimli (Felix Gonzalez-Torres). *Artist actual*, Galeriarist.
- Bismark, V. B. (t.y.). "The master of the works": Daniel Buren's contribution to documenta 5 in Kassel, 1972. *Oncurating*, 33. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/the-master-of-the-works-daniel-burens-contribution-to-documenta-5-in-kassel-1972.html>
- Bourriaud, N. (2019). *Introduction to the seventh continent: history, geography, demography, culture, archeology, politics* [16th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Block, R. (1995). *Is it possible to create works that aren't art?* [4th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Cameron, D. (2011). *Poetic justice* [8th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Elmgreen, M., & Dragset, I. (2017). *Introduction* [15th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Erdemci, F. (2013). Mom, am I barbarian? [13th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Esche, C., & Kortun, V. (2005). *The world is yours. Art, City, and Politics in an Expanding World* [9th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Griffin, T., Meyer, J., Bonami, F., David, C., Enwezor, O., Obrist, H. U., & Rosler, M. (2003). Global tendencies: Globalism and the large-scale exhibition. *Artforum*, 42. <https://www.artforum.com/features/global-tendencies-globalism-and-the-large-scale-exhibition-167779/>
- Groys, B. (2009). From medium to message: The art exhibition as a model of a new world order. In J. Seijdel (Ed.), *The art biennial as a global phenomenon* (pp. 56-65). NAI Publishers.

- Hanru, H. (2007). *Not only possible but also necessary: Optimism in the age of the global world* [10th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Haegawa, Y. (2001). *Egofugal* [7th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Hoffmann, J., & Pedrosa, A. (2011). *Introduction* [12th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Kortun, V. (1992). *Istanbul as raumgeist* [3rd International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Madra, B. (2003). *İki yılda bir sanat*. Norgunk Press.
- Martinez, R. (1997). *On life, beauty, translations, and other difficulties, or finding angels in* [5th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- McGarry, K. (2015). The 14th Istanbul biennial. *Artforum*, 54(4). <https://www.artforum.com/events/the-14th-istanbul-biennial-214931/>
- Örer, B. (2011). *Foreword* [12th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Örer, B. (2013). *Making ways*. [13th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Örer, B. (2015). *Foreword* [14th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Örer, B. (2017). *Foreword* [15th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.
- Robertson, J., & McDaniel, C. (2010). *Themes of contemporary art*. Oxford University Press
- Vogel, S. (2010). *Biennials-art on a global scale*. Springer-Verlag.
- WHW. (2009). *What keeps mankind alive?* [11th International Istanbul Biennial Catalogue]. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.