

“Developing critically engaged audience” An Interview with Çelenk Bafra, Curator of Istanbul Modern

By: Dr. Zoltán Somhegyi



SO? Architecture and Ideas, Sky Spotting Stop, 2013, selected project from the YAP Istanbul Modern in partnership with MoMA/MoMA PS1. Installation shot from the museum's courtyard by Pelin Dervis

How does the Istanbul Modern define its role and function both in the city and in the wider region? Did the institute fulfill the expectations of its founding ten years ago?

Founded by the Istanbul Modern Art Foundation, Istanbul Modern has the aim of promoting modern and contemporary visual arts and culture from Turkey and familiarizing a wide range of audiences with local

and global arts and culture through artistic, social and educational programs. As the first private museum in Turkey dedicated to modern and contemporary art, the name “Istanbul Modern” emphasizes its public responsibility and mission; today Istanbul Modern is perceived as the modern and contemporary art museum of the city and the country. Istanbul Modern emerged from a vision and project that took 15 years

to realize before its inauguration. From the outset, Istanbul Modern has sought to transform the museum experience while offering audiences some of the significant examples of modern and contemporary art from Turkey and around the world. In addition to providing a space for modern and contemporary art in Turkey and introducing large segments of the audiences to the museum environment, we have sought to establish powerful institutional bonds and strengthen the exchange between local and international communities. As the Museum consolidated its program and social ties, it has also achieved international recognition. Istanbul Modern is now a potential partner for international projects, and thus makes collaborations with major museums around the world, such as the MoMA/MoMA PS1 in New York, MAXXI in Rome, Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, Benaki Museum in Athens, Design Museum of London, Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, etc. Just an example, “A Space for Young Public”, is the series of specially designed workshops for children and young people developed and implemented in partnership with the Centre Pompidou in Paris. We have also collaborated with art institutions all around the world to promote the artistic creation of Turkey; comprehensive selections from our collection, i.e. key works of modern and contemporary painting, photography and video art in Turkey have travelled to the museums and art institutions in Austria, Bahrain, China, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Ireland, Korea, Russia, Sweden and the UK. The museum also pioneered the development of a new type of partnership between the private and public sectors in Turkey and international funds. On the one hand, the museum building was allocated to Istanbul Modern directly by the prime minister and the public sector continues to provide the museum both with funds and support in kind. On the other hand, individual and institutional supporters from Turkey and abroad as well as corporate and media sponsors are vital to the museum’s exhibitions and programs. In ten years Istanbul Modern managed to establish a sustainable and independent financial and organizational structure for its programs and projects. As such, it sets a successful model for other art centers and organizations both in Turkey and in the region with certain disadvantages, limited infrastructure, slim public

access to arts and lack of means for artistic production. Through its permanent collection as well as an active roster of exhibitions and programs, I believe that the museum opened new perspectives in Istanbul’s cultural scene, spurred curiosity and encouraged reflection in the general public in Turkey. Although a young institution celebrating its 10th year, Istanbul Modern has managed to build up a local and international recognition and ties with the local and international community. When Istanbul Modern opened, the founder and the chair of the board, Ms. Oya Eczacıbası, promised to offer the audiences an opportunity to witness, learn about, experience and even make arts; and to become updated with the current trends in contemporary arts and culture in the world through a dynamic and evolving structure. We believe that we have achieved this goal.

Few months ago, Istanbul Modern celebrated its 10th anniversary with the show “Neighbours – Contemporary Perspectives from Turkey and Beyond”. Why the selection of this show for the anniversary?

Both the curatorial department and the advisory boards have been emphasizing the necessity of having a role and a mission in the surrounding region of Turkey for a long time. This has significance because of Istanbul’s geographical position and the artistic potential in the region. Through an efficient artistic policy, Istanbul Modern can strengthen its position in the local, regional and global art world. Regarding the temporary exhibitions and the general artistic program, focusing on the region is a priority especially given the fact that the first ten years the museum has contributed a lot on the local art scene by retrospectives of Turkish artists and group shows on main topics and issues in the history of art in Turkey. This mission will continue for sure, however, now that Istanbul Modern has established a team and program specialized both in Turkey and the global art in the wider sense. A special focus on the Balkans, Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions has become indispensable for curatorial research, networking, exhibitions and programming. The Institution also invested by setting up a research team that can establish a network and develop knowledge about the artistic creation and contemporary issues in the region. In this respect,



Exhibition views from “Neighbours - Contemporary Narratives from Turkey and Beyond”, 2014. Installations shot by Sinan Kocaslan

Istanbul Modern’s exhibition in 2014, *Neighbours – Contemporary Narratives from Turkey and Beyond*, is a significant start with a right timing. It’s the outcome of my three years of research and trips with Paolo Colombo supported by our curatorial team with the invaluable contribution of a long list of advisors, partners, artists, art professionals and volunteers in the region. Investigating the contemporary art practices in Turkey and the surrounding region, *Neighbours* brought together artists from neighboring geographies that have historical, political, and cultural ties with Turkey including the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, etc. it also explored practices that relate to social life in the public space, such as spectacles and ceremonies, and the way these have seeped into today’s visual arts. The exhibition focused on two aspects that are ingrained in the region’s cultural weave: narratives and travel. These dovetailed into a number of works tangent to themes such as mobility, nomadism, odysseys, language, and

translation, and cultural transmission, etc. The show featured visual artworks, as well as performance and spectacles, including extensions of disciplines that have developed outside the academic circles of art, such as political cartoons and folk art. In total we worked with 35 artists from 17 countries and proposed a program of special events – video programs, film screenings, performances, workshops, talks and panel discussions – dedicated to the region’s art and culture. I believe that *Neighbours* should be considered the first outcome of Istanbul Modern’s curatorial research and investment in its surrounding region. It’s a statement for the 10th year, to be continued! I would also like to mention two other exhibitions on the occasion both are comprehensive projects on Turkey’s cultural creation and both are conceived for the first time in Turkey. I curated together with Levent Calikoglu *Plurivocality - Music and Visual Arts from Turkey* that continues until December 2014. Exploring the bonds the visual arts have established with



Exhibition views from “Neighbours - Contemporary Narratives from Turkey and Beyond”, 2014. Installations shot by Sinan Kocaslan. mg9402_53_5547686

sound and music from past to present, Plurivocality serves as a source for understanding the cultural and sociopolitical role sound and music play in Turkey and how sound and music have influenced visual art practices. The history “Repertoire”; conceived by my colleague Birnur Temel with other researchers from arts and music; is an initiative that examines Turkey’s sociocultural history from the late Ottoman era to the 1980s via its reflections in the visual arts and music. As for A Hundred Years of Love in fall 2014, organized on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Cinema in Turkey, it is co-curated by our film curator, Müge Tüfenk; with Gökhan Akçura, a prominent researcher and writer from Turkey. Our cinema is considered the only art house cinema in Turkey and offers a rich and international program since ten years. We have screenings, discussions, publications and short film commissions to emerging directors are programmed as well as a comprehensive exhibition will be held about

material culture related to cinema in Turkey with a special focus on the notion of spectatorship.

How do you see the art scene in Turkey? What are the positive developments of the last years, and on what issues should the professionals and actors in the art field (artists, curators, gallerists, museum professionals, collectors etc.) concentrate more?

Developments in culture and arts in Turkey have given us hope since late 90’s. Organizations and individuals have been showing a growing interest in contemporary artistic production. In part, this is due to the opening of privately funded art institutions and museums, such as Istanbul Modern, Sakıp Sabancı Museum, Pera Museum, AkbankSanat, Borusan Contemporary, Arter, etc. that are making significant projects and disseminating critical information about arts not only to potential public but also to art professionals or potential art supporters and collectors from Turkey and



Exhibition views from “Neighbours - Contemporary Narratives from Turkey and Beyond”, 2014. Installations shot by Sinan Kocaslan.

abroad. Istanbul Modern’s establishment represented a significant milestone in the transformation of Turkey’s contemporary art environment. Today, as one of the most important showcases of the development and the creativity of Turkish society, Istanbul Modern symbolizes the vibrant encounter underway between art and society in Turkey. I have sincerely hoped that this growing interest from the private sector and the public would have a positive influence on the central and local governments given the fact that the public funds have been still very slim for visual arts and it’s still very difficult to talk about a cultural policy in Turkey vis-à-vis contemporary arts. However, not much has changed on the public sector; on the contrary; rumors of censorship grow and authoritarian cultural policies are being discussed; so it’s difficult to remain optimistic. The rising profile of Istanbul in the global culture and

arts scene is mainly fostered by the growing number of large-scale culture and arts events in our city. The main project driving this transformation is the Istanbul Biennial. Another event is the Istanbul Contemporary art fair, and other international art fairs in the city, which aim to reveal and unleash Istanbul’s artistic potential and contribute to the development of the art market in the country. Around these two phenomena, a rich scene by independent art spaces, artist studios and commercial art galleries have emerged in Istanbul. However, the lack of a sustainable visibility of arts in the local media is an issue not only for visual arts but for culture in general. This also means limited number of art journalists and art critics that are usually either under-paid or do their work as a voluntary contribution. Self-criticism, institutional critic; or let’s say critical thinking in general seem to be the main issues in the



Hal Tenger, *Balloons on the sea*, 2011, 7 channel video installation, 340 Seconds. Courtesy of the artist, Green Art Gallery & Galeri Nev. Inatallation from the exhibition “Plurivocality - Music and Visual Arts from Turkey” in 2014.

contemporary art scene. It's hard to determine trends in contemporary art in Turkey or anywhere else nowadays. However, in terms of media, I personally observe that fine art photography and photo-realist or hyperrealist paintings are quite in demand by the local audiences and collectors therefore some artists tend to focus on them. Having said this, one must say that video art, sound art and new media production are growing rapidly. The contemporary architecture and design scene has been gradually more visible and active in the last five years. Although these developments, I am afraid that the scene will be more and more dominated by the global and local art market; hence the rise of art fairs and galleries versus the biennials and museum exhibitions. What still matters to me the most, are the research based exhibitions, retrospectives, open archives and institutional collaborations engaging with the cultural

and socio-political history of the country and the region. These are fueled by a young generation of artists and independent professionals through the initiatives of private museums or non-governmental research centers.

Progressive shows are important and inspiring for the already-connoisseur public, but how can you reach out the wider audience? How is public responding to Istanbul Modern's exhibitions?

Overall, around 6 million people have visited more than 100 exhibitions that Istanbul Modern has organized since the institution's inception in December 2004. The museum managed to reach both local and international public and especially young people. With almost 40% visitors from abroad, the international public has consistently positioned Istanbul Modern among Istanbul's top attractions. In addition to making



Nevin Aladag, *Session*, 2013, 3 channel video installation, 360 seconds. Courtesy of the artist, Wentrup Gallery & Rampa Istanbul. Video from the exhibition “Plurivocality - Music and Visual Arts from Turkey” in 2014.

contemporary art and culture accessible, interesting and desirable to people from all walks of life, we are investing in our future by engaging children and young people. Almost 1,5 million children and young people have benefitted from our educational programs. We have developed a series of social projects for visitors with special needs in collaboration with NGO's, including visually impaired people, mentally retarded children, high school students in the peripheries, etc. Just to mention another statistics, more than 65% of the visitors are women and under 25 years old. I am personally proud by the result of this survey as a young woman from Istanbul that believes the driving force behind change and freedom are young people

and especially women. This is also what we've been experiencing since the Gezi movement in 2013. They will change the world and the art hopefully. We established a dynamic communication platform comprising not only a vibrant exhibition program on modern and contemporary art, photography, moving image, cinema, design and architecture but also educational and social programs; panel discussions, lectures, seminars on arts, performance, cinema, design, architecture and literature. We also offer a reference and research library with almost 10,000 books. Our programs are balanced by an artistic policy on local and global context. Through a wide range of interdisciplinary events, Istanbul Modern has succeeded in creating a

new awareness in Turkey of museums as institutions of learning and communication and awakened public interest in visiting them, this way contributing to the development of a new museum culture in our country. We have also introduced new museum management and curatorial models for both intra-muros and extra-muros projects and events to enhance the art mediation and right communication with the audiences. Istanbul Modern has always aimed to establish itself as an influential social platform which is a huge task in a country where people aren't accustomed to visiting museums or even exhibitions. Through its programs, Istanbul Modern has become a multipurpose cultural center for the encounter of everyday life and culture and we are learning a lot from our encounter with our audiences and value their feedback, comments and input a lot for our future projects.

What perspective do you vision for the museum – what are the future plans and new areas, topics or media to focus on in the coming years?

Looking ahead, our aim is to continue expanding our support of contemporary art and artists in Turkey. I sincerely hope that this growing interest will have a positive influence on the central and local government and the cultural policies in Turkey since the public funds are still very slim and not systemized for visual arts projects. Istanbul Modern has a continually expanding collection focusing on modern and contemporary art from Turkey as well as major works of contemporary art from all over the world and I personally hope its collection will focus on the new works produced by the Istanbul Biennial, new works made about Istanbul and Turkey and artworks from the surrounding region of Turkey. Although Turkey's art milieu only began to develop its institutional structure in the last decade, it has a long history of interaction with the world, particularly Europe. In this developing institutional environment, Istanbul Modern offers a structure that enables it to respond energetically to new challenges. It has developed a strong standing in the international art community as a trusted partner. I hope that we have even closer relations with the local and international art community and all the artists, institutions and museums in the city and the region see Istanbul Modern as a

significant art institution and even a good model. We will strive to increase collaboration with neighbouring countries and especially the Mediterranean. We would like to continue building our network in the region as one of the pioneers of Turkey's contemporary art scene and become a trustworthy partner of all kinds of international, regional and local collaborations. We hope to develop an international residency program for artists and art professionals, a program based on research and production, in the future. We would like to revisit the museum building and determine its strong and weak points as well as the new needs to see whether an expansion or even a new building is necessary or not after the first ten years. In order to establish museum visits as sustained activities, develop a critically engaged audience, we will continue to maintain a dynamic and evolving structure. We want Istanbul Modern to make its mark on Turkey's future through its contributions to art education and social projects. Istanbul Modern has always aimed to reach out to broader segments of society and is gradually getting closer to attainment of the original founding objectives. It will focus more and more to create encounters and promote understanding between diverse social groups. I hope that Istanbul Modern will symbolize a vibrant meeting point between art and society in Turkey in the upcoming years.

About the writer:

Dr. Zoltán Sombegyi (1981) is a Hungarian art historian, teacher and writer currently based in Sharjah, UAE. As a researcher of art history and aesthetics, he is specialized 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 and art market trends, with a special focus on the arts of the MENASA-region. He curates exhibitions, participates in international art projects and often lectures on art in Europe and in the Middle East. He is a consultant of Art Market Budapest – International contemporary art fair. Currently he is Assistant Professor at the College of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah, UAE. He is the author of books, artist catalogues, and more than two hundred articles, critiques, essays and art fair reviews.