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Protocinema Founder Mari Spirito on the Manifold Challenges Facing Istanbul's Art Scene

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Protocinema's Mari Spirito (Photo by Ali Taptik)



Conceived as an artistic wormhole connecting New York and Istanbul, [Protocinema](#) is the highly unconventional brainchild of the equally unconventional curator **Mari Spirito**, a former [303 Gallery](#) dealer who in 2011 decided to parlay her voluminous Rolodex of art connections into the kind of free-floating, no-holds-barred platform that artists dream of. Now nearing its fifth anniversary, the nonprofit has staged politically piquant, opinion-changing shows by Western artists such as **Trevor Paglen**, **Dan Graham**, **Jacob Kassay**, and **Thief** in Istanbul, and by Turkish artists including **Ahmet Ögüt**, **Can Altay**, and **Köken Ergun** in Manhattan. With each iteration a connection is forged, importing internationalist art tactics into Turkey and broadcasting that country's artistic avant-garde into the West.

Now, with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's **Istanbul Biennial** once again turning Turkey into a cynosure of the global art elite's attention, **Artspace** editor-in-chief **Andrew M. Goldstein** spoke to Spirito about the ideas behind Protocinema, the perilous politics (and plentiful other dilemmas) of the Istanbul art scene, and what that confusingly titled biennial is all about, anyway.

*This is the second installment of our **NADA Network** series, focusing on galleries affiliated with the **New Art Dealers Alliance**.*

What is Protocinema? And where does its name come from?

We're a cultural portal between Turkey and New York devoted to showing artists from different cultures in diverse contexts, through site-aware exhibitions. The name Protocinema comes from Werner Herzog's *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, in which he comes across a cave painting of a beast running with eight legs and says something like, "Maybe this is man's first attempt to represent motion—maybe this is proto-cinema." Now I'm digging deeper and asking, "Why is Protocinema in motion, and what does it mean to realize site-aware exhibitions?" Well, it's about movement because we want to link cultures and create conditions for empathy, and it's site-aware because it's sympathetic to context.

How do you choose the artists you work with?

I'm interested in work by artists that deals in some way with behavior modification, thought reform, and how each of us come to our belief systems. One of my criteria is that I want to show artists who haven't been exhibited in the cities where I'll show them, and whose work has a distinctly individual voice. And I'm not fighting with other institutions to show the hot new person—I'm more interested in opening up dialogue and making connections.

So, the artists can be already famous, like Dan Graham, who came to Istanbul in 2011, or they could be totally unknown, like Atalay Yavuz, but it's always the first time that they're showing in that city in such a way. It's important that the artwork should be understood in a different way in the different context. Then, when they're here, I go and do groundwork so that years later they'll maybe have a show at a bigger institution, or at a gallery.

What is Istanbul like as a context for art these days? Turkey seems to be undergoing a very bumpy period of political growing pains, with the authoritarian president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan alternately ceding power and cracking down on the liberal movement there.

Turkey is changing a lot very fast right now—and, on the other hand, not fast enough. There was the situation that gave way to the Gezi Park protests [in the aftermath of the Arab Spring], and that period gave us hope. Then there were elections in early 2014 that gave Erdogan more power, which took away hope. Now we just had parliamentary elections in the beginning of June that stripped power away from Erdogan, and where a new third party from Eastern Turkey, HDP [The Peoples' Democratic Party], was allowed to come into what has been a two-party system here since Erdogan took power. They were able to get seats in parliament and also get enough votes so that someone from their party can run for president in the future.

It seems like the government is much more inclusive now—in a real rebuke to Erdoğan's repressive regime, there are now more women, gays, and Kurds than ever before in the parliament. But at the same time there's still a divided mentality in the country that could be seen in the brutal government crackdown on a recent gay pride parade there.

We think that happened because Erdoğan is mad that he lost the parliament elections. That perception of inclusiveness you are talking about comes from the members of the HDP Party, but that is new and small. It is still very conservative here.

How is contemporary art filtered into the civic discourse in Turkey?

It actually isn't, which is both good and bad. The people in the art community follow contemporary art, and the people outside of it don't. But that is changing. For example, when Fulya Erdemci curated the 2013 Istanbul Biennale, what she wanted to do was to have it take place only in public spaces. But that was before Gezi Park—and after Gezi Park it wasn't possible. She couldn't get any answers from the municipality, so she had to put it indoors in partner institutions.

In response she made it free—whereas usually you had to pay 10 lira to get in—so it became the only biennial of that scale that was free to the public, transforming it into a kind of public space. And what we found was that it was packed all the time with regular people. So there is an audience, and they'll come if it's free, but they don't go to galleries. It's growing though—people are curious.

Is there an engaged critical community in Turkey?

In terms of the press, no. All the mainstream newspapers are controlled by the government—there's no freedom of the press here. There are art publications here, but they're few and far between and still trying to gain criticality. There is *Istanbul Art News*, for instance, which is only a few years old, and m-est.org, which is an English-language online publication run by an artist and a writer/curator. Publications here normally don't last very long. But when it comes to an engaged popular community, there are many self-organized groups that work together, keep each other informed, write, meet, and do things, like the 60,000 people who were poll-watching for the last parliament elections.

An artist you recently did a project with in New York, Hale Tenger, told me that when the government goes after an artist in Istanbul for being anti-Turkish or some other cause for censorship, it's not because a government agent saw a show and reported back but rather because a newspaper critic denounced its content in a review, bringing it to the government's attention.

That's exactly what happened to her in 1993. The right-wingers would never go to the biennial or SALT or any other art spaces—the only way they learn about the content of an artwork is by reading about it. In Hale Tenger's case, she was taken to court and it was a long, drawn-out ordeal, and in the end she had to swear that the work—which was clearly about political oppression—was actually merely about gender issues.

It seems like an unsettling way of turning critics into a network of informants.

That was the case in the early 1990s, but now there's a bit more space, and in any case it's important to go on with your life and not self-censor. Recently, for instance, Cynthia Madansky made a multichannel video installation called *1 + 8* where she went to all of Turkey's border countries and talked to people on either side about what life was like, and then made a huge installation at SALT that dealt with all of the issues she encountered—women's issues, Kurdish issues, and other political issues.

Because it was at SALT, an art institution that was busy all the time, many people saw it—but the government didn't even mention it. If she had been a writer and written about these issues in the newspaper, she would be in jail right now. In a way, the art community is a place where you kind of can talk about things that you can't talk about in other parts of the community.

How did you come to found Protocinema?

When I was working at 303 Gallery I was already traveling to Istanbul quite a bit, coming here about three or four times a year to visit artists and work on projects. I was also involved with the World Water movement at that time, so when the World Water Forum took place in Istanbul in 2008 I traveled around Turkey to talk about the risks of water privatization and commercialization. At the same time I was working through the gallery with artists who had long-term projects underway, like Mike Nelson and his pavilion for the Venice Biennale or Doug Aitken and a project that we did in Greece. That way of working with artists became really interesting to me, and I wanted to investigate that more with long-term site-specific works.

Because I was going back and forth between New York and Istanbul, it was like a door opened to me—it was a moment when I knew enough people and I knew the context here, but I wanted to work between the two cities. That's why I designed Protocinema.

Who were the artists that brought you out to Turkey and got you excited about the possibilities of the Turkish art scene?

When I first came out there in 2007, right before Hou Hanru's Istanbul Biennial, I was doing studio visits with Ahmet Ögüt, Köken Ergun, Can Altay, İnci Evner, Cevdet Ereğ, Emre Hüner, and Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, just to name a few. It was all super-exciting for me, and I've since worked with almost all of them.

How did you find them?

I met [the artist] Corey McCorkle at an opening in New York just before I came here for the first time, and he was going back and forth to Istanbul. He gave me the phone number of November Paynter, who was at that time working at Platform Garanti—which later became SALT—and she introduced me to a lot of these artists. At Platform they also had this tiny room containing files on artists, and Vasif [Kortun, the curator] let me just sit in there and go through them all—and if there was someone I was interested in, their phone number was in the file, so I could just call them up. It was really easy.

Others helped me too. By chance, I had met the collector Ari Meşulam through another friend in Basel just before that. Then Sylvia Kouvali, who was just then starting Rodeo Gallery, invited me to stay in her apartment one summer while I was on a sabbatical. So, just through being in the community, I met so many different people.

At the time, Istanbul saw the opening of SALT, new nonprofits, and several new galleries—there was a real sense that a new infrastructure for the art scene was being built. Why was that?

That was a time when the economy was strong here, so people were getting excited about contemporary art and there were resources to do things like build a foundation or start a gallery. There were about 10 years when things were growing, growing, growing, and Turkey was a shining example of a secular society in the region. But then in the past couple of years, because of the conflict with the government, the economy has gotten tougher. Now there actually aren't as many active collectors, and while there are some structures here, there aren't a lot. So galleries have closed, and things have changed.

What is the existing collector scene like there? I know that one of your board members, Haro Cumbuşyan, is working with his wife, Bilge, to create a platform to educate and nurture collectors. What is the patronage landscape like?

The same year that I founded Protocinema, three other institutions were founded in Istanbul that were specifically geared towards nurturing and encouraging collectors to participate in the art context here. One is Collectorspace, which Haro designed around the premise that he and Bilge have learned the most about collecting by going to other collectors' houses and seeing how they live with the art— what they do and what they don't do, and what they like and what they don't like.

You mean in Istanbul?

No, all over the world. Whenever you go to art fairs, they have VIP programs where you can visit people's collections, and Haro and Bilge love this and have learned a lot from it. So the way Collectorspace works is that Haro will choose a collector he feels is doing something visionary and bring one artwork of that collector's to Istanbul to show in a tiny jewel-box space he has in Taksim Square. Then he'll send his colleague Özge Ersoy, the writer/curator who runs m-est.org, to this person's house to do a guided video walkthrough of the collection. As a result, people in Istanbul can watch how these collectors live with their art, and it's actually fantastic. Haro also brings the collectors themselves to Istanbul, and they do a talk and people can come and hear about why they do what they do.

The interesting thing is that most of the people who come to these talks aren't collectors—they're artists and curators and writers. The collectors who do come are already very engaged. One of these is Tansa Mermerci, who is also on my board, and she also has an organization called Spot that she runs with the curator Zeynep Oz. What they do is have classes for adults who are curious about collecting and don't know where to start. So they have art history courses and do trips to museums and galleries and make introductions and teach them about etiquette and process. People pay to take these courses, and Spot uses that money to run the program and also produce new works by local emerging artists every year and put on an exhibition. So it's like an education/production fund.

What an interesting concept.

People become empowered with knowledge. The idea is that they'll then go start collecting on their own.

Then the last one of these organizations is SAHA, which is the word for field in Turkish. It has three founders who were getting asked for money all the time by people in the art world who needed funds for different projects, so they got together and made a granting organization—a kind of cultural council. It's grown really fast, to about 60 members now. Some of them are collectors, some of them are businesspeople who want to give, some of them are corporations, and they donate money and then people and institutions apply for it.

Their main mission is to give money to institutions to show Turkish artists abroad, so when Köken Ergun was in Okwui Enwezor's Paris Triennial, the Triennial applied to SAHA for money and got funds to support Köken's participation. The same thing happened with Cevdet Ereğ for dOCUMENTA, and Protocinema got support from them for Hale Tenger's exhibition in New York. Now they've started watering the grass at home, so to speak, giving money to nonprofits in Istanbul. It's inspired other organizations to think about how they can participate as well.

What are some other areas of growth in the Istanbul art scene?

Well, there's Art International, the new art fair that's now in its third year, and the organizers are trying to do it properly and make it global and do everything right. There's still plenty of room for other things, though—there's room for more galleries, there's room for publications, there's room for art schools. The education situation is that there's one very traditional art school called Mimar Sinan that's named after a very important architect here and then there are two universities, Sabancı and Bilgi, that have art departments in the university. So, maybe 12 artists will graduate from Sabancı's Art Department each year, which is really small when you think of how many artists will come out of Yale, Columbia, or CalArts. There's also room for residency programs—there are a few small ones, but they lack intention and ambition. This means that the cultural landscape is wide open, which is a great opportunity.

Is the Turkish art scene predominantly focused in Istanbul or are there pockets outside as well?

There is an art school in Izmir that's pretty good, where Cengiz Çekil taught and where he met Vahap Avşar, and there's a artist-run space down there. Ankara is like Boston in that it's a city that has lots and lots of schools, and it has an artist-run space called Torun and SALT has a branch there in the Ulus district, so it's growing. Then there are a couple of tiny biennials, like one in Mardin that I worked on in 2012 with Paolo Colombo and Lora Sariaslan with about 20 artists, and there's another one up in Sinop by the Black Sea with 35 really young artists right out of art school, and one in Chanakkale, and so on.

Then, a lot of artists come from Eastern Turkey, and there's a gallery here in Istanbul called Pilot that primarily shows artists from Eastern Turkey. From the outside it seems like there's a lot of things happening, but from the inside it doesn't seem like a big boom.

Reading about the Turkish art scene from the outside, there's a lot of emphasis on resistance and political speech. For instance, Halil Altındere recently got a lot of attention for his video *Wonderland*, shown at MoMA PS1, which was a lively hip-hop inflected call of protest against gentrification in an Istanbul neighborhood. Is this kind of engaged art that's fighting the power actually the tenor of the art scene there—that it's a climate of opposition?

Yes and no. Not every artist is working in this way, but it is the predominant concern because it is the predominant concern of living here. But with the art that exists outside of this socially activated kind of practice, there's a full range: it can be poetic, it can be personal, it can be about societal issues. There's not a lot of minimal art here. We don't have zombie here. But what's happening with the next generation is a big question. Who are the good artists emerging now? That's a big part of my inspiration for starting Proto5533.

What's that?

There's an artist-run space called 5533 in the old 1950s Han [a building complex that traditionally housed itinerant merchants], which sells textiles and sewing machines and things like that on the other side of the Golden Horn here. It's a storefront run by two artists, Nancy Akakan and Volkan Aslan—but they're artists who don't want to run an exhibition space, so every year they invite another curator to run the space, and for 2015/2016 they've invited me.

What are you going to do there?

I'm going to do one exhibition with Mika Tajima, because her work makes sense regarding issues of labor in the context of a Han, and for the rest of the year I've just launched an emerging artist and curator series called Proto5533. How it's going to work is that I've hand-picked seven young curators in their 20s who are all living in Istanbul. Five are Turkish, one is American, and one is Syrian, and each gets one month to mount an exhibition.

They all either work at galleries, museums, or publications or are somehow already involved in art, and they each give me a proposal for an exhibition. Then I give the proposals to a panel of eight mentors, several of whom work in Istanbul, like November Paynter at SALT, Celenk Bafra at Istanbul Modern, and Övül Durmusoğlu, an independent curator working between Istanbul and Berlin. Then, to provide international viewpoints, I've invited Anne Ellegood from the Hammer Museum, Anthony Huberman of CCA Wattis, François Quintin of Galeries Lafayette in Paris, and Yasmil Raymond from MoMA.

Istanbul is lucky to have you—your network is incredible. How does the series operate?

The curators send in their proposals, and the mentors provide feedback via Skype or email. Then the curators go back and work on their proposals some more and read the suggested texts or whatever, and when they're ready I'll give them a date for their show. After that, they're responsible for everything. Each curator has to come up with a concept, choose the artists, ship the artwork, install it, organize the opening, prepare the press release, then de-install and get it cleaned for the next person. There's no budget, so they're even learning how to fundraise. We're launching a KissKissBankBank online crowdfunding campaign, so keep an eye out for that.

Why use a KissKissBankBank instead of the Art Basel Crowdfunding Initiative, the collaboration with Kickstarter that you work with?

I would love to use the Art Basel Crowdfunding Initiative, because I know that they're successful and it works, but it would be a conflict of interest since I'm on the jury. [Sound of birds] By the way, I just want to say that three green parrots just flew out of the tree outside my window. It's amazing here. There are so many birds that at sunset it's a cacophony. Seagulls the size of small dogs, so loud that they sound like the monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*.

That sounds incredible. It reminds me that in 2012 you told the *New York Times* that “in New York it feels like the best years are behind us. In Istanbul it feels like the best years are yet to come.” Do you still feel that way?

How wrong I was. [Laughs] I love New York, but it's like cultural fois gras—it's too much, it's too rich. There are 700 to 800 museums and galleries and there are too many things to see and people to talk to and things to do. When you tell someone you're having an opening they almost have a panic attack in front of you because they've got opera tickets and a dinner and five openings to attend already. But it's so important to do things there because it gets exposed to so many great people and you get so many ideas and so many people can participate on such a high level.

Then you come to Istanbul, and there are literally eight galleries and four institutions. When you do something, people come, and you really feel like you're participating in the scene. Even if there's very little money here for contemporary art, it's extremely rewarding. Now I have people who have worked for me on different projects who are having shows, going to graduate school and working on all these projects—they're my Protocinema alumni, and it's fun.

But Istanbul's art scene is not really in a growth period anymore.

No, it's kind of catching its breath and slowing down. But let's see if it's going to grow more in the future. One thing you can count on here is that things change very fast all the time. The context is very dynamic.

Is the international art market finding Turkish artists?

The thing about the art community here is that the first point of entry for foreigners is normally the Istanbul Biennial—curators come from all over the world to see this biennial, and Turkish artists enter the international dialogue this way. But because they become “Biennial artists” it takes a bit longer for them to also become part of the gallery system. That said, we all know that when a major gallery in the U.S. or Europe picks up an artist, one factor that is taken into consideration is whether or not this artist already has a collector base.

Could you expand on that?

Before Akram Zaatari could be picked up by Thomas Dane Gallery in London, his collector base had to be built by Gallery Sfeir Semler in Beirut. That’s because Thomas Dane—or any gallery on that level—is not going to represent an artist who does not already have a solid following. I use this example to make a point. Who is building the collector bases for artists in Turkey if there are so few galleries and so few active contemporary art collectors? There’s certainly room for more Turkish voices in the international dialogue, and there are excellent artists here who don’t have galleries in the Western art context. At the same time, there is certainly room for more voices from elsewhere to be part of the dialogue in Turkey.

This week the global art spotlight is on Istanbul for the opening of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s biennial there, titled “Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms.” To begin with, do you have any idea what that title means?

I can talk about this a bit from my perspective, and to do that I’ll break it into two halves: the “Saltwater” half and the “Theory of Thought Forms” half.

“Saltwater” itself has two functions in this exhibition. One is that it’s about information and perception, since every living being—animals and plants alike—have the ability to perceive between fresh water and salt water for survival. The other reason she’s using the word “Saltwater” is that it opens up a whole plethora of metaphors to talk about water issues, vibrations, and waves—not just thought waves or ocean waves, but sound waves, cell phone and radio waves, waves of insurgence, and waves of energy.

In fact, she’s put the biennial in over 30 different locations around the city, most of which are much easier to get to by sea than by land. For instance, there will be artists out on Büyükada, which translates as “Big Island,” so we’re going to have to take a ferry there. She wants you to be on the water.

As for the “thought forms” part, she’s using the intersection of the discovery of the neuron, the height of Art Deco architecture coming to Istanbul after a major earthquake, and research that neuroscientists are doing on thought forms, which is the concept that energy follows thought. So, if you’re thinking good thoughts about me, I’m going to feel good energy from you. And we all know that there’s information that you get when you just stand near somebody, if you like them or you don’t like them. These vibrations are a form of communication.

There is also a book from 1901 called *Thought Forms* by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, who did experiments like inviting people to illustrate the fact that if you’re jealous you have an aura that’s a green jagged shape and if you’re really happy you have this soft pink aura. You can see this in the images that Carolyn is using in her press material—those are paintings that were done by non-artists to be diagrammatic representations of energy when people are having specific thoughts.

This book was also in Kandinsky’s studio, and he references it in one letter—leading scholars to consider these diagrammatic watercolors as one of the influences behind the origin of soft-edged abstraction. And people who know about esoteric healing—which has Tibetan roots that were channeled through Alice Bailey in England in the first half of the last century—know that it is based on thought forms as well.

So, going back to the title of the show, it references the two sides of communication, where “saltwater” is about taking in information and “thought forms” is about sending out information.

How does this relate specifically to the Turkish context?

That is a good question that we'll have to ask Carolyn. But she does talk a lot about art as providing the ability for life to flourish, and the year of this biennial is also the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide, which is a very contested issue in Turkey. Her way of handling it is to put in a lot of Armenian artists, so my guess is that her way of addressing it is through this form of healing.

The Armenian genocide is obviously a tremendously divisive issue embedded within the Turkish nation, since the government has yet to acknowledge any culpability in the ethnic cleansing that took place, and any public addressing of this historical event is liable to get you arrested, as happened with the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk. How strongly is this legacy felt in Turkish art?

I wouldn't say that it's a concern in Turkish art, per se. Political injustice is more the concern in Turkish art, and people have different experience of what those injustices are. But, for example, November Paynter just curated a show at SALT called "A Century of Centuries" that was about major moments where political change happened and what the effects are, and that show discussed many political and historical events—but within it she was able to talk about the Armenian issue. So there's a way of being indirectly direct when you wrap the commentary within another framework. After all, the show was clearly about the Armenian issue.

What is next for Protocinema?

I'll do a show with Latifa Echakhch in Istanbul now but then I'm going to be going to New York to collaborate with P! on a show with Vahap Avşar. Then in February Protocinema goes to Bangladesh—we're doing an exhibition with Lara Ögel, during the Dhaka Art Summit, for which we just got a grant from the Asia Art Council.

So you're scaling out internationally—what kind of staff do you have?

[Laughs] I don't have any full-time staff. What I do is that I work *Oceans Eleven*-style, so for each exhibition I build the A-team that I need for that show. I do have people I consistently work with in both cities, and I have a freelance grant writer in New York. For Trevor Paglen, I had to find someone in Istanbul who can manage metal fabricators. For Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster I needed someone to find props for her event. Each artist has different needs, so each time to try to find the people with those skills that suit the project. It's fun.

You're doing all of these incredible projects and injecting so much energy into the Istanbul art scene. How can people help you?

You can send me money. I'm having a very special event hosted by Koray Duman, an architect in New York and who just renovated this gorgeous Lower East Side apartment—it will take place this winter between Miami and Christmas. But, yeah, it's day by day, and step by step. Oh, and you can buy art on Artspace!