

Protocinema's Mari Spirito Brings New York to Istanbul, and Vice-Versa

● By Artsy Editors Nov 4, 2013 10:20 am [f](#) [t](#) [✉](#)

In our quest to cover the Istanbul art scene in conjunction with [Contemporary Istanbul](#), we were repeatedly directed to Mari Spirito. Shaping the scene as much as she is participating in it, Spirito is the Founding Director of [Protocinema](#), a not-for-profit, nomadic art organization that works with artists to create unique exhibitions in Istanbul and New York. Spirito's influence in Istanbul is palpable—in other interviews both [Arie Amaya-Akkermans](#) and Elizabeth Thomas dropped her name—as well as in the greater art world, especially coming off recent collaborations with major contemporary artists including [Trevor Paglen](#), [Jacob Kassay](#), and [Dan Graham](#). Formerly the director of 303 Gallery, through Protocinema Spirito is bridging the art worlds of Istanbul and New York, creating a stream of artistic exchange between the two cities. Spirito shared with us the details of Protocinema and the divergent yet comparable art worlds of Istanbul and New York.

Artsy: Can you tell us about Protocinema?



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Mari Spirito: I founded Protocinema in 2011 as a nomadic, mission-driven art organization based in Istanbul and New York, with a hands-on education program. We make exhibitions by artists from many parts of the world in both cities, always in different spaces, including storefronts, apartments, parks... it's up to the artist. Most recently we showed new work by Trevor Paglen in a mechanic's garage in the neighborhood of Dolapdere during the Istanbul Biennial. It was a film, photography, and sculpture installation called Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite. On November 7th, we open an exhibition with Köken Ergun in the basement of the Westbeth building in the West Village, New York. It is a three-channel video installation called *Ashura* about an Istanbul community and their preparations of the holiest day in the Shi'a Muslim calendar. Köken's work often looks at rituals and ceremonies in various sub-cultures, as well as the customs that define and bind communities. I think New Yorkers will really get it.

Artsy: How does your approach to curating differ in New York and Istanbul? Generally, how do the art scenes differ?

MS: My approach to making exhibitions doesn't really differ in Istanbul or New York—my approach is inclusive in many ways. Each of these cities shares scale, energy, and is at the center of their own region, while counterbalancing very different opportunities and strengths in the realm of contemporary art. One scene has 800 art galleries and institutions and the other has closer to 100. They differ from each other in every possible way, while sharing many of the essential factors that affect the production and understanding of exhibitions.

Artsy: Do you primarily live in Istanbul? How does living in Istanbul compare to New York?

MS: I live both in Istanbul and New York. I see cities more as friends, and I prefer to have many friends. They enrich my life. The art scene is more geographically condensed in Istanbul than New York, and while I'm there I'm lucky to live somewhere that feels right at the center of it all.

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seen as celebrity figures, as they are in the United States?

MS: Well I'd question whether top artists are actually seen as celebrities in the United States. Like Maurizio Cattelan says, "The fact that artists, curators, and people from the art world know me doesn't make me a celebrity. The world out there is much larger than what you imagine." Of course, there are some names in both places that have wider recognition, and how that manifests corresponds to the difference in scale of the art scenes which I mentioned earlier. One thing my practice has really taught me is that art is very similar wherever you go. Working nomadically and internationally like I do really dispels a lot of the notions of 'here' and 'there'.

Mari Spirito is the Founding Director of Protocinema, presenting transnational-nomadic exhibitions in New York and Istanbul, mission-driven with a hands-on education program, since 2011. This past summer Spirito collaborated on a Research Project titled: Asar-ı Atikal/ Ancient Works with Övül Durmusoğlu, Rossella Biscotti, and Akram Zaatari, originating at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara. Spirito is a consultant for Art Basel's Talks Program, 2013. She holds a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. Prior to Protocinema, Spirito was Director of 303 Gallery, New York from 2000- 2012; and is on the boards of Participant Inc., New York, New Art Dealers Alliance, New York. and Collectorspace, Istanbul.

Images courtesy Protocinema, Istanbul:

Köken Ergun, Arshura, 2012

2 views of: Trevor Paglen, Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3), 2013

Dan Graham, Pavilion, Semi-Circular 2-way Mirror, 2006.



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Concept, Paris; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, photos Batu Tezyuksel.

Jacob Kassay, Untitled, 2012, glass, borrowed book, glass - 20.3 x 12.8 x 2.4 cm, book - variable (5). Courtesy: Protocinema, Istanbul; Art: Concept, Paris; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, photos Batu Tezyuksel.