

ESSAY 10

Curating the city
Contemporary art

Culture has a handy habit of bringing people together and nowhere is this more apparent than Istanbul. Political upheaval has created a city of fluctuation and fluidity; it's a context its art scene has embraced.

*by Mari Spirito,
curator*

Istanbul is a city with scale, whether it's a transcontinental bridge, the soaring glass buildings in Levent or the sense of endless urban megalopolis. It's grand, unapologetic and impressive. Yet I'm drawn to finding the small, inconspicuous parts of town. As the director and curator of Protocinema, the Istanbul and New York-based arts organisation that is itinerant and "site-aware", it's the old mechanic's garage in Dolapdere or the shelves of a deli on the back streets of Galatasaray that interest me. These are dynamic places to stumble upon art in daily life.

Much of my research for places to create and host shows takes place on foot. I search while strolling Istanbul's chaotic ski-slope streets, up and down its seven hills via neighbourhoods that change in temperament from one road to the next.

In Tophane I once staged an exhibition of Brian O'Connell's sculpture "Openings to the water..." We moved it, a cement

imprint of a seven-metre 1960s fishing boat, into an old abandoned storefront. For the duration of the exhibition, the window of the entire ground floor was removed; it was open to and almost part of the street.

The artwork attracted all kinds of people. The Tophane neighbourhood is a mix of conservative inhabitants, who have been there for many years, and younger expats. There is, predictably, tension. However, the neighbourhood kids became regulars and most of the workers nearby – in the corner shop, restaurants or hardware shop – became translators and ambassadors, welcoming and explaining the art to visitors. The reaction to the boat evoked many childhood memories for some inhabitants who shared these tales

“One of Istanbul’s greatest traits is the palpable sensation that anything can happen here – and it often does”

anything can happen here – and it often does. It is a city charged with meaning and as artists and curators we respond to this context. A few years ago we staged an exhibition with US conceptual artist Dan Graham, whose glass “Pavilion” series addressed how architecture affects behaviour. To do this we took over a former flower shop in Taksim Square, the symbolic centre of power in the city. Here he screened a video, about a shopping mall, that debated the nature of fabricated public spaces and showed a glass-and-steel pavilion sculpture.

This was Graham’s first visit to the city and he assumed no one here was familiar with his work. In fact, he had hundreds of fans in Istanbul. The exhibition brought together people from all walks of life to

with those ready to listen. The conversation continued: “Why is this art?” “What is it about?” “I have another idea about it – do you want to hear it?”

One of Istanbul’s greatest traits is the palpable sensation that

Non-profits with nous

01 IKSV

Non-governmental culture powerhouse founded in 1973.

02 Collectorspace

Showing private art collections just off Taksim Square.

03 5533

Shows, research and debates.

discuss the nature of public space how the built environment affects our lives. This was just prior to the Gezi Park resistance.

By bringing art to unlikely places in the city we are exploring how our expectations alter our perception. For the 2015 season of Protocinema’s emerging curator series *Proto5533*, İlhan Özcan has presented the work of Izmir-born artist Mehmet Dere in the Istanbul Trader’s Association (IMC). This mid-century concrete structure was built in the 1950s as Turkey began the push to modernise. Its tiered balconies were designed to be rather like a futuristic mall, intended as an optimistic centre of booming business. It has succeeded – today the IMC is home to over 1,000 businesses, from textile wholesalers to CD shops and the non-profit contemporary-art space 5533, which took over a former sewing-machine shop in the building.

Istanbulers have learned to be subtle and flexible in order to survive. It’s challenging to keep up with the changing social and political context and though there are constraints as a curator in this ancient city – funding, censorship, logistics – contemporary art has the power to both polarise and unite. — (M)



ABOUT THE WRITER: Mari Spirito is the founding director of Protocinema, a transnational experiment in exhibition-making. It places contemporary art in delis, downtown apartments and forgotten bunkers in Istanbul and New York. Before moving to Istanbul she headed up New York’s 303 Gallery for 12 years.