

Art

Istanbul's Underground Art Scene: myth or reality?

It would be hard to disagree with the notion that Istanbul has now achieved the status of global contemporary art hub given the number of art galleries, private and corporate-funded cultural institutions, and art fairs that have seen the light of day in the last two decades or so. However, the question whether Istanbul is home to a genuine and burgeoning underground art culture is more debatable. Eager to find an answer, **Claire Zerhouni** and **Naz Cuguoğlu** strode across the city to look for emerging artist-run platforms, non-institutional spaces and people leading alternative art projects. They came across six of them, all forging their own path in Istanbul's vibrant art scene. These spaces are run by young guns who seem to share one trait: thinking outside of the box.

TORNA

Torna is a tiny bookshop hidden in one of Moda's peaceful streets that you might have the chance to discover if you enjoy roaming around this charming side of Kadıköy. Torna specializes in one of the hottest art trends: 'Artist Books', in other words, works of art realized in the form of a book, usually published in very limited editions. Comprising publications from independent Turkish publishing houses (Bandrolsüz, Bakkal Press, REC Collective) and from the catalogue of internationally established names (Motto from Switzerland, Good Press from the UK), Torna has assembled a nicely curated selection of books and periodicals by both emerging and established artists.

Torna was founded in 2011 by artist Merve Kaptan and engineer David Unwin, two creative minds who needed spaces to work on their own practices. Back then, David needed a lathe studio to work on solar panels while Merve needed an off-space to work with other artists. The duo loves working with artists who are interested in text, film, sound and performance. Recently, Torna hosted Australian artist Caitlin Franzmann for three months in its residency, which led up to an exhibition titled 'Invisible Movements' including sound and video works, and a publication engaging with concepts of

somatic experience and urbanism.

Torna's space consists of the permanent bookshop, a multipurpose engineering atelier and Merve's studio, all of them likely to turn into exhibition spaces.

According to Merve and David, the projects exhibited at Torna are always an experiment, as they "rely on the limitations of working within and alongside another running production space." Opening May 16, Torna's next experiment will be a very promising installation by British photographer Jess Gough.

Torna, tornaistanbul.com, *Ressam Şeref Akdik Sokak, Kefeli Pasajı, Kadıköy*

PRIZMA

Encompassing artworks created with new technologies (digital art, computer animation, robotics) and aiming for a different kind of interaction between the audience and the artwork, new media art has been one of the most rising trends in contemporary art lately. In Istanbul, PRIZMA is its best ambassador thanks to its immersive, cinematic and mesmerizing site-specific artistic explorations. In a time where we are surrounded by technology, PRIZMA explores how we react to this new reality. Besides group shows and the 'Moving Images' series, PRIZMA gives priority to underground filmmakers. Lately, they hosted director and contemporary artist Ozan Adam whose feature film 'For the Blinds' had been selected in Istanbul Film Festival's New Turkish Cinema selection last year. At PRIZMA, he showcased his new movie and award-winning short films, among other video works.

PRIZMA was founded by Eli Kasavi and Lara Kamhi, two creative souls who themselves practice cinematic and media-based forms of art. They explained that "the initial motivation behind creating PRIZMA was the lack of general support current galleries give to new artistic approaches. The lack of freedom the emerging artist goes through





blocks the development for new forms of expression.”

According to them, despite the fact that ‘expanded cinema’ and video art have been widely acknowledged half a century ago, the Turkish scene’s involvement with these mediums is still very limited, which makes it difficult for the local audience to fully engage with this form of art.

If you agree that media art should no longer be an alternative, rather a necessary one to understand our current world, do not miss their upcoming exhibition, Prizma Group Show #2, opening on April 2.

PRIZMA, prizmaspace.com, Siraselviler Cad 56 Beyoğlu,

MAUMAU

Maumau is located in an old Çukurcuma building with baby blue windows, a small exhibition space and a creative aura. There, you get the chance to meet international artists, writers and researchers who came to get inspired by Istanbul’s atmosphere.

The space was founded by writer Sine Ergün in 2012 with the intention of offering a home to artists from all over

the world, both as a way to foster dialogue between cultures and give an international echo to Istanbul’s art scene.

Maumau provides residence programs for artists and writers and supports the production of documentaries. Artists and writers are offered accommodation and the chance to use the studio for six weeks in order to work on their projects. The residency ends with a final exhibition, readings and artist talks. Self-directed-residency provides a space to artists who are at different levels in their projects so that they can stay as long as they want. Besides the shows of resident artists, Maumau also sets up exhibitions to support emerging and young Turkish artists.

Since it opened its doors, maumau has hosted more than 50 artists and writers coming from from countries such as Japan, Chile, Brazil, Australia, and the US. More recently, they have been hosting two oil painters from South Africa and Iran, and a Norwegian artist making art out of ice. We suggest you pay a visit to their group exhibition that’s on until April 11.

If you’d like to be part of this international and creative atmosphere, you can just knock on maumau’s door and

have a nice chat with the artists working there. And if you feel like it, you could share one of your poems during their open mic events.

maumau, www.maumauworks.com, Ağa Hamamı Sokak 25, Sözcük Apt, Cihangir



KÖŞE

Köşe is a new two-floor space in Kadıköy that was started by the performance collective ‘Studio 4 Istanbul’. There, Köşe’s founders – Fatih Genckal, Onur Karaoğlu and Utku Kara – create, rehearse, and present their theater performances to the public, such as their recent adaptation of Fassbinder’s ‘The bitter tears of Petra von Kant.’ Hilal Polat, an up and coming costume designer and painter, also established her studio at Köşe, a small room full of colored fabrics.

Köşe is open to collaborations with Turkish and international performers, and has launched a residency program. British theater director Kathryn Hamilton, Turkish choreographers and performers Aydın Teker and Canan Yücel Pekıçten, and the Istanbul theater company Kadro Pa have been invited to present their shows and lead workshops. Köşe will soon open an acting school offering basic acting training. Other than that, the space seeks to build strong partnerships with various civil society organizations, and welcomes film screenings, debates, and small exhibitions. Last March, for instance, Köşe hosted the Syrian Mobile Festival and the Queer Artist Meeting last March.

This April, Köşe invites you to attend a theater workshop led by Hamilton, a concert by songwriter Kalben (April 3) and the premiere of a new performance co-written



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by Onur Karaoğlu and Kathryn Hamilton (April 17). Next fall, the team will hold an international festival inviting collectives from the Middle East to showcase performances addressing issues of gender hegemony and violence.

Köşe, www.kose.li, *Yeldergirmeni Sokak 2/A, Kadiköy*

PROTOCINEMA

Mari Spirito founded Protocinema in 2011. Primarily active in Istanbul and New York, Protocinema sets up singular exhibitions and performances, in the sense that they are "site-aware." Mari started to spend time in Istanbul in 2007, and witnessing the profound changes occurring within the local art scene at that time, she had the impulse to create Protocinema as a response to these evolutions.

Protocinema seeks to open a dialogue between New York and Istanbul and introduce artists who have not had many exhibitions in these cities. Exhibitions, collaborations and artistic interventions are presented in spaces specific to each artist. "The idea is that the context that an art work is viewed in is an internal part of how an art work is understood and interpreted", Mari explains.

Protocinema notably featured the work of Atalay Yavuz at Özge Bakkaliye, a convenience store in Galatasaray. The artist installed a thin clear Plexiglas box, the same size as a window, at the entrance of the shop. This box, filled with a medical gel used to look into the human body,



transformed the shop into a metaphor for the body that could be viewed from both inside and outside. Protocinema's 'Dîner Noire' by Dominique Gonzales-Foerster - a performance based on 22 psychologically dark books and Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot' - was also one of the most intriguing art events from last year.

This May in New York, Protocinema will present an early work by Hale Tenger, titled "We didn't go outside; We were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; We were always on the inside." Created in 1995 for the 4th Istanbul Biennial - it hasn't been displayed since - it shows a wooden guardhouse lined with images of the Anatolian countryside in a barbed wire yard.

Protocinema, www.protocinema.org

311ARTWORKS

When Alp Güneysel took over 311artworks's space in 2012, he had no experience in running an art gallery. However, as a former visual communication designer, he had a strong interest in contemporary arts and was dreaming about a space that would be "a playground for experimentation". "Working in advertisement helped me to understand the market and the forces behind it, how a gallery can differentiate itself from the competition, and how people react to certain things," he explains.

Thus, 311artworks is a constantly evolving open space. It does not have a strict agenda and refuses to conform to the art market or collectors' requirements. The space is dedicated to sound exhibitions and multidisciplinary projects. They organized the first Bicycle Film Festival's exhibition to address the issue of a sustainable urban life style. Anytime soon, 311artworks will open a 'Cabinet of Curiosity' in their basement, presenting a collection of old electronic objects while allowing artists to intervene.

Until then, you can visit the solo exhibition titled 'I'm Turkish' by Volkan Yıldırım consisting of mosaics and paintings (until April 12). Also, mark your calendar for an upcoming exhibition opening April 16, by American surrealist artist Charles Howard.

311artworks, *Lüleci Hendek Caddesi 31, Tophane*. www.311artworks.com



Protocinema - Dîner Noire