



THE QUIETING OF TURKEY

ENCORE

Once Europe's cool new art capital, Turkey bustled with eager patrons looking to invest, and new galleries opened freely and unceasingly—until the coup attempt in 2016. Since then, it has become rather still in Istanbul. *Gesine Borchardt* surveys the current situation

Dawn after a night of chaos. Istanbul on the morning after the Gezi Park Protest, 2013

Reportage

It must have been 10, 15 years ago that Istanbul was proclaimed the new Berlin. Artists and start-up founders alike suddenly flocked to the Bosphorus. One gallery opened after another in the Turkish metropolis, and patrons invested in private museums and cultural foundations, raising as many sponsorship funds as all collectors in Germany put together.

There was an air of optimism among Istanbul's artists, and every two years curators, buyers, and critics from all over the world flew to the celebrated Istanbul Biennale, flitting back and forth across the strait, sipping champagne. They found themselves at art fairs and vernissages, curious about the culture-hungry city that admittedly also drew its extraordinary power from the way President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's so-called Justice and Development Party (AKP) left behind the old-fashioned nationalist spirit of Turkey's founding father, Atatürk, only to be faced with a new generation of wealthy dynasties that thought globally and gained more and more influence.

Thus, the names of families (and family businesses) like Koç, Sabancı, and Eczacıbaşı stood for a new kind of support that, if not always consistently tasteful, at least reflected a broad range of Turkey's contemporary art and was also notably oriented toward the West. Galleries like Rodeo, Mana, and Rampa became glamorous hot-spots in a scene where Asia and Europe shook hands.

But even at the beginning of the 2010s, this new dynamic became noticeably tenser due to Erdoğan's thirst for power, as he turned the judiciary in his favor with the help of Turkey's first constitutional referendum. What followed were the massive Gezi Park protests in 2013. They spread from Taksim Square to the whole country, and are said to have involved 3.5 million Turks, finally culminating in a military coup attempt in 2016, which toughened the regime further.

A second constitutional referendum in 2017 sealed Erdoğan's dictatorial role—and Istanbul disappeared from the international art map.

Rodeo, Mana, and Rampa are now closed, as are many other commercial galleries, even though, it must be said, some private museums are upgrading—architect Renzo Piano is currently building the new Istanbul Modern; the Arter cultural center moved into a stylish new building; and the Garanti-Bankası's Salt art hub is still around, albeit, like everywhere else, with far fewer exhibitions a year. Certainly, Turkey is much worse off economically than it was nine years ago, and the political climate is not one in which the liberal or leftist art business feels comfortable. No question about it: the bubble has burst.

It has also become quieter among the many cultural workers, patrons, and entrepreneurs whom Erdoğan had arrested after the attempted coup. One of their most prominent is Osman Kavala, a key figure in Istanbul's art scene. Born into one of the oldest and most respected families in the country, he founded Anadolu Kültür in 2002, creating a crucial, internationally renowned, and well-connected non-profit organization for cultural and social projects.

Back then, cooperations with foreign organizations such as the German Goethe Institute and the Heinrich Böll Foundation were a matter of course, stimulating international exchange and cultivating liberal values like equality and ethnic diversity.

A former tobacco warehouse of the Kavalas became Depo, an exhibition space for contemporary art that explicitly focused on works tackling explosive topics like the Armenian Genocide or the ongoing suppression of the Kurds. More than an entrepreneur and philanthropist, Osman Kavala is someone who understands culture as a political medium. He was also a

co-founder of the Open Society Foundations alongside American philanthropist George Soros, fighting for human rights and freedom of the press. Kavala frequented the loftiest political circles, cavorted with artists, and mediated between left-wing intellectuals and the conservative bourgeoisie, between East and West, between the old and the new—and he’s been in prison for almost three and a half years.

Kavala was arrested at Istanbul Airport in October 2017. The allegations: organizing and financing the Gezi Park protests, being involved in the coup attempt, and espionage. Aside from a brief break, he’s been held in the maximum security Silivri prison outside Istanbul.

Not even protestation by the European Court of Human Rights has lifted the scandalous charges. The arbitrariness is intentional. Erdoğan is setting an example. It’s also a message to the old Turkish bourgeoisie who turned their back on Erdoğan after showing some initial sympathy, and to everyone else who protested against the president at Gezi Park.

“Osman being imprisoned for over three years is a symbolic political punishment. It shows how the government can display its force arbitrarily on its opponents,” the artist Hale Tenger, born in 1960, tells me. She knows Kavala well, has done exhibitions with him, and is friends with his wife, Ayşe Buğra. The fact that Erdoğan is not facing more pushback from abroad baffles her.

Especially in recent years, Europe has kept rather quiet—the consequence of the EU’s refugee agreement with Turkey. “We live in a ‘non-law’ state. So many innocent people are in prison. We all feel the danger. And the world just watches!” Tenger still remembers Turkey’s 1980s rampaging military regime, when images were removed from exhibitions and artists imprisoned too.

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“Political pressure was always there. But now it’s extreme. It’s totally unforeseeable whether, when, and why it’ll hit you. You wake up in the morning and don’t think of anything else. It’s unbearable.” The other day, someone was arrested for a retweet, and in Izmir, the practice of Tenger’s doctor, a renowned physician known for his liberal attitude, was closed. “They repeatedly came back, each time with an absurd reason, checked every single thing in the office, his bookkeeping, and found nothing deficient. Finally they said he should have started his new secretary’s social insurance not on the day she started work but a day before.” The absurd fine amounted to 1,881 lira, the number matching Atatürk’s year of birth. This kind of grueling harassment is now part of Turkish people’s everyday lives.

“If you can force a doctor to close his office, it’s clear what Anadolu Kültür is going to face,” Tenger says. But Kavala won’t be silenced. Even

from his cell, he initiated the podcast *Adalet Atlası* (Atlas of justice), released by Anadolu Kültür. “That gives me hope. They can demolish buildings and close facilities, but they can’t prevent people from thinking and speaking,” says the artist.

In the meantime, the non-profit space Protocinema, founded by American curator Mari Spirito, and one of Istanbul’s most progressive places for international contemporary art, opened an exhibition reacting to the pressure on LGBTQIA+ people in Turkey. In his text about the show, its curator, Alper Turan, writes: “Within the last year marked by the Covid crisis, the Turkish government’s LGBTQIA+ policy shifted from passive ignorance to active, systematic, and violent attacks, mainly on the public visibility of LGBTQIA+. Students and protestors got arrested because of rainbow flags—even children were forbidden to draw rainbows—and that flag literally became a target and a crime. As a response to that, I invited queer artists who are originally from Turkey but based around Europe to produce abstract yet queer works that don’t use any color in order to evade censorship and state oppression.” Asked about the state of the city’s art scene, Turan says that it’s rolling on, as it always has in one way or another. “There was always turmoil in this country, and accordingly there was always a reaction to it in the art community.” Mari Spirito nods in response. “The art community in Istanbul is resilient and innovative. We are familiar with crisis and well equipped to pivot effectively,” she says. “While Covid has been revealing underlying corruption and growing violence, the art community has engaged in deeper collaboration. We are working together to do what we can. Turkey is one of the few countries that has open borders and open art spaces, which is a ‘double-edged sword,’ as they say.” She points to a

strong, adaptable network and collaborative mindset among artists, curators, and patrons. But besides the political instability, Turan reiterates, the economic problems persist: “There have been big cuts in funding at institutions—they’ve started to make almost yearlong exhibitions to fill up their programs and spaces.”

Ali Kazma, born in 1971, has a somewhat similar feeling about the situation: “It’s just an endless cycle of intimidation.” Gezi Park shaped his

generation, but older artists had already lived through the military coup of 1980. They’re often more pessimistic. Kazma tries to avoid tunnel vision. “The biggest issue facing cultural institutions today is economic. The time of big money is over.” The art and discourse are both of good quality, but it happens in small circles and is undynamic. Now you mostly show your work among friends.

Kazma, who was picked for the Turkish Pavilion at the 2013 Venice

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Biennale and now partly lives in Paris, opened an exhibition at Kiraathane, a self-described “free word center” that also offers a platform for writers and poets. Regarding Osman Kavala, he says: “Kavala is a big-hearted, humble, and very courageous man. He supported many of my artist friends and stands up for minorities, especially for the Kurds,” Kazma says. “But it’s for sure that he is not in prison because of that, even if many people want to see it that way. Things are more complicated.”

Indeed, Osman Kavala’s detention seems more like a signal to the other wealthy and internationally connected families who’ve turned their backs on Erdoğan—“Look, if it can happen to him, it can hit you too.” Nevertheless, you can’t really compare the Kavalas to the Koçs, for example, who have benefited from the looting of Armenian property and only developed into big supporters of a free cultural scene during Istanbul’s recent boom years.

During the Gezi Park protests, the Koçs opened one of their hotels on Taksim Square as a refuge for demonstrators fleeing police violence—only for the family to promptly face an investigation of their taxes. Few people got away with a warning: the left-wing politician Selahattin Demirtaş was arrested after the 2016 coup attempt, as was the journalist Ahmet Altan, who’s serving a life sentence in the same prison as Kavala.

The Kurdish artist and journalist Zehra Doğan, on the other hand, whose art and reporting relate to the oppression of the Kurds, was released. It’s always the same erratic in-out pattern with this populist regime. The Gezi Park protests; the coup attempt; the conflict with the Islamic, democratic, liberal, and pro-Kurdish Gülen Movement; and the Kurdish conflict have all shaped the terrain where Erdoğan’s cult of punishment now festers. Such an atmosphere of threats and violence would wear down even the most resistant art scene.

CANSU YILDIRAN, from the series *Fallacy*, 2021, photograph on foil, 178 x 140 cm
Shown in the exhibition *A FINGER FOR AN EYE*, curated by Alper Turan at Protocinema

