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The Istanbul Art-Boom Bubble

By SUZY HANSEN

Earlier this winter, the giant 120-year-old Ottoman bank building in Istanbul reopened as a multimillion-dollar contemporary art space called [SALT](#). This was surprising. Turks were never big on contemporary art, and for years rich people didn't visit that part of town.

When I moved to the neighborhood five years ago, it was all electrical-supply stores and abandoned buildings and men smoking. My building didn't have heat; girlfriends wouldn't visit after dark; a neighbor once attacked another neighbor with a small sword. I don't see swords in Istanbul anymore. I do see a lot more art.

One evening in November, Turks and foreigners traipsed up the cobbled sidewalks to SALT's huge, heavy doors for the opening-night party. The headline exhibit featured thousands of old black-and-white photographs taken by a dead Armenian studio photographer and carefully assembled by the young artist [Tayfun Serttas](#). Another exhibit was an installation by Gulsun Karamustafa, Turkey's doyenne of contemporary art. Another was about archaeology and Europeans looting the Ottoman Empire.

But the space overwhelmed the art. It was too magnificent. Nothing like SALT existed in Istanbul. Inside, the building was five floors and 100,000 square feet of carved white marble. Curators, bankers, interior designers, writers, musicians, academics, artists and wealthy wives craned their necks to take in the soaring ceiling as they climbed the grand staircases. They gaped at the stylish library, and the plush movie theater, and the smoking terrace that was also a restaurant. The great imperial bulk of SALT loomed over the Golden Horn and the forlorn rooftops below.

Foreigners and expats gushed with approval. Even the fatalistic Turks, skeptical of Westerners' enthusiasm, couldn't help admitting that this strange art institution was awesome.

It appears that Istanbul, which went from a cosmopolitan wonderland in the 19th century to, in the Nobel-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk's words, a "pale, poor, second-class imitation of a Western city" for much of the 20th, is having its moment of rebirth. These newly wealthy corners of the East seem full of possibilities, but what kind of culture will the Turks create?

On my way out, I ran into Mari Spirito, a longtime director at 303 Gallery in New York.

Spirito had just moved to Turkey to set up a nonprofit called [Protocinema](#). Above our heads, Arabic script was etched into the marble: “He who earns money is God’s beloved servant.”

“In New York it feels like the best years are behind us,” she said. “In Istanbul it feels like the best years are yet to come.”

Those best years might be a long way off, many Turks would joke, but still, it is a heady time to be young and talented in Istanbul. One summer night I accompanied a group of women as they finished their dinner at a meze tavern, put on red lipstick and stopped for a bottle of raki (Turkey’s national liquor) and cigarettes on their way to a party not far from SALT. Especially on muggy evenings, Istiklal Caddesi, the central pedestrian artery of the city, swarms with people, bodies colliding as Turks and tourists race to shops, cafes and bars. Arms around one another, the women maneuvered through Istiklal’s traffic into Rumeli Han, an Ottoman-era arcade building that exudes a faded, dingy glory, with sooty stone staircases and crumbling ceilings. Up a few flights, past the Communist Party office, music drifted out of an artists’ studio. Beer bottles and cans covered the table and floor; a stack of easels leaned against a wall; the girls poured their raki into tiny plastic cups and found a seat with their friends.

“This place has become a meeting point,” one gallery owner said. “It’s feeding the underground scene.”

In a long room, about 40 Turks were watching the performance group [Ha Za Vu Zu](#) play music. The 20- and 30-somethings sat on the floor and listened quietly. Some women wore retro styles, ’40s hair and cigarette pants. Men with poofs of black curls lounged in T-shirts. A pretty girl in a sundress thrust an invitation into my hand. “I’m having my first show!” she said. The venue was the prominent exhibition space Arter. “Please come.”

The artists then began dancing to old Turkish rock, a hybrid of Western and Anatolian music, joining together in a modern version of traditional Turkish dancing: arms spread wide, women and men dancing together in pairs. The vibe was anything but self-conscious; it felt like a safe place to go nuts. Shoes came off, feet turned black. After a few hours, sweat pouring down their faces, the men took off their shirts, shouting, laughing, stamping. Someone danced into a heart-shaped ashtray, spilling cigarette butts on the floor; a woman took off her shirt, too.

“We’re like girls and boys playing,” said Yasemin Nur, a 35-year-old artist who attended the party with Gozde Ilkin. Both are members of [AtilKunst](#), an all-female artist collective. Nur had short, asymmetrical ’80s-style hair, with a thin braid. “I do feel it is like a playground,” Nur said. “But we are very serious. Everyone is hardworking. They live as they produce, and they produce as they live.”

This is a life few Turks will ever know. In this conservative Muslim country of 80 million, the artists have minimal influence on social and political life at home. But they will someday export contemporary Turkish culture to the world. They have grown up during a relatively free and prosperous time in Turkey and make up an artistic elite that has more in common with their counterparts in other nations than with their own countrymen. In conversation they can easily shift from Turkish to European to American pop culture. As one young woman put it, “I know Chicago politics better than I know my own municipality.”

Most of these artists now congregate in Beyoglu, the old European quarter, which for a long time existed in a state of spooky, decaying glamour. The elite wouldn't go to Beyoglu at night. As Turkey's economy exploded, kebab shops turned into conspicuously European cafes, squatter buildings bloomed into boutique hotels and high rents drove the poor to the city's periphery. Art galleries popped up in unexpected places. The nouveau riche and old-guard elite realized that rich people should have art collections, and the art market spiked. All of a sudden, Turkey's versions of the Rockefellers and Whitneys wanted to slap their names on old buildings and fill them with art.

Meanwhile, the ruling Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party (A.K.P.), which routinely throws writers and journalists in jail, rarely bothers with provocative artists, at least so far. (In a sinister dispatch from the Interior Ministry, an A.K.P. official pointed out that terror, that is, Kurdish terror, comes in all forms, including art.) During last year's Istanbul Biennial — now a major art-world event — Emine Erdogan, the prime minister's head-scarf-wearing wife, gave a speech at an opening at the Istanbul Modern, the city's main modern art museum. Freedom of expression is bad for politics, but contemporary art is good for business. Whether the government's heavy-handed relationships with the corporate patrons of the art world will be good for art is another story.

Some money has been trickling into the lives of young artists. I saw Gozde Ilkin's work months earlier in the same Rumeli Han building, at the gallery artSumer. Her show was called “Refuge: Chorus of Voices From Inside.” Ilkin had sewn silhouettes — of a bride and groom, Turkish men dancing — onto old patterned bedsheets and curtains found in her family cupboards. The silhouettes came from scenes she'd seen in real photographs. In another piece, tiny tanks, helicopters and soldiers hid among the orange and brown flowers on a curtain. The work, titled “[Curtain: They Were Sleeping Somewhere Inside of Us](#),” seemed to be popular with visitors.

“Everything is already sold out,” said the gallery's owner, Asli Sumer, said. “They sold out yesterday” — before the show opened.

“See?” Patrick Legant, an international art consultant who worked for 10 years at Sotheby's in London, turned to me and said. He had been living in Turkey for a few months

then. “This is crazy Istanbul!”

Artists like Ilkin, who is 31, find themselves with opportunities and temptations that artists of other generations here never experienced: nonprofit spaces, media attention, parties, lectures, auctions, sales. There are new books to read, archives to comb through, full-scale exhibitions of predecessors whose work they’ve never seen. And there are financial rewards for some: weeks after Ilkin’s opening, one of her pieces sold for \$12,000 at an auction at Sotheby’s in London — its third auction of exclusively Turkish art. Ilkin, who as a member of AtilKunst spends time making political stickers and putting on free performances, has actually been able to make a living as an artist. “When I sold my first piece, I was sad,” she said. “I am attached to what I do, and it’s not easy to give a price to it.” She doesn’t sell everything, though: “It’s important to keep some things close to you.”

The artists are well aware of what’s happening to their once-ignored corner of the world. “It’s totally different, it’s a market now,” Yasemin Nur said. “It’s connected to the last economic crisis, and now Istanbul has become the hip city, and is chosen as a hip city. The system needs the hip city, and next it will be Beirut, and next somewhere else. This is our time. We will be sad, but the wind will go.”

The core of Istanbul’s art scene coalesced in the ’80s and ’90s through the efforts of a few prominent figures: curators like Ali Akay and Beral Madra, the artist Halil Altindere, the SALT director Vasif Kortun. Most artists will tell you that Kortun, who is 53, is the father of Istanbul’s art world. “We can say, there was before and after Vasif,” one artist told me. In order to show your work home or abroad, said another, “you used to need Vasif.” And he’s respected internationally. “He seems to be able to predict where art institutions will go,” the Beirut-based critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie said.

In 1998, Kortun returned from directing Bard College’s Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies in New York and opened up a small office in Beyoglu. He called it the [Istanbul Contemporary Art Project](#), which became Istanbul’s nascent art hub. Then, with the backing of Garanti Bank, Kortun established Platform Garanti, an exhibition space that also archived books, criticism and artists’ production materials. Platform closed in 2007, and Kortun and Garanti opened SALT Beyoglu and SALT Galata in 2011. The projects, conceived as places “for research and experimental thinking,” cost about \$30 million.

If archives and libraries are a focus, it’s because few such institutions have tended to Turkey’s history. “We always wanted to create a place in Istanbul which would have all the materials so people can do their research,” Kortun said. “The ’80s conceptual generation hasn’t been assessed, the reason being they were not market artists. A lot of them went through tough times with serious disinterest in their work. So we’re digitizing the complete archive.”

The neglect extends into the past well beyond the 1980s. “I don’t think most of the stuff we know is correct about the history,” Kortun said. “If you take the Ottoman Empire as a map, I think the most invisible part of the empire is Istanbul and the artists from Turkey.”

Turkish intellectuals attribute Istanbul’s lack of a solid modern and contemporary culture to its broken history — especially the sharp break between the Ottoman Empire and a modern, secular state. Even after the republic’s founding in 1923, the Turks endured many more violent disturbances: World War II, pogroms against Armenians and Greeks, an ongoing civil war with the Kurds, three military coups. But there’s another reason for the absence of a coherent Turkish culture.

“Istanbul is shallow,” Kortun said. “It’s not an intellectual place. It was an old city with Greeks and Armenians and Jews. The Armenians were the intellectual backbone of the city. This place lost its lungs in the beginning of the 20th century. Maybe more than its lungs. It was a crippled place when it started as a nation. The 20th century is the lost century for this city.”

The “bridge between East and West” cliché idealizes Constantinople’s fabled past, before the emergence of the repressive Turkish state. That’s why it sometimes feels, in the 21st century, that even as Istanbul artists are merging with the international community, they are also looking backward to discover themselves.

“It’s not a revolution,” Kortun said, referring to Istanbul’s current phase of cultural production. “It’s a correction.”

Istanbul’s art community has changed enough that Turkish artists who once fled to London or Berlin or Amsterdam have come home. One day I met with Ali Kazma at [Arter](#), the art institution whose chairman is Omer Koc, one of the most serious and respected collectors in the country. Kazma, a 40-year-old video artist, returned from New York 12 years ago. Arter’s exhibition at the time included older contemporary artists — members of Kortun’s neglected generations — like Ayse Erkmen, Sarkis, Hale Tenger and the pioneering collective Hafriyat. Kazma’s video installation “Written” was displayed in a small, dark room. Multiple screens showed the flickering flames of the burning page of a book, then the slow reappearance of the words on the page.

He was happy to be back in Istanbul. “First and foremost it’s a young country, and a young city,” he said. (Half of Turkey’s population is under 30.) “That has an effect on the psyche. You can afford to make mistakes when you are young. You can take risks.”

There are also pitfalls. Many artists express anxiety about the rush of corporate money to the scene — the Turkish government does not finance much of anything art-related — complaining that it doesn’t always go to the artists themselves, who desperately need money and spaces to experiment. There’s very little art criticism in Turkey, everyone

complains, and things are moving too fast without reflection. The intellectual versus commercial balance is out of whack. Ten years ago, according to Tayfun Serttas, the artist from SALT Galata, people used to talk about art until the morning. “We used to process everything on a much more intellectual and conceptual level,” he told me.

And sudden international interest in Turkish art, many suggest, can tempt artists to Orientalize themselves, to make their art explicitly “Turkish” from a Western perspective, in response to the needs of the market. Take the example of a recent hyperrealistic oil painting by Taner Ceylan, one of the most successful Turkish painters today, which depicts an Ottoman woman with a veil standing with her back to the famous Courbet painting of a naked woman with her legs spread. More than one Turkish artist saw Ceylan’s piece as evidence of a bad, self-Orientalizing trend. It sold for \$370,000 at Sotheby’s.

“I am not interested in being labeled an artist belonging to a certain geography,” Kazma said. “Now that it is not kosher for a Western artist to have an Orientalist angle, sometimes we see works in exhibitions that have the Orientalist approach by non-Western artists. I never wanted to do that.”

In reality, Turkish contemporary art runs the gamut of mediums and ideas. Some argue that there’s nothing distinctively Turkish about Turkish art; for a long time Turks were taught to imitate the West. Turkish modern art looks a lot like Western modern art, much to the dismay of international art experts looking for something exotic. What is real Turkish culture anyway? It’s not harems and fezzes — that’s Ottoman. One gallerist said she wasn’t even sure what “Turkish” art would look like.

While most Turkish contemporary art deals with universal themes, some of the political works have been specific to modern Turkey — Ataturk, the army — and don’t always translate abroad. One artist argued that Turks should be responding to the neoliberal capitalist age, not to Turkey’s era of military coups and authoritarianism.

Kutlug Ataman, the most famous Turkish artist in the world, sees a different shortcoming in Turkish art. A video artist and filmmaker, Ataman left the country when he was a teenager just after the 1980 military coup and returned to Istanbul for good almost 10 years ago. One British critic [reviewing a 2010 retrospective](#) of his work at the Istanbul Modern said that Ataman was “one of the few artists of any nationality whose work I’d travel anywhere in the world to see.” But that retrospective, “The Enemy Inside Me,” might have been the first time Turks encountered his work: a video of himself dressed in belly-dancer drag, dancing; four large-screen videos side by side of women speaking simultaneously about why they wear wigs; an interview with an elderly Armenian woman struggling to regain her memory.

Ataman said he always longed to return to Turkey, but he was skeptical of the art he sees in

Istanbul: “A great majority of the work consists of imitations of Western gestures. Their reference is New York and London.”

Ataman doesn't think Turkish artists have confronted the real source of their material, the thing they have to offer the world. He referred to an infamous recent incident, when a mob of Turkish men attacked gallery-hoppers who'd spilled onto the streets drinking alcohol in their fashionable clothes. The galleries were gentrifying the neighborhood, and the community, many Turks later told reporters, felt encroached upon and left out. To many other Turks, however, the attackers were religious types angered by the liberal lifestyle they'd been forced to witness: uncovered women, gay men, art, alcohol. In the center of Istanbul, Turkey's two worlds came face to face, in a microcosmic dance of the confrontation happening all over the world: the West and the East, the rich and the poor, the comfortable and the angry.

Ataman regards such a confrontation as a brush with the “real Turkey.” “When I look at artists' practice in Europe, I am not inspired,” he said. “If the artists here can engage with Turkey, they will be ahead of the rest of the world. Because the world is this. This desert.”

Istanbul's art boom won't last forever. The economic crisis in the West and political instability in the East have caused the market to soften a bit, gallerists say. More important, perhaps, a majority of the buyers of Turkish art are Turks. And some of those new collectors know very little about art.

It's a challenge for gallerists like Sylvia Kouvali, 30, whose international gallery, Rodeo, which represents acclaimed Turkish artists like Gulsun Karamustafa, Banu Cennetoglu and Emre Huner, as well as established foreign artists like James Richards, Haris Epaminonda and Iman Issa, is often cited by foreign observers as the city's best. Kouvali, who is Greek, sells 90 percent of the gallery's works at art fairs abroad. Inexperienced Turkish collectors don't always appreciate her artists.

And as Ataman's story also suggested, it isn't easy being a gallery owner in a conservative Istanbul neighborhood. Rodeo opened six years ago in Galata, across from the Irmak Meat and Chicken store, a barbershop and a teahouse where men sit and smoke and watch the colorful gallery-hoppers with heavy eyes.

One evening, at an opening for Gulsun Karamustafa, the Rodeo crowd smoked outside, so as not to break the country's new antismoking laws, but drank inside, so as not to anger the locals. Since the attack on the galleries, undercover cops had taken to shadowing the parties. Kouvali forgot to give the cops a heads-up about her event, and a broad man wearing hoop earrings and red pants, looking like an '80s break dancer, walked into the gallery and put down his card. “You didn't call us,” he said, looking hurt. He was an odd undercover cop, though in his efforts to resemble the creatively dressed gallerygoers, he

looked unlike any Turkish man I'd ever seen. His partner, dressed in an Adidas sweatsuit, came in after him. "We're here to protect you," he said gravely. The "real" Turkey often comes in the form of a paternalistic police force.

But Kouvali is committed to Istanbul and to the community that has developed around Rodeo, which spans from Cairo to New York. "Just as to someone from New York, Athens or Istanbul is a periphery, for me, New York is a periphery," she said. "Of course here I am sitting under a picture of Leo Castelli." She looked up at a photo of the New York gallerist and laughed. "We learned from New York. But I am not of that place. Now everything is central and everything is the periphery. This is the doom of our time, the freedom and the possibility. You can do whatever you do anywhere, and people will come and find you."

I met one of Kouvali's artists, Banu Cennetoglu, at a studio off Istiklal. Cennetoglu, tiny and friendly, works with photography and books. When she was young and living in Turkey, photography was about imitation, and she left to free herself, living in Paris and New York for years. "It was hard to judge your own talents in this country," she said. Abroad, as an assignment photographer, she felt frustrated by the limits of photography and turned to other mediums. In the Venice Biennale in 2009, Cennetoglu presented some 450 of her own photographs in the form of a mail-order catalog, photos of everything from the twin towers burning to Cennetoglu herself.

Cennetoglu now runs a space called BAS in the neighborhood of Karakoy, where she displays her library of artist books. One of her recent projects involved printing the work of an Armenian artist whose graphic novel she found in a secondhand shop. Nothing like BAS had existed in Turkey before she set up the space. This was how far Turkey still had to go: where would a young artist have found artist books in Istanbul? At SALT's opening, as we stood in the gorgeous library full of art journals and magazines and books, a European friend wondered why they'd built a library in a space for exhibitions. It's because there aren't many libraries to be found.

In 2010, Cennetoglu organized a talk to discuss the work of an artists' collective called Koridor that was active from 1988 to the mid-'90s. Very few Turkish artists had ever heard of the group, but many people I spoke to recalled how important the event was to them. "The talk recognized that there were some artist groups from the recent history," Cennetoglu said. "It's important not to ignore them."

Cennetoglu's projects reflect a movement in the art community now — recovering the past, creating something solid. Unlike the old modernist Turkish painters, looking exclusively to the West, Turkish artists also hunger for knowledge of what came before them in Turkey. There's an imperative, conscious or not, to discover and solidify a real contemporary culture that is organic to Turkey, even as the country is integrated into the global system.

“This will become an international scene before it was even a Turkish one,” said one very young artist who was working at Rodeo. “It’s like the hot money pouring into this country. When it goes, what will be left?”

One day in 2010, I attended an art auction at a Swissôtel in the center of Istanbul. The house sold mostly modern art, with a smattering of contemporary pieces. The room was packed. Young men in expensive, untucked button-downs, the weekend wear of investment bankers, sat in groups of five, talking loudly. They looked like frat boys at a fashion show.

Halfway through the event, the auctioneer arrived at an Erol Akyavas painting, the showcase piece of the evening, one of the few Turkish works that had a vaguely Islamic theme. Multiple bidders quickly took the price into the high six digits. We all felt where things were headed. The auctioneer announced, “One million,” and held up his gavel showily. When the gavel fell, the room broke out in applause.

The digital counter, however, did not have seven digits. A girl scrawled a large golden No. 1 and, doing her best Vanna White, held it up in front of the other six digits. The counter flipped to zeros: 1,000,000. A collector held up his camera phone and took a picture.

Suzy Hansen is a writer living in Istanbul.

Editor: Dean Robinson