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# A Canvas of Turmoil During Istanbul Biennial

By RACHEL DONADIO

ISTANBUL — Back in January, Fulya Erdemci, the curator of this year's Istanbul Biennial, decided to focus the exhibition on art in public spaces. The city was booming, but at what cost, and for whose benefit? It had become the central question there. Ms. Erdemci wanted artists to engage with the issue, and citizens to engage with public art.

During the winter, organizers of the Biennial, which opens to the public on Saturday, began applying for permits to install works around the city and in buildings slated for demolition. Then in May, Gezi Park, a once-dingy area near the city's central Taksim Square, erupted, as Turks of all backgrounds took to the streets in a wide-ranging protest set off by anger at how the government was developing the city without the consent or participation of residents. Riots broke out, police tear gas flowed and the Biennial was forced to move inside.

The organizers are trying to cast that change in a positive light. "When Gezi happened, we were so excited," Ms. Erdemci said last week as she stood at a Biennial site in a former industrial warehouse in front of an installation by the Mexican artist Jorge Méndez Blake — a long brick wall with a copy of Kafka's novel "The Castle" tucked underneath. The demonstrations, she said, asked the same question she had hoped would be raised in the Biennial: "If it's possible to have multiple publics come together, live together, act together?"

Now in its 13th edition, this year's Istanbul Biennial, which runs through Oct. 20, is called "[Mom, Am I Barbarian?](#)" taking its title from a book by the Turkish poet Lale Muldur. It fills five venues in Istanbul's bustling downtown, bringing together 88 artists from around the world: 15 of them are Turkish, others are from Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, Asia and North Africa.

Last week, as visitors arrived, the largest demonstrations since June erupted in Istanbul. More demonstrations are planned for this weekend and the crisis in Syria has led to an influx of refugees to Turkey and has put the government even more on edge. Given the volatile climate, the city did not grant the exhibition permission to show works in public areas, out of fear of protests. This decision meant that many artists had to rethink their contributions or produce works that commented on the dynamics of public space, rather than in public space.

One project that was unthinkable after the Gezi uprising was by Erik and R



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brothers who form the Dutch collective Rietveld Landscape. They initially proposed an installation in which thousands of tiny lights would flicker like fireflies on the facade of the Ataturk Cultural Center, a landmark in the center of Taksim Square. But after the building became festooned with protest banners during the Gezi Park demonstrations, Biennial organizers never got a response from the Turkish Culture Ministry about their request, Ms. Erdemci said. (The ministry did not respond to requests for comment.)

Instead, the brothers' installation, "Intensive Care," features a small dark room in which lights play against a tiny scale model of the building. After spending a month last winter in the city, Erik Rietveld said he could sense the tension building. "There was a frustration, people were so worried about the possibilities of exposing themselves," he said.

Perhaps the most telling Biennial exhibition space is a nearly unmarked storefront in a shopping mall, tucked between shops with mannequins in head scarves and long, polyester robes. It's indicative of the somewhat marginal role of contemporary art and of the largely secular intelligentsia in Turkey, where the Islamic party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dominates the economy and the debate.

In Gezi Park, the city has embarked on a politically charged, if quaint, landscaping project, planting beds of roses and marigolds and turning on a once-dormant fountain. Indeed, in an atmosphere in which seemingly mundane acts like standing in one place or silently reading books in the park became forms of resistance and led to arrests, some spontaneous public art in Istanbul has resonated even more powerfully than the art on view in the Biennial.

A few weeks ago, a retired engineer [caused a stir](#) when he painted one of Istanbul's many steep flights of stairs in rainbow colors. Visitors flocked to the stairs and newlyweds posed for photos there. But the painting wasn't approved, and the municipality repainted the stairs gray. Protests ensued. People started painting stairs across Turkey. To calm the waters, the city repainted the original staircase in colorful stripes.

"Wonderland," an arresting video filmed in February by the Turkish artist Halil Altindere that is showing at the exhibition, features a group of boys of Roma descent from the Istanbul neighborhood of Sulukule. They perform a hip-hop song and dance about the fate of their neighborhood, where old houses were bulldozed to make way for the new, and ethnic populations were transferred to new housing in high rises on the outskirts of the metropolis of nearly 14 million.

"You call it urban regeneration," the group sings. "It's the downfall of the city."

In "Is the Museum a Battlefield," the artist [Hito Steyerl](#) of Berlin traced a bullet casing from a battlefield in Turkey, where a friend of hers was killed, to the manufacturers who produced it, some of whom also engage in arts philanthropy. (One of the sponsors of the Istanbul Biennial is Koc holding, whose subsidiary Otokar is a supplier to the Turkish army, Ms.

Steyerl said.)

Indeed, a running subject of the Biennial is what could be described as the art-industrial complex, in which corporations involved in military contracts or some of the gentrification projects that have stirred up such anger in Istanbul then offer financial support to art that comments on those projects. (The Biennial is run by a private foundation backed by some of Turkey's leading construction companies.)

**SALT**, Istanbul's premier contemporary art institution, is also hosting parts of the Biennial, as well as a retrospective of the pre-eminent Turkish artist Gulsun Karamustafa, whose work addresses questions of migration, displacement and the Turkish military dictatorship of the 1970s, during which time she was imprisoned.

As he sat on the terrace of a SALT building, with the sounds of construction in the background, Vasif Kortun, SALT's director of research and programs, said that what struck him most about the Gezi Park protests was that decades after Turkey's military dictatorship, "it was the first time a nontraumatized generation of youth got together without any debt to the past."

He checked Twitter on his laptop to see if any demonstrations were planned for that night. "It was a very good wake-up call," he added.

*Ceylan Yeginsu contributed reporting.*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: September 17, 2013**

*An article and headlines on Saturday about the Istanbul Biennial described it incorrectly. It is an exhibition in which artists are invited to show works; it is not an art fair, a commercial venture in which galleries pay fees and display works for sale. The article also misstated the title of the show. It is "Mom, Am I Barbarian?" not "Mom, Am I a Barbarian?"*