

# Beral Madra

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Artcritic and Curator. She coordinated the 1st (1987) and the 2nd (1989) Istanbul Biennale, curated exhibitions of Turkish artists in 43rd, 45th, 49th, 50th and 51st Venice Biennale, co-curated the exhibition *Modernities and Memories-Recent Works from the Islamic World* in 47th Venice Biennale.

Since 1984 she has organized more than 250 local and international artists in her art centres and in other official art spaces in Istanbul. She curated and co-curated over 50 international group shows. She has represented and coordinated Istanbul Scholarship of Berlin Senate (1995-2013). Curated international shows in Borusan Art Gallery (1997-2000). Curated the exhibitions in West LB, Istanbul (1999-2002). Lectured in the Art Management Department of the Faculty of Art and Design of Yildiz Technical University (1998-2002). She is founding member Diyarbakir Art Centre (established September 2002 ; founding member of Foundation of Future Culture and Art; founding member and honorary president of AICA, Turkey (established 2003); 2008-2010 Visual Arts Director of Istanbul 2010 ECOC, conducting the major projects *Lives and Works* in Istanbul, *Portable Art*, *Kadirga Art Production Center*, *Sanat Limani*. BM-CV-ENG-2013

2012 Founder and partner of Kuad Gallery: [www.kuadgallery.com](http://www.kuadgallery.com)

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# **...the curator** **has his own evolution<sup>1</sup>** **Curating Through** **the Post-Truth**

## **Different Curatorial Strategies**

The aim of cultural fusion of globalisation could not balance the regional disparities in socio-political-economic circumstances that were not so suitable for the system and dissemination of contemporary art productions; therefore curating should be discussed according to the local conditions in where it has different tasks, aims and functions. This is an inevitable reality even if the so called multi-cultural international exhibitions since early 1990's have immensely contributed to the coherence, networking and exchange between very differently structured art scenes all over the world.

Not so far, even in 1980's all the artists of leading cities of South-east Europe (the Balkans), South Caucasus, Middle East and East-Mediterranean had no connection to each other, not to say no information about their art scenes! In late 1980's many of the artists and curators from these cities tried widely to contribute to the remote but potential communication and cultural exchange. Each of them have a complicated story to tell about this venture through political and economic polarisation that have fallen on this region since 2nd World. War. If theoreticians and critics now mention *aesthetic of resistance*<sup>2</sup> this term also fits into that context of keeping the impossible dialogue between neighbour scenes through artistic work in this vast region. In fact most of the artists and curators still transmit a visual chronicle, a comment or an observation about their

» 1 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ca/7523862.0011.025/--aesthetics-of-resistance?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [dostep: 10.06.2019].

» 2 *Here Time Becomes Space: A Conversation with Harald Szeemann* by Carol Thea, <https://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag01/june01/bien/bien.shtml> [dostep: 10.08.2019].

experience. All the regional cities have multi-layered histories and societies, overloaded with complex socio-political and cultural memory that cannot be told, narrated or visualised in a simple and trivial way, because artists of this region are still thinking and producing works that keep this memory alive.

Contemporary curating, in Western-Europe started in early 1970's adopted from arthistorical system, accurately implemented by Venice Biennale and disseminated after the Cold war, during the 1990's to geographically and culturally different territories. The distribution of exhibitions into region or city based locations played an important role in reducing the authority of Modernist and state supported and controlled exhibition structures based on local national or 20th century Eurocentric proclamations. Since mid 1990's, the exhibitions and related events such as symposium and workshops organized in EU countries, the Balkans, Middle-East and South Caucasus in collaboration with EU institutions and funds significantly reflected the necessity of communication and appreciation and curating became an essential intermediary profession within these art scenes. In this transition period the curator of this region played a role as an entrepreneur, a researcher, a networking participant. The experienced West-European curators have contributed to this transformation as tutors, avoiding the colonialistic supremacy complex.

The intense art exchange within the region where Istanbul is the centre of early accomplishments in global culture industry system with its connections to EU institutions, such as Goethe Institute, French and Italian Culture Institutes, Biennale and some semi-international artfairs, consists of multilateral exhibitions, roundtable or symposium meetings and artist residencies. These have been initiated quite early by forward-thinking local and curious curators and their international partners, who played their role as researchers as well as responsible actors with the support of the institutions of EU. These interactions have been between the official or semi-official EU institutions and individuals and private or civil initiatives of the aforesaid regions.

However, the state and local government cultural policies in the region were and are still under the spell of Modernist ideologies and state controlled culture industry, that lack professional education infrastructure, expert merits, action flexibility and international expansion. On the other side, since 1990's the private sector investments and supports are acting more in tune with the mainstream art dissemination system. Yet, the international art market has still its reservations to enter into these countries. The rather local collector financed art market is also intending to interfere in to the field of curating, however occasionally facing a resistance of professional ethics. Evidently, during the first decade of 2000

Istanbul art scene was very fashionable and many curators have entered into the region through their relations to local curators. These early international curators have contributed to the professional merits of curators, to the success and impact of Istanbul Biennale as well as to the local artists who had an ample ability and power to enter into the competitive international field of contemporary art.

### **Curatorial Responsibility**

Two early exhibitions that were initiative and crucial in inviting the absent countries into the feats of contemporary art in Europe. The first one is the exhibition realized in Expo Arte, Bari, in 1989 with pioneering curators from Cyprus (Efi Strousa), Italy (Renato Barilli, Filiberto Menna, Pietro Marino), France (Gerard George Lemaire) Yugoslavia (Biljana Tomic) Spain (Teresa Blanche), Israel (Amnon Barzel), Turkey (Beral Madra). The other is *Europe Unknown* which was curated by Anda Rottenberg and realized in Krakow accommodating 45 artists and many curators from the Non-Western and Post-Soviet world and Western Europe in 1991. These exhibitions required serious curatorial responsibility and heralded the disappearance of the concepts as “the centre” and “the periphery”, the exhaustion of the modernistic models, defending the presence of the so called “local cultures”, mostly highlighting the names of charismatic cities. They opened the way to discover the so-called avant-garde artists and their dissident productions within the state controlled culture policies. Looking back to their content and form, these two exhibitions were quite unintentional in their approach to these unknown art scenes and genuinely explorative. Subsequently, due to the discourses against cultural polarisation, these exhibitions were labelled as “multi-culti communication” or “ethnic marketing” whilst these multi-cultural exhibitions were instrumentalized by political and economic powers. However, these early multi-cultural exhibitions that have been organized by EU and USA curators definitely served the absent countries to be part of the high-art game. Yet, due to the rules of art market, the discovered artists were immediately labeled, marketed, packaged for hyped international consumption. These cynical terms are not being used anymore, as the international exhibitions have become excessively crowded with artists from five continents, as we are even observing in the artists and curators lists of Venice Biennale, documenta Kassel, established in 20th century with Eurocentric proclamations. One can say that today, the artists and curators of the Non-EU have more priority in the international exhibitions. Venice Biennale 2019 is the mega show-case of this inevitable visibility.

The paradox is – although it is a positive one – up until today major political ruptures, upheavals and even wars in the aforementioned region have stirred the desire and volition for communication and dialogue through art and culture. For example, the Middle East artists and curators had an unforeseen access into the international art milieu after the Post-Gulf War. The Balkan Conflict aroused the interest of EU intellectuals and artists to the traumatized Balkan cities. Today, the migration and refugee crisis as well as post-truth confusion have provoked a more politically and culturally correct curating methods or attitudes. After 9/11/2001, when the definitions Islam, Axis of Evil and Terror reflected new political and cultural divisions together with their spheres of influence, the aforesaid region became again the destination of desire and dissidence, an experimental field for official cultural policies of EU. It is commonly acknowledged that the post-9/11 era has eroded civil liberties across the world.

Another curatorial responsibility emerged just before this attack. In 1995 The Rockefeller Foundation invited curators from Islamic countries to co-curate an exhibition for 49th Venice Biennale. The exhibition under the title *Modernities and Memories, Contemporary Art from Islamic Countries* was also a turning point in my vocation as curator. It turned my attention to the East and South-East of Turkey; since then organizing exhibitions, networking events and publications in collaboration with South Caucasus and Middle East artists and curators. The preparation process as well as the structure of this exhibition aimed to be a model for prospective projects that will be conceived and realized in Non-western countries. The project started with a series of meetings from 1995 on with the aim of realizing a joint cross-cultural communication between the Islamic countries to express cultural pluralism through contemporary art works. The curatorial group meetings were held in Paris (1995), Istanbul (1996), Jakarta (1996), New York (1996) and Venice (1997). The exhibition was prepared through a defined process of inquiry focusing on contemporary aesthetics, experience and criteria of art as well as on the philosophy and artistic vocabulary of the artist as regards to her/his cultural background. The first venue of the exhibition was 47<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale 1997 in Zenobio Institute, Academia. The second venue was Istanbul in Dolmabahçe Cultural Center. Two panels, one with the artists and curators, the other with scientists, writers and theoreticians were held during the opening days. The artists in this exhibition have been selected for their ideas and concepts which reflect the socio-political-cultural environments and developments in their countries, for their competent exploitation of tradition and modernism which opens new perspectives and modes of perception and for their skill and knowledge in applying the universal art language into their native background. The exhibition neither promoted individual

artists nor represented national or regional identity or an artistic movement. However, it represented a common pattern in handling the conditions of Modernity and Post-modernity, it revealed cultural differences between the Muslim societies, it displayed the processes of re-practicing traditional distinctions, it suggested to move on undiscovered paths and to acquire new ways of perception.

### **Curating exhibitions of contemporary art and creating an image of art**

Curating exhibitions with artists from very different national or regional contexts, in particular from countries with unfinished Modernities and with today's polarisation based on religions requires an intense dialogue and communication with the local artists and curators giving them the opportunity to convey their knowledge and experience. These exhibitions should be based on research, comprehension, recognition, appreciation and collaboration. The curator must explore dilemmas, difficulties and practical problems within these art scenes and their relations with the Western art centers. Since 1980's the majority of exhibitions, particularly the biennales and large scale cultural events are expected to be structured within these conditions, manifesting multiculturalism, in combination of religious, ethnic or traditional diversities and particularities. However, the remnants of the traditional curating techniques and concepts are still prevailing. In her inspiring speech in 1994 AICA Congress in Stockholm and Malmö Julia Kristeva has indicated that "contemporary art is at the heart of speculation, commercialism, the show business society and what since the fall of the Berlin Wall, has become known as the New World Order"<sup>3</sup>. How can we evaluate this far-sightedness after twenty five years about today's curating principles and techniques of international exhibitions?

Undoubtedly, there are advantages of Globalisation in liberating and increasing the artistic and cultural exchange between territories that could never communicate with each other before. Yet, there are disadvantages in pushing contemporary art productions into the whirlwind of the non-democratic orders, adverse political governance and Neo-liberal economy ruling in these territories. Evidently there is also an ever growing temptation to discover new or unknown art scenes probably as the eternal heritage of Orientalism and apparently due to the strange ferment that is made of the contemporary art making and art market all over the world.

» 3 Julia Kristeva, *What Good Are Artists Today?, Strategies for Survival-Now!*, Ed. Christian Chambert, *The Swedish Art Critics*, Lund University Press, 1995, p.25-37.

After the New World Order or Globalization, now in the age of Post-truth.

With multi-cultural allegations, with total electronic image penetration, the interaction between artists, official and private institutions, galleries, dealers, the public who are under the spell of all these dispositions and instrumentalizations, curating is extremely complicated and the relationships often strained. Within this environment, curating, criticism, dissenting, resistance and challenge, which are the essential aspects of contemporary art productions are under a submerged condition. Yet, Kristeva further said that “revolt is and integral part of pleasure principle; and without this pleasure we cannot be content with shows and performances”<sup>4</sup>.

Revolt is still the essence of art making and aesthetic experience interpreted by art criticism for the public. Here, the curator is taking the responsibility of exhibiting artists who are creating strategies of revolt, that is allusive in the concept and art works of the exhibition. In this regards, when the standardising entertainment and show culture which has an immense economic value within the global capitalism, interferes and manipulates the art and culture of revolt, even if the public will not experience pleasure, aesthetic perception and visual contentment, as Kristeva states<sup>5</sup>. If we acknowledge that system, ideology and policy discrepancies between the infrastructures of global art scenes are an essential obstruction in front of the artist and the curator, this is not so visible in the international biennale, in which the nations and supporting private sector remove the barriers in order to show-off their power. In that case the submerged position of the art and culture of revolt gets a relative freedom.

As nothing much has changed since Kristeva’s speech in the sense that entertainment industry has never withdrawn its claims on art and culture, and the world is enduring worst kind of transformations since the Gulf War, 9/11 and Iraq War, and is going through more severe transformations after the Arab spring, current Syria war and ongoing refugee crisis. Curators living and working in the regions and cities of the countries where the political and economic developments adversely affect art and culture policies, are obliged to re-think and re-form the content and form of the international exhibitions within these dispositions. They have to find less sophisticated, artist-friendly and down-to-earth strategies to revive the power of art to mediate between cultures and policies. Examples such as independent artist initiatives, residency programs and private sector investments and funds show that an intense dialogue is practiced on different levels of communication methods and strategies, with the involvement of different official, corporate or private groups of people. Apart

» 4 *Ibidem*, p. 25-37

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from the usual conceptual and formal objectives of art making today the significant aspects of this dialogue are: Homogenisation of the differences of cultural industry levels; elaboration of the political relations through art and culture; strategies of visibility for every art scene; respect to resistance and narcissism of the contemporary artists and curators; contribution to the different levels of art as an instrument for democratisation processes or in a more effective way, to the correction of democratic processes...

Contemporary societies seem to value art with a small a. It values culture only when it plays a practical or entertaining role in people's lives. In fact many societies in our region seem to have a big problem with the idea of art for its own sake, or culture for its own sake. Art and culture is appreciated when they should serve some other sake, such as economic advance, social education or therapy for the individual. Similarly, works of art are valued for their investment value rather than for their inner merit. The answer to the question, what is curating in these circumstances, cannot escape these realities. The contemporary art exhibition is a transgressive field in the positive sense where the viewer, together with the artist and his background or environment can pass over or beyond these standard life models that ignore human spirit and free thinking. It is clear that in our age we have to venture in order to have the freedom of thinking, speech and expression; the democracies are not complete and accomplished. ●