

Abstract: Curating a Contemporary Art Biennial as a Zone of Encounters: 11th International Istanbul Biennial, What Keeps Mankind Alive

This paper gives a brief account of the curatorial strategies employed in the 11th International Istanbul Biennial, curated by the Croatian collective What, How & For Whom? / WHW in 2009, in order to discuss the ways in which curatorial practice in contemporary art can contribute to the creation of “contact zones” and new conditions for the interpretation and contextualization of global art and the expansion of previous conceptions of historical formations.

Art museums, which started as Western institutions for collecting and exhibiting artistic heritage, have also functioned as spaces of hegemony as institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York have been highly influential in the creation and diffusion of a Western-centric narrative of art history. In the last few decades, the proliferation of large-scale international perennial exhibitions in previously peripheral regions of the world has raised new questions about their contribution and/or challenge against the dominant discourses of art and their potential for creating new contexts and narratives of art. These exhibitions also have an ambivalent relationship to art museums. While they often claim to give temporary accounts of contemporary art without being biased and restricted by the museums’ historically determined criteria of inclusion and display, they nonetheless also tend to adopt the role of the museum in places where there are few/no museums that collect and present art for local audiences, and where a more definite museological account of art and its history is missing.

Within this context, the 2009 Istanbul Biennial appeared as a project that engaged with earlier art historical accounts to discuss art’s political potential in today’s neoliberal global capitalist world. The exhibition attempted to map the global expansion of modernism through art while also exploring the economic and political consequences of this expansion in different local situations. Showing recent art together with avant-garde traditions from the 1960s and 1970s that has been invisible in the Euro-American discourses, the exhibition functioned like a temporary museum, with majority of artists coming from non-Western origins: the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Caucasus. The exhibition challenged official accounts of art history with a narrative that emphasized continuities and exchanges between geographies, as well as between the past and present. This paper explores the historical and aesthetical connections that were proposed between different geographical regions and suggests that the possible global exchange of knowledge and experience that this exhibition offered provides new possibilities for approaching exhibition making as a tool for presenting unaccounted relations within a global entanglement rather than rewriting history from scratch.