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| <b>OBOE</b>                                                                                              | Journal On Biennials<br>and Other Exhibitions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Studies on the Venice<br>Biennale: National Pavilions | Vol. 5, No. 1 (2024)<br>Echoes |
|                                                                                                          | <div data-bbox="636 360 729 387"><b>Echoes</b></div> <div data-bbox="636 454 1442 580"><b>From Blinking in the Darkness to the World Art Stage: Turkey's Participation in the Venice Biennale on (In)Visibility and Hegemony Discourse<sup>1</sup></b><br/><b>Esra Yıldız</b></div> <div data-bbox="636 647 748 674"><b>Abstract</b></div> <div data-bbox="467 678 1442 1283"><p>The 1950s were important for the visibility of modern Turkish art and Turkey's first participations in international biennials such as Venice, São Paolo, and Paris. Turkey first participated in the Venice Biennale in 1956, then again in 1958 and 1962, after which it did not return for various reasons until 1990. Until the 1990s, participation at Venice and other international biennials was mainly organised through the initiations of the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, alongside the government's inadequate support through related ministries and foreign embassies. After 1990, the responsibility for participation in the Venice Biennale was undertaken first by curator Beral Madra and then, starting from 2007, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and private sponsorships. Following a historical narrative, this article focuses on Turkey's representation in the Venice Biennale from 1956 to 2024; how participation was realised through the state's institutions, individuals, and IKSV; how the local and global cultural and political atmosphere influenced participation; and how Turkey's participation evolved from (in)visibility to hegemony. All of the above are discussed through primary sources such as archival documents, exhibition catalogues and the statements of artists and curators. The article will shed light on the history of Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale, which has been little discussed in the writings of art history.</p></div> <div data-bbox="636 1350 762 1377"><b>Keywords</b></div> <div data-bbox="467 1382 1442 1440"><p>Venice Biennale, Contemporary art, Turkey at the Venice Biennale, Academy of Fine Arts, IKSV</p></div> |                                                       |                                |
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# From Blinking in the Darkness to the World Art Stage: Turkey's Participation in the Venice Biennale on (In)Visibility and Hegemony Discourse<sup>1</sup>

Esra Yıldız

## Introduction

Artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Nurullah Berk, who devoted great effort to the visibility of Turkish art, starting from the exhibitions held in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s to the representation of Turkey in the Paris Biennial as a *commissaire*,<sup>2</sup> went to Venice with the artist Sabri Berkel in 1953. In an article written after the trip, he underlined, and not for the first time, that the government did not give adequate importance or financial support to art and culture, and these were important reasons for Turkey's invisibility in international biennials. Beyond financial and organisational difficulties, the government's indifference and the lack of a consistent perspective and policy on art and culture prevented Turkey's regular participation in biennials at the national level for a long time. Berk added:

For how many years have we forgotten our participation in the Biennale exhibition held in Venice every two years. The time comes, there is no money, the budget has not been allocated, the painters cannot get along, we miss this beautiful opportunity due to lack of organisation, and we stop. The Biennale exhibitions are put on in a place with large parks, half an hour from Venice. All states besides Turkey built pavilions of various sizes here because there is no other community in the world that does not give importance to the arts and its own art. Even the states that we deem small and consider inferior, built small pavilions in proportion to their financial means, and they show the works of their painters and sculptors.

1

This article relies on my ongoing research and publications on Turkey's participation in international biennials. I first discovered archival documents about Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in November 2016 during my visit to the ASAC Archive, the São Paulo Biennial papers in the Bienal de São Paulo Fundação Bienal de São Paulo/Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo in early 2017. All these papers shed light on the undiscovered and unwritten history of Turkey's participation in international biennials, the early history of which I was the first to document.

2

Commissaire (commissioner) is a French word used until the 1980s to identify the institution's head curators.

We contacted the representatives of the Biennale and showed them photographs of Turkish painters' artworks. They were amazed. "Since you have such advanced art, why don't you participate?" they said. The answer to this should have been: "Because we, as a state, are such a poor country that we cannot supply the two thousand liras needed to load a few chests of paintings and sculptures from Istanbul onto the Barletta ferry to send them to Venice!"<sup>3</sup>

Considering biennials' impact on contemporary art and their position as a driving force for its visibility in the era of globalisation, how might the country's art be promoted on an international platform such as the Venice Biennale, and become a part of the artworld at large? How did Turkey's presence on international platforms affect its art in a period when contemporary art was reshaped after the Second World War? How did the government and actors from the private sector regulate national participation? Seeking answers to these questions and following a historical narrative, this article focuses on Turkey's representation at the Venice Biennale from 1956 to 2024 and presents a discourse on Turkey's position from (in)visibility to hegemony, using primary sources such as archival documents, exhibition catalogues and the statements of artists and curators.

### Participation in the Venice Biennale in the 1950s<sup>4</sup> and 1960s through the Academy of Fine Arts

Before becoming a focus of attention in art and culture through the Istanbul Biennial, Turkey was represented in international biennials and exhibitions by artists selected by the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul. Starting in the 1950s, biennials and art festivals played an important role in the regeneration of Europe and the reconciliation of countries affected by the war. After the end of the Second World War, the new peacetime international order favoured presenting many artists from various countries to show a multinational approach to exhibition-making. There was a parallel increase in participation from different countries, particularly in the Venice Biennale. As art historian and curator Lawrence Alloway stated, the number of participating countries increased to an average of thirty between 1948 and 1966.<sup>5</sup> The number of biennials held in different cities worldwide also increased; it was no longer just the Venice Biennale. Other events, especially "Southern Biennials" held on different continents, such as the São Paulo (1951), Alexandria (1955), and Tehran (1958) biennials, presented an alternative to the art history previously written through the historical narratives of the North/West. Thus, biennials created novel perspectives on art. This evolved into a new stage and structure, contributing to a new art historiography.

In this new atmosphere, Turkish artist Abidin Dino took part in the Venice Biennale for the first time in 1952, but did not represent Turkey per se. As a member of the Turkish Communist Party, Abidin Dino was exiled to Adana due to his political ideas in the 1940s, and his passport was confiscated. After this ban was lifted, he went abroad and was invited to the 26<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1952) with his work *Frutta* (Fruit). Turkey did not participate in 27<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1954) for economic and administrative reasons. Luca Pietromarchi, the Italian Ambassador to Ankara, wrote in a letter to Giovanni Ponti that the reasons for Turkey's absence in the Biennale were not only economic, but also because it feared both that Turkish

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3

Nurullah Berk, "Seyahat Notları: Adriyatığın İncisi", *Yeditepe*, no. 35 (April 15, 1953): 2.

4

The section on the participation of Turkey in the Venice Biennale before 1990 is based on my article; Esra Yıldız, "Turkey's Participation in International Biennials in the 1950s", *Art in Translation* 14, no. 3 (2022): 297-337, doi: 10.1080/17561310.2022.2150415.

5

Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).

works would be unable to match those from abroad, particularly in comparison with the West.<sup>6</sup> The prejudice expressed by this bureaucrat from the Italian government shows that he did not consider Turkey to be in the same league as other producers of modern art. However, when Turkey first participated in the Biennale in 1956, Secretary General Rodolfo Pallucchini praised Turkey's avant-garde perspective.<sup>7</sup> This would later open discussions about whether the art of non-Western countries can be considered in the context of modernism and other discourses in contemporary art during the post-1990s era of globalisation.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey began to be invited to the Venice Biennale from 1948 onwards but was unable to participate until 1956 for various administrative and economic reasons. Between 1948 and 1956, invitation letters were sent to Turkey for each iteration. In 1948, Turkey could not participate in the Venice Biennale for economic reasons.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Turkey had been invited to the São Paulo Biennial since 1953 but was only able to participate for the first time in 1957, when the 4<sup>th</sup> Biennial was held, for administrative reasons, as stated in the letters.<sup>10</sup> The participation of Turkish artists and the awards gained in the 1950s and 1960s (such as Kuzgun Acar winning the great award at the 1961 Paris Biennial)<sup>11</sup> showed that Turkey was already acknowledged as a force in the international art and cultural scene, and suggests the universal appeal of these artists' works.

As part of Turkey's process of integration into Western art, and indicative of its increasing authority in world art, abstract art had become an important tendency in the country in parallel with its dominance at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s. By participating in important exhibitions and establishing a presence in the French art scene, artists such as Nejad Devrim,<sup>12</sup> who, since the end of the 1940s, had connections with the Paris avant-garde scene, became the cornerstones of the opening up of Turkish art at the global level. Known as the *École de Paris* artists, they also gave Turkish art international visibility,<sup>13</sup> and Turkey would further cement its position before the period of the biennials.

Besides the success of Turkish artists living in Europe, conferences and meetings provided an important opportunity to promote Turkish art through international cultural relations. During the 6<sup>th</sup> International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Congress, art critic Zahir Güvemli sent a series of articles by Turkish art critics to the President of Naples Journalists, Adriano Falvo, who agreed to publish them in Italy. He also underlined the importance of foreign cultural centres in promoting both local arts and mutual cultural relations, adding that he had encountered Marinetti's works in 1936 thanks to the Istanbul Casa d'Italia.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1940s and 1950s, Turkey had already joined many international political and cultural organisations, becoming a member of UNESCO in 1946, NATO in 1952

6

Luca Pietromarchi letter to Giovanni Ponti", December 3, 1953, in *La Biennale, L'Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* (hereafter ASAC), *Arti Visive*.

7

Rodolfo Pallucchini, 'Introduzione', in *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia* exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), xxx.

8

This discussion was also highlighted in the 60<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2024), which had a high number of non-Western artists and was titled *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*.

9

Giovanni Ponti letter to Feridun Cemal Erkin, April 9, 1948, in *La Biennale, ASAC, Arti Visive*.

10

For instance, it is stated in a letter dated August 4, 1954 that Turkey would not participate in the Biennial for administrative reasons (por motivos ordem administrativa). Theodemiro Tostes letter to Arturo Profili", August 4, 1954, in *The Arquivos Históricas de Arte Contemporânea, São Paulo*.

11

Murat Ural, *Kuzgun Acar* (Istanbul: Millî Reasürans Art Gallery, 1997).

12

The son of Fahrelnissa Zeid, the Turkish-born, Paris-based artist Nejad Devrim exhibited his paintings in prestigious Parisian art galleries starting from the late 1940s, but during his lifetime he was never invited to a biennial.

13

Ali Artun, *Modernizm Kavramı ve Türkiye'de Modernist Sanatın Doğuşu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2021).

14

Zahir Güvemli, "Dolayısıyla III", *Varlık* 115, no. 470 (January 1958): 11.

and AICA in 1953. The 6<sup>th</sup> AICA meeting was held in Istanbul in 1954, providing Western intellectuals an important opportunity to experience Turkish art practices. Important art and cultural critics such as Lionello Venturi, Paul Fierens, and Herbert Read were also jury members of the Business and Employment (1954) exhibition competition organised by Yapı Kredi Bank.

The regeneration of relationships between Turkey and Italy also impacted culture. After World War II, the first cultural agreement between Italy and Turkey was signed on July 17, 1951.<sup>15</sup> Before Turkey's first participation in the Venice Biennale in 1956, an Italian art exhibition, which visited various countries, including Istanbul, was organised to promote a new image of Italy through art and culture. In the post-war period, a new era of Turkish-Italian relations began on March 24, 1950, when the Turkish-Italian Friendship, Reconciliation and Judicial Leveling Treaty was signed in Rome. An example of good relations between the two countries, the exhibition *Art Italienne d'Aujourd'hui* (Italian Art Today, April 26-May 6, 1953), was opened in 1953 at Dolmabahçe Palace. It exemplified the expansionist approach of the Venice Biennale in bringing Italian art to different countries, at a time when Turkey and some other countries did not participate in biennials. Although Turkey was not a Biennale participant at the time, Istanbul residents showed a great interest in art that had not previously been seen, as about a thousand people visited the exhibition each day.<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Ponti stated that the exhibition, which featured a broad range of Italian artworks, from Carlo Carrà to Arturo Tosi, was a message of friendship sent by the new Italian democracy to the Turkish people.<sup>17</sup> It was clear that through this exhibition Italian art professionals were trying to turn a new page as a response to Turkey's inability to participate in the Venice Biennale. Shortly after this exhibition, in the new multicultural atmosphere, Turkey was amongst the thirty-four participating countries in the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1956).

fig. 1

Abidin Dino, *Fruit* (Frutta),  
Photo: Michele Como  
(Laboratorio Fotografico  
Industriale), 26th Venice  
Biennale  
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle  
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



15

Mevlüt Çelebi, "Atatürk Dönemi Ve Sonrasında Türkiye-İtalya İlişkilerini Etkileyen Faktörler", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, no. 31 (2015): 69-92.

16

"Bugünkü İtalyan Sanatı", *Yeditepe*, no. 37 (May 15, 1953): 1, 8.

17

Giovanni Ponti, "Preface", in *Art Italien d'aujourd'hui: April 26 - May 16 1953*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Venice: Fantoni, 1953).

fig. 2  
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th  
Venice Biennale (1956)  
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle  
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



fig. 3  
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th  
Venice Biennale (1956)  
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle  
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



fig. 4  
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th  
Venice Biennale (1956)  
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle  
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, art and culture were seen as important tools for society's education and attaining Western and European ideals. The Republican People's Party (CHP) supported art and culture, sending artists abroad for education as well as inviting foreign educators to Turkish universities. In the 1950s, when the biennial-style exhibition gained importance, Turkey participated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennale (1955), the 28<sup>th</sup> (1956) and the 29<sup>th</sup> (1958) Venice Biennials, the 4<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennale (1957), the 4<sup>th</sup> (1956) and the 5<sup>th</sup> (1958) International Biennials of Contemporary Color Lithography and the 1<sup>st</sup> Paris Biennale (1959). These invitations were extended to Turkey during the governance of the Democrat Party (DP), a conservative, pro-nationalist and pro-American party.

During the DP governance, which lasted until May 27, 1960, the cultural and social fields experienced a significantly different and openly hostile political atmosphere, where leftist and communist artists and intellectuals were targeted. Nazım Hikmet, for example, was stripped of his Turkish citizenship by the DP government in 1951. Most of the members of the Turkish Communist Party were arrested, including Yaşar Kemal, Sadun Aren, and Behice Boran. Institutions and organisations involved in culture and art on wider social platforms were prevented from carrying out activities. Community Centres and Village Institutes were also shut down in 1954 as they were seen as pro-communist organisations.

In these years, the DP also interfered in the participation of left-wing artists in international exhibitions. Tevfik İleri, then-Minister of National Education, prevented Nuri İyem's paintings from being shipped to Brazil for the São Paulo Biennial (1957). Nuri İyem, who was arrested during World War II for holding communist ideals and opposing fascism, was followed by the police after his exhibitions and lectures. After İleri prevented his works from reaching the São Paulo Biennial, İyem said, "he w[ould] not participate in international exhibitions again".<sup>18</sup> According to Derek Patmore, a similar case involved İbrahim Balaban, who learned to paint from Nazım Hikmet and was prevented from exhibiting at the 11<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Festival due to pressure from the state.<sup>19</sup> More generally, the government attempted to censor left-wing artists in this Cold War atmosphere of suspicion.

After the World War II, Giovanni Ponti aimed to bring a new political neutrality to the Biennale in the context of the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> The year 1958 is considered a turning point in the history of the Venice Biennale and modern art more broadly, with abstract trends featuring both in the national sections and international pavilions.<sup>21</sup> The Biennale showed abstract and neo-realistic trends in the Italian art section between 1948 and 1956, while modernism was emphasised in international pavilions.<sup>22</sup> The works from Turkey exhibited in the 1956 and 1958 Venice Biennale reflected the trends of Italian cultural policy. Abstract and figurative

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18

Nuri İyem letter to the Directorate of São Paulo Biennial, July 15, 1957, in The Arquivos Históricos de Arte Contemporânea, São Paulo.

19

Clifford Endres, "Edouard Roditi and the Istanbul Avant-Garde", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 471-493.

20

Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale at its Turning Points: 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968", in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (London: Routledge, 2020), 84.

21

Nancy Jachec, "Anti-Communism at Home, Europeanism Abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958", *Contemporary European History* 14 (May 2005): 193, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002316>.

22

Nancy Jachec, "Venice Biennale".

works from Turkey were equally represented in the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1956).<sup>23</sup> Abstract art was a dominant trend at the 29<sup>th</sup> Biennale and although figurative and realistic works were also included (1958)<sup>24</sup> in Turkey's section, abstract and abstractionist works dominated. Art critic John Berger, for one, found non-Western participants to be more interesting during the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1958).<sup>25</sup> He thought that the United Arab Republic Pavilion<sup>26</sup> at the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale was the most positive and lively pavilion of the event, in contrast with the exhausted, finished, academic art of the West.<sup>27</sup> The abstract works of other Non-Western countries also grabbed the attention of Western art critics.

Sabri Berkel curated Turkey's section in the 31<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale (1962), selecting the art of thirteen artists to display amongst the thirty-three participating countries. Abstraction still dominated the exhibition, and French painter Alfred Manessier received the grand prize. This edition presented Turkish artists from both old and new generations, with predominantly abstract paintings. The 1962 Biennale also marked the first time that a Turkish woman artist—Tülay Tura, whose work would also be represented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Paris Biennial (1961)—would participate in the Venice Biennale.<sup>28</sup> In the first three iterations, artists who worked for the event, such as Sabri Berkel and Nurullah Berk, were also represented by one or more artworks as participatory artists.

After Turkey's first participation in 1956, Sabri Berkel and Nijad Sirel hoped that Turkey would better prepare for the next Venice Biennale, and they expressed their wishes to establish an independent Turkish Pavilion for this purpose.<sup>29</sup> Since Turkey did not have a country pavilion in the Venice Biennale in those years, its artworks were shown alongside other countries without a pavilion in the Giardini, the main exhibition area of the Biennale. At the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1956), Turkey was in the Palazzo Centrale amongst the pavilions of countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. At the 29<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1958), the Turkish Pavilion was surrounded by the Israel, United States of America, Czechoslovakia, and France Pavilions, next to the venues where artists from Tunisia and Malta were

23

Artworks exhibited at the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1956): Paintings; Ahmet Hakkı Anlı, *Composizione* (1956); Nurullah Berk, *L'uomo con il Narghilé* (1954), *Donna Che Cuce* (1956); Sabri Berkel, *Preoccupazione* (1955), *Serenità* (1956); Cemal Bingöl, *Donna che tesse* (1956); Ali Avni Çelebi, *Parrucchiere* (1937); Cevat Dereli, *Il raccolto* (1955); Halil Dikmen, *Paesaggio* (1945); Hamit Görele, *Paesaggio del Mar Nero* (1941); Neşet Günel, *Composizione con tre figure* (1951); Nuri İyem, *Natura morta* (1956); Zeki Faik İzer, *Composizione: la musica* (1947); Ercüment Kalmık, *La costa* (1956); Arif Kaptan, *Composizione* (1955); Cemal Tollu, *Le capre* (1955), *La terra* (1956); Salih Urallı, *La donna con la bicicletta* (1956); Eşref Üren, *Paesaggio d'Ankara* (1945); Turgut Zaim, *Le Tessitrici* (1937), *Paesaggio d'Ankara* (1945). Sculptures; Kuzgun Acar, *Scultura* (1956); Hadi Bara, *Scultura* (1954), *Scultura* (1955); Şadi Çalık, *Variazioni Sui Triangoli* (1954); İlhan Koman, *Scultura* (1954), *Scultura* (1956); Zühtü Müridoğlu, *Testa* (1937), *Torso* (1953), *Figura* (1954); Nijad Sirel, *Il poeta Abdülhak Hamit* (1929). *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), 268-272. The commissaire of Turkey's section at the Biennale was Sabri Berkel.

24

Artworks exhibited at the 29<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1958): Paintings; Erdal Alantar, *Composizione* (1956), *L'oca* (1956), *Composizione* (1957); Nurullah Berk, *L'uomo con narghirle (I Versione)* (1955), *L'uomo con Narghirle (II Versione)* (1956), *Ricamatrice* (1955); Sabri Berkel, *Composizione* (1957), *Figura* (1957), *Grafia* (1957), *Grafia* (1957), *Motivo* (1957); Şadan Bezeyiş, *Adapazarı* (1926), *Ritratto* (1957), *La Città: Istanbul* (1957), *Ritratto e Città* (1958), *Composizione* (1958); Cemal Tollu, *Il Frumento* (1956), *Dervisci, Tornitori* (1958), *Due Contadine* (1958); Turgut Zaim, *Antico Teatro all'aperto* (1955); *Contadine Yörük* (1957). Sculptures; Hadi Bara, *Scultura* (1956), *Scultura* (1956); Şadi Çalık, *Scultura* (1956); İlhan Koman, *Scultura* (1955), *Scultura: Piani* (1955), *Ritmo* (1957). The commissaire of Turkey's section at the Biennale was Nijad Sirel. *La Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo della XXIX Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia, 1958), 361-363.

25

John Berger, "The Biennale", in *Landscapes: John Berger on Art* (London: Verso, 2016), 155.

26

A short-lived (1958-1971) state formed by the union of Syria and Egypt.

27

Berger, "The Biennale", 158.

28

The number of female artists participating in the Biennial, which was historically very low in the selections made by male professors from the Academy, has increased over the years.

29

Sabri Berkel and Nijad Sirel letter to Massimo Alesi, November 1956, in *La Biennale, ASAC, Arti Visive*.

exhibited. In the 31<sup>st</sup> Biennale, it was surrounded by countries such as India, Ireland, Brazil and, Argentina. The economic and political placement of nations, particularly their status as first and third-world, or developed and developing countries, are important factors in the Biennale's imaginary map.

Catalogue texts are also important in understanding how Turkey presented itself. In the 28<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1956) catalogue article for Turkey's section, Sabri Berkel mentioned two tendencies in Turkish art: "one works with a desire for inspiration by connecting national sources to the Western spirit, and the other is eager to transcend the local atmosphere by reconnecting to a vision with a freer character".<sup>30</sup> In his article for the 29<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1958) catalogue, Turkey section commissioner and Director of the Academy of Fine Arts Nijad Sirel stated that because Turkey was a bridge between Eastern and Western civilisations based on both its ethnic and geographical structures, it would become a synthesis and meeting point of East and West in the future.<sup>31</sup> For its participation in 1962, Sabri Berkel outlined the different tendencies in Turkish art; combining ancient aesthetics with modern art and trying to escape tradition to use new forms.<sup>32</sup> This iteration presented artworks "different in form but close to each other in spirit", from contemporary Turkey. Local-national discourse and being a part of Western art without losing its unique spirit in art were among the main discussions during these years at the Academy.<sup>33</sup>

fig. 5  
Turkey Pavilion at the 28th  
Venice Biennale (1956)  
© ASAC Archivio Storico delle  
Arti Contemporanee, Venice



<sup>30</sup>

Sabri Berkel, "Turchia," in 28. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1956), 268.

<sup>31</sup>

Nijad Sirel, "Turchia," in 29. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1958), 364.

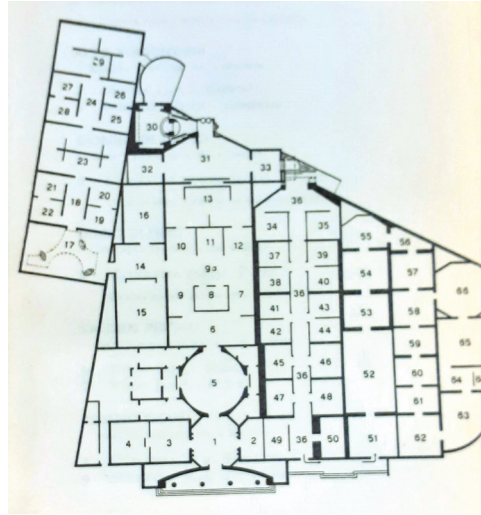
<sup>32</sup>

Sabri Berkel, "Turchia," in 31. *La Biennale di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia, 1962), 119.

<sup>33</sup>

Esra Yıldız, "Ulusalılık ve Evrensellik Tartışmaları Bağlamında Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Sergilerde ve Bienallerde Temsili (1950-1970)", *Yedi*, no. 27 (2022): 95-111, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17484/yedi.938194>.

fig. 6  
Palazzo Centrale exhibition  
plan (Turkey's space: 55), La  
Biennale di Venezia, Catalogo  
della XXVIII Biennale di Venezia,  
Venezia: Stamperia di Venezia,  
1956



### The Long Interval: The Absence until 1990

After Turkey participated in the Venice Biennale in 1962, Sabri Berkel, who had organized Turkey's previous participations in the Biennale, tried to initiate another one for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Biennale (1966),<sup>34</sup> but did not succeed. Although Turkey received an invitation letter to the event and despite Berkel's efforts, lack of support from state institutions prevented Turkey's participation until 1990. The interval spanning nearly thirty years can be interpreted in various ways, as archival documents do not provide enough solid information about the non-participation of Turkey during this period.

Undoubtedly, Turkey's introversion was partly due to the political events and collective trauma experienced by artists and civil society alike as a result of the military coups of March 12, 1971, and, especially September 12, 1980, which interrupted not only social but also art and cultural life. They affected Turkey's cultural relationships on an international scale, particularly in the first few years following the coups. After the 1960s, many important factors affected Turkey's participation at Venice and other prominent biennials until the 1990s. These factors include delays (in the form of late replies to invitation letters), economic factors, the fact that Turkey's decisions through Academy professors regarding representation and selection of artists for biennials, including the Venice Biennale, did not parallel global artistic trends, and the fact that politically and socially engaged artworks were not given a prominent space in educational institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. Concerning the selection criteria for artists to participate in biennials, and artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Şükrü Aysan, stated that at some point, "the artists selected remain somewhat marginal in the national context", particularly in the Paris Biennial participations organised by Nurullah Berk, the Academy, and national juries.<sup>35</sup> During these years, artists also criticised the selections of representatives of the Academy and the ministries. Adnan Turani appreciated the quality of artworks exhibited at the Bangladesh International Dhaka Biennial, where he was invited as a jury member, but he criticised the selections of the Ministry of Culture for Turkey's participation, finding them controversial. Indeed, he claimed that:

It would be better if the state gave weight to those who really understand the selection process, because if we (as a country) do not, we will not be invited because weak artworks are being sent. This is

<sup>34</sup>

Sabri Berkel letter to Mario Marazzan, December 7, 1965, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

<sup>35</sup>

Şükrü Aysan, *Akademi'ye Tanıklık I: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi'ne bakışlar: Resim ve Heykel*, edited by Ahmet Öner Gezgini (İstanbul: Bağlam Yayınları, 2003), 289.

my firm conviction because you cannot interpret why we were not invited to the previous Biennale in any other way.<sup>36</sup>

Political artworks, meanwhile, were under the firm control of the government. For example, the negatives of Director Yılmaz Güney's film *Yol*, co-directed by Şerif Gören, which shared the grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival (1982) with Costa Gavras' film *Lost*, had been smuggled abroad. Yılmaz Güney wrote the script while in prison during the September 12 military coup. Films about the political atmosphere of the period, such as Erden Kıral's *A Season in Hakkari* (1983), which won the Silver Bear Award at Berlin Film Festival, were banned in Turkey. Artist Gülsün Karamustafa, who was banned from going abroad after the March 12 military coup, said that as a politically engaged artist who studied at the Academy between 1963 and 1969, being political had long been seen as the enemy of art in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> After September 12, Nil Yalter, who participated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Paris Biennial (1963) by the invitation of Nurullah Berk, and had lived in Paris since 1965 as a politically active artist in France during the 1970s and 1980s, could not return to Turkey until the 1990s. Important political artworks produced in the 1970s and 1980s could be shown at international cultural and art events without the support of the state.

While political art was rising in the world, one questions what kind of difference could have been achieved in terms of art and artists, had contemporary art been more open about resistance and solidarity with other countries and had the political works produced in the 1970s and 1980s in Turkey been exhibited at the biennials.

Another example of the cutting of ties with the art world can be given. Curator and art historian Dieter Ronte organised his first exhibition on Turkish art, 300 Jahre (300 Years), at the Vienna Contemporary Arts Museum in 1982, on the occasion of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Turks' siege of Vienna. But, as a result of the intervention and pressure of the Turkish state, he was unable to invite artists from Turkey, but only Turkish artists from the diaspora living in Germany and France.<sup>38</sup>

The selection criteria of state institutions were controversial, and the artists chosen by the Academy for international events did not keep up with contemporary trends, remaining stagnant in relation to global cultural and artistic developments. Despite the limited participation of Turkey in international biennials in the 1980s, artists continued to produce work in the country, and the 1980s was a productive period for contemporary art despite the violent atmosphere of the September 12, 1980 military coup and difficult political conditions. Particularly between 1980 and 1990, Turkey's participation in biennials was focused on the South, including the Alexandria Biennial and the India Triennial, as well as certain European Biennials, such as the Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennial.

The lack of participation in biennials can be considered together with the social and political developments of the period, alongside a decrease in the economic support of the state, and the inadequacy and disruption of the Academy's overseas organisation. For example, in 1968, as riots started in Paris and spread to different countries, art and cinema looked to the streets and their actions. New Wave Filmmakers protested the Cannes Film Festival, and the venue of the 1968 Milan Triennale was occupied by students and artists. In the same year, young people and workers were also protesting the Venice Biennale, and Turkey could not participate due to the politically active students, including those of the Academy and Istanbul University, in 1968.<sup>39</sup> Similar to the biennials held in the shadow of social uprisings in Turkey and the rest of the world, the aesthetics of the political and the

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Adnan Turani, "Plastik Sanatlar", *Varlık Yıllığı* 1985 (İstanbul: Varlık Yayınları, 1985), 112.

37

Erden Kosova, "Gülsün Karamustafa ile Söyleşi", *art-ist*, no. 4 (September 2001).

38

Dieter Ronte, *Im zeichen der stadt: zeitgenössische kunst aus der türkei = Şehrin işaretleri: Türkiye'den Çağdaş Sanat* (December 2, 2001-February 17, 2002), exh. cat. (Bonn: Kunst Museum, 2002).

39

Turkey did not participate in the 29<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1968), but it was represented at the 10<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial (1969), held during the military government of Emílio Garrastazu Médici.

imaginative power of the street were more inspirational than the “institutional” presentation of pure art in 1968. Artists looked to the street rather than being a part of an “event”. This “non-participation” is also related to the policies of conservative and right-wing governments towards art and culture in a period when leftist politics and culture reached a broader context in Turkey. Many years later, during the Gezi Park Protests in the summer of 2013, the S.a.L.E.-Docks collective occupied the Turkish Pavilion and hung up photographs showing police brutality to protest against the government and sponsors of the Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. They asked: what should be the role of art in times of crisis?

On the other hand, the “absence” of participation in biennials such as the Venice Biennale, where artists are still represented in national pavilions, may also be considered an “anti” attitude, a stance against participating in such an art event. After the assassination of Hrant Dink (2007), an Armenian Turkish journalist who tried to reconcile Turkish and Armenian societies during his lifetime, artist Aydan Murtezaoglu withdrew from the Venice Biennale to which she was invited, stating that “identity and belonging had become problematic descriptions”. While similar experiences were seen in the radical atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, artists used these opportunities to question the impacts of nation-state ideology and capitalism on culture and art with artworks based on institutional criticism.

### Participation after the 1990s

After the September 12, 1980 military coup, neoliberalism and the government’s privatisation policies would be reflected in various fields and state organisations, including art and culture. In the dark atmosphere of the 1980s, the voice of civil society was rising against the repressive politics of the government. Additionally, artists, whether individually or collectively, tried to revitalise the art and cultural scene with the exhibitions they organised, as the government did not give adequate support and importance to art and culture. In the 1980s, neo-conservative governments were on the rise, as was the commercialisation of art and cultural fields with the arrival of new art world actors, galleries and collectors. Turkey’s contemporary art would enter the artworld through the Istanbul Biennial.

In the era of globalisation, Turkey joined the rising voice of the global South’s contemporary art scene. Even though Turkish contemporary art showed tendencies similar to those of Western art in the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of art and cultural institutions such as contemporary art museums prevented its practices from being witnessed by international art critics, artists and audiences. In the 1990s, Turkey recommenced its participation in international biennials such as Venice and São Paulo after many decades of absence, and it carried with it the growing influence of the Istanbul Biennial on the international art scene.

The Istanbul Biennial began through the organisation of Eczacıbaşı Holding’s cultural initiative, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), when Turkey applied for full EU membership. Inviting international artists, art critics, and curators worldwide and attracting an international audience, the Istanbul Biennial became the showcase for Turkey’s contemporary art and its artists alike. For the 1<sup>st</sup> Istanbul Biennial (1987), officially titled 1<sup>st</sup> International Istanbul Contemporary Art Exhibition, Italian art historian and curator Germano Celant was commissioned to organise an international exhibition as part of the event, but it did not happen because its budget ran nearly equivalent to the budget of the biennial in its entirety.<sup>40</sup> Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, meanwhile, did participate in the 1<sup>st</sup> Istanbul Biennial. Many Italian artists participated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Istanbul Biennial

fig. 7  
Giardini exhibition plan  
(Turkey's space: 2), La Biennale  
di Venezia, Catalogo della XXIX  
Biennale di Venezia, Venezia:  
Stamperia di Venezia, 1958.



(1989) coordinated by Beral Madra.<sup>41</sup> The first two Istanbul Biennials presented the Turkish contemporary art scene to the art world and curators such as Pier Luigi Tazzi, Pierre Restany, and Harald Szeemann afterward stated that Turkey should already have taken its place in the international art scene.<sup>42</sup>

Besides the Istanbul Biennial, other art and cultural events were instrumental in restarting Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in 1990. Held in the Fiera Del Levante area of Bari (March 16-20, 1989), the 14<sup>th</sup> EXPO-ARTE also included a special exhibition titled "Contemporary Art in the Mediterranean", for which Beral Madra curated Turkey's section. In an article published in *Gazetto Del Mezzogiorno* (Bari), Pietro Marino wrote, "Turkey, which has not participated in the Venice Biennale for many years, is holding a very striking and intense exhibition this time, and contemporary art in Turkey should be approached with a new perspective".<sup>43</sup>

After a long interval, curator Beral Madra, who organised the first two editions of the Istanbul Biennial in 1987 and 1989, reinitiated Turkey's participation in the Venice Biennale in 1990 with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and curated five iterations (1990, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2005) between then and 2007. With the impact of globalisation, periphery countries seemed to take as subjects the idea of other(ness) and non-Western art practices in representations of their art. Under Beral Madra's curation, discussions of non-Western approaches to Turkey, critiques of orientalism, otherness and east-west belonging were prominent themes to appear in the exhibitions' curatorial frameworks.

<sup>41</sup>

Artists Alberto Abate, Luca Alinari, Luciano Bartolini, Carlo Bertocci, Maurizio Bonato, Lorenzo Bonechi, Jose Manuel Broto, Daniel Buren, Patricio Cabrera, Luigi Campanelli, Miguel Angel Campano, Piero Pizzi Cannella, Bruno Ceccobelli, Mario Fallani, Lino Frongia, Giuseppe Gallo, Paola Gandolfi, Walter Gatti, Paolo Iacchetti, Massimo Livadiotti, Nicola Maria Martino, Tommaso Massimi, Elisa Montessori, Gianfranco Notargiacomo, Nunzio, Luca Maria Patella, Maurizio Pelegrin, Stefano Di Stasio, Marco Tirelli were among the participating Italian artists.

<sup>42</sup>

Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 135.

<sup>43</sup>

Beral Madra, "Bari'de Expo-Arte 89' ve Akdeniz'de Çağdaş Sanat Sergisi" (1989), <https://www.beralmadra.net/exhibitions/turkish-exhibition-in-expo-arte-bari->, last accessed May 2024.

fig. 8  
Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Pistoletto and Beral Madra at the opening of 44th Venice Beinnale Turkish Pavillion Exhibition (1990)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 9  
Mithat Şen and Kemal Önsoy paintings, 44th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1990)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 10  
Serhat Kiraz, "The Time of Emptiness", 45th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1993)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



When it resumed participation in the 44<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1990, the space reserved for Turkey was a 60m<sup>2</sup> (3 x 5 x 4 m) area in the Italian Pavilion, next to Iraq, Korea, and Nigeria, countries which did not have their own pavilions. For the Biennale, Beral Madra proposed four artists (Hasan Safkan, Kemal Önsoy, Erdağ Aksel, and Mithat Şen)<sup>44</sup> to represent Turkey amongst artists from forty-nine participating nations. Artist Hasan Safkan,<sup>45</sup> whose work was considered alongside the abstract and abstract-figurative paintings of Mithat Şen and Kemal Önsoy, was ultimately not included in the exhibition due to limited space and curatorial choices.

In the 45<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Biennale (1993), Erdağ Aksel, Serhat Kiraz, Adem Yılmaz & Jårg Geismar represented Turkey, again at the Italian Pavilion. Taking Turkey's participation as important for the visibility of its art, in the exhibition catalogue Beral Madra emphasised the disadvantages of Turkish artists' production in the period of "Turkey's transition from the periphery to center", "in the absence of art structures and institutions",<sup>46</sup> as these prevented them from being recognised by the art world public. While Aksel compared and investigated Eastern and Western traditions using Fatih Sultan Mehmed and his portrait painter Gentile Bellini, Kiraz<sup>47</sup> focused on comparing religious-dogmatic and rational thought using science, and specifically black holes. Adem Yılmaz & Jårg Geismar's *Inbetween* was a collective work realised with international migrant artists in opposition to the nationalistic approach to producing art, and was shown in the garden. Kiraz viewed Turkey's place in the Biennale as a "passage" since it necessarily depended on utilizing the Italian Pavilion's exhibition space.<sup>48</sup>

fig. 11  
Erdağ Aksel, "Here and Now and Then", 45th Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey (1993)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



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Beral Madra letter to Giovanni Caradente, April 4, 1990, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

45

Giovanni Caradente found sculptor Hasan Safkan very interesting and the best choice amongst suggested artists by Beral Madra, and wanted to show Mithat Şen and Safkan together. Beral Madra letter to Giovanni Caradente, April 24, 1990, in *La Biennale*, ASAC, Arti Visive.

46

Beral Madra, "The Highway Leading into the Future is Quite Crowded", in *45<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Pavillion of Turkey*, exh. cat. (Mas Matbaası: İstanbul, 1993).

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As a visibility of Turkish contemporary art, Kiraz also had a gallery exhibition in Venice during the Biennale period.

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Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 145.

After its two participations in the 1990s, Turkey was not represented again at the Venice Biennale until 2001, for various reasons including the government's disinterest and disorganisation<sup>49</sup>. This absence would be called "playing the missing"<sup>50</sup> by Madra, and she underlined the importance of participation to show Turkey's European face. In 1997, artists İnci Eviner and Serhat Kiraz were part of the exhibition "Modernities & Memories: Recent Works from the Islamic World", a parallel event of the 47<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale for which Beral Madra

fig. 12  
Ahmet Öktem, "Transit Identities" (The Perfumed Garden), installation view, 49th Venice Biennale, Pavilion of Turkey (2001)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



was one of the curators. The exhibition was also shown in Istanbul in 1998. Once again, for these artists, modernism in non-Western countries, contemporaneity of their art practices, and their place in world art were the subject of this parallel exhibition.

The main exhibition of the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2001) was titled "The Plateau of Humanity" and curated by Harald Szeemann. For the Turkey Pavilion's exhibition title and content, curator Beral Madra took reference from the book *Perfumed Garden*, known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, written by Sheikh Omar Ibn-i Muhammed El Nefzavi about the sexuality of Eastern women in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The book has attracted Orientalists and Western writers for centuries. Its Turkish translation was the subject of a lawsuit on obscenity charges, with the translator later acquitted in 1992. The exhibition featured artists Ahmet Öktem, Butch Morris, Murat Morova, Sermin Sherif, and x-urban, and was split up to be shown at two venues; Theis Park and Nuova Icona Gallery.<sup>51</sup> At the next Venice Biennale (2003), Turkey presented its exhibition in the Arsenale in a 220m<sup>2</sup> area allocated for those countries without pavilions. The exhibition concept "limbo", which means "a region on the border of hell"<sup>52</sup> can also be considered for discussions

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Beral Madra says; "We could not participate in the 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>, and 48<sup>th</sup> biennials – the 46<sup>th</sup> biennial was the 100th anniversary – because the invitation letters sent to the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs were not answered in time". Beral Madra, "Türk Sanatçılara Teşekkürler", *Radikal*, June 18, 2007, <https://www.beralmadra.net/articles/radikal-gazetesi/turk-sanatcilara-tesekkurler/>, last accessed December 2023.

50

Madra, *Bienal Yazıları*, 153.

51

This exhibition was also presented in Istanbul at Borusan Art Gallery, which was one of the Biennale's sponsors at the time (2001–2002).

52

Beral Madra, "Concept Text IN LIMBO Twenty-four hours in the life of the viewer" (2003), <https://www.beralmadra.net/exhibitions/in-limbo-the-pavilion-of-turkey-50th-venice-biennale/>, last accessed April 2024.

about Turkey's place in the contemporary art scene and world art, as in the case of biennial participation after the 1990s.<sup>53</sup> At the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale (2005, curator Beral Madra), Cyprus-born fashion designer Hüseyin Çağlayan represented Turkey, and his video *The Absent Presence*, which features Tilda Swinton and combines different fields such as anthropology, biology, and genetics, once again took identity politics as the artwork's topic. In order to attract audiences, Turkey was presented at the Levi Foundation, which was supposed to be visited by forty-five thousand people a day during the Biennial, near the Peggy Guggenheim Museum.

After 2005, with the impact of the Istanbul Biennial on the world's contemporary art scene, and gradually rising interest in it, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs transferred the responsibility of participation in the Venice Biennale to IKSİV, after which one artist was generally selected for each iteration of the Biennale, instead of group shows. Participating artists were as follows: at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale (2007) Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin (1957-2007) (Curator: Vasıf Kortun, b. 1958); at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale (2009) Ahmet Ögüt (b.1981) and Banu Cennetoğlu (1970) (Curator: Başak Şenova, b.1970); at the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2011) Ayşe Erkmen (b.1949) (Curator: Fulya Erdemci, b.1962-d.2022); at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2013) Ömer Ali Kazma (b.1971) (Curator: Emre Baykal, b.1965); at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2015) Sarkis (1933) (Curator: Defne Ayas, b.1978); at the 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2017) Cevdet Erek (1974); at the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2019) İnci Eviner (1956) (Curator: Zeynep Öz, b. 1982); at the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2022) Füsun Onur (1933) (Curator: Bige Örer, b. 1977); and at the 60<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2024) Gülsün Karamustafa<sup>54</sup> (1946) represented Turkey at the national level. An advisory board, mostly consisting of people from IKSİV, biennial sponsors, its affiliated art institutions, and artists and curators previously representing Turkey in the Biennale were responsible for the selection process. Most of the curators selected were from IKSİV or art institutions of Biennale sponsors, or were curators who had organised the Istanbul Biennial. For example, Fulya Erdemci was director of the Istanbul Biennial (1994-2000), and curated the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2013), while Vasıf Kortun curated the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, Emre Baykal was director of the Istanbul Biennial (2000-2005), and Bige Örer was also the director of the Istanbul Biennial (2008-2024). As pioneers of contemporary art in Turkey, Sarkis (1933), Füsun Onur (1933)<sup>55</sup> and Gülsün Karamustafa (1946) were chosen for representation in recent years. İnci Eviner, Hüseyin Çağlayan, and Sarkis had a comprehensive exhibition at Istanbul Modern, Eczacıbaşı Holding's Museum. Most of the participating artists are also present in the collections of private museums. The exclusion of young, critical, and political artists from the Venice Biennale's delegations in favour of acclaimed ones is another controversial issue in the local art and cultural scene. In 2014, Turkey rented a long-term space for the Venice Biennale, with the support of twenty sponsors for twenty years, at Sale d'Armi, Arsenale at the the world's oldest first-league biennial, which had long excluded non-Western countries from its main venues.

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Participating artists: Ergin Çavuşoğlu, Neriman Polat, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Gül Ilgaz, and Nazif Topçuoğlu.

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The curator, Esra Sarıgedik Öktem, who was selected as the curator of Turkey's Pavillion at the 60<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, resigned from her position as she avowed her support for Defne Ayas, whom members of the Istanbul Biennale board had selected, but who had been rejected by the Istanbul Arts and Cultural Foundation (IKSV). There was controversy over this selection for the 60<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in the art scene because Sarıgedik Öktem, as an art dealer and gallery owner who is also representative of Gülsün Karamustafa, was not an ethical choice. Rhea Nayyar, "Turkish Curator Resigns From Venice Biennale Pavilion", *Hyperallergic* (August 14, 2023), <https://hyperallergic.com/839263/turkish-curator-resigns-from-venice-biennale-pavilion/>, last accessed December 2024.

55

In cooperation with ARTER, Vehbi Koç Foundation's museum, Museum Ludwig (Cologne) organised "Füsun Onur. Retrospective" (September 16, 2023 – January 28, 2024), curated by Barbara Engelbach (Museum Ludwig) and Emre Baykal (Arter).

Artists from Turkey were also included in the main exhibitions of the Biennale<sup>56</sup>, and the Istanbul Biennial's impact<sup>57</sup> can also be seen on these selections<sup>58</sup>, as it was accepted that the Istanbul Biennial established a monopoly<sup>59</sup> on the Turkish contemporary art scene over time. Similarly, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev<sup>60</sup> (the curator of the 14<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial) said that she discovered Turkish art through the Istanbul Biennial: "I saw many of the Istanbul Biennials. Most of what I know about the art from Turkey, in general, was from the Istanbul Biennial. [...] René Block rediscovered Füsun Onur. I asked him to tell me about older artists".<sup>61</sup> Thus, a network was formed through Istanbul Biennials and their curators. For example, in the main exhibition "Always a Little Further" at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale (2005), curators Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral invited Bülent Şangar and Semiha Berksoy, whom Martinez also presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (1997) she curated. For the main exhibition "Milk of Dreams" at the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2022), curator Cecilia Alemani selected Müge Yılmaz and Özlem Altın, both of whom were previously presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2019). Taking its title from the book by Leonora Carrington, the Biennale gave a prominent place to unforgotten surrealist women artists. However, it did not include Turkish artists such as Tiraje, who had participated in André Breton's exhibition and met Max Ernst in her Parisian years. International curators learn about recent trends in contemporary Turkish art through Istanbul Biennials, not from art history writing, and they usually include artists that they have recently worked with. This can be also considered an obligation of the art market, and demonstrates how history is written.

Some of the artworks included in the main exhibitions were more political than those found at the Pavilion of Turkey. For example, Kutluğ Ataman was invited to the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (1999) by the curator Harald Szeemann. Ataman's four-screen video *The Women Who Wear Wigs* (1999) is a powerful representation of identity and gender politics in contemporary Turkey, featuring four women from both the left and right wings who had to wear wigs for various reasons, including political activities, health problems, and gender issues. However, when Ataman<sup>62</sup> was invited to the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2011) again after many years, his work was far removed from its earlier political stance.

National representations place a lot of responsibility on artists' shoulders. It is clear that, at a certain point, artists seem to deal more with global issues than local ones as a result of current Turkish politics and self-censorship. After the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the attempted military coup in 2016, the

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For example: Kutluğ Ataman (1999), Hakan Gürsoytrak-Gülsün Karamustafa-Oda Project (2003), Semiha Berksoy-Bülent Şangar (2005), Fatma Bucak (2011), Yüksel Arslan (2013), Meriç Algün Ringborg -Kutluğ Ataman (2015), Hale Tenger-Nevin Aladağ (2017), Halil Altındere (2019), Müge Yılmaz-Özlem Altın (2022), Semiha Berksoy-Fahrelnissa Zeid-Nil Yalter-Güneş Terkol (2024) participated in the main exhibitions of the Venice Biennale's different editions.

57

The impact of the Venice Biennale on the Istanbul Biennial is based on my article; Esra Yıldız, "From the Efforts of the Weak Horses to the International Arena: The Istanbul Biennial and Art Worlds", *International Journal of Arts Management* 25, no. 3, 74–85.

58

I also discussed about this point in my previous article. "Artists from Turkey could join different biennials, and that could be related to their being exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial for the first time before being represented in international biennials abroad. For the artists participating in important exhibitions and biennials abroad, the Istanbul Biennial was generally the first biennial at which their works were represented" Esra Yıldız, "From the Efforts of the Weak Horses to the International Arena: The Istanbul Biennial and Art Worlds", *International Journal of Arts Management*, no. 3 (vol. 25), 77.

59

Vasif Kortun. "Weak Fictions, Accelerated Destinies", in *İskorpit: Aktuelle kunst aus Istanbul (Contemporary Art from Istanbul)*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Berliner Kulturveranstaltungs-GmbH, 1998), 16-21.

60

As the artistic director of documenta's 13<sup>th</sup> edition (2012), and the drafter of the 14<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2015), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev included Füsun Onur and Cevdet Erek in both exhibitions.

61

Halil Altındere and Süreyya Evren (eds.), *User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary art in Turkey, 1975-2015* (Istanbul: Berlin: Revolver Publishing; Art-ist, 2015).

62

In recent years, Kutluğ Ataman was harshly criticised by the art and cultural scene for supporting the AKP government.

governing party since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), increased pressure on civil society, targeting intellectuals and artists. This pressure was seen both directly and indirectly in the form of self-censorship by art and cultural institutions and their events. In recent years, IKSİV-organised cultural events have been criticised for being apolitical and censored. For example, the 16<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2019), titled “The Seventh Continent” and curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, was about the impact of the Anthropocene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Biennial brought an urgent world problem into the art scene by displaying works from around the world but turned a blind eye toward similar ecological issues in Turkey. During the AKP regime, natural sources and assets have been privatised, and ecological degradation has risen to an extreme level. Yet visitors did not see concern about these problems in the works of artists from Turkey. During the Istanbul Biennial, a meeting was held with the curator Bourriaud specifically for art historians in collaboration with AICA (the International Association of Art Critics) Turkey, but IKSİV stipulated that questions were to be collected from art critics beforehand. Organisers from IKSİV censored the thoughts of art critics to prevent them from questioning the Biennale’s content.<sup>63</sup>

IKSV is also responsible for organising Turkey’s participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale. At the 15<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennale (2016), the Turkey Pavilion presented Darzanà, a boat built from the waste of the Camialtı Shipyard in the Golden Horn and transported to Venice. This project sparked a discussion about the instrumentalisation of art and culture through corporate sponsorship, since the waste originated on account of the gentrification of the area, and to which many NGOs, local people and academics reacted, as a burden to the history of the workers.<sup>64</sup>

As these examples show, the withdrawal of local politics from artworks reflects Turkey’s current political atmosphere. This situation continues in recent years, as can be seen in Turkey’s participation in the Venice Biennale, where body politics (*In Resistance*, Ali Kazma), migration, the refugee problem (*We, Elsewhere*, İnci Eviner), and environmental concerns such as water pollution (*Plan B*, Ayşe Erkmen), were the major subjects of artworks presented in a global context, without local concerns. As an artist who produced artworks about migration continuously during her career, when Gülsün Karamustafa was selected as a representative of the 60<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2024) with her exhibition “Hollow and Broken: A State of the World”, she did not deal with the biennial’s theme “Foreigners are Everywhere” in the context of Turkey’s political condition as a country which hosted more than 3 million Syrian migrants officially. As a politically engaged artist, Karamustafa instead stated, “What I am dealing with is the state of a world hollowed out to the core by wars, earthquakes, migration, and nuclear peril unleashed at every turn, threatening humankind while nature is ceaselessly scathed and the environment made sick”.<sup>65</sup> It was a general answer to a global problem, one unconcerned with Turkey’s special political conditions.

At the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2015), Rakel Dink, the wife of Hrant Dink, used the words Armenian Genocide in her text in the exhibition catalogue, sparking a crisis to which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Culture and certain sponsors reacted by preventing the distribution of the catalogue as a form of censorship. Artist Sarkis and curator Defne Ayas<sup>66</sup> tried to resist and call attention

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AICA Turkey should not have accepted this controversial meeting offered by the IKSİV. More recently, “Dying to Divorce” (2020) a documentary film about violence against women in Turkey, was not included in the 40<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Film Festival (2021) due to its political content, even though it was highly appreciated by the director of the film festival.

64

T. Gül Köksal, “Altı asırlık mirasın yağması” (June 11, 2019), available at the link: <https://birartibir.org/alti-asirlik-mirasini-yagmasi/>, last accessed May 2024.

65

“Türkiye Pavilion opens at the 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia”, <https://www.iksv.org/en/news/turkiye-pavilion-opens-at-the-60th-international-art-exhibition-of-la-biennale-di-venezia>, last accessed December 2023.

66

Curator Defne Ayas, who resisted censorship, was not selected as the curator of the 2023 Istanbul Biennial despite the advisory board’s decision regarding her position.

to the censorship by exhibiting the catalogues vertically in a coffin. “The Respiro” exhibition opened on April 23, 2017, a historically important date for the Armenian people. One of the thirty-six stained-glass panes in the installation showed Hrant Dink smiling against a background of pomegranates. As a part of “Respiro”, Sarkis’ artwork *Golden Icon* was displayed at the Hrant Dink Foundation in Istanbul. Recalling and revitalising various histories and memories, Sarkis brought a different perspective from other artworks previously exhibited at the Biennale. National representation was used to show cultural diversity and the unspoken history of so-called minorities in Turkey in an obscure way, without direct political reference.

## Conclusion

Today, biennials are the dominant exhibition genre in contemporary art, and they are the central platforms for so-called decentralisation and the acceptance of non-Western art into the art world. At a time when the hegemony of biennials and global capitalism’s impact on contemporary art is most felt through art and cultural institutions and corporate sponsorships on a global scale, Chantal Mouffe’s proposal to create an agonistic public space<sup>67</sup> may be extended to biennials, when considered as the platform where contemporary art is most discussed. Another question to be asked is how the power of biennials can be turned into transformative platforms for artists and art, especially for countries like Turkey whose art is open to different interpretations due to its particular geographical, economic and political structures. The Venice and Istanbul Biennials occupy key positions for these discussions.

As has already been discussed in recent years, biennials are gradually establishing a hegemony over the production and spaces of art and culture as they increasingly grow in number. According to Pierre Bourdieu, culture is a means of legitimation and domination, and the universality and transition to universality, which biennials supposedly suggest, can be considered critically as a “transition to the monopolisation of the universal”.<sup>68</sup> For countries such as Turkey, where the history of modern and contemporary art museums does not go back such a long time, and contemporary art museums did not open until the 2000s, biennials are important cultural events for regulating the contemporary art scene using their hegemonic power.

The Academy of Fine Arts’ pre-1980s mission to send artists to biennials was taken over by IKSİ, which oversaw Turkish artists’ participation in the Venice Biennale at the national level after 2007. Because contemporary art has never been part of the cultural policy of certain governments, private sponsorship became dominant in this field, and the government intervened only indirectly to regulate participation.

In this sense, the role of biennials, particularly the Venice Biennale, is crucial for presenting Turkey on the international art scene, and it impacts Turkey’s cultural scene and institutions, such as private contemporary museums. For example, purchases made from the Scandinavian Countries Pavilion curated by René Block (the curator of the 4<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial) at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale (2007), form the core collection of both the Vehbi Koç Foundation’s (a sponsor of the Venice Biennale Turkish Pavilion and main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennale for 2007-2026) Contemporary Art Museum and ARTER’s collections.<sup>69</sup>

Some of the exhibitions were also shown in Istanbul after being presented at the Venice Biennale, and the Biennale disseminated its power and impact through various events. A selection from the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale under the

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Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

68

Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State Lectures at the College de France, 1989-1992*, transl. David Fernbach, (Malden: Polity Press, 2012).

69

René Block, İlkey Baliç, and Tankut Raşit Aykut, *Starter: Works from the Vehbi Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Arter, 2010).

title “Venice-Istanbul” (October 18, 2006-February 2, 2007) was opened at Istanbul Modern, an Eczacıbaşı Holding Museum, for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Italy. Rosa Martinez, who curated the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Istanbul Biennial and was chief curator of Istanbul Modern at the time, said: “The Venice-Istanbul project shows how art can move from biennials towards museums and how it can gain new meanings through this transition”.<sup>70</sup> This transition, which presented itself as universal, actually brought a Euro-centric approach to the museum and expanded the Biennial’s ideology to the Turkish art scene.

In the pre-1980 period, issues such as the prolonged bureaucratic process with correspondence through consulates and foreign ministries, the late establishment of relations and extended communications with biennial administrations, insufficient financial support from the state, and difficulty bringing foreign currency to the country were significant factors influencing participation (or lack thereof) in the Venice Biennale. Although Turkey’s participation in biennials was always a goal of the Academy, it never achieved the desired level. Regarding biennial participation, Nurullah Berk said:

The commissioners, who were appointed with great difficulty, were given a weekly or ten-day allowance, and they were deprived of the additional allocation necessary for contacting or treating administrators, officials and critics, or even having a cup of coffee with milk. On the other hand, there were no “cultural attachés” in our embassies. Most embassies would find it drudgery to deal with the arts. The close attention and help of the commissioners depended on the intellectuality, goodwill, and understanding of the Ambassador.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, regarding participation in the Venice Biennale in the 1950s and 1960s, Cemal Tollu said that most countries exhibited their works in pavilions they had built, and published their own catalogues for promoting their artists, in addition to the main catalogue, whereas Turkey was put in a corner as a guest of the “Italian Government”. He wrote: “Even though the embassies of other nations make an effort to invite worldwide art critics and well-known artists with elaborate banquets to introduce them to their own artists, we cannot go beyond *blinking in the dark*”.<sup>72</sup>

This situation, evocatively described above as being unable to “go beyond *blinking in the dark*”, has begun to change over years, through international biennials, including Venice and Istanbul, and their impact on contemporary art and artists in Turkey, and their production after 1990. Eczacıbaşı Holding is the founding corporation of IKSİV, an art and cultural foundation which organises the Istanbul Biennial, and various festivals, and is responsible for selecting of artists and projects for important biennials such as Venice. IKSİV opened its own museum, which brings together modern and contemporary artworks, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Warehouse in Karaköy in 2004,<sup>73</sup> which was also used as one of the main venues of the Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul Modern, which had been the main venue for several editions of the Istanbul Biennial, underwent a transformation when it evolved from biennial to museum. It is but one example of the double-sided transformation of the museum-biennial relationship and the musealisation of biennials all over the world. This

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70

Rosa Martinez, “From Venice to Istanbul Modern, How Does Art Travel”, in *Venice – Istanbul*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Istanbul Modern, 2007), 20.

71

Nurullah Berk, “Çağımızda Plâstik sanatlar”, *Cep* (November 1, 1966), 107.

72

Cemal Tollu, “1962’de Plastik Sanatlar”, *Varlık Yıllığı 1963* (Ankara: Varlık Yayınları, 1962): 63-69.

73

The 4<sup>th</sup> Warehouse has been demolished and a new museum, which Renzo Piano Architects built, opened in 2023.

fig. 13  
Hussein Chalayan, "The  
Absent Presence", 51st Venice  
Biennale, Pavilion of Turkey  
(2005)  
© Beral Madra Archive.



fig. 14  
Gülsün Karamustafa, "Hollow  
and Broken: A State of  
the World", a site-specific  
installation, 60th Venice  
Biennial, Pavilion of Turkey  
(2024)  
© Esra Yıldız



situation is also a result of the growing influence of capital and private companies in contemporary art and biennial participation during the period of neoliberalism affecting the whole world after the 1980s, while Turkey was undergoing a rapid transformation after the September 12 military coup and the economic decisions made on January 27, 1980. The free market economy, supported by the policies of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in England in the 1980s, showed similarities with the Turgut Özal era in Turkey. The aim of neoliberal policies to create brand cities and promote contemporary art globally was realised through international biennials, which would gain importance after the 1990s.

The international representation and visibility of Turkey, hampered by institutional and economic inadequacies, especially before 1980, in addition to relations developed solely through personal efforts that failed to go beyond “*blinking in the dark*”, have improved since 1990, when they found a more professional platform and network through the effects of globalisation and neoliberalism, as well as the support of private capital. Oliver Marchardt refers to biennials as hegemonic machines because of their increasing power to mediate local, national, and international relations, which is gradually overcoming that of art institutions.<sup>74</sup> Turkey’s participation in the Venice Biennale exemplifies this. However, the influence of these networks and biennials, with their impact on art historiography and international representation in Turkey, is becoming that of a hegemonic power. Examples discussed in the article such as the curators of the Venice Biennale’s different editions selecting artists from Turkey whose works were exhibited in the various Istanbul Biennials, some private museums<sup>75</sup> in Turkey forming their collections with purchases from the Venice Biennale, and a curator who had previously curated the Istanbul Biennial and Venice Biennale opening an exhibition of selected works from the Venice Biennale, all demonstrate the hegemonic effect of international biennales in the narrative of contemporary art in Turkey.

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74

Oliver Marchardt, “Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of Biennialization”, (2008) in Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hall and Solveig Øvstebo (eds.), *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010).

75

For example, a very recent exhibition at ARTER (2025) also highlighted the museum’s purchases from the Venice Biennale: “Maaria Wirkkala’s Landing Prohibited, an installation which was displayed at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale in 2007 and acquired the same year by the Arter Collection, is now set to meet audiences in Istanbul for the first time”. See, “Maaria Wirkkala: Landing Prohibited”, <https://www.arter.org.tr/EN/exhibitions/maaria-wirkkala-karaya-cikmak-yasaktir/5361>, last accessed February 2024.

## Author’s Biography

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