

## THE CITY DEVELOPMENT, CONTEMPORARY ART AND "NEW REGIONALISM"

A Note of Residency in (DEPO), Istanbul

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This paper is based on my travel records, or as an organizational brief report from my journey and my experience of residency in the land of Istanbul. This paper will briefly analyze the stories and observations during my two-weeks living in the city, ranging from the micro to the macro – from the family stories, the city development, until the story of a Turkish contemporary art discourse and the rise of "new regionalism".

### From The Emily's Apartment

The story begins from the Emily's family – the place where I stayed in Istanbul. Her house or precisely her apartment is located in downtown: Taksim Square<sup>1</sup>. Emily is a French woman and her husband, Adam, is a Turk who was born in the capital: Ankara. Emily works at French Cultural Centre and teaches at a French-language school, while Adam is a dancer who works more at home. Selma is their daughter. She is a beautiful girl with rounded eyes and Arabic nose. Selma becomes a good friend of mine because she often surprises me in the early morning with her Turkish: *Cao!*



Selma and I  
Photos taken by Adam

Emily's apartment building is quite old and seems spooky. When I got home that night, the light was suddenly off, and a moment later it was suddenly on (after I checked, it was certainly an error automatic light). Emily said that it is a 200-year-old building. Indeed, old buildings dominate the neighborhood face in Istanbul – with its dark alleys and gloomy apartment entrance hallways. Emily and Adam never know who their neighbors are, even the amounts. We can see the depiction of the apartments from the images below:

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<sup>1</sup> Taksim Square: (Turkish: *Taksim Meydanı*) situated in the European part of Istanbul, Turkey, is a major shopping, tourist and leisure district famed for its restaurants, shops and hotels. It is considered the heart of modern Istanbul, and is the location of the Cumhuriyet Anıtı (Republic Monument), which was built in 1928 and commemorates the formation of the Turkish Republic. Taksim, from Arabic *taqzīm*, means "division" or "distribution". The Taksim square was originally the point where the main water lines from the north of Istanbul were collected and branched off to other parts of the city (hence the name). This use for the area was established by Sultan Mahmud I. The square takes its name from the stone reservoir which is located in this area. Additionally, the word "Taksim" can refer to a special improvisational musical form in Turkish classical music that is guided by the Makam system. There also used to be a military site built in the 19th century but it was demolished in the early 1940s.

(Accessed on February 7, 2011 Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taksim\\_Square](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taksim_Square))



Photo 3 and 4: The entrance hallways in Emily's apartment

### The Overview in the City Development of Istanbul

After Istanbul experienced a massive program of 'apartmentization' in the 60's, the urbanization in Istanbul had augmented uncontrollably. In the period of 1950 - 1980, the urban population had increased four times (around 5 million people). This fact spawned the waves of immigrant settlement patterns, called *gecekondu* (or built overnight). These *gecekondus* occupy public spaces, amongst the old buildings, and finally legalized in 1980. The legalization of *gecekondu* was apparently well-intentioned, however it actually became the land privatization development projects which resulted apartments and real estate built by developer companies. It becomes a practice of privatization and speculation of urban space in the large scales<sup>2</sup> which authorize the apartment projects as the legal substitute of *gecekondu*. The idea of the new middle-class settlement as well as the wave of modernization which brings the individualism and consumerism lifestyles have pushed the idea of apartments as an "ideal home". In the city scale, the 'apartmentization' symptom has destroyed the wide-gardened houses in Ottoman era<sup>3</sup> and created an enormous expansion toward strategic areas in several 'legendary' places according to the history of Istanbul.

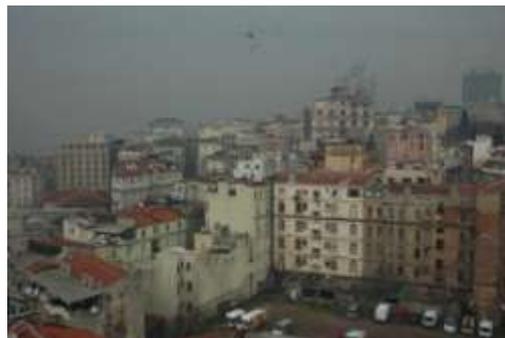


Photo 5 and 6:  
Images of apartments built from the old buildings – the mixture of old and new – with the expansion of space in its roads.

Like what many people say, Istanbul is a double-faced city. The face of modern global city overlaps with the old buildings. Unexpectedly, we can see an ancient cemetery with Roman-lettered

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<sup>2</sup> A brief history in the development of this city is presented in a news report called "Refugee Diwaan", A publication made possible by: Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, IABR 2009/sub-exhibition "refuge".

<sup>3</sup> The memory of the 'apartmentization' process still remains in Turkish people. It changes not only the city landscape but also the characters and cultural relations of the Istanbulus. Orhan Pamuk, a writer, writes his story on how he lives in a big family in a dense apartment in "Istanbul, Memoirs and The City". Meanwhile, Elif Shafak, a novelist of "The Flea Palace" tells in details about the changes in city spaces and 'apartmentization' through her story in the flat scenes in Istanbul.

in its tombstones when we stroll down the neighborhood. We also can walk down the Istiklal (independence) Street – a 24-hour lively street passed by thousand of pedestrians and sometimes by antiques trams – and in a sudden we will find ourselves in an ancient solemn church called “Saint Marry Cardessi” or The Holy Maria. It is where two paradoxical spaces meet in one place – Istiklal Street with its global interconnectivity and futuristic market transaction, and the olden church with its ancient interconnectivity and old faded souls. The limits are not being cultivated, but they present the contrast. The apartments, settlements, mosques, churches, city bastions, old building and advertisements billboards are crammed, asking for people’s attention.

Indeed, the antiquity and greatness of Istanbul (only) live in the mind. The mind is one that drives them to apply the interesting building renovation technique. The antiquity is preserved in some places or some parts by maintaining the type of materials, ornaments, shapes, positions and the area of space. Re-functionalization occurs in every building. The building renovation technique follows the archaeologists, which is to retain the original but strengthen the new structure inside since those buildings will accommodate new modern functions. Through this renovation technique, antiquity is conserved, to be remembered and to be sold.





As the main face of modern Istanbul, the ‘apartmentization’ has shaped the distinctive character of the city. The settlement pattern and the city spaces synergize with the strong character of Turk’s kinship and brotherhood. The neighborhood streets create antique alleys and become the meeting place for the people. Food stalls, cafes and parks are always crowded with the people who talk to each other, out of the boundary walls of the apartment. On the other hand, cars and motorcycles run speedily as if they make the alleys as their playground. People curse and greet loudly, yet nothing happens. Everybody plays, while “communal fun” is emerged amidst the apartment alleys.

### **Contemporary Art and Art Society (Art Lovers)**

I came to Istanbul after its 6 years unification with the Europe Union. Turkey became the part of the Europe Union officially on October 3, 2005 following the debates among the European Union countries. Soon after its unification, Turkey has changed its policies and cultural management





that significantly affect the cultural development in Istanbul, for example they create a new structure called *Avrupa Kültür Derneği (European Cultural Association)*<sup>4</sup> that has been organizing several trainings in policies and cultural management in Turkey and on the other hand has opened the debate on how to build and modernize their cultural policy. The European networks, habits and art fairs in

recent years have impacted the art scene and art culture in Istanbul and influenced the local customs. The effect is not only in understanding resources and opening new opportunities that are available in the cultural life in Istanbul today, but also changing the way in making relation and communities within and inter-fields of fine arts as well as changing the business practices in fine arts field.

The examples of changes in Istanbul are also seen in the development of contemporary art in Istanbul. The tradition of fine arts in Istanbul has close relation to Italy and inherits the traditions of the bourgeois style of the Anatolia<sup>5</sup>. Art scenes are created by business families, corporations and political figures. Art and art space become part of their life – an important part for the sake of their business practices continuity and socialite. The art field does not work – in Bourdieu's terms – as the only economic capital, namely as artworks selling system, but also as part of an effort or a symbol of increasing social capital, politics and culture in the interrelation of (the bourgeoisie) society. Almost all banks and business institutions, including universities in Turkey have art galleries or art institutions/initiatives. The names of the gallery or art institution are taken from private banks' name, such as: Garanti Platform derived from Garanti Bank, Akbank Sanat derived from the Akbank Bank, etc. Contemporary art is used not only to describe the artworks phenomenon and production, but also become the name for that galleries and art institutions.

The overview on Istanbul's art market developments and how the Istanbul contemporary art discourse has experienced the incredible growth after joining the European Union can be studied through the forewords from "Contemporary Istanbul". It is an event that has been going for 5 times each year (in 2011, it is the sixth). "Contemporary Istanbul" is the biggest art events held annually in Istanbul. Here is an excerpt of the forewords of 2009's:

Art pieces of 12.5 million dollars were exhibited last year at Contemporary Istanbul while the graphic of sales were really high. While considering the sale rates of the Turkish contemporary art auctions that took place in Turkey and internationally this year, we see that the global crisis did not affected the art market. In this context, there is an expectancy of high collectors' interest to Contemporary Istanbul. The fact that contemporary art is bought and sold to millions of dollars shows how contemporary art is crucial for culture art industry.

Besides more art galleries, *Contemporary Istanbul*, in which diversity of artists and works increases constantly, gives eleven art institutions including Sabancı Museum, Akbank Art Center, Istanbul Modern Museum, IKSU (Istanbul Foundation of Culture and Arts), Doğançay Museum a chance to get together with art lovers. Contemporary Istanbul adding a different dimension to the art events in Turkey not only

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dragan Klaic, Istanbul's Cultural Constellation and Its European Prospects, A Report Commissioned by [www.labforculture.org](http://www.labforculture.org), accessed on January 29, 2011 (forwarded link from Zeynep, DEPO).

<sup>5</sup> **Anatolia** (Yunani: ανατολή *Anatolē* or **Asia Minor**, "the rising sun" or "East"; the comparison between "East Asia" and "Levant", the general etymology of Turkish *Anadolu* (ana "mother" and dolu "content"), in Latin is called **Asia Minor**, which is an area in South-west Asia or Asian Turkey at present. The civilization with its civilians who lived in and conquered Anatolia includes Hattite, Luwian, Hittite, Phrygia, Samaria, Lydia, Persia, Kelt, Tabal, Mesekh, Greek, Pelasgia, Armenia, Roman, Goth, Kurd, Byzantium, Turkey Seljuk and Turkey Utsmani. They are all coming from various ethnicities and linguistic. According to the written history, Anatolian spoke Indo-Europe and Semite, a lot of language from uncertain knots. In fact, from the ancient language of Hittite, Indo-Europe and Luwian, several scholars have recommended Anatolia as the hypothesis center of the spreading Indo-Europe language. Other writers have suggested that the origin of Anatolian came from Etruria, Ancient Italy. Nowadays, most Anatolian speaks Turkish – a language acknowledged by the conqueror of Anatolia, a Turk, and the rising of Ottoman in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, Anatolia remains its multiethnic until the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The minor ethnic and Kurdish live in the south (from Wikipedia, accessed on February 8, 2011).

creates a contemporary art atmosphere in Istanbul, but also introduces the cultural and art life of Istanbul to the world.

While Contemporary Istanbul has the opportunity of reaching large audiences with the national media's interest, on the international press platform 35 magazines from 16 countries and 10 portals will be publishing articles and adverts about Contemporary Istanbul. Thanks to this, Contemporary Istanbul plans to reach nearly 4 million readers predominantly its main target of audience from the art platform (gallerists, curators and art critics). With the participation of many editors from different publications, a wide range of reflections about Contemporary Istanbul is predicted to be spread. Istanbul is becoming one of the most important centers of contemporary art in the world.<sup>6</sup>



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Two weeks in Istanbul, I visited some places categorized as art museums<sup>7</sup>, such as Istanbul Modern and Pera Muzesi as well as Dogancay Muzesi in Istiklal Street (*Istiklal Cadessi*). I also visited several art institutions/initiatives, such as Garanti Platform, IKSU (Istanbul Foundation of Culture and Arts), and PIST - Interdisciplinary Project Space. Then, I visited dozens of galleries that are easy to find along the Istanbul streets (AKBank, Arter, Fransiz Kultur Merkezi, ArtSumer, Garanti, Sanat, Apple Gallery, Borusan, NON, Elipsis, PI Artwork, RAMPLA, etc). I attended several opening solo art exhibitions in galleries and some discussion or seminar, especially in DEPO – the host institution as well as the art institution/art initiatives, a place where I could hang out, discuss, plan and work when I was in Istanbul. In DEPO, I also attended a large demonstration in Istanbul in order to commemorate the death of a Turkish-Armenian journalist named: Hrant Dink.<sup>8</sup>

My impression during my visits in the art scenes in Istanbul is apparently quite similar to what happens in Yogyakarta. I met the same persons or communities all the time from one event to another. Some people said to me: "You will meet the same people when you attend the opening art exhibitions". The opening art exhibitions become a meeting place for colleagues and friends who called themselves as *art lovers* (compare to the use of the word "collector" and "art community" in Indonesia). The opening of art exhibition is



<sup>6</sup> *Contemporary Art Meets Istanbul*, a foreword in *Contemporary Istanbul*, 2009. I quoted from a booklet in DEPO.

<sup>7</sup> Besides fine art museum, there are a lot of heritage museums in Istanbul that I visited, from the famous complex of Old Istanbul: Topkapi Palace and its museum inside, Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Basilica Cistern, and also museums that I found suddenly in the streets like ancient cemeteries, olden mosques, churches and many more places that I forget the name.

<sup>8</sup> Hrant Dink (born September 15, 1954 – died January 19, 2007 in the age of 52 years old) is a Turkish-Armenian journalist. He is known as the chief editor of *Agos*, Turkish-Armenian newspaper and one of significant member of the Armenian community in Turkey. He was murdered in January 19, 2007 in Şişli District, Istanbul, in front of his office (from Wikipedia, accessed on February 23, 2011).

always crowded with delicious food and a festive celebration. It is a celebration of encounter that encourages inspirations, conversations and agreements in artwork processes, business and politics.



Different from the opening of art exhibitions, the discussions are held in art initiatives such as DEPO and PIST. DEPO is an example of the initiatives space created by a foundation named Anadolu Kultur. DEPO is founded by a Turkish political figure and managed by researchers, activists, journalists and arts organizer – not by artists. The workers and art researchers are also involved in arts and culture projects in Istanbul, which is a network that drives the discussion and creative practice in Istanbul. As the initiatives space, DEPO often holds discussions, talk shows, debates (in person or group) and becomes the part of publication discourse from every exhibitions held in DEPO. There are quite a lot of people coming in discussions (different from the opening night, only drinks are offered). There is a high enthusiasm in discussion in Istanbul regarding their thinking tradition.

The encounter spaces such as DEPO and PIST in fine arts field in Istanbul are very interesting. Their presence is associated with the development context and the city development in Istanbul which overlaps with the new phenomenon happens triggered by the new cultural relation resulted from the unification process of Turkey into the Europe Union.

There are at least three layers of assumption. The first layer: when the contemporary art (market) development in Istanbul has established itself becomes an important part of the increased prosperity of some residents of the city, the art field has experienced the productive excitement. Galleries come alive and grow. The art lovers greatly increased in number so that the opening of exhibition is always lively. There are also various artworks with experiments, especially in the form and material, which is actually also supported by an expensive production.

The second layer: the fast development of city and contemporary art market have provided a physical and social landscape which becomes the continuous inspiration sources for fine arts, nevertheless the feeling of constant 'alienation' is also appeared. The themes in urban life are interesting to be analyzed since it portrays the actual phenomenon. Like what I saw in "Megalopolis", an exhibition by Mounir Fatmi. He uses multimedia tools to speak about the urban life problems which shift rapidly in the surface (shown in vertical). However, this changing is

generated or heavily carried by people who live under it (horizontal). Through the video screened in every room, Mounir wants to say that behind the glamorous walls of Istanbul in fact there has been destruction in the walls of history itself. The themes of "split" urban life done by Mounir Fatmi often appear in other art exhibitions in Istanbul.

The third layer: the feeling of "alienation" toward the environment



itself (which is opposite to the fact that Turkey has a very strong family tradition) that moves along with the accessible connections with the cities around the world due to the progress of mobility has led to a new type of relationship. This new relationship is very interesting because it redefines the old relations with the new perspectives and new ways to communicate. These relationships have led to the “new regionalism”, which comes out of national boundaries and physical geography. It is shown in MY CITY Project, [www.benimkentim.org/ediary](http://www.benimkentim.org/ediary), which works as a facilitator of intercities communication in Europe and Asia. They organize youth communities in Berlin, Istanbul and other cities to make their statements, then it is processed into a joint intercities statement. It is also seen in a publication called "Refuge Diwan" which maps the problems in Istanbul, Amman, Beirut and Cairo to see new possibilities in their relationship at the present. The themes that revolve around the issue of new relationships are seen in the titles of events, for example Scottish Screen, Palestinian Documentary, New Emerging Arabian Art, etc. In my opinion, the strengthened intercities relations and the attempts to redefine a new intercultural relations, between places, between problems, and so forth is a driving factor as well as the presence of a new power and a mirror from the failure of the nation state and the breakdown of new media in answering the problems of contemporary society.

