

**Independent Artist Initiatives in Istanbul:  
Circulation of Culture in Grassroots Globalization as a Form of Activism**

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**Introduction:**

The relationship between art and politics is on the agenda once again. The form and the dimension of this relationship vary in different contexts. In some studies activists’ employing the method of performance is regarded as mobilizing artistic mediums in their forms of activism.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this employment of performance in demonstrations, artists themselves form collectives to express their shared ideas as opposed to the ones dictated by hegemonic forces, such as market forces, institutional forces or state forces depending on the context. Also there are several numbers of examples of what is regarded as art activism today. Parallel to the reawakening of art and politics, the recent literature on social movements deals with so called ‘new social movements’, attributing to historical transformations in the forms of collective action from 1970s onwards with pointing out to Seattle protest movements in 1994. Also it is important to underline the recent phenomena of transnational networks and grassroots globalization in relation to the transformation of social movements. Undeniable transformation of collective action in that sense, parallel to societal and economic transformations in the world, points out a different form of activism in cultural level with several meanings, visuals, interpretations in specific localities. Artists in that sense constitute a very crucial part of that kind of practices as oppositional actors. This new forms of activism through artistic and *innovative* means and values is being discussed under various topics like creative resistance, cultural resistance, cultural activism, creative protest and with some other similar ones. Although this list of titles not necessarily refers to art initiated activism all the time, in most of the discussions on this specific subject of activism in relation to culture in general there seems to be references to some oppositional artistic practices. Like Reclaim the Streets, Guerilla Girls, Missile Dick Chicks or Yes Men.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding the organizational dynamics of artist groups who position themselves as alternatives to this or that, whether they have an activist agenda or not, independent from someone, something is very crucial to identify the similarities and differences of those new networks and thus recent forms of protests. With focusing on the recent formation of so called *independent artist initiatives*, the main argument of this study is that this recent formation in Turkey signifies both a micro scale emergence in the contemporary art field as a result of small numbers of artists’ collective organizations and in the macro sense it facilitates defining the producers of the local culture in circulation in the transnational art field. Any study on this formation also have the chances of illuminating the formative dynamics of the intersection of social, economic, political, cultural and the crucial discussions in this intertwined sphere. These crucial discussions will be analyzed within the limits of a master thesis which this study is a small part of it. Those discussions in the thesis can be categorized as: Firstly the basic division in the contemporary art field as the meaning of contemporary associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel V. Kutz-Flamenbaum, ‘Code Pink, Raging Grannies, and the Missile Dick Chicks: Feminist Performance Activism in the Contemporary Anti-War Movement’, NWSA Journal, vol.19, no.1, 2007

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theyesmen.org/>, <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/>, <http://www.missiledickchicks.net/>

modern versus contemporary as the current. Those are the concepts used and associated for two different translations of the word “contemporary” in Turkish. Second category is the role of European Union as an important social actor in this field and the myth of ‘EU funds’. Last but not least the role of artist initiatives in grassroots globalization and new protest forms in relation to what is characterised with several names as cultural resistance, cultural activism, and art activism. The last one is the main focus of this paper.

### **New Forms of Protest-the current global conditions**

The failure of a set of political economic practices and policies in 1980s all over the world in technically speaking that is neoliberalism and the disillusion from the promises of the globalization for that period especially has been disregarded only by the mainstream economists and their clientele who have been using the rhetoric of development, free trade and poverty for their benefit.

The rigid transformations of those neoliberal policies and their social repercussions since the 1990s have challenged the hopeful promises of globalization which are being characterized by David Harvey as such:

the process of neoliberalisation entailing ‘creative destruction’ not only for prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also for division of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart<sup>3</sup>

From this ‘creative destruction’ to increase in the crime rates, abuse of power by institutional forces, erosion of moral values, rising of religious fundamentalism, genocides, economic deterioration in the world, strengthening discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, nationality and the permanence of gender oppression by hegemonic masculinity there exist hope in the same structural transformations likewise the global mechanisms, in the protest, resistance and oppositional collective action forms which can be defined as the grassroots globalization. It is also very important to put in mind that the grassroots globalization is also a constantly changing dynamic as well.<sup>4</sup>

Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, articulates an analysis of the darker side of globalization, where the rhetoric on the circulation of money, images, people, ideas, spread of democratic ideals converted into an era of terror and violence not only in the borders of a nation state but also through the very same global networks exercised on minority populations. The relevancy of Appadurai’s work for this paper lies on his call to think about grassroots globalization. Violence in the localities where wars are terrorizing the everyday life of civilians is being operated through the networks in the global scale. Appadurai defines this structure of transnational networks as “cellular systems”. Internet, in that sense facilitates a better understanding of those cellular systems by being connected yet not vertically managed, coordinated yet remarkably independent, capable of replication without central messaging structures, hazy in their central organization features yet crystal clear in their cellular strategies and effects.<sup>5</sup> His juxtaposition vis-à-vis this violence networks threatening civilian

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<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.3

<sup>4</sup> See Srilatha Batliwala “Grassroots Movements as Transnational Actors: Implications for Global Civil Society”, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non Profit Organizations*, vol 13, no.4, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Durham and London, 2006, pp. 28

lives is a “utopian form of cellularity”. This utopian form is the same form of organization but for this time it is not centred on the goal of terrorizing, but to counter the worldwide trend against peace and equity.<sup>6</sup> He characterizes this kind of organizations, where he refers as grassroots globalization as parts of new social movements as:

Constructing the global not through the general language of universal problems, rights or norms but by tackling one issue, one alliance, one victory at a time.(...) The new transnational activism has more room for building solidarity from smaller convergences of interest and though they may also invoke big categories.<sup>7</sup>

Grassroots globalization facilitates a ground for *new* forms of social movements in that sense. “Social movements are several symbolic revolutions behind their opponents, who use media consultants, public relation consultants and so on” says Pierre Bourdieu in *Acts of Resistance*<sup>8</sup>. With the both excitement and the anger in the era of post 1995 French demonstrations, Bourdieu was most likely the one of them who missed the diversified structure of so called “new” social movements of today in this sentence of generalization where this “newness” is resulting from this each and everyday increasing diversity and complexity. This older version of social movements concentrated on class struggles based on the conflicts upon economic resources are challenged by the new social movements “...who use media consultants, public relation consultants...” as well in their organization like Bourdieu describes as the mediums of the opponents above.

The important turning point for social movements in terms of ‘newness’ as the studies suggest is the Seattle anti globalization protests against the international organizations like WTO, IMF and some others.<sup>9</sup> There aren’t many studies on new social movements without any reference to Seattle as a remarkable time in history. It can be argued that the transformation in the social movements dates back to the 1970s not only as because of the cultural innovations, feminist, ecologist movements, and participatory democracy but also because of the enduring legacy of the New Left in which the legacy would help to the grasp the ideological backgrounds in those movements.<sup>10</sup>

The artist collectives, initiatives or independent groups and the activist platforms formed simultaneously with mobilizing artistic notions are recently regarded as part of those cellular networks of protest and activism implying the utopian source of hope as opposed the dark side of globalization. An articulation on these recent formations in the art scene is also signifies the newness in question.

### **Turkey:**

Most of the critics on neoliberal economic policies highlight the period of 1980s in Turkey as well. The social and cultural repercussions of those economic policies on the other hand, are more visible and traceable from 1990s and onwards. In Turkey, these periods are associated with Turgut Özal, who is a critical figure of Turkish neoliberal transformation as a political leader in 1980s. In his era the emphasis on consumerism and parallel lack of emphasis on

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<sup>6</sup> ibid. 137

<sup>7</sup> ibid. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, Polity Press, 1998, pp.53.

<sup>9</sup> For more detailed analysis on ‘Battle of Seattle’ see Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, Brendon Smith, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity*, Southend Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Cohen, Shirin Rai, *Global Social Movements*, Continuum International, 2000, pp.4.

thrift led corruption in economy. The critical decision of opening up the capital account at the year 1989<sup>11</sup> thus has led not only a radical change in the economic environment in the long term but this decision (along with some other decisions) paved the way for a long process of transformation with privatization and changing social roles.

The period of 1990s was also characterized with 10 years of war between Kurdish guerrillas and the state. Starting with the 1984 guerrilla attacks on the security forces by the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) and state repression in return cost approximately 30.000 lives until the war which ended in 1999. For that period, especially in the 1990s, there was a gradual shift to a national security state. This decade is characterized as "military dominated authoritarianism coupled with a lack of accountability."<sup>12</sup> The long period of war, erosion of freedom of expression and of cultural rights, and in total weakening of democracy in addition to armed brutality and violence against civilians, economic corruption leading to severe crises made marks on this period which are still continuing today. The 1990s which is characterized as the period of "high globalization"<sup>13</sup> with "the deeper integration of world markets and the extensive spread of ideologies of marketization worldwide"<sup>14</sup> experienced in Turkey as discussed above.

The concept of social movements as a new formation challenged the old version with the international anti war movements in Turkey in 2003. Many of the participants were from workers' unions from all over the world but at the same time other social initiatives, groups, feminist communities, ecologic activist were there as well. In that sense the diversified participants, an "anti" stance, international feature and a wide range of various groups as participants can be the factors that lead to classifying these protests as a part of new social movements. The experience of these demonstrations of 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003 sutured with the organization of social forums especially the ones in Turkey which one of them is discussed in the analysis of Levent \_ensever<sup>15</sup> after the General Preparation Meeting of European Social Forum organized in Istanbul. He compares and contrasts between the advantages and disadvantages of social forums and global anti war protests in his article. His analysis is important in the sense that the social movements which occupied some space in different frameworks, the 15<sup>th</sup> February movements along with the changing patterns of social movements thereby becoming new social movements is studied in the context of Turkey thus the transformation of the structure of social movements becomes visible in the Turkish experiences as well.

In this period of "high globalization" artistic field also transformed gradually in Turkey, with the new economic liberalization attempts creating opportunities, the Turkish artists living and working in Europe or US had started to turn back to home with accumulated experiences and knowledge. The first discussions on 'contemporary arts' and politics also accelerated in that period. These artists formed several collectives, with many different purposes; some of them having an explicit political agenda and some others concentrating on different concerns. Many of those groups were very influential on the formation of artist initiatives today. In the same

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<sup>11</sup> See Ziya Öni\_, 'Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective', Middle Eastern Studies, vol. 40, no 4, 2004, pp. 113-134.

<sup>12</sup> Ça\_lar Keyder, 'The Turkish Bell Jar', New Left Review, vol. 28, July August 2004, pp. 65-84.

<sup>13</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Durham and London, 2006, pp.2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp.21.

<sup>15</sup> \_ensever, F. Levent . " \_stanbul'dan Avrupalı Aktivistler Geçti. (Activists were here in Istanbul)" Birikim (181), 2004.

period, Istanbul's participation in the league of metropolitan cities was the question that will bear the role of one of the cultural capitals in relation to this participation. In that period also the interaction between arts and the social and the artists having more effective positions in the society in the political issues becomes a characteristic. Art sociologist Ali Akay, argues that "this era [1990s] gave birth to the intersection of arts, politics and sociology" in Turkey<sup>16</sup> and he adds that this formation happening all over the world that is the artists having more effective positions in society in political issues and Istanbul, as one of the metropolises continues to play a role in this process.<sup>17</sup>

### **Art and Politics and Independent Artist Initiatives (IAIs) in Istanbul:**

Avant-garde artistic movements from 1920s onwards provide backgrounds for today's challenging and protest aesthetic events. From surrealism, Dadaism, futurism to Situationists the relationship between art and politics has been a topic of discussion on the agenda for a long time. On the linkage between the new forms of protests and the historical transformations in the intertwined sphere of art, politics and the social, Allan Scott and John Street provide an important assessment. In their article on 'new politics' and the new forms of political communication and action, they suggest that:

Situationist critique of consumer society as a society of spectacle, its rejection of vanguardist politics, its emphasis on individual acts of resistance and its absorption of anti-statism from anarchist political theory provided a synthesis which reappears as a legitimating leitmotif within recent political campaigns. So the 'newness' of these new social movements may consist in the rediscovery of a political vocabulary from the 1950s and 1960s (...)<sup>18</sup>

"Dubord Nation" or "Dans edemedi\_imiz devrim, devrim de\_ildir (The revolution that we can't dance is not a revolution)" are the quotes written on wall from an exhibition called "Mudahale (Intervention)" calling 'street artists' to intervene in the public sphere of Istanbul in June 2007<sup>19</sup>. Those quotations or references to Guy Debord and Emma Goldman are not the only traces of the legacy of Situationism or surrealism in Turkey; the contemporary art field is witnessing several changes and transformations in relation to the 'social'. The engagement of the arts and politics, arts and activism or in general arts and the social as Akay suggests has a new form than before. The title of the 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Istanbul in September 2007, which is the major contemporary art event with international recognition in Turkey that is 'Not Only Necessary but Also Possible, Optimism in the Age of Global War', exemplifies this change in the agenda of contemporary art. The leading artists of IAIs were played an important role in this Biennial and also criticized for only being active in Biennial times to be able to play this part in the Biennial<sup>20</sup>. With a title and a mission of optimism in a global war age, the Biennial organization committee alerts that this agenda of art and politics revisited signifies hope as opposed to global wars like scholars alerting the hope of grassroots

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<sup>16</sup> Ali Akay "The Art Community in the 1990's" in *User's Manual Contemporary Art in Turkey 1986-2006* eds. Halil Altındere, Süreyya Evren, Istanbul, 2007, pp. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Allan Scott and John Street "From Media Politics to E-Protest" in *Culture and Politics in the Information Age: A New Politics?* Ed. Frank Webster, London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> <http://hafriyatkarakoy.com/index.php?sayfa=sergiler.mudahale>

<sup>20</sup> Some writers criticize the formation of alternative institutions as being insincere with what they are doing that in relation to a sharp increase in the number of initiatives during biennial times. They tend to evaluate them according to their sustainability in that sense.

globalization and transnational activism as opposed to “creative destructive” forces of “high globalization”<sup>21</sup>. More than providing a space for artist collectives, the organization committee has announced that the 11<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial is going to be held in September 2009 under the curatorship of What, How & for Whom / WHW, a curators' collective formed in 1999 and based in Zagreb, Croatia.

What, how and for whom are the three basic questions of every economic organization that also concern the planning, concept and realization of exhibitions, as well as the production and distribution of artworks or artists' position at the labour market. These questions, which were the title of WHW's first project dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, in 2000 in Zagreb, became the motto of WHW's work and the title of the collective. Instrumentality of social capital in constituting the social post-socialist reality turned out to be a matrix for the development of WHW's projects and their internal and external operations. All WHW projects have been conceived as a platform for discussing relevant social issues through art, theory and media, as well as a model of collaboration and exchange of know-how between cultural organizations of different backgrounds.<sup>22</sup>

IAIs, also referred as alternative art groups or locations, seem to be playing a more important role in two years, it can also be said that an emphasis on ‘collectivity’ will be discussed more frequently in the contemporary art scene in Turkey.

Although the model of alternative formation, artist run collectives, and independent initiatives is borrowed from western practices<sup>23</sup>, there are significant characteristics of the Turkish experience of the formation of art initiatives.

Elaboration on IAIs in Turkish context:

The notion of alternative immediately raises the question of alternative to what? The multiplicity and diversity of groups under the umbrella of “artist initiatives” in Turkey prevents a single understanding of “alternative”. Perhaps the most common frame which is the frame these initiatives define themselves as an “alternative” to the modern art of the Republican Era in Turkey. To mark this distinction they use the self referential term “current” art. So they differentiate themselves from the national canon of “modern art” which invokes the “modernity” ethos of the Turkish nation. The groups following the modernist legacy translates the word contemporary into Turkish as ‘cagdas’ most of the time implying a future reference and a goal to synchronize with the *West*. On the other hand, the canon of ‘current’ art differentiate itself from those modernist ideals explicitly. According to Ay\_egül Sönmez<sup>24</sup> the period starting with the 1990s with artists gathering under a certain title of the “current art” demonstrates the freedom of not expressing itself under the title “contemporary art”. Sönmez emphasizes the importance of this difference between current and contemporary in order to define the current art practices that have taken place in Turkey during 2000-2007, corresponding to the period of emergence of artist initiatives in Istanbul. She describes this

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<sup>21</sup> Consecutively the terms employed by David Harvey and Arjun Appadurai.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/english/>

<sup>23</sup> In Australia these form of collectives is called artist run initiatives which are recognized and to some degree financed by the government; in Netherlands and Germany there are similar formations as well. In other parts of the world rather than Europe, there are several examples of artist initiatives with this specific name as well. For further information about artist initiatives around the world: RAIN network.

<sup>24</sup> Ay\_egül Sönmez, “Current art in Turkey 2000-2007 Determinations and Incidents” in *User's Manual Contemporary Art in Turkey 1986-2006* eds. Halil Altındere, Süreyya Evren pp. 136. Sönmez also characterizes the current art practitioner of that period as “Current Turkish artists producing artwork under headings such as sex and assimilation, violence in all aspects of life, exile, new urbanization, language, history, and memory, objects of everyday life and metaphorical objects...”

period and the divergence between two translations of a single concept of contemporary with highlighting a leading figure of that period:

Through the emphasis on the present time, current art broke free from the spotlight of the modernizing aspect of contemporary art. Naturally this freedom caused confusion. It was 2001 when the first current art museum in Turkey was found. As the exact definition of current art continued to perplex, attention was directed to Vasıf Kortun, the director and the curator of the museum and a complete organizer of current art. Kortun who attracted a lot of attention and who would be active during the period 2000-2007 as he had never been before, defined this problem-creating term as follows: "Unlike contemporary art and artists, current art and artists do not draw attention to the modern republic project. This is a break in the intermix/transition between modern and contemporary...Current art does not work on drafting a future; it is involved with 'here' and 'now'..."

When this group of 'current art' practitioners are examined there seems to be ten or eleven formations that are being named under the title "artist initiatives". This number varies as a result of a diversity of reasons: financing problems to loosing the location they occupy, ideological conflicts to disputes in artistic practices. The number of those initiatives can change in time especially during Biennial times. Some of them are run by a single artist in an officially registered place; some of them operate as a group on the basis of projects functioning without a fixed place. All of those initiatives are different from each other in various aspects such as their work, how they are managed, financed, operated, their exhibition organizations, and with the projects they are dealing with.

Those IAs discussed below are the most *famous* ones:

*The Apartment Project* "was initiated by Selda Asal with the aim of providing artists the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and hosting their own exhibitions. Since its opening in 1999, it has been host to various performances, installations, exhibitions, happenings and events. Some of these projects have travelled to other locations, and projects travelled to exhibit at the Apt."<sup>25</sup> The Apartment is on the Istiklal Street in Taksim which is regarded as the heart of Istanbul where nearly all of the public events, art events, pubs, shops, cafes are located; in the Taksim district, the end of Istiklal Street combines with the historical peninsula of Istanbul known as the Golden Horn.

*BAS*, "is an artist-run space initiated in 2006 by Banu Cennetoglu which collects and produces artists' books and printed matters. BAS, while willing to create awareness with its growing international artists' books collection aims as well to generate a new platform for Turkish artists to explore printed matter as an alternative space."<sup>26</sup> BAS, which is now a legal association, has a fixed space at the end of Istiklal Street in Taksim district.

*Galata Perform*, as its name suggests, mostly organizes performance events. Visibility Project is one of them. Deniz Aygun, the program coordinator defines Galata Perform as an artist initiative as well and Yesim Ozsoy Gulan, the artistic coordinator who had started the project of Galata Perform in 2003 suggests that the team of Galata Perform, developed a character, had their objections about art and independence and wanted to be everywhere and preferred to

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.apartmentproject.com/apartment.asp>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.b-a-s.info/page8.html>

exist with their attitudes, opinions and voices. She adds that they have created an independent space for themselves in Galata a neighbourhood located at the end of Taksim Square.

*Hafriyat*, with its exhibition area *Hafriyat Karaköy*, a small place in Karaköy district which is in the historical peninsula of Istanbul close to Taksim district, is one of the prominent figures in the formation of IAIs. Hafriyat group defines their position as a common platform and conception realized by a group of artists, collectively organizing exhibitions for ten years. Hafriyat, as the group suggests, is an effort to graze from the rigid, sterile, conservative, commercial and academic isolation constituted by the sphere of galleries, artists, collectors and audiences. Hafriyat claims to have a permanent sociological sensitivity. The group of artists living in Istanbul are problematizing the tragic and ironic manifestations and signs of the Turkish modernization project as they call it that way.<sup>27</sup>

*NOMAD* was founded in 2002 as an independent formation and registered as "association" in 2006. The group consists of designers, engineers, architects, curators and writers and targets to produce and experiment new patterns in the digital art sphere by using various lenses of other disciplines as they suggest. *NOMAD* is known with its international Ctrl\_alt\_del Sound-art Festival.<sup>28</sup>

*Oda Projesi* (Room Project) is an artist collective composed of three artists Ozge Acikkol, Gunes Savas and Secil Yersel. Members of this collective describe *Oda Projesi* as an art project realized in 2000 with a decision on renting and sharing an apartment as a private studio and share an apartment as a private studio in Galata district. According to them, the apartment “started to be evolved into a multi-purpose, and public space, with a shift in the usual role of the audience in the contemporary art scene”<sup>29</sup>. *Oda Projesi* is mostly problematizing the notion of neighbourhood and they weren’t only evicted from the apartment due to the process of gentrification in the neighbourhood but also open up discussion on this specific topic of recent debates.

*PIST* defines itself as an interdisciplinary project space and considered as one of the independent artist initiatives. Didem Ozbek and Osman Bozkurt, the two artists of this formation, actualize many projects since 2006 in their fixed place in a district rather than Taksim which is very crucial for the dynamics of this formation. The significance of *PIST* does not only grow out of the location of the space but also they are the ones who organized meetings with the other so called IAIs on the mechanisms of this formation of independency, being alternative in the contemporary art field. These meetings, later on, provided a common perception on IAIs and have been contributing to a collective identity of artist initiatives.

There are some other groups and organizations being recognized or define themselves as independent artist initiative.<sup>30</sup> Those discussed above are selected because of their significance in the formation of IAIs and their explicit definitions on their role as alternative although they are not characterized as activist groups. The information above is gathered through web pages and media. From the interviews that I had conducted with the artists in those groups, writers, and curators, challenges and internal mechanisms, as well as inter group relations provide more solid grounds for understanding their relationship with “activism” and the “social”.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://hafriyatkarakoy.com/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nomad-tv.net/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://odaprojesi.org/lang-pref/en/>

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.istanbulartlist.net/LiST02.pdf> a list of organizations in the contemporary art field in Istanbul

Most of them are problematizing the notion of being autonomous although the name is *given* as such. According to them autonomy is limited when an alternative form of institutional structure is in question. Three of them had the statue of association<sup>31</sup> which in their terms (this situation of being an association recognized by law) “makes it impossible to be regarded as independent with its totality of meanings”<sup>32</sup>. There is a problem of institutional identity for those collectives in that sense. Some artist initiatives avoid from that form of state recognition but to be able to have a sedentary fixed place to organize meetings, exhibition, projects and such activities necessitates certain form of recognition in order to pay the bills and especially to organize gatherings<sup>33</sup>. Having a specific location brings out a must for having a legal institutional identity at the same time.

Having a space of their own is important in the sense that they have the opportunity to let younger artists to exhibit their works which they praise with organizing exhibitions and undertaking such kind of projects. The young artists who are out of the list of many curators of the museums or reputable galleries can exhibit their works in those places according to those initiatives. Along with young artists, experimental works, interdisciplinary projects, digital art which cannot find a widespread acceptance can also be exhibited as well within the limits of what those initiatives provide as exhibition areas. Having a space is also important to organize meetings where many of the collective protest actions are organized in such kind of artist initiative’s places.

Most of the initiatives claim that the main idea behind their formation is not to engage in direct political action or to form a collective group identity to mobilize for political protest but to come up together, to work together, to reduce the limit of censorship, to declare some form of autonomy, to initiate something, to create some space for artistic expression of their own. In that sense, they do not position themselves as the oppositional, activist or the resistor actors but the alternative to the institutions they declare their independency, autonomy from which are, as they name, the galleries, museums, foundational institutions, big actors and mostly the ones they characterize as the profit makers. According to this idea, the sponsorship and the management through these big actors make it harder to declare that form of autonomy both in artistic expression and the operation. This position as being the alternative not the opposite justifies their relationship and interconnectedness with those so called big actors in different occasions such as biennials or specific exhibits, individual exhibitions in galleries and some other forms of events. In addition to that this point also legitimizes the sponsorship agreements (if they are able to sign any) or search for some funding through sponsorship or from EU funding opportunities.

Although the main aim to come together with this name is not to engage in political activism, there is also a parallel formation of a different ground for mobilizations. Next to some of the feminist activist art practitioners with transnational networks like Guerilla Girls or Missile Dick Chicks, there are also artist groups with transnational activist networking questioning the ways in which art and activism come together, art as a resource of mobilization for social change, the transformation of art in a global market place, alternative process of creative production, the performative action, artist as the producers of cultural values in relation to

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<sup>31</sup> The term association is used here for Turkish equivalent *dernek*, and they are subjected to Turkish Government’s “law of societies”.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with an artist (by author)

<sup>33</sup> In daily language, after the military coup in 1980, it has been regarded that a group of people coming together will eventually organize protest demonstrations. So it was a threat for the state and also banned to gather with certain number of people in public places altogether.

cultural activism and some others.<sup>34</sup> IAs converge from those art activist networks at the point that their first aim with forming a collective is not for activism but for collective artistic production. Those IAs also form networks of communication on transnational scale and claim to engage in social and political projects as well.<sup>35</sup> Artist initiatives' political engagement in an alternative political platform parallel to those transnational activist networks is not a first priority or intention nor a contingent formation. The claims of autonomy and the act of initiating imply certain ideologies. When the political culture in Turkey radically shifted in January 2007, those certain ideologies of IAs also became more visible than before.

### **Challenges:**

In 2007 January, the assassination of Hrant Dink, an important and leading Armenian intellectual, was the remarkable turning point for Turkey. It was not only about the context of political relations and a process of transformation in the social in relation to the minority problems. Also those new forms of contestation and protest have been challenged as well.

Dink was a journalist and a passionate supporter of free speech in Turkey. He had been constantly putting an emphasis on the importance of mutual understanding between Armenians and Turks. He was also the founder and editor in chief of the Armenian-Turkish weekly newspaper *Agos*. With the assassination of Hrant Dink and the ascendance of violent, racist nationalism, this recently formed and emerged political platform or ground has been challenged on producing collectively through artistic means as a form of mourning, protesting and reaction. Where the loss of Dink is also an important landmark on the transformation of collective action and new forms of social protest in Turkey in a more general sense, the creative forces of the IAs appeared in this protest sphere several times.

In the second year of Hrant Dink's assassination, while the trials are still running and during every trial the protest meetings are still continuing, there have been several events for his memorial and for protesting the mechanisms before the freedom of speech. Among them, two of the most visible ones was a sound instalment of Dink's written texts in the exhibition area of Apartment Project which is recognized as one of the most prominent and the role model of artist initiative and the other one was another exhibition called "Münferit-Isolation" in another space of IAs, Hafriyat Karaköy which is without a doubt considered as the most politically active and protest one<sup>36</sup>.

The exhibition of "Münferit" organized by a group of artist under the name The January 19 Collective, referencing to the date of the assassination of Hrant Dink. The actors in the contemporary art field gathered right after Dink's death and "sensed the demands of a past whose voice had been suppressed"<sup>37</sup> by recalling the validity of the intersection between art and the political field and they arrange this exhibition of Münferit-Isolation:

With this event, the contemporary artists and writers who form the January 19 Collective, which has been meeting regularly for a year, meticulously investigated the records of these past murders which have been covered up, and faced their own

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<sup>34</sup> This is a very popular discussion among scholars, activists and many other actors which is being discussed around the key concepts such as cultural resistance, cultural activism, transnational activism, art activism, community based art, new social movements, grassroots globalization.

<sup>35</sup> R.A.I.N. network is an example: <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/> which BAS also a member.

<sup>36</sup> In interviews, most of the informants differentiate Hafriyat in different aspects, as being the most 'political' one, as being the most 'local' one in *good sense*, or as being the most 'collective' one.

<sup>37</sup> <http://thejanuary19collective.blogspot.com/>

personal memories. We refrained from turning the event into a rigid memorial exhibition. The act of commemoration was imagined as a stance, an action. Today, contemporary art is being refined as a cultural field to decorate Turkey's shop window facing the outside world. We want to reiterate that the radical intervention of contemporary art to the present and the social is still possible.

The 19 January Collective has close ties with the IAIs formation. The meetings were held in those fixed places for several times, and the ones who constitute 19 January collective are significant actors in this IAIs formation. Virtual meetings have been held through the networks of initiatives. At the end, the anonymous works were exhibited in Hafriyat Karaköy an artist initiative's space. The artist, have been discussing on the relationship between art, activism, politics, social, public space since the beginning of the IAIs formation. With the loss of Hrant Dink, those discussions actualized; perhaps not evolved into the ideal as imagined at the beginning but in the end the works has received significant amount of reactions.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship of arts and politics, whether inspiring new forms of protests as the performative acts in demonstrations, stencil works on the streets or artistic events inspired from the leading figures or groups in the theory or activism like Emma Goldman and Guy Debord, is a very recent phenomena disabling a well designed both theoretical and practical articulation of the long term repercussions. Moving from the two binary oppositions of aestheticization and romanticization of politics to the denial of a change, newness or being unable to see what is beyond the incorporated and institutionalised, thus 'governmentable' forms of activism, as a conclusion, I prefer to posit some questions:

Does initiating can be associated with direct political action?

Are there some other formations beyond institutions?

What are the promises of aesthetics different than traditional forms of demonstrations?

How the local culture is transformed and interpreted through transnational art networks which are associated with a critical stance?

What does it mean to organize as an art activist network or to organize without a reference to activism but with a critical stance at the same time?

What are the mechanisms of commercializing the "political" for which it can be said that the aesthetics paves the way?

What are the ways in which the right wing, conservative ideologies instrumentalize the art field?

Could we consider the art field and the actors as the sphere of grassroots?

How can we criticize and question the forms and ways in which the 'neoliberal incorporation' occurs?

This list of questions can be extended easily; as long as the transformations in the globe in disadvantage of the masses occurred that rapidly, the questions on how to oppose will increase simultaneously.