

2006: A Year of Thought, Discussion and Preparation for Culture* Serhan Ada**

When we take a retrospective look at the cultural scene of İstanbul, the year 2006 stands out not for what has actually been done, but as a time when the accumulation of the past years was questioned and preparations were made for the coming years rather than as a time of ‘action’. In this respect, it will not be wrong to evaluate the year 2006 as a transition period.

There are three vital developments supporting this view: the report by Dragan Klaic entitled “İstanbul’s Cultural Constellation and Its European Prospects”¹; the Annual Spring Plenary Meeting of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM, formerly known as the Informal European Theater Meeting) that took place within the framework of the Culture Forum İstanbul entitled “Margins of Europe” in April 2006²; and finally the steps taken toward the confirmation of the İstanbul’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2010, which was announced at the meeting of the Council of Ministers consisting of the ministers of culture of the European Union (EU).

1. Klaic’s Report: An Evaluation on the Cultural Life in İstanbul

Setting off with the fact that Turkey and cultural operators coming from Turkey started to appear more and more in the cultural networks of Europe and at meetings about

* In *İstanbul Kültür Turizm 2006 Değerlendirmesi*, İstanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, İstanbul, 2007, pp.45-53.

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¹ This work which was commissioned by www.labforculture.org running with the support of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) was in fact concluded in December 2005.

² Although there is no detailed information on the Annual Spring Plenary Meeting that took place in April, the website of IETM, www.ietm.org may be checked.

cultural policy and training, the report by Klaic bears the purpose of taking a closer look at—to put it with his words—“this less known actor” of the European cultural scene.³

Klaic begins his work by describing the circumstances during the time period of his stay in İstanbul. In the aftermath of the beginning of the negotiations between Turkey and the EU on 3 October 2005, Klaic’s stay took place during the month of Ramadan and overlapped with the 9th International İstanbul Biennial. In this respect, it may easily be argued that Klaic’s observations belong to an ‘extraordinary’ period in comparison with the regular intensity of both the political and the artistic agenda throughout the year.

The most distinctive characteristic of Klaic’s concise report is that, without stressing the changes İstanbul’s cultural infrastructure went through within the course of history, he takes a quick glance at the contemporary panorama and puts forth some clues and propositions related to current problems and perspectives.

The first point elaborated in the report concerns the three private museums that play an important role in İstanbul’s art scene. In this part, Klaic briefly mentions the Sabancı Museum (Sabancı Group),⁴ İstanbul Modern (Eczacıbaşı Group) and the Pera Museum (Koç-Kıraç Family) as well as enumerating their main characteristics and explaining the connections of these museums with the founding families.

İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSİV) takes its place as “a major player” in the report. While briefly explaining the anticipated activities that will take place at the new headquarters (Deniz Palas located at Tepebaşı) of İKSİV, Klaic mentions that the Foundation also intends to transform Antrepo (Warehouse) No. 5 in Karaköy into a venue for performing arts. Klaic argues that, despite the ‘threat’ the Galataport project

³ Dragan Klaic, who lectured on drama at different universities in former Yugoslavia, currently works as a scholar at the University of Leiden and makes research in several institutions in the Netherlands.

⁴ The author indicates that the Sabancı Museum opened at the same time with the other two museums. This misinformation in fact connotes another point: opened in 2002, the museum started to implement its current programme and to stage international exhibitions targeting a larger audience under the management of its current director Nazan Ölçer.

poses on this area, an art venue would meet urgent needs at least for the coming three to four years.⁵

Klaic also includes **santralistanbul** in his report and identifies the project that will be realised through converting the former Silahtarağa Electricity Power Plant as “an exceptional opportunity”. The report claims that as a cultural regeneration project born out of the synergy of science, education, culture and the arts, **santralistanbul** can be a model for multidisciplinary and trans-regional partnerships.

Probably the most important part of Klaic’s work is the second part of the report where, after describing the institutions and projects, he discusses the qualitative tendencies that guide the cultural life. In this part, the author observes that rather than the cultural projects with the right content and management, it is the real estate deals that are executed effectively and swiftly in the city. Klaic underlines the fact that while discussions regarding the establishment of an İstanbul city museum in Darphane (the former imperial mint) has been going on and on for many years, real estate development projects concerning Karaköy Harbour and Haydarpaşa Railway Station were prepared at once. Pointing at the separation between the world of culture and the world of commerce, Klaic remarks that the urban planners “have failed to create a productive interface between the two”.

According to Klaic, İstanbul’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2010 is a unique opportunity to comprehensively reconsider the cultural infrastructure of the city. Yet his analysis contains no clues as to which methods can be utilised to achieve this positive expectation. Klaic rests his arguments only by stating that it would be useful to include art management in the universities’ curricula and that 2010 is important in terms of changing the attitude against culture in the fields of communication and popular culture. However, it is clear that the success of 2010 will depend on building a new project culture oriented toward creating a different, enhanced and collaborative environment for people living in İstanbul.

⁵ Both İKSV and İstanbul Modern were founded and managed by Eczacıbaşı family and their foundations.

Again in this part, the cultural institutions located on İstiklal Street (Garanti Platform, Yapı Kredi Culture and Arts Centre, Aksanat and Tünel Sanat respectively) that were established/managed by banks are enumerated, and the insufficiencies as well as misleading and even—from time to time—censoring tendencies of the private sector as operators of culture are emphasised. However, in this respect, Klaic does not mention that the sponsorship regulation has almost never been exercised.⁶

Under the title of “A New Territory,” the author briefly lists the—relatively—new initiatives in the field of performing arts.⁷ Although I do not share Klaic’s hasty approach to categorise projects and initiatives that are different from each other under the same title, it is impossible to disagree with his evaluation stating that in all these attempts there is a missing dimension of strategic approach and sustainability.

In the remaining part of this section, after making a comparison between the budgets of culture and tourism in Turkey,⁸ Klaic briefly reviews the project titled “Now!” executed abroad by the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, Topkapı and Archaeological Museums, Military Museum, Atatürk Cultural Centre and with the support of the Ministry. He then continues by giving examples of collaborations between local authorities and universities in the field of culture and mentions the cultural centres operated by European countries in İstanbul.⁹

Probably the most valuable aspect of the Klaic report summed up here is the conclusion part gathered under nine subtitles including the evaluation and the suggestions of the author. Among these, the most important point he makes is without doubt reminding

⁶ The Legislation on Incentives for Cultural Investments and Enterprises numbered 5225 and dated 21.07.2004.

⁷ Ara Café, Onay Sanat, Galataperform, Maçka Sanat, Dot, 5. Sokak Tiyatrosu, Karga Sanat, Semaver Kumpanya, BKM, Profilo Sanat respectively.

⁸ According to Klaic, 85 % out of 445 million-Euro total budget of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is allocated to tourism whereas 15 % is allocated to culture.

⁹ Klaic repeats his argument regarding establishing “Houses of European Cultures” which he originally suggested in his article entitled “Dry the Morass of Ignorance” dated 2004.

that the responsibility of developing İstanbul in order to expose its rich cultural potential belongs to the professionals working in the field of culture. Klaic depicts this group as “a rather fragmented group, competing for scarce resources, international contacts, the support of foreign missions, even access to information”. There is no doubt that this evaluation deserves longer discussions. It is clear that competition as well as exchange of information and data cannot be carried out properly without an open flow of communication. In order for culture to turn into a sector, first of all, a ‘competitive market’ should be formed.¹⁰

Klaic’s second proposition points the need for umbrella structures as a solution for the “let it be small but mine” understanding and underlines the necessity for establishing healthy relationships with the local authorities in order to achieve this aim. He also reminds that building bridges between different fields is another valid way of working in cultural practices. He provides collaborations between private initiatives and public institutions, small and large cultural operators, universities and the sector, between individuals working on historical heritage and individuals working in contemporary creativity, and between professionals and amateurs as examples.

Another suggestion put forward in the report is establishing wide, powerful and new foundations.¹¹ Klaic also adds that the Third Sector Foundation in İstanbul and the European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam would play a guiding role in this matter.

In order to coordinate and integrate the abovementioned efforts, a centre operating in a university environment for documentation, information gathering and training to operate in a university environment is among Klaic’s propositions.

Finally in the report, the continued interest of European cultural institutions and operators—whom are referred as the “future leaders [in the field of culture]”—in

¹⁰ It should be remembered that Açık Radyo, Anadolu Kültür A.Ş. and similar multi-partner non-profit initiatives may be regarded as benchmarks in this respect. Nevertheless, Klaic briefly mentions Anadolu Kültür A.Ş. under the part entitled “Dialogue with the Municipalities”.

¹¹ One would expect the author to remind the difficult and slow legal procedures involved in establishing, running and auditing the foundations in Turkey.

Turkey, and the opportunities which will be opened up with Turkey's membership to the EU are designated as the factors which complete this picture.

Klaic's report, which gives the impression of a picture painted with thick brush strokes, is a study on the powerful and weak aspects of the basic operational dynamics of the cultural life in İstanbul, its actors and development perspectives. The evaluation and the suggestions in the conclusion part of the report, on the other hand, provide us an important ground for discussion.

2. IETM at the Culture Forum İstanbul: Margins of Europe

The Annual Spring Plenary Meeting of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) was organised by the European Cultural Association (AKD, Avrupa Kültür Derneği) under the theme of "Margins of Europe" between April 19 and 23, 2006. The fact that Europe's central position in culture was discussed by individuals and institutions influential in the different areas of culture in Europe questioning the so-called 'united Europe' as a monolithic structure and identity was of utmost importance especially at a moment when the negotiations for Turkey's EU membership began.

During the IETM meeting, where a large number of professionals of culture, artists, academicians and representatives of NGOs from Europe (and some from outside Europe) found the chance to meet individuals from the field of culture and arts in Turkey and to make plans for the future, the meetings were held at very different locations during the course of four days. Several performances were also arranged to take place in between these meetings. Thanks to these performances, European professionals in the field of culture and the arts had the chance to see the works of young Turkish artists and to consider them for their future organisations and events.

The concept of 'margins' was analysed in terms of its geographical, political, intellectual, psychological, cultural and artistic components and the changes the 'us' and

the ‘other’ dichotomy went through in Europe was questioned and discussed from a critical perspective. Although the IETM meeting was among many occasions where the concept of the ‘other’ was scrutinised, while Europe is getting more and more conservative in drawing its geographical and political borders, it was important for making professionals of culture to see beyond the margins, understand what is there and to show that they were open to the difference and creative diversity that would spring from there.

During one of the liveliest sessions of the meeting, the report by Klaic was also discussed in detail. The speakers of the session agreed that the report is a valuable document as an introduction to the cultural life of İstanbul. It was notable that during the discussion, artists and art managers from Turkey criticised the report for being incorrect and insufficient from a “foreigner’s perspective”. However, some young cultural managers, who also helped Klaic during his research, spoke in support of the report. Whether the reactions to the report by Klaic will lead to a real and productive discussion or lay the groundwork for further and comprehensive studies, time will show.

The IETM meeting, which unfortunately lacked a publication, proved that the quest for “A Soul to Europe” will be a prolonged process.

3. İstanbul Officially Candidate to the European Capital of Culture

İstanbul’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2010 was confirmed toward the end of the year 2005. For the finalisation of the decision, Turkey had to wait for the meeting of the Council of Ministers composed of the ministers of culture of the European Union (EU) that took place on November 13, 2006. After this meeting, the “candidacy for 2010” was officially announced.

Throughout the one-year period of waiting for the finalisation of candidacy, preparations were made regarding what needs to be done. 2010 Executive and Advisory

Boards met regularly and displayed an effort to execute this process in a governance approach.

First of all, a draft bill pertaining to the functioning, resources and the authority-responsibility framework for 2010 was prepared and submitted to the Undersecretariat of the Prime Minister's Office in order to enable the required legislative steps. Opinions of several government officials working for different ministries were also taken in Ankara regarding the 2010 bill.

At the same time, application and eligibility criteria for the project calls for 2010 were drafted and presented to the approval of the 2010 Executive Board. Also the preparations for creating an "Artistic Committee" (literally called the Project Assessment Team) and an Artistic Advisory Board which would both function as a collective moderator and facilitator throughout the project applications were finalised.

The members of the Executive Board attended several cultural and artistic events, meetings and festivals in different cities of Europe throughout the year and made presentations on the mission and objectives of 2010. In addition, culture professionals coming from Europe visited İstanbul to address audiences composed of interested individuals, representatives of the NGOs and students.

The core managerial unit of 2010 moved to its new office on the first floor of Atlas Passage on İstiklal Street partly allocated provisionally by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism for the occasion.

2006 marked a period during when attempts to complete the preparations toward 2010 were made.

4. Three Art Fairs, One Meeting, Metropolitan Planning and Culture

The number of the art fairs organised for some time in İstanbul was raised to three in 2006. First of these is the “16th İstanbul Art Fair ARTIST 2006” organised between October 28 and November 5 within the scope of the Tüyap Book Fair; the second is the “Artİstanbul 2006 International Contemporary Art Days” organised by the Art Galleries Association and İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality as well as Dream Design Factory at Antrepo No. 5 in Karaköy on November 21-26; and finally, the contemporary art fair entitled “Contemporary İstanbul” which was organised for the first time at Lütfi Kırdar Convention and Exhibition Centre on December 21-24. The feature that attracted attention last year was the steps taken by the organisers of the art fairs towards “product differentiation”. For example, the space reserved for collectors at “Artİstanbul 2006 International Contemporary Art Days,” the variations by artists under the theme of “Turtle Trainer” (a very famous early Turkish painting by Osman Hamdi) and the events organised at “Contemporary İstanbul” are among the promising developments. It would not be wrong to expect fairs to differentiate themselves more in terms of their programme, content and communication programme in the forthcoming years.

Another event which could be discussed here that characterised the year 2006 was the symposium entitled “Lifestyle Culture in İstanbul” organised by İKSV at the Sofa Hotel on November 9-11. Different aspects of cultural life in İstanbul were debated in the symposium. The most striking point about the meeting was the large number of students among the audience, which differentiated the event from those of the previous years. The presentations will be collected in a book that is due to be published in 2007.

As a final remark, it would be right to mention the work conducted by the İstanbul Metropolitan Planning and Urban Design Centre (İMP) in the field of culture. The Cultural Industries and Cultural Tourism Group within the Centre have begun to be operative “with the purpose of producing strategies in order to use cultural industries [...] as a driving force in increasing the profile of İstanbul [...] and providing the city with a more sound structure”. The fact that the culture industry (creative industries) as an “igniting” force in urban planning and regeneration was included in official

documents is no doubt a new and promising element in the cultural life of İstanbul.¹² However, we have to wait and see how this will be supported with further research and concrete projects. In a recent meeting IMP opened the topic of urban regeneration and culture to the discussion of the broader public.¹³

As a conclusion, 2006 has been a year to be remembered with what has been thought, discussed and prepared rather than what has been done in the field of culture and the arts. Yet it is not possible to predict how these newly emerging thoughts and discussions will influence the cultural life of the city in the coming years.

¹² For detailed information on this subject see *İstanbul İl Bütünü Çevre Düzeni Planı-Plan Uygulama Hükümleri* (August 2006), pp. 10-11.

¹³ The roundtable entitled “Golden Horn as a Culture Basin and the Naval Yard” was held at the conference room of IMP on 7 December 2006.