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divisible Istanbul

[melinda rackham: isea 2011, istanbul](#)



Captured (cannon), Tamiko Thiel, 2011

ALONG THE STEEP, TWISTING COBBLED LANEWAYS AND MAJOR THOROUGHFARES OF ISTANBUL ALIKE, PLAYFUL KITTENS RUN AMOK WHILE THEIR ELDERS LAZILY RECLINE ACROSS DOORSTEPS OR SPRAWL UNSELFCONSCIOUSLY ON STORE MERCHANDISE. THIS SPECIAL STATUS OF STRAY CATS IN ISTANBUL, LOVED AND FED BY LOCALS AND PASSERSBY, PROTECTED AND PROVIDED WITH VETERINARY CARE BY THE STATE, ILLUSTRATES A JUNCTURE OF THE EASTERN AND WESTERN WORLDS—MUSLIM IDEALS OF TOLERANCE MIXED WITH WESTERN-INFLUENCED URBAN BELIEF IN ANIMAL RIGHTS.

Istanbul is a city of not only multiple overlaying levels of social, religious and financial complexity but also of horizontal strata. The senses can be overwhelmed at street level by the cacophony of the immediate. From below it is almost impossible to tell that there is another layer of activity on the rooftop bars and restaurants. However if you ascend by small elevators, breezy views of concrete high rises, glittering mosaics of domed mosques and Mediterranean ambience stretch out before you. This complexity was reflected in the many subjective experiences of ISEA Istanbul—from the immediately seen to the intriguing and ultimately more interesting invisible layers and levels of the event.

symposium

The Symposium, with its impossible to reconcile multiple parallel presentation sessions, was not well attended despite ISEA2011 having 1,350 local and international participants. Some suggested that the venue at Sabanci Center in Levent, accessed by most delegates via several modes of transport and entered through machine gun guarded security points, did not provide a space for easy discussion. The majority of the discourse, fuelled by Tweets, Flickr sets, armchair Facebook commentary and spirited mailing list attacks and defences, centred not so much on art or philosophy, but on organisational models, structure, finances and issues of cultural difference.

The contemporality of many overlaying and intersecting levels of public and private modes of interaction was neatly surveyed by USA-based curator Christiane Paul in her keynote on the shift to network cultures. Today, what

used to be thought of as virtual and immaterial (ie online and mediated environments) are ubiquitous and self-performed platforms promoting distributed identity and collectivity. Paul outlined how Mixed Reality experience in gaming, exemplified by groups such as Blast Theory (UK) and Augmented Reality (AR) interaction, predominantly in advertising, are becoming the norm.

the art

And then there was the art. ISEA being co-located in Istanbul and overlapping with the 12th Istanbul Biennial proved an overwhelming lure for a large number of Australian practitioners, academics and writers. That the ISEA exhibitions were part of the Official Parallel Program of the Biennial and the publication of Conference proceedings and inclusion in a special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA), contributed to this interest. Italian academic Lanfranco Aceti, the ISEA Artistic Director and Conference Chair, proposed that the synergy with the Biennial would provide fruitful exchanges between media arts and fine arts communities, however the members of Australia's fine arts communities I encountered at the Biennial events were nowhere to be seen at ISEA.

My most synergistic art experiences came under the banner of Invisible Istanbul—a collaboration between media artist Tamiko Thiel (US) and young Istanbul architectural and urban designers Cem Kozar and Is?i Ünal of PATTU. Invisible Istanbul uses Augmented Reality to overlay virtual artworks via GPS positioning onto the physical sites around the Biennial. In other words it was an AR Intervention into the Biennale. Any viewer could see several different, unregulated site-specific artworks by launching content on their smartphones or tablet PCs. This mediated layer of visibility provides an arena for dialogue between artists not previously accessible. As Thiel states "The difference is that with AR technology, participation is the decision of the artist, not the curator."



Captured (cannon), Tamiko Thiel, 2011

Situated in Tophane on the former site of the Imperial munitions factory and barracks, Thiel's Captured Images powerfully overlaid simple objects simultaneously into the contemporary art of the Biennial and its historical space, bringing the relationship between art and politics to the fore. Her Capture (for Hrant) honours assassinated journalist Hrant Dink, an advocate for Turkish-Armenian reconciliation and human and minority rights in Turkey. It is one of the very few works in ISEA that actually references any local or political events, with iconic images of a murdered Hrant's shoe soles, sourced from broadcast images of his death, visually embedded into the articulated metal displays of the Biennale.

In other works Thiel juxtaposes virtual pencils against discarded armament shells; compares cannon ball production with touristic evil eye amulets; and intertwines swirling ephemeral tweets and hash tags against the clean neon texts of the Biennial.

Another AR work Urban Dynamics, created by PATTU, departs from the Tophane compound to explore the nearby neighbourhoods of Karaköy and Galata. The future and the past of the city are seen in planes and layers through a new set of AR eyes, revealing what has shaped the city and its people from the old docks, beer houses and brothels to the world of haute couture and café society.

Geographical, physical and virtual data spaces truly merged at this ISEA: Manifest.AR inhabited the Kasa Gallery repositioning artworks from their Venice Biennial intervention Orada Deglii; Troy Innocent conducted Neomaflex AR art walks in the Beyoglu neighbourhood; and Andrew Burrell demonstrated care for virtual life forms from The Institute For Advanced Augmentiform Development and Release on the streets around Taksim. Many delegates attended ISEA workshops on AR and VR, as clearly recent developments in soft and hardware development offer a seductive and much richer mediated experience via the current generation of personal devices.

The other main art venue, Cumhuriyet Gallery in Taksim Square, adjoining the major pedestrian thoroughfare of Istiklal Caddesi, was a perfectly positioned and beautifully restored building of rambling colonnades and soft curving spaces. Unfortunately it was not a venue that easily housed electronic art or network connections, and was closed on several occasions when riot police occupied the Square to thwart student protesters and teachers striking for higher wages. Over-crowded schedules, signage issues and long distances between venues, meant many never to be repeated experiences slipped silently under most participants' radar.

Two such were provided by Richard Castelli (France), director of Epidemic (www.epidemic.net/fr) and producer of much of the most interesting electronic media art and theatre globally. In Istanbul Castelli curated the Madde-Isik 2 (Matter-Light 2) exhibition which included world premieres of the kinetic Assistante Sociale by Jean Michel Bruyère and Kurt Hentschläger's HIVE, installed over the five floors of Borusan Muzik Evi. A forum for select international cultural operators at ISEA titled "Who Understands Media Art?" clearly gave the message to stop seeing ourselves as different. Castelli's private guided tours in Per-ili Kösk, the head-quarters and con-tem-po-rary art mu-seum of Boru-san Hold-ings, elegantly illustrated capital investment in new art practices within corporate culture.

The disparity between resources for ISEA artists and Castelli's artists could not have been clearer. Many artists at Istanbul, as is often a feature at any ISEA, were frustrated by installation difficulties. Customs hold-ups compromised the Kathy Clelland curated exhibition Signs of Life: Robot Incubator with Mari Velonaki's new work in progress Diamandini being delayed, while Kirsty Boyle's Tree Ceremony, involving a robot interacting with a tree, failed to arrive at all. Meanwhile small robot works brought by the artists, like Boyle's fragments and John Tonkin's nervous robots, tumbled and turned in the exhibition space as carefree as Istanbul kittens.

foregoing complexity

ISEA veterans know what to expect and how to work within these resourcing parameters, showing easily transportable and installable works. The curatorium of Sean Cubitt, Vince Dziekan and Paul Thomas cheekily presented The World is Everything That is The Case, art works that were actually housed in suitcases—and not to the detriment of the works. Meditation Wall, the Karen Casey installation (in collaboration with Harry Sokol and Tim Cole) of digital patterns influenced by the artist's brainwaves, received good international press. Much of the success for the events was due to the tireless and cheerful negotiations of Istanbul-based ISEA Program Director Özden Sahin, who provided help to those caught in cultural and bureaucratic issues, smoothing the way for many.

This ongoing aspect of ISEA is a double-edged sword. While always providing an unprecedented opportunity to extend the scope of international electronic artworks which are rarely seen together in any country, the ISEA exhibitions can fall down through lack of continuous organisational infrastructure. Major artworks often rely on individual artists being able to fund their own exhibition, hence more complex works are forgone for the easy install. The host city's local arts community and general public do not see the best representation of media arts that they could, hence the shows become hermetic, reaching only a small audience.

Isea 2013 australia—the challenge

What lessons can Australia learn before we host ISEA 2013 in Sydney? The last time we hosted this event was TISEA in 1993. It was a pivotal point in media arts history, however financially disastrous for all organisations involved. Hopefully, 20 years later, issues of adequate resourcing and support from major funders and institutions have been addressed. Most importantly ISEA needs to be vital and relevant to the local arts community, leaving us with additional resources, rather than depleted. Can we tolerate another forum for internationals who drop in and out of the country swirling only in their own vacuum-packed culture?

Sean Cubitt opened ISEA by discussing how our standardised technological forms of spreadsheets, databases and geographical information systems have irrevocably altered our understanding of, and relationship to, both time and space. Given the predominant use of this technology is in the management of people, commerce and politics, he suggested that we, as artists and creatives, look for both older and new alternatives to the grids from within which to operate. Perhaps the same can be said for our institutional and festival practices. In order to rebuild or reuse forms which can cut across outmoded structures, we must re-visit, re-examine and re-visualise what it is that we value in our artistic communities in Australia and worldwide.

the informal Isea

One successful form at ISEA was an on-the-fly daily discussion forum. Curated by Stephen Kovats, the Lounge@Nuru_Ziya provided a responsive informal program each evening of specific topics fuelled by fresh mint lemonade, local fruits and wines, in a stylish boutique hotel and gallery venue. By the third evening's Lounge, Terra Virtualis Augmentio, discussing the entwining of the virtual in everyday materiality and launching the Australian Journal of Virtual Art, its popularity blew out the venue completely. Coinciding with an impromptu -empyre- mailing list meeting, crowds milled outside closing down the narrow street. The Lounge served its purpose in bringing disparate groups of ISEA attendees together, who dispersed in different groupings to local restaurants and bars to engage in face-to-face dialogue.

It seems that informal, interstitial events—where art, information sharing and debate happen in ambiguous moments and spaces—provide a positive way forward. They are sometimes uncomfortable, a little chaotic, often confused; however their loose structure leaves openings for multiple outcomes, rather than tired and predictable ones. But can there be any formula for success when an event is an evolving and growing entity—one aspect that nails it as others spin out of control?

Will future events be more anarchic and energetic—spaces of rational oblivion or controlled frustration? We may not have to worry as Anita Fontaine and Geoffrey Lillemon's *Rainbow X Apocalypse* (Australia), a video installation downstairs in the Nuru Ziya gallery, reminds us of the doomsday prophecy that 2012 is the final year of human existence. By creating an afterlife for avatars in the Metaverse, a videogame-esque heaven in which our souls live on for eternity, Fontaine asks a more broadly relevant question. "Is escape into a digital reality the only way forward for the human conscience?...In the face of this looming dystopia, what do we choose? Absolute death or virtual reality?"

at the crossroads

We really are at crossroads with ISEA and many festivals and institutions around the world of similar vintage. The space for many art practices and debates today has shifted into social spaces and out of the gallery. On the virtual and electronic plane many visible and invisible layers compete to inform, direct and augment audiences in ways that previously have not been viable. The new worlds move in invisible data flows, visceral and intuitive vectors, as we develop and nurture subtle sensing organs, both biological and electronic, to detect and experience where they can take us.

Despite its many issues, and after the memory of boats on the Bosphorus, cocktails, parties and bathhouses fade, ISEA Istanbul had depth and presence. The call to prayer ringing across the city at regular intervals deeply resonated within my body and mind. Having a prayer mat in my hotel room (instead of a bible) was deeply encouraging on a global level. It tells me that we do not lack vision and inclusion in our communities, and that there is an alternative to re-presenting outmoded forms. I look forward to an Australian ISEA that will integrate the gems of tradition with experimental formats, in a sustainable mix that inspires and reinvigorates our local arts sectors.

ISEA2011 Istanbul, Sept 14- 21

Adelaide based Curator Melinda Rackham writes on the diversity of contemporary artforms and was Ambassador for the Australian Centre for Virtual Art (ACVA) at ISEA Istanbul.

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