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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-5DeUioQGc&feature=youtu.be>

<http://artforum.com/diary/id=41191>

Public Relations

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Left: [Fulya Erdemci](#), curator of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Right: [Andrea Phillips](#), co-organizer of the biennial's ten-month public program, “Public Alchemy.” (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

WHEN THE ISTANBUL FOUNDATION FOR CULTURE AND ARTS (IKSV) struck a sponsorship deal with Koç Holding to support five editions of the Istanbul Biennial over ten years, from 2006 through 2016, one can reasonably assume that everyone involved wanted something fairly solid—financial stability, reputational fortification—from the arrangement. What no one seems to have imagined, however, was that the deal would so ruffle the feathers of Istanbul’s factional communities of contemporary artists, political activists, and territorial leftists that Koç—Turkey’s largest industrial conglomerate, which is run by a powerful, wealthy family and has its hands in everything from banking, oil, and gas to defense—has since inspired a veritable performance program of increasingly aggressive protests running parallel to but angled against the biennial itself.

In 2009, a network of anonymous collectives set out to sabotage the event, albeit playfully, by producing posters mocking the curatorial framework, an open letter accusing the biennial of whitewashing arms dealers, a disseminated set of instructions for interrupting video projections and multimedia installations, and a series of demonstrations staged on the opening night, which sucked the air from an otherwise fine and serious exhibition curated by

the Croatian collective WHW. At the time, observers across the political spectrum chalked the protests up to the petulance of the so-called “orthodox left” (how’s that for paradox), which apparently saw WHW as a rival and a threat, and the group’s leftist credentials and Bertolt Brecht—inspired themes as an encroachment on its territory.



Left: Artists [Ali Kazma](#) and [Burak Arıkan](#). Right: Writer Lara Fresko with curator [Vasif Kortun](#), director of research and programs at Salt in Istanbul.

In 2011, when [Jens Hoffmann](#) and [Adriano Pedrosa](#) organized a prim and mostly apolitical exhibition, a group known as the Conceptual Art Laboratory took advantage of the ideological vacuum to reprint—and slip into the biennial’s promotional material—a damning letter written by Vehbi Koç, founder of the family fortune, in support of the military coup that overthrew Turkey’s civilian government in 1980, which, among other things, set the country on a path of economic liberalization. The coup was followed by a dark period of roundups, arrests, and tribunals. In the text of his letter, Koç blithely puts himself at the disposal of coup leader [Kenan Evren](#), and offers his services against the malice of communists, Armenians, and Kurds.

So what can we expect in 2013? Well, for one thing, the curator [Fulya Erdemci](#), who is organizing the thirteenth edition of the biennial, is not only rooting her exhibition deeply in the city of Istanbul, she is also digging into some of its most pressing urban problems. This firm emphasis on a specific time and place promises to position her biennial as a welcome counterbalance to that of her predecessors, Hoffmann and Pedrosa, whose exhibition could have been anywhere. But it has also exposed Erdemci to a more virulent strain of protest, in part because with the launch of an ambitious, ten-month public program in January, called “Public Alchemy,” she considers her biennial already well underway.

There are still four months to go before the official opening, but Erdemci has titled her show (*Mom, Am I Barbarian?* after a book by the radical Turkish poet [Lale Müldür](#)) and outlined her curatorial themes (the public sphere as a political forum; contemporary art as the thing that both defines and dismantles what we know, experience, and understand to be public). A “prologue” exhibition just opened at TANAS in Berlin, featuring works by [Jimmie Durham](#), [LaToya Ruby Frazier](#), [Amal Kenawy](#), [Cinthia Marcelle](#), [Şener Özmen](#), and [Mierle Laderman Ukeles](#), among others. A writing workshop organized alongside the biennial is now hitting its halfway mark, as is “Public Alchemy,” which has so far addressed issues of urban planning, civil rights, censorship, repression, and free speech, all leavened with poetry readings, music,

and a walking tour.



Left: Curator and critic [Maria Lind](#), director of Tensta Konsthall. Right: IKSVM's production team removing a protester from the performance.

The Conceptual Art Laboratory has inserted itself into every event for “Public Alchemy” to date. In March, protestors countered Erdemci’s *Mom, Am I Barbarian?* with C.P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” which they recited until a day’s worth of talks and lectures had to be shut down and rescheduled. Two weeks ago, the group interrupted “Public Alchemy” again, during the third installment in the series, titled “Public Capital,” which delved into the relationship between art and money through a performance on May 10 and a symposium on May 11. A group of young, lanky activists turned up for the performance by the Brussels-based duo Vermeir & Heiremans, which was held in a corporate-style conference room at the Marmara Taksim Hotel. As that piece unfolded, the activists staged their own bit of agitprop-theater.

At ten-minute intervals, someone would stand up from the crowd, show off a T-shirt and a faux-branded banner printed with the names of gentrifying neighborhoods in Istanbul, and then drape himself (or herself) on the floor in the middle of the room, only to be quickly picked up and hastily dispatched by three members of IKSVM’s loyal production team, who removed five protestors before the rest of the audience, many more activists among them, left in droves. For the duration of these two bizarrely competing performances—Vermeir & Heiremans were doing the first run-through of a commissioned work called *Art House Index*, a putative Skype conversation with a fictional financial analyst who breaks down the abject horrors of contemporary art as an asset class—Conceptual Art Laboratory’s Niyazi Selçuk kept a video camera trained on Erdemci’s face, which led to a long, drawn-out confrontation, ending well past midnight with both parties at a police station filing complaints and counter-complaints against each other.

“I’m working on the public domain so of course I am touching the most contested space and opening it up to conflict,” Erdemci says about Taksim Square, in whose proximity the performance was strategically placed. The square sees a million in pedestrian traffic a day. It is Istanbul’s preeminent public space. And it is currently in the throes of a controversial redevelopment plan, which is considered symptomatic of larger issues, including rampant real-estate speculation, demographic shifts, the dispersal of poor communities from the city center to peripheral suburbs, and the tint and scent of corruption that lingers around Turkey’s

robust, non-recessionary economy. “Istanbul is undergoing a wild transformation,” Erdemci explains. “What we are doing with the biennial is concurrently commenting on what’s happening, not in the past or the future but in the present. For me it was inevitable that we would look into the city. Art has many ways to communicate. Dialogue and debate are an important part of it. We need to negotiate with local government, the intelligentsia, grass-roots activists, and the extreme hardcore activists. There are publics to activate. If people are attacking us, then what we are trying to do is already there.”



Left: Writer and scholar [Suhail Malik](#). Right: Artists Vermeir & Heiremans introducing their performance in a conference room of the Marmara Taksim Hotel.

Of course, one could argue that if the protesters really want to see changes in how Istanbul is developing, then they might want to take their demonstrations elsewhere, to the offices where public policies are actually made, or to the headquarters of Koç, if that is indeed their target. One could also argue that with this latest round, the protests have taken an unfortunate turn toward the personal and potentially chauvinist, attacking Erdemci directly because she is the curator but also, it seems, because she is a woman. A number of Istanbul’s contemporary artists, meanwhile, have the good humor to be critical of the protests from a formalist point of view. “They’re just not creative enough,” one artist told me later. Throughout the program, several artists ducked in and out of the proceedings, amused but somewhat indifferent to the disruptions, including [Ali Kazma](#), who is representing Turkey at this year’s Venice Biennale; [Emre Hüner](#), who was enjoying the tail end of a double-barreled exhibition at Rodeo and the nonprofit Nesrin Esirtgen Collection; [Ahmet Öğüt](#), who was on his way to Beirut to give a talk at Villa Fleming; and [Burak Arıkan](#), who hosted the unofficial after-party in the studio he will soon vacate when he moves to New York this summer.

On Saturday morning, Erdemci was clearly tired and a little rattled. But with [Andrea Phillips](#), who is co-organizing “Public Alchemy” and served as a lively, engaging moderator during the symposium to follow, she had already dashed off a written response, and prepared a small speech. She welcomed the protesters’ repeated use of the biennial as a public platform but cautioned them against veering off into obstruction, harassment, and the vandalism of other artists’ work, including the Vermeir & Heiremans performance. No protestors showed up for that day full of talks and discussions in the Salon IKSIV, which was a shame, given the many probing questions that came up, courtesy of some fine contributions by the academics [Alberto López Cuenca](#) and [Suhail Malik](#), the dealer [Haldun Dostoğlu](#), and the curators [Vasif Kortun](#), [Maria Lind](#), [Barnabás Bencsik](#), and [Kuba Szreder](#). There was talk of moral versus

commercial economies, vernacular culture and self-styled communities as bulwarks against the market, the manipulation and cartelization of that market, [Gregory Shollette](#)'s 2010 book *Dark Matter* and the status of labor in and around contemporary art, the need for institutions to be agile more so than sustainable, and the plain fact that art schools are graduating way too many students for the system to bear. Did the participants make radical proposals for reconfiguring that system? Absolutely. With just two biennials left on Koç's clock, perhaps the sponsorship deal could become the occasion for a critical response more productive and precise.

— [Kaelen Wilson-Goldie](#)



Left: Artist [Emre Hüner](#). Right: Curator Barnabas Bencsik, 13th Istanbul Biennial curator [Fulya Erdemci](#), Istanbul Biennial director Bige Örer, and scholar Alberto Lopez Cuenca of the Universidad de las Americas in Pueblo, Mexico.