Essay

Art's Networks

A New Communal Model

Derya Yücel

Every artistic approach throughout history has formed its own language and reshaped the object of art. As for contemporary art, it was technology that determined its orientation: the computer, intermediary spaces, mass communication tools and the Internet have become the new media for many artists working today. It is clear that the digital perspective presents new and powerful sources

Genco Gülan, Tele-rugby, 2003, 00:10:00:00, Presented at Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of the artist.

of creative expression in the field of contemporary art, the Internet being an especially suitable environment for the visualisation and sharing of critical discourses. Within this framework, this essay will consider the ways in which Turkish artists are utilising new media in the local art scene.

I will divide my article into three main sections, exploring the use of technology as a medium in Turkish art, looking at how the development of new media art practices and their transformation – in terms of communication imposed by social media – are processes that are progressing in different channels. I will discuss three examples of art produced from within the field of new media: the first reflecting on the creative changes new media has engendered in the local art environment. My second example will illustrate the contribution of New Media art and Net art in developing new positions against established art institutions and positions of power in the art world. And with my final example, I will focus on how social media can be used as tools for the organization of a wider critical stance within a social and political framework.

Genco Gülan, Web Biennial, 2012, Gallery One. This juried selection is curated by four curators from Istanbul, Athens and Berlin. Courtesy of the artist.

Genco Gülan's 'Alternative Biennial'

Today, technology has created its own linguistic structures, and artists have transformed these linguistic structures into new forms and approaches that they employ in their creative production. New technologies, globalised mass communication tools and the Internet have not only influenced the processes of art, but since the 1990s, art has declared its independence from the object and become information. Digital practices have released art from its status as an object restricted by its commodity value and expanded its scope into a process that indicates a much broader social context. Today, post-Internet art practices have provided art with an even wider platform that extends from interaction to democracy, as well as from form to behaviour.

Though digital art practices have become increasingly influential in artistic production since the 1990s, New Media art in Turkey did not develop parallel to western contemporary art. However, artists producing in this field did begin to emerge from the 1970s onwards,

following the first generation of contemporary artists like Teoman Madra and Nil Yalter, for instance. Teoman Madra (1931, İstanbul) is one of the first artists who experimented with video and computers to create multimedia environments and installations, always using original musical compositions by Turkish and international musicians. His abstract photography works, accompanied by contemporary music, often reflect concepts and concerns relating to the Fluxus movement. Cairo-born, Istanbul-based Nil Yalter participated in the revolutionary political movements of the late 1960s in Paris, later immersing herself in debates around gender and migrant workers from Turkey. She also experimented in different media including drawing, photography, video, and performance art. Her work *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) is a classic example of early Feminist art and video art in Turkey. In their work, the artists focused on the interaction between contemporary art and other fields, after which the use of digital tools in the field of contemporary art production in Turkey became more widespread.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, many more artists and artist groups have worked on revealing the intersections of art

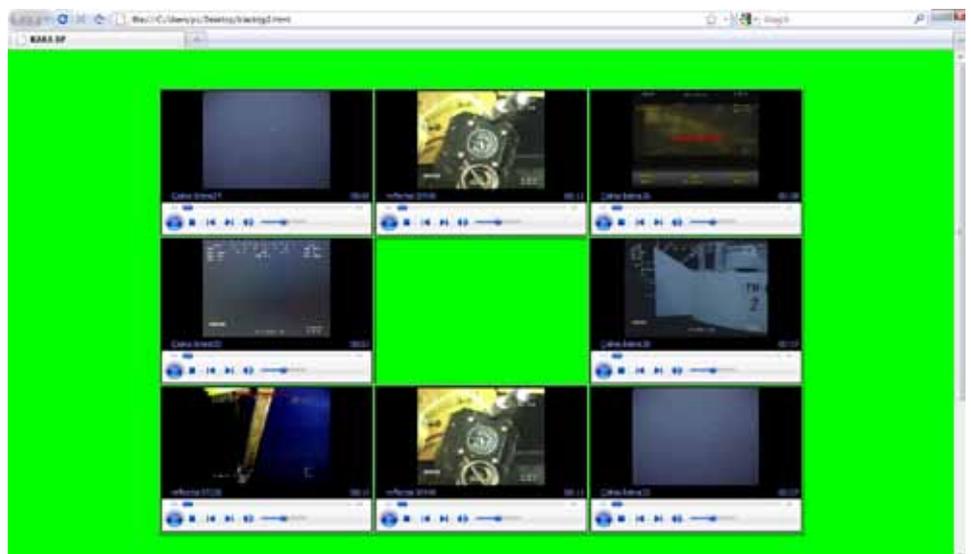Genco Gülan, Twin Marcus, 2010, Siyamese twin boron sculpture and TV. Courtesy of the artist.

and technology in terms of their social impact. Xurban.net, which combines philosophical and political ideas with digital media, is one of the first examples that comes to mind. Functioning as an international collective since 2000, xurban_collective has members located in Izmir, Istanbul, Linz and New York City. Core members of the group are Güven İncirlioğlu and Hakan Topal, whose transatlantic collaborations take the form of media projects and installations. Xurban_collective's mission is to instigate the questioning, examination, and discussion of contemporary politics, theory, and ideology, and their unique intercontinental perspective is well served to provoke a consideration of these issues. Documentary photography, video, and text are often combined in an effort to render visible the multiplicity of informational layers inherent in the subjects or situations explored.

Meanwhile, NOMAD, founded in 2002, aims to create new templates in the field of digital art. Elsewhere, BIS, the Body Process Arts Association founded in 2007, organised the Amber Platform for art and technology, an international network for collaboration that includes an annual festival, bringing together artists, researchers and technicians with a focus on new media and technology.

It is of course necessary to underline that this pool of knowledge began to form in the 1990s. Genco Gülan (1969), an interdisciplinary artist who lives in Istanbul, began to produce his first works in an online environment during this period and had to develop many techniques and definitions himself. His project Web Biennial (http://www.webbiennial.org/) began in 2003 and was realised in 2005, 2007 and 2010, with an Internet exhibition showing hundreds of artworks by around 400 artists.

The Internet has been, from the very beginning, a platform in which artists have enjoyed the autonomy to communicate with the viewer, exhibit their works and enter into debate. With its highly dynamic structure that provides a globally accessible viewer base, constant change, reproducibility and easy effacement, the Internet is widely regarded by artists as a field where spatial and institutional restrictions can be overcome.

Genco Gülan, Black BP, 2010, combined web casts from multiple web cams operating under the water at The Gulf of Mexico, Presented at the Web Biennial 2010 and at Ankara Cer Modern'de as an installation together with inflatable sculptures. Courtesy of the artist.

Elif Öner's Pseudo-Modern Museum and the Net art Project that Went to Court

Since the emergence of neo avant garde art movements, art's tendency to solely represent itself and become a field of power independent from life, has disturbed some artists. In this framework, museums – as spaces where art history is reorganised – have also become a target for artists. Instead of reformulating the principles of museums in their own work, they have developed works that explore and question the institutional framework of the museum. For instance, Marcel Duchamp, a pioneer of avant garde art, drew attention to the institutional might of the museum. His *Fountain* (1917) did not only trigger the debate on the definition of art and the artist, but also announced that the museum and the gallery space had assumed such a position of authority that any object they chose to display assumed the status of art. There are parallels between the questioning by the early avant garde movements of the autonomous role of the museum and the activities of artists who produced work around a critique of art institutions in the 1960s. First Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Robert Morris, and later Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher and Hans Haacke produced works that, rather than adapting the principles of the museum to their work, chose to explore, challenge and interrogate the institutional framework of the museum in a much wider sense.

The limits of traditional categories in art have no doubt changed with the use of technology and alternative approaches have become visible in an art system where, for a long time, galleries and museums had the upper hand. Using the means provided by technology, artists have succeeded in venturing beyond the walls of institutions and acquired the freedom to produce, present, exhibit and communicate.

Today's artists frequently focus on the political and economic role of virtual spaces. Artists like Istanbul-based Elif Öner are interested in the tools of technology not only because they provide the latest means to produce art, but because they allow strategic practices to be applied to the social and cultural field. Öner's 2008 project, http://www.museummodern.org, is a web-based sustainable project that focuses on the concept of the museum as a work of art and departs from the idea of Internet reality. Öner opts to criticise the art environment from the context of the museum and proposes the creation of alternative tools by deciphering the complex relationships that exist within the triangle of artist-museum-collection, thus transforming the art viewer into a participant. In Istanbul, private museums and art fairs have rapidly multiplied in recent years. It was this development, along with the collective move by collectors to present their holdings to the public – a tendency not witnessed before the 2000s – and the now organic connection between capital and museums, that laid the foundation for Öner's web museum. This pseudo-museum also focused on the issue of genuineness and representation in online job applications and CVs, and realised three projects. In her first exhibition, titled *The Artist's Studio*, Öner

explored the concept of time and the branding process museums apply to artists, allowing her own studio to be visible on a 24-hour webcam that could be viewed online. In her second project *Through the Looking Glass*, inspired by Lewis Carroll's eponymous book, she presented her web museum in a mirror image. For her third project, she created a digital collection whose exhibits (and exhibitions) were composed of both real and virtual works, thus continuing to criticise the authority of the museum as the founder and curator of her own virtual museum.

AYÇA CEYLAN, 2012, video performance, 7.43mn. Courtesy of the artist.

But from this criticism of museums within the existing art system, cracks began to appear. Öner's work *Hysteria* was produced for a group exhibition titled *Museum in Museum* curated by Fırat Arapoğluin in April 2012 at the Elgiz Contemporary Art Museum. Questioning the concept of the museum, the work became the subject of a lawsuit for an apparent breach of commercial reputation. For *Hysteria*, Öner purchased the '.com' domain name version of the Elgiz Museum's web address – which contains the domain name '.org' – and broadcast from her '.com' address an advertisement for penis enlargement. Öner had already decided, at earlier stages in the process, to produce a work similar to her work at 'www.museummodern.org', but the content was not clear. Seeing the work for the first time at the opening, administrators stated that the 'curator exhibited a different project titled *Hysteria* by the artist without prior knowledge of the Museum', a phrase that was posted alongside the work at the time. At the end of the exhibition, Öner was sued by the Elgiz Museum for breaching its brand rights and for causing commercial damage to the brand; a request was also filed for access to the address 'elgizmuseum.com' and to take it out of circulation. A work criticising the disregard in Turkey for artist's rights, the absence of state support for art and the power institutions have gained in the contemporary art world, where private capital and sponsorship dominate, *Hysteria* not only opened up for debate concepts such as the museum, censorship and private capital – it also created a tragicomic situation that exposed the mechanisms of this existing structure.

The Organisation of Artists Against the Proposed Abortion Ban

Today, the Internet and social media networks form not only a field where artistic production takes place and is viewed, but also an autonomous zone where democratic demands are voiced, and organisation and activism are carried out. In this sense, the collective/artistic activity that took place in Turkey between the 7th and 8th of July 2012 became an interesting instance of artists questioning the authority of the state. This activity was one of many actions realised against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speech in May 2012 that proposed a ban on abortion and the draft law that was drawn up in its aftermath. The action began on a Facebook page titled '7-8 July Art Action: The Abortion Ban is Legal Rape', created by Saadet Sorgunlu and Kardelen Fincancı, two artists from Istanbul. It soon became an event that included many cities in Turkey. Artists came together over two days at artist studios to defend their human rights

GÖKHAN ASLAN, Black Abortion, mixed media, 140x210cm. Courtesy of the artist.

and freedoms against the instrumentalisation of the female body by political power, and carried out various artistic productions, from painting to performance. The outstanding aspect of this action was that it was realised completely on the initiative of two independent artists, and that it presented an example of participation, voluntarism and solidarity via the art environment using social media. Over a short period of two months, this participation included around 250 artists from various cities in Turkey including Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakır, İzmir, Antalya and Bartın, and tens of studios and alternative art spaces that provided their spaces and technical equipment. It is an example of social media presenting an unprecedented platform for activism.

Digital media has acquired a solid position in our daily lives. Technological advances, global mass media and the Internet have influenced the ways we perceive art, bringing art within every person's reach. As a result, the role of art and its existence has entered an important period of transition and evolution. The art experience can be had not only in museums and other cultural institutions, but at home, at work or anywhere with Internet access and at all times.

Art, from this perspective, has for some time been transformed from works that are fully developed aesthetic representations, to acts that propogate knowledge and create an arena for communication. Artists now focus not only on the final outcome, but on the experience itself: the experimental process in the creation of a work of art. By releasing art from being produced for a specific social group as a confined object with a meta value, circumstances have established a movement that points to the production of art from within a wider social context.

Today, social media and its networks are taking this process further, functioning as a medium to provide a field for artistic activism as a behavioral practice. However, art history teaches us that every alternative practice is eventually institutionalised and becomes part of the mainstream. New artistic approaches emerge as alternative, critical or oppositional; yet as part of the institutionalisation process of the opposition, all kinds of artistic practices create their own spaces, own economy and own dealers, forming links with the system. In view of this possibility of digital art evolving in the same direction, there is a need for vigilance. Nevertheless, the Internet and digital art hint at potential new strategies to intervene in the world, life and the real.

Derya Yücel

Derya Yücel was born in 1979 in Istanbul, member of AICA (International Art Critics Organization). She studied Art Management and Museum Studies. She works in Istanbul Culture University and Istanbul Bilgi University, Art and Design Faculty as a lecturer. She writes art articles for magazines/newspapers in Turkey and curated numerous national and international exhibitions since 2004. Latest, she was invited to "Curated By_Vienna: East by South West" in May 2011. Her book "New Media Art and the New Museology" was published by Istanbul Culture University in February 2012.