

## ISTANBUL.

A megalopolis. A city of dreams. A desired city to visit. A must to see.  
A city of pleasures. A city that is both East and West. A city of mixture and craze.  
A city of hills. A city that never sleeps. A city that culture flows in its pipes.  
A city that promises.

This prologue to Istanbul is a compilation of its representative sentences that formulate rather a fantasy. As all phantasms have a link to reality these sentences do fulfil their expectations when a certain face of Istanbul is under experience. At the same time, the phantasmal relationship to a city does produce its mismatching mirror images. In other words, the phantasm leads to the experience of the “image-reflected” rather than the “source”. Like *love*, where the lover’s perception is blinded to receive the loved one as (s)he is, but as how (s)he imagines him/her to be...

Places we live are places of relationships; here love and hate precede other emotions. Camus writes that the love we live with cities are the secret ones; Calvino prefers to create his own “idea city” through collecting fragments of cities he has visited and imagined; situationists construct cities of detournement; modernists...? How does modernisation shape a city? In the specificity of this text: How have the processes of modernisation formed the Istanbul of today?

From the beginning of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, its political arena has been in flux of action whilst the continuum is under continuous rupture through change of governments, accumulation of elections and systematically appearing coup d’etats. Pre-modernisation era has been marked with an “end” after the Second World War, where the single-party system has been replaced with multiple-party system leading to stratification of military/justice/bureaucratic elite trichotomy. In other words: Pre-multiple-party period has been defined by the government and political elite’s (such as the intelligentsia, military and bureaucrats) juridical and cultural modernisation models; whereas the period itself has started off with closures of conservative parties to public through economic and infrastructural reformations. Following, the support on agriculture has been replaced by the introduction of industrialisation and rapid growth of industrial entrepreneurship. The first government of multiple-party system functioned as the introducer of liberal economy that influences the transformation of the villager to bourgeois of the lands, eventually to bourgeois of the industries. In that framework, rather than supporting the small villages and its agricultural production and existing infrastructure, the rapidly introduced growth in factories and industrial production leads to imbalance of gross national product, that then to imbalance of socio-economic formation of middle class. Hence emigration to large towns and cities for economic reasons become unavoidable. In this narrative of the shift in infrastructure the social, political, economic, sensuous spaces are remapped. Hence the villages start to shrink whilst cities tend to explode. Istanbul receives the major rate of emigration during 60’s and especially in 70’s. In a short period of ten years, the city expands its size and its population more than ten times. The newcomers inhabit land illegally and unlawfully. Istanbul, which has once accumulated its residents in the historical peninsula and Taksim area, starts to expand towards any possible direction. Today, Istanbul is a city without borders where the neighbouring city starts by the neighbouring street. Newcomers’ unruly behaviour irritates the local, threatening his/her intrinsic condition of living Istanbul. As the new inhabitations on the outskirts legalise during pre-election periods, the position of the illegal inhibitors gain significance. The suburban no longer only belongs to the suburbs but becomes part of the big melting pot, shaping and forming that pot. In other words, the outsider no longer resides as the outsider but takes part, involves in the formulation of the inside. This transformation takes place rather heterogeneously, depending on the support groups of the party that is urging to come on power in the due elections; hence the districts that will produce the most vote for the

potentially winning party receives the privileges of legalisation and infrastructure (water, electricity, transport...). Thus the city is in a continuous amorphous growth without any direction or consideration of its potential. In other words, the capacity and capability of the city are not taken into account, but the directory of addressee of power and its agents. In this line of thought and with the eyes of an observer, today's Istanbul becomes a monstrous city, which consumes its residents thus receives a glorification, ruled by irregular distribution of power and its temporary holders.

A newspaper clipping influences **Esra Ersen**<sup>1</sup> the way in which the underlying infrastructure and the accumulation of history are brought together in a small line: "They have never seen the sea". This line was used in order to describe the inhabitants of a district in Istanbul who have been living in Istanbul for the last 30-40 years and who have not ever left their district thus who have never been to Bosphorus: the most praised picturesque element of the city of Tales. These residents of Istanbul and who do not live the city, but in their neighbourhood entangles various questions on the schemes of power and its distribution in forming and managing a city: A city of Eighteen Million inhabitants.

**Ersen** questions the very condition of the contemporary metropolis<sup>2</sup>, Istanbul where its residents' experience of life, of belonging spans a variant in relation to their backgrounds. In this line of thought, **Ersen** starts visiting a neighbourhood alike in the clipping. Through her encounters with women residents, **Ersen** initiates the idea of taking them on a trip to Bosphorus: a physical yet a symbolic act of allowing access to Istanbul by its infamous experience.

*Passengers, 2009* is a two-channel video installation, composed of a bus trip and documentation of the neighbourhood. The trip to Bosphorus takes place on a grey rainy day where the residents are picked up in front of their houses one by one. The group composed of mostly women and children are accompanied with some male relatives. The trip is not spectacular, in its all means. The route the bus takes is rather unconventional: passing through districts alike, and places under construction as well as the financial district of skyscrapers and posh neighbourhoods. The viewer (the passengers, the audience) is not necessarily mesmerised by what they see. Possibly for the first time in their lives they pass through other lives (alike or different) like a flaneur: without relating to, yet not having the possibility of encounter. The bus takes its passengers through narrow streets, under giant bridges, on steep hills, passing by significant and insignificant settlements, places... Throughout the trip **Ersen** does not only focus on the reaction of the passengers to the outside they are irregularly surrounded by, but also collects the faces of Istanbul. Hence, the video does not operate on a single line of projection where only the interior is documented, but also posits on the outside collecting the roundabouts, the streets, the people on the streets, the rainy weather and the urban landscape. The trip takes place in the pre-election period in Istanbul where flags and

---

<sup>1</sup> Esra Ersen works with various media, from video to installation and to photography. Her works mediate the domain of the social through intimate encounters. Ersen's practice lies in the heart of the encounter and dialogue that she triggers. Ersen shares time, space and experience with the subjects of her pieces where the social phenomena she chooses to focus flourishes. In other words, notions such as integration, regeneration, gentrification, rehabilitation, social democracy and sustaining power are put into question through relating to the communities who are under the influence. After investing a period of research on the issues and the conditions Ersen wants to reflect, she approaches to individuals and brings in individualities, which belong to that of community she chooses to work with. The idea of community, its foundations and conditions sparkle through the verbal and the visual, leading the emergence of social, political, economic, psychological, sensual and physical aspects of such formation.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the text I have used wordings such as megalopolis, metropolis, and city in order to refer to Istanbul. This varying vocabulary is not an outcome of confusion about what these definitions stand for but what Istanbul does.

banners of parties occupy the public space. The amount of flags and banners and their content varies in relation to the districts of influenceable potential voters. The language of the elections and the imagery that is constructed are significant artefacts to relate to the socio-historical streamline. The images and the language used, promise trust for a change. The promise produces faces in accordance with the districts and its residents' needs or conditioned desires. The trip to Bosphorus hence is composed of various trips taken to other realities and conditions of living in Istanbul as well as being received by Istanbul. The video ends with halt by the sea. Neither the location nor the light is at its optimum. The passengers do not relate to the view as one expects – this specific group rather focuses on what the sea has in store. They observe the jellyfishes and the algae in the sea rather than what the sea stands for.

The neighbourhood is composed of, mostly, still shots of the outside locations of the district the passengers reside. The camera acts like a scientific observer, gazing at the children playing on the street or at the street seller's walkthrough, or at large scale wall paintings on facades of buildings, taking the viewer (the audience) to a trip creating a commonality with passengers. The wall paintings that occupy the neighbourhood are composed of images that represent nature, let this be a forest where a river is flowing through, or a sea reminding Istanbul with the boat, or a field where farmers are at work. The compilation of these images do not have a coherency but they function for the sake of 'as if'. The conveyance of these images is the conditions of *as if* where one feels as if being in the forest or as if working with relatives in the field or as if taking a boat trip on the sea. These conditions of *as if*, do not only refer to possible past but also to un-lived and inexperienced present. In other words, while these paintings fulfil the condition of belonging through imagery they also create an unrooted melancholia to the past and to the un-lived present. Additionally, some wall paintings depicting a sunset on the African continent do not have a correspondence in the actual and imagery space of experiences of the residents. When we look outside the frame, broadly the frame of these images, the urban landscape that confronts us is spectacularly different: brutal, grey and irregular. In this relation, these paintings are not mere decorations of built-in spaces but are positioned as (also function as) the escapes from the daily to the imaginary.

What happens with *Passengers*? The video installation is not a mere documentation of a trip to Bosphorus and a district of Istanbul. The piece stems from a social condition positing to a larger scale of interrelated situation: the post-condition of 70's emigrants – how they position themselves, how they live, and more importantly how they are asked to live, underlining the tension of the negotiation of place, but also the social space as well as mapping out the political strategies played upon. Hence in the piece there is only the spectator diffused to the current social condition on a trip...

Fatos Ustek  
Independent art critic & curator  
Editor Nowiswere, Contemporary Art Magazine  
[www.nowiswere.com](http://www.nowiswere.com)