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An Interview with Burak Delier

Critical Treachery

The 10th Istanbul Biennial brings together many works which include direct political references. It is possible to find discussions on a wide range of issues, from the destructive effect of neo-liberalism on the lower echelons of society to violence carried out by nationalist ideologies, to textural changes in urban architecture to the invasion of Iraq. In addition to this, following the statement by Koç Holding that they will support the Istanbul Biennial with a 10-year sponsorship agreement, the sincerity of the political criticism brought forth at the Biennial has been questioned. We have asked Burak Delier, who was at the centre of debates with his previous work and is participating in this Biennial with his project Parkalynch, about the issue.

Erden Kosova: Burak, a while ago you founded a company called TersYön/ReverseDirection. And I think the first product of the company has become Parkalynch, the work you exhibited within the scope of the 10th Istanbul Biennial. As far as I understand, the design and production of this parka, which provides protection against social lynch attempts and police beatings, was rather laborious. I assume the reason the project is not installed at Antrepo, where the political works have been brought together, but at İMÇ, has to do with this economic aspect – the idea of the company, the posting of posters of Parkalynch in streets before the exhibition like advertisements and the symbolic sales of the parkas during the exhibition accompany this. In other words, you are attempting an ironic commodity production and associate this with a phenomenon which opens wounds in society. How exactly do the economic references operate here?

Burak Delier: This work has both political and economic aspects. What I want to emphasize with the project is the fact that the politics we are subjected to is always related to economics and consumption. When we carry out a criticism in the cultural field we behave as if it only has to do with cultural politics and it does not have an economic dimension, whereas politics should not be isolated from economics. This has to do with the claim that the arguments of Marxist theory and the left in general have lost their validity and parallel to this, the left has been reduced to liberalization, and a hollow “freedom of expression.”

Yes, I embark upon an ironic commodity production. The question whether these parkas are works of art or commodities must be asked. I try to open a debate on the claim that the work of art is the most luxurious commodity and that a commodified object loses all its political references and all its ability of resistance. Today, the thing we call the work of art is, in the full sense of the word, the most luxurious object of consumption, it is the commodity of commodities, it is the most special and –if we use the language of companies

and ad agencies- it is aimed at the A+ consumer group and even higher. Moreover, normal commodity production, which has no claim to be art, is also aimed at social classes which have a certain economic clout, which can consume the produced article. No one produces anything for people who have no power of consumption. This is the point where the self-styled democracy of the free market “cracks.” What I am trying to do with TersYön/ReverseDirection is to reverse this flow. To respond to the work of art which is produced in limited numbers for special people, not with another work of art, but with another commodity produced for the unlimited number of oppressed and despised of society. An object which has a certain function, a price, an advertisement, which is sold. However, the “target audience” of this object is people who are lowest on the normal consumer scale, and even those who do not feature on it. In this sense, I think these parkas are “commodities” which can resist and not lose their politics despite the fact that they are commodities. The aim I observed here was not to radically destroy the system –that would be an easy and best-selling idea- but to problematize it from within and to bend and distort it. If people come and purchase these parkas for a symbolic price then the work will have worked and TersYön/ReverseDirection will collect the capital necessary for its next “product.”

E. K.: In an interview you held with Radikal newspaper just before the Biennial you criticize the contemporary art scene for being closer to liberalism rather than left thought. However, it is necessary to remember that many artists who thought along the same lines as you did emerged in the last ten years parallel to the politicization of art in Europe and they set about opening up new ground for themselves with the collectives they founded and with alternative art spaces; and in some cases they participated in post-Seattle social mobility. So what does it mean, for these artists who take on economic politics from a critical point of view, to operate in a field predominantly coded by liberalism? For example, this view has been voiced in this newspaper as well, is it possible to embark upon a criticism of neo-liberalism at a large-scale exhibition supported by large companies? Or, in a more particular context, how does your work Parkalynch operate in the Biennial context, how does it construct its criticality?

B. D.: This is a perplexing issue. I believe the thing called art has a nucleus which escapes the codifications of the meta-language of the market or the sponsor companies. I do not want to rake refuge in this but I will not go by without saying it, the thing called art has always been supported by the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy –the Medicis etc.- and the artists have developed various methods of resistance in awareness of this fact. The trademark of art is that something which cannot be contained by meta-determinations. However, let us not understand this with the crudeness of “never mind that, let us get on with our work.” Art has the ability to escape your control, to trigger other things, ideas, conditions, actions. The real issue is to activate this ability. Whether in an alternative space, or in the most powerful sponsor-supported exhibition in the world, if you manage to succeed in doing this, it means you have gained a small-scale victory. I said it in that interview as well, the artist is a “traitor” in this sense, and must be one, too. Even if the artist feeds off the bourgeois class, s/he must go towards the

working class, and even lower, towards the paperless, the deterritorialized, those who have been forced out of history. Therefore, it is possible –and necessary- to attempt a criticism of neo-liberalism at an exhibition sponsored by large companies. Moreover, no one, including the curator, can know what the outcome of an exhibition on such a large scale will be, which means that those large companies do not know what they are sponsoring. For them, it is the prestige which counts, the surface; they are not too bothered about the content, but for us the content is of central importance. For example, to aim towards content by neglecting even the surface and aesthetics could be a strategy today; tomorrow, and when tomorrow content is seized by the meta-language, to investigate aesthetics as a possibility of resistance... In this sense, I think Parkalynch does work, even in the context of the Biennial, and that it does manage to escape that restricting meta-language. Anyway, the work itself targets a rather concrete and rough target; the work will be complete when these parkas produced by a company (!), albeit small, are used by some in demonstrations, rallies, and actions against large companies, states and war. The work must also be seen independent from the Biennial format. Finally, I would like to ask if it is not too easy to skip over an entire exhibition and 100-odd works of art, thousands of ramifying thoughts and attitudes, because this large exhibition is supported by companies. There seems to be an indolence of dissident thought here to me, because the criticism about the sponsorship of large companies is sitting there, and it is grasped immediately with a reflex move. I think more substantial things can be taken hold of. What is more, don't we need the exact opposite, multiplicity, propagation, to undercut the system from a thousand and one sides, to expand, to reclaim lost ground with a thousand and one thoughts and attitudes?

E. K.: A strong reaction, which may even called contempt, has emerged in Turkey in recent years against 'contemporary', 'modern', 'conceptual' artistic expressions. This reaction comes from different sources including those who take refuge in the 'golden age' of centuries ago, those trapped in Adornian aestheticism, those flirting with neo-nationalism and those who are stuck with the indispensability of manual labour and ability. This approach acts as if the new ways of seeing and knowing which have emerged in the past forty years do not exist, and ignores the curve of politicization and the independent projects in contemporary art. But still the gentrification of contemporary art, the attempt to transform contemporary art into a spectacle, experienced on a global level, and also in Turkey particularly in recent times must be stated. The interest once shown by centres of capital or bourgeois families to Orientalist painters whose subject was the Ottomans, and then in the eighties to neo-expressionists, has now shifted to contemporary art. Art institutions opened by these families and finance institutions have a certain influence as well. Strongly political works are rehabilitated in sterile exhibition spaces. In addition to this, works attached to docile interpretations of aestheticism and psychologism are highlighted. How possible is a constructive "treason" in an environment like this? The idea of 'disruption from the inside' reemerged on the agenda in the recent past with the arguments of the Situationist International. But we appear to have come to the limits of this as well. If the said 'inside' is constantly shifting to the right, or is sinking in to the logic of capital, don't the ones who try to disrupt it from the inside get dragged towards places they do not want to be?

Your work in one of the parallel exhibitions of the previous Biennial caused discomfort and you withdrew the work just before the opening. Now you are taking part in the Biennial. Do you think everything is disruptable? Isn't a rupture necessary at a certain point?

B. D.: I do not think everything must be disruptable. One has to take the risk of being hurled away to part the curtains. The situation at the previous Biennial says it all, really. The series of events which developed because of that work was important because it showed how things happen; how can we put it, it revealed the iron hand behind the soft face. It is still important in this respect. Let us point out that playing "inside" is playing by accepting the rules of the game and seeking resistance, an opening or a disentanglement within those rules. Even when we assume we are "outside," we have to play the game to solve it. This is the strategy TersYön/ReverseDirection follows anyway, the way it handles all these concepts, company, product, advertising campaign, sales, trade, etc., all this functioning, it tries to "disrupt" the entire economic and political regime. Why should it not try to disrupt a large, sponsor-supported exhibition? I do not think art is a field of compensation. So we cannot say the condition and order of the world to one side, and art to the other. Art is not a "higher" area, where the negative aspects of this world will be compensated for or will be reflected with dry expressions, separate from the "lowly" world. Art is a power which can intervene in and transform this world. This is why it must be "inside" and active. It should not withdraw to its own exclusive neighbourhood. However, just like playing the game, it is possible to leave the game, not to play, to deny the game as well. A state where no possibility of a break away remains, or can be observed, points to absolute domination and surrender. But let us elaborate on this properly, if a field is seized by the bourgeoisie/capital, one must respond with a strategy of counter-seizure. To withdraw from the field is tantamount to accepting loss. In contrast, if art is emptied of its content as an intellectual field or if the work of art is exploited as a luxurious product of consumption and instrumentalized by the meta-language, we must respond to this with strategies of seizing art "from below," rendering it ours once again.

It seems like we need concepts other than the "inside," the "outside" or "disruption" here. A friend of mine told me it was better to develop a "behaviour" rather than thinking in terms of "inside" or "outside." From this I understand the necessity, of responding to different moments, different conditions and events from different positions and of embarking upon a continuous effort of resistance without rendering a position or a strategy absolute, without claiming them to be final, without covering up the possibility of rupture. We know the story of Goliath and David. We are in the midst of an unjust, unethical and unequal struggle, as "small people" facing gargantuan mechanisms of exploitation and violence we must be wiser and more intelligent. As you underlined, to turn back and hope for help from modern aestheticism or an emphasis on manual labour transformed into a popular trend already consumed, dissolved and nailed to the wall by the bourgeois class and capital does not correspond to intelligence and wisdom. However, my claim is that contemporary art carries this possibility. Not because it is called "contemporary art," but because it problematizes art itself, and includes experimentalism and engagement.

