

Texts in the Open — The Gezi Parki Protests in Istanbul

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Abstract

Are graffitis tracing the call for human rights? The Istanbul Gezi Parki protests were an outlet that left writings in public spaces expressing discontent, but also represent the thoughts of the protesters at their most radical core. By analyzing and interpreting images of the protests taken by the researcher the protests should be able to be interpreted in a way that in the same time distances itself from the subject by taking the stance of the observer and immerses itself by trying to build a common understanding. With a hermeneutic approach of interpretation those texts were put into a historical context and interpreted while relying on the researchers experiences and photographs and supported by three interviews with contemporary Turkish and Dutch artists which occupy a key role with their status as intermediate subjects connecting cultures as active agents. The results show clearly the non-localness of the texts. With the close reading network structures are revealed that imply the globality of the conflicts.

Keywords: Istanbul, Turkey, Gezi Park, Protests, Graffiti

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Introduction

Are graffitis tracing the call for human rights? This general question leads to the concrete empirical example of my experience while documenting the Gezi Park protests and following interviews with artist as part of a bigger project to analyze the artworld of Istanbul. Five years passed since the tipping point of political resistance happened. Since then a new process of de-politicization has been put into motion. Often an economically rationalised view of the world is constructed by the people in the artworld. As a Turkish artist puts it:

The government is not supporting art. The galleries receive support from their own families, or through banks. In reality a lot of banks are supporting many a beautiful galleries.¹

But if there is an economic determination even this just happens through the political structure and culture as a structuring system that is much more basic. The place of the protests and of the galleries is Beyoğlu, one of the main districts of Istanbul.

Graffitis in general are spatial markers of territory. If they are in another language they stand in for a lost representation. They suture the lack in the environment. the excluded becomes included by signing the space. The paper examines a French language text that is suturing exactly that lack. We should not forget the known propaganda effect of those sprayed words, used as a propaganda method in 2000 the spray paint for the graffitis by the rebels against Milosevic in Belgrade. Paid by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (Herrera 2014, "Cyberdissident Diplomacy").

Methods

To start the conversation between the texts and letting them speak in an academic context one has to understand in an iterative approach. Taking one text after another and placing it in a context, while keep asking questions. This is the hermeneutic approach of deep interpretation. With the help of photographs by the author and his own experiences the events are described and interpreted.

The interpretation of graffitis is also based on interviews with artists as part of a bigger research, precisely one Dutch and two Turkish artists. They represent active agents in a global network where Gezi Parkı as an *event*² as an archetype still reverbs. One artists describes the event of Gezi Parkı as a always reverbing background tone. The artists are important for contextualization because they create meaning in the milieu of the creative sector. And as a generalization the events around Gezi Parkı can be used to describe the Turkish post-industrial society that is still in the making. At this time contemporary art was competing with the Istanbul Biennial of 2013. An example is the Standing Man, a performance piece of a man that stands for hours on the Taksim Square intensely staring at the Atatürk Cultural Centre. The reach of the publication in social media and the many different interpretations are showing the

¹ “Çünkü devlet desteklemiyor sanatı. Galeriler kendi aileleri tarafından destekleniyorlar ya da bankalar tarafından yani buradaki bir sürü güzel galeri aslında bankalar tarafından destekleniyor.”

² In the sense of Badiou 2007, 174, that after the *event* things appear to be transformed, even of the past.

success in the same way contemporary art tries to disrupt, but is not able to achieve because of the inner conflict between the commercial marketability of the art piece as a product and the institutional prefiltering. The point is underlined by the number of visitors of both the event and the media presence of non-governmental media. As well as the spatial presence with the government securing of Beyoğlus, that produces a fundamentally different view of the space, this event created a physicality of consciously occupying space that the event of contemporary art can't. Even though the concept of the Biennial is to be present all around Istanbul.

In the same way that the gallery is the professional platform per se, the graffiti is the defining institution of the protest event, putting the art to the street in a way that traditional outlets can't. In the event of Gezi Park there is a self-image of being *La poésie dans la rue*, 'the poetry in the streets'. When analyzing the text is transformed from a sign the own culture to a representation of that culture. So with the first interpretative step of understanding a new meaning is attached. For the next steps each element will be links to the interpreted cultural system that sustains them and their relation to protest and art.

Interpretation of Figure 1

Figure 1 shows a construction area and a truck. The signs of an already begun deconstruction that was initiating the protests. On the truck the words *KATİL* 'murderer' are written. Detached in the background stands a person. Many different people can be seen in the background. They are close to some buildings, some with a glass facade. A big part of the picture is taken over by the Turkish flag. Different signs show that the protests are ongoing. The left trucks shows that the reconstruction of the park was in the making. But then were stopped because of the protests. There is a lonely person that stands in the middle of the construction area shows that at least in this way the protests were successful. The construction could be stopped. The word *KATİL* 'murderer' means that some demonstrators were killed. It shows at the same time that it was possible for the protestors to *sign* the tools of the assumed 'murderers'.



Figure 1: Construction area around the Gezi Park

The execution on the truck, the tools of the government as medium, shows the expression in a society where it is getting harder to take certain decisions into their own hands, concerning their environment. The public space is actively changed through them. The subversion of the ruling ideology is one of the fundamental properties of art. But a working definition of what constitutes art is the integration into the art world. But those texts don't integrate into the art world as that would be a limiting factor that could also put in danger the anonymity of the texts. Free expression is part of the human rights³ (Article 19), but is limited by the property rights, which save the property from vandalization.

The vandalization, especially the protests are confronting against the production and consumption cycle, the fear of the shopping mall that could replace the park, that brings the people to the street.

In the same image there is the Turkish flag. That national symbol shows the influence of republican values contrasting conservative as part of an ongoing national conflict. The event of the founding of the republic was initiating this rift. The Tanzimat reforms were the first steps towards a break between progressive and regressive powers. But just the break from Ottoman Empire created the foundational event that constitutes the republic. In that way the Turkish flag represents the introduction, and today's maintenance of the project of modernity in Turkey. Graffiti here is a tool to

³ United Nations, 1948

express this ideology in the physical environment. The build environment comes first as actively designed, and being a sign of the opposition leading to deeper interpretations.

Let's look at Figure 2.



Figure 2: Graffiti on the French Cultural Institute

The text is sprayed on the door of the French Cultural Institute of Istanbul in Taksim *LA POESIE DANS LA RUE 1 JUIN 2013* 'Poetry is in the streets, 1. June 2013'. In the foreground there is a man. A foreign institution is chosen as the medium for the expression. The foreign country being France could be interpreted as the ideal country where the ideals of the protestors could be realised. Here the image, the perceived reality is important. The first thing to recognise is the dotted capital *Î* that shows that a person with a Turkish language background sprayed it. It is not common in French orthography to make a difference between *I* and *Î* because the latter letter does not exist in the French alphabet.

The slogan is most likely emprunted from the British band *The 1975* that published videos with those words. On 20. February 2013 the video *Chocolate* appeared on Youtube with the English words *POETRY IS IN THE STREETS IN FULL LIVING COLOUR*. Then the text reappeared in the final from one month before the graffiti was sprayed on 25. April 2013 in the song *The City* with the text *LA POÉSIE EST DANS LA RUE* in the form of a tattoo. The usage of a French slogan by a British pop

group sprayed by a Turkish protestar shows the tightly knitted net of different cultures and different cultural elements. The text creates a meaning across three cultural boundaries. Each enhanced by a new context to create a deeper meaning. A historical deeper view shows that the slogan was also used in 13. May 1968 in France. But if in the mode of anonymous creation, the original usage can't be known, as the inner motivation of the author remains unknown. It shows how culture is connected in such an open way. Counter culture of 1968 and following pop culture is connected to European culture where Turkey forms a part of, especially regarding the created communicative space.

The spatial characteristics may be extended to a global counter culture, but cannot be seen here. Borders that are assumed by mainstream culture in the example of France as a political not so close country to Turkey, especially after the question of putting the word *genocide* for the death of the Armenian Turks, are unimportant for the counterculture. There is a certain similarity in the way of thinking of this subgroup that an interviewed Dutch artist called *contemporary thinking*. Artists and activists actively use signs from different sources and interpret them in this space creatively anew. Foreign signs are owned through their application in the local meaning. They are making sense through the own lived world and accustom an own liveliness, ready to turn back to the original context in a new richer sense. One of the things that happened to European modernity when being extended to the reappearance of the project of modernity in the Turkish nation. New creative ideas can be created especially in a borderline space that oscillates between the new and the accustomed. They are not just in the flow of material objects, but are also feed back to the individual, that is actively changed and brought into a recursive (affecting itself) conflict.

In the same time the political space cannot be excluded. The spatial dimension works in the background *deep undertone*, as mentioned by the Dutch artist. Thereby local political space functions as an element of the city. That has a certain fascination on its own for observers. See here the statement of the Dutch artists interviewed:

Like in Istanbul definitely some deep undertones of the city that seem to come out. Really rough, rumbling kind of earth shaking stuff. That is, you know, the suppressed frustration. You could never talk about Istanbul without feeling some kind of a suppression, right?

When we analyze the text in the same way as we did with the photographs, first human emotions are assigned to the city. Suppression is a key word in the quotation. What that means is censorship as an important factor to be interpreted. Because in all of the interviews it is never directly addressed. We can only interpret the desire to express this thought by how the consciousness about the situation at hand is structured and how unconscious processes turn into motion in the interview process. It is in the quote a "feeling", "some kind of suppression".

Another Turkish artist talks about it in that way:

For example I mean my paintings are mostly fantastic or whatever. And somebody could say, when they look back at it. Maybe it's a reaction to

political oppression in Turkey. To turn it into a fantasy world in times of political risk.

Here the word *maybe* qualifies it. But mostly it is in this context a hypothetical interpretation of the artists own work. The person does not commit to this statement as a definite motive for creating the artwork.

Graffiti are signs of the radical core of protests

Are graffiti tracing the call for human rights? Graffiti are an expression of the radical core in the Istanbul Gezi Parki protests. Because if one takes the risk to write those texts, one has to have a strong motivation. This conviction has to be expressed in a fast distilled message, because of the material circumstances. Spraying it fast to not be discovered. While risky and not rich in meaning, the medium itself has become a main form to govern a broadcast communication in public space. It has the power to undermine the economical or governmental sanctioned messages by countering it in the same space. A means that can never be achieved by digital media, that have also the power to undermine the master narrative. Because of the break in the medium, and the spatial distance. It is therefore a way to discover in the most direct way thought and meaning of the protest. When graffiti are seen as a cultural element, they belong to the category of consciously created ones as a communicative action to leave a message. They challenge contemporary art with not assuming this status and avoiding the art market, or the integration into the art market.

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