

BOOM, BOOM, BOOOOOM!

Notes on a Giant Implosion

Hakan Topal



Screengrab of Turkish transvestite Bulent Ersoy with her Islamic dress.

Courtesy Hakan Topal.

There's a great deal of international press coverage about emerging art hubs. Art, fashion and real estate news sections highlight cities such as Istanbul, Mumbai, Shanghai, and Beirut, featuring high profile collectors, museum directors and artists in their typical environs, celebrating these new cosmopolitan spaces. Regional survey exhibitions in first-world cities sustain narratives about flourishing art production. Museums organize trustee trips to visit these cities, and to meet with important representatives of the art community. The new global art scene gives rise to new contemporary art fairs and some artists, galleries and dealers benefit from this extravaganza.

The art market is similar to the real estate market. In fact, there is a cosy relationship between these two industries since they both provide a curiously intermingled backdrop for bourgeois social capital – 'products' sold in both markets are often limited editions or unique as long as the demand is sustained; prices are almost guaranteed to increase. In order to modify and maintain this demand, a collector's desires need to be manufactured. A salesperson's job involves injecting optimistic excitement into the marketplace, which is where the extravaganza takes place. A stream of optimistic speculations influences markets. In return, speculation turns into a convincing narrative, a truth set. This speculative reality is the new ground where money can be made; updated statistics support the tale of booming emerging markets.^[1]

But wait. Not so fast. This story is about the endless boom, its spectacle and parallel stories, not to mention its decay, corruption from within, and collapse. It's about social actors who participate and those who resist. The year 2008 marked the bankruptcy of a speculative free market economy. Now that the fog is clearing, the unbearable hypocrisy of the bourgeois is plainly visible. Perhaps it is the aftermath of catastrophes that always makes things more noticeable. Perhaps the obscenity of the neoliberal economy has always been apparent, but we chose not to see it.

My goal is in no way to criticize the art market – it has been done many times before, and in recent years many books and articles have been published exploring contemporary art with respect to global financial markets.^[2] Of course, behind the façade of the art world's 'most powerful', artists and curators are trying to find new ways to survive, providing a perfectly exploitable work force in which cultural workers hopelessly apply to already scarce jobs. Artists, dealers and galleries need to survive.

Therefore, it is not the market but the dominance of the new market ideology that is the main problem. In other words, the financialization of every aspect of cultural production suffocates the possibility of salient voices. Within these circumstances, the boom repeats itself, first as a spectacle, then as farce.

Yet, for some reason, the narrative of this boom is still propagated, echoing through pseudo-intellectual coverage on art blogs, bouncing over Facebook walls, and retweeted by market-savvy artists and curators. It does not take long to realize that the boom is actually a loop.

The Story of Fan and Shit

In April 2013, Murat Ülker (the CEO of Ülker Holdings, owner of Godiva Chocolates), a businessman who has intimate connections with the AKP Government, bought empty picture frames – a conceptual art piece by Bedri Baykam – for around \$125,000. This acquisition made a big splash in the news, not because of the extravagant price for – in my opinion – a mediocre contemporary artwork, but for an Islamist businessman's purchase of a 'secularist' artist's work, which was seen as a reconciliation gesture towards the secular Turks who were dismayed by the rise of Islamists. In fact, the purchase was prompted by Baykam's comment that secular people do not purchase Ülker products because they prefer a 'secular' brand.

Baykam has been a curious figure in the Turkish art scene and is known for his expressionist paintings reflecting a wide-range of polemical themes including Kemal Ataturk, the Turkish flag, leftist political figures of the 1970s, various art historical references including pop art, as well as performances that involve nude female bodies. He is also known for his fanatical, uncompromised support of a secularist republican state. As the son of a prominent parliamentarian, he has been engaged with politics from a young age, and is an active member of CHP (People's Republican Party), making frequent television appearances as an opposition figure against the AKP government.

Baykam's awkward relationship with politics is not surprising. In fact, the Turkish art scene has always had an intimate relationship with the political power nodes. Istanbul

Modern has Egemen Bağış, a corrupt, disgraced ex-minister, on its board of trustees and Aksanat, a prominent a space in Istanbul, once exhibited 1980 coup-d'etat general, seventh president Kenan Evren's paintings in a major single person show. Major art spaces are single-handedly run by banks or by 'prominent families' – the oligarchy. Within this highly contested art scene, artist Kutluğ Ataman rises as another contentious figure.

On 19 October 2014 Ataman's film *The Lamb* won the best film award at the Antalya Film Festival – known as the Oscars of Turkey. The festival was stained by the censorship of a documentary film featuring the Gezi uprising. In protest, the jury resigned, and all of the participating filmmakers – except Ataman – wrote a joint anti-censorship statement. Although Ataman later declared that he was also against the censorship, he noticeably chose not to be in solidarity with his fellow filmmakers. The fact that Ataman has been a keen supporter of the Islamists led many to view his award as a 'thank you note' from the government. Similar to many pseudo-leftist intellectual figures of Istanbul, Ataman saw Erdogan's government rise to power as a positive step for democracy. The 'liberal-left' (an oxymoron) ignored the cruel neoliberal transformation and destruction of public life with a conservative moral value system. In order to justify the AKP's right wing agenda, the 'liberal-left' constantly attacked any possible opposition during these years and labelled them as coup planners. They appeared in the international media frequently. In fact, in his 2010 *Financial Times* interview Ataman said, 'they (the AKP Government) are the most democratic force in Turkey today' and he openly declared that he voted for them, 'not once, but twice'.^[3] At first Ataman supported the Gezi uprising, but he quickly moved to position himself alongside the pro-government forces, frequently appearing on television channels close to the Erdogan government. He condemned and labelled the Gezi uprising as another military coup attempt. It seems that Ataman's position paid off. He has already produced a major promotional exhibition for Sabancı Holding and is expected to receive substantial state support for his upcoming film projects.

Both Baykam and Ataman are in their 50s, raised by prominent families and recipients of an art education in California. Strangely, they both crafted their 'homecomings' as events. The art market loves controversial television-friendly figures, no matter what they have to say. Looking in retrospect, it is interesting how Baykam and Ataman are figures whose work rose in the Turkish art scene and that they perfectly complement each other. Baykam is a painter dealing with modernist themes and Ataman is a

filmmaker and video artist who is known for his evocative works that deal with long running identity-politics issues. Baykam has been a keen promoter of the 'old regime', whereas Ataman loves the 'new'. I do not know if they have ever met or spoken with each other but I am sure they know of each other. But they are the darlings of the art market; both are radical figures, but never radical enough to question the status-quo. They are controversial but only in a sensational sense. They are revolutionary in the same sense as fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld.

The 'free market' provides a sense of ideological continuity, and operates as an equalizer where the artist negotiates with the state apparatus. Actors of old state-controlled capitalism, and the new neoliberal free market economy are different sides of the same coin. Markets cherish opportunists and these men are just that; they strategically extract any opportunities from any given social situation and position themselves next to power nodes. The disappearance of salient voices within the cultural milieu depicts a very dark picture. Art no longer is understood as an honest relationship with life, but rather it is instrumentalized. Artists transform themselves in to slavish-products. This ethical implosion has far-fetched implications.

Construction. Violence.

The joyful intoxication of the so-called Arab Spring spirit is gone, replaced by social anxiety or – Al Qaeda to ISIS, Hamas to AKP – contaminated by Islamists. Although the local contexts are very different from each other, the people of the MENASA region share a common destiny. New regimes come and go, however a particular version of patrimonial authoritarianism suffocates the public sphere. The actors change, but the power play remains the same. It seems that there is no way out of this venomous cycle.

Really? Is it that hopeless? Maybe.

Currently in the Muslim world, Islamist neoliberalism is destroying the diversity of political life, minorities are discriminated against, women's rights are in danger, and freedom of expression suffers tremendously. Society as a whole is being re-engineered according to newly invented Islamic moral codes weaved with a particular free market

logic.

Let's pause a moment and look at Ahmad Mater's pictures of Mecca. His meticulous photographic series *Desert of Pharan* (2011–2013) documents Mecca 'becoming a commercial fiction'.^[4] Its demolition and reconstruction is fuelled by endless hysteria and real estate speculation. During the destruction extravaganza, many important historic sites were erased, including an eighteenth century Ottoman Castle.

I am not a preservationist – far from it. Sometimes we need to creatively engage with historical artefacts to be able to open up space for a new imagined society. Yet, this has to be with the most careful attention. The process of reconstruction should include architects, urbanists, sociologists and NGOs for a democratic public discussion. However, when it comes to the new neoliberal developmentalist logic, there is no space for public concern, there is no debate. Here, in its most general sense, when I talk about neoliberal development, I refer to a general shift in advanced capitalism as identified by the reconfiguration and reassembling of cultural, social, economic relations and practices according to a logic of all-encompassing market 'rationality' and a valuation process characterized by deregulation, privatization, depolitization, monetization and financialization of all fields. In that respect neoliberal development is never voluntary, but a violent political *fait-accompli*. This is a despotic, but also pragmatic and fluid model of for-profit maximization, employed at all costs. The results are, for the most part, devastating.

In that regard, the new Mecca takes its model from theme parks marketed towards the global tourism industry and it is increasingly looking like Las Vegas. Mecca has one advantage however; its authenticity comes with the place. The real thing is at the centre where, thousands of years ago at the cube, Pagan and monotheist tribes gathered around to celebrate a moment where there can be peace. It is the same cube that Muslims believe was built by Abraham to commemorate a meteorite sent by Allah.

The Kaaba is the ultimate art installation, praised five times a day. It is something to be seen, looked at, and if possible touched. Hotels, gambling halls, theme parks, and shopping malls spend millions of dollars to create a unique attraction, a spectacle infused with a sense of authenticity that can easily be transformed into cash. Mecca

does not need all that. The cube is there. Hotels and restaurants fill up; airports operate at their full capacity. If the religion industry is similar to the gambling industry, The House of Saud is the Steve Wynn of the Middle East, selling pure speculation to the masses. There is a slight possibility that you may win but you should never forget that the House always triumphs.

When it comes to the Turkish economic boom, its rapid transformation reflects the collapse of a socio-cultural infrastructure. It is decimating cultural, archaeological, and historical artefacts; collapsing the education system, and dissolving already-weak state functions. Public art spaces are being closed by the government, theatres are being transformed into shopping malls, parks are being privatized. Islamists instrumentalize religious practice as an extension of their private interests. Mosques are no longer temples where Muslims conduct their religious practice but are bunkers built to attack the very secular underpinnings of public life.[\[5\]](#)

Again, this implosion is a spectacle. Everyone is watching hopelessly – almost. By the time you think that the show is over, it is restaged again with different actors at a different site. This vicious cycle has no beginning and no end. One has to break it. One has to re-imagine a brand new future – even though we may have an inevitable cynical tone, we should see the potential. We need new constitutive, alternative narratives; new artistic, cultural and intellectual formations; new and young networks; and, of course, new institutional models to sustain our efforts. There has been enough watching and complaining. It is time to get to work with people we trust – a work within.

But, where is art in all this economy?

Fiction. Fictitious. The End.

In his influential work *The Great Transformation* (1944), Karl Polanyi describes labour, land and money as fictitious commodities. They are fictitious because they cannot be bought and sold like regular commodities. If we treat them as a commodity, we annihilate their inherent properties: human labour turns into slavery and land is built over, privatized, poisoned with fertilizers, and ruined for good. Money is no longer a

mere symbol for exchange but becomes an ultimate goal in itself, as if it is detached from the social relations of production. Speculation on money destroys the very fabric of society. None of these 'fictitious commodities' are products in the sense that they are not produced to be sold. Although, Polanyi did not deliberate on art as a fictitious commodity, in the same vein, we can argue that artworks are not produced as products to be sold.



An artwork is primarily an open-ended means of human expression, and creates its own space of engagement, inviting all possible viewers in a free dialogue around it. It strives to form an imaginative community. As soon as an artwork is treated just like any other commodity, and is bought and sold in the market place without any public consideration, it loses its inherent ability to be part of the intellectual-social commons and cultural history. When an artwork is transformed into a mere decorative object, it is cut from all possible publics, mutilated of its potentials. Yes, someday, somehow, it may even be part of the commons as public display, but until that day an artwork has to survive as a prisoner.

Artworks are not only being treated like any other commodity, but also the new art market is increasingly understood as similar to other speculative financial markets, overpowering aspects of cultural production, and undermining the characteristics of its content. The art market is not a special place for elite bourgeois activity, but it is an extension of the new market economy, where profit is defined by the speed and influx of capital. Certainly, fast capital accumulation is more like a curse; it erases any differences, and it erodes society from the inside out.

For a generalized market, anything can be commoditized. Capital has no god; it has no ideology, no ethics, and no particular political agenda. It only wants to flow – however it can. And it wants to flow very fast by overcoming any obstacle. Yet, capital cannot move by itself, it needs to be carried by a powerful social force; hence it attaches itself to the most powerful right-wing current in society. Capitalism has a reciprocal relationship with right-wing conservatisms. They expand together. Between the 2001 Turkish economic crisis and the 2013 Gezi uprising, Istanbul enjoyed international attention. During this time, while the rest of the country transformed into a cultural desert, some 'intellectuals' bluntly closed their eyes to what was happening all around them. Major gentrification projects displaced many communities, destroyed neighborhoods, and abolished the already weak public, cultural infrastructure. This economic boom fuelled by the international flow of money created the construction craze which left Istanbul and many other Turkish cities under perpetual construction. In that sense real estate and art has an intimate relationship. A booming real estate market meant a booming art market as well.

Indeed we are living in very dark moments.

The Boom is constantly unfolding and the salient cultural production is left at the mercy of the bourgeois elite's 'good intentions'. Major corporations, holdings, and families quickly moved in to cash in on this international excitement of the explosion. Yes, their intentions may be good. They are really good people.

But don't we hate the conditions that necessitate all that sappy bourgeois goodness?

Yes, the historical struggle is just starting, again.

[1] Ingo Arend, '2nd Art Fair Art International in Istanbul,' Universes in Universe website, October 2014 http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2014/artinternational_istanbul.

[2] For example, see: Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Natasha Degen (ed.), *The Market, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

[3] Rachel Spence, 'Return of the native,' *Financial Times* website, 5 November 2010 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/d3605d4c-e849-11df-8995-00144feab49a.html>.

[4] Ahmed Mater, 'Ahmed Mater: *Desert of Pharan*, Statement by the artist about his project,' Universes in Universe website, April 2013 http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2013/ahmed_mater.

[5] For instance in Turkey, mosques are built without the consent of the citizens, in Alevi towns and villages and in secular neighborhoods as way to provoke conservative

reactions against non-Orthodox, secular Muslims.

About the Author

[Hakan Topal](#)

Hakan Topal is an artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York. He is an Assistant Professor of New Media and Art + Design at Purchase College, SUNY and a graduate faculty member in the School of Visual Arts's MFA Program. Trained as a civil engineer (B.S.), he continued his studies in gender and women's studies (M.S.) and sociology (M.A.). He received a Ph.D. in sociology from the New School for Social Research with a concentration in urban sociology and sociology of arts. His dissertation was titled *Negotiating Urban Space: Contemporary Art Biennials, The Case of New Orleans*. He was the co-founder of international art collective, *xurban_collective* (2000-12) and exhibited his collective and individual art works and research projects extensively, in institutions such as the 8th and 9th Istanbul Biennials; apexart, New York; Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21), Vienna; Kunst-Werke, Berlin; ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; MoMA PS1; Platform, Istanbul and the 9th Gwangju Biennial, and represented Turkey in various international exhibitions including the 49th Venice Biennial Turkish Pavilion. His texts and projects have been featured in various international journals, books and catalogs. He is co-editor of the book, *The Sea-Image: Visual Manifestations of Port Cities and Global Waters* which is the outcome of visual research and an international symposium for the Istanbul European Capital of Culture 2010.