

NIGHTCOMERS: A SUPPLEMENT TO THE 10th ISTANBUL BIENNIAL

How to activate in each situation the political potential inherent in artistic activity? That is, its power to embody the mutations of the sensible, and thereby contribute to reconfiguring the shape of the world?¹ This question, while being a crucial aspect of my approach, also fits nicely with the underlying theme of this project – *dazibao*. *Dazibao*, a form of radically democratic street postings of public opinions during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was characterized by its anonymous, low-cost, low-profile, counter-official street posters hung illegally within the public space. With the *nightcomers* project, we tried to appropriate the initial premises of this political act into the sphere of arts while at the same time transforming it with the awareness of the degree of abstraction that is involved in carrying one piece of information to another place in society.

Given that an artistic intervention can be political by modifying the visible - the ways of perceiving and expressing it,² both the works screened and the form of the project aim not only to reveal the most palpable and visible political aspects, but also the more subtle and invisible ones. In relation to the works, this aspect is discernible in the participants' aim to delineate the shape of the present with economy of means, minimum gestures and small signs. The specific medium they work with, namely video, is not only important as a tool that has immediate access and is easily transportable, but it also has the advantage of being disseminated on a massive scale given its ability to be easily copied. The videos in this project mirror the low-tech, low-profile features of the early days of videos. However, they present different approaches both in video time and format: some are the documentation of ephemeral projects, whereas others fall into the category of performative videos. The content driven videos address different aspects of social and political problems, such as nationalism, urbanism, religion, the ecological crisis, homophobia, violence and racism. At times these subjects are dealt with in a clearly political context, while at others they are dealt with indirectly. They match the initial utopian idea of video as a vehicle for provoking social transformation. Some examine the usage of public spaces, evoking questions about what is public and how one gains access. Others are parodies of conventional formats like advertisements. They comment on things of our times that fill life and yet hollow it out, rendering it empty.³ Some videos are aggressively anti-visual, while others are poetic and symbolic. One of the unifying aspects of the works is that they raise the question of how to channel the attention of the public towards things happening in the world without resorting to propaganda. Most of all, they display how low-tech, low-profile forms and small-scale interventions are still able to disseminate ideas, countering the opulent, market-oriented works that have a greater presence in the art world today.

The political aspect of the project is subtle. First of all, *nightcomers* is primarily about anonymity. Although most contemporary art is produced collectively, we have a tendency to believe in the individual creators. In contrast, *nightcomers* seeks to play up

¹ <http://caosmose.net/suleyrolnik/textos.htm/07.11.2007>.

² Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 17-18.

³ Bartoli, Claire, *The Sound: Accompanying text for the soundtrack of Jean Luc Godard*.

the aspect of anonymity rather than promoting individual works and artists; it gives visibility to the works while rendering them anonymous. Secondly, *nightcomers* takes place at public sites in Istanbul that are outside the traditional confines of art in physical and intellectual terms, and it tries to engage an audience that is not necessarily within the contemporary art circuit. It aims to find a place between mobilization and specificity, meaning that it does not essentially belong to one particular location and is not determined by its environmental context.⁴ However, simply because a work is out there does not make it necessarily public. This project raises a lot of questions about how to make things public, how to relate to the public and which forms are still capable of rendering things visible. Since the aim of the project is to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social, I believe that matters of concern exist only if the affected groups circle them as such by making them visible and perceptible in the public sphere.⁵

As a matter of fact, within the whole structure of the Biennial the *nightcomers* project can be interpreted as a supplement, an addition to the Biennial. Yet, supplement encompasses not only the meaning of substitute, something allegedly secondary, but it also underscores the absence of the original. Derrida cautions us in emphasizing that a supplement does not come as an aid to something original, and it does not exist in only enhancing the presence of something. On the contrary, it is always ambiguous by adding itself as plenitude, or by adding only to replace as in the case of sheer supplement. If *nightcomers* is a supplement for the Biennial, it uses all the advantages of these layers of meanings. *nightcomers* is an addition to the Biennial; it is – lightly put – a refreshing project, but it can also be interpreted as a mirror image which emphasizes mobility as opposed to the site-specificity of the Biennial, by favoring anonymity over promoting artists, by running at odd hours instead of having regular opening/closing times, and most importantly by resisting the exclusivity of the art world by integrating diverse audiences.

Lastly, how does art serve towards legitimating and normalizing existing power relationships? How can one deal with it without being an idealist? The most apparent analogy between politics and art seems to me to be that both encompass the hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion. Art especially legitimates this power relationship in the selection process. Our aim from the outset has been not to limit the project to artists alone, but to make it an open call. We have endeavored to find a language that would encourage participation. Yet, the ultimate challenge is to stick with the concept of *dazibao* by showing every work that has been sent to us. Ironically, to reject the power of the curator – which, as this project clarifies, is the selection process itself – is one of the limiting aspects of this project, and for now all we can do is to reflect on this power without giving it up.

⁴ Kwon, Miwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site-Specificity” *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring 1997): 109.

⁵ Simon Schaffer, “Public Experiments’ in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Latour, Bruno and Weibel, Peter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press) 302.