

Dan Miller

To: Liang Luscombe, Lisa Radford, Dan Miller
inside the panorama

Today 11.41 am



Dear Liang, Lisa, Fayen,

It's been strange to be thinking ahead to one biennial while also being present at the formation of another. And it's been strange to be present at an event ostensibly about the presentation of art and instead see a sticky web of labour relations, private wealth, elite recreation and conspicuous consumption draped over it all. Tonight I worked at the home of one of the richest families in Turkey, as a docent for their private art collection, displayed over six floors. When he arrived, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and I discussed an Ai Weiwei work on the floor in front of us. To his credit, HUI didn't stay long, but by the time I finished my shift Klaus Biesenbach was still on the rooftop terrace, quaffing fresh figs and French wine with his entourage.

Meanwhile, a few streets away, several hundred peaceful protesters were violently broken up by scores of Turkish riot police when they attempted to form a human chain and chant anti-government slogans. One European guest arriving at the party had stinging eyes from the lingering teargas, but his tone implied he was only remarking upon it because it added to his sense of adventure. Istanbul in late summer, what a thrill.

This is how it has been here over the past couple of weeks, a tumultuous time of pro- and anti-AKP demonstrations, city-wide flag-raising (in which the Biennale venues had to participate lest they be accused of disloyalty), attacks by PKK militants here and in other parts of the country, and continued attacks on Kurdish areas by the Turkish army. All this time, rumours, only rumours. Despite what I have heard, I myself have seen little action. There are only rumours, and just a few noticeable signs. Strangely enough, my experience of the Biennale has been similar. My information has always already passed through so many hands that it's noticeably grubby.

It occurs to me that one thing that art and politics share in common (in their operation, if not their theory) is the central role of rumour. In other words, a certain grubbiness. But I would like to end the analogy there. Is it too much to suggest that there is a politics to which a large number of the earth's people are currently subject? (The same can not be said for art.) Under this politics, which I might scantily define as a rightward-hopping securitised fulfillment of financial capitalism's real-time wet dream, we are being prepared—mobilised, no less—for one reality: war. Which is to say, for a large proportion of us, we are being mentally prepared for our labour and eventual sacrifice.

I don't need to summarise ongoing events in Russia, Syria (and all the states to which its displaced are attempting to reach), Australia, and so on, to demonstrate how easily the tenor of a state's domestic politics can invoke not just the fear of war, but the expectation of it.

Since you asked me to make a contribution to Foot-notes in anticipation of the Ural Biennial, I have found it difficult to anticipate the thing itself rather than the sticky web draped over it. Paradoxically, in my currently ultra-mobile position, I feel more firmly stuck to this web than ever before. At the same time, I have found it difficult to resist the urge (by the states of which I am a citizen, the one in which I live, and the ones in which I travel) to fully anticipate—to be mobilised for—war.

This became deafeningly clear to me a few days ago, when I visited the Panorama 1453 Museum in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Topkapı. Opened in 2009, the museum was a pet project of President (then Prime Minister) Erdoğan, ostensibly educating the Turkish public on the history of the Conquest of Constantinople (what in the West is called the Fall of Constantinople) in 1453. The museum, however, is no work of scholarship: it is a purely ideological project aimed at justifying and celebrating the brutality of the Ottomans, while re-envisioning a foundational role for Islam in the creation of Istanbul.

The centrepiece of the museum is a 38-metre diameter panoramic painting (complete with dome) depicting the final successful capture of the city from the Byzantines. In addition to the detailed painted scenes of work, heroic violence and noble death, a large perimeter replete with fake weapons, and a confusticating mix of audio tracks (cannons, a brass band, the sound of marching, and so on) serves to raise the heart-rates of visitors and produce an adrenaline rush that is immediately connected to the action of war. A message to the youth of Turkey: do what we say, you have all this to look forward to, if not as actors then at least as viewers.

I made some audio recordings inside the panorama, and I will go back soon to make some more. I was thinking that the occasional irruption of museo-simulated war sounds from a neighbouring authoritarian state in the room at the Iset might be a nice contribution I could make to the project. As pessimistic as I always feel, I have to at least hope that someone might find a way to burnish my smouldering coals.

L&L, let me know what you think. Do you think this could work? If needed, I could source an audio player, speakers, cabling, etc. before I leave Istanbul. Let's talk soon.

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