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An art boom energizes Istanbul

Once a 'pale imitation of Western city,' Ottoman capital fills with galleries

BY SUZY HANSEN

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This winter, the giant 120-year-old Ottoman Bank building in Istanbul reopened as a multimillion-dollar contemporary art space called SALT. This was surprising. Turks were never big on contemporary art, and for years rich people didn't visit that part of town. When I moved to the neighborhood five years ago, it was all electrical-supply stores and abandoned buildings. My building didn't have heat; girlfriends wouldn't visit after dark.
But one evening in November, Turks and foreigners traipsed up the cobbled sidewalks to SALT's huge, heavy doors for the opening-night party. The headline exhibit featured thousands of old black-

On the Bubble From The New York Times Magazine

From The New York Times Magazine and-white photographs taken by a dead Armenian studio photographer and carefully assembled by the young artist Tayfun Serttas. Another exhibit was an installation by Gulsun Karamustafa, Tayfun Serttas. Another exhibit was an installation by Gulsun Karamustafa, Carlwey's doyene of contemporary art. Another was about archaeology and Europeans looting the Ottoman Empire. But the space overwhelmed the art. It was too magnificent. Nothing like SALT existed in Istanbul. Inside, the building was five floors of carved white marble and grand staircases. The visitors gaped at the stylish library, the plush movie theater and the smoking terrace that was also a restaurant. Even the fatalistic Turks, skeptical of Westermers enthusissm, couldn't help the control of the strength of the

possibilities, but what kind of culture will the Turks create?
On my way out, I ran into Mari Spirito, a longtime director at 303 Gallery in New York. Ms. Spirito had just moved to Turkey to set up a nonprofit called Protocinema. Above our heads, Arabic script was etched into the marble: "He who earns money is God's beloved servant."
"In New York it feels like the best years are behind us," she said. "In Istanbul it feels like the best years are behind us," she said. "In Istanbul it feels like the best years are yet to come."

The New York it rees like the best years are years are behind us," she said. "In Istanbul it feels like the best years are like the set years are the set of the set

ish rock, a hybrid of Western and Anato-lian music, joining together in a modern version of traditional Turkish dancing: arms spread wide, women and men dancing together in pairs. The vibe was anything but self-conscious; it felt like a safe place to go nuts. "We're like girls and boys playing," said Yasemin Nur, a 35-year-old artist who attended the party with Gozde Ilkin. Both are members of AtilKunst,



linik was part of an emerging art world in Istanbul. Part of the show included a light installation and played out in an old cotton factory, top. A visitor to the Istanbul Con-temporary Artfair at Besiktas in November an all-female artist collective. "I do feel it is like a playground," she said. "But we are very serious. Everyone is hardworking. They live as they produce, and they produce as they live."

This is a life few Turks will ever know.

This is a life the Turks will ever know. In this conservative Muslim country of Smillion, the artists have minimal influence on social and political life. But they any someday export contemporary Turkish culture to the world. They have grown up during a relatively free and prosperous time in Turkey and make up an artistic elite that has more in common with their counterparts in other nations than with their own countrymen. In conversation they shift from Turkish to European to American pop culture.

Most of these artists now congregate in Beyoglu, the old European to American pop culture, which for a long time existed in a state of spooky, decaying glamour. As Turkey's economy exploded, kebab shops turned

into conspicuously European cafes, squatter buildings bloomed into boutique hotels and high rents drove the poor to the city's periphery. Galleries popped up in unexpected places. The nouveau riche and old-guard elite realized that rich people should have art collections and heart market spiked. Meanwhile, the governing Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party, which routinely throws writers and journalists in jail, rarely bothers with provocative artists, at least so far. (In a sinister dispatch from the Interior Ministry, a party official pointed out that terror, that is, Kurdish terror, comes in all forms, including art.) During the Istanbul Blemial last year — now a major art-world event — Emine Erdogan, the prime minister's head-scarf-wearing wife, gave a speech at an opening at the Istanbul Modern, the TURKEY, PAGE 22

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TURKEY, FROM PAGE 18
city's main modern art museum. Freedom of expression is bad for politics, but
contemporary art is good for business.
Whether the government's heavyhanded relationships with the corporate
patrons of the art world will be good for
art is another story.
Artists find themselves with opportunities and temptations that artists of
other generations here never experi-

inttes and temptations that artists of other generations here never experi-enced: nonprofit spaces, media atten-tion, parties, lectures, auctions, sales. There are new books to read, archives to comb through, full-scale exhibitions of predecessors whose work they've

The artists are well aware of what's happening to their once-ignored corner of the world. "It's totally different, it's a market now," Ms. Nur said. "It's

connected to the last economic crisis, and

it's because few such institutions have tended to Turkey's history. "We always wanted to create a place in Istanbul which would have all the materials so people can do their research," Mr. Kortus adu. "The '08s conceptual generation hasn't been assessed, the reason being they were not market artists. A lot of them went through tough times with serious disinterest in their work. So we're digitizing the complete archive." Turkish intelectuals attribute Istanbul's lack of a solid modern and contemporary culture to its broken history—especially the sharp break between the Ottoman Empire and a modern, secular state. Even after the republic's founding in 1922, the Turks endured many more violent disturbances: World War II, pogroms against Armenians and Greeks, the civil war with the Kurds,



three military coups. But there's another reason for the absence of a coherent

menians and Jews.

The Armenians were the intellectual backbone of the city. This place lost its lungs in the beginning of the 20th century. Maybe more than its lungs. It was a crippled place when it started as a nation. The 20th century is the lost century for this city."

tion. The 20th century is the lost century for this city."
The 'bridge between East and West'
Chich idealizes Constantinople's fabled past, before the emergence of the repressive Turkin's state. That's why it sometimes feels, in the 21st century, that even as Istanbul artists are merging with the international community, they are also looking backward to discover themselves. "It's not a revolution." Mr. Kortun said, referring to Istanbul's current phase of cultural production. "It's a correction."

er reason for the absence of a Carl Turkish culture.

"Istanbul is shallow," Mr. Kortun said. "It's not an intellectual place. It was an old city with Greeks and Ar-menians and Jews.

ment phase of cultural production. "It's a correction."
Istanbul's art community has changed enough that Turkish artists who once fled to London, Berlin or Amsterdam have come home.
But there are pitfalls. Many artists express anxiety about the rush of corporate money to the scene — the Turkish government does not finance much of anything art-related — complaining attit doesn't always go to the artists themselves, who desperately need money and spaces to experiment. There's very little art criticism in Turkey, everyone complains, and things are



Left, the entrance to the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 2004 on the Bosporus, and a reflection of its interior, above

moving too fast without reflection.
The intellectual versus commercial balance is out of whack. Ten years ago, according to Tayfun Serttas, the artist from SALT Galata, people used tay about art until the morning. "We used to process everything on a much more inclientual and conceptual level," he said. Turkish contemporary art runs the gamut of mediums and ideas. Some argue that there's nothing distinctively Turkish about Turkish art, for a long time Turks were taught to imitate the West.

Turkish modern art looks a lot like /estern modern art, much to the dis-

for something exotic. What is real Turkshouldure anyway? It's not harems and fezzes — that's Ottoman. One gallerist said she wasn't even sure what "Turksiah' art would look like. While most Turksish contemporary art deals with universal themes, some of the political works have been specific to modern Turkey — Ataturk, the army — and don't always translate abroad. One artist argued that Turks should be responding to the neoliberal capitalist age, not to Turkey's era of military coups and authoritarianism.

Kutlug Ataman, the most famous

drag, dancing; four large-screen videos side by side of women speaking simultaneously about why they wear wigs; an interview with an elderly Armenian woman struggling to regain her memory. Mr. Ataman said he always longed to return to Turkey, but he was skeptical of the art he sees in Istanbul: "Ag great majority of the work consists of imitations of Western gestures. Their reference is New York and London." Mr. Ataman doesn't think Turkish artists have confronted the real source of their material, the thing they have to offer the world. He referred to an infamous recent incident, when a mob of Turkish men attacked gallery-hoppers who do in their fashionable clothes. The galleries were gentifying the neighborhood, and the community, many Turks later said, felt encroached upon and left out. To many other Turks, however, the attackers were religious types angered and the community, many Turks later said, felt encroached upon and left out. To many other Turks however, the attackers were religious types angered and the community, many Turks later said, felt encroached upon and left out. To many other Turks however, the attackers were religious types angered 1 stanbul, Turkey's two worlds came face to face, in a microcosmic dance of the confrontation happening all over the world: the

in a microcosmic dance of the confronta-tion happening all over the world: the West and the East, the rich and the poor, the comfortable and the angry. Mr. Ataman regards such a confronta-tion as a brush with the "real Turkey," "When I look at artists' practice in Europe, I am ont inspired," he said. "If the artists here can engage with Turkey, they will be ahead of the rest of the world. Because the world is this. This desert!"

world. Because the world is this. This desert."

Istanbul's art bom won't last forever. The economic crisis in the West and political instability in the East have caused the market to soften a bit, gallerists say. More important, perhaps, a majority of the buyers of Turkish art are Turks. And some of those new collectors know very little about art.

Unlike the old modernist Turkish painters, looking exclusively to the West, Turkish artists also hunger for knowledge of what came before them at home. There is an imperative, conscious or not, to discover and solidity a real contemporary culture that is organic to the country, even as it is integrated into the global system.

"This will become an international scane before it was even a Turkish one;" scale one very boung artist who was

"This will become an international scene before it was even a Turkish one," said one very young artist who was working at the gallery Rodeo. "It's like the hot money pouring into this country. When it goes, what will be left." One day in 2010, I attended an art auction at a Swissole in the center of Istanbul. The house sold mostly modern art, but. The house sold mostly modern art, but. The house sold mostly modern art with the properties. The room was packed. Halfway through the event, the auctioneer arrived at an Erol Akyavas painting, the showcase piece of the evening, one of the few Turkish works that had a vaguely Islamic theme. Multiple bidders quickly took the price into the high six digits. We all felt where things were headed. The auctioneer arnounced, "One million," and held up his gavel showly. When the gave felf, the room broke out in appliause.

The digital counter, however, did not. The digital counter, howeved a large solden No. 1 and held it up in front of the cher six digits. The counter flipped to zeros: 1,000,000. A collector held up his camera phone and took a picture.

connected to the last economic crisis, and now Istanbul has become the hip city, and is chosen as a hip city. The system needs the hip city and next is will be Beirut, and next somewhere else. This is our time the hip city, and next is one of the hip city, and next is one where else. This is our time. The core of Istanbul's art scene coalesced in the 1890s and '90s through the efforts of a few prominent figures: curators like Ali Akay and Beral Madra, the artist Halil Altindere, the SALT director Vasif Kortun. Most artists will tell you that Mr. Kortun, who is 53, is the father of Istanbul's art world. "We can say, there was before and after Vasif," an artist said. To show your work at home or abroad, said another, "you used to need Vasif." And he's respected internationally. "He seems to be able to predict where art institutions will go", said Kaelen Wilson-Golde, a critic in Beirrut. Goldege's Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies in New York and oppened a small office in Beyoglu. He called it the Istanbul Contempary Art Project, which became Istanbul's nascent art hub. Then, with the backing of Garanti Bank, Mr. Kortun established Platform Granti, an exhibition space that also archived books, criticism and Garanti Bank, Mr. Kortun established Platform closed in 2007, and Mr. Kortun and Garanti in 2011. The projects, conceived as places. "for research and experimental thinking," cost about 309 million. If archives and libraries are a focus, CROSSWORD | Additional Reading

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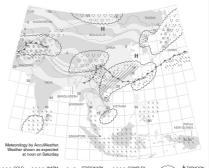
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PEOPLE **

→ MAOM WATTS WIll play DIANA, PRINCESS
OF WALES, in a film about the last years of her life. Ecoses Pilms in Britain said the film, "Caught in Flight," will focus on the two years before Diana's death in a Paris car crash in 1997. OLIVER WISSONIESEE, best known for "DOWNfall," about Hitler's last days, will direct. The British-born actress, who was raised in Australia said she was honored to get the role. ωρ



"share the saxophone role" during the E Street Band's "Wrecking Ball" world tour, which begins March 18 in Atlanta. The new "Wrecking Ball" abum, which will be released March 6, is the first since the death of the band's saxophonist last summer. Mr. Manion is a longtime saxophonist with SOUTHSEE JOHNNY AND THE ASBURY JUNES. (AP)

TON VOIGHT and ELLIOTT GOULD have ▼ NOW WORFIT and ELLIOTT COULD have signed on to stain in the Showtime drama pilot "Ray Donovan," Digital Spy reports. Let's vehereber is playing the leading role in the pilot, which centers on a man who fixes off-the-record issues for the rich and famous in Hollywood. Mr. Voight will play Ray's father Mickey Donovan, who has just been freed from prison. Mr. Gold will be a recurring guest star as Ray's mentor.