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## An art boom energizes Istanbul

ISTANBUL

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

BY SUZY HANSEN

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*

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 Gulsum Karamustafa, Turkey's doyenne 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 Westerners' enthusiasm, couldn't help admitting that this strange art institution was awesome.

It appears that Istanbul, which went from a cosmopolitan wonderland in the 19th century to, in the Nobel-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk's words, a "pale, poor, second-class imitation of a Western city" for much of the 20th, is having a moment of rebirth. These newly wealthy corners of the East seem full of

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 Protopinema. 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 yet to come."

Those best years might be a long way off, many Turks would joke, but still, it is a heady time to be young and talented in Istanbul. One summer night I accompanied a group of women as they finished their dinner at a meze tavern, put on red lipstick and stopped for a bottle of raki (Turkey's national liquor) and cigarettes on their way to a party not far from SALT. Especially on muggy evenings, Istiklal Caddesi, the central pedestrian artery of the city, swarms with people racing to shops, cafes and bars.

Arms around one another, the women maneuvered through Istiklal's traffic into Rumeli Han, an Ottoman-era arcade building that exudes a faded, dingy glow, with sooty stone staircases and crumbling ceilings. Up a few flights, past the Communist Party office, music drifted out of an artists' studio. Beer bottles and cans covered the table and floor; the girls poured their raki into tiny plastic cups and found a seat with their friends.

"This place has become a meeting point," one gallery owner said. "It's feeding the underground scene."

In a long room, about 40 Turks were watching the performance group Ha Za Vu Zu play music. The 20- and 30-somethings sat on the floor and listened quietly. Some women wore retro styles, 1940s hair and cigarette pants. Men with pools of black curls lounged in T-shirts.

The artists began dancing to old Turkish rock, a hybrid of Western and Anatolian 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,



An exhibition in September called Mentalink 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 Contemporary 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. In this conservative Muslim country of 80 million, the artists have minimal influence on social and political life. But they may 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 quarter, 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 the art 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 Biennial last year — now a major art-world event — Emine Erdogan, the prime minister's headscarf-wearing wife, gave a speech at an opening at the Istanbul Modern, the TURKEY, PAGE 22

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**JON VOIGHT** and **ELLIOTT GOULD** have signed on to star in the Showtime drama pilot "Ray Donovan," Digital Spy reports. **LIEV SCHREIBER** 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. Gould will be a recurring guest star as Ray's mentor.