

# Globalization's

## An Interview with Paolo Colombo in Istanbul

by Carolee Thea

*A short time before the September opening of the Istanbul Biennial VI, Turkey was ravaged by an earthquake. Paolo Colombo, the curator, wondered, "How, with such a catastrophe, could one think of presenting an international biennial?" His inspiration to move ahead, he said, is best stated by William Faulkner, who said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize that, "Our tragedy today" is assuaged by "the poet's voice [which] need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars, to help him endure and prevail."*

**Carolee Thea:** *The decision to carry on with the Biennial after the earthquake built hope on top of disaster, not disaster upon disaster.*

**Paolo Colombo:** For the first time, I had the opportunity to do something very practical, to bring help to people who needed real help. At the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Art, we all wanted to contribute to the normalization of the situation. The country had been in mourning for 28 days. Although mourning is necessary, there comes a point when life has to go on. We felt we could raise funds for the survivors of the earthquake. Today (as we speak), there are probably 600,000 homeless and 40,000 dead within a radius of 50 miles. This means that millions of families have been touched by this tragedy. The art community had the possibility of responding to something outside of itself. Artists gave generously to the benefit auction, and collectors bid generously. Other proceeds of the Biennial, such as admission tickets, were donated to a fund for the victims of the earthquake. At the outset, much of the promised local funding was rightly diverted to the victims of the earthquake. We had to go to the international community in order to go on with the Biennial, specifically to those foundations that had already earmarked their funding for art. The Peter Norton Family Foundation responded immediately with a \$100,000 challenge grant, which gave us the strength to continue. And from that we were able to raise the rest of the funding.

**CT:** *Your title for the Biennial, "Tutku ve Dalga,"*

*("The Passion and The Wave"), echoes the intensity and the polyglot character of the Turkish people. There are many Turkish artists in the exhibition. Do you think the works of Turkish artists differ from those of Chinese or German artists?*

**PC:** Absolutely. It's hard to pinpoint the exact reason; I think it deals with a very specific yet elusive sensitivity. I believe that the way artists visualize things is informed by their mother language. The way one situates things in space is determined by the pauses, commas, and interjections that occur in one's mother language. As an Italian, it is hard for me to conceive of Carpaccio's iconography outside of the Italian language structure. His paintings are constructed in what seems to me as the visual equivalent of an Italian literary text—full of parenthetical sentences, appositions, secondary phrases—I recognize the Italian language in his visual syntax.

One of the Turkish artists I chose is the poet Sami Baydar. He made an extraordinary set of calligraphic and lyrical drawings, where the pauses (the white spaces on the paper) act as silence isolating a phrase. Where these drawings are grouped three or four on a page they function almost like a stanza. These works respond organically to spoken and visual language. Obviously, the art that is made in a country is informed not only by the spoken language, but by the visual culture as well: the architecture, posters,

**Candice Breitz, *Babel Series*, 1999. Video installation.**

# *Under<sup>tow</sup>*

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**Globalization has engendered a powerful undertow, and this process is registered by artists all over the world.**

and street signage. In Istanbul, life in the streets is extremely layered and chaotic. Artists cannot be separated from the visual nourishment that the streets give, nor from their personal experience, their language, and their history. What makes something art is its perception, not just an active will of the artist. There is no category of objects that a priori is art—logically, one cannot say that every painting (or sculpture, and so forth) is a work of art. Therefore, the concept of art defines a value that is recognized only in a relational process, and this takes place in an ideal triangle made up of the artist, the object, and the viewer.

**CT:** *Can you explain further?*

**PC:** In literature, there is something that critics call a “voice,” a specific expressive quality that is recognized for its uniqueness. Language, context, and historical realities play an important role in the reception of a work, in the recognition of the voice. Likewise, there are objects that today we call art and that when they were made did not have that

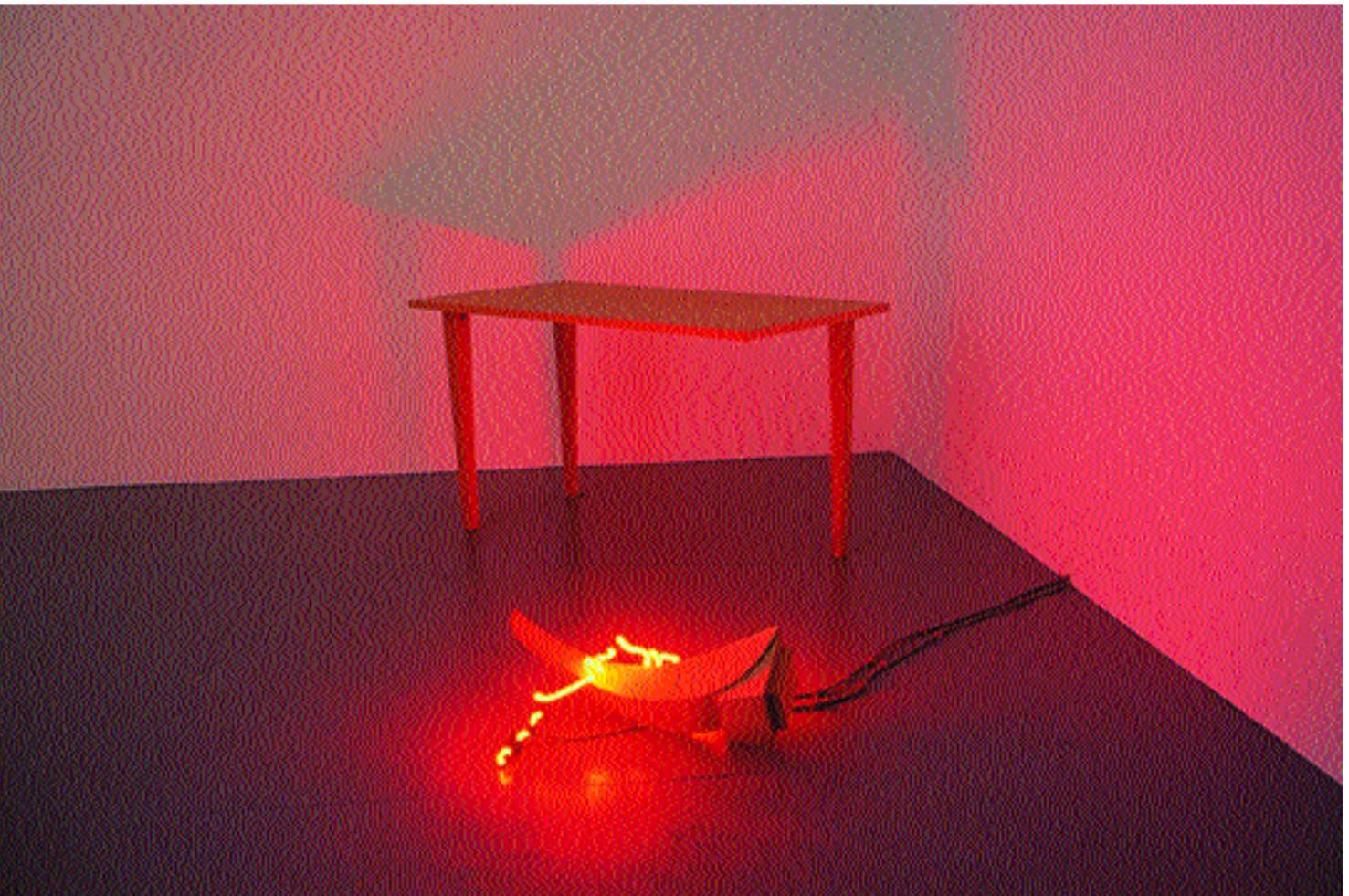
quality for the maker (Greek vases are an example) or for the public who acquired those works. What we usually recognize as art contains a fairly fluid set of values, one that changes with time and perspective.

**CT:** *African art is made up of objects that were specifically designed around a codified set of rules meant to please the gods. If it was not perfect, the gods would not enter the object. But innovations were possible if an artist/maker carried out the rules and expressed himself with subtle inflection.*

**PC:** You’re right, but in the larger picture we tend to privilege change in all artistic forms. In the past it wasn’t necessarily so. For the Egyptians, it was the following of a canon that confirmed a work of art. As it was then, today it is still the recognition of the artistic value of an object that makes it a work of art.

**CT:** *Were you ever a visual artist?*

**PC:** I was until 1983. Before that date, I had studied English Literature at the University of Rome and briefly American Studies at Yale and Art History at



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Columbia. I knew I would not become a scholar, and in graduate school I studied little. At that time, I worked on writing, and I also exhibited at Anina Nosei, at P.S. 1, and even at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, where I am now employed.

**CT:** *How were you chosen to be the curator for the Istanbul Biennial?*

**PC:** Rosa Martinez called me in Geneva. At that time, I didn't know her. She was bringing a group of her curatorial students to the Centre d'Art Contemporain two years ago. I gave a tour to the students and spoke briefly with Rosa. Two weeks later she invited me to participate on a panel discussion titled "On Love, Friendship and Other Possibilities," at her Biennial in Istanbul. After that she asked if I would present a proposal for a biennial. Rosa is a spectacular person, courageous, strong, and generous. I owe a lot to her and to her support.

**CT:** *What issues did you consider when designing your proposal for the Biennial for Istanbul?*

**PC:** A biennial is a photograph of our time. It captures the two years that have preceded it and, one hopes, it anticipates the two years that will follow it. Therefore, it has a relatively short duration. One of my concerns was how the process of globalization has engendered a powerful undertow, and how this process is registered by artists all over the world. I chose to give a voice to individuals and to underline the weight of emotion in our everyday life. I chose a specific name for the Biennial, one related to the history of Istanbul, and more so to a real person who was born in this city in 1892—a singer whose stage name means "passion" in Greek and "wave" in Turkish.

**CT:** *The narrative or novelistic in regard to personal content is the signifying issue in this Biennial. Where I understand that along with globalization, a dialogue or defense of identity occurs, other millennial issues such as cybernetics, biotechnology, or the computer as fetish are missing here.*

**PC:** Whatever is missing is willful. When you're named to do a biennial, it's an opportunity to be slanted, literally going with your heart. There are a few artists in the exhibition, such as Fatimah Tuggar, who exhibited computer-generated images.

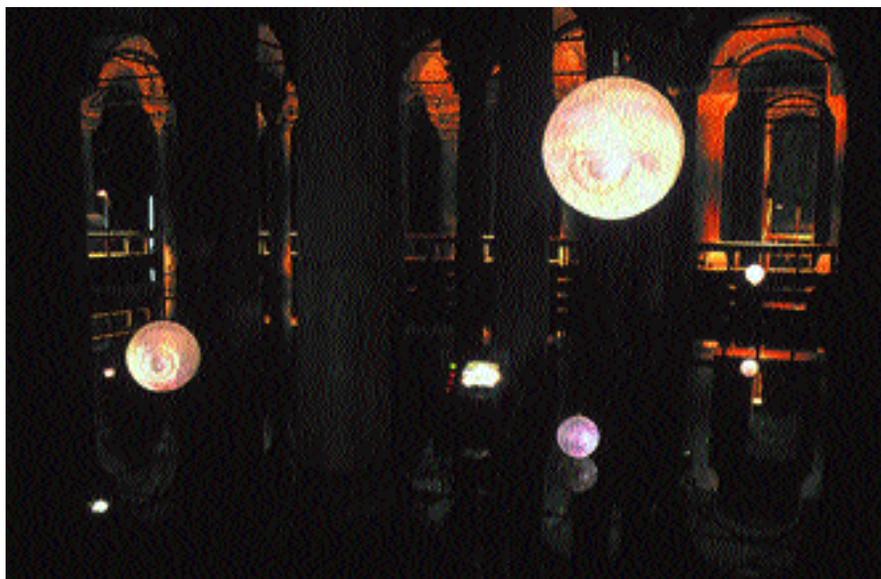
**CT:** *But aren't you running the risk of choosing art that serves your curatorial demands?*

**PC:** My goal was to make clear the temperament of each work in the exhibition and to present it in a way that is as close as possible to the original intent of the artist. In group exhibitions one tends to indicate the points of consensus among artists and not those of dissent. I tried to follow a different route, the one that emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual work.

**Opposite:** Sefa Sağlom, *Hitting (Roses Will Bloom Where They Hit You)*, 1997. **View of installation.** **This page, top:** Füsün Onur, *Opus I*, 1999. **Mixed media.** **Bottom:** Tony Oursler, *Refraction*, 1999. **Installation view.**

**CT:** *Do you think that artists should have editors?*

**PC:** I think that this is the role of a curator. When publishing a book, the editor decides the margins, the font, and other issues related to the text and its presentation. For "The Wasteland," T.S. Eliot had Ezra Pound as an editor. I certainly need an editor,



and I think most people do. An editor is one who allows you to see the work with distance but not necessarily one who forces the work into something other than what it is.

**CT:** *When you're in the artist's studio do you give advice or explain your curatorial precepts?*

**PC:** When I'm in a studio I mostly look. I do not give advice unless an artist asks me about specific issues. The advice comes in a situation when I'm in control, in one's institution for instance, but in the

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studio I'm an observer. My role is taking charge of the space a work occupies once it is in the exhibition. It is where a relationship of mutual trust and acceptance takes form. There, I may intervene in the presentation of a work. I feel ill at ease in the studio unless the artist asks me a specific question, for example, about the timing or the titles in a video. I generally discuss more abstract things, and I want to hear the artists talk about their work.

**CT:** *We spoke of creating a concept for an exhibition and treading that fine line of employing art that's only in the service of your idea, finding a place in between that is not just about feeding the curator's ego.*

**PC:** The artists I invited to the 6th Biennial are con-

cerned with narrative and with the communication (or the suppression) of emotion. There are a number of artists whose work I like and support, but who were not close to the theme of the Biennial, and whom I did not invite. I also tried to limit the selection of well-known artists, yet I felt it was important to have artists who can articulate a complex discourse; therefore I invited a small number of mid-career artists with whom I had worked in the past, like Pipilotti Rist and Ugo Rondinone. Tony Oursler had done his first "doll" exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva. I am an admirer of Christopher Wool, who did an exhibition and who curated a series of films at the Centre in Geneva. Many of the artists invited to the Biennial were new to me.



I came to know their work in different ways: visiting studios, reading articles, and also by referral by other artists, critics, galleries, and museum people.

**CT:** *Are there any selections from Asia?*

**PC:** Unfortunately, I was not able to visit much of Asia, but one place I was able to go was Kazakhstan, and I did invite two artists from Almaty. I went to Brazil where I met Iran Do Espírito Santo, who also exhibited in the Venice Biennale. And I went to New York to see Lisa Yuskavage, who is exhibiting for the first time in a biennial.

**CT:** *To see a lot of painting in the Istanbul Biennial is refreshing. Other global exhibitions have been more concerned with aspects of installations in historical architecture sites.*

**PC:** I think painting today is extremely interesting. Paradoxically, new media have been very helpful in restoring the belief in images as a vehicle for content. In a way, painting is in a privileged position. Unlike video, which is linear and sequential, or photography, painting is not dependent on time. Haluk Akakçe and Margherita Manzelli, for example, are both extraordinary young painters, who speak about the human condition today in an extremely perceptive manner.

**CT:** *As a curator, do you have any ideas about changing reality, making a difference or a political statement?*

**PC:** We can only make small changes. We make small changes and next week someone else makes other small changes, this is the way it works. We don't change reality, but perhaps the awareness of a few individuals. Art is about pleasure. No, pleasure is the wrong word. (Is reading Dostoevsky a pleasure?) Art reflects the human condition and has a meaning for only a number of people, for a few, maybe just from time to time.

**CT:** *Yes, it doesn't have to be a grandly heroic move it only needs to reflect a moment. We're sitting on the European side of the Bosphorus Strait watching the boats find their way to the Mediterranean as they have done for centuries.*

**PC:** Think of it in this practical way. If you take the boat across the Bosphorus (it's a 12-minute ride), and then walk for 11 months you might reach China.

**CT:** *There's something timeless here.*

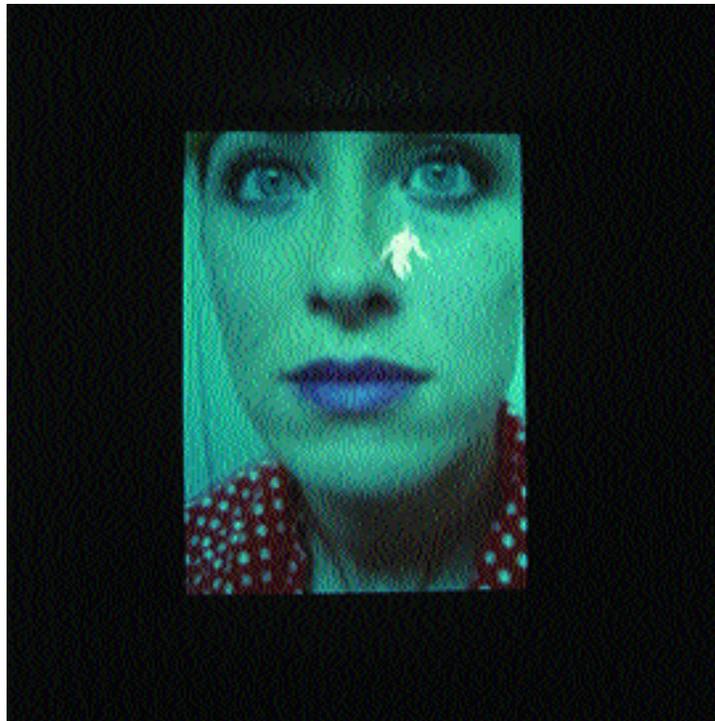
**PC:** In the catalogue, I talk about other perceptions of time as an individual factor. We talk about shared experience, our sense of time. There were two films in the 1960s in which a cinematic minute lasted one minute of real time. In one, *Silence*, by Bergman, it seems to last endlessly. In the other, *The Yellow Submarine*, one follows the clock ticking while time seems to fly. The point is that our sense of time is more personal than our sense of space.

**Opposite:** Lukas Duwenhögger, *The Go-Between*, 1999.

**Mixed-media installation. This page:** Pipilotti Rist, *I Couldn't Agree With You More*, 1999. **Video installation.**

**CT:** *Getting back to older descriptions: In the field of Oriental and Islamic studies, Edward Said commented that Orientalism is a critical study of Western knowledge about the exotic and occupies a historical context. How do you feel about this?*

**PC:** Once again, the issue of Orientalism is determined by our point of view. Turkish culture is a central culture, it's not peripheral. Do you know that the Turkish language is spoken by minorities in Hungary all the way to Kazakhstan? Three hundred million people speak Turkish and languages derived from it. This will tell you about our point of view. In



the west, Turkey is still mostly seen as a geographical expression, a peninsula inhabited by 60 million people. In Western eyes, that is where the Turkish influence ends. This is not true. When I was in Kazakhstan I wanted to buy some chocolate; I did not easily find a Mars bar or a product of Nestlé, but Ulker, a chocolate from Turkey. Kazakh is an Altaic language—with the little Turkish I speak I could get around without feeling utterly unable to communicate. I think that the Western world does not have a sense of the cultural importance of Turkey. The vision of Western Europe is still slanted from the time of the Crusades. The demonization of the enemy is still a current practice in the West.

**CT:** *European knowledge about the rest of the planet has been shaped by the Western will to power.*

**PC:** Yes, but now the objects of observation are imaging back, and it's about time.

*Carolee Thea is a writer and curator living in New York, and a contributing editor to Sculpture.*