The Aesthetics of Global Protest

Korkut, Umut, Jenzen, Olu, Eslen-Ziya, Hande, Erhart, Itir, McGarry, Aidan

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Korkut, Umut, et al.
Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76708.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76708
Maybe, We Will Benefit from Our Neighbour’s Good Fortune: An Exhibition on Collectivity, Community, and Dialogue in Turkey

İşıl Eğrikavuk

Abstract
Deriving from the Gezi Park protests, this chapter focuses on an art exhibition that took place in Istanbul in 2017, which was realized under the ‘Aesthetics of Protest’ project. Looking at past examples of community art practices, this exhibition proposes to think of collectivity as a form of resistance and frames how aesthetics of protest can be traced to artistic work in order to provide solidarity and empowerment. Working with different art and environmental collectives, the exhibition questions the idea of ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘neighbourliness’ and searches for ways of sustaining hope and solidarity through the aesthetic values of the Gezi Park protests and in an artistic practice. This chapter conceptualizes the process of the exhibition and its artistic research process.

Keywords: art, collectivity, exhibition, community, artistic research, dialogue

Neighbourhood: From House to a Park

I am the member of a generation, who grew up in Turkey of the 1990s in a non-gated condominium without any security guards or walls. In that Anatolian city called İzmit, each of our neighbours at the time, their children and even the children of their children, knew one another; they knew even the smallest details of each other’s furniture and what was cooking for dinner in each house every night. It was a time when you cooked something, you
would give one plate to your nearest neighbour ‘because it would smell good and they might like to have it too’, would say our mothers. When you gave the food, you would also leave your plate with your neighbour and soon find out that your plate would return in a few days with some freshly cooked and delicious food on it. That was the exchange of the day.

Years later, when I came to Istanbul and started to live in an apartment, I realized I had only law offices as neighbours, whose owners I never met. My flat was protected by an alarm system that made me feel like my head would explode each time it went off by accident. I had one neighbour whose name I knew, as well as the building superintendent who pounded on the ceiling from downstairs every now and then when I was making too much noise. Still, I tried. I clearly remember one day giving a bowl full of soup to my neighbour just like the old times, yet my plate never made its way back.

The Process into Gezi Park Protests

The example above encapsulates the change that not only Istanbul but many Turkish cities have gone through in the last 20 years, especially whilst the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has been in power. The AKP, during its sixteen years of rule, has ‘aggressively embedded neoliberalism in neo-authoritarianism’ which ‘prioritized the governance of urban landscapes and adopted urban transformation as a technique for consolidating neo-authoritarianism’ (Akçalı and Korkut 2015: 77). Such a neoliberal urban understanding transformed not only public spaces, but has also weakened the social fabric of the city, rendering feelings of community and neighbourhood a thing of the past, as many neighbourhoods were demolished ‘to build highways and high-rises, eventually pushing the working class to peripheral areas’ (Akçalı and Korkut 2015: 81). Thus, the idea of being neighbours evolved from people having a strong sense of sharing and being part of a community into being isolated and hiding from one another. Older traditions that encouraged mutual trust and sharing and provided a sense of community became almost extinct all over Turkey, most specifically in Istanbul, which is populated almost by almost 15 million people.

Yet, in May and June 2013, something unexpected and groundbreaking happened. Known as the Gezi protests, it started with a small crowd of protestors coming together as a reaction to the government’s announcement of the destruction of Istanbul’s centrally located Gezi Park (see McGarry et al., introduction). However, ‘what began as a simple environmentalist protest grew rapidly and spread across the country as a result of police brutality faced
by the small group of activists’ (Batuman 2015: 1). In a few days, thousands of people had gathered in the park and at Taksim Square, located right at its exit. The protests soon spread to other cities, such as Ankara, Adana, İzmir, and Eskişehir, as well as many others. In only a few days an environmentalist protest turned into ‘a major civil uprising against the government in which the most chanted slogans were “Down with the government!” and “Shoulder to shoulder against fascism!”’ (Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013).

As much as it was a protest arena, the park quickly became a place where people started to inhabit as well, echoing the occupation repertoire of recent protests in New York, Hong Kong and São Paolo, amongst others. In a few days, Gezi Park was transformed into a neighbourhood, a social microcosm of the nation where thousands of people gathered by day and hundreds slept by night. The park became almost like a town, with its freshly built squares, monuments, communal eating places, and even small signs that identified each passageway or corner (such as the ‘LGBT Street’ or ‘Çapulcu [Marauder] Corner’ (see Tulke, this volume). The term çapulcu was especially a significant word because the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had attributed it to the protestors, who in return quickly ‘internalized this term and made it a nickname for themselves’ (Öğün Emre et al. 2013: 7). Similar to this creative twist on the meaning of the word çapulcu, the Gezi microcosm adopted many other creative practices. Many of these practices involved collective cooking, eating and distributing food, an open library, a free-speech station, a mock-marriage hall, as well as dancing, music and performances.

One of these performances, referred to as ‘Standing Man’ by the media, was started by dancer and choreographer Erdem Gündüz and ‘was taken up quickly by a large number of followers’ (Verstraete 2015: 122), later becoming one of the most celebrated and iconic images of the Gezi protests. In his performance, Gündüz stood facing the Atatürk Cultural Center, which was then the main theatre, opera and ballet house of Turkey, on which a flag showing Turkey’s founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was hanging. Gündüz’s passive act of standing drew the attention of passers-by, and ‘this humble gesture of non-violent action’ (Verstraete 2015: 122) soon turned into a major protest. Similar to ‘Standing Man’, there were other creative and collective practices taking place in- and outside the park. One of these examples was ‘rainbow stairs’, which was an anonymous act of painting public stairs in the cities with the colours of the rainbow. The choice of rainbow colours ‘obviously referred to advocacy of LGBT communities in Turkey and was a great instance of solidarity between different groups of people’ (Germen 2015: 18). It was also a clear declaration of visibility
and belonging in a public space for this marginalised community. This performat ive gesture became almost a battle between the people and the municipality, which immediately moved to repaint the stairs grey, only to find the next day that the stairs had been painted with rainbow colours again. These acts signify how the Gezi protests were inspiring different communities in Turkey to assert their presence and demand recognition – to be seen and to be included.

In addition to all these creative acts, a very common and everyday practice in the park was centred around cooking, eating, and sharing food. While among the leftist groups, ‘distribution of food free of charge reflected the ideology of sharing and equal distribution of resources’ (Haksöz 2015: 7), such sharing was also adopted especially by an anti-capitalist Muslim group during Ramadan. Breaking their fast in the park together with other protestors (known as yeryüzü sofrası, or ‘Mother Earth meals’), this act of sharing a religious ritual with others ‘destabilized the conservative AKP government’s claim to be the sole representative of religious practices’ (Ağartan 2018: 211). Furthermore, it also reaffirmed the importance of food for building solidarity and community cohesion.

Witnessing many of these events personally intrigued me for two reasons. First of all, many of these examples were extremely similar to what I had studied years ago as an art student in terms of their creative potential. Yet secondly, what fascinated me more was that they passed beyond the borders of the art institutions and were collectively experienced by thousands of people, who possibly had no previous contact with arts or artistic practice. As stated by Verstraete (2015: 122), some referred it, in a somewhat essential claim, as ‘Turkish people becoming familiar with performance art for the very first time’. As an artist, I could make a link between the protests in the park to certain artistic practices, for example, found objects such as pepper gas cans being on display in the park as if they are in a museum. Just like a ready-made object in art meant that an object could gain another meaning by being shifted from its original context and placed in another, these gas canisters had lost their functional purpose (to disperse the protestors) and instead became artefacts that capture and communicate the brutality of the government and an expression of excessive state power.

Similarly, a construction vehicle belonging to the municipality and originally used for the reconstruction of the park area was painted bright pink by the artist collective KABA HAT, and thereon was turned into a playful sculpture on which people took selfies. Another highly participatory act in the park was the open library serving as a free donation and pick-up point for books in the park. Thus, the park became a space where solidarity,
participation and dialogue became visible, and this became known as ‘Gezi spirit’. At the very same time, all these practices invoked a very strong sense of community and solidarity among heterogeneous groups and attempted to bring back sentiments of community and the close neighbourliness of the past. Yet, this reminder of the past did not necessarily mean romanticizing the earlier days. Rather, the park became a place where new aesthetics of protests were crafted and displayed through fast-pace, dynamic and fluid forms every day.

Still, one can ask, What are the new aesthetics of protest? How does one define them? What I refer to here as ‘aesthetics’ is not a Kantian feeling of pleasure that an aesthetic encounter (see Ryan, this volume) or a ‘visceral sign of underlying harmony’ produce (Kester 2004: 29). I am rather taking ‘dialogue’ and ‘dialogical aesthetics’ as keywords, which will be discussed in the next sections. While doing that, I am also aware that it may appear as an attempt to situate a political uprising in Turkey solely in a context of Western contemporary art theory. However, what I am trying to do here is to determine whether it is possible to form links between socially engaged or participatory art practices and Gezi protests, and to interpret what these common frameworks might uncover about the Gezi protests.

As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded ‘Aesthetics of Protest: Visual Culture and Communication in Turkey’ (hereafter ‘Aesthetics of Protest’) project, in 2017, I curated an exhibition on the theme of neighbourhood and community. The exhibition sought to communicate and sustain the principles and ideas of the Gezi Park protests through collective artistic expression.

Post Gezi: Changing Feelings, Spaces of Resistance

When I joined the ‘Aesthetics of Protest’ team to develop and curate an exhibition on the project theme, I knew clearly what I did not want to do. The exhibition was scheduled for 2017, exactly for four years after the Gezi protests, in a dramatically different political environment, one characterized by increased authoritarianism. I suspected that the hope and idealism engendered by the Gezi protests had given way to a different understanding of people’s relationship with the state, but also with each other. In the subsequent years, the park had survived, but both the physical and political atmosphere around it had changed. Taksim, the cultural centre of Istanbul had turned into a giant shopping area attracting tourists; Erdoğan was no longer the prime minister but the president following the 2014 elections,
which brought ‘a period of extreme polarization, full of uncertainties and tensions’ (Özbudun 2014). Moreover, a failed coup had taken place in the country, leading to a continuing ‘state of emergency’, allowing ‘the Turkish government to restrict or ban gatherings and censor the media’ as well as to purge ‘hundreds of thousands of people from civil service, shutting down critical media organizations, and arresting tens of thousands of suspected members of the opposition’ (Eagan 2018). The optimism and hope embedded in the Gezi spirit, which had emerged in 2013, had not translated into positive political and economic changes. As a result, many people like me, who were the regular inhabitants of the park during the protest, somehow felt a bit deceived; perhaps a bit tired as well, and isolated. The hope and optimism of the park protests had been suppressed by the increasing authoritarianism of the government and, gradually, many people had fallen into a grudging acceptance of the status quo.

Yet, in terms of collective production and solidarity, it was still possible to see the traces of the Gezi protests continuing – though not in Gezi Park, but in other public spaces. The Gezi protests had started as a result of a resistance against the demolition of the park, and had quickly morphed into a political outcry articulated by many disaffected groups. However, there was still a need to protect the existing green spaces of the city as the ‘AKP-led urban transformation had entailed “grounding neoliberalism” in the material environment’ at the cost of the natural environment (Akçalı and Korkut 2015: 82). Branding its projects ‘Çılgın Projeler’ (Crazy projects), the AKP government continued to initiate major infrastructural projects pursuing ‘increasing self-entitlement to privatize public assets’ (Iğsız 2013), including public (and green) spaces.

Still, there were opposition voices. One of the well-known collective projects involving community gardens was against the demolition of Yedikule Vegetable Gardens in the Fatih district of Istanbul. These plots comprised 85,000 m² area of fertile urban farm that has been cultivated since the Ottoman times by the Istanbul metropolitan municipality. If destroyed, ‘the traces of a unique eco-system of houses, barns, gardens and resources of Ottoman agricultural technology [could] have been erased’ (Cihanger and Durusoy 2016: 132). As a reaction, a growing group of gardeners, ecological activists, artists and journalists collaborated to secure the gardeners’ rights to continued use of the land and to conserve the area. Other similar acts included the Kuzguncuk Garden and Roma Garden in Cihangir in Istanbul. Beyond Istanbul, especially in the Black Sea region, locals protested against pervasive hydroelectric plants and other power plants, as well as copper mines, which operated at the expense of the environment. Hence, they
organized against the ‘commoditization of urban and environmental common purposes’ (Özgökçeler and Sevgi 2016: 507). In the Black Sea province of Artvin, for example, protestors staged protests, blocked roads and set up tents, thus earning the moniker ‘junior Gezi’ from Erdoğan. Such persistent collective environmentalism certainly was using the repertoires of Gezi, yet had a distinct communal favour in the sense that ‘the main focus of resistance here was the mine’ (Özgökçeler and Sevgi 2016: 505).

As the environmental protests continued all around Turkey, it was possible to see a similar collective spirit and solidarity through artistic productions as well. Gezi was long gone, yet a group of artists and academics, who had come together under the group name of Turuncu Çadır (which translates as ‘Orange Tent’, literally referring to the orange tent that had become a meeting point for artists during the protests in Gezi Park), were continuing to meet and debate every week in person or online in Facebook groups. Following this, in 2014 and in 2015, some 84 artists came together for an exhibition entitled Stay with Me, in which they reflected on the memories, findings and traces of the Gezi protest. Organized by the artist-run-space Apartment Project, the exhibition took place in Istanbul, Berlin, Amsterdam and Bremen, respectively. The manifesto of the exhibition summarized the feeling that many people were sharing at the moment: ‘This [the Gezi protests] was the hope itself. It was spirit of solidarity, struggle, standing side by side. Then […] nothing changed. We closed back into ourselves. Now, we are just left tired. Is it possible to remember this hope?’

In the exhibition, each artist created a notebook to document, re-enact or comment on their experience from the time of the protest. This was not just remembering what was long gone, but rather an attempt to keep it alive through physical documentation.

Yet, four years after, how would it be possible to remember the feeling of hope? And, most critically, how could an exhibition achieve that? How could an exhibition attempt to bring back the vanishing spirit of solidarity and communal support that was so dominant in the Gezi Park protests? As an artist as well as the appointed curator of the exhibition, I felt that an exhibition to foreground the ‘Aesthetics of Protest’ project should not repeat or reflect on yet again what happened in the park since this would only be a failed attempt to mimic the past. Therefore, rather than looking back, I chose to contribute to the legacy of the Gezi protests, exploring continuing

artistic and communal production. Thus, emerged the idea for *Maybe, We Will Benefit from Our Neighbour’s Good Fortune*, an exhibition on collectivity, community and dialogue. Drawing on the ideas of ‘participatory and community art practices’, I decided to work with artist collectives, and engage them to produce new works on the theme of community, neighbourhood and collectivity, which was something we had all experienced thanks to the principles and ideas of the Gezi Park protests. The hope was to move beyond frustration with the events unfolding in Turkish politics and instead to reinvigorate those sentiments and aspirations that emerged so vividly in the Gezi protests. It was a call to bring back the lost values of traditional neighbourliness through communal artistic production.

**Dialogical Aesthetics**

In order to create the theoretical framework of the exhibition, I started to look into theories and practices of art that revolve around social relations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the French curator Nicholas Bourriaud’s term ‘relational aesthetics’ (1998) was an often-debated approach in contemporary art, which foresaw that social relations could become the centre of an artwork. In his collection of essays under the same name, Bourriaud drew attention to the art of the 1990s, which, he claimed, takes ‘as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an interdependent and private symbolic space’ (Bourriaud 1998: 14).

Although Bourriaud’s concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ (1998) has left a stamp on the period, he was still much criticized by other writers. Notably, art historian Claire Bishop was critical of the essentializing tendency to see a community as a single entity that looked at things from the same perspective, and artworks which she described as creating a ‘fictitious whole subject of harmonious whole community’ (Bishop 2004: 79). Departing in her argument from those found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Bishop suggested that antagonism was essential in a functioning democratic society so that confrontations could provocatively serve as an opening within the democratic public sphere. Referring to Bourriaud’s proposed idea of relations occurring in the gallery space between a group of art dealers or like-minded art lovers, she suggested that it might be interesting to think what would happen if the gallery space was invaded by people who were genuinely seeking asylum.
Moving from Bishop's comments, I began to consider: How can art become instrumental in opening up a democratic sphere with various identities, voices and representations while building up communities with a strong sense of collectivity? How can it allow different voices yet constitute a community? These questions led me into exploring community art practices and collectivity, and thinking of these as transformative tools. Surely the idea was not new; other people such as the famous German artist and teacher Joseph Beuys had once described the term ‘social sculpture’ as a socially engaged art that would ‘mould and shape the world in which we live’ (Beuys 2010: 9). Beuys had also claimed that everyone is an artist. This did not mean that everyone was a painter or a sculptor, but every human being would be participating in the future social order through art, which could have revolutionary characteristics.

Moreover, the artist Suzanne Lacy has also long been working with Beuys's questions and asking how artists could ‘become catalysts for change’ and ‘reposition themselves as citizen-activists’ (Lacy 1994: 8). As an artist, Lacy was also engaged in work in collaboration with the public, and in pointing to different social and political issues since the 1970s. Her work Three Weeks in May (1977), in which she and a group of women made maps indicated where rapes occurred in public spaces in Los Angeles, became instrumental in making these cases heard in the public space by a plethora of performances.

Through looking at these artists’ work, I found myself engaging with the dialogical practices of art in creating communities. The art historian Grant H. Kester formulated the term ‘dialogical aesthetics’, where he wrote aesthetic experience was created as a ‘condition and character of dialogical exchange itself’ (Kester 2004: 4). According to Kester, by creating a dialogue between different segments of communities in societies, artists could enable us to ‘speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse’ (Kester 2004: 2). Kester's ideas on dialogical exchange was extremely critical as for me as it reflected the spirit of Gezi – a space where people from different class, groups and segments could come together and stand side by side as argued above. ‘The plurality of people with different political, religious, ethnic, social, cultural, sexual tendencies yet all pursuing the same notion of freedom was very striking’ (Germen 2015: 18), to illustrate Claire Bishop's 'antagonism', which did not define community as a single identity but rather a group of people with different perspectives. Hence, taking Kester and Bishop as my references, I built an exhibition that I hoped would sustain and nourish the community, collaboration, participation and dialogical aspects of the spirit of Gezi, as well as revive the feeling of communal support and solidarity.
Maybe, We Will Benefit from Our Neighbour’s Good Fortune: An Exhibition on Collectivity

The saying ‘Maybe, we will benefit from our neighbour’s good fortune’ (Komşuda pişer, bize de düşer) in Turkish involves a slight double entendre. It means that the positive circumstances and good fortune of those around us will also hold for us. It also signifies the act of exploiting and creating opportunities for oneself from the good fortune of others. I thought that this old saying, despite the changing dynamics of neighbourhoods in big cities, could present an opportunity to pursue questions by way of an exhibition: Can the new aesthetics of political protests provide the lost values of traditional neighbourliness and at the same time constitute acts of resistance? Can collective production and communality, and a concept of neighbourhood formed around such an understanding, constitute a counter-stance towards oppressive politics? These were the questions that started my research for the exhibition.

As mentioned previously, I am taking dialogue and dialogical aesthetics as a key point in defining aesthetics of protests. But can we consider every dialogue as a democratic conversation? In her article ‘An Introduction to Community Art and Activism’, Jan Cohen-Cruz points that not every community art practice may stem from or lead to a democratic turn. She specifically speaks about Lenin’s embrace of festivals and parades and Hitler’s Nuremberg party rallies to celebrate the values of the Third Reich. Seeing these two examples as a terrifying example of mass art’s capacity to be used to any ends, Cohen-Cruz writes, ‘those rallies stand as a cautionary tale about the dangers of coercive community-based art, actually controlled from above’ (Cohen-Cruz 2002: 2). According to her, although it involves a group of people, it would not be possible to speak of a democratic role in these parades, as they are controlled from a higher position.

Having these questions in mind, I set off to create an exhibition space where heterogeneous groups of people could come together and have a dialogue in which, the works, their creators and the participants could have equal roles instead of a top-to-bottom relationship. Just as the Gezi protests had brought various groups together to exist in the same space almost like neighbours with different ideologies, I wanted to bring different groups of artists and audiences together in the space, yet also allow room in the space for any possible contradictions.

With these questions in mind, I searched for collectives, which included artistic, ecological and academic groups working in Istanbul and beyond, which were also engaged in ideas of community engagement
and neighbourliness. I should underline that the exhibition did not only consist of artistic projects, but also projects and workshops involving the environmental, gastronomic, and theoretical discussions framing them. By working with art and ecological collectives, I hoped that the exhibition would, instead of remembering Gezi, reflect and further the ideas of Gezi into another platform in the light of an exhibition.

The Works

During this research process, I met with many artist, non-artist and academic collectives that were working across different mediums together. Out of these meetings, and through many dialogues on the exhibition’s theme, I decided to focus on three art collectives: Dadans (Istanbul), HAH (Istanbul), and Pelesiyer (Ankara). Each were producing works together for different periods of time. I asked each collective how they reflect upon their own collectivity, how they perceived ‘neighbourhood’ and what they would like to produce in the light of the theme of the exhibition.

Through the process, I regularly met all the collectives to discuss their process and to exchange ideas. I also interviewed each collective on how they perceived collectivity and how it influenced their work. As an artist, I also knew how difficult it could be to produce a piece of work, especially in an art market where a single signature could be worth of millions. I asked each collective how they viewed being a collective. For Dadans, collectivity was ‘something exponentially increasing both in terms of enthusiasm and in terms of the quality of the work’ and therefore it was quite motivating. For HAH, which was a group of six people, collectivity was also a question they often asked themselves: ‘What can we bring out from standing side by side instead of being a single subject?’ And for Pelesiyer, a collective of four people who met at art school, it ‘was being a single entity like a human being’. These interviews later became part of the exhibition together with another film, which spoke about the curatorial process.

For the final works in the exhibition, Dadans took on the topic of listening to one’s neighbour through the walls and constructed a performance. Members of Dadans placed a drinking glass on the body on another member and described the memories emanating from the body part where the glass

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
was placed. After that, they placed the glasses on the bodies of randomly selected audience members and asked them to do the same. As the audience members started to speak, the room became a place where very personal and mostly body-related experiences and stories were shared among the audience. The performance thus became an open dialogue, where one could open up private memories, yet without necessarily waiting to be answered.

HAH and Pelesiyer also created participatory works. HAH came up with an installation covering almost an entire floor in which small pieces of paper and pencils were hung from the ceiling. On each piece of paper one found either a question or an answer. Participants were asked to complete the work by either answering a question or writing a new question for the next person. Some of the written questions were: ‘Do you consider the stray dog or cat on the street more of your neighbour than your actual neighbour?’ ‘Is your best friend also your neighbour?’ and ‘What would unhappiness be if it was a space?’ Answers included: ‘I used to have a chicken when I was a child. It was called Çanta (Bag). I really miss it’ and ‘The answer is more difficult than existence. It depends on where you are at the moment.’ Thus, the final installation became a continuous dialogue process between people who did not know each other and who communicated and exchanged ideas only through their writing, making the piece literally the signifier of dialogical aesthetics.
Finally, Pelesiyer made an eatable artwork, for which members of the collective collected flour from their neighbours in Ankara in advance of the Istanbul workshop and made a 1.5 meter-long loaf of bread that was quickly consumed during the opening event. This was quite a critical work for the exhibition as it reflected the whole process of making and sharing food together in the park. The fact that the final outcome (the bread) was consumed on the opening night by the visitors was also a bonding experience for everyone. In Dadans’s performance, the oral stories were shared; in HAH’s installation, the writings were shared; and in Pelesiyer’s it was an item of food that brought everyone together.

The exhibition did not only include artworks. I wanted to use the space to include other means of production, sharing and discussion revolving around art, ecology and food. With this in mind, I met with the members of the Istanbul Permaculture Collective, who were interested in the theme of the exhibition. Together with them, we decided to organize two DIY workshops to take place during the exhibition, one focused on cultivating one’s own garden at home, and one on making one’s own bread with organic ingredients. During the opening exhibition, we also cooked and shared two giant pots of rice and beans with the visiting audience, thus literally sharing what we produced.

There were two other collectives who contributed to the framework with different perspectives. The first, Artık İşler, a video collective, screened
their work *The Waste of Istanbul*, which made us consider the relationship between collective production and collective waste. The second significant collective involved was Birbuçuk, a group of culture professionals who practice dialogue as a form of artistic production: they organize talks as their works. Together with other experts they invited, we organized an open discussion one day around a lunch table on the politics of food. This was our closing event and it wrapped up the whole exhibition. We ate, listened, spoke, discussed and left the space with not just the memories of our dialogues but with ideas on how to move forward. This was exactly the spirit of Gezi, a collaborative experience where you could form dialogues with people from all over the country, participate in forums, eat together at the same table, and be interactive and creative. As I mentioned earlier, our idea was never to repeat what happened in Gezi or show its documents, but indeed to sustain its spirit and ideas with new forms. We realized this through the exhibition.

Before I turn to my reflection on the exhibition, I would like to make two points about the location of the exhibition space. After a long search, we decided to hold the exhibition in a non-profit space, one dedicated to furthering the interests of its neighbourhood and very open to inviting and working with people living there. Thus came our connection to the Halka Art Project, an art space on the Asian side of Istanbul, which was very much dedicated to community art projects and was the right location for us due to its openness to raise, work on and collaborate on issues regarding the needs of the local community. Finding an exhibition space on the Asian side of Istanbul was also important for a second reason. The fifteenth Istanbul Biennial was taking place that year on a similar theme, ‘A Good Neighbour’, and it was mainly taking place on the European side of the city. This contrast – and perhaps ‘neighbourliness’ – made the two exhibitions stand side by side both thematically and geographically.

**Reflection**

This chapter is written almost one year after the exhibition and in a very different political context. On 24 June 2018, Turkey voted, yet again, to return Erdoğan as president, which marks ‘the official break with a parliamentary democracy that Turkey has maintained for over half a century, giving way to a presidential republic’ (Eagan 2018). Right before the elections, on 30 May

---

2018, Istanbul’s iconic Atatürk Cultural Center, which acted as one of the focal points of the Gezi protests, was demolished.\(^7\) Exactly opposite of this space, a new mosque is being built as the new cultural icon of the Taksim area, significantly marking the change happening both symbolically and physically. Yet, in such an area of continuous oppression and precarity of human rights, how can one continue to speak of resistance, or rather, can resistance ever take shape of different forms of protest? By embracing the aesthetics of socially engaged, participatory and dialogical art forms, I tried to build an exhibition that would sustain the ideas of Gezi protest in the form of artistic works, and thus see whether we could in this way continue to sustain the ideas of hope and solidarity.

Evaluating the outcome of an exhibition or its effects on community is neither a quantitative or qualitative task, therefore it is hard to judge by academic methods. As Tom Finkelpearl (2014: 6) writes, in talking about participatory art and its aesthetics, it can be even more difficult while ‘agreeing on aesthetic criteria remains particularly difficult in the light of the diversity of practices and the fact that the aesthetic, ethical, and social values can be diametrically opposed’. Sometimes, a work of art could also be re-evaluated or gain new meaning after several years.

The case of *Maybe, We Will Benefit from Our Neighbour’s Good Fortune* was certainly an exhibition towards building a community producing, sharing, discussing and consuming artistic, ecological, dialogical and culinary experiences. By taking the ideas of dialogue-based, participatory art practices, and linking them to an environmentally conscious political protest and its values such as collaboration and collectivity, we tried to see whether it would be possible to sustain these values in an artistic context and thus sustain hope for the future. Even though the qualitative outcome was never a goal, more than a thousand participants visited the exhibition, around a hundred people joined our workshops and discussions, and there was even more visibility on social media. In an environment where freedom of expression is extremely limited and the right to protest is almost banned, the exhibition searched for ways of sustaining hope and solidarity through the aesthetic values of Gezi and in artistic practice. Even though the acts of cooking, eating and gardening may seem like simple daily tasks, in an atmosphere of censorship, they served as tools for the artists and participants to come together and support each other in a safe exhibition space.

When it comes to an actual change of political climate, it is hard to make a clear judgement on what will happen soon. As artists, academics, and culture professionals continue to work with what they have, they also face harsher changes and implementations. In such an age of precarity, it seems unlikely to expect grand gestures as protest. Still, could the sole act of coming together through art collectives be considered as resistance? And what if these acts also come together and grow, just like the hundreds of people standing on a square together? Can we create new communities with new values and at the same time be neighbours again in full solidarity? As hopefully similar practices continue to exist, such questions will unfold in time.

References


uploads/2015/03/Participatory_Art-Finkelpearl-Encyclopedia_Aesthetics.pdf. Accessed 25.03.19.


About the Author

İşıl Eğrikavuk is an artist whose work focuses on performance art and community art practices. She has been an Assistant Professor at Berlin University of Arts since October 2017. Her current PhD research investigates artistic acts, performance and collectivity in relationship to political protests. For the ‘Aesthetics of Protest’ project, she curated an exhibition in Istanbul in 2017 titled Maybe, We Will Benefit from Our Neighbour’s Good Fortune.