# CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios
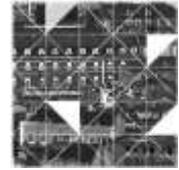
Towards a solidary form of publicness: circulation of cultural assets between alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul and their micro public(s)

Gökçe Sanul[1], Centre for Urban Studies, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Abstract

One of the world's mega cities, Istanbul, is changing drastically with the neoliberal and conservative policies transforming its public spaces and sociocultural fabric in contested ways. These changes require stimulating reflections on the formation of new public spheres. This paper approaches this problematic through a focus on the ways in which alternative cultural organizations in Beyoğlu – the cultural hub of Istanbul – create new forms of publicness.

Drawing on a comprehensive empirical research, this paper argues for a solidary form of publicness developing in and through alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul via the circulation of cultural assets. This particular form stimulates thinking about publicness as circulation, going beyond the over-simplistic idea of the physical togetherness of people in one particular place. Instead, it aims to reconceptualize publicness through the solidarity relations of alternative cultural organizations and their micro public(s) and to observe the formation of multiple (counter) public spheres as an emergent infrastructure of circulation connecting different sites, people and media across cultural spaces.

Keywords: Solidarity networks, publicness, circulation, cultural organizations, Istanbul.

Introduction

As in any major city in the world, neoliberal policies are dramatically changing Istanbul. Underlying the recent surge in public-private partnerships is the ambition of public authorities to transform Istanbul into a global city by boosting the tourism and construction sectors; as well as through culture-led regeneration projects, inevitably changing socio-spatial fabric of public spaces. More specifically, the historical binary between secular and Islamist

imaginaries continues to shape Istanbul's public spaces in contested ways. In pursuing both imaginaries, authoritarian tendencies have also been an integral part of shaping public spaces in the context of Istanbul. Observing the intersection and conflict in this binary relationship within a neoliberal and authoritarian context, therefore, stimulates elaborating on the changes in public spaces and tracing the formation of new public spheres more than ever.

As Frank Eckardt (2008) points out, the problem with the concept of 'public space' is that it derives from theoretical and empirical considerations "which neglect the multi-faceted dimensions of cities like Istanbul: complex, diverse, multi-layered, antagonistic and overlapping, homogeneous and heterogeneous and everything at the same time, the same place" (Eckardt, 2008: 17). Therefore, if we examine the micro-spatial units of this seemingly contested city, allowing the complexity of its spatio-cultural and/or socio-political dynamics shaping its public spaces to breathe the heady air of possibility, a much more rewarding method of tracing Istanbul's new public spheres opens up.

In this paper, the examination of these complex dynamics of public spaces is undertaken through an empirical focus on alternative cultural organizations emerged in the 2010s in the field of contemporary arts. In the near absence of public funding, private money supporting the contemporary arts has played an important role throughout modern Turkish history and in a context of military coups, authoritarian politics and censorship. These privately funded initiatives have always also been considered providers of a relatively autonomous space at a distance from state repression. While the mission of privately funded contemporary arts was previously considered to be educating masses in line with secularization, recently the role of the contemporary arts has been directed towards engaging with wider social questions towards a more alternative stance, a position which also informs the concerns of the cultural organizations examined in this paper (Zizlsperger, 2019).

In the 1990s, Turkey's cultural history acquired a special meaning due to the phenomenon of conflict with Turkish modernization which, in the case of Turkey, refers to Westernization (Kahraman, 2008). The cultural sector played a specific role in this process, by adopting a more liberal approach; moving away from traditional alliances, and breaking ties with bureaucracy and the army. In this socio-political context of the 1990s, some cultural organizations clearly started to problematize the concept of modernization, and to search for alternative institutional definitions and missions that better aligned with the socio-spatial reality of a rapidly changing and diversifying Istanbul. As part of from this tradition, three cultural organizations, namely SALT, DEPO and Alternative Theatre stages will be examined in this paper by asking in what ways they create a new form of publicness and what is the new form of publicness developing in and through these cultural organizations.

When discussing the ability of contemporary art to shape public spaces in an emancipatory way, the idea of reclaiming public spaces through artistic and cultural interventions has been associated with the accessibility of artists/activists to some material spaces, defined as streets, squares or parks (Minty, 2006; Beyes, 2010; Smith, 2013; Hou, 2010; Abaza, 2013; Buser et. al., 2013) Although this literature revealing diverse cases across the globe – from Cairo to Vienna, from Cape Town to Bristol – enriched our conceptual vocabulary to extend the limits of the given meanings of 'publicness', it has remained limited to certain physical spatialities. I aim to go beyond these spatial limitations by referring to Iveson's (2007) conceptualization of publicness as the circulation of ideas, claims, expressions and objects. I believe that broadening our understanding through the case of Istanbul's alternative cultural organizations will be useful for multiplying the meanings of publicness in the contexts where neoliberal policies merge with conservative and authoritarian tendencies.

In this sense, our second section will revisit the concept of 'counter public sphere', which emerged through criticism of the Habermasian concept of public sphere. I will then specifically focus on Iveson's understanding of publicness as circulation, which enables the discovery of new forms of publicness by diversifying our spatial imaginaries on public spaces. The article's third section is dedicated to a detailed description of the context of Istanbul, focusing in particular on the contested ways in which broader societal ideologies in Turkey – such as Westernization and modernization – and the rise of political Islam have shaped public debates and spaces in the last decades. I will then move in the fourth section to discuss in depth my research methodology, including how case study methodology informed concrete steps of data collection and analysis. After describing the case studies in the fifth section, I will deepen my empirical analysis and discuss throughout the sixth section how the circulation

of tangible as well as intangible cultural assets enables a solidary form of publicness to arise in and through alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul. The last section will point out further direction of research to conceptualize solidary publicness.

Conceptualizing new forms of publicness

In this paper, the conceptualization of a new form of publicness is linked to the debates engaging with public spaces in a procedural sense rather than its topographical conceptions. While procedural approaches indicate the formation of common action in any space, topographical approaches offer an understanding of a city as a network of physical sites that serve as a stage for public representation and visibility (Iveson 2007) Accordingly, reflections proposed by geographer Kurt Iveson offer inciting first thoughts to conceptualize new forms of publicness. He underlines two problematics of the dominant tendencies in urban studies to analyse public spaces in cities. The first one is the equation of the idea about being part of the public with claiming rights over material public spaces defined as streets, squares or parks. His quote below has been an important guide, enabling me to go beyond the spatial limitations of the publicness:

> To frame our analysis of public urban geographies with reference to topographical conceptions of public space
> is to blinker our vision – such analyses start by paying attention only to particular places (those places that are
> or ought to be 'public space') and then asking about their accessibility – are they open to all? (Iveson, 2007:
> 207).

The second one is the equation of state with publicness. Knowing that the abovementioned public spaces are regulated by public authorities, Iveson's thoughts are of critical importance to diversify our understanding about publicness. He articulates the importance of distinguishing "between the state and the public, and to be wary of conceptions of the public interests that fail to acknowledge the fundamental diversity of urban inhabitants" (Iveson, 2007: 41). In this respect, he proposes an urban imaginary that is well aligned "with the visions of a heterogeneous public sphere."

This is where I suggest a partial return to Jürgen Habermas' 'public sphere' concept, which allows us to pursue new forms of publicness. According to Habermas (1993), 'the public sphere' in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion, it put the state in touch with the needs of society. Let me further explore his ideas on 'literary publics', which could conceptually contribute to my analysis about the publicness of the alternative cultural organizations that revolve around the intersections of cultural, spatial and socio-political forms of thinking. As Meral Özbek (2004) summarizes, members of bourgeois society during the seventeenth and eighteenth-century in Europe who produced critiques of philosophy, literature and art, constitute 'literary publics', which were distinct from the dominant order of the Church and the State (Özbek, 2004: 48). Özbek (2004: 40) therefore interprets the Habermasian public sphere as a spatial concept where ideas, expressions and experiences are produced, shared and negotiated in social life, which in turn consists of processes, infrastructures, cultures, institutions, relationship practices, rules and ways of interacting, as well as spaces and times and their transformations.

Habermas' public sphere concept has been an influence for many scholars from diverse disciplines to broaden its scope towards counter public spheres. With her concept of 'subaltern counterpublics', Fraser notes that this historiography demonstrates that the bourgeois public was never the public. Instead, she argues, "virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including, nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics and working-class publics" (Fraser, 1990: 61).

Moreover, what makes this concept important for the current paper can be seen in the reflections of Geoff Eley and the way in which he defines the Habermasian public sphere. Eley stresses how Habermas' public sphere concept can be used as a framework that enables us to look for politics in other social places. This is why Eley believes that the usefulness of this concept is "about opening up a space (…) to talk about politics without it being

subsumed in the conventional institutional understanding of how politics occur (…) as located in the political process narrowly understood – parties, legislatures, government" (Eley, 2002: 232).

Tracing these 'other social spaces', I now suggest reorienting our conceptual interest towards Iveson's stimulating thoughts, introducing a conceptualization of the 'counter public sphere' through which normative understandings of 'public space' can be questioned. In doing so, he prompts us to critically engage with the public/private distinction through the shift of its boundary by changing some socio-spatial norms and thus allowing more space for urban diversity. As previously stated, in creating these counter public spheres, Iveson (2007) attaches importance to going solely beyond the association of public spaces with physical material spaces such as streets, parks or squares. Moreover, he highlights posters on the street, a notice left in a bookshop window and texts, mobilizing them to represent a variety of urban sites as venues for different kinds of publicness by establishing scenes of circulation (Iveson, 2007: 32-34). This argumentation highlights the co-existence of co-present action taking place on stages of the city and in mediated on-screen interactions. Therefore, Iveson (2007) argues that his investigation into the geographies of publicness demonstrates that those engaged in making a public space often combine actions on stage, in print and on screen in crafting scenes of circulation. Accordingly, making a public space is "to construct a scene through which ideas, claims, expressions and the objects through which they are articulated can circulate to others" (Iveson, 2007: 3). This very idea of the circulation of ideas, claims, expressions and objects will be a key analytical tool in this paper to examine new forms of publicness through alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul.

Contested public spaces of Istanbul

In order to investigate new forms of publicness in the context of Istanbul, above all, we must understand the debates on public spaces throughout the modern Turkish history and attach due importance to the role of the secular/Islamist binary in shaping public spaces. The conflict between these two ideologies, secular and Islamist, can be traced back to the formation of Istanbul's public spaces following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Having undergone a modernization process beginning in 1923 by way of 'authoritarian secularism', Turkey represents an intriguing example of a "project of modernity even in an overwhelmingly Muslim country" (Bozdoğan and Kasaba, 1997: 4). Accordingly, emerging problems as a result of the shift from an Ottoman/Islamic culture to a Western culture led to 'societal disorder' in Turkey (Kongar, 1989), and the cleavage of these cultural positions formed the basis of Turkish politics (Yavuz, 2000).

In the post-1990 era, Turkey's cultural history acquired a special meaning due to the phenomenon of conflict with Turkish modernization which, in the case of Turkey, refers to Westernization (Kahraman, 2008). Islamists formed a counter-hegemonic force against the prevailing Kemalist ideology by making Islam more visible in the public space (Göle, 2006). The conflict over headscarves constituted a significant part of the debates about private versus public spaces. Moreover, the attempt to build a mosque in Taksim/Beyoğlu, a district known as the showcase of the modern face of Istanbul, turned into a major battlefield within the discourse of the 're-conquest' of the city introduced by the Welfare Party in 1994 after its election victories (Bora, 1999; Bartu, 2001).

However, Islamists were not the only group who contested authoritarian secularism. Following the military coup of 12 September 1980 and despite the anti-democratic constitution, a crucial characteristic of this post-1990 period was the rise of the civil society and civic consciousness in Turkish public life, during which a critical stance towards the authoritarian tendencies of the state have been developed by highlighting human rights. In parallel with this civic consciousness, a new mindset has emerged within the contemporary art scene in Istanbul. As stated by Zizlsperger (2019: 20) "One of the main themes in Turkish art of the 1990s was the challenge of racial nationalism, militaristic culture and national identity" in addition to "problems such as rural-urban migration, the integration problems (…) substance addiction, lack of education and domestic violence." Moreover, contemporary arts have played an important role throughout modern Turkish history and in a context of military coups, authoritarian politics and censorship, these privately funded initiatives have always also been considered as providing a relatively autonomous space at a distance from state repression. For instance, the first Istanbul

Biennial, organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts in 1987 was one of the contemporary art events which opened the way into the autonomy of art production (Madra, 2008).

In the 2000s, on the one hand political Islam secured its presence with the victory of the AKP in the 2002 parliamentary elections. With the party's subsequent triumphs in 2007, 2011 and 2015, public spaces continued to be shaped along neoliberal and conservative lines. The cultural policies of the AKP government, stated by Aksoy and Şeyben (2015), shifted to a conservative, religious position supported by the imaginary of neo-Ottomanism, producing a counter-cultural project in the face of the Westernization imaginary developed by the secular Republican project. This shift has deeply influenced debates on public spaces and spheres. On the other hand, contemporary art in Istanbul peaked during the first decade of the 2000s and could easily be seen as representative of a period during which economic interests, cultural policies and the intentions of curators and artists aligned to successfully market Istanbul as a member of the league of global cities. Meanwhile, the same period that indicates the rise of the privatization of arts prompted the spread of privately funded cultural institutions in Beyoğlu.

However, the turbulent times that began after the Gezi Park protests in 2013, and continued with various terrorist attacks and the attempted coup in 2016 have resulted in many of the contemporary art spaces closing, moving to other neighbourhoods or even relocating abroad. During this period, there have been several restrictions for artists and activists for expressing themselves in public spaces such as streets, parks and squares. In a context where public spaces are closed in line with increasingly authoritarian tendencies, in this paper, I will focus on alternative cultural organizations which contain promises of creating new forms of publicness despite these closures.

As Özbek (2004) argues, the debate on the public sphere produces rousing disputations about political legitimization. It is the conflict and its conclusions that force the fabric of public spheres to change. Accordingly, the Gezi Park protests contributed to an increasing interest in scholarly debates about public spheres in Istanbul (Göle, 2013; Inceoglu, 2015). Beginning as a protest by a small group of environmentalists against the removal of trees from a park in an area scheduled for development by the government, the Gezi Park Protests of June 2013 shaped the debates on public spheres regarding the tremendous solidarity and collectivity between disparate segments of Turkish society, such as secularists and Islamists. Likewise, we can observe in literature that the process started in Gezi has paved the way for the development of new socio-spatial concepts by prominent scholars from Turkey. The most influential notion for this research has been Berna Turam's (2015) 'zones of freedom', who explores the ways in which urban spaces are shaped by political contestations. Conducting research in highly divided urban sites such as university campuses, Islamic art scenes, and neighbourhoods in Istanbul, Turam revealed the ways in which some urban spaces reproduce power and thus overcome the predetermined narrative about the secular/Islamist clash. This work has enriched my perspective to approach contestations over public spaces and extract new meanings from them. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on cultural organizations whose alternativeness are associated with their mindset that 1) challenges the historical secular/Islamist binary and 2) embraces the diversity of the urban population. Let me introduce below my methodology to study three alternative cultural organizations.

Studying new forms of publicness

To conduct this research, I used a case study methodology, which offers an effective way to link qualitative research with urban research. As Muir (2008) argues, case study often has a spatial focus, is suitable for examining a contemporary phenomenon, and allows the use of multiple research methods with qualitative bias. Given that the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul has been the hub for spatio-cultural changes and contestations over public spaces and contemporary arts organizations, it provided a clear spatial focus, which makes case study research suitable. Second, considering the contemporaneity of the phenomenon that is investigated, a case study methodology was also an advantage in conducting this research. Third, I combined several qualitative methods of data collection, which enabled me to gather and analyse the cultural actors' points of view in order to discover socially constructed meaning (Blaikie, 2000). This very qualitative bias also requires providing substantial descriptions of the research context "where values shaped by history, politics and culture can be complex and contested" (Muir, 2008: 107). In my analysis, I investigated new forms of publicness in relation to the historical context in which alternative

cultural organizations of Istanbul are embedded. More specifically, I examined these forms in relation to older and mainstream forms of public spaces and cultural institutions.

This research has its preliminary roots in the informal observations that I made concerning the change in Beyoğlu's public spaces during the period when I was living in Istanbul and actively participating in its cultural life, between 2005 and 2013. The fact that Beyoğlu has witnessed a rapid transformation over the last two decades, leading to the closure or relocation of various cultural organizations, made this area particularly relevant to research from the perspective of new forms of publicness. In contrast to other cultural organizations located in Beyoğlu and operating without public funding, SALT, DEPO and Alternative Theatre stages seemed to lack organizational or even communicative relations with public authorities. Therefore, my case study selection was based on the assumption that these organizations experience more contestation and are more prone to censorship and closures, but are also more involved than other organizations in experimenting with new forms of publicness. The cases, in other words, were selected on the basis of their being 'most likely' to generate information that is expected to confirm my hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Hence, my cases are not 'representative', but better understood as 'critical cases' that have a strategic importance in relation to the overall research problematic of new forms of publicness as highlighted in this paper.

While adopting a case study methodology, in-depth interviews were the major method of data gathering. I designed semi-structured interviews of approximately two hours. I would like to highlight that my interviewees had different experiences, coming from the visual arts and performing arts sectors. Because of these differences, the interview questions changed according to the direction of the conversation, while at the same time maintaining a focus on the general themes. These themes were: i) organizational/institutional practices (foundation details, founding members, funding tactics); ii) relationships with other actors (public authorities, private funders and peers); and iii) creation of new public practices (aesthetico-political content, tactics in space uses, users' profile). My process of interviewing was a dynamic one, during which meaning was produced by the active involvement of the respondents. I used 'active interviewing' through which I – as the interviewer – and the respondent tried to create together a meaning from the conversation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1988). As Cochrane states, "the importance of recognizing the interview as a relationship between interviewer and interviewee, jointly producing knowledge, is fundamental here (Cochrane, 2014: 41).

Interview transcripts constitute my most essential dataset. A first round of in-depth interviews was conducted with 38 people from various cultural organizations, including people associated with SALT and DEPO in the period from March to September 2015, enabling me to gain a deeper insight into the contemporary art scene. Following this first round of interviews, which facilitated my analysis of organizational dynamics, relations with public authorities, characteristics of the cultural and spatial infrastructures, and interaction with the locality of SALT and DEPO, a second round of interviews was conducted with ten people from SALT and DEPO in January 2016. These interviews focused on substantive reflections on the content of the exhibitions and public events, as well as the social relations between actors in their networks. Additionally, in-depth interviews were held with twenty people from the private theatre scene of Istanbul, including 14 participants in the Alternative Theater Joint Initiative.

Although my target group were the founders/creators of the SALT, DEPO and Alternative Theatre stages, I have also used an ethnographic data gathering method, namely participant observation, to deepen my understanding about 'the micro public' of these cultural organizations. My acquaintance with Alternative Theatre began in 2010, when I discovered Kumbaracı 50 and began attending their productions. In turn, I discovered that there was a network of Alternative Theatre stages, with productions that I began to attend. In these cultural spaces I had theatre experiences that I had never encountered before. The content of their plays, their use of space and the unconventional stages, where we as the audience and they as performers were in very close proximity, made these theatres a touchstone of my cultural life in Istanbul. However, once I clarified my research topic, my position vis-à-vis these organizations changed. To establish a separation point between the activities and performances I attended as an audience member and those I attended during my fieldwork process, I structured the fieldwork carefully. I participated in five Alternative Theatre performances, I observed, took notes and photos about how the audience reacted to discussions either before or after the plays. The fieldwork also reflected on my perceptions about the use of space and the interaction of the audience with the physical theatre.

I knew SALT Beyoğlu from my master's studies, so it was only natural that I visited its exhibitions or participated in the screening of performances from time to time during my fieldwork. However, my real acquaintance with SALT Galata only started during my doctorate fieldwork, when the SALT research library became a place where I worked on a daily basis. My familiarity with this space enabled me to observe the other people who used the library, the interaction between space and users, and the relationship between this particular space and other areas of SALT Galata, such as the exhibition spaces, the Ottoman Museum or the cafe. Because I was not as familiar with events at DEPO as I was with Alternative Theatre and SALT, I spent a good deal of time familiarizing myself with this organization. When I went to this space for interviews, I also visited their exhibitions and took photos and notes.

Grasping new meanings

Regarding the data analysis, I suggest that qualitative approaches to social network and content analysis, as well as combining these methods with narrative analysis, are useful with regard to examining new forms of publicness in a contested urban context.

I formed thematic lines by conducting narrative analysis through which I indicated notions of publicness, circulation and solidarity. The thematic lines emerging out of this narrative analysis are used to qualitatively analyse social networks and contents. Herein, the social network analysis for SALT and DEPO relied on the social relations between SALT, DEPO, Alternative Theatre stages and other actors from their networks in and outside of Istanbul. The literature on social network analysis highlights the importance of defining "the relationship among the set of social actors" (Robins, 2015: 19). Therefore, my primary intention was to understand the relationships among those actors. This is why, during my interviews, I asked which organizations they collaborated with or had the support of. In this way, I adopted an 'event-based approach' to defining the boundaries of the network, and looked for organizations that collaborate or that support key events.

Alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul: SALT, DEPO and Alternative Theatre

The cultural organizations that are at the core of the analysis in this paper can be understood as being part of the tradition emerged in the 1990s, as they aim to reveal the diversity of the urban population and to bring forth critical perspectives of Turkish modernization. Let me introduce the three organizations which will generate interesting insights on new forms of publicness. More clearly, an understanding about their aesthetic-political content, their use of space and their funding tactics may enable us to reflect on new forms of publicness and to take the first step for conceptualizing a solidary form of publicness throughout the next sections.

SALT, a non-profit cultural organization founded in 2011 by Garanti Bank, opened with the initiative of prominent Turkish curator Vasıf Kortun. The mission of SALT is described as exploring critical and timely issues in visual and material culture and cultivates innovative programs for research and experimental thinking. It operates in two different buildings in Beyoğlu. SALT Beyoğlu, located in a 19th century building on Istiklal Avenue, the longest pedestrianized street of Istanbul, and consisting of an exhibition space, archival space, cafe, bookshop, open cinema, and an open garden. Its location influenced the physical design of the building, whose ground floor plan forms a continuation of Istiklal Avenue, signaling its openness to the public (see Figure 1). However, SALT Beyoğlu was closed between 2015 and 2018 due to licensing issues.

Figure 1. The entrance of SALT Beyoğlu located in Istiklal Avenue

Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2015.

The second building, called SALT Galata, is located on the Banks Street in the Karaköy district and hosts an auditorium, the renovated Ottoman Bank Museum, workshop spaces, cafe, and a bookstore (see Figure 2). More importantly, it hosts SALT Research, which consists of print and digital resources open to the public, an open archive. Going beyond this project, it has become a working space for the students from the neighbourhood and another floor has also opened for library users.

Figure 2. The entrance of SALT Galata located on the Banks Street, Karaköy

Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2015.

DEPO is a relatively small cultural centre, which defines itself as a space for culture, arts and critical debate. It lies in the Istanbul city centre and aims to meet the needs of Istanbul's culture and art scene for non-commercial, independent spaces open to voices that offer critical critique over the historical and current issues regarding Turkey and neighbouring countries. It was founded by Osman Kavala, who is also the founder of Anadolu Kultur, an NGO aiming to create dialogue between different ethnic, religious and regional groups through culture and arts. Besides being the head of Kavala Group Companies since 1982, Kavala took place in the founding committees of Turkish Audiovisual Cinema Foundation, Foundation to Fight Soil Erosion, and Helsinki Citizens Associations. Being a contested figure in Turkish cultural politics, in 2013 Kavala was appointed to integrate a wise men commission composed of 63 renown individuals in order to reshape public opinion on the peace process and the Kurdish issue (Cevik and Seib, 2015). However, in parallel with the changing political conjuncture following the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and failed coup attempt in 2016, Kavala was accused of being among the organizers of Gezi Park protests. He has been imprisoned since November 2017 under charges of "attempting to abolish the constitutional order" and "attempting to remove the government of the Turkish Republic" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017). DEPO is located in the Tophane neighborhood of Beyoğlu, where it occupies an old tobacco warehouse that was inherited by the family of Osman Kavala. This building was first used as an exhibition space during the 9th Istanbul Biennial. After a renovation process, the DEPO team settled there in 2009 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The entrance of DEPO located at Tophane
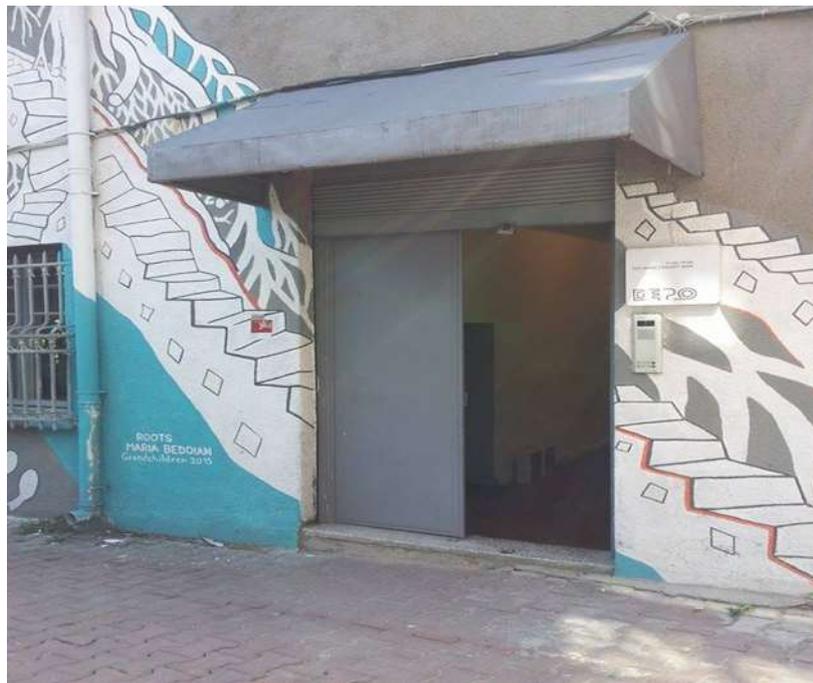
Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2015.

Finally, Alternative Theatre stages are independent groups using experimental approaches to dramaturgy, playwriting and staging. The pioneers of the Alternative Theatre of Istanbul are from a 1980s generation who suffered the oppression brought about by the Military Coup period and established their independent theatre groups in the 1990s, settling in the Beyoğlu district in the 2000s. They are located in the back streets and transform nonconventional theatre spaces like an apartment, a pool hall, a bakery or a textile atelier into 'black box' stages which are known as a large square room with black walls and a flat floor. Their seating capacity is between 50-150 people (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. An example of a black box stage from Kumbaracı 50

Because the stage sets are minimal and easily movable, the chairs can be folded out and the seats are unnumbered. This non-traditional approach also extends to their funding strategies. Unlike SALT and DEPO, they don't have a specific, regular donor. Instead, they operate with the support of small amounts from individual contributors as well as by investing money from other jobs. This 'mixed funding' strategy has been a key contributing factor to the spread of alternative spaces across Istanbul in the 2010s (Sanul and Van Heur, 2016). Additionally, they formed a joint initiative of Alternative Theatre in 2011 in order to find collective solutions for their common problems with financing and location as well as to increase their audience numbers. What makes the plays of the Alternative Theatre stages specific is their articulation of the stories of a wider range of urban populations, which are usually not visible in public theatres or in the commercial private theatres, including the stories of Kurds, LGBT, and Muslim women with headscarves (Başar, 2014: 180).

Towards a solidary form of publicness

While discussing the role of the secular/Islamist binary as well as authoritarian tendencies in shaping public spaces throughout the modern Turkish history, I shed light on the new mindset of civic consciousness that emerged in the 1990s, which laid the foundations for the alternative cultural scene in Istanbul. From this alternative scene, I argue that a new form of publicness has been developed by challenging the traditional secular/Islamist binary and providing space for urban diversity. In this section, I will therefore deepen my empirical analysis of 3 alternative cultural organizations, namely SALT, DEPO and Alternative Theatre.

My findings show that a solidary network is developed between alternative cultural organizations and their micro (public) in two ways: 1) through the circulation of tangible cultural assets and 2) through the circulation of intangible cultural assets. Based on these findings, I will show how an understanding of publicness as circulation of cultural assets gives birth to a solidary form of publicness.

Publicness as circulation

As introduced in the conceptual framework, the basis of this understanding of publicness as circulation stems from the conceptualization of counter-public spheres by Iveson, who defines public creation as "to construct a scene through which ideas, claims, expressions and the objects through which they are articulated can circulate to others" (Iveson, 2007: 3). Adapting this line of thinking to my empirical analysis, I use tangible cultural assets instead of objects; and intangible cultural assets instead of ideas, expressions and claims. The very circulation of these assets will enable me first to reveal the network of solidarity between alternative cultural organizations and their micro public(s). Second, this solidarity network will provide a basis for conceptualizing a solidary form of publicness.

a.   Circulation of tangible cultural assets

My empirical findings enabled me to associate 'objects' with tangible assets which indicate physical assets used by the cultural organizations, such as books, furniture, technical equipment and/or digital sources. The first remarkable example of this kind of circulation occurs between SALT and Robinson Crusoe 389, a bookstore that was forced to move from its premises on Istiklal Avenue due to increasing rent costs. After SALT made the decision to provide the bookstore with space in their building, patrons of Robinson Crusoe 389 formed a human chain to carry the books hand-by-hand to the fourth floor of SALT Beyoğlu (Sanul and Van Heur, 2018: 811) (see Figures 5a and 5b).

Figure 5a. Rob 389 Hand to hand 15 June 2014

Photo credit: SALT Research, 2015. Photograph by Mustafa Hazneci.

Figure 5b. Rob 389 Hand to hand 15 June 2014

Photo credit: SALT Research, 2015.Photograph by Mustafa Hazneci.

Another evidence from SALT is the project called SALT Research, which offers free library facilities. This example shows us the circulation of books, library facilities as well as digital sources among users. Here is how an interviewee from SALT shares her thoughts addressing this idea of circulation:

> All the people using SALT are part of it so that they are even able to touch it. This is why we consider 'user' a keyword and we don't chose to define these people as visitors. I think even an ordinary person who enters SALT Beyoğlu just for using its toilet is its user. But surely SALT Research has a different user profile as it involves researchers. A difference between a library user and an ordinary passerby using SALT's toilet is that in exchange for the thing that we are offering, we expect to have more productive questions from them depending on the material that they use. I mean we expect that these materials will turn into a thesis or an exhibition.

> (Interview with the associate director of SALT, 20 March 2015)

Let me strengthen this idea of circulation with empirical evidences from the case of Alternative Theatre. As shown below, the Facebook call by a theatre group (Tiyatro Hal) announcing a performance which was organized for helping Van, a city in south-eastern Turkey, after an earthquake, is another good example of the circulation of tangible assets.

> It is very cold…. If you are coming to our plays before February 10th 2015, please do not forget to bring scarves and hats. Not for you, but for the children in Suruç. We, the undersigned stagehands and groups who perform on these stages, kindly ask that you bring scarves, hats and gloves to fit children between 0-14 years of age. Please leave them in the boxes in our foyer. We are one with hope and solidarity, not with the war!

Lastly, one interviewee from Kumbaracı 50 expresses her thoughts which concretize the circulation of tangible assets among Alternative Theatres:

> We are very similar to each other. If we have some technical problems, we can call our colleagues in the next street and ask them to bring the machine we need. For instance, we borrowed a smoke machine two days ago. I think this is nice; such cooperation makes the desire to produce together much stronger, and in turn you feel stronger.

> (Interview with a member of Kumbaracı 50, 3 April 2015)

b.   Circulation of intangible cultural assets

The second way underlying a new form of publicness is the circulation of intangible cultural assets, which are associated with ideas, claims and expressions. These assets cover the cultural/artistic output produced in these cultural organizations such as theatre plays, exhibitions or workshops.

Let me begin with the case of Alternative Theatre. The emergence of local plays is an essential component of today's alternative theatre movement in Istanbul. These new scripts, which are nurtured by the diversity among the urban population, also grant visibility to the stories of marginalized groups. An important aspect of this attitude, with regard to forming an intangible cultural asset, is that it offers the stage to topics about Turkey's recent past that have not been staged before, for example, gay citizens, women with headscarves or human rights issues. The quote below, of an anonymous interviewee from an Alternative Theatre stage, namely Kumbaracı 50, shows how these local plays circulate among Alternative Theatre stages through their network of Alternative Theatre Joint Initiative:

> We have aimed to put our spaces on the map. For instance, if you know Kumbaracı 50, you can get to know other stages through the association with Kumbaracı 50. People who come to Şermola can go to Mekan Artı, and when they go to Mekan Artı, they become aware of a play at Tiyatro Hal. Besides increasing the visibility of our places, we also want to show the audience that there are more spaces in which they can find plays made with a similar language and worldview.

> (Interview with a member of an Alternative Theatre group, 2 March 2015)

Similarly, an interviewee from DEPO reflects on the creation of a publicness through the circulation of ideas:

> Yes, of course, different people come here. It depends on the exhibition. I mean, the visitors to the exhibition of the Human Rights Foundation are different from the visitors in solo exhibitions (...) Our visitors consist of many followers and workers of renowned NGOs, including some from abroad. They can be from Hrant Dink Foundation or LGBT organizations (…) But overall, it creates a publicness for sure, especially when they participate in the debates or talks where there is an exchange of ideas that creates publicness.

> (Interview with the project coordinator of DEPO, 4 August 2016)

In addition to the circulation of intangible cultural assets among local actors, we were able to observe the same process between these cultural organizations and their international counterparts. According to an interviewee from Kumbaracı 50, this very formation of the local texts is the primary reason to develop translocal relations, as they start to attract the attention of transnational actors more than ever. Although Kumbaraci 50 was the first theatre group involved in collaborative projects in 2011, it should be stated that the number of groups engaged in these translocal relations has increased since then. In 2017, in addition to Kumbaraci 50, other alternative theatres, such as D22 and Şermola Performans, have also produced collaborative projects with the Fringe Ensemble, which was funded by Kunststiftung NRW and the Goethe Institute.

It is also possible to observe the same form of circulation between SALT and translocal actors. For instance, SALT's membership in L'Internationale (a museum confederation funded by the EU Culture Programme) has paved the way for collaborative exhibitions and public programmes between SALT and the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Another example from DEPO shows that the Portuguese Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation supported DEPO's full 2015 exhibition programme, which enabled Armenian artists to document the longings or memories over urban space in Turkey (Sanul and van Heur, 2018).

Circulation as solidarity

The circulation of tangible as well as intangible cultural assets indicates the formation of a network of solidarity between alternative cultural organizations and their micro public(s). This network of solidarity, which lies behind a solidary form of publicness, manifests itself in solidarity relations 1) with like-minded groups and 2) with different segments of the urban population.

The first aspect of the solidary publicness indicates a solidarity network between alternative cultural organizations and like-minded groups. These groups make a claim to publicness, which is not restricted to an audience that follows contemporary art. More clearly, one common factor to these groups is that they have been marginalized in the current socio-spatial context of Beyoğlu due to their different value orientations, such as their interest in environmental issues, minority and human rights, and urban transformation; all of which collide with major concerns of public authorities to shape public spaces through neoliberal and conservative policies. In that sense, alternative cultural organizations develop solidarity in their relations with these groups by sharing space with them. Similarly, there is the case of Alternative Theatre, showing that the unification under the AJTI in 2011 was, therefore, an attempt to solve their common infrastructural problems and create a symbolic platform for solidarity in the face of financial struggles and a low number of followers. Although this is not a binding formal organization that compels any particular theatre to participate in its joint initiative, I argue that the unification resulted in developing a publicness built on a common sense of solidarity among its members and other like-minded theatre groups.

Within this scope, these spaces enable people to meet others with a common sense of cultural taste in terms of loyalty to the same bookstores, cultural centres or theatres, who share similar concerns about their city and country. For instance, an interviewee emphasizes the significance of alternative theatre spaces for their micro public by saying: "People who think like us believe that they are in a 'safe place'. From the moment they enter this space they are faced with the things that they can't confess or that they want to shout out". Therefore, descriptions such as 'meeting point' and 'safe place' point out again the aspect of solidarity with the groups and their followers who cannot – or do not want to – find a stage in the mainstream cultural institutions. Besides these local-local interactions, the quote of former director of SALT demonstrates how the circulation between local and translocal actors through the international museum confederation nurtures a solidarity form of publicness:

> There is a consensus that we are facing similar conditions to those in the late 1930s, but we have already lived through that, and the 'never again' institutions put in place to avert another disaster have not been effective. This is a new situation, and in the new culture wars we need new kinds of internationalisms. We need to take care of each other.[2]

These networks of solidarity established with the like-minded and marginalized cultural actors of public life align well with the perspectives of Ash Amin on solidarity: "It is not this kind of mobilization of solidarity that I have in mind, central though it is for any account of the ways in which public space can project social togetherness. Instead, I am interested in symbolic visualizations in public space of solidarity in a 'minor key', as a kind of public commitment to the margin. This is a form of solidarity towards the emergent and always temporary settlements of public culture, serving to reinforce civic interest in the plural city, the rights of the many, the margin brought to the centre, the legitimacy of the idiosyncratic and ill-conforming" (Amin, 2008:16).

---

[2] Retrieved from: https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/on-public-mindedness-in-conversation-with-vasif-kortun.

The second aspect of the solidary publicness emerges in networks which intend to open up more space for urban diversity. Herein, alternative cultural organizations challenge the traditional secular/Islamist binary by enabling a circulation process with a segment of the population who is different from these like-minded groups. The most significant example is the project of SALT Research incorporating people who may have different ideologies and cultural backgrounds. These are users of the space who need free studying facilities and are thus outside the established SALT networks, and who seem mostly unaware of, or are not interested in, the exhibitions and workshops of SALT (see Figures 6a and 6b).

Figure 6a. Photo from SALT Research and its cafeteria indicating the diversity of its users

Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2017.

Figure 6b. Photo from SALT Research and its cafeteria indicating the diversity of its users

Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2017.

Similarly, the aforementioned call by Alternative Theatre for sending gloves to a South-eastern city by articulating that they are one with hope and solidarity, not with the war, shows the same intention. Another evidence could be given from the Alternative Theatre attempts to expand the range of their public. As they settle in the back streets, they become neighbours with merchants who have spare-parts stores, stationers, cafes or tea houses (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. A street in Karaköy where an Alternative Theatre stage is located

Photography: Gökçe Sanul, 2015.

The quote below shows that these encounters have led them to build unexpected relationships with people who normally do not have similar cultural tastes to the micro public of Alternative Theatre:

> There is a kebab shop near us and we eat there or recommend it to the groups that play in the theatre. The owner closes his shop at 8 p.m. and comes to our play together with his family; and not only to our play but also to the plays of other groups.

> (Interview with a member of an Alternative Theatre stage, 16 June 2015)

In that sense, it is possible to observe that these contacts with shopkeepers – by inviting them to the plays or by organizing free workshops for the children in the neighbourhoods – led to developing a solidary form of publicness with a different segment of the population. This aspect of the solidary publicness is in line with the intention of creating a common life through forming alliances between different groups (Turam, 2013), and indicating "new forms of urban civility in Istanbul (…) as actual experiments with democratic practices of bonding, integrating, and collaborating across ancient faultlines" (Turam, 2018: 117), thus articulating the everyday negotiation of diversity as an experiment. More clearly, this negotiation, in the words of Amin, "means experimenting in everyday situations that bring people from different backgrounds to work together in projects of common interest, so that a habit of intercultural formation emerges" (Amin, 2006: 1017).

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I focused on the alternative cultural organizations of Istanbul stemming from a tradition which challenges the authoritarian secularism linked with the modernization project of Turkey, and that are performing in the 2010s in a context where authoritarian tendencies have been revived through Islamist imaginaries. In this context, I showed that a solidary form of publicness is developed between these cultural organizations and their micro public(s) via the circulation of tangible and intangible cultural assets. This very circulation is critical not only to challenge the secular/Islamist binary but also to challenge authoritarian governmental attitudes which result in the closure of public spaces. Therefore, thinking about publicness as circulation goes beyond the over-simplistic idea of the physical togetherness of people in one particular place. Instead, we can start observing the formation of multiple (counter) public spheres as an emergent infrastructure of circulation connecting different sites, people and media across cultural spaces.

Although Istanbul is a fascinating city and a particularly interesting case to investigate due to the ways in which neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies have come together over the last decades, and how this shapes sites of publicness, other case study investigations would allow us to reach more comparative conclusions. I would be particularly interested in pursuing more research on the extent to and ways in which the alternative cultural organizations play a role in creating new forms of publicness in the face of political regimes characterized by authoritarian policies. This is not just applicable to Turkey or other emerging or development economies, but also to 'the West', where we can observe top-down austerity policies in combination with the rise of conservative or extreme right-wing political parties adopting an authoritarian and repressive approach towards arts and culture.

The last important step to further conceptualize the solidary publicness is methodological. While this paper has paid almost exclusive attention to the production side – focusing on how cultural actors produce new forms of publicness– obviously it would be interesting to investigate which and how actual users, i.e. audience members of these cultural organizations, are part of the constructed sites of publicness. This would involve a deeper engagement with ethnographic techniques. A completely ethnographical setup would most likely generate highly relevant information on the actual practices and perceptions shaping solidary forms of publicness, as well as on the social composition of the micro publics addressed here. This ethnographic focus would also enable the further conceptualization of the notion of solidary publicness, especially by exploring its possible inclusion and exclusion mechanisms as a more critical engagement with its limitations.

Acknowledgements

References

Abaza M. (2013) "Cairo Diary: Space-Wars, Public Visibility and the Transformation of Public Space in Post-revolutionary Egypt", in C. Berry, J. Harbord, R. Moore (eds) *Public Space, Media Space*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Aksoy, A., Seyben, B-Y. (2015) "Storm over the state cultural institutions: new cultural policy direction in Turkey", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21(2), pp. 183-199.

Amin, A. (2006) "Good City", *Urban Studies*, 43 (5-6), pp. 1009-1023.

Amin, A. (2008) "Collective culture and urban public space", *City*, 12 (1), pp. 5-24.

Bartu, A. (2001) "Rethinking heritage politics in a global context: a view from Istanbul", in N. Al Sayyad. (Ed.), *Hybrid urbanism: On the identity discourse and the built environment*, Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 131-155.

Başar, D. (2014) Performative publicness: alternative theater in Turkey after 2000s, Unpublished Master Thesis, Istanbul, Boğaziçi University.

Beyes, T. (2010) "Uncontained: The art and the politics of reconfiguring urban space", *Culture and Organization*, 16 (3), pp. 229-246.

Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing Social Research*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Bora, T. (1999) "Istanbul of the Conqueror: The «Alternative Global City» Dreams of Political Islam", in Ç. Keyder (Ed.) *Istanbul Between the Global and the Local*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Bozdoğan, S. and Kasaba, R. (1997) *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Buser, M., Bonura, C., Fannin, M., Boyer, K. (2013) "Cultural activism and the politics of place-making", *City* 17 (5), pp. 606-627.

Cevik, B. S, Seib, P. (2015) *Turkey's Public Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Cochrane, A. (2014) "Interviews", in K. Ward (ed.), *Researching the City*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 38-53.

Eckardt, F. (2008) "Introduction: Public Space as a Critical Concept. Adequate for Understanding Istanbul Today?", in F. Eckardt and K. Wildner (eds.) *Public Istanbul: Spaces and Spheres of the Urban*, London: Transcript Publishing House, pp.13-20.

Eley, G. (2002) "Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere", *Positions*, 10 (1), pp. 219-236.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), pp. 219-245.

Fraser, N. (1990) "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text* 25-26, pp. 56-80.

Göle, N. (2006) "Europe's Encounter with Islam: What Future?", *Constellations*, 13 (2), pp. 248-262.

Göle, N. (2013) "Anatomy of a Public Square Movement", *Insight Turkey*, 15 (3), pp. 7-14.

Habermas, J. (1993) "Further reflections on the public sphere", in C. Calhoun (Ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Holstein, J. A., Gubrium, J. F. (1997) *Active Interviewing in Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice* edited by D. Silverman. London: Sage Publications.

Hou, J. (2010) *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the remaking of Contemporary Cities*, New York: Routledge.

Hürriyet Daily News (2017) "Court arrests Turkish activist Osman Kavala over failed coup attempt", 1 November 2017. Available at: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/court-arrests-turkish-activist-osman-kavala-over-failed-coup-attempt-121694

Inceoglu, I. (2015) "Encountering difference and radical democratic trajectory: an analysis of Gezi Park as public space", *City*, 19 (4), pp. 534-544.

Iveson, K. (2007) *Publics and the City*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Kahraman, H. B. (2008) "The End of the 'New' as We Know: Post 1990 and the 'New' Beginnings in Turkish Culture", *Third Text*, 22(1), pp. 21-34.

Kongar, E. (1989) *Kültür Üzerine* [On the Culture], Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi.

Madra, B. (2008) "The Hot Spot of Global Art: Istanbul's Contemporary Art Scene and its Sociopolitical and Cultural Conditions and Practices", *Third Text*, 1, pp. 105-112.

Minty, Z. (2006) "Post-apartheid Public Art in Cape Town: Symbolic Reparations and Public Space", *Urban Studies*, 43(2), pp. 421-440.

Muir, J. (2008) "'Are you taking notes on us?' Reflections on case study research in urban environments", in P. J. Maginn, S. M. Thompson, M. Tonts (eds.), *Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 105-132.

Özbek, M. (2004) *Kamusal Alan* [Public Sphere], Istanbul: Hil Yayin

Robins, G. (2015) *Doing social network research: network-based research design for social scientists*, London: SAGE Publications.

Rose, C. M. (1998) "The several futures of property; of cyberspace and folktales, emission trades and ecosystems", *Minnesota Law Review*, 83, pp. 129-182.

Sanul, G., Van Heur, B. (2016) "The invisible city of alternative theater: tactics, collective actions and micro-publics in Istanbul's cultural economy", *Law, Social Justice and Global Development*, Special Issue 'Cultural Economies and Cultural Activism' (1), pp. 1-14.

Sanul, G., Van Heur, B. (2018) "Spaces of openness: Urban citizenship and cultural infrastructures of common life in Istanbul", City 22 (5-6), pp. 801-819.

Smith, C. (2015) "Art as a diagnostic: assessing social and political transformation through public art in Egypt", *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16 (1), pp. 22-42.

Turam, B. (2015) *Gaining freedoms: claiming space in Istanbul and Berlin*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Turam, B. (2018) "Urban civility defying political authoritarianism? Unpacking Turkey's reversal of democracy", in F. Duina (ed.), *States and Nations, Power and Civility: Hallsian Perspectives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 100-121.

Yavuz, H. (2000) "Cleansing Islam from the Public Sphere", *Journal of International Affairs*, 54 (1), pp. 21-42.

Zizlsperger, A. (2019) "Mapping Turkey: contemporary visual arts in Turkey", *Dutch Culture*, pp. 1-49. Available at: https://dutchculture.nl/en/mapping-turkey.