changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings
from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS
Eleftheria Deltsou
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E-BOOK (PDF)
Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times /
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EDITORS:
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DESIGN:
Yorgos Rimenidis

PUBLISHER:

The Hellenic Semiotics Society
Ελληνική Σημειωτική Εταιρία

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FOR THE EDITION
the publisher
FOR THE PROCEEDINGS
the authors

ISBN 978-618-82184-0-6

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Contents

Preface 11
Introduction 12

PLENARY SPEECHES

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg *Thinking the Novelty* 16

Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos *Continuities, discontinuities and ruptures in the history and theory of semiotics* 30

Farouk Y. Seif *Resilience and Chrysalis Reality: Navigating Through Diaphanous Space and Polychronic Time* 52

Göran Sonesson *The Eternal Return of the New. From Cultural Semiotics to Evolutionary Theory and Back Again* 68

Κάριν Μπόκλουντ-Λαγοπούλου *Γιατί η Σημειωτική;* 88

SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

Mari-Liis Madisson, Andreas Ventsel *Analysis of Self-descriptions of Estonian Far Right in Hypermedia* 102

Joseph Michael Gratale *The 'War on Terror' and the re-codification of war* 112

Emile Tsekenis *'African modernity': Witchcraft, 'Autochthony', and transformations in the conceptualizations of 'individual' and 'collective identity' in Cameroon* 122

Sofia Kefalidou, Periklis Politis *Identity Construction in Greek TV News Real-Time Narratives on Greek Financial Crisis* 134

Anthony Smyrnaios *Discerning the Signs of the Times: The role of history in conspiracism* 144

Όλγα Παντούλη *Ο 'αριστερός' και ο 'ανατολίτης' σύζυγος στις αφηγήσεις γυναικών επιστημόνων: διαδικασίες επιτέλεσης του φύλου τους* 152

Μαριάννα Ψύλλα, Δημήτριος Σεραφής *Η ανάλυση ενός γεγονότος μέσα από τον πολυσημικό λόγο των εφημερίδων: Μία μεθοδολογική και πολιτική προσέγγιση του Δεκέμβρη του 2008* 160

Αλεξία Καπραβέλου *Ο ρατσισμός σήμερα μέσα από τη σημειωτική ανάλυση ρεπορτάζ εφημερίδων* 170

SPACE AND/IN SOCIETY

Eleftheria Deltsou *Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise': A Mirror-λ letter and heterotopias of an urban experiment* 186

Fotini Tsibiridou, Nikitas Palantzas *Becoming Istanbul: a dictionary of the problematics of a changing city; inside critique of significant cultural meanings* 196

Κώστας Γιαννακόπουλος *Αναφομοίωτες διαφορές, «εξευγενισμός» και πόλη* ... **206**
Ιορδάνης Στυλίδης *Η Βιτρίνα ως ελκυστής σημασίας* ... **216**
Δήμητρα Χατζησάββα *Αναδυόμενες έννοιες για τον χωρικό σχεδιασμό* ... **226**
Θεοδώρα Παπίδου *Μεταγραφές ψηφιακού υλικού στον αρχιτεκτονικό σχεδιασμό* ... **236**
Κωνσταντίνος Μωραΐτης *Τοπία σημαίνοντα* ... **248**
Νεφέλη Κυρκίτσου *Η ολίσθηση των σημασιών στην τοπική θεωρία του Jacques Lacan* ... **260**
Ανθία Βερυκίου *Τόποι απουσίας και Τοπολογικά τοπία* ... **270**

VISUAL CUTLURES

George Damaskinidis *Are University Students Followers of the World's Semiotic Turn to the Visual?* ... **284**
Dimitrios Koutsogiannis, Vassiliki Adampa, Stavroula Antonopoulou, Ioanna Hatzikyriakou, Maria Pavlidou *(Re)constructing Greek classroom space in changing times* ... **294**
Polyxeni Manoli *A multimodal approach to using comics in EFL classrooms* ... **308**
Αικατερίνη Τάτση, Μαρία Μακαρού *Πολυτροπικά πολιτισμικά παλίμψηστα: η περίπτωση ενός κόμικ* ... **318**
Αναστασία Φακίδου, Απόστολος Μαγουλιώτης *Σημεία και κώδικες: Πώς αντιλαμβάνονται τα παιδιά τη γλώσσα εικόνων που αναπαριστούν την παιδική ηλικία;* ... **332**
Έφη Παπαδημητρίου, Δήμητρα Μακρή *Πολυτροπική κοινωνική σημειωτική προσέγγιση στη δημιουργία νοημάτων-σημείων από μαθητές/τριες της πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης* ... **346**
Θεοφάνης Ζάγουρας *Ο σχεδιασμός πολυτροπικών κειμένων για το γλωσσικό μάθημα στο Δημοτικό Σχολείο* ... **360**
Dimitra Christidou *Does pointing in the museum make a point? A social semiotic approach to the museum experience* ... **374**
Παρασκευή Κερτεμελίδου *Οι μετασχηματισμοί του μουσείου τέχνης στην εποχή της κατανάλωσης* ... **386**

ART

Eirini Danai Vlachou *The Beatles Paradigm. Transcending a collection of 'ropey', scrappy, multi-cultural breadcrumbs into a whole new semiosphere* ... **398**
Μαίη Κοκκίδου, Χριστίνα Τσίγκα *Η κουλτούρα των βιντεοκλίπ: η περίπτωση των μουσικών βιντεοκλίπ δια-τροπικής ακρόασης* ... **408**
Angeliki Avgitidou *Art imitating protest imitating art: performative practices in art and protest* ... **420**
Spiros Polimeris, Christine Calfoglou *Some thoughts on the semiotics of digital art* ... **430**
Χρύσανθος Βούτουνος, Ανδρέας Λανίτης *Η Σημειο-αισθητική προσέγγιση της Βυζαντινής τέχνης ως Εικονική Κληρονομιά* ... **440**
Άννα Μαρία Παράσχου *Τοπογραφία διάρρηξης: Φωτογραφικές απεικονίσεις πολέμου από τον Simon Norfolk, ως μια αφήγηση ανατροπής* ... **454**

Pirjo Kukkonen *Signs of times and places in Aki Kaurismäki's films. The existential subject and the semiotic modalities of being and doing* 466

Christina Adamou *Swarming with cops* 478

Yvonne Kosma *Picturing 'Otherness': Cinematic Representations of 'Greekness' in "My Big Greek Fat Wedding"* 488

Χρήστος Δερμεντζόπουλος, Θανάσης Βασιλείου *Προσεγγίζοντας μια αφαιρετική κινηματογραφική μορφή: "Το Δέντρο της Ζωής", του Terrence Malick* 498

Νίκος Τερζής *Η σημειωτική μέθοδος ανάλυσης μιας ταινίας* 508

Ηρώ Λάσκαρη *Σύστημα γενεσιουργής οπτικοακουστικής αφήγησης* 524

ADVERTISEMENT

Luiz Carlos Migliozzi Ferreira de Mello *Viagra: New Social Forms* 536

Nikos Barkas, Maria Papadopoulou *'The house of our dreams': A decade of advertisements in building magazines* 544

Stamatia Koutsoulelou *Advertising strategies in times of crisis: A semiotic analysis* 560

Περικλής Πολίτης, Ευάγγελος Κουρδής *Κοινωνιόλεκτοι σε ελληνικές τηλεοπτικές διαφημίσεις. Η περίπτωση της «γλώσσας των νέων»* 572

Ευριπίδης Ζαντίδης *Αναδυόμενες ταυτότητες και εθνικότητα σ' ένα φλιτζάνι κυπριακού καφέ* 588

Ελένη Συκιώτη, Γενοβέφα Ζαφειρίδου *Σημειωτικές παρατηρήσεις στη σύγχρονη διαφήμιση: Η περίπτωση της εμπορικής και της κοινωνικής διαφήμισης* 600

Βασιλική Κέλλα *Η διαφήμιση ως λεκτική πράξη* 612

LANGUAGE, TEXTS AND TEXTUALITIES

George Androulakis, Roula Kitsiou, Carolina Rakitzi, Emmanuel Zerai *Linguistic cityscape revisited: inscriptions and other signs in the streets of Volos* 622

María José Naranjo, Mercedes Rico, Gemma Delicado, Noelia Plaza *Constructing new identities around Languages and Media* 634

Ιωάννα Μωραΐτου, Ελευθερία Τσέλιου *Ανάλυση Λόγου και μεταμοντέρνες προσεγγίσεις στη συμβουλευτική / ψυχοθεραπεία: η «στροφή στο λόγο»* 642

Φίλιππος Τεντολούρης, Σωφρόνης Χατζησαββίδης *«Κατασκευάζοντας» το κείμενο και τον συγγραφέα: οριοθετημένα και μη-οριοθετημένα σημειωτικά πλαίσια της σχολικής γλωσσικής δημιουργίας* 652

Βάσια Τσάμη, Δημήτρης Παπαζαχαρίου, Άννα Φτερνιάτη, Αργύρης Αρχάκης *Η πρόσληψη της γλωσσικής ποικιλότητας σε κείμενα μαζικής κουλτούρας από μαθητές της Ε' και ΣΤ' Δημοτικού* 664

Αναστασία Χριστοδούλου, Ιφιγένεια Βαμβακίδου, Αργύρης Κυρίδης *'Lego-Legends of CHIMA'. Κοινωνιοσημειωτική ανάλυση της συναρμολόγησης του θρύλου* 676

Μαρίνα Σούνογλου, Αικατερίνη Μιχαλοπούλου *Η Σημειωτική στη διαμόρφωση της έννοιας του πολίτη στο νηπιαγωγείο* 686

BODIES & MINDS

Fotini Bonoti, Plousia Misailidi *Graphic signs of jealousy in children's human figure drawings* **700**

Eirini Papadaki *The Semiotics of Children Drawings, A Comparative Study of Art, Science and Children Drawing* **708**

Myrto Chronaki *Changing practices and representations of birth and birth-spaces in maternity clinics and at home* **720**

Athanasios Sakellariadis *Metaphor as a Hermeneutical Design of the Mental Phenomena: The role of narrative speech in the cognitive field of the Philosophy of Mind* **730**

Anita Kasabova *A semiotic attempt to analyze delusions* **738**

LITERATURE

Miltos Frangopoulos *The Task of the Translator* **756**

Fitnat Cimşit Kos, Melahat Küçükarslan Emiroğlu *Reality as a Manner of Transformation* **766**

Angela Yannicopoulou, Elita Fokiali *Transmedia Narratives for Children and Young Adults* **778**

Ioanna Boura *The expression of worldviews through narratives and chronotopes of liquid times* **790**

Evgenia Sifaki *The "Poetic Subject" as "Subject of Semiosis" in C. P. Cavafy's "Going back Home from Greece"* **798**

Αγγελική Γιαννικοπούλου *Το εικονογραφημένο βιβλίο χωρίς λόγια* **808**

Μαρίνα Γρηγοροπούλου *Κόσμοι που συγκρούονται και σημεία των τεχνών: οι «Σκοτεινές Τέχνες» του Νίκου Κουνενή* **818**

Σοφία Ιακωβίδου *Εις τα περίχωρα της δυστοπίας: αφηγήσεις της κρίσης στη λογοτεχνία για νέους* **826**

Πέγκυ Καρπούζου *Το παιχνίδι και η ηθική της μετανεωτερικής συμβίωσης* **834**

Αγλαΐα Μπλιούμη *Ρευστοί καιροί και μεταφορές – Σημειωτικές προσεγγίσεις στη λογοτεχνία της ενωμένης Γερμανίας* **844**

Παναγιώτης Ξουπλίδης *Ένας οικείος δαίμονας: προς μια προσέγγιση του σημείου της λογοτεχνικής γάτας σε 7 κείμενα παιδικής λογοτεχνίας του Χρήστου Μπουλώτη* **856**

Conference Credits **868**

Becoming Istanbul: a dictionary of the problematics of a changing city; inside critique of significant cultural meanings

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the characteristics of Istanbul's problematics as a transforming city, exposed through an art-project, part of which was the publication of the book Becoming Istanbul. The contributors to the project do not only negotiate global hegemonic economic and political values, as well as local power politics, but they become distinguished informants who promote a critical perspective and put themselves in dialogue with social analysis. In doing so they are able to subvert strong orientalist views, as well as global and local stereotypes that proliferate between the West and the rest. 'Becoming Istanbul' could serve as a very interesting example for the observation of the dynamic relations which unfold themselves through the interaction between the local and the global. Moving beyond the idea of space being made meaningful, we seek to explore the impact of spatial contestation and questions of adaptation and resistance in people's lives.

Keywords

Istanbul , **urban transformation** , **artistic movement** , **social activism** , **spatial contestation** , **hegemonic discourses**

The Project

Becoming Istanbul was initiated on the occasion of the 2008 Frankfurt Book Fair, where the city was the Guest of Honor. Albeit its main objective to hold one of the most important book exhibitions and literary events, the Frankfurt Book Fair is also accompanied by a number of architectural shows. In this respect, the German Architecture Museum [Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM)] proposed to the Garanti Galeri in Istanbul the organization of an exhibition project, aiming at representing the most contemporary issues on Turkish architecture and urbanism. After discussing on different topics, the people from Garanti Galeri came up with the idea of designing an encyclopedic scheme that would bring forward the diverse, often overlapping and certainly ambiguous perspectives on Istanbul living and the main challenges that the city faces through its rapid transformations at multiple levels. After different suggestions, the contributors of the exhibition came up with the idea of organizing a twofold project constituted by an interactive digital installation and the publication of a book. Both of them had the format of a dictionary, in the sense that they were formed by key-terms that, according to the organizers, would describe different aspects of the city's past and present social, architectural, political and economic transformations. In the exhibition there are general abstract terms, like "adaptation", "amnesia", "public order" or "pretension" displayed in boxes randomly on large computer screens. Opposite of each screen there was a wooden stand with a database, where the viewers could choose any of the terms on the screen by clicking on the box. As soon as a box was clicked on, a number of windows appeared, each of them showing a video, a set of photographs, an academic project, a piece of news broadcast and so on. All those different sets of multimedia were linked to the concept initially clicked on the box. Moreover, each window was also connected with all the other concepts that it was supposed to be related with.[1]

The book on the other hand, was designed and produced to look like a "dictionary" or an "encyclopedia", as our interlocutors put it. According to the authors, the initial idea was to select a number of key-words, with the difference that this time it would not be just abstract concepts but also specific terms referring to particular places, buildings, situations or even simple objects. The underlying principle for the selection of the key-words that would be included in the dictionary-like book was that there would be used as many terms as possible that function as clichés when somebody thinks of Istanbul. As the director of Garenti Galeri explained to us, during our fieldwork only the three curators of the project carried out the process of the initial selection of these terms. After coming up with all the one-hundred and fifty-two words, the curators had several meetings in order to decide who was going to write about which group of terms. The criteria were mainly based on the assumption of who was going to write about a term in a manner that would fit the curators' expectations about the final appearance of the book.

Here we focus on the second part of the project, the dictionary or "encyclopedia", as our interlocutors preferred to describe it. However, a cross-reference between the two parts of the project was, according to the curators, essential for the full understanding of the message conveyed in *Becoming Istanbul*. All the contributors were people who have lived in Istanbul for long periods, including some who are not Turkish. In this respect, *Becoming Istanbul* is first of all a case where local people represent their personal narrative about their immediate environment; the place they live in. According to one of them, *Becoming Istanbul* should be viewed by external observers initially as an attempt of local people in Istanbul to talk about the city they love, and who see with great interest and anxiety the changes brought about by the city's rapid transformation.

From an anthropological perspective *Becoming Istanbul* represents an interesting case study of local contestation over living space, as an open arena of multiple and often conflicting discourses and subject positions. These appear as a set of narratives regarding a city, which bears on one hand the entire basic social, economic, political and cultural characteristics of a modern metropolis or a global city (see Sassen 2001, 2005), while on the other hand it gathers an array of attributes deriving from Western imagination and orientalist conceptions. The contributors' position towards that issue is clear: "Our intention was to confront any orientalist perceptions about Istanbul and put emphasis on the contemporary issues that the city confronts as part of the wider global economic and cultural procedures". As the subtitle of the Turkish edition of the book suggests, *Becoming Istanbul* is an arrangement of different narratives that include phenomena, speculations and metaphors.[2] And this is precisely what the whole project is about; an endeavor of local people to describe phenomena, articulate speculations and illustrate metaphors about their changing city. What is more, this is not a unified or homogenous process but it entails to some great extent the element of difference both in understanding and in negotiating the way people view, experience and become affected by the rapid transformations their city faces.

The Anthropological Project

Both of us, having different previous projects in the city of Istanbul until then, decided to engage in this common work.[3] We were and still are interested in the ways people in Beyoğlu (a central neighborhood around Taksim square) engage with social movements through artistic expression. At the same time it was obvious that local modalities of engagement in social activism draw energy and phantasy both from various forms of sociability and the balancing effort to deal with orientalism. However, at the present time a big opportunity for the multiplication of social movements that contest space and identities emerged. This came from the government's and the municipality's projects to attack and transform the city-center through gentrification, ennoblement (see i.e. the Tarlabasi project after the installation of the new mall on Istiklal Street, the demolition of

old movie theaters, i.e. Emek cinema, etc. Cf. Palantzas, 2012). Many of the people living in Beyoğlu engage either in social activism, or artistic and entertainment activities as a way of life. However, at the same time the places of Taksim square and Istiklal Street, as par excellence signs of 'public space' and its relevant negotiations in Modern Turkey since the end of the Ottoman empire, became the main symbolic places of contestation towards the state's authority.[4] Under the threat of the previously described neoliberal attack to this place, the two main modalities of living and using the public space, social activism and artistic expression came closer.

An important part of this is the engagement of activism with artistic ways of expression, such as the street-art activities and the various public performances (Tsibiridou, 2013). At the same time, in the center of Istanbul in Beyoğlu and Galata, since 2000 we notice the multiplication of artistic events, as well as the opening of many art-galleries. The growth and investment on art addressed to nouveaux riches clients at the time of neoliberal governmentality led equally to the serious investment and sponsorship of the wealth on art projects (see the Garanti bank investment for the Salt Gallery as well as the present project). Moreover, small art-galleries were opened too, giving the opportunity to less famous or amateur artists not only to expose their work and express their critique on their own society, but also to earn an income from their own art.[5] This proliferation of art production became a modality of activist expression in the center of Istanbul and we decided to focus our attention on one of them, in order to open a dialogue with local agents thinking critically and being reflective over their own society. The aim of our project remains to understand critically both the living space of the center of the megacity of Istanbul at the era of neoliberalism, and the glocal modalities of social activism people are engaging with in order to challenge modern identities and citizenship, to contest authoritarian ruling and thus produce both new subjectivities and living experiences (Lefebvre, 1974; Low, 2003; Harvey, 1989; Appadurai, 1996). These modalities refer to the ways people as agents conceptualize and react to the Western assumption of dichotomy between the public and the private sphere, as well as the orientalist one between the West and the East.[6] This perspective seems to be justified by the recent mobilization that resulted in the events that took place at the Gezi park.[7]

Methodological issues

Searching for alternative ways to describe and interpret how people live and experience their city (interactively produce and reproduce the space), mostly in the center of Istanbul, we decided to focus on this particular artistic project. In the frame of cultural critique, artistic representation as a reflective approach of one's own society and living conditions permit us to open a dialogue with those local informants/agents looking for a critical understanding (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Marcus, 1995; Herzfeld, 1997) of "becoming" both of their own city, society and themselves. However, this process can nev-

er be one-dimensional, since people, as active agents, are dealing with contradictions and stereotypes. At the same time they try to deconstruct the latter and negotiate the former, they do produce new assumptions, unless they shape their narratives through irony, humour, fragmented truth, dialogical presentation etc (Fischer, 1998; 2001; Tsibiridou, forthcoming). These processes of deconstructing and negotiating hegemonic narratives regard first of all the choice of the medium of communication, as the genre of representation. This is the case of the interactive exhibition or the dictionary-style book. Both choices of becoming Istanbul project clarify from the beginning the fragmented character between the Self and hetero-understanding, reminding anthropologists the snowball style and accidental access to fieldwork data and the always fragmented non-holistic capture of reality in terms of permanent and multilayered "interpretations" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). People participating in the BI project become favored interlocutors for our anthropological one. We base the analysis upon their discourses in order to open dialogue and use them as informants critically interpreting their own society.

Their discourses include, among others, the semantic framework under which those artistic interventions as performances took and continue to take place under various circumstances. One of these derives from the presence of the anthropologist in the field and his/her additional need to narrate a story, interpret practices, intentions and ways of life adopted by people interacting within a given space. We are interested in those signs adopted by people in their attempt to capture their own 'truth'. Let us give one or two representative examples:

By reading the book we realized the need of the writers to narrate the permanent transformation of the city, as well as the fluid bond of its inhabitants with the urban space and its different connotations.[8] However, the never ending transformation and the endless will of capture by its permanent or temporary inhabitants becomes the modality of the unsatisfied will of its appropriation. Istanbul becomes the body of the mistress of the unsatisfied in love guy motivated by jealousy (see rubrics on pornography and eroticism). Since the last decades of the 20th century and the neoliberal governmentality multiplying the "chaos"[9], fluidity, liminality and passing through became the aesthetics of living and tasting the city.[10] The latter include the management of the nostalgia over the past of the city negotiated and reclaimed equally be secularists and Islamists, Istanbul residents and newcomers. The vulnerability of the town can be proved by its multiple wounded and transformed center, the Taksim square. The latter seems to symbolize and mutate the modality of 'passing through' as a philosophical stance of the pre-modern identities (different religions, languages and activities one culture of living in the city) ("*Anarchy II*", p. 18), the permanent will of its transformation and appropriation since the rise of capitalism, the social movements and the people raising against the authoritarian ruling and its military technology, since the foundation of the nation-state. We read under "*Taksim square*" and elsewhere that the surrounded area of Beyoğlu represents

the "heart of the city", while at the same time it is endorsing liminal and marginal practices taking place "out of somewhere" (Beyoğlu as Pera in Greek).

This kind of feeling in addition to the conceptualizations of the unity between the public and the private space seem to go with habitus of intersection between people and space, intimate and public spaces. This interdependence of each other modality gives birth to multiple liminal conditions, as is the permanent in love status with the city, i.e. the gluttony of savoring and tasting it in erotic terms.[11] That leads to an ambiguous status of living and conceptualizing the city.[12]

With these conceptualizations/interpretations used by social agents in the spirit of a performed cultural critique, we can open a less hegemonic dialogue promoting critical understanding.[13]

The aim of this project remains the enlargement of anthropological understanding, when this meets with artistic curiosity in the frame of cultural studies. We are convinced that this approach makes us able to understand better the local priorities and global challenges, contradicting contacts or the deconstruction and reproduction of stereotypes. We want to narrate a diagonal story about people and space, crossing the eyes, aesthetics and discourses local agents adopt, by following cultural critique; this diagonal narrative of ours can provide two kinds of information:

1. Present the local stories with their own modalities and priorities.
2. Understand critically how people are feeling and acting through the city,14 (re) construct subjectivities and citizenship not only in the frame of nation-state but through everyday lived experiences within the city.

These people want to tell their own stories about their city and their everyday habitus and thus contest, protest and negotiate assumptions and stereotypes formed either vertically or horizontally. We think it is better to pay attention to these stories of living and acting in the global city of Istanbul before we construct any scientific narrative for the city "from above" or reproduce a stereotypical journalistic like discourse.

Concluding note

Having read the book we think we can better empathize with those informants who deal and consume the stereotype of "living between the West and the East" or live under permanent "transformation" and "chaos". By investing into the joyful experience of continuing to invest in small things of everyday present and old habits, they are not only reclaiming the past by avoiding to essentialize nostalgia, but they also shape the present by using the memory and the positive energy of the past. People living and acting here at the heart of the city (Beyoğlu[15]) are making a productive use of past memories,[16] even if they have never been part of the city. The place and its dynamics make them fantasize and be inspired by memories of well being and happiness, warmness and humanism, good will and expectations of improvement against discrimination, authoritarian ruling,

patriarchy, etc. However, as the present and future of the city and its inhabitants are in permanent transformation through the project of continuous non-ending renovation, people enjoy much more to live in the city than write about the city. As they make it clear in the book, "if you want to write about the city, you have to be away from it".

We think that it is this fruitful blocking of people that makes them more productive to this alternative and inventive activism, i.e. the artistic ways of representation and interpretation of their living conditions. The neoliberal project of gentrification has just accelerated and proliferated this modality of living precariously and in permanent transformation. Based on the mutation of the condition of fluidity and instability the dynamic permanent change pushes them to invest on 'emotions of love and solidarity' and try to find more artistic ways of totally embodied understanding experiences, through multiple representations of the body and its anatomy.[17]

It is not that we desire to reproduce the dichotomy between rational reasoning and emotional empathy. On the contrary, by paying attention to the living space and the embodied experiences we would like to avoid this dilemma between a scientific or an artistic approach (see our methodological option converting ethnography with cultural studies). People living in Istanbul are making perfectly reasonable choices, but most of them, and particularly those who prefer to be active in the heart of the city, enjoy everyday experiences with the deepness, inventiveness, and sometimes frivolity of the artistic condition.

It is not by accident that it was those people, who, having suffered from authoritarian ruling and repression in the past started the Gezi mobilizations, reclaiming a restart over citizenship and living conditions. The era of neoliberal governmentality enforces Istanbul to live under two kind of biopolitics, gentrification and real estate projects aiming to the individual profit, as well as the reshaping of public space by an authoritarian ruling fantasizing a re-Islamized *à la Ottomane* citizenship. People's reaction to the above politics is given through creative artistic practices, claiming the right to the city, to their memories and to their habitus of the past, full or generosity, love and experiences of sharing .

Endnotes

1. See http://www.becomingistanbul.org
2. The English title of the book is *Becoming Istanbul: An Encyclopedia*, [Derviş, P., Tanju, B., Tanyeli, U. (eds). (2008) Istanbul: Garanti Galleri] while the Turkish one is more revealing and intimate; *Istanbullasmak: Olgular* [phenomena], Sorunsallar [speculations] and *Metaforlar* [metaphors].
3. F. Tsibiridou's research for the last 5 years on social activism in the area shows the increase of activism in Beyoğlu by those who contest and try to negotiate gender and ethnic identities, choice of sexuality and citizenship in the public space. In addition, N. Palantzas' previous project was looking at the different manifestations of Euro-scepticism among citizens of Istanbul, regarding Turkey's accession to the European Union.
4. "According to the definition of a "great" state official in very recent past, public sphere is the place where the police can ask you for identification documents, therefore the publicity in Istanbul is the police demanding identification and the citizen presenting it. According to the same course of

logic, the police can ask for identification everywhere, so therefore everywhere in Istanbul is public space" ("*Public space*", p.233)

5. See indicatively "Sanctity and Despotism of Progress", *Alan Art Gallery*, Istanbul 2013.
6. "although it means "everywhere outside private space", such a simple definition means nothing in Istanbul" (p235). The reason can be found in the way conceptualizations and negotiations over the public space and the embodied experiences of authoritarian ruling and control, are pushing people to appropriate the intermediate outside space as places of entertainment and relax. (*Public space*, pp. 235-236). All this remind us the multiple ways of appropriation of the outside places as for instance the "non-lieux de la supermordernité" (See Augé, 1992).
7. The Gezi park mobilizations which started in May 2013 inspired by the global occupy movements have already shown the persistence of the activists coming from different ideological spaces to engage with their will to resist on government's last gentrification project in the center of the city. The latter was about a will to transform a park, an open space to Istanbul's citizens and visitors, to a mall and a private hotel garden. The objection on this project, beyond the persistence of the activists who still come back reclaiming symbolically the renegotiation of their living in the city and their citizenship in the country, have shown the inventive and creative character of their resistance adopting artistic technologies of expression in addition to the development of deep solidarity practices.
8. See "*Urban transformation*" and elsewhere in the book edition.
9. "Istanbul must hung with all its "anarchy" in Taksim Square. See then if it dares cause chaos again..."(*Anarchy*, p.19)
10. See also Jale (2010) and Mills (2006).
11. See on "*Urban transformation*". Pp 341-342.
12. See on *Eroticism*, pp. 92-96. "Istanbul is the city of the ambiguous and the obscure; nothing ends or begins in the full sense here. (p. 94) (...) this uncertainty can be startling, but it also presents possibilities, it opens on to discovery and adventure for those who are curious and seek what is different (pp.94-95). The power of Istanbul lies precisely at this conflicting intersection, in these interfaces where globalism touches marginality and capitalist mechanism touches poverty (...) It registers aesthetics and anesthetization, its charm is interwoven with slovenliness, clumsiness and even ugliness. This gives it potential to delay, therefore future and therefore excitement and hope. Istanbul is ready for the unexpected, for experimentation, that is why the city attracts the masses (...) in this dilemma between Eros and Civilization, the city has always taken sides with Eros and it doesn't surrender to masculine reason. That is precisely what makes it attractive and worth living in. ...Its eroticism is nurtured not by a readable, reasonable and conservative beauty but by these careless, ambiguous, equivocal and provocative whispers" (p.96).
13. We read under "*Public space*"(pp. 235-236) and "*Wound*" (pp.352-355): "There are three ways of looking at the wound zones of the city. The first is the specialist-eye. The specialist-eye is sometimes purely scientific; it categorizes wounds, places them in test tubes, measures their pain, underlines their continuity and monitors the volume of bleeding per second. Another option is to look with the curious-eye. The curious-eye is often the artist's eye. It is curious about how life is around here. About rhythm, entertainment, the humor. It tries to catch the rituals, the fleeting stories that drift away. It learns their language, signs along to their songs. Another way is to look at wounds with the wounded-eye. What does the wounded-eye see when it looks to the wound? Sometimes the last thing a wound wants is dressing (...) Wounded beauty. This is Istanbul's constant seduction".
14. "We need to understand within the plural structure of the city. The key concepts here are –space and politics. Urban space is both the space of conflict and the space upon which discursive clashes take place. In other words, the politics of the space are performed in the space of politics. The political spaces of Istanbul are the product of this process in two senses. And precisely for this reason, it is not difficult to guess that urban transformation projects as a tool of top-down inter-

vention in the city will receive a strong social reaction in this area" ("*Political Space*", p. 226) "... Neighborhoods like Beyoğlu and Harbiye which reflected the speed of urban transformation were not approved as spaces of anxiety and indecision, whereas old Istanbul, and especially Fatih, identified with a more stagnant, conservative life style represented the synthesis new modernization proposals" ("*Literature*", p.173). "Istiklal caddesi or "Beyoğlu", neither a street, nor a neighborhood ... For the last two centuries it has been the most significant space where Turks who want to make an individual cultural preference have expressed heir choice" ("*Istiklar Caddesi* or Beyoğlu, p.156).

15. "The spatial counterpart of the aforementioned division here is Beyoğlu and Boğazici. Beyoğlu expresses the absence of space by alluding to transcience with its fast life, streets, restaurants and hotels whereas the Bosphorus indicates settlement and possessing a specific space." ("*Literature*", p.171)
16. "The novelist history of Istanbul after the 1960 bifurcates even more with the emergence of fragmented narratives (...) the new agents in the history of a far more crowded city broken to smithereens (...) Istanbul is the space of nostalgic praise or historical reckonings, an interrogation of identity. In this process, the city is no longer a tale of ancient ages founded with reproduced orientalist images (...) This city, which now lives a different existence with its skyscrapers, satellite cities and underground and is never bored of change, continues to rewrite itself into novels in the same manner ("*Literature*", p. 173)
17. The body becomes the main vehicle of reference in other artistic and activist performances too (see Tsibiridou, 2013), as many other examples of resistance have already revealed (see Comaroff, 1985).

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