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POLITICS OF CONSERVATIVE ART: THE MAKING OF THE YEDITEPE BIENNIAL

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POLITICS OF CONSERVATIVE ART:
THE MAKING OF THE YEDITEPE BIENNIAL

A Master's Thesis

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To Emin

POLITICS OF CONSERVATIVE ART:
THE MAKING OF THE YEDITEPE BIENNIAL

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by

Eda Nur Babutcu

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THE DISCUSSION ON THE CONSERVATIVE ART IN TURKEY: THE
MAKING OF THE YEDITEPE BIENNIAL

By Eda Nur Babutcu

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Political Science and Public Administration.

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ABSTRACT

POLITICS OF CONSERVATIVE ART: THE MAKING OF THE YEDITEPE BIENNIAL

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This dissertation comprehensively analyzes the Yeditepe Biennial as a case study to illuminate the complex relationship between art, culture and governance in contemporary Turkey, particularly during the AKP rule. Using the conservative art debates sparked by İskender Pala's critical comments in 2012 as a backdrop, this dissertation situates the Yeditepe Biennial as a concrete expression of the government's cultural strategy. Using descriptive and analytical methods, the study draws on a critical discourse analysis of various sources such as interviews with the biennial's board of directors, curators and organizers; press releases, catalogues and reports. The central argument is that the biennial, ostensibly a cultural exhibition, is strategically designed to function as a political tool, actively shaping cultural discourse in line with the conservative, traditionalist and neo-Ottomanist agenda of the current government. The research meticulously examines the planning and execution of the biennial, revealing the political, bureaucratic and artistic networks involved. The partnership between the *Fatih Municipality* and the *Classical Turkish Arts Foundation* (KTSV) is scrutinized, revealing a complex nexus that underscores the political underpinnings of the event. This dissertation argues that beyond being a cultural showcase, the Yeditepe Biennial represents a critical intersection of art,

culture and governance and serves as a barometer of cultural policy and power in contemporary Turkey.

Keywords: conservative art, cultural politics, cultural hegemony, biennial, Yeditepe Biennial



ÖZET

MUHAFAZAKAR SANATIN SİYASETİ YEDİTEPE BİENALİ'Nİ YAPMAK

Babutcu, Eda Nur
Yüksek Lisans, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü
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Bu tez, günümüz Türkiye'sinde, özellikle de AKP iktidarı döneminde sanat, kültür ve yönetim arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi aydınlatmak için Yeditepe Bienali'ni bir vaka çalışması olarak kapsamlı bir şekilde analiz etmektedir. İskender Pala'nın 2012'deki eleştirel yorumlarıyla alevlenen muhafazakâr sanat tartışmalarını bir arka plan olarak kullanan bu tez, Yeditepe Bienali'ni hükümetin kültür stratejisinin somut bir ifadesi olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Betimleyici ve analitik yöntemler kullanan çalışma, bienalin yönetim kurulu, küratörleri ve organizatörleriyle yapılan görüşmeler; basın bültenleri, kataloglar ve raporlar gibi çeşitli kaynakların eleştirel söylem analizine dayanmaktadır. Ana argüman, görünürde bir kültür sergisi olan bienalin, stratejik olarak kültür politikalarına katkı sunacak bir araç işlevi görecektir. Bu şekilde tasarlandığı ve mevcut hükümetin muhafazakâr, gelenekçi ve neo-Osmanlıcı gündemi doğrultusunda kültürel söylemi aktif olarak şekillendirdiğidir. Araştırma, Fatih Belediyesi ile Klasik Türk Sanatları Vakfı (KTSV) arasındaki ortaklığı mercek altına almış; bienalin planlanması ve yürütülmesini titizlikle inceleyerek bienal çevresindeki siyasi, bürokratik ve sanatsal ağları ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu tez, Yeditepe Bienali'nin kültürel bir vitrin olmanın ötesinde, sanat, kültür ve yönetişimin kritik bir

kesişimini temsil ettiğini ve günümüz Türkiye'sinde kültür politikası ve iktidarın bir barometresi olarak hizmet ettiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: muhafazakar sanat, kültür politikaları, kültürel iktidar, bienal, Yeditepe Bienali



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while trying to collect documents by talking via Zoom, today we are sitting at the same table again in the shadow of entirely different lives. As if we were at this table yesterday... It is very nice to still be like yesterday, Saliha. Thank you.

I have no words to express my gratitude to my mom, dad, and Elif who will always be my little tortoise. My eyes fill with tears, and I can only say thank you for making difficult easy.

I reserved my last words for my best friend, my better half, Emin. It is wonderful to grow up with you.



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INTRODUCTION

Never forget that political power is obtained through ballot boxes, but we need to exert strenuous efforts, study hard and sweat blood to obtain cultural power.... Prepare us a viable roadmap with depth and vision for the future in line with our 2023 vision. Study it very well; let's both study it and put it into practice. I would like to announce here that I will personally follow up on every reasonable and feasible proposal to be put forward in this council, and that I will also appoint a committee about it.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (TCBB, 2017)

Following these words of President Erdoğan at the National Culture Council (*Millî Kültür Şurası*), which reconvened after 28 years, a “traditional art event” called Yeditepe Biennial was organized in Turkey under the auspices of the presidency. The aim of this biennial, the first of which was held in March 2018 and the second in January 2022, is defined as bringing traditional back into the scene in the art field (Yeditepe Bienali, 2023). Although it is not clear whether there is a direct link between the recommencement of the National Culture Council and organization of the Yeditepe Biennial in succession to each other it is very likely that President Erdoğan gave the green light for organizing an “art event” focusing on the traditional arts and values. Several factors such as the financial, logistical as well as non-monetary support of the presidency and other state institutions to this biennial and that this biennial is being held in partnership with Fatih Municipality, which is held by the AKP, and with the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation (*Klasik Türk Sanatları Vakfı*), which was established by Erdoğan's order in 2007 and whose administrators are known to be close to the Erdoğan family, all strengthen this possibility.

The Yeditepe Biennial holds significance in contemporary Turkey due to its position in the intricate interplay between culture, politics, and power, particularly in the context of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s utilization of cultural

elements to maintain political hegemony. Yeditepe Biennial may serve as a strategic tool for the Erdoğan and AKP government to shape and maintain their political dominance through various means. It may allow them to influence Turkey's cultural landscape, curate artworks and messages to align with their political agenda, and promote their ideological views emphasizing traditionalism, nationalism, and Islamic culture. Furthermore, the biennial may enable the AKP to control the voices and perspectives presented in the art world to reinforce their cultural and political agenda. By framing the biennial as focused on traditional art, they seem intended to guide the trajectory of Turkish culture in a specific direction. As I will discuss in the upcoming chapters, I consider the art that has come to the forefront through the Yeditepe Biennial as an extension and a tangible reflection of the conservative art debates that began in 2011. In this regard, I aim to explore the path from “conservative art” to “traditional art” and examine how these discussions are reflected in the political sphere or reflect the changing political atmosphere. Within this framework, this thesis aims to understand the multifaceted debates surrounding “conservative art” within the context of the Yeditepe Biennial and its potential political ramifications. Understanding the precise content and implications of conservative and traditional conceptualizations is crucial for apprehending the government's cultural strategies. Moreover, the organization of such an event raises questions about its key players and the behind-the-scenes dynamics, which are essential for comprehending culture production.

In this frame, my research objectives are several: First, I am interested in the conceptualizations of “conservative art” and “traditional art.” How is conservative and traditional art juxtaposed against contemporary art in Turkey? How did these discussions start and evolve? How do politicians involved in the organization of the

biennial, as well as the organizers and curators, define “tradition” and “traditional art?” Why did they pick the biennial format? Second, I am interested in political, bureaucratic, municipal, and art networks which collaborated to make the Yeditepe Biennial. Who made decisions? Who were the actors? What kind of decisions were made by which actors? How do traditional artists come into contact with the political-bureaucratic world? In this vein, the question is what is the relationship between state and art according to the Yeditepe Biennial circles? I argue that the Yeditepe Biennial was not only a cultural exhibition, but also a carefully orchestrated political tool to reinforce a conservative, traditionalist and neo-Ottomanist narrative in line with the AKP government's political agenda. Through the Biennial, traditional arts were used as a strategic tool to assert cultural power and consolidate political dominance, and the relationship between the state and the arts was shaped through the sponsorship mechanism, enabling the government to provide selective support to the exclusion of state organs.

In the introductory chapter, I will first situate my research within the existing body of literature; first by introducing the literature on the politics of culture in contemporary Turkey, and second, by critically examining secondary works on biennials and politics of art. Finally, I will explain my methodological approach to this research.

A. Literature Review

a. Literature on the Politics of Culture in Turkey

There is limited literature contributing to an understanding of the politics of culture during the AKP era in Turkey. While several pieces provide unique perspectives, collectively, they shed light on the various dimensions of this political and cultural transformation. Scholars dealing with Turkish cultural studies highlight various issues, including controversial decisions and practices, censorship, attempts to shape cultural identity, and political consolidation. “Marka Takva Tuğra” (2015) delves into how the AKP government used a blend of cultural references, economic policies, and political discourse to consolidate its power, engage with various segments of the population, and address social and economic concerns. It highlights how the AKP government has exerted direct pressure on the media, arts, and everyday life through censorship, statutory regulations, and interventions by top-level bureaucrats. The manipulation of culture, including the promotion of conservative values, religious myths, and nostalgia, is instrumental in maintaining Erdoğan's power. In parallel to Marka Takva Tuğra, “The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey” (2022) is another compilation that examines the various cultural aspects of contemporary Turkey, such as football, mass media, shopping, cooking, and advertising as keys to the complex struggles over gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and religious identity (Stokes, 2020).

Aydın Çubukçu (2015) covers the story from the beginning and discusses the cultural policies of the AKP during the era of Abdullah Gül and later Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The initial AKP government under Abdullah Gül did not significantly

differ from the cultural policies of previous governments and emphasized an “interplay between universal values and national culture.” However, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power, there was a clear shift towards a more assertive cultural policy, emphasizing the need to redefine and promote a cultural revival. The focus was on creating a “cultural reawakening.” Erdoğan's government aimed to establish a dominant culture that internalized and encompassed all cultural diversity within the nation, emphasizing the importance of preserving historical and cultural heritage (Birdal, 2015; Çubukçu, 2015). In this vein, Sinan Birdal (2015) stresses the importance of understanding ideology and hegemony through concrete political practices rather than a narrow cultural lens. Birdal underlines how the AKP has used ideology and political strategies to consolidate its power and maintain its political hegemony in Turkey, emphasizing the need to consider concrete political practices and interventions in understanding the relationship between ideology and hegemony (Birdal, 2015). In this dissertation, I consider the Yeditepe Biennial as one of the concrete practices Birdal points out.

One of the most important concepts pointing to the AKP's cultural agenda is “New Turkey.” Durgun (2015) refers to the concept of “Lumpen Development” by Marxist thinker Samir Amin, highlighting the clientelist capitalism in Turkey. In her account, AKP, known for its development policies, has shifted its focus to identity and lifestyle politics, which can be described as “New Turkey.” Burak Onaran (2022) also discusses the concept of “New Turkey” as the label of the political vision of the AKP. Onaran's article explores the connections between “New Turkey” and its imagined Ottoman past, shedding light on how the current ruling party manipulates history to consolidate its political agenda. Kemal İnal (2015) highlights a series of visible changes and ideologies that shaped the cultural landscape during this period.

He points out the introduction of policies and practices that segregated different groups within society. Examples include private beaches for women wearing the veil and separate municipal buses for women wearing headscarves. This segregation was indicative of a change in societal norms and values. Destruction of the historical cinema building and the imposition of alcohol and tobacco restrictions, as well as interference with dress codes and the promotion of the “türbanlı bacı” (veiled sister) as an ideal woman, are examples (İnal, 2015). These actions signified a change in the preservation of cultural heritage and lifestyle. Shifts in the education system, the rise of religious Imam Hatip schools, and the promotion of Islam over secularism in media content are also worth attention. Traditional Turkish culture was replaced with Islamic themes and symbols in many areas of public life. İnal concludes that the cultural landscape under the AKP was significantly influenced by the party's approach to the commodification of culture and the conservative transformation of society through Islamic principles.

Conservative transformation extended to various aspects of life, from education and media to politics and daily practices. In this frame, we are constantly witnessing the heroization of the Ottoman past, primarily focusing on Turkish military achievements (Brileva, 2022). For example, in recent years, the Turkish government has used various means to highlight the First Battle of Kut in national memory, a long-forgotten victory over the British Army in World War I. Here, mass media, as a tool to reach broad audiences, plays a significant role in shaping society's perceptions. Onaran's article (2022) uses the historical TV series “Mehmetçik Kut'ül-Amare” as a case study to examine the relationship between politics and truth in “New Turkey.” It delves into the reasons for growing public indifference to historical manipulations, drawing on concepts like 'the age of post-truth' by Myriam Revault-

d'Allonnes and the 'reign of presentism' by François Hartog. Onaran shed light on how the historical narrative of the First Battle of Kut has been reinvented and reintroduced to the Turkish public, eliciting patriotic sentiments and aligning with universal clichés about national myths. This narrative emphasizes Turkey's historical mission, the presence of external enemies, and prioritizing the nation's survival above all else. The article suggests that this reinvented history, including nationalistic emotions of pride and revenge, is a part of the AKP's effort to create a detachment and establish a new state tradition while revising the official Turkish nationalist historical schema. Caner Tekin (2022) focuses on another TV drama series, “Payitaht: Abdülhamid,” to discuss the deliberate construction of an implicit connection between the historical challenges faced by Sultan Abdülhamid II and the contemporary challenges confronting President Erdoğan in Turkey. This narrative aligns with the changing representations of Sultan Abdülhamid II in educational materials during the AKP era (removal of references to Abdülhamid's autocratic rule in official history textbooks). Such TV series not only follow the official narrative of Abdülhamid but also actively fabricate certain historical elements (Tekin, 2022). “Payitaht,” like other TV shows aired on Turkish state television, is seen as a government effort to instrumentalize and rewrite history, primarily to legitimize an increasingly authoritarian regime. It argues that such a regime was necessary for the Sultan to overcome his rivals. The series misrepresents Abdülhamid's conflicts with the British Empire, the Zionist movement, the so-called New World Order, and the Union and Progress movement to draw parallels between historical events and contemporary adversaries, even using them to demonize civil demonstrations like the Gezi Park protests. On the other hand, Brileva (2022) highlights the coexistence of different versions of Turkish national history in modern Turkish cinema. During the

AKP's rule, although mainstream cinema has been used as a platform to promote Turkey's 'glorious history,' emphasizing neo-Ottomanism, Turkish art house cinema delves into the intricacies of Ottoman and Turkish history, addressing challenging topics like the Greek, Armenian, and Kurdish questions. They offer a more detailed exploration of history by focusing on individual lives and their often tragic stories. These films provide a platform for expressing critical perspectives on the traditional view of Turkish history. The fundamental disagreement between Turkey's creative intelligentsia and the ruling elite regarding the interpretation of history is seen as part of a broader discourse on cultural hegemony and resistance (Brileva, 2022). Demirer explores the growing importance of politics through symbols, ceremonies, and performances in Turkey's political tradition (2015). The world of symbolic production seems endless. Some scholars, such as Petek Onur, focus on the cultural life in the city. She highlights the recent restoration and renovation processes in Ankara's historical center, which have led to the opening of new shops, cafes, hotels, and museums, attracting both tourists and citizens (2022). These newly developed sites, such as Hamamönü, are characterized by a blend of neo-Ottomanist cultural practices, neoliberal economic activities, and Turco-Islamic connotations, starkly contrasting the partially restored Ankara Citadel quarter. Onur argues that these new tourist sites serve as a spatial representation of the ruling elite's cultural and political agenda, entailing various social and cultural power networks. The representations of Ottoman heritage at these sites are intended to symbolize the ruling elite's power and a new concept of public memory, strongly influenced by Turkish popular culture viral TV series on different periods of Ottoman history (Onur, 2022). Petek Onur characterizes Ankara's evolving urban culture as an example of restorative nostalgia, as defined by Svetlana Boym, where nostalgia is used to reconstruct a lost past and

fill gaps in popular memory with new constructs (2022). These invented traditions often serve nationalist and religious political purposes in the case of Turkey. By focusing on the Yeditepe Biennial, this thesis adds to the examples of AKP's influence on the cultural landscape, looking at it from the perspective of art practices and at the same time, unlike the existing literature, providing an insider's view of the issue through interviews with biennial circles.

With all these examples we encounter and are exposed to every day in life, we are also directly exposed to the issue of culture in the rhetoric of President Erdoğan and state officials. Duygu Durgun (2015) criticizes the AKP's divisive rhetoric targeting artists and cultural institutions. Examples include the demolition of a sculpture in Kars, the controversial appointment of bureaucrats to cultural institutions, and the cancellation of a concert due to a false accusation of criticism on social media. She points out the historical use of culture and art as political tools in different political eras and calls for a more pluralistic and democratic approach to culture and art in Turkey. Türkoğlu (2022) investigates the growing influence of political leaders and populist rhetoric in Turkey's cultural policy realm. It discusses the role of cultural institutions, such as the Presidential Symphony Orchestra, in promoting the political agenda of the AKP. The article highlights how the AKP has sought to gain more control over cultural institutions, turning them into instruments for political propaganda and control. Türkoğlu argues that cultural policy has become increasingly politicized in Turkey, emphasizing the challenges this poses for artistic freedom and cultural diversity. Durgun highlights that the Turkish state continues to see itself as the “protector” and “patron” of culture and art, and there is no departure from the idea that culture and art should be conducted under political authority with the right to intervene. It discusses recent debates, such as the proposal to transform

the State Opera and Ballet into an institution directly appointed by the Prime Minister and the creation of the Turkey Arts Institution (TÜSAK), as efforts to expand political influence in cultural and artistic domains. However, I argue that conservative art debates and the Yeditepe Biennial show that the state is not monolithic. There are many actors within the state with different agendas and worldviews. The government bypasses the bureaucracy and state organs and intervenes directly in art. The way to do this is to make art sponsored by the government or presidency, not owned by them. On the other hand, there are so many instances of disrespect towards the arts, such as vandalizing or removing sculptures and, on the other hand, praising traditional art forms like ebru, calligraphy, and ceramics. These actions reflected shifts in the perception of art and culture under the AKP (İnal, 2015). In the Yeditepe Biennial, we see that these praised branches of art have been showcased as the essential art of the Turkish people.

In the literature, only Erdem Çolak has a study on Yeditepe Biennial. He approaches the Biennial within the context of “New Turkey” and examines the transformation of state iconography by conducting a comparative analysis of various neo-Ottoman representations produced through three different art exhibitions organized in Turkey in three distinct periods: the “Muhteşem Süleyman Çağı” exhibition in 198), the “Türkler: Bin Yıllık Yolculuk, 600-1600” exhibition in 2005, and the “First Yeditepe Biennial” in 2018 (2021). He defines Yeditepe as the “New Biennial of New Turkey.” In Çolak's account, the Yeditepe Biennial seeks to establish traditional arts in a contemporary context, emphasizing the creation of added value for Turkey's traditional art culture. He perceives the biennial as part of a broader cultural policy that attempts to construct an aesthetic community within society by involving the public in determining “authentic” aesthetic preferences, as

opposed to the previous cultural elite's influence on art and culture. Çolak raises the concept of Ottomentality to understand the biennial's biopolitical and neoliberal strategies. According to Yang Erdem, who evaluates the cultural policies targeting society's cultural life during the AKP era, Ottomentality acknowledges that when neoliberalism and neo-Ottomanism come together, they create new forms of governing society's cultural life based on market and neo-conservative rationalities as two independent forces (Yang Erdem, 2017 in Çolak 2021). However, the effectiveness of these efforts, along with other neo-Ottoman policies, remains to be seen over time. Çolak's work is limited as he focuses on the visible aspects of the Biennial in search of traces of the transformation of state iconography. On the other hand, my goal is to conduct an in-depth analysis, delving deeply into what the Yeditepe Biennial signifies for the ruling elite and society and exploring its implications thoroughly.

b. Biennial Literature

Biennial literally means “occurring every two years.” Biennials in the art world are defined as “periodic, independent and international major exhibitions surveying trends in contemporary, cutting-edge art” occurring every two years (Sassatelli, 2017). A biennial basically serves as a platform for showcasing contemporary art and cultural expressions of artists worldwide, influencing cultural exchange, and shaping artistic trends. They often comprise a diverse range of artistic practices, such as visual arts, performance arts, installations, and digital arts, and offer artists a ground to experiment with different mediums, themes, and styles. These events create an environment where artists can experiment with their new ideas, explore critical

issues, challenge conventions, and present their perspectives without the constraints of traditional art institutions (Kompatsiaris, 2017); and attract art enthusiasts, collectors, curators, and visitors from the globe. Biennials vary in size, aims, funding, structure, and publicity. We are also witnessing triennials, quadrennials, and quinquennials, which take place every 3, 4, or 10 years discussed in the biennial literature as parts of the biennial world (Kasfir, 2018; Sassatelli, 2017; Robin, 2015; Montero, 2012).

In the existing literature, World Fairs are widely perceived as the forerunners of the biennial format. On the other hand, “the concept of biennial” dates back to the early 20th century when it became a popular format for international art exhibitions. The first biennial is often traced back to the Venice Biennale, established in 1895. The Venice Biennale, held in Venice, Italy, was initially organized as a national art exhibition but soon evolved into an international event, becoming a model for subsequent biennials. (Montero, 2012; Marchart, 2014; Martini and Martini, 2011). The second, Sao Paulo, came to the scene approximately 60 years later, in 1951. The São Paulo Biennial in Brazil was another well-known event, showcasing contemporary art from Latin America and around the globe. The number of biennials in the world was limited to around 20 up until the mid-1980s. Starting from the mid-80s, we are witnessing a sharp proliferation of the biennial format. This proliferation period is often called the “Biennialization” of the art world (Wu, 2009; Montero, 2012). The total number of biennials reached 60 by the mid-1990s, and this sharp proliferation process was often closely associated with the rise of globalization. Today, the number of biennials is claimed to be over 200 all around the world, many in previously peripheralized locations. However, some are short-lived or occasional due to economic or political reasons (Kasfir, 2018; Marchart, 2014).

Throughout their development process, “increasingly, biennials dictate the agenda of what is contemporary art and how one is to understand, appreciate and experience it.” (Sassatelli, 2017) Eventually, they became the new commissioning agency model dedicated to producing experimental engaged art in the public realm (Bishop, 2006); and have evolved into massive events featuring competing selections and representations, attracting media attention and public participation. In this sense, biennials play a significant role in shaping artistic trends and influencing art movements globally. Biennials' themes and curatorial approaches can set the tone for artistic discussions and practices in the contemporary art world (Jones, 2017). On the other hand, one of the common outstanding aims of the biennials is contributing to the economic life in the city and appealing to its attraction to strengthen the tourist industry (Marchart, 264; Montero, 2012).

Nevertheless, the relevant feature of biennials for this thesis is neither their role in shaping artistic trends nor their contribution to capital accumulation. The importance of biennials for this work stems from the fact that it is not possible to think of them as purely artistic events because a biennial is also an activity that generates a specific discourse through artistic images and representations (Azman, 2012). With the function of producing a particular discourse, these events have become important sites for artists to engage with critical social and political issues, including issues of identity, migration, human rights, environmental concerns, and postcolonial legacies. In this sense, biennials serve as platforms for social and political critique through artistic expression. Also, some biennials taking place in different regions, particularly in peripheralized locations, contribute to decentering the art discourse dominated by Western institutions.

Since the biennial format is both historically and culturally considered as Western, one of the crucial puzzles discussed in the literature is whether it can adopt or serve non-western perspectives. Although biennials primarily showcased “international contemporary art” from European and North American countries, as the influence of borderless capital grew, they began to expand to include the Caribbean, South America, Africa, Asia, and the Islamic world. These are called peripheral biennials (Kasfir, 2018; Stallabrass, 2004). They offer opportunities for non-Western artists and art scenes to gain international recognition and challenge the Eurocentric art narrative. In this vein, peripheral biennials embrace their position as alternative centers of art and culture. This perspective suggests that these exhibitions in peripheral locations challenge the dominance and influence of established art centers, offering an alternative perspective and platform for artistic expression. By celebrating their peripheral status, these biennials aim to highlight and promote diverse artistic voices and narratives that may have been marginalized or overlooked in the past.

As Kasfir emphasized, “the expansion of the peripheral biennials has sparked debates about what 'international art' or 'biennial art' really is. Is it a currently fashionable style or medium found in major art centers? Is it a statement of opposition to hegemony from the periphery? Or is it an egalitarian mix of various artistic expressions?” (Kasfir, 2018, p.5). Some argue that biennials are worldwide occurrences that establish opportunities for contemplation, the exchange of diverse ideas, and original forms of artistic representation in a cultural display. On the other hand, some view the notion of biennials as proof of the homogenizing and trivializing impacts of a cultural sector that has been intensified by neoliberal globalization. They assert that biennials have surrendered some of the culture's

inherent independence to economic pragmatism. Overall, biennials are seen as either cultural elaborations of new economic and political powers or as spaces of resistance and diversity (Sassatelli, 2017; Stallabrass, 2004; Marchart, 2014; Bishop, 2006; Kompatsiaris, 2017; Diggon, 2012; Azman, 2012; Day et al., 2010).

In the framework of this thesis, I am focusing on the literature that considers biennials as a ground for resistance and diversity with a particular focus on peripheral biennials since both President Erdoğan and supporters of the Yeditepe Biennial perceive it as an event against the cultural Eurocentrism in Turkey, and as a reminder of public's identity and essence Cultural Eurocentrism, in this case, refers to the art produced by the proponents of the İstanbul Biennial (İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu, Sabri Kalender, Serhat Kula, Berkan Karpat; interview, 2022). In this sense, what makes the Yeditepe Biennial unique is that it is not positioned against a Western biennial but against the İstanbul Biennial, which can already be regarded as a peripheral art event (Özpınar, 2011). The central discourse produced by Yeditepe Biennial may be found in the official slogan or blurb of the art event: "Senin bir sanatın var (You have the art)." I found it right to choose "the art" rather than "an art" in the English version of the biennial slogan/blurb. The art reflected through this event is pointed out as the normal, or "the one." It reminds one of the right-wing attitude of considering themselves and conservative right-wing world view normal or natural (Bora, 2012). The question here is if this biennial is initiated against the Eurocentric conceptualization of art in Turkey, why is it creating another solipsism? Why is there a need to conduct this biennial? Who initiated it, and who carried it out for what purposes? Moreover, finally, what kind of art have they produced for which purpose?

B. Methodology

The methodology employed in this thesis involved a comprehensive data-gathering process over the past two years. I interviewed a total of 22 people who participated in the management and running of the biennial. I also used press bulletins, biennial catalogs, reports, maps, websites, panel discussions, YouTube and TV interviews with curators, and tweets. Within the scope of this thesis, I first met with KTSV officials on March 2, 2021, and learned about their vision for the biennial. As of December 2, 2021, I started my interviews. Until February 28, 2022, I conducted 19 interviews, most of which were one hour long. The shortest was 30 minutes, and the longest was 2 hours and 15 minutes. Most of these took place face-to-face in my interviewees' offices or a cafe, and 4 took place online via Zoom due to my interviewees being abroad, busy schedules, or the ongoing effects of the pandemic. In the period of January to February 2022, I attended the 2nd Istanbul Biennial as a participant observer and had verbal conversations with the officials. In order to get answers to new questions that emerged in my thesis writing process and to meet new actors, I conducted three additional interviews between 7-10 August 2023. Apart from these, I received answers to some of my questions through e-mails, phone calls, and WhatsApp chats with the organizers of the Biennial. While contacting my interviewees, I mainly relied on the official list published on the Biennial website and catalogs. I reached the people on the list either through my other participants, LinkedIn, or their workplaces' corporate e-mail addresses and telephones. The most critical barrier I encountered in this process was the protective attitude of the names still involved in the biennial. In the name of “not harming the biennial.” I was not wanted to meet with those who had previously taken part and left, and I was left fruitless by stalling at the point of contacting sponsors. Although I have reached out

to the left members of the biennial with my own effort, my attempts to contact the sponsors remained inconclusive.

I will analyze the data by applying critical discourse analysis to analyze written and spoken materials in relation to their social context. It gives a ground for examining how power dynamics within the biennial's organization and within the broader socio-political context influence the discourses and narratives surrounding the event. I aim to go beyond the surface level of discourse to expose the unspoken intentions and implications of the actors involved. My methodology also gives me a framework for assessing how discourses can influence and be influenced by societal change. For example, the actors' discourses differ before and after the 2023 national elections in Turkey. I found critical discourse analysis proper to exceed the complexities of the Yeditepe Biennial, as it provides the analytical depth required to explore the multifaceted relationships between cultural production, politics, and power. I intend to reveal the nuanced ways in which discourses are constructed by the biennial, its organizers, and its socio-political context.

CHAPTER I

As a cultural manifestation of political ideology, the Yeditepe Biennial serves to understand the role of the state in shaping artistic expression in line with AKP's political agenda. This chapter aims to analyze conservative art debates from the very beginning in order to understand the trajectory leading to the Yeditepe Biennial and to take a holistic view of the relationship between the state and culture under AKP rule. My purpose is to bridge the conservative art debates with the establishment of the Yeditepe Biennial, exploring how the event became a manifestation of the governmental discourse.

A. Initiation and Evolution of Conservative Art Debates

In 2012, Turkey witnessed the birth of the conservative art debates that would pave the way for the establishment of the Yeditepe Biennial. These debates began with İskender Pala's critical comments on the selection of works in the city theaters and were soon sparked by a speech by Mustafa İsen, then Secretary General of the Presidency. This initial spark led to subsequent expansions and contributions from various voices interested in the issue, prompting an evolution in the definition and understanding of conservative art within the Turkish context.

In his article dated February 14th, 2012, İskender Pala discussed the inappropriateness of the play “Günlük Mühtecen Sırlar” and stated that the structure and activities of the City Theaters should be reviewed (“Bir Sanatsal Tepki Ve Sanat,” 2012). The call for a review of the City Theaters actually points to a desire for a systemic change. It implies that the problem was not just with individual

productions but with the institutional framework that allows such productions to exist. This stance reflects a broader perspective that seeks to align cultural production with a particular set of moral and societal norms. The response to this call for change came without delay from a government official. A month later, on March 23rd, in his speech titled “Understanding of Culture and Art in 21st Century Turkey”, which he delivered as the guest of honor as part of the Suriçi Group Platform meetings, Mustafa İsen underlined the inefficiency of the state's art institutions by referencing to Pala. The real igniter of the debate was İsen's assertion that the conservative segment is obligated to create conservative aesthetics and conservative art norms and structure, just as they understand democracy in a conservative manner. At this point, İsen complained about the lack of a cultural change in the AKP government and the restrictiveness of the system (“Muhafazakar Sanat Normu Oluşturmalıyız,” 2012). İsen's speech, which underlined that there was no cultural shift towards conservatism during the AKP rule, became the catalyst for a broader discourse on conservative aesthetics and the structuring of art within the framework of conservative ideology. Mustafa İsen's speech critically acknowledged an unexpected cultural stagnation under the AKP government, which advanced a conservative agenda in many respects. İsen's admission seems to be a sincere acknowledgment that despite the AKP's transformative impact on Turkish politics and society, it has not produced a corresponding shift in the cultural sphere. This reflexive criticism from the inside was crucial as it indicated an official acknowledgment of the need for a cultural realignment with the government's broader ideological stance and reflected the tensions between the government's intentions and the realities of cultural production. Therefore, the significance of İsen's speech lies not only in its content but also in its implications. He suggested

that the AKP sought to extend its influence into the cultural sphere, seeking a deeper cohesion between its political leadership and the culture. This was the first step in a call for a holistic approach to ensure that Turkish art reflects the values espoused by the AKP. İsen's call encouraged a broader debate questioning the nature of the state-art relationship and the definition of conservative aesthetics. This debate, primarily fueled by figures associated with the AKP and sympathizers within the media, questioned the existing paradigms of artistic expression and proposed the formation of a conservative art norm. The discussions expanded, drawing in various intellectuals and cultural figures who either supported the call for a distinct conservative aesthetic or opposed the compartmentalization of art into ideological segments. I would like to cite some important touchstones in this debate.

A few days later, from İsen's speech, on March 27th, in Sabah Newspaper, Emre Aköz asked what Mustafa İsen meant by conservative art. On March 28th and April 8th, Uğur Derman and Bülent Kahraman expressed their opinions on the subject in interviews in Habertürk and Akşam newspapers, respectively (“Muhafazakâr Sanat Da Ne Demek?” 2017). On April 8th, the same day as Kahraman's statement, Nuriye Akman from Zaman newspaper interviewed Mustafa İsen, the spark of the controversy. In the interview, Mustafa İsen tried to clarify the issues he touched upon at the conference (“Köşk Genel Sekreteri İsen: Devletin Sineması Yoksa Tiyatrosu Da Olmamalı,” 2012). When Akman asked, “Whom do you want to interfere in the theater plays?” İsen claimed, “In the current system, four or five experts appointed by the general director of the state theaters determine the repertoire. So why shouldn't the municipality of that city or some civil organizations of that city have the right to determine the plays I will watch?” By suggesting that municipalities or civic organizations could play a role in determining theatre

productions, İsen suggests a shift from a centralized decision-making system to one that is more participatory and reflective of societal values. Here is what the values and especially society includes who is undenoted. According to İsen, artists who would receive support from the state should submit their works for approval, and even if they were to perform independently of state support, they should not perform art that disturbed the established attitudes of society.

Organizations that can receive support from the state must also submit what kind of play they will perform. Beyond that, I will not receive support from the state, but this is my understanding of art. Those who want to say it is my understanding of art... will perform if it will not disturb some of the established attitudes of society. They can also do it politically. Let's not look at the issue only in terms of sexuality. ("Köşk Genel Sekreteri İsen: Devletin Sineması Yoksa Tiyatrosu Da Olmamalı," 2012)

In this interview, İsen proposed the establishment of a state-controlled art council. This model proposes a shift from the direct production of art by the state to a form of surveillance and facilitation through project-based support. This model would aim to minimize bureaucratic interference in the creative process and facilitate a more flexible, results-oriented approach to arts support. It could have potentially paved the way for more responsive and focused resource allocation, encourage innovative projects, and ensure the strategic use of financial resources, but in this case, it is instead promoted as a way of taking control. In fact, İsen's words, "if it does not disturb some of the established attitudes of society," leave a big door open, and these undenoted norms can easily be interpreted as the norms the government aspires to. In such a framework, the idea of a council raises the possibility of increased state intervention in the arts, where political and ideological agendas may influence decisions on funding and project approval.

In addition to the relationship between the state and art, another important debate that has emerged is the nature of conservative art, as mentioned above. İsen

put forward the idea of conservative art, but there was no clear definition of it, although the discussions around it have already been started. In this respect, the main question raised in Akman's interview was what conservative art is. İsen defined conservative art as “the activity of creating new products by combining traditional accumulation with contemporary opportunities within a 'balance' framework.” According to him, the issue was not maintaining the old but using the past as an inspirational source while moving forward according to the day's conditions. İsen's definition of conservative art as a balance between tradition and modern possibilities seems broad and open to interpretation. The fact that he does not include details on how this balance will be achieved and maintained has left the door open to different interpretations and potential conflicts, and the debate has grown. On the same day with Akman, Emre Aköz wrote an article in Sabah newspaper titled “State and Art: Performing or Supporting?” he invited other names to the discussion. At this point, Aköz points out that he and İsen talked and agreed that such a discussion should be opened. Although the title of the article points to the role of the state, the nature of conservative art was first and mainly discussed within this framework. The names Aköz pointed to were prominent right-wing figures, especially in Sabah and Zaman newspaper circles.

Engin Ardiç and Hasan Bülent Kahraman from our newspaper, Hilmi Yavuz, Beşir Ayvazoğlu, İskender Pala, Ahmet Turan Alkan from Zaman newspaper are the ones that immediately come to mind... There are women novelists and storytellers like Leyla İpekçi, Cihan Aktaş, and Fatma Barbarosoğlu, who are also newspaper writers. They should also be included in this discussion. The starting questions could be: Is there such a thing as conservative art (and aesthetics)? If so, what is it, based on what principles, and how is it done? Many more questions can be generated based on these. (Aköz, 2012)

Aköz's approach of including key figures from a particular ideological background may have resulted in a limited scope or bias in the debate, limiting a multifaceted discussion. The first response to Emre Aköz's call came from İskender Pala. İskender

Pala started his article by defining the term conservative and ended with a twenty-point art manifesto. I will elaborate separately on this in the context of my thesis, as it stays at the center of the debate and presents a framework that includes the norms of conservative art. It must be said that according to Pala, it would not be conservative art but the art of the conservative (“İskender Pala'dan Muhafazakâr Sanat Manifestosu,” 2012). The second response to the call came from Beşir Ayvazoğlu. In his article in Zaman newspaper dated April 12th, Ayvazoğlu addressed the issue and expressed his views that the artist, not art, can be conservative. He also mentioned that conservatism requires knowing what is universal and emphasized the importance of knowing what to preserve and how to preserve it and the importance of being aware of what is going on in the field of art and culture in the world (Aydemir, 2018). Then, on April 15th, Hilmi Yavuz joined the discussion and stated that this issue had not been discussed since Yahya Kemal and that he was glad it was brought to the agenda with İsen's statements. He put the issue in a broader perspective by stating that it is a problem of civilization rather than conservatism and that it should be thought about as the reproduction of Islamic civilization's aesthetic norms and structure. Yavuz suggests the concept of “Islamic Aesthetics” instead of “Conservative Art” and says that the issue will be solved by combining the traditional with the modern and transferring it to the present. Stating that conservatism is confused with traditionalism, Yavuz emphasized that Islamic Aesthetics, which he proposed instead of conservative art, makes no political reference and that the discussion should be approached from a purely aesthetic point of view (Aydemir, 2018). Although İsen emphasized the concept of conservative art, and some circles supported this conceptualization, some opposed the classification of art, such as Ayvazoğlu, and those who took it further claimed that the artist could not

be conservative either. For example, according to Dücane Cündioğlu, the most fundamental principle of art is imagination, and it cannot have limits; therefore, the artist cannot be conservative. (Cündioğlu, 2012) According to Murat Belge, since every word spoken is new, it is impossible to preserve something the same. According to him, art cannot be conservative but contains conservative elements. For others, art that was considered revolutionary could not be conservative at the same time. It can be said that such people perceive the concept of “conservative art” as an oxymoron in İçener's interpretation (2012). On the other hand, some argue that where one can speak of “free art,” there can also be “conservative art.” For example, Uğur Derman emphasizes his support for conservative art. He explains that it is normal to find conservative art where there is Marxist or revolutionary art (Aydemir, 2018). Here, we encounter a definition and marking based on contrast or duality. According to this view, the determinants of conservative art are “decency and decorum,” and therefore, the artist has limits. It is worth mentioning here that these limits have been expressed not only by those who conceptualize duality but also by many others (İçener, 2012).

B. From Art Manifesto to Manifestation of Conservative Art

Debates

“Conservative's Art Manifesto” by İskender Pala in Zaman Newspaper expanded the discussion and drew the framework of conservative art. The importance of this column is that it presents norms beyond the conceptual discussion. Pala first defined conservatism in his column on April 10th and then established the central backbone of the debate with his twenty-point manifesto. Pala accepts conservatism according

to the definition given by "Kubbealtı Lugatı" and characterizes himself as a conservative according to this definition. Kubbealtı defines conservative as "(A person) who is attached to national and spiritual values, artifacts, customs and traditions, who want to protect, preserve and maintain them." Drawing from these, instead of conservative art, which he sees as a limiting term, he uses the expression "conservative art" and lists twenty points that define this art. Pala's lists are as follows:

1. Muhafazakar Sanat (MS) (Conservative art) is the aesthetic dimension of a society whose ties with its past have been traumatically severed to reconcile with its self.
2. MS is an art that originates from society's identity and is made visible in its bosom.
3. MS is an aesthetic field in which a nation with an economic development ranking of 16th but a human development ranking of 92nd can complete its structural change and express itself freely. It opposes those who prevent the river from finding its natural course and those who want to change it artificially with its production.
4. MS aims to contribute to social peace, enlightenment, and material and spiritual development through its productions.
5. MS accepts as a prerequisite that freedom and free environments are inevitable for every artist. However, it opposes vulgarity, poor quality, and discrimination in the name of art.
6. MS is civil; it opposes state control and favors the state's contribution as a sponsor rather than a patron.
7. MS is not a religion-based art, but it considers religious sensitivities.
8. MS does not fight with the public. In this respect, it supports the conservative art scene in the UK and is uncomfortable, for example, with the blasphemy of Islamic values in a predominantly Muslim society.
9. MS does not reject the West, accepts its methodology and productions, but distances itself from its spirit.
10. MS knows, for example, Fuzuli or Dede Efendi, Shakespeare or Moliere, Brahms or Vivaldi, Kurosawa or Coppola, but instead of producing their imitation versions, it produces its work with the idea of becoming a Fuzuli, a Molier, a Vivaldi or Coppola.

11. MS has the ideal of producing by blending Nazım Hikmet or Orhan Kemal, Karacaoğlu or Şeyh Galib, Dostoyevsky or Dante, etc., without getting caught up in Mehmet Akif or Necip Fazıl.

12. Based on the principle that the classical is always open to interpretation, MS is determined to reinterpret and reproduce classical understanding, art, and culture instead of repeating or imitating them.

13. MS is aware of its cultural geography and is free of the chick complex that does not like its shell.

14. MS favors producing what belongs to it with the same quality, acting before the Western artist who strives to discover the products of our geography because he has exhausted his own dynamics.

15. MS is an art that criticizes but never excludes non-conservative art products, even though it is always ignored and excluded in non-conservative art platforms.

16. MS is, in the language of Yahya Kemal, the ancestor of a natural organism that, in Tanpınar's words, continues to change and changes by continuing to change.

17. MS is a civilizational perspective and strives to produce a balanced civilization of matter and spirit in its most advanced form from its rich historical/cultural heritage.

18. MS interrogates and interprets tradition and adds it to contemporary accumulation.

19. MS produces works using all the possibilities, techniques, knowledge, and instruments of civilization and the modern age. However, it draws inspiration from its past while breathing soul into that work. Remember Barış Manço's *From Seven To Seventy-Seven*. This is why we loved it.

20. MS knows that the phrase 'Conservatism does not have a proper understanding of art and a developed aesthetic,' which is bandied about at every opportunity, is a cheap and unfair deliberate fabrication to ignore something. ("İskender Pala'dan Muhafazakâr Sanat Manifestosu," 2012)

Although the text is presented not as conservative art but as the manifesto of the conservative, each article begins with the term MS (conservative art) and lists its ideal characteristics. In this respect, Pala seems quite confused. Pala's definitions are pretty broad and vague. This vagueness is probably intentional in order to leave room for flexibility and to be reinterpreted according to political circumstances. As with İsen, Pala, who emphasizes the balancing of the modern and the traditional, neither defines tradition nor does he define it. Again, reminiscent of İsen, the manifesto

opposes the direct control of art by the state and emphasizes sponsorship. The emphasis on harmonizing art with national identity, social norms, and religious values seems to encourage a kind of control that is subtly compatible with AKP's cultural narratives. It is as if the issue here is not whether art should be managed by the state or not but the government's ability to intervene in the cultural sphere. Since the groups within the state that manage the arts are separate from the government, art can be controlled through other means. By hiding behind a discourse of liberation and efficiency, this door seems to be trying to be opened. While the encouragement of civil society rather than state support is noteworthy, given the complexity of civil society's role in Turkey's cultural landscape, it implies that state control can be exercised through civil society, especially when civil society groups are aligned with the government. Although Pala states that he considers himself a conservative and that he wrote the manifesto based on this identity, the discussion generalizes and evolves into the concept of conservatism in Turkey, the existence of conservative art, the effort to set norms for art and art-power relations (Aydemir, 2018). Director Ezel Akay published an "addendum" on his Facebook account and evaluated Pala's manifesto. In this piece, Akay listed the ambiguities, deficiencies, and, in his opinion, inaccuracies in Pala's articles. ("Muhafazakar Sanat Manifestosu'na Ezel Akay Kuyruk Taktı!," 2012) The striking element of İskender Pala's article for me is that it is built on vague concepts such as "severing ties with the past, identity, self," just as the Yeditepe biennial did. What society means and which identity is referred to is left open-ended. In this respect, the text seems to hang in the air. Mustafa İsen, who had probably been following all these debates for some time, took over the editorship of the 9th issue of the Journal of Conservative Thought in December,

which centered on these debates. İsen again drew attention to the balance between the past and the future, parallel to his April 8th statement and Pala's manifesto.

The word conservatism is really a word that has different connotations and meanings in everyone's minds... I want to make clear what I mean and walk through it. The most beautiful connotation of the concept of conservatism is balance... A balance between the past and the future... This is what I understand from conservatism; I definitely do not understand conservatism as a mimicry of the past... I do not understand conservatism as preserving some acquisitions in the past. On the contrary, the past is a source of inspiration for us. I understand it as producing new things with the perspectives we can derive from this source of inspiration. The main difference between this and the arts that have severed their relationship with the classical is that modern arts that have severed their relationship with the classical are fields of activity that have severed all ties with the past. In conservative thought, on the other hand, this source of inspiration still exists. Therefore, the idea of continuity is maintained in these societies. Societies have memory just like individuals. I believe that the dulling of the memory of societies will have serious negative consequences, just like the dulling of the memory of individuals. In a sense, that inspiration establishes a relationship between the past and the present as a point of contact. This is what I understand, and I think Tanpınar expressed it well: to continue by changing, to change by continuing. (Koyuncu, 2013)

Furthermore, according to İsen, states have to create a cultural environment.

However, he claims he is not discussing pressure and coercive policies but an artistic environment that will expand with state support. One of the question marks here is to what extent is free development he mentions really free? When we think of İskender Pala's "MS is free but..." and Mustafa İsen's statements about city theaters, we should leave a question mark here. So, why did Mustafa İsen open all these discussions?

What was his expectation and purpose?

Today, first a cultural stirring and then its transition to an aesthetic rise... After all this, a race for civilization... Therefore, this is what I expect, what I hope for; this is what I believe in.... Now, instead of this centralized structuring, I really believe that if we allocate more serious budgets than the current budgets allocated by the state to culture and try to support entirely project-based work, gorgeous products will emerge. I believe that there would be great competition, a great race, and as a result, a remarkably good picture would emerge. We have flour, and we have sugar; we even have good halva most of the time. There is a legislative barrier to showcasing this. If we can eliminate this legislative barrier, Turkey will start to achieve remarkable results in this regard in a few years. (Koyuncu, 2013)

Mustafa İsen's remarks resonate with a vision of cultural renaissance and aesthetic progress that is closely aligned with the AKP's goal of a culturally strong Turkey. Although İsen's advocacy for increased state funding for culture and a shift to project-based support has the potential to point to a desire to catalyze innovation and excellence in the arts by envisioning a competitive yet collaborative environment in which cultural production flourishes, it actually seems to carry a desire for control and direction, given all the discussions above. İsen also acknowledges the legal obstacles that, in his view, prevent the full realization of this cultural potential they dream. His call for the removal of these obstacles is indicative of an effort towards policy reform to free artistic and cultural endeavors from bureaucratic constraints. These discussions seem to have fizzled out at some point and there was a period of deep silence. However, have these obstacles been overcome in the passing years, has a consensus been reached on the nature of conservative art, has the AKP government been able to instrumentalize art? In other words, have flour and sugar come together and become halva? I think it is. I am evaluating the Yeditepe Biennial as the Halva the AKP circles would wanted to serve. Starting with the 2017 National Culture Council, Erdoğan often talks about the lack of cultural power and this speech is repeated many times in the same year with different syntaxes (Diken, 2019). It seems that no progress has been made since İsen's complaint in 2012. Rather than the conceptual discussions that started in 2012, this time Erdoğan himself takes the steering wheel and emphasizes that he will personally support any project to establish cultural power (TCBB, 2017). The fact that this speech more or less coincides with the beginning of the preparations for the Yeditepe Biennial gives us

the impression that there may be a connection between this cultural event and the government's cultural agenda.

The Yeditepe Biennial, established later, can be seen as a manifestation of the conservative art debates, crystallizing the discourse into a tangible event. The Yeditepe Biennial embodied an event that is exactly in line with the views of İsen and Pala, an event that feeds on ambiguity, complains about the severing of our ties with the past, and claims to experiment with new forms while preserving the original identity of society. The event not only echoed Isen's calls for a balance between tradition and contemporary innovation but also served as a testament to the AKP's determination to forge a culturally conservative identity. As the Biennial came to life, the direct participation of Fatih Municipality and the patronage of President Erdoğan demonstrated the state's involvement in the cultural sphere. This involvement can be read not as passive support but as a strategic maneuver to ensure that the Biennial aligned with the government's vision of the country's cultural identity. It clearly demonstrated the state's involvement in the arts as an active player with an interest in the cultural narrative presented. The event's focus on traditional Turkish arts, as opposed to more contemporary forms, signals an attempt to counterbalance the Western-oriented cultural policies that have prevailed since the founding of the Turkish Republic. This reveals an effort to create a cultural environment in line with the party's conservative ideology and underscores the strategic use of cultural policy to create a cultural hegemony in line with the government's conservative and nationalist ideologies. The Biennial's slogan, “You have the art,” and the presentation of the Yeditepe Biennial as a conveyor of the essential art of the society is an indication of this situation. The Biennial became a vehicle through which the AKP could project its conservative aesthetic and, in doing

so, sought to realign Turkey's cultural trajectory with the party's ideological principles. The event thus embodied the intersection of art and ideology, becoming an important example of how political narratives can shape and even direct cultural expressions and public perceptions of national identity.

Furthermore, my interviews indicated that the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation (KTSV), the founding partner of the biennial, was established in 2007, before the conservative art debates, with the directive of the then prime minister and president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. What all this shows me is that starting with the establishment of the foundation, even with the establishment of ISMEKs¹ during Erdoğan's mayoralty, cadres were trained to deal with and engage in “conservative art,” and then a debate was ignited in 2012, a framework was drawn, and today, with Yeditepe, it has found a practical application; with project-based state sponsorship, just like İsen and Pala proposed. As a result, the establishment of the Yeditepe Biennial, influenced by the conservative art debates that began with the interventions of İsen and Pala, symbolizes the culmination of the AKP's efforts to integrate conservative values into the country's cultural fabric. The biennial exemplifies the complex interplay of power dynamics, political ideology, and cultural politics in Turkey's contemporary art scene. Through the lens of the Biennial, the realization of a cultural agenda tailored and supported by the state and the role that political discourses play in shaping art and, thus, social values can be observed. In the context

¹ İSMEK stands for the Art and Vocational Training Courses of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and was established in 1996 during the administration of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. İSMEK offers a diverse range of courses within the boundaries of Istanbul, including popular programs such as English language, clothing production, elocution, and basic Microsoft Office programs. In 2021, the institution was restructured under the direction of Ekrem İmamoğlu, which led to the closure of traditional arts courses. During the same period, its name was also changed to *Enstitü İstanbul İSMEK*. (“ENSTİTÜ İSTANBUL İSMEK,” n.d.).

of these debates, the Yeditepe Biennial can be seen as a response to Isen's call. This cultural initiative seeks to realize the conservative change that Isen finds lacking.

The next chapter will closely examine the Yeditepe Biennial from its foundation to its promotion, from its purpose to its actors, and will open up the meaning it expresses at the intersection of culture, art and the governance for discussion.



CHAPTER II

This dissertation argues that the biennial was not the result of an improvised decision but a deliberate instrument to achieve cultural policy goals, realized under the auspices of the Presidency, who decided that the biennial format was the most appropriate platform to achieve the desired impact. In this chapter, the Yeditepe Biennial will be examined in depth from its inception, discussing the story of the biennial's formation, the delicate process of strategic planning, negotiation, and alliance-building between political actors, cultural institutions, and the art community, and the biennial's mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

A. Beginnings

The Yeditepe Biennial has two founding and executive partners. The first is the Fatih Municipality, and the second is the Foundation for Classical Turkish Arts (KTSV). According to their own statements, Fatih Municipality is more interested in the organization and logistics, while KTSV is interested in the artistic aspect of the biennial (Kaygusuz, interview, 2023; İbrahimhakkığlu, interview, 2021; Selvi, interview, 2022). Of course, in the decision-making stages, we come across intersections of situations where areas of intervention are intertwined, but, as they stated, there is such a distribution of tasks. There is another institution that is not mentioned among these partners but is at the very center of the issue: Erk Ajans (Erk Agency). Erk Agency actually manages the biennial's campaign and PR work, but the directors of the agency are both founders and board members of the biennial. In fact, the agency acts as an organ of the Municipality. This is due to their long years

of working together and the close relationship they have established. When we look at the executive scheme of the biennial, we see the board of directors at the top. These are the senior officials of KTSV, Fatih Municipality, and Erk Agency. The Chairman of the Board of Directors is the Mayor of Fatih. Even if the mayor changes, the role assigned to the current mayor, successor, or predecessor does not change. The curator and the curatorial team are determined as a result of the evaluations of the board of directors. The other layers involved are more like temporary service providers.

If we take a closer look at the main actors, it is said that Erk Agency was founded as a small advertisement agency in Fındıkzade, Istanbul, and grew under the patronage of Bülent Arınç and Kemal Öztürk (anonymous, interview, 2022). The owners have never changed since the very beginning: Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu and Emine Karabulut. Over the years, they have established close ties with the Fatih Municipality and undertook all of the Municipality's advertising, promotion, and organizational work. Karabulut and İbrahimhakkıoğlu also run the *Nilhan Sultan Köşkü* (Nilhan Sultan Mansion) restaurant in Üsküdar, Paşalimanı together with Nilhan Osmanoğlu, a junior and outspokenly conservative member of the Ottoman dynasty. This partnership reminds us that the conceptualization of “Ottomentality” by Yang Erdem depicts the intersection of neo-Ottomanism and neoliberalism (Çolak, 2021). If we closely look at the activities of the Erk Agency, the co-founder, Emine Karabulut, states that:

After the establishment of the AK Party government, especially from 2005 to 2013, cultural and artistic activities in Istanbul were prevalent. We have been actively preparing projects at home and abroad since then, and we were involved in implementing some. Of course, it is not just us; it is teamwork. God has mercy on him; Kadir Başkan (Topbaş) took the initiative. Of course, this is something related to the center. After all, we call it art, but it is something really intertwined with politics. In other words, if a perception plays an active role in politics, it

spreads to the arts, the economy, and the social sphere. Therefore, at that time, we were busy doing cultural and artistic activities in the country and abroad. Even the Metropolitan Municipality was doing it. Sometimes, we were presenting projects; sometimes, we were in the implementation phase of the projects. These were generally works done to promote Turkey and to announce Turkey's cultural and artistic values to the world. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

Emine Karabulut's statement provides insight into the symbiotic relationship between cultural initiatives and political agendas in Istanbul. Karabulut's mention of teamwork probably implies the involvement of various stakeholders, including artists, cultural institutions, and political entities. The reference to the support of former Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Kadir Topbaş could reflect the instrumental role that political figures can play in the cultural sphere and direct projects to align with broader political visions. The intertwining of art and politics mentioned by Karabulut is particularly noteworthy. This points to how cultural perceptions and political power dynamics can influence each other. In the eyes of political authority, art can be interpreted not only as a form of aesthetic expression but also as a tool that can be used to shape economic and social narratives both domestically and internationally. Moreover, Karabulut's emphasis on using art and cultural projects to promote Turkey's global image points to the strategic use of culture in diplomacy and international relations. In these respects, Emine Karabulut's narratives seem to contain clues to the strategies employed by the AKP to place its cultural initiatives within its political framework.

Fatih is a district known for being the center of the Nakşibendi İsmailağa religious community and has been governed by right-wing parties. The AKP has governed the Fatih Municipality since the local elections 2004; before that, it was governed by the Fazilet and Refah parties (YSK, 2023). Fatih district covers the entire historical peninsula, the region known as “Suriçi,” and therefore has a significant cultural significance (Fatih Belediyesi, n.d.). In this respect, it can be said

that Fatih Municipality has a serious potential to feed the biennial spatially. When we turn our eyes to the role of Fatih Municipality in the biennial, we see that the most important name that stands out is Necati Selvi. Necati Selvi is the deputy mayor of Fatih Municipality in charge of publicity and cultural affairs. He has been working for Fatih Municipality since 2008 (“Necati Selvi,” n.d.). Although the official chairman of the first Yeditepe Biennial was mayor Mustafa Demir, it was Necati Selvi who carried out the biennial activities on behalf of Demir (interview, 2021). His official role in the biennial was to serve as a member of the board of directors. Since some of the exhibitions of the Istanbul Biennial² took place within the borders of Fatih Municipality, he was somewhat familiar with the biennial format. Although Selvi claimed that they started negotiations with İKSV during the preparation process of the Yeditepe Biennial, İKSV President Görgün Taner denied these claims (interview, 2022). Although there are different narratives about how the idea of the Yeditepe Biennial was first conceived, the most common one is that the idea of organizing the Yeditepe Biennial was first put forward by Necati Selvi and Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu in 2015. Since Erk Agency has been handling the promotional and event works of Fatih Municipality for many years (since 2006), it seems to be part of the ordinary course of life that Necati Selvi and Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu came together to organize an art event under the roof of the Municipality. The fact that Selvi has been in office since 2008 suggests that he has had a long-lasting influence

² “Since the 1980s, Istanbul has emerged as a candidate for a new global city at the eastern frontier of Europe. Thus, with the encouragement of the government, the private sector has begun to organize several large-scale cultural events in order to reshape the city as a global city and re-present the nation with a more European outlook. This is in keeping with the desire to facilitate Turkey’s EU accession process and attract global commercial activities. The Istanbul Biennial is one of the most important of these cultural initiatives.” (Sütçü Robin, 2015) In this vein, Istanbul Biennial is organized by the secular contemporary art circle under the umbrella of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) and Koç Holding has been the main sponsor of the biennial for many years.

on cultural activities in the region. They may have seen the biennial as an opportunity to improve the cultural landscape of the district under the auspices of the local government. We know that such initiatives are not only about promoting the arts but can also emerge from cultural events for broader political and social goals, such as city branding, tourism, and asserting the Municipality's role in the cultural sphere. Emine Karabulut's remarks quoted above were in this context. In conclusion, the Municipality's participation in the Yeditepe Biennial underlines the role of political actors in shaping cultural policies and events and raises questions about the dynamics between political authorities and cultural institutions in the creation and management of such important artistic initiatives.

Based on such a background, Karabulut and İbrahimhakkıoğlu claim that they came up with the idea of organizing the biennial among themselves in 2007. However, even if we take their word for it, there was no concrete preparation for the biennial between 2007 and 2015. In 2015, Erk Agency and Fatih Municipality came together and, according to their own statements, took the first concrete steps. However, I have not encountered any definite event confirming this. It is also said that the idea for the biennial came from Mayor Mustafa Demir and Necati Selvi, not the agency (Kalender, interview, 2021). However, others I interviewed claim that, in practice, Demir was not part of the biennial organization. He is said to have only attended a few board meetings and led the openings. In fact, while the board of directors of the biennial was largely preserved from the first to the second biennial, the board's chairmanship was given to the new mayor in the second biennial. In other words, it is possible to say that the role was attributed to his office rather than Mustafa Demir. Following the alignment of the municipality and Erk Agency for the biennial, another actor, Sabri Kalender, joins in their narrative. Sabri Kalender is the

owner of an art gallery, Galeri BİRİMZA, located in the Skyland Hom in İstanbul and he specializes in the works of traditional artists (“Manifesto - Galeri BİRİMZA,” n.d.). Kalender knew the traditional art world and the artists quite well, who would later come together under the roof of the Yeditepe Biennial. In his network, Kalender introduced Necati Selvi and Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu to the *Klasik Türk Sanatları Vakfı* (Classical Turkish Arts Foundation, *KTSV*) and led the partnership between the KTSV and the municipality. For the idea to come to life, the municipality needed the networks and authority of the foundation among the traditional art circles:

Then I told the foundation, 'Brother, we have to do this.' I mean, 'it has to be you; we cannot convince artists on our own as you can; it is very difficult.' It is one thing to sit back and look at the projects; it is another to look at the people, the art community. Also, these (artists) are resentful of each other; they hardly come together. Each of them has a style. People who do not go beyond those styles. (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2021)

The dialog quoted by Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu reveals the pragmatic approach adopted to engage with the KTSV. It acknowledges the foundation's influence and prestige in traditional art circles, which the municipality lacked. İbrahimhakkıoğlu's comments suggest that the foundation's door was knocked on to deal with complexities such as competition within the art community and adherence to different artistic styles, which could pose challenges in bringing artists together for a joint project. Sabri Kalender's role as a contact person between Necati Selvi, Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, and the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation was crucial in aligning the cultural initiatives of the local government with the expertise and authority of a well-established art foundation. The KTSV itself was established precisely to undertake such projects. In the words of Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, one of the founders:

When we look at the historical course of these arts in our country, unfortunately, it is obvious that they experienced a collapse with the Republic. In the face of this, painting, sculpture, and their derivatives were revived from the Tanzimat period onwards with the Republic. We do not know whether such a goal was pursued, but the result shows that, yes, there is such a structure (cultural hegemony), and this structure has expanded to a certain point. However, there is something forgotten here. There are things in our books, architectural Works, and walls. Why have these become so weak, so invisible, so unheard? Unfortunately, the idea of bringing this to the agenda somehow did not materialize for many years. So, there was no such initiative. If there had been an attempt, would what we call hegemony have suppressed it? No, I do not think so. After all, each of these is a richness, a point of view. After all, these arts have some universal concepts and are based on them. We can openly and sincerely say that these arts, which we call classical Turkish arts, traditional arts, or arts with tradition, have progressed thanks to the efforts of our current President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Unfortunately, there was no such infrastructure. There was no such preparation. There was no such work. He tried to revitalize this and wanted institutions related to these arts to be built, established, and created. The Classical Turkish Arts Foundation was established with such an idea. It was established in 2007. This is exactly the intervention of this political power in the arts. Yes, it is true; there is such an intervention, and this intervention is something that is slowly beginning to bear fruit... In the light of these concerns, these demands, these discussions, we have come to the point of a biennial. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2022)

Since the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation was already established for the revival of these arts by the order of Erdoğan, it was precisely the organizational support structure İbrahimağaoğlu and Selvi were looking for. Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu's ideas provide a historical perspective on the decline and revival of traditional Turkish arts and position President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a key, even savior figure in their revival. The foundation's establishment at Erdoğan's behest and its aims suggest a deliberate strategy to promote a particular cultural narrative in line with the ideological position of the state. İbrahimağaoğlu's statement suggests that the KTSV was conceived as an instrument of cultural policy designed to counter perceived cultural hegemony and to re-emphasize traditional arts within Turkey's modern identity. Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, one of the founders of the KTSV and a member of the board of directors of the Yeditepe biennial, told the story of the biennial in a way that confirms its instrumentality: “Our foundation organizes

exhibitions, events, talks and conferences with municipalities in coordination with the Ministry of Culture” (interview, 2022). Üsküdar Mayor Hilmi Türkmen was among the founders of KTSV (Our Foundation, n.d.). Although the same political party governed Fatih and Üsküdar for many years, it is said that KTSV and Fatih Municipality had never met before Sabri Kalender brought them together. From that point on, KTSV and the municipality became partners in the organization of the Yeditepe Biennial. On the KTSV side, things seem to be complicated. Ahmet Özel, the official president and one of the founders of KTSV, is said to have never actually been involved in the foundation's work. He only attended the first meeting where the idea was discussed (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022). As far as I have observed during my visits to the foundation, I am unsure whether Özel takes an active role in any of the foundation's activities. He seems to be very much in the background. It is also noteworthy that Özel is one of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's lawyers (“Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’ın Avukatı Özel’in Acı Günü,” 2018). In this context of the KTSV, the de facto chairman of the foundation is Muhammed Emin Demirkan, the son of Reisul Kurra Vekili Mustafa Demirkan, who happens to be Erdoğan's compatriot (hemşeri) and family friend and who came to the fore in the press with a prayer in Ayasofya (“Diyanet’ten, Atatürk’e hakaret eden Mustafa Demirkan’a ilişkin açıklama yapıldı,” 2021). Demirkan family's other members also participate in the biennial's different layers. Muhammed Emin Demirkan was the one who led the foundation side. Considering these, both sides' close relationship with Erdoğan and the AKP deserves attention in the partnership of the municipality and the KTSV. Muhammed Emin Demirkan's leading role within the KTSV and the various involvements of the Demirkan family in the organization of the Biennial highlights the intersection of personal networks, political alliances, and cultural initiatives. It seems indisputable

that each of the names involved in the Biennial's management has a personal or business relationship with the AKP or Erdoğan.

In Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu's narration, the Fatih Municipality approached the KTSV to organize an event to revive traditional arts. They had some alternatives: An art fest, a biennial, or some sort of other major organization. Then, all parties decided to go with a biennial by expecting that it would provide an international ground that may attract attention and give a chance to convey the message they want to give to the world. The difference in İbrahimağaoğlu's narrative is that the event format was not chosen before meeting with the foundation; rather, it was a collective decision.

Fatih Municipality came to us and said that we want to do something about these arts and carry out an activity. We sat and talked. What can we do? There were exhibitions, and many municipalities held exhibitions about these arts and implemented educational programs. What can we do else? We sat and talked; we wondered if we could do a biennial. In other words, with a concern, a desire, a desire to see if we can add an interpretation to these arts in contemporary terminology, say whatever you want... Considering the bottleneck in the development that has come so far, we wonder if such a modern, contemporary understanding can open room for these arts. So, the idea for a biennial was formed. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2022)

When Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu and Necati Selvi brought the idea, neither KTSV nor the artists knew “what a biennial is,” İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu stated. However, with each party's varying, sometimes contradictory purposes, the format was decided as a biennial. From then on, consultation meetings were held with the outstanding figures of the traditional art circles. “Several” meetings were held. Muhammed Emin Demirkan states that there were two. Besides, although different interviewees told me that these meetings were organized since 2015, I do not think it was before 2017 since the first contact between the foundation and the municipality was at that time. As Emine Karabulut stated, we know that one of these two meetings was held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Sultanahmet, İstanbul (interview, 2022).

We even organized something like a search meeting before the first biennial at the Four Seasons in Sultanahmet, and this concept was discussed a lot. At that time, the director of the Museum of Islamic Art, the provincial Director of National Education, public officials, and artists were invited to the meeting. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2021)

In 2017, two consultation meetings were held with the board of directors and competent people in the field, the first one more narrowly and the second one more broadly, and face-to-face consultations with these people continued afterward. (Muhammed Emin Demirkan, interview, 2023)

Despite my explicit questions, no information about the artists participating in these meetings was provided. I think there are two possible reasons for this: the first one is that these were really confidential meetings where confidential matters were discussed, and the names of the participants wanted to be hidden, which I don't think is very likely. The second one is that there were few meetings or with few participants, which is more likely. In general, when I look at the biennial, we see that small-scale works in practice are magnified in discourse and that the preparation, which is actually very short and hasty, is tried to look elaborate. The mystery surrounding the meetings may also result from the reflex of “trivializing” them. According to Gurbetçioğlu and Kalender, we know that in these meetings, what a biennial is, whether to have a biennial or not, and if so, how to proceed were discussed, and we know that most of the traditional artists were seriously against the idea. Gurbetçioğlu describes the reaction of the artists as follows:

(Artists) said, what do you mean? How am I going to explain Ehli Hiref³, how am I going to employ it, and so on and so forth? So let me tell you something like this. In fact, in meetings with fellow artists, I almost never got into the conversation. There were things I heard that made me feel frustrated. The artist gets up and says, ‘How can I explain this? Is this possible?’ The man is right. I mean, the man puts his hands in his pockets, even takes one out, and waves his hand. He says, man, that's what writing is for. It has never been used for any other purpose until today. Syrians did it, Iranians did it, Iraqis did it. Everyone except

³ The Ehli Hiref organization was the trained production organization of the Ottoman palace, consisting of troops of artists and craftsmen who were “masters of art” and various specialists who provided services.

Istanbulites used it in every way. We didn't do it. ... We just wanted them to face it. (İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu, interview, 2021)

The artists consulted were unwilling to abandon established patterns in traditional arts in favor of new experiments. Using traditional arts to express ideas other than the divine word seemed unusual and distant to the artists. However, what exactly did the initiators of this biennial want the artists to face? What was the problem, and what was the solution to it? Or was a solution possible? Before moving on to aims, I need to say that while these consultation meetings were taking place, President Erdoğan took the biennial under the presidency's auspices. The board of directors, probably members of the municipality, took care of this process. Necati Selvi, İbrahim Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu, and Muhammed Emin Demirkan say they applied to the relevant authorities, and after two or three months of waiting, the patronage was granted. The importance attributed to the presidential linkage stems not from financial support directly coming from the presidency but from the opportunities offered by starting out with the presidential fora. It is an important question whether the biennial would have come into existence without Erdoğan's patronage because sponsorships were obtained thanks to this support (interview, 2023). Although it was stated that there was a months-long wait for the issue of presidential patronage and that the application was made like any other institution, one of my interviewees mentioned that “promises might have been made earlier.” Given the mentioned closeness of both the foundation and the municipality to Erdoğan, it is highly likely that this was not a standard procedure. The date when Erdoğan's patronage was officially granted is April 27, 2017, one month after the convention of the National Culture Council. Here, it would be beneficial to underline that the date of Erdoğan's complaint about cultural hegemony and the date when the parties came together for the biennial overlap with each other. Considering that the

application for patronage was made two to three months before it was given, we can say that Erdoğan was probably already aware of the biennial project when he spoke of supporting projects that would help him gain cultural hegemony. It must also be kept in mind that the foundation was already established for this purpose on Erdoğan's order. In this respect, it is probable that this support is a part of Erdogan's cultural agenda. This possible relationship will be evaluated in more detail in the subsequent sections.

B. Aim

In the process of organizing the Yeditepe Biennial, Erk Agency partners Emine Karabulut and Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu and Fatih Municipality deputy mayor Necati Selvi on the one hand, and the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation (KTSV) on the other, the biennial is a complex collaboration between various actors representing both artistic and political interests. As a platform where art and politics intersect, the biennial creates a space where different goals and motivations from these two fields converge and sometimes clash.

As I mentioned when I was telling the story of how the biennial was set out, Erk Agency and Necati Selvi wanted to organize an event under the roof of the Fatih municipality. I must stress “being under the roof of the municipality” because the municipality officials approach whatever they have initiated as an “icraat” (political performance). Emine Karabulut states that they wanted to make a great event for the municipality that will be talked about and that would put the municipality under the spotlight, and she emphasizes the importance of the support of the political will:

We were already running the communication side of Mr. Mustafa Demir. Since we were running the communication side, this is how we look at communication: we have to do things in such a way that they should be talked about. The motivation of the leader is also important. I mean, our work should be very niche. Everyone should talk about it. ... Thank God both Mustafa Bey and Ergün Bey believed in this. In other words, the authority will first say, 'Yes, I am behind you; you can do it.' No matter how strong you are, no matter how correct your arguments are, but in the end, I would like to say that the political will has done a great job here; at least they believed us. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

Emine Karabulut emphasizes how decisive political will is on the success of an event. This again emphasizes the influence of political authority on art and culture and how art is intertwined with politics. Karabulut's words point to an understanding that the success of an event is measured not only by its artistic value but also by the public opinion it creates. This makes it clear that Erk Agency and Fatih Municipality see the biennial as more than an art exhibition but as a platform that will attract widespread attention and promote the municipality and its policies. From the Erk Agency's point of view, exhibitions were not enough to get under the spotlight. The aim here seems to be to highlight the biennial as an event rather than the traditional arts. In this context, the biennial format was found to be striking enough:

As a company, we did very big exhibitions, and we realized that this work doesn't go further with exhibitions. I mean, it's not the exhibition that will make this event the talk of the town; I just told you, I mean, there are some examples on Google search engines. I also need to include some jargon in my own work in order to be able to exist in the national and international arena in order to spread the philosophy I want to rise. It is also necessary to speak some of that language. I mean, if you look at it, a lot of municipal institutions and organizations are doing a lot of things, organizing events and exhibitions. Very recently, the Ministry of Culture undertook the *Beyoğlu Kültür Yolu* (Beyoğlu Culture Road) project. What was in it? There were many exhibitions. There were high-quality works. There were also works that may fit the biennial format. ... What happened? It came and went as the Ministry of Culture's Beyoğlu Culture Road. We will remember it if it happens again, but no one will talk about it now, and no one will do research on it. As I said, this is a very valuable thing. I mean, whether it is talked about positively or negatively, each of them is a value. The fact that you are doing this interview with us right now, that you are thinking about it, that you are writing something about it is so valuable. Therefore, creating this environment and presenting this environment was one of the important pillars of this work. Otherwise, it would just be an exhibition. Maybe it would have been like this; we

could have debuted with something from our own vocabulary. But how possible was it to disseminate this to the public? Therefore, we are partially benefiting from its ready wind. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

These statements reveal the limitations and inadequacies of exhibitions and art events to have a sustainable impact on public opinion. The agency and the municipality realized that exhibitions alone are insufficient to keep an event on the agenda. This means that public resonance is also judged by the impact created on the internet and media platforms. In order to make this event talkable and increase its digital visibility, the agency needed a catchy jargon that would stand out in search engines. In this context, beyond the artworks on display, Karabulut focuses on how the event positions itself as an event and how it creates a public debate. Thus, it becomes clear that the organizational strategy of the Yeditepe Biennial was determined not only by its artistic content but also by the social interaction and media visibility of the event. Even though the artists did not react well, the Erk Agency and the municipality were determined to do something that would make a splash.

For example, we held a consultation meeting with the artists. The issue was whether or not to call it a biennial. “Why do you call it a biennial?” Masters much older than us were against it. We defended it; we said that it is needed for it to be worldwide, for it to be announced. Because we want to announce something. Your work is already very valuable. The biennial is an element we need to use as an argument to publicize the performance. We said let's do the right thing, let people speak, let them speak, let us listen to them and see what they say. So the process started. (Şems İbrahimhakkioğlu, interview, 2022)

Use of the word biennial in quotation marks... You know, there are some examples that stand out in search engines. If we want to make a brand or something more visible, if we want it to be more, I don't know, more perceptible, we choose certain words. These have a certain duration; we can think of the word biennial in this way. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

These statements show that although the artists were invited to the discussion, the organizational process of the Yeditepe Biennial was not shaped by the

participation and reactions of the artists, especially in terms of the choice of format. Instead, consultation meetings are seen as declaration meetings. The biennial format was chosen as top-down because it was seen as a strategic means of communicating with a wider audience. The organizers believe that this format will contribute to the promotion of their work not only locally but also on a global platform. This emphasizes the importance of using the biennial not only as an art exhibition but also as a communication tool. However, I am not sure whether the issue here is the promotion of the artworks and artists or the ability of the municipality to take effective action, and I leave a big question mark here. On the other hand, the approach of “Let's do the right thing, let people speak, let's listen to them, let's see what they say” suggests that the biennial should function as a platform for dialogue and interaction. This shows that the organization of the event is not only about exhibiting the works of artists but also about creating interaction and discussion with the public. In conclusion, the consultations with artists during the organization process of the biennial and the disagreements and debates that took place during this process can be considered an indicator of how the biennial is positioned not only as an art event but also as a means of disseminating ideas and cultural values. Deputy Mayor Necati Selvi, in a similar vein, says that the exhibitions are not enough and that they want to do something bigger and more effective.

The Yeditepe Biennial is actually a path we took as a result of a few consultations when we came together with Şems Bey, who is also a member of our board of directors, to do a work on classical Turkish art. In this context, we could have held exhibitions like many municipalities do, but in order to differentiate it a little more, we also wanted it to have an impact at that time, to contribute to art, to go international, to have artists work for this work... We analyzed that this situation could be formed under the roof of the biennial. (Necati Selvi, interview, 2022)

For Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu and Emine Karabulut, rising to an international stage seems to be very important. There may be more than one reason for this. First,

the international reputation of an event they invented will elevate both Erk Agency and Fatih Municipality in the eyes of the public and politicians. In this respect, the aim seems to be to create a success story for Erk Agency and Fatih Municipality and to play a pioneering role in the cultural field with the support of political will. Second, contemporary art from Turkey is represented at the Venice Biennial by İKSV. In this respect, there may be a desire to shift the face of Turkey's representation to a conservative one. Chairman of the board, Mayor Mustafa Demir, has already said that we will send Yeditepe to the Venice Biennale instead of the Istanbul Biennial (“Ayasofya'dan Yeditepe'ye,” 2018). Moreover, in this speech, Demir needed to emphasize that the source of this allegation is not his own person. The source here seems to be the government or President Erdoğan implicitly. However, it is worth remembering that this wish did not happen. Considering how effective diplomatic channels were in the participation in the Venice Biennale, I think the reason for this withdrawal can be considered as Yeditepe's failure to create the desired impact. Besides, we know that biennials are also discussed in the literature for their contribution to tourism and the accumulation of economic capital. The municipality is aware of this mission and wants to instrumentalize the biennial in this sense as well.

We are making such a preparation, but how much it can be actualized is under discussion. Our agenda right now is to take the biennial abroad and determine the cost of it. Eventually, we want to organize a part of the biennial abroad. ... We have strategies to promote Turkey not only in Venice but also in other countries and mediums, especially in various parts of the world related to our own field of activity in tourism. We want to use the biennial for that (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2021).

In addition, Emine Karabulut was asked if the biennial met her expectations: “It definitely did. We even open job advertisements. We advertise for graphic designers; candidates know us because of the biennial” (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022). So,

I infer from this answer that one of the expectations was to increase the reputation of the Erk Agency via the Yeditepe Biennial.

On the other hand, when we turn our attention to the KTSV, we encounter a direct concern for traditional arts in their discourse. They are not interested in an accumulation of economic capital or promotion of the municipality, at least at the level of discourse. One of the main focuses for them is what the function of these arts is or will be in today's world. According to them, all of these arts are *kitabî* (bookish) arts (shaped around writing, found in books), and with the adoption of the Latin alphabet, they have lost their usual functions in life. At this point, their aim was not just to revive these arts but also to open a new channel for them to gain new functionalities. For them, these arts are still part of a living and changing tradition.

Most of all, would the artists and art enthusiasts we thought we were serving be able to articulate a thought, a move, an idea, a manifesto via classical art in the same way as contemporary artists do with the techniques they use? In other words, I wanted to see, I was curious to see, and I wanted to be confronted with the fact that the audience could understand what was being said what wanted to be said... In today's world, where the art that these artists are doing is not just an art of decoration, art of ornamentation, but today, when so many things serve so many things in so many subjects... Will our artists be able to express a thought, a manifesto, an emotion? It was important for me that they confront this and raise awareness about it. (İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu, interview, 2021)

These statements by İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu reflect an important idea about the role of art and artists. These statements emphasize that art is not only an aesthetic embellishment but also can express a thought, a movement, or an idea. This is a perspective that emphasizes the intrinsic meaning and depth of art. According to Gurbetçioğlu, the techniques used by contemporary artists increase the expressive power of art. In other words, the combination of traditional art forms and contemporary techniques can help traditional arts reach and be understood by a wider audience. Taking art beyond ornamentation and decoration may also open the door to

a ground of interaction with the audience. Should art have a social role? I would like to leave this as a topic of discussion, but it seems that according to Gurbetçioğlu, the answer is yes. In conclusion, İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu's statements express an idea that emphasizes the power and meaning of art, the interaction of artists and audiences, and the potential of art to create social impact. These statements support the idea that art plays a role beyond merely being a source of aesthetic pleasure. Considering that the foundation was founded by Erdoğan and the aforementioned network relations, it would not be difficult to say that these manifestos and ideas would align with AKP cultural policies. In the following sections, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion for the biennial will be discussed in more detail. The foundation aims not only to ensure the survival of traditional arts but also to disseminate the government's art policies and redefine their role in today's world. In trying to integrate traditional art forms into the modern world, the KTSV has raised the issue of how these arts can serve the needs and tastes of contemporary society. In this context, it is possible to say that they are trying to build a bridge between updated versions of traditional arts and contemporary art forms. The question here is why the KTSV consented to the biennial among the many other forms of exhibition on the way to this aim.

It was discussed for weeks for sure. Whether it should be a festival or this or that, but that was not our intention. 'Is the concept of a biennial a persecution for classical Turkish arts?' We discussed this a lot. Then we decided on this. No matter where the idea of a biennial came from, regardless of its origin. In the end, this has become a universal concept. What do we want to say in space in this universal geography? We claim that this is the art. What can we express with these arts? I mean, what can we tell an English person, an American, an Argentinian, a Mexican? It has to sail towards another medium or mediums so that we can tell these people something. If you have such a problem, if it is to be presented as a universal value, we decided that there was no harm in using the biennial, which is already a universal concept. This is what we did. There is only one thing here. I mean, I told you at the first biennial, what did we do? In the first biennial, we carried out an activity with approximately 25-26 venues, more than

20 openings, more than 600 artists, and approximately 3000 works. In fact, this is something that was done consciously, and we decided this at the time. We said, yes, this is not a biennial. A biennial is not like this. The biennial examples we have seen are not like this. This is not a biennial, but we want to build a biennial. Let's see what we have and what we don't have in the first biennial. Let's create an inventory of this work. Let's move on to the second biennial as soon as possible. Maybe in the third, maybe in the fourth, we will say yes, this is the biennial. Anyone who has already visited the first biennial and the second biennial and thought about it will realize this. The first one consisted of exhibitions. Now, it has reached another point with a philosophy. Probably, the third biennial will go one step further. Maybe in the fourth biennial, we will say, "Yes, this was our intention." (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2022)

İbrahimağaoğlu says that before deciding to organize a biennial event, they seriously considered what the concept of a biennial meant and what role it could play for Turkish arts. What is the purpose of presenting traditional Turkish arts as a universal value? İbrahimağaoğlu states that they aim for the biennial to not only promote Turkish art but also to be meaningful for an international audience. But what is the contribution of being international? Why is it important to appeal to an international audience? For Erk Agency and the Municipality, we have already discussed this. For the foundation, this can be interpreted as an essentialist approach to the arts performed within the biennial. İbrahimağaoğlu states that the biennial is not just an event consisting of exhibitions; it has come to another point with a philosophy. This confirms what İsmailhakkıoğlu says and shows that the biennial was intended to become a platform for thought and a form of expression rather than just an art exhibition. The first biennial seems to have laid a foundation for further reflection and meaning, and the foundation anticipates that future biennials will further evolve and deepen. In the text signed by the president of the KTSV, which appears on their website and at the beginning of all their publications of the biennial, we are witnessing references to historical consciousness, national might, universal civilization, and the characterization of Turkey as the pioneer of the Islamic world. The emphasis here is very similar to Erdoğan's rhetoric. Although this text is

presented with the signature of the president of the KTSV, it is likely to have been written by the scriptwriter of the biennial and approved collectively since the president of the KTSV is not actually involved in the biennial. Feyza Altındal, also the scriptwriter of the biennial, is also one of the scriptwriters of the TV series “Alparslan: The Great Seljuk.” This gives us clues as to how small the circle the cultural issues in Turkey revolve around. Turning back to the text, there is also a strong emphasis on the support of President Erdoğan. The fact that the President took this event under his wings is seen as a representation and a reminder of national power.

Knowing history means knowing national strengths and national flaws. To move forward accordingly, to give direction, and to know what will grow from which seed is a power that cannot be gained with anything else. As those who have blown the wind of a universal civilization of more than 1400 years in Anatolia for the last thousand years, we know how the seeds carried by this breeze have blossomed all over the world. We want to remind and show how the accumulation of thought and art we have created has great value and a large place in the cultural accumulation of human history with the biennial we have prepared by focusing on our classical arts. Organizing an event such as the Yeditepe Biennial would suit Turkey, which is the pioneer of Islamic geography in the field of culture and arts. Just as the “Ahl-i Hiref”, which we set as the theme, was under the patronage of the state in the past, today, the Presidency protects the Ehl-i Hiref of this age, who are working on this theme. We would like to express our gratitude to our esteemed President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for taking the Yeditepe Biennial under his wings as a representation and reminder of national power, to Fatih Municipality and its esteemed mayor Mustafa Demir for cooperating with us on this path, to the artists who enriched the biennial with their works, to the artists with whom we cooperated on this first together, and to all individuals, institutions and organizations that provided us with material and moral support and contribution, and we would like to share with you the satisfaction and pride we feel as the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation for being a part of such a beauty. (“Vakıf Başkanı’ndan | Yeditepe Bienali,” n.d.)

The press release covering the first public announcement of the biennial expresses the desire to elevate the “kadim” (ancient) arts, which are already at a significant height. Here, the biennial is presented with the title “a project that has no equivalent in the world” (“Basın Bülteninden | Yeditepe Bienali,” n.d.). This text

includes a sub-heading “Why biennial.” The need to underline and explain the choice of format is interesting and probably stems from the reactions received during the consultation meetings. The message here seems as “we are able to do it too:”

We want to see the echo of our civilization, which has an art philosophy based on need or value, in today's arts and artists within the structure of a biennial. Because the content of our art is very rich in terms of the metaphorical loadings that occur in the atmosphere of biennials.

Nevertheless, why are they doing it, too? Why do they want to be seen within the structure of the biennial? No answer is given. These questions lead us again to discussions on cultural hegemony. The story of the Yeditepe Biennial's emergence reveals how artistic initiatives are shaped by political support and will and how they are strategically used to resonate widely with the public. This is an example of how art is not only an aesthetic expression but also has a political and social function and how events and projects are woven and constructed for political purposes.

C. Curator, Curatorial Team, and Curatorial Approaches

a. Curator

This chapter will discuss Serhat Kula's biography, personality, relations with the world of art and politics, and how his understanding of art influenced his approach to and role in the biennial. Serhat Kula, Curator of the First Yeditepe Biennial, studied fine arts after completing his education at Kartal İmamhatip High School. He graduated from Sakarya University Faculty of Fine Arts. Immediately after his graduation, he studied “Architecture and Art History” at Technische Universität Wien (Bachelor's degree) and continued his higher education at Mimar Sinan Fine

Arts University in Turkey. He worked as Editor-in-Chief and Art Director at Skylife magazine of Turkish Airlines. In 2018, he curated the first Yeditepe Biennial. After the biennial, he was appointed as the Skopje branch manager of Yunus Emre Institute.⁴ To open a parenthesis here, the fact that Kula was appointed to a public institution at an executive level after the biennial without any diplomacy/management/public experience can be read as another sign of the biennial's importance in the President's eyes. Returning to the biennial, there are different rumors about how Kula was selected among the other candidates. Kula claims that KTSV made his appointment and that the municipality was not involved in the process. Board members, on the other hand, say that he was chosen from among the applicants. After the decision for the biennial was taken, the search for a curator began, and many names were contacted through personal and institutional networks.

Everyone is preparing their suggestions. After working, 6-7 preferences come. I suppose two of them were interviewed. The interviews are usually conducted by the foundation. Then he introduced us. He has to convince us, too. Of course, in your choice, s/he has to know you.' Having a good grasp of the philosophy of the work was one of the valuable questions. I mean, it's not just something that has an artistic dimension; a foreign name who is interested in contemporary arts but is also involved in Classical Turkish arts can also be the curator of this work. I mean, in order to do something, you need to have knowledge about something. In fact, he should have been familiar with its philosophy. Of course, this thing was evaluated, especially by keeping it in the foreground. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

⁴ "Yunus Emre Foundation is a public foundation established by Law No. 5653 dated 05.05.2007 to promote Turkey, Turkish language, history, culture and art; to make information and documents related to these available to the world; to provide services abroad to those who wish to receive education in the fields of Turkish language, culture and art; to increase Turkey's cultural exchange with other countries and to develop friendship. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, as an affiliate of the Foundation, carries out cultural and artistic activities for the promotion of our country as well as teaching Turkish to foreigners in the centers it has established abroad in order to realize the objectives of this Law, and also supports scientific studies." (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, n.d.)

Although Karabulut assumes two interviews were done, she also states that the KTSV carried out this work. The KTSV officials, on the other hand, claim that not two but several interviews were conducted. According to Gurbetçioğlu, some were not deemed competent for the job, while others were not compatible with the Board of Directors. It is important to underline here that the board was looking for a compliant character. They were looking for a curator who would be part of the decision-making mechanism rather than an independent curator. Gurbetçioğlu expresses this by saying, “I do not want to work with a man I cannot interfere with.” (interview, 2023). This statement emphasizes the strategic thinking behind the curator selection process and the rationale behind the board's choices. Gurbetçioğlu explains that selecting a curator is not only about artistic vision but also about political and institutional cohesion. In the curator selection process, we clearly observe that a figure who obeys authority is desired and that there is little room for independent thought. Gurbetçioğlu explains that this is because they are not sure that someone they have just met will be able to respect the boundaries that need to be respected. . It is clear that the board is looking for a curator who will work within their own system of rules and values and who will be predictable and directable. This reveals the board's risk aversion and reluctance to work with a new and potentially uncertain figure. So, was Serhat Kula the right fit at this point? There are those within the board who say they are happy to move forward with Kula, and there are those who say they accept him as a necessity of the times, even if they are not entirely happy with the situation. Kalender and Gurbetçioğlu describe working with Kula as “good fortune” and consider him qualified for this biennial because of his familiarity with modern and traditional arts. Kalender refers to Kula as “someone from our home” and “from our climate.” On the other hand, Mehmet

İbrahimağaoğlu's narrative differs when he talks about the thoughts of the board in making their decision:

We were also worried about how we would explain our problem to someone who had nothing to do with these arts. Therefore, we wanted to set out with a curator familiar with these arts. We could not be successful in this. We could not convince anyone; no one came; negotiations took place, but we could not get a result. This process took months. We just wanted this art to move somewhere further. As we could not get the result we wanted from these meetings, Serhat said that he aspires to this job voluntarily. 'I think I can do that,' he said. ... We were in between and waited for the other evaluations to be concluded. He convinced us with what he told us in this process. However, we wanted to set out with a more professional person with international experience. We saw that in Serhat, he had an excitement. "Okay, then we have experience too; we will do this job with his excitement." we said. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2022)

The fact that some members express their satisfaction and others seem to accept the situation shows that there is no consensus within the board. While Kalender and Gurbetçioğlu emphasize that Kula is in line with the board and its values, Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu's account makes new claims about the ideal curatorial profile desired by the board and the difficulties encountered in Kula's appointment. İbrahimağaoğlu states that the board was looking for a more experienced and international profile, but Kula's volunteerism and enthusiasm ultimately resulted in the appointment. İbrahimağaoğlu's statement suggests that the board could have had a different preference but decided that Kula was the most suitable candidate under the current circumstances. Therefore, it reveals the dilemma the Board of Directors faced during the decision-making process, the different expectations, and the pragmatic solution that was ultimately reached. According to Gurbetçioğlu, it was Murat Gür who suggested Serhat Kula. Gür worked with Kula at SkyLife magazine and is also one of the biennial artists. During the conversations, he also mentioned his acquaintance with Bilal Erdoğan, the son of President Erdoğan. Someone from KTSV then called him and asked for his opinion. Bilal

Erdoğan stated that he had met Kula before, wanted to do something for these arts, and had no negative opinion about Kula. With this reference, the curator's selection was finalized. One of the people I interviewed claimed that he was appointed directly by Bilal Erdoğan.

I met the curator, an original man, but we disagreed many times. I would like to say that we have no problems personally, but we could not agree on the idea. I saw he did not know anything; he had come with an appointment from above. I also know who appointed him. Bilal Erdoğan's appointment... Serhat has nothing to do with the biennial; he must have a background in artistic curation. He has studied fine arts, but to prove himself, he needed to have a background including a role in organizing at least twenty to thirty exhibitions. (Anonymous, interview, 2022)

Considering the consistency of the stories I listened to, this seems less likely because Bilal Erdoğan does not seem to have been involved in any of the decision-making mechanisms, and this claim is based on the fact that Bilal Erdoğan asked my interviewee how the curator was. This question seems to align with the scenario in which Erdoğan was asked for his opinion. At this point, I would like to discuss the role of personal relationships and political connections in the curatorial selection process. Murat Gür's recommendation of Serhat Kula and the fact that this recommendation gained strength through Kula's acquaintance with Bilal Erdoğan shows how networks and personal acquaintances in the art world influence the professional decisions that need to be taken in the organization of the biennial. This raises the question of how transparent and objective the curatorial selection process is. Discussing different claims on such an issue calls into question the openness and fairness of the process. We may be faced with a structure that gives advantages to certain individuals and ignores potentially more qualified candidates. Criticisms of Kula's experience and competence in the art world emphasize the tension between professional qualifications and personal connections. Therefore, the extent to which

professional qualifications are taken into account in the curatorial selection process becomes a serious question. In conclusion, the story of Kula's selection reveals the complexity of competence, connections, and political interactions in the art world and how these can be intertwined in the selection process of a curator, and hints at the more comprehensive decision-making processes that also affect the selection of artists and the overall management of the biennial, and their repercussions in the art world. Kula was alone when he arrived:

I started from scratch. In fact, there was no one at the very beginning. I was working in a café, and there was no physical environment. I started with my computer and my phone. The only part I was not involved in during the call was the theme, *Ehli hiref*. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2021)

Once the curator was determined, he is said to have wanted to form his own team and chose his companions through WhatsApp groups and announcements he published through his acquaintances. Kula states the staff included in the curatorial team forms the brain trust of the biennial (interview, 2022). They played a major role in determining the artistic vision and in the selection of artists and works (Beyza Uzun, Burcu Karataş, Zehra Kaygusuz, İsmail Erdoğan). The team also includes architects responsible for the preparation of installations (Elif Merve Gürer, Yusuf Enes Mete), a site coordinator (Murat Kösemen), an engineer determining how historic sites can be used (Cihad Kol), and a protocol officer (Onur Cevahiroğlu). After these names are submitted to the foundation for approval, the biennial process begins in the curatorial sense.

b. Curatorial Approach

What makes Serhat Kula interesting is that his education positions him at the intersection of two art circles in Turkey, one of which is the flagship of traditional and the other of contemporary arts. This seems to have influenced his curatorial approach as well. Kula aims to bring these two veins together in the biennial. The main question here is what Kula will preserve and what he will leave out. Kula is against the separation of different types of art but accepts the current positioning of the two art circles in Turkey. According to Kula, both sides lobby to express their political views and worldviews rather than aesthetic concerns; both are engaged in protest art. What he means by protest art is the revanchist attitude of both (interview, 2022). In line with what the majority of the members of the Board of Directors say, Kula claims that the “religious sector” felt oppressed during the Republican period and that with the establishment of the Republic, these art forms and the world of meaning they contained were tried to be destroyed. With the power they received from the rise of the AKP, a chance for revival arose; he read Yeditepe as an effort in this direction. His words give us some clues about his character:

I am from Istanbul. Do not look at the fact that I studied in Europe; I spent my childhood in the Grand Bazaar. ... My narration style may have caused them to think of me as they (the board of directors) are. All my work is art expertise, but I do not get into its mood a lot. Art has no importance in my personal life; it does not change anything. I have such a line. I noticed it. This is purely my professional job. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Kula draws a profile concerned with traditional arts with an innovative perspective and also has a knowledge of contemporary art. His character seems to shape the biennial and his scope of authority over the biennial. Before moving on to discussions on these, I want first to propose his story of being the curator. Serhat Kula problematizes conservative art in Turkey in terms of its conceptualization,

characteristics, scope, and function. Although Serhat Kula defines himself as an alternative rather than a competitor to the Istanbul Biennial and the understanding of the art it represents, he constantly uses the language of “us and them.” What I gather from our interview, his public speeches, and the texts published under his signature is that he distinguishes between those who represent the İKSV circle (the organizers of the Istanbul Biennial) and those who represent the conservative art circle. However, he places art above this distinction in his own words and insists on positioning the Yeditepe Biennial as a new actor in the field, not as an actor in opposition to secular actors, especially the Istanbul Biennial. He defines Yeditepe as “different” rather than “against.” His stance is parallel to that of the curatorial team. However, this is where he differs from the majority of the board members. Serhat Kula describes his dialog with İKSV officials as follows:

So let you defend the contemporary and let us defend the tradition, like a seesaw. I told them very clearly. We need to have such a perspective. There is no such team here. It is full of politicians and municipalists. These people have no such intention anyway. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Kula came together with İKSV officials and proposed to engage in pure art and to exist as institutions representing two different understandings of art in Turkey without carrying any political agenda. Nevertheless, according to Serhat Kula, the municipality members and politicians who manage and advise the Yeditepe Biennial are an obstacle to this proposal. Their concern is not art. So Kula, too, was aware of the contradicting views and aims and drew inspiration from this situation when designing the First Yeditepe Biennial. Kula says he thought he would be the appetizer (*meze*) of an ideological debate. Then he explains his thoughts:

If I am experiencing such an uneasiness, then I should fully reflect this uneasiness in the biennial. In other words, those who take artistic pleasure, who want to reveal the element of nationality, who want to modernize, who want to wink at the

other side, who want to intimidate the other neighborhood... I wanted to reflect on these questions in the biennial, and I said let's put forward things that everyone can do. I used the concept of laboratory everywhere. I shared that concern directly with them, and I said let's build the Yeditepe Biennial on this concern. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

The curator says that his focus was not criticizing contemporary arts or glorifying traditional arts; he wondered what would come out from the clash of the two ("Yeditepe Bienali ve Yaklaşımlar," 2018; Serhat Kula, interview, 2022). He defines the Yeditepe Biennial as a laboratory where he wants to see what is at hand, what can be done, who will achieve what, and who will stumble. Kula's approach was accepted by the board of directors because, as mentioned earlier, one of their objectives was to see what was at hand in the first biennial and to reveal the potential. Considering this approach, the first biennial seems like a trial board rather than a biennial in the literal sense. Kula mentions that motivating the artists for the coexistence of traditional and contemporary was challenging. According to him, the artists were not in a position to grasp the discussion immediately because they were excited. Some had searched on the internet, looked at other works worldwide, and thought about how they could combine them with their own work, but it was not that simple. However, there were also some surprising successes:

But I was surprised by, how shall I put it, 30% of the inflationary works, slightly more paid works (Kula refers to the works with high costs)... Those I thought could do it could not; those I never thought could do it did. There were exceptions, but most of them turned out this way. So, we have seen that traditional arts suppress some people with their method of education and production. We saw that those people who had a sense of art could not get out of those molds; they were oppressed by the molds, but when someone stretched out their hand, they were ready to produce, ready to turn it into potential. We also realized that the names we refer to as artists were actually only successful within the existing conditions or became famous by accident. They did it when there was no one else. They met the right people in the right place at the right time and advertised themselves. I felt really sorry for some of them and not sorry at all for others. There were also some people I wish they had never gotten into this biennial work and always stayed high in my eyes. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Since the curator's aim and expectation was to see what was available and to reveal the potential, it seems he achieved his expectations at the end of the biennial. At the end of the day, the biennial has been a ground that reveals the problems in the education methods of traditional arts and brings talents to the surface. The most important question here is to what extent traditional arts are open to innovation and differentiation. Kula states that the biennial will be a filtering process; those who criticize will remain with whatever they are doing so far, while those who succeed in breaking out of the mold will create a new style:

This is the concern of the *üstads* (masters) right now. They say that if you pave the way, the line of these arts will deteriorate. I do not agree with this. Because this is related to the nature of human beings, some people really want to stay within the framework of confidence. Bedri Rahmi has a beautiful quote: 'The worry of a potter making the same pot for the seven hundred thousandth time cracks me up.' I think this is a discussion related to people's stances, astrology, I don't know, the way they are created, everything... This art does not have to be like this; it should be open to change according to people's style. Bedri Rahmi cracks because of that, but nothing happens to the potter. The potter is very happy because he makes every pot the same, so the potter will remain as a potter, and Bedri Rahmi will remain as Bedri Rahmi. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

However, according to Serhat Kula, this renewal movement should be carried out quietly until it reaches a certain level of maturity:

The Yeditepe Biennial was not the right space for this, by the way. Because it is still in the eyes of everyone, in the eyes of the authorities. Under the eyes of ancient artists, even such mafia-like men, there is a mafia in this business. There are groups that determine what will be what, what will be right, or the prices of their works. It is still the only organization in front of everyone's eyes. So it doesn't allow too much contradiction. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Besides, he criticizes the lack of national view in “this art circle” and defines detecting the people with nationalist vision as his personal aim in the biennial. At this point, he differentiates what he called the *Islamic protest view* from that of national. Although they may seem to be the same at first glance, their purposes are

different, Kula states. The question for nationalists should be, “What should appeal to a Turk in 2022?” from his perspective.

c. Curatorial Authority and Scope of Intervention

This section emphasizes that, on the one hand, the Board of Directors did not seek an independent curator and felt the need to preserve the existing “balances;” on the other hand, Kula was a part of this network as well and was willing to be not independent. So, it aims to discuss how these balances affect the decision-making in Yeditepe Biennial and Kula's curatorial practice.

It is important to underline again that the Board of Directors was not looking for an independent curator. Board members talked about the “balances” they have to maintain. It is possible to say that these are the balances arising from the position of the KTSV in the traditional art circles, the relationships between the KTSV and the Erdoğan family, and, of course, the presence of Fatih Municipality and the close relations of the KTSV directors with the Erdoğan family. In fact, Serhat Kula states that he endeavored to ensure these balances in a way to protect his personal relations with the KTSV officials, politicians, and artists. This situation brings the curatorial authority into an area where it can be constantly intervened. Kula, in fact, allowed them and did what he wanted to try new on behalf of traditional arts in an area he created in the biennial for himself. Meaning Kula unobtrusively tried what he wanted to try. It is not clear to what extent it would be appropriate to call this an intervention since there is mutual consent, but it is clear that we are facing a joint decision-making mechanism. In my meetings with members of the Board of Directors, the

issues are handled as “we did it, we decided, we chose, we accepted.” Another question is whether the Presidency monitored an event that it sponsors and intervened in its organization and content. Although the KTSV does not acknowledge the existence of such a mechanism, İbrahimhakkıoğlu's remarks are worth noting:

The content was monitored by Mr. President's chief of staff. He has an advisor, a gentleman on the content side. He is already in the advisory committee. He is even an artist, I forget his name. Was it Hasan or Hüseyin? The foundation side was meeting with him. (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2022)

This claim shows that the art and culture realized within the biennial are kept under control and supervision by the political authority. We can say that this supervision and control constitutes a potential pressure on artistic freedoms and expression and that this process takes place behind closed doors, far from transparency. On the other hand, İbrahimağaoğlu states that the *KTSV* is already a foundation that is closely followed and trusted by the president and that he knows its activities, so there is no need for monitoring or audit. The lack of supervision is attributed to a pre-established relationship of trust rather than artistic freedom.

There was no supervisor or overseer at the biennial, but we know this: We know that there was a lady appointed by the President of the Republic who acted as a lookout on behalf of the institution (the presidency) related to this art environment. But they had nothing to do with the biennial or the activities of this foundation. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2021)

Considering that one of the president's advisors, Fecir Alptekin, intervened in the composition of the opera *Sinan*, it is likely that Alptekin was the person İbrahimağaoğlu referenced. (Andante, 2021). While the lack of any monitoring sounds like it could be true given the position of the KTSV, İbrahimhakkıoğlu's direct reference to a name, Hasan or Hüseyin, suggests that there might have been a consultation process with the Presidency. The concealment of the person consulted

or contradictory statements on this point may be due to sensitivities about how artistic control will be perceived in society, the openness of political figures' influence on art to criticism, or the controversial nature of cultural policies. In conclusion, the scope of the curator's authority and intervention in the biennial allows us to question to what extent Turkey's cultural and artistic environment is intertwined with political power and its cultural policies and to what extent the independence of art institutions is protected.

D. Portrait of the First Yeditepe Biennial

a. Naming

This chapter offers an insight into the choice of the name of the Yeditepe Biennial and suggests that not only historical and cultural values but also strategic and branding considerations played a role in the naming of the event. It is understood that the name Yeditepe aims to reinforce its association with the historical peninsula of Istanbul and the boundaries of Fatih Municipality, thus reinforcing the organization's regional identity and attracting the local community's attention. The idea behind this choice is to capitalize on the recognition of Yeditepe as a historical and cultural landmark of Istanbul and to use this recognition in the organization's marketing and PR strategies. It is argued here that Fatih Municipality and KTSV consciously chose this name in order to attract the attention of both locals and external visitors and to increase the prestige of the biennial. This suggests that decisions on the organization's naming were made per a specific political and administrative perspective rather than purely independent artistic values. Furthermore, the name of

the Yeditepe Biennial and the decisions regarding the selection of its venues seem to reflect a mixture of the historical and cultural heritage of the region and the contributions of local authorities. We know that the name Yeditepe refers to Suriçi in the historical context and that all so-called seven hills are within the borders of Fatih Municipality (“İstanbul'un 7 (Yedi) Tepesi,” n.d.). In this sense, it seems not interesting that the name of a biennial organized in partnership with Fatih Municipality would be Yeditepe. But it was not the only option to refer to the area. Let's take a closer look at why Yeditepe was chosen among the possible references:

When we look at the poems of the elders, ancient Istanbul, the city within the city walls, is referred to as the Yeditepe (city of 7 hills). In fact, Yeditepe is İstanbul itself. You know, it is not correct to think of it only as Suriçi (inside the city walls), Suriçi walls in quotation marks. Yeditepe starts from Nuruosmaniye, which is within the city walls of Istanbul. It continues from Yavuz Selim. Like Koca Mustafa Pasha... We can mention these. But what we call ancient Istanbul is already the area within the historical peninsula, but with the reference to Yeditepe, we are actually referring to Istanbul, in fact. So this should not be considered as Fatih. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

Karabulut, the man who pronounced these words, is also denoted as the first person to suggest this name (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2022). İbrahimağaoğlu, conveys the foundation's point of view and underlines that they wanted to take advantage of the popularity of the area by referencing it. By choosing the biennial's venues in the same area, they would naturally benefit from the circulation of people in there. In this way, local and foreign tourists will be able to encounter the biennial in a compulsory way. İbrahimağaoğlu states:

We wanted to use the popularity of the peninsula, we wanted to use the popularity of the components within it... Hagia Sophia, Suleymaniye Madrasahs... The PR for the work we had done that day would have brought a burden that we could not afford, that we could not even imagine, which neither the municipality, nor the metropolitan city, nor us could afford, but there was something that these places provided us. There is PR, there is recognition, there is visibility. We wanted to use this, and since Fatih Municipality was involved, we chose the historical peninsula

as our venue. Yeditepe is already a definition related to the historical peninsula, all seven of the seven hills are on the historical peninsula. (Interview, 2022)

After presenting the narratives of the Municipality and KTSV, I would like to share the views of the curator as a third eye:

I think the name of Yeditepe was chosen to cover Istanbul completely, to capture that historical thing. All of them, all seven hills, are said to be in Fatih. ... That area has many names: Devlet-i Aliyye, Sur-u Sultaniye. Of course, I think Yeditepe is an expression that has been used a lot in recent literature to describe the place. However, it doesn't mean anything to foreigners. One might think that there is a place called Yeditepe, one might think that there is a place like Yeditepe because biennial names are usually city names. This happened because the name Istanbul Biennial was also taken. Therefore, such a name was preferred, I think it is a practical solution. It also fits in terms of pronunciation for branding. It's not bad. It is better than the name Fatih Biennial. It could have been that, it would have been definite because it would have fit the municipal perspective, Mustafa Demir's municipal perspective. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

The curator, Serhat Kula, offers an additional perspective, suggesting that "Yeditepe" was chosen to encompass the entirety of Istanbul and capture its historical essence. While acknowledging that the term might not hold much meaning for foreigners, Kula sees it as a practical solution, especially considering the limitations imposed by the use of the name "Istanbul Biennial." He notes that the name "Yeditepe" aligns well with branding and being easy to pronounce. Considering all narratives and perceptions, the selection of the name "Yeditepe" for the biennial emerges as a deliberate and thoughtful choice, balancing historical significance, practical considerations, and branding.

b. Artistic Work Selection and Limitations

The artistic content and curatorial choices of the Yeditepe Biennial seem to have been shaped by the ideological limitations and political expectations of the board of

directors. This reveals how the space for the free expression of art is limited by political and ideological frameworks and how artists are forced to maneuver within these frameworks. The reasons and political interactions underlying the hasty organization of the biennial imply a broader context and possibly a political agenda underlying the discourse. As explained above, by the time the curator became involved in the biennial, the theme of Ehli Hiref had already been determined by the board of directors. According to Kula, it was a concept that was both too general and unfamiliar to the artists. However, there was already a call for the submission of artwork. Therefore, the theme was never opened to discussion. The board members said they did not wait for the curator to choose the theme because their time was limited. One question here is the reason for that hurry. Why did they have to start the biennial at that time? Considering the importance that they attributed to the biennial, one would expect severe time devoted to the preparation. However, that was not the case. How can this be interpreted if no political directive had been received for the biennial to start?

Our time was very limited. Biennials are normally prepared in two years. And artists are involved in the project. First the curator determines the theme, then you announce it. Artists develop projects based on the announcement. They present their projects to you. And the management chooses from the projects. Whichever one is more suitable for our theme is discussed with them and the selected artworks start to be produced. This process takes a minimum of one year or fifteen months. But when we set out, we had to open the biennial within six months. (Sabri Kalender, interview, 2022)

Kalender mentions that they “had” to make preparations over a period of 6 months.

This state of obligation seems to contain clues about an external pressure.

Considering the time difference between the beginning of the biennial and the National Culture Council, where President Erdoğan first brought up the discourse that culture has failed to become a power, it may be possible to think that a specific

timing was sought for the presentation of a political agenda. Such a limited time frame must have had a significant impact on the curatorial quality and artist participation of the biennial. Furthermore, such a shortened process may have limited the opportunity for selectivity and the reflection required for creativity, thus reducing the quality of the artworks and exhibitions. At this point, we also come across the fact that important decisions, such as the choice of theme and calls for artists, which should normally be the curator's determining factor, have been accelerated. However, whether this is a result of time constraints or the super-controlling reflexes of the Yeditepe Biennial's board of directors, I would like to leave as a matter of debate. Kula overcame the ambiguity of the theme by coming up with sub-themes that the Board of Directors would approve (*Çiçeğin Her Hali, Kuş Misali, İstanbul'a Dair, Mekandan Taşanlar, Kusursuz Tekrar*). Going back to the selection of the art works, before the curator came, there was a call for submissions based on the theme of Ehli Hiref, and the application files had arrived. All the founders of the biennial claim that, in the first Yeditepe Biennial, over 600 artists participated and over 3000 works were exhibited, but only 269 artists are listed on its website. This is because there were so many group exhibitions in the first biennial. For the groups consisting of *üstads* (masters) and their students, only the names and biographies of the *üstads* are given (interview, 2023; "SANATÇILAR | Yeditepe Bienali," n.d.) If we consider the ways of reaching out to these artists during the first Yeditepe Biennial, we can divide the artists and works into three groups: those invited by the board, those who applied, and those who the curator found and convinced to participate. The first group included artists and artist groups associated with the KTSV, the Foundation for Classical Turkish Arts. They were invited to participate in the biennial by invitation, and the curator did not intervene or direct them in terms of the works they submitted.

The second group included those who sent project files in response to the call.

Among them, there were those who drew their frames, described their installations, and depicted their sound projects. The third group consisted of those whom Serhat Kula approached by looking at their previous art works, and then convinced them to produce some new ones:

We included the first set of artists in the group of those who do not want or cannot make biennial works. For the second set of artists, except for those who were out of the city, I went to the workshops of all of them and changed what they told me there. Most of them had told, dreamed, but at some point, they had failed. There were also those I said, 'Forget about the project completely, but I see a spark in you, why don't you do something like this?' For example, there was a prayer rug made of mosaic. This was not that lady's idea. She was a mosaic artist. She was dreaming of a traditional art painting made of mosaic. I went to her workshop. It's a very professional workshop; glass cuts everywhere and so on. I asked her to make it there in a fabric-like way as a message for the opening of Hagia Sophia. We gave it a name: *İkindiyi Beklerken*. I found and caught the third group: those who didn't care and didn't apply. I went and convinced them. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Serhat Kula explains that he had no intervention in the first group of works but only evaluated them aesthetically as a first filter and then handed the ones he did not want over to the board for the final decision. There are two narratives here: the first is the one told by Serhat Kula, in which he first evaluated the works himself, covering the three different processes described above; the second is the one told by some of the board members, in which they first undertook the selection of the works themselves and then handed them over to the curator for a second filtering according to the theme. Based on my observations and considering the board's general concern for authority and the plot of the stories, it seems likelihood that Kula's narration, which is also validated by the other members of the board, is accurate:

I tried not to break the traditional ones because they are already dealing with a lot of problems. Concentration process and so on... It's not a field that can accommodate a new idea. The artist has something in her/his head, s/he will work for three months without breathing, s/he will call when it is finished, s/he will say

he has finished and brings it back. This is not a process we can carry out together, touch the material and make decisions together. If they were really bad in terms of traditional arts, I added them to the pool I had prepared for the foundation to evaluate them, and then the foundation eliminated them. In traditional arts, the classical works I mentioned, there was a 15 percent difference between me and them. Sometimes I wanted to show how boring it was, I have to admit that. The boredom of some works was also useful for me. I would put a energetic work right in front of it and make it more valuable. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

The board of directors states that they have certain criteria for the selection of works, both in terms of the artist and the work. These are basically that the artwork should not conflict with their understanding of Islam, that the work should not carry a political mission, and that the artist should not be a *political gunslinger* (“siyasi silahşör” in İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu’s words). For example, it is stated that one work was not included because it attributed an image to a prophet. On the other hand, two artists are said to have been excluded because of their intense political discourse (interview, 2023). What is meant by intense political discourse here is that of oppositional to the existing government that is presented to the public. One example is coming from Murat Kösemen, the field coordinator of the biennial:

For example, I said let's include Ahmet Güneştekin in the biennial. I proposed, and Serhat Kula liked it. And I brought Ahmet Güneştekin and Serhat together. We had a meeting, and Ahmet Güneştekin accepted. He only offered one or two conditions. Those were tolerable things; they were not things that would cause problems. But at that time, Ahmet Güneştekin tweeted. I mean, he shared a post and criticized Turkey's political agenda in his own way. He is right; he is wrong. That is a separate issue. It can be discussed. However, because of that tweet, the biennial management decided that Ahmet Güneştekin would definitely not be there; that is, he would not be included in the biennial. (Murat Kösemen, interview, 2021)

Gurbetçioğlu, one of the members of the board of directors, states that at that point, he felt a responsibility towards the president who sponsored the event and that this responsibility is directed not at Erdoğan in person but at the office of the presidency (interview, 2023). In this sense, it cannot be said that there was a conflict with the curator either because Kula also states that he had certain limits and that he would

not want to include artwork, for example, that can be construed to make LGBT propaganda (interview, 2022). Emine Karabulut emphasized morality in her discourse as their redline; however, Karabulut remained what she meant by moral ambiguous.

Absolutely, not just let's put it together and however it happens. There is a red line. We want to spread it somehow; we want to bring this idea to the masses under the name of biennial, but we have a certain thing: we have a standard. So it shouldn't be something that pushes those boundaries. So you can bring a feminist interpretation to a work. But without being immoral. ... At the end of the day, we say freedom is art, it is unifying, this and that, but there are certain values in quotes, and it is one of our important sensitivities that they should not be offended as much as possible. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)

In parallel to Karabulut, Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu claimed the works to be exhibited should be in line with the spirit of traditional arts. İbrahimağaoğlu brings another ambiguity there. During the interviews, they refrained from filling in these concepts and giving concrete examples, but it is clear from the analysis of all the interviews that these are religious boundaries.

In the first biennial, as few works as possible were eliminated. These were eliminated because they were found to be contrary to their own historical background and spirit, in other words, they were eliminated because they were deemed inappropriate. Serhat, the curator, and the foundation carried this out. The municipality did not intervene in this artistic part. They were not willing or enthusiastic about it anyway. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2021)

According to Zehra Kaygusuz, a member of the curatorial team who was in contact with the artists, another constraint here is that some artists did not want to be included in the Yeditepe Biennial for fear of being ostracized by secular contemporary art circles (personal communication, 2023). Berkan Karpat, the curator

of the second biennial, says that some artists exhibited their works with the signature “no name” due to this concern (interview, 2022).

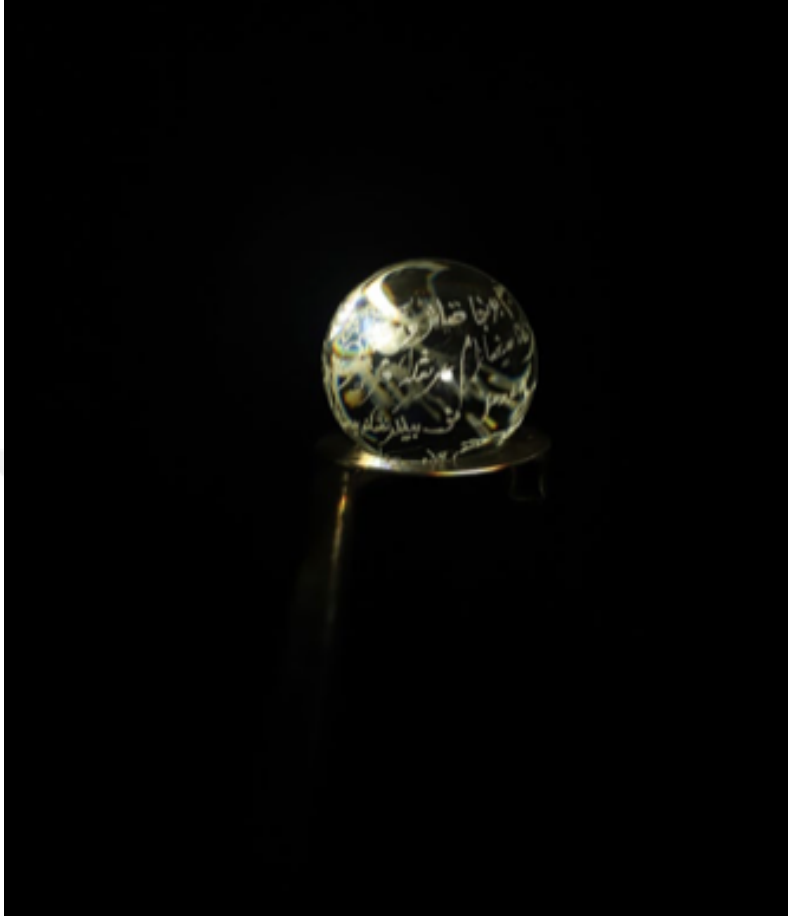


Figure 1: *Gevher-i Kan*, No Name Artist, 2018

Artists' hesitation to participate in the biennial for fear of being ostracized by secular contemporary art circles reflects the polarized nature of the art world in Turkey. This shows how artists' need to protect their careers and social circles affects their artistic expression and participation. Berkan Karpat's commentary on some artists' choice to exhibit their work anonymously reveals the pressures artists face when exhibiting their work and how these pressures influence their decision to conceal their identities. So, this information reveals that participation in the Yeditepe Biennial is affected by two main mechanisms of exclusion: Direct Exclusion: The selective filtering process applied by the board and curator may have excluded artists and

works that fall outside specific themes or political views. This could mean that the board and curator exert ideological control over art, and the biennial is limited to works that conform to a particular political or cultural line. Indirect Exclusion: Artists' fear of being associated with the biennial is another factor preventing them from participating. Artists may be concerned that their participation in the biennial may lead to negative judgment by their peers or the broader art community. This concern manifests itself in the form of exhibiting their work anonymously or avoiding participation in the biennial altogether. These two mechanisms of exclusion show how divided the biennial, and Turkey's art scene in general, is in terms of social and political pressures on artists. It also highlights the extent to which the relationship between art and politics influences artists' decisions on how and under what conditions to present their work. This provides an important context for understanding the limits of free expression in the art world and the challenges artists face when exhibiting their work.

c. Art Branches Represented at the Biennial

It is seen that there has yet to be a consensus on the naming of the art/art cluster contained in the Yeditepe Biennial in terms of the cadres who founded and carried the biennial. The question here is, what are the art branches under the roof of this biennial, and why are they problematized? Within the scope of the first biennial, two international exhibitions and 27 local exhibitions were organized, and the arts of “calligraphy, *tezhib* (illumination) tile, marbling, calligraphy, mosaic, decorative ornament, *kaatı* (paper cutting), and miniature” were included. In the second biennial, the selection was reduced and limited to three exhibitions and four art

branches, “calligraphy, *tezhib*, marbling, and miniature.” It is stated that the new curators will decide how the following biennials will continue. However, the exclusion of other arts in the second biennial does not constitute an element of complaint or criticism, and these four arts are seen as the prominent veins of the arts included in the Yeditepe Biennial in the eyes of the audience (Zehra Kaygusuz, interview, 2023). Also, the survey conducted among the audience in the first biennial

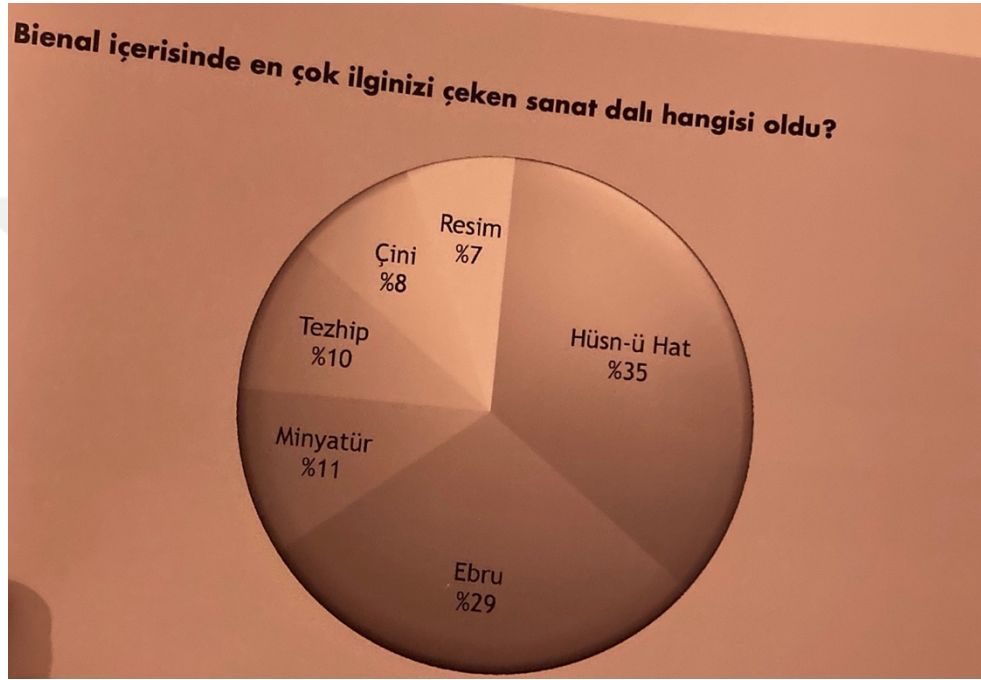


Figure 2: Questionnaire, KTSV and Fatih Municipality, 2018

showed that these four branches attracted the most attention.

In this respect, I find it appropriate to focus my discussion on these art forms. In order to make sense of the issue, I would first like to make an introduction by briefly discussing the emergence and historical course of these art branches. In the second section, I will give a perspective on how and why Yeditepe circles problematize them. Then, I will give a section on how the founders of the biennial names these arts will be discussed to figure out what all the namings tell us about the cultural environment and these arts; where does the Yeditepe Biennial take the discussion on conservative art?

The most important feature of these arts, in my eyes, is that since they had their golden age in the 16th century in the Ottoman Empire and are associated with Islam, conservative circles directly relate these branches to cultural heritage in the Turkish context. Given the neo-Ottomanist emphases of the AKP era, it is not surprising that the biennial is framed by these arts. But what does this heritage, which reached maturity centuries ago, mean for today? Curator Serhat Kula, who gave a panel titled “Yeditepe Biennial and Approaches” within the scope of the first biennial, stated that he could not complete his thoughts on traditional arts and that he tried to resolve his concerns and uncertainties in the biennial (Ensar Vakfi / Ensar TV, 2018). Kula draws attention to the fact that traditional arts are not part of an exhibition culture but they were performed because of their functions in the past. According to him, these works arise out of necessity and shape our aesthetic perception by manifesting in space and objects. The primary purpose is to decorate the sacred, to adorn the holy. In this speech, Kula recounts a memory of Baha Tanman:

When we were discussing this subject, Baha Bey said: I was sitting in my late grandmother's house... She is the granddaughter of a precious family. While we were sitting, he said, when we were serving tea to our guests after dinner, we would say, “Let us serve our works now,” and the framed precious writings would be served. They would be placed in front of the guest and say, look, excuse me, but there are such artifacts; we are offering you these too. They would show them off as the treasure of our house and then quickly put them away. Because it was considered very shameful to hang on the wall and say we have this; this is an ornament, a valuable item. (Ensar Vakfi / Ensar TV, 2018)

Serhat Kula's statements point to a contradiction and cultural dissonance in the exhibition of traditional Turkish arts and their participation in modern art events such as biennials. Kula describes a time when traditional artworks were presented in homes as if they were being offered to guests, but it was considered shameful to accept them as ornaments or objects of display. This suggests that artworks had a

personal value and were not there for show but rather for personal appreciation.

Kula's anecdote reveals the contrast between the “essence” of traditional arts and contemporary art exhibition practices. According to him, if a traditional artist truly believes in the subject matter of his or her work, he or she should not exhibit it but wait for those who want to find it to do so through their own efforts. This is based on the understanding that art should not be valued by the relationship between supply and demand but by art lovers searching for artworks and discovering them through their own efforts. So, despite the opposition between the “essence” of these arts and the exhibition, how is the biennial a way out, and why is it preferred?

I think that if the traditional artist really believes in what he/she does in terms of exhibition, that is, if he/she is aware of the issue of his/her work, I think he/she should not exhibit anything. So they should come and find it. If you know what I mean, it has to move forward with supply and demand. Therefore, this is already a matter of total incompatibility. An exhibition, let alone a biennial, is an idea that fits differently from this. For example, we already exhibit it in the mosque; it is already on display there. This is our exhibition model. The man who will understand these things is the man who already goes to the mosque. It was not only a mosque but also a place of festivity. You see them there. If you had a lot of money, you would go to the famous one, otherwise to the small shops inside the inn. So how did we come to the logic of “I made this, come and see”? This process started in the 70s when contemporary art exploded in Turkey. Painters trained in Europe go to Anatolia to capture original colors and figures. A new movement emerged. From Bedri Rahmi to Nuri İyem, they all went and painted Anatolia and then came back and opened exhibitions. This movement started with this, so the exhibition of contemporary art in Turkey has no history. For example, there was no gallery in 1910 or no exhibition in 1925. Our culture has no 'I did it; here, take a look.' It does not exist in contemporary art, either. It does not fit traditional art at all. An organizational style that can be discussed today will not underline this issue anyway, but you cannot just say there is none and cut it off because this is a sector. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Kula's observations emphasize that modern art organizations such as exhibitions and biennials are not compatible with traditional arts, as these arts have their origins in a culture where they are naturally displayed in community centers such as mosques. According to this perspective, the “I made it, come and see” mentality is the result of a movement that began in Turkey during the contemporary

art boom of the 1970s when Western-influenced artists exhibited works inspired by Anatolian art. In conclusion, Kula's remarks highlight the tension between the preservation of the essence of traditional art and the integration of contemporary art into exhibition practices. Yet today, traditional arts are a sector, a field of production. Since the establishment of İSMEKs, traditional art production has been seriously supported, and artists have been trained in this field. But how will these artists earn their income? This in itself seems to be an issue that the government should deal with, let alone expanding cultural policies. Managing a sector, it has grown or watching it disappear. Today, with the political support and encouragement given to traditional arts, there is more supply than demand. According to Serhat Kula, this situation can be solved by collecting and investing in art. Kula mentions that traditional arts are not considered a market and underlines that Mehmet Çebi is trying to create the needed market. Çebi has created inflation, as Kula puts it. A work bought for 50 thousand was sold for 200 thousand, a work bought for 200 thousand was sold for 500 thousand, and prices were inflated. Serhat Kula interprets this as an excellent effort to increase the base. However, since there were not enough collectors, this business could not continue.

There are 3-5 fan collectors, ten at most. There was Şevket Eygi, the late Şevket Eygi; even if he did not have money, he would find money from somewhere and go and buy that work. For example, this man wants to see it in his house. Nevertheless, I did not show it to someone. Collecting is divided into two: one is to show yourself as an intellectual, and the other is because of a serious interest in it. Since that is not the case, we both say that this does not fit the basis of the work being done, and we also say that these men need it. After having so many artists produce, the giants also need to create a procedure. Either they call it a biennial or a competition; they should advertise it somehow. I have thought a lot, but there is no equivalent. I think the natural solution, the ideal, the way it should be, is not to do it, but this is impossible. The state and politics have to produce something for these artists. It also works in his favor. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Was the sole aim to regulate the balance of supply and demand? There is a part in the panel discussion that says, “We need to determine our visual needs.” One

of the issues that attracted my attention the most in my interviews, and which was emphasized by all participants without exception, is the desire to preserve the “traditional” or “tradition.” According to Kula, artists, art administrators, and politicians must decide what they are doing and why. In this respect, I find his questions very important: “Why do we protect tradition? Where does the impulse of ownership come from? Is tradition a protest tool for us? Is our culture fading, and we make art to keep it alive or to spread religious ideologies? I mean, are we making protest art, or do we love it? Do we remember our instincts and enjoy it? We need to reveal the dialogue between the art lover and the work. Maybe we are afraid to hear the king naked” (interview, 2022). The first biennial's slogan, “you have the art,” and the emphasis on “remember, embrace,” seem to carry this relationship directly to the ground Kula calls to protest. As I already mentioned in the curator section, Kula believes that both sides are making protest art in Turkey. I would also like to remind you that the founders of the Biennial (e.g., Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, İsmail Hakkı Gurbetçioğlu, Muhammed Emin Demirkan, Serhat Kula, Berkan Karpas) mostly talked about the decline of traditional arts in the Republican era. The political power gained during the AKP era has brought a new field of opportunity for these arts to come to the agenda. Academic Betül Bilgin, one of the artists and advisors of the biennial, mentions that traditional art departments existed in the past. However, the faculty did not even accept their works for the graduation project exhibitions. According to her, the right to life and development granted to these arts began with the AKP government's arrival on the scene. It is also possible to trace this back to Erdoğan's mayoralty. İSMEK also created a training ground and trained teachers beforehand. Even when traditional arts departments had the opportunity to expand, people who had been trained at İSMEK were invited to give lectures at universities

because there was no trained staff. It also seems that KTSV has assumed the mission of a school and has become an authority (Gurbetçioğlu, Kula, Şems).

Betül Bilgin mentions that this rupture started with the advent of the printing press and that the loss of function was inevitable. The reason for denoting the Republican era as the focus of criticism and complaints seems to be the Alphabet Revolution. Since the aforementioned arts have primarily developed around calligraphy, and since the aim of calligraphy is to “adorn” what is signified and sacred, I believe that calligraphy should be emphasized in particular because what both the printing press and the lettering revolution removed from lives was not adornment but the Arabic writings to be adorned, namely calligraphy. In this respect, calligraphy is particularly important for the Yeditepe Biennial circles (Betül Bilgin, interview, 2023; Zehra Kaygusuz, interview, 2024). These are often called book arts (Gurbetçioğlu, Kalender, Karataş, Kargusuz). What is essential is the text at the center. Miniature is composed of visuals that support the text in manuscripts, while illumination is used to decorate the text, page, or work. Although marbling is separate from this, “There are written marbles in Islamic calligraphy as an invention of Necmeddin Okyay. If a work of calligraphy is written with gum Arabic and dried and then placed in a marbling boat, the gummed parts do not absorb the marbling, and the written part remains the color of the paper” (Derman, n.d.). Consequently, the introduction of the printing press and eventually the Alphabet Revolution made calligraphy, so the other branches developed around unfunctional. Burcu Karataş, an art historian from the curatorial team, states, “Calligraphy is sound. However, how many of us hear that sound when we look at a calligraphy work today?” We live in a time when the vast majority of society does not understand the meaning of calligraphy, the meaning of the word written on it. If we return the discussion to the

function issue in Kula's speech, what are the functions of these arts today? If framing these arts, works of art, and hanging them on the wall does not fit the philosophy of this work, will the stated philosophy of the way of displaying them be abandoned? Or will a middle way be found? Another critical point Serhat Kula highlights is the lack of a transition period. According to him, there is a vein of art that suddenly broke and suddenly returned. It was forgotten, left behind, and returned with the AKP. For this reason, it has not been able to experience either conceptual or operational debates and has not been able to undergo an evolutionary process.

The Yeditepe Biennial is located right here and opens up these arts' nature, trajectory, material, and exhibition methods for discussion. However, conservative art and artists engage in the abovementioned debates and face being included in a biennial. This top-down format has brought new challenges. As discussed in the previous chapter, the board wants to be both the decision-maker and the executor of the work. Here, the “decision” can include every stage of the biennial, from the opening date to the theme to the forms of the exhibition. On the one hand, there is a curator. What I can see in this environment is that since there has to be a curator in the format called biennial, they work with a curator. If this was an optional choice, I do not think the curator would have a place in an event called Yeditepe. On the other hand, many artists are unwilling to work with a curator since a curator creating his/her own composition rather than composing the artworks in line with artists' wishes (Betül Bilgin). I wonder why artists who do not want to be part of the “biennial” format take part in the Yeditepe Biennial. The answer comes from Bilgin again: Because they want to be seen.

In such a framework, the discussions presented by the Yeditepe Biennial seem pretty complex and multi-layered. Because the upcoming organization is trying to

guide the transformation process of certain art branches, wants to see the material and potential at hand, opens up the forms of the exhibition to the discussion, questions its framework, and wants to assume the role of the carrier of tradition by drawing attention to the dualities of traditional and modern, and carries a political agenda as a manifestation of cultural policies. Here, we see many separate debates that often intertwine; sometimes, one overrides the other. All these debates take place on the axis of biennial art. All arguments are shaped by these arts and the world of meaning they contain. So what is this art? What does this cluster of arts, which some call classical, some Turkish, some traditional, some conventional, some traditional, some Islamic, some book arts, some ancient, and which is often called by multiple names, and all these nomenclatures tell us about the cultural environment and these arts? Where does the Yeditepe Biennial take the discussion on conservative art? When we go back to the conservative art debates, we see that there have been intense conceptual discussions for several years since 2012. As discussed throughout this dissertation, the Yeditepe Biennial, on the other hand, goes beyond the conceptual debate by breaking out of this shell, accepting and swallowing all definitions, sometimes even moving on a slippery ground and changing shape in a discursive sense. We can read this as both a shallowing of art discussions and an interpretation that the way to spread a certain cultural agenda in a scenario where a conceptual consensus cannot be achieved is to push concepts away or to accept them all. The Biennial slogan is similarly constructed in such a way that it can change shape and be pulled from every end.

d. Slogan

This subsection focuses on the selection process of the Yeditepe Biennial's slogan and campaign design and aims to examine the various layers, decision-making mechanisms, and messages that the slogan embodies. The campaign's conception and creative process contains important reflections on the aesthetic, conceptual, and ideological approaches of the board of directors and the curatorial team. Moreover, the story of the choice of the slogan also contains various clues about the balance of power within the biennial. If we take the story from the beginning, when the biennial's slogan and campaign design are to be determined, an announcement is made, and a competition is opened. What is interesting here is that although Erk Agency was a part of this work and their design was chosen at the end of the day, a why was a competition needed? Wasn't it already clear that Erk Agency would be selected in the scenario where the campaign design was prepared by a team headed by Emine Karabulut from the Biennial Board of Directors? Whether the competition was an effort to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public and create the illusion of transparency in the creative process is a matter of debate. İbrahimhakkıoğlu, co-founder of Erk Agency, says they wanted to see other agencies to ensure they were not missing anything (interview, 2022):

This agency is where this slogan originated. We actually put a mirror in front of the board of directors while making the presentation. First of all, we had to convince the board of directors. As an agency, we need to say something in a creative sense. ... By the way, we decided this in the agency presentation. As the board of directors, yes, the Biennial could be a project of Erk Agency. Agency was the first one to bring it and the board of directors was formed from these people and it started very well. But in the end, let it make a presentation like an agency and let other agencies do the same. We sent an e-mail to all the agencies and said, 'O agencies, we are organizing a biennial.' We also told the team headed by Emine Hanım at our agency that we are your clients, convince us and make a presentation to us. ... Four agencies made a presentation to us, made a presentation to the board of directors. Together with Mrs. Emine, they put a

mirror in front of us. And there was actually a very nice saying on it. You are looking at the most beautiful thing, namely yourself. It said that you are actually a work of art. We actually tried to emphasize that, that you have the art. Do you realize that you are actually a work of art? Like a wake-up call, for example. That's art... We thought about it so much, that's why we set up mirrors in all the squares. We said, 'Have you looked at yourself?' We wanted to say, 'Stop fighting.' Actually, 'Stop criticizing.' God has created you so beautifully... Look, He has given you hands, arms, minds, ideas, freedom in every way.

Although İbrahimhakkıoğlu reflects the idea of coming up with a public competition as a collective will, according to the Kula, it was the idea of Muhammed Emin Demirkan. He wanted to be fair and said, "Let us get ideas from a few companies; something different might come up," the curator states (interview, 2022). Although there is talk at the level of discourse about a search for justice and wanting to see other ideas, this does not seem to be a valid argument. Probably, these discourses only contributed to the realization of the competition process because, in fact, Erk Agency's idea was not liked by the curator and the curatorial team, but it seems to have been accepted by the force of the board of directors. We know that there was another slogan that came to the fore at the end of the competition. Board members, the curator, and the curatorial team discussed it. In the narrative of the board, "You have the art" was the most appreciated slogan, but the curator and some members of the curatorial team stated that they liked the other campaign, but it was not accepted by the board. It was "Bu bir bienal değildir" (This is not a biennial).

I mean, there was even something in the first one. 'This is not a biennial.' So there was something like that. It's not that we didn't like it, but it's a bit like a game of Ali Cengiz. They came with a discourse like 'this is not a biennial.' This was discussed and debated a bit, and there was a painting under the picture of a pipe that said this is not a pipe. There were four applicants, I don't remember the other two, but we discussed that a bit. (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2021)

In the past, the board of directors referred to the slogan that was liked and desired by the curator and the curatorial team as "it was discussed a bit, but it was not good

enough” and tried to make the process seem fair and transparent with a kind of internal justification.

Let us take a closer look at “You have the art,” the slogan proposed and selected by Erk Agency. Emine Karabulut, who led the creative team, explains the chosen slogan:

That's why in the first biennial we said 'you have the art' and we started with fingerprints. Because the fingerprint is different in every created human being, so you yourself are already a work of art, that is, you are created as the highest of the created, as a human being, you are already a work of art, so what you do, this is performing art, this is a speech, this is a look, this is an art that you do. Realize this and claim what belongs to you. This beauty that belongs to us, which has a philosophical depth, I first of all want to announce it to my own children, to remind my own citizens, to propagandize it in our own geography, and to carry it beyond borders. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2021)

Many KTSV officials, like Erk Ajans, emphasize that human beings themselves are an art. Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, on the other hand, goes beyond this and states that it is a message to protect traditional arts:

We want to remind you of something. At home, you see such calendar cartons, you see a calligraphy, you see an ornament, sometimes they show it on TV as a najaf mashrapa. Embrace this. Because we want to bring this to people's eyes. So there is such a thing and realize it. ... We mean the whole country while saying “you.”(interview, 2022)

According to the information I got from Ebubekir Kalkan, the former creative director of Erk Agency, who designed the campaign, this slogan was designed in three layers. The campaign was carried out based on the third layer.

The first one was a form that directly pointed to the meaning of the sentence, addressed the person we were talking to (the audience) and reminded them. In this sense, it was aimed to “raise awareness”. The second reflection was to point out that we are obliged to contribute to this tradition that has survived from the past to the present and to pass on classical arts to future generations. The importance of the audience's contribution to the biennial was emphasized. The third reflection of the phrase 'You have the art' was its *Sufi* meaning, pointing out that man, the most superior being created by God, is also a work of art. This discourse, which we

have reached the meaning of 'You are a work of art created by God, you are the artful one', formed the backbone of our campaign slogan. (Ebubekir Kalkan, interview, 2021)

I had the chance to examine the documents confirming Kalkan's words. What is noteworthy here is that while the layers of meaning of the slogan are clear, today, it is denied by a large part of the board of directors. We see the same attitude in the current active staff of the biennial organization. Considering that the slogan and the campaign have been the focus of criticism by certain segments of society or the art community, one might think that such an attitude is adopted in order to eliminate them. However, this completely contradicts the narrative I quoted above that the aim of the biennial is to create a ground for dialogue and discussion, even through criticism. At this point, we observe an effort and reflex of self-acceptance. The other possibility here could be that the organization is oriented towards a particular cultural strategy, and as a result of the change in this strategy, there is a need to move away from previous approaches. The multi-layered structure of the slogan may be an indication that they are prepared for various changes of position from the very beginning.

Murat Kösemen expresses his feelings about the expression “You have the art” and says that he finds it dirty. According to him, it is a slogan chosen with a Jacobin attitude, as if to reject the other side. He also draws attention to the English version of the slogan. Although the direct translation of the Turkish slogan “Senin bir sanatın var” goes for “You have an art,” they are using it as “You have the art” in the English version. Kösemen mentions it as a “bad translation,” but I am not sure whether this choice is conscious or not. I think they may have wanted to define the art made within the scope of the Biennial as the real or the one. For Kula, the emphasis in “You have the art” led to discrimination in art and implicitly pointed to

another. From his perspective, “you” in the slogan goes for a specific segment of society, and others were automatically denoted and discriminated against. The only message was, “You have traditional arts; this is your art, brother.” In his account.

The slogan “This is not a biennial” seemed to him paradoxical and pleasant:

There is a famous painting, ‘This is not a pipe.’ They made a motto based on that, ‘This is not a biennial.’ I liked it. You said ‘Yeditepe Biennial’ but you say this is not a biennial. Actually, we wanted that questioning, the issue we were questioning, to be questioned with the campaign and to be questioned by everyone. Because ‘You have the art’ gives the image of a completed work. We are determined, you have an art, everything is over, it's done, it's okay from now on, you'll like it... I didn't like that. I asked the same concerns you mentioned, the second justification they gave was ridiculous. I didn't even think about it, “You are already a work of art, you have the art.” (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

In this way, they could both question the initiation of a biennial and not take responsibility. Kula states, “Because we are doing something like a biennial. Will there be a biennial? We don't know that either. It was a much more modest expression that fits traditional arts” (interview, 2022). Kula means that although they have initiated to organize a biennial, they were unsure about the final work. It could be something very different from a biennial, or they may fail completely. However, since the idea of “You have the art” was coming from the Erk Agency, the agency of two board members, there was no room for the slogan Kula liked. The municipality side insisted on the idea of the Erk Agency. Nevertheless, the curator got on well with creative director Ebubekir Kalkan, and they were able to run the campaign together. However, Kula underlines that the weight of the municipality and the Erk Agency continued (interview, 2022). The curator says that other ideas were not bad, but he did not like the campaign “images.” Kula refers to the color palette, pictures, paintings, and fonts used in the campaign. Agencies attended the competition and brought not only the slogans but also the visuals and the persona of the biennial. According to him, both the idea and the image of “This is not a biennial” were very

good. Even though he did not like the phrase “You have the art,” he perceived the image as not bad:

In terms of image, 'You have the art' was not bad. It gave a soft image. The colors were in a style suitable for spring. I personally liked the graphics, the imagery, and the modern look. I liked the spider-like isohypes design in the background that united it all and so on. So there was no problem in terms of image, but the expression... (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

Considering the whole story, the process of choosing the slogan and the agency to run the campaign is a good example of understanding the balance of power between the board and the curator. While it is the curator who creates the approach and the composition, it is the Board of Directors who chooses the presentation and the slogan, just as they also choose the overarching theme. The Yeditepe Biennial's campaign process and the various layers of the slogan “You have the art” emphasize the uniqueness and creative potential of each individual while at the same time reminding us of the responsibility to preserve and transmit traditional arts. However, the denial of some aspects of the campaign by the board and staff suggests that shifting power dynamics and cultural strategies within the organization are in constant flux. In sum, the slogan and the campaign have provided conceptual flexibility to the organization of the biennial by combining a call for ownership and protection of traditional arts, a call for the individual to see himself as a work of art and thereby claim his own culture, and a mystical reflection. It allowed the biennial to act according to the direction of the discussions that would follow.

e. Finance

The financial aspects of the Yeditepe Biennial raise several interesting points in the context of cultural policies. The fact that the Biennial receives most of its funding

from Fatih Municipality, supported by state support and sponsorships, reflects a project-based funding model rather than a consistent sponsorship approach. This practice is emblematic of the general trend in cultural funding in Turkey, where state and municipal resources play an important role. The Biennial's financing, especially the first one, benefited from presidential patronage, which served to enhance its prestige and attract sponsors, demonstrating the intersection of culture and governance. It is possible to say that the Yeditepe Biennial is not financially transparent. There is no public publication of income or expenditures, and during my research, the founders of the biennial generally refrained from providing information on this issue. I am gathering some information about the sponsors of the second biennial from Sabri Kalender, who is both a board member and one of the sponsors. This may also give clues about the first biennial, which is my main focus. In pursuant to this, the financial burden of the Biennial seems to be mostly carried by Fatih Municipality. Other expenses are met through governmental support and sponsorships. Here, it is possible to say that the biennial does not have permanent sponsors; each biennial is considered as a project, and project-based sponsors are agreed upon. As we see in examples from around the world, the biennial is also on the agenda to generate its own revenues. This was started with the sale of various souvenir products in the first biennial, but it did not continue. I see this as a failure rather than an inability.

So we are preparing for the third one. Since the first one, our goal is to sell our products in the sales points of the Ministry of Culture. We sold our products in the first one. We did not do anything like that in the second one. (Emine Karabulut, interview, 2022)



Figure 3: Souvenir products sold in the first biennial from the office of Erk Agency, Own Work, 2021

As with almost everything else, we encounter different narratives about sponsorships. According to the municipality, sponsors themselves call and insist on sponsoring this work (interview, 2022), while according to the KTSV, this is not an easy task.

We explained it to people in the first biennial. There were many difficulties in the first biennial because it was the first one. There were many partial sponsorships. True, we did not make a loss. We did not make a profit either. Our dream for the second biennial was that people would look at it, say this and that has been done and they would want to sponsor it. So we imagined that now sponsors will rain down. We even thought that we would choose them, but here came this pandemic. It was worse than the first one. Therefore, this sponsorship issue bent our back

because of being the first in the first one and because of the pandemic in the second one. (Mehmet İbrahimağaoğlu, interview, 2022)

If we take a closer look at sponsors, we see that they are divided into contributors (*katkı verenler*) and supporters. (*destek verenler*) It is said that contributors are those who provide financial support, while supporters are those who contribute in any way except for financial support (interview, 2021). The differences in the narratives of sponsor engagement and identification - whether they approached the Biennial or were sought out - reveal the complexity of the cultural-political landscape. The categorization of sponsors into contributors and supporters, and the fact that some provide in-kind services rather than direct financial assistance, points to a nuanced model of sponsorship that goes beyond monetary transactions. For example, *United Group*, a company providing facility management services, is denoted as a contributor, although they have not provided financial support. However, they took on all the cleaning and security work of the biennial. Based on such examples, I think that some of those who provided services that can be purchased free of charge are also included in the category of contributors. On the other hand, for example, the Governorship of Istanbul facilitated the process of obtaining permission for works that require permission from the governorate, allocated venues and was included in the category of contributors. In this framework; contributors of the first biennial are *Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Promotion Fund, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkish Airlines, A101, TAV Airports, Renault, United Group, Çalık Holding, İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality, and İstanbul Chamber of Commerce*; supporters are *İstanbul Governorship, Republic of Turkey General Directorate of Foundations, TCDD, Anadolu Agency, Güneş Insurance, İbni Haldun University, İstanbul University, Marmara University, İlim Yayma Foundation, Kapalıçarşı, Fors Media, İstanbul Tourism Association, Anadolu Cultural Entrepreneurship, and*

Sırma Water. All of these organizations are known for their proximity to the government. The KTSV officials also stated that they do not receive direct financial support from the Presidency, but that presidential patronage makes it easier for them to find sponsors, and that they have the power of the presidential prestige behind them (interview, 2023).

As curator of the second Yeditepe Biennial Berkan Karpat explains, there was a serious budgetary reduction in the second biennial:

Everyone here put their hands on the line, because we have to. We also had to provide financial support.... We couldn't just quit because some people quit. For example, we weren't involved in the first one, we were not a sponsor. In the second one, we actually got involved because of a budgetary problem. At that time, because it was the covid period. The situation of the country was obvious. The situation of the government was obvious. So it gave a very serious opportunity to all its people. Normally, the Prime Ministry Promotion Office, the Presidential Promotion Office, there are many promotion offices and they have special budgets. There are budgets allocated to art, official budgets. And when they receive these, they are already received under the foundation. Everything is officially registered. Now that everything was channeled to the public during the covid period, we also had difficulties. Many groups withdrew their sponsorship from us. For example, A101 withdrew. So we had to sponsor the event as the gallery. (Interview, 2022)

The fluctuating participation of sponsors from the first to the second Biennial, influenced by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in municipal governance, seems to underscore the challenges of sustaining financial support for cultural events, although the possibility that the first biennial did not achieve the desired success should also be considered here. After telling his own story of inclusion as a sponsor of second biennial, Kalender gives the following information about other sponsors:

We didn't receive any financial support from the Ministry of Culture. For example, it opened its venues for us. The Ministry of Transportation, for example, is our sponsor, they didn't give us any money, but they used us on all main arteries and subways, on their billboards. United Group was our cleaning and security

sponsor. So again, it was not a financial support, but all the cleaning and security was completely theirs. Turkish Airlines, Türk Telekom, BİNSAT, Erk Agency were the sponsors who provided financial support. ... And from RTÜK... You know in spot broadcasts, in advertisements, in those kinds of places and newspapers, they had their own usage areas and periods. They rotated the videos of our biennial during those periods. ... TÜRSAB did not provide financial support either. Tourism agencies added us to their travel guides, they also gave us hotel support. ... We also received support from the state, but in a limited way. But our biggest sponsor among them is Fatih Municipality. Of course, this is official. Fatih Municipality is the one who has taken the heavy burden here. (Interview, 2022)

Here we witness the use of the facilities of some state institutions for the biennial. An important question for me was whether the support received from the metropolitan municipality changed with the changing administration (AKP to CHP) from the first biennial to the second. Since the biennial sponsorships were already project-based, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was never approached during the second biennial. Likewise, İmamoğlu and his team did not offer support either. There is a common discourse here that if they wanted to, they could have asked what the curator and his team was doing and then support them, but it seems contradictory that the same people applied for the support of such as the governorship and ministries for support, they want the Metropolitan Municipality to find the biennial to support. On the other hand, İbrahimağaoğlu states it was a conscious decision to not apply to the metropolitan municipality:

If such a biennial had been proposed to the metropolitan municipality, would the metropolitan municipality have accepted it if we had said that we want to use the venues and facilities that the metropolitan municipality uses? We do not know this issue. We set out from this: The metropolitan municipality closed down an institution called ISMEK, which overlapped almost exactly with our field of activity. There were thousands of trainees, hundreds of instructors. In other words, the metropolitan municipality said, 'I have other priorities in these arts, I don't want to transfer resources here' and closed them down. They closed them down to a great extent. Now we looked at it like this, I mean, how are we going to work with an institution that closes these? What are we going to say, what are we going to explain so that this will happen? I am not saying it is impossible, but we thought it would be very difficult and we did not make an offer. (Interview, 2022)

Municipality was already our partner. While we were making the announcement of this, they liquidated the congress of the team we were working with and afterwards no one came and knocked on our door like “what are you doing, what are you doing, what kind of support can we give?” (Sabri Kalender, interview, 2022)

As we see in both narratives, there was resentment towards the metropolitan municipality and the approach towards party identity is quite prominent, even though it is tried to be pushed to the background. The strategic decision not to approach the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, although monetary reduction after its transfer from the AKP to the CHP, suggests a political dimension to sponsorship and support.

Leaving the issue of sponsors aside, I would like to draw attention to the issue of monetary contributions given to the artists. It is also rumored that some artists are provided with a much higher financial flow than they should be under the roof of the Biennial (Anonymous, interview, 2022). On the other hand, Murat Kösemen, the field coordinator, states that they sometimes encounter absurd financial demands from artists as well:

There was a project worth 600.000 liras. Six hundred thousand liras. In 2018, 600.000 is a very solid amount. The man wants to appoint a separate curator for his work. He also puts that curator's expense into the work. The artist doesn't know where he is applying to. The people who accept the project don't know what they're doing. This project was accepted. It came as a file in front of me. I said, I don't understand these files. Who is the curator? Curator has two assistants. He had inserted expenses for them too. Do you get it? It's a small audience, but there were examples like this. We rejected this work. (Interview, 2021)

However, we also know from the curator's narrative that some big-budget works were revised or rejected due to financial constraints.

Some of the works had large budgets, among them there were works that I liked very much, but we had to reject them. We offered those people the opportunity to either not do it or downsize it. There were some who modified it, others said, “No, I came with this project, if it doesn't work, it's okay.” (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

These two words underscore the need for clear and equitable financial protocols and highlight the tension between artistic vision and practical budgetary constraints in the Yeditepe Biennial. In such a closed structure, differences in funding between artists can lead to questions of favoritism or misallocation of funds, which is particularly sensitive when public money is at stake.

In conclusion, the Yeditepe Biennial's financial uncertainty and reliance on project-based sponsorships, coupled with the influence of political dynamics on sponsorship participation, reflect the interplay between culture and politics. The Biennial's funding challenges and the government's role in facilitating sponsorships point to the broader implications of cultural policy and the role of the government in maintaining the biennial's financial stability. This is an indication that the continuity and sustainability of ideological alignment will continue to be a budgetary imperative for an event that has tied itself that closely to the government and presidential patronage.

f. Venues

Since the biennial is organized in partnership with Fatih Municipality, all exhibition venues have been selected within the municipality's borders. In fact, all exhibition venues were chosen within the borders of “Yeditepe”, but the founders of the biennial do not attribute a special meaning and emphasis to this in terms of venue selection. Serhat Kula made the venue selections by visiting the places from a list given to him:

I was given a list of about a hundred venues. Then I eliminated certain venues according to the projects that I received. Instead of selecting the venues and placing the art works there, I chose the venues according to the styles and forms of the art works. Also, unlike the second biennial, I invited all the artists to the venues I had selected. We saw together where and how their works would stand. We drew the situation in the space on Autocad, they saw it in three dimensions and were fully satisfied. The artists knew the location of the works, how much space they would occupy, etc. (Serhat Kula, interview, 2022)

In addition, Cihad Kol from the curatorial team, as an engineer, measured and determined the physical suitability of historical spaces for exhibition. Even though the choice of venue was left to the curator, a list was provided to be followed. We know that venues were eventually approved by the board of directors and that there were some disagreements throughout the process. At the end, Kula selected 33 venues for over 3000 artworks and the agency created the map below:



Figure 4: Venues of the First Yeditepe Biennial, 2021

We know through the biennial's open sources that 29 of these spaces were used. Kula explains that this is due to the physical condition of the places and some restorations not being completed in time. For example, the restoration of Tekfur Palace was not finalized when the time for the biennial came. Here, we again witness the hurry for the biennial to start. Since all the processes were intertwined and quickly taken care

of, there was no time to change the map and it was published in this way, with some misdirections.

It is noteworthy that all the sites Kula has chosen are historical sites and there is no place for a non-Islamic site, such as a church. We can make sense of this second situation with the constraints I mentioned in the selection of works. It seems same constraints were applied to the selection of the venues. Regarding the choice of historical sites, the curator proposes that there were some practical reasons. First, they were on the routes of tourist visiting Istanbul. In this way, it would be possible for the First Yeditepe Biennial to welcome more visitors. Second, since Kula was trying to bring new styles and approaches to the traditional artworks, including modern sites would also have led to a conflict between space and artworks, which would have hindered the original purpose.

It seemed a bit awkward to display them in modern buildings. I also looked at it from the point of view of foreigners because that area receives a lot of foreigners. I thought that if the biennial is going to bring in foreigners, there should be interesting places. Because if it was inside a modern building, I didn't think people would be curious and want to see it. And there are none in the Fatih region anyway, you can't find them even if you look for them. You have to go to a madrasah, a külliye, a mosque. Therefore, it was not something that was done specially, but the main thing was for the art lover to integrate with that art, to see that künde-kari, that muqarnas. Also, it didn't make much sense to make a crash of three or four combinations. I mean, there is already a crash inside, it was not right to have spatial differences on top of that. After all, we are doing this for the first time.... Actually, this was a second aim of this biennial. One is being a laboratory within itself and one is being a laboratory between the space and the work. Look, 500 years have passed and we are still trying to catch up with them. What was made in the 16th century... Another work will never give the same taste. Today, someone living in a small house in Ümraniye cannot produce it in an apartment, you know what I mean? So let's know that this is the second channel, and maybe it is useful to use it. I tried to show that the spaces have already done the right thing, and that today we are trying to imitate or catch up with them, this is where the protest is actually. We are still trying to remember that day with these works. (Interview, 2022)

In order to show that the Fatih region is already architecturally full of works of art and that they are not recognized, the curator chose to make almost twenty percent of the venues that are rarely visited. Serhat Kula wants to introduce these previously undiscovered spaces to the viewers on the occasion of the biennial and show that these spaces are also artworks. He gives the Mahzen and Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hamamı as examples. Kula wants to draw attention to the fact that these places are also works of art. In line with Kula's point of view, some members of the curatorial team have also stated that one of their aims was to give a new function to such valuable spaces (interview, 2021). On the other hand, places underfoot (?), such as the Museum of Islamic Art, are also included. The aim here is to ensure that people inevitably see the biennial as they pass by and to advertise it. The fact that all of the venue choices for the first biennial were made in Fatih does not mean that this will always be the case. Paradoxically, although the KTSV officials stated that they will stay in Fatih and justify this with the richness of the historical texture, the agency and the municipality want to expand this event spatially. At first glance, this seemed to be a constraint for KTSV and an indispensable condition for the municipality. However, the case is different than expected.

There will be spatial expansion, we even want it to travel the world. So maybe in the future, in the next stage, other countries are also on the table. Anyway, look, when we took this project forward, there was something we believed in. We don't have anything like being in Fatih and not in another place. I mean, we can do it in Fatih today. We can do it in Üsküdar with the same Fatih Municipality. (Şems İbrahimhakkıoğlu, interview, 2021)

I attribute the lack of consensus on spatial expansion to the differing objectives of the KTSV and the municipality. Whether the main focus should be on the event or the arts presented in the event seems to be the main line of tension between the two sides.

In sum, the choice of venue for the Yeditepe Biennial within the boundaries of Fatih Municipality seems to be in line with a strategic approach to culture and tourism that aims to integrate the exhibition with the historical fabric of Istanbul, but it can also be interpreted as a necessary consequence of Fatih Municipality being one of the biennial partners. The choice to exhibit in historical rather than modern spaces was intended to enhance the visitor experience by capitalizing on the city's rich heritage. At the same time, however, these choices foreground a specific cultural and historical narrative due to the exclusion of non-Islamic historical sites. This inclusion/exclusion mechanism reflects a cultural and historical narrative that aligns with the AKP's cultural policies, which emphasize the revival and promotion of Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic heritage. This deliberate venue choice not only serves to enrich the visitor experience by connecting art with the region's historical context but also supports the AKP's ideological focus on reinforcing national identity through a celebration of the past. This cultural strategy underscores a broader political agenda that seeks to intertwine Turkey's contemporary cultural expressions with its traditional and religious roots.

g. Promoting the Yeditepe Biennial

While promoting the First Yeditepe Biennial, advertising activities progressed in three separate phases. Communications were planned to start on February 1st, and a teaser phase was carried out until February 28th. This phase was designed to create public opinion before the Yeditepe Biennial. By adopting the WOMM (Word of Mouth Marketing) approach for this process, it was aimed to open a conversation about the event (Kalkan, interview, 2021). In this phase, social media influencer

marketing, Twitter hashtag work, traditional and new media use, and guerrilla marketing practices were planned. What is noteworthy at this stage is the creation of an agenda for the arts to be covered in the biennial and the biennial's understanding of art without mentioning the name Yeditepe Biennial. In addition, prominent faces in the print and visual media were asked to bring up talking points related to the content of the Yeditepe Biennial; writers, intellectuals, and artists were asked to produce programs and write columns on topics selected from the Yeditepe Biennial agenda. As a guerrilla marketing practice, mirrors designed as if they were in the living room of a house were placed on the streets; giant mirror cubes were placed in places such as Vatan Street and Sultanahmet Square, and the words “You have the art” were written on these mirrors. At the end of the period, the website and social media accounts were launched. Aside from the fact that the Biennial website contains an extensive archive, the social media accounts are quite inactive today. In addition, the term “Yeditepe Biennial” is rarely found in Twitter searches. In this respect, it can be concluded that there was no success in creating public opinion and drawing attention to the event by creating a social media agenda. The second phase was planned to take place between March 1-15, 2018, and was designed as the main promotional period in which all the advertising activities prepared to announce the biennial would be shared just before the Yeditepe Biennial. The tone and frequency of the communication were intended to reach the highest volume during this phase. March 15-May 15 is the campaign phase of the event period, which is planned to run concurrently with the biennial. Due to the change in the opening date of the Biennial, there were various shifts in these dates. The reason for the delay in the opening was the desire to ensure Erdoğan's participation. This participation would increase the legitimacy and resonance of the event. The last two phases utilized the full range of

traditional and new means of communication. The tools used included TV commercials, newspaper articles/news/announcements, outdoor applications, various types of billboards, subway/tram ads, brochures and social media channels. During the transition from the first biennial to the second biennial, the intensity of billboard use decreased considerably as a result of the transition of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality from AKP to CHP administration, and advertisements on public transportation vehicles were carried out on the Marmaray owned by the Ministry of Transportation, leaving aside the subways owned by IBB. Although this situation is referred to by some of the biennial management as their own preference (Selvi, 2021), it is also emphasized that IBB has distanced itself from the biennial (Gurbetçioğlu, 2023). Billboard works were carried out within the borders of AKP-owned municipalities. This alone seems to be enough to reflect the biennial's relationship with the AKP. When we turn our eyes to the media, we come across newspapers and magazines known to be close to the government or ideologically right-wing during the first biennial. In particular, Anadolu Agency, a state-run media outlet, was characterized as a “Global Communication Partner”. In this sense, we see that the frequency is concentrated in Yeni Şafak, Anadolu Agency, and TRT. However, other outstanding media sources that we came across news on the biennial

were A Haber, Milliyet, Hürriyet, Yeni Akit, Star, Yeniasya, Takvim, and Karar. The question that arises here is how the biennial was covered.



Figure 5: *Basından* (From Press), KTSV and Fatih Municipality, 2018

As in the press release, the Yeditepe Biennial was heavily covered in the media as Classical Turkish Arts or as the first biennial organized in the field of traditional arts (“Basın Bülteni,” 2018; “Serhat Kula ile Yeditepe Biennial Üzerine Konuştuk,” 2018; “Yeditepe Sanata Çıkar,” 2018). One of the most important points highlighted in the press was that the event was organized under the auspices of the President of the Republic. Presumably, this situation was used to raise the reputation of the biennial, which was planned and intended, and to increase its support. In addition, the opening ceremony attended by the President of the Republic was naturally covered in the media. In fact, it can even be said that this opening was the

most publicized moment of the biennial (“Cumhurbaşkanı Yeditepe Bienali'nin açılışında konuştu,” 2018).



Figure 6: President Erdoğan at the Opening Ceremony of the First Yeditepe Biennial, 2018

Erdoğan's speech here is noteworthy:

When art, culture, and history have been pronounced, Turkey was taken captive by a barren and narrow perspective concerned with only a certain period of time and a certain template. This mentality, which is more Byzantine than Byzantium, and Westerner than the West, is still at odds with the national values; unfortunately, it did not appreciate the legacy that our ancestors left us. We are witnessing that this top-down, oppressive, Jacobin understanding continues today in some so-called art circles. (TCCB, 2021)

This statement by President Erdoğan at the opening of the first Yeditepe Biennial is a critique of the existing art establishment in Turkey, which he perceives as disconnected from the nation's values and historical legacy. He frames the contemporary art scene as alienated from national identity, suggesting it is overly influenced by Western perspectives and neglectful of Turkey's own rich cultural heritage. Erdoğan's mention of a “barren and narrow perspective” suggests a desire to broaden the scope of what he considers valuable and noteworthy in the Turkish art

world. His reference to the so-called art circles could be interpreted as a call for a return to traditional values and a celebration of what he views as a more authentic Turkish culture, in contrast to what he views as a Westernized and elitist art scene that dominates sectors like the Istanbul Biennial. This critique aligns with his government's broader cultural policies, which promote Ottoman and Islamic heritage as central to Turkish identity. At this point, the Yeditepe Biennial is presented as a space of liberation and emancipation with the reminder, "You have the art." His remarks at the opening of the Yeditepe Biennial can be seen as a strategic positioning of the event within the government's cultural policy. By critiquing certain art circles, he underscores his administration's support for a cultural renaissance that aligns with national values and traditions, distinguishing the Yeditepe Biennial from other art events that may be perceived as disconnected from these values. The speech signifies an intent to reshape and reclaim the cultural narrative in favor of a perspective that is more reflective of the government's ideology and vision for Turkey's cultural identity through Yeditepe Biennial. Apart from these, the biennial was also covered in the media, albeit sparsely, with the opening of various exhibitions and the venues it used. The second biennial received more media coverage because the biennial management stated that they started to approach this issue more professionally (Kaygusuz, 2023). Even though means appealing to different worldviews were used, the extent to which this was successful is a matter of debate. For example, Cüneyt Özdemir, made a connection with the curator on his YouTube channel, and in addition to his reluctant attitude, he sarcastically emphasized that this was a paid advertisement by saying, "So that Kenan Taş would not eat *taş* (stones)" at the end of the interview (In Turkish, "taş yemek" (literally "eating stones") is an idiom for being broke or running out of money. However, since the person he works with is

named Kenan Taş, Özdemir uses a play on words by mentioning that the interview was a paid advertisement, sarcastically suggesting it was to ensure that Kenan Taş wouldn't "eat stones" — in other words, to prevent Kenan Taş from running out of money.).

In sum, the promotional strategy of the Yeditepe Biennial focuses on creating public discourse and maximizing visibility through various marketing tactics. In this process, the biennial was presented as a platform to rediscover and liberate oneself through traditional Turkish art, in contrast to the Westernized mainstream understanding of art.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation takes the Yeditepe Biennial as a case study and discusses a concrete event that will help to understand the government's art policies in a broader cultural and social context, starting from conservative art debates. The Yeditepe Biennial is analyzed descriptively and analytically in Turkey's cultural and political dynamics, especially during the AKP rule. The power dynamics and narratives around the biennial are revealed by applying critical discourse analysis to interviews, press releases, catalogs, and a range of media sources. The main argument suggests that the biennial is not only a cultural exhibition but also a carefully orchestrated political tool to reinforce a conservative, traditionalist, and neo-Ottomanist narrative in line with the agenda of the current government. Through the Biennial, traditional arts were used as a strategic tool to assert cultural power and consolidate political dominance.

The conservative art debate in Turkey, which began with İskender Pala's critical comments on the selection of works in city theaters that initiated a broader debate on the role and nature of conservative art, has been further inflamed by the participation of influential political figures who have emphasized the need to establish conservative aesthetics and norms that reflect the government's conservative approach to democracy. As a manifestation of these debates, the Yeditepe Biennial seems to have been deliberately created to present a concrete manifestation of the government's cultural strategy. To deepen this argument, we examine the planning and execution of the Biennial, revealing the political, bureaucratic, and artistic networks that collaborated to bring it to life. The complex connection between the organizational structure of the Biennial and the AKP, particularly through the partnership between Fatih Municipality and KTSV, is

evidence of the political underpinnings of the event. This control over cultural expression can be read as an attempt to shift the trajectory of Turkish culture in a direction that supports the AKP's vision of culture. In conclusion, the Yeditepe Biennial represents a critical intersection of art, culture, and governance. In this context, the main focus of this thesis is to invite the reader to look beyond the aesthetic surface of the Biennial to its more profound political significance as a barometer of cultural policy and power in contemporary Turkey.

The two-pronged literature review provides a comprehensive background on cultural politics in the AKP era, focusing first on the biennial literature to better understand the nature of the event and then on the contemporary literature on the AKP's cultural policies, highlighting themes such as cultural identity, political consolidation and the promotion of conservative values. The first chapter discusses the evolution of conservative art debates in Turkey, beginning with critical commentary in 2012 and leading to the claim that a conservative aesthetic should be created to reflect the government's conservative interpretation of democracy. Tracing the trajectory of these debates, it highlights the contributions of key figures and the eventual expansion and shaping of the concept of conservative art in the Turkish context. The relationship between the Yeditepe Biennial and conservative art debates is then brought to the fore, and the connection between them is drawn. The second section directly discusses the Yeditepe Biennial by examining its genesis, its strategic planning, and the key actors, networks, and financial resources involved in the process. It looks at the partnership between Fatih Municipality and the Classical Turkish Arts Foundation (KTSV) and how personal and political connections influence the direction of the Biennial and align it with AKP cultural policies. In addition, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and what the biennial includes

and excludes in terms of artists, artworks, venues, financial sources, and promotional means carry important data regarding the content of cultural policies.

When we look at the formation process of the Yeditepe Biennial, we see that as a continuation of Turkey's conservative art debates, it has developed to feed the AKP's cultural policies and has been shaped as a platform in line with political goals. The official support and patronage of President Erdoğan clearly indicated that political and cultural agendas were intertwined and that a political background supported this initiative. While the collaboration between Fatih Municipality, Classical Turkish Arts Foundation (KTSV), and Erk Agency shaped this event, this strategic alliance aimed to reinforce a specific cultural narrative and brand the biennial conflict by using art as a platform and leveraging the biennial format. The organizational structure of the biennial created a complex network between political actors, cultural institutions, and members of the art community. Although the biennial brought traditional and contemporary art forms into dialogue as a testing ground for new potentials, the conceptual foundations of the biennial were overshadowed by the time constraints of a rushed launch or deliberately did not engage in a conceptual debate. Although touted as a consequence of time constraints, throughout the first and second biennials, the steering committee was able to implement its agenda by adopting a top-down method of execution. The selection of artworks was evaluated both in terms of aesthetic judgments and conformity with the board's Islamic and political sensitivities, and the understanding represented by the biennial was controlled to align with the AKP's cultural policies. For future studies, evaluating the Yeditepe Biennial from the audience's perspective seems to be an interesting field of study to understand how the AKP's cultural policies are finding

correspondence. Furthermore, examining the biennial's contribution to Istanbul's cultural tourism and international branding could provide valuable insights into the intersection of culture, economy, and politics.



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