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INTERVIEW: MARI SPIRITO

BY MINE KAPLANGI



Installation by Hale Tenger "We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside. We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside 1995-2015", Galeri Nev, Istanbul, Green Art Gallery, Dubai, Protocinema, New York / photo © Vehbi Dileksiz

American Curator and art manager **Mari Spirito** is one of Istanbul's most active persons in art world, always organising different projects at the same time and traveling to a other countries frequently. Dedicated to encouraging careers for emerging artists and curators, she is currently the consultant for Art Basel's "Talks Program" and has previously lived in New York, where she was director at 303 Gallery. In 2011, Mari initiated her own project *Protocinema* – an art organisation that connects cities such as New York and Istanbul, through educational programs, exhibitions and various collaborations. One of her newest, self-initiated endeavours is the temporary exhibition series *Proto5533: A collaboration between Protocinema and the Istanbul-based artist-run-space 5533*, displaying emerging curators and artists. I met Mari in Istanbul's district Çukurcuma, where we had coffee on the rooftop of a historical building. She told me about *Protocinema*, its goals and why she chose Istanbul as a base.

Mine Kaplangi: Mari, when did you decide to create Protocinema?

Mari Spirito: "Creating?" – it was, in fact, just the naming of something that was already going on. Protocinema is an itinerant, site-aware art organisation. I started coming to Istanbul regularly in 2007 and included artists from there in exhibitions at other places, while also making exhibitions in Istanbul and including artists from elsewhere. This is what Protocinema has been doing now as an organisation for more than four years.

INTERVIEWS

ARTISTS
CURATORS

TEXTS

ACADEMY
ART FAIRS
EXHIBITIONS
THOUGHTS

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ARCHIVE

- ▶ 2017 (15)
- ▶ 2016 (22)
- ▼ 2015 (25)
 - ▼ October (3)
 - INTERVIEW: MARI SPIRITO
 - INTERVIEW: BILLY RENNEKAM
 - INTERVIEW: YVONNE REINER AND TINA SAUERLÄNDER
 - ▶ September (1)
 - ▶ August (1)
 - ▶ July (5)
 - ▶ June (2)
 - ▶ May (2)
 - ▶ April (5)
 - ▶ March (2)

MK: Why did you choose Istanbul as a base?

MS: I was involved with the World Water movement, so when the World Water Forum took place in Istanbul in 2008 I travelled around Turkey to talk about the risks of water privatization and commercialization – which also brought me there quite a bit. I have been working supporting artists for over 20 years, working in galleries. During that time I became interested in collaborating on long-term projects, in production and commissioning, and I wanted to investigate that more with long-term and site-specific works. One day I was living in New York and coming to Istanbul a lot and then seemingly the next day I was living in Istanbul and going to New York a lot – it actually happened over a long period of time and it was very organic.

- ▶ February (3)
- ▶ January (1)
- ▶ 2014 (38)
- ▶ 2013 (61)
- ▶ 2012 (44)
- ▶ 2011 (24)
- ▶ 2010 (1)



Mehmet Dere "Payback", curated by Ilhan Ozan, 2015, Proto5533, Protocinema, Istanbul

MK: What is the goal of Protocinema?

MS: Protocinema is a mission-driven art organisation that creates opportunities for emerging and established artists from all regions, in cities where their work has yet to have much exposure. The exhibitions happen mostly in spaces outside of existing structures, in abandoned spaces, parks, garages, even a corner shop, sometimes we do partner up with other non-profits or museums. The idea is to talk about new ideas and open up dialogue to ideally improve mutual understanding between individuals – that is the dream goal.



Latifa Echakhch "Farewell" (2015), Proto5533, Protocinema, Istanbul

MK: What kind of collaborations are you planning?

As far as immediate plans – we have an exhibition up now in Karaköy of new works by Latifa Echakhch which addresses current tension in Turkey, in relationship to the war. The main work takes the form of a performance-installation, "Farewell" (2015) which has a young person painting text in the floor in water that dries up very quickly. The text are fragments of letters from adolescents to say good-bye to their parents as they depart to fight. We have plans for the rest of the year for five more exhibitions in our Emerging Curator and Artist Series called Proto5533 – a partnership with the artist-run space 5533, on the other side of the Golden Horn. Each selected curator or artist get the space for one month to make an exhibition – in order to do so they give me a proposal and we work in it together. Then we send the proposal to our mentor curators, who hold positions at museums and art spaces in Istanbul and abroad, and one independent curator, who give feedback and input to the proposal – and then the exhibition is realized. It's a great process that enables many different kinds of valuable exchange and was very much inspired by a curatorial intensive I did with Independent Curators International.



Latifa Echakhch, "Jadid"

MK: What other upcoming projects are going to be realised through Protocinema?

MS: In May 2016 we will present new work by Mika Tajima in IMÇ. Right now we are going to New York to open an exhibition on November 8 at and in collaboration with P! – a show with Vahap Avşar. Titled "Lost Shadows" (2015) its an exhibition of take-away postcards created by the artist from the found photographic archive a former Turkish postcard company. Over the past 15 years, Avşar has worked with this image archive to construct an on-going series of work.



Group show "The ways we stand by" with Sirma Doruk, Alexandra R Howland, Miriam Katz and Hasan Ozgur Top at Proto5533, Protocinema, Istanbul.

MK: You are also active beyond the Protocinema project. What are you currently working on?

MS: I'm a juror for the Art Basel Crowdfunding Initiative, in which we have a page on Kickstarter focused on supporting artists by raising funds for non-profits all over the world. We have supported many projects and it has a very high success rate, this is very rewarding. I'm also programming the Conversations and Salons for the Art Basel fair in Miami and Basel, which is especially engaging as it gives us another opportunity to talk with artists and art professionals from diverse backgrounds and practices about what they do and how things look from their perspective, and share it with the public, all the talks are on line.

MK: What do you think about Istanbul art scene's development?

MS: The context is constantly shifting and is clearly volatile right now, all we know is uncertainty; it challenges us every day. That said, the cultural landscape is wide open, which is a great opportunity if you have the inspiration and energy.

protocinema.org



Portrait Mari Spirito, photo © Ali Taptik



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