

Revitalizando el espacio y la memoria: la iniciativa de videoarte de Monitor en Esmirna

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Resumen

Monitor, una organización de arte contemporáneo sin fines de lucro establecida en Esmirna en 2018, aborda la escasez de espacios de exhibición en la ciudad al reutilizar locaciones abandonadas transformándolas en espacios artísticos. Centrándose en el video, Monitor explora la relación entre arte, espacio y tiempo, involucrando tanto a audiencias locales como internacionales. Su enfoque nómada asegura flexibilidad y sostenibilidad, además de facilitar el acceso al arte contemporáneo en contextos con recursos limitados. A través de sus exposiciones y eventos interdisciplinarios, Monitor contribuye activamente al paisaje cultural de Esmirna, fomentando el pensamiento crítico y el diálogo dentro de la comunidad artística.

Palabras clave: Monitor, video arte, arte contemporáneo, Esmirna, revitalización urbana, exposiciones nómadas.

Revitalizing Space and Memory: Monitor's Video Art Initiative in Izmir

Abstract

Monitor, a non-profit contemporary art organization established in Izmir in 2018, addresses the city's shortage of exhibition spaces by repurposing underutilized or abandoned locations and turning them into art venues. Focused on video, Monitor explores the relationship between art, space, and time, engaging with both local and international audiences. Its nomadic approach not only ensures

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flexibility and sustainability but also enables the accessibility of contemporary art in contexts with limited resources. Through its exhibitions and interdisciplinary events, Monitor actively contributes to Izmir's evolving cultural landscape, encouraging critical thinking and dialogue within the art community.

Keywords: Monitor, video art, contemporary art, Izmir, urban revitalization, nomadic exhibitions.

Introduction

Founded in 2018, Monitor is a non-profit contemporary art organization based in Izmir, a city often regarded as peripheral within the contemporary art landscape. Its primary aim is to address the city's shortage of exhibition venues by introducing innovative approaches to the use of the urban space. In this way, the initiative integrates space into the conceptual and narrative framework of each exhibition, transforming locations originally destined for other purposes into venues for showcasing art. Over the years, numerous sites—ranging from abandoned warehouses, old cinemas, artist studios, an old town hall, an auto repair shop, a printing house and co-working spaces—have been transformed into temporary exhibition venues. Drawing inspiration from these unused buildings, Monitor chooses to emphasize the architectural characteristics of the sites and their cultural and symbolic significance for the city and its inhabitants.

Monitor's focus on video art stems from the medium's unique interaction with space and its ability to challenge conventional modes of interaction with audiences. Video art dynamically integrates memory with the flow of time, transforming it from a remnant of the past into an evolving narrative. Indeed, it can be addressed as a convergence of time, memory, and continuity. When memory is revisited through video, it transcends its role as a static remnant of the past, evolving into a dynamic and living presence. Unlike cinema, where time follows a linear progression, video art distorts and reimagines time, intertwining it with the space in which it is experienced. This spatial connection is a defining feature of video. Unlike cinema, which adapts to various viewing environments, video relies on a dedicated space. When displayed on digital platforms, it loses its unique aura and risks leaving its narrative incomplete.

By leveraging video's capacity to bridge temporal boundaries and reshape perceptions, Monitor has cultivated a sustainable and visually impactful exhibition approach. Designed as an international and enduring project attuned to Izmir's dynamics, it aims to foster meaningful connections with both local and global audiences, promote the development of new perspectives through the concepts it engages with, spark new conversations among audiences, and engage viewers who have yet to establish a connection with this particular medium. To achieve all of this, Monitor reimagines spaces for each exhibition, uncovering their latent potential within specific thematic contexts. The project has hosted numerous exhibitions featuring artists from Turkey and abroad bridging global topics with local contexts. As part of its public programs, it hosted interdisciplinary discussions around selected themes such as the climate crisis, censorship, body politics, migration and the loss of memory, bringing together participants from various fields and steadily expanding its audience.

Izmir has seen a shift in recent years due to reverse migration. Also, the current economic and social conditions in the country limit mobility for many local art-

ists, audiences, and students, making access to the international contemporary art scene more difficult. Given the city's tendency to rely on external influences for its cultural and artistic development, this has fueled a growing interest and demand for artistic and cultural activities. Monitor addresses this gap as an inclusive cultural project, emphasizing equal accessibility. By tackling social and global issues, it fosters critical thinking, elevates the quality of cultural demands, and introduces fresh perspectives.

A brief history of contemporary art in Izmir

Monitor has evolved through a careful examination of the transformations within Izmir's contemporary art scene, encompassing the city's cultural shifts from the mid-1980s to the present, alongside its cultural policies and artistic practices. To fully grasp the nuanced relationship this initiative has cultivated with the city, it is useful to consider its historical and cultural trajectory.

Izmir has long been a place where diverse communities—including Turks, Jews, Armenians, and Greeks—have lived together for centuries. Maritime trade has played a pivotal role in sustaining and enhancing this diversity. By the early 19th century, Izmir became a key trade hub in the Mediterranean, with economic growth significantly shaping its social and cultural dynamics. During the early 20th century, it gained international recognition as a center for culture and the arts, drawing attention, particularly from countries with established consulates in the city.

After the Greek army occupied Izmir on May 15 1919, following World War I and the War of Independence, many non-Muslims, particularly the Greek population, left the city as part of the population exchange. On top of that, the great fire of 1922 symbolically marked the loss of Izmir's cultural prominence. In the following years, the city's cultural environment struggled to keep pace with its economic developments, and the desired vitality could not be achieved. Despite this, in 1974, Turkey's first Faculty of Fine Arts was established, later becoming part of Dokuz Eylül University in 1982. Relevant contemporary artists, including Erdağ Aksel and Cengiz Çekil, started working as lecturers at this institution. In the 1980s, significant shifts in the contemporary art scene began to take place.

The first important exhibition in Izmir that transcended traditional artistic techniques was *In Memory of Joseph Beuys: Another Art*. Following Beuys' death in 1986, Cengiz Çekil decided to organize this show in his memory, which took place in March of that same year at the German Cultural Center. The exhibition featured prominent contemporary Turkish artists, including Necati Abacı, Halil Akdeniz, Cengiz Çekil, Ayşe Erkmen, and Füsün Onur.

As expressed in the curatorial text, Çekil opposed the commercialization of art and its transformation into mere decorative objects. He argued that art held

spiritual value and required dedicated effort and labor. The exhibition sought to illustrate that contemporary art could articulate itself through innovative practices, breaking away from conventional materials and techniques. Çekil emphasized that such events were just the beginning and hoped for the establishment of an art community rooted in intellectual foundations. However, he also warned that without the continuity of these initiatives, they might remain only as fleeting ideals². The exhibition marked a significant turning point since it did not only bring together local and international artists but also increased the visibility of contemporary art in the city. The contributions of artists such as Cengiz Çekil, Erdağ Aksel, Ann Aksel, and Halil Akdeniz, who were key figures in shaping the dynamics of contemporary art in Izmir during the 1980s, offered viewers a fresh perspective. Additionally, thanks to this exhibition, gallery owner and curator René Block became aware of the Turkish artists and subsequently included some of them in the 1991 Istanbul Biennial.

However, several factors have prevented Izmir from becoming a contemporary art hub like Istanbul. These include insufficient investment, the lack of events that could provide international visibility for local artists, and the limitations of existing galleries that are not only technically inadequate but also fail to engage meaningfully with contemporary art, offering little in terms of relevant content or programming. While Izmir has made significant strides in artistic production, it has lagged behind Istanbul due to these limitations.

After the 1986 *In Memory of Joseph Beuys: Another Art* exhibition, the contemporary art scene in Izmir continued to grow with the *Mixed Exhibitions* organized at the İzmir Turkish-American Association (1987-1988) where prominent artists such as Ann B. Aksel, Ayşe Erkmen, Cengiz Çekil, Erdağ Aksel, Füsün Onur, and Osman Dinç participated³. However, following this period, contemporary art in the city entered a phase of stagnation.

Considering that existing art venues in Izmir, such as the Selçuk Yaşar Museum and Yapı Kredi Art Gallery, primarily showcased traditional artworks rather than contemporary pieces, the opening of Şantiye Gallery in 1994 marked a reawakening of the city's art scene, which continued until its closure in 1995. Located in a construction site on Talatpaşa Boulevard in Alsancak, a busy area of the city, the space was temporarily transformed into an art gallery through the initiative of Merih Dönmez. Between February 1994 and January 1995, it hosted nine exhibitions that played a crucial role in enhancing the visibility of contemporary art, with the sole condition for participating artists being to "use the space as freely as possible."

The rapid development of the contemporary art scene in Istanbul had an impact on Izmir, which faced various challenges in keeping pace with these changes,

² Cengiz Çekil, *Another Art*, Photocopy of the exhibition text, Izmir.

³ Many significant artists who exhibited at the İzmir Turkish-American Association in 1987-1988 eventually left the city, and their involvement in the local exhibition scene ceased.

especially since the late 1990s. Events such as the International Istanbul Biennial gave Turkish artists greater international visibility, establishing this city as the country's hub for contemporary art. The 4th edition of the Biennial, held in 1995, was particularly transformative, sparking a significant intellectual migration. However, despite the growing contemporary art market in Istanbul, Izmir struggled to benefit enough from these developments, with cultural and artistic support remaining predominantly concentrated in Istanbul.

In the early 2000s, a new generation of young artists in Izmir began searching for alternative spaces to show their work. In 2002, they organized the exhibition *In Between* at the construction site of the Palmiye Shopping Mall. This exhibition became a significant milestone and was instrumental in the founding of the K2 Contemporary Art Center.

The Izmir Culture Workshop was organized in 2009 to address gaps in the city's cultural landscape and to establish strategies for its cultural and artistic development. The workshop highlighted the city's regional positioning, its cultural diversity, and the lack of collaboration among institutions in the arts sector. It stressed the need for greater cooperation between cultural actors and sought to create opportunities for artists and cultural managers to collaborate, aiming to strengthen the city's cultural dynamics⁴.

In recent years, many cultural actors have been able to materialize their projects with funding from organizations like Spaces of Culture, CultureCIVIC, and the SAHA Association. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives remains uncertain and a key concern for Izmir's cultural future is whether these projects will continue once their funding ends. Independent, non-profit initiatives primarily sustain the contemporary art scene.

In summary, while the contemporary art scene in Izmir has made efforts to align with evolving national and international trends, it has faced various challenges due to cultural policies that are concentrated in Istanbul. Initiatives like the Izmir Culture Workshop and independent art projects have been crucial for strengthening the city's contemporary art dynamics. However, for these initiatives to become sustainable, greater support and mechanisms for long-term viability need to be established.

Monitor as an independent cultural model

In a city where the continuity of support structures remains uncertain, the model established by Monitor provides an example that could be applied globally. Over the years, the project has showcased works by both Turkish and international artists in the field of video art, across a range of venues and online platforms.

⁴ *Culture and Art in Izmir*, Izmir Culture Workshop Reference Document, p. 1, Izmir, 2009.

With the support of Kültür için Alan (Spaces of Culture), it has continued its activities in 2018, 2019, and 2020. In 2020 due to the pandemic, a transition to the online environment was made. Considering the context, displaying video works on an online platform was the more feasible option. However, it also presented challenges as the spaces used in Monitor's exhibitions were integral to the works presented, shaping the direction of the conceptual narrative. Although the online environment enabled a broader reach for certain works, the connection the audience could establish with them was quite limited compared to the experience in a physical space.

In 2021 Monitor published a book that documents the exhibitions held since its inception and serves as a significant contribution to the archive of Izmir's visual arts history, featuring valuable contributions from various authors. In 2022, it organized the exhibition *The Antaios of Despair*, inspired by a quote from Emil Michel Cioran's *Tears and Saints*. The project was supported by the CultureCIVIC Local Projects Grant Program and collaborated with the Karşıyaka Municipality venue. The exhibition featured video works by Ecem Arslanay, Yiğit Tanel Kaçar, Sena Başöz, Hera Büyüктаşçıyan, Özgül Kılınçarslan, İz Öztat, and Ezgi Tok, and took place on the upper floor of the Bahçelievler multi-storey marketplace in Karşıyaka. The project used the flow of nature as a guiding framework for measuring time and explored slowing down as a way to resist the world's discordant rhythm and align one's breathing with nature's flow. This approach to slowing down did not mean being forced to stop when faced with obstacles, but instead proposed moving deliberately, appreciating each step, and creating paths along the way, rather than rushing to a destination. Alongside the exhibition, guest speakers from literature, design, and ecology discussed this theme through their practices.



Figure 1. Sena Başöz, *The Box and The Outline* (2020). Photo: Monitor.



Figure 2. Ecem Arslanay and Yiğit Tanel Kaçar, *The Clocks* (2021). Photo: Monitor.

That same year, Monitor was invited to participate in the 8th Çanakkale Biennial, presenting the exhibition *What Grows Where It Flows*, featuring works by Liliya Lifanova and Cevdet Ereğ and supported by SAHA Association. Held in the Mekor Hayim Synagogue—open for worship only on select days of the year—the exhibition drew inspiration from the venue’s name, meaning “source of life”, and explored the idea of uninterrupted flow in vital resources. It posed questions about how life might exist in a cosmos where such flow remains constant and examined the conditions that could lead to a full stop.

In addition to its independent exhibitions in Izmir, in 2023, Monitor organized the exhibition *You Survived When Nothing Grew* at the Historical Bıçakçı Han, as part of its collaboration with the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of the South (BIENALSUR). The exhibition explored the possibility of continuity in a system where vital needs are unmet, inviting reflection on what we can learn from the remains of those who have passed and those who continue to exist by changing form. Featuring works by Eglė Budvytytė, Özgür Demirci, and Emilija Škarnulytė, the exhibition also included the video by Florencia Levy’s *Fossil Place*, curated by Florencia Incarbone, as part of the BIENALSUR partnership.



Figure 3. Eglė Budvytytė in collaboration with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Lukas Steponaitytė, *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars* (2020). Photo: Monitor.

In Forgive Me, I Can Speak No Louder, one of the exhibitions from Monitor's inaugural year, the works of Ali Kazma and the Slovenian artist duo Platearesidue were brought together to address the pressing issue of the climate crisis. In *Safe*, Ali Kazma's video from the *Resistance* series, originally presented in the Turkish Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, we could see the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a facility designed to withstand catastrophic events—such as nuclear attacks, earthquakes, or rising sea levels caused by global warming—to preserve and transmit plant genetic diversity to future generations.

The foundation of Platearesidue's work lies in confronting the passivity toward nature, whose equilibrium has been disrupted by humanity's greed and negligence. Their video piece, *Alma Mater*, was filmed in one of Slovenia's few remaining ice caves, focusing on the rapidly melting ice layer—a stark consequence of global warming. During the same period, Angelopoulos' archive was destroyed in a fire that broke out in the town of Mati, near Athens. A parallel could be drawn to the melting glaciers in *Alma Mater*, which symbolized the erosion of the Earth's history. The exhibition took place in the Austro-Turk Tobacco Warehouse, a building that was demolished roughly a year later. At the time, rumors circulated that the city-center site would be replaced by a 250-meter skyscraper, a project widely condemned as an "urban crime" by architects. This looming threat was central to Monitor's decision to choose the warehouse as the venue. Ultimately, the building of the proposed skyscraper was canceled following a lawsuit filed by the Izmir Branches of the Chamber of Architects and the Chamber of City Planners.



Figure 4. Ali Kazma, *Safe (Resistance Series)* (2015). Photo: Monitor.

Another exhibition, *Nothing Happened Here*, explored societal memory through the lens of urban transformation and featured works by Gülsün Karamustafa and Chto Delat. The Pakistan Pavilion in Kültürpark, built in 1938 and regarded as a memory center of the city, served as the venue for the exhibition during the Izmir Fair. The Kültürpark itself, originally the site of the Armenian neighborhood before the Great Izmir Fire, had evolved over the decades into a layered repository of urban memory. However, this collective memory faced imminent erasure due to planned urban transformation projects. *Nothing Happened Here* invited viewers to bridge the divide between what is remembered and what remains unheard, addressing the ways urban memory, shaped by spatial transformations, is wielded as a tool of governmental dominance over society.

Conclusion

Since 2018, Monitor has been transforming spaces—once intended for other purposes or fallen into disuse—into exhibition venues located across both central and peripheral areas of Izmir. This “spacelessness” policy has become central to the project’s nomadic identity, driven not only by sustainability, adaptability, and flexibility but also as a response to the city’s shortage of venues dedicated to contemporary art and as a key factor in audience development.

This approach serves as a call to reimagine the potential possibilities inherent in underutilized spaces and provides the freedom to select locations aligned with the themes of specific exhibitions. Also, it offers visitors distinct experiences with every show. These spaces, in turn, often went on to host other artistic projects, contributing to the development of new exhibition venues in the city.