



BANANÉ
ISTANBUL, TURKEY

Art incubators

Banané started life as a website to unite artists in Istanbul. Now it is a media platform and a window into the Turkish cultural scene

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Gulia Campaner and Stephanie Gallia's 'pinch-me' moment came in November 2009. Their Banané online art platform was holding its first public exhibition in an old Ottoman mansion, a short walk from the Bosphorus Straits. To their surprise the venue was packed out. 'The street was so full of people that cars couldn't pass down it,' explains Gallia. Remarkably, it was the first time they had physically met the artists they were exhibiting. Perhaps less curiously, in Campaner's words, 'it was the first time we realised we had way more followers than we ever thought possible.'

Banané is what can best be described as an 'artist incubation service' – an online platform that exposes and promotes Turkish contemporary art. It was launched in April 2009, a venture 'born from unemployment' laughs Campaner. It was also prefaced by the discovery of an untapped litany of unsung young artists, all yearning for a voice. Gallia takes up the story: 'We wanted to feature the work of people who had just graduated or who posted their work on blogs like Found (ffffound.com) and Boom (booooooom.com).'

'We started by displaying local artists that we knew with a short interview and biography of their work,' she continues. The site quickly ↳





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became a hub for young creatives eager to be discovered by a highly inquisitive audience.

Two years on and Banané is the must-visit portal into Istanbul's young Turkish art scene. Crucially, the site is in both Turkish and English, a result of the girls' Turko-Levantine roots. Gallia grew up in Izmir, a coastal trading capital of the old Levant, while Campaner attended a French lycée in Istanbul's Galatasaray area and is part of the city's ancient Venetian community. 'We became a link between our artists' websites and a wider audience,' says Campaner.

That audience became wider still after their first exhibition in 2009 and now the pair are representative of the city's burgeoning art movement – dynamic, polyglot and brimming with confidence.

As Istanbul basks in its 12th Art Biennial this September, it's Campaner and Gallia who would

01 Giulia Campaner helped to found the interactive platform to unite the burgeoning art scene in her native Istanbul
02 Stephanie Gallia says the Turkish capital is now a beacon of opportunity for contemporary artists

make the city's most desirable invitees to your pre-exhibition cocktail party.

In the last 30 months, Sotheby's, the London-based auction house, has held three sales of contemporary Turkish art. According to Fortune Magazine, the Turkish art market is now worth an estimated \$200m. The Banané girls are more familiar than anybody with the emerging generation of painters, sculptors and digital artists.

Their choice of Istanbul as their artistic nexus was certainly astute, but is part of a wider wave. Turkey has long been a net exporter of creative talent, sending fashion designers, writers and chefs to Germany, the United States and further afield. Now it's a beacon of opportunity, as Campaner explains: 'Everyone feels that it's the right time to be here, that something is happening.'

Both studied art and architecture in London but, as anyone who's flown from Heathrow to Istanbul's Ataturk airport recently will attest, Istanbul seems the more dynamic city by far.

'London has stayed stagnant over the past five years, especially after the crisis,' says Gallia. 'There was a drop in energy,' agrees Campaner, 'but it has been the exact opposite here in Istanbul.'

Inside Banané HQ is a meeting of the old world with the new. A semi-abandoned bourgeois townhouse adorned with frescoed ceilings houses a magnificent interior atrium containing a vast table surrounded by 14 assorted chairs; an arrangement that wouldn't look out of place in the dying days of the Ottoman aristocracy. Indeed, the girls' silver MacBooks are the only hint at modernity.

Random detritus including pieces of foam and lengths of bunting border the room ('a launch party two nights ago'), but for a media platform that's half-Facebook, half-art incubator, we should expect nothing less.

The girls encourage interaction on their site through their 'Contribute Your Work' link on the platform. 'Immediately we started receiving emails from all over Istanbul saying 'please put me up, I'm a photographer, illustrator, painter or whatever'. We discovered a whole new world beyond what we knew,' explains Gallia.

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Regular curating has thrown up other discoveries too. Of the city's up-and-coming creative minds they tell us to look out for Muharrem Çetin (belkemigi.com), an artist who originally worked with digital collages, appeared on Banané and found widespread fame in the blogosphere. The girls collaborated with edgy local gallery Milk (whatismilk.com) in July 2011 to turn Çetin's digital designs into physical form with his first exhibition, a show of 18 large scale collage pieces. In another conversion of online into tactile, the launch of Banané's first printed magazine will coincide with the upcoming Istanbul Biennial. While the website is a veritable database of newly discovered Turkish artists, their journal promises to be a 'richer, more detailed' window on to the city's cultural life.

Another way in which Banané serves as a contemporary art platform is by presenting foreign artists and outfits, such as Art Barter (artbarter.co.uk) with whom they plan to work with soon. This Anglo-Belgian group rent out vast spaces and fill them with art – recent shows have included work by Tracey Emin and Gary Hulm. Visitors view the exhibits then are able to bid for their favourite pieces by making an offer – often goods or services, rather than money – on a piece of paper. The artist chooses his prize and the transaction is complete. It's hard to imagine one of Istanbul's more established galleries collaborating with such an offbeat, and quite possibly unprofitable, venture, but the city's art scene is richer for it.

After our interview, the girls take me to an exhibition opening at Arter (arter.org.tr), a fabulous new gallery space a short walk away. To complete the lesson in how far Istanbul's contemporary cultural scene has moved in the past few years, we walk past SALT Galata (saltonline.org) on the way, an equally fantastic art space set inside the former Ottoman Bank. SALT is due to open during the current Biennial with a vast art library and a rooftop restaurant. 'The thought that Istanbul didn't have a contemporary art museum until 10 years ago is unthinkable now,' says Campaner, before going on to name the Pera Museum, Istanbul Modern and Santral, three superb institutions dedicated

to contemporary art. So, has this new rash of museums and galleries influenced Banané's stable of young artists?

While any big art opening is amazing for the city scene, 'we have a very different audience,' says Gallia. Times are changing though. 'People that we have been working with are now reaching the stage where they are joining the likes of Galerist,' (one of Istanbul's leading contemporary

outlets) and local representative of photo-realist painter Taner Ceylan – the darling of Sotheby's previous Turkish art sale. 'We're now a stepping stone to those (bigger) places, which is something we'd like to be,' says Gallia

As we arrive at Arter's latest exhibition, it's clear that people are tuning into Turkish art by the thousand. In their search for the next big thing, Banané may just become it themselves. ■



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