

THE TURKISH RECIPE FOR ART

SALT is a not-for-profit art center based in Turkey which seeks to challenge and provoke people, encouraging them to not only witness but to also communicate back, critique, respond and get involved. [BY AHMAD DIALDIN](#)



SALT Interpretation, Sound of Movement workshop, SALT Beyoğlu, November, 2012.
Photo: Cem Berk Ekinil. Image © Iwan Baan

Quick tip: if you're interested in searching about the SALT institute in Turkey, don't google, "Salt Turkey" unless you want a hundred and one ways to salt, brine, and cook a turkey.

SALT is a not-for-profit art center based in Turkey whose mission is to explore cultural and historical issues and cultivate innovative programs for research and experimental thinking. Unsatisfied with one-way communication of past institutes, SALT seeks to challenge and provoke people, encouraging them to not only witness but to also communicate back, critique, respond and get involved. The more I see of what SALT is trying to accomplish, the more I realize that they are a vital player in Turkey's art ecosystem. This in turn has led me to a eureka moment while writing this article and pondering the bigger question, "What makes an art ecosystem? How do you know when you have one?" I think I may have stumbled upon the answer. Sure, there are many variables that come into play, but when the thought hit me, when I heard myself say it out loud, it felt like a magical incantation, a whispered word of power that carried upon it the weight of the Truth, with a capital T.

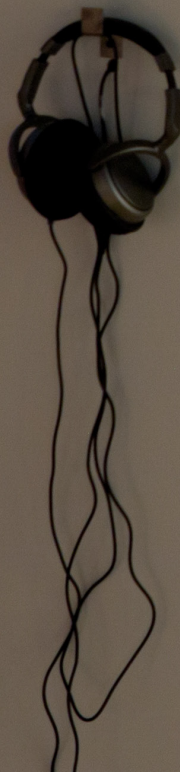


Hipsters.

Bear with me for a moment. I'm not trying to use the word in any derogatory fashion. Far from it, as a tech geek and sci-fi nerd, hipsters are basically my cousins. They are obsessed with their art world just as much as I am with my technology and science fiction worlds, delving into all its obscure corners and showing off our knowledge, protecting it with the vehemence of a fanatic (albeit they do it with a quieter intensity), and shunning any blatant commercialization and acts of selling out.

My point with all this is a simple one: where there's smoke, there's fire. Where there are hipsters, there's an art ecosystem. And guess what? Turkey's got them.

Serving up an art ecosystem doesn't happen in a day. It's a slow and elaborate recipe. You need government and private foundations to provide funding and resources; galleries to provide space, infrastructure and logistics; artists





SALT Interpretation, Istanbul Eindhoven SALTVanAbbe: Modern Times exhibition critique, SALT Galata, December, 2012. Image © Iwan Baan

to actually create their masterpieces; and most importantly, an engaging and curious public to provide support and appreciation. After all, what's the point of a delicious meal if there's no one to eat it.

Each country develops its own recipe and serves its own unique taste. In Turkey, since there has been a lack of publicly-funded and state-run institutions, it has fallen to the private industry to take on the mantle and the responsibility. For decades, it has been left to the wealthy, the corporations and the banks to maintain the Turkish art world; opening galleries, art centers, museums and foundations, and now, the next link in the artistic evolutionary chain. This is where SALT comes in.

In 2006, Turkey's second largest private bank, Garanti Bank, decided to throw out the cookbook and make something new and original. They took one cup of historical concentration from the Ottoman Bank Archive and Research Centre, added three heaping tablespoons of Garanti Galerisi's architecture and design focus, and folded in a bowl of contemporary art from their Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Centre. Cook and simmer for about five years, and voila, a brand new innovation center, dedicated to host exhibitions, engage in research projects, and maintain an enormous library and archive of art, design and history made available for any and all that seek knowledge.

SALT's activities are distributed between SALT Beyoğlu and SALT Galata in Istanbul, and SALT Ulus in the capital city of Ankara. SALT Ulus is the most recently opened of the three branches, looking to expand out of Istanbul and begin the development of a country-wide network that encourages research to be developed in parallel to that being conducted in Istanbul. The resulting knowledge will enter a process of open exchange and dialogue that will inform all of SALT's programming and activities across its three venues.

The Beyoğlu art complex opens up off a busy street with an inviting public space to draw in passerby. There's a Walk-in Cinema, a superb concept that offers a communication platform between presenter and audience, allowing for programmed and spontaneous events and performances. You can just walk in, toss up your visual project and perform, present and communicate your heart out. There's a garden on the top floor, a bookstore dedicated to visual culture, large event spaces and exhibits, and a comfortable cafe to loiter in and discuss art, culture and history.

About ten minutes away, SALT Galata is housed in what was once the Ottoman Bank building, the main financial institution of the Ottoman Empire. Hosting the Ottoman Bank Museum, this space also holds an impressive amount of workshop spaces and archives, exhibition spaces, a large auditorium, and a cafe and bookstore. However, the cornerstone of SALT Galata is SALT Research, which offers public access to an ever-growing treasury focused on Turkey's recent and not-so-recent social, economic, arts, architecture and design histories. Its coffers are replete with print and digital resources of the past 150 years and more, available to anyone willing to learn, to teach, to create.

"We don't look at archives in a classical way any longer," said SALT director Vasif Kortun. "We're not a vault, and we're not simply sitting on them."

"We dedicated an Open Archive space to specific projects run by SALT Research at SALT Galata," said SALT Research archivist Sezin Romi. "There's usually a prejudice about archives; that they are closed to the public; that they cannot be accessed easily due to bureaucratic procedures and so on. However, here we present archives in the form of an exhibition."

"There is so much to do, and I feel we have just scratched the surface," said Kortun. "SALT Research is not simply an amalgam of archive and a library, it is becoming a proactive research body."

Maintaining a proactive approach, the institute also launched SALT Interpretation, which offers personal tours, workshops and collaborative projects with the local schools and community organizations, forging a valuable bond and open communication between the institution and the youth of Turkey.

To see the effect of the art ecosystem growing and thriving in the country, all you have to do is look around the neighborhood SALT is located in. In between centuries' old mosques and Greek churches, you've got Arabic hookah lounges and European cafes; galleries and foundations alongside esoteric craft shops and local artisans; hip fusion restaurants and traditional teahouses. Every culture, every design, every layer of society, all jumbled up like a beautiful mosaic, or, more appropriately, like a delicious potluck stew. They had all the ingredients available, and all the prep work done. All that was left was to follow the last step in the recipe. A step repeated over and over again in kitchens around the world, morphing your dish from a bland meal to a flavorful masterpiece.

Just add SALT.

