

Chasing Ghosts Through Bathhouses and Cisterns at the 14th Istanbul Biennial



Wael Shawky, "Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala" (2015), HD video (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren; all images courtesy of IKSU)

ISTANBUL — Caroline Christov-Bakargiev's highly anticipated Istanbul Biennial,

[SALTWATER, A Theory of Thought Forms](#), is not exactly a straightforward affair. Expectations were sky-high after her acclaimed 2012 Documenta 13, so the largest shoes Christov-Bakargiev had to fill were probably her own. It would be unfair to compare the two exhibitions conceptually, even if many of the artists included in her Documenta 13 followed her to Istanbul to make new work. But Istanbul is not Kassel. The city's historical and poetical weight, its characteristic urban makeup and architecture, and its past and current geopolitics will always interact in a very specific way with a citywide exhibition. The Istanbul Biennial has always engaged with the city to a degree, seeking out alternative venues or commenting on the current state of affairs in Turkey and abroad, so this is not a novelty. However, the number and variety of venues across the Bosphorus this year is unprecedented. And Christov-Bakargiev's conceptual cartography was sometimes in brilliant harmony with the city, such as the decision to screen Wael Shawky's video *The Secrets of Karbala*, the last in his marionette-based historical *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy, in the 15th century [Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hamam](#), the oldest *hamam* (Turkish bathhouse) in the city. That said, some of the venues seemed excessively dispersed, and sometimes the works and their locations clashed, as with Arshile Gorky's poorly installed painting that was partially blocked by a display case in Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence.



Arshile Gorky, "Act of Creation" (1947), graphite and wax pencil on paper, on display at Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence. (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren) (click to enlarge)

Today, a few weeks after roaming the charming, winding, and increasingly gentrified streets of Beyoğlu on the hunt for art in hotels, derelict apartments, car parks, and other unusual sites, after one fight too many with Istanbul taxi drivers, and after a lovely ferry ride across the Sea of Marmara, the magic of the Princes' Island, and the very welcome reprieve of an air-conditioned and wall-labeled (oh joy!) Istanbul Modern, I am still of two minds about this biennial. The concepts of "salt water," "knots," and "waves" seem either too literal or too abstract to tie the whole exhibition neatly together, and this disconnected nature was reflected in the fragmentation of locations, modes of

transportation (foot, car, or boat), and the overall experience of the project. Perhaps the curator's — or draftsman's, as she likes to call herself — slightly overwrought explanation of how salt crystals come together and separate, and how this movement lies at the heart of the exhibition, illustrates the bipolar energy of the biennial best. There is undoubtedly some excellent work on display, but trying to pinpoint what the exhibition does as a whole is far trickier. Perhaps that is Christov-Bakargiev's intention: to have us engage with art with joy, repulsion, a shrug of the shoulders, surprise, or mere exhaustion, while the salty drops of our sweat in the Istanbul heat trickle slowly down our backs.



Anna Boghigian, "The Salt Traders" (2015), textiles, wax, water color, gouache, wood, salts, sand, sound (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

One of the connecting factors in *SALTWATER* is the ghosts of the past. "With and through art, we mourn, commemorate, denounce, try to heal," Christov-Bakargiev writes in the biennial statement — words she repeated during the press conference. This year marks the centenary of the Armenian genocide under Ottoman rule (which is still unacknowledged by present-day Turkey), and many Armenian artists from the diaspora and artworks addressing the Armenian question were incorporated into the biennial. In the Galata Greek Primary School, this was framed beautifully by Cairo-born Armenian artist Anna Boghigian and Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz's large-

scale installations, placed on the ground and top floors, respectively.



Michael Rakowitz, "The Flesh Is Yours, the Bones Are Ours" (2015), plaster, moulds, casts, dog and livestock bones, rubbings, photos, letters (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

Boghiguiian's new work "The Salt Traders" (2015) seems to have shipwrecked a boat in the middle of the exhibition space. Its sail, featuring a world map, is suspended from the ceiling and anchored by one of the salt rocks that we find in heaps, like coarse salt, throughout the space. Part of the boat's torso is discarded and lies abandoned. In her distinct paintings, Boghiguiian maps out tales of ancient and colonial travels and expeditions, nationalist histories and political drama and massacres, the scramble for resources and their unequal distribution. All the paintings are shown in honeycomb frames, combined with salt and actual honeycombs. The shape of a honeycomb resembles the structural formula for salt, a pattern repeated on the boat's sail. This visual association renders this installation of a broken and partial history ambiguously salty-sweet. Rakowitz's new commission also echoes forgotten and painful histories. His archive of molds, casts, rubbings of ornaments of well-known Ottoman landmarks made by Armenian craftspeople, and a collection of excavated dog bones from the island of Sivriada in the Sea of Marmara sit uneasy together. Sivriada, or the "useless island," is known for its 1910 "dog massacre," when, in an attempt to modernize and clean up the city of Istanbul, 80,000 dogs were transferred to the barren island to die.

Another decision to modernize the city after the devastating 1894 earthquake was rethinking its buildings in European Art Nouveau, with much of the architectural ornamentation produced by Armenian artisans. In Rakowitz's haunting installation, dog skeletons and ornamental casts are put on a par: The cruelty perpetrated against "unwanted" animals and the brutal ethnic cleansing of the Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire merge. They are the ghosts of a presence in the city that is forever lost.



Anna Boghigian, "The Salt Traders" (2015), textiles, wax, watercolor, gouache, wood, salts, sand, sound (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

[Aslı Çavuşoğlu's](#) beautiful ink drawings *Red/Red* at Istanbul Modern also recall a narrative of loss. The distinct red pigment is from the Ararat or Armenian cochineal, an insect that was used as source of dye — typically found in oriental rugs, textiles, and

illuminations — from around the 15th to the 19th centuries. Considered a nuisance in Turkey but celebrated in Armenia, this rather patriotically named bug is found on the Armenian highlands, a site of ethnic cleansing during the Armenian genocide and still a contested geography. Red is so much more than just a color here: it is a forgotten history, combining the nationalist red of the Turkish flag with the red of blood spilled.



Aslı Çavuşoğlu, "Red/Red" (2015), Armenian and Turkish red on worn-out papers and handmade notebooks (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

And Turkey's problems are not just confined to its past. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his conservative nationalist AKP minority government are clinging ever more strongly to power at the expense of encroachments on freedom of expression and civic liberties, as well as Turkey's secularism. Being assaulted and tear-gassed by riot police on the main commercial thoroughfare in Beyoğlu, Istiklal Street, leaves most Istanbulites by now unfazed. And then of course there's the spillover of the civil war in Syria, which has not only meant a huge influx of Syrian refugees to Turkish border towns and elsewhere in the country, but also has given the Turkish government the pretext to rekindle the armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), claiming that they are combatting ISIS.



Marwan Rechmaoui, "'Pillar' Series" (2015), 14 pillars, concrete, metal, mixed media (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

Christov-Bakargiev should be commended from shying away from knee-jerk reactions to the current political situation. The complexities of the representation of disaster is something Lebanese artists have become skilled at through their own experience of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) and its aftermath. Marwan Rechmaoui's *'Pillar' Series* (2015) — fourteen subdued yet monumental concrete structures, unclear if in ruin or under construction — were one of the highlights of Istanbul Modern. Walid Raad's cardboard boxes and wooden crates with cut-outs of Iznik motifs buried deep in a former bank vault, now the Kasa Galeri, recall a fictional wartime measure in 1914, in which the motifs were boxed up and sealed away to protect them from damage. We are left with empty packaging and the absent presence of the imaginary object that "managed to sneak out." The work is reminiscent of how, during the Lebanese Civil War, the National Museum of Beirut, located on the dividing line between East and West Beirut, encased precious artifacts in concrete to protect them from the carnage of war.



Walid Raad, "Another Letter to the Reader" (2015), laser-cut boxes, wooden shipping crates (photo by Cisem Asya Albas)



Susan Philipsz, "Elettra" (2015), Photographic prints and sound (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

It remains unclear, however, how the biennial actively engages with the volatility of its surroundings, other than via the past, told primarily through architectural heritage. One would have to be a boor not to be charmed by the dilapidated splendor of the Princes' Island of Büyükada, with its horse-drawn carriages and crumbling palaces. Ed Atkins's video of a man falling through a sinkhole acquires an additional dimension when viewed while treading the creaking wooden floors of the once-magnificent 19th-century Rizzo Palace. Susan Philipsz's large black-and-white photographs of the sunken remains of Italian radio pioneer Marconi's yacht *Elettra*, his floating laboratory, coyly curl up in their frames, scattered on the floors of the Mizzi Mansion while cats curiously swarm in to play in the terracotta sand. Philipsz's excellent work, with its subtle and beautifully displayed sound installation, would be equally impressive in any white cube space. As such, there's a risk of falling prey to the seduction of nostalgia instead of the disquiet of the present, and to the alluring beauty of decay that causes the artworks, in some cases at least, to play second fiddle.



William Kentridge, "O Sentimental Machine" (2015), video installation (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

Much has been made of Leon Trotsky's four-year stay on the island, his first stop when exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929. This proximity to the Marxist revolutionary hero is, of course, something the art world would salivate over. It's enough fodder for South African artist William Kentridge to dedicate a whole new multichannel work to Trotsky. Yet compared to his mesmerizing commission for Amsterdam's Eye Film Museum earlier this year, *O Sentimental Machine* (2015), despite the grandeur of the elegant Hotel Splendid Palace and the smart use of projection surfaces, disappointed. The walk through the ruins of Trotsky House and its weedy garden falls short of spectacular, leading you to the waterside where Argentinian artist Adrián Villar Rojas's

brash life-size bestiary of fiberglass and organic materials are perched in the water. This is one of the few works in the biennial with a definite “wow” factor; one colleague called it “complex kitsch.” To me, it was the ultimate abject: repelling, but somehow I could not avert my eyes. A battle between highly constructed artifice and...well...highly constructed artifice. Had I been tricked by the artist, or by the curator who tries not to be a curator, or by a biennial that somehow tries not to be a biennial, but flips back into one by using this type of sweeping gesture?



Adrián Villar Rojas, “The Most Beautiful of All Mothers” (2015), site-specific installation of organic and inorganic material (photo by Kubra Karacizmeli)

One of the more poignant works in the whole show was Pelin Tan and Anton Vidokle’s video “2084: a science fiction show/Episode 2: The Fall of the Artists’ Republic” (2014), shown in the Adahan cistern. Oskar Niemeyer’s eerie and desolate International Fair in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city, provides the perfect setting for this surreal film, populated by humans sporting animal masks and quoting lines from, among others, Nietzsche and Assisi. The Brazilian architect’s unfinished project (due to the outbreak of the war in 1975), with its futuristic concrete domes, offers so much potential but is in essence a failed project in a failed state. Quite similar, then, to the video’s eponymous Artists’ Republic, intended to save the world after the demise of politics. It is an interesting comment on the limitations of art from two politically

engaged figures such as Tan and Vidokle. In a letter to the biennial's participants, they proposed that all artists suspend the presentation of their work during the opening for 15 minutes in order to call attention to the worrying escalation of violence between the Turkish government and the PKK.



Pelin Tan & Anton Vidokle, "2084: a science fiction show/Episode 2: The Fall of the Artists' Republic" (2014), video and sound (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

It seems that the breakdown of politics and the impotence of art are inextricably intertwined. And so, this biennial, with so much promise, ends up either doing too

much or too little. For all the salt involved, it all felt a bit under-seasoned.

The 14th Istanbul Biennial, [Salt Water: A Theory of Thought Forms](#), continues at various locations around Istanbul through November 1.