

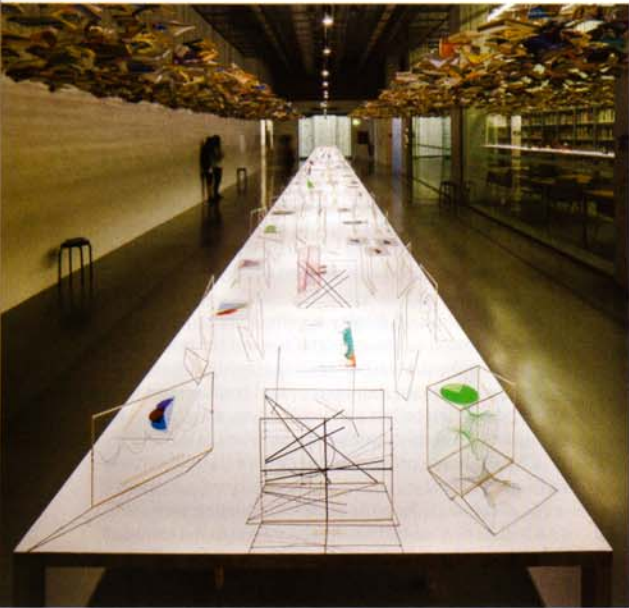
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From left: Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens, *The Prophets*, 2013—, wood, acetate, thread, metal wire, mesh. Installation view, Istanbul Modern, 2015. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags) (detail), 1967, concrete, enamel, textiles, 74 1/4 x 94 1/4 x 55 1/4". Lawrence Weiner, *Ramak Kala* (On the Verge), 2015, paint. Installation view, Rumeli Feneri. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren.



14th Istanbul Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

Kevin McGarry

AS WE RODE a crowded midnight ferry across the Bosphorus strait, forty-eight hours into our frenetic marathon of biennial viewing, one of my most patient and scholarly colleagues cried out in exasperation, "Is there anyone who can tell me what 'Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms' means?!" This koan, equal parts Toni Morrison and MIT Press, is the title of the Fourteenth Istanbul Biennial, presented by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts and curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

Part of the answer is a simple matter of historical definition. "Thought-forms" is a concept associated with the British theosophist Annie Besant, and the title of a 1901 book she authored with C. W. Leadbeater. The notion refers to a kind of synesthetic materialization of thinking, through which colors are linked to emotional states, shapes to real and imagined vibrations, and so on; these connections are postulated as universal, transcending all religions, cultures, and ethnicities. Though Besant

and Leadbeater's text has long languished in relative obscurity—particularly in art history, where it is overshadowed by the more famous synesthetic theories of Wassily Kandinsky and František Kupka—Christov-Bakargiev sees the volume as "one of the first examples of modern abstract art theory," and took it as an inspiration for her biennial.

In Christov-Bakargiev's approach, salt water, too, is taken as a medium for linking visual abstraction and symbolic and psychological content. Indeed, the interconnections between the two themes of her title are neatly established by the drawings of thought-forms created by several of Besant's friends, hung in a handful of rooms in Istanbul Modern. Their visual vocabulary suggests both knots and waves, the two motifs the curator repeatedly cites to encapsulate the manifold tensions and movements symbolized by salt water, a conceptual investigation extended throughout the 550-page catalogue, which includes curatorial essays and a range of literature selected by participating artists.

The works most harmoniously connected to these curatorial conceits were all contained within the exhibition's largest and most conventional venue, Istanbul Modern, the city's contemporary art museum. Several of these were historical and many, too, were serial. Like the ocean waves repeatedly referenced in Christov-Bakargiev's texts, series can hint at enormity while delivering succinct individual moments that register on a human scale. And thankfully so, because this show needed all the concision it could get: As Christov-Bakargiev's follow-up to Documenta 13, it was enormous—the nearest thing the art world has to a box-office-obliterating summer sequel.

Of course, abstraction and fluidity come in many forms, as the works spread throughout Istanbul Modern's galleries reminded us. It was a welcome detour to be momentarily lost in Armenian painter Paul Guiragossian's canvases of huddling crowds or families abstracted into

vertical streaks and splashes. Several 1947 crayon drawings by the Australian aboriginal artist Wonggu Mununggurr depicted coastal floodplains from a bird's-eye vantage point, transforming the earth's undulating topography into slanted grids of demarcated space—an allusion to salt water's geopolitical weightiness that was no less pointed for seeming to come out of art history's left field. Another Armenian, the Iranian-born Sonia Balassanian, contributed an aptly executed new work, *Silence of Stones*, 2015: a room of coarse boulders honed into the configuration of featureless heads, shaped just enough to maintain a taut formal ambiguity between abstraction and figuration. Such a solid material so fluidly wrought resonated with Christov-Bakargiev's ideas about thought-forms and water alike. There were other highlights here as well: a coy Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), 1967; a typically spare and affecting Etel Adnan, *Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire*, 2015; *Temporary Actors I and II*, both 2015, the paintings Liu Ding commissioned from a trained Soviet realist; and a playful panoply of handmade three-dimensional assemblages of sticks and plastic cutouts representing vectors from the finance world made by the Canadian duo Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens, *The Prophets*, 2013—.

While these diverse works were all contained within Istanbul Modern, visiting the biennial's thirty-five other exhibition sites was more doable than one might have expected. (Lawrence Weiner's piece at the mouth of the Black Sea was one exception, a ninety-minute boat ride from downtown.) More than half were scattered within a ten-minute walk of one another in Beyoğlu, the most Westernized and well-trodden district of the city. Although the neighborhood has its own palpable street life, virtually all the visitors seemed to be art-world insiders already familiar with the area from previous biennials and more interested in ticking off the venues than exploring the city itself.

From left: Francis Alys, *The Silence of Ani*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 21 seconds. Adrián Villar Rojas, *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers*, 2015, fiberglass, mixed media. Installation view, Trotsky House, Büyüka Island. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren.



Most previous iterations of this exhibition have followed variations on the same plan, and there is nothing wrong with honoring this tradition; the Istanbul Biennial, after all, pioneered this dispersed, in situ style of urban display. But it was a colossal waste of resources to fill so many scattered venues with largely mediocre works, whose site-specificity ranged from the merely anecdotal to the superficial. The most egregious examples of this disconnect between art and city were the works of the dozen artists conscripted to make projects for seemingly arbitrarily chosen spaces, a handful inside boutique hotels (in their guest rooms, basements, etc.) that doubled as biennial hospitality sponsors. Then there were what the organizers called “fictional venues”—a beach, an orphan-

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age, a condemned mansion—places that were inaccessible to the public, but whose history and provenance as urban artifacts in their own right were meant to contribute a spectral *je ne sais quoi* to the exhibition.

If it was, at times, hard to discern a clear curatorial vision in the midst of all this far-flung, conjectural activity, that may be fitting; Christov-Bakargiev did not in fact describe herself as having curated the show, preferring the verb *drafted*. The docents I spoke with had been trained to refer to her as “the drafter,” stating, for example, “That is not what the drafter intended.” In their scripted obedience they sounded like acolytes of a messianic cult. While *drafting*, as an initial stage in an editorial process, suggests a system of production that is more collaborative than the traditional top-down curatorial model, this

repeated and ubiquitous shift from verb to noun evokes a figure more megalomaniacal than even the most bombastic curator—and that, I presume, is not what the drafter intended.

Yet, in a way, I admire Christov-Bakargiev’s ambitious and ostensibly generous thinking for thinking’s sake. Like those of the city, the biennial’s innumerable discursive strands rummage through a wealth of aesthetic and ideological traditions. At times the biennial embraced its own unwieldiness, but in doing so the exhibition felt grandiosely disinterested in any reality beyond itself, particularly the viewer’s cumulative experience, or Turkey’s present political circumstances. In curatorial texts, dire historical matters such as the Armenian genocide of one hundred years ago were represented only obliquely, through allusions to an unspecified “history of wars” and “ethnic cleansing.” They were addressed more explicitly in works by artists such as *The Silence of Ani*, 2015, by Francis Alys, a film that documents a poetic intervention in Ani, a once-great city near the Turkish-Armenian border, which was destroyed nearly a millennium ago and whose ruins the artist filled with children playing bird flutes as a call to peace; or Aslı Çavuşoğlu’s *Red/Red*, 2015, delicate drawings done in a special red dye, used primarily in Armenia for centuries, that comes from a bug whose habitat is the same border, near the Aras River, and whose numbers have been decimated by industrialization. Such works were well considered, cleverly tweaking the significance of artifacts to teach lessons that have been occluded by hegemonies, but felt a bit stilted, even dated, as quintessential “biennial art”—the now-familiar research-driven practices that take up the latent politics of local physical artifacts or regional traditions and imbue them with narratives or aesthetics that handily plug into contemporary art conversations (more forgivable from Alys, who is a key figure of the generation that

invented this genre). I did not see a work—or curatorial gesture—that directly engaged with the occupation of Gezi Park or the tumultuous events that have unfolded in this city since, with the exception of a few overbearingly didactic pieces that were positioned as footnotes to the sprawling show.

Indeed, the biennial’s most monumental statements were seemingly unrelated to the city hosting it. Ed Atkins and Adrián Villar Rojas, for example, made incredible pieces on Büyüka Island. It’s a no-brainer to invite both of them to just about any biennial these days, as they consistently produce exceptional works. But what Atkins’s uncannily oneiric haunted house had to do with Istanbul I will never know. And Villar Rojas’s menagerie of beasts coupled to one another, rising out of the stony shore just below the house Trotsky occupied during his exile . . . well, what was the connection between his piece and this politically and historically loaded site, which was repeatedly touted in the exhibition’s literature? And why did Christov-Bakargiev, during one of the exhibition’s many panels, publicly ask seventy-seven-year-old Turkish artist Füsün Onur to relate her work to French theory? The only person less interested in that connection than me seemed to be the artist herself.

But if we have heard of the dangers of the biennial-and-art-fair-tourist industry countless times already, one hopes that the warnings finally stick. More is not more, and the seemingly arbitrary imposition of a new kind of lyrical abstraction or spiritual form onto this biennial was therefore all the more distressing, leveling the works into sameness when specificity and difference were desperately needed. Curatorial vision should serve artists, above all, but very few of the best works in this biennial were buoyed by the way in which they were situated, drifting in a fathomless sea of eddying, runny ideas. □

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