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The Bosphorus shoreline of Istanbul in Tophane, with the Nusretiye Mosque on the right and the new Museum of Painting and Sculpture on the left, and the Topkapı Palace across the water. The Prince's Islands appear in the distance.
All photos by HG Masters for ArtAsiaPacific.

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TURKEY

15TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL: "A GOOD NEIGHBOUR" (PART 1)

BY HG MASTERS

After several agonizing years, Istanbul needs some serious healing—as I wrote a couple of weeks ago in a [preview](#) of the 15th Istanbul Biennial and other exhibitions that opened around the city last week. No single exhibition or biennial, of course, can cure or ameliorate the troubles of a city or country, but perfection shouldn't be the enemy of productivity. It was at many moments over a week of openings and social events when the Istanbul art community displayed—and more importantly, genuinely seemed to feel—a solidarity that had eroded in the last five years, when societal pressures and the grievous political discord afflicting the country had seeped into the cultural community and fractured many crucial alliances.

Here is some background to understand where the Istanbul Biennial is today: In 2013, the 13th Istanbul Biennial, titled "Mom, Am I a Barbarian?", opened just months after the [Gezi Park protests](#) of May and June of that year had ignited long-simmering rage against the Turkish government, fueled by a host of environmental, urban and cultural issues. The curator of that edition, Fulya Erdemci, and even the Biennial itself and its organizing institution İKSÜ (the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts), became the target of vitriol from many corners of the art community—for, among many things, having to relinquish its ambitions to install artworks in public places, including in the contested Gezi Park and nearby Taksim Square. (Often overlooked at the time was that, even before the protests, the conservative Istanbul municipality had been largely unresponsive to the Biennial's requests for permits, and the protests centering around those areas effectively ended whatever slim chances existed for those projects to be realized.)

Two years later, in 2015, the 14th Istanbul Biennial served as former biennial advisory board member Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's much-anticipated return to the international stage after her monumental [Documenta 13](#) in 2012. Her exhibition, titled "[Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms](#)," sprawled up, down and across the Bosphorus and was intellectually engaging in its attempt to root modernist abstraction in Victorian-era design and evolutionary biology, and the political swells that produced cultural waves in the form of socialism, anticolonialism and theosophy. That Istanbul Biennial also featured more than a dozen projects that boldly responded to the centennial of the Armenian genocide. While the exhibition deftly avoided (largely through a series of rhetorical sleights of hand) the potentially calamitous attention of government pundits who have in the past persecuted those who push the country to acknowledge this long-suppressed—and still officially denied—episode in history (among other violent sectarian incidents since then, including the government's renewed war against Kurdish communities in the southeast since early 2015), Christov-Bakargiev's art-world celebrity status and ambitious fundraising initiatives brought another divisive regime to the city: that of the moneyed international art world, and all of its hierarchies of the super-patrons, mega-gallerists and well-connected scenesters. Many people, including myself, felt disillusioned by the levels of exclusivity around access to certain projects—perhaps most emblematically, the private boat trips to experience a widely publicized jazz-music performance work by [Theaster Gates](#) and Pierre Huyghe's underwater project near Sivri Island (Sivriada, in the Sea of Marmara), [Abyssal Plain](#) (2015–), that were rhetorically vaunted and central parts of the Biennial but almost entirely inaccessible except to the art world's visiting elite. I remember the opening week of that year's edition to have been full of resentments and frustrations for the Istanbul art community, while many simmered that the government's war on Kurdish towns had gone largely unacknowledged. It was an occasion that unfortunately exemplified Turkish society's paradoxical hospitality to Western visitors and its deeply subliminal, reflexive hostility among and toward those who live here. And worse, it was a biennial that, despite its deep intellectualism and superficial leftist sympathies, exacerbated existing divisions in Turkey's cultural community between those with international pedigrees and the rest.

Even so, several important legacies emerged out of the two previous Istanbul Biennials. Since the 2013 edition, sponsorship from Koç Holdings has permitted admission to the Biennial to be free of charge. (Koç Holdings is the largest conglomerate in Turkey, and has been the subject of criticism from both ends of the political spectrum: from the left for selling military equipment to the government to facilitate its campaigns to occupy or destroy Kurdish cities and towns; from the right for appearing to shelter some Gezi protesters in its hotel near Taksim Square during particularly violent police attacks in 2013.) Attendance to the Biennial soared as a result of the free admission. More than 335,000 visits were logged in 2013 and more than 540,000 visits were made to the 36 biennial sites in 2015. However, it is unclear whether those numbers reflect unique individuals or visits by the same people to multiple sites.

The [announcement](#) in April 2016 that Berlin-based duo Elmgreen & Dragset would curate the 15th edition of the Istanbul Biennial was, perhaps, a belated response to the proposal that had been made in 2013 by certain members of the art community that the next Istanbul Biennial should be curated by an artist. This decision on the part of İKSÜ—whether it was conscientious or due to the difficulties of recruiting other professional amid a tumultuous period in Turkey, as some people have murmured—offered a genuine opportunity for the Biennial to return to the ethos of an artist-centric, art-community-oriented exhibition, rather than one dominated by inadvertently divisive curatorial figures (both of whom are women, which may have propelled added layers of criticism).



The metal construction barriers with posters for the 15th Istanbul Biennial, "a good neighbour," fencing in the baroque Nusretiye Mosque along the way to Istanbul Modern.

In certain ways, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset were an ideal choice to curate the 2017 Istanbul Biennial. As an artist-duo, Elmgreen & Dragset had already participated in three previous editions of the Istanbul Biennial—in 2001, 2011 and 2013—so they already had a history and solid relationship with the exhibition and city itself. Their 2013 project for Erdemci's iteration, *Istanbul Diaries* (2013) was a room of writing desks in the Galata Greek Primary School, where young men came and wrote daily diaries of their experiences that could be read by visitors—which felt like a sensitive yet understated artistic response to the post-Gezi context of youthful discontent that had erupted from a generation previously dismissed as largely apolitical. And because they are artists themselves, Elmgreen & Dragset have an inherent sense that allows them to showcase other artists' works in the best possible fashion in the often-crowded context of a biennial.

During the press conference on September 12, Michael Elmgreen spoke to this latter point directly, noting that they had participated in many mega-exhibitions where they had barely conversed with the curators, or felt their projects were neglected simply because of the sheer volume of presented artworks. By inviting just 56 artists to Istanbul, they hoped to invert this lamentable recent tendency among mega-exhibitions—Documenta 14 wasn't explicitly mentioned, but perhaps on the minds of many who were present. Furthermore, their title and theme of "a good neighbour" was phrased in lowercase to suggest that it could be part of a question such as "Is a good neighbour someone who . . . ?"—meant to invoke questions of whom might make for a "good neighbour" in a new century of rapid social transformations, from the increasingly repudiation of patriarchal and heteronormative societal norms on the one hand, to the influx of economic and political refugees into many countries previously bound by homogenous nationalist identities on the other. It was also a call to restore empathy between individuals and social groups, a theme as relevant in the world at large as it is in the Beyoğlu district where the Biennial is largely held this year—a central district of the city harshly fractured between migrant, religious and secular groups amid Turkey's recent political strife, further divided by the area's gentrification and the increasing polarization of wealth in Turkey.

Being "a good neighbour" was a motto that everyone could, and did, adopt. I heard it throughout the past summer in passing reference from people here who were working toward their exhibitions with the spirit of collaboration rather than competition—perhaps with an overdue sense that members of the cultural community needed to be allies rather than adversaries, and a begrudging acceptance that international attendance would be lower than in the past three editions. So while everyone here noticed that there were fewer outside visitors during the opening week, at the same time many foreigners who have invested in Turkey in the past, as well as the core of the Istanbul art scene itself, still showed up in energetic numbers to support the Biennial—which has remained the city's most stalwart supporter and platform of contemporary art over the last three decades. "It's like the old days," both verbatim and in various versions, was the sentiment I heard from many who knew the Istanbul art scene before I ever did. Every time the sentiment was uttered, it was meant as a deep and sincere appreciation.



XIAO YU's performance and installation *Ground* (2014/17), featuring two Chinese farmers leading a Turkish donkey in plowing a field of dirt and wet concrete outside of Istanbul Modern.

After the press conference on Tuesday morning, I skipped the crowded Galata Greek Primary School where the press tours had started and went directly to Istanbul Modern, the other of the two largest venues of the Biennial. I turned off the main road into the Bosphorus-fronting area around the museum that is now a massive and foreboding construction site (part of the several mega-projects currently transforming areas of the city), with the state-run Museum of Painting and Sculpture under construction on one side and leading to an empty expanse where the Biennial's previously central venue, the red-walled Antrepo customs warehouse, once stood. There, I spotted ahead of me René Block, the curator of the fourth Istanbul Biennial in 1995 and an important connector between the art scenes in Turkey and Europe in the 1990s and 2000s. I joined him in dodging cement-mixers and dump trucks through the parking lot that surrounds the island of Istanbul Modern, where I was immediately struck by a hangar-like structure that housed a field of dirt and wet concrete being plowed by a stubborn donkey and two Chinese men. It is a work by Xiao Yu, *Ground* (2014/17), that immediately responded to the city's seemingly constant overturning and transformation into new concrete structures—one of the sorest points of contention that had led to the Gezi Park protests more than four years ago, while also being one of the celebrated hallmarks of the now ironically named "Justice and Development" Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) that has ruled Turkey since 2002. For anyone who might have thought this 15th Istanbul Biennial would skirt politics in Turkey (and elsewhere), it was a first indication that the politics of the exhibition would be lying there in plain sight, albeit just below the surface.

Part 2 of this blog will look more closely at the works shown in the various venues at the 15th Istanbul Biennial. A full review by Istanbul-based writer Naz Cuguoğlu will be published in ArtAsiaPacific Issue 106 (Nov/Dec).

HG Masters is editor at large of ArtAsiaPacific.

The 15th Istanbul Biennial is on view at six venues in the city until November 12, 2017.

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TURKEY

15TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL: "A GOOD NEIGHBOUR" (PART 2)

BY HG MASTERS



A wall of posters in the Asmalimescit neighborhood of Beyoğlu. All photos by HG Masters for ArtAsiaPacific unless otherwise noted.

Fourteen months ago, in the days immediately following the failed military coup d'état in Turkey, and just two and a half weeks after a terrorist attack by ISIS members on Istanbul's main international airport on June 28, the 15th Istanbul Biennial, scheduled for September 2017, might have seemed like an unlikely possibility to many in the international art world. Yet I never had any doubts. In response to skeptical inquiries, I would always relay a variation of what the Biennial's director Bige Örer had conveyed before: the Biennial would happen, no matter what. To their credit, in August 2016, curators Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset were in Istanbul, proceeding with their research with the team at the Istanbul Biennial's parent organization İKSV (the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts), even as the country was still recovering from the shocks of the preceding months.

Yet given the conditions in Turkey and the government's aggressive response to the attempted coup (including the arrest and incarceration of tens of thousands of people, including more than one hundred journalists), I wondered how Elmgreen & Dragset's Istanbul Biennial would, or wouldn't, address the extremely fraught and precarious politics of the moment. The Biennial's title, "a good neighbour," was meant to question the rapid social transformations taking place in Turkey (and elsewhere), but also indicated to me that the event would adopt an ameliorative tone rather than a confrontational one. But this doesn't mean that it is a timid exhibition. Visitors can quickly realize the many references to Turkey's current turmoil and politics—even if they are not explicitly stated. It was not only through metaphors that artists addressed urgent topics; in several notable instances, their portrayals of current realities were explicit.



YOUNG-JUN TAK, *The Silence and Eloquence of Objects*, 2017.

Istanbul Modern

The works in Istanbul Modern reflected on various aspects of urban transformation. The first work inside the museum, *The Silence and Eloquence of Objects* (2017) by Young-Jun Tak, was a white-painted, four-by-six-meter replica of the artist's Seoul tiny apartment installed upside down on the ceiling, and was meant to echo the cramped and solitary living conditions of many young people in booming cities with sky-high rents, though the work didn't compel extended contemplation. More striking was Latifa Echakhch's corridor lined with frescoes of groups of people, *Crowd Fade* (2017), which the artist had painted on the walls and then chipped off onto the floor, and the messy canvases and wall collages of layered paper scraps by Yonamine that imitated the aesthetics of urban streets. Rayyane Tabet's installation *Colosse Aux Pieds D'Argile* (2015) was made from columns found by the artist that came from an old family home in Beirut that was being deliberately destroyed to make room for new apartment towers. It was paired with young artist Alper Aydın's literal sculpture, *D8M* (2017), of a bulldozer's claw pushing a pile of tree branches into the gallery's corner, which immediately evoked countless recent instances in Turkey when natural areas have been brutally razed.

Human relations in the context of cities were addressed in Volkan Alsan's three-channel film *Home Sweet Home* (2017), which depicts two women cohabitating on a boat that is cruising along the Bosphorus with an apartment on top of its cabin, in Candegir Furtun's sculpture of nine pairs of male legs arranged in a row on a tiled bench that recalled a hammam, and Victor Leguy's project made from objects donated by Arab exiles he met in Istanbul's Arabic-language bookstore The Pages. Kim Heecheon's video *Lifting Barbells* (2016) shared the perspective of a young city-dweller, agonizing over GPS-tracking, surveillance and digital intrusion into our lives through letters in Spanish to the character's girlfriend in Argentina. Throughout, the connections between works were prosaic but not didactic, eclectic in their national contexts while displaying shared sentiments of concern for the future of cities around the world.



PEDRO GÓMEZ-EGAÑA, *Domain of Things*, 2017.

Galata Greek Primary School

The Biennial's strongest venue was the Galata Greek Primary School. Pedro Gómez-Egaña's installation *Domain of Things* (2017) occupied a central location in the building, and featured performers moving around objects of furniture that were perched high on wheeled platforms. Ali Taptik's photographs of the city filled the walls of the stairwells and visitors could link, via a QR code, to www.friendsandstrangers.net, where stories of three individuals are revealed through interviews. Olaf Metzel's piece *Sammelstelle* (1992/2017), a room lined with corrugated metal with a revolving metal gate at its entrance strongly evoked refugee and internment camps—as relevant to the Europe of today as it was during the early 1990s, when it was made in response to the refugees in Germany fleeing sectarian wars in the former Yugoslavia countries.

The real gut-punch—and the ultimate repudiation to anyone who says the Istanbul Biennial avoids confronting political issues—comes in the video by Erkan Özgen featuring a deaf boy from Kobane, the Kurdish city on the Turkish-Syrian border, which was occupied by the so-called Islamic State and then liberated from their control. The child recounts his memories of the fighting using only gestures in a horrific testimony that pushes into the territory, like an Artur Żmieski project, how of probing how much brutality an artwork can, and should, represent. Similarly outspoken was Mahmoud Obaidi's project *Compact Home Project* (2003–04), which comprises handmade books that contain physical traces of Iraq's recent history, with metal sheets as their covers and that come in old suitcases—evoking the country's displacement through its destruction by the United States-led coalition. More metaphorical was the jarring clash of aesthetics found in Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe's installation, *Scenario in the Shade* (2015–17), which portrayed, through a series of rooms, the many distinct Southern California subcultures. Stepping into vastly different worlds that been have clustered was an experiential event, like snooping around in all the houses on one's street. Perhaps most neighborly of all were Andrea Joyce Heimer's paintings and hand-written captions of recollections from growing up in a small-town community in the United States.



DAYANITA SINGH, *Museum of Shedding*, 2016.

Pera Museum

Highlights from the Pera Museum were a room of Gözde İlkin's fabric collages made from fabrics obtained from her family, depicting scenes from their time spent together. There was also a tightly curated display in one room with works by five artists, including a Louise Bourgeois print, a video by Monica Bonvicini of someone with a miniature house on their head banging their head against a wall, and Aude Pariset's child's crib full of writhing worms. Fred Wilson's project *Afro Kismet* (2017) featured Ottoman-era prints masked in tracing paper with cutouts to reveal tiny African figures, and a bold pairing of black-Murano-glass chandeliers with tiles made in an unconventionally dark palette at the famed İznik tile factories. In the same vein, Dayanita Singh looked at museological practices in *Museum of Shedding* (2016), which arranges her black-and-white photographs to be viewed as part of a set of custom-made furniture.



TUĞÇE TUNA, *Body Drops*, 2017. Courtesy IKSIV, Istanbul Biennial.

Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam + ARK Kültür + Yoğunluk Atelier

Provocative works by Monica Bonvicini occupied the men's section of the 15th-century Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam—the only venue not located in Beyoğlu. Her massive digital collage made of women's legs from fashion magazines was matched with stacks of the word “GUILT” in reflective steel, and a black cube wrapped in leather belts, continuing her interest in riffing on minimalist forms with materials that evoke the body and cultural rituals of bondage and submission. Tuğçe Tuna's 45-minute dance performance *Body Drops*, held in the same venue, was similarly bold in its choice of actions and casting, mixing able-bodied performers with two that have physical disabilities.

Mahmoud Khaled's transformation of the Bauhaus-style cultural center (which was once a private home), ARK Kültür, into the fictionalized residence of an Egyptian man who is escaping persecution and obsessed with the figure of the “crying boy,” was a unique Biennial work that was perfectly suited for the site and the city, and reminiscent of Orhan Pamuk's nearby Museum of Innocence. The performative installation at the Yoğunluk Atelier in the Asmalmescit district was not quite as engaging—it was a pitch black room of domestic spaces imperiled by what at times sounded like an earthquake, but was nevertheless an attempt to cross boundaries of artistic disciplines.

It is of course a bit facile to say the 15th Istanbul Biennial displays many of the traits of its artist-curators and their own works—but it seems accurate. The Biennial is handsomely produced and installed, sensitive to the contexts that artists are addressing and to Istanbul itself. There is an enthusiasm for immersive installations and theatrical scenarios. It's sincere, and honest about politics, even when being metaphorical. Above all, what the Istanbul Biennial is trying to do is to be that “good neighbour” in exhibition form—one that is generous in listening and responding to communities, and in giving artists a generous platform for their works. At this moment in Turkey, perhaps being understated, while not letting things go unstated, is the way to survive and start rebuilding for the future.

Part 1 of this blog can be read [here](#).

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