

PERROTIN

PRESSBOOK

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

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Your Friends and Neighbors

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Monica Bonvicini's *Belt Out*, 2017, at the Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam. (Except where noted, all photos: Gökcan Demirkazik)

EVEN BEFORE TURKEY'S failed foreign policy of “precious isolation” materialized, we weren't big on neighbors.

Despite Turkish-language proverbs such as “Neighbors [even] need the ashes of each other,” my generation was taught to fear the neighbor (who coveted “our” land and resources) during “National Security” classes at school, and we returned to homes where thick curtains would—almost magically, of their own accord—shut tight moments after sunset. In a 2001 video simply titled *Neighbor*, Bülent Şangar captured this tension: Like a first-person shooter game, the artist follows his neighbors' movements from behind semitransparent tulle curtains with the barrel of a gun—shooting the video at the same time.

Although Şangar's work is not part of “a good neighbor,” the Elmgreen & Dragset–curated fifteenth edition of the Istanbul Biennial, it addresses the question at the heart of the show: How do we live together without descending into mediocrity, (auto-)censoring, and communal violence? In a country where state violence has become the norm, the genius of “a good neighbor” lies in its seeming banality, which, as Michael Elmgreen suggested with Nordic politeness at the press conference, “may be a conscious choice on the curators' side.”

Every other choice was also conscious—and calculated. For the second time in a row, the biennial used a high school for its press conference (this time, the four-hundred-year-old Saint Benoît French High School instead of the Italian High School); the rest of the exhibition seemed like a counterpoint to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's dizzying, scavenger-hunt-like fourteenth Istanbul Biennial, which included thirty-five locations (including mobile, imaginary, and underwater ones). Elmgreen & Dragset's spans just six locations, all (except one) within short-walking distance; more than thirty new commissions from fifty-six artists formed a manageable—even cozy—parcours that eschewed high-flown theory and curatorial poetic license. In contrast to the all-caps title of Christov-Bakargiev's “SALTWATER,” Elmgreen proclaimed: “a good neighbor is always written in lowercase. Anything can come before or after... and I would like to think there is an invisible question mark at the end.”



Left: Artist Xiao Yu. Right: Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen, artists and curators of the fifteenth Istanbul Biennial.

After the meticulously kept verdure of Saint Benoît, Xiao Yu's stubborn donkey at the entrance of Istanbul Modern proved quite a contrast (and a controversial one at that). Inside, an austere and pared-down sculptural narrative dominated, with forceful propositions from Adel Abdessemed, Candeğer Furtun, Lydia Ourahmane, and Rayyane Tabet linking representational regimes to our built environments. A remarkable exception was Kaari Upson's magnificently dark set of Oldenburgian-*cum-informe* furniture and objects, including urethane paper towels and an armchair for “The Artist is Present”—length use.

On my way out, curator Jens Hoffmann (and artistic codirector of the twelfth Istanbul Biennial) anxiously asked the pervasive question: “Are people coming?” “They” did come after all, but without the fanfare of guided patrons' circle tours and sit-down gallery dinners hosted at Cezayir Restaurant. Most international professionals seemed to be hunting solo instead of in packs: From Hoffmann to CAMH's Bill Arning to Delfina Foundation's Aaron Cezar, they entered my vision only briefly. So it was a shock when I saw a big friendly table hosting an Al Serkal Avenue dinner and another studded with Tate Modern's Clara Kim and Vassilis Oikonomopoulos at the experimental eatery Yeni Lokanta. (But who were *those* people who rode the Contemporary Istanbul cars emblazoned with the letters “VIP”? That and the rationale behind covering an art fair with fake grass remain a mystery.)

Back at the Galata Greek Primary School, visitors were treated to a generously installed group of works that resonated with the inherent dichotomy in Elmgreen & Dragset's own artistic practice. Elaborate, fictive immersive environments (Pedro Gómez-Egaña's dazzling elevated apartment-on-wheels operated by live performers, and *Scenario in the Shade*, Jonah Freeman & Justin Lowe's four-room extravaganza on subcultures as chosen families) competed with simple yet heartrending gestures like Erkan Özgen and Dan Stockholm's works on trauma and death. Stockholm's negative casts of his own hand were mounted on metal scaffolding tubes like those he used to touch every single surface of his father's home after he passed away, whereas Özgen's video showed a deaf and mute Syrian boy, a refugee from Kobanî, recounting an extremely violent series of events with bodily gestures—a shattering survivor testimony that I found problematic due to the lack of the artist's mediation.



Left: Artist Bahar Yürükoğlu and Pilot Galeri's Amira Arzık. Right: Artist Burçak Bingöl and Collective Çukurcuma's Naz Cuguoğlu.

But it was a trio on the third floor of the Pera Museum that really got me: Tatiana Trouvé stacked painted bronze casts of all the soaps her assistants used during preparations for her exhibitions since 2002 in a gradually thinning, fragile-looking column next to Lee Miller's shocking mise-en-scènes in the abandoned apartments of Eva Braun and Adolf Hitler in late 1945 (including an auto-portrait in Hitler's bathtub). A subversive monumentality and interest in human traces also prevailed in Fred Wilson's pseudoencyclopedic installation *Afro Kismet*, in which he covered two large walls with unconventional Iznik tiles boasting rich mauves, sandy browns, and petroleum greens (as opposed to the Ottoman red, blue, and green). An homage to the largely invisible or no longer existent Afro-Turkish communities, the walls spelled "Mother Africa" and "black is beautiful" in calligraphic Arabic script. Only the tiles in Rüstem Pasha Mosque could rival the splendor.

A certain Istanbulite brand of oxymoronic elegance, combining understated splendor and epicurean ostentation, was in evidence at the opening ceremony in the gardens of Palais de France, as well as at Ömer Koç's soirée at the Abdülmecid Mansion in Kuzguncuk on the other side of the Bosphorus. Due to heavy bridge traffic, I arrived at the mansion as disgruntled as the rest of the international press corps, but this turn-of-the-century neo-Orientalist jewel box—empty save for two dozen works from Koç's private collection—made me forget all about that.

Inside, Bige Örer and I shared our astonishment at how such dramatic interiors—where every surface was intricately painted, marble, ceramic, or intarsia—brought the best out of the works on view. The private obsessions of Turkey's most influential arts patrons were theatrically laid bare: Besides the obligatory pair of photographs by Elmgreen & Dragset, spotted, deformed bodies of Patricia Piccinini neighbored Daphne Wright's upturned *Stallion* and *Swan* made of white marble dust and resin. The first Turkish prima donna to perform in Europe, Semiha Berksoy seemed to give birth to a cock in an electrifying self-portrait from 1974. And I thought the mysterious and worldly *Academic Life Room Model*, 1783, by Austrian master Franz Xaver Seegen was a stand-in for the elusive collector, who insisted on pronouncing Istanbul with a hard "i" in the old-fashioned, true Istanbulite way. Oh, and there were rhinoceroses. Lots of them.



Left: Artist Candegir Furtun. Right: Artist Young-Jun Tak.

Mahmoud Khaled's installation at a Bauhaus villa in Cihangir, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, was a museum complete with an audioguide—just like Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence a couple streets away—commemorating the fictional life of a lachrymose homosexual man who fled to Istanbul and purportedly built this house to avoid persecution in Egypt. While the midcentury kitsch and sentimentality of Khaled's work was not to everyone's liking, I saw it as a subtle queering of Atatürk's 1935 Marine Mansion in Florya—another inspiration for the artist—which laid patriarchal notions of progress on the psychoanalyst's divan.

It took me a while to recover from the opening party at Soho House Istanbul (ft. DJ sets by, naturally, Elmgreen & Dragset) and its aftermath at the queer-friendly bar Gizli Bahçe. But eventually I crossed the Golden Horn to see the Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam in Balat. This beautifully renovated fifteenth-century bathhouse was a hair-raising epilogue to the rest of the show: Monica Bonvicini occupied the male apodyterium (where men undressed) with two sculptures, one of which spelled a thirteen-foot-high GUILT in polished stainless-steel mirrors. Seeing her Kaaba made from men's belts (*Belt Out*) in the adjacent caldarium made me realize why she was relegated to the quieter, more conservative side of the water. I shivered and sweated from the heat coming from the two other sculptures—cascades of long LED lights held together in a Hesse-like fashion with electrical cables and wires. Having lived most of my life under an Islamist populist autocracy, this sensation was strangely familiar: at once homey and totally unfamiliar.

As the sun set, I ditched my plans to see the only remaining work of the biennial, an Ugo Rondinone installed outside the biennial's "neighborhood" precincts. A permanent gift to the city from Koç Holding, sitting atop a municipal cultural center in Beşiktaş, this rainbow-colored text sculpture was first exhibited on Taksim Square at the Paolo Colombo—curated sixth Istanbul Biennial in 1999—exactly a month after the big August 17 earthquake. It was comforting to think that I would forget about it in time, eventually seeing it on the bridge highway one night on my way back from the Asian side, only to be gently reminded that I shared Rondinone's question with almost everyone in this scared yet bustling, ever-captivating megacity: Where do we go from here?

— Gökcan Demirkazık



Ugo Rondinone's *Where Do We Go From Here*, 1999/2017. (Photo: Onur Dogman)



Left: ArtAsiaPacific editor-at-large H.G. Masters and curator and writer Duygu Demir. Right: Project ArtBeat's Natia Buka.



Left: Artist Inci Eviner. Right: Artist Volkan Aslan.



Left: Artist Dan Stockholm. Right: ArtReview Asia editor Aimee Lin and director of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore Uta Meta Bauer.



Left: Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset at the press conference of the fifteenth Istanbul Biennial. Right: Koç Holding Chairman Ömer M. Koç speaking at the press conference of the fifteenth Istanbul Biennial.



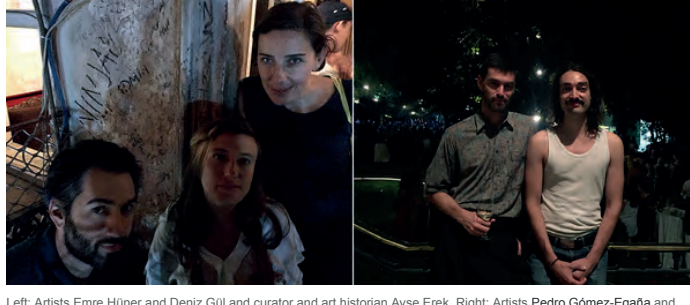
Left: Artists Aslı Çavuşoğlu and Hale Tenger. Right: Artists Özgür Kar and Sabo Day.



Left: Dealer Doğa Öktem, Sena Pakkan, and dealer Roupen Kalfayan. Right: Curators Tili Fellrath and Sam Bardaoui of Art Reoriented.



Left: Istanbul Modern curators Öykü Özsoy and Ümit Mesci. Right: Elipsis Projects founder Sinem Yörük and Protocinema's Mari Spirito.



Left: Artists Emre Hüner and Deniz Gül and curator and art historian Ayşe Ereğ. Right: Artists Pedro Gómez-Egaña and Leander Schönweiger.



Left: Dealer Suela J. Cennet and writer Ingo Arend. Right: Curator Adnan Yıldız.



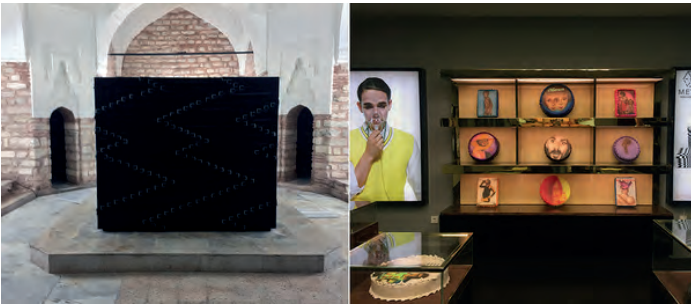
Left: SAHA Association's director Merve Çağlar and project coordinator Yavuz Parlar. Right: Arter's communications director İlkay Balıç, curator Başak Doğa Temür, exhibitions director Gizem Uslu Tümer, and curator Eda Berkmen with a sculpture by an anonymous artist from the Ömer M. Koç collection.



Left: Artists Simon Fujiwara and Mahmoud Khaled. Right: Artists Victor Leguy and Lydia Ourahmane.



Left: Editor and writer Ben Eastham and Art Unlimited's editor-in-chief Merve Akar Akgün. Right: SALT's editor-in-chief Başak Çaka, senior programmer Merve Eilveren, and director of Research & Programs Meriç Öner.



Left: Monica Bonvicini's *Belt Out*, 2017, at the Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hammam. Right: View from Jonah Freeman & Justin Lowe's *Scenario in the Shade*, 2015-17, at the Galata Greek Primary School.



Left: Curator Işın Önol in Leander Schönweiger's *Our Family Lost*, 2017. Right: Artist Yonamine in front of his work.



Left: Istanbul Biennial exhibition coordinator Elif Kamışlı, public program coordinator Zeyno Pekünlü, and artists Fred Wilson and İz Öztat. Right: Istanbul Biennial exhibition coordinator Özkan Cangüven and director of the biennial Bige Örer with artist Gözde İkin.