Looking for Neighbors

"From a local perspective, 'A Good Neighbour' brought hope to an art scene wrapped in a dark curtain." Hou Rf reviews the 15th Istanbul Biennial, curated by artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset.

Thirty Years after its initiation, the Istanbul Biennial recently presented its 15th installment, curated by artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset. The title they have chosen for the exhibition, "A Good Neighbor," offers a unique perspective on current global politics, as well as Turkey's geography and political agenda. We are all familiar with the common definition of "neighborhood" as the sum of the social relationships between people living in adjacent or nearby places. But today's technology and social media have introduced a different kind of neighborhood, which is fast and emotional: stories spread instantaneously, making neighbors out of thousands of people via a single tweet. It is interesting to see whether and how the exhibition responds to this new development of the term.

In Istanbul, the notion of whistle-blowing is important to mention in this context - we are witnessing its emergence among dissenters due to the country's tense political environment, and, as a result, the pressure of silencing. In local minds, the title of the biennial had become a work of art by its own right, because the exhibition visited the concept from the smallest scale to the greatest, and reflected back to us the unease and the struggles of our neighbors.
[1]15th Istanbul Biennial

Photo by: Ilgin Eraslan Yanmaz

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15th Istanbul Biennial

Photo by: Ilgin Erarslan Yanmaz

IKSV_15B_Sahirugureren_288_Retouched.jpg
Contrary to the 14th Istanbul Biennial [6], titled “Saltwater”, which took place all around the city, this year's biennial seemed to be a more modest enterprise. 56 artists from different countries were guests of "A Good Neighbor," at six adjacent sites, three of which were the main venues. Two of these, Istanbul Modern [7] and Pera Museum [8], offered a relatively familiar museum experience, while Galata Greek Primary School [9] stood out as a site with a history of resistance [10], where installations, works, and places "spoke."

The vicinity of Istanbul Modern has been going through a gentrification process for a long time. The 13-year-old building, which has originally been built as a storehouse nearly 60 years ago, will soon be demolished as a part of the neighborhood's reconstruction. Istanbul Modern will temporarily move to a different location during this period, to be replaced by another museum building. As you enter the Museum in the course of your biennial visit, you can hear the sound of a trumpet from afar, but only if you catch its brief appearance. I will return to this short tune later.
[12] 15th Istanbul Biennial

Photo by: Ilgin Erarslan Yanmaz

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The staging of the biennial in the museum resembles, even if not directly, the works of curators/artists Elmgreen & Dragset: installations sprawl around large, breathing spaces. Of the whole, I would first single out Candeğer Fürtun (b. 1936, Istanbul), who was given an utterly unique place in the biennial regarding her work and artistic style. Since the 1960s, Fürtun has been working mainly in ceramics, opening doors and introducing new audiences to this medium through her original language, and especially her descriptions of the human body. The work Untitled (1994–1996) immediately evokes a tiled Turkish bath or bathroom; and then you realize that the legs you're seeing belong to men. Ceramic legs that are close but not touching, evenly spaced. Bodies neighbouring unto each other, men sitting side by side. This is a very familiar scene, which, by association, makes us think of a patriarchal system. One of the legs is different from the others - there's a hand on it; it distinguishes itself as it represents our already vanished relationships with our neighbours. "The reason why I'm only exhibiting legs is that we are now living in a world where individualism no longer exists and pluralism is more important," Fürtun says in an online interview [16]. "Our bodies used to be significant as a whole, unique, but now it is fragmented. However all these fragmented pieces still point to a whole body, so by putting those legs up there I wanted to emphasize the disappearing of individualism and the fragmented body."
Candeğer Fürtun, Untitled, 1994–96
Ceramics, 46.5x600x48 cm

Courtesy of the artist
Presented with the support of SAHA – Supporting Contemporary Art from Turkey
Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren
As we move away from Fürtun's work, we find ourselves in the middle of a transaction. On the wall, there's an installation of objects, half of which is censored or faded out with white color. This is Victor Leguy [21]'s (b. 1979 in São Paulo) work *Structures for Invisible Borders* Structures for invisible borders. This installation was created by the artist's exchange of everyday personal objects with Syrian refugees and Arab immigrants in Istanbul. Leguy's installation points to the country's seen and unseen immigrants and refugees. It is as if we are following visible and invisible routes on a migration and displacement map.

Ceramics, 46.5x600x48 cm

Courtesy of the artist
Presented with the support of SAHA – Supporting Contemporary Art from Turkey
Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren
Victor Leguy, Structures for Invisible Borders Structures for invisible borders, 2017
Exchanged objects, graphite, charcoal and pencil on paper and white paint.

Photograph: Sahir Ugur Eren
Though my favorite site of the biennial was Galata Greek Primary School, there are many more artists worth mentioning, whose works are shown at the Istanbul Modern, such as Volkan Aslan and Mahmoud Obaidi. Aslan's (b. 1982, Ankara) three-channel video installation Home Sweet Home, a still image from which is used on the cover of the Biennial catalogue, portrays two women leaving in a houseboat on the Bosphorus. His work, too, creates an immediate affinity with the immigrant's state and journey, through manipulations of time and light.

Volkan Aslan, Home Sweet Home, 2017
3 Channel + Single Channel Video, 6’50’’

Courtesy of the artist and Pi Artworks
[31] Volkan Aslan, Home Sweet Home, 2017
3 Channel + Single Channel Video, 6’50”

Courtesy of the artist and Pi Artworks

HSH_VideoStillFromTheCenterChannel_copy.jpg [32]

[33] Volkan Aslan, Home Sweet Home, 2017
The paintings of Mahmoud Obaidi (b.1966 Baghdad) titled “Make War Not Love Chapter 3,” feature the artist’s story. Obaidi was born in Iraq, left it in 1991, and now lives in Canada. His memories and collected drawings reconstruct the poignant stories from Iraq as a new monument. Another series of works called “Compact Home Project,” dated 2003-2004, was exhibited in Galata Greek School, which I would turn to next.
Mahmoud Obaidi, Make War Not Love, Chapter 3, 2013–15
Mixed-media on canvas 257 x 247 cm

Courtesy of the artist
Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren

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But still at Istanbul Modern, let’s go back to where the trumpet sound can be heard; the foundation of a building, an unfinished construction. A very young artist, Lydia Ourahmane [38] (b. 1992, Saïda, Algeria) applied the real-estate laws of her homeland – Algeria - as a base for her installation All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell [39]. She laid a foundation for the minimal area necessary to secure it from resale or human dwelling, then moved it to the museum. There is a small pond on the hard concrete, regularly refreshed by the biennial staff, and a smell of fresh concrete. Just like a brushstroke in a classical painting, it emphasizes the most poetic side of the work.
Lydia Ourahmane, All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell, 2017
Concrete, steel, water, trumpet Solo. 280 x 400 x 20 cm, 00:48 min. (trumpet solo)

Courtesy of the artist
Presented with the support of Jerwood Charitable Foundation
Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren

Moving closer to the exit, Crowd Fade bursts into sight: a corridor with ruined and partly erased murals on both walls. It seems as if Latifa Echakhch [42] (b.1974 in El Khnansa, Morocco) has painted today's world on the wall. Resistance paintings from many places in the world come together side by side and form a collage. The rubble on the floor implies that this painting has been ruined and erased.

IKSV_15B_Sahirugureren_185.jpg [43]
[44] Latifa Echakhch, Crowd Fade, 2017
Fresco 365x2028x136 cm each

Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Kamel Mennour (Paris), Kaufmann Repetto (Milan), Galerie Eva Presenhuber (Zurich), Dvir Gallery (Tel Aviv)
Produced with the support of Pro Helvetia and Institut Français. Presented with the support of Galerie Kamel Mennour, Kaufmann Repetto, Galerie Eva Presenhuber and Dvir Gallery.
Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren
Latifa Echakhch, Crowd Fade, 2017
Fresco 365x2028x136 cm each

Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Kamel Mennour (Paris), Kaufmann Repetto (Milan), Galerie Eva
Echakhch’s work has been one of the most striking pieces of the biennial, because it adds to the contemporary facility with which a personal resistance story turns into a public experience in today’s global social media. Using current technology, you can watch the resistance in Sao Paolo on your mobile phone when you’re at home in Istanbul, or you can even have images from war zones streamed live to you at home. Echakhch’s work relates to this by telling the story of a demonstration that takes place in different sites all over the world, showing that everything occurs in a similar way.
at the same time, despite the physical distance.

The next main biennial site, the Pera Museum, featured works by many distinguished artists from around the world, such as Fred Wilson, Louise Bourgeois, and Berlinde De Bruyckere. Visitors were also able to view the museum’s collection for free. Vajiko Chachkhiani [49] (b. 1985, Tbilisi, Georgia), is a spectacular artist who has also exhibited at The Georgian Pavilion of this year's Venice Biennial. In his current video work, *Life Track*, from 2015, an unknown character is watching us; or vice versa. In Chachkhiani's video, the view of a window in a nursing home from the outside points to life's track through its end, while I personally can't help but think of how we affect each other's life. We can easily Google our neighbours, and find their Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram profiles by just seeing their names on the doorbell; and we can easily be discovered by others, too. That is, if we can find a name on the doorbell in the first place, because everybody's anxious now. The easy flow of information can be beneficial, but it is concurrent with a rise of suspicion, which leads us to avoid almost all communication with people in the street or in the building we've just moved into. Our relationships, the stories we've witnessed, and our maximized fears (even if they are used for protection) reduce our interactions. We infer almost subliminal insights about the person we interact with.

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[Vajiko Chachkhiani, *Life Track*, 2015
Single-channel HD video with sound, 03:34 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Marzona (Berlin)
Sim Chi Yin [52]’s (b. 1978, Singapore) The Rat Tribe shows people, mostly migrant workers in Beijing, living in underground windowless dank rooms that used to house bomb shelters before being privatized and then opened to the public. Watching this work, one thinks of the increasingly disproportionate distribution of wealth leading to new working classes that live under very poor conditions. Worst of all is the obligation to comply with these conditions. Although each area reveals a unique definition and a new language, being side-to-side with everyone on the street removes all borders.

Sim Chi Yin, 2014, from the Rat Tribe series

The floor of Pera Museum embraces an amazing solidarity: Gözde İlkin, Louise Bourgeois, Berlinde De Bruyckere, and Monica Bonvicini raise profound questions, each in her own language.

Galata Greek Primary School was the most unique venue in the biennial, becoming one with the works and taking the installations to higher levels. The Galata Greek Primary School (Galata Rum İlkokulu in Turkish) was built in the neoclassical style between 1885 and 1909, to cater to the Greek community in the area. It had stopped functioning in the 1980s, due to demographic and political changes. After being abandoned for about 20 years, it started functioning as a contemporary design and art space in 2012.
Mark Dion, Jonah Freeman & Justin Lowe, Pedro Gomez-Egana, and Andrea Joyce Heimer deserve a highlight. At the entrance to Galata Greek Primary School, Pedro Gomez Egana [55]’s (b. 1976, Bucaramanga, Colombia) installation Domain of Things [56] greets the visitors. It is an unstable construction that heighten a stage set of a home. As the performers activate the machinery underneath the platform, the ‘home’ above moves too. Like other works in the biennial, it deals with the way we make, or call a place, ‘home’ and how it stems from our identity.

Domain Of Things (Documentation) [57] from pedro gomez-egana [58] on Vimeo [59].

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[61]Andrea Joyce Heimer, 2017
Pera Museum, 15th Istanbul Biennial

Photograph: Nicelle Beauchene
Also in Galata Greek Primary School are paintings by Andrea Joyce Heimer [62] (b. 1981, Great Falls, MT, USA). Reminiscent of Instagram feeds, the paintings are hung evenly and symmetrically, while their titles are written in pencil on the wall, like notes and comments. Another guest of the Greek School is Mark Dion [63] (b. 1961, New Bedford, MA, USA). His installation is a laboratory, reminiscent of a research museum exhibition. When you open the doors of two wooden cabinets on the wall, you can see The Persistent Weeds of Istanbul, illustrating the plant species that managed to survive in spite of Istanbul’s intense wave of urbanization, and The Resilient Marine Life of Istanbul, showing the sea creatures that still inhabit the Bosphorus. Created through Dion’s cooperation with artists and illustrators, this series shows what is beyond its own physical conditions: another side and dimension of home and resistance. If resistance has become a frequently used word in this article, maybe it’s because resistance is found both in the exhibition at large and in many of the artworks it has featured.4

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Mark Dion, Resilient Marine Life of Istanbul, 2017 (Burak Dak, Işık Güner, Reysi Kamhi, Dana Sherwood, Jana Weaver, Bryan M. Wilson)
Wooden cabinet, watercolour drawings. Cabinet 425.5x75.8 cm, 64 paintings, each 15.2 x 22.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (New York)
Produced and presented with the support of Tansa Mermerci Ekşioglu. Photograph: Sahir Uğur Eren
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"A Good Neighbour" offered a large spectrum of voices and visuals. It lets us comprehend various stories told by artists from different corners of the world, including third-world countries, and other areas suffering from issues such as immigration, civil war, nationalism, and gender discrimination. From a local perspective, "A Good Neighbour" brought hope to an art scene wrapped in a dark curtain. The ongoing state of emergency, last year's coup attempt, terror attacks in recent years, the rise in the exchange rates of the euro and the dollar, and the ever-changing political structure arouse a feeling of having an unidentifiable ghost at the threshold. Thanks to those responsible, global politics keeps pace. Countries can close mutual borders in 2017. The 15th Istanbul Biennial makes us ask global and actual questions firstly of ourselves, then of our friends, family, and the society in which we live, creating a dialog: Is a good neighbour someone who reads the same newspaper as you? Or someone who leaves you alone? Is a good neighbour a stranger you're not afraid of?5
1. This year, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV [70]) prepared a biennial guide, available for a very affordable price. The language and style of the guide are also very accessible. In this guide, the description of Leguy’s work opens as follows: “History is said to be written by victors.” This a poetic opening sentence, containing the power to create a relationship between the reader and the work.

2. Meanwhile, during the biennial we heard that Adel Abdessemed had received many critical reactions because his work was made of ivory.

3. “I’d heard about basement rooms from some years earlier,” Sim Chi Yin says in an interview, " and then in 2010, a local Beijing newspaper labeled the migrants who live in the basements ‘the rat tribe’, or ‘shu zu’ in Chinese. I felt it was an unfair label and decided to start documenting the community that lives in this universe beneath Beijing’s skyscrapers." See: http://15b.iksv.org/news [16] (Accessed, Dec 30, 2017).


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