

SCENE & HERD

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Breaking the Waves

ISTANBUL 09.07.15



Left: Istanbul Biennial artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Right: Musicians Burhan Öçal and Cory Wilkes with artist Theaster Gates. (Except where noted, all photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

IT'S EARLY MORNING in Istanbul and from the upper deck of a small pleasure boat I'm watching the sun pop over the hills, an improbably pink orb playing hide and seek with the clouds and fog. There are thirty of us here wiping the sleep from our eyes as we chug north on the Bosphorus, heading for the Black Sea. We've only just discovered our destination. The boat is strewn with microphones, musical instruments, two dozen glass teacups, a well-read copy of an Elif Şafak novel, and a cigarette long abandoned in its ashtray, burning away. No one seems to know what comes next.

The occasion for this four-hour boat trip unfolding at the crack of dawn on Friday is *The Anthem of Mu*, Theaster Gates's mesmerizing contribution to the Fourteenth Istanbul Biennial, which opened on Saturday and runs through November 1. His work also fills two floors of a shop on Boğazkesen Street, in Beyoğlu, where some days earlier I found a slide show of patterns, some hopeful pottery, and a great Freddie King record spinning on a Technics turntable.

Boğazkesen, I learn, means "cutthroat" as well as "a cut to the Bosphorus," and the street really does cut down a steep hill to the strait, which splits Istanbul and divides Europe from Asia. That wide body of water, cinematic at every moment, is the unlikely hinge of this biennial, an exhibition in thirty-six parts organized by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and titled "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought-Forms." It is unlikely but also obvious—as the defining feature of Istanbul—and moreover effective in restoring the spirit of any visitor to the biennial exhausted by trying to match Christov-Bakargiev's will and see everything. (Even if you cut the fat from the list of participants, there are still close to a hundred artists with substantial works on view.)

Two musicians climb up from the boat's lower deck: the mustachioed Burhan Öçal with a Turkish *darbuka*, and Cory Wilkes in dark shades, torn denim, and a trumpet. They begin to play. Gates joins them, sings a song of love and longing, and settles into storytelling mode. His niece asks her grandfather one day to tell her where he's from. "Silver City, Mississippi," he says. She comes back to him skeptical. Where's that? she asks. Her grandfather tells of how the Army Corps of Engineers built a dam that flooded the land. "Now Silver City is underwater," Gates growls. "Silver City is Mu.... Mu is the place you can't see. Mu is the place you can't go to.... Mu is the place you can never see.... And so I am searching for Mu."

Our boat rounds a corner and we see the Black Sea. Above us loom the two arms of the controversial third bridge over the Bosphorus, under construction on either side. The closer we get to the bridge the more fraught the performance becomes. Wilkes lurches erratically, thrusting his trumpet to the cardinal points of a scrambled compass. Gates grabs hold of his torso to keep him from falling overboard. A dance of struggle, protection, and paternal love rises and subsides. The boat turns, the engine stalls, and we head back to the accompaniment of Gates's singing. Öçal and Wilkes play off the edges of the boat, mournful-sounding, an elegy for all that's been lost at sea.



Left: Artists Theaster Gates, Liam Gillick, and Adrián Villar Rojas. Right: Artist Banu Cennetoğlu.

The Istanbul Biennial has been around for nearly thirty years now. It has weathered economic collapse (1994), a devastating earthquake (1999), and unending demonstrations against its sponsors and funders (Koç Holding and the Eczacıbaşı family). The last edition opened within four months of massive antigovernment protests in Gezi Park. At the time, it seemed like everything was at stake. Now, the wider political situation is as urgent, more distressing, and even more complex. Turkey is uncomfortably embroiled in the Syrian civil war. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, three times prime minister and currently president, reacted badly to his party losing ground to a coalition of Kurds and leftists in the last elections. Since then, under the guise of bombing ISIS, he has resumed Turkey's war with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). He also called for snap elections. Allegations of corruption and rumors of a coup abound. Crackdowns on dissenters, rivals, and power brokers outside Erdoğan's fold are frequent. Moreover, there are now millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey. One can hear the accented Arabic of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo everywhere. That's a minor aural enrichment in the life of the city. Corresponding to it, however, is a major humanitarian disaster, the great travesty of our time, which is now plain for all to see—in the torrent of stories about the migrant crisis in Europe and the single, searing image of a three-year-old boy named Aylan Kurdi, whose tiny lifeless body washed up on a beach in Bodrum last week.

Bleak, I know, but this is the world we live in, a fact that hit me hard as I arrived in Istanbul. On Monday, Mari Spirito's itinerant young institution Protocinema opened a show in Karaköy for the Moroccan artist Latifa Echakhch, juxtaposing a joyous video of teenage boys jumping into the sea with a ruminative daily performance, for which another teenage boy uses a large Chinese calligraphy brush to write in water on the floor. The lines of text, destined to disappear quickly as they dry, are taken from the letters of young men writing to their mothers (and occasionally their fathers) to say goodbye and explain their joining ISIS in Syria, where they'll face no shortage of depravity and an all but certain death.

On Tuesday, I was stuck in traffic, winding toward the Marmara Pera Hotel, when I saw Banu Cennetoğlu's *The List* for the first time. Up on the hotel's roof is an old LED screen hosting the public art program YAMA, which the curator Övül Durmuşoğlu just recently revived. Her first installment is the latest iteration of a project Cennetoğlu has been working on for ten years—a list of all the migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who have died within or on Europe's borders since 1993, documenting the name, age, sex, country of origin, and cause of death in each case. Earlier versions were circulated on billboards, posters, and newspapers. From now through September 26, *The List* is flashing on the YAMA screen from sunset to sunrise, one word in Arial font at a time, until the four-hundred-plus-page document is done and the screen goes dark.



Left: Novelist Orhan Pamuk with curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and artist William Kentridge. Right: Artist Michael Rakowitz.

A formidable strength of Christov-Bakargiev's biennial is that in real, no-bullshitting terms, it puts these awful events of our age in historical perspective, delving into past experiences of exodus and exile to see what art has done (and can do) with the wreckage of tragedy and trauma. At a press conference on Wednesday morning, as the assembled masses were sweating it out on the playground of a neoclassical Italian high school, journalists asked if her emphasis on the Armenian genocide had elicited state censorship (the short answer was no) and what her thoughts were on the plan (hatched by Pelin Tan, Anton Vidokle, and Artıkışler Kolektifi) for the biennial's artists to suspend their participation for fifteen minutes to protest the Turkish government's actions against the Kurds and demand a return to the peace process.

"Being a feminist," she began, "politics starts with the body, how we eat, how we sit, how we make love. Politics is everything. It's not just an action or a gesture. If the artists want to do this, then it's fine by me." She paused. "But if you're asking me if it's going to have any effect on the Machiavellian deals going on, that's another question. I'm a skeptic."

If this makes the preview days sound like a dire political congress, then rest assured, the atmosphere was jovial and festive, with the usual dinners and parties and jarring contrasts between the lives artists lead, the works they do, and the moneyed patrons who are more and more called upon to boost the budgets of biennials everywhere. On Wednesday night, the opening cocktail at Istanbul Modern was a bit rowdy for me, the afterparty on the roof of the gallery-packed Misr apartment building highly unlikely—but I was thoroughly charmed to discover that people still drink and smoke and dance as if they might die the next day.



Left: Curator Emre Baykal with artist Füsun Onur. Right: Artists Francis Aliys and Kristina Buch.

The next day, still alive, I joined hundreds of others—artists, collectors, curators, museum staff, friends, and a few rumpled members of the press—on a field trip to the island of Büyükada. I avoided, if only just, being run over by the ingénues of MoMA PS1's patronage set, who were joyriding around the careless isle on a rickety horse-drawn buggy. Some time later I nearly bulldozed through Glenn Lowry, MoMA's director, who, with rather less of an entourage, was stepping sprightly down the perilous dirt path from the ruins of Leon Trotsky's island exile home to Adrián Villar Rojas's wow-inducing installation of crossbred sea monsters on the beach below.

What might have been the highlight of my day, a conversation between the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk and the artist William Kentridge, was basically a bust, so I took a break. And throughout those days of dragging my sorry five-months-pregnant self up and down and all around Istanbul in the stultifying heat, I did often wonder if that had been Christov-Bakargiev's point, to break us and force our revolt. She said nearly as much in a lovely conversation with the elfin septuagenarian artist Füsun Onur, whose performance for the biennial is a whitewashed fishing boat, mounted with a sound system, slowly tooling up and down the Bosphorus while blasting out a poem. In the Q&A that followed, people kept asking Onur, Christov-Bakargiev, and Hans Ulrich Obrist (of course) how it worked, where to find it. "If you just slow down and sit on the roof of Istanbul Modern and have a coffee and sit for an hour," Christov-Bakargiev said, "it'll pass and you'll see it."

The indefatigable Anna Boghigian, who lives in Cairo and has filled the ground floor of the old Greek primary school in Galata with a sprawling installation of sails and honeycombs, gave me one such occasion to slow down, stopping me on Boğazkesen Street for a chat about the troubles in our region. ISIS had just destroyed Palmyra's Temple of Bel, a two-thousand-year-old treasure. "I think they want to destroy all the temples, all signs of paganism and pagan worship," Boghigian told me. "This is ignorance at its fullest."

A haunting performance by Haig Aivazian gave me another moment of respite, as eight members of an all-male Armenian church choir slowly climbed the stairs of the Greek school, singing an ethereal folk song, originally sung in Turkish by Armenian women lamenting the loss of their men who had gone to Istanbul for work. A few hours after *The Anthem of Mu*, Michael Rakowitz allowed me one last pause when I pulled him aside for a lightning-quick lunch to hear about *The Flesh Is Yours, The Bones Are Ours*, his impressive three-room installation of plaster casts, rubbings, and retro vitrines telling the story of Armenian artisans through their apprentices. Given how polished the work appears, I was shocked to hear that the whole thing had fallen apart five weeks earlier, when Rakowitz's main character balked. All of the work was made in the last three weeks, a period of production so intense that at one point he begged Christov-Bakargiev to let him go. She said no, urged him on. Having worked with her for fifteen years now, he swears by her style of tough love.



Left: Artist Anna Boghigian. Right: Artist Asli Çavusoglu with curators Defne Ayas and Ceren Erdem.

I'll leave it to the sounder methodology of art historians to suss out exactly what's going in the exhibition with patterns, decorations, and motifs—and with Art Nouveau, theosophy, and science (loved those early images of the northern lights). For me, the forms that resonated, gave the show its emotional oomph, the

preview days their experiential heft, and reached out to other projects and the wider world were those that are most widely shared—the love songs, the letters, the lists.

When I spoke to Christov-Bakargiev in July, she told me that when she decided to divide the biennial into so many small parts, she was thinking of Edward Snowden holed up in his Hong Kong hotel room. “I wanted to get beyond the complaints of there being no public space,” she said, “to consider the use of private space and the agency of a public act.” I thought about that again as I looked up to see *The List* before leaving. Not for the first time all week I wondered: What will we do? Who will use these moments of solitude—so essential to our travels—to do something brave? At a time when we are losing so much, real places like Palmyra, will we ever recover the lost promise of Mu?

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Artists Lawrence Weiner and Basim Magdy. (Photo: Kate Sutton) Right: Protocinema's Mari Spirito with artist Emre Hüner.



Left: Fiorucci Art Trust founder Nicoletta Fiorucci with Nadia Samdani of the Dhaka Art Summit. Right: Artist Cevdet Ere and writer H. G. Masters.



Left: Dealer Tamara Corm with Tate Modern's director of exhibitions, Achim Borchardt-Hume. Right: Artist Iz Öztat with Istanbul Biennial director Bige Örer.



Left: Writer and curator Theodor Ringborg with artist Meriç Algün Ringborg. Right: Curator Vasif Kortun.



Left: Artist Fatma Belkis. Right: Artist Alex Lee with Özkan Cangüvan.



Left: Sheena Wagstaff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Right: François Quintin, director of patronage for Groupe Galeries Lafayette, with Beirut Art Center director Marie Muracciole.



Left: Curators Till Fellrath and Basak Senova. Right: Curator Duygu Demir.

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