



Ugo Rondinone, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, 1999/2017, neon, Perspex, translucent film, aluminum. From the series “Rainbow Poems,” 1997–2017. Installation view, Mustafa Kemal Cultural Centre, Istanbul. Photo: Onur Dogman.

## the 15th Istanbul Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

**THIS FALL**, as the Fifteenth Istanbul Biennial opened in my hometown, art’s resilience was evident—lustrous, even, in the face of negative expectations, populist politics, and outside speculations that an oppressive state would hinder free expression, or that Istanbul would be a dangerous place to visit. The biennial also transcended trends, moving beyond unwieldy constructions of political correctness and pushing against airless conceptions of the exhibition as a curator’s stronghold. Intimately political works proved to be accessible, and person-to-person communication was encouraged, as the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, this year’s curators, invited fifty-six artists from thirty-two countries to present work investigating the concept of “a good neighbor.”

And so the show started with a core component of politics: the neighborhood. As communities shaped by geography and municipalities, neighborhoods imply borders, which in turn define states, but also, more generally, various relations of all scales. A neighborhood, too,

is the interface between families and larger entities; it is the liminal space where politics brew. This iteration's concept shot right to the heart of the problem underlying conflicts worldwide by questioning our tendency to see "the neighbor as the bearer of a monstrous Otherness," to borrow Slavoj Žižek's words.

At the biennial's initial press conference in December 2016, residents from different neighborhoods of Istanbul took the stage and asked a myriad of questions, such as "Is a good neighbor . . . too much to ask for? . . . Reading the same newspaper as you? . . . Cooking for you when you're sick?" The resonance of that series of acts lay in the many repercussions, however small, that rippled outward from their performance and into suburbs and projects that various developers had built as residential zones conducive to neighborly connections. The prompts had even wider reach in the project's next phase: Artist Lukas Wassmann and graphic designer Rupert Smyth—in collaboration with the curators—installed billboards in cities worldwide featuring the aforementioned queries, translated into the languages spoken in the signs' various host countries. Meanwhile, notions of neighborly relations were further explored in the exhibition catalogue's companion book, *a good neighbor: Stories*, as well as via a series of anecdotes published in the online Turkish newspaper T24.

Throughout the work on view, the concepts of diversity, inclusivity, and the microcosm were often enveloped in personal narratives, and intimate accounts delivered by multiple voices articulated perspectives that commanded a wide range of emotional registers: While Mark Dion's coupled works *The Persistent Weeds of Istanbul* and *The Resilient Marine Life of Istanbul*, both 2017, entailed intensive collaborations between wildlife illustrators and fine artists that portrayed two biotic communities as case studies for urban sprawl, a video installation by Monica Bonvicini, *Hausfrau Swinging*, 1997, depicted a naked woman wearing a maquette of a house on her head and banging it violently against walls.



Sim Chi Yin, Zhou Limei and Zhao Qingxuang, 2011, ink-jet print, 19 3/4 × 27 1/2". From the series "The Rat Tribe," 2011–14.

In addition to the exhibited works, the biennial's public program, coordinated by artist Zeyno Pekünlü, offered two main symposia, "Chosen Families" and "Mutual Fate," which encouraged communally shaped experiences in various settings. Collective Çukurcuma, an Istanbul-based nonprofit, staged readings, while Hamisch—a Syrian cultural house—and the Goethe-Institut co-organized a workshop in which refugee children created their own superheroes with the help of young Syrian artists. Such events were often realized with the participation of activists, researchers, and musicians.

Artist Ugo Rondinone's neon sculpture *Where Do We Go from Here?*, 1999/2017, from his "Rainbow Poems" series, loomed above it all, displayed for the duration of the biennial on the roof of the Mustafa Kemal Cultural Centre, where it will remain permanently on view. The piece, it's worth noting, was initially installed in Taksim Square—one of Istanbul's most iconic public spaces, linked both to the metropolis's uniquely rich history and to its present-day dystopian leanings.

One might have expected questions about the concept of neighbors to lead not so much to

discourse as to discordant noise, given, for example, the everyday cacophony of social media, not to mention the hundreds of Turkish radio and TV stations actively voicing opposing views—testaments to society’s wider fragmentation—which seem to be, if not deaf, vehemently impermeable to one another. To take just one portion of the nation’s many psychological and cultural disjunctions: Election-result forecasts generated by research and consultancy firms working for the country’s political parties and major media outlets alike have consistently revealed, since the late 1980s, sharp divides in the Turkish population’s responses to the government’s stances on secularism and democratic values.



**Candeğer Furtun, *Untitled* (detail), 1994–96, ceramic, 1' 6" × 19' 8 1/4" × 1' 6 3/4". Photo: Sahir Uğur Eren.**

And yet the prospect of leveraging the neighborhood as a political force is not completely foreign to Turkish minds. Much as it fueled, in America, Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, which relied on “change” building outward from smaller communities, this tactic is at the root of the current Turkish government, which gained momentum through highly successful communication with neighborhoods that helped it establish power in the 1980s and '90s from municipalities upward. Since then, of course, divides of ideology and identity

separating regions otherwise existing in close proximity have grown painfully obvious, whether in Turkey, the US, Spain, North and South Korea, or the Arabian Peninsula, and animosity between neighbors has come to be recognized as an undeniable component of ongoing conflicts both latent and violent.

The biennial's venues were full of works that represented or alluded to clashes between neighbors where borders have been either challenged or violated: In Erkan Özgen's video *Wonderland*, 2016, a thirteen-year-old deaf-mute Syrian boy articulated, using his body and nonverbal sounds, his traumatic experiences in Kobanî, to which ISIS laid siege between 2014 and 2015. Candegör Furtun's *Untitled*, 1994–96—an apt response to male dominance—was a series of ceramics showing bare human legs “manspreading” in public and private spaces. Evoking ideas of movement and survival, Pedro Gómez-Egaña's *Domain of Things*, 2017, comprised a large-scale mechanical installation manipulated by performance artists, seemingly re-creating a ground-floor apartment and the basement beneath it. An installation also pertaining to estrangement within a living space by Leander Schönweger, *Our Family Lost*, 2017, was a portrayal of confinement, wherein the irregularities underlying relationships were expressed through architectural elements, systematically decreasing in scale not unlike the interiors of *Alice in Wonderland*. A multichannel video, *Home Sweet Home*, 2017, by Volkan Aslan reflected on isolation, in scenes set against the backdrop of Istanbul's Bosphorus Strait, while Sim Chi Yin's “The Rat Tribe,” 2011–14, comprised portraits of migrant laborers living in underground Beijing shelters.



**Pedro Gómez-Egaña, *Domain of Things*, 2017**, metal, wooden panels, furniture, sound, performance. Installation view, Galata Greek Primary School, Istanbul. Photo: Sahir Uğur Eren.

The biennial's theme also prompted more indirect takes on the frissons of disquietude that arise when cultures and groups find themselves adjacent to one another. In Yonamine's densely layered collages *Drontheimer Strasse 19 I*, 2015, and *Tamam 3*, 2017, for example, the artist drew from the visual vernacular of city streets: graffiti, torn down, detritus left in the aftermath of protests, remnants of urban accumulation turned to rubbish. Tsang Kin-Wah's installation *The Fourth Seal—HE Is to No Purpose and HE Wants to Die for the Second Time*, 2010, featured a chaotic accumulation of text projected throughout the interior of a room. Drawing on religious and philosophical concepts from around the world, it conveys spiritual turmoil via a dazzling swarm of words that seem to express either inner voices or fervent dialogues intertwining into an intense cacophony.

Dystopia may not allow for a sustainable discourse, but what it prompts is resistance: The biennial gave voice to the neglected and the downtrodden, and hope to the isolated and the remorseful. It created opportunities to speak out against war and annihilation and to speak up for LGBT rights—for basic human rights—all in a context that emphasized the universality of

human emotions. Elmgreen & Dragset, with their gentle touch and poetic juxtapositions, furnished an example of a new mode of curating that does not overwhelm the art it foregrounds with overly confident yet blurry theorizing. The Istanbul Biennial will endure as a stronghold for artists, and its most recent iteration proved that form always exceeds the confines of messaging, of instrumentalized words or transactions—thereby showing that art is more than theory, and much more than politics.

Mine Haydaroglu is editor in chief of the Turkish art magazine Sanat Dünyamız.

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