



Ozan Atalan, *Monochrome (detail)*, 2019, still from the 5-minute color HD video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising a second 5-minute color HD video, concrete, soil, water, and a buffalo skeleton. Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum (Antrepot 5). From the 16th Istanbul Biennial.

16th Istanbul Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

THE EIGHTH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL was titled “Poetic Justice.” Sixteen years on, the latest edition might as well have returned to that title. Roughly a month before the opening, a press release from the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSÜ) appeared in my inbox, somberly announcing the loss of the biennial’s main venue, the Haliç Shipyards, “due to the delay of the construction process . . . and the need to complete the disposal of asbestos materials determined to be present.” After lending its prestige to a real-estate project that threatens to destroy invaluable living and material cultural heritage, the mega-exhibition had been expelled from the site it had helped to legitimize. Splendidly situated on the Golden Horn, with sweeping views of the peninsular Old City, the nearly six-hundred-year-old Haliç complex would have been back in the public eye for the first time in years had the exhibition actually taken place there. The yards were gradually and purposely rendered obsolete around the turn of the millennium; having been classified as a protected historical area in 1995, they were handed over to the city by the Turkish Maritime Organization in 2006 with the proviso that they be used for the “upkeep, repair, and construction of conventional passenger ferries.” At that point, cordoned off from the

public sphere, the site became fair game in the neoliberal scramble for the spoils of urban redevelopment.



View of “The Seventh Continent,” 2019, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul State Painting and Sculpture Museum (Antrepo 5), Istanbul. Figure: Mariechen Danz, *Womb Tomb: Imprint Pressures (bog body/map spill/fm)*, 2019. Platform: Mariechen Danz, *Body Bricks (detail)*, 2019. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren.

The winner of the contract for the Haliç Yacht Port and Complex Project successively rebranded the plot Haliç Port and then Tersane Istanbul (Istanbul Shipyard). A recently disclosed master plan for a science center in the area (supported by a foundation whose board of trustees is led by a son-in-law of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) revealed that only a handful of the buildings on the grounds had been deemed “worthy of preservation as a cultural asset” after all. Earlier this year, President Erdoğan announced that the Sadberk Hanım Museum, established by the longtime main sponsor of the Istanbul Biennial, Koç Holding, would relocate to the site. Architect and academic T. Gül Köksal’s article “The Sacking of a Six-Century-Old Heritage,” from which I have drawn most of the

facts above, details the unwillingness of the developers to share information or negotiate with Haliç Dayanışması (Golden Horn Solidarity), a group founded in the heat of the 2013 Gezi Park protests that brings together workers, residents of the working-class neighborhoods around the site, architects, urban planners, and others, to protect the shipyards' historic structures and advocate for its neighbors' right to the city.

Not surprisingly, the unprecedented loss of Haliç Shipyards prompted some awkward maneuvering from curator Nicolas Bourriaud on behalf of the biennial, as he finally took a position on the controversy over the site. Only after having secured a new central venue—the renovated midcentury warehouse Antrepo 5, future home of the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul State Painting and Sculpture Museum, slated to reopen there next year—did Bourriaud write in an Instagram post, “Proud to move and stand against #toxicgentrification” [*sic*].



Eva Kot'átková, *The Machine for Restoring Empathy* (detail), 2019, mixed media with performance. Installation view, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University Istanbul, Museum of Painting and Sculpture (Antrepo 5). Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren.

The relocation of some forty projects (out of fifty-six) to a venue made available only a few weeks prior to the exhibition's opening was an incredible accomplishment and merits a standing ovation for the whole biennial team as well as its artists. Bourriaud documented the feat in an amply illustrated one-page essay in the *Field Report* (i.e., the catalogue). This text's dramatic title, "The Exodus: A State of Ecological Emergency," puts the construction-delay-ridden departure from a highly problematic site on a par with a biblical event and recasts the forced flight in a heroic light. The allusion to ecology chimes with the biennial's moniker, "The Seventh Continent," a reference to the gigantic mass of trash covering six hundred thousand square miles in the Pacific Ocean, but in the case of this exodus, art replaces garbage as the thing that is systematically ejected.

The show fails to problematize the anthropological gaze.

In contrast to the nave-like interior of the shipyards' main building (think Venice's Arsenale), the layout of Antrepo 5 is decentralized to a degree that proved less than ideal for an exhibition of this scale. Constructively deconstructed by the prominent Turkish architect Emre Arolat to showcase one of the most important collections of modern painting and sculpture from Turkey, Antrepo 5 boasts clusters of rectangular solids that unevenly jut into or out of the building's original reinforced-concrete frame like shipping containers. Presented in relative isolation from one another, the works, even the strongest, are subsumed in "a kind of archipelago of disparate thoughts" (to repurpose Bourriaud's own description of our present moment).



Andrea Zittel, *Personal Plots*, 2019, concrete blocks, plaster, paint, gravel. Installation view, Büyükkada, İstanbul. Photo: Onur Dogman.

What is promised by “The Seventh Continent”? Warning visitors not to mistake the exhibition for “a manifesto for ecological art [or] a comparison between the practices of artists and anthropologists,” Bourriaud’s curatorial statement extends an invitation to “immerse [one’s self] within the tribes composed by the artists . . . [and] be the anthropologists of this new world.” (Apparently, it’s fine to compare art *viewers* to anthropologists.) Most of the artistic propositions could be neatly placed in one of two categories: all-too-literal journalistic accounts of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, or ecologically minded yet hermetic, narrative yet formalist parafictions. The former category is exemplified by a pair of video installations, Eloise Hawser’s *The Tipping Hall*, 2019, which graphically details the operations of one of Turkey’s largest waste-recycling facilities, and Ozan Atalan’s *Monochrome*, 2019, featuring a sea-buffalo skeleton and drone footage on small flat screens of sea buffalo that are being driven from their habitat on the outskirts

of Istanbul by urban sprawl. The latter group of works, many of them characterized by a post-Haraway, vaguely posthumanist bent, includes the Berlin- and Vilnius-based duo Pakui Hardware, who upcycle *informe* aesthetics by juxtaposing visually enticing materials such as thermo-vacuumed Plexiglas, silicone, latex, and faux fur to create shapeless bodies whose organs grow on the outside (*Extrakorporal*, 2019). The anatomical motif recurs in *Body Bricks*, 2019, by Mariechen Danz, who attempted to create a glyph-like writing system by pressing—à la potato print—organ models made of semiprecious stones onto 2,455 handmade replicas of Haliç Shipyards bricks. Perhaps the mostly earth-tone installation initially appeared too drab, for the artist also included a life-size ceramic human body in tie-dye colors with yet more organs hanging out of it (*Womb Tomb: Imprint Pressures [bog body/map spill/fm]*, 2019).



Ursula Mayer, *The Fire of Knowledge Burns All Karma to Ashes*, 2019, HD video, color, silent, indefinite duration. Büyükada, Istanbul.

The problem with “The Seventh Continent” is that while striving toward a unified anthropology of the human and the nonhuman, it gives in too much to a certain utopian universalism. Bourriaud goes as far as calling his vision variously “post-ethnicist” and “post-cultural,” positing “a territory where all subjects coexist and co-work.” While the *Field Report* cites Okwui Enwezor’s 2012 La Triennale, “Intense Proximity,” as an anthropologically inclined predecessor, Bourriaud’s show fails to similarly problematize the power dynamics inherent in the anthropological gaze. It is ill-advised to attempt to reclaim and redefine some of the most destructive constructs in the history of white-supremacist settler colonialism, as Bourriaud appears to be trying to do, however circumspectly or ironically, when he refers to artists as “the primitive and the savage of their own tribe,” qualifying their works with “radical strangeness.” “Strange” as these works may be, the most potent contributions to the show resist such exceptionalism and blatant exoticism with an intelligently communicated layering of fiction, humor, and sensitivity to context.

In this vein, Eva Kot’átková’s participatory work *The Machine for Restoring Empathy*, 2019, playfully fashions textiles, in a gesture of trans-species fellow feeling, for the use of humans, animals, plants, and objects who/which “lack something” or “feel incomplete, broken, or wounded.” Korakrit Arunanondchai supplements a magical-realist video about his grandmother’s dementia and a “drone spirit” with a room of painted-over video stills on canvas (*Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names*, 2019). Strewn with dried flowers and weeds, the installation poetically examines how technology inflects our memories (or lack thereof) and our very understanding of life cycles. Dora Budor’s standout trio of “dust chambers” (*Origin I, II, and III*, all 2019), on the other hand, are filled with drifting particles in hues borrowed from J. M. W. Turner paintings and are activated by the din of nearby construction, as if to show that the incessant production of surplus value directly fuels aestheticizing impulses—a sort of inversion of Man Ray’s photograph *Dust Breeding*, 1920, which documents the motes of dirt that collected over the course of year on Duchamp’s *Large Glass*.



Hale Tenger, *Appearance* (detail), 2019, black obsidian mirrors, iron, epoxy resin paint, water, audio-spotlight speaker. Installation view, Büyükkada, Istanbul. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren.

A ninety-minute ferry ride away, on the largest of the Princes' Islands, where the wealthiest Istanbulites used to summer in well-appointed mansions, the exhibition continues with a particularly underwhelming set of works, often bearing little to no relation to their locations. In a public square near the harbor, Andrea Zittel presents a large horizontal sculpture whose concrete grid of roughly grave-size rectangles is filled with black, gray, and yellow pebbles (*Personal Plots*, 2019) that perhaps would not have been so listless in its original spot in the shipyards. (The work had already begun to collect trash, not unlike the actual Seventh Continent, on the second day of the preview.) In Anadolu Kulübü, an old-fashioned social club set up by Atatürk up the hill, Armin Linke's multifaceted yet academically dry exposé of deep-sea mining (*Prospecting Ocean*, 2018) is coupled, for no clear reason, with Ursula Mayer's *The Fire of Knowledge Burns All Karma to Ashes*, 2019, an HD-video loop of a life-size LED avatar of trans Dutch model Valentijn De Hingh

floating against a black background, blowing out the flames that emerge from her left hand.

One notable work in this especially lackluster part of the show is Hale Tenger's minimal intervention in the overgrown garden of a stone mansion uphill from the club—the former summer residence of a nineteenth-century patriarch of Constantinople, repurposed as a primary school around the time of the establishment of the Turkish Republic under Atatürk. *Appearance*, 2019, dots the garden with a handful of round black obsidian mirrors, while unintelligible, hushed voices materialize all around with no apparent source. If you stand by the apple tree, you may be able to finally make out the recitation of a poem about girdling—the practice of wrapping a strip of bark around the trunk of a tree to overstimulate fruit growth, which eventually kills the tree. The last line of the poem is spoken in a barely audible whisper: “Can you be by not doing?” The most overpowering sight in the biennial is steps away. At this height, the garden commands a view of the Asian side of Istanbul endlessly extending southward, a giant vale of glass facades reflecting the sun's glare as the forests helplessly recede toward the hilltops beyond. It seems safe to assume that Tenger's simple, mindful plea against the desiring machine that is the Capitalocene will go unheard by most, including those in charge of decision-making and funding for the Biennial.

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