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Artists participating in the 15th Istanbul biennial in Turkey

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Abstract

The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts has been organising the Istanbul Biennial since 1987. The biennial aims to create a meeting point in İstanbul in the field of visual arts between artists from diverse cultures and the audience. The 14 biennials that İKSV has organised up to now have enabled the formation of an international cultural network between local and international art circles, artists, curators and art critics by bringing together new trends in contemporary art every 2 years. Curated by the artist duo Elmgreen and Dragset, the Istanbul Biennial exhibited works by 56 artists from 32 countries which discuss the concepts of house, neighborhood and belonging under the title 'a good neighbour'. The works of the nine Turkish artists participated in the 15th Istanbul Biennial are included in this review. A descriptive study in the screening model, the data of the report, was obtained by scanning the source.

Keywords: 15th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey artists.

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1. Introduction

The most comprehensive international art exhibition organised both in Turkey and throughout the geographical sphere we are in, the Istanbul Biennial plays an important role in the promotion of contemporary artists not only from Turkey but from a number of different countries in the international arena. After the first two biennials realised under the general coordination of Beral Madra in 1987 and 1989, IKSV decided to adapt a single curator system following the Istanbul Biennial directed by Vasif Kortun in 1992. The biennial was organised under the curatorship of Rene Block in 1995, Rosa Martinez in 1997, Paolo Colombo in 1999, Yuko Hasegawa in 2001, Dan Cameron in 2003, Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun in 2005, Hou Hanru in 2007 and What, How & for Whom/WHW in 2009, Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffmann in 2011 and by Fulya Erdemci in 2013. Held in 2015, the 14th Istanbul Biennial was drafted by Carolyn-Christov Bakargiev.

The work of the following artists participating from Turkey was reviewed.

1. Volkan Aslan (b. 1982, Ankara, lives in Istanbul) 'Home Sweet' 2017.
2. Alper Aydin (b. 1989, Ordu, Turkey lives in Ordu, Ankara, Konya and Istanbul) 'Home' 2017.
3. Burcak Bingol (b. 1976, Giresun, lives in Istanbul) 'Follower' 2017.
4. Cancleger Furtun.
5. Gozde Ilkin (b. 1981, Kutahya, lives in Istanbul) 'Inverted Home' 2017.
6. Erkan Ozgen (b. 1971, Derik, Mardin, lives in Diyarbakir) 'Wonderland' 2016 Video.
7. Ali Taptik (b. 1983, Istanbul, lives in Istanbul) 'Friends and Strangers' 2017.
8. Tugce Tuna (b. 1973, Mons, Belgium, lives in Istanbul) 'Body Drops' 2017, performance.
9. Bilal Yilmaz (b. 1986, Manisa, Lives in Istanbul) 'Dirty Box' 2016.
10. Yogunluk (Founded in 2013, Istanbul, based in Istanbul) 'The House' 2017.

1.1. Volkan Aslan (b. 1982, Ankara, Turkey lives in Istanbul, Turkey)

Volkan Aslan's video installation *Home Sweet Home* (2017) is a meditative take on the realities of displacement. With its disjunctions of time and perspective and imagery of water and travel, the work commemorates individuals forced to make long journeys, such as migrants or those who have suffered a loss of home. *Home Sweet Home* is also a poetic parable about the way in which we all share an itinerant and fragile human condition, even though each of us may experience this condition differently.

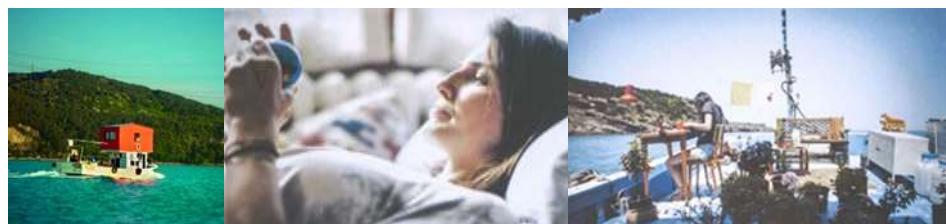


Figure 1.

The three-channel video installation, set within the Bosphorus Strait in Istanbul, takes as its starting point a tragic image of human itinerancy: a hybrid boat-home structure commonly found in poor areas within large cities and used to create temporary dwellings on bodies of water. A woman sits on the front of a boat, looks out onto the water and observes the passing landscape. Scenes of domestic interiors and daily routines meld with views of landscapes, shores and city views. As the work develops, we see, with bitter-sweet irony, that the three places in the film—which initially seemed distinct rare in fact depictions of different views onto linked realities.

The film speaks of various forms of collapse: of the security of home; of the architecture of inside and outside. It reflects meditatively on a world upended and inverted, in which many are on the move

and in disarray, where even tragedies that initially seemed to be too distant to affect us are closer than we think, and neighbours we may not know are in fact right beside us.

1.2. Alper Aydin (b. 1989, Ordu, Turkey lives in Ordu, Ankara, Konya and Istanbul, Turkey)



Figure 2. D8M, 2017

'Progress', or the advancement of human history, encompasses a number of ruinous and destructive acts. Processes of construction and wreckage are closely linked. The ideologies, instruments and technologies of human advancement are intertwined with the reality of natural resource exhaustion, ecological collapse, war, displacement and the precariousness of financial and environmental systems. The works of Alper Aydin respond to human interactions with nature—either through subtle interventions in natural settings or more direct engagements with human acts of construction and urban development. His temporary interventions into environmental sites point out the connections between human building and ecological collapse and resource depletion. For a past project, he used water-based paint to inscribe upon stones on the coast of the black sea, their exact weight: natural resource reduced to rational system, and abstraction standing for exploitation and commodification.

For the Istanbul Biennial, Aydin's work D8M (2017), which includes the blade of a bulldozer, has been placed inside Istanbul Modern. This tool for razing and displacing natural terrain is seen pushing a thicket of real trees that were cut to make way for a new airport north of Istanbul, as part of a construction project that is also displacing homes. An emblem of the eradication that comes with construction, the piece of equipment appears to roar and flex itself. Alienated from their 'natural' settings, the blade and trees foreground the brutal erasure of nature done in the name of expansion, efficiency and mobility. The work animates and performs our destructiveness, disavowal and forgetfulness of our natural habitats.

1.3. Burcak Bingol (b. 1976, Giresun, lives in Istanbul) 'Follower' 2017

Burcak Bingol reproduces ordinary materials or objects using ceramic and ornamental patterns. Her glazing techniques, floral designs and motifs, common to the Islamic world, were prevalent in the Ottoman period. Thus, her works are investigations of Turkish cultural history and its legacy, as seen in relationship to historical crafts, symbols and visual motifs—though placed within a contemporary context.



Figure 3. 'Follower' 2017

For the Biennial, Bingol has created a series of works responding to today's Istanbul, the global culture of surveillance, as well as to the tradition of ceramics and crafts. Works in the series 'Follower'

are experiments in dissemblance and stealth, in which tradition becomes a means of camouflage or disguise. Having observed that in the Tarlabasi neighbourhood of Istanbul, there was an increasing number of surveillance cameras, Bingol covered a number of them with a ceramic pattern of flowers and garlands and placed them on the exteriors of buildings. The implicit weaponry of the surveillance camera is neutralised by the imagery of flowers, becoming fragile and even beautiful, and the decoration incorporates plants from the Beyoglu area of Istanbul, which is symbolic as a site of resistance.

Bingol's cameras track not only the spectator, inverting the relationship between viewer and viewed, but also the memory of public, social and environmental spaces. Even though its appearance is rapidly changing, Istanbul owes much to the historical legacy of craft. Bingol's work can be seen as an ode to these traditional techniques as well as a way of resisting or negating the technologies that are set against them in contemporary contexts.

1.4. Candeger Furtun (b. 1936 Istanbul Turkey lives Istanbul Turkey) Untitled, 1994–1996



Figure 4. Untitled, 1994–1996

Candeger Furtun employs traditional ceramic techniques in order to examine and portray the human body. She often works with reproductions of individual body parts, which are then combined so that an individual fragment can represent the whole or suggest a larger scene, history, idea or space. Having studied arts and crafts both at home and abroad in the 1950s and 1960s, her eye towards her own culture is that of an insider as well as an outsider.

Furtun's Untitled (1994–1996) series of ceramics shows nine bare human legs placed side by side and installed on a bench-like construction. Recalling mannequin legs, the disembodied limbs are male, if hairless, and one pair is touched by a hand. Suggesting a number of bodies in a row, the work references the hammam culture of Turkey, in which people sit on benches in a space of healing and rest. Yet it might also recall the seating of people on public transport, in waiting rooms, or other public–private spaces. Or perhaps this group of exclusively masculine 'manspreading' limbs quietly addresses the furtive conditions and exclusionary tactics of male power: the coming together of men in order to negotiate or sign deals behind closed doors.

While the leg is the means of mobility for the body, here it is immobilised; while the hand is a site of expression, of use and of touch, here it is without function. Through this abstraction, Furtun's works contrast the individuality of human bodies with their representation, pointing to notions of artifice and seriality. Despite the intensive physical labour that goes into the production of these ceramics made by casting and throwing—they are inherently ones of reproduction and sequence. Conversely, the work pays respect to the human form, which although subjugated to the forces of serialisation and homogenisation, remains particular, gendered and unique.

1.5. Gozde Ilkin (b. 1981, Kutahya, lives in Istanbul) 'Inverted Home' 2017



Figure 5. Inverted home/2017

Working with found garments and domestic fabrics, Gozde Ilkin is interested in objects that embody cultural codes and collective memory. She uses these clothes and textiles as intimate materials that carry the traces of history while devising her own contemporary imagery through such techniques as needlework and stitching, as well as painting. A careful attention to line used both figuratively and in abstract forms, dovetails with her focus on patterns, whether those representing social and political relationships, confrontation and definitions of power, or gender and urban histories. For Ilkin, patterns in fabrics are structures that bridge memory and the present, the imagined and the real.

For the Istanbul Biennial, Ilkin presents a number of works constructed from domestic fabrics that come from her family. Dowry sheets, curtains or tablecloths are modified using techniques such as cutting, perforating, disassembly, applique and fastening, some of which she learned directly from her mother and grandmother, who also taught her to weave. The imagery that she has incorporated into the works is culled from family photographs. The effect, as well as the multiplicity of styles and reference points, is to counteract and render unstable the normativity of family life—making it ‘disjunctive’, to borrow a word used in one of the works in her series Inverted Home (2017). With such titles as Adjacent Territory and Bonds of Love, The Individual Footing, the Layout Plan and The Deficient Joint Gap, the series investigates the borders of the home and points out the contradictions of the safe spaces within, the intransigence of memory, and the controversies that persist within social and family settings. At-Home Day (2009) combines floral motifs with what appear to be four women while Boys Eat Turkish Delight (2008) presents a domestic scene in which three men are seen playfully feeding each other at a table.

1.6. Erkan Ozgen (b. 1971, Derik, Mardin, lives in Diyarbakır) 'Wonderland' 2016 Video



Figure 6. 'Wonderland'

The ongoing European migrant crisis counts as one of the major humanitarian emergencies of the 21st century: millions have been displaced from the Middle East and northern Africa and made their way into Europe, facing perilous conditions both en route and at their precarious sites of arrival. Their stories—told with differing degrees of accuracy and objectivity through the media, documentary forms or art—repeatedly point to the difficulties of mediating and relating such experiences.

Erkan Ozgen's video 'Wonderland' (2016) reflects on the ineffability of trauma. The short video introduces a 13-year-old boy named Mohammed, who escaped from Kobani in northern Syria, directly

south of the border with Turkey—a city that experienced a significant siege by ISIL forces in January 2015. Since he is deaf and mute, Mohammad can use only his body, and no words, to articulate his traumatic experiences. He does so with animated energy and no overt sense of sadness. While we may not doubt the authenticity of the narratives that Mohammed so hauntingly conveys, his inability to express them on our usual terms points to the way in which the experiences of others can become sites of uncertainty, projections, misconceptions and fears. The work shows the impossibility of representing war and conflict, trauma and pain to those for whom these experiences are foreign, and how viewers must construct, imagine and visualise such experiences from their own subjective position. Seen in this light, the work's title perhaps refers to the space of the imagination and its importance in representing the inexpressible.

1.7. Ali Taptik (b. 1983, Istanbul, lives in Istanbul) 'Friends and Strangers 2017'



Figure 7. 'Friends and Strangers 2017'

Within cities, we are all neighbours. City life entails the coexistence of numerous people living in close proximity, whose relationships, encounters and interactions are largely products of chance and serendipity. Life-paths may intersect or they may not. Architect and photographer Ali Taptik's contribution to the Istanbul Biennial is a photographic installation with a virtual component, entitled Friends and Strangers (2017). The work tells a story about individuals from four different parts of Istanbul and their unexpected crossing of paths.

Presented at the Galata Greek Primary School, seven photographs are on display on four stairwell landings. Friends and Strangers reflects on questions such as empathy, proximity and interconnection within an urban context, asking, 'How do we relate to individuals we don't know'? The work portrays three people who are invited by a photographer to meet at his studio. Here, they undergo a social experiment based on a model of intersubjective closeness developed by American psychologist Arthur Aron. Aron posited that our personalities are largely formed by the people with whom we are close and devised a set of questions for people to ask each other in order to encourage intimacy.

Taptik's characters come to know one another in this way, as well as through questions from a 1967 questionnaire by Swiss writer Max Frisch. The online component of the work is interviews with Taptik's characters: Mehmet, an art patron and a CEO engineer, whom the photographer met at a fundraiser, and who collects the photographer's work; Merve, a strong-willed architect, who is politically active and has been a friend of the photographer since school, and Cem, a skilled printer, a quiet and selfless character with an intense interest in the city's flora and fauna. Employing Frisch's questions, Aron's method, photography, storytelling and interviews, the work reflects on the conditions of mutual understanding, coexistence, urban life and the ways in which we relate to individuals. www.friendsandstrangers.net

1.8. Tugce Tuna (b. 1973, Mons, Belgium, lives in Istanbul) 'Body Drops' 2017, performance



Figure 8. Body drops

Tugce Tuna is a choreographer, dance artist, academic and movement therapist. According to the artist, the body is 'the space in which one lives and practices one's own politics'. For the Istanbul Biennial, she has developed a new performance entitled Body Drops (2017), performed by nine dancers on a regular schedule throughout the exhibition. Body Drops responds to notions of the body's remnants—what does the body leave behind in mind and space? How do different bodies experience spaces in unique and non-communicable ways? The work is performed in Kucuk Mustafa Pasa Hammam. Within Turkish culture, the hammam is a significant space for social organisation and division. In these private spaces of gender segregation, brides-to-be are evaluated and selected by mothers for their sons. Thus, these spaces are tied not only to ritual functions but also to the social functions of surveillance and control. Tuna's work responds to the architecture of such ritual and social spaces, in which the human body is put on display. A Turkish proverb states: 'Whoever enters the hammam will sweat'. The philosophical implication of this phrase is that people should prepare themselves for the consequences of whatever they commit themselves to. In pointing to this idiom through the title of her work, Tuna suggests that for individuals who do not perceive their body as 'normal', due to disability or a sense of inferiority, hammams are uncomfortable places. She sees her work as a direct intervention into this condition, showing that all bodies are equal, and as a challenge to the discrimination that we unwittingly commit. Here, she brings together bodies as neighbours under the uniting dome of the hammam, creating a performance inspired by the contours of the space as well as the star signs of the performers.

1.9. Bilal Yilmaz (b. 1986, Manisa, Lives in Istanbul) 'Dirty Box' 2016



Figure 9. Dirty Box 2016

Over the past few decades, processes of globalisation and neoliberalism have crept into many cities around the world. While they have resulted in short-term profit for some, they have also wiped away the local heritage of specific places. In fact, these processes are not entirely new: in the early 20th century, the Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin lamented shifts in the experience of daily life in cities, such as the loss (via capital) of chaotic and mysterious urban spaces, cluttered bazaars and festering canals. The city of Istanbul, in particular, which has long been prized both locally and abroad for its labyrinthine and mysterious urban landscape, and for its unique traditions in craft, food, architecture and labour, has experienced rapid change in recent years. There have been many forced

transfers of people, and as the city loses its individual character, centuries-old traditions and handicrafts are also vanishing.

Bilal Yilmaz's Dirty Box (2016) documents this passing of traditions of skilled labour due to recent changes in urban life in Istanbul. The artist photographed craftsmen, including a woodturner (Aydin Usta), a metalsmith (Bekir Usta), a carpenter (Fedai Usta) and a manufacturer (Caglayan Usta), who employ artisanal knowledge passed down by generations. These images are displayed via a mechanical 'shadow box', a portable wooden container that transforms into a projector and screens a map of Istanbul onto the wall, and with it the sites and practices of the varying dying crafts of the city. For Yilmaz, amid the processes of cleaning up cities for and by global capital, 'dirt' stands for the elusive, unexpected and chaotic aspects of cities: the historical, material debris, manual labour and crafts or the gritty sense of specificity that is the first to go as cities are homogenised. Dirt, then, is something to be treasured and—as here—affectionately documented.

1.10. Yoğunluk (Founded in 2013, Istanbul, based in Istanbul) 'The House' 2017



Figure 10. The House 2017

Many human experiences are highly conditioned by the spaces in which they take place. In art, the utilisation of space is key: consider the creative environment of the artist's studio, our habitual viewing of artworks within a museum gallery, or the architectures constructed for focused attention such as auditoriums or stages.

Seen in this way, changes in the organisation of space—in cities, in rural areas—or smaller-scale arrangements of domestic or working spaces, have not only physical but also psychological and cognitive effects. Through the use of site-specific installations, the Istanbul-based collective Yoğunluk—which in Turkish means 'Intensity'—explore the relationship between art and space. With roots in architecture and cinema, the group focuses on the way in which space can condition human experiences. Their new work The House (2017) is an installation in an Istanbul apartment rented by the collective as a studio. Located just off Istanbul's istiklal Street—a crowded, commercial avenue—on the top floor of an apartment, The House (which accommodates a maximum of five visitors at a time) is a darkened, domestic space that contrasts with the city's bustle. The work, impressionistic and atmospheric, aims to interlink our cognitive experience of the world with external and physical aspects, demonstrating how changes in lighting, sound and atmosphere can have dramatic effects. The furniture and various objects placed within the space are all coated in texturised, black silicone, the tactile experience of which combines with other sensory occurrences involving light and sound. Initially disorienting, as the installation progresses, light begins to enter the apartment and external stimuli such as sounds of the outside world become recognisable, creating a tangible sense of spatial change while demonstrating the crucial role of space in crafting our experience and situating us as viewers.

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