Messages in Bottles: Impressions from the 14th Art Biennial in Istanbul

The opening days of the 14th art biennial in Istanbul were haunted by a child's ghost, three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who had drowned during his fatal journey, fleeing Syria. Michal B. Ron on the Istanbul Biennial

Critique / Michal B. Ron October 16, 2015

The opening days of "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms" – the 14th art biennial in Istanbul, orchestrated by the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev – were haunted by a child's ghost. It was three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who had drowned during his fatal journey, fleeing Syria. All that week the media distributed the horrible photograph of his body which had drifted to the shores of Turkey. Refugees' boats fall prey to saltwater. Saltwater, the biennial's theme, carry many spirits whose voices confuse any theory, form, or organized thinking. Some of the artworks presented in the biennial address specters which reside in scientific, political, psychoanalytic and theosophical theories and thought forms. The latter are introduced in Thought-Forms (1901-1905), a book by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, which gave the biennial its title and the image adorning its publications, one of Besant's drawn "thought forms". Christov-Bakargiev invites other voices to speak, and that grants the proposal she "drafts" in the biennial its vitality1. In the state of emergency in which we live, readdressing ghosts, that might seem esoteric, appears crucial.

The biennial is scattered all over Istanbul: from the city center in Europe it spreads to Asia and to the Princes' Islands in the Sea of Marmara, and reaches as far as the mouth of the Bosphorus Strait in the north. It takes place in sites such as museums and schools, splendid hotels and collapsing wrecks. Visiting the latter becomes especially loaded under the impression of the current refugee crisis. During the transfers from site to site, which proceed mainly in ferries on the water, questions arise concerning the fate of people who have turned nomads in the search for safe haven and shelter. How different from them are the people of the art world, traveling from one hotel to the other and occupying deserted structures with video works or installations. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," wrote Walter Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), when he himself met the fate of becoming a refugee.2 The biennial encourages attentiveness to voices that differ from the history as announced through the trumpets of the victorious, and therefore it can embody a cultural proposal that goes beyond mere barbarism. We need to learn from "the tradition of the oppressed," proceeded Benjamin, that "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."3 It seems that the biennial attains a conception of history that is in keeping with that insight.

Walid Raad, Another letter to the reader, 2015 (photo: Sahir Ugur Eren) Courtasy of IKSV



[1]Walid Raad, Another letter to the reader
2015 (photo: Sahir Ugur Eren) Courtasy of IKSV

An artistic proposal may become barbaric when it is didactic, illustrative, or merely literal. Yet the strong artistic maneuvers in the biennial are explicitly fictive. Walid Raad's installation Another Letter to the Reader (2015), for example, opens with the following fiction, whose protagonists are decorative motives: "Sometime in late 1914," the Turkish Minister of War "ordered the storage o hundreds of İznik motives, thought to be in danger of extinction and/or to protect them from war-time damage." The motives were boxed and kept in various banks' vaults in Istanbul, but later it turned out that "the motives somehow managed to sneak out during the war, leaving behind the safety of their shields." According to the letter, after the war most of the government officials blamed the motives for treason and subversion and demanded a court-martial, whereas only few realized that they "left their containers to search for the blue, green and red colors that had long abandoned them." The work is installed inside a safe in the basement of a building which was originally built for a bank, which Raad filled with empty crates, cutting different decorative motives from the sides of each one. The above-mentioned motives fill the safe with their absence, as an inversion of a message in a bottle: the container no longer holds the message for a future reader, to finally find and release, preserved as a whole, but instead the message had broken out of its shelter's borders and spread to the four winds, leaving behind only a hole. When Theodor W. Adorno coined the term Flaschenpost – message in a bottle – during his exile in the United States, at a time when it was clear that there was no addressee in Nazi Germany for his critical writings, he could have assumed that no reader would ever be found for his messages.4 The metaphor he advanced, however, revealed a thought-frame through which he could not have imagined yet another possibility: that it wouldn't be the readers who'd evade the message, but it's the message that had already eluded the readers, escaping the bottle which they eagerly hold in their hands. In the installation, the presence as absence becomes a negative of the absence that the archive forces on the documents it shelters, and, according to Jacques Derrida, at the same time conceals.5 It is a

celebration of an archive failure.

Wael Shawky, The Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbalaa, 2015 (photo: Sahir Ugur Eren) Courtasy of IKSV **[2]**



[3]Wael Shawky, The Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbalaa
2015 (photo: Sahir Ugur Eren) Courtasy of IKSV

Another spectacular failure happens in Wael Shawky's video Cabaret Crusaders, the Secret of Karbala (2015), which tells the story of the crusaders and Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, aka Saladin, with mesmerizing marionettes made of Murano glass, dubbed with an enchanting soundtrack in Arabic. Emperors, military leaders, and religion officials are presented as fantastic and animalistic creatures, in a world where strange dinosaurs-dogs stray around, and in several impressive scenes the stage of that world turns around its axis. The video is screened in a 15th century hammam in the old city of Balat, a big carpet is spread before the screen, with pillows which invite the viewers to sit down for a history lesson that feels like One Hundred and One Night stories. When figures from the past stop being flesh and blood and become myths, the proposal to imagine them as glass monsters, as magnificent as fairytale, seems accurate. They are hard and fragile as the history they embody, which a new storyteller could crush under his feet in the next victory march to come.

William Kentridge, O Sentimental Machine, 2015 (photo: Ofri Lapid) **[4]**



[5]William Kentridge, O Sentimental Machine
2015 (photo: Ofri Lapid)

Or, conversely, the defeated rise, persisting in declaring history from their exile, as a futile shouting through a megaphone. This is how the communist revolutionist Leon Trotsky is presented in William Kentridge's video O Sentimental Machine (2015), which is screened in five channels on the doors of the fabulous Splendid Palace Hotel in the island Büyükada. In the video, Trotsky, who had lived on the island between 1929 and 1933 in exile, and his secretary, skillfully transcribing his words on a typewriter, become megaphones. He dictates to her his utopian ideas concerning man as a machine, which turn into love letters to the revolution that had banished him away. To the work of Adrian Villar Rojas, The Most Beautiful of All Mother (2015), one gets through the wrecks of the house in which Trotsky had lived in his last two years on the island. The house leads to a garden with fruit trees which emit an intense scent. The sound of the waves is heard from the sea, and a narrow path leads downwards, until great statues of animals appear, standing on bases in the water, facing the shore. They arise from the sea as hybrids, as if they have escaped, mutated, from Noah's ark: a sculpted gorilla with a shiny white glaze, bears a lion made of unglazed material, and beside them stands an elephant, giraffes, a hippopotamus, an ox, wolves, a bear, a rhino, an elk, a camel and more, all carry on their white bodies more animals, in whose bare bodies organic and inorganic materials are sunken. Pierre Huyge's Abyssal Plain (2015 onwards) is intended for the inhabitants of the sea only. It is described as a cement stage sunken on the bottom of the sea, the coordinates of its exact location are given in the minimal guide that accompanies the biennial. Now we are left to imagine octopuses dancing on it with their eight arms.

Adrián Villar-Rojas, The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, 2015 (photo: Michal B. Ron) **[6]**



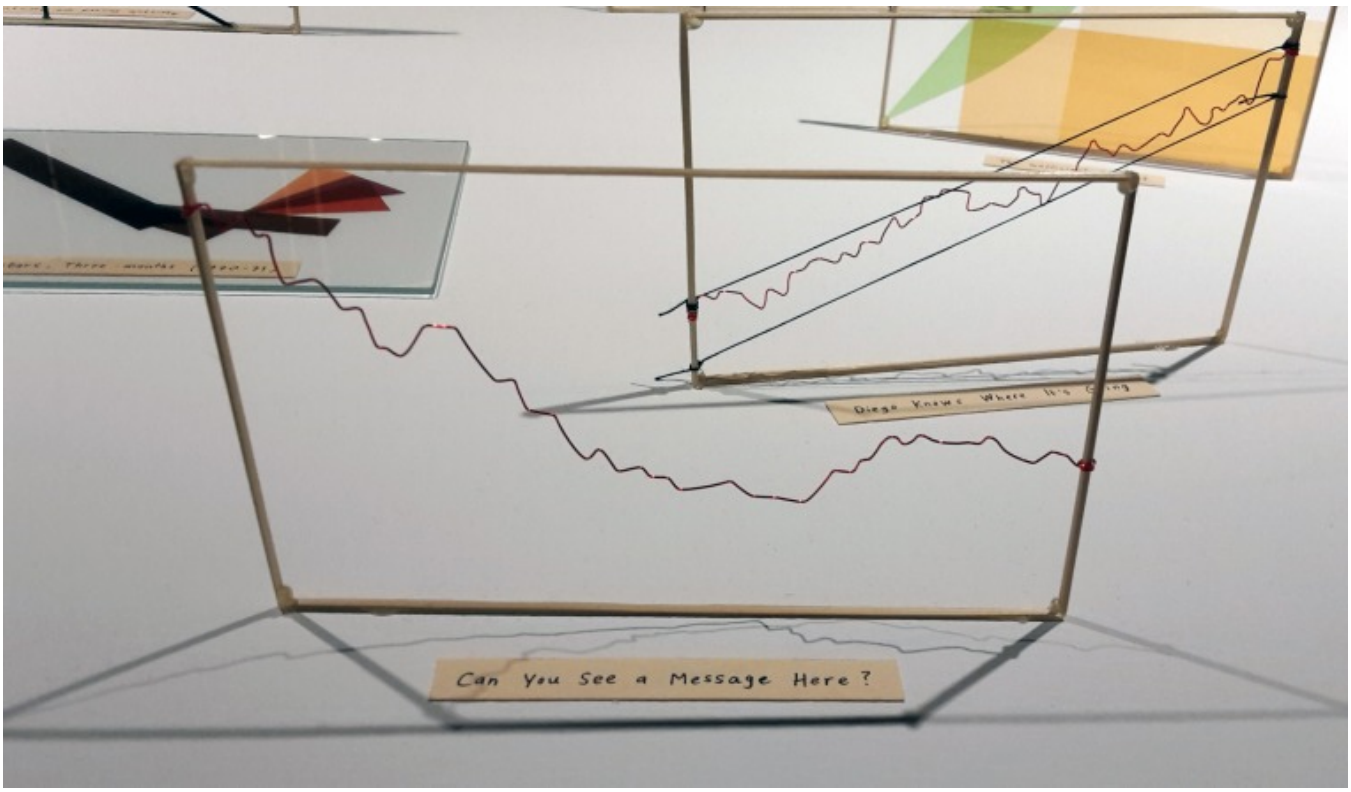
[7]Adrián Villar-Rojas, The Most Beautiful of All Mothers
2015 (photo: Michal B. Ron)

Finally, Noah’s ark anchors at the museum. At Istanbul Modern, the museum of modern art, Christov-Bakargiev has curated a group show that embraces contemporary artists as well as figures from the 19th and 20th centuries. The exhibition presents new and old works, next to works newly reproduced

especially for the biennial. It collects messages that could have disappeared in different historical circumstances of floods, to which the biographies of several participating artists testify:6 Paul Guiragossian (1925-1993), for example, was born in Jerusalem to Armenian parents, genocide survivors. Since 1947 he has lived and worked in Beirut, and the paintings he produced between 1948 and 1991 depicted abstracted human figures as vertical color stains gathered closely together; the paintings of the Yolgnu people, which appear abstract, have been used as a political instrument in the struggle for their rights as an indigenous people in Australia, in trials that lasted until 2008; and Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991) was an Ottoman princess and an abstract painter, one of the first women who were allowed to study in the art academy in Istanbul. Further on Red/Red (2015) is shown, a new work of Aslı Çavuşoğlu, in which she paints the story of the red color with special carmine ink, which only the Armenians know how to produce from the insect Ararat cochineal, using a recipe that is kept secret. In her paintings, the deep Armenian color disappears, and the lighter red of Turkey's flag takes over. The writer Orhan Pamuk is famous as a recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature. But the museum hosts his notebooks, which are full of paintings.7The museum has become a Noah's Ark for documents in danger of being forgotten.

A long table welcomes museum visitors. It is full of diagrams, graphs, and economic models, made of wooden slivers, transparent paper, and thin treads – the ongoing project of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, The Prophets (2013 onwards). Next to each graph, a note, written in pencil, generally announces what it represents: "the relation between time and development," for example, or simply "the Greeks". The gentle models transform theories that authoritatively describe power relations and confidently predict future trends, into dilapidated playful toys. They also offer an amused view on the seriousness that sometimes characterizes the curator's approach to theories and the byproducts they conceive (or the ghosts they receive). This appears in the part of the exhibition titled "The Channel", which she sees as a Klein bottle8 which describes the biennial, similarly to the "brain" presented in dOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel (2013). Yet, we should recall that not only "Theories of Thought Forms" but also "Saltwater" carries the biennial, in a title that functions as another proposal, next to, by, and around the many artworks that are gathered into it. And as in that influential dOCUMENTA, in which Christov-Bakagiev has created sensitivities to non-human consciousness such as those of animals and minerals, in the Istanbul biennial attentiveness has been created to many messages in bottles carried upon the sea. In the current state of emergency, we could only hope that a similar attentiveness is possible to messages carried by people.

Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, "The Prophets", 2013-ongoing **[8]**



[9]Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, "The Prophets"
2013-ongoing

- 1. “Drafts” and not “curates”, since according to Christov-Bakargiev, the word “curating” is associated with power and fulfilling a function in the art world, from which she wishes to distance herself, whereas the word “drafting”, with which she terms her practice in the biennial, is free from these connotations. See for example the interview with Nicola Trezzi, “Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on the 14th Istanbul Biennial,” Flash Art. 13 July 2015. Online.
- 2. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.
- 3. Ibid, 257.
- 4. Adorno refers to the new music as “the true letter in a bottle” in his “Philosophy of New Music”, for example. See Theodor W. Adorno, Philosophy of New Music, ed. and trans. Robert Hullton-Kentor (Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 102.
- 5. Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” Diacritics 25.2 (Summer 1995): 9-63).
- 6. Noah’s ark and the flood relate to a letter Hannah Arendt wrote to Gershom Scholem: Now we sit then, the few survivors (in fact we are not to blame for staying alive, and therefore should surely – even if not happily – live in certainty), like Noah in his ark, into which we couldn’t have even saved the most needed; even worse, we few ‘Noahs’ seem to be afflicted with the additional awkwardness, that we navigate our arks to just pass each other toward where we would never meet. And although I object bringing all ‘Noahs’ into one ark, what would unfortunately be easy, given the small number of those who understand what is going on, I would have still loved to see it, if a few ships would be tied to one another or at least navigate so that one could call ‘hello’ and ‘how are you’. Letter 28, Arendt to Scholem, 27

November 1947. Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt / Gershom Scholem. Briefwechsel – 1939-1964 (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 140.

- 7. Presenting sketchbooks repeatedly occurs in the practice of Christov-Bakargiev, and blurs the distinction between art produced by “non artists”, and “non art” produced by artists.
- 8. A Klein Bottle is a mathematical model in four dimensions that has no inside and no outside.

Source URL: https://www.tohumagazine.com/article/messages-bottles-impressions-14th-art-biennial-istanbul-0

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/valid_0.jpg
[2] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/wael-shawky-cabaret-crusades-secrets-karbalaa-2015-photo-sahir-ugur-eren-courtasy-iksv-0
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/IKSV_14B_Sahirugureren_516_1.jpg
[4] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/william-kentridge-o-sentimental-machine-2015-photo-ofri-lapid
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/kentr.jpg
[6] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/adri%C3%A1n-villar-rojas-most-beautiful-all-mothers-2015-photo-michal-b-ron
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Adrian-Villar-Rojas_0.jpg
[8] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/richard-ibghy-and-marilou-lemmens-prophets-2013-ongoing
[9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/richard_0.jpg