

BIENNIAL ISTANBUL

UNDER THE SURFACE

THE CURATOR CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV DRAFTS THE 14TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL WITH 1500 WORKS BY 80 ARTISTS WHO SEEK TO UNEARTH SECRET CODES

BY FABIO CYPRIANO

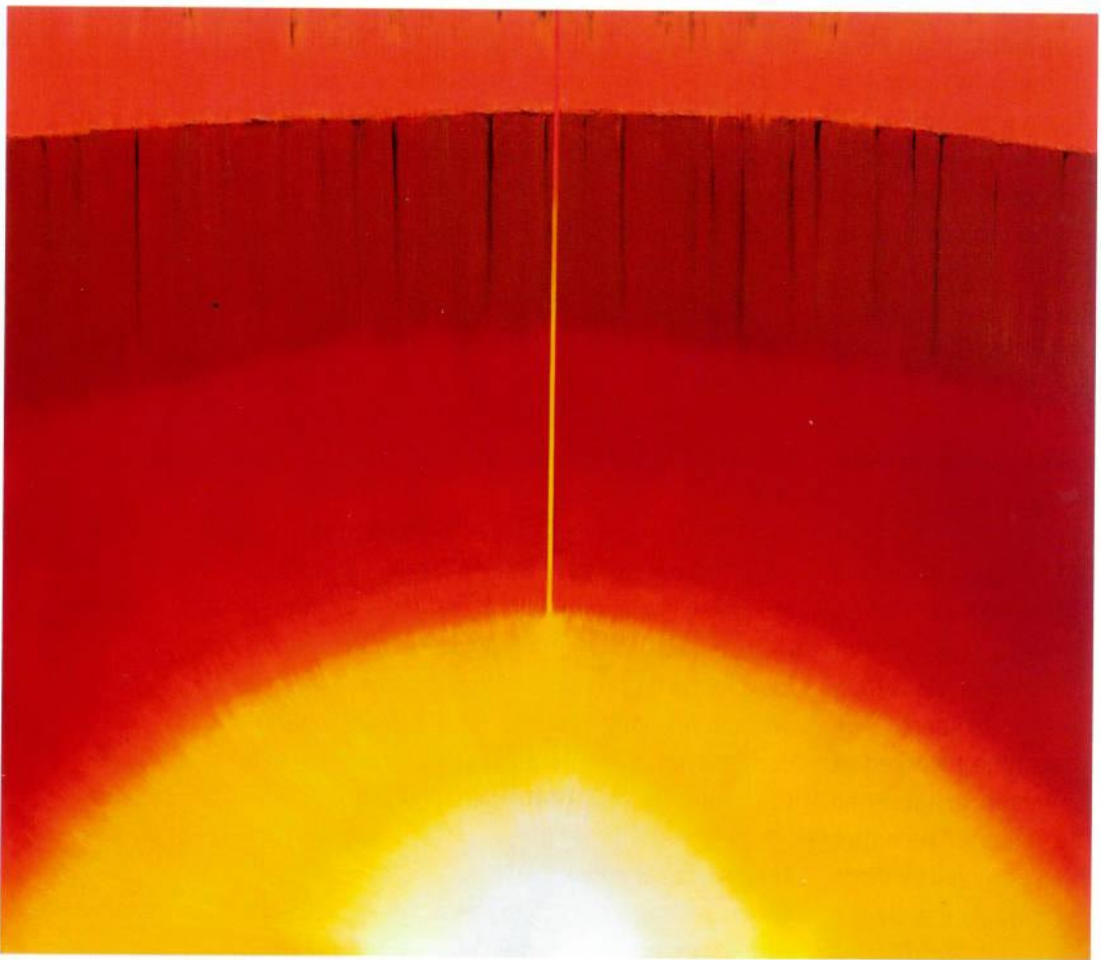


THE WORK OF BRAZILIAN PAINTER Cildo Meireles, *Projeto de Buraco para Jogar Políticos Desonestos*, will be one of the central pieces of the 14th Istanbul Biennale, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, opening soon in September. "Because I am working with this idea of what lies below the surface, whatever it may be, an iPad or even an iPod, this is a way to incorporate this idea of secret codes", the curator says about Meireles' painting. In this painting, the artist portrays Brasília as a small town, giving prominence to the layers beneath the surface because it came to her attention that the crust under the Brazilian capital would be smaller than anywhere in the world.

Christov-Bakargiev's curatorship not always unearths interesting things, but as in Meireles' paintings, it opens doors to complex issues. In Istanbul, the key will be the controversial topic of the genocide of Armenians in Turkey 100 years ago. Instead of presenting literal works on the Holocaust, she will display *art nouveau* vases of French Émile Gallé. "Addressing *art nouveau* is

also a way of addressing the Armenian question because the craftsmen who made moulds for the buildings of Istanbul were Armenians", says the curator.

Last May, while the singer Alcione relaxed at a hotel pool in the region of Jardins, São Paulo, Christov-Bakargiev talked to **ARTE!Brasileiros** about central concepts of the Turkish show. The curator responsible for the dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany in 2012, will revisit in Turkey some of the ideas she discussed back then, for example, her reflections on the theme of Anthropocentrism. To this end, in addition to *art nouveau* objects, she will occupy buildings designed by the *art nouveau* Italian architect Raimondo Tommaso D'Aronco in Istanbul, because she found a parallel between the organic shapes of the late nineteenth-century art movement and discussions of today about bio agriculture and bio architecture. "I realized that what I was doing was an *art nouveau* of today, but that only came to me when the dOCUMENTA (13) was over", she says. Read the following excerpts from the interview, featured in full online:



CILDO MEIRELES PROJETO
DE BURACO PARA JOGAR
POLÍTICOS DESONESTOS, 2011,
OIL ON CANVAS, 240 X 140 CM

ARTE!Brasileiros – What led you to organise the Istanbul Biennale after dOCUMENTA (13)?

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV - Curating art shows again was not in my plans. I thought there are many young curators and the world has had the very best of Carolyn, so I took up a "lecture mode", giving talks in several places. I did that for three years and while I was researching for a project at Getty Centre, I got the invitation from the Biennale. I was honoured because I had been part of their committee. I intended to stay away from the art world for a while so I could focus on studying, but I guess that by detaching from the art world I was being more narcissistic, not less. Curating an art exhibition is to be at the service of artists, it is shedding a light on other people's visions so they can be celebrated, so I returned.

I'm also very close to those I work with. Collaborating with them is like co-signifying their works. They ask my opinion, I give suggestions. I missed doing that.

I really believe in the Istanbul Biennale. I have been critical of biennales before. I thought they were popping up everywhere and it became more of a touristy thing. But now we live in world where we have so many wars and conflicts, and so many fairs and auctions. I think these temporary exhibitions are platforms that need be protected and cared for. These are low budget events compared to others in the art world, so we must dedicate time and intellectual breath to carry on with them and engage the public.

In dOCUMENTA (13) you addressed Germany and Afghanistan. Istanbul is situated between these two cities...

This is an interesting point. In fact, there are a lot of issues involving the city of Istanbul. The show in Kassel played a role in the reconstruction of an entire community after World War II. The city that had been bombed down to the ground it was then occupied by those responsible for its liberty. The same occurred in Kabul at the time I worked at the dOCUMENTA (13). The community in Kabul had just left a fascist regime, the Taliban. The entire city was bombed down and then occupied by those who freed it from the fascist regime, mainly the Americans. This is exactly what happened in Kassel

when Arnold Bode was ahead of the dOCUMENTA. However, Afghanistan is a Muslim country, quite different from Germany and Turkey. Turkey is not an Islamic nation. They have an Islamic majority, but the principles of their government are based on the separation between State and religion. Certainly, there are parallels between the issues surrounding both shows. To a certain extent, this starts with the Gulf War (1990-1991), a catastrophe that led to the dismantling of Iraq and ended up being sort of a Pandora box.

Many works for the event will be commissioned...

Yes, most of the 80 artists will produce a new piece, that's how I work. I won't disclose the line-up before the opening of the show, but I basically use the same equation every time: 1/3 of the featured artists are those who I always work with, 1/3 are local artists and 1/3 are new artists.

After dOCUMENTA (13), I know people will say: "Oh, she invited the same artists over again". In fact, 1/3 of the artists not only participated in the dOCUMENTA (13) but also in all the previous shows I did. We are part of the same generation of artists. I frequently work with them and we share a lot of the same ideas. For example, I read some authors to reflect on the theme of dis-anthropocentrification while Pierre Huyghe reads others, but we basically share the same concern.

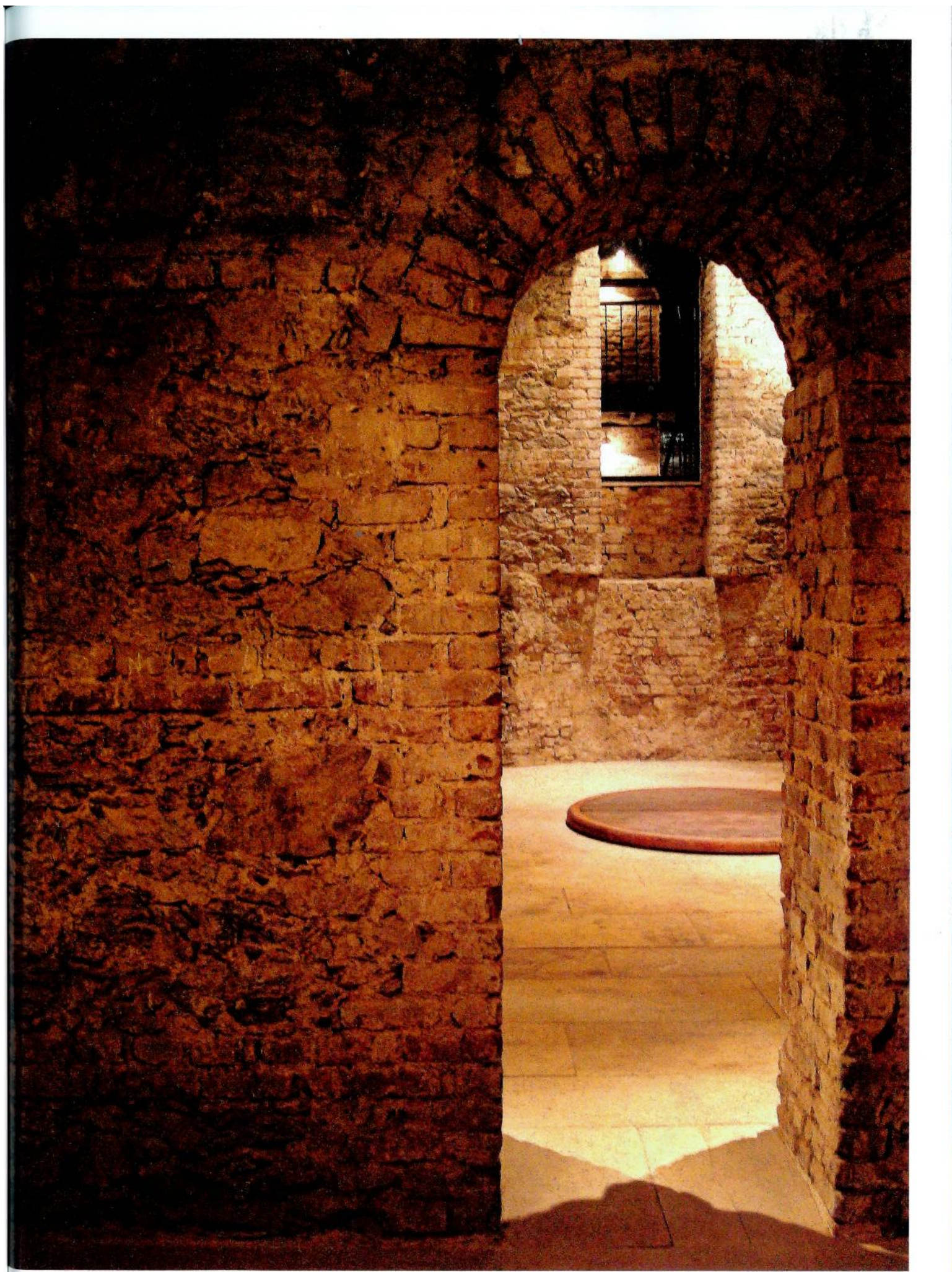
Any Brazilian artists?

Cildo Meireles has a very important piece in the context of the exhibit *Projeto de Buraco para Jogar Políticos Desonestos* (2011). This is a great platform to discuss what lies below the surface. Also, this painting has been displayed only two times. I am working with this idea of what lies below the surface, whatever it may be, an iPad or even an iPod, so this is a way of incorporating this concept of secret codes. Of course this is just one piece in his body of work, but it definitely plays a central role in the show. It will be in the 'medulla' (ou central brain?) of the exhibit, I would say.

The way you did in Kassel?

Exactly, it is among the key works of the biennale, of its concept as a whole. This time, however,

ADAHAN HOTEL,
FORMER MANSION
OF A PROMINENT
JEWISH FAMILY AND
TODAY ONE OF THE
EXHIBITION SPACES
OF THE ISTANBUL
BIENNIAL



I am not calling it 'medulla'. I will gather some historical works to reflect on anthropocentrism and the organic. So in this sense, this is sort of the continuation of Kassel.

I came to realize that I was interested in bio agriculture and bio architecture, in how they evolved in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, because these activities have encountered resistance in the same way that aspects of modernism and classicism met with a great deal of resistance in the late 19th century, when *art nouveau* came up with its organic shapes, like waves. *Art Nouveau* was a form of reaction against the 19th century's classical architecture. It evolved simultaneously with the philosophy of Nietzsche, Bergson. I realized that what I was doing was recasting the *art nouveau* movement, but I was only able to see that after the dOCUMENTA (13) ended". And now, you see, I bring wonderful *art nouveau* pieces by Émile Gallé (1846-1904) to the Biennale. Gallé was an anarchist! The *art nouveau* artists were against power, against the bourgeoisie, against the *art déco*.

Did he work in Istanbul?

No, Émile Gallé did not work there. But the whole town was rebuilt by the Italian architect Raimondo Tommaso D'Aronco (1857-1932), who was invited by the sultan to build the pavilion for the International Agriculture Fair, in 1894 - which actually never took place because of an earthquake - and Aronco ended up settling in Istanbul for 16 years and rebuilding the whole city. So there

are many buildings designed by him and also by Armenian architects. In fact, there are a lot of buildings in the city that were built by Armenians who were later beheaded! In that sense, addressing *art nouveau* is also a way of addressing the Armenian question since the craftsmen who made moulds for the buildings of Istanbul were Armenians as well. *Art nouveau* was never given any credit in cities such as Paris or Barcelona. The movement belonged to the outskirts. It was different in Istanbul where I now I notice how bio architecture offers resistance to the Frank Gehry buildings.

What are the exhibit places you chose?

I will use the Museum Istanbul Modern for the first time. I also chose Arter and two other art spaces. In total, the show will take place in 30 exhibit sites and most of them are unconventional locations. They will be like waves going from the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea. For three days you will need boats to visit the exhibition, not taxicabs.

What is the concept behind the title of the exhibit - Salt Water?

Salt Water is a subjective concept. It bears many different meanings. Salt water soaked through the corpses of dead slaves during their attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean. These corpses took the place of the ocean's whales, since one out of ten slaves died during the attempt while whale hunting for oil was emptying the ocean's waters. This is an extremely sad story and it will be addressed in one of Ellen Gallagher's piece.



ÉMILE GALLÉ (1846-1904), VASE MANTE RELIGIEUSE ET HANNETON (DRAGONFLY AND BUG) TRANSPARENT GLASS AND ENAMEL

14th Istanbul Biennial
September 5 through November 1
biennialfoundation.org