The 14th Istanbul Biennial, titled “Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms,” constitutes a flood of explanation. “Drafted” (as the event’s press release describes her efforts) by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, whose previous curatorial projects were spectacular and rich Documents 13 (2012), “Saltwater” was something like a echo to that 600-year interval, or within the entirely different context of greater Istanbul. Stretching from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara at 30-plus locations, the Biennial announced itself with the scholarly currents of 17th-century Europe, as well as Turkey’s early 20th-century history, most significantly addressing the 1923 Armenian Genocide orchestrated by the military government of Enver Pasha.

To attempt a condensed explanation of the Biennial’s two-part title, “Saltwater” refers not only to Istanbul’s unique ecology, but also to the primary liquidity of our bodies and the “sodium chain” of our most fundamental vital processes: The water itself lends itself to “waves” of populations, uprisings, emotions and electromagneticities—and to the “races” that arrest such movements, such as war and ethnic cleansing. “Thought Forms,” meanwhile, is a reference to theosophist, feminist and social activist Annie Besant’s turn-of-the-century visual depictions of spiritual energies, which Christov-Bakargiev proposes as a proto-modernist attempt to render concepts in an abstract, visual manner. They were among the sources of inspiration for the Biennial’s section at Istanbul Modern, shown in a L-shaped space dubbed “The Charcoal.” Other objects in this chain of association include the Nouveau vases with organic motifs by Émile Gallé, drawings of neurons circa 2009 by neurobiologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, a video by Jeffrey Peake illustrating deep-sea rivers, a ball of salt gathered by Tacita Dean from Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (1970), a self-portrait by Leon Tzechy, loam-like paintings by Jacques Lacan, and Pablo Ariz’s electrical cable sculpture On the Library (1990). Getting onto Christov-Bakargiev’s wavelength was a prerequisite—but not always so feasible, given her willfully obscure descriptions in the Biennial’s guidebook, or the highly abridged information in the wall texts on so many variegated species.

The Biennial’s component at Istanbul Modern was the largest stream of artworks, and its anchornautical biodiversity was impressive. There were Giuseppe Penella di Volpe’s preparatory drawings from 1993 for his painting of rural workers marching on a boat, paired with Michelangelo Pistoletto’s Venere degli Strati (“VENUS OF THE LAYERS”) (1967-74), comprising a neoclassical figure facing a mountain of clothes, and Anibras Kolkestif’s video documenting a 2009 protest by a Turkish workers’ union in Aniara. Next came an uncounted pile of Elin Melin’s 2012 photograph of the Bosphorus—a panoramic image encased with sand and a plastic bag dredged from the bottom of the strait—with a 1972 painting of land and sea by Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, which has nearly identical horizontal proportions. Shortly after came a mini-survey of hurrowing, midcentury modernist paintings by Paul Guernaguian, whose semi-abstraction evokes figures being marched, herded, confined—in reference to the 1930s rhetic cleansing that his parents had survived. The genocidal theme continued with Australian artist Vernon Ah Kee’s series of brutally simplistic, red-black-and-white splatter paintings that resemble faces, and his more engrossing four-channel video about the 2004 riots in Palm Island, Queensland, triggered by the death of an Indigenous man while in police custody. Redemption was supposed to come in a following section of bark paintings, message sticks, drawings and other items that narrated (instances in which ritual objects brought reconciliation and recognition to Indigenous Australian communities. Yet, these objects’ histories were so tightly compressed into a single wall text that their gravity was difficult to fully appreciate.

One thing that did receive extensive elaboration was the most tabo topic in Turkey today: the long officially denied Armenian Genocide of 1915. While direct reference was strategically avoided in official press releases and publications—through the Armenian phrases Mede Voghbin (“The Great Crime”) and Hayotk eskenapatayn (“Armenian genocide”) were used in a wall text for Paul Guernaguian—Michael Rakowitz deployed the contested term in his Frank, at times gruesome, project about an Armenian plaster-mold maker in late 19th-century Istanbul. Rakowitz connected the craftsman’s trade (and a room of ground animal bones in the plaster itself) to the Istanbul government’s 1915 edict that killed 800,000 stray dogs from the city to a barren island nearby, an event that historians suggest presaged the genocide four years later. The ghosts of Turkey’s destined extermination population were summoned in Haig Aivazian’s collaborative performance—which took place only on the Biennial’s preview days—right in the Church of the Bepaqlı Hreznian Church, whose members performed a traditional song written by genocide survivor and out-patient Ulaş Hesap Şenbaş on nearby, at Dem, was Francis Alÿs’s new film, which shows children playing bird calls on whistles while running amid the ruins of the 19th-century Armenian city of Ad in eastern Turkey, creating a living symphony in the barren landscape.

Despite pronouncements that it was a city-wide affair, the Biennial was in reality dispersed along the historical north-south axis of the Bosphorus—perpendicular to the city’s 21st-century urban sprawl that runs both east and west. At its northern end “Where Jason and the Argonauts are said to have passed while searching for the Golden Fleece” (Christos Bakargiev writes, giving a hint of her referential timeliness) was a lighthouse on the Black Sea that bore a wave

logo by Lawrence Weiner, and a beach with a Cold War-cruise missile site—one of the Biennial’s three “imaginary,” or inaccessible, venues. Other projects that were difficult to experience included a white fishing boat traveling up and down the Bosphorus and blaring the opening lines of Ezra Pound’s Thirteen Cantos (1933-42) Christos Bakargiev said it was best visible from the terrace of the upscale restaurant at Istanbul Modern. Meanwhile Beate Hohme created an un-stirrable underwater theater for marine life in the Sea of Marmara, specific details of which were vague and selectively dispensed. The Biennial’s exclusive undertones were most clearly felt on Büyükada (or Prinkipo), the largest of the Princes’ Islands, where a library, ferry terminal, awash hotel and several boulevards mansions in varying states of disrepair housed individual artworks. Projects displayed here had either rubbed out their stories, or were still being dazzled, dillipilated, historical spaces. For instance, Ed Aitkin’s film about a man whose Florida house coves into a sinkhole was shown in a building itself seemingly on the brink of collapse, while Adrian Villar Rojas’s meta versus of life-size statues emerging from the sea, in front of the house where Leon Trotsky lived for two years while in exile, was a bombastic-looking attempt to surpass the site’s historical weight.

More humble and integrated projects were found back on land around Tophane, such as Ceylan Eker’s Rooms of Drawing (2015), an emptied-out car park, stripped down to shades of white and gray and filled with a subtle clicking soundtrack, which created a welcoming atmosphere in Istanbul’s cacophony. The lone project in the city’s historical peninsula was at the 53rd-century Cildik Mescit Pasa Hamam, where Wael Shawky screened the final chapter of his Cabaret Crusades trilogy (2010–15), in which he depicks events of the early Crusades era including the sack of Constantinople, in 1204 CE with Muraco glass puppets. That the newly produced film had no Turkish subtitles was again an indicator of the Biennials intended audience—what is, not those from the surrounding working-class neighborhood who are less likely to know either Arabic or English.

While Christos Bakargiev enticed the necessity of experiencing the Biennial slowly and enjoying its watery wayways, in a city as large and congested as today’s Istanbul, time is a precious commodity. Furthermore, the Bosphorus itself, because of its natural beauty, is a highly exclusive area of the city—even though many thousands commute across it daily As the Biennial intentionally retraced even further from public space, to the deep nooks of the dossier’s private spaces of wealth and entitlement, and into a highly erudite yet elliptical curatorial language. Christos Bakargiev may have brought the international art world—with all of its self-indulgences, insularity and hubris—to Istanbul, for better and for worse. She created a complex, meaningful bubble for those of us who were privileged enough to appreciate it.