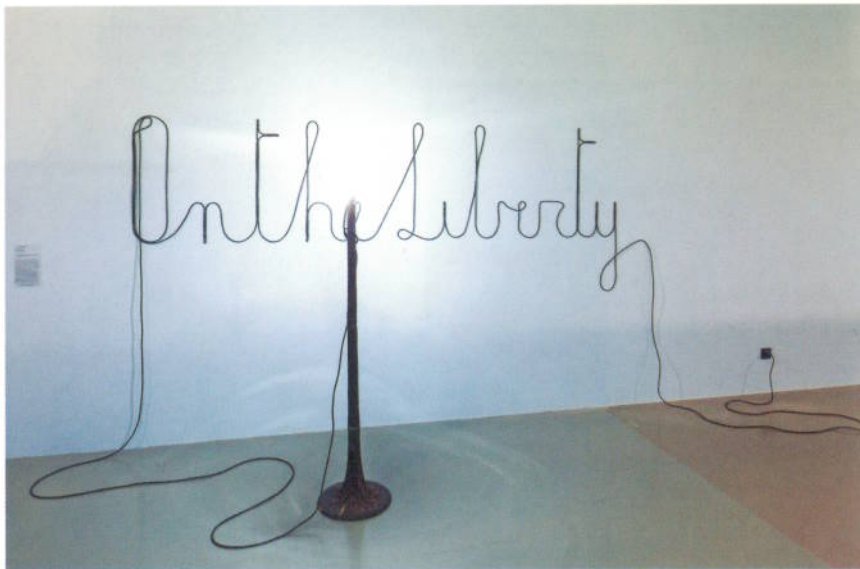


# 14TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL

SALTWATER: A THEORY OF THOUGHT FORMS



The 14th Istanbul Biennial, titled "Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms," necessitates a flood of explanation. "Drafted" (as the event's press release describes her efforts) by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, whose previous endeavor was the spectacular and rich Documenta 13 (2012), "Saltwater" was something like a coda to that 100-day festival, set within the entirely different context of greater Istanbul. Extending from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara at 30-plus locations, the Biennial immersed itself in the intellectual currents of fin-de-siècle Europe, as well as Turkey's early 20th-century history, most significantly addressing the 1915 Armenian Genocide orchestrated by the military government of Enver Paşa.

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 liquid of our bodies and the "sodium channels" of our neurons. The water motif lends itself to "waves"—of populations, uprisings, emotions and electromagnetism—and to the "knots" that arrest such movements, such as war and ethnic cleansing. "Thought Forms," meanwhile, is a reference to theosophist, feminist and socialist 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 paradigm. They were among the sources of inspiration for the Biennial's section at Istanbul Modern, shown in an L-shaped space dubbed "the Channel." Other objects in this chain-of-association codex included Art Nouveau vases with organic motifs by Émile Gallé, drawings of neurons circa 1899 by neurobiologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal, a video by Jeffrey Peakall illustrating deep-sea rivers, a ball of salt gathered by Tacita Dean

from Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a self-portrait by Leon Trotsky, knot-like paintings by Jacques Lacan, and Fabio Mauri's electrical cable sculpture *On the Liberty* (1990). Getting onto Christov-Bakargiev's wavelength was a prerequisite—but not always so feasible, given her willfully oblique 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 anachronistic biodiversity was impressive. There were Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's preparatory drawings from 1901 for his painting of rural workers marching arm-in-arm, paired with Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Venere degli Stracci* ("Venus of the Rags") (1967–74), comprising a neoclassical figure facing a mountain of clothes, and Artıkışler Kolektifi's video documenting a 2009 protest by a Turkish workers' union in Ankara. Next came an uncanny pairing of Elmas Deniz'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 harrowing, midcentury modernist paintings by Paul Guiragossian, whose semi-abstractions evoke figures being marched, herded, confined—in reference to the 1915 ethnic 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 history that did receive extensive elaboration was the most taboo topic in Turkey today: the long officially denied Armenian Genocide of 1915. While direct reference was strategically avoided in official press releases and publications—though the Armenian phrases *Medz Yeghern* ("The Great Crime") and *Hayots tseghaspanutyun* ("Armenian genocide") were used in a wall text for Paul Guiragossian—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 use of ground animal bones in the plaster itself) to the Istanbul government's 1911 edict that exiled 80,000 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 decimated Armenian population were summoned in Haig Aivazian's collaborative performance—which took place only on the Biennial's preview days—with the choir of the Beyoğlu Üç Horan Church, whose members performed a traditional song written by genocide survivor and oud-player Udi Hrant Kenkulian. Nearby, at Depo, was Francis Alÿs's new film, which shows children playing bird calls on whistles while running amid the ruins of the 11th-century Armenian city of Ani 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," Christov-Bakargiev writes, giving a hint of her referential timeline) was a lighthouse on the Black Sea that bore a wave

logo by Lawrence Weiner, and a beach with a Cold War-era satellite dish—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 *The Cantos* (1915–62); Christov-Bakargiev said it was best visible from the terrace of the upscale restaurant at Istanbul Modern. Meanwhile Pierre Huyghe created an un-viewable 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 Büyükdada (or Prinkipo), the largest of the Princes' Islands, where a library, ferry terminal, swank hotel and several bourgeois mansions in varying states of disrepair housed individual artworks. Projects displayed here had rather strained or superficial ties to these dilapidated, historical spaces. For instance, Ed Atkin's film about a man whose Florida house caves into a sinkhole was shown in a building itself seemingly on the brink of collapse, while Adrián Villar Rojas's menagerie of life-size beasts 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 Cevdet Ereğ's *Rooms of Rhythms – Otopark* (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 ambience from Istanbul's cacophony. The lone project in the city's historical peninsula was at the 15th-century Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hamam, where Wael Shawky screened the final chapter of his "Cabaret Crusades" trilogy (2010–15), in which he depicts events of the late Crusades era (including the sacking of Constantinople, in 1204 CE) with Murano glass puppets. That the newly produced film had no Turkish subtitles was again an indicator of the Biennial's intended audience—that is, not those from the surrounding working-class neighborhood who are less likely to know either Arabic or English.

While Christov-Bakargiev extolled the necessity of experiencing the Biennial slowly and enjoying its watery voyages, 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 retreated even further from public space, to the deep recesses of the drafter's mind, to private spaces of wealth and entitlement, and into a highly erudite yet elliptical curatorial language, Christov-Bakargiev truly brought the international art world—with all of its self-indulgences, insularity and hubris—to Istanbul, for better and for worse. She created a beautiful, mournful bubble for those of us who were privileged enough to appreciate it. **HG MASTERS**

**Opposite page, top**

**FABIO MAURI**

*On the Liberty*  
1990  
Mixed-media installation with lamp and wire on wall, electricity and light bulb, lamp: 170 x 30 x 30 cm; writing: 67 x 354 cm. Photo by Sahir Ugur Eren. Courtesy Istanbul Modern.

**Opposite page, bottom**

**MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO**

*Venere degli Stracci* ("Venus of the Rags")  
1967–74  
Marble and textiles, 212 x 340 x 110 cm. Photo by Sahir Ugur Eren. Courtesy Istanbul Modern.

**This page**

**PAUL GUIRAGOSSIAN**

(From left to right) *Vase*, 1959, oil on canvas, 50 x 35.5 cm; *La Faim*, 1954, oil on masonite, 50 x 40 cm; *Self Portrait*, 1948, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Photo by Sahir Ugur Eren. Courtesy Istanbul Modern.