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Loose Threads, Tangled Knots

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Could artworks or biennials have healing effect on the public in moments of crisis? Taking its cue from these question, this article focuses on four artworks that were part of the 14th Istanbul Biennial that ended in early November 2015.





Sarkis, Les 2 Bacs (2 Water Tanks), 1968, plastic, water, bronze, negative, neon; Musée des LIFE COLLAGES (Museum of LIFE COLLAGES), 2009–10, collages on Arches paper. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren. Courtesy of the artist and Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts

Contemporary politics leave little space to think clearly in Istanbul these days. The recent collective memory has been occupied by images of death, as Turkey has been plunged into a spiral of violence since June—ranging from the rampant refugee crisis to the suicide bombs that killed more than 130 civilians and wounded hundreds, as well as the fatal attacks that affected both sides of the 30-year conflict between Turkish security personnel and PKK fighters. Evidently, it is not easy to look at art *now*. «With and through art, we mourn, commemorate, denounce, try to heal,» Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is quoted in the press release of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, «and we commit ourselves to the possibility of joy and vitality, leaping from form to flourishing life.» Titled *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, this edition of the Istanbul Biennial departs from the images of knots and waves, and the resource salt water. The exhibition brings together references to patterns of waves, densities of water, flows of fluids, and closed loops. My starting point for this text comes from a non-art video, titled *Vortex Loops, Knots and Links* (2013–14), which is part of *The Channel* at Istanbul Modern—an overview exhibition that highlights various notions of the theme (with a function similar to the Brain's at dOCUMENTA(13)).

Vortex Loops, Knots and Links captures images of how a science lab (William Irvine and Dustin Kleckner at the University of Chicago) ties water into a knot. Imagine water bubbles twisting into pretzel-like linked rings or trefoil knots. Represented by this short, high-speed, black and white video, the study—a scientific first, as it claimed—turns the abstract notion of knottiness in fluids into a testable idea on a laboratory scale. The researchers argue that studying the amount of knottiness helps us to understand the behavior of fluids. Pondering on the gridlock, the impasse that I feel about the recent acts of violence, it is tempting to take this analogy and relate it to recent history. If we were to imagine the past as a fluid, a substance that continually deforms under pressure, how do knots, hitches, and catastrophes untie themselves? Is it even possible to represent the moments of rupture in history?

The 14th Istanbul Biennial spread across more than thirty venues for two months, occupying not only white cubes, but also temporary spaces of transition, such as hotel rooms, shops, former banks, and abandoned private houses. Now that the Biennial is over, I want to ponder four works in the Biennial: works by Cevdet Erek, Francis Alÿs, Michael Rakowitz, and Sarkis, which lead me to the following questions: In defiance of the difficult political circumstances, what is the critical potential to look at art within the temporal framework of the Biennial? If we are to assume that «quality» in artworks is replaced by the idea of «relevance,» how is it possible for artworks to act beyond sentimental forms of idealism and formulate political attitudes towards the present?

Some artworks are capable of abstracting yet communicating contemporary urgencies without becoming illustrations. One of them is Cevdet Erek's *A Room of Rhythms – Otopark* (2015) that occupies a covered car park built in the 1940s in Tophane, an Istanbul neighborhood defined by urban regeneration and displacement. Erek's installation creates a minimal, visually sparse yet immersive setting. The artist implements only a few spatial elements in the empty car park. Half-painted in white and grey, the new curtains that drop from the beams mimic the existing walls of the space. So does the light box that sits on the floor, tilted—creating a continuous horizon line indoors. This set up might evoke a sense of isolation from the outside, however it does the opposite by suggesting the idea of transition—of a passage from one place to another (indoors-outdoors), one form to another (car park-exhibition venue to be demolished soon), one moment in time to another (past-present). And the auditory experience is essential to connote these changing states.



Cevdet Erek, A Room of Rhythms - Otopark, 2015, mixed media and architecture elements. Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren. Courtesy of the artist and Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts

Directional speakers installed in the car park pulse with rhythmic beats, creating patterns and waves. They encourage the viewer to move around the space so as to hear sound patterns that emanate from different speakers. Erek thus directs the bodies of the audience, without suggesting a predetermined path. Moving around the space, the viewers become the constituent parts of the overall soundscape, a sort of a collective enunciation. Rather than a formal exercise on spatial emptiness (and the politics of gentrification in the neighborhood for that matter), I see Erek's installation as a shelter for self-reflection, a place to articulate the void as well as the constant lump in the throat feeling. The work acts not only as an intellectual performance but also as a space for emotional discharge, in a time when social urgencies of the public in Istanbul are mostly about finding ways to embrace life and death in a collective way.

Collectivity through sound is essential to another work located in the same neighborhood. Hosted by a former tobacco warehouse turned into an exhibition space, *The Silence of Ani* (2015), a black-and-white video work by Francis Alÿs, begins with a shot of the Akhurian River that forms a part of the geographic border between Armenia and Turkey, followed by static shots of crumbling ruins of the medieval town Ani, once known as «the city of a thousand and one churches» (and until recently a militarized no-man's land). The camera records the sounds and the images of a desolate landscape, only to be interrupted by birdcalls. Alÿs then shows a group of teenagers hiding in and moving through the grass around the ruins. Playing whistles, they mimic birds—a nightingale, a mocking bird, and a lapwing, among others. Similar to the speakers in Erek's A Room of Rhytms – Otopark, each child produces a particular bird sound to form a melody in the end, which can be read as a «song» against the sense of abandonment and neglect. The birdcalls build a *crescendo* and slowly fade away as the children fall asleep among the ruins.



Francis Alÿs, *The Silence of Ani*, 2015, video with sound. Courtesy of the artist

For me, Alÿs's work loses its strength towards the end of the video as it shows an animated bird flying and landing on one of the ruins. If the ruins stand for what is destroyed, killed and lost, what could the bird suggest in the end? The confrontation with loss requires a continuous engagement with the past as well as its ghosts and images. The so-called cathartic figure of the animated bird thereby weakens the proposition of individual agencies to speak the silence against a background of destruction, to refuse closure. Moreover, in the final section, a roving camera records a bird's eye view pencil drawing of the historical Ani, coupled with a male voiceover that gives a prosaic summary of the town's history and explains the methodology of the work: «Today, each student will receive a musical score and an instrument designed to imitate birds.» The didactic tone undermines the potentiality of the work reflecting on similar acts and processes of destruction, staying at best contextual.

Another work that responds to ruptures and catastrophes is Michael Rakowitz's installation titled *The Flesh is Yours the Bones Are Ours* (2015). Rakowitz's work brings together drawings of details of architectural ornaments taken from rubbings of Art Nouveau edifices in Istanbul with a set of new plaster casts that the artist produced from old molds of a local Armenian craftsman. Here the simple act of copying/rubbing and creating replica friezes (presented on the floor and on display tables with no protective glass) is a poignant gesture that does much more than connect Istanbul's architectural history and Armenian craftsmen. These drawings and sculptures act as documents rather than museological pieces that are organized, categorized and relegated to a past. They demand the constant attention of the viewer, to question the idle transmission of knowledge of cultural heritage, and more importantly their combinations remind of the political and geographical co-existence of peoples. The installation's relationship to its venue only makes it stronger: the Galata Greek School stands out as an educational institution that lost its original function because of the dwindling Greek population in the last century.

However, the formal strength of the piece is diluted as Rakowitz juxtaposes the plaster casts with dog skulls from Sivriada (reference to the 1911 massacre of stray dogs in Istanbul), bones of livestock from Armenian farms in Anatolia, and archival materials with photographic representations of the Armenian Genocide, placed in old, wooden display cases. The immediate references to the Genocide risk turning the installation into an attempt to chronicle bodies and deaths. Here comes the paralysis in attempts to represent loss. The illustrative, repetitive representations become a form of containment, stealing away a space of delay, a space of engagement in relation to histories of destruction—destruction of peoples, knowledge, and material cultures in this geography and beyond.

Going back to Istanbul Modern, I find a much-needed breathing space in Sarkis's work *Two Water Tanks* from 1968. The installation consists of two developing trays filled with water, which contain the film negatives of two photographs that Sarkis took during the student unrest in May 1968 Paris, showing groups of civilians and police officers gathering on the street. A gallery assistant sits by the trays, taking the images out of the water when requested. The viewer is not immediately confronted with the photographs, as the assistant mediates the experience, making the images «visible» by holding them against the light. This is how the artist slows down the process of inscribing the images in a historical context—questioning their documentary value to capture an event. The work thus creates a moment of suspension, as it echoes a past and a present at the same time.

In Sarkis's work, image-making is not only a political act to record and witness but a tool to imagine how the pains of the past and the moments of rupture translate into contemporary realities. Each photograph resting in water is right beneath a white rectangular neon piece attached to the tray. The neons provide the light to see the negatives but also reveal the tension between water and electricity. The uneasy combination hints at a source of aggression, charging the images with a sense of resistance, just like the bodies in the photographs—not in action but in suspense, waiting for something to happen. The images thereby transcend their immediate context and resist their own closure. This is precisely how Sarkis allows the perception of images to be indirect and eventually laborious. Rather than reproducing an event in time, he suggests looking at how moments of rupture history, the knots, need continuous engagement to reveal and resolve.

Some critics wrote that most of the works in the Biennial, especially the newly commissioned ones, deal with the past, not touching contemporary issues in Turkey such as the refugee crisis or the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. However, the «relevance» of the works doesn't necessarily depend on simple representations of current political situations, but on the elusive and much needed archives of thoughts and emotions around moments of rupture in the past, extending

into the present moment. What I ultimately expect from artworks in such exhibitions is to offer the viewers a toolbox that could help them to question the ways in which they process news, the past, and the present, with their ghosts, images, and remains.

Having said that, I'm not sure if the Istanbul Biennial should mount an effective critique of contemporary politics, or could have a healing effect on the public. But it surely has the potential of expanding the public discourse on acts of violence and collective mourning as it spreads around the city and is accessible to a broad public (also because the entrance is free of charge, a policy that started with the previous edition curated by Fulya Erdemci). However, it is not these formal qualities that will prove the Biennial's agency in public. It is rather the will of the Biennial as an institution to sustain a debate on the potentiality of artistic production—a will to influence the public discourse to amplify and inscribe the works with layered, replete meanings in the collective memory of the city. After all, it is only the scope of the public's imagery that is capable of loosening intricate knots, if not to disentangling them.

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