

Art in America

THE ISTANBUL BIENNIAL IGNORED THE CITY'S SPECIFIC SOCIAL ISSUES IN FAVOR OF GENERAL ECOLOGICAL THEMES

By Kaya Genç

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PHOTO SAHIR UGUR EREN.

Five weeks before the [Istanbul Biennial \(https://www.artnews.com/t/istanbul-biennial/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/istanbul-biennial/)'s opening in mid-September, its organizer, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, and curator Nicolas Bourriaud changed the exhibition's main venue from the historic Haliç shipyards, dating from 1455, to the sleek new Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum. Over the past half-decade a tycoon loyal to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been developing the shipyards into a shopping mall complex the construction of which has left behind as the biennial team found last-

shopping mall complex, the construction of which has left behind, as the biennial team found last-minute, toxic asbestos. The concern for public health threw into relief Bourriaud's reluctance to engage directly with the issues plaguing Istanbul—the destruction of its forests, the persecution of its scholars and journalists by the government, the pollution of its Golden Horn with medical and other waste—in the show itself. Of the 220-plus works on display, only a few contend with such issues. Among them is Ozan Atalan's *Monochrome* (2019), an installation that juxtaposes the skeleton of a water buffalo on a concrete pedestal with a video comprising drone footage of that animal's northern Istanbul habitat, which a construction firm recently cleared to make space for what will become the world's busiest airport.



Ozan Atalan: *Monochrome* (detail), 2019, concrete, soil, video, water
buffalo skeleton, 10 by 10 by 3 feet; in the Istanbul Biennial.
SAHIR UGUR EREN

In Bourriaud's essay for the biennial, "Thesis Upon Art in the Age of Global Warming," he proclaims that contemporary art has taken up lessons from ecological crisis by devising new "catastrophic modes of representation." In Western art for two millennia, he writes, figures have been portrayed as distinct from their settings, with nature serving as "nothing more than scenery, a theatre that mankind is tasked to arrange as he pleases." He argues that in the catastrophic style of contemporary art, distinctions between figures and backgrounds, humans and nature, and the global and the local have been removed: "not a single space seems entirely hermetic anymore." He wants artists to reconsider the role of waste, treating it as a "proletarian object" that "opens up a space of freedom, available and recoverable for the invention of new uses," and has titled the biennial "The Seventh Continent," after the vast garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean. (Estimates of the patch's size vary, but recent figures commonly put it at twice the square mileage of Texas.)

Such a reuse of waste is addressed in Taipei-based En Man Chang's *Ungrounding Land—Ljavek Trilogy* (2018), a three-channel video installation shown at the Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum. The installation explores the subject of Indigenous people who migrated from Taiwan Island's principal mountain range to downtown Taiwan in the 1950s to work as laborers for construction firms. Using wood boards and found objects, these migrants built makeshift lodgings that the local government, charging the inhabitants with illegal occupancy, later destroyed. Chang interviewed a family of such migrants, the Balasasaus, for the video, which places them in a history of Taiwan's plundering by forces ranging from the Dutch East India Company to the current

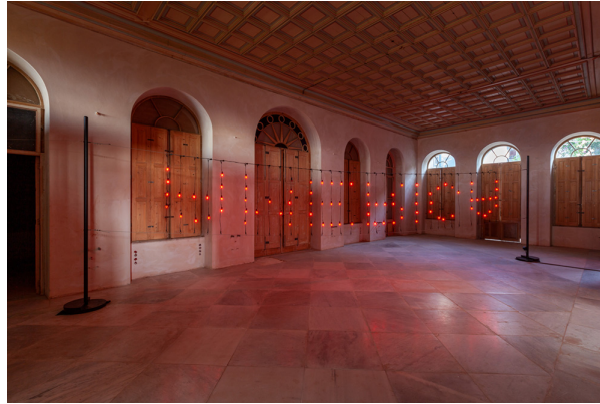
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View of En Man Chang's video installation *Ungrounding Land – Ljavek Trilogy*, 2018, three-channel video installation, 13 minutes, 9 seconds, dimensions variable.
COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO SAHIR UGUR EREN.

For his striking installation *Nommo* (2019), also at the Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum, American artist Radcliffe Bailey built a large-scale slave-ship replica out of wood. Eight white plaster busts of an African man look out from the semicircular deck. Amid the busts an old radio plays three audio pieces, one of which, recorded in Senegal, features voices of ship-makers and the sounds of ocean waves. Bailey's installation, like Chang's, shows similarities between traumatic histories and present-day injustices, though its relation to the curatorial premise about waste and climate change is tangential at best.

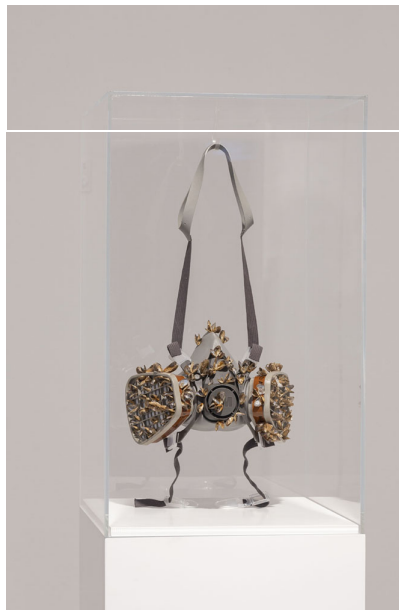
Among the works exhibited at the Pera Museum, Simon Starling's beautifully conceived tribute to Henry Moore stands out. A pebble that Moore found on an English beach inspired his *Warrior with Shield* (1954), an arresting sculpture of a wounded but defiant soldier. Starling produced a steel replica of this work between 2006 and 2008, and submerged it in Lake Ontario, in order to force the sculpture, as the artist notes in an accompanying exhibition booklet, "into a somewhat unexpected relationship with the story of . . . zebra mussels"—a species whose emergence in Canada is attributed to the effects of climate change. The mussels colonized the protein-rich surface of the sculpture, which, additionally, suffered a moth infestation after it entered the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Starling presents two lightbox transparencies documenting the work's restoration by AGO conservators as well as a sculpture, *Infestation Piece (Mask for Istanbul)*, 2019, in which the dust mask that one conservator used during the process is covered in mussel shells.



Glenn Ligon: *Untitled (America)*, 2019, Mahya (light bulbs, paint and wire) on metal stands; in the Istanbul Biennial.
COURTESY GLENN LIGON. PHOTO SAHIR UGUR EREN.

Glenn Ligon's installation at the Mizzi Mansion on Büyükdada—an island located off the coast of Istanbul, in the Sea of Marmara, and reachable by ferry—considers the legacy of Americanization in Istanbul. In Islamic cultures imams string lamps called *mahya* between the minarets of mosques, spelling out verses from the Qur'an. In 1946, when the battleship USS *Missouri* entered the port of Istanbul, the *mahya* at the city's famed Blue Mosque were arranged into the English word WELCOME, signaling the arrival of American influence in Turkey. The Americanization of Turkey—the process of convincing Turks to allow highways, Hiltons, hamburgers, anti-communist organizations, and other capitalist endeavors into their lives—accelerated after the United States introduced the Marshall Plan in 1948. Ligon's installation *Untitled (America)*, 2019, is a new *mahya* addition to his well-known series of works spelling out

AMERICA in neon lights. In this latest piece, the rendering of the name shifts every fortnight, from upside down to right side up to the Turkish version, AMERIKA, and so on. In an adjacent room, the artist shows *From Another Place* (1970), a documentary by Turkish photographer Sedat Pakay on James Baldwin, who moved to Istanbul in the 1960s in an attempt to escape America's antigay, antiblack political culture. Ultimately, as he discusses in the film, Baldwin



Simon Starling: *Infestation Piece (Mask for Istanbul)*, 2019, zebra mussel shells, dust mask, epoxy glue, wood, and plexiglass, 67 by 13¾ by 11¾ inches; in the Istanbul Biennial.
PHOTO SAHIR UGUR EREN.

found that this culture extended worldwide, including to the city in which he had taken refuge. Ligon additionally exhibits two videos of his own, *Taksim (1)* and *Taksim (2)*, both 2019. These works, shot by handheld camera, feature street footage of tourists and locals killing time around

Istanbul's historic Taksim Square. Baldwin had lived in that neighborhood, but his rented house no longer stands, and the square—where massive May Day celebrations took place during his time—now mostly attracts selfie-takers. Ligon's videos serve as a slow-burn meditation on the erasure of Taksim's historic identity; in the background of certain shots in these lengthy, careful observations of present-day Istanbul, one can see Gezi Park, where millions of citizens protesting the government marched in 2013.

Given the very real issues Istanbul faces today, Bourriaud's curatorial proposition for the biennial seems surprisingly abstract. But despite his reluctance to engage with Istanbul head-on, the climate themes and changing labor practices that the works explore are nevertheless important to consider. Public life in Turkey has already shifted to a more progressive agenda: in this year's local elections, the country's main opposition party wrested control of Istanbul from conservatives, espousing, among other liberal platforms, environmentalist policies. The Pacific garbage patch may be growing, but the number of people willing to address it is growing as well.

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