

review

# contemporary manifestos

From the works of 70 artists attempting to answer the 11th Istanbul Biennial theme, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?*, some left impressed while others felt depressed.





TEXT BY MYRNA AYAD  
 IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ISTANBUL FOUNDATION FOR  
 CULTURE AND ARTS AND MYRNA AYAD

The title of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?*, is owed to a song title of the same name from the 1928 *The Threepenny Opera* written by German poet, playwright and theatre director Bertolt Brecht. The Biennial's title does the intended trick: the audience seeks to answer this question; the command is in the asking, not the answering, and that is precisely what the curatorial collective What, How and for Whom (WHW), comprised of Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Devi, Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović, the foursome behind the Biennial, want. Given that the title had people wondering, it certainly confused some, whose answer to 'what keeps mankind alive?' was in stark contrast to the Biennial's rather dark and dominant feel.

"Mankind is alive with beauty and that is absent from the Biennial," noted Nazila Noebashari, Director of Tehran-based Aaran Art Gallery who was in Istanbul in a show of support for two of her artists, Jinoos Taghizadeh and Shahab Fotouhi, the only two Iranians showing at the Biennial. "The answer would have to be freedom; this is what keeps all of us alive and what links us," added Andrée Sfeir-Semler of Galerie Sfeir-Semler, whose artists – Marwan (see *Canvas* Volume 4 Issue 6), Rabih Mroué, Wafa Hourani and Anna Boghiguian

– contributed significantly to a piece of the Middle Eastern art representation pie. In total, of the 70 artists at the Biennial, 13 are from the Middle East. That is greater than the number of Turkish artists showing at the Biennial, a point that Noebashari raised. Is it an unwritten rule that a Biennial's home country should show more of its national artistic wares?

Strewn across the floors of the Biennial's three spaces – the Antrepo No 3 warehouse, the Feriköy Greek School and the Tütün Deposu (Tobacco Warehouse) – were the crumpled red sheets of paper by Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, the first artist to declare herself a feminist in the former Yugoslavia. Elements from reports on the status of women collated by Turkish NGOs constituted Iveković's *Turkish Report 09* and hit home the message that such issues are often treated as rubbish. Once more, but in a rather micro form, the Biennial engages the audience – some curiously picked up the crumpled red sheets while others pushed them aside with their feet. "You have to decide to read them or not," says WHW's Ćurlin. Perhaps in a more Middle Eastern context, *Turkish Report 09* could be perceived as the rose petals thrown over brides and grooms at weddings or on

Facing page: Etcétera. *Errorist Kabaret*. 2009. Theatre stage is surrounded by various life-sized characters and images, called *gente armada*.  
 Above: Oraib Toukan. *Reworking Ammar*. 2009. Courtesy of the artist.



“If you’re trying to avoid politics, many of the meanings in the Biennial will elude you.” – WHW, curatorial collective behind the 11th Istanbul Biennial

the bodies of martyrs at funerals. “There are many different readings to these kinds of works,” admits Ćurlin.

In a corner at the Antrepo No 3 was an inviting installation by Buenos Aires-based Etcétera, a group of visual artists, poets, puppeteers and actors. Their red-dominated 2009 *Errorist Kabaret* is typical of their amusing yet alarming set-ups – a distressed-looking head of Vladimir Lenin superimposed on a baby’s body lay in the lap of an angel with Mahatma Ghandi’s smiling visage, while Sigmund Freud’s solemn-looking face rested on the figure of a clown. Looking at this theatre stage, new findings pop out; from themes and characters to metaphors, one almost yearned to be a ‘fly on the wall’ in this would-be setting. Another corner displayed

the distinct, almost grotesque human heads of Marwan in a seemingly chronological evolution of works spanning from 1963 until 2009. Close by was Jordanian artist Oraib Toukan’s *The Equity is in the Circle*, a multimedia installation comprising video, text and photography. What looked like Dubai real estate advertising spreads was in actuality Toukan’s clever implication to auction off Middle Eastern nations.

From a formal aesthetic perspective, the Biennial, particularly at Antrepo No 3, was well-orchestrated in that the works somehow interfered with one another. While each piece held to its individuality, there was a structure to their amalgamation that felt as though they were all cut from the same thematic fabric. “The way in which the works are mixed brings you somewhere else, with young and established artists side by side,” noted Sfeir-Semler. Noebashari, on the other hand, believes that, “the curatorial cohesion was

Above: Works by Syrian artist Marwan and Sanja Iveković’s *Turkish Report 09* strewn on the floor.  
Facing page: Cerith Wyn Evans. 2007. (Detail) *Things That Speak - The Glass Flowers* by Lorraine Daston. Chandelier, flat screen monitor, Morse code unit and computer. Dimensions variable.

definitely there through an Eastern European taste, but overall, it is depressing." Truth be told, the Feriköy Greek School and the Tütün Deposu venues were dominated by Eastern European political themes. Unless one has a comprehensive understanding of the region's political track record, it may prove difficult to appreciate the works. Noebashari struck a chord, for this sentiment was echoed by others; one Middle Eastern gallerist, who preferred to remain anonymous, commented, "the only person missing was Tito." Sfeir-Semler noted that "Sarajevo is too present." Ćurlin admitted that WHW "focused more on the Eastern European collective," adding that their selection of works from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East was derived from a belief that, "the political themes found among [these areas] are shared and are also relevant positions in Contemporary art."

But is the Biennial's title relevant to today? Doesn't the world share the same doomsday global issues it did in 1928? "It's good to be reminded and kicked about issues, but when you bring words like 'mankind' in, you've got to be more inclusive," added Noebashari, citing that some parts of the world were conspicuous by their absence. WHW did not want the Biennial "to be a catalogue of the world's wrongdoings," and yet, walking through the spaces, one could not help but think of the atrocities that mankind has committed; and herein lie their artistic after-effects. There is no doubt that this was a political Biennial and one that WHW wanted people to walk out of "angry and shaken enough to cause a reaction." The curatorial team of four women, all of whom are graduates of the University of Zagreb with degrees in comparative literature and art history, are known to take works or historical positions to trigger discussion. In terms of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, Ćurlin admits, "if you're trying to avoid politics, many of the meanings in the Biennial will elude you." Perhaps, but in the words of Brecht himself, from his inspirational *What Keeps Mankind Alive?* song is this lyric: *Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance.* And 'brilliance', I believe, is a positive word. 🗨

**The Istanbul Biennial runs until 8 November. For more information visit [www.iksv.org](http://www.iksv.org)**



Curator Suzanne Egeran's *In The Between* featured an impressive line-up of artists including Iván Navarro, Diana Al-Hadid, Ahmed Öğüt and Cerith Wyn Evans. "I decided to present it now because the Biennial activates the local community, attracts international visitors and offers opportunities for multiple conversations," says Egeran.

Eleven artists tackle the show's complex, multi-layered theme. "It addressed how Contemporary art functions in Istanbul. If meaning is created in the space between an object and the viewer, then how do the layers of culture and history in Istanbul affect our perception of art objects here?" asks Egeran. From Wyn Evans's *Things That Speak – The Glass Flowers* by Lorraine Daston, a chandelier with a flat screen monitor flashing out Morse code, to Navarro's *Exodu*, neon lights disappearing into a seeming endless black well, the works challenged ways of viewing and communicating.

Held at Meşrutiyet Caddesi, Egeran noted the building's "beautiful architectural details which give a sense of time and the layers of history that my exhibition is activating." This dialogue between space and exhibition, viewer and works was visible in the show's curation and feedback. "This year's Biennial is quite political. Many said it was nice to see the ways that art can function and exist in the world. Istanbul's art community was happy to see works by international artists like Tom Friedman being shown here for the first time."

With its artistic heavy-weights, *In the Between* certainly succeeded and in the words of Marcel Duchamp, revelled in "the madness of the unexpected."

**For information visit [www.inthebetween.egeran.com](http://www.inthebetween.egeran.com)**