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Curator Dan Cameron



The Antrepo customs warehouse on the Bosphorus
Photos courtesy www.universes-in-universe.de



Inside the Antrepo exhibition hall



Esra Ersen
Still from *If You Could Speak Swedish*, 2001

Poetic Justice

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by Carolee Thea

Eighty artists from 40 countries participated in the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, which was on view at several sites throughout the city this fall, Sept. 20-Nov. 16, 2003. Curator Dan Cameron gave the show the conceptual frame "Poetic Justice" in an effort to focus on politics while at the same time allow artists to claim a special point of view. "At this stage of globalization," Cameron explained, with "hybrid and transitional identities increasingly becoming the rule. . . interchanges between artists from different cultural backgrounds are significant."

The biennial, then, had a human purpose, and was in synch with the ideas of the Creolist Edouard Glissant, who wrote that "relations in all its senses -- telling, listening, connecting, and the parallel consciousness of self and surroundings, is the key to transforming mentalities and reshaping societies."

The biennial got off to a promising start, when on opening night Surasi Kusowlong presented a Thai kick-boxing match with Turkish fighters, preceded by a ritual dance by the pugilists. After about seven rounds -- well-toned ring girls displayed the round numbers during the rest periods -- the winner was chosen by the audience, which voted by piling red or blue chips on a scale, matching the color of the fighter's trunks. This was great fun, besides being a transfiguration of the commonplace.

The biennial's main exhibition hall, the Antrepo, is a former customs warehouse alongside the Bosphorus. Its darkened first floor, full of artworks but nevertheless sparingly installed, interspersed mixed media works with draped viewing areas that housed videos. Most of the video works, whether complex or mundane, political or not, were personal narratives.

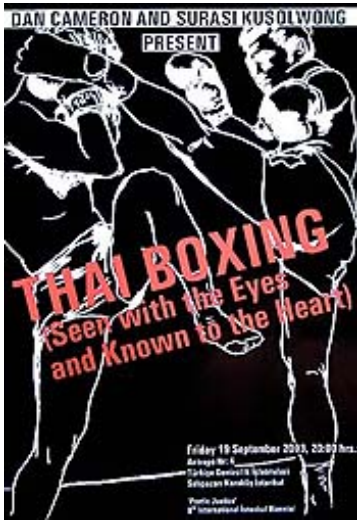
One of my favorites was Marcel Odenbach's *Male Stories*. A man is being shaved in a Turkish barbershop. A caged bird chirps and ethnic music drones. The man in the chair drifts off and the video segues to dreams of ancient battles. A closeup of the razor scraping noisily along the man's neck threatened an imminent breach of trust between the barber and his customer, but overall, the work presented a breathtaking juxtaposition of the historical mixed with the sensual and everyday.

More overtly political and personal was Esra Ersen's work, *If You Could Speak Swedish, Sisters*, which featured newly arrived immigrants who wrote in their native languages what they would like to say if they could speak Swedish. On the soundtrack was an instructor, who continually corrected their pronunciation of the new language they were speaking. Ersen's video was a palpable examination of the ways that identity is formed and meaning is created.

Two other touching videotapes were one by the Israeli artist Efrat Shvily that observed the present practice in Israel of people finding comfort in collectivity by singing songs to alleviate distress with their situation, and a wrenching video by Melica Tomic, *Triple*, in which she taped the search for burial sites of murdered children.

Uri Zeig's video projection, titled *Ancient Machine*, featured monologues by elderly people reflecting on their lives, presumably near the end of their time. The artist also designed a ridiculous sculpture to house the projector, an element that distracted from the work's poignancy.

Smashing Mirror Limit, by artist Song Dong, projects onto opposite walls, the action of the artist smashing a mirror on a riverbank; a metaphor for the destruction of systemic modes.



Surasi Kusolwong
Thai Boxing Poster, 2003



Yoshua Okon
Triangulacion, 2003



Hassan Khan
Still from To the Man Masturbating in
the Toilet of the Charles de Gaulle
Airport, 2002



Do Ho Suh's ineffable nylon Staircase,
2003

On three screens set up in the middle of one room was a projection by Mexican Yoshua Okon of several Turkish-style Sumo wrestlers in various hilarious postures. The Egyptian artist Hassan Khan's *To the Man Masturbating in the Toilet of the Charles de Gaulle Airport* (2002) is a DVD that tests the seamy side of sexuality, and expresses a certain universal tension in the urban fabric.

A metal staircase with chains serving as the banisters connected the darkened theater of the first floor to a lighted second floor. It turned out to be a sculpture by Monica Bonvicini titled *Stairway to Hell*, which was quite dramatic and introduced a pervasive architectural theme. Nearby was a facsimile staircase by Korean artist Do Ho Suh. This work, made of red transparent nylon and stitched together in three dimensions, was rather smaller than life size. While continuing its journey to an imagined upper floor, Do Ho Suh's ineffable staircase floated as if in apprehension of a journey unknown.

In her *Untitled Corridor*, the Warsaw-based artist Monika Sosnowska constructed a hallway that brought the view around a corner to a narrow, unenterable passage with doors and details and ambient sounds, near but unreachable. Tania Bruguera's *Poetic Justice* was a hallway lined with scented tea bags and small videos. This work referenced colonialism as well as a kind of perverted minimalism.

Appeals, a new work by the U.S. artist Ann Hamilton, appeared as a series of floor-to-ceiling blue reverse to white curtains that swished open and closed to divide the space as in the activity of inclusion or exclusion.

German artist Taner Ceylan meticulously painted portraits of gay male, porn or fashion model types in elegant interiors. As carriers of alienation and beauty they too referenced exclusion.

Jorge Macchi's 2003 work, *Buenos Aires Tour*, gave the feeling that one was in a Borges garden of forked paths, yet one modeled on a subway map and concepts of Buenos Aires. With texts and sound the work was intriguing; one, as in the confusion of instructions on being in a new city.

Other works addressing the theme of architecture included a large drawing of a fantasy city by Paul Noble, *The Bridge to Camp Acumulus Nobilitatus*, and mural-sized canvas by the Ethiopian-born artist Julie Mehretu, *Empirical Construction*, that seems to describe worlds coming together or falling apart.

The show also included a pair of mesmerizing videotapes of insects -- both with nature/culture and master/slave overtones. The celebrated Albanian artist Anri Sala presented *Ghost Games*, a work that focuses on a crab being taunted by people on a night beach holding a flashlight. The Iranian photojournalist Seifollah Samadian contributed a video called *The Art of Killing* that depicts a spider creating its web and consuming its prey.

The second venue of the biennial was the Tophane-I Amire Cultural Center, which was originally built in 1451 and was once a cannon foundry and barracks. Some of the works were too seductive in their spirituality for my taste. Religious persecution in the name of cleansing for spritual justice reeks rancid nowadays.

Two works there caught my fancy. The Palestinian-American artist Emily Jacir's work, *One, Where We Come From*, consisted of 32 mounted photos with accompanying texts. For her project, the artist asked displaced Palestinians the question: "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" She then sets off with her privileged U.S. passport and does her best to full the requests, documenting the results.

Her tasks ranged from the poetic ("Drink the water in my parents' village") to the apparently mundane ("Go to the Israeli post office in Jerusalem and pay my phone bill"). Some were impossible to fulfill, as was the destiny and legal status of the people.

Another engaging work -- underlying the terrible fate of nationality -- was by Pascale Marthine Tayou, an artist who was born in the Cameroons but now lives in Brussels. His work, *Devise/Untitled*, was a game of darts. On the target appear names of countries with the date of their entry into the UN and their flags were attached to the darts.



Monika Sosnowska's untitled hallway

Tania Bruguera
Poetic Justice, 2002-03

The Tophane-i Amire Cultural Centre



Pascale Marthine Tayou's dart game

The Hagia Sophia Museum proved too imposing a venue for almost all of the works exhibited. One work by Tony Feher that referenced the stained glass windows was sensitive but, in the end, lacking.

The Yerebatan Cistern, a water reservoir that was built in the 6th century, was also a site for the biennial. The artists who compete or conjoin with this leaky architectural phenomenon rarely disappoint.

Of the five artists here, only the French artist Bruno Peinado was male. He installed a sculpture made of a motorcycle and some red machinery that stood on the water, and could only be seen from afar. I liked that my mind or eyes could not wrap around it. Peinado's work is meant to be paradoxical while also opposing unities of time and space.

Jennifer Steinkamp's work, a projection of a tree onto the wall, appeared upside down in the water and was quite gorgeous. I fancied it as this pioneering tree that sends out roots from its trunk into the earth, offshore into the shallows and all with an illusory fragility and precariousness! Yes, it was a poetic presence until I spied two more trees projected nearby in a site that referenced the famous upside-down Medusa columns that are everywhere here. The branches and roots moved like manic worms, or perhaps like the hair of the Medusa. Oy! Less is more, Jennifer.

Fiona Tan, an Indonesian who lives in Amsterdam, uses old film footage to generate endless streams of meanings and associations. News from the Near Future, the video projection she chose for this site, coalesced with and was mirrored in the pools, as in the past becoming the present.

The Portuguese artist Filipa Cesar, who splits her time between Lisbon and Berlin, showed an intriguing and open-ended work titled Berlin Zoo (2001-03). This amusing video-loop shows people in the central Berlin transit station looking up at the train timetable. With their brows knitted and mouths agape, the work reminded me of 9/11, with people in my city gaping at the burning World Trade Center.

Several works were sited throughout the city's neighborhoods, sending visitors to the biennial on a kind of treasure hunt. Through colorful and narrow streets, with only instructions or an unfamiliar address (Yemenciler Caddesi No. 66, anyone?). Once found, the work by Columbian artist Doris Salcedo did not disappoint. She filled a gap between a row of buildings with a massive heap of 1,600 wooden chairs. In Untitled, 2003, she illustrated the idea of inside/out.

London artist Mike Nelson, whose installation in the 2000 Venice Biennale was one of that show's highlights, sited his work here in an ancient garment district that is given to narrow streets and aggressive pushcart vendors. In an ancient factory building with fortress-like stone walls, a ramped dirt floor and arched entrances with thick wooden doors, Nelson created a kind of den, glowing red as in a photographer's studio. Claustrophobic, it was a metaphor for the artist's mind -- in fact, Nelson worked there while in Istanbul. Across the hall, in an arched doorway with small streams of light, a man beckoned us to take tea. This piece worked on the level of discovery, poetics, enigma and participation.

Another marvelous site-specific work was based on the notion that our supply of fresh water is dwindling. According to artist Bruna Esposito, "of all the water on the planet, only 0.5 percent is fresh." At the Istanbul Science Center, with Italian modernist flair and a Greenpeace sensibility, she designed an enclosed area with mosaic tiles, four sinks at different heights (for children) and a fish tank that sat atop an ancient squatting toilet. Then, up a few stairs to a compost toilet -- set within a round tall light translucent glass arena. "No need for expensive sewer and purification plants," she said, "as micro organisms will do the job." An ancient solution to a present problem -- a good idea.

"Poetic Justice" signified only a small step in the larger curatorial practice. While the show entertained a heartening thematic model, I was left begging for more eccentric confrontations - as in the works of Surasi, Esposito or Nelson.

The arts are a vehicle for change. A show that privileges the margins like "Poetic Justice" may aid in resetting our internal wiring, but more work is needed to produce the kind of excitement and questions that lead to change. The Istanbul Biennial must be a model for experimentation,



engaging more complex or destabilizing motifs that embrace the mutations of institutional critiques. The venerable Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts could certainly consider this for its next chapter without damaging its earned stability!

CAROLEE THEA is a New York critic and art historian.

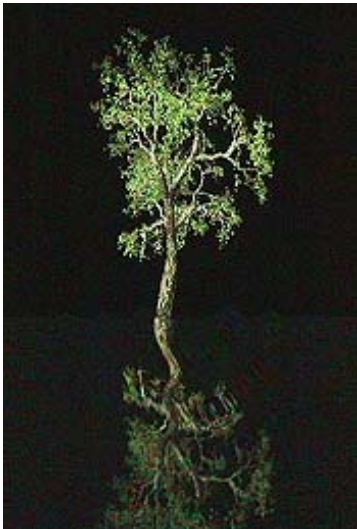
The Hagia Sophia Museum



The Yerebatan Cistern, a 6th-century water reservoir



Bruno Peinado's installation in the Yerebatan Cistern



Jennifer Steinkamp's computer animation in the Yerebatan Cistern



Fiona Tan
Still from News from the Near Future,
mirrored in the water, 2003



Filipa César
Still from Berlin Zoo, 2001-03



Doris Salcedo's project in the
ironmonger's district

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