

## ESSAYS

# Gathering Gossip and Parsing Truth at the Istanbul Biennial

by Alpesh Kantilal Patel on October 27, 2015

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A room with architectural moldings in Michael Rakowitz, "The Flesh is Yours, The Bones are Ours" at Galata Greek Primary School (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted) (click to enlarge)

## Back to School

ISTANBUL — "Gossip," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "trifling or groundless rumour." I actually like to think of it as knowledge, but the kind that's not considered true or rational — at least not yet anyway. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, organized her sprawling exhibition ostensibly around the theme of salt water as material and metaphor. But the exhibition is also about playing with the line between gossip and truth. Nowhere is this better evidenced than in her inclusion of a slew of works that surface the history of Armenians in Istanbul, in particular the genocide that the Turkish government has yet to officially acknowledge. Indeed, one person's truth is another's "groundless rumour."

As an example, consider the contribution of Chicago-based artist Michael Rakowitz. Made specifically for the Galata Greek Primary

School, one of the 36 venues of the biennial, the work is titled "The Flesh is Yours, The Bones are Ours." This refers to a Turkish saying meant to convey that parents give permission for a mentor to have influence over their child, and it is exactly what the parents of Kemal Cimbiz said to Armenian artisan Garabet Cezayirliyan when he became their son's master. Moldings and friezes by Cezayirliyan can still be found on many of Istanbul's stone buildings. Rakowitz took rubbings of buildings throughout the city that contain architectural flourishes designed by both Cezayirliyan and other Armenian masters on large sheets of paper. He then hung them so that they overlap on the walls of one floor of the school's hallways, surrounding the viewer. What becomes visible has, it turns out, always been right in front of us: traces of the work of Armenians that evidence that they are part of the architecture — the backbone, if you will — of the city.



Detail of architectural rubbings in Michael Rakowitz, "The Flesh is Yours, The Bones are Ours" at Galata Greek Primary School

In collaboration with Cimbiz, who took over Cezayirliyan's atelier when he died in 1982, Rakowitz also recreated some of the moldings, which are laid flat or placed leaning against the walls of one of the schoolrooms. Their cumulative effect is funereal. However, returning to Rakowitz's title, the work seems to suggest that cultural transmission is one way to fight erasure. Many of Cezayirliyan's molds survived because he used ground bone and gum Arabic. Rakowitz similarly ground bones and mixed them with plaster to make the final molds. Some of the bones are supposedly from Sivriada, an island onto which the mayor of Istanbul exiled the city's stray dogs in 1911. The animals eventually died of thirst and hunger or drowned trying to escape; this just might be a coincidence, but even now, as one walks the streets of Istanbul, one sees plenty of stray cats but not as many dogs. Rakowitz's work powerfully suggests that Armenians were construed as animals that could be herded and disappeared, too.

He takes full advantage of the site of the installation



*Skeleton of dog from the island of Sivrada in Michael Rakowitz, "The Flesh is Yours, The Bones are Ours" at Galata Greek Primary School*

by employing glass-and-wood display cases that typically might have featured photographs of smiling children. Here there are photographs as well, but of lynchings of Armenian men. School perhaps is an ideal place to begin to take the gossip regarding the Armenian genocide at the periphery of Turkish discourse and turn it into the kind of truths that are inculcated in the country. Yet the work never quite demands the latter — pedagogy, after all, is often perverted.

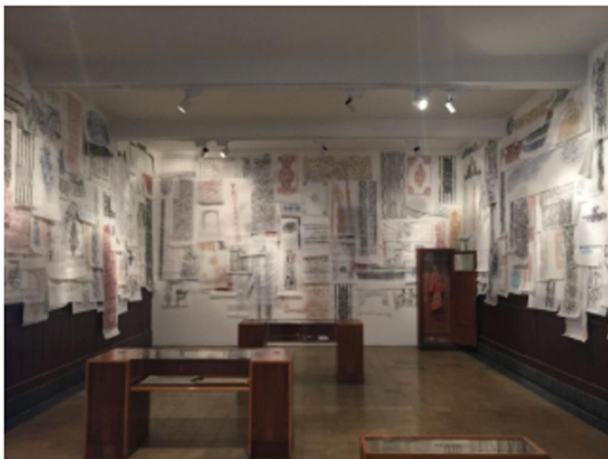
The Greek school suspended its educational activities in 1998 in part because of the dwindling number of Greeks, a group that faced its own genocide in the early 20th century in the city. Though this history is not specifically referenced in Rakowitz's work, it certainly looms large in the background — another spectral presence, like those conjured by the wall rubbings. Rakowitz's installation and the site work well together to dislodge truths without unilaterally replacing them with new ones; they are held in tension

## White Cube

Christov-Bakargiev's use of varied sites for the biennial — a bank, boats, gardens, garages, a hotel, private homes, and an island (to name a few) — enhances the experience of viewing the works of the 80 featured artists, even if not always as successfully as described above. Interestingly, what suffers the most in the exhibition is the site of the museum, in particular the Istanbul Modern. On display there are a number of paintings on bark by the Yolngu, Aboriginal inhabitants of the northeast Arnhem Land of Australia. These works are known as "saltwater paintings" because they provide evidence of the Yolngu's ancient knowledge of the sea.

Christov-Bakargiev's intention in incorporating these works at the Modern is no doubt to make genuine transnational connections between different kinds of oppression. And on a more practical note, bark can expand or contract, thereby causing damage to the works, if the temperature at which it's displayed is not controlled. From a conservation point of view, then, the museum might be the only venue that could guarantee the safety of the works. Nonetheless, these otherwise fascinating paintings look limp and lifeless in the white cube that has drained them of whatever activism and dynamism they once embodied. Their display is contested, too, among some of the Yolngu people, since the works show secrets of their spiritual language, signs and symbols. Hopefully this topic has been picked up for discussion in one of the many biennial panels.

There are works that do quite well in a museum setting, of course. In *The Prophets* (2013–ongoing), Canada-based artists Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens have transformed graphs and charts regarding labor, taxes, savings, and investments into approximately 500 tiny, three-dimensional models that cover one long table. Made out of mesh, wooden sticks, thread, metal wire, and acetate, they are ephemeral and fragile, seemingly underscoring that those in power falsely render the incontrovertibility of their forecasts.



*Hallway with glass-and-wood cases and architectural rubbings in Michael Rakowitz, "The Flesh is Yours, The Bones are Ours" at Galata Greek Primary School (click to enlarge)*



*Installation view of Saltwater Yirrkala bark paintings (1998) at Istanbul Modern (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren) (click to enlarge)*



Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *'The Prophets'* (2013–ongoing), mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view at Istanbul Modern, 2015, produced in collaboration with Henie Onstad Kunstsenter and with La Biennale de Montréal (photo by RIML) (click to enlarge)

The works of both the Yolngu and the team of Ibghy and Lemmens call into question official knowledge. For instance, the saltwater paintings were used to successfully petition the Australian parliament in 2008 to grant the Yolngu sea rights; what counts as proper evidence was radically re-shaped by the ruling. Ibghy and Lemmens's piece is playful but also a biting commentary on the endless and sometimes unreadable graphs, charts, and tables spewed by "specialists" of all kinds and the truths they claim to embody.

## Beyond the White Cube: Catalogue

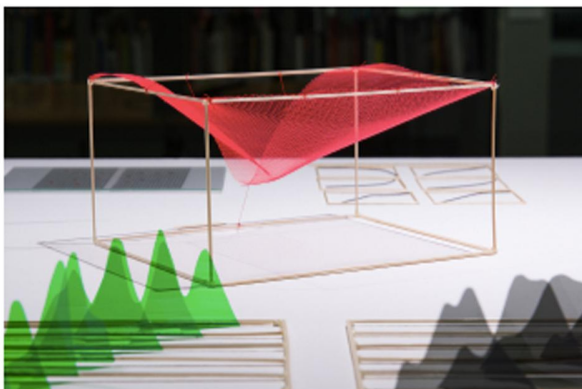
Reviews (like this one) tend to suggest that that an exhibition has to be experienced in the flesh to be truly appreciated: you had to be there, as the saying goes. At least some of this is predicated on the notion that there exists an unmediated liveness, which has been debunked by performance art theory and Derridean deconstruction. I don't

want to downplay the importance of seeing exhibitions and artworks in person: we should all do so when possible, especially critics writing about them. I'm also not arguing that we should sit at home glued to a screen of some kind.

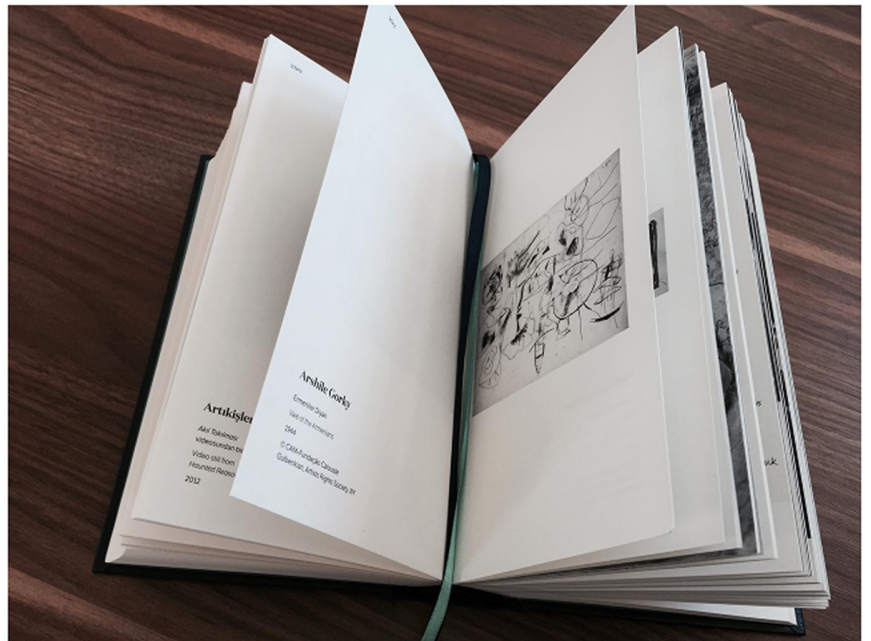
Yet the reality is that most of us will never be able to attend a biennial, or only very few of them. This is the second time I've been able to visit a biennial outside of a city in which I lived. Most of my own experiences with biennials consequently involve reading catalogues, whenever they're available. Sadly, many are sloppily put together or an afterthought. That is absolutely not the case here: Christov-Bakargiev has put just as much thought into the catalogue as the exhibition of objects. The catalogue, of course, is a great source for details on the curator's rationale, but this one also includes about a dozen essays by art historians, critics, and scientists — some of whom are not the usual suspects from the art world. The artists contributed drawings as well, but these did little to add to my understanding of their works; the short texts they selected for the anthology, however, did provide insight into their broad range of interlocutors.

In total, the catalogue clocks in at 550 pages. The hardcover edition with a slipcase is priced at a modest 35 Turkish liras (roughly US \$12 or €10). It's also available to download for free from the biennial's website, ensuring that anyone can have access to it. I wish other biennials would adopt this kind of policy.

One thing I did find odd was that, with the exception of the drawings, the catalogue is printed on thin, lightweight (80 grams) ivory

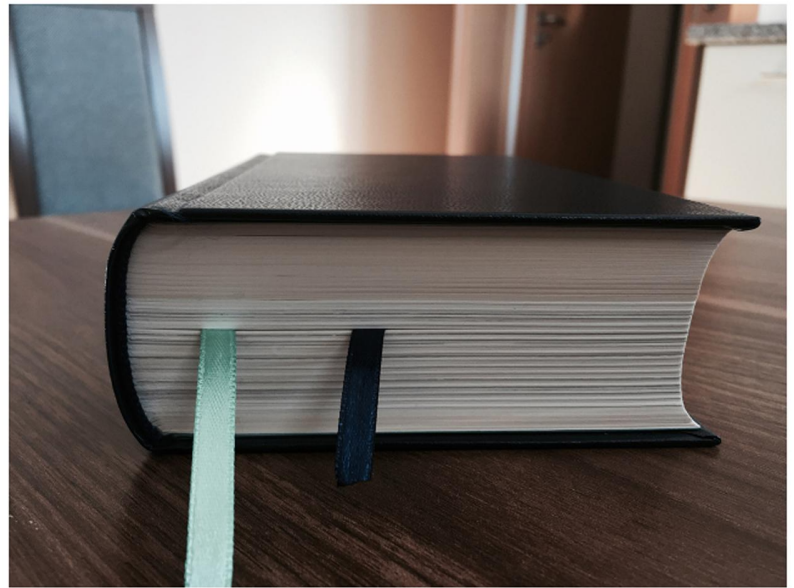


Detail of Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *'The Prophets'* (–ongoing), mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view at Istanbul Modern, 2015, produced in collaboration with Henie Onstad Kunstsenter and with La Biennale de Montréal (photo by RIML) (click to enlarge)



Spread from 14th Istanbul Biennial catalogue, *'SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms'* (2015), "drafted by" Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and published by İKSV and Yapı Kredi Publications

paper — the thickness of paper used for dictionaries or bibles. This in and of itself is probably not too unusual; the book weighed a lot less because of it. Yet, woven into the binding are two satin ribbons, like those you might find tucked in a bible to mark important passages. Moreover, the cover of the book is approximately 7 1/4 x 4.5 in (18.4 x 11.4 cm), its girth 1 3/4 in (4.4 cm). All of the latter make it uncannily resemble a pocket Bible and have the effect of conflating the curator with God. This is unfortunate, as it overshadows the fact that there's a certain degree of openness rather than control in terms of content. If one is able to ignore the materiality of the pages, then the essays by the many contributors manage to open up the "official" exhibition and prevent it from become its own stable and singular truth.



Detail of 14th Istanbul Biennial catalogue, 'SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms' (2015), "drafted by" Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and published by İKSV and Yapı Kredi Publications

## Beyond the White Cube: Public Programming

Shifting gears, there is fairly significant public programming happening alongside the biennial that needs to be considered an integral part of the exhibition. Overall, roughly 70 different roundtables, group readings, conversations, programs for children, and group tours have been scheduled. Much like the catalogue, the public programs are not an afterthought for Christov-Bakargiev. This is not surprising, given that panels were a big part of her Documenta (in 2012).

The curator refers to the public programming as "Speech Acts and Forms of Discourse." In the most general sense, speech acts are things done with words. Christov-Bakargiev writes in the catalogue that the programming will "articulate and give voice to the uncertain knowledges enfolded in ... the exhibition, rendering them both useful and inoperative." In this way, the panels at least implicitly dovetail with my own assessment of the biennial as productively engaging with the uncertainty around truth and its obverse: "groundless rumour," or gossip.

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Installation view of Saltwater Yirrkala bark paintings (1998) at Istanbul Modern (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren)

There were only a few events planned for the first week of the biennial, none of which I was able to attend. Of course, there's no way for anyone coming into the city for a short time like I did to experience all the events; however, those living in Istanbul might have the opportunity to more fully experience all facets of the biennial. Indeed, it's worth noting that during the press preview, Christov-Bakargiev said the biennial is for the people who live in Istanbul, who can experience it leisurely. On the one hand, this was a sly retort to a question from the press about best strategies to see everything in a few days. On the other, I believe the curator does have a special interest in the denizens of the city.

Given this, it's unfortunate that the gossip on the street is that people residing in Istanbul are not particularly happy with the biennial. Ari Akkermans's brilliant and informative review here in Hyperallergic begins to unpack some of why this might be.

In the catalogue, Christov-Bakargiev writes about how salt can be reparative and corrosive — it can heal as much as it can destroy. This paradox is embedded in gossip: it can recast knowledge — set the record straight — as much as it can pervert truths. At its best, the exhibition slips and slides between these two poles.

The 14th Istanbul Biennial continues at various locations around Istanbul through November 1.

Aboriginal art

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Featured

Richard Ibghy

Istanbul

Istanbul Biennial

Marilou Lemmens

Michael Rakowitz

Turkey

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