

REPORT FROM ISTANBUL

Between East and West

The recent Istanbul Biennial, curated by René Block, mixed regional and international artists from 47 countries in an exhibition that eschewed overarching themes.

BY GREGORY VOLK

The Fourth International Istanbul Biennial was noteworthy for what it was not. It was not a showcase for celebrated international figures, nor did it feature an in-the-know roster of younger artists who have already received substantial acclaim. Instead the Istanbul Biennial was a much more free-form event—part intercultural meeting ground, part innovative exhibition.

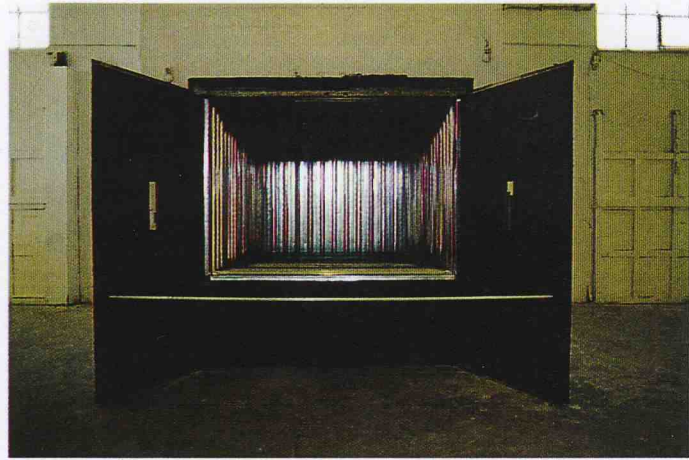
The work on view proved enormously eclectic, with installations predominating but other genres well represented. Over 100 established and emerging artists from 47 countries were invited, many of them by no means familiar to an international audience. Nineteen Turkish artists took part, including several artists in their twenties and thirties. Particular attention was paid to artists from neighboring areas—the Balkan countries, for instance, including Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Serbia—but there were also participants from Iran, Israel, Egypt, Morocco, Thailand, China and Japan.

Istanbul, a vibrant metropolis of 14 million inhabitants, is a historical center of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and a city resonating with Third World and Eastern European influences. It was an apt location for such a diverse exhibition, and René Block, a well-known German dealer, collector and curator who has long been closely identified with the Fluxus movement, proved an interesting choice as curator. It was Block's decision that the Biennial would dispense with national presentations of artists chosen to represent their respective countries; he considers this a 19th-century approach that is outdated today. Block spoke to me of his desire to have a real engagement with Istanbul, and his wish to avoid having the exhibition turn into a kind of international road show temporarily plunked down in an exotic locale. He seemed intensely

aware, too, of his own status as a German curator working in Turkey, given the often uneasy circumstances of the roughly two million Turks who live and work in Germany.

In approaching the work of younger artists, Block brought to bear his own knowledge of art from the 1960s and '70s. An exhibition of European Fluxus artists was mounted in conjunction with the Biennial, and Block included in the Biennial itself a number of older works—by Polke, Broodthaers and Beuys, among others—some of which were culled from his own extensive holdings. This left him open to charges of promoting his own collection, but I would suggest that more generous motives were involved. Such works loosely mapped out connections between the artistic generations, while also providing a rare opportunity for a Turkish audience to see the kind of influential pieces that a Western European or American audience might take for granted.

The exhibition was more an independent than a state-sponsored event; it was coordinated by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, and most of its funding came from private sources. Because of Turkey's checkered human-rights record, especially regarding the political left and the substantial Kurdish minority, an obvious concern of Block and the Turkish organizers was that the Biennial not be used by the national authorities as a legitimizing advertisement. When one also considers that since the last municipal elections the city government of Istanbul has been controlled by an Islamic fundamentalist bloc with its own agenda, the situation becomes even more complex. However, I detected no overt attempts at censorship or manipulation. Ironically, the most striking example of governmental interference came from the United States government, when the U.S. Information Agency made a last-minute decision to withhold funding that would have made possible the presence of American artists. This decision was regrettable, as Block's



Ayşe Erkmen: Wertheim-ACUU, 1995, metal sheets covering the interior of the freight elevator in the Antrepo warehouse.

choices (Janine Antoni, Maya Lin, Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler, among others) were excellent, and the participation of these artists would have added considerably to the exhibition.

The Biennial took place in three separate sites: Antrepo, a renovated two-story customs warehouse by the Bosphorus; the Hagia Irene, a Byzantine basilica dating from the 4th century, now a museum; and the Yerebatan Cistern, a 6th-century underground grotto. The latter two sites are in the heart of Istanbul's historic old city. The Yerebatan Cistern is near the Hagia Sophia, and the Hagia Irene is in the first courtyard of the Topkapi Palace.

The Antrepo warehouse, with spare white walls and individual exhibition spaces, was by far the most museumlike of the sites, and this was where the majority of the artists showed. Upon entering, one was confronted with a wall of pulsating video monitors, part of an installation by Nam June Paik dealing with Turkish soldiers who fought in the Korean War. In contrast to Paik's high-energy piece, Svetlana Kopystiansky's installation was austere yet sensuous. Tall wooden shelving units lining the walls of an open room were divided into rows of square compartments, in which were displayed several hundred books whose loosely fanned pages faced outward. Built-in ladders connecting the units and a pair of gymnastic rings descending from the ceiling resulted in an unlikely conflation of two Russian obsessions: literature and gymnastics.

Istanbul artist Ayşe Erkmen covered the entire interior of the building's freight elevator with shining metal sheets, the same material used for shipping containers, thus acknowledging the building's past as a shipping warehouse. However, as

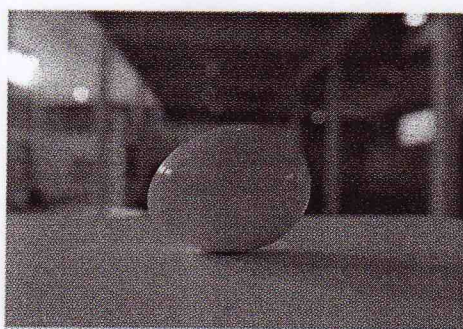
Installation view of Hale Tenger's *We didn't go outside, we were always on the outside; we didn't go inside, we were always on the inside*, 1995, shed, barbed wire, mixed mediums.



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Lawrence Weiner: Just Enough, 1995, wall painting.



Above, Karin Sander: Chicken Egg, Polished, Raw, Size 0, 1995, polished egg.

Left, Romuald Hazoum : Mask, 1995, mixed mediums.

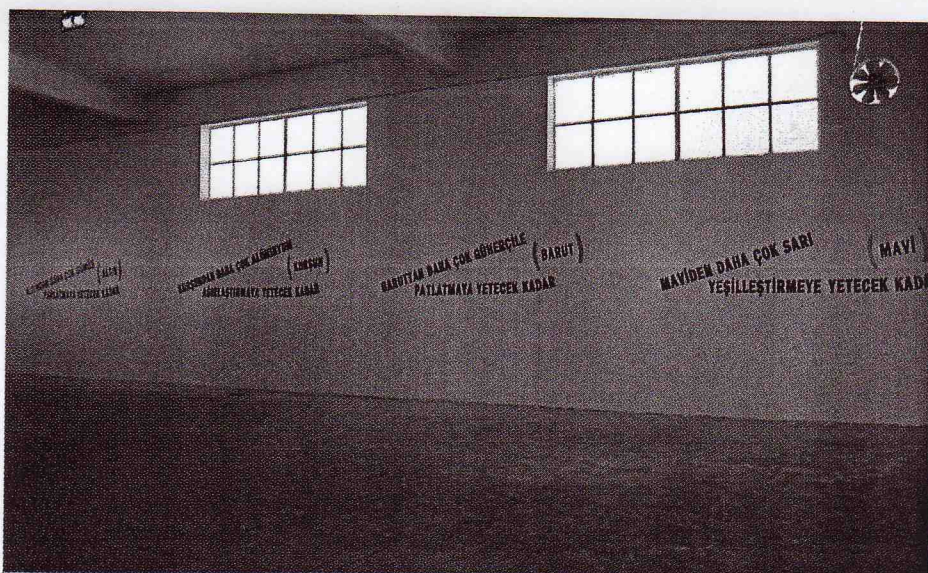
one contemplated this gleaming structure, it solemnly departed, only to reappear a short while later; throughout the day it shuttled between the building's two floors. "This," Erkmn informed me, "is a sculpture that is not entirely sure where it belongs." There was, in fact, something wonderful about this planned uncertainty, with its invocation of movement and transition.

Alfredo Jaar showed *Europa*, a work consisting of six approximately 1-meter-square light boxes placed in a row a short distance from a wall. On the fronts of the light boxes are photographic transparencies of flames and on the backs, hidden from the viewer, are searing images from the Bosnian conflict; these images are disclosed in a series of 30 small, square mirrors hung in a horizontal line on the wall. As one slowly moves, the reflected images become a kind of fragmentary film. One first sees an isolated hand, then discovers that the hand belongs to a shocked woman stepping out from a bombed house, and finally observes another woman helping her. It's an elegiac yet bristling

work, filled with the sense that while we in the West watch such mayhem happen, we do precious little to stop it.

In the Turkish artist Hale Tenger's haunting installation, a small shed filled with tattered keepsakes and mementos was surrounded by ferocious barbed wire. The shed was originally used by workers when the building was a customs house; a threadbare yet dreamy enclave, it is strewn with magazine cutouts showing flowery meadows and high mountains. Here, it became a mysterious memorial combining privacy with a sense of loss and entrapment.

These works were interspersed with others that contributed to the show's eclectic air. The Benin artist Romuald Hazoum , for example, displayed a suite of "African masks" made out of throwaway materials such as plastic jugs, and the Polish sculptor Jaroslaw Kozlowski showed a "nomadic living room" made of household furniture piled atop a table on wheels. The Macedonian Zaneta Vangeli's bizarre three-part installation dealt with, among other things, the nature of the Trinity and, according to her accompanying brochure, the "theology of Pseudo-Dionysius." The installation included three monochrome paintings, each decorated with a silk-screen print of Jesus's face taken from an Andrei Rublev painting, and a video purporting to be a biography of one Vladimir Antonov, a fictitious



character, with intriguing texts scrolling across "Antonov's" endlessly morphing face.

Lawrence Weiner's piece consisted of a wall text written in Turkish. Translated into English, of the four phrases reads MORE SALTPETER THAN BLACK POWDER, ENOUGH BLACK POWDER MAKE IT EXPLODE. Nedko Solakov, a Bulgarian artist, covered a room with truly hideous floral wallpaper suggestive of forlorn apartments in faltering cities. Solakov's addition of scribbles, notations, tiny drawings (some impish sex scenes with ccculating figures, others portraying seeming mythological figures cavorting about) turns the wallpaper into a kind of screen upon which outlandish consciousness is projected. *Chicken Egg, Polished, Raw, Size 0*, by the German Karin Sander, is a chicken egg so highly polished (means of sandpaper) that at first it seems to be made of marble or glass. Set on a pedestal near the middle of a much-trafficked corridor, the egg referred as flickering reflections everything around including passersby and other art works as well the changing natural light.

Compared to the installation works, painting does not fare nearly so well at the Biennial. Notable exceptions were Sigmar Polke's crusty varnish-canvas abstraction *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (1981) replete with biomorphic splotches, and John Kirkeby's suite of gorgeous landscape-derived abstractions. Other striking works provided radical variations on the genre of painting. In *The Golden Age of Painting*, Igor Kopystiansky hung 25 small rolled-up fragments of what appear to be old-master canvases from the wall by means of string. Komar & Melamid gave a hilarious twist to the idea of artistic engagement with the local culture. Continuing their series of works based on ethnographic "audience preference" research [see *A.i.A.*, (1994), they interviewed a number of Turks and determined what they like most in a painting (outdoor scenes, water, children, domestic animals, sharp curves, the color blue) and what they like least (sharp angles, geometric patterns, thick brushstrokes, the color fuchsia). The artists then fabricated two paintings corresponding to the criteria: a very blue river scene filled with frolicking kids and happy dogs, and a small geometric grid heavily impastoed fuchsia, orange and purple.