

# The 12th Istanbul Biennial

Lee Weinberg, an independent curator and writer, headed to the opening week of the Istanbul Biennial in October. Here she reports back on the curatorial constructs used to frame this large-scale exhibition, which has become a key fixture on the international contemporary art calendar.

Contributed by: Lee Weinberg

← previous

next →

## Untitled (The 12th Istanbul Biennial), September 17th – November 13th

**Curators:** Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa

**Architect and designer:** Ryue Nishiwaza

**Venue:** Antrepo 3 and 5 are next to Istanbul Modern (Istanbul Museum of Modern Art)

The venues are open Tuesday-Sunday, 10am-7pm and until 10pm on Thursdays

**Closest tram station:** Tophane

The 12th Istanbul Biennial set an anchor in the past right from its conception at the Remembering Istanbul conference in November 2010. With the work of artist Felix Gonzales-Torres as its conceptual starting point, the Biennial is asking us to stop and look back in an attempt to understand the roots of post-modern, politically involved art.

The absence of any activist, event-based or community-based art work - forms which seem to play a growing part in contemporary political art - brought aesthetics back to the forefront, and asked not only about the role of art in society, but also about the means with which it is expected to fulfill it.

**"The 12th [Istanbul] Biennial is not a spectacle of attractions."**



Nicolas Bacal, The Geometry of Space-Time After You [La geometria del espacio tiempo después de vos], 2010

The 12th Biennial is not a spectacle of attractions. It does not spread itself around the urban space; instead it takes the form of a large-scale exhibition. As such it succeeds in working within a tight thematic framework, finely tailored around five points of departure inspired by Gonzales-Torres's works: *Untitled (Abstraction)*, *Untitled (Passport)*, *Untitled (Ross)*, *Untitled (History)* and *Untitled (Death by a Gun)*.

Each of these themes is investigated through a group exhibition surrounded by a cluster of solo exhibitions. Altogether, the exhibition displays works by 130 artists from 41 different countries, mainly from the Middle East and Latin America.

### The Biennial as a Curatorial Conceit

The biennial as a form is traditionally concerned, almost obsessed, with the contemporary. But the obsession of this current Istanbul Biennial is with past acts - as an opposition to the tyranny of 'the new' and the accepted cultural norm of growth and development.

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Jonathas De Andrade, 2 in 1 [2 em 1], 2010

Hence the works presented are groping, and rearranging historical archives, searching for the traces of personal and individual identities within politically infected historical artefacts.

Indeed Gonzales-Torres was known to 'infect' modernist formalism with personal, emotional and theatrical content, and the artists presented in this exhibition seem to be trying to understand how their identity, history and destiny are infected by social and political agendas, while their art is trying to isolate the malignant parts.

### Five Parts

**Untitled (Abstraction)** takes the viewer on a journey through the landscape of the city. This part, which opens the Istanbul Biennial, acts like an introduction: it is a dictionary of textures, an investigation of the aesthetics of labour, craft and language - each gradually infected with personal and political narratives.

Interwoven here are the works of artists such as Füsüm Onur and Dóra Maurer from the 1960s and 1970s, and contemporary works by artists such as Adrian Esparza and Nazgol Ansarinia. This juxtaposition recalls a history of art that constantly negotiates the tensions between aesthetics and ethical concerns.

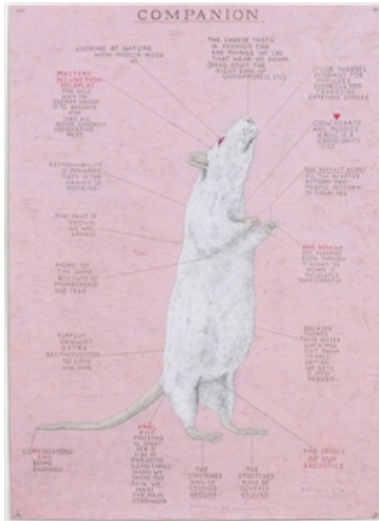
In the work of Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Media Farzin, art history collapses into the political history of the Middle East offering a critical re-reading of both. This exhibition becomes a point of departure for the next two exhibitions on the upper floor: *Untitled (Passport)* and *Untitled (Ross)*.



Alessandro Balteo Yazbek and Media Farzin, Detail of Alexander Calder's performing mobile Orange Fish (1946) at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008

**Untitled (Passport)** asks questions about freedom of movement – both physically and metaphorically. From the intimate work of British artist Simon Evans, reconstructing an inner-world in scientific diagrams and maps, to alternative representations of the world by artists such as Kirsten Pieroth, Jorge Macchi and Hank Willis Thomas, inner cartography of the self is designed and moulded according to the confines of Western thought.

**"Untitled (Passport) asks questions about freedom of movement – both physically and metaphorically."**



Simon Evans, Companion, 2010

While still resonating with *Untitled (Passport)*, and the borders of identity defined by political power, ***Untitled (Ross)*** repositions the body at the centre of history, a theme which later will reinforce and endow *Untitled (Death by a Gun)* with an emotional intensity.

The fragility of the body is echoed in the installation by Francisco Tropa, whereas Teresa Burga negotiates a cold scientific representation of her body. 'The AIDS Time Line' by Group Material and the politically infused pottery by Ardmore Ceramic Art Studio, bring humanity's struggle with AIDS to the forefront, and remind us that the body of Ross, Gonzales-Torres's partner who died of AIDS, is not only a matter of private concern.

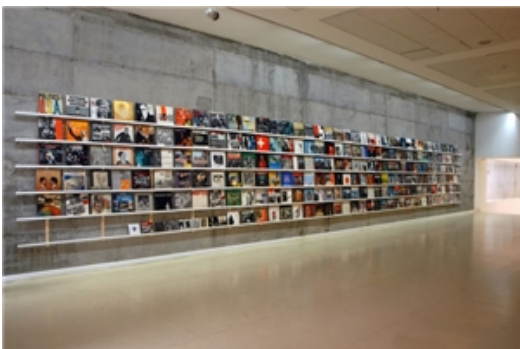
While acknowledging human bodies as historical documents, these artworks try to re-claim the intimate, the personal and the private.



Ardmore Ceramic Art Studio, Punch and Mavis painting pots, 2006

***Untitled (History)*** is carefully structured in a self-reflective manner. Many of the artworks in this section are pointing to curatorial practice itself as a means of creating historical narratives.

Dani Gal and Tina Modotti work with the arrangement and display of collections, while Jonathas de Andrade and Marwa Arsanios invent and reconstruct personal archives. Here, the subjective and the private are intermingled with what is perceived as objective and public, blurring the boundaries between personal and historical narratives.



Dani Gal, The Historical Records Archive, 2005-ongoing



Martha Rosler, From the series HouseBeautiful: Bringing the War Home (1966-1972)

The exhibition structure guides the viewer around the works in such a way as to revive and imbue historical artworks with a new lease of life. Martha Rosler's collages, for example, are infused with a renewed relevancy through their placement next to the works of Palestinian artist Bisan Abu-Eisheh, who carefully positions the remains of destroyed houses in archival vitrines.



Ala Younis, Tin Soldiers, 2010-11

**Untitled (Death by a Gun)** concludes the journey, and deals with the consequences of an un-careful construction of history.

Although the group exhibition intentionally avoids images of dead bodies, death and violence are present everywhere and are metaphorically brought to the fore by works like Ala Younis's installation of 12,235 tin soldiers.

#### Containing the Biennial

An underlying theme that crisscrosses through the Biennial is the relationship between architecture, power and violence. The design and structure of the exhibition, something which has been carefully considered, is reminiscent of a city.

The ex-warehouse is divided into white cubes of various sizes covered in tin sheets, and reflects the aesthetic of an industrial container port. Transient and temporary, the structured space echoes the self-organising and rhizomatic nature of urban structures in Middle Eastern and Latin American cities. These formal commonalities reflect political similarities and affiliations that are highlighted in the content of the art works, demonstrating how the physical structures in which we live impact on the way we live in them.



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