

# Climate Crisis, Plastic Waste and Bewilderment: The 16th Istanbul Biennial

Should art explain, solve or soothe? In 'The Seventh Continent', answers are thin on the ground

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 19 SEP 19

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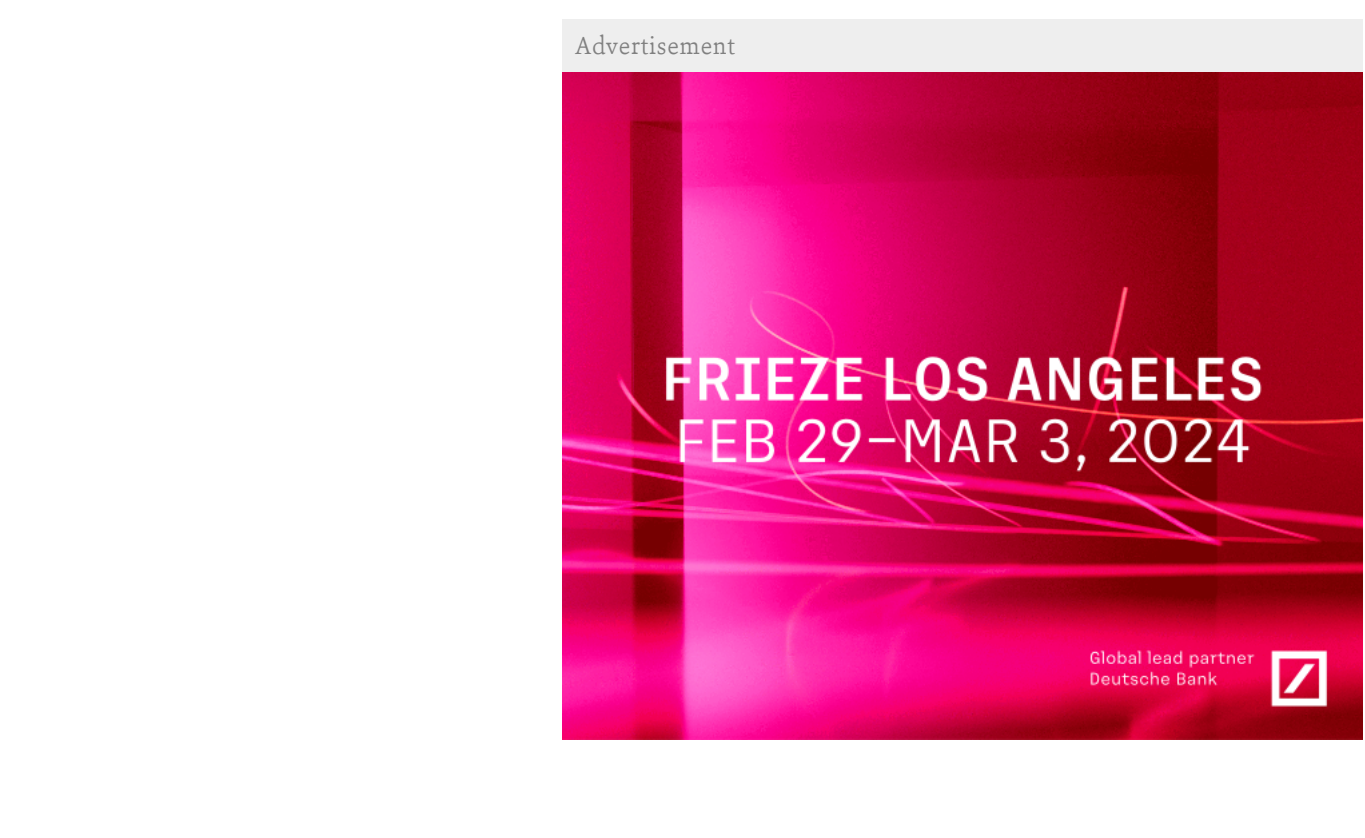


On the bus to the airport after visiting the 16th Istanbul Biennial, I read an article about the town of Hasankeyf in south-eastern Turkey. It's been inhabited for 12,000 years, which makes it possibly the oldest continuously populated place on Earth and, despite a global outcry, is about to be submerged to make way for the controversial Ilisu dam project, which will displace around 80,000 residents and threaten hundreds of wildlife species, including the rare striped hyena and the Euphrates soft-shelled turtle.

The night before I left Istanbul – a city with unsafe levels of air pollution – I attended a lavish reception for the Biennial at the French Consulate. Halfway through the evening, the champagne-quaffing was interrupted by a group of activists calling for the release of Osman Kavala – a philanthropist, human-rights activist and chairman of Istanbul's non-profit Depo gallery – who has been incarcerated on trumped-up charges in a Turkish jail for three years, along with 15 other activists, some of whom are artists. Kavala's plight is not unusual: Turkey imprisons more journalists per capita – currently, 131 are behind bars – than any other country in the world. On 4 September, it was announced that Kavala had been awarded in absentia the 2019 European Archaeological Heritage Prize in 'recognition of his dedicated and untiring promotion of knowledge, protection and preservation of endangered cultural heritage in Turkey'.



Ozan Atalan, *Monochrome*, 2019, installation view, Istanbul Museum for Painting and Sculpture, 2019. Courtesy: the artist



Why mention any of this? Because this year's Istanbul Biennial, which is curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, focuses on the climate crisis – a crisis that is intrinsically political. The exhibition is titled 'The Seventh Continent' after the mass of waste that forms vast floating islands in the world's oceans: around seven million tons of plastic that covers 3.4 million square kilometres. In the opening press conference, Bourriaud cited as an influence Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) – a melding of lunatic ambition, opera, capitalist greed and epic failure. As well as being a rollicking adventure, Herzog's masterpiece also touches on – to paraphrase Bourriaud – exploitation, colonialism and hubris, the reactivation of ancient forces and the power of fiction, and the artist as a translator between diverse languages and beings, humans and non-humans.



Johannes Büttner, *The possibility of another life expresses itself directly in a cop car on fire and obliquely in the faces of my friends*, 2019, installation view, Istanbul Museum of Sculpture and Painting, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

'The Seventh Continent' includes more than 220 artworks by 56 artists and collectives (fairly evenly split between men and women) from 25 countries. The show is staged across three venues. The main one, the MSAU Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, was a last-minute replacement after it was discovered that the original site – the ancient Haliç Shipyards on the shore of the Bosphorus – was riddled with asbestos. (Bourriaud quipped that this is the first biennale to have relocated due to environmental concerns.) Secondary venues include the Pera Museum and various locations on Büyükdada Island, about an hour by boat from Istanbul.



Monster Chetwynd, *Gorgon's Head Playground*, 2019, sculptural installation, 2.8 x 6 x 3.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

In no particular order, personal highlights include: Ozan Atalan's installation *Monochrome* (all works 2019), which features a buffalo skeleton and a film about the displacement of these majestic animals by Istanbul's relentless growth; the Feral Atlas Collective's exhaustive response – via videos, documents, drawings and more – to the 'undesigned effects of human infrastructures'; Mika Rottenberg's wonderfully bonkers *Spaghetti Blockchain*, a film that mines the detritus and ritual of daily life via throat singers, fluorescent sludge and burning marshmallows; Agnieszka Kurant's *Post-Fordite*, which comprises stones formed from old automotive paint; Monster Chetwynd's joyful *Gorgon's Head Playground*, which is permanently installed in Maçka Park (much to the glee of local children); Johannes Büttner's seven sculptures of figures formed from seven different types of earth, *The possibility of another life expresses itself directly in a cop car on fire and obliquely in the faces of my friends*; Deniz Aktaş's quietly meticulous drawings of tyres, *The Ruins of Hope*; and Radcliffe Bailey's elegiac installation *Nommo*, which reflects upon the history of slavery and bondage via a boat, sculptures of heads and music by Sun Ra Arkestra, amongst others. Notwithstanding the occasional incursions into science, generally speaking, the tone of the exhibition is delirious, hallucinatory and kaleidoscopic – as if art is as bewildered by the climate crisis as everyone else.



Müge Yılmaz, *Eleven Suns*, 2019, various stones, objects and water containers. Courtesy: the artist

Despite this confusion, 'The Seventh Continent' prompts a few straightforward questions. Namely: how can art respond to the immensity of what is happening to the planet – and, more specifically, Turkey – and what are its responsibilities? Should art explain, solve or soothe? Can it actually effect change or is it a gilded distraction for an elite, an 'art-washing' of a very real problem? Should it trust science or create alternative realities? Of course, an exhibition is a proposal, not a solution, but answers to these questions are thin on the ground. I grew tired of the amount of work that deals with fictitious histories; given the crisis at hand, what is needed right now are facts, incisive and imaginative solutions, not a retreat into solipsism. I'm all for an art that is enigmatic, indecisive and contemplative, but it's not what is needed by the inhabitants of Hasankeyf or the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon or the jailed activists or the millions of sea creatures dying from ingesting plastic or the children whose health is being destroyed by air pollution. What they require is direct action – and, if you want to harness art to the cause, that surely means leaving the safety and insularity of the gallery behind.

***The 16th Istanbul Biennial, 'The Seventh Continent'* in on view until 10 November 2019.**

Main image: Simon Fujiwara, *It's a Small World*, 2019, mixed media, 110 x 110 x 80 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv/Brussels, TARO NASU, Tokyo, Esther Schipper, Berlin, and Gio Marconi, Milan

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Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

**TAGS**  
[16th Istanbul Biennial](#), [Nicolas Bourriaud](#), [Monster Chetwynd](#), [Johannes Büttner](#), [Radcliffe Bailey](#), [Feral Atlas Collective](#), [Ozan Atalan](#), [Jennifer Higgie](#), [Review](#)

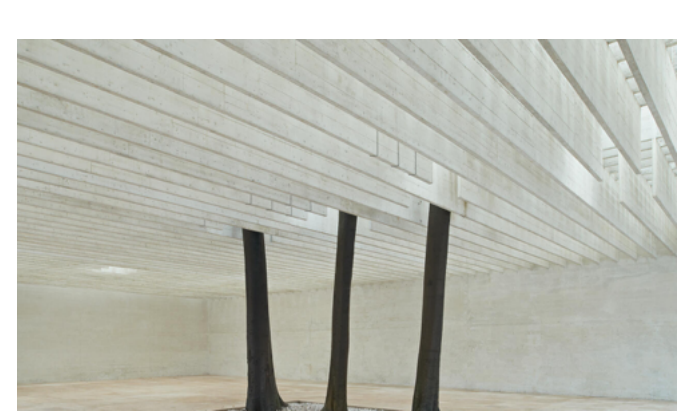
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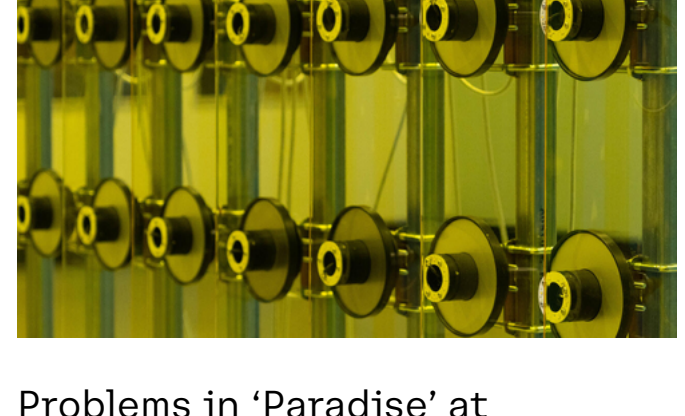
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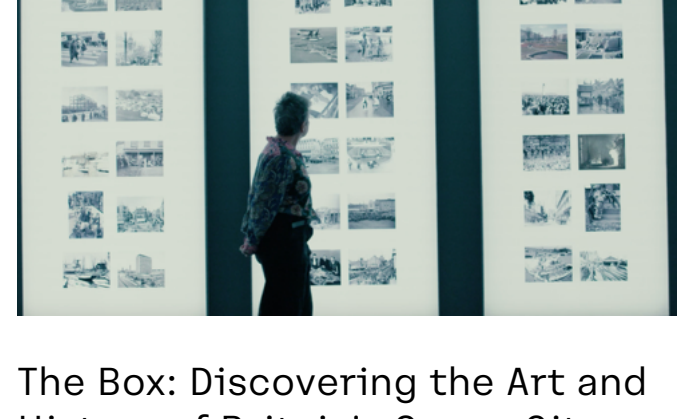
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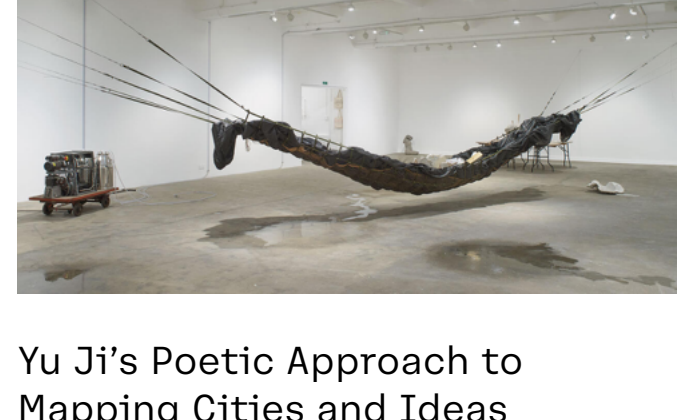
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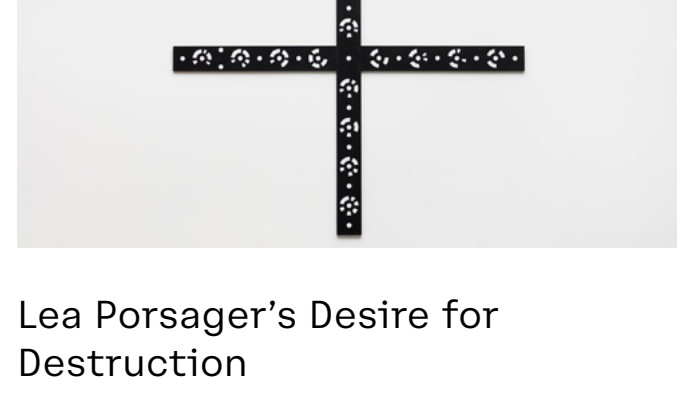
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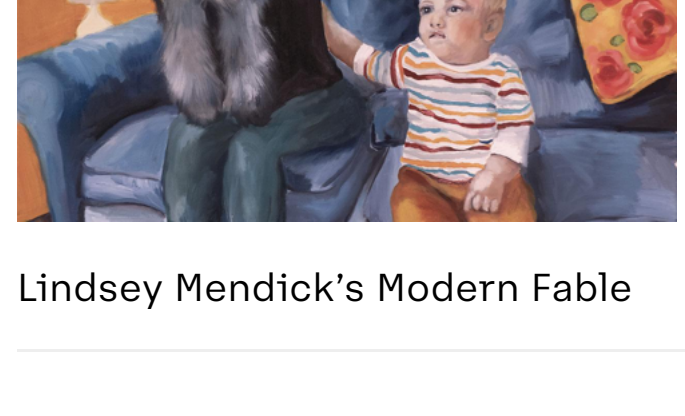
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