



Elmgreen & Dragset's Artist-Driven Istanbul Biennial Is a Model for Future Curators

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Erkan Özgen, *Wonderland*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist Presented with the support of SAHA – Supporting Contemporary Art from Turkey.

When artist duo-cum-curators [Elmgreen & Dragset](#) came up with “a good neighbour” as their theme for the Istanbul Biennial, the world was a different place. Barack Obama was president of the United States; Britain was a mainstay of the European Union. The military coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government, which saw tanks in the streets of Istanbul and Ankara, had yet to happen. Since then, the planet has shifted on its axis.

As the 15th Istanbul Biennial opens to the public, “a good neighbour”—the very question of how to live together as people and countries—is relevant in ways few could have foreseen. And if, on the surface, Turkey is recovering a superficial form of normality, the coup’s aftermaths run deep. Bolstered by the ongoing state of emergency, Erdoğan is reported to have presided over tens of thousands of arrests, as well as the mass termination of public officials suspected of supporting the putsch. Mass trials are

ongoing. Freedom of expression has also been severely curtailed and arrests over social media posts are not uncommon.

Speaking at the biennial's press conference earlier this week, Elmgreen & Dragset hinted at the difficulties of working in Turkey, although they denied any allegations of censorship, self-imposed or otherwise. "Of course we live in times when the whole world doesn't look like Western Europe or the U.S., where we speak about a freedom of speech that is different from the rest of the world," said Michael Elmgreen, when I asked about the kind of limitations they had to contend with. "But in our preparation for the biennial, there was nothing we could not do."

Whether or not he was being politically correct, the duo has delivered, in a highly fraught context, a biennial that is by turns politically charged and poetic, anchored in its local scene yet international in reach. The exhibition might not overtly criticize Erdoğan's government, but it nonetheless feels topical and attuned to its surroundings; it's a fantastic achievement.



Lungiswa Gqunta, *Lawn 1*, 2016-17. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren.

"A good neighbour" is also a lesson in curating. For art stars of their caliber, Elmgreen & Dragset have kept a remarkably low profile here. The duo's show stands in stark contrast to Adam Szymczyk's Documenta—or, indeed, to the last Istanbul Biennial, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. It's an antidote to the model of the über curator's so-big-it's-impossible-to-see exhibition. The number of artists has been kept purposefully low, a mere 56 (versus over 100 at the last edition), including [Fred Wilson](#), [Monica Bonvicini](#),

and [Rayyane Tabet](#); 30 of the participants are presenting new commissions. There's no curatorial statement *per se*, [just 40 questions around the](#) theme, ranging from “is a good neighbour someone you rarely see?” to “is a good neighbour genderless?”

The rest has been left to the exhibiting artists, who wrestle with these questions, and raise many others, throughout the biennial's six venues, mainly located in Istanbul's European city center. Taken together, these spaces mimic an archetypal neighborhood of sorts. There's a house, a school, an artist's studio, two art institutions ([Istanbul Modern](#) and the [Pera Museum](#)), as well as a hammam.

That the personal is political is a somewhat tired trope, but it has never ceased to be true. And it's precisely this overlapping of micro and macro events, often intricately linked to the notion of “home,” that the biennial effortlessly embraces – whether it's with [Andrea Joyce Heimer](#)'s remarkable painting depicting a turf war between black and white families in her native Montana, or [Mahmoud Obaidi](#)'s *Compact Home Project* (2003–04), a collection of the personal papers he managed to rescue when fleeing Iraq.



Latifa Echakhch, *Crowd Fade*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Kamel Mennour (Paris), Kaufmann Repetto (Milan), Galerie Eva Presenhuber (Zurich), and Dvir Gallery (Tel Aviv). Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren.



Latifa Echakhch, *Crowd Fade*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Kamel Mennour (Paris), Kaufmann Repetto (Milan), Galerie Eva Presenhuber (Zurich), and Dvir Gallery (Tel Aviv). Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren.

It's difficult to consider Istanbul and the concept of neighbors without thinking about its border country, Syria. Roughly three million Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey, the overwhelming majority of them without access to basic facilities. No art can truly do justice to the catastrophic enormity of this human tragedy, but [Erkan Özgen](#)'s short video *Wonderland* (2016) is a poignant evocation of the ongoing situation. It presents

Muhammad, a young boy born deaf and mute, who narrates his escape from the northern Syrian city of Kobani with startlingly evocative hand gestures. *Wonderland*'s potency lies in the tension between what is directly referred to—the bombs, the lack of water—and what is left out: the weight of trauma on millions of lives like Muhammad's.

Turkey comes in and out of focus throughout the biennial, with artworks that are both specific and alert to other geographies. [Latifa Echakhch](#)'s *Crowd Fade* (2017) is a long corridor painted on both sides with images of groups of people; the walls have been purposefully bashed in, leaving many of the faces crumbled to dust on the floor. Based on images of the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the piece is a pointed reference to the progressive erosion of the right to peaceful assembly, in Turkey and beyond.

[Olaf Metzel](#)'s *Sammelstelle* (1992–2017) is an enclosed space covered with torn-up pieces of corrugated iron, a material that now stands as a signifier of displaced-person camps and shantytowns. Originally conceived in response to the refugee crisis triggered by the war in the former Yugoslavia, this latest iteration of the piece makes a striking sculptural statement. *Sammelstelle* entraps the viewer in a room evoking Calais's Jungle, Lesbos, Malta, as well as Soweto, Rio, or Delhi. It pays homage to the 31.1 million people currently displaced, and, more broadly, to all those for whom home is little more than a precarious assemblage of metal sheeting.



Installation view of Stephen G. Rhodes, *Willkommen Assumption: Or the PrivatePropertylessness and Pals*, 2017. Photo by Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi. Presented with the support of Zabłudowicz Collection.

Not all artists handle these questions as elegantly, however. [Stephen G. Rhodes](#)'s *Wilkommen Assumption: Or the Private Propertylessness and Pals* (2017) is a bloated installation of tents climbing all the way up to one of the old hammam's cupolas. It is meant to evoke simultaneously the disastrous consequences of fracking in Louisiana and the ongoing situation in Mediterranean refugee camps, but the straightforward representation—tents standing in for tents—is too immediate, too obvious to really tell something new. The fragile shelters turn into parodies of themselves.

The biennial is also notable for the ways in which Elmgreen & Dragset—at the peak of their own fame—have provided a springboard for younger artists, many of whom tackle challenging material head-on. Among the highlights in that regard is [Lungiswa Gqunta](#)'s floor sculpture *Lawn 1* (2016–17). Upturned, broken Coca-Cola bottles filled with green petrol are lined up on the floor. They make up a green carpet, formally redolent of both the defensive lawns associated with white neighborhoods in the artist's native South Africa, and the glass shards crowning concrete walls to deter trespassers. [Vajiko Chachkhiani](#)'s video *Life Track* (2014), the static shot of a sick, homeless man (and well-known Berlin character) staring out of a hospice window is one of the biennial's most haunting images.

Giving that much space to artistic practices still in development comes with an amount of risk—the chance that new commission won't pack the punch they might have promised on paper. I was particularly looking forward to [Mahmoud Khaled](#)'s *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man* (2017), the latest from an artist who has explored queer identity with pieces like *Do You Have to Work Tomorrow* (2013), a highly effective series of photographs picturing a Grindr exchange between two young men against the backdrop of Egypt's recent political turmoils.



Mahmoud Khaled, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, 2017.

Khaled's immersive installation for the biennial takes as a starting point the story of 52 gay men arrested in 2001 for attending a boat party on the Nile. Homosexuality is still illegal in Egypt, and during the trial the men covered their faces. One of them was seen crying and became an icon for the Egyptian LGBT community. Khaled invented a new life for the anonymous crying man. In the artist's imagination, he now lives as a recluse in Istanbul, surrounded by pictures of Giovanni Bragolin's famous kitsch images of crying children. Visitors are given audio guides and led from room to room, the different elements on display systematically dissected. There lies the rub. The "house museum" could have been a fantastic place to explore at one's own pace, but Khaled needed to trust the narrative power of his installation more, and let the objects do the talking. Instead, the audio guide's tightly controlled interpretation suffocates his crying man, who struggles to come to life. One can only hope that future versions of the project allow him more breathing room.

This kind of small disappointment is the price curators have to be ready to pay if they are to prioritize experimentation over self-aggrandizing. But where there's no risk, there's no success. Elmgreen & Dragset's biennial is a generous and relevant platform, fizzling with new energies. It doesn't set out to change the world, but proves that art can offer considered reflections on what it might mean to share it with others. As all sorts of walls continue to go up, we couldn't have asked for more.

—Coline Milliard