

## 16th Istanbul Biennial: “The Seventh Continent”

International biennials are often formed around painfully vague terms: “unity,” “division,” “multiplicity,” and so on. By contrast, the 16th Istanbul Biennial was refreshingly specific. Curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, the show was titled “The Seventh Continent,” referring to the seven-million-ton mass of waste and micro plastics circulating in the Pacific Ocean. No irony was lost in the exhibition’s last-minute



Installation view of **SIMON STARLING**'s (left to right) *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore) / Conservation I and II*, both 2019, Duratrans, perspex, lightbox, 118 × 140 cm; and *Infestation Piece (Mask for Istanbul)*, 2019, zebra mussel shells, dust mask, epoxy glue, wood and perspex, 170 × 35 × 30 cm, at the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 2019. Courtesy the artist and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

relocation from the historic Istanbul Shipyards due to the discovery of asbestos at the site only weeks before the opening. Bourriaud asks what it means to recognize our accumulated rubbish as a continent and, following this, how we might conceive of nature when even huge geological formations are “man-made.” The Biennial was an astute response to the world as it is now: globalized, overwhelmingly connected, and full of things soon to become waste. The show circled around three major tenets: the collapse between nature and culture; the compression of distance; and a granular approach to anthropology that makes sense of nature-human interrelations in the Anthropocene.

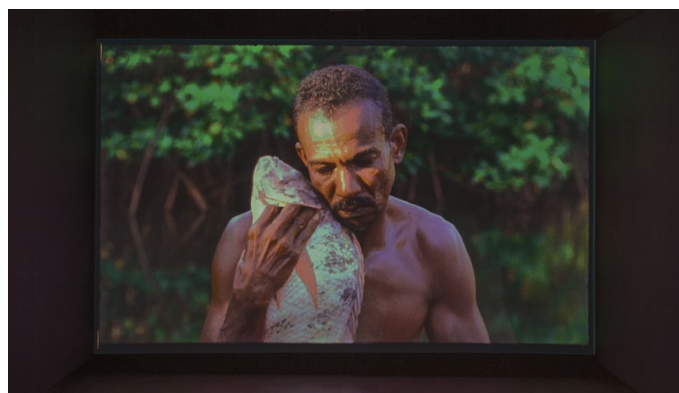
The Pacific garbage gyre is a manifestation of humankind’s impact upon the environment.

Nature and culture cannot be viewed as dichotomous, as human activity dictates the fate of the Earth’s ecology, which in turn conditions our survival within it. The fusion of nature and culture was evoked in Simon Starling’s *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* (2006–08), for which the artist remodeled a Henry Moore sculpture and left it in Lake Ontario for over a year. When Starling’s sculpture re-emerged, it was covered in zebra mussels and subsequently infested with moths. Moore’s original sculpture was inspired by the smooth surface of a pebble on the beach—an artwork mimicking the forms of nature. By contrast, Starling made nature from art, as the recast copy became a site for fauna. It was similarly difficult to determine where Turkish artist Hale Tenger’s installation *Appearance* (2019) ended and nature began. For this piece, Tenger used a sound cannon to project an audio track off of the facade of an old stone house and into an abandoned garden on Büyükada island. Walking through the garden, dotted with obsidian mirrors, visitors heard the artist’s voice, softly reciting a poem in English and Turkish. Her words referenced the local technique of girdling, whereby a layer

of bark is removed from trees to enhance their production of fruit, pointing to an early manipulation of nature.

Joanathas de Andrade’s 2016 film *O Peixe (The Fish)* evoked the collision of nature and culture to a far more unnerving effect. The work follows a group of fishermen from northeast Brazil as they perform a ritual of holding each fresh catch close to their chest. As the fish gasp their final breaths, what looks like an act of love is, in fact, suffocation. De Andrade’s film is equally a portrait of the fishermen and the fish, capturing an act where human and aquatic breaths rise and fall together, before the latter finally ceases.

Haegue Yang presented a strange mingling of political and botanic realms in her room-sized installation. The soundscape consisted of audio from a live broadcast of the 2018 meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean president Moon Jae-in in the Demilitarized Zone. All the audio track captured of the historic occasion was the sound of camera clicks and birdsong in the zone, which has grown into a pastoral idyll due to heavily restricted access. These sounds clash with another looped soundtrack of synthetic Turkish voices, and the chaotic visual components of Yang’s



Installation view of **JONATHAS DE ANDRADE**'s *O Peixe (The Fish)*, 2016, 16mm film with color and sound: 37 min, at the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 2019. Courtesy the artist; Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo; Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Les Moulins/Havana; and Alexander and Bonin, New York.

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Installation view of HAEGUE YANG's works at the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

installation: a wallpaper of angels, tulips, laboratory equipment, and Secchi disks; raffia sculptures reminiscent of pagan totems; and gently-scented gym balls, producing an overwhelming assemblage of texture, color, and smell.

Yang's overdetermined field of images—an "iconographic smog," as Bourriaud described it—bridges to the Biennial's second thread: the collapse of distance. In the curator's words, "The world's topology is parting from its geography: two distant dots on the map may now coincide, as though both globalization (economic and climatic) have folded the planet and created previously unheard of creases." Mika Rottenberg's film *Spaghetti Blockchain* (2019) gives form to this suffocating proximity in what resembles an ASMR-video-turned-psychedelic-trip. The film follows an absurdist and dismembered chain linking a Tuvan throat singer in Siberia to potato farmers in Maine, and a bizarre "antimatter" factory producing jelly slabs, spun sugar, fried eggs (all melted on a hot plate), and colored powder for balding men. Depicting the details of synthetic and biological materials, *Spaghetti Blockchain* suggests that both are controlled by contemporary capitalism, symbolized by the invisible factory.

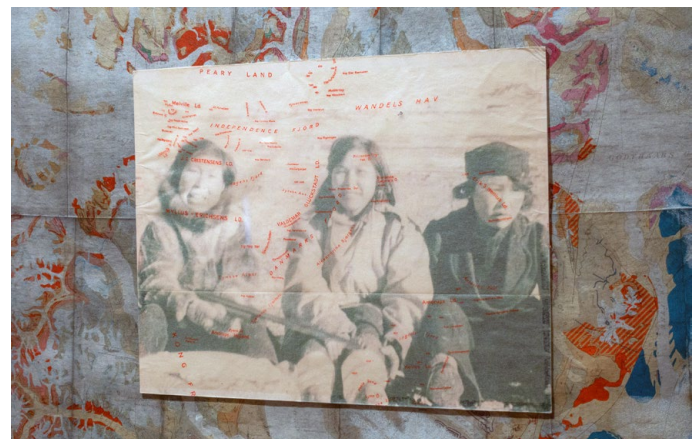
How do we make sense of this "decentered" era, in which we experience claustrophobic interconnectedness even as global society fragments along new economic and sociopolitical fault lines? Bourriaud called for a reconceptualization of art as a process of "molecular anthropology" that encompasses not only humankind but the totality of its interactions with nonhumans. Armin Linke's research-based installation *Prospecting Ocean* (2018) applies this methodology in its wide-reaching study of deep-sea mining, ocean bioprospecting, and the neocolonial search for ocean minerals against international maritime law, which mandates certain waters as the "common heritage of humankind." As Linke's research documents and recorded interviews show, a history of marine geographies has come to include a history of us, and our desire for territory and resources.

Other artists dismantled traditional anthropology, suggesting that we must first recover the discipline from its colonial roots. First Nations Danish-Greenlandic artist Pia Arke's series of English-language maps of the Arctic, which she drew over and annotated with pencil, reveal the arbitrary nature of national boundaries and

anthropological groups. Works by Norman Daly and Paul Sietsema go further still to create false archaeologies. Daly's fabricated artifacts, from the fictional ancient civilization Llhuros, were displayed in cabinets at the Pera Museum like real historical objects. Sietsema's 16mm films also feature forgeries: *Figure 3* (2008) reels through photographs of fake Polynesian artifacts, while *Anticultural Propositions* (2009) shows the script of a lecture allegedly given by Sietsema in New York, though the text was in fact plagiarized from an essay by Jean Dubuffet.

Not all of the projects lived up to Bourriaud's nuanced concept; many were very on the nose. And yet it was only in light of the clear curatorial premise that weaker elements became apparent. No artwork could collapse under a dull, predictable, and conveniently vague theme as it would have no concrete point of reference to fail against. Even if it didn't always hit the mark, "The Seventh Continent" found an abundant metaphor in the floating expanse of waste and offered new perspectives on facing our contemporary crises.

## SOPHIE ROSE



Detailed installation view of PIA ARKE's *Legend I-II-III-IV-V*, 1999, five mixed-media collages, 213.5 x 181.5 x 4 cm, at the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 2019. Courtesy Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk.

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One Year (6 Issues) USD 95.00  
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Single Copies RRP AUD 29.00, CAD 20.00,  
EUR 18.00, GBP 16.00, HKD 156.00,  
JPY 2,152, KRW 24,000, NZD 30.00,  
SGD 28.00, USD 20.00, Almanac USD 30.00  
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ArtAsiaPacific (ISSN 1039 3625) is published six  
times yearly by: ArtAsiaPacific Holdings Ltd.

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TALA MADANI, *Morris Men*, 2012, oil on  
linen, 172.7 × 167.6 cm. Courtesy the artist  
and Pilar Corrias, London.

#### BANI ABIDI

Bani Abidi is an artist working  
primarily with video, but also  
with photography and drawing.  
Her work uses humor in all  
its gravity. She lives mostly in  
Berlin and partly in Karachi. A  
major survey of her works from  
the past 15 years, "Funland,"  
is on view at the Sharjah Art  
Foundation from October 12 to  
January 12, 2020.

(See ONE ON ONE)

#### ALESSIO ANTONIOLLI

Alessio Antoniolli is the  
director of Gasworks, London,  
where he leads a program  
of artists' residencies and  
exhibitions by emerging local  
and international artists. As the  
director of Triangle Network,  
he is involved in advocacy,  
fundraising, and strategic  
development for artists and  
grassroots organizations. He  
has also lectured widely and has  
juried awards such as the 2019  
Turner Prize.

(See DISPATCH)

#### JOHN ALEXIS BALAGUER

John Alexis Balaguer manages  
operations and research  
at Palacio de Memoria, an  
arts center in Manila. He  
is the curator of Curare, an  
online platform for emerging  
Philippine art. Formerly,  
Balaguer was part of the  
curatorial team of the Ayala  
Museum, and was gallery  
manager at Archivo 1984. He  
is the 2019 recipient of the Ateneo  
Art Awards for Art Criticism.

(See REVIEWS)

#### NADIA CHRISTIDI

Nadia Christidi is a PhD  
candidate at the Massachusetts  
Institute of Technology,  
where she researches water  
shortages across various cities.  
As an artist, she has presented  
works at platforms including  
Amman's Darat Al-Funun, the  
Beirut Art Center, and Ashkal  
Alwan, Beirut. She is currently  
a resident researcher and writer  
at Dubai's Jameel Arts Centre,  
where she is developing a  
commissioned mini-publication  
on the city's water resources.

(See PROFILES)

#### MICHAEL MCCULLOUGH

Michael McCullough is  
a partner at Pearlstein  
McCullough & Lederman LLP,  
a law firm providing high-level  
services to the art market.  
McCullough advises galleries,  
auctioneers, collectors, and  
museums on a variety of art  
matters. He is a former in-  
house counsel of Sotheby's.

(See THE POINT)

#### SOPHIE ROSE

Sophie Rose is a curator  
and writer. She is currently  
assistant curator at Brisbane's  
Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery  
of Modern Art. Working with  
Australian and international  
practitioners, she is interested  
in how the concepts of  
memory and duration figure in  
contemporary art.

(See REVIEWS)

#### DANIELLE SHANG

Danielle Shang is an  
independent writer, exhibition  
organizer, and art consultant  
based in Los Angeles. Her  
research focuses on issues  
of urban renewal and social  
change, examining the impact  
of globalization on art in the  
global south. She has written for  
*Artforum*, *Hyperallergic*, *Yishu*,  
*LEAP*, *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*,  
and *Randian*.

(See FEATURES)

#### MARYBETH STOCK

Marybeth Stock divides her time  
between Singapore and Japan,  
where she works as an editor  
and researcher for a Tokyo  
public relations firm. She also  
covers the Singapore arts scene  
as a long-time contributor  
to *ArtAsiaPacific*.

(See WHERE I WORK)

#### STEFAN TARNOWSKI

Stefan Tarnowski is a writer  
based in Beirut. Currently,  
he is researching the Syrian  
revolution and media  
infrastructures as part of his  
PhD at Columbia University's  
Anthropology Department. He  
is also a translator and subtitle  
from Arabic and French to  
English, and has worked as  
a researcher for a number of  
artists and filmmakers.

(See ESSAYS)



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