

HYPERALLERGIC

The Istanbul Biennial Examines the Tricky Question of What Makes a “Good Neighbor”

Dealing with themes of surveillance, personal and shared space, and what defines home in film, installation, and more.



Mary Pelletier | October 30, 2017



Burçak Bingöl, “The Follower” (2017) (produced with the support of Zilberman Gallery and SAHA, Supporting Contemporary Art From Turkey, photo by Sahir Ugur Eren courtesy the artist)

In the months leading up to the 15th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, posters —hung in windows alongside “For Rent” signs and pasted next to broadsides advertising concerts — began asking the city’s residents some very personal questions:

Is a good neighbor someone you rarely see? Is a good neighbor richer or poorer than you? Is a good neighbor willing to babysit your 5-year-old?

Part introspective canvassing, part marketing campaign, 40 individual questions galvanized Elmgreen & Dragset’s theme for the 2017 edition: *What makes a good neighbor?* The Scandinavian artist duo (the Biennial’s first artist-curators) decided to approach this edition with broad notions of community and its many trappings: neighbors, borders, politics — even how we formulate our own homes. 55 artists were selected to exhibit across six venues (which, unlike the Biennial’s last edition, are each within neighborly walking distance), responding however they saw fit.

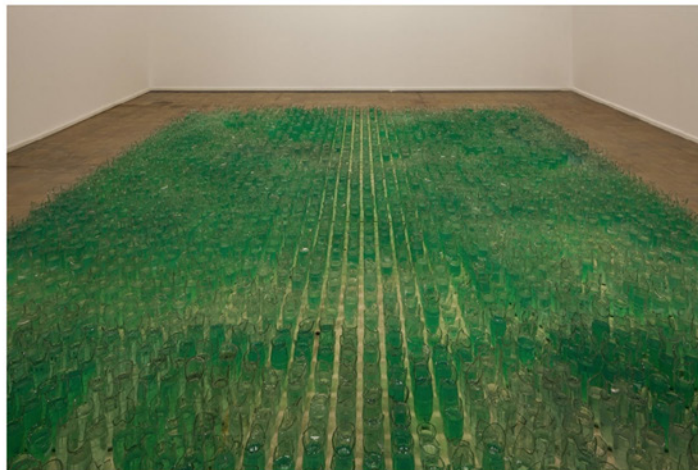
Of course, there are no right answers to these questions; still, many successful artworks in the Biennial bear out personal, global, and political identities, tackling what it means to be part (or, not part) of a community in myriad ways and media. Here are three of the questions posed by Elmgreen & Dragset, and a selection of Biennial artworks that probe them with possible “answers.”

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Is a good neighbor a stranger you don't fear?

Security and surveillance play an introductory role in the biennial — as is now common practice at art institutions across the world, it is unsurprising that the first thing to greet you at any given venue is a security guard, sometimes followed by a metal detector or x-ray. Turkish ceramicist Burçak Bingöl has brilliantly intervened in daily acts of surveillance by installing ceramic CCTV cameras amidst the venues' actual cameras in "Follower 2017." Bedecked with local flora beneath a sheen of glaze, they are a subtle wink to those who look up and spot them — and a reminder that, as you ponder her ornamental additions, someone is most likely inspecting your image on a screen nearby.

At the Galata Greek Primary School, Lungiswa Gqunta's "Lawn I" (2016/2017) is a tightly packed grid of jagged, overturned Coke bottles, filled with a neon green petrol. Taking up most of an old classroom, "Lawn I" comments on the outdoor leisure areas of her native South Africa — reserved for the wealthy, suburban elites, the garden becomes a realm of disparity between residential populations. Shards of glass often top the fencing that keeps "strangers" out of these gardens— here the glass and its threatening edges form the basis of a charge piece of oft-disputed property, and visitors tread lightly, navigating ideas of neighborhood.



Lungiswa Gqunta, "Lawn I" (2016/2017) (photo by Sahir Ugur Eren, courtesy the artist)

In a room at Istanbul Modern, Candeğer Furtun's "Untitled" (1994-96), confronts visitors with a line of naked, male legs, sat body-less, on a span of tiles. Immediately, you're in a hammam, nine identity-less men sat side by side, and one ceramic hand placed firmly (aggressively?) on a thigh. It's at once impersonal and intimate, and we are left wondering how these figures may relate to one another, and how masculinity operates in their world — it's no accident that there are nine figures here, representing Turkey and its eight regional neighbors.

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"Untitled" (1994 - 96) (presented with support from SAHA, Supporting Contemporary Art From Turkey, photo by Sahir Ugur Eren courtesy the artist)

Is a good neighbor just some shadows cast on the rolled down blinds next door?

Over at Ark Kultur, Mahmoud Khaled's "Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man" (2017) introduces a neighborhood stranger — the "unknown crying man." The entire cultural space has been transformed into his home, and an audio guide illuminates the life of its sole inhabitant: one of the 52 Egyptian men arrested on a gay party boat floating down the Nile in 2001.



Mahmoud Khaled, "Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man" (2017) (presented with support from Arts Council Norway, Ari Messoulam, and Office of Contemporary Art Norway, photo by Sahir Ugur Eren courtesy the artist)

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Here, Khaled re-imagines the future of one of these men, in Istanbul, through an incredibly detailed assemblage of furniture, books, magazines, and photographs, many of which speak to his queer identity, and hint at the personal reasoning behind his somewhat reclusive life. In the glass shower room, the only place neighbors could catch a glimpse of the crying man, scenes from the Egyptian film *All My Life* (dir. Maher Sabry, 2008), loops continuously on a television screen, showing the story of a gay man's arrest; in his study, a selection of queer literature is stacked alongside the daybed. Though homosexuality is not illegal in Turkey, the house tour is a powerful and painfully personal study of continued persecution in the region — even in the crying man's new home.

Is a good neighbor tuned in to the same channel as you, watching from a sofa almost like yours, bought from a similar chain store?

Tucked away in an apartment building, Yoğunluk's Artist Atelier is the smallest of the Biennial's six venues, showcasing "The House" (2017). Only three or four visitors can enter the darkened space at a time, and soon, the darkness give ways to soft illuminations of typical homewares. The building, some 100 years old, provides its own creaky soundtrack, and gives off a haunted house vibe, enhanced by the sticky counters, tables, and chairs, all covered in a film of sweaty latex. Surreal and familiar at the same time, the quiet, four-minute experience forces us to ponder the atelier's question: "How do you figure out that somewhere is a house?"



Volkan Aslan, "Home Sweet Home" (2017) (produced with support from SAMM, Supporting Contemporary Art From Turkey, Berlin Wing, and Eight Museum Friends of Lumen, photo by Felix Unger from courtesy the artist)

At Istanbul Modern, Volkan Aslan's three-channel film, "Home Sweet Home" (2017), is a quietly beautiful meditation on personal and shared space, which takes place on the Bosphorus. To the left, woman moves about a cosy, compact living area: repotting a plant, filling a water glass, rolling a cigarette. To the right, a woman sits on the deck of a boat, taking her coffee at a desk firmly planted onboard. In the middle, rolling shots of the river link the two, but it's not until the film nears its end that we see these two women share a single houseboat. It's a play with forced perspective that confounds distance, and, after viewers are done chuckling at their own assumptions, leaves space to muse on the way distance functions within relationships, inside and outside the home.

The 15th Istanbul Biennial continues through November 12.