

Swimming in Metaphors

“Tuzlu su” “Saltwater” 14th Istanbul Biennial September 5 – November 1, 2015

By Susan N. Platt

As a migration crisis unfolded in Turkey (refugees on rubber rafts were trying to reach Greece from the coast of Turkey), a Biennial titled “Saltwater” seemed an amazing coincidence. But innocuous as the title appears, the theme encompasses political, spiritual, mystical and scientific metaphors that reach back into history and up to the present moment.

“Tuzlu su” “Saltwater” features venues that cannot be seen, installations in obscure locations, and ferry trips to the Princes Islands in the Sea of Marmara and up the Bosphorus.

Under the Sea of Marmara, entirely invisible to us, Pierre Huyghe’s “*Abyssal Plain. Geometry of the Immortals*” (2015-onwards) is located near the inaccessible island of Sivriada. (period not comma) Huyghe is building a “concrete stage ...around existing rock formations on the bottom of the Sea of Marmara....over the next few years it will become a platform for objects taken from the surface, production left over from the history of the Mediterranean region, including the artists own production.” Through the power of natural currents, the existing creatures of the sea will join the human artefacts on the “stage.”

The intent of the organizer, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who refers to her role as drafting a “Composition,” takes on the metaphor of saltwater as a synonym for “transformation and change on the planet . . .It is a theory of life. “ Christov-Bakargiev does not believe in separating art and science. Flow of water is equated in her mind to flow of ideas, waves to waves of resistance and outrage, knots to arrested movement and to the conflict of art as an empathic political statement in conflict with art as capitalism. The knots refer to resistance. So emerges why a video about knots in water by the physicist William Irvine appears beside a riveting film by oceanographer Jeffrey Peakall of a large underwater river that surges up the Bosphorus in opposition to the surface flow.

Tacita Dean’s *Salt (A collection)* literally materializes salt. Dean pairs a ball crystallized in potash and several postcards referring to her attempt to visit Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in 1997. The original 1968 Smithson film is at the very back of the exhibition, like a deep archeological layer that was clearly a primal inspiration: in an anonymous video Christov-Bakargiev herself visits the site of the Jetty (which appears and disappears periodically, in response to water levels in the Great Salt Lake, much in the spirit of the exhibition.)

The contradictions of salt water, as both life giving and destructive, connects here to the contradictions of capitalism. Grace Schwindt’s disorienting installation *Little Birds and a Demon* included a voice narrating the nightmarish condition of birds caught in an oil spill, as we viewed her seemingly unrelated off kilter installation: two irregularly geometric salt “carpets,” a table with one leg on the salt bearing a copper cauldron filled with what is called “used-pointe-ballet-shoe-soup,” a ladle, soup bowls, a stack of silver spoons, and two chairs, one falling over. It disrupts our sense of the rational. Schwindt is a caustic commentary on the corrosive effects of capitalism.

On the other hand, Senam Okudzeto *Glossolalia no 12*, part of an ongoing project called “Portes Oranges,” celebrates grassroots capitalism, women’s economy, particularly through the sale of oranges, in Ghana. Also addressing positive outcomes was the amazing group of Australian aboriginal paintings that became legal documents that proved ownership of the land and sea.

Theaster Gates’s *Three or Four Shades of Blues* inspired by Iznik pottery, included a pottery store, referencing small scale capitalism, offered bowls made of dust taken from resonant sites in the city. Upstairs were videos of blues musicians.

My favorite work, though, was Pelin Tan and Anton Vidolke’s video *2084: a science fiction show/Episode 2: The Fall of Artists’ Republic* in a cistern under a hotel in the depths of central Istanbul. Photographed inside and outside an abandoned dome building in Beirut in the Rashid Karami International Fair Complex designed by Oscar Niemeyer from 1962 – 1974, five people with dog, chicken and horse masks, as well as a human, recite a story: a great people’s uprising led to remaking the world with “art so beautiful that people became animals.” Feeling became the economic resource, but the great utopian experiment failed, leaving only these few creatures inside an abandoned utopian structure.

Like this video, the entire Biennial felt a bit like remnants inside a utopian dream, swimming in a sea of metaphors that expanded our perceptions and opened our minds to the amazing complexity of life on the planet.