



Untitled
(12th Istanbul Biennial)

Istanbul, Turkey
September 17 – November 13, 2011



by Dave Colangelo

Curators Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa kept the 12th Istanbul Biennial artists a mystery until the last minute. They also limited all exhibitions to the grounds of the Istanbul Modern. They hoped, as stated in a pre-show press release, to question the effect of preconceived notions of the exhibition. They also hoped to address what they saw as a dilution of aesthetic rigour resulting from the “ancillary” events—off-site installations, talks and interventions—that have become the norm at international festivals. These tactics, or lack thereof, aimed to create an atmosphere of intense focus on the delimited site of the exhibition and on the themes of this year’s biennial: love, death, abstraction, history and territory.

Although they sidestepped the formal and aesthetic challenges of presenting work outside of the gallery, Hoffmann and Pedrosa succeeded in reminding us of the importance of the gallery space for making intellectual and emotional statements with art. The 135 artists on display were selected largely from the Middle East and Latin America (a reflection of Hoffmann and Pedrosa’s interests, reinforcing their stick-to-what-you-know approach) and were organized into 54 solo presentations and five group shows, each drawing inspiration from the work of the late Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996). His highly personal and political work—such as “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991), a regularly replenished pile of individually wrapped candy that is free for the taking, and which weighs roughly the same as his dead lover, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS five years before Gonzalez-Torres did—takes modern and conceptual traditions and injects them with politics and the personal. Pedrosa and Hoffmann use these cues well. By never actually showing Gonzalez-Torres’ pieces in their entirety (only describing them or displaying photographs), Pedrosa and Hoffmann employed fragments as a

^{top}
Gabriel Sierra, *Untitled (Support for mathematics lesson)*, 2007, rulers, plate and fruits, dimensions variable
PHOTO: GABRIEL SIERRA; IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LUISA STRINA, SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL, AND CASAS RIEGNER, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

^{below:left}
Cevdet Ereğ, *Ruler Coup (Mini)*, 2011, laser on transparent perspex and white paint, 0.4 cm × 2.5 cm × 19 cm, 5000 copies produced for the 12th Istanbul Biennial
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

novelist would an epigraph, setting the tone for the emotionally charged, politically motivated selections in this decidedly formal framework.

The tone was, as you might expect, serious. And rightfully

^{right}
Dani Gal, *The Historical Records Archive*, 2005–ongoing, installation view at Herzliya Museum, Herzliya, Israel, vinyl records, dimensions variable
PHOTO: YIGAL PARDO; IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FREYMOND-GUTH FINE ARTS, ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND.



so. The weight of these themes called for concentration over participation. The crowds seemed to understand, moving slowly and carefully from room to room. In one room, somewhere between the group shows entitled *Untitled (History)* and “*Untitled (Death by Gun)*”, Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967–72) series seemed to inspire hushed contemplation. Was it the continued occupation of troops on foreign soil and the expanded field of media infiltrating device-laden homes that invoked this solemnity? Not far from Rosler’s work was *The Historical Records Archive* (2005–ongoing) by Dani Gal, an emerging Israeli artist. Packed more tightly, this collection of LPs of recorded political addresses and coverage of historical events from various countries was the closest the biennial came to playfulness. (This was a show, after all, where, Columbian-born artist Milena Bonilla’s *Stone Deaf* [2009]—one of the few included video works—showed a series of close-ups of insects crawling across the weathered, and disputed, grave of Karl Marx.) The inclusion of Gal’s work bridged a gap between popular material culture and the curators’ statements, reminding us of our complicity—the sheer weight of being within globalized capital—which can at times feel too lightly distributed across the goods and media we consume and discard.

Pedrosa and Hoffmann’s introspective and controlled exhibition continued in the works displayed in a room entitled *Untitled (Abstraction)*. Although not appearing in the show, a description of Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Bloodwork—Steady Decline)* (1994)—a hegemonic grid humanized and subverted with a diagonal line representing the state of Gonzalez-Torres’ immune system—laid the groundwork for this section. Here, Mona Hatoum’s *Untitled (Hair Grid with Knots 6)* (2003), consisting of human hair woven into paper to create a simple grid, treats the organizational substrate of harsh modernism with delicate strands that seem anything but finite. Gabriel Sierra’s sculptural, almost architectural work, *Untitled (Support for mathematics lesson)* (2007), picks up on these vital associations. In this piece, apples and pears rest in the spaces created by an interlocking grid of rulers. The imposition of the organic suggests the uncontainable and incommunicable within modern modes of measurement and expression. The thought of that which decays imprecisely filling these definitive spaces—belying their underlying calculus of approximations—is comforting and unsettling.

Rulers and grids return in *Untitled (History)*. They served well to create connections across the critique of modern formalism and the application of this to larger political themes. Turkish artist Cevdet Ereğ’s *Ruler Coup* (2011), for example, redraws the markings on a

straight edge to include dates of significant military interventions in Turkey's history and dates of the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

While Ereğ reclaims the ruler's strict form, the curators have attempted to reclaim the gallery—in many ways an architectural extrusion of the modernist grid—as a vehicle for human expression and political discourse. The varied shapes and heights of the enclosures—separated from one another so that an intricate network of passageways emerged in the spaces between—referenced the small clusters of houses and buildings found in architect Ryue Nishizawa's native Japan, but also mimicked Istanbul's patchwork of paths and forms, which are evidence of the city's long and contested history. The corrugated metal sheets that supported the walls were also familiar; these are typically used as barriers for construction in the city. The locally sourced partitions were clever and appropriate and served to support an exhibition that reinforced the importance of gallery walls.

While these subtly evocative spaces effectively delivered and directed the audience to carefully planned and executed interventions by artists, little was done to acknowledge the impact of the shifting architecture of informational practices on political and artistic discourse. Given that this was a biennial that, by every indication, wanted to ask what we might learn from a re-examination of well-worn modes and methods, this criticism may be unfounded. It is just that the few pieces that did manage to address the impact of digital culture (Mungo Thomson's

Untitled (TIME) [2010], which projects flickering images of all of the covers of *TIME* Magazine through time; and Shuruq Harb's *A Book of Signatures* [2009], a projection of the scanned signatures of men named Mohammed in Palestine displayed beside the book containing the signatures that was kept closed inside a vitrine) came across as miniscule offerings that managed only to introduce the impact digitization and its attendant automatisms have had on the aesthetics and poetics that shape personal, historical and public memory. This certainly should not be overlooked in future Biennials. Although new-media works, public interventions and work displayed outside of the gallery are often criticized for lacking aesthetic and formal rigour, curators should see this as a challenge to be met, not as a danger to be avoided.

At this year's Biennial, the curators attempted to construct an environment that expressed their political concerns and forms without the distractions of unpredictable and unintended contextualizations, which they certainly achieved. And although this does not, and should not, in any way, mark the end of more experimental forms of presentation, it does give us pause to consider the continued efficacy and importance of developing and working within well-established modernist forms.

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Rural Readymade

Confederation Centre of the Arts,
Charlottetown, PEI
May 28 – October 9, 2011

by Jane Affleck

The concept of the readymade is hardly new to the art world. Art students—if not your average gallery-goer—learn about Duchamp's urinal shortly after discovering that mixing Cadmium red and Naples yellow produces tangerine. Despite his virtuoso skill in signing "R. Mutt" on a urinal and drawing facial hair on a postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, I wonder if Duchamp could have hit the side of a barn door with a paintball gun if his life depended on it.

Among the works of the 10 artists comprising the *Rural Readymade* exhibition at the Confederation Centre, nary a barn door could be found (though a couple of rustic chairs did feature). Most of the pieces displayed present a new twist on the readymade or the rural; the most thought-provoking accomplish both. Not all the works, however, are entirely successful.

New Brunswick-based Janice Wright Cheney's *Coy Wolves* (2010) does speak to the show's two underlying propositions, though the piece is arguably more rural than readymade. Some effort went into coating three taxidermy forms in caramel

and chocolate brocade and these hybrids (coyote + wolf) make vamp eyes through lace veils, with paws, reminiscent of antique sofa legs, stepping upon vintage hardcover books.

The diorama plays at domestication and domesticity: leg forms once wild but appropriated and resituated within the definitive household space—the parlour—are here reclaimed but along with certain trappings: the accessories worn by the breed

of woman inhabiting those parlours. The suggestion is that veils are to that breed of woman what the paw/leg form is to the sofa: an artifice. Identity, then, including the careful civility constructed by our pioneering forebears, which we now take for granted, is a kind of readymade: there for the taking and waiting to be named. Or renamed, as the case may be.

Just beyond *Coy Wolves* is the installation by Adriana Kuiper and Ryan Suter,



Clint Neufeld, *Taxidermy Queen*, 2010, ceramic, vinyl, wood, 81.3 cm x 76 cm x 1.12 m. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST