

## Istanbul Biennial

16 Sept-30 Oct

Various venues, Istanbul

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Review by Marc Spiegler

Even before the Istanbul Biennial opened, it looked promising. Spread across seven sites closely grouped in the Beyoglu neighbourhood and almost entirely devoid of art stars, the selection by Turkish curator Vasif Kortun and Britain's Charles Esche teemed with little-known names – a welcome thing in an art world where the overlap of artists in such expositions threatens to make them redundant.

Better still, those artists delivered. By chance, the two best sites lay just around the corner from each other. In the former Deniz Palas apartment building, Israel's Michael Blum installed a mini-museum devoted to the memory of Safiye Behar, a Turkish communist who emigrated to America and had intimate ties to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, allowing her to secretly shape the country's history through her correspondence with him. The rooms held artefacts, furniture, photos, documents and a long documentary video interview with her Chicago grandson, all quite compelling. And totally fake, it turned out – a fact that once ascertained sent many viewers scurrying back to see Blum's rooms a second time. Next door, Nedko Solakov annotated a dilapidated apartment with his trademark jottings, which animated the windows, doors and nail holes, giving them significance and turning the seven rooms into a stage of sorts.



The nearby Bilsar building housed *Hunt for the Unabomber*, by Ola Pehrson of Sweden, who took the soundtrack from an existing documentary on the American terrorist and completely reshot it using a mix of found video and home-made props. The only other piece in the two-storey space was Romanian Dan Perjovschi's rough marker drawings, which offered a sort of epigrammatic, acridly funny running commentary on Istanbul and the art world at large. In one a grinning tourist bales 'Pleasure?' at a Turkish fisherman, who dourly replies, 'Nope. Lunch.'

The one thing lacking from the biennial was significant outdoor work, with the exception of Britain's Otto Berchem, whose impenetrable icons were stencilled delightfully all over town. Fortunately a parallel exhibition 'YaYa2', curated by Emre Baykal and Fulya Erdemci (both former Istanbul Biennial directors), took it to the streets. In a derelict strip of buildings along the waterfront, Australian artist Callum Morton installed a gleaming Levi's outlet, while local artist Kemal Önsoy wrapped a statue on Tunel Square in 8-meter high Styrofoam paneling, insulating it from the street life bustling around the popular meeting point.

But perhaps the cleverest intervention loomed directly over the pulsating intersection of Karaköy. Atop the skyscraper there, four local architects repainted two dozen satellite dishes a bright Turkish red. In a city where the constant pull between old and young, East and West, elite and impoverished, makes chaos the default state of being, that splash of uniform colour seemed an alien and magical apparition within the city's entropic skyline.