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Optimism on the Bosphorus

By Eleanor Heartney, excerpted from a longer article

The artists assembled by Istanbul Biennial curator Hou Hanru addressed a range of local and global ills. His stance? Art can be a tool for change.

Just prior to the September opening of the 10th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey was in the news because of the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leader of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party, as prime minister. While editorials in the Western press were full of anxiety about the possible Islamification of the world's one secular predominantly Muslim state, the Biennial acknowledged the ongoing tension between Turkey's secular and religious factions only indirectly, as certain artworks alluded to it as an aspect of broader issues. "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War," curated by Hou Hanru, currently director of exhibitions and public programs and chair of exhibition studies and museology at the San Francisco Art Institute, dealt



Xu Zhen, *8848-1.86*, 2005, snow, refrigerated vitrine, tents, video and mixed mediums

with such themes as global trade, war, terrorism, the legacy of architectural modernism and art's capacity for nurturing social change. Eschewing, as did his immediate predecessors Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, the more picturesque and historic venues that have been a feature of most Istanbul Biennials, Hou produced an earnest and fact-filled exhibition. At its best, it offered a savvy match of site and art, and at its worst, underscored the incompatibility of information-driven art and the biennial format.

Incorporated within this Biennial were several shows that presented very different exhibition models. Most successful was the one installed at the Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM). This severely rectilinear glass and aluminum structure was named for Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkist Republic and long a lionized figure whose secularist legacy is just now coming into question. When completed in 1969, the AKM was regarded as a stirring symbol of Turkey's embrace of modernity, and it has served since then as a multipurpose exhibition and performance hall. Today, its somewhat frayed International Style architecture has a retrograde look; in fact, the building is slated for demolition to make way for the construction of a new, up-to-date cultural center.

Questioning the need to destroy this landmark, Hou titled the exhibition at the venue "Burn It or Not?". Interspersed throughout the building were projects that reflected in various ways on the unforeseen and often unfortunate consequences of the kind of utopian modernism embodied by the AKM as the style played out in locations as diverse as Moscow, Paris, Berlin and New York, and smaller communities in Armenia, Estonia and Hungary.

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Along with such more or less documentary works were several more playful installations dealing with the decline and fall of the utopian idea embodied by the AKM. Korean artist Lee Bul presented *Mon grand récit: Weep into stones...* (2005), an elaborate installation that rose above the floor like a topographic display and featured such elements as an inverted mosque, a poetic English text in flashing neon, fragmentary models of generically modernist architecture clinging to a central towerlike structure and a synthetic clay landmass, all connected by arabesques of super-highways that wove through the tableau like the tracks of a carnival ride. Chinese artist **Xu Zhen** presented an even more disconcerting metaphor for the absurdity of utopian aspirations. His offering consisted of a museological display purporting to document his ascent of Mount Everest, which culminated in the removal of the mountain's peak, displayed here in a vitrine surrounded by tents, sleeping bags and other equipment used by the alpine team.