

Martin Herbert, ArtReview, Dec 2, 2024

## 17th Lyon Biennale Review: What Now?

The 2024 edition, 'Crossing the Water', is at once well intentioned and adrift in a sea of vague metaphor. The theme of the latest Lyon Biennale sounds like what you'd get if you typed 'safe biennale theme 2024' into ChatGPT. Subtitled 'Crossing the Water', this edition – guest-curated by Alexia Fabre, director of Paris's Beaux-Arts art school – 'has invited artists to give their own vision and experience of human relationships and being open to the Other, their sense of the things that unite and disunite us'. One might generously construe this as true to a moment in which the far right is winning elections across Europe by demonising foreigners, the European Union is drifting apart and the planet is in ecological meltdown. These factors, though, aren't specifically imaged in the nine-site, 78-artist (many of them French), multigenerational show, such that the biennale seems at once well intentioned and adrift in a sea of vague, can't-we-all-get-along metaphor.

(...)

Over at the Institut d'Art Contemporain in Villeurbanne, northeast of the city, a fusion is attempted: showcasing ten emerging artists while maintaining coherence. Evidently a wide range of artistic approaches can be made to fit the biennale's therapeutic lean: Nadežda Kirčanski's sparse and disconsolate installation, replicating a medical environment via furniture and projected photos of hospital doors and an unmanned desk, asks for empathy with the sick and vulnerable in Serbia, or the powerless generally (nista spec 1.0 / nothing special 1.0, 2018–24). In affective terms the standout is Matthias Odin, whose *Vortex aEra Player* (2024) memorialises people who've given him somewhere to stay by making quietly intense strip-lit vitrines housing bits of their furniture and personal effects; a further cramped walk-in installation mirrors the tiny dimensions of the smallest legal domicile in France. Meanwhile, the Cité Internationale de la Gastronomie de Lyon – Grand Hôtel-Dieu, a former hospital and now a chef's school ('hospitality', 'care') pivots into classic 'biennial art': Annette Messenger's *Eux et nous, nous et eux* (2024), creepy stuffed toys bursting from seventeenth-century wooden cupboards, and Christian Boltanski's video *Animitas* (blanc) (2017), a snowy field in which 800 Japanese bells tinkle in the wind, abjuring us to remember the dead too.

All of this inevitably skirts what used to be called compassion fatigue; here there's nary a subset of society that it isn't incumbent on us to understand, remember, sympathise with and support. Meanwhile, in a country where Marine Le Pen's National Rally is in a potential kingmaker position in government, references to surging fascism are scant to invisible, certainly less present than those to shamanic rituals, even. Of course, art is famously keyed to questions rather than answers, but for all the broadly interesting and well-intentioned art on show here, the Lyon Biennale and the curatorial mindset it advertises suggests a deer-in-the-headlights approach to present strife. The shit is already all over the fan, and blandly exhorting people to care more about everyone and everything in sight isn't enough.