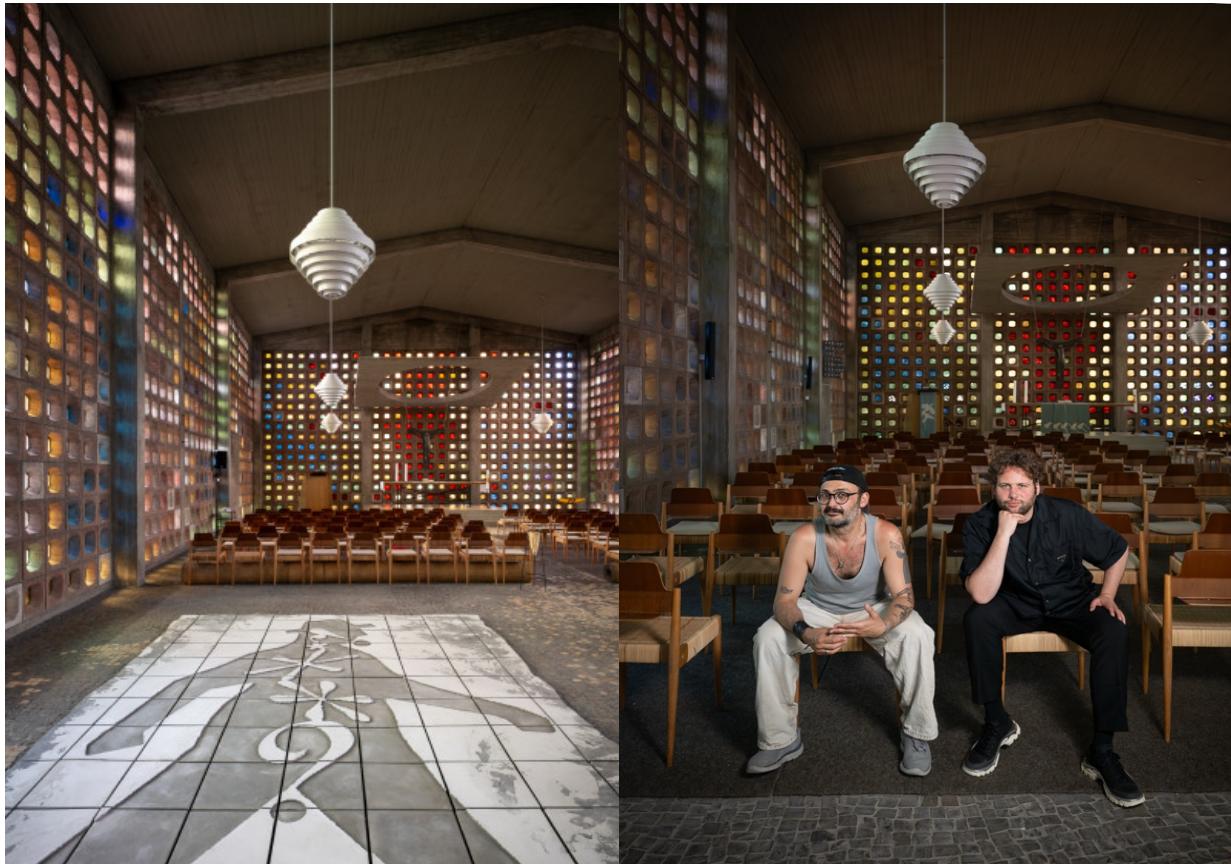


## Seeding Futures: On Biennales, Mediation, and Civic Imagination

A conversation between curators Misal Adnan Yıldız and Jules van den Langenberg during a road trip through the German Black Forest



Installation by Josse Pyl for Ornamenta in 2024, Curators Misal Adnan Yıldız and Jules van den Langenberg revisiting the Egon Eiermann designed church in the German Black Forest, one year post their commitment to the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and Ornamenta in 2025, photos by Sander van Wettum

**Jules van den Langenberg:** Misal, I've been thinking a lot about tempo: how speed shapes the DNA of most biennials. Across the global circuit, everything moves at an accelerated pace. Mounting, traveling, assembling, networking, collapsing. Biennials often follow the tempo of the art market rather than the rhythms of communities, ecologies, or long-term cultural work.

**Misal Adnan Yıldız:** Exactly. This is why flying to Istanbul, São Paulo, or wherever, in every second year, just to see the new works from the globe one can see at Art Basel, or Arco Madrid, becomes a sort of nonsense. There is a need for a frame for continuity, École, long term engagements and sustainability.

Many recurring programs are too fast for their own future. They resemble what I call "monstrous art experiences", events that move through our bodies with spectacle

and intensity, offering short bursts of hyper-visibility before disappearing. What remains? Often exhaustion, precarity, and unease. This leads me to a central curatorial question: What stays with us once the physical bodies of the exhibitions vanish?

J: This connects with a question that guides me in the work I do as well: how do we conceptualize the afterlife of cultural programs? Not documentation or archives—those are administrative remnants—but the emotional, civic, and ecological residues: new relationships, patterns of solidarity, shifts in local infrastructures.

Scholars like Mary Anne Staniszewski analyze the conventions and assumptions embedded in exhibition design, showing how display practices structure meaning and experience. And writers such as Bethwaite & Kangas explore the complexities and paradoxes of biennial formats, how economic, political, and artistic dimensions intertwine, without reducing them simply to predictable templates. All these critiques urge us to imagine alternatives.

M: Let us also acknowledge the late curator Fulya Erdemci, whose pioneering work in establishing and curating the Cappadox Contemporary Art Exhibitions at Cappadocia continues to inspire us. Erdemci's experience in institutional settings, including SKOR, informed her commitment to creating innovative, locally engaged exhibitions that challenged traditional notions of art and audience.

Her approach, characterized by a hands-on engagement with publicness, brought new perspectives on how artists extend their experiments at their studios at challenging conditions of nature, climate and local history with the new audiences. Biennales claim seeds but often skip the soil by extracting visibility and abandoning roots. From my observations, I would like to remind you of Britta Peters, whose persistence work in Ruhr exemplifies a similar commitment to local engagement and collaborative world-building. These two would stay as alternative and solid curatorial voices for me.

J: You mention some examples associated with public works, public space, and also making things public. The track records of large scale exhibition formats in places like Istanbul, Sharjah or Brugge illustrate how topics such as urban transformation, gentrification and privatisation have been part of the biennial formats and their searches for new connections with their contexts. We seem to have deviated from this trajectory?

M: I Agree. To be bold, especially 2010s biennials provided a critical ground for exploring what our commons, grounds, and publics are. These events demonstrated how exhibitions can function as negotiated spaces, rather than merely authored ones, and how alternative modes of authorship can expand what a biennial can be.

J: One such alternative to your chain of thoughts is of course Skulptur Projekte Münster, which takes place only every ten years. The decade-long interval forces slower thinking and deep-rooted engagement. Site specific interventions by Pierre Huyghe or Gregor Schneider reshaped not only my view on the world as a visitor but became woven into the city's collective memory and spatial identity.



Public art work Inverted Paradise by Spazio Cura curated by Jules van den Langenberg for Ornamenta, in 2024 and in 2025, , photo by Sander van Wettum

M: Right! Which site specific and rooted examples of large-scale exhibition formats from the past would you have wanted to experience?

J: Going further back, Black Mountain College functioned like a proto-biennial: interdisciplinary, process-led, relational, and durational. Without calling itself a biennial, it embodied many of the values contemporary biennials are now trying to reclaim. Their program was educational and on-site development. The same goes for Jan Hoet's Chambres d'Amis (1986), where works were installed in private homes across Ghent. The project disrupted the conventional exhibition model by inviting audiences into everyday domestic spaces. Its impact came from intimacy, hospitality, and the integration of art into lived environments. Do you have current examples of this?

M: The 13th Istanbul Biennial stands out for its timely coincidence with the Gezi Protests in 2013, which prompted a significant shift in the original plan for the program. Elmgreen & Dragset's revised proposal for a public work, inviting young men to keep diaries in a staged environment, which resulted in living documents that have become a critical testament to a generation's experiences and emotions. Similarly, Egemen Demirci's contribution to the last edition of the Ural Industrial Biennial in Yekaterinburg exemplified collaborative world-building and regional specificity, showcasing the potential for exhibitions to shape public discourse and foster community engagement. Demirci collected nearly a thousand letters, to be preserved in a time capsule and sent to their recipients years later, creating a unique

space for negative participation – a poignant example of how art can facilitate unexpected forms of civic engagement and introspection.

**J:** My thing is that too often curators are mistaken for symbolic brokers—mediating institutional expectations, public pressures, donor concerns, and artistic visions simultaneously. Meanwhile, artists risk being depoliticized through exposure, integrated into systems that reward neutrality or compliance. Can we think about how biennials can become even more productive for longer term collaborations between makers and mediators?

**M:** My destiny with biennials somehow was also about dealing with the political tension, which became clear much later after the closing of the event. This is especially evident in conservative or politically restricted cultural environments. There is a responsibility to re-politicize what has been softened, to reintroduce friction, and to hold space for complexity. A biennial should not function as a smoothing device.

**J:** Working on large-scale projects reveals that the most important encounters often occur between the installed works and exhibition—within the spaces of transition, orientation, and social exchange.

**M:** Mediation is central to this. Without mediators, public programmers, translators, educators, context readers, and caregivers, an exhibition becomes a closed system. These roles create accessibility—linguistic, emotional, conceptual—allowing a wider public to engage meaningfully.

**J:** Sure, without that a biennial becomes an echo chamber. Effective mediation slows the pace, fosters recognition, and ensures that artworks and practices actually land. It encourages curiosity and supports both learning and unlearning. Without it, the biennial risks becoming little more than an elaborate backdrop.



Public art work *Inverted Paradise* by Spazio Cura curated by Jules van den Langenberg for Ornamenta, in 2024 and in 2025, Photo by Sander van Wettum

**M:** Any recent work in which you managed to apply some of this?

**J:** I have been exploring site responsive formats in the Polder Triennial and Ornamenta's German Black Forest program for contemporary art. Where collective authorship and process-led structures redefined institutional dynamics. In these models, the scaffolding itself (the structures that support production) becomes an artistic and political proposition. Our mantra: the context is the curriculum. This involved a more gradual working method enabling artists, curators, citizens and landscapes to work in tandem on cultural productions that could have only really happened in their specific *genius loci*. Making them also worthwhile to travel for.

**M:** Scaffolding is never neutral. Choosing certain support systems, project-led learning, open kitchens, shared studios, directly shapes who can participate and how. It determines whose needs are recognized and whose voices gain resonance.

**J:** A biennial could serve as a laboratory for new forms of cohabitation, not merely an arena for finished artwork?

**M:** Exactly. A shift from presentation to resonance. From showing to growing.

**M:** I often return to Gordon Matta-Clark's FOOD—a restaurant conceived as a social sculpture. It fed artists, neighbors, and unhoused individuals, blending nourishment with artistic experimentation. It embodied radical hospitality as a cultural strategy.

**J:** Imagine! A biennial that treats hospitality as a central ritual—something that marks transitions, gathers communities, and acknowledges shared labor.

**M:** The conclusion of a biennial could become a harvest feast. A communal gathering for artists, staff, visitors, and neighbors. A moment to reflect collectively on what changed, what was lost, and what emerged.

**J:** This creates permeability and reciprocity?

**M:** Yes. More shared meals, more public kitchens, more open studios, more commons.

**J:** Sometimes the most radical gesture is a pause. This however has become a luxury for many, to pause.

**M:** The *nádas*, a universal term for a wild field left fallow for renewal, captures this principle. It mirrors the notion of a gap year in educational or spiritual contexts: a deliberate break that enables reflection, regeneration, and recalibration.



Public art work Rainbow Fountain Haug by artists duo Veronika Sedlmair and Brynjar Sigurðarson curated by Jules van den Langenberg for Ornamenta, in 2024 and in 2025, photo by Sander van Wettum

**J:** So do we think Biennials are in need of internal intervals?

**M:** Rest zones, reflection zones, silence zones. Not every part of a biennial needs activation. Audiences need space to digest. A biennial with seasons can foster depth rather than velocity.

**J:** Ok. So you are saying relevance arises from depth, not speed.

**J:** When asked whether biennials should be abandoned, my response is no, they should be re-rooted. Ecosystems built around memory, solidarity, critique, and civic imagination.

**M:** They can be considered as opportunities for providing us evaluation of our work. Re-rooted, re-scaled, re-imagined. The shift must be from event-making to ecosystem-building, right?



Public art work Black Ball by Yvonne Dröge Wendel for Ornamenta in 2024, Curators Misal Adnan Yıldız and Jules van den Langenberg revisiting archives of Stadtarchiv Pforzheim in the German Black Forest in 2025, one year post their commitment to the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and Ornamenta, photo by Sander van Wettum

**J:** Biennales become shared histories and institutional archives by rendering existing networks.

**M:** As Boris Groys notes, contemporary art exists in a tension between global circulation and local grounding. Our task is not to solve that tension but to choreograph it.

**J:** And to compost the failures of past models.

**M:** And to nurture the hidden seeds of biennials yet to come.

**J:** Because a meaningful biennial, like a good ancestor, leaves behind more than documentation.

**M:** It leaves possibility.

## Colophon

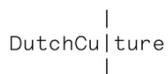
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The text is based on a road trip and return visit to the German Black Forest area where both Yildiz and Van den Langenberg worked in the period 2020-2024. Yildiz at the Kunsthalle Baden Baden, Jules van den Langenberg at the province wide program for contemporary art Ornamenta.

The curators felt supported in their conversation by peers and proofreaders Els Wuyts (former curator of the Triennial Brugge and the Triennial Beaufort in Belgium), Dr. Jacques Heinrich Toussaint (head of art in public space in Dortmund), Sevie Tsampalla (program curator Leuven & Beyond, European Capital of Culture 2030, formerly co-curator Triennale Brugge 2024, assistant curator Liverpool Biennial 2016), Defne Ayas (former artistic director of the 2021 Gwangju Biennial and current director of the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven), Deniz Ova (Former director of the Istanbul Design Biennial and current director of SALT Institute), Philip Horst (founder and director of ZKU Berlin), Tatjana Sprick (program and development director at dieDAS Akademie / Marzona Stiftung in Saaleck) and Laurens Otto (art critic, curator based in Amsterdam).

All photos by Sander van Wettum.

Font NewEdge 666 by Charlotte Rhode, Ornamenta 2021-2024.



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## Background information

### Biography Misal Adnan Yıldız

Misal Adnan Yıldız is a curator, educator and researcher. He is the former director of Artspace Aotearoa in Auckland/New Zealand (2014–2017) and prior to this, he held the position of artistic director at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart/Germany (2011–2014). He shared the direction at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden with Çağla İlk from May 2020 to July 2024; and among others, co-curated, “Sea and Fog” an exhibition inspired by Etel Adnan, which received AICA Germany’s The exhibition of the Year Award in 2025. Yıldız co-curated the main exhibition for the 6th Ural Industrial Biennial for Yekaterinburg city in Russia in 2021, and recently, co-curated the 20th edition of Mediterrena, Biennial of Young Artists co-organised by BJCEM and ŠKUC as part of GOI25 in Nova Gorica/Gorizia (European Capital of Culture, 2025) featuring 94 positions from 16 countries as the selected international curator with Ljubljana based curator Tia Čiček. He has been invited as a collaborator, author and participant to Manifesta 7, 9th edition of SIART of La Paz, 10th, 13th and 15th Istanbul Biennial, Arco Madrid, Art Basel Conversations, March Meeting (Sharjah Biennial), summit Berlin, and many other international discussion and exhibition platforms.

### Biography Jules van den Langenberg

Jules van den Langenberg is an artistic director and independent curator working at the intersections of contemporary art, landscape, and talent development. He recently served as curator for the (Nelly&)Theo van Doesburg Foundation (2022-2026), Ornamenta (2021-2025) and Polder Triennial (2019-2022). Van den Langenberg experience includes initiating and leading projects in close collaboration with artists that challenge ideas about longevity, site specificness, permanence and authorship in art and society. Former collaborators include the Van Abbemuseum, Museum De Pont, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Sandberg Instituut, Depot Basel, London Design Biennale, and Dim Sun Lausanne. He has lectured and joined in juries for institutions including Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, ArtEZ Arnhem, the Henriette Hustinx Prize Maastricht, the Gerrit Rietveld Academy Amsterdam and the Staatliche Kunsthakademie Kassel. His writings have been published in De Witte Raaf, Sandberg Series, Dezeen, Gallery Kreo, Zilberman Gallery and Gallery Annet Gelink.