

The Architectural Review

Are we human?

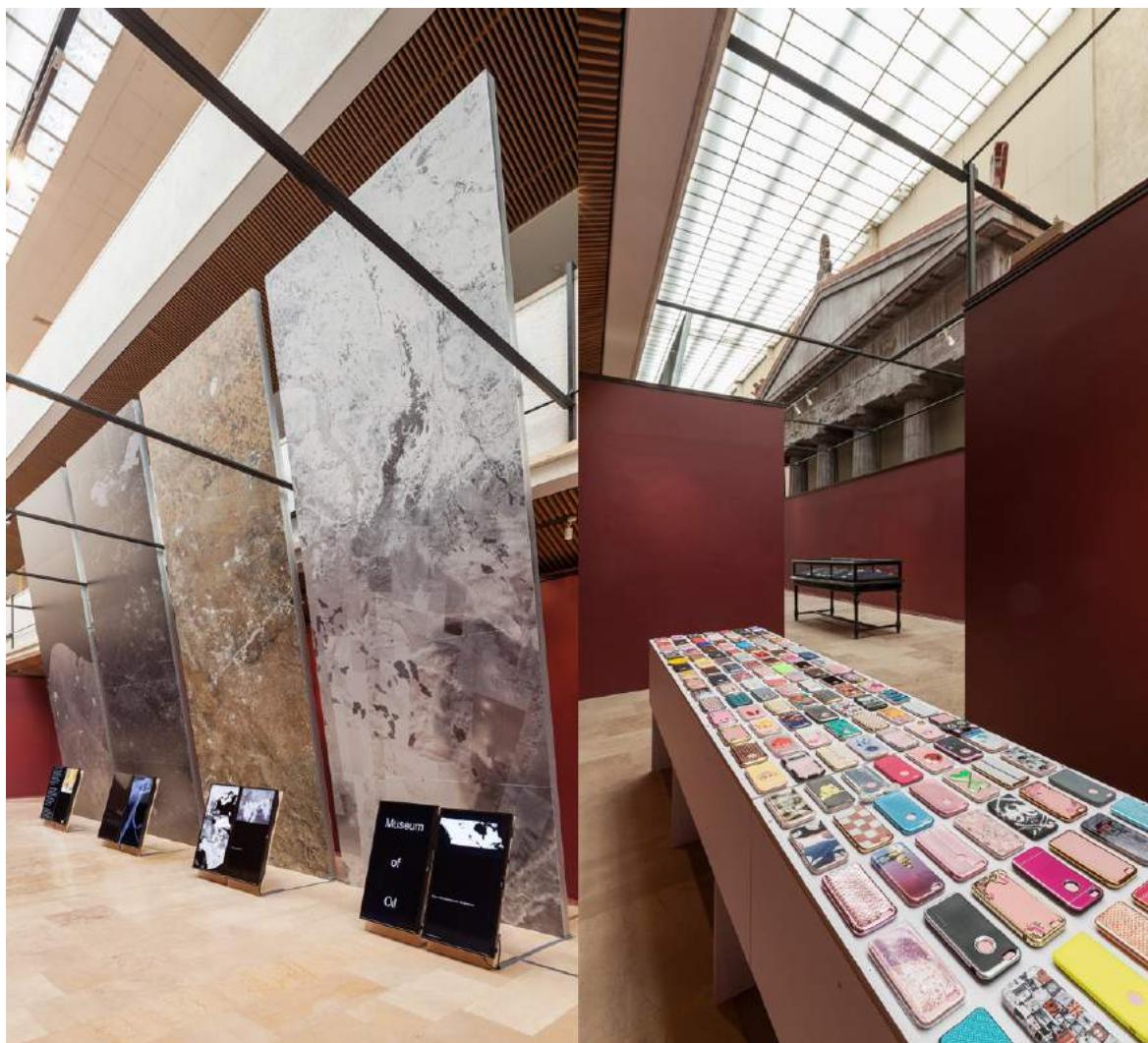
8 November, 2016 By [Tom Wilkinson](#)



The curators of this year's Istanbul design biennial ask some enormous questions – but would answers be more useful?

As the British government prepares to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights and thousands of refugees are left to drown in the Mediterranean, what does it mean to ask 'are we human'? This is the title given to this year's Istanbul Design Biennial by its curators Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley. Like all questions worth asking, it is a dangerous one – not least in the context of post-'coup' Turkey, where more than 80,000 supposed enemies of Erdogan's regime now languish in jail.

No one could accuse the curators of lacking chutzpah. Rather than corralling a selection of Dieter Rams-fanboys and excruciating chairs in the latest materials, they solicited responses to a series of enormous questions following on from the one in their title. What is design? Who does it, and for whom? And what does it do to us, the designers, the designed for, and the designed? In taking this approach, Colomina and Wigley have looked through the showroom window into the back office and beyond, to the supply chain, the factory and the mine. They pursue designed objects out into the street and the home, as well as into landfills, oceans and the stomachs of birds. They have turned back 200,000 years to the origins of humanity, peered beneath our skin to the molecular and looked beyond the solar system.

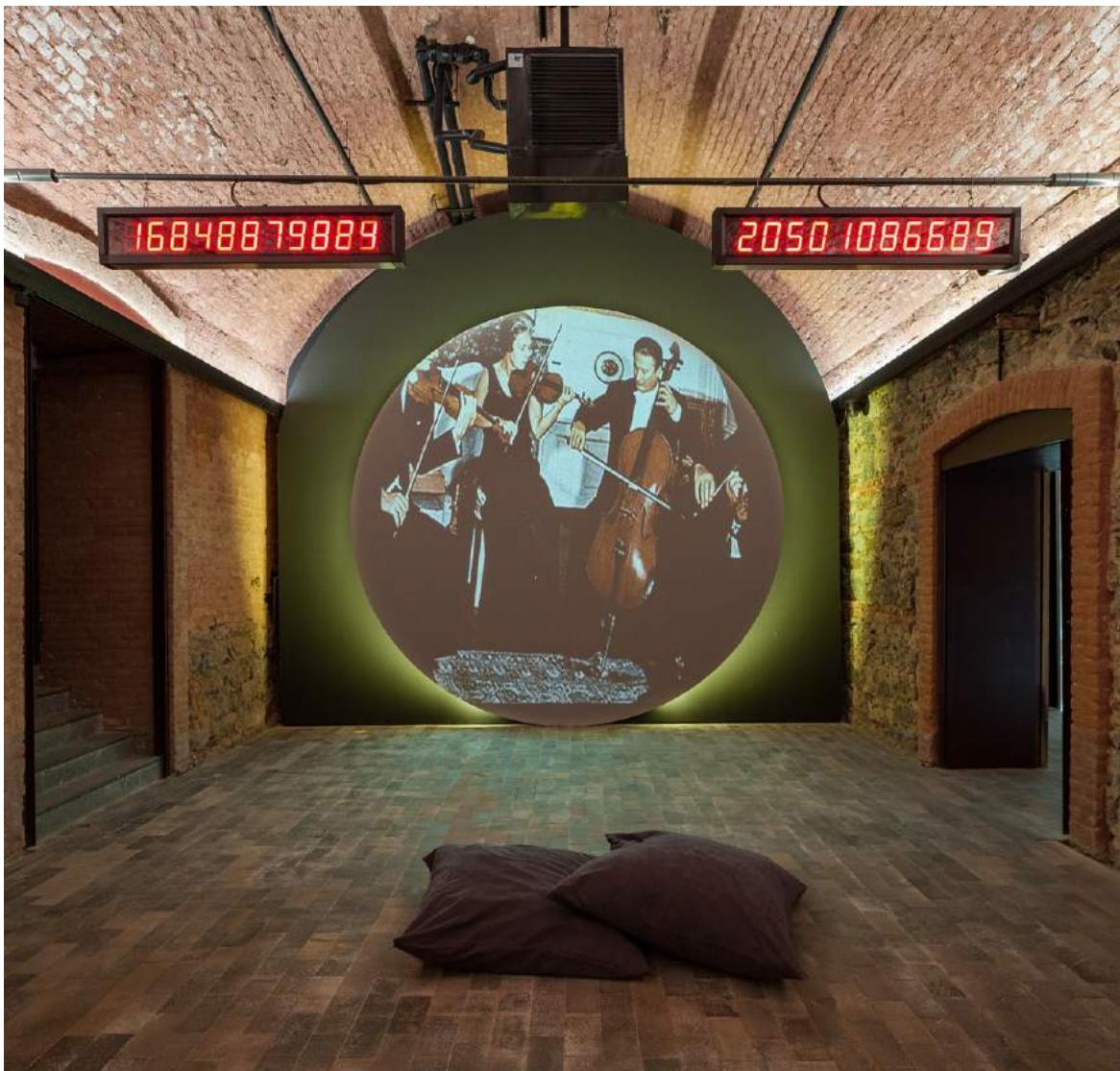


archaeology

'Museum of Oil' (left), a project by Territorial Agency that argues for the cessation of oil extraction, is installed opposite an antique portico (right) in the archaeological museum. In the foreground is a collection of mobile phone covers, petroleum-based products that the curators compare to prehistoric beaded necklaces.

These themes are investigated by more than 250 collaborators across five venues, including the archaeological museum, where Territorial Agency's 'Museum of Oil' faces the portico of an antique temple. This project explicitly argues for the cessation of oil extraction and its retirement alongside other dead technologies. But while situating this display in the archaeological museum makes clear polemical sense, there is also an implicit institutional critique, since the historical entanglement of oil exploration and archaeology of petrodollars and cultural capital, is inescapable – and very much alive.

Elsewhere, a trail of 8,500-year-old footprints found during recent engineering works in the city have been preserved using an innovative technique, and slung from a ceiling, inverting the geological record so that our ancestors stomp across our heads. Crucially, these feet were shod, pointing to the fact that design has been with us from the start. And it has preceded us into the cosmos, as a film on Carl Sagan's exhibition aboard *Voyager 1* reminds us. From deep time to outer space, it seems that nowhere is free from design.



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The Voyager 1 space probe is the human-made object furthest away from Earth. Launched in 1977, the craft contains a gold disc inscribed with audio-visual information about 'Life on Earth' – an emissary to extra-terrestrial life that will probably survive our demise as a species. Installation by Rutger Huiberts and Evangelos Kotsioris.

For those who share Reyner Banham's exasperation with the profession's imperialistic tendencies ('there is nothing a designer can do to a spoon except fuck it up'), this might provoke despondency; at the very least, it could seem like boosterism. But far from arguing for the special competence of the designer Colomina and Wigley expand the category to incorporate pretty much everyone – not just makers of sofa cushions, as the *Werkbund* had it, but also those who arrange them.

Their exhibition also embraces fucked-up spoons, not from an ironic appreciation of kitsch but because bad design – they contend – is a powerful generator of new ideas ('good' design on the other hand is an 'anaesthetic', buying our acquiescence with whispered ergonomia). Along with their archaeological focus, which pivots on the recent backdating of the dawn of human life according to traces of prehistoric design discovered outside Europe, this offers a firm rejoinder to the kind of techno-pessimism exemplified by Heidegger's thought. We have not fallen into a state of technology; rather we would not 'be' without it.



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8,500-year-old footprints discovered during engineering work in Istanbul and preserved using an innovative technique. These feet were shod, showing that design has been with humans from the outset.

This is not to say that the curators haven't given due consideration to design-negative aspects. The exhibition is full of examples of negligent, inept and iniquitous design. There are oil spills and forest fires, shipwrecks and mutilations. We reconfigure our brains with chemicals and then flush them out at detox centres, smash our noses and reshape them according to the latest fashions, eradicate species and live in addictive intimacy with our phones. Are all of these instances really redeemed because they provoke further investigation, or does this amount to a kind of theodicy of design?

It might also be objected that the ideas explored by the curators are not well served by a couple of less considered displays in this otherwise thoughtful exhibition. These include an unsatisfying survey of plastic surgery in Seoul that makes a facile link between place and face without addressing the [complex collision of colonial and regional standards of beauty](#) underlying these practices, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro's video installation about blushing, which is embarrassing for all the wrong reasons. Some questions are probably better answered by papers than displays, and some architects should stick with the day job.



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Jussi Parikka and Ayhan Ayes constructed a water-serving automaton described in the *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (1206) by Baghdad scholar Al-Jazari. At a moment when AI threatens to eradicate millions of jobs, it is a reminder that the powerful have long dreamed of android labour

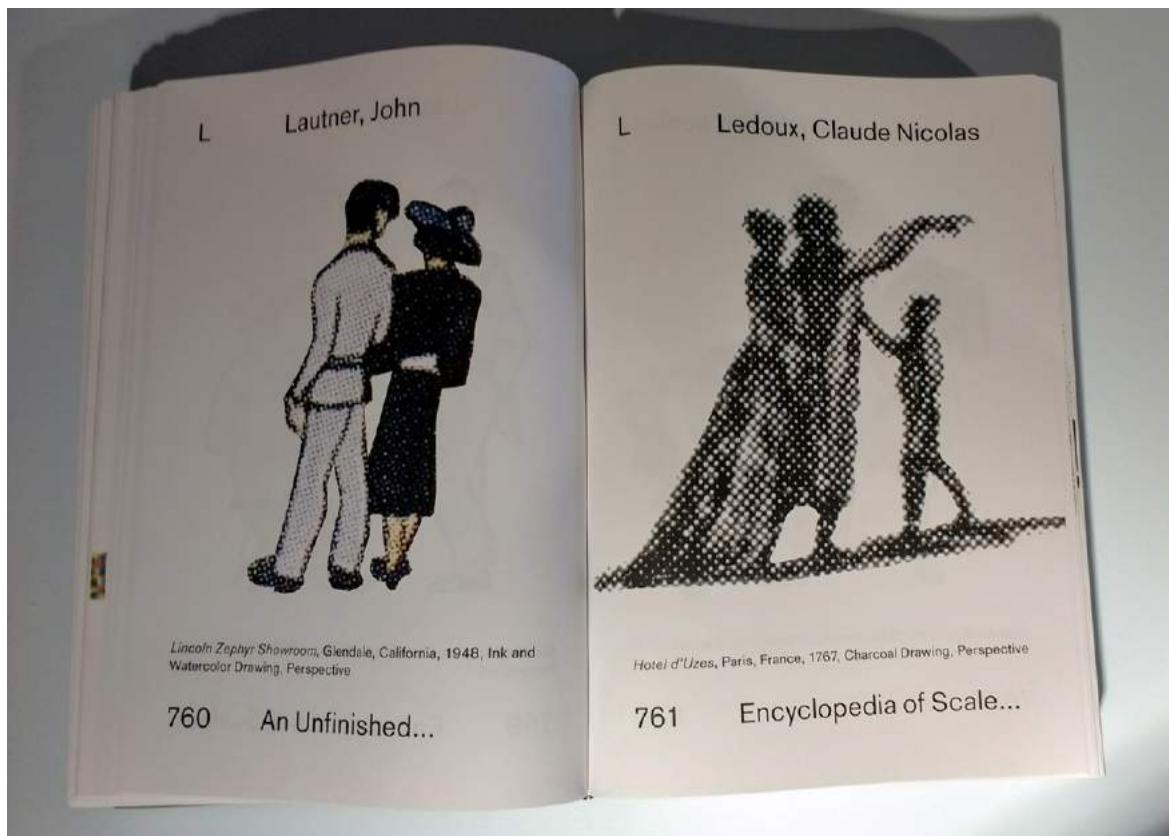
More substantially problematic is the concern that, although the universalising tendency inherent in the discourse of the human is certainly questionable – indeed, this process of questioning has been going on for some decades now – the stakes are exceedingly high in the current climate. Does musing about the obsolescence of humanity help people whose humanity is being erased? Or does this make the question ‘are we human?’ all the more pressing?



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During the Second World War, Frederick Kiesler worked on an unpublished manuscript titled *Magic Architecture*, presented here as a video installation. This followed the story of architecture from its origins to the atomic age, and as Spyros Papapetros, curator of this exhibit, observes, 'Kiesler's incomplete or "endless" history of human housing suggests that while constantly reinventing our origins, we ultimately design our own end.'

These questions should not detract from the excellence of Colomina and Wigley's curation, and the superiority of their approach over that of recent design exhibitions, not least this year's comparatively incoherent Venice Biennale. Rather it is testimony to the genuinely provocative nature of the enterprise, which, instead of indulging in some light hand-wringing before resolving that designers have all the answers, takes a step back and asks: are designers not part of the problem? And if so, what can be done to change that? If the exhibition lacks in propositional work as a result, perhaps we should be grateful for the absence of self-congratulatory designs for high-tech migrant tents and relish instead this attempt to redesign the designer



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MOS Architects compiled a huge number of images of human figures taken from architectural drawings as a book titled *An Unfinished Encyclopedia of Scale*. A selection of these have been enlarged and transferred to a wall hanging (top image).