

# SAHA

## SUPPORTING ART FROM TURKEY

BY ASSISTING LOCAL ARTISTS, CURATORS, AND CRITICS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE, SAHA ASSOCIATION HAS BECOME A VITAL PART OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE

TEXT Yao Hsiao

For a long time in Turkey, no established institutions existed to support artists on the international art scene. Without a platform providing access to networks and financial assistance, it was hard for local artists and curators to participate in international projects.

But in 2011, SAHA Association was founded as a non-governmental organization aiming to build relationships between contemporary artists from Turkey and the rest of the world. To support art from Turkey in the long term, the association mainly focuses on three key aspects: residency programs, new productions, and publications. “There is a need for such institution in Turkey,” Çelenk Bafra, Director of SAHA, told *The Guide Istanbul*.

### INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

To enhance the international visibility of contemporary art from Turkey, SAHA has collaborated with various renowned institutions around the world, such as Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Delfina Foundation in London, and Independent Curators International (ICI) in New York City.

SAHA focuses on supporting a new generation of artists. However, international institutions are often reluctant to work with artists that they know little about. “[That’s why] we build bridges, support the [art] ecosystem, and encourage foreign curators to visit Istanbul and help them research contemporary art from Turkey,” said Bafra.

Currently, SAHA is supporting the artist Hera Büyüктаşçıyan to create a site-specific work as part of the *Underneath the Arches project* in the Roman ruins of the town of Borgo Vergini-Sanità in Naples, as well as work by the artist Banu Cennetoğlu, who is holding her first solo show in the United States at New York’s Sculpture Center.

In addition to building international connections for artists and curators from Turkey, SAHA has also been working on several domestic projects. After providing grants to local art initiatives and biennials for many years (such as Sinopale, Mardin Biennial, and Çanakkale Biennial), SAHA recently started a new art writing project.

“People complain about the lack of art criticism or critical thinking in Turkey,” said Bafra. But she argues that the problem is not a paucity of good art critics, but rather a lack of suitable outlets and appropriate pay.

SAHA Writing Series was launched, inviting one independent art critic every six months to produce articles. Pieces by the current resident writer, Evrim Altuğ, can be found on SAHA’s website; including his thoughts on the theme of the upcoming 16th Istanbul Biennial.

Bafra has big ambitions for SAHA in the coming years. “I hope to turn it to an institution that not only supports the [art] ecosystem,” she says, “but that also creates content through our own projects and works more closely with creative people.”

Installation view, Banu Cennetoğlu, SculptureCenter, New York, 2019. Photo: Kyle Knodell

