

Photography by  
Ahmet Polat

Text by  
Fisun Güner

Destination

How to Be Both Contemporary and  
Authentically Turkish

# Ista nbul

Istanbul



Istanbul







'Authenticity.' This is a word one simply never hears when talking to Western artists. But spend time among Turkish artists living and working in Istanbul today, a city that's seen an astonishing rise in the number of contemporary art galleries in the last two decades, and it won't be long before someone says it. And though you might not be inclined to make too much of it at first – for it strikes an almost amusingly old-fashioned note to Western ears (what does 'authenticity' mean to a European or American art culture inured to decades of irony?) – one can't help but begin to note a familiar pattern thereafter. Why are Turkish artists suddenly afraid of seeming 'fake'? Or is 'authenticity' a long-term anxiety?

I'm not sure we need confer on it the status of a syndrome – The Anxiety of Authenticity as a label does seem to overplay it. However, one does palpably sense it as a concern and one wonders if it affects other newly emerging players on the contemporary art stage, such as India or China, where collectors have found much to feast on in the last ten years and artists from both countries have achieved dizzying heights of international prominence.

In Turkey, artists seem anxious not to be pushed into making work for a market that wants to locate something definitely 'Turkish', whatever that may mean. Talking to a number of high-profile and emerging artists in Istanbul during the city's 13th biennial, what started to become clear is that many fear collectors and curators are often only interested in new markets when they can identify a regional flavour to the work. As the feminist artist İpek Duben notes (overleaf), collectors and curators often appear to project certain clichéd expectations of what they regard as authentically Turkish, which is often at odds with what Turkish artists themselves consider authentic. In short, the question appears to be: How can one be truthful to one's instincts and concerns as a Turkish artist when it's the West setting the agenda?

The art boom of India and China occurred, of course, because those countries have two of the world's fastest-growing economies and, since money talks, they have impacted on the global cultural landscape. Turkey, too, is experiencing rapid economic growth, at least compared to most of Europe, and this has impacted significantly on the cultural life of Istanbul. The city now boasts over 150 galleries, two biennials – one for design and one for art – and several contemporary art fairs.

In İstiklal Caddesi, the main shopping drag in Beyoğlu, which is the city's art district, you will find upmarket European clothing chains jostling with traditional bazars. You'll also find SALT, a multi-storey building owned by Garanti Bank, which has a walk-in cinema, a bookshop, a café and three floors of exhibition space, and which is currently showing one of Turkey's biggest art stars, Gülşin Karamustafa (until 5 January 2014). Dealing with issues around migration and displacement, Karamustafa, like

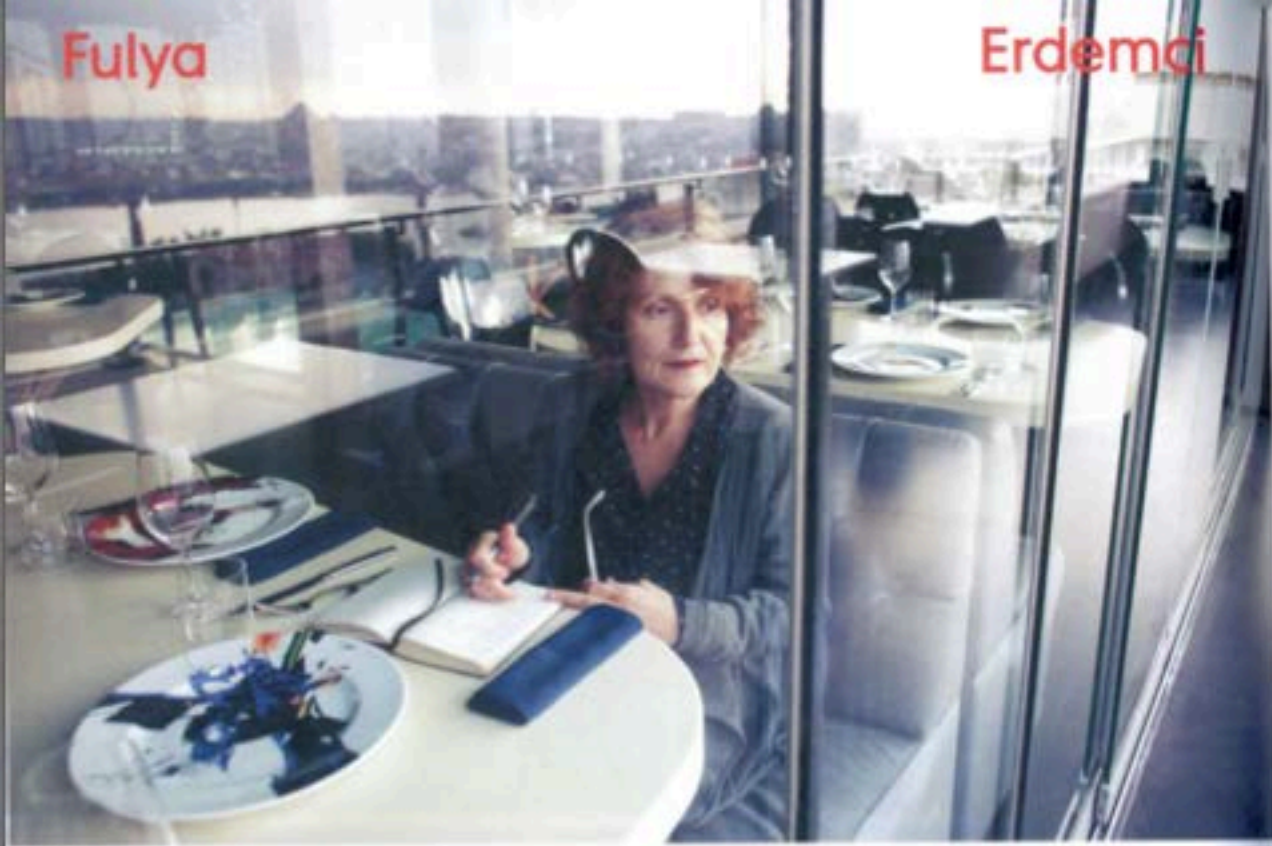
many prominent contemporary Turkish artists, works predominantly in film, as well as found photography, objects and text. The space is one of two SALT venues in Istanbul (the other is primarily an art research centre and archive; there's also one in Turkey's capital, Ankara). Like all of Turkey's galleries and multimedia art centres, including its biennials, SALT is entirely funded by private money. Culture doesn't get a penny from the state.

Banks certainly hold sway in the Turkish art world. Akbank Sanat, the first of the major arts centres, was founded in 1993 by Akbank, one of Turkey's biggest banks. And the Istanbul Modern, which opened in 2004 in a nineteenth-century warehouse on the Karaköy quay, is the brainchild of Turkish pharmaceutical company Eczacıbaşı Holding Group. Housing a permanent collection of modern and contemporary Turkish artists (alongside works by major Western artists), it eloquently tells the history of Turkish art from the nineteenth century.

Film and video feature prominently in the museum, including work by Kullug Ataman, well







Fulya Erdemci is a curator and writer based in Istanbul. She was responsible for the 2013 Istanbul Biennial, and for several years was the director of SKOR: Foundation For Art and Public Domain, in Amsterdam. In 2002 she initiated the first urban public space exhibition in Turkey. Art in the public urban domain continues to be her primary interest.

— The Turkish artists we're usually exposed to in Europe all seem to come from a film and video background. But the art scene in Istanbul is much more diverse.

You're totally right, but it depends where you're looking. Sculpture and painting are also having an evolution here right now. If you're looking at the market, of course objects get a higher ratio. But if you look at exhibitions, which are more research-based, video, installation and photography are prominent.

— What made you explore the theme of public space as political forum for this year's Biennial? Considering the political situation in Istanbul, it seems very apt.

Actually, my conceptual framework was conceived last July, in 2012. You have to start selecting artists one-and-a-half years before. But I've always been very interested in urban transformation and art and the urban public space. I also believe that artists have the capacity to foresee things more clearly than politicians.

When the events exploded I was actually in Venice [for the Biennale]. It was a unique type of civic awakening in Istanbul — very unique, because different types of people — feminists, animal rights, environmentalists, Islamic people, nationalists, Kurdish people — all of them came together to protest against what is going on. And it was such a burning issue for the city — it presented itself with such violence that it would have been a kind of censorship if I didn't concentrate on it.

— The world was pretty stunned by the heavy-handed way the government reacted against the protesters. Did it make you think twice about moving back to Istanbul?

When I moved back to Istanbul last September it was with happiness, because I like living here, but after seeing all the changes — 48 gigantic urban transformations are planned and most of them are in process right now — and having seen the way they've been implemented... the lack of ground-up negotiations. There's no space for the voices of people who actually live in this city. After I'd lived here a couple of months and seen the situation I did feel very depressed.

— You worked in Amsterdam. You can hardly imagine a more different environment — artists

there are pretty well looked after in terms of government funding. But in Turkey, the state gives artists nothing. Because it's all private money, does that affect the nature of the art here? Well, in the Netherlands or the rest of northern Europe, you cannot really complain about funding. However, the urgency of art there is much less than it is here. Lack of funding from public sources can also give a kind of freedom to the artists because, as you may imagine, public funds might be restricted to certain conditions in Turkey. And if we got support from the Turkish government, most probably we couldn't have touched on these difficult issues. But, on the other hand, it's an unleashed environment if you have only the market to support artists. And that has a good side — it can give a kind of lift, an energy, to artistic production. However, it also makes the non-commercial sort of art more invisible, much less available for the general public, so I think it has good sides. But on the other hand, yes, instead of intellectual filtering, the market determines the form of art.

— You talk about not having freedom if art organizations receive government funding. But the sponsoring bodies for the Biennial are surely in direct conflict with some of the artists who have protested against the urban planning? Actually I want to put things right [on that issue]. The president of the foundation was involved in urban transformation projects but our main sponsor, Koç, is not criticized because of [its involvement in] urban transformation but because it produces cars for the military. Of course, one can question this. However, for me, art is not separate from the system that we're all living through. All of us use Macintosh [products], all of us use smartphones, all of us have certain habits of consumerism. But at same time we do call for basic rights. What I try to do is to bring criticism of these issues out in the open, but also show that art can't always be that clean. We can unfold these larger structures for the public to see, but we shouldn't pretend that art is this clean thing, untouched by the world.

— Were you under pressure to make the decision to withdraw events from the public space? (The Biennial was initially due to be held in part outdoors, in line with its 'public space as political forum' theme.) Were you reluctant to do it? Not at all. Let's not pretend we are five girls making an exhibition. No. This is an institutional structure, an international one. It takes a long period of preparation. In order to create such projects in urban public spaces you have to get permission from the authorities — the same authorities that suppress the voices of people on the streets. It would be very good for the authorities, a PR and marketing tool, if we collaborated with them. Through art they would be

able to legitimize their position.

But before making this decision we invited all the artists and the activists and talked [together]. The majority of the people thought [withdrawing] was a very good move but some of the artists said, 'No, you shouldn't do this, you should make anonymous guerrilla-type interventions in urban-type public spaces.' But it's a big ship and you just can't do that in a month. Secondly, I couldn't ask artists to risk their lives. Seven people died, and many were taken into custody [in the protests]. But also, I think it's very pretentious if we commission guerrilla-type projects within an institutional framework. And I'm sure you know John Cage's 4'33 silent piece — our gesture is similar to that. It's an artistic and philosophical as well as a political statement: by this absence we are pointing out presence, pointing out what is going on.

— Is it too strong to say artists feel under attack in Turkey?

No, it's not too strong a word, really. In Gezi there were lots of performances by musicians, by performance artists. Even Osman Erdem — he's an art historian and head of AICA [International Association of Art Critics] in Turkey — was in the protest. He just went to help a woman who was attacked by police. And you can see his photographs. His court case will happen in February — they are asking for from six months' to three months' imprisonment for him, for reacting against the police and trying to help someone. So maybe it's a strong word, but since the prime minister of this country is blaming artists, I think we can say it.







Burak Delier is a multimedia artist whose work offers a critique of corporate culture and the compromises and justifications people make in order to survive it. *Crisis and Control* presents six 'portraits' of businessmen and women. Dressed in business suits, the participants have each been asked to hold strenuous yoga positions while they talk about their aspirations and how they see themselves within their own corporate cultures. In *Notes from my Mobile*, the artist presents his video journal – recorded on the hoof on his phone – relating his anxieties about his place in the art world and his inability to play the role that's expected of him. His works are sharply humorous, while also laying bare the daily contortions people make in order to get by.

— On paper your work sounds very dry, serious and heavy going. But there's an awful lot of humour in it that your gallery isn't letting us in on. Yes, you're right. The press release is really dry. I think they are not that confident – they want to show some intellectual weight. They prefer to look serious.

— For *Crisis and Control*, were the participants 'real' people?

Yes, they're real, and what they're saying is real. There is nothing scripted. It's staged, of course, and I organized the camera and the yoga positions that they take up. But everything else is real. There's this guy in the 'warrior pose'; he'd just transferred to another firm, and the

speech he gives is from a real interview he'd just had – he'd memorized his presentation and decided to use it in the film.

— Considering the self-revealing nature of the piece, did you find it difficult to persuade people to participate?

No, people liked the idea – I think it touched something deep in them, and they wanted to be a part [of it]. I had two or three meetings with each of them. I discussed my aim for the video, and all the conversations turned out to be a kind of therapy session for them, because all of them are not really content in their work. They know it's a kind of bullshit job, but they also identify with their work – it's part of their personality, their persona, which is important to them.

— It becomes obvious that they are all quite conflicted. You see this when their public mask slowly begins to fall as the film progresses. Yes, they are compromised. That's exactly what I was trying to make visible.

— But the guy standing on his head – he didn't move from his script at all. That was quite interesting.

That guy was actually a bit shy. I just told him to relax, just to talk about what he was thinking.

As he begins to tell his story he tells it in a very controlled way, but then you see him change. He had a problem with a guy in his firm; he had to fire this guy. But he couldn't. It took two or three months to fire him. And when he's telling the story, you can hear this really uncontrolled breathing. He gets more and more anxious.

— Have you ever worked in the corporate world yourself?

No. But all my friends from high school are white-collar workers. So I hear all these stories. They're all really bored in their jobs.

— They must envy you. Economically, no.

— I loved the idea of the peep show in *Notes from my Mobile*. It was a clever way to frame the video.

I always had the idea of putting the video in an enclosed space, a box, that people would have to look through. I shot the video from a cell phone, so it was an intimate relation with myself. It was meant to be seen as a kind of confession – it was like a therapy session with myself. Or like a life-coaching session.

— There's some amusing existential self-reflection, a bit like Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

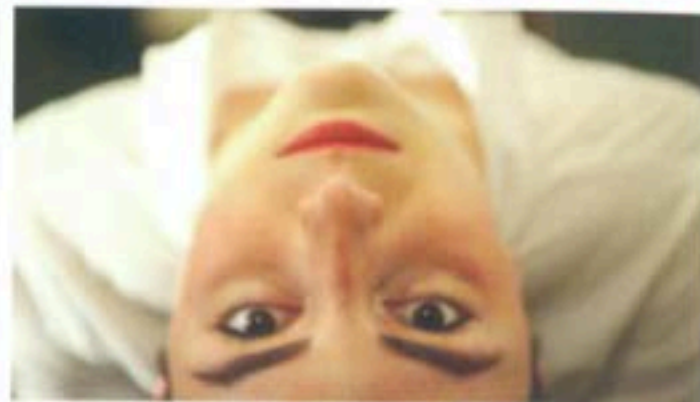
Actually, that's where the title comes from.

— In that work, you're obviously expressing your anxieties as an artist, but you're also saying something about the art world, that it's become very corporate. It pretends that it isn't part of the corporate world, but that's exactly what it is. Yes, it's very difficult for me. Because, you know, all that self-promotion, the pushiness, pushing yourself onto people, imposing yourself upon curators, museum directors – for me, it's... I don't feel at ease with it – I feel kind of judged. Also, in the works, it's also about exploring the issue of an 'authentic' personality – we're not sure if this 'authentic self' exists. Everything is mediated. If you put your thoughts in an artwork, it's framed. But the work is also tongue-in-cheek.

— There seems to be an anxiety around the concept of 'authenticity' whenever I meet Turkish artists.

Perhaps you hear it because in Second or Third World countries we have this anxiety, because what we are showing to the 'First World', the Western world, should be authentic. For artists living in London, New York or Paris, they never think of authenticity. Because they are Western. They lost that over a century ago.

— You've made me think of someone like Kutlug Ataman, who's probably the best-known con-



We're not sure if this 'authentic self' exists. Everything is mediated







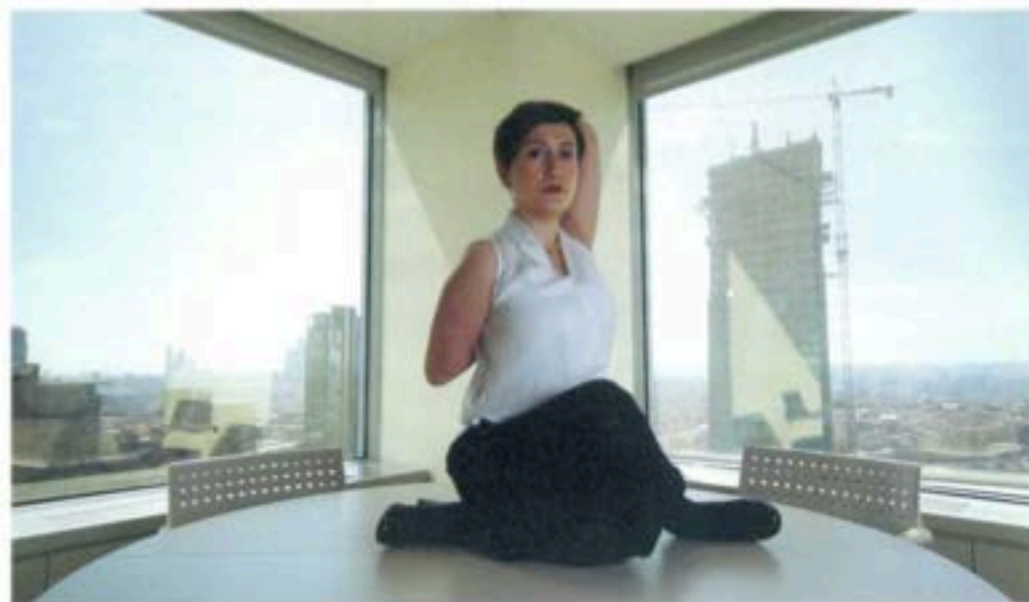
I bought along some jackets  
'produced' by a fictional fashion  
company I'd invented who made  
garments for activists



temporary Turkish artist in London. When he first showed in London, everyone was talking about the gay issues, and the transgender and transvestite that he explored in his work – as if Turkey had never seen anything like that before and it was brave to confront these issues and very transgressive. And, actually, it was ridiculous – they were projecting all sorts of ideas they had about Turkey and Turkish artists. Orhan Pamuk, in interview, has also expressed similar concerns about the clichéd views we have about Turks. Of course. The most famous pop singers in Turkey are gay or transsexuals and very openly so. They are not marginalized in Turkey – they are mainstream. Ataman is a very good strategist – a tactical man. He plays with these kinds of expectations. He knows what the West will embrace. In my video I'm saying I'm working like a Western artist, and they're expecting me to wear rugs and show some miniatures in my work. Maybe I should use this kind of 'authentic' look to my advantage.

— You've worked in various media, not just video, and also anonymously, with some 'guerrilla'-type projects. Tell me about some of those. Well, during the Gezi Park protests, I bought along some jackets 'produced' by a fictional fashion company I'd invented who made garments for activists. In Turkey in 2006, there were lots of activists – Kurds, Leftists – who'd been beaten on the street. People just wanted to lynch them, just for handing out leaflets. I made a poster for this jacket with a beautiful girl and very handsome man wearing the Parkalynch jackets and throwing stones. And last year I did a work called Performance of Silence. The idea was that I would give a lecture and everyone in the audience would sign this agreement forbidding them to talk about what's happened in the lectures.

— That one reminds me of Tino Sehgal, who doesn't allow anything to be documented. And I've also been thinking that my next project will be about bankruptcy – every day I get messages on my phone saying that we can pay your credit-card debts – we can slice it and you can pay later. Turkey is a growing country and in five years will experience some financial crisis, because it can't continue like this. And if you look at the city – everywhere there's construction going on and when they can no longer find people to rent or buy these kinds of houses, these companies will be bankrupted. And the crisis will begin. That's what happened in the United States and Iceland. You see the same cycles going on in Turkey right now.







Halil Altindere is one of Turkey's most prominent video artists, making films that engage with marginalized communities and subcultures. His most recent film, *Wonderland*, captures the anger and frustration of Roma youth from Istanbul's Sulukule district in the city's historic peninsula. A settled Roma community had lived in the area since the fifteenth century, but the community has now been displaced due to an urban regeneration project that has meant property prices in the neighbourhood have risen tenfold.

The darkly humorous video shows the boys in mock fights with mechanical diggers, setting fire to a security guard and in a mock-up of a Mafia-type scene, while the soundtrack pumps out a hypnotic hip-hop beat. They sing with snarling exuberance: 'We pissed on the foundations of the newly built blocks. My town will be torn down. Soon Sulukule will be home to the bourgeoisie.' Since the film was first shown, the boys, who call themselves Rebellion on Destruction, have carved out a music career for themselves.

— How did you find the kids in Wonderland?  
I'd wanted to do something about the gentrification of Sulukule for some time, for the last six or seven years. But then it became urgent when the government proposed demolishing the Sulukule area. And I saw these kids and I was really impressed with their attitude. They called

themselves Rebellion on Destruction, and I told them what about wanted I do.

— It's a bit like a pop video and a bit like a gangster movie — there are lot of thrilling action sequences. Tell us about the filming process.  
I used a lot of techniques. We filmed it over two weeks, in February, when it was absolutely freezing and snowing, probably the worst time in the year to film. We used a normal camera, but we filmed from a helicopter on one overhead shot where you're seeing the kids running over a bridge and the camera follows them over this long bridge. And the cameraman usually works on action films — he put a camera on his head for some of the scenes.

— It's very violent. Were you worried that you might be criticized for celebrating gun culture?  
Gun culture? [Laughs] No, no. In fact, I'm showing the film in London next. Hans Ulrich Obrist [the Serpentine Gallery's director of exhibitions] invited me to their 'Boplos Marathon' after seeing it at the preview of the Istanbul Biennial. Also, it's going to be shown in New York next month in a two-day symposium about global gentrification [Art, Place and Dislocation in the Twenty-First-Century City, at Creative Time]. So it's getting a lot of attention. It doesn't celebrate violence.

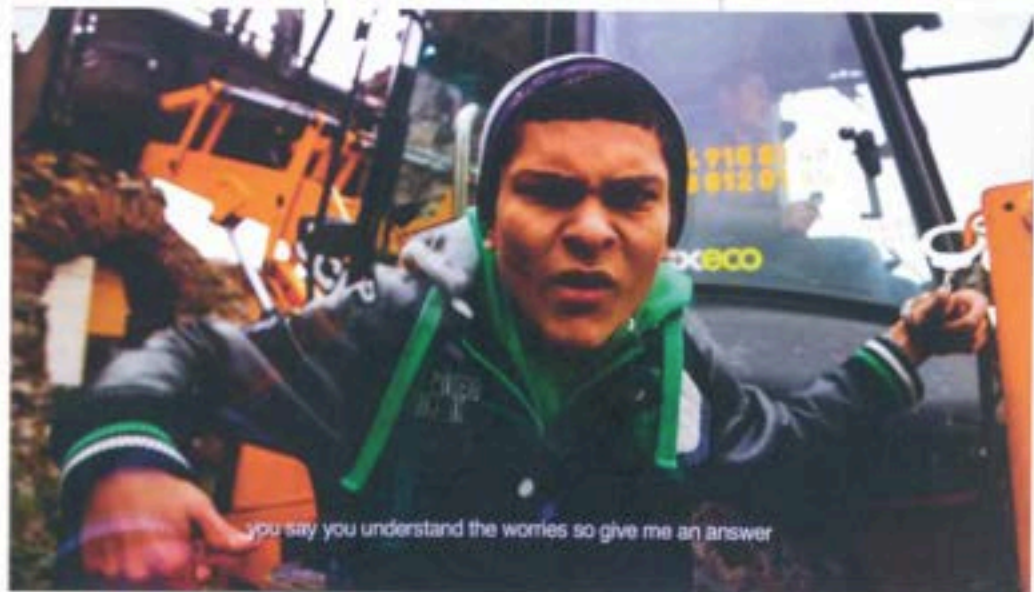
— Did *Rebellion on Destruction* have any say about how it was filmed?  
The kids thought it was just going to be a normal pop video. So I had to tell them that I'm an artist and I make video art and documentaries. They loved the idea and put a lot of energy and creative ideas into it. They're now making an album. And they are giving concerts. They are a bit crazy.

— Your work often deals with marginalized communities as well as subcultures. Would you call yourself a political artist?  
I only think of myself as an artist, but I have made work talking about marginalized people and repression. These issues are important and I'm interested in what's going on in Turkey. But I wouldn't use the label 'political'. I can't work within that label.

— Are you going to work with these kids again?  
We'll see. I liked them. You should come to the concert.



They sing with snarling exuberance: 'We pissed on the foundations of the newly built blocks. My town will be torn down. Soon Sulukule will be home to the bourgeoisie'



you say you understand the worries so give me an answer





Ipek Duben is among one of the most prominent Turkish artists to have emerged in the late 1980s. Growing up in Istanbul, she studied for an MA in Political Science in Chicago, then trained as a painter in New York. Her work has a feminist perspective, and she explores issues of identity shaped by her experience of living between Turkey and the United States. Probably her best-known piece is *Manuscript*, a series of works from 1994, and shown at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial. Here, she combines the language of Islamic miniatures with the painterly language of abstraction and expressionism.

— You lived in New York for many years. When did you move back?  
I've come back many times, but I finally came back in 2000, in the fall.

— That's an interesting time to come back. There were various reasons. It was after 9/11, but 9/11 never really had much to do with it. For the last few years I was commuting. My studio was in Manhattan, but my husband was working in Istanbul as a professor and I was sort of thinking whether I should really move my studio to Istanbul or not. Finally I did because I realized it was getting to be very exciting here.

— Do you think it would have been difficult to maintain an international profile as an artist if you'd returned to Istanbul much earlier?

Yes and no. I'd left Istanbul in 1999. When I left I was working with the best gallery in Istanbul, Maçka Sanat. I had done several shows with them. And people knew me very well because I had already written on art in magazines and I had done some art criticism, and that had received a tremendous amount of attention. This was mostly because I had a more objective way of looking at the artwork without personalizing it, without talking about the artist but rather talking about the art.

It's difficult for someone outside Turkey to appreciate what I'm saying, the difficulty of that position.

— Yes, 'objective criticism' has been the norm in the West, but I imagine it was different in Turkey. Well, that position was not exactly the position in Istanbul. In other words, you look at the work and you try to place it in the evolution of art movements and so on — or at least that's one approach — and interpret the art piece itself.

But in Turkey the word 'criticism' implies negative criticism, not evaluation or analysis. And so when I didn't do that, that drew a lot of attention and was really appreciated. So people knew me as an art critic, which I eventually realized was a bad thing when you're also an artist, so I stopped writing. And I announced it. I said I wasn't writing any more, period. I

thought, you can look at my artwork and try to understand what I do without this baggage.

— What was the art scene in Istanbul like back in the '70s, when you first returned to Turkey after studying art in New York?

I came back to Istanbul in 1976 — it was very provincial at that time. At the same time, the fine art academy in Istanbul was very dominant in determining what was contemporary — what was the thing at the moment. It was all about minimalism, modernism, abstract art. The figure was out.

— I don't suppose you had 'happenings' in Istanbul.

Happenings? No. I can talk about art history here for hours, to explain where Turkish art is coming from, which Westerners cannot understand. One reason is, they cannot read the Turkish books that have that information. Since the first Istanbul Biennial in 1987, curators who think they've been interested in Turkish art have not really been interested in Turkish art. They have been interested in looking and finding art here which resembles exactly what they are used to. And now we're talking about multiculturalism and relational geography and fluidity... All of a sudden I realized that the situation had changed dramatically in Istanbul.

By the mid-'90s, there'd been a major leap and an expansion of socially conscious art. For a long time the discussion in Turkey had been about authenticity and not copying the West. In the '90s that had largely, though not altogether, stopped. That's a very significant thing. So from the '90s Turkey was very much within the flow of the art world. Still, in the '80s there were very serious women artists who were doing really good contemporary art in Istanbul. People forget that.

— And were they interested in the same sorts of issues that women artists in New York were interested in — performance, the body, that kind of thing?

Well, I am the first woman in Istanbul, as a Turkish artist, who used the body, as a language, in painting. I did a series called *Şenife* in 1980 and '81 — a show I did with 12 paintings. It's of a dress without the body, though it looks as if there's a body inside, without the head. So that was really a very sociologically and politically significant body of work. In fact, in 1980, I got an award for one of the paintings. But after the award, when I did a show some months later, I got a horrendously bad review which said 'These are not paintings, these are nightmares, horrific figures, and it's an insult to Turkish women.' So it was a very moralistic evaluation, and that's where I come back to what I said earlier to you, about criticism.



I am the first woman in Istanbul, as a Turkish artist, who used the body, as a language





— Your approach to painting is very conceptual, but was it difficult being a painter in New York when everyone else around you was doing video and performance?

I think so. The significance of performance – using the body as an element of language – I used that very consciously, beginning in '91, and certainly in the work here, in the Biennial, which was done in '94 in New York. So when I went back to New York in '91 having begun to work in this fashion – using the Islamic and Eastern language, which is flat, which is serial, which is very geometric and not three-dimensional and so on, but combining it with abstract expressionism and realism and the psychology of the portrait – I was asking, how do you combine these things? I personally, as a woman and an artist, having lived in the West and the East for equal amounts of time, was a combination of both. I stood right there with these problems in my own existence. So my work in '91 came out of this questioning of myself: What is my identity? And that work was about identity. Şerife was about identity, too.

— Lots of Turkish artists are now represented by major galleries in the West, but I'm finding it hard to find many women. They're mostly men, who seem to be working in video and film. Yes, and I have my own theories as to why that is so. It's unavoidable, I think. When I came back from the States after art school, in around '76, and I began to look at the history of Turkish painting, I could see there was something strangely off from what I knew of Western art and Western art history. I wanted to know about the history of Turkish painting, the big masters, who they were. And I'm looking from the 1860s, when Turkish painting began to Westernize, to 1960–'70, and I thought that it didn't look

exactly like Cubism, or exactly like Impressionism. My writing began from that point – because I asked myself the question, "What is it, what is the difference?"

Then I did doctoral research [at Mimar Sinan University] – an epistemological study of Turkish painting: its mindset, its aesthetic, its ethics. The Islamic cultural consciousness, its understanding of morality, what is proper or not, what is beautiful or ugly – and I understood that the essence of all that in the artist's mind and being went into his hand and brush and eye. That's what I finally understood – it's the connection, that contact with reality, which is different. And that's why the Turkish Impressionists were different from the French Impressionists. Therefore, it was very difficult for painting to succeed in Turkey, unless they did traditional painting, which is Eastern painting, or in that particular style – flat, illustrative, descriptive and so on. But when artists moved into performance, video, collage, they felt free. They could really be themselves.

— So then, we're left with the dominance of video... The video thing is easy to do, if you're intelligent and you get a good idea of what is today's problem – if it is political demonstrations, you go and shoot a few things. But, in fact, the first video artist in Turkey ever was a woman – Nil Yalter. And she did the first feminist videos in Paris and she was actively involved in the feminist movement – at that time the men were simply painting horrible realistic paintings.

— Tell me more about Manuscript, its conception and how it was first received in Turkey. I made that work in New York and it came after Traces. Traces was a breaking point for me in terms of my own language – my signature. Not just purely geometric abstraction and not just New York expressionism. As a result of that I emerged with a combination of the miniature style and expressionistic painting and collage.

But I very soon realized that Traces would not be legible to the American audience because the symbolism was so hidden. Anyone who didn't really know Islamic art, miniature art – it would be very difficult for them to decipher. So here I am with this work Traces, and I'm thinking: I have to make my metaphors more legible, more easily available. So I decided to use photographs of myself (instead of drawings) using the manuscript and the book format around the issue of my identity as a woman, and as a mother in an Islamic tradition – even though I grew up in a very secular family. At the same time, in my work I'm acknowledging that I'm not just Western, I'm also Turkish. I thought to myself this [Western] expressionist language is not completely reflective of me. That's when I thought: Alright, I'm going to study miniatures.







Known for her eccentric style and provocative language, Lale Müldür is one of Turkey's foremost contemporary poets. Her poetry collection, *Mom, Am I Barbarian?*, was chosen as the title of this year's Istanbul Biennial. She is collaborating on an ongoing film project with experimental filmmaking duo Kaan Karacehennem and Franz von Bodelschwingh, for which, at the time of this interview, they'd already filmed 300 hours of footage (a 15-minute clip was shown at the Biennial). Karacehennem describes the film, *Violent Green*, as a docu-fantasy. With its loose narrative structure, it's a poetic exploration of the relationship between its makers, and the film features some of Müldür's improvised poetry.

— Lale, you're celebrated in Turkey for being a poet, and one who is strikingly influenced by the visual arts in your writing. But filmmaking is a new departure. How did this film collaboration come about?

LM: Well, I've been friends for ten years with Kaan and one or two years with Franz. And I've been watching good films all my life, and I was looking forward to a good filmmaker to come into my life and they came.

— The film is quite discursive, a kind of 'day in the life' project, and in the clip we see there's a tender scene of Kaan brushing your hair, and it ends with a lyrical passage of all three of you on a boat. What ideas were motivating you?

LM: No ideas. And I didn't expect all these li-

ties — scriptwriter, director and all those things that I ended up doing. But everything is very logical and very illogical in the film. The film, if it can be called a film in the natural sense... but one can hardly call it a film.

— Why not?

LM: I can't — it's in the film. I can't explain.

FvB: The film is basically about us, and our relationship with what's happening around us in Istanbul. Gezi becomes part of it. But it's just basically us.

KK: We can call it docu-fantasy. Lale is writing some improvised poems for it.

LM: Everything is improvised in the film — the dialogue, the poems, everything. It's been very difficult getting it together, editing it.

— You haven't actually stopped filming. Where do you hope to show the final cut?

FvB: We like to keep it open. That's one idea to make it a feature film, but it could also be like an installation. Our goal now is to create nice material, and then in the end we'll see. If you limit yourself at the beginning and say, this is a feature film or an installation, that restricts you and doesn't really help the process.

KK: And there is always the web, where you can show your stuff and reach millions around the world.

— It premiered, or at least 15 minutes of it did, at the Biennial, which was obviously very political this year and attuned to what's been happening out on the streets. Franz, you mentioned Gezi. How do you think the film is about the current situation in Turkey?

LM: I think it's very political. I can give you an example — they don't want to give it as an example, but I'll give it. Before the famous Gezi protest we did a little film on protest, asking for protest to come — and they didn't want to show it.

KK: One month before Gezi we were shooting on location in southern Turkey, and there were some big constructions on the road and we decided to shoot there and Lale was saying 'what should I talk about?' and I was saying 'talk about sex, or smoking'. And all of a sudden Lale started talking about revolution and made a big call for rebellion. And we were like 'what is she talking about?' We didn't have a clue what she was talking about. That was all about a month before Gezi.

FvB: The protests are still going on in different ways. I mean, it's much harder now, because the police are even more brutal now, and they are responding more quickly.

— Lale, this year's Biennial was named after one of your poetry collections, *Mom, Am I Barbarian?* Did Fülya Erdemci [Biennial curator] come to you with the idea of the theme?

LM: Yes, she came and told me she wanted to use it, and I said, 'OK, you can have it.' But I knew she was going to have some trouble with it.

— Well, traditionally 'barbarian' is a term the West has used to describe Turks. So it's a provocative and very loaded word.

LM: Yes, and we accept we are barbarians. We accept it, honey. But I'm angry with the media, because they took the title *Mom, Am I Barbarian?*, but they didn't go on about the political aspect of it, and I don't like that. They don't care about the political stuff. Nobody does. So I'm angry.

— Lale, you use very strong emotive, provocative language.

LM: It's down to years of provocation. It's revenge. I work with the idea of revenge in my mind. Against you all. They didn't put the parts we liked the best. We didn't have full control over what was shown.

KK: That's a very touchy subject.

FvB: Yeah, it's been a compromise. But that's OK.

The protests are still going on in different ways. I mean, it's much harder now, because the police are even more brutal now, and they're responding more quickly



But I have my school and other things to do.







Inci Eviner works across a broad range of disciplines, including video, photography and installation. But drawing underpins her practice. Among her most recent works, which featured in the 2013 Istanbul Biennial, is a series of fluid drawings whose subjects appear at once recognisable but, like Rorschach ink blots, uncanny and elusive: hooded figures reminiscent of news images of Abu Ghraib prisoners appeared as a recurring motif.

Other works include the animated film *Hare Coogü*, based on early-nineteenth-century engravings by German artist Antoine Ignace Melling, who chronicled the Ottoman court. Eviner replaced the original figures with animations of women performing mundane actions, thus challenging the Western perception of the harem as a place merely of sexual intrigue.

Eviner also initiates collaborative projects with students in immersive installations, which function as part stage set and part study area and in which the roles of teacher and student easily blur.

— Tell me about the collaborative work you do with students. In *Co-action Device: A Study*, which you presented at the Istanbul Biennial, I saw stuffed animals, human skeletons, strange props and dead trees – it looked like a wild archaeological dig. What was going on? Well, it might be an archaeological dig, but

actually it was a kind of school. We, the students and I, were doing performative research, in which everybody affects and inspires each other. Each group has their own subject, but at the same time they're developing ideas together. So there's an architecture group, for instance – they worked on the wall fresco. The fresco is actually a map of Gezi Park and Taksim Square. Imagine in 30 years' time that there are people looking at this work – it explains what's been happening in Turkey right now. On the fresco, the students have related many stories, some of them very personal, some of them about the Gezi resistance.

— What do you mean by 'performative research'? Performative just means moving, but not necessarily resulting in a performance as such. Moving, thinking. Before we started this project I gave my students a class. So we discussed some methods, some approaches. Everyday there is performative research. And sometimes there is a performance. I'm not sure when – when they are ready, they can do something on the stage. And also there are three dancers. They are lovely, but unfortunately they're not here today. Reading and performative readings are a very important part of this project. There are some texts that I give them to read. For example, Rancière, the French phi-

losopher, and also Ece Ayhan, the poet, and other important Turkish poets. And especially Beckett's physical performance play *Quad*. We read everything together. And we act out *Quad*. Then we develop some ideas.

— So, you've created a school, an art school, but one which has a very democratic and collaborative way of working and with something of a utopian vision. Yes, because I wanted to create an autonomous area – it's an art school for freedom, inspired by the Gezi resistance. I wanted to create a place where freedom of thought and expression were valued.

— Did the students just come to you. Was there a process of selection? Did you interview them? It was an open call and I invited students from different disciplines and some of them were law students, some art students, some architecture and art-history students. So, it's a multi-disciplinary project. A few of them didn't really like the project so they left. We ended up with 35 students.

— Tell me about the objects you gathered together. The enormous uprooted tree in the centre of the installation, the human skeleton. There are many props for inspiration and which are also part of my art vocabulary that I use in my videos.

— And so, the trees in the centre, do they represent the pulling down and destruction of the trees in Gezi Park? Yes, exactly. You know, the Gezi resistance started with just one tree – you know this story? With just this one tree.

— As well as the uprooted tree, you've got human hair – well, I don't know if it's human hair, but it's hair, like someone's been scalped or there's been a human sacrifice. Yes, the students are trying to repair something. Because the tree has been cut up, uprooted, it's like a corpse. So the group are trying to repair many things. It's a symbolic gesture of repair.

— Did you conceive this project before the Gezi Park protests? I've done similar projects. This is the kind of educational methodology I enjoy. Acting and thinking – it's like Aristotle's 'walking and thinking'.

— So this is really an education for them. Not pedagogic, but yes it is, very educational. But this is also art. It's not realism. You can't make it into a real school. This is a good way of critiquing the school system, and the art system. I teach at a university and I'm not happy



Imagine in 30 years' time that there are people looking at this work – it explains what's been happening in Turkey right now





them, because it's so formal. Teaching in class is so formal. I need something like this.

— What do you think is wrong with art-school education?

Everything. Because you know I have two identities – one as an artist, one as a teacher. And they are entirely separate – but here these two identities come together in this project. I had been teaching in a state university for years, at Yıldız College of Art and Design – it was wonderful and I was very happy. But state policy comes to the university and ideologically everything changes. So I quit, and transferred to a private university. And I was faced with another problem, the money problem.

— I'm interested in the changes you talk about. What changed?

They changed the rector and dean, and they preferred to do a programme of traditional art and especially Turkish art. So I and my friends quit. It's very common in Turkey, because education is not free – I mean ideologically free. And also financially it's not free. Some of my former students are here. Art is knowledge production – I want to use this knowledge production.

— Tell me about your drawings – they're powerful but elusive. I was reminded of Abu Ghraib and hooded victims of torture.

Yes, after the Gezi resistance, the political situation was very much on my mind, so I created these drawings. The question that's very important to me is: how can politics and aesthetics exist on the same platform? And I often use drawings to help me develop ideas for three-dimensional projects, or sometimes for a video project.

