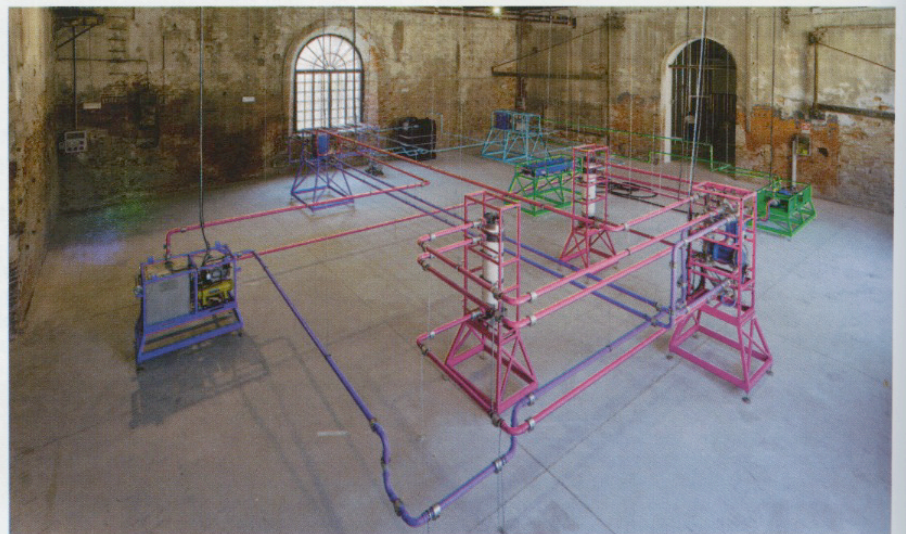
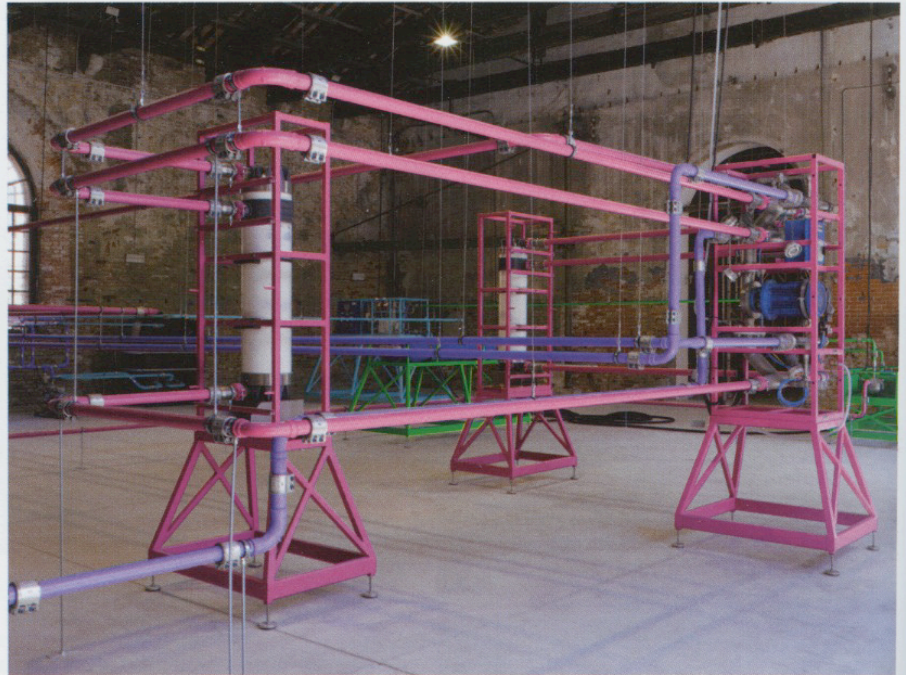


INTERVIEW



Ayşe Erkmen

SOMETHING CONNECTS

Başak Senova

AYŞE ERKMEN

Ayşe Erkmen's distinctive process shows a commitment to long-term research-based projects that can be traced as far back as the early '80s. Each work is nurtured by an engagement with specific sites, histories and geographies. The audience's perception and the historical, cultural and social impact of the venue are decisive elements for Erkmen. The experimental techniques and media she uses are grounded in verbal and visual languages. The artist never accepts a situation or a given as it is; on the contrary, she either adapts a work to a complex situation or invents a witty solution as an artistic response. This is what is at stake for her. Yet, as in Plan B (her project that represented Turkey at the 54th Venice Biennale), the end result always challenges everyday social and political possibilities within the art context.

BAŞAK SENOVA: *Your projects always resonate between the subject matter that detaches itself from the art context and the powerful physicality of the art object. How do you process this tension?*

Ayşe Erkmen: I take everyday objects, or more often situations, which I already see as artworks/sculptures, and I work them into artworks that are freed from these starting points. There is a long process of working through to reduce and change the direction. The tension may come from the result of this switch of context or the effort to balance the form and function while creating the work.

BS: *What are the significant and inevitable aspects that create this balance?*

AE: Depending on the situation, any part of this process of working through can offer something significant that has impact on the work. For example, in *Plan B* (2011) water can be considered inevitable, whereas in *Let It Flow* (1999) in Jerusalem, wind became the most significant aspect of the situation I encountered there.

The only thing that is inevitable in my work is my process: the things that I come across in any given situation I use to think through. I don't always know what I will find in advance and what my feelings and interest will be towards what I find. If I find something of interest and significance, this can be the inevitable. But it changes immensely from one project to another.

One can also say that the one inevitable aspect of my work is my constant and precise attention to and interest in form. I think this is the part that communicates, and I feel the form should be arresting to the viewer. How it communicates and what it communicates can be vastly different.

BS: *By navigating through different paths, you turn the production process into a challenge that creates its own protocol. In this context, how would you characterize your process of producing projects in relation to the spatial and the perceptual input?*

AE: I try to free the work of myself (the artist's

hands and decisions). I guess you could consider this a protocol. I am most happy and content when my impact on the work is as little as possible. Therefore I prefer to work with few materials and if possible with nothing brought in from outside. Examples can be *Das Haus* (1993), *More or Less* (1999), *Eingang* (1996), *Participation* (1998), etc. Sometimes possibilities, sometimes impossibilities come up in the process of making the work. These influences take me to a point of reduction. This is like a distillation of things and a general approach. But the process of producing works individually has many more parts than that. Research for understanding a site or situation can also be as personal as a passing comment from a person I meet on the street (*Every Bag Counts*, 2008) or the title of the work can come from the deadline of a curator (*Bis August*, 2004). I join diverse elements that can create a disjunction that is not always easy to read — at least not on the first encounter — and it is a long way to a solution in which chance and coincidence work together with consideration.

BS: *As far as I see it, works that took place in different exhibitions and venues — Typed Tables (2001), Typed Types (2002), Lazy Dog (2004) — operate as a metonym for your approach to form. Although the form or the visual language of your work has diverse and multifaceted qualities, there is always a consistent aspect in the way it is presented.*

AE: The sentence “the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” is already a form. It has a visual, narrative form — a cinematographic image. Moreover, as a grammatical unit this sentence — like all words and letters — is a form.

This, among a few others, is a well-known sentence to people working in a special field of design. It includes every letter of the alphabet and is made to be a guide for showing different typefaces as placed in a sentence. Therefore its function is all about form; how a group of words look when written with this or that typeface.

In this series of works you are mentioning, I have added one more formal aspect to this. I have formed/created and used my own typeface — letters created by bringing together signs and symbols in a classical typewriter.

This awkward sentence, with its funny and bizarre blend of action and animation, together with my odd/unusual typeface, transforms itself into an even more complicated and multifaceted form.

I first used the typeface as it is (Limerick Biennial, Galerie Barbara Weiss) with the title *Typed Type*; afterwards I included the sentence “the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” with the titles *Typed Word* or *Lazy Dog* in various forms and places (Villa du parc-Annemasse, Kutluğ Ataman office). Next I translated the sentence into Turkish (exhibited in Galatasaray Square), which took out the sentence's practical quality of holding all the letters of the alphabet, and as a result made it

and the work even more senseless.

Certain forms are often repeated in my work because I see connections between the space or the situation — something connects. For example, I have used the blinds in different locations at different times because of the connection to the windows as the starting point, because this was something I couldn't avoid. It was the same way in Venice, where I couldn't look past the water. Forms can be carried through in my work as long as it finds a resonance in another site. But it doesn't mean that it is always a remake. That form often communicates quite differently in the new situation. There are some forms that follow me. They exist as a catalogue of forms floating in my mind and sometimes they find a place to put their roots, but at other times a form can appear in a work, never to be seen again.

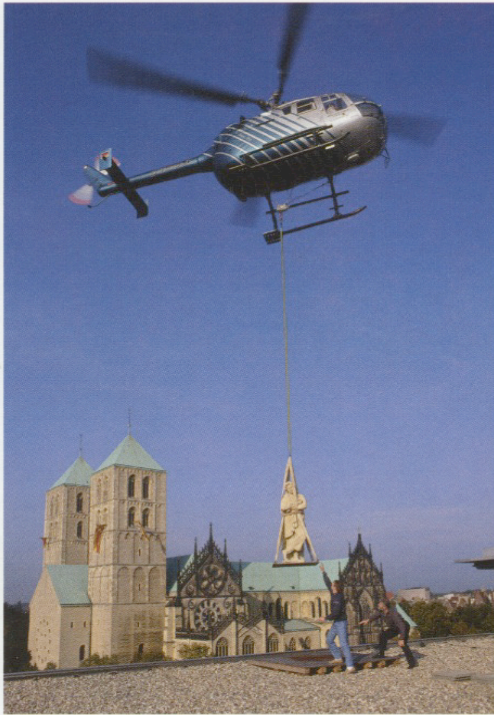
BS: *Most of your projects start or end with the idea of “relocation” — relocating ideas, objects and even contexts.*

AE: I don't think of it as relocation, although in some works such as *Shipped Ships* (2001) and *Sculptures on the Air* (1997) and many others that are similar, it looks as if there is relocation, but this is just a formal viewing. *Shipped Ships* is more about the disappearance of the artwork; the politics of labor in a given situation involving a city and its people, among many other things; and most importantly, as the name suggests, giving a holiday to these ships — not relocating them. *Sculptures on the Air* is very much about sculpture, therefore art. The “air” in the title works with the double meaning that the sculptures are being “broadcast” rather than being carried. Maybe it can be said that I use locations as a tool to inform my work, playing with what belongs and what I bring in and the tension I try to achieve from this encounter.

It can be a transformation of a place, a shift of a situation or an idea, a reduction, a distillation, a reconsideration of the space as in *Blueish* (Kunstverein Freiburg, 2009) where the basement swimming pool gets reduced to half and becomes a floating object in the entrance floor of the exhibition space; or more recently the work *Sixty Five Percent* (2010) made for the lower gallery space of Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin, which reproduces the ground plan of the upper gallery spaces using a dance floor material; or a larger impression of a location like in the works *Flat White* (2006), three carpets that take their name from a milky coffee type, a classic in New Zealand, or *Blinds* (2006) and *Level 2* (2006) in the exhibition “Awesome”; or an appropriation as in *Plan B*. These are a few examples that come to my mind right now. I hope my work offers a platform to slip outside of what is seen rather than just what is seen.

AYŞE ERKMEN, *Plan B*, 2011. Water purification units with extended pipes and cables. Photo: Roman Mensing / artdoc.de. Installation view at the Pavilion of Turkey; 54th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2011. Courtesy Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin and Rampa, Istanbul.

INTERVIEW



BS: So, your works have multiple layers of meanings and connotations, which become activated with diverse associations. Are you open to any kind of interpretation by the audience, or would you like to guide them in advance?

AE: I am not opposed to the audience seeing something I don't see in the work or something that I have not thought about. But when asked, I try to make clear what has driven my interest in making the work, even when it does not fit the reading or the understanding of the viewer or the curator. Confusions and misunderstandings are welcome, as I see them as the result of the layered complexity of a work. One can say I guide the audience in advance by the title. However this also doesn't work every time, as I can have secret/private titles such as *Bis August, Habenichts* (2007), *Awesome* (2006), *Müssiggang* (2002), etc. In general, I am not keen on guiding the audience, either in advance or afterwards; I am opposed to being the one to tell or to know.

I take the work or exhibition as place of production where the audience and work enter a relationship to produce different meanings.

BS: Nevertheless, with some of your works — such as *On Its Own* (2011), *Construction* (2009) — the intellectual and cultural input of the audience is articulated as one of its layers.

AE: *On Its Own* is a work that can bring a common interest to viewers — to pursue their own self through the same method. Other than

that, to my understanding, this work does not include the audience's input. This is a very intimate and private work that opens up gradually from this privacy to the history of one person, to the social history of one name, then to certain similarities, to unknown relations, acquaintances and to related social and political realities and histories, thus developing into a general experience.

Construction deals with a very private and hidden secret of the exhibition space, a text written on the floor of the room in its original construction, later to be covered up in an effort to create a more contemporary space for exhibitions. The text, "art is in the life of a people," inscribed on the helmets of the workers working on the construction of even more contemporary rooms to be added to this art institution, is nowhere to be seen and therefore gives no clue to the daily visitor as to where it comes from. This text references the original room, its history, art history (due to the special typeface used) and art in general.

BS: On the other hand, with most of your works the physicality and/or the presence of the audience activates or even completes the work, such as in *Ghost* (2010), *Corridor* (2009), *Up and Down* (2009), *Left and Right* (2009) and *Alright Now* (2009).

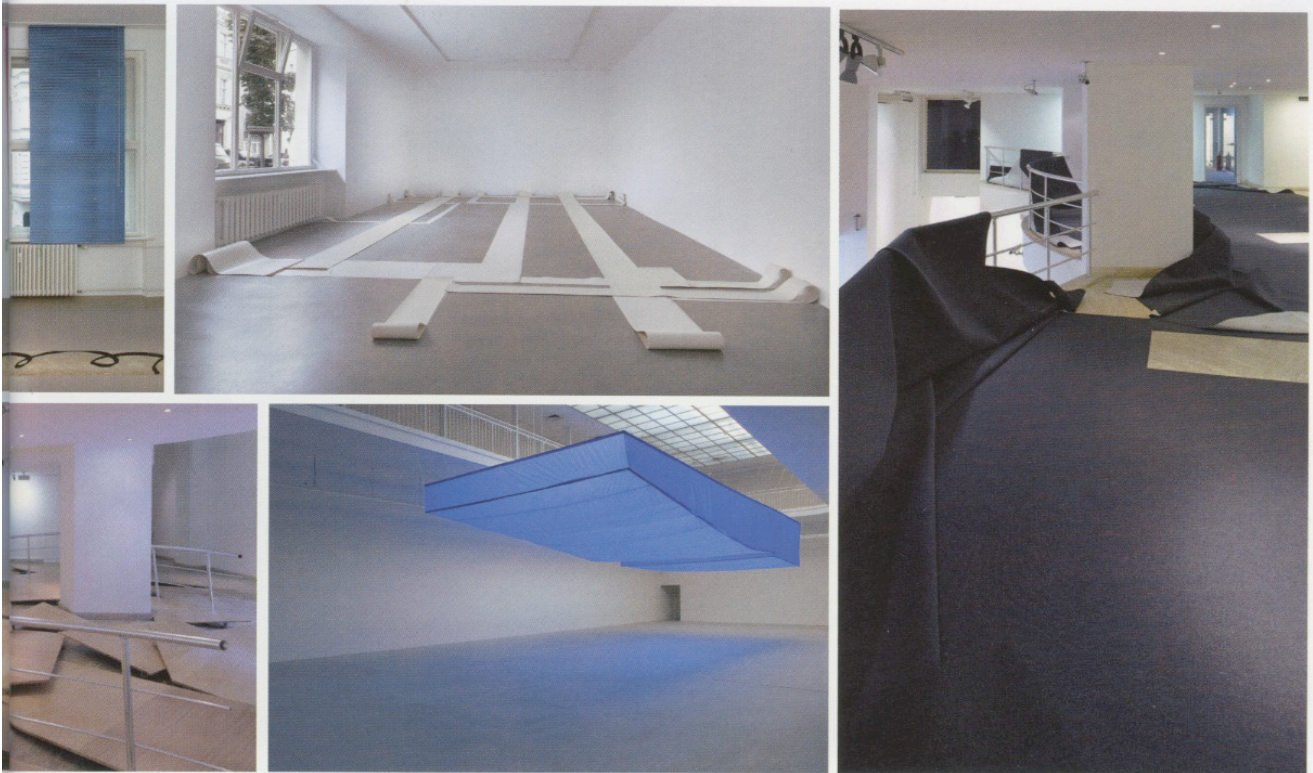
AE: Likewise in *Up and Down*, *Left and Right*, *Alright Now* and *Corridor*, the peculiarities of space have been the inspiration and the room

has been used as the main actor, whereas in *Ghost* the history of the space together with gossip, rumor and celebrity plays an important role.

BS: What were the factors that shaped the idea for *Plan B*, the project that you developed for the Turkish Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale?

AE: In my work, the factors can be anything from a space to a situation or a small detail I have seen or heard elsewhere. All these factors can come into play in the process of thinking through the possibilities of a given situation. In *Plan B*, my immediate involvement was with water in the context of Venice, naturally, and the location inside the venue where water is easily reachable. The basic idea is to bring the water inside the room as an extension of what is happening in the city itself. Then comes the machine deconstructed and placed apart for each component to stand on its own with its prolonged pipe system encircling the room and taking up almost all of the space. The machines "perform as sculptures," as if actors in an elaborate theater. In this circuit of machine sculptures and pipes of ever-changing water from Venice — from salty to sweet, from sweet to clean, from clean to drinkable and back — the viewer is only able to walk in between, feeling the vibrations, hearing the chorus of sounds and watching the separated parts of one compact machine

AYŞE ERKMEN



that does this all. The extended pipes with their assorted colors and types, depending on their responsibility inside the system, together with the forms and locations of necessary attachments, add a sculptural feature to the whole scene.

BS: Accordingly, how do you locate the audience in the course of the presentation of Plan B?

AE: The idea for *Plan B* started as a work with a result: a fountain was to be the end product, giving the audience the possibility of drinking water from this source. In that "Plan A" version of the work, the viewer would have had direct access to transformation and to what he/she could witness. The water from the canal would end up in the body of the viewer. This would have been a work that would have involved the audience directly and provided some satisfaction. *Plan B* is a refined version of Plan A's accessible, easygoing idea. Here in *Plan B* water is on its own, whirling around the room freely from one machine/sculpture to the another, making its own journey through art then back to reality/life. The viewer can only participate in the intimacy of change and transformation without consumption as evidence; the work becomes independent of all concerns other than itself.

BS: I wonder about your working process with curators. For instance, could you briefly describe

your collaboration process with Fulya Erdemci for Plan B?

AE: I had already worked with Fulya Erdemci on several projects before. In the first and second "Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions," in the big historical exhibition "Modern and Beyond." I worked with Fulya Erdemci again in the Scape Biennial: "Wandering Lines – Towards a New Culture of Space" in Christchurch, New Zealand, which Fulya co-curated with Danae Mossman. I worked with her even before, indirectly, in the Fourth Istanbul Biennial when she had not been the curator (René Block was the curator) but the director of the biennial.

My working process starts by talking closely with curators. Then I go away to be alone to develop my idea. Then I come back having sifted through many ideas and having come to a kind of solution. For *Plan B*, it worked more or less the same way. The fact that I worked closely with Fulya in the past made the working process uncomplicated. She knows me well and understands my work and working style. After a few site visits together with Fulya Erdemci and co-curator Danae Mossman, in which we all saw the room and tried to explore the context of the site, I proposed my idea and we started working together on this idea, which went through considerable changes to be finalized in this very complex work. ■

From left clockwise: AYŞE ERKMEN, *Sculptures on air*, 1997. Skulptur Projekte Münster. Courtesy Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Roman Mensing. AYŞE ERKMEN, *Shipped Ships*, 2001. Frankfurt am Main; Moment Deutsche Bank. Courtesy Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Bärbel Högner. AYŞE ERKMEN, *Habenichts*, 2007. Installation view at Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Courtesy Barbara Weiss. Photo: Jens Ziehe. AYŞE ERKMEN, *sixtyfive percent*, 2010. PVC, metal snap fastener, dimensions variable. Courtesy Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Jens Ziehe. AYŞE ERKMEN, *Ups and Downs*, 2008. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view at Yapi Kredi Art, Istanbul. Vehbi Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection. Photo: Cemal Emden. AYŞE ERKMEN, *Bluish*, 2009. Installation view at Kunstverein Freiburg. Courtesy Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Marc Doradzillo. AYŞE ERKMEN, *Ups and Downs*, 2008. Installation view at Yapi Kredi Art, Istanbul. Vehbi Koç Foundation Contemporary Art Collection. Photo: Cemal Emden.

Başak Senova is an art curator, writer and designer based in Istanbul. She was the curator of the Turkish Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale featuring artists Banu Cennetoglu and Ahmet Öğüt.

Ayşe Erkmen was born in Istanbul in 1949. She lives and works between Istanbul and Berlin. She represents Turkey at the 54th Venice Biennale with *Plan B*.

Selected solo shows: 2011: *Rampa*, Istanbul. 2010: *Witte de With*, Rotterdam; *Barbara Weiss*, Berlin.

Selected group shows: 2011: "Bodily Choreography," Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; "Continuous Variations," Akbank Anat, Istanbul. 2010: "Tactics of Invisibility," Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna; "For the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there," Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis / de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam | MOCAD, Detroit | Kulturet, Lisbon. 2009: *Sharjah Biennial*, Sharjah.