

“My intention is to not be a ‘visitor’ there”

With her work “We, Elsewhere”, İnci Eviner will be representing Turkey at the 58th International Venice Biennial. The theme of this year’s biennial is based on the historic Chinese curse of “May you live in interesting times.” We visited Eviner at her studio and talked about her work. The artist emphasizes that her intention is to not be a “visitor” there and to “try to define the problem of being stuck between the ground and the earth.”

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The 58th International Venice Biennial curated by Ralph Rugoff will be on view May 11-November 24, inspired by an ancient Chinese curse of “May you live in interesting times”.

At the Pavilion of Turkey, coordinated by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) and sponsored by Fiat, İnci Eviner’s “We, Elsewhere” will be exhibited. The exhibition is located in one of the main spaces of the biennial at the Arsenale. The exhibition is curated by Zeynep Öz.

Eviner will transform the pavilion into a stage for her project. Her studio in Hasköy that she moved into two years ago resembles a greenhouse of images. This is a historic neighborhood where sounds of mosques, synagogues, churches mix with the voices of children, cats, dogs, and the clatter of labor from the local shopkeepers. The artist’s creations, two and three-dimensional, organic or computed, old and new are intertwined with scientific, cultural, and of course art historic publications for reference, drawing you into this land of ample imagination, provoking a deep curiosity.

The artist’s work “Beuys Underground”, which was exhibited at the 13th Sharjah Biennial and which had earned the artist the special prize (2017), was a combination of the digital, the dramaturgic, and the aesthetic with references to July 15 in Turkey. If we are to talk about her work for the Venice Biennial using the press release as a basis, Eviner of course uses her drawings and re-forms them into architectural forms, videos, sound installations, and objects, adding sensational and visual layers.

Eviner knows that while taking steps forward in the production of artistic work, it is also important to take a step back or to withdraw for the sake of the work. For her project sponsored by Fiat and also supported by SAHA, Eviner recently led a press presentation to a full house together with the exhibition’s curator Öz at the IKSV building. Eviner and Öz referred to the artist’s 2013 work at the Istanbul Biennial presented at the Galata Greek School “Co-Action Device: A Study”, “Parliament” from 2010 and “Harem” from 2009.

The artist turned towards us trustingly, with sincerity her drawings, sketches for and samples from video installations, brand new three dimension structures/works as if they were pages of secrets; Eviner does not conceal the mental and emotional intensity that she is undergoing. As she spoke to us, she appeared to be communicating with the

many beings that she was seeing both within her and outside of her, pouring out her heart.

At one point, the artist showed her most recent video-drawings, underscoring how sound was a very critical determining factor for this project both as a material and as a source of editing.

We intervened here and there, embarrassed.

This is just like speaking to a pregnant woman, while watching for the pulse of both the woman and the fetus, calmly, carefully.

The things I have seen make me think about psychiatry. Could we say that these are “bipolar” images?

We can't, because if we said that we would be overly deterministic. This is an artwork, so we need to see them in their own contexts.

Within that “whole.”

Yes, because they are all interconnected: The sound, the space, everything is related to each other.

But nothing is there randomly.

No, they are not. But all my works include an ingredient of “madness”, what I consider madness is that thing lingering on the boundaries of the rational mind, what we call desire. We could talk about Lacan, this is a part of all my works. As I have mentioned at the press conference at IKS, I'm very intrigued by how all our gestures and relationships in daily life, our behaviors are politicized. I'm looking for a “space” between the individual and the political and I'm placing all of these things there and there are figures that we encounter frequently such as Antigone, girls reading, dogs, sheep, joy etc. I guess these are compositions emerging from the image-vocabulary that I have formed over the years.

At “We, Elsewhere,” the figures' shadows turn inwards and fall on them, leaving no space. We see that the imaginary characters wandering around are actually missing here. Perhaps the other half of an incomplete story, all actors from a “tragedy.” It is as if there is a “tragedy” that was canceled as it was about to be realized. When we look at these figures up close, you can see traces of daily life and emotions, human relationships, love and hatred.



We, Elsewhere / Sketches
Courtesy of the artist and Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV)

From my notes based on my impressions at the press conference: “Incomplete, half beings of a geography that has its own refugees, but is also made up of refugees.”

Yes. Are they beings or are they trying to be, trying to establish a life there in that in-between? These are not fictional elements of a specific story, but they are attempts to form a whole. If we are to return to (Giorgio) Agamben, being a citizen, or in other words, being protected by laws, and being nakedly human: I choose to stand between the two. An in-between where one has not yet transformed the other. This is perhaps what I’m looking for.

Agamben was also very much impacted by Hannah Arendt’s 1943 text “We, Refugees.” We are in this text, but there are also artists and all the Others. But on the other hand, walking through the space and the sound make completely different encounters possible. I aim for different dimensions of meaning to emerge from within these layers.

And dramaturgy is transformed into an “opportunity” for you.

Ali Akay made a great comment, which was inspiring. There is the following in Michel Foucault’s “Will to Know” class notes from 1974-75: “Oedipus’s story always comes after. First the action takes place and then the story. The story is always missing a piece, because they do not have a past. They have to be here, now.” This is not an effort to establish a story, to earn an identity. We could talk about that in-between, that state of being suspended.

With my works, I do not intend to propose anything directly. I thus want to avoid speaking with limited sentences. But it is not easy to articulate within the confines of the speaking language. As I mentioned at the press conference, this is a work and I do not make it so that it carries a message or so that it exemplifies a theory. Thus, it is expected for it to stand on its own and for it to work and to produce meaning. This is why I call it a “device.” I put a lot of things inside and I expect it to function within itself and to produce meaning from the materials. I want to watch how concepts and notions, light and darkness, fear and trust, sound and emptiness impact and transform each other. But these are also things that very much emerge out of me. In other words, they are an encounter with the very personal and the social and they establish a field of interaction. And there is always the animal, you see it too. I had used a sheep/sheep’s skin in my photography series from back in 2000, “Nowhere-body-here”. I have a specific vocabulary. I always use it and I can’t give it up.



Co-Action Device
Courtesy of the artist and
IKSV

You are producing a language, but you are also trying to avoid that language.

Yes. Sometimes I’m very much within it, it is very “me”, but I also want to take a distance and look at it from a removed perspective.

Because you want these things to “realize themselves”.

I create the opportunity to do so. I make platforms, stages, and by leaving them be, I allow them to function and I want some things to emerge from that interaction.

Here, the methods you have employed since the beginning of your career come up again: the miniature tradition, issues of description, taking sections, the state of studying or not studying something...

I can say that I’m very much inspired by art history. Allegories have always been interesting to me. Visual images always help certain narratives to be embodied. When you look at these gaps and tensions between meaning and images, it is possible to trace the identity politics of representation.

The half-mythological figures that I have been producing for a long time are in this work. In particular, within the videos are oracles, sorcerers, nemeses, those resigned to god's will, those emerging from a whale's guts... On the one hand corroding the boundaries of the visual language, while on the other, creating a consistency within the work.

Taking seriously, respectfully what is behind the scenes as well as what is in front of it, the need to describe properly, being able to exhibit that. Being able to say here is the poverty that produces the wealth that you see above, there is a below to what you see above.

There are very striking conflicts and contradictions here. These are coming from the world that we inhabit and of course from Turkey.

Turkey is a place that has fulfilled its destiny through incomplete things.

Arendt criticizes her own position and situation in her text, "We, Refugees." And in reality, the post-refugee refugee is the paradigm for a new historic conscience. It is a highly paradigmatic rupture. The individual is defined in a different way philosophically. So when I return that moment of rupture, I found Arendt. All of these readings shed light on my path and I was able to see more clearly the contradictions of the world I live in.

Please don't think of my following comment as a backwards way of thinking, but whenever I'm alone with your works, I find myself having existential concerns.

But of course. I try to create a field of existence. But this field of existence is loaded with today's needs, urgencies and the past's weight, ruptures; a moment of existence within these contrasts. Love exists in that "moment." All of these emotional explosions and compassions are there.

Because all of these beings know that they are going to kill the moment they describe themselves.

The language of speaking is dragging us towards a trap again. It is for certain that while I try to leave open doors as I'm speaking, it is difficult to do so.

Sometimes, older modes of expressing certain words is more effective. Instead of saying *hapishane* [prison], we say *mapushane* [again prison, used less frequently today]. There is an important experience of the inside and the outside in your works. Similar things happen within mental health institutions. Those inside begin to treat those outside differently and those outside treat those inside differently. Perhaps because of jealousy, a "madness" label is stamped on to them or we stigmatize those who emerge from the inside to the outside. When we look at the designs of your works, I think about the visitation day, the day when we see "them", when we visit. This is a project I feel I'm inside of and outside of at the same time. We are going to have a certain privilege once we go inside, but it also appears that we would be discriminating against some people.

But my intention is about us: To be present. To not be just a visitor there.

To become one.

Yes. I want all the works I make to internalize people, to enchant them, to seduce them. I want the works to take the viewers into their mouths and spit them back out onto the walls. Always. *Harem* was also like this. They are all like this. In other words, you first think that you are seeing something fun. But the more you get into it, the more painful it becomes and you see that you are confronting your own pains. I don't know to extent I can relay these emotions to people, but that is my desire.

Are you criticizing the idea of a pavilion?

While national identities have long been eroded, the country pavilions at the Giardini became very nostalgic architectural specimen. Sometimes a country's curator and artist are from countries. Twenty years ago, identity politics were based on national identities. More recently, the USA was represented by African-American artists and the Australian pavilion presented Aboriginal artists. The world's identity crisis is obviously not over, but the scale has shifted. The different perspectives presented at these biennials and the critical dimension make it possible for us to discuss identity politics from a fresh perspective. So I think of national pavilions as a historic nostalgia.

The best works that I have ever seen were at the Venice Biennial and I was very much influenced by that. Years ago, I had seen a work by Louis Bourgeois there and it was a remarkable experience, encouraging me for my work. This is what the Venice Biennial is for me. I don't know what it is for other people. If you ask me about the issue of representation, I like my country. I represent you, I represent myself. I wish good things would happen here so that we could all be happy. I hope to make good art so that I can improve people's lives. This is what I feel when I look at good works. I want that. This is why I like looking at art.

If we were to use the term "laboratory" to describe what you have produced, would this scare you?

Of course! This is a "habitus" that erodes and expands the boundaries of sensations and emotions, it is temporary. It is a site of experience. These are the things working here. Everybody is working. But there is also pain. There is also the queer. There is the transsexual being, there is the pain of man. It is not a laboratory, there are many artists who do that and they call their works laboratory. That is different. This is not like that.

Are there digital drawings within your production?

No. But there are images at the end of the day. We start off with digital images, videos. But when we are constructing the works, I place the videos together with the drawings on paper.

Are they serendipitous like contemporary music compositions or are they as sturdy as classical music compositions?

They are neither: I sometimes become a mediator to give them each an opportunity, to leave myself outside, to make them into works. Sometimes I ask, where do all these come from? Of course from the subconscious. In other words, there are two different distances—this also exists within Foucault, the state of being inside/outside. Sometimes we wipe off our face with what we have done, we destroy it. And sometimes we are crushed under the weight of some things or the load of history.

If we were to return to your question of publicness that you asked during the press conference, here we move away from something being “my problem” or the problem of the “other” and towards an elsewhere, converging at new values.

Being here and not being here. This is a state that we have been encountering since your older works.

Yes, I care about that. I’m curious about what is within my subconsciousness. I work with that. All the works that I do are stemming from that desire, from within. On the other hand, I’m the subject and the stage for a struggle between the world and I.

So there is no difference between the respect that you have for the innate and the transcendental?

In terms of the innate, as I always say, the drawing is a mediator. It is a natural relationship that we have established with sincerity, by creating. It is a tool of transforming our artistic identity into action. What keeps it natural, consistent is my practice since I was six, of drawing. So when I look at that drawing, these things emerge. And when I’m realizing them, I return to drawing, to the rehearsals I have been making with actors. I create my own models and I take action.

As you have mentioned, there is a “staging” through (Hieronymus) Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, as Orhan Pamuk has implied about you.

There is staging, but it is a stage that opens up channels between the past and the now and the future.

Because we experience the absurd and the rational at the same time. Could we not avoid this? Are we subjected to it?

Yes, but we are not subjected to it. In other words, I’m looking for that space of fears that we do not yet have the name for between experiencing an enormous pain for the first time and that transition between pain and theory, an in-between space.

I’m trying to define my own “dasein”, my problem with being trapped between the ground and the earth.

I guess what you are inspired by is the freedom of dreams. What I feel the closest to in your works is that state of emotion, that unexpected state in a dream. Should we define this as surreal?

We cannot say that, because Surrealism is about creating new, strange, irrelevant images, a bringing together of unrelated things. Whereas I'm after something that I do not know yet. My dreams are not as rich. This is what you think. Because these are rifts between what is expected and what is not expected, what is known and what is not known yet.

You told us during the press conference that you instructed the young contemporary art troupe working with you to “forget everything they knew about dance.” Do you say the same things about politics, history, philosophy, all -isms and ideologies in the name of art?

I ask where all these daily gestures come from and who they are intended for. The bodily gestures that dance aestheticizes also have a memory and I try to refrain from using this domesticated language. Instead, I try to find a new and fresh body language created by momentary leaps of emotion. There are clichés, representations within that language and I try to open up space for their potential to be transformed into something else. In other words, I would like to foresee such a bodily expansion. This opens up a freer field movement for me. I can thus subvert the readily available body language or question the things it represents. If I were to return to your question, art is of course a means of questioning all those things you mentioned.

Taking this as a departure point, could we say that in your personal art history, you lean towards dissecting not the “dead” but the living? If what you mean by the dead is the iconography of art history, I would never give that up. As most contemporary artists appear to believe, I do not think of myself as having just descended from the sky. Whatever you do, there is something that connects you to the past, to the history of painting. Because I work with images. There is no sense in rejecting that. But using that self-consciously and questioning it is very meaningful. In other words, it is important to know and to keep studying art history. For example, in my work “Beuys Underground” (2017), a society that had lost their memory was trying to create an identity by looking at paintings in art history. They constructed allegories, creating symbols. On the other hand, we try to re-invent and to form an artificial culture by bringing pieces together. Because we keep erasing our past. This work was made after July 15. At our present time when we are right between an uncertain future and an erased past.



Beuys Underground
Courtesy of the artist
and IKS V

Of course, we had previously brought that issue up with you (<https://www.unlimitedrag.com/single-post/Yeraltindaki-Beuys>) On the other hand, the history and the image that your project draws up in my mind is that of Istanbul's Taksim Square, Ataturk Cultural Center, the flag there and of course, May of 2013, the Gezi Resistance. There is a counter-culture center there.

No, I call that habitus. Some people have lived here, it is a site of living. I don't know how you arrived at Ataturk Cultural Center.

In reality, the state of an idea becoming an object.

The idea, the thought, the feelings, the situations, the sensations. It is of course very important to create a visual experience.

Being able to do with breath, with sound what was previously done with lines.

Yes. Not imposing meaning from the outside, not adding something on from the outside, not defining it top-down. Instead, being able to create the movement from within, capturing it as an internal need.

And we are hearing a sort of communication, right? Not music?

We encounter a sound that gives life to these things. But this is not a representational work. This was a production based on their actual sounds, then digitally re-creating artificial sounds.

How did you arrive at the architectural stage of *We, Elsewhere*?

With “Harem”. There was an architectural section there, I was already very intrigued by the political representations of architecture. I like working on this topic. Then there was the “Parliament” and I specifically looked at iconic architectural examples of modernism. I was interested in architectural plans, the political representations of drawings. And these became increasingly three-dimensional over time. The “Co-Action Device” at the 13th Istanbul Biennial had emerged from my video “Nursing Modern Fall”.



Parliament
Courtesy of
the artist and
IKSV

Then what could we say about what is going to happen once someone leaves the Pavilion of Turkey? Its permanence, its temporariness? What is the memory that will stay with us? What could be said about the memory it is going to produce?

If you are asking me what I expect from this work, first of all, I want to be affected by my own work. And I hope you will be affected too. I would like to draw the viewer in and then throw them out. This is a living experience. The memory that I try to evoke or remind you of should find a space of movement within your body. I would like to have different emotions, things that will be simultaneously experienced be within the works.

I'm reminded of that moment in Lewis Carroll's famous novel when little Alice goes through that mysterious tunnel.

Of course viewers have different backgrounds and personality types and once I present these, many things will be triggered for them just like what happened with you. But what I really want is for the work to establish its own life and to prohibit you from thinking of anything else.

The viewer should not succumb to their own paradigm. If they are a “terminal”, they should function as a terminal.

They should not succumb to it, there is no end to that. To art, I mean, the work. It should not be buried under this or that charged meaning. This over-interpretation is truly tiring. It is itself, I would like it to be a being for itself.

Then, how do we record this once it is finished? With a documentary? A debate? An argument? A text?

We do not have to record it. It has been experienced and it is over.

Maybe this is a cliché, but I have to ask. What is your opinion on shadow plays?

I am related to that state of being in between.

This practice of yours reminds me of the ritual of “tattooing” that emerges from the need to permeate the symbolic into the skin, the being, and from there to the consciousness.

I am not interested in that, but maybe. Everything is possible. As you are talking about these things, I’m thinking if my works are too weak. Are they not producing anything by themselves? Because you are constantly producing things about them. [laughter]

I would like to ask this question in relation to your work “Parliament”: We see today that these worms have grown and are causing difficulties for the structure, leading to its collapse—a foreshadowing.

Yes. This is a matter of a given identity. Wars stemming from identities.

You say that you are always after the space of a “now.” This is also a situation that tells us that you are putting a distance with the past and the future. You are saying that you do not want to encumber the future nor be encumbered, to be crushed by the past.

That’s very true.

Then we also have to leave your paintings, your works alone for the time being. Or rather maybe they need to leave us alone. Then are we asking how to describe possibility and potential?

I do not describe; I create opportunities for them to self-realize. This must then be how they emerge naturally, sincerely. It is not by force. It is not done by pouring theory into it, by dressing things up as such. I desire them to relay to us some things as living beings, with sincerity. Having said that, it is not appropriate for an artist to define these things in this way; the viewer should make the final decision.

How closely are you affiliated with the artistic production that emerged from Istanbul in the last thirty years? Are we on the right track with the schools, fairs, juries or is all this just an illusion?

But this could be about the artists. It does not matter who the institutions are. I always give this example: At one point in the Soviet Union, many artists including Ilya Kabakov were working underground. And the KGB was always after them. However, these people found a way to make art. They did not have art institutions. So one should not link everything to the absence or deformation of institutions.