

Füsun Onur
Once upon a time...



La Biennale di Venezia

59. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali



Fusun Onur
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59th International Art Exhibition
La Biennale di Venezia
Pavilion of Turkey

Curator: Bige Örer



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BIGE ÖRER

You've worked with Füsun Onur on multiple occasions and you have an ongoing dialogue with her. When did you first encounter her work?

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV

Harald Szeemann was the first to tell me about her work, when I was in Australia, working on the Sydney Biennale. The first piece I saw was this sculpture [*Dual Sculpture*, 1970] in the corner of a room in Fulya Erdemci's exhibition, *Modern and Beyond*, at santralistanbul in 2007. And then I saw her work again at the 12th Istanbul Biennial curated by Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa. That was a beautiful biennale; it was wonderful. On that occasion, I asked you if I could visit Füsun – I was already working on DOCUMENTA (13). I remember a very long car ride. And the strongest impression I had when she opened the door of her house, was that instead of it opening into an indoor space, it opened into the Bosphorus. So it was almost like a psychological shift of expectation, because suddenly I was overwhelmed by the sound of the Bosphorus, and the light and the shadows of the waves of the Bosphorus on the walls. The entire house gave me the feeling of going through a layer of ghosts or a portal to another world. And that other world was neither an indoor world nor an outdoor world.

I think it was this feeling of going from the street directly into the Bosphorus, and the sense that the habitable living space didn't have the thickness of a house but was just like a thin film, that turned into the piece of art that we ended up making together for the 14th Istanbul Biennial in 2015. She made the work, of course, but when working together with artists, the piece emerges through the conversation.

BÖ

What do you remember about this work, *Deniz (Sea)* (2015)?

CCB

It was a little white fisherman's boat with speakers that went back and forth on the Bosphorus. People would barely see it – they had to look for it – but it was a surreal experience because there was sound coming from the speakers.

I remember the photos of some of her earliest works on the Bosphorus. They looked like doors, architectural

pieces that you could walk through, or at least she was photographed walking through them, with her long hair and flowery dress. I imagine her as this beautiful young woman in the hippie generation, but when I met her – and her sister, İlhan of course – she was an old lady. And it was kind of scary, because to see two older women in a house full of objects and photographs that are the memories of a past world makes you feel that you could be in a dangerous space – somehow sweet on the outside and dark on the inside. Especially when you see all the little dolls and toys, because they remind that these two women were once children. They've grown into adults, but Füsün still has complete access to her life as a child. It's as if the parents died and the children took over the space. And that's a typical movie trope. So from a psycho-analytical perspective, visiting her in her house and studio is interesting. The studio is downstairs, but more or less everything in the house is a kind of a *gesamtkunstwerk*. So I suppose the most important artwork will ultimately be the house itself in fifty years' time. It should be turned into a foundation and kept exactly as it is, exactly where it is.

BÖ

It's actually been donated to Arter, who will turn it into a museum house and a guesthouse for artists.

CCB

That's wonderful news! It's going to be one of the most special places to go in Istanbul in fifty or a hundred years. It does have this disquieting effect: a combination of joy and possible catastrophe. This reminds me of work she made, *Pink Boat* (2014), the video of these little inflated boats that look like swimming-pool toys. It was a piece made on the occasion of a protest about a bridge that was supposed to be demolished I guess.

BÖ

Yes, it was a proposal for an outdoor work to protest the demolition of the Galata Bridge in 1993. And she wasn't able to realise it at that time. So, many years later, for her exhibition at Arter, the project was produced as a video work in front of the house in Kuzguncuk.

CCB

Right, and I saw that exhibition. I was working on the Istanbul Biennial at that time. So in that video, when you see these boats, you think of childhood and toys at the beach, but there are no children: it's just the water and the boats. It could be the scene after a catastrophe, or it could be a world where there are no children. So there's always something on the edge, something between the lightness and the joy of childhood and a disquieting feeling.

I have the sense that Füsün has this very keen intelligence, which she doesn't always express in words, but you can see it in her eyes, in the way she looks at you, and listens to you. That's a very feminist quality: to have this hidden power that you don't always release. And I don't know if it's true, but I can imagine her being very precise in cutting away things that are just baggage, and not worthwhile.

BO

And what was it like working with her on your historical dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition? She participated with an existing work *Untitled: the chair with a chain* and her name on it, which was produced for the first time in 1993, and the new commission *Dance of the Crows* (2012). You also published her artist's book on this occasion. How was working with an artist who doesn't use a computer, or have a mobile phone, and whom you always need to visit in person? And what was it about her work that resonated with you?

CCB

The chair work was very important. That's why I invited her. It had a lot to do with a sense of trauma that was part of the subject matter in the Neue Galerie in Kassel, where her work was shown. For the new work, she was interested in the birds that were flying around the Neue Galerie outside. There are a lot of birds in the Bosphorus as well. She ended up making an embroidered curtain where there were these symbols and images of birds flying and a kind of pictogram alphabet. And the birds are migratory, so you could imagine that the birds at the Neue Galerie would fly to Istanbul in certain seasons of the year. Ultimately, they become little marks, like turning a sketch or something you see through the window outside into a very primitive early human language. What she did was to somehow bring the viewer's attention, not to the space in the Neue Galerie, but to the outside: the whole Neue Galerie becomes a film or a curtain that directs you to look outdoors. Artworks that are portals, doors or windows, towards the outside world are constants in her work.

Like you say, she doesn't look for the latest technology or means of production. Her work is very sophisticated, but she's always used elementary materials and simple gestures, like this embroidery, and it makes me think of a kind of feminist Arte Povera, like what Marisa Merz was doing in the 1960s and 1970s, for example. They didn't know each other, but they were working at the same time: Marisa Merz in Turin and Füsün in Turkey. I would place her in a feminist tradition, but I don't think that her work relates so much to someone like Carol Rama, who was also working

in the 1970s in Italy, because she had a very strong idea of the frame of work and of the finished nature of the work, whereas Merz was less traditional and used any means or materials, and did a lot of weaving with copper threads. I think of Füsun's embroideries or spatial works in relation to this. So being an Italian and a so-called expert on Arte Povera [laughs], that gave me a form of situated knowledge which allowed me to understand Füsun's work, even though it has another history to it, which is a refusal of minimalism and the surrealist origin. So that could be something that made me connect with her and invite her to participate in DOCUMENTA (13), which was wonderful. And yes, we did make a book on that occasion which was like a scrapbook of the books that her sister kept of newspaper clippings and personal photographs. Her sister was the archival part of this, let's say, dual personality. There's one part, which is archiving, and then there's the other part, which is playing. And so, the archiving part became a book. I think it was the first monograph, wasn't it?

BÖ

Margrit Brehm has worked on a book in 2001 on the occasion of her exhibition in Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and it was translated and published in 2007 in Istanbul with the title *For Careful Eyes*, but I think yours was the first time that the albums were published in that way.

CCB

Yes, it was the first publication of the albums, which are, if you think about it, like the house. The house contains this compilation of all the objects, and the albums contain a compilation of all the archival materials. So it's a little archive within a larger archive. You could say that the album is a book about her work, so you don't need to make another book; you just need to copy, scan and publish that book. That was the basis of that DOCUMENTA (13) book, which I really like.

BÖ

Apart from Arte Povera, how would you contextualise Füsun's practice in global art histories, starting from the 1960s and coming to our day?

CCB

Well, there is no global art history anymore. Art history is a discipline that's in crisis, and it's only existed since the history of photography in late 1800s, since this allowed people to compare styles of sculptures and paintings and really study the works. Before, there was the story of the lives of the artists and there was the story of the techniques or materials of art, and so on. But this very modern

discipline or field that we call art history has been dramatically re-written with globalisation and the start of multiculturalism and the postcolonial studies in the 1980s, which then developed into anti-colonial studies in the 1980s, 1990s. What has happened is that there's no global art history, but a lot of regional art histories have been written. There's a multitude of those. So I don't know how one could say where Füsün's work lies in a global art history, even if it did exist.

Her work resonated with me when thinking about women who, around the world, started to work with materials and techniques that recall domestic labour. There are examples all over Europe, and the US, and there have been many exhibitions about feminism and the use of fabric, for example. But it's mainly a tendency from the 1980s. So I guess you could say that Füsün's work enters into that tendency of women, as well as other marginalised communities of artists, doing work that uses the techniques of daily life, which goes back to radical practices in the 1960s. There were also male artists, like Luciano Fabro, who for the work *Pavimento, Tautologia* [Floor, Tautology] (1967) mopped and waxed an area of the floor and put newspaper on top of it to keep it clean. These works, either by men or women, that celebrate daily, domestic labour as a technique for art, was part of a rejection of the parameters of academic and high art. So her work certainly enters into that. And then there's the inflection of locality into abstraction of minimalism, I mean her practice in minimalism in making architectural things is something that happens also in a post-minimalist context.

And again, generally speaking, it's a feminist strategy not to separate the public and the private. Like Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79). Most feminist artworks are based on the belief that your work as an artist is also grounded in your daily life and that it's a lie to separate the artwork from that daily life. This breaking of the boundary between public and private was a big theme on a theoretical level in the 1980s, influenced by feminist thinking. So all of this is expressed in Füsün's work, although she was working in a rather isolated way in Turkey and she wasn't part of the public discussion. Her work wasn't published in articles or books about such questions, because the art world is provincial. If you weren't in New York or London at a certain time when these feminist things were happening, if Griselda Pollock didn't know you, if the art critics and art historians like Linda Nochlin didn't know about your work, then how could they put it in the books? It's not out of

ill will, so I don't think it's necessary to accuse those feminist art historians of having excluded Füsun; I think it's just normal, because she was in a place that wasn't readily accessible. And even today, when you might think everything is accessible with the internet, it's not true, because we search for things that we know we want to search for. So I don't think it's possible to make some sort of objective art history and include people from all over the world. It's probably better to do regional art histories right now. I think that answers the question.

MONOGRAPH

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