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Özmen

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Introduction to the short history of Kurdish contemporary art with Şener Özmen

Şener Ozmen est un artiste des nouveaux médias, écrivain, éditeur et traducteur Kurde vivant à Wilmette, dans l'Illinois, aux États-Unis. Il a été à la fois acteur des pratiques artistiques contemporaines dissidentes qui se sont développées à Istanbul après les années 1990, puis à Diyarbakir dans les années 2000 – ville où il a vécu et créé –, et l'un des critiques d'art qui a rendu compte de cette évolution à travers des expositions thématiques et des artistes (en particulier kurdes). Ses articles sur l'identité kurde, le nationalisme, le militarisme, le sexisme, la production artistique et littéraire dans les zones de guerre et de conflit, la migration et les problèmes de traumatisme post-migratoire, rédigés dans un style unique, ont été publiés dans des magazines d'art et des journaux. Il a également publié deux livres sur ces sujets, ainsi que des textes de catalogue. Les courts métrages et les œuvres vidéo d'Özmen ont été présentés dans les musées d'art contemporain les plus prestigieux du monde et dans le cadre d'expositions collectives. En 2016, il a été membre du jury du concours Love & Change Film Competition à l'if Istanbul (Festival international du film indépendant d'Istanbul) aux côtés du réalisateur de documentaires et scénariste Adam Curtis (Royaume-Uni) et de la productrice de documentaires Philippa Kowarsky (Israël). Özmen a remporté le Prix Meuly (Hoch Hinaus, Kunstmuseum Thun, Suisse) en 2005 et a organisé de nombreuses expositions ainsi que des expositions individuelles. Il est également un écrivain kurde publiant certains romans comme Istanbul Guide, Apriori Tour Guides (Istanbul With All Its Conventioanl Destruction), Internatioanl Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2005 ; Travma ve Islahat (Trauma and Restructure, Readings on The Contemporary Art), Lîs Editions, 2007 ; Rojnivîska Spinoza (Le Journal de Spinoza), Lîs Editions, 2008 ; Pêşbaziya Çîrokên Neqediyayî (Le Combat des histoires incompetentes), Lîs Editions, 2010 ; Gramera Bêhîzûr (La grammaire agitée), Lîs Editions, 2014 ; Xeyb (L'invisible) Lis Editions, 2017 ; Qiseyên Xerîbiyê (Histoires de contrées lointaines), Éditions Lîs, 2019 ; Cemîlê Nîgarkêş û Heft Qambihostên Dewletê (Cemil le peintre et les sept nains de l'État), Éditions Avesta, 2020 ; Kurê dêlê (Fils de pute), Éditions Avesta, 2022, etc.

Engin Sustam: *I think we met at the end of the 1990s. It's the memory of Kurdish contemporary art that began in the biennials or the gallery exhibitions in Istanbul and then on a global scale. Then, of course, important artists of Kurdish contemporary art, first in Iraqi Kurdistan and then in the Western diaspora, were included in international exhibitions, biennials, archives and catalogues... I think my thesis (Kurdish Subaltern Culture And Contemporary Art In Türkiye) covered this claim. There is a reason why I did this with you, because you are part of one of the first generations of Kurdish contemporary artists. As of the 1990s, your works were much discussed alongside the works of first-generation artists like Timur Celik, Mahmut Celayir, Walid Siti, Hiwa K., Mehtap Baydu and Jujin's 'Serê Mehê' (Month's Head or Menstrual period, performed in 1998 during 'Youth Event' exhibition), etc. The next generation of the 2000's Ahmet Ögüt, Erkan Özgen, Cengiz Tekin, Fikret Atay, Berat Işık, Sherko Abbas, etc.: Untitled (1996), Road to Tate Modern (2003), Blood Sweeter Than Honey (2004), etc. Again, it comes to my mind, I got to know you through your installation as part of the Youth Action II exhibition curated by Ali Akay, Özdemir Altan, Canan Beykal, Balkan Naci İslimyeli. There, you produced with Halil Altindere the work 'Untitled' in 1996 at Istanbul Tüyap. I think this installation about the burnt villages in Kurdistan has been the subject of a lawsuit. The years when social trauma turned into video or photography works... Now I would like to ask you, perhaps in the form of a question-conversation, could you tell us about the young Kurdish artists of that period of war conflict, their / your work, the political-cultural atmosphere of the period in Türkiye? With this question, I would like to look at the memory of Kurdish contemporary art in Türkiye, Iraq, Iran and the diaspora (In Syria only after the Rojava revolution in 2012)?*

Şener Özmen : After an excessively long introduction to a brief history, I understand that I will approach the issue from a linear perspective. For example, I can start by stating that none of the approaches valid for «Turkish contemporary art,»¹ which its actors have no hesitation in using, can be adapted to Kurdish contemporary art — for this, it is sufficient to look at the artistic practices of the artists from the two nations. Kurdish artists must abandon the idea of writing a shared history with the artists of a nation that, for years — almost without interruption — has worked to destroy not only their history, language, culture, and nature but also the very existence of the Kurdish people who created themselves (this is something we will later discuss). Firstly, even if they

¹ *What does Turkish Contemporary Art mean? Doesn't this definition, which we often encounter in English articles, mean the contemporary art of a nation? In other words, it has a very clear racial emphasis, doesn't it? Then why is the concept of "Turkish contemporary art" circulating in the Turkish art scene?*

were to write such a shared history, it would not be a history that Kurdish artists could take pride in before humanity; it would neither be their history nor their memory! Although Turkish artists, contemporary or otherwise, produce critical or questioning works, frequently emphasizing activism through art, revolution through art, change through art, healing through art, empathy, unity, coexistence, and even collaborative production through art, the continuity of the colonial regime in Kurdistan and the preservation of the nation-state's survival remain somewhere in their minds as underlying issues.

In 2015, the expanded new version of *User's Manual* prepared by Halil Altındere and Süreyya Evren was published: *User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary Art in Turkey / 1975–2015*. As you know, the first edition historically focused on the years 1986–2006, whereas the second edition extended both further back (to 1975) and temporally forward (to 2015). Alongside texts by many curators and art writers you are well familiar with—such as Nilgün Özeyten, Ali Akay, Ahu Antmen, Marcus Graf, Beral Madra, Vasıf Kortun, Fulya Erdemci, René Block, Charles Esche, Hou Hanru, Derya Yücel, November Paynter, and Osman Erden—there was also an interview titled *Knowing the Value of Life on the Planet*² conducted by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the curator of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, with Halil Altındere and Süreyya Evren. At the beginning of the interview, Christov-Bakargiev noted that most of what she knew about Turkish art was based on the Istanbul Biennials. However, more intricate matters were also discussed—topics that many of the aforementioned curators and writers had not addressed in the guide. These included issues surrounding «Turkish art,» as well as the decentralization and localization of Turkish art in tandem with globalization. In Bakargiev's words, «(...) *Before 1995, art was art; before that, no one called Sarkis Turkish. They didn't call him French either; nor did they label Arte Povera as Italian. When you go to Turkey, you see both international art and a scene from Turkey. There is both Turkish art and art that is not Turkish.*»³ Bakargiev also mentions Kutluğ Ataman, one of the first artists she encountered, noting that he invented local-global art. Of course, she does not forget Can Altay, and with an almost medium-like tone, she claims to see politics in his works (involving entirely Kurdish paper collectors, as well as the city). She suggests that Turkey's struggle for EU membership (in her words) «brought Kurdish artists to light» [one could also say it was like a chemical reaction], asserting that Kurdish artists gained prominence during this period. She concludes this discussion (in reality, Bakargiev neither knows nor cares about anything related to the Kurds or their artists) by stating

² *Istanbul Biennials and Appreciating Life on the Planet*, Interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Halil Altındere & Süreyya Evren. Translated from English: Savaş Kılıç. (pp.201-205).

³ Abbr. p. 202.

that Turkey (and Turkish contemporary art) faced a new test during the era of René Block's and Rosa Martinez's non-authoritarian biennials, under the guise of plurality, multiculturalism, diversity, and democracy. This test involved "not only Turkish but also Kurdish" artists (see Bakargiev). It is at this point that the subject of Kurdish artists from Diyarbakır arises, with references to more videos and more politics.

Engin Sustam : *I think you're drawing up a historical and archival map here. In decolonial practical terms, how did these 'identity-based' references manifest themselves at exhibitions or biennials, for example in artistic collaborations between Turkish and Kurdish artists? Could you tell us about the exchanges between artists, or how the curators approached you – in other words, why they chose you or your works?*

Şener Özmen: This is a very important question, particularly in terms of understanding why the thoughts and approaches of Turkish artists and Turkish curators toward what might be called "Kurdish-becoming" later began to change—especially in relation to Istanbul, where transformation and change had already begun to gain significant momentum in the 1990s. Indeed, it is also possible to say that this shift created a new "trauma" for a significant segment of the Istanbul-centered Turkish contemporary art milieu.

The conceptualist generation of Turkey in the 1980s—described by Vasıf Kortun as a generation that was dour, disciplined, conservative, stubborn, and elitist, one that suspended the social and political realities and the empirical conditions of the geography in which it existed, and persistently rendered their reading irrelevant (see Ofsayt Ama Gol, Vasıf Kortun & Erden Kosova)—did not see the Kurdish question. In the 1990s, however, Turkish artists attempted to live with the suspicion that Kurds might constitute a separate nation. Their knowledge of Kurds was largely limited to the PKK and to attacks on border outposts; consequently, they did not know the Kurds prior to the PKK. Their understanding of Kurdish struggles was often mediated through their "Kemalist-nationalist" fathers and mothers; in many of their families there was almost certainly a high-ranking officer or a pasha.

Yet, as I said, Istanbul was changing. Something called collective work had begun to emerge. International exhibitions, visiting artist programs, collective production, workshops, and courses in contemporary art had begun to consider more seriously how interaction among artists—such as those you mentioned—might be expanded without confining it within the framework of "identity" or condemning it to identity alone. This process also demonstrated how relations

with Europe could be established through contemporary art, rather than by, as their Ottoman ancestors once did, laying siege to the gates of Vienna.

At the 1997 Istanbul Biennial, curated by Rosa Martínez, Halil Altındere presented his installation *Dancing with Taboo(s)*. It was truly subversive. Throughout the processes of producing and exhibiting identities, I was always in Istanbul, alongside Halil. *Dancing with Taboo(s)* was an iconic work; it could just as easily have been read as *Dancing with Kurds*. Because artists produced their work under the close scrutiny of curators, I can say that the perception of Kurdish artists was largely shaped by the approaches of the curators of the time.

There was also a certain Europeanism at play. Kurdish artists, through contemporary art, found at least a partial opportunity to step outside the spiral of violence in Kurdistan, and they often became local heroes who guided visitors through bazaars and markets. This, in fact, has never changed.

As for myself and my works: the installation that Halil Altındere and I produced in 1996 was exhibited in the *Homeland / Deterritorialization* exhibition of Young Activities II. In 1999, I participated in the exhibition *A Special Day*, curated by Vasıf Kortun, with *Schizo-Notebook* (Diyarbakır, 1998). I had not expected that a handmade notebook would attract such attention. What I wrote and drew in *Schizo-Notebook* established connections with the issues of language and colonialism—through words, references, and imagined conceptual islets—and with the female body, Kurdistan, Diyarbakır, the room, the artist, the writer, Kurdish literature, holes, and blind windows. It was the product of a schizoid approach; in fact, the approach of Turkish curators was itself schizoid.

Although the section on Kurdish artists lacks the depth to develop a robust argument, it still provides sufficient data for discussions about their entry into Istanbul, subsequently into Istanbul Biennials and Western Europe, within an art-historical (and, of course, socio-cultural) framework. In other words, as you mentioned at the beginning of your question, borrowing Bakhtin's concept of *chronotopes* (time-spaces), we cannot discuss either the presence of Kurdish artists in Turkish contemporary art or the effects of Turkish contemporary art on Kurdish contemporary art without examining the interconnected political and cultural processes. Of course, there's this situation: if we are going to talk about contemporary art in Turkey in the 1990s, we need to address it together with the actors of the '90s (those who wielded a pen or only produced art). That means considering the 'Istanbul' exhibitions of Vasıf Kortun, a «authorial» curator, and art writer Erden Kosova, who was part of the same cluster and sought

to conceptualize the productions of the era in political terms. It was during this time that the notion of the “Istanbul Miracle” emerged. In his conversation with Erden Kosova, Kortun stated that in the 1990s, focal points like the “Albanian Miracle,” the “Northern Miracle,” and the “Beirut Miracle” had formed.⁴

Kosova rightfully asks what dynamics might have triggered these miracle-seeing efforts. The “Diyarbakır Miracle”⁵ (a term coined by Vasıf Kortun, Ş.Ö.) came later, with my handmade *Schizo-Notebook*⁶ produced in Diyarbakır in 1998. That was when I was trying to escape Çukurova University (henceforth referred to as Ç.Ü., note by author) and participated in *Genç Etkinlik-2*⁷ in 1996 with the theme “*Homeland-Deterritorialization*,” alongside Halil Altındere from the same department. At the time, there was no Diyarbakır in my life, and I didn’t even know if I would ever return there. Our discursive sphere of influence stretched from Adana (where we were studying) and Mersin (where Halil’s family lived, and where we enjoyed creating controversy by disrupting exhibitions of academic painters clustered there) to Istanbul. Halil frequently traveled to Istanbul and eventually settled there. I sometimes accompanied him on these escapes, trying to survive both in life and in art. I recall that in my early university years (when Halil wasn’t around), our department attended the second Istanbul Biennial (I missed the first one since I started at Ç.Ü.’s Fine Arts Education Department in 1988).

At that time, the concept of curatorship had not yet been established, and Beral Madra worked as the “General Coordinator” of the first two biennials. No matter how you look at it, the 1989 Istanbul Biennial, titled *Contemporary Art in Traditional Environments*, and what we saw in those venues deeply influenced us young art students. We mostly encountered examples of Turkish contemporary painting, but it was also possible to see artists like Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Daniel Buren, Jannis Kounellis, Ayşe Erkmen, Gülsün Karamustafa, and Erdağ Aksel. At the 2nd Istanbul Biennial, Vasıf Kortun was Beral Madra’s assistant, Sezer Tansuğ was on the advisory board, and Asil Nadir was on the sponsor list. In a press release written before the first biennial, Madra

⁴ Introduction, *Offside But Goal*, Vasıf Kortun & Erden Kosova, 2014 SALT/Garanti Kültür AŞ (Istanbul).

⁵ *Offside But Goal*, p. 86.

⁶ On the “Diyarbakır miracle” front is Özmen, whose first plastic narrative, the schizoid notebook (*Schizo-Defter*, 1998), depicts an ironic “normalization”. In this work, we see a Diyarbakır that welcomes the artists pouring in from the West with extravagant pomp. Among them, we see a Kurdish youth in a state of shock as his existence is shattered and destroyed. -erotic imagination and its repression. This is also a story of individual and social loss. Vasıf Kortun, *Offside But Goal*, p.86.

⁷ AIAP Youth Action-2 (1996), *Territory-deterritorialisation*, TÜYAP, Istanbul.

stated that the new economic restructuring (referred to as a breaking point for the modernist culture and art system) was seen as an opportunity for those wishing to enter the circulation of both national and international art markets.⁸

As a generation, I had no connection to Istanbul-based exhibitions that nourished contemporary art, like *New Tendencies*, *Istanbul Exhibitions of Today's Artists*, or *A, B, C, D: A Slice of Avant-Garde Turkish Art*. The exhibitions I participated in, which I believe nurtured the contemporary art scene of the 1990s, were the *Youth Activities* series, followed by *Today's Artists Istanbul Exhibitions*. To list them: *Youth Activity-2* in 1996, *Today's Artists Istanbul Exhibition* in 1997, *Youth Activity-3* in 1997, and of course, the *A Special Day* exhibition in 1999, where *Schizo-Notebook* was exhibited. Those exhibitions had a new spirit—pluralistic rather than hierarchical. The Istanbul Biennial was the pinnacle of this. Before we get to the 9th Istanbul Biennial in 2005 (curated by Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche), during this period after *Schizo-Notebook*, my new work, which I called *Plastic Narrative*, became *Istanbul Guide*. Kortun's exhibitions, however, continued to pave the way for Diyarbakır-based themes: *Young Activity-3* in Ankara (2000, at the Ankara Contemporary Arts Center), *Revisit* at Proje 4L (2001), and my first international participation, *Short Stories* (2001, La Fabbrica del Vapore, Milan, Italy), curated by Roberto Pinto and Vasif Kortun. All these exhibitions were linked to the path that began with *Schizo-Notebook* in Diyarbakır. While I thought I was in a safe place, I was detained at the Diyarbakır Police Department when I went to apply for a passport. *The Story of Tracey Emin* (2000) emerged during such a time.

But I didn't know either Mahmut Celayir or Timur Çelik (I admit, we were conditioned against painting, and I believe there were some justifiable reasons for this). The only Kurdish artist I knew at the time was Halil Altındere. Both of us came from the same department, and we were both from Mardin. Istanbul-centered contemporary art seemed to consider this sufficient in terms of numbers and representation, and for a long time, it appeared to remain so. Halil was one of the participants in Rosa Martinez's 5th Istanbul Biennial in 1997. His magnificent six-piece series *Dancing with Taboos* was exhibited at Darphane-i Amire. During that time, I was also in Istanbul, and we were sharing the same house—or rather, I had moved in with Halil. I became a member of DAGS (Interdisciplinary Young Artists Association) in Urban. It was the first—and perhaps only—artists' organization of the 1990s, established in 1996. Together with Halil, we carried posters designed by Vahit Tuna and went from wall to wall. I still remember Alican Yaraş, Nadi Güler, Fulya Köseoğlu (Bilge), Hakan

⁸ Beral Madra's Curatorial Practices and Her Contribution to the Turkish Art Scene, Yıldız Öztürk, *Yedi Journal*, Issue: 17, Winter 2017.

Onur, Mürteza Fidan, Didem Dayı, Genco Gülan, Elif Çelebi, İnsel İnal, and Funda Peşken. I also want to add that I met Hiwa K. thanks to Vasıf Kortun. We sat at a café on the slope of *Platform Contemporary Art Center* (now SALT Beyoğlu). He spoke in Sorani, and I spoke in Kurmancî, discussing contemporary art and Kurds.

Returning to *Dancing with Taboos* (and we must), Halil's "identity" breakthrough was most prominently linked to the Kurdish issue via Western European art media (what else could they say?). It was interpreted as a sharp critique of the bans (on language, rituals), the mechanisms of oppression, and the ongoing militaristic policies in Kurdistan. However, this style of interpretation and approach was not presented—or perhaps not even considered—for the works of Şenol Yoroğlu (whom Osman Kavala had introduced us to; Yoroğlu had come to Diyarbakır during a scorching August, and we met and talked), Mahmut Celayir, or Timur Çelik, despite their being older than us. It was as if they were invisible; there were other aspects of their work that stood out more than their Kurdishness. We had no knowledge of Walid Siti either. Kurdish artists who had migrated to Europe likely had better chances of meeting artists who had emigrated from other parts of Kurdistan. For example, the artists you call the "First Generation" (though I won't use that terminology) were individuals I met much later. I encountered Timur at the *Fiktion Okzident*⁹ (Istanbul, 2011) exhibition, and I met Mahmut Celayir at the *Bêwelat – The Unexpected Storytellers*¹⁰ (Berlin, 2021) exhibition, which was your initiative. The former was a curatorial encounter, while the latter was more related to "being Kurdish" and being an artist. We never came together at any other exhibitions. Working with different mediums and thought structures might have played a role. Perhaps this first section should have been titled "Diyarbakır." When I graduated and returned to Diyarbakır, after a few years, Cengiz Tekin and Erkan Özgen—who had also been through the Ç.Ü. process—requested transfers from Mardin to Diyarbakır. In my final days in Adana (after Halil had left), those two artists were always around. They seemed more determined to continue creating art than anyone else, and that's how it turned out.

In 2001, we organized the *Art and the City*¹¹ exhibition at the State Fine Arts Gallery in Dağkapı, Diyarbakır. Erkan Özgen, Cengiz Tekin, Berat Işık—whom we had met in Diyarbakır—Murat Gök, and Erdoğan Kaplan from Istanbul participated. I conceptualized the framework and wrote an article about the exhi-

⁹ https://www.adk.de/de/programm/index.htm?we_objectID=31033

¹⁰ <https://archiv.ngbk.de/en/projekte/be-welat-unexpected-storytellers/>

¹¹ «Cefakâr Doğu» or «Welcome To Diyarbakır,» *Seductive Narratives*, Şener Özmen, Lis Publishing, 2016.

bition and the participating artists for *Artist Skala*, the sexiest and most expensive art magazine published by Bedri Baykam. The Diyarbakır art scene, with all its settings and actors, completely changed with the 2003 exhibition *Seni Öldüreceğim İçin Çok Üzgünüm*¹². This highly “controversial” exhibition was criticized from various fronts by Ahu Antmen, Erden Kosova, and Vasıf Kortun. The focus was less on the heavy participation of Kurdish artists and more on the subjects they addressed. From Diyarbakır, Erkan Özgen, Cengiz Tekin, and I participated in René Block’s *In den Schluchten des Balkan (In the Gorges of the Balkans)*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 2003) exhibition. The so-called “Diyarbakır Miracle,” as Kortun put it, or the “Diyarbakır School,” as art writer Ayşegül Sönmez later dubbed it, appeared to start producing anti-colonial works out of Diyarbakır’s harsh climate. My path crossed with Ali Akay again at this time. However, I had first met him at an exhibition by Ali Can Yavaş in Istanbul. Back in Adana (while waiting to graduate), I had told him how much I admired his writings and thoughts on contemporary art. As for Jûjîn—since you brought it up—Halil Altındere’s mistranslation gave it the name. Without consulting me, he named Jûjîn’s performance *Serê Mehê*¹³ (*Month’s Head*), which was a literal translation of the Turkish word *aybaşı* (menstruation). Subsequently, this mistranslation persisted in almost all texts and academic or semi-academic studies on performance art in Turkey. No one noticed. The duality in Jûjîn’s name was the only marker emphasizing Kurdish female identity in that performance. Yet, it was mistranslated. While it should have been *kirpiyaşam* (*hedgheg-life*), it became *kirpikadın* (*hedgheg-woman*). Not that I’m criticizing anyone, but at the time, Kurmancî still held an exotic charm in the Istanbul-centered contemporary art scene (I was writing novels and stories in the Kurmancî dialect). Menstruation, too, undoubtedly carried such exoticism. Jûjîn’s blood also inspired Kurdish female artists who didn’t even know her. We knew that Zehra Doğan used menstrual blood¹⁴ in her drawings while she was in prison. How long is art’s memory? Thirty years? Twenty years? Or Ten years?

Engin Sustam : *So, your answer is quite long and gives the perspective of an artist from the artistic space of the dominant culture. So, I’ll move on to another question. As in the 90s, in all Kurdish spaces, some emblematic works of art created by Kurdish artists are ironical and cynical works (not only in contemporary art, of course, but also in cinema, theatre, music, etc.) based on an anti-colonial political stance / image with feelings for territory, micro-identity and national belonging, which precede memories of conflict, war, social trauma,*

¹² <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/9596>

¹³ In fact, it was ‘*mehik*’ (menstruation).

¹⁴ <https://www.5harfliler.com/carsaf-kahve-regl-kani-sistemi-alt-ust-eden-isler/>

violence, political repression, racial domination and of course the militarisation of all Kurdish spaces (evacuation and burning villages, of course the vehicle for disappearances, unsolved murders is the famous Beyaz Toros¹⁵ police special team car). As Didi-Huberman aptly puts it: “The historical mark of images does not only indicate that they belong to a specific era, it indicates above all that they only become legible at a specific era.” I would like to know your opinion: what is the state of Kurdish artistic endeavours or the general content of Kurdish contemporary art today? Have we entered a decolonial period, or are Kurds still being fed with the same images of the 90s? I also wonder if within Kurdish spaces, is art instrumentalized by the struggle for political and identity emancipation or is there space for the creation of singular perspectives?

Şener Özmen : Heinrich Leutemann’s 19th-century lithograph “Obstruction of a Road Survey in Singapore” depicts a real event: a colonial researcher, G.D. Coleman, and a group of Indian convict laborers building a new road in the jungle in 1835, were attacked by a tiger. The encounter portrayed in Leutemann’s lithograph (which also served as the conceptual starting point for *Encounter or Good Morning Monsieur Courbet*, a video Cengiz Tekin and I produced in 2004) signals the beginning of an ecological turmoil that would lead to the extermination of Malayan tigers—an extinction that became a symbol of colonial power. In an article titled “*A Savage Experience in Adana*”,¹⁶ sociologist-curator Ali Akay, reflecting on a student exhibition held at Çukurova University’s Yapı Kredi Art Gallery, evaluated exhibitions outside Istanbul through the lens of «savagery» and «experience.» His words reminded me of the instinctive reaction of Malayan tigers to outsiders who did not approach with good intentions.

Another essay in Akay’s book is titled “*Anatolian Tigers and the East*”¹⁷, in which he offers a notable comment: “*Nonetheless, an emerging movement last year is also making itself felt this year; just as with the ‘Anatolian Tigers,’ the art scene seems to be experiencing a Southeast Turkey boom. Artists from the Southeast, in particular, are bringing the issues of their regions into the exhibition halls. Sociologically, we are facing a highly interesting phenomenon in the TŪYAP exhibition.*”¹⁸ The significance and position of artists introducing

¹⁵ A Renault brand white car, known as “White Toros”, was used by JİTEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism) to kidnap and kill the people, has become the symbol of the ‘90s in the Kurdish collective memory.

¹⁶ *Sanatın Sosyolojik Gözü* (The Sociological Eye of Art), Ali Akay, Baglam Publications, October 1999.

¹⁷ *Youth Action* (1995-1998) / *Anatolian Tigers and the East, The Sociological Eye of Art*, Ali Akay, Baglam Publishing, October 1999.

¹⁸ Abbr. p. 64.

their regional (Kurdistan's) issues into exhibition spaces within the history of contemporary Turkish art have largely been shaped by the privileged gaze and evaluations of outsiders.

Engin Sustam : *Actually, now that we're on the subject, I think we should address the concept of 'Kurdish contemporary art'. I don't think that term was used in your generation back in the 1990s; people spoke of 'Kurdish artists', but I think we're going to start using 'Kurdish contemporary art' now, aren't we? In fact, I've already mentioned this in my recent articles.*

Şener Özmen : Yes, we need to raise this issue; you're right. We are well aware that terms like "Kurdish contemporary art" didn't exist in the 1990s. However, even in the 2000s and beyond, this term wasn't widely used, though Kurdish artists—here referring to those from Northern Kurdistan—developed more frequent relationships with the Turkish art scene (galleries, curators, museums, clusters, groups, collectives, art writers). The clustering of artists in Diyarbakır and later in Mardin, establishing collectives and venues through their own collaborative networks, belongs to the post-2000s. In Diyarbakır, Loading and Merkezkaç Art Collective, and in Mardin, Mişar Art—all emphasized their status as non-profit, independent spaces that did not rely on public or institutional structures. Beyond "memory," none of the other conceptualization tools—such as "conflict," "social trauma," "violence," "political oppression," or "racial domination of the white space"—interested these collectives. These topics also found no place in the funding ledgers of Istanbul-based grant institutions, nor were the aforementioned collectives political structures anyway. There's one more point to note: Diyarbakır's prominence in contemporary art (2003–2010) began to fade slightly with the inaugural Mardin Biennial in 2010. The arrest of Osman Kavala, the founder of the Diyarbakır Art Center, disrupted connections with the first generation of contemporary artists, resulting in the reduction of its impactful activities. The biennial's continuity pushed Diyarbakır to seek different strategies to maintain its central position. Despite initial dismissive attitudes, collaborations eventually developed, with Diyarbakır-based artists and those from Mardin participating in major art events. Initially visitors, these artists later became hosts and integral contributors.

There is, of course, another dimension to this. Unfortunately, a phenomenon cannot enter language unless it has first been conceptualized. Because we have never been able to come together around questions such as whether something called "Kurdish contemporary art" actually exists today, whether it exists at all, when the term began to be used, where it emerged, or even whether it truly emerged in the first place, we have not been able to discuss it properly.

Moreover, a number of rather peculiar Turkish and Kurdish artists appeared who felt deeply uncomfortable with being visible within the boundaries of such a conceptualization. In other words, certain generations confined their imaginary reflections to Kurdistan—Diyarbakır, Mardin, Batman—while presenting, through a discourse of “minority” or “minor-ness,” whatever stories they wished, often with great eagerness, to show in Istanbul. I describe this as spreading all their wounds and scars across time. Yet we have still not been able to discuss where these generations diverge from Şükran Moral’s performance *With Three Married Men* (2010), which she carried out in a village in Mardin. Moral’s performance was presented as a critique of the feudal Kurdish order. In fact, the web of honor codes, murders, forbidden relationships, customs, traditions, and tribal structures—so familiar from the popular television series set in Mardin—captivated not only a Turkish artist like Moral but also Kurdish artists themselves. This approach, which reads and perceives Kurdistan primarily through the framework of a tribal system, ultimately reveals a nationalist-leftist tendency that fails to recognize the Kurdish struggle for existence and, at the very least, sanctifies a colonial relationship.

In the 2000s, apart from Engin Sustam, who conceptualized the question of Kurds and contemporary art within the academic sphere (indeed the very field where we needed it most), we did not see anyone else doing so; and we still do not. As you know, your arrival in Diyarbakır came long after the readings we had been conducting through sociology and contemporary Kurdish literature. I remember that we discussed my work *Welcome to Diyarbakır*, which appeared in Ali Akay’s exhibition *The Power of Language I (Dilin Gücü I, Diyarbakır, 2003)*. It was, frankly, an absolutely terrible piece!

Returning to your question about interactions among artists: I can say that it was Ali Akay who brought us together. It was also Vasıf Kortun who introduced me to Hiwa K. We had a conversation along the lines of “sit down and come to an understanding.” We had coffee on the street where Platform Contemporary Art Center was located; he spoke in Soranî, I in Kurmanji, and we talked about contemporary art and the Kurds.

On that same street, in the same coffeehouse, we would also meet Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz. Zelal and I even attended Brener’s poetic performance. In the 1990s we did not even use the word “Kurdistan”—which, to me, felt like something more than just a word.

In 1995, Avesta Publishing was founded. Three books were published, and all three were banned. After the ban on speaking Kurdish was lifted in 1991, the

books, journals, and cassette recordings that began to appear one after another generated tremendous excitement.

In 2019, I held a talk at the İsmail Beşikçi Foundation's venue in Diyarbakır titled "*Does Kurdish Contemporary Art Exist?*"¹⁹ because the subject had not been addressed as a serious issue. Süreyya Evren, in an article for *Istanbul Art News* published in December 2014, focused on the Turkish translation of my first Kurdish novel *Rojnivîska Spinoza*.²⁰ Interestingly, the article bore the title "*There Is No Kurdish Contemporary Art*"²¹, and Evren noted the following: "The first artist who caught my attention, Şener Özmen, represents a subjectivity speaking from Diyarbakır toward the center. While the center might sometimes refer to global hubs, it is mostly Istanbul. Özmen, speaking from Diyarbakır to Istanbul, rarely addresses Diyarbakır itself, let alone broader Kurdistan. Yet in his novel, the writer Şener Özmen articulates a subjectivity that spans across greater Kurdistan."²²

At this juncture, we might pause to discuss the notion of "*speaking toward the center*", what it entails, and how it continues to function today. Despite sufficient conditions and a multicultural atmosphere, I had not held a solo exhibition in Diyarbakır. This discourse eventually transformed into a dialogue in 2001 when NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art) and the Garanti Contemporary Art Center initiated artist talks. Upon Vasıf Kortun's recommendation, I was their first speaker. The talk was titled "*Arts Flowing Toward the Center*". Almost a quarter of a century has passed, and I see that the core ideas shaping my work remain as relevant as ever. In summary, here's what I shared:

«Neither the *Schizo-Notebook*, nor Tracey Emin's *Story*, nor the artist's common sense from three days ago, nor the *Manifesta Murders* can be indicators of a historical stability. Perhaps it will be necessary to talk about the damage caused by an obsession—a rather long-standing obsession—that has been created in the artist's language. The thought, which I know is irrelevant but from which I can't seem to free myself: ART! ART as a design that my consciousness is stuck on, which I cannot escape, cannot correct! And ART as a deviation! This is the thought that forms the core of my work!»

Engin Sustam : *I wonder through which networks and intermediaries (mediation, relation, etc.), and above all in which location (Istanbul, Europe or Di-*

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62bwsXqeVns>

²⁰ <https://www.everestyayinlari.com/kitap/spinoza-nin-gunlugu-sener-ozmen/10472>

²¹ <https://surmetinler.blogspot.com/2014/12/bir-kurt-guncel-sanati-yokmus.html>

²² <https://surmetinler.blogspot.com/2014/12/bir-kurt-guncel-sanati-yokmus.html>

yarbakır), your works were circulated – in other words, were they shown through exhibitions, etc.?

Şener Özmen : A network is not woven by a single spider. If such a network exists—and this is what we call a “network”—it emerges as the product of a collective effort. However, there is also the concept of “articulation,” and it is a dangerous one. Were the Kurds articulated into an already existing system? Did they come into being as a continuation of Turkish contemporary art history? There are indeed art writers and critics who read the issue in precisely these terms.

I, however, am among those who think otherwise. My works have been exhibited—and continue to be exhibited—in various centers around the world, with the exception of Diyarbakır. If you ask why Diyarbakır is absent, I will certainly not be the one responsible for answering that question.

We were all producing to feed Istanbul; that was our main motivation, because there were no institutions, spaces, publications, or people to evaluate our productions, talk about them, archive them, or write about them. We had nothing! However, we could be transmitted—that was it. Kutluğ Ataman and Perihan Mağden had come to Diyarbakır, Ataman had spoken at the newly built Diyarbakır Municipality Guest House in the heart of Ofis, and there was no place to sit inside. After a long time, with the rise of violence in Kurdistan once again, he joined the ranks of those whose view of Kurds and Kurdish artists had radically changed, and he had said in a long interview with *İstanbul Art News* that he had been deprived of the fathers (René Block, Osman Kavala) of those living and producing in Diyarbakır. According to him, we were finished—our cause had started fast and ended just as quickly! In this context, other artists had also made remarks about the blockage of Diyarbakır-based artists.²³ However, the same René Block (and of course, the Koç family) had elevated Ataman to the top of Turkish contemporary art and supported him unconditionally. The fundamental argument behind these reactions and «racist» discourses was the paranoia that the West (that is, those who vowed to divide Turkey) was nourishing not only the Kurdish issue but also contemporary Kurdish art. It was also European (German) institutions and curators that had carried Turkish contemporary art abroad.²⁴ One of the controversial exhibitions was *Urban Realities*:

²³ Prominent artists such as Adnan Çoker, Kezban Arca Batıbeki, Mehmet Gülerüz, and Bedri Baykam began to fiercely criticize Kurdish artists based in Diyarbakır (*Author's note*).

²⁴ René Block, who made significant contributions to the international circulation of Turkish artists, invited many artists to exhibitions in Turkey through collaborations with Turkish curators while serving as the director of IFA in Germany in the early 1990s. The «İskele» exhibition, one

*Focus Istanbul*²⁵, organized by German curator Christoph Tannert in Berlin. The exhibition had divided Turkish curators and art collectives in two, with invited artists Joulia Strauss²⁶ exhibiting busts of Abdullah Öcalan and Leyla Zana facing opposite directions and attached to each other. The mainstream Turkish media, of course, had exploded, with *Hürriyet Avrupa* headlining «They've Dragged the Turks into the Scandal.» *Zaman* newspaper had conducted interviews with Turkish curators and artists, gathering their opinions. Fulya Erdemci, Mehmet Güleriyüz, and others were some of them. The Istanbul art scene was boiling, and a group, which included many well-known artists, had protested Tannert's exhibition and approach, even writing a declaration. The reaction had been harsh, and the crisis had escalated to the point of severing relationships with the artists from Turkey who participated in the exhibition but did not withdraw. Here, we could see the clash of two perspectives—those who subtly said that the withdrawals and reactions had nothing to do with the Kurdish issue (since Turkish curators had been working with Kurdish artists for a long time) and the Republican-Kemalist artists who claimed that the exhibition was planned to divide Turkey, leading to a renewed conflict (just like in the early days of the Istanbul Biennales).

Engin Sustam : *Could you tell us a bit about your work, for example 'Road to Tate Modern', which you created with Erkan Özgen and which springs to mind right now?*

Şener Özmen : I do not clearly remember when, or in which interviews, I stated that I am not an artist. I say that this is not important. As you know, *Road to Tate Modern* emerged in 2003. It was produced for Halil Altındere's exhibition *I Am Very Sorry Because I Am Going to Kill You*. Around the same time, *Supermuslim* also appeared. We used to gather at the Diyarbakır Art Center (DSM); it was our only center. A strong editing studio had been established there, and we would no longer have to edit on the rather low-performance PCs in our homes. We seemed to be suspended somewhere between Avid Media Composer and Adobe Premiere Pro. We were working with H8 cameras and buying MiniDV tapes. We had no budget; we were cutting back on household expenses to finance our work. If subtitles were needed, we would send the original tape to Istanbul to professional artists working in that field. *Road to Tate Modern* also went through these processes.

of the first exhibitions showcasing Turkish artists abroad, was also organized with René Block's efforts, under the curatorship of Beral Madra and Sabine Vogel in 1994. (See: User's Manual 2.0, Contemporary Art in Turkey 1975-2015, Halil Altındere, p. 36.

²⁵ <https://artmap.com/gropiusbau/exhibition/urban-realities-focus-istanbul-2005>

²⁶ <http://joulia-strauss.net/2005-urban-realities-fokus-istanbul-2/>

At that time, Erkan Özgen and I produced other videos as well; most of them were never edited (and consequently never exhibited). The idea was mine—I have said this before. Although some of the dialogues were spontaneous, we largely adhered to the main script. I enjoyed producing collaborative works. I did not want to create an aura around a single name. Tate Modern was the center of the center of the center. I was not trying to reach it; rather, I wanted to reveal the absurdity of the very attempt to reach it. Centers have, of course, changed, yet the issue of being trapped within coloniality in Kurdistan has remained as a kind of falsehood. All those discourses opposing biennials, the critical approaches, the reflex to protect the city—they all lasted only until one was selected.

Engin Sustam: *If I remember correctly, the video also explored the issue of colonization by focusing on the center-periphery aspect (the city of Mardin, its mountains, you in a teacher's uniform, the distant landscape with the symbol of Tate Modern, etc.).*

Şener Özmen : Of course, there were also the debates generated by the exhibition *Modern and Beyond* (September 8, 2007 - February 29, 2009), designed as the opening exhibition for Santralistanbul. Curated by Fulya Erdemci, Semra Germaner, Orhan Koçak, and Zeynep Rona, this exhibition aimed to showcase the transformation process of artistic production in Turkey (the 50-year history from 1950-2000), bringing together works from over 100 artists and artist groups. In this exhibition, works such as *Road To Tate Modern* (2003) and my first productions *Plastik-Anlatı* were displayed, and some 'big' artists were uncomfortable with the distribution of the works across different floors, leading to a crisis over the priorities in the museum. In this context, it is also worth considering academic circles. Over time, as Kurdish artists began to become more visible internationally (in important exhibitions), concepts such as Kurdish identity, super-identity, and sub-identity started to become subjects of theses (contrary to Kurdish intellectuals and academic circles). For example, in Ceren Özpinar's doctoral thesis *Art History Writing in Turkey between 1970 and 2010* (June 2015) at Istanbul Technical University-Social Sciences Institute, the section titled "*4.4 Construction of Identities*" mainly focuses on the formation of Kurdish identity in contemporary art and references artists such as Halil Altındere, Şener Özmen, Erkan Özgen, Cengiz Tekin, and Berat Işık. Sometimes Kurdish identity is discussed alongside Armenian identity (another perspective of super-identity), with Sarkis often taking the forefront in canonization, as Turks are well aware of which minorities' voices they have permanently silenced. In this sense, Turkish artists (and curators) who comfortably work on the Armenian trace know that they are not in as intense a field as

the Kurds. At the time, I revisited a catalog essay by curator and art writer Fatoş Üstek, who wrote about Ayşe Erkmen's *J, K & H* installation created for the exhibition *The Second Exhibition* at Arter. Üstek also provides information about a hat shop in the Arter building from 1914-1920. Throughout the process, they reached Madame Katia (Katia Kiracı)²⁷, a hat designer from the Hazzopulo Passage, but nothing was said about Katia's roots. The hats came from the unknown and would soon be linked to 1915, which made the connection between the hats and the space, as well as the uniqueness of the moment of borrowing and encounter, more significant. Hermine Sedat is Ayşe Erkmen's grandmother, who had a haute couture dressmaking shop in the Simpatyan Apartment.²⁸ One of the triptychs in Cengiz Tekin's²⁹ 2004 photographic installation *Photography* depicts his murdered uncle and is related to the bloody course of recent Kurdish history. My *Shut Up!* piece from 2009 (it's strange for me to say this!) was used as a banner on the websites of organizations investigating unsolved murders and referenced the same bloody history (the dark actions of paramilitary groups in Kurdistan). Berat Işık's video *Karanlıkta Dans* (2003) looked at the historical presence of Kurds (and the Kurdish language) in Kurdistan, while Erkan Özgen's video *Adult Games* (2004) was connected to the process of terrorization of Kurdish children. How clearer could it be, I don't know. With *The Exit* (Şener Özmen, 2003), we were coming together in the normalization³⁰ exhibitions, as if things were really starting to normalize this time. As Kurdish artists, of course, we were mistaken, and this was not our first mistake.

Engin Sustam : *Can we say we have entered a decolonial period, or are the Kurds still being nourished by the same images of the 90s and 2000s?*

Şener Özmen : Kurds are not being nourished, yet they are not starving either; rather, they establish an oxymoronic relationship with contemporary art systems. We need to look at the image-production plantations of the 1990s and 2000s—especially the 2000s, since none of these figures existed in the 1990s. I had once mapped this out. In 2012, for the exhibition *Zero Tolerance* at Pilot Gallery, I designed and exhibited a newspaper under the same title. Since we can still speak of a historically unfinished process—Kurdish is still banned; a 16-year-old Kurdish youth from Cizre who attended Newroz wearing

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYPMTJkZlyM>

²⁸ *Second Exhibition* catalog, p. 16, Arter.

²⁹ See: *On Cengiz Tekin...* Şener Özmen, Loving Fictions, Lîs Publications, 2016. The article titled *On Cengiz Tekin* was published in the 7th issue of art-ist Contemporary Art Magazine following the artist's solo exhibition titled *The Artist's So-Called Portrait* at the Diyarbakır Art Center (Diyarbakır, 2008, curator: Şener Özmen). (*Author's note*).

³⁰ «Normalization,» organized as a series of exhibitions, was supported by the European Culture Fund. See: <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/195983>

a T-shirt bearing the word “Kurdistan” is detained; attacks are carried out against Newroz celebrations in Rojava; the *Ala Rengîn* flag is burned—it seems that the transition to a decolonial period will take much longer.

Which political movements aim to eliminate the ongoing effects of colonialism on the knowledge, culture, economy, and mentality of the Kurds? How will intellectual, political, and social struggles be developed that can liberate Kurds from the grip of prevailing paradigms? İlke TV broadcast live, in full, the Turkish message sent by Öcalan for the Amed Newroz; yet when it came time for the Kurdish translation, the presenter cut the broadcast. So the question of colonialism comes from the realm of politics, it progresses through the body of Kurdish language.

I could answer your question by consulting sources regarding the masculine and feminine, body politics, masculinity and femininity, and images in contemporary art; however, this would not be quite so simple. In an interview with *Frieze* in July, Yvette Mutumba, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Contemporary And and Contemporary And Latin America* (C&AL), emphasized: «It is not enough to organize an exhibition, conference, panel, or performance about decolonization and then move on to ‘the next subject.’ It is also not enough to recklessly use and overuse these concepts until they lose their meaning.»³¹

If we follow Mutumba’s arguments (she is engaging in a highly interesting discussion), we can see that we have not entered a decolonial period, and we cannot choose this as a fantasy because we are still producing works with the side effects of colonialism. In my opinion, a breaking point has occurred. The works produced by Fatoş İrven, using different techniques, challenged the post-2000 Kurdish contemporary art field; the dualities of geography as body and body as geography (unlike her contemporary Zehra Doğan), also signaled the transformation of the dominant artistic language in Northern Kurdistan. In the 2006 video *Tractatus*, produced with Cengiz Tekin, we attempted to show the impossibility of tissue transplantation [using the tongues of two slaughtered cattle] (we were still ironic). Speaking of tissue, on the other hand, there was a video-performance by İrven, in which she sewed into the palm of her hand with a needle, and another video by Sanja Iveković, where she cut a fine stocking over her head with scissors in front of a mirror (without damaging her facial tissues). Of course, there was also *Orlan*. In short, from Marina Abramović to Carlos Martiel, despite their dramatic appearances, the tradition of self-harm in Performance Art (using the body as material; a body to be nailed, cut, or stapled) continued. On the other hand, in the masculine cluster, the issue of the body

³¹ <https://www.frieze.com/article/yvette-mutumba-why-decolonizing-institutions-has-hurt>

often manifested itself as bodilessness, or as part of an effort to cover the body with various fabrics (such as in *Supermulsim-Ş.Ö.*³², *Tractatus Ş.Ö.&C.T.*³³, *The Artist's So-Called Portrait-C.T.*³⁴, *Wait, You Are Surrounded-B.I.*³⁵, and similar works). In a video by Berat Işık, he painted his face black using the makeup room of theater actors. In *Eyes Wide Shut* (2001), however, he did not feel the need to conceal his face. In the videos he produced in 2001 and 2004, he was featured himself, and in later years, the cast grew, and the locations, of course (as with many of us), changed.

Engin Sustam : *I'm trying to understand what you're saying here. Could you tell us a bit more about the relationship between Kurdish artists, traumatic experiences and their work, for example that of female artists of your generation, such as Fatos İrwen?*

Returning to İrwen's works, they were disturbing in a way that was just right; the issue of «us» and «them» was presented as «I» and «my body,» and this was far from a matter that could be solved by the male-dominated Kurdish contemporary art scene. Both İrwen and Zehra Doğan, although not because of their works, had spent time in the prisons of the colonialist state and had experienced violence. As the privileged areas assumed by the dominant contemporary art cluster lost their effect, it became clear that the approach of «irony» and «mockery» at the beginning of your question – starting from the memory cities of Kurdistan and the horrific results of the Self-Government Wars, the Kobani protests, the epic struggle against ISIS in Rojava and South Kurdistan, martyrs, the radical change of the political climate, and the end of normalization – could no longer be sustained. However, this did not happen. The issues tackled by the artists, the political climate that began and ended with the normalization process, the collapsed peace tables, and the reentry of Kurdistan into the spiral of violence in the 2000s, all called back the mystification of the 2000s. Mehmet Ali Boran, an artist living and working in Mardin, acted with an understanding that continued this influence. His works, with their «irony» and «mockery,» tried to preserve the discursive power of the 2000s, and of course, the mystification (the Kurdish perspective of looking at Kurdistan from Kurdistan). Boran should have been the artist of our generation (he was born in 1981), a persistent representative. However, we could not see this ownership in the artists who formed the Centrifugal Art Collective. Setting aside their political preferences (egalitarian, inclusive, and pro-Turkey), they tried to read the political and iden-

³² Sener Ozmen.

³³ Sener Ozmen & Cengiz Tekin.

³⁴ Cengiz Tekin.

³⁵ Berat Işık.

tity impacts (in order to appear completely independent) on a very cautious and hesitant ground, from a place that, for them, essentially did not exist. Their behavior, as if they lived in Oslo rather than Diyarbakır (which was already quite surprising), was a matter to be investigated.

Engin Sustam : *You have now, of course, presented an incredible cartography, which is not just the memory of an artist who has lived through contemporary Turkish art, but I should say the memory of one of the artists who has also shaped contemporary Kurdish art. As an 'art critic' who has lived through this memory, I realise the importance of what you are saying here dear Şener, from the generation of Şener Özmen to Fatos Irwen or all the new young generation. I think we should add the colonial relationship between Kurdish artists and the dominant cultural institutions and players in Turkey. I'm sure we'll have plenty more to discuss about this intensive experience of a Kurdish artist. But I have to move on to another area again, due to time constraints here. So, in my opinion, the demonstrations by Kurdish artists show a decolonial micro-political perception of a stateless society in the art world. However, they also show how they position themselves politically in a critical relation to the dominant culture. So, we should approach this analysis in relation to Kurdish art works? or what is the Kurdish decolonial perspective in Kurdish artistic spaces?*

Şener Özmen : I will try to keep my answers shorter. Honestly, I have no such experience. Yes, I think we should approach it this way, of course, politically, they are not just establishing a critical relationship with the dominant culture, they are also trying to solve it, understand it, and dissect it. They are rebelling against something; this can be the established culture, occupation, the psycho-social situation(s) created by occupation (Jasper defines this as «liminal situations»), the criticism of fascism and racism, and they are nourished by this, meaning (actually) by the issues of Turkish society as well. Is that «The Kurdish issue,» or is it a cultural issue? These distinctions are very clear, I believe. However, it seems like they are also committed to remaining as a stateless society. They cannot imagine what an independent Kurdish state would look like. What would it be like to live there and remain an artist? Without creating art from the destruction caused by colonialism, how will they talk about micro-political perceptions, and on which platforms?

In Georges Didi-Huberman's *How to Open Your Eyes*, he also looks at Harun Farocki's 1969 film *The Inextinguishable Fire*.³⁶ In the testimony of Thai Binh Dahn, born in Vietnam in 1949, at the Stockholm Court, he makes a two-and-

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnpLS4ct2mM>

a-half-minute speech, reading loudly from papers on a table. «Like a philosopher,» Didi-Huberman says, «he presents us with an aporia, or rather, an aporia for the thought of the image.»³⁷ He directly addresses the camera: «How can I teach you the effects of napalm? And how can I teach them the wounds caused by napalm? If we show you napalm wounds, you will close your eyes. If the viewers wish to ignore the effects of napalm, then you must examine things about the reasons for napalm usage that they cannot ignore. Napalm burns at 3000 degrees. Even the smallest drop burns for half an hour. When it burns, it releases toxic gases that attack the respiratory system. These toxic gases also drive people out of shelters. There are almost no survivors within an 80-meter radius.»

Farocki's *The Inextinguishable Fire* had a strong influence on my 2015 video work *How To Tell Of Peace To A Living Dove*.³⁸ In a completely black background frame, unlike Thai Bihn Dahn, I was struggling with a white dove (actually its image) from a table camouflaged with black fabric, without looking directly at the camera. In the background, the voice of my son Robîn was heard – this time it was the inner voice of Kurdish children speaking – and Robîn, with his imperfect Turkish (I had placed a Turkish text for him to read and recorded his voice), was addressing a dove trapped in the war between the Kurds and the state. A single Kurdish political movement did not seem to foresee that Kurdistan's cities would be destroyed, hundreds of people would be killed, and thousands would be displaced along with the demands for self-governance. While the war in Sur was still ongoing, political actors had said they did not think the state would respond so aggressively to these demands (they never even imagined it). Interestingly, in 2013, a group of AKP's MPs, along with their wives, went to Cizre, Şırnak and released doves by the Tigris River. According to another report, the mayor of Yakutiye District in Erzurum, Ali Korkut, an AKP member, protested Israel's attacks on Gaza and released white doves as a symbol of peace for the freedom of Palestine and the liberation of the Palestinian people. Similarly, Kurds were releasing doves near the Four-Legged Minaret, where Tahir Elçi, the former President of Diyarbakır Bar Association, was murdered. Syrian representatives gathered on September 1st, World Peace Day, at Beşiktaş World Peace Park and released doves. At the 2015 Newroz celebration in Van, Selahattin Demirtaş, who later pointed to the message of Abdullah Öcalan to be read the next day in Diyarbakır, also held a white dove in his hand. Newly married couples were releasing doves at their weddings. Whose dove was this and why did it keep changing hands?

³⁷ *How to Open Your Eyes*, Georges Didi-Huberman, s.41.

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5jAjzsECXQ>

In a recent article I read (*Pigeon Politics*, Fahim Amir)³⁹, I learned that the pigeon is described as a «synanthrope» (a species that lives alongside humans) or a companion species. They also do not build nests but instead find shelter in existing nooks. I was chasing the metaphor, but it wasn't going very well. The leaders of their flocks did not have to be the most knowledgeable birds; the fastest pigeons, regardless of their ability to navigate, could become the flock leader.⁴⁰ *How To Tell Of Peace To A Living Dove*, on the other hand, also called back Beuys' performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Beuys believed in reincarnation, while I was terribly afraid of this possibility. Again and again (as in Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads*), would I be born into a colony? Would I be something as grotesque as the baby-monster in David Lynch's *Eraserhead*?

Engin Sustam : *Speaking of the white dove, I remembered your video 'How To Tell Of Peace To a Living Dove?' (2015). We were talking about the peace process, we are still talking about it today, the doves are changing hands again (...). As you know, it's not only art but also, I am interested in studying the complex relationship between insurrection / resistance, ecological politics, seeing decolonial creation as a place of transgression where colonial rhetoric of the power meet art, politics, society and the culture. How can you identify the creative potentiality of Kurdish artistic spaces faced with these socio-political situations just as you were ironically involved in the doves question above ?*

Şener Özmen : I think the relationship you describe as complex depends on where and from which perspectives we establish it. Our creative potential is shaped here, in this space. We often overanalyze the works produced by Kurdish artists; there are no sharp turns or boundaries (in the North). Within the Turkish contemporary art world, «Kurdish identity» shared a common ground that did not pose a problem for institutions, curators affiliated with those institutions, exhibition organizers, or art writers. Let's take Burak Delier's «Guard» from the «Free Kick» exhibition curated by Halil Altındere at the 9th Istanbul Biennale's *Hospitality Area* in 2005. In the photograph, there was a person waiting in front of a soldier standing guard at Dolmabahçe Palace, holding a knife behind them. As a result of discussions, «Guard» was removed from «Free Kick,» with the artist's «consent» (whatever that means). It was interesting that the person facing the guard was also «Kurdish.» The artist himself later wrote extensively about it: «A Case of Self-Censorship as 'Guard,'» was the title of the article. Later, this, along with other essays by Delier,

³⁹ *Pigeon Politics*, Fahim Amir, <https://evergreenreview.com/read/pigeon-politics/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S096098221501307X>

was published as a book under the title *Scenarios of the Art World*⁴¹ by Koç University Publications. In the aforementioned article, Delier also referred to «Road to Tate Modern» (produced in 2003), created at the same time as «Guard.» Delier wanted to go beyond the culture politics that positioned him as a marginalized subject. He said that *Road to Tate Modern* shattered Turkish pride, and no one had said this before. I would like to make an analogy: within the boundaries of Turkish contemporary art, Kurds were always in a «Hospitality Area,» and they weren't treated as good guests, nor are they still treated well, but I do not understand why they persistently want to stay. Their films are banned, censored, concerts are canceled or prohibited, we cannot even write two Kurdish words on the city road! I argue that the issue lies in the mother tongue; as long as we continue speaking in Turkish and communicating in Turkish, I see that the creative fields and potentials are also dimming.

Engin Sustam : *I realise that there's a lot to say, but we're keeping our answers short this time. I'd like to ask two related questions : What politico-social and cultural changes, if any, underlie the transgression of contemporary Kurdish art? What are the traces (the micropolitics forms of politico-social relations) that Kurdish contemporary art could display?*

Şener Özmen : I will try to give a shorter answer to your question. These are not issues independent of our history and, undoubtedly, our reality. We worked as writers, artists, curators, etc., at the farthest points that political, social, and cultural changes could lead to. When the situation in Northern Kurdistan started to return to normalization, I personally saw that I was more productive. Normalization, that is, the times when you don't create in a panic! As for micropolitics, this is useful only for organizations, it comes from uncertainty or opposition, but the artist has utopias, and we also know that there is no such thing as a specific space in art. This is why the Northern artist, Northern curator, and Northern art writer are pragmatics.

Engin Sustam: *I think that the Western diaspora has become a place for reception, creation and artists' homes as in cinema, in literature. Two related questions: How do exile and the diaspora become a source of inspiration for artistic and intellectual expression at the level of political singularity through the work of art creation? How do artists define their unique reflections on political issues in diaspora?*

Şener Özmen : We should look at artists in exile or in the diaspora and their productions, but whether we can, I don't know. Frankly, this is more your field than mine, and I'm skeptical of both concepts. I mean, I see it, for example,

⁴¹ <https://press.ku.edu.tr/kitap/sanat-dunyasinin-senaryolari/>

they are very critical in Berlin, never miss an exhibition, but when they get bored, they come to Istanbul, relax, and enjoy their day. Those who can't come say that their dream is to have an exhibition in Istanbul.

Engin Sustam : *I understand, but isn't Istanbul already the biggest diaspora space for Kurds ? I insist again, if you will allow me, I will continue my questions in order to establish an Kurdish artistic memory of this uprising space. Through which door can we access the experience of a contemporary Kurdish subaltern art? How can we identify contemporary Kurdish art? Maybe an addition to this question: Do you think Kurdish contemporary art has an international dimension today? I mean, how does it get into circulation? If we think about the public, the reception, the mediation, the collection and the network.*

Şener Özmen : Let's start with this question: Do you think Kurdish contemporary art has an international dimension today? Of course, it does! It exists as artists of a stateless nation, which has no precedent in the world. Kurdish contemporary art can be defined through the concepts of "statelessness" and "colonialism," and it can be read from here. Kurdish contemporary art has long rejected the proposition that art is something exclusive to the West, and in this sense, paradoxically (and anachronistically), it is integrated into global art. This is why no Kurdish artist uses the term 'contemporary art'; rather, the term 'global art' is more commonly in circulation. They work with international curators, participate in international exhibitions and projects with diverse perspectives, and can use their production conditions and personal experiences in a universal forum. The expansion of the art field since the mid-90s plays a significant role in this. The increase in the number of museums and galleries, the discourse and practices of curating that have created new spaces, is undeniable in its impact. Participation in biennials and public art programs, international grants, and the emergence of non-profit organizations have also made important contributions to this process. And of course, I believe the cultural activism that emerged in connection with collective action, influenced by the broad-based social movements in Northern Kurdistan, should also be discussed.

Engin Sustam : *As an artist and writer, Şener Özmen, why does pathological and traumatic language appear in the works of artists as a recurring theme? How can we read the traumatic effect in a singular perception of artistic creation, the image of contemporary art which privileges a decolonial aesthetic, a political memory and a psycho-social reading in Kurdish spaces? So, you already have a book on this topic published in Türkiye: 'Trauma and Reformation'. Also, do you think this traumatic perception in art space has changed*

today? Maybe let's talk about your book a little bit and also the other artists works.

Şener Özmen : The first edition of *Trauma and Reformation*⁴² was published in 2007, and the second edition was released by Lîs Publishing in November 2016, with an introduction by Ali Akay. In the introduction I wrote for the book, I said: "The book in your hands emerged as an 'unofficial contemporary art reading'; a careful selection from contemporary art projects seeking self-respect, including interpretation, exaggeration, critique, reasonable opinions and suggestions, symptomatic marginal documents, central data, refined analyses, and 'contemporary art readings' that resisted becoming a 'book' for many years."⁴³ It seemed as though I was looking for an excuse to write, and not only for *art-ist* Contemporary Art Magazine, which was published by Halil Altındere (one of the best publications), but also for the first online contemporary art magazine in Turkey, *nihayeticimdesin.com*, and later for *Siyahi* and other e-magazines. It was a time when art writers (there were just a few of us) referred to each other's writings—or works—and there was a lot that triggered writing in the art world. «Trauma,» which I had already written about before, was one of the images of the post-90s period for me, with traces in works like *Schizo-Notebook* (1999), *Tracey Emin's Story* (2000), *Manifesta Murders* (2001), and *The Artist's Common Sense from Three Days Ago* (2001). Later, trauma was dealt with in a more popular language in works such as *Coloring Book* (2004) and *Blood is Sweeter Than Honey* (2004), which I did with Ahmet Ögüt. For the 2019 *Sinopole* (7th Sinop Biennial)⁴⁴, I produced *A Sinopole Diary*⁴⁵, which became my latest work in this context. This was an image moving forward with both writing and drawing, and its reality, of course, could be questioned.

Regarding the issue of repetition, isn't this exactly the process we are dealing with? Doesn't colonialism create a repetition in the mind? We Kurds live both the apocalypse and its aftermath (post-apocalyptic) within the same time frame. For instance, in some academic studies, they frequently emphasize how colonial discourse addresses science fiction narratives, including those in the post-apocalyptic era. An example? The *Hope* (2008)⁴⁶ video is like that because we understand that the traditional apocalypse logic colludes with colonialism. *The Day I Saved the Kurds*⁴⁷ video is also post-apocalyptic when viewed from this

⁴² *Trauma and Reform*, Şener Özmen, Art and Theory Series, Lîs Publications, 2007.

⁴³ *Preface*, Şener Özmen, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴⁴ <https://m-a-u-s-e-r.net/>

⁴⁵ <https://senerozmen.com/artist-books>

⁴⁶ *Hope*, Single Channel Video, PAL DV, 02'42", (with Cengiz Tekin)

⁴⁷ *The Day I Saved The Kurds*, Sener Ozmen, 2019, Single Channel Video, HD PAL, 07'47".

perspective. Colonialism attempts to speak through the mother tongue, looking at, touching, and communicating with an alien cubic life form hidden in a tree hollow. Yet, Kurdish contemporary art, the apocalypse, and the post-apocalyptic myth are not issues to be approached with such vague (and, in my opinion, absolute) judgments!

Engin Sustam : *Does contemporary Kurdish art spread forms, images, rhythms of subversive visibilities that criticize the colonial space in the field of art? Indeed, as we see in contemporary art in Africa, in India, in Latin American space or like Palestinian artists in the diaspora and others.*

Şener Özmen : I'm not sure if I can categorize artists and their works, and I'm not sure if it's necessary either. However, it is possible to say that after our generation, Kurdish contemporary art has developed in a way that is shaped by art dealers, gallerists, and collectors, differentiating it a bit from art as a game. Let's think of it as neither too Turkish nor too Kurdish. When it comes to Northern Kurdistan, we can also say that in some areas, this sarcastic balance has been lost. I want to talk about the absurdity of trying to stay Kurdish while avoiding being Turkish and trying to solve the closeness confined within Turkishness. Some have discarded their ruined nature and mind, obsessed with places like Antalya, Bodrum, and so on. We love and admire Mona Hatoum very much, but her works don't reach us. Artists like *Jehangir Sabavala, S.H. Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Sakti Burman, and Krishna Reddy* went to France to break the rigid structures of colonial art education, and many artists followed them. However, even after independence, rigid, archaic art education continued, and artists found more freedom in Paris. Now, we cannot fully observe the competition between the diaspora and the homeland. We see Palestinian artists, anti-Semites, doing so. Israel, on the other hand, wants to open a new page with the Kurds in this apocalypse. As for me, I find the profile of the anti-Semitic Kurdish artist and curator banal! I know the Turks, the art writers, the curators, and the artists.

Engin Sustam : *And my last questions dear Şener Özmen. I think all of these questions are interconnected. And if we consider these questions in terms of the economic, political and social problems of Kurdish artists in global artistic spaces : So as you know, Kurdish artists cannot easily define their own 'artist identity' outside the diaspora (except Başûr of Southern Kurdistan in Iraq and in Rojava of Syria) due to racism, ethnic stigmatisation and political discrimination. Artists from the Kurdish space specially in Türkiye and in Iran, like Kurdish intellectuals, are generally stuck between various political positions, so how can we analyze all this? Does it have a 'negative or positive' effect on*

the creativity of Kurdish artists? It is still not possible today to talk about Kurdish contemporary art in world art history, except for the catalogue's artworks that you were a part of: 'Kurdistan - In-Between Worlds – Luciano Benetton Imago Mundi Collection' which Claudio Scoretti (Art advisor), Irina Ungureanu (curator), Aneta Syzlak (curator), Erkan Özgen (artiste, curator) : How do you think this situation will be overcome?

Şener Özmen : This is actually related to the question above and my response. I also wrote an article for the catalog you mentioned, where I evaluated the situation in detail. In my opinion, there is a trend that is tied to the colonial states they live in, the politics they represent, and the struggles they engage in. Here, we encounter the concept of «being too Kurdish,» referencing an article by Ferzan Şer.⁴⁸ Being «too Arab,» «too Persian,» or «too Turkish» doesn't create any issues. It works just fine. Are troops being sent to Kobani? Then let's get to work, Turkish collectors, Turkish art fair organizers, writers, and artists! I believe that the way we read the situation is overly exaggerated for contemporary art practices in the North.

⁴⁸ <https://botantimes.com/ahmet-turk-an-neturk-aha-ev-e-hemu-mesele/>