



DEFAULT SETTINGS:



DASEIN

O z a n A t a l a n

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1. ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will analyze the factors that incited my interest in my current ideas, investigate the motivations behind my practice and explore their conceptual background. I will anatomize the occurrence, development and incorporation of my current works in relation to how my graduate research has contributed to my artistic growth. I will also discuss the relevancy of my subject matter to my autobiography in a broader cultural context with reference to specific art historical and contemporary influences. The philosophical platform on which my choices of subject matter, material and aesthetics rely will be addressed in congruence with my current position artistically.

STRANGE

I don't think the flow of the life differs from the flow of the cars down the road
Whatever the sky is trying to say with its uncanny yellow-gray tone, I don't even care
I belong neither to the town under this sky nor to the places rebuilt in my mind
to nothing but this alien mind.

Wind just appears in the movement of twisted branches
and of the blue white red flag I am staring at
Which I would think were dancing; if I knew nothing,
The chimneys would be bellowing some new clouds
And the teeth of a venomous snake would be the best spot to kiss.
This must be why I read poems in places and times irrelevant,
Maybe I can't reconcile the lemon with its yellow
Though prostitution and marriage harmonize in unison
dancing together on the stage of legitimation.
This is why the cold street under my feet is actually
a limbo where my mind wanders between the real and the illusion
Neither absent nor present.

Without love without damage without pain without feeling without my real self,
Ever do my hands flee to the mountains
Instead of writing briefs to the bosses.

This soul is made of a material which expands as it shrinks
which becomes more ambiguous when defined
Now I feel like a poem translated into another language
Still constant, yet ever changing
Still the same but too different.
Always looking for a place where it doesn't exclude
doesn't essentially mean that it includes.

Ozan Atalan

Syracuse, NY 2015

2. INTRODUCTION: Transitions and Alienation

I would like to give some brief autobiographical information to clarify the reasons behind my practice, since I am a big supporter of the idea that art can mediate between objective and subjective realities. I was born in an isolated coastal town where I always felt under oppressive military influence due to the town having one of the largest military bases in Turkey. At the age of 9, I was circumcised under semi-medical conditions with a traditional ceremony to celebrate my “manhood”. This was a true personal trauma which as a child contributed to my self-alienation.

At 18, I started to study law but it wasn't until my graduation and my completion as an intern lawyer that I fortunately realized my talents and passion laid elsewhere. In 2008, when I was 22, I made a radical shift in my life and began my art practice at the School of Fine Arts. After my freshman year, I had to suspend my enrollment in art school for one year in order to fulfill my compulsory military service in my home country. Eventually I returned to school, started to live in a ghetto, and after getting my BFA degree, I started my graduate study in The USA as another sociocultural change in my life.

My shift from law to art and from the liberated aura of art school to the oppressive military environment were extremely sharp transitions which culminated in drastic sociocultural and socio-economical changes in my life. But the greatest chance was to be able to exist in these transitional spaces which is helping me define my art practice as a form transition and resistance. Having to fulfill all the gender-related cultural and legal obligations in the patriarchic Post-Ottoman society has caused a quest for my sexual, political and social identity. All these different and chaotic life experiences have helped me gain a different comprehension of reality¹. The sensation from all my traumatic past experiences still remains, and exists as versatile strata in my work, mostly with a socio-critical aspect.

My self-alienation was caused by things that I did and had to do without pursuing my authentic desires, and it was painful until I realized it. As Turkish engineer Zeynep Sarilar mentioned in her self-organized TEDx Talk about “The Management of Perception”, either collective perception controls the person or the person has the ability to control their own individual perception and live a real life which is not shaped by others` expectations.² In this sense, my work strives to operate by shuttling between subjective logic and objective rationality; translating different aspects of different realities into one another to create a certain sense of alienation, pleasingly discomforting the audience and generating the inherent awakening impulse of estrangement.

¹ In this paper, the term `reality` will be used from Jacques Lacan and Philip K. Dick`s perspectives. In Lacanian theory the real becomes that which resists representation, what is pre-mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic – what cannot be symbolized – what loses it`s "reality" once it is symbolized (made conscious) through language. According to Philip K. Dick, ‘Reality is that which, when you stop believing it, doesn`t go away.’ (Jean Westerhoff, Reality: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 32.)

² Zeynep Sarilar, Perception Management, TedxTalks, 2014.

Therefore, detachment from myself the “trans” states of my life have caused, but at the same time triggered an awakening from my alienation is both subject matter and the function of my practice.

My point in alienation does not necessarily and primarily relate to being an artist in the army, being a Turkish man in American culture or not fitting into stereotypical masculine roles that my vernacular culture prescribes. **It rather concentrates on the idea of self-alienation, in other words, a simulation of self-awareness, a lack of realizing one`s potential in life and an unconscious ignorance of one`s real self.** Slavoj Zizek describes this situation as “the unknown knows” : things that we don`t know that we actually know. They are a part of our identity, they determine our activity and this is what is called the unconscious in psychoanalysis³.

Based on all the specific life experiences above, I feel entitled to say that transitions and alienation have been the most prominent concepts in my life, hence my art practice. Therefore, my main focus in my practice is the capacity of alienation to positively change a life, because once alienation is detected, it turns out to be a life changing power. In my work, I am eager to analyze the nature of alienation and, by extension, utilizing the perspectives gained of it, I strive to create experiences to estrange the viewer from the mundane by either discovering the eerie sides of the beloved or the congenial sides of the uncanny. To do this, I am very keen to change the individual perceptions of the viewers by causing a disengagement with the collective perceptions that manipulate the majority of the people.

³ Ben Wright, Manufacturing Reality: Slavoj Zizek: The Reality of The Virtual, Documentary, 71 mins, USA, 2004.

3. ART PRACTICE AT GRADUATE SCHOOL

"I wish to make sculpture about belief, or about passion, about experience that is outside material concern."

Anish Kapoor

3.1. Influences and Early Work

Alienation offers a fragmentation in our true selves, just like the split between the body language and the behavior of the lady in Goya's *A Caza De Dientes / Out Hunting for Teeth* in his *Los Caprichos* series, 1918. As she tries to pull a tooth from a dead man's mouth due to its value in sorcery, she is in between her humanity and superstitious beliefs. I believe when we follow coded structures to gain power and to try to control things that we actually can't, we get detached from our humanity – our intrinsic desires and behaviors. As Fritz Pappenheim said, we are inclined to get involved in a very limited part of reality which allows us to achieve our objectives, and then disregard the rest of it. Thus, this kind of behavior ends up creating a deeper loneliness and detachment inside of ourselves⁴.



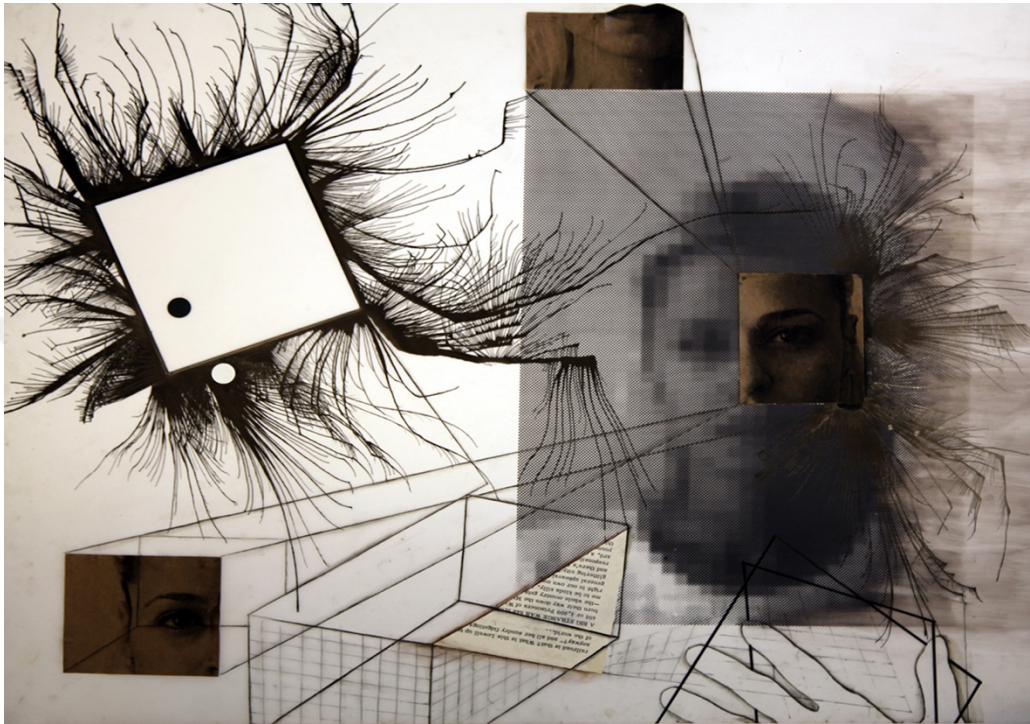
A Caza De Dientes, Goya, 1918



The Exile, Josef Koudelka, 1973

⁴ Fritz Pappenheim, *Modern Insanin Yabancilasmasi/The Alienation of Modern Man*, Phoenix Press, Ankara, 2002, pg 3.

Josef Koudelka`s photograph series the Exile has been a very important influence to me. I would rather understand alienation from actual human experience which resides in art, instead of reading in psychology books.



My Pretty Alienation, Ozan Atalan, 2014

After experimenting with alienation as a subject matter in my work, as could be seen in *My Pretty Alienation*, it wasn` t enough to illustrate alienation and I wanted to create that sensation in my audience. Still homing in on the same feeling, I decided to estrange the viewer from the numbing ordinary and use alienation as a function of my work. I did so by creating dark uncanny atmospheres where people could feel momentarily solitary and confront with themselves. The estrangement effect in Epic Theater has guided me in terms of disclosing the facades of everyday experiences, eliminating the distinction between the mundane and art, inverting the expectations of the viewer⁵. Because estrangement effect makes the play self-referential, motivates the viewer to think and keeps their intelligence and sensation aware that they are watching a play.

In my video installation *Still Trying to Understand the Game*, I discovered my interest in creating analogies and stage-like environments where one could feel like in an odd and over-intensified game. In an analogy to a child`s game, I aimed to create an interactive experience for the viewer to play with the rocks covered by pages from existentialist books and clock mechanisms where the hands have been replaced with branches. On the projector screen, overlapping phantasms of a face are swirling, momentarily unifying

⁵ Berthold Brecht, *Epik Tiyatro/Epic Theater*, Cem, Istanbul, 1990, pg. 194-195.

then drifting apart once more, prompting the viewer to try to resolve an expression from the images' multiplicity and hence confront themselves in this loop.



Still Trying to Understand The Game, Ozan Atalan, 2014

During this process, Elif Safak's opinions on *The Politics of Fiction* also helped me understand the importance of changing cultural circles. Her discourse was very much in congruence with my point in utilizing the awakening power of alienation, which means when a person experiences a life-changing event, it usually culminates in realizing the true-self from a more objective perspective. In her talk, she says "Now we all live in some kind of a social and cultural circle. We all do. We're born into a certain family, nation, class. But if we have no connection whatsoever with the worlds beyond the one we take for granted, then we too run the risk of drying up inside. Our imagination might shrink; our hearts might dwindle, and our humanness might wither if we stay for too long inside our cultural cocoons. Our friends, neighbors, colleagues, family -- if all the people in our inner circle resemble us, it means we are surrounded with our mirror image."⁶

3.2. Effects of Law Background on Art Practice

My law education deepened my insight on how cultural codes are built and function. Basically, I was always more attracted to Natural Law. In contrast to Positive Law and its stress on the congruency of current codes, Natural Law emphasizes legitimacy based on respect for the various states of being human. In short, I paid more attention to the facts than to the rules. Since then I have followed a humanistic understanding of the endogenous dynamics of life.

⁶ Elif Safak, *The Politics of Fiction*, TED, 2010.

My transition from law to art was when I realized my self-alienation as a lawyer. I was following others` dreams, not mine. The unhappiness, anxiety and stress disorders, desensitization towards life made me realize how detached I was from my desires and real self. I was more interested in watching the pigeons which accidentally flew into the courthouse from the roof while waiting for the trials, or having conversations with the convicts who work at the copy centers of the courthouse was more exciting than having to file a claim. In short, I was lucky enough to realize who I really am and change my life. This experience is one of the examples of why alienation is a significant concept behind my practice.

3.2.1. Rejection of Polarization

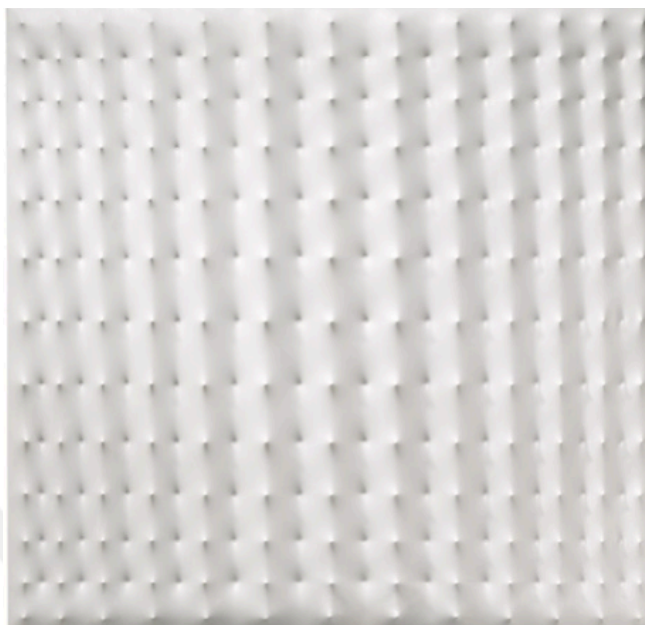
Another projection of my law background on my art practice manifests itself in my counter-stance against binary oppositions. In law methodology, the reasoning rests upon the dialectic of inductive and deductive systems. There is always a rule to be applied to a fact, and this requires implementation of deduction from the universal to the particular (rule - fact duality). Contrary to that, inductive system applies presumptions and can even change a rule based on a specific fact, hence it pays more attention to the vitality and tensions of life. Beyond the dualist analytic reasoning of deductive system, common sense and sense of justice which the induction supports should never be underestimated. These concepts open more room for creative thinking and efficient solution for a legal case. In other words, reducing a fact to a binary opposition between the universal abstract rule and the particular concrete case is never enough for a solution. From my experience, I strongly believe that we should never ignore our intuitive capabilities while rationalizing a matter. In this sense, I confidentially reject the polarization between intellect and feelings, and I strive to embed both in my work.

In addition to that, the dualities of De Facto and De Jure⁷; and Ipso Facto and Ipso Jure⁸ have contributed to my idea of creating analogies as an alternative to polarizations. In my installations, I tend to create physical dichotomies which validate a transitional space where the viewer`s perception becomes a part of the work.

Life is always in the state of transition where I believe the tension, passion and vitality reside, just like in Enrico Castellani`s *Superficia Bianca, 1968*. I was influenced by this piece due to the tension of the canvas resisting the inward and outward pressure of the nails. The tense formal transitions of the canvas, the flow of the light and shadow animate the work and are alluring elements for me.

⁷ De Facto means “in factuality” while De Jure means “based on current codes”.

⁸ Ipso Facto refers to as a matter of the fact, and Ipso Jure means “due to the current laws”.



Superficia Bianca, Enrico Castellini, 1968

From the perspective of collective consciousness, there seems to be no avoidance from the fact that our mindsets are formed by Western Dualist approach starting from ancient Greece, Platonist duality of the particular and the transcendental universal. Descartes polarized mind and body with his Cartesian system: Res Extansa (the material or the tangible) and Res Cogitas (Things attributed to the spirituality, things that do not have physical existence in the spatial extension). Subsequently, Kant`s Critique of Pure Reason divided the world into the duality of good and bad, Critique of Practical Reason into right and wrong, and in Critique of Judgment into beautiful and ugly. Dualism seems to be deeply-rooted in the development of human categorization. A binary opposition is a child's first logical operation. Whilst there are no opposites in 'nature', the binary oppositions which we employ in our cultural practices help to generate order out of the dynamic complexity of experience⁹.

But as I clearly expressed previously, I am against these polarizations. In my practice, other than a structuralist paradigmatic approach, I follow a rather post-structuralist one which ignites my interest in changing perspectives. In his experiments which take part in the Book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Antonio R. Damasio also indicates how profoundly frontal brain damage can effect people`s feelings as well as their bodies¹⁰. Therefore, I support the idea of unison of body and soul, the tangible and the intangible, material and the immaterial. **I am searching for a third option where my audience can locate themselves in a transitional physical**

⁹ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics For Beginners*, 2014. (<http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/>)

¹⁰ Antonio R. Damasio,, *Descartes`in Yanilgisi: Duygu, Akil ve Insan Beyni/Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Varlik Press, Istanbul. 2006, p. 210-272.

and mental place where they can find more room for intuition and sensation, which might blend dualities and dichotomies we construct. Love, intuition, spirituality, quantum physics, and belief are things that can't be explained epistemologically. In this sense, the false dichotomy of culture and nature is fundamental to my thinking system.

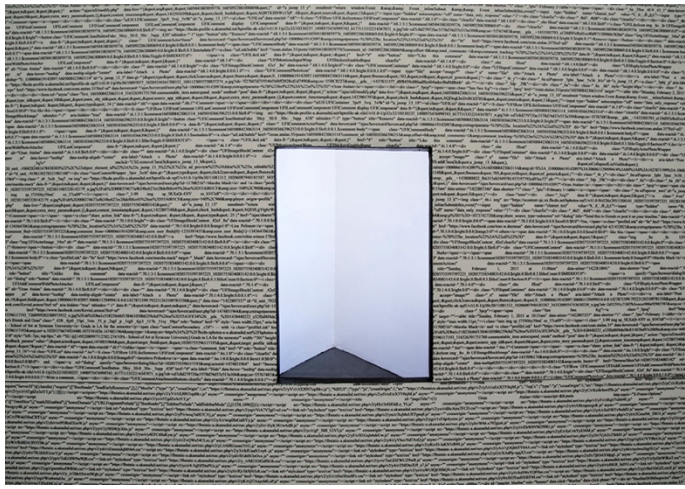
3.2.2. Emphasize on Actual Experience: Counteracting the Lack of Affection and Apathy

During my law practice, I was in a delusion that reality consisted of rules. For instance, a divorce case did not mean much more than choosing which provisions of the law to apply, regardless of the sensation of the actual experience. This kind of professional automatization and desensitization led me to become alienated due to my deprivation of a sense of actuality.

Now, utilizing the notion that rules distancing from reality the way screens do, I emphasize the significance of actual experiences; not represented, simulated or filtered ones. I strived to create this sort of effect with my work *The Corner*, which blocks the viewer's direct sensation of the actual corner but allows them to see it through a screen.



The Corner. Ozan Atalan. 2015



The Corner. Ozan Atalan. 2015 (Detail)

Another installation in which I strived to engage the viewer in experiencing the actual by using all of their senses was *The Heartbeat On A Dead Planet*, 2015. It juxtaposed real grass planted in real soil and a screen placed in the real soil displaying a video of grass moving in the wind. According to Baudrillard's Simulation Theory, representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real, but simulation negates the sign as a value and claims its own reality¹¹. I was also influenced by Guy Debord's idea of The Spectacle which draws parallels to The Simulacra, which offers a set of situations "where the world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and the efficient motivations of any hypnotic behavior."¹² Holding on to these ideas, I wanted to disclose the delusive zone that digital images invade in our minds. Consequently, work supports the actual experience which – on my own terms – means **being there at that very moment and feeling it with every sensorial capability we have** -just like having sex or watching the ocean during which we use our five senses and even beyond.



Heartbeat on A Dead Planet, Ozan Atalan, 2015

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 3-7.

¹² Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle/The Spectacle of Society*, 88 mins, France, 1973.

3.3. Translation Between Realities

Strictly related to my interest of emphasizing actual experiences and estrangement, I am eager to displace a material from its original context and translate it into the field of another reality. To do so, I aim to create a feeling of alienation in the viewer that breaks stereotypes and borders. I believe my engaging work, *Hyper Nothing Mark-up Reality*, 2014, in which the gallery was covered by over 1000 digital prints of HTML codes of an image on my Facebook timeline was a relevant example of the idea of translation. The digital image displayed on an Ipad on the floor is that of a blindfolded bull stranded in a pit full of blood during the Feast of Sacrifice, in 2014. Translating digital codes (HTML) into physical world where they made no sense, I put the audience into a position of participating in a simultaneously cathartic and alienating experience. My ambition was to overwhelm the audience in a claustrophobic environment and make them realize the factuality of what the virtual image depicts.

At this point, I should state that estrangement and engagement are not contradicting concepts in my practice, because detection of alienation leads to confrontation with objective reality. Consequently, they co-exist in this causality relationship.



Hyper Nothing Mark-up Reality, Ozan Atalan. 2014



Hyper Nothing Mark-up Reality, Ozan Atalan. 2014 (Detail)

3.4. My Interest in Engagement in Art

It was back in 2013 when I first discovered the significance of engagement in art. During an exhibition opening, a transvestite was arguing with her boyfriend loudly at the doorstep of the gallery and the visitors were throwing despising glances at them. After a while, she stopped crying and walked inside to visit the show and grab a drink but she must have felt so detached that she suddenly walked outside. Again after I understood the situation, I served them drinks and invited to walk inside and check the show any time they wanted. My friendly approach led to a conversation among three of us and the conversation group enlarged as my friends approached and contributed to it. At that moment, I felt like people were more interested in the dynamics that I spontaneously created than the pieces of the show in the gallery. I believe it was not only a conversation but also an attempt to normalize the socially marginalized. Either on an individual or a social basis, the majority of people are inclined to be manipulated by the social codes or collective perception. This mental state is a simulation, a form of escapism of avoiding taking responsibilities for our agency in social life. But those people were actual, they had real lives, real pleasures, real pains and I was glad to have contributed to creating a different perspective with the power of engagement, not escapism.

Since then, I have been striving to create similar experiences with my installations which activate both emotional/conceptual processes as well as sensorial/perceptual processes. Because despite its ephemeral nature, experience changes one's

perception and remains in mind. I believe this is a stronger way to effect people just like Lawrence Weiner, a leading figure in Linguistic Conceptualism, said: the work is owned by the viewer once perceived, can never be taken back, and continues to live in the audience`s mind¹³.



Risk of Infection, Ozan Atalan, 2015

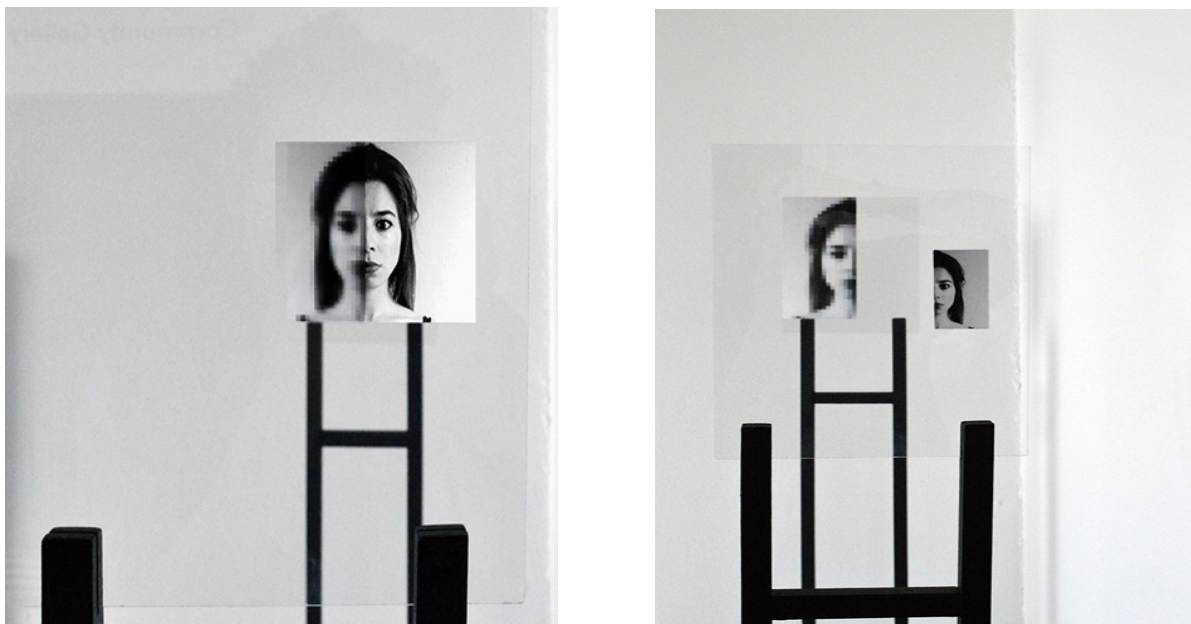
In Fall 2015, I made my first performance, *Risk of Infection*, based on the idea of an engagement with the audience, by summoning them to engage with my privacy and memories. I wanted to re-experience the sensation of a past experience – the embarrassment that I had when I was 9 during my recorded circumcision. It was a personal attempt and a therapeutic experiment to exorcise myself from the possession of a traumatic memory. I also intended to announce my vulnerability as a man in front of a crowd in a social structure in which men are conditioned to pretend to look strong. During those 15 minutes of intense emotional interaction, I discovered the power of engagement with the audience considering a social conditioning.

¹³ Ahu Antmen, 20. Yuzyil Bati Sanatinda Akimlar/Art Movements in the Art of 20th Century, Sel, Istanbul, 2008, p. 195.

3.5. My Role and Aesthetic Choice as An Artist

During my research in Public Memory in 2014, especially after attending the Cultures of Memory Symposium in the UK, I started to concentrate on the concepts of sensation, post-memory and the agency of the artist. Specifically focusing on post-memory, which refers to events prior to our birth, hence a mediated form of memory transmitted by narratives and visuals, I started to question the reliability of a constructed history. It was a questioning on the reliability of history through `the ancient dispute between word (ratio) and the picture`¹⁴. As an artist, I feel responsible for creating discourses counteracting the mainstream information which might be non-objective due to the politics of power structures. In this sense, I see myself as a counter-discourse creator so that the sensation of the event will always remain for next generations.

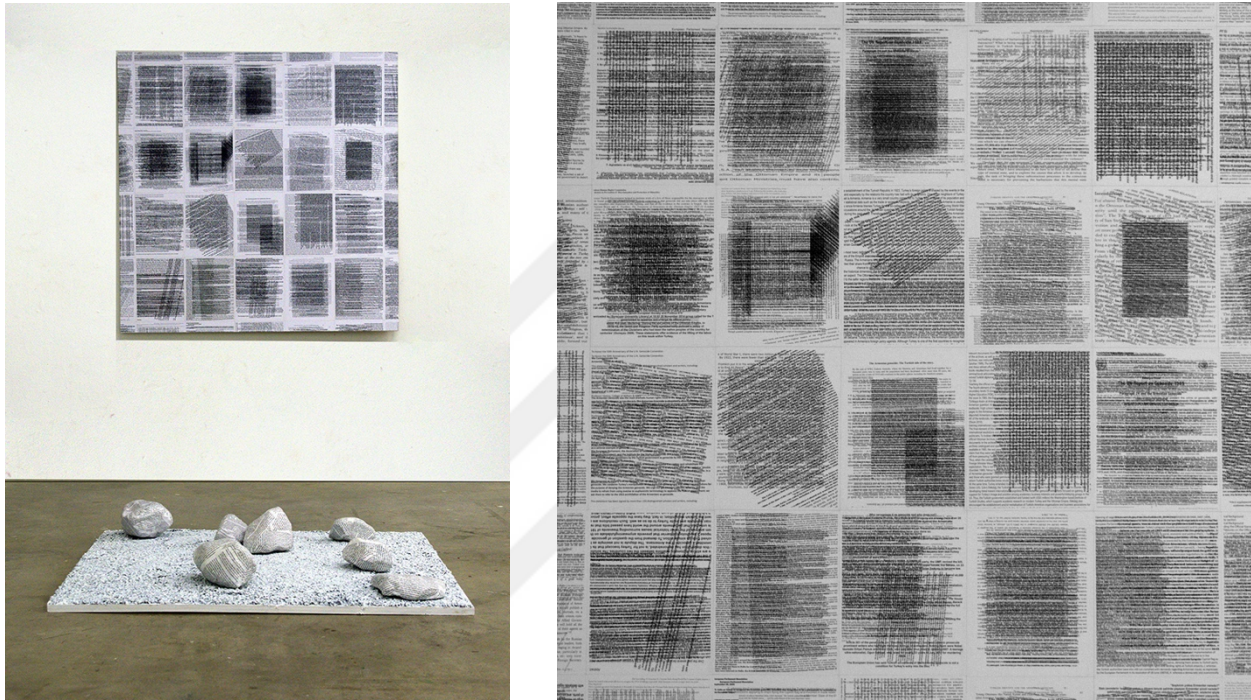
In my work *The Perception Mechanism*, I tried to translate a culturally-specific event into a more universal language. The work links the basic physics principle of Perspective and Depth Perception to the social reality in Turkey. The image is that of Ozge Unlutecan, an actress who was judged for expressing her thoughts on social media during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Commemorating her experience, *The Perception Mechanism* invites the viewer to physically position themselves so that both halves can be perceived as one, offering a physical separation but perceptual integration of her image. That one half of the image is pixelated refers to the applications of censorship in my home country. This is a work which requires additional textual information to be fully grasped by the viewer.



The Perception Mechanism, Ozan Atalan, 2015

¹⁴ Gunnaf F. Garlach, *On Some Conditions of Aesthetic Production in a World Changed by Media, Wahnnehmung/Perception*, Die Gestalten Verlag, Berlin, 1996, p. 25.

In my other work, *Post-Memory*, moving from the question of whether text could still deploy meaning despite its overwhelming illegibility, I wanted to question the reliability of post memory by merging memory-creating and recording documents from different perspectives about the Armenian Question. It also illustrates a confused and fearful mind of a Turkish citizen.



Post Memory, Ozan Atalan, 2014

As a man of this age, the postmodern idea of blurring borders and the unification of culturally constructed binary oppositions have also influenced my comprehension of contemporary aesthetics, which is supported by Jacques Ranciere's idea that it is precisely this belonging together of "pure form" and the mundane that comprises the aesthetic regime¹⁵. I have always enjoyed embedding abstract and real life imagery into each other. This is also very related to Ranciere's understanding that art refers to a combination of an inevitably unconscious creation with a conscious intention to produce; in other words, identicalness of "Logos" and "Pathos"¹⁶, but I would personally add "Ethos" since effectiveness of art also relies on the artist's identity as a resource of experience¹⁷.

¹⁵ Hal Foster, What's the Problem With Critical Art? London Review of Books, Vol. 35 No. 19, 10 October 2013, p. 14-15.

¹⁶ Jacques Ranciere, Estetik Bilinçdisi/The Aesthetic Unconscious, Ara-lik Publications, Izmir, 2006, p. 25.

¹⁷ In Aristotle's Philosophy, Ethos refers to the Writer's Character or Image somehow related to the ethics, Logos refers to the logical arguments and Pathos refers to the consideration of the emotions of the audience. These are three basic principles which Aristotle argued to persuade an audience of a specific position. (Dr. John R. Edlund, Cal Poly Pomona- <http://web.calstatela.edu/faculty/jgarret/3waypers.html>)

Other than following Ranciere`s approach on Contemporary Aesthetics by means of seeing artistic choices as choices of systematic thoughts, I also visit poetry, absurdism and magical realism as various ways to define my aesthetics. I have been keen to explore poetry as a device to deconstruct grammatical structures and to decode the established structures of meaning, absurdism as a device of altering rational or empiricist logic, and magical realism as a device to twist reality.

Most importantly, during my MFA research, **I have learned how to let what I would like to say find its own form of embodiment, rather than pushing it into a preconceived aesthetic approach.**

My graduate school works have always had a political and social critical aspect to them: they constituted responses to Gezi Park Protests, my circumcision ritual, social media, Feast of Sacrifice, and the Armenian Question, which find their roots in cultural and/or religious applications. But I would avoid considering my work “political” as a genre because I strongly agree with the idea that every art work is inherently political. I don`t consider myself as an activist or advocate of any specific philosophy. In this sense, I feel entitled to say that I am using my agency by producing work based on the autobiographical projections of broader political contexts. I would like to create individual change in perceptions, which would contribute to a social change. Therefore, I confidently relate to the idea that art is a political activity that enables people to derive new potential meanings from numb human sensations¹⁸.

To conclude, I am willing to follow Chekhov`s idea: "The solution to a problem and the correct way of posing the question are two completely separate things. And only the latter is an artist's responsibility."

4. MFA EXHIBITION WORKS

"Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man . . . do not think as a thinker . . . think as a living, real being . . . think in Existence."

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach

4.1. A Utopia: Dream of Unlearning and Unknowing

Just like concepts evolve from intuition, my current work *Default Settings: Dasein* derived from my dream of unlearning and unknowing: imagining what it would be like to live without knowing anything. This is why I have always been interested in doing things about which I have no knowledge, such as getting lost in cities and finding my own way,

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, Farkli Dunyalari Dusunmek/ Thinking Worlds: The Moscow Conference on Philosophy, Politics, and Art/ Sanat, Eylemsizlik ve Siyaset/Art, Inaction and Politics, Metis Press, Istanbul 2012, p. 224.

and other similar experiences that invoke my intuitive capabilities to create my own knowledge from the given data.

I believe culture is numbing, and it is hard to keep the individual awareness active all the time. I don't like to be a part of contexts which reduce people and situations into stereotypes. Jean Dubuffet exemplifies this mind-conditioning aspect of culture in which people ignore what they see of the natural or cultural phenomena with their own eyes, stating that it is extremely rare to find someone who can confess that they don't actually like a Raphael painting or a Racine tragedy¹⁹. Because just like in this art work analogy, it is difficult for one to realize and admit that they actually don't like something historically and institutionally acknowledged due to the fear of collective rejection.

I was also heavily inspired by the gestures of The Cynics, which included their focus on the tension between the rules and the facts of life (hence the coded values of civilization and the nature). They undermined the social rules by living in accordance with the virtues of a human in nature, adopting a natural life style, and managing a life in accordance with their authentic desires. They were not affected by the politics of desire, did not mince their words (parrhesia), and they paid more attention to developing forms of socio-critical praxis rather than creating doctrines²⁰.

Omar Khayyam, a Persian mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet, who was an esoteric persona during the reign of Great Seljuq Empire, has always been a great influence to my thinking in terms of his brave gesture against Sultans' religious and sociopolitical rules during his era. As a part of my Eastern heritage, his ideas have had a huge impact on my work's main ontological arguments of over rationalization, the integration of polarizations, and the importance of the actual experience. They helped me form an eclectic structure for my work as could be seen in his quatrains:

*Remove the concerns of existence and non-existence from your mind;
Stop thinking about the unapproachable and get to know yourself.
Fill your glass with the wine, take a deep breath;
Because you don't know how many breaths you have more to take.*

...

*I know the facades of being and nihility;
And the inner sides of both ascending and falling;
Why does it matter to go beyond destiny
I am already fed up with all sorts of knowledge.²¹*

These lines also influenced the way my works could be perceived as the result of an existentialist anxiety to recapture the passion of living, by reminding my audience of the

¹⁹ Jean Dubuffet, *Bogucu Kultur/ Asphyxiating Culture*, Dost, Ankara, 2010, pg 5.

²⁰ Nazile Kalayci, *Skop Bulten, Dogruyu Soylemek: Hakikat, Elestiri ve Toplumsalilik / Skop Bulletin, Telling the Truth: Truth, Criticism and Socialization*, 5/1/2013.

²¹ Omer Hayyam, *Butun Dortlukler/All the Quatrains*, Cem, Istanbul, 1998, pg. 41-57.

basics of life. This explains how the title of my works “Default Settings: Dasein” emerged.

Considering my inspirations above, I dream of an installation where the natural and the man-made are interdependent, divorced from the stereotype “man versus nature” with the following further considerations.

4.2. Anthropocene

Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings exist as the most important species on the planet. Its accompanying world view concentrates on human values and experiences, disregarding other organisms and entities entirely. In accordance with this, Anthropocene refers to the most recent geologic period in which Earth systems are altered by human influence. I believe the Earth has started to become overwhelmed by this control obsession of humanity. Our endless fantasy world, which materially culminates in a highly industrialized transformation of raw material, is leading to a lack of respect for nature.

Anthropomorphism, gentrification, and artificial intelligence are some of the concepts that evolve from the anthropocentric approach. With anthropomorphism, we attribute human paradigms to animals and plants. We gentrify, disrespecting the authentic demographics of even our own species, ignoring cultural-relativity. Contemporary scientists even expect Artificial Intelligence to `think and feel` like a human being, measuring it by its ability to pass as human²². Considering all these, I believe all the social and ecological problems stem from this anthropocentric understanding. **My take on Anthropocene is to see it as form of awakening from a collective alienation.**

Therefore, in such a period of time when human culture is based less on what the facts of the world actually are than on how they are perceived, my thesis work is primarily a response to the underestimated importance of natural and cultural phenomena that are beyond our control. It is a critique of the conceit of humanity to wastefully transform nature beyond our basic effort to survive. Because, I simply believe reality does not exist in the human mind, unlike the protagonist O’Brien stated in George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four²³.

4.2.1. A False Dichotomy

Anthropocentrism entails a deep distinction between human and nature. In terms of my comprehension of nature, I share the same opinion as Nicholas Chernyshevsky: nature is indifferent and neutral to the man, it is neither an enemy of us, nor a friend²⁴. Metaphorically speaking, snow can be fatal as well as it can be pretty while watching it from the windows of our warm domestic places. My work reflects my insight that

²² Benjamin H. Bratton, Outing I.A.: Beyond the Turing Test, The New York Times, February 23, 2015.

²³ George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-four, Martin Secker&Warburg Ltd, New York, 1987, p. 535.

²⁴ Nicholas Chernyshevsky, Sanatin Gerceklikle Estetik Iliskileri/The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality, Evrensel Press, Istanbul, 2012, pg 44.

humanity - at least during our life time which is a transitional space between birth and death - has no other separate existence from nature and the civilization we are born into. I support the unison of natural environment, social environment and individual physical and mental existence—as similarly stated in *The Waking Life* by Eamonn Healy: our lives consist of biological, anthropological and cultural strings²⁵.

Taking on this human-nature polarization as a fallacy, I would like to connect my comprehension of nature as objective reality with culture as a form of constructed reality, eliminate the fallacy of dichotomy of human-nature, and create a counter-discourse of the anthropocentric approach towards nature.

4.2.2. Transformation

It is simply impossible for human to chemically create raw material *ex novo* (from the beginning) or terminate its physical existence. In my work, I move from the idea that human is nature, and material can only be subject to a transformation via the vehicles of our cultural existence just like science and technology. Hence I see transformation as a vehicle for abolishing the constructed nature-human dichotomy.

In general, while the “Branch in Motion” is my personal commentary on perception of time, the fish tank and the moving image part addresses the spatiality from an Existentialist perspective, considering that Existentialism offers two notions of existence: time and space²⁶. Both base on a perceptually integrated mental image despite their dualist looks, either physically separated (tank and the video) or heterogeneously combined (the branch in motion).

²⁵ Richard Linklater, *The Waking Life*, 2001, USA, 99 mins.

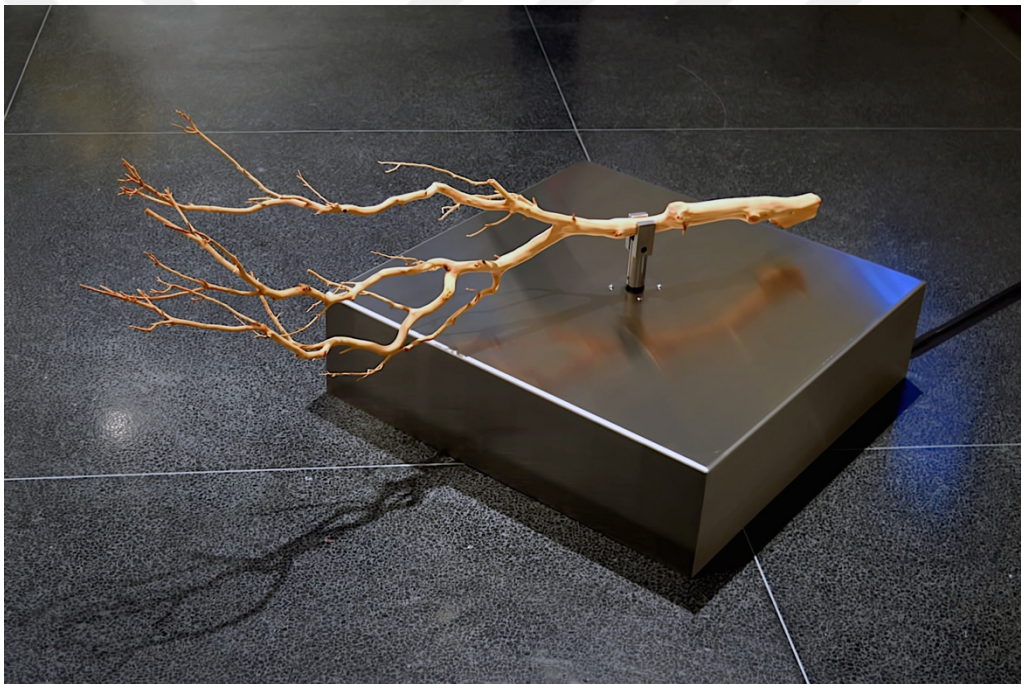
²⁶ Engin Genctan, Ankara University Magazines Database, *Varoluscu Psikolojinin Temel İlkeleri/Main Principles of Existentialist Theory*, Vol: 7 Issue:: 1 DOI: 10.1501/Egifak_0000000417 Publishing Date: 1974, pg. 15.

4.3. Time

"We have nothing of our own except time, which even the homeless can experience."

Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*²⁷

I contemplated an object which puts together the natural and the constructed. In the work, nature is considered as a form which is older than history of man and which will exist after a possible extinction of humanity. While the motor mechanism creates a motion, it also animates the branch which is a symbol of objective reality. The object is a co-existence of nature and the man-made.



Considering the idea of transformation, the motor which creates the motion for the branch is an industrialized version of raw material in nature. Likewise, the material choice of using a sandblasted branch also relies on the same idea of transformation.

My branch in motion is not a surreal clock. It is an object which incorporates the human-made and the natural with an existentialist approach to time. Time is a convenient phenomenon which is part of objective reality which exists without human intervention, but on the other hand, it is subject to being measured into units like seconds, minutes,

²⁷ Guy Debord, *Gosteri Toplumu ve Yorumlar/The Society of The Spectacle (and the Comments)*, Ayrinti Press, Istanbul, 1996, pg 84.

hours, days, months and years. It is an abstract overlap of what it is and how it is perceived, and reality and perception.

In this body of work, I wanted to transcend the perceptual characteristics of time. It loses its culturally coded units and its constructed-aspect vanishes. In this materialized combination of subjective logic and objective rationalism, by irrationalizing the cultural construction of time, I search for a universal language of time beyond our cultural differences. I do not aim for strife or tension, but a reminder of the unison of man and nature, by going beyond the popular conception “man versus nature” or vice versa.

The composition of “branch in motion” is horizontal to address people around. I wanted to create a specific visual effect by assembling the coldness of inorganic metal box and the warmth of an organic branch, not for causing a fight between both, but for creating a co-existence within the same object. The duration between each tick is also not one second, I wanted to break the expected and use an undefinable time-gap, staying out of the cultural “aspect ratio” of time. The time gap between each spin is a fractional unit between 3-4 seconds and it completes a 360 degrees cycle in 2 minutes and 30 seconds. This choice is irrational, arbitrary and by chance; but the context is to create an intended ambiguity in order to alter our perception of time and capture a poetic effect. Speaking of “the poetics”, I refer to an intended alteration of meaning in order to build a new one, just like Nazim Hikmet, the Turkish poet, played with the rational causality of time and place in his poem: “...your letter that didn't come crumples in my hand”.

Another point which helped me conceptualize the work was Antonio R. Damasio's description of some of his patients who had serious brain damage as “knowing but not feeling”²⁸. These patients were able to operate rationally, they could understand circumstances, but they lost their capabilities to foresee the results of their actions and developed apathy even against facts. **In a world of manipulation and over rationalization, I want to reverse “knowing but not feeling” into a state of “feeling but not knowing” to make an argument against over-rationalization.** Over-rationalization relies on extreme use of logic and reasoning to construct a justification for the facts that one's action causes, and it creates a delusion distancing from objective reality. It also refers to a form of alienation caused by the overload of information, which deteriorates one's actual desires and disables one's ability to comprehend life, by disregarding the very individual sensation, passion and sensibility of living. I would like to support visceral actions, and intuitive abilities by being timeless in a specific time.

Therefore, focusing on the poetics of time, I do not want to refer to a business meeting at a specific date and time, instead to invite the audience to think about our impotence against the constant loop of time during our lives as well as making them feel “being there at that very moment”. In this sense, the object, which I would define as an interactive sculpture, prioritizes moment over time. It is not a clock, but a personal

²⁸ Antonio R. Damasio,, Descartes`in Yanilgisi: Duygu, Akil ve Insan Beyni/Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, Varlik Press, Istanbul. 2006, pg. 62.

interpretation of time, plying between being a literal indicator of time and and creating a poetic influence of it.

4.4. Space



Any time I traveled between the European and Asian parts of Istanbul, I could see no difference geographically and ecologically, even though we culturally divided two territories into Asia and Europe. Building on this, I wanted to create a physical segregation, but perceptual aggregation of an image. I also wanted it to be a reflection of my autobiographic alienation experience in terms of the domestication of nature and alienation through the basic dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion. Video installation section of *Default Settings: Dasein* explores how nature, indifferent to our existence, can be domesticated and alienated in our cultural habitat by creating a duality of interior and exterior space embedded in the same body of work. On the one hand, the fish tank in the gallery embodies the removal and isolation of its plants from their natural environment. On the other hand, the fish tank in the video is itself removed from its expected context, stranded in the middle of a natural environment yet simultaneously unreachable to the viewer. I believe the video adds a polysensory quality to the work. The digital loop in the video, the biological loop in the tank and the mechanical loop of the branch altogether constitute a metaphor for the existing loops in life. Humanity is in a constant loop of material life limited to time and space from an Existentialist

perspective. At this point I think it would be relevant to include a quote from the movie, *Synecdoche New York*:

“What was once before you - an exciting, mysterious future - is now behind you. Lived; understood; disappointing. You realize you are not special. You have struggled into existence, and are now slipping silently out of it. This is everyone's experience. Every single one. The specifics hardly matter... It is time for you to understand this²⁹.”

As for my decision behind the aesthetics of the work: with the chrome-plated fish tank stand, I intended to make it less visible besides animating the work with the reflections of the audience walking around. This also invests in helping them engage with the work. The aquatic plants included are quite common and invasive species, called *Salvina* and *Ceratophyllum*, and they dominate the water gradually by creating an ecosystem on their own. As long as water and light, which are essential for photosynthesis are provided, they grow, die and grow again. My aim is to present nature as it is in its own life circle, without gentrifying it or without trying to make it look pretty or ugly, visually in contrast to the idealized look of the stand which represents our fantasies. But on the other hand, despite their diverse visual languages, the fish tank, stand and the plants co-exist as an individual body. The work is an intersection of unmediated world, industrial transformation and a digitized nature. There is a hierarchic order in the vertical composition of the work: a fancy stand carries the modest plants, which is my ode to nature. I believe all these aspects trigger a conversation between the ideas of transformation, the loop of natural and anthropological life and the integral relationship of human and nature.

The process of producing also constituted a primary and real life experience of my subject matter and contributed to my conceptualization process. I visited three metal companies consistently – some of them had heavy machinery which is almost as old as Industrial Revolution and some of them had newest technologies. I also visited Biology Department multiple times to search for the best-fit aquatic plant for the work. Seeing nature packed “in an institutional building” reminded me of vulnerability of nature and created a different sense of alienation, just like being in industrial environments where tough machinery caused a similar sensation.

4.5. My Cultural Heritage Within the Work

In *Default Settings: Dasein*, it is possible to see the subconscious projections of my cultural heritage as well. Especially in Trace part of Turkey where I was born and raised, people are able to belly dance to high-tempo music with sad lyrics – they seem to celebrate their sadness in an absurd sense, just like I `celebrated my trauma` with a white shirt in my performance *Risk of Infection*.

Similar to that, and metaphorically speaking, borrowed brides used to have symbolic and temporary marriages with young sons of rich families during the Ottoman reign.

²⁹ Charlie Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York*, 2008, USA, 124 mins.

These pseudo-marriages were intended to teach the young guys how to operate a good sexual life within a real marriage. These women were highly respected and well paid, but on the other hand, if they fell in love with the guys who they were hired for, the way that society perceive them would drastically shift to prostitution culturally. This is an obsolete tradition which I am totally against, but it is very strange to see so many dualities embodied in one person - these women were simultaneously holy and whore, respected and not, and they operate both inside the marginalized and accepted channels in society.

Going further back in history, pre-Islam Middle Asian Turkish mythology rests upon an understanding of universe where there is no absolute good and bad, and where the nocturnal, moon and water are not less important than day, sun and fire symbolically. Comprehension of life used to be under the influence of the belief of an absolute unison of whole universe. All the non-human entities were believed to have spirits. This object-subject interdependency is fundamental to the idea behind my thesis work and it did not allow me to pursue a solely anthropocentric philosophy or an entirely object oriented ontology.

Being born and raised in Turkish culture inevitably affected the way I perceive things from different socio-cultural points of view. These and other similar interconnections between seemingly-irreconcilable dualities are subconscious cultural footprints of the idea of integration of dualities and my interest in transitions and creating different layers in my work.

My most recent influential life experience was in Los Angeles, where fantasies and facts overlap. It was influential to observe the dynamics of a city where a broad spectrum of constructed culture (including poverty, homeless and celebrity cultures, queer culture, material and spiritual consumption, driving culture, film industry, sex industry, religious facilities, different races and ethnic backgrounds and identities, etc.) and intact nature were embedded into each other. Living in a city where a globally-leading culture is produced and where nature is preserved as it is obviously created a deep impact on my work. LA LA Land functions as the highest form of our fantasies, juxtaposed to the Pacific, mountains and sheer nature.

5. CONCLUSION

"I feel therefore I am free."

Audre Lorde

I believe in the universalizing power of feelings no matter how different we are in terms of our intellectual capabilities. My gesture in my practice is to create counter-stances against culturally-constructed polarizations, and cultural prescriptions. My MFA thesis work centers around opening room for the intuitive capabilities of the audience in such an over-rationalized and polarized world, and questions the meaning of one's existence in the cultural and natural heritage we are living in. I never underestimate the power of nature and humans' ability to transform it, but I criticize the the limits and vehicles of this

transformation for the sake of our fantasy world beyond our basic needs. In this sense, I am responsive to Albert Camus` protagonist stranger Meursault`s response during his criminal judgment, when he said the overwhelming heat of sun caused him to kill the Arab man³⁰. In this novel, I believe the real strangers were the judicial people who were detached from their own needs and desires by the manipulation of unconscious collective perception. For this reason, in my work, there is always room for the unknown, the undefinable, and the intuitive to invoke the stimulating power of alienation and existentialist anxiety to find and take responsibility for who we really are, which is the only impossible means of turning back to basics and which can only be achieved through reconsideration of our place in life. The specific part of the thesis work “Dasein/Existence” also stems from this Existentialist perspective. Hence, the installation focuses on the significance of building an intact perception through life and navigating between their objective reality and different levels of representation within a broad spectrum of media, including nature itself and a highly industrially transformed version of it. In congruence with the essence of my work, I hereby end my text to avoid “over-rationalization”.



Default Settings: Dasein, Ozan Atalan, 2016

³⁰ Albert Camus, Yabancı/The Stranger, Can Art Publications, Istanbul, 2011, pg 95.

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