

‘You are an iconoclast!’ author Lynne Tillman and artist Serkan Özkaya talk post-conceptualists, Pierre Menard and ‘massive stuff’

by Lynne Tillman •

Lynne: Serkan, I wanted to talk first about the difference between a neo-conceptualist and a conceptualist, since some of your works respond, or have responded to, conceptualists such as Joseph Kosuth.

Serkan: I’m not really familiar with the term “neo-conceptualist.” Is that what I am?

L: That’s what I was wondering. Is it you? Are you a neo-conceptualist? Or are you a post-conceptualist?

S: Neither, I would hope.

L: No. That’s not even a term, “post-conceptualist.”

S: I do know that my work almost always makes references to other work—to secondary creations or cultural products such as novels, artworks, or pieces of music.

L: How do you mean “secondary”?

S: Meaning, I’m not referring life as it is or trying to imitate nature, but instead I implicate other work that is about life—work that is the deliberate construction of another human being.

L: It’s called art, I think.

S: I was trying to define it, I guess.

(Laughter)

L: So, does the term “neo-conceptualist” mean anything to you?

S: It might, actually. There are artists in my generation who are making conceptual work, but I don’t have much of an interest in trying to get into the art world or defining it in such terms. It’s a vast world right now, with more than its share of big, shiny objects, but even the drawings and the humble stuff seem to have found a place as salable objects.



David (inspired by Michelangelo) 2012, New York (photo by Brett Beyer)

L: Why have things become so big? Why have art objects gotten so much bigger? Perhaps this is a question I shouldn't be directing to you, it's too big itself. But why is it that we expect to look at massive stuff? Except, of course, one could make the opposite argument: with new technology, we expect things to get even smaller. So, we're in-between desires for extremely large-scale work—whether it's a Richard Serra sculpture or Paul McCarthy's recent installation at the Park Avenue Armory, or tiny microdots of information that we'll wear on our eyeglasses or carry in a pocket.

S: Each scale offers a similar sensation, I think, because our bodies don't really get too much bigger or too much smaller; we're pretty much always dealing with the same mass. The artistic experience is also a bodily experience; it's something you face with your body and with your existence. This experience can be triggered remotely. Even if you don't personally encounter a work, but you think of it and can conceive of it, then you somehow involve your body in relation to it. That's the performative aspect of art, and it's also why we still have galleries and museums instead of just relying on reference images in books. Or, when you think of music, it needs to be in the air; it needs that presence. Art needs that presence, too. It's not a total abstraction, like literature.

L: I'm thinking about your work in relationship to music. And making a big jump because we haven't really discussed your work and specific pieces (laughter). But from early on—from when I first knew you—you were sending letters to museums with specific requests. In one case, you wrote to the Louvre asking that the Mona Lisa be turned upside down.

Now, I'm thinking about music because such work is very abstract, and it's playing with the mind in a way. It's abstract, it's a move. It's never going to happen. The Louvre is not going to put the Mona Lisa on its head, you know?

S: No?

L: I doubt it. Just as you can never capture music—because it's in the air—you cannot necessarily capture the art of those letters. There's some relationship between your early beginnings in art with music, which I know means a lot to you. Would you talk about that a little?

S: I have a couple different takes on music. I do play the drums, which I always considered a hobby and which was never my main thing. We made all these albums and did plenty of concerts, but it's really not my thing. I don't consider myself very talented in playing music, but it makes me feel good, so I will do it in a room with my friends without concern for broadcasting it. But when it comes to art, I want to proclaim my inventions or findings or works. Then, I have this other relationship to music; I like to listen to and write on music.

L: You're a great listener to all types of music.

S: Not all types. More and more, I listen less and less, and I keep going back to the same things. If you want to narrow it down, my interest probably starts with Wagner, and then keeps going. Even today, I'm still really keen on German opera—Henze or Wolfgang Rihm, and so on. Music is a very important part of my everyday living. It's like reading a book. I have to sit down and listen to a long piece of music that makes me think. It really feeds me, nurtures me.

L: You bring to mind Stephen Prina. Do you know his work?

S: A bit, yes.

L: He's an old friend of mine and, I think, a very good, intriguing artist. He started out in bands, but he works with music, playing it, scoring films, working with scores on gallery walls. He's also a conceptual, or neo-conceptual, artist.

S: We can divide music people into two camps: the composers, who are really into abstraction and who live in their own world as if participating in a religion. Then there are the performers who are very much at peace with themselves. Performance provides a kind of satisfaction derived from intense bodily effort and the sense of being one with all these people that you're playing with.

L: I know from living with a musician that, when it's working for David (Hofstra), when he's playing with people and they're really making something together, it is, I think, a wonderful experience. It doesn't happen every time, of course. But I want to bring this back to your development as an artist and also to your thoroughly international quality. This conversation is, after all, for a magazine that's about Turkish culture and politics, yet such local concerns don't seem to come into your work in any kind of explicit way.

S: First of all, I am not sure there's actually any development in my work.

L: Let's say difference, then.

S: I keep finding myself being rather single-minded, and not open for many things. I feel like there's a plan...

L: Are you saying there is no change?

S: There might not be. I'm not sure. Like they say about a groundhog: He's got one trick; one good one. A lot of artists said that, actually. You could say about Christo that he just did one work and one work only. I'm not saying that I'm repeating the same thing; I'm doing many different projects, but...

L: Well, you have one mind. You have a mind.

S: And it's a single one.

L: You don't have multiple minds. Most of us don't have multiple minds. We have a mind, whatever a mind is; we have a brain, at least. I don't know where the mind is, it is an abstraction; but we work out of it, and it's the complex of everything we know and don't know.

S: In terms of politics, though, I always thought that work like my project of letter writing was actually a cry from this young guy who learned everything from newspapers, or a couple of foreign magazines that ended up in his hands, or who encountered hearsay, like, "You know, there's this artist, who wrapped the German parliament," or something to that effect. And that's how I learned about...

L: But why did that excite you? There you are, a young guy in Istanbul, and you hear about this building being wrapped. What was exciting to you about it?

S: I don't know. I was talking about this with Pavel Büchler, a Czech artist. He's a little older than I am, and he said that in Czechoslovakia, where he grew up, there was nothing; again, no museums, no publications, nothing. He said, somebody, someday, at the academy, would come up with a little magazine in a foreign language they wouldn't understand, and they would look at these black and white images. There would be a photo of table with a typewriter on it, and they would get so excited. They had no idea what it was, but they could feel

that it was a conceptual effort of an art piece. So I don't know, maybe it's the Zeitgeist. Before that though, I was really crazy about Leonardo and Michelangelo and all the masters, and I would have their books and try to make copies of their paintings.

L: You make beautiful drawings. The piece where you copy newspapers—what's the name of it?

S: Today Could Be A Day of Historical Importance.

L: There is a hand involved in that. Your hand. Very much like a Leonardo or a Michelangelo.

S: It's also a parody.

L: Yes, but parody, I think—and Walter Benjamin thinks—always shows...

S: Me and Walter.

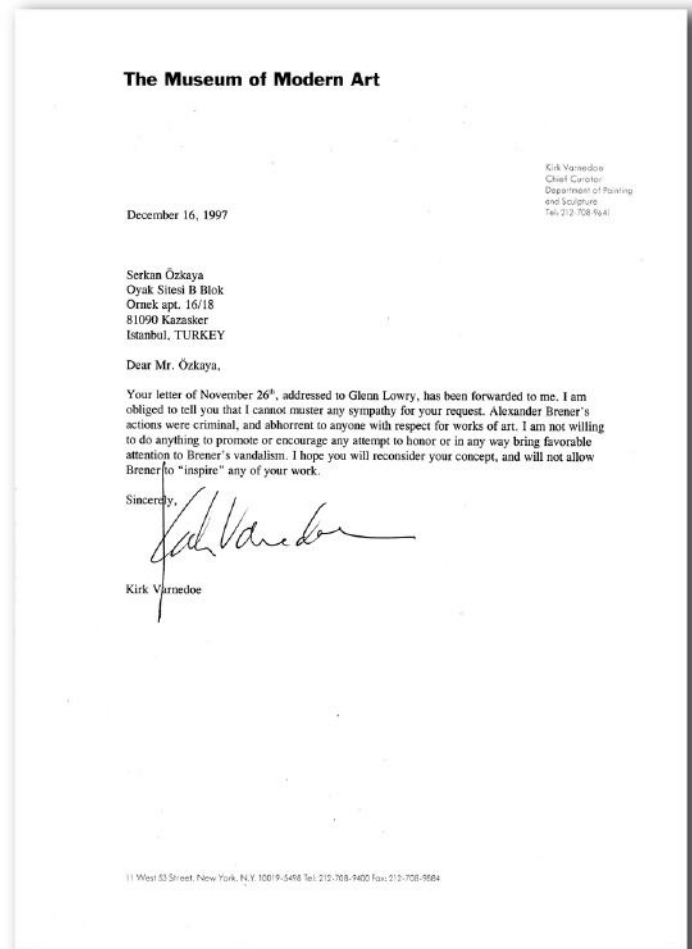
L: Right, Walter and I—we both believe that parody is always part love.

S: Yes, of course.

L: It's different from satire. When you are parodying, you're embracing the object, loving the object.

S: Definitely. That was my situation in Istanbul and I would think then—now it's less apparent I guess—but then for me all those things were kind of political. These acts were political because they would put the individual face-to-face with the gigantic institution, like the Louvre. Then again, they're not political in terms of engaging with the conflicts about the Kurds and Turks and such. It's more absolute in some ways. It's about the individual and the history, the institution, the museum, the art institution—the most important institution in the world, the Louvre—and this little guy facing it, trying to turn the whole institution upside down. Then again, my idea was that I am an art lover. Remember the first thing I said in my presentation in 1997? "I am not an artist, I'm an art lover." I think the museums are responsible to the art lovers in the world. That's why they exist. It's like a democracy. The art is preserved for you, for the art lover. The works in a museum actually belong to you.

L: When you showed me the letters between you and the head of the Louvre, I was very surprised



Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1997-present. Work-in-progress. (Detail: Kirk Varnedoe's letter of December 16, 1997)

that he had written back.

S: I know, and he's a really funny guy. I never met him, Pierre Rosenberg, but my painter friend Ömer Uluc had. He's no longer at the Louvre. Ömer said he looked at everything as if he was looking at a piece of shit.

L: Yet he wrote you back.

S: Yeah, and then I called him, and his secretary answered. I was going to Paris and I wanted to arrange a meeting. Then, between her poor English and my poor English, we were trying to make conversation and I said, "I wrote a letter about Mona Lisa" and she responds, "Oh it's you!" (laughter) "No, no, no, no, no, no, Monsieur Rosenberg has no time!" But they knew about it. It's good when people have a sense of humor.

L: But then when you wrote to MoMA?

S: Yes, to Glenn Lowry, and then my letter was forwarded to Kirk Varnedoe.

L: ...about wanting to put a dollar sign on a Mondrian. And he wrote back?

S: Oh yeah, and then he took all the effort to warn me, and then declare what he thinks about it and so on.

L: But it's interesting it was taken seriously.

S: Well, I think those are great ideas! Wasn't it in Albert Camus's *The Plague* where the protagonist imagines that when he sends the manuscript to the publishing house he wants the publisher, after reading it, to stand up and utter the words to his staff: "Gentlemen, hats off!"?

(Laughter)

L: It also reminds me to mention literature, in relationship to your idea of the secondary that we were first discussing. When I think about Borges and his *Don Quixote*, his re-writing of it, "Pierre Menard," I see something of that in your work. What if Borges had written to the publisher of Cervantes, and said: "I am proposing that I write..."

S: Like, "here's my novel, would you consider it?"

L: "Would you consider doing it?" In a sense, Borges was one of the first appropriationists.

S: Cervantes was an appropriationist, too.

L: I guess you could say, then, every writer is, in some sense, because certainly Shakespeare appropriated stories from others. But the way in which Borges did it was truly different. I would argue it was appropriation in the way we think of it now; not just using an earlier story, but using it with the idea that, to duplicate it, is to make it different. That's a different concept from appropriating a story. It's that the duplicate, even if it's the same thing, is like a Sherrie Levine.

S: Exactly.

L: ...is its own thing.

S: Doesn't Don Quixote start with a paragraph where Cervantes says, "In fact, this is something I found and I'm translating it now?" or "This is really written by this Arabian guy Benengeli?" There's that one layer in the beginning.

L: Did Cervantes do that in part to avoid problems with the Church?

S: Could be.

L: I know that Chaucer, for instance—although he's earlier than Cervantes—when he wrote the Canterbury Tales, he wrote a forward as a kind of an apology for what would happen in his tales, and that was to appease the Church.

Let's go to your ideas about seriousness and comedy, because I think these considerations run deep in your work. To be serious is sometimes to be funny. To be funny can be very serious. One of the things that I like so much about your work is that it's always on that border. It's funny, it's serious. That's the same thing, isn't it?

S: People ask me that question all the time. People who don't even know my work, they tell me, that they can't understand if I'm joking or I'm being serious. That happens to me in personal life as well, not only in work. So are you saying my work...



*Mona Lisa Upside Down, 1996-present. Work-in-progress.
(Photo by Baris Ozcetin)*

L: No. I wouldn't ask you that question. What I'm saying is that you conflate the funny and the serious. That people respond like that, they're responding to something that's in the work, but it's not that you're making a joke, or not making a joke. It's that there's a different philosophical attitude about what an art object is.

S: When you talked about *Mona Lisa Upside Down*, you said you're sure the officials at the Louvre would never agree to do it. But at the same time there's some kind of participation on that end, too. You're also surprised that they wrote me back instead of just dumping it in the trash. Maybe they don't know if I'm joking either. We don't know either. It exists in that in-between space. Is it a serious proposal, or is it a joke? Is this guy pulling our leg? Does he really want to do that? Is he a serious artist? Would it make sense? I bet you Leonardo has done it many times, to see how the painting was going. That's what painters do.

L: Yes.

S: You know? They put it upside down or face it to a mirror.

that struck me is if you turn it upside down, there's more negative space, or there's at least as much negative as positive space. So, half of the canvas is dark, and that is conceptually fascinating. What part should we be looking at: the part with the figures or the looming dark space? But when I say the Louvre would never do it, it's

L: Look at the great Velázquez, *Las Meninas*. In my novel, *Motion Sickness*, I wrote about that painting. One of the things

not because they're not thinking it's serious. Maybe you're right: one day it might happen that it would be done because we would be living in a different moment, when people could be looking at the Mona Lisa upside down, because it had for so long been looked at right side up.

S: Because we can't...

L: ...we can't see it anymore

S: We can't see it.

L: That's a strange thing, too, in a time of reproduction and a glut of images. Are you trying to make work that escapes those kinds of issues?

S: I would hope so, yes.

L: Is it a motivating force?

S: I'm not really sure what the motivation is. Unfortunately, the more I keep going, the more I find myself inventing rules for my own self or my own work. Sometimes I think of Schoenberg and how he came up with atonal music to free himself from the straightjacket of tonality, and then later in life he's burdened by all these rules about the 12-tone system—that this note has to come after that note etc.—and then atonal music becomes just another set of rules like tonality and it loses its liberating horizon. 12-tone music never reaches that level of atonal liberty, in fact. But more and more, I make rules for myself, saying, "OK, I'm only going to make work on people's creations." Say I'm going to work on a piece of pasta. Pasta is designed. The designer may be anonymous, but you know the thing is man-made; it's not a rock from the nature.

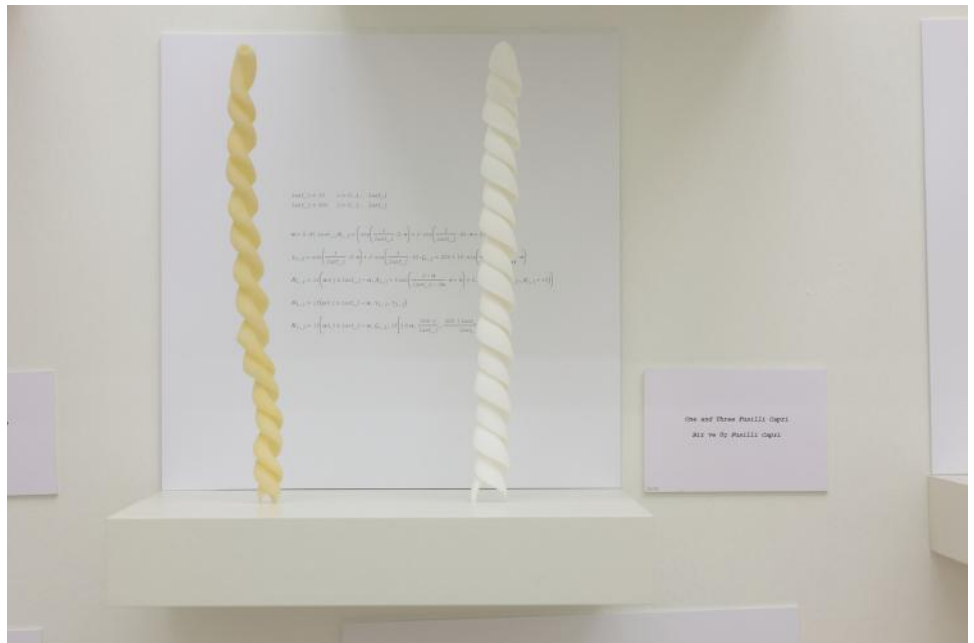
L: That was the work called One and Three Pasta.

S: And it's a reference to Kosuth.

L: The title?

S: The title. Also Michelangelo's David is a deliberate design by an artist. And afterwards, I was thinking to myself, "OK, no more human figures. I'm not going to make any work that refers to a concrete human figure." For some reason I just thought that was becoming lame.

L: But that's something I do in my writing all the time. "OK, you've done it this way, now don't do it that way; you wrote no coincidences in this novel, now use coincidence in the next." It's just a matter of playing



One and Three Fusilli Capri from One and Three Pasta 2012 (with George L. Legendre) (photo by Paris Ozcetin)

with different structures or different forms; you're making forms out of these concepts or rules.



Sudden Gust of Wind 2008, Bilsar, Istanbul (photo by Baris Ozcetin)

S: I'm not sure I'm going to go back to the older concept. I feel like the figure is too easy for me. I decided to act on my fascination with that letter-size paper; blank paper. It's something between the abstract and the concrete. It's something that we all know what it is. It's a letter-size paper—a letter sheet—but it's also a rectangle. And it's between two dimensional and three dimensional, because it's has almost no thickness, but once you bend it a little bit, it becomes an object. It's also super cheap. You can get one pack for just five dollars and get the thread and make a gigantic installation.

L: And what's the title of that?

S: Sudden Gust of Wind—a reference to Jeff Wall this time. And he refers to Hokusai, the Japanese woodcutter.

L: Yes. I saw your piece in New York. For a writer, apart from its other effects, that piece, with those blank sheets of ordinary paper shifting in the air, has a lot of resonance.

S: The most recent piece I made, *Mirage*, is basically a shadow, and precisely a shadow which doesn't even linger. It only shows up for 45 seconds and then goes away.

L: I would relate that latest work, *Mirage*, which I also saw, to *Sudden Gust of Wind*. You see shadows cast by the many papers hanging from thread. And I would relate *David*, the enormous *David* you made that went around on a truck in New York City, to turning the *Mona Lisa* upside down. These are both stock figures in the history of art, in a sense, and with each of them you've altered the context.

S: Which I think is super political, no?

L: Super political or just political?

S: Very political.

(Laughter)

With *David* I rotated that icon sideways and put it on a truck to take it on a road trip. When I first mentioned to somebody that I wanted to turn the *Mona Lisa* upside down he said, "Oh, that would be like turning the Jesus Christ upside down at a church." Putting an icon upside down is an insult.

L: Who was it who did the *Piss Christ* in the 1980s?

S: Andres Serrano.

L: The iconography of the Christian church has been used in...

S: Dennis Oppenheim did an upside down church; his public monument. And that caused a big uproar, actually.

L: It's funny how symbolic things are taken with dead seriousness.

S: The first David I built fell down and broke into pieces.

L: Where did it break?

S: That was in Istanbul, at the Istanbul Biennial, in 2005.

L: Was it lying on its side?

S: No, it was put on this pedestal.

L: Were you there when it fell down?

S: Yes, unfortunately I was. They were trying to install it, but then they just removed the crane too early. That's very iconoclastic and accidental!

L: Did anyone get hurt?

S: The installation crew was taken to the hospital.

L: What did they do wrong?

S: Oh, everything, basically. First of all they were hurrying up so much to put up that gigantic thing. And then with the crane, they put it up on the pedestal. But the crane was costing them money, so they wanted to get it back quickly. But they needed to attach piece first. There were three guys on top of it, pulling it, pushing it, and then they all came down together.

L: Oh God.

S: Yeah.

L: I want to return to something, and you don't seem to want to discuss this, but I'm going to be pushy about it. When you talk to an American artist about what it is about their work that's American and so on, people usually say things about...

S: ...their background.

L: Or how American ideas influence their work, or they're anti-American attitudes, etc. There's usually some sense of that. Now, with your work, I wouldn't be able to tell it from Turkish, French, or American work. I wouldn't know how. It's in reference to Western art, or it's engaged in Western art. So, I'm curious about what Turkishness is to you.

S: When I first started, I used to define my work as extremely Turkish and that was the impulse for me. Because I didn't have any originals around me, all that mattered were copies—not even copies, representations of copies.

It can be a Xerox page, it can be a story someone tells you. That was the whole inspiration. Whatever I was looking at became my umbilical cord to the Western art.

Hence the fascination with copies or agents, or representations of things; and I think this fascination is very powerful. I always had this feeling that I was at the wrong spot, at the wrong time. It's almost like there's a big art history, which has been written and is also being written at the same time, but not where I am. And we didn't even have any originals around. There was no museum. Nothing.

L: Do you mean no museum for...

S: For contemporary art.

L: Contemporary art.

S: ...or any. In Istanbul there was one museum, which was the State's Painting and Sculpture Museum. And almost every time you go there, the lights will be down and there would be a couple of security guards who would greet you and tell you that the power was out and that it was closed for the day. Then, if you insisted, they let you in; they would turn the lights on. That's the one museum in Istanbul, the biggest museum. All the paintings in storage were being damaged or stolen for years.

L: What kind of paintings are there?

S: Turkish, just Turkish. And, even if it started with the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish history of painting consists of painters who were sent to Paris to get educated, and who came back making paintings just like what they'd seen abroad.

L: Copies. There's the copy also.

S: Yes, there's the copy, but they didn't even consider it a copy. And this persists even today. An old friend of mine—I hope he's not going to read this interview—with whom I used to play in a band has a new band, a so-called rock band. I went to see them in concert once. It's just another rock band. I mean, who needs it? And he's my age, so it's not even a question of young energy. They did these cover songs. One cover was from Faith No More and the drummer just does what the drummer of Faith No More does. And the guitar player does the same thing. And then my friend opens and closes his mouth just like the singer of Faith No More would do and makes similar sounds. Here again it feels just like an imitation. It feels so empty. It didn't sound like music. It sounded like all these bits and pieces put together without the music, without the essence. So it felt like a copy; it felt like a shell to me—which is exactly what my work is. Look at David, it's just a shell, it's an imitation of itself. But I would like to think, just like in Borges, we're conscious of that fact.

L: I think art allows that. And unless your friend and his band were being parodic...

S: No, I don't think so.

L: What you're talking about raises an important question in terms of culture and globalism. So you're saying that in Turkey you had no models except copies of things that came and...

S: And very brief visits to Italy or places in Europe...

L: I guess the question is, why the necessity to look somewhere else for your models? Now what we're seeing in contemporary art, whether it's coming from Japan or India or Korea or Turkey or Africa, is a kind of mash-up. There's a mixture of styles, but so many of them are veering toward a more Western notion of contemporary art.

S: Because it's validated here, and the discourse is written here.

L: So, for a contemporary artist, let's say, working in China, there would be no art criticism in China that...

S: There is some.

L: No, but in the past, in the West, there would've been a Clement Greenberg or more recently a Rosalind Krauss—the idea being that there is a discourse around new work. But in China, perhaps there would be a discussion of the Ming Dynasty or...

S: I don't really know China that well, but I can give you an example from Turkey. There's this really interesting magazine that used to be published which featured discussions by these intellectual guys who would come together and talk about some Turkish artist's work or about a show. But all the references in those discussions would be made to Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and to whatever Turkish artist they happened to be talking about that day—that's it. There were no strings binding the work to some larger cultural story. It was just these three names—the biggest dead artists in recent memory—that framed the big criticism there. Nothing else was relevant.

L: Do you mean that in terms of contemporary Turkish life or Turkish culture?

S: Whatever. It could be Turkish or not, but I doubt they knew any of the international contemporaries. So, I would imagine some other names, at least. But it's always these three, four names; always dead, always safe, and that makes it a cliché.

L: I'm trying to understand the bigger problem here and why it is that things look the way they look in this so-called global art world. You're saying that in order for a viable contemporary art to take hold in these different cultures, the critic and the artist must conceive of it together.

L: It's even more fundamental than that. In Turkey, where the republic is barely 90 years old, the country's primary aim has been to catch up to Western civilization. Atatürk told the people, from today on, we are not Oriental, we are Occidental; we're looking towards the West, and we're going to catch up with their level of civilization.

In the last days of the Ottoman Empire, they used to send the talented kids and bright young scholars to Europe to learn some things and then bring them back. Now we have a hotshot curator who is proud of "bringing" contemporary art to Turkey. And there's this famous painter who thinks he "brought" abstract expressionism to Turkey—as if "bringing" some movement or style is creative or inventive.

L: But there have always been such exchanges within the West, with someone going to France for training or venturing on the so-called grand tour.

S: Yet this is almost like reverse imperialism or self-orientalism based on the prejudice that the good things are in the West, and all we can do is to go and get them and apply them in our society. It won't work.

L: So how do contemporary Turkish writers—apart from Orhan Pamuk—relate to contemporary art? Are there...

S: There are some. Thanks to recent protests, art has become a hot topic in Turkey. It has managed to infiltrate into the mainstream consciousness.

L: How did that happen?

S: These protests are mainly organized and executed by very young people; people in their teens and early 20s and 30s.

L: What is their protest?

S: It started with Gezi Park, where they were gassed and attacked by the police. They're really creative, these young people, and they're nonviolent; they're very cool and smart people and they work together as a diverse group. And they've taken to organizing a number of artistic programs and events. Then, there was a peak. Again the police were extremely brutal against all the protesters, young and old. They killed people, they gassed a lot of people, and they used brutal force. It was a horrible day for all of us. We felt extremely bad after that, and tried to reach out to our loved ones and friends, to see if they were OK. The next day, this young guy went to Taksim Square and stood there for about eight hours.

L: Not moving

S: Not moving. Just like that. And after about three hours, they noticed him, and some people started standing like him as well. It became this artistic performance. He's an artist, the guy who started it, Erdem Gunduz. The next day it was all over the headlines.

L: And how did the police react to people just standing there?

S: The police arrested the other people, but they didn't touch that one guy. And then many of the others encircled him with a human chain to protect him; it was pretty amazing.

L: And the protest was effective, yes? They're not going to destroy the park.

S: It's not really about the park. Hopefully they're not going to destroy the park, although there's still a big, brutal fight going on. Every day there's some protest for this or that, because people are not really in their element. They've been pushed to the edge for years now. They're reacting, and the reaction to their reactions has been so extreme that it has drawn all kinds of support, from every background.

L: Is it a sectarian versus non-sectarian clash?

S: Not necessarily.

L: But religion plays a part, no?

S: Religion plays a part. Religion plays a bigger and bigger part every day, but these people are so diverse. There are the Atatürk fans, there are religious people, there are secular people, there are young people, there are not so young people...

L: All protesting the government.

S: The government, yes, but it's really a human reaction. When people saw those young kids just standing there and the police beating them up and gassing them straight to their faces, they reacted with a basic human empathy.

L: People across Turkey became very upset, regardless of their positions?

S: A lot of them, yes. But we're still faced with all these power relationships.

L: Do you think it's going to affect the next election?

S: I would hope so, yes. These people do not belong to a specific political party or to one movement. The movement they belong to, if any, is diversity. In that respect, the election limit should be lowered if not altogether abandoned. It's 10 percent now, in order to be represented in the parliament; you have to get at least 10 percent of the votes overall. And only a few parties can do that. If it's lower, or if the limit is removed, more groups and views can be represented.

L: I see. So let's go back to your artwork in relationship to some of the ideas we've been talking about. To return to the issue of scale, I've noticed that you've begun addressing that in some way by giving attention to the smaller end of the spectrum—to the details. I'm thinking about the piece where you made the mold of the Teddy Bear's head. What is that called again?

S: Bring Me The Head of...

L: Bring Me The Head of... Which is such a grand title for such a...

S: ...silly piece.

L: It's not silly; it's just that you would hear, Bring Me The Head of... and would think of Judith carrying Holofernes's head on a plate. And Jack the Baptist carrying....

S: John the Baptist, we call him. (Laughter) Jack the Baptist. That sounds better. Jack the Ripper and John the Baptist.

L: In that piece you made a mold of a head, and took the mold to different restaurants.



Bring Me The Head of... 2008 Murat Pilav, Izmir

S: ...instead of museums or galleries. And they decided what the ingredients would be; what the material of the sculpture would be.

L: Each restaurant decides that.

S: Yes, according to the menu.

L: And people order it.

S: People order it from the menu. But you only pay for the food; you don't pay extra for the art.

L: What do you consider to be the art?

S: I think there are different levels. Fundamentally, it's about the experience, but to me it's really about the story. You were at the opening with Mirage...

L: Yes.

S: ...we're there, we think we've seen it, but what we've seen wasn't much, and what we felt was much more different than whatever we see on the video. To me, it's really the video, but it's even more than that—it's actually the story, "There was this shadow of a gigantic airplane in a gallery." And that's, to me, is enough. In order to generate this kind of effect or performance, you have to realize it. You can't only talk about it. This is not necessary in literature. You can talk about Pierre Menard, who has written Don Quixote one more time, but then his work is lost, so we don't know where it is; nobody has seen it. It's a beautiful fantasy. Or the map—again, Borges—that covers the whole empire, and it's gone. It's a beautiful, beautiful idea and you relate to it again like you would to an art piece. In my work it's more like I have to make it happen so that you always think of this one individual or this one artist or this one art



Bring Me The Head of... 2012 Capital m, Beijing

piece; for instance: "That guy made a double size of so and such sculpture and then put it on a truck and took for a ride in New York."

Sometimes I mix things that I've read and that I've lived. Then you don't know what you've experienced—maybe you've seen it, or you heard about it; maybe you were there but maybe you weren't there. It just becomes a part of your memory; fantasy and being and so on—but it's still important for me to get it accomplished. In that respect, Mona Lisa Upside Down is not done yet. I look at it as a work-in-progress.

(Lynne laughs)

L: In *Bring Me The Head of...*, there's a certain amount of time that the whole process requires. It asks for an engagement with people on different sides of it—there's the one making it, the one eating it, and the one whose idea generated it. This all happens as a kind of small event. You could do it as a theater piece; you could have on-stage a table and chairs and you could have two people go in and the menu could be enlarged on a screen, and they would choose from the menu and you could watch the cook cooking it, and then serving it—but then it would be about spectatorship. What you're interested in is people doing it, having an experience.



Bring Me The Head of... 2008 Changa, Istanbul

S: Yes, they activate it. Because I never made the sculpture, only the negative space of it, the piece is almost like

a thought. I came up with the mold for it, but it's just the idea waiting to be filled.

L: It's interesting that you worked with a mold, because in a way part of your whole project is about the mold of art history; the mold of things that we see. How do we break the mold? I hadn't thought of it before, but in that *mise en abyme*—in that mold—is the story of everything. I think that's true. You are an iconoclast! In a sort of quiet way, but not maybe not so quiet, if *Mona Lisa* ever hangs upside down.

S: But still, it would only be for a few days.

(Lynne laughs)

L: You're not asking for everything.

S: Do you know how it got famous, that painting?

L: How?

S: It was stolen in 1911; then it became famous. It wasn't that famous until then. Of course Leonardo was a big master, but there were other pieces in that museum which were more famous than *Mona Lisa*. Picasso was arrested for that theft—or questioned—with Apollinaire, because they were at the museum at the same time and they had a friend who provided them with some artefacts from the museum, illegally of course. They weren't the ones who stole the painting though. Only years later did the police find the painting, which had been stolen by an employee of the Louvre, because he loved it.

L: Did he first want to sell it?

S: I don't think so. In any case, people went to the museum to see the empty space of *Mona Lisa*. So that's how it got famous.

L: How long was it off the wall?

S: I think a couple of years.

L: Really?

S: Yeah.

L: And what did they do to the man who took it—the one who actually took it?

S: I don't know.

L: He just loved it.

S: He just loved it. He used to work at the Louvre, and he took it and put it under his bed or something like that.

L: It's interesting because people often want to know: who was the *Mona Lisa*?

S: I know.

L: To me, it's similar to when you publish a novel and go on the road with it, people ask: how much is this like your life? Did this ever happen to you, or to someone you know? That's so far from what I'm interested in, or from what I'm interested in when I look at the Mona Lisa. It doesn't matter to me who she is. And yet always, the idea that there's a reason why something is the way it is, has always got to have a source, a sort of absolute reason. She looks like this because...

S: I think that way of attaching meaning is very primitive.

L: Yes, of course.

S: It's very primitive, this cause and effect relationship, this way of thinking. I believe we can do better than that. It's like a mere proposition almost. That's why I'm really fascinated with J. L. Austin's speech acts. He says that in language not everything is a proposition and not everything is pragmatic.

L: Yes, it's not all instrumental.

S: It's not at all instrumental. The language is basically what it is. It's a conversation at its heart; we're creating a whole world by forming sentences. We're not trying to prove something.

L: The ethno-methodologists, for example, in their work, or the symbolic interactionists, would come to identify how things that happen between people are instances of society, how language is implicated in the equation. Each interaction is an instance of society, because in the way we talk together, we either bring things together, or we pull them apart.

S: My David is not actually a copy, or a replica of Michelangelo's statue. It's really not important, to me at least, what it's a replica or reflection of. I didn't pick it because it's Michelangelo's sculpture, or because it's so beautiful. I picked it because it's the most famous or the most iconic sculpture ever, and in my opinion, the most valuable man-made object in the world we live in. Were the icon of art a box by Donald Judd, I would've picked that. I couldn't care less what it is.

L: You wanted it because it was recognizable. But people would not recognize it as well if it was Donald Judd. Certain segments of the population...

S: If Donald Judd's thing was so famous, people might recognize it.

L: You chose something that was recognizable. It's like Peter Dreher, that German painter I like so much, who paints the glass, just a plain water glass. He said to me years ago that he chose it because everybody would know what it was. It's a water glass.

S: In Turkey, speaking of political, before the collapse, when we tried to put it up...

L: The David?

S: ...the David. When we tried to put it up—and it was early in the morning—people on the street who were going to work couldn't even look at it. First of all, they didn't know that it was a famous statue by a famous Renaissance artist. They were looking at it in all their ignorance, which I find really interesting. At that point, it

becomes just like the Mona Lisa upside down versus right side up—those people were the ones who could look at it with such ignorance and with such openness. They saw it for the first time in their lives. But then again they couldn't look at it, because it was the statue of a naked boy.

L: Oh.

S: That, I realized then and there.

L: What kind of statuary was there in ancient Turkish culture?

S: There's not much. Mohammad, the prophet, he was an iconoclast. That was his big act. He went to Mecca, and destroyed all the icons, because people were worshiping them and that he was against it—people must worship one God.

L: Like Moses.

S: Just like in Judaism; in the paintings, you're not supposed to make a...

L: No, you're not supposed to make representations.

S: It's a very similar thing with sculptures. When I was in the army, those guys, my friends, they sometimes asked me what I did...

L: The other soldiers?

S: ...the other soldiers. And when I said I made sculptures—because I wouldn't be able to say I'm a conceptual artist, they wouldn't get it, so I'd say I was a sculptor—they would ask, "Do you make icons?" Then they would get worried for me and they would tell me, things like, "Did you really check it in the Holy Quran? Are you sure that's OK? You can actually make these icons?" It's deep in the culture. So, yes, my work is not overtly political, but at the same time it speaks to a certain...

L: Perhaps it's not about realpolitik, I'd say, but I don't see how any work can escape politics. It's definitely about...

S: To what extent did you think Mirage was political? Did you associate it with drone warfare or with 9/11?



David (inspired by Michelangelo) 2005, Istanbul (photo by Baris Ozcetin)

L: Yes. I think the first image I had was of the drone, and then the shadow, just as a haunting figure. Then probably I thought about 9/11. We were in a gallery space, and there was something quite oppressive about it. Even though it is a shadow and immaterial, it still was over us, and there was this darkness. It would be great if you could do it in a much bigger space. And sure, shadows don't have sound, but planes do, and when they cast their shadow, there is some sound—something to think about given your interest in music.

S: Yeah, yeah. But it's...

L: It doesn't have to be an airplane sound. It could be very disorienting, when the shadow comes over. It could be just the sound...

S: ...of an ice cream truck?

(Laughter)

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Transcription by Jeffrey Bishku-Akyul

