

EMRE HUNER: “HOW CAN YOU IMAGINE SOMETHING THAT DOESN’T HAVE ANY FORM?”

In conversation with Emre Hüner.

Emre Hüner interviewed by Thomas Roueché
TANK Magazine, Issue 87
2021

Emre Hüner is an artist living in Istanbul and Amsterdam. Working with a variety of media, Hüner’s practice focuses on constructed narratives and eclectic assemblages, which explore the subjects of utopia, archaeology and ideas of progress and future. For his latest show, *[ELEKTROİZOLASYON]: Unknown Parameter Extro-Record*, at Arter, in Istanbul, Hüner has created an immersive world around a central video work. In a hall with dizzyingly high ceilings, objects – at once props from the film itself and sculptures – spill out as if parts of a crime scene or an archaeological dig.

Thomas Roueché: *Were you already working on something when Arter approached you to do with the show?*

Emre Hüner: I was, but at that stage it wasn’t really defined in terms of a subject. I hadn’t thought about a space, and I was mostly writing and drawing. I definitely wasn’t working on a sculptural piece. I was spending my time writing, thinking and drawing, which gradually changed into a strange practice of making drawings of sculptures I wanted to make or sketches as if the piece had been made. I completed 70 or 80 sketches more or less like those in the exhibition. Then I was writing parts of a novel. Even before the invitation I’d been working on things for about a year and a half. I have this attitude of accumulation: even if I don’t know what I am doing. I keep going, and that keeps me busy. If I know already what it is I am doing, I get bored of it. Initially I thought about making these drawings and the writing I was doing part of an animation, but I knew that to make an animation of that scale would be a huge amount of

work, and long hours in front of the computer to make it. But that's just what I do. Even when I knew I had this huge space to fill, I was busy with small scale sculptures and surfaces. I had these moments where I was thinking about tiny details like foaming and bubbling of ceramic surfaces, and suddenly I'd remember that I had to fill 275 square meters of space. It's been a super long process, but I'm happy about that. It's closer to how I'd like to work -a year is good, but two years is even better.

TR: *I feel like the depth really shows. The space is so vast- in its volume, too.*

EH: When [Arter's curator] Emre Baykal invited me, the building was still under construction. Looking at the building from the outside it didn't seem that big; you don't imagine it has such large spaces within it. So I was shocked by the size of the space when he showed me where he wanted my exhibition to be. He'd come to my studio before and seen all the small drawings I'd been doing – but his space is nine meters high! That was an important moment that the project changed. The space was inviting me to think in three dimensions. My conclusion was to work on a film, to write a script, with the fragments of writing that I had been doing: a writer goes around the city at night and meets a dead poet.

TR: *This is the main character in the film...*

EH: It comes from that, but the final film, everything had changed. The text that I had written was quite abstract; it was not really a film script. When the actors read it there was no clear storyline, rather they are in spaces and they interact with them, and with the props. And then there were things happening around us while we filmed. For example, we shot on a sand dredger in Yenikapi and there was a dog, and an abandoned boat with a man living on it, and another guy cleaning mussels and a team of divers -everything that was. Happening around us gradually infiltrated into the scene. At some point nobody knew if the camera was filming or not. Everything seemed part of the fiction.

TR: *Everyone was performing?*

EH: Completely. It would have been nice if there had been another camera filming us; we looked like actors, too. We were a really small crew, just me, two actors, one driver and maybe another friend. And the script was changing all the time. Beyond the locations, almost everything else was improvised. The actors themselves kept changing characters.

RODEO

TR: *Because Arter is so new, it's really interesting to see how the building features in the film. A great deal of the work is about making invisible parts of the building bore visible.*

EH: When I first visited the building, they told me there were seven floors underground! Three are galleries and performance halls, and then there is a garage, ventilation equipment, storage; even above, there are upper floors that are closed to the public and a roof space. It became clear from the first moment that the museum was part of the fiction. If I, as a cameraman, am part of the fiction, then the museum is another character in the film. That's why we shot scenes there. And then, of course, there was the Arçelik washing-machine factory. [Arçelik is owned by the same Turkish holding company that has endowed Arter.]

TR: *And that echoes these invisible things that have been made visible.*

EH: There is always the element. Of the invisible parts -air-conditioning and ventilation and pipes – the idea of an invisible infrastructure in between the cultural space and the industrial space. I made sculptures of polyurethane and ceramics, materials also used in washing machines, but on a huge scale. All these fittings and pipes that run through the city between buildings are the connectors of the story in a way. In the washing machine factory there was the storage space of storage spaces; it is almost too gigantic to comprehend. I filmed the storage robot that brings parts from shelves and puts them back again – it's all computerized. In some ways, it's like a gigantic version of my exhibition. As if I produced 20,000 sculptures of the shame shaper. I also shot more documentary scenes there, because it was really fascinating to see from the beginning to the end how a washing machine is being produced. Many things are made by machines, but there is always a person who takes control of the machine, who makes small interventions and tricks that go unnoticed. It's fascinating because everything is on rails and comes to the workers so they don't have to walk.

TR: *It's interesting how in films the robots become so quickly anthropomorphized by the viewer; your documentary footage is so quickly turned into fiction. The show grapples with these ideas of visible and invisible infrastructures and logistics, but also with an expanding and contracting feeling of time.*

EH: That's why there is the idea of recording, which started as recording sounds, the recording the news, then recording ourselves, or me keeping diaries mixed with daily news for three

years. Taking moulds of found objects, casting them and repeating them was also a kind of recording. That somehow registered just a glimpse of the time that has passed, and you suddenly become aware of the incomprehensible dimensions of it. In the installation, you have that feeling of compressed time: I used sketches of anatomy from the 1600s alongside screenshots of YouTube videos of shoe factories, and there are sculptures that are made of these modified ceramic glazes that already carry some kind of memory all these volcanic explosive, corrosive, porous surfaces. So yes, it plays a little bit with this idea of deep time. Of not really being able to comprehend dimensions. That's the whole notion of Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* and in her text, [curator] Asli Seven argues that I was maybe trying to pursue the shadow of a hyperobject, a really abstract, ungraspable, not visible thing that is always there and shadows us, but which we can't really see. The example most often given is the climate, but it's anything that escapes your grasp, that is somehow fluid. So I think that this maybe goes into the forms in the exhibition and I think that that in a microscale, that is why there are narratives within narratives, this idea of lists, which shifts in time, we don't really understand when is when. Maybe it's 80 years from now or maybe it's last week; I tried to play with that timelessness.

TR: *One central sculpture in the show takes the form of a wave breaker. You've had a long-standing interest in Metabolist architecture and the way it brings organic forms into architecture. I was reminded of that by the wave breaker, in that it is both industrial but also responding to natural world.*

EH: Yes, it was a mixture of brutalism and Metabolism. I made that work in 2009; this is a rereading of it. I started out with a landscape drawing that is also in the exhibition: a man is climbing the ruins of wave breakers and sees a dried-out landscape. At that time I was imaging some sort of ecological post-apocalyptic landscape or a post-disaster border in between countries, maybe some sort of wall. But now, recalling the object with these other sculptures after 12 or 13 years, it assumes other characteristics; everything that was more hidden comes to the surface. The thing is, these sculptures don't work on their own – they only work if you pour 300 of them. Otherwise it's nothing, just a single thing that stands there and will be washed away. They need to be bonded together, just as in nanotechnology you need to form fabrics of ten thousands of repeating cell structures. In Fukushima, the wave breakers did not stop the waves. Then the ceramic sculptures are like bodies, basically the extension of living organisms, just being alive and not alive what's in between. All these structures are trying to connect organism, life, death, which is slightly inspired by the Duchampian idea of “bachelor” machines, all these machines that are in literature. There's a really nice publication that I was reading from the exhibition that

Harald Szeeman did called *Bachelor Machines* and they're works and pieces and sculptures, from Kafka's penal colony, or the machinery that is in Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus*, and many other mechanisms that are described in books, which have a specific function, but are abstract. There is a bigger form that is somehow the core of the sculpture and then there are replicas, other objects that repeat, like styrofoam pieces or fuel tanks or a helmet, and it created a sort of machinery that recalls a function, but we don't know what exactly that might be. The titles of the works help a little bit, so I played with ideas with terminology. I played a little bit with encyclopedic and science-fiction terminology, but also terms of science.

TR: *It has a kind of archaeological effect.*

EH: I always go back to that, a fictional archeology of inventive artefacts. But then they are sometimes not artefacts, but activators of new narratives. In that sense, it's speculative.

TR: *The casts you have of fish brains seem particularly unreal, or speculative.*

EH: For me, being mesmerized by a form that you at first see as something like an alien totem, but is then revealed to be a shark's brain, is maybe how we can think about the limits of formal imagination. How can you imagine something that doesn't have any form? From a similar point of view, if you look at shoes or a single element of a pipe fitting you might start to see too many possibilities in how things take shape. That maybe requires a new terminology; it's some kind of an archaeology, but one that mixes both past and future. So it's like trying to imagine new definitions of situations that you don't yet know what to call. Those were the excuses to imagine the new forms and that research became more visible in the connection of things, but also on the surfaces of the glazes, where I basically created an explosive sandpaper inside glass, making micro-experiments in the kiln to get there.

TR: *It creates textures that seem surprising – foams you associate with softness, but which are actually hard and crystalline.*

EH: It was also this feeling of having flesh. That's why I say human bodies, but what I really mean is more like having flesh and if you look at the flesh at some point maybe it's porous, maybe it's bubbling and foaming. All these metabolisms change and turn into something else. It was perhaps a way of making little Frankenstein's monsters: objects that gain life, while on the other hand, what we call alive is also an object. That sort of surface was also a representation

of that in-betweenness maybe.

TR: *The effect is very immersive, even psychedelic, to use an overused descriptor.*

EH: No, no, psychedelic is good. There's definitely a psycho-something side to it ["Psychometrics of the Unfinished" is the title of the sculpture series in the exhibition], and immersive because its scale is sometimes so vast that you need to dive into it. It's a multitude of things. Maybe that's also a symptom of something else; it cannot be just one thing, it has to be thousands. Sometimes I feel like I have this unstoppable desire to accumulate; maybe it's endless, I don't know.

<https://tankmagazine.com/issue-87/talks/emre-huener/>