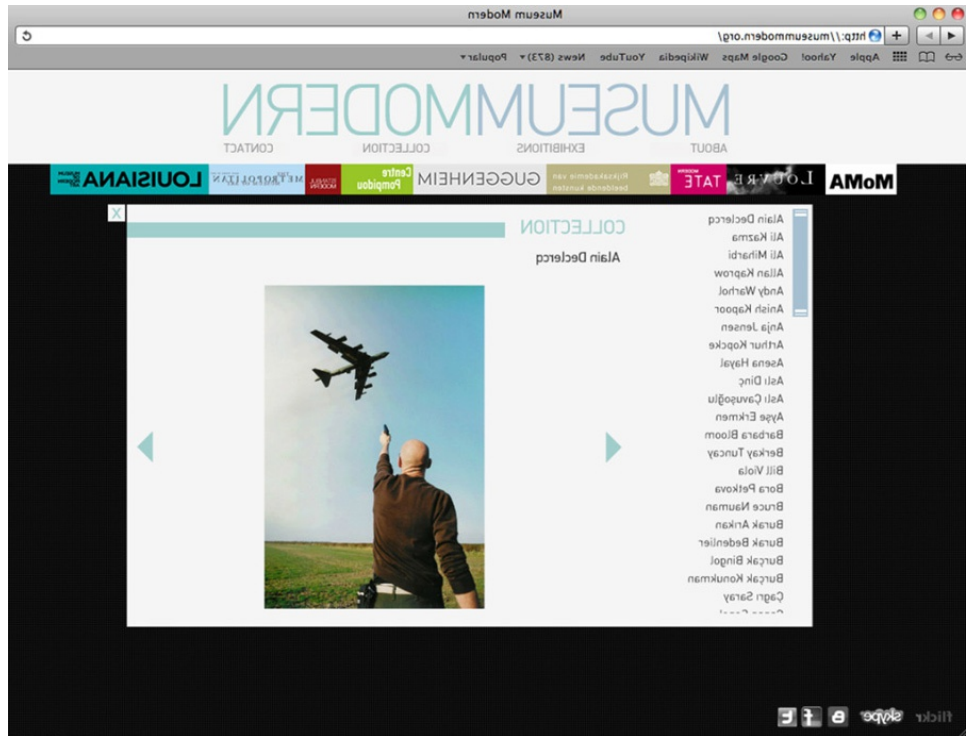


## INTERVIEWS

### An Artwork is not Just a Passive Object You Hang on Your Wall

Elif Öner in conversation with Derya Yücel



Elif Öner, [www.museummodern.org](http://www.museummodern.org), 2010. Domain address, Flash, Webcam Server, IP Camera. Jpeg, Mjpeg.  
*Courtesy the artist*

Today, technology has formed its own linguistic structures and artists have transformed these linguistic structures into new forms and approaches they are able to use in their work so as to develop strategic practices that might be applied onto the social and cultural fields. Elif Öner, is one such artist, who carries out research into the real and fictive boundaries of video, internet and new media, and produces projects on concepts such as the museum, archive and memory. In her practice, Öner generally uses the potential created by virtual spaces as a critical distance opposed to actors that occupy positions of power in the art system. Her projects include [www.museummodern.org](http://www.museummodern.org), which departs from the idea of internet reality and in which the concept of 'museum' as a work of art is explored; *Hysteria*, which discusses the concepts of museum/censorship/private capital and ironically criticizes the position of power that institutions occupy; and Ibraaz Platform 006 commission, [www.historicalfuturemuseum.org](http://www.historicalfuturemuseum.org), a sustainable web-based project on memory, time and the personal archive.

**Derya Yücel:** Today, artists see the Internet as a space where spatial or institutional restrictions can be overcome. However, on the other hand, it is also a medium treated suspiciously by institutions due to commercial concerns. Your preferred artistic media mostly includes digital tools such as photography, video and the Internet. You received a traditional artistic education but you prefer to use new media as your means of production. I see this as a courageous choice in an art environment where traditional media is still popular.

**Elif Öner:** I studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Marmara University. I graduated from the Department of Painting, but the school system allowed for multiple media. We carried out interdisciplinary research and worked on conceptual art. Once I began to produce works based around an idea in the framework of conceptual art, I also began to explore the idea of a work choosing its own medium. I began to think and work on what the language of the medium said and what it meant. I focused on video art and worked mostly in this field. I also went on to a Master's programme at the same university after my graduation. My thesis topic was the Internet as an artistic space.

I also stayed in Berlin for six months as part of the Erasmus programme. I can't say that this period greatly contributed to my educational process. The school I graduated from belonged to the Bauhaus school and the educational approach in Berlin was almost the same. Yet, if the education didn't contribute to my work, the city itself certainly contributed to my experience in terms of the perception of artistic identity, for instance. In Turkey, an artist is lauded as a 'thing'. Art, with a capital A, is a different world, and the perception is that everything else is subordinate to it. In Berlin, I felt that art was more part of everyday life. It also existed in the street. This was perceived as a natural state of affairs. This was the difference I perceived between Istanbul and Berlin. But this has changed a bit after Gezi Park movement.

**DY:** The intersection of art and life. We witnessed and experienced this in an unexpected manner during the Gezi resistance. Its impact has changed many things, you're right. Qualities long attributed to artistic identity in Turkey had formed an established tradition. The myth of the genius artist and the belief that art is a superhuman, mystical and creative process is still widespread and

influential. A broad generation of artists loyal to our history of modern art made a particular effort to protect this perception. In the context of the intersection between life and art, there is also an accumulation of practices that have developed since the 1990s in Turkey.

**EÖ:** Artists' initiatives have made significant contributions but sustainability has not been achieved. Since they receive no support, artists' initiatives lose their resilience after a while. Collective practices that gained power from the early 2000s on in Istanbul played a highly important role in the development of contemporary art. The Don Quixote squat in the Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood in Kadıköy was also made possible by the changing perceptions of art and its practices post-Gezi. A spontaneous and collectively evolving approach where everything exists side by side, where divisions such as artist/non-artist are insignificant – this is the kind of method I saw in Berlin and what I was influenced by.

Before I went to Berlin, I had taken part in the artists' workshop organized by the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art within the scope of the Sarkis exhibition in 2009. This was a workshop Sarkis held with eight young artists and it was a very enlightening experience for me. It was a workshop that progressed with new productions and discussions. When I was at school, I had made a video work in reference to Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). I followed stray dogs in the city with a handheld camera. Dogs, known as trackers and guides, turned into lost ghosts in the city. I had found out that Sarkis, too, was a Tarkovsky fan and was excited by it. During the workshop, I produced a work in reference to Sergei Parajanov, the Soviet Armenian film director who Sarkis references in some of his works, and whom I admire greatly.

**DY:** Almost during the same period you produced a project where you departed from the everyday, practical difficulties of 'being' an artist in which you chose to criticize the local art scene in the context of the museum: [www.museummodern.org](http://www.museummodern.org). This virtual museum was presented as a project that proposed the creation of alternative tools by deciphering the complex relationships that exist in the triangle of art-institution-collection. This work also transformed the art 'viewer' into a 'participant'. Could you discuss the stages that led to this work?

**EÖ:** Sarkis's exhibition was titled *Site*. It was about the city-state as a structure. If a site opened in a museum could become an exhibition, I thought, why can't a site, in the context of the Internet, also become a museum exhibition? A work in the free presentation zone of the Internet does not need to possess a corresponding reality: you can form an infinite site in virtual reality. So I departed from positioning the museum as an exhibition space and created the site itself as exhibiton-art. In addition to the projects I carried out in the exhibitions section online, I also included the logos of powerful western museums. When you click on these logos you jump to the websites of these museums.

But I designed the site so that when you click on anything on these museum pages, it always took you back to the main page. In a sense, it formed a transient and unexpected link. I created a movement that pointed at the structure itself. Thus, I transformed the museum, as an institution that affirmed artistic identity, into an exhibition object. The question I wanted to pose was: what

happens if the museum itself becomes an artwork? For the first project, I opened the museum with an 'artist's studio' that questioned the terms under which we call someone an artist and also asked how does one become an artist. I exhibited my workshop online, around the clock, via webcam. I announced the times when I would be at my studio via Facebook. I communicated with viewers via social networks. I spoke with viewers via Skype. Those who connected to the network could view the space when I was or wasn't there.



Elif Öner, *Bia*, 2012.  
Courtesy the artist.

**DY:** So you also transformed yourself into an art object. And perhaps, from the viewer's point, you also fanned the tension between the physical and such notions as the perception of time or the concept of reality – neither of which have a clearly-defined object. The Internet opens up a powerful field in subverting established categories of art. This work asked questions such as, what is the museum? Who is the artist and how does the 'work' of art operate? You realized three projects in this fake museum, which contextualized issues of reality and representation in online job applications and CVs sent as their appendices.

**EÖ:** As an independent artist, the Internet provided me with a medium to create a field of presentation. In parallel with these ideas, I outlined the museum on the basis of the concepts of 'museum' and 'artist'. It aimed to create a space, open up a field within social life, or the art 'market'. Yes, the museum was virtual, and the studio was an image. But I was there, and the location was a residency

studio defined as an artist's studio by another institution and you could watch it 24 hours online. Its purpose was to appear as a museum, and in this sense, it aimed to question the power of the established perception of the museum, and the language of the Internet.

Artists sent their CVs or their projects. Curators asked me, via this museum, what kind of 'real' works I made. In other words, very few people understood that this itself was an artwork. The language of the Internet was crucial. While I was there, people participated online in an art project via webcam, from wherever they were. The idea that I could share it on a global platform was exciting for me.

I formed the second exhibition on the museum site in reference to Alice's 'Through the Looking Glass'. Alice enters through the looking glass, and although everything seems the same, everything is a reflection. I saw a link between this sensation and the effect the Internet had on perception. I wanted to reflect the inversion of reality and its perception by transforming the site into a mirror image. I reorganized it so that I produced a mirror image of everything in the museum. This meant that we, I mean the 'we' in front of the screen, were inside the mirror. I also wanted to raise questions such as, what is accurate information on the Internet, and how do we access it? So I added a search button to the page. This button linked you to Google. Through this, I asked: what is the information presented to us, and should we unconditionally accept it as accurate?

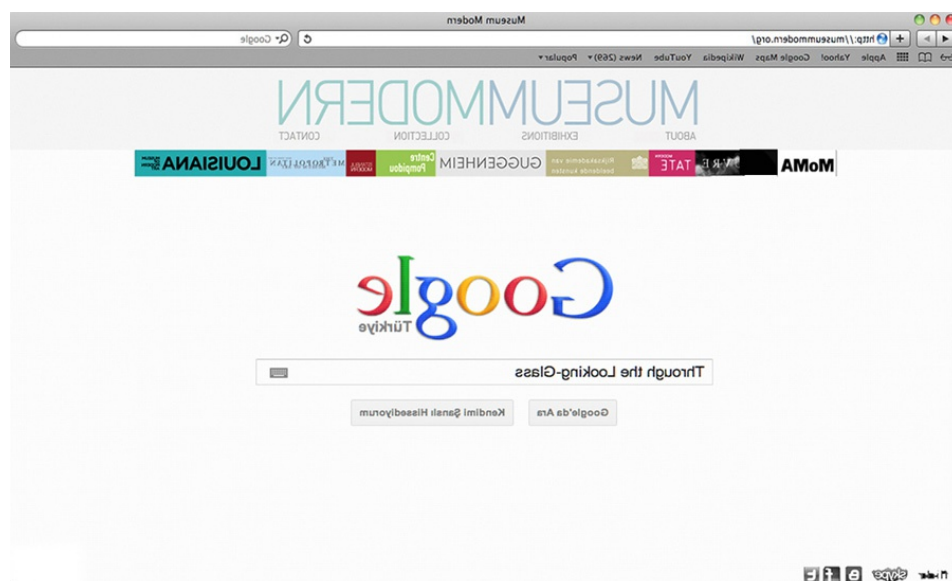
**DY:** It could also be read in the context of questions such as how is information accumulated and how is history written in our age. Who shapes the construction of knowledge, and how does the process take place? Although, for a very long time, knowledge regarding culture and art was constructed by museums, once the intense criticism of the museum produced mainly by artists after the 1960s entered the system, it formed cracks. You too, with the digital exhibition you formed with both real and virtual names, criticized the authority of the museum as artist, curator and founder of your own virtual museum. This recalls another work you produced, *Hysteria* (2012), which also aimed to disrupt the concept of the museum and the power of capital. But in the case of this work, perhaps the process evolved in a manner you did not expect. It turned into a tragicomic chain of events involving art, the institution, Internet, commerce and law.

**EÖ:** I developed *Hysteria* after I received an invitation to take part in an exhibition titled *A Museum Inside a Museum*, featuring 12 artists. Accepting the invitation, I created a website with a .com extension using the name of Proje 4L / Elgiz Contemporary Museum of Art – the institution where the exhibition was going to be held. In effect, I had only created a pirate version of the museum's website. Then, I linked the concept of hysteria with the stance of the museum. This was because I believed that in some way, I had to discuss the way in which a private collection defined itself as a museum; the oppressive attitude of private capital that filled the vacuum of institutions on the art scene; the way the institution presented its invitation to artists as a favour; the way it only consolidated its own status without providing support to any of the artists while it also spoke of public art; and all the other difficulties we suffered at every stage of this exhibition project.

We received very little support from the institution. We even had to collect money amongst ourselves to print the exhibition poster. The institution claimed that opening their space to us would create a sufficient impact for our careers. This is of course not an attitude displayed only by this institution, it is how the art scene operates, an effect of the domination of the art market. So I wanted to expose it in the simplest manner. I put up a penis-enlarging cream advert on the site I had produced, as a direct image emphasizing the position of power. It also had a performative aspect in my opinion. When you clicked on the image, you accessed a text about how the art scene in Turkey received almost no support, and that artists had to deal with strenuous living conditions, and that this wasn't even mentioned. I also added a caption to the image that declared: 'With contributions from Pleasure-Inducing Products'. In my opinion, both my message and my method were very clear.

However, this was perceived almost as a sensationalist act and an attack on the institution. On the day of the opening, they told the curator that they did not want to exhibit this work. They made absolutely no attempt to contact me. Later, the institution filed a case against me, and demanded the website be closed down. The institution had perceived this as an insult attacking their brand value, and emphasized 'ethics' more than anything in a case they based on a breach of trademark and commercial rights. The debate focused on my use of the image of a penis, or, as in some criticisms in the art world, around 'taste'.

But an artwork is not only a passive object you hang on your wall. Art also has a disruptive aspect, and in fact, it has historically progressed by deconstructing and reconstructing itself. I tried to tell this both to the institution and to the legal teams involved, and also to people from the art world, who had been cowed into submission. It was a long process, and eventually the site was closed. And the museum immediately bought all the extensions that existed on the Internet. Nevertheless, it was the first time I felt so powerful. I had experienced art's power to criticize and to transform. At a time when my belief in making art in Turkey had decreased, it was hope-inspiring to see the critical power of making art and experiencing that art could not be hemmed in and controlled. The work had spoken for itself, and all these issues were discussed in art circles throughout the process. That was a source of motivation for me.



Elif Öner, *www.museummodern.org*, 2010. Domain address, Flash, Webcam Server, IP Camera. Jpeg, Mjpeg.  
*Courtesy the artist.*

**DY:** As you have pointed out, art has long been producing criticisms against this type of submission. Institutions particularly should have taken note of this. However, beyond the issue of moderate criticism accepted in the art world, or the issue of taming criticism, as you also emphasize, it seems the Internet, new media and an independent stance are able to form a zone of freedom for artists. Your project was a criticism aimed at the disregard for artists' rights in Turkey, the rejection of artists' demands, and the dominant position of institutions in the contemporary art scene, mostly run by private capital and sponsorship in the absence of public support. Museums are not only a repertoire where diverse objects are collected, but also an archive where different approaches or viewpoints are brought together. In this sense, museums also draw boundaries with what they choose to include in their archives, and what they leave or cast out. You also have constructed such archives with your personal history, memory and narratives. How did your own concept of the archive develop?

**EÖ:** The archive, and the information it contains was always there in my work, that is why I frequently used the name of the museum in my works. One day, at a second-hand shop, I found an ID card of Ediz Hun (a Turkish film actor). From among hundreds of old ID cards, that was the one I stumbled upon. It was an absurd coincidence. Why had I come across this ID card here and now? I actually saw a relationship with the culture of pillaging I had been interested in before. Pillaging was a form of action that existed in the past of our society. So I interlinked the way in which second-hand shop owners took and sold objects associated with personal memories from a space, an institution or homes, with this culture of pillaging.

Many of these spaces were like small prototypes of the pillaging and transformation of society, identities and in fact, entire cultures. I began to prepare the project that focused on the transformation of Istanbul and personal memory via this process based on the commercial exchange of objects. In order to do this, I went to second-hand shops in Istanbul and collected personal identity cards; I was particularly looking for ID cards and photographs of non-Muslims, Greeks and Armenians. I held interviews with second-hand shop owners, and Orhan Cem Çetin took photographs of more than 300 objects. These objects were, for me, the images of the pillaging of homes, probably carried out by these shop owners. On the one hand, this act of collecting was related to death, and on the other hand, it was like an effort to hold on to the past, and to life.

I'm not originally from Istanbul, my mother is from Germany, and my father is from Maraş, I don't feel like I belong anywhere, I move house a lot, for instance. I am rootless. I have no family or relatives in this city. There is no neighbourhood where I spent my childhood. The more I collected these identities, objects and photographs, I felt I was trying to acquire such ties. I realized that through objects, I was claiming these stories and identities as my own. How could I strike roots in a culture based on taught stories and a destroyed history and the forgetting of the past; what kind of effort could I show? These were the thoughts that passed through my mind, as well as the question of why we would want such a thing.



**DY:** In your exhibition titled *You Already Know Half Of The Story* held at ArtSümer this year, you created a narrative via what is shown to us, or stories that have ended, or have been cut short. What you showed us was half of the story. We could see, for instance, the note on the back of an old photograph, or the identity information next to a faded face in a photograph. Yet there was a gap, something left unfinished in every object. You are also interested in the connection established with the past, in collecting and the archive, and questions such as what we collect and archive, and why. Your exhibition was not only about every selected object being a sign of our identity, but also about how our identities change as we accumulate objects.

On the other hand, you formed a visual memory. A story, that emerged through your selection from an existing archive. We could also call this a selection with which you visualized the connections you form with the city, society and culture, departing from a search for your own roots. For instance, in the project titled <http://www.historicalfuturemuseum.org>, realized in partnership with Ibraaz, you and Dutch artist Vincent Rozenberg have produced a website on which you upload photographs you take daily. This one-year project at first appears as a personal diary, yet it also reveals a story, a memory about that day, and the city. It also goes on to expose the relationship between artistic practice, everyday life and history.



Elif Öner, *True Copy of the Original*, 2011.  
Courtesy the artist.

**EÖ:** Yes, recently I have been interested in collecting memories, souvenirs, and creating visual stories of states of remembering. And working on what they 'really' represent, what they have the potential to represent, what their meanings might be. I could actually say that the project I am working on with Vincent is an extension of this particular perception. Vincent was living in Holland and we were sending each other photographs we took every day, calling them 'the photograph of the day'. I decided to indicate the date in one corner of the frame in photographs I took while thinking on concepts such as photography, archive and



memory. It is common knowledge that history is written by individuals, and that photography serves as a tool with which personal histories are written. I believe that it is impossible to write history, or at least that it is impossible to produce an objective account of history.

We can perceive yesterday only from today. An interpretation of the past is possible perhaps only from the present. I imagined the 'museum' as a structure that protects and perhaps constructs history by archiving culture and objects. That is why we called the 'historical future museum'. It would indicate the present without using the word 'present'. Then we formed [www.historicalfuturemuseum.org](http://www.historicalfuturemuseum.org).

In producing this site, and the exhibition we will be showing for one year, there was a line in Emir Kusturica's film *Otac na sluzbenom putu* (*When Father Was Away on Business*) that stuck in my mind. The father in the film goes to the border between two countries, the guard tells him he can't pass, and the man replies, 'But I passed yesterday'. And the guard replies, 'Yesterday is yesterday, today is today.' So we chose this sentence we frequently used when sending each other the photographs as the title for our Internet exhibition, which began on 1 November 2013. We both upload a single photograph every day. The photographs I take also feature the date. The two photographs are presented together each day, and the photographs of each day that has passed since 1 November can be viewed by clicking on the *yesterday* button.

During the first days, I placed the photographs I took behind a piece of glass and made interventions with paint, and added the intervened images in the museum. These new layers in fact referred to the relationship with reality and history. We planned a process that would refer to the controversial structure of concepts such as archive, knowledge and history. The actual definition of the photographs that move into the past is gradually reduced; we formed the programme code so that by the 365th day, our first photographs will disappear completely. We wanted to refer to various social events, like a memory that is being erased. We wanted to point towards our position in history at the moment we experience in the present.

**DY:** Social memory that has been lost, or has disappeared, the relationship between the archive and the museum, and histories permeated by geographical and cultural codes. And on the other hand, millions of personal diaries, individual accounts of history being shaped on Facebook pages. However, as you also point out, there is a questioning of our relationship with reality and fiction and how both collapse into one another in everyday life. The relationship between reality and fiction, and between memory and archive, are also topics prominent and underlined in your projects.

**EÖ:** What I am trying to do is emphasize the very existence of illusion, rather than creating an illusion. Reality is very simple, but equally complicated, it has no clear nature, and everything is frequently displaced and enters into new engagements. These engagements sometimes display absurd situations, yet this is where the relationship between reality and fiction is structured and it defines itself on the basis of memory-history. I could say that it is around these intersections that my works revolve. As in the new realities I construct upon

images I sample from the Internet. Or, as in my most recent project, where I focus on the boundaries between reality and fiction.

I recently travelled to Balıkesir, a small town in the Aegean region. I stayed at an old house. The house had some strange qualities that attracted my attention. Both its door and its windows were protected with heavy iron bars. I asked people who lived there and found out about the story of the house. It was a dramatic story about a woman named Jale. Jale fell in love with a sailor and had an affair with him. The man promised he would return one day, but never did. Jale waited and waited, and eventually fell ill, she started to imagine that every man who came to her house was the man she loved. So now I have begun to prepare an interactive Internet project through which I will tell a 'woman's' story based on this story. The viewer will progress within the structure by making selections using a variety of options I will form with images, photographs and texts. There is no end to it, it doesn't reach a conclusion, but what emerges is a path formed through choices, like a state of filling the blanks, or creating gaps. How much are we able to touch reality, or how much of it do we lose? How do intersecting stories and identities shape us? After all, is this not how all networks operate?

***See a presentation and statement for Öner's project with Vincent Rozenberg, the website [www.historicalfuturemuseum.org](http://www.historicalfuturemuseum.org), which was commissioned for Ibraaz Platform 006, [here](#).***

**Elif Öner** was born in 1980 in Istanbul, and studied at the Department of Painting at Marmara University Faculty of Fine Arts. She used mixed media techniques and produced mainly video works during her undergraduate years. After she completed her undergraduate degree, she started the graduate program at the same university. In this period, she also pursued the Artist Residency Program at the Borusan Art Center for two years and concentrating on virtual reality, she started producing works with the use of Internet as an art discipline as well as on the notion of space through Internet. Constructing her production over the language of the medium, Elif Öner continues her work on ways of recognition focusing mostly on the concepts of museum, the artist, history and memory.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **Derya Yücel**

Derya Yücel was born in 1979 in Istanbul, member of AICA (International Art Critics Organization). She studied Art Management and Museum Studies. She

works in Istanbul Culture University and Istanbul Bilgi University, Art and Design Faculty as a lecturer. She writes art articles for magazines/newspapers in Turkey and curated numerous national and international exhibitions since 2004. Latest, she was invited to "Curated By\_Vienna: East by South West" in May 2011. Her book "New Media Art and the New Museology" was published by Istanbul Culture University in February 2012.