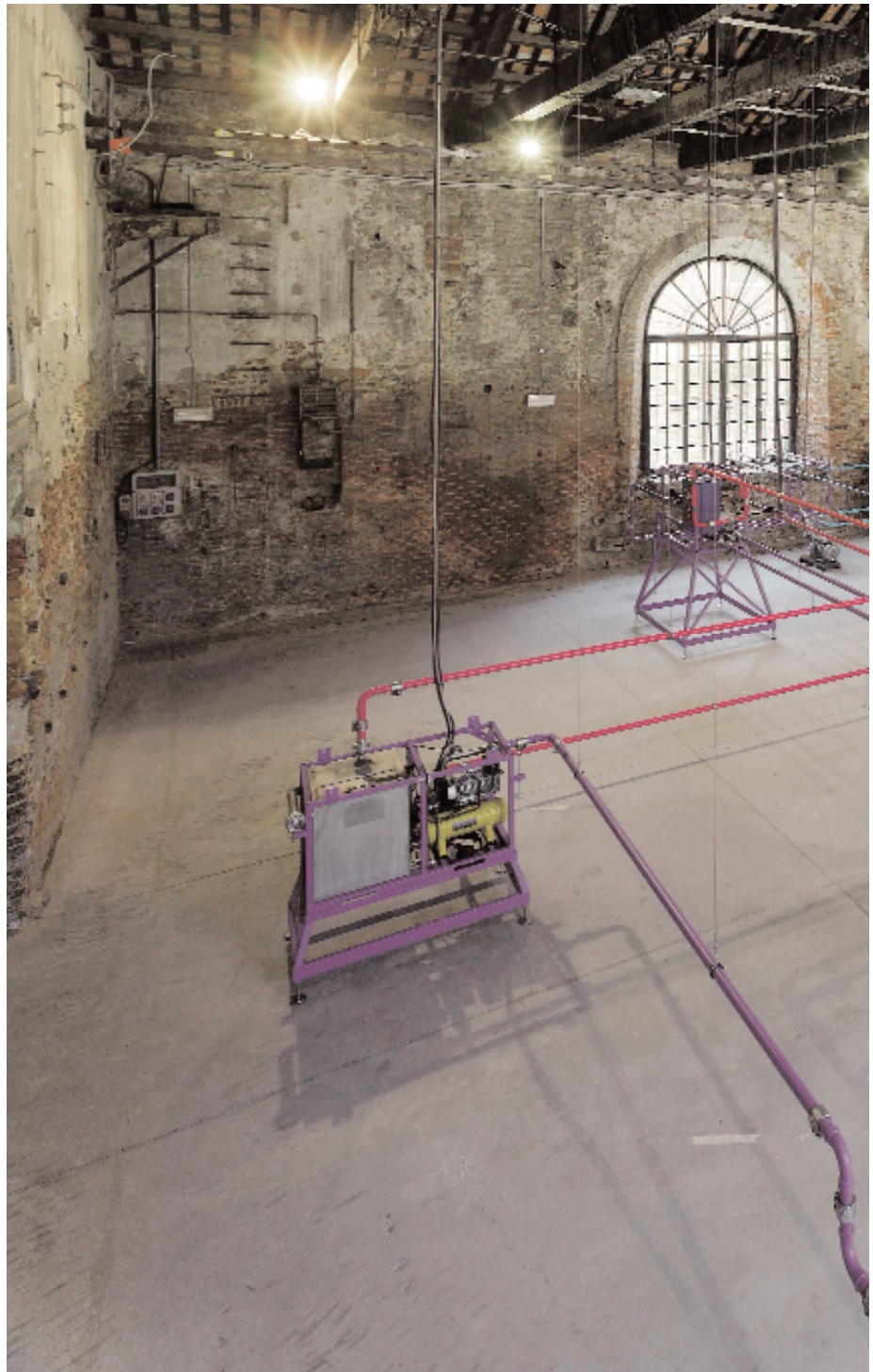


Plan B, 2011. Water purification units with extended pipes and cables, view of installation at the Turkish Pavilion, Venice Biennale.



Ayşe Erkmen's *Plan B* and



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Other (Not So) Futile Gestures



BY BERIN GOLONU

Ayşe Erkmen's site-specific sculptures activate the materials found in a particular place to shed light on the factors and histories that have lent it shape. She will often work with evanescent substances such as water or air or use pre-existing objects collected from a site only to return them to their place of origin at the project's end. As a result, lasting evidence of her projects often takes narrative form. Many of Erkmen's works are characterized by her propensity to activate inanimate objects, to endow them with unexpected action and movement, and to temporarily lend them new life. In *Sculptures on Air* (1997), a legendary piece created for Skulptur Projekte Münster, Erkmen worked with sculptures taken from the façades of war-destroyed buildings. They were brought out of storage, flown over Münster via helicopter, and then exhibited on the roof of a museum overlooking a cathedral. Spectators who witnessed the extraordinary flight of these 19th-century sandstone sculptures still talk about the ghostly mirage, likening it to a scene out of a Fellini film.

Plan B, Erkmen's recent commission for the Turkish Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, also repurposed an inanimate object—this time, a machine used at emergency sites to purify water for drinking—giving it new life as a vibrant post-Minimalist sculpture. The machinery of the sculpture worked with an evanescent substance—dirty water from a canal—and gave it new existence as purified drinking water. The Turkish Pavilion is situated in one of the restored rooms of the Arsenale (an old shipbuilding yard), with windows facing one of the canals. To indicate the different stages of the purification process, Erkmen painted the pipes and machine parts of her deconstructed unit in different colors; the components were then reconnected in a way that filled the space. The effect was a cross between a Minimalist grid sculpture and a boiler room. One of the pipes dipped into the adjacent canal and entered the pavilion through a window, carrying with it a quantity of putrid green water, which went through a lengthy purification and desalination process as it traversed the colorful pipes, until it finally reached a drinkable stage. To mark the end of the process, another pipe leading out to the canal dumped the clean water back into the murky channel.

Erkmen's original proposal entailed passing the clean water out to visitors, but the Biennale's administration nixed this engagement with the public as too risky. An alternative plan changed the intent behind the installation, thereafter titled *Plan B*, so that all the energy expended to purify the water would be directed toward a futile gesture. During the press conference, Erkmen, together with project curator Fulya Erdemci, stressed the need not to interpret the project literally, as a comment on diminishing sources of clean drinking water. Though the metaphorical implications of *Plan B* are indeed multifold, such an interpretation should not be discounted. After all, the project's catalogue includes a prescient essay by historian Edhem Eldem on the history of public water distribution in Istanbul, which concludes with the important observation that city residents still cannot drink water out of the tap.¹ The fact was not lost on viewers that while being an essential source of life, water also carries tremendous destructive force, as the recent tsunami in Japan chillingly demonstrated. Considering the fact that rising sea levels caused by climate change now threaten Venice's very existence, it is worth addressing the broader environmental issues raised by this site-specific installation.



Plan B, 2011. Two installation details of the Turkish Pavilion, Venice Biennale.

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Rather than making a positive statement about the ability of technology to turn back the tide of environmental degradation—as intended by the original project (or “Plan A”)—*Plan B* carried a much more ominous message. Though the purified water could be read as a metaphor for positive change, whether relating to issues of social progress or environmental justice, *Plan B* sounded a cautionary note about facts versus appearances, about the ability to effect real social and environmental change as opposed to merely going through the motions by means of dubious “greenwashing.” As a result, it engaged in a potent formal and conceptual relationship with its geographical location while critiquing the Biennale as a site where national status is on prominent display.

This was not the first time that Erkmen’s ambitious ideas gained a more purposeful direction after navigating certain roadblocks. In Münster, she was originally interested in working with the cathedral and proposed to alter its façade by adding a clock with hands of equal length, which could not, therefore, accurately measure time. The proposal could be read as a critical approach to the influence of time on tradition, religion, social change, and their relationship. Church leaders rejected Erkmen’s idea, refusing to work with her because they believed her status as an immigrant from a Muslim country inhibited her comprehension of their Christian values. If anything, this incident uncovered the religious intolerance and cultural prejudice that still pervade Erkmen’s adopted nation of Germany. Not impeded by the cathedral’s refusal, Erkmen went on to make *Sculptures on Air*, a temporary project that has since been retold to shed light on Germany’s tenuous relations with immigrant populations. Erkmen’s encounter with church leaders takes on a particularly distressing cast when viewed through the lens of Germany’s war-ridden history.

Rather than bringing something hidden into full view like *Sculptures on Air*, *Plan B* made use of something visible across Venice. The many metaphorical associations of water open the project up to a complex web of interpretations. As something that traverses the globe and enables individuals and goods to travel across the world, water can represent a great many systems. It can stand in for the flow of raw materials, products, services, information, or relations traded in a transnational economy. Water quality also gauges the environmental health of a place and affects the health of its people. *Plan B*’s use and treatment of Venice’s water (the city has no source of potable drinking water of its own) potently illustrated the complicated equation linking capitalist enterprise, modern development, and environmental impact.

In contrast to water’s transnational flow, *Plan B*, installed in the national Turkish Pavilion on Italian soil, also addresses the complicated relationship between the discrete nation-state and its network of global ties. Political leaders elected to head a nation have the competing tasks of ensuring a nation’s wealth and economic growth, protecting its supply of natural resources, maximizing its energy resources, and protecting the health of its environment. By deploying a machine used in emergency situations, *Plan B* points to the uneasy co-existence of such goals. Using Turkey as just one example, it suggests that all leaders allow natural resources to be used in drastically unsustainable ways in order to maximize growth and capital return.

In his essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” historian Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes a historical view of humankind as a species that has drastically altered the physical processes of the earth and thereby undermined its own long-term survival. In his view, “species thinking” might enable us to recognize our united fate in a shared catastrophe.² Our political leaders, however, are not positioned to ensure the environmental health of the nations over which they preside. They always err on the side of short-term economic growth because they seldom calculate past the next election. If we look at “developing”



Sculptures on Air, 1997. 13 stone sculptures, helicopter, safety belts, metal tighteners, carabiners, steel plates, bars, and pallet, 3 views of work for Skulptur Projekte Münster.

ROMAN MENSHING, COURTESY THE ARTIST, GALERIE BARBARA WEISS (BERLIN), AND RAMPA (ISTANBUL)



nations such as Turkey, whose growing economies are tied to growing industries, the last thing their political leaders want to do is limit growth since that would entail limiting their power as global players. Turkey's greenhouse gas emissions are growing at a rate that is among the fastest in the world (near to rivaling the already devastating impact unleashed by "developed" polluters). Yet Turkish president Abdullah Gül managed to convince the 2009 U.N. Copenhagen conference on climate change that Turkey should be labeled a "developing" country, thereby gaining an exemption from emission-reduction policies pertaining to other Annex I countries. Turkish environmentalists referred to the results of the Copenhagen summit as a "total disaster" for their country's environmental health.³

Yet, as Chakrabarty argues, the fate of Turkey is also the fate of our collective future. Other world leaders are just as guilty of delivering spin over substance at environmental summits, pandering to the business interests that finance them. Moreover, one nation's refusal to combat climate change transgresses national borders to affect populations across the globe. Much like the self-serving gestures of the political machine, Erkmen's installation conjured visions of dystopian systems that perform empty gestures and futile tasks to justify their own existence. Her machine, dangerous not only for its cold, industrial beauty, but also for its thirst for energy, had no regard for the human population that it was originally created to serve.

This idea of the machine taking on a life of its own, or "performing" for an audience as a sculpture, is echoed in an early Erkmen work commissioned for the 4th International Istanbul Biennial (1995). Staged in a renovated, former industrial site like the Arsenale, the Istanbul Biennial occupied one of the buildings of the Antrepo, a renovated customs warehouse (which has since been turned into the Istanbul Modern Museum). Erkmen called attention to the site's industrial history by working with the building's freight elevator. She transformed it into a kinetic sculptural work by denying its original function.

This page and opposite: *Wertheim ACUU*, 1995. Existing freight elevator, corrugated steel sheets, and cordoning bars, 400 x 259 x 252 cm. 4 views of work for the 4th Istanbul Biennial.

Named after its manufacturer, *Wertheim ACUU* was set on remote to move up and down through the building's floors, its doors opening and closing on their own. No access was granted to viewers, who could watch the elevator performing its routine but not use it for their own needs. *Wertheim ACUU*'s actions were alarming, like a ghostly presence whose unclear, slightly threatening intentions seemed out of (human) control.

Plan B enacted a similar rebuke from a machine toward its human audience. In the catalogue, Erkmen states her wish not to win public favor with her installation: "In such an event [as the Venice Biennale], the work needs more of a presence, more than it has in other places. A presence like a celebrity, you need to turn heads, as people are tired and our location is the very end of the exhibition, people have seen hundreds of artworks...It has to be performative, it

COURTESY THE ARTIST, GALERIE BARBARA WEISS (BERLIN), AND RAMPART (ISTANBUL)



has to attract the attention of the people but it should not seek affection.”⁴ The installation allowed viewers into its sphere yet denied their existence: visitors could penetrate the space by stepping over or under the interconnected pipes, yet they were refused the right to “use” the machine for its intended purpose.

Plan B's position inside a national pavilion drew a comparison between its mechanistic properties and the metaphor of a political machine. Even though the public may have built the political machine to act on its behalf, *Plan B*'s refusal to serve the public with its clean drinking water suggests that power does not extend to the public but resides within the political system itself. Could the antagonism of *Plan B*'s political machine toward the public be an incentive for people to seize back power? This is the main question posited by *Plan B*, and it suggests that the stakes are rising by the day, like the sea level around Venice.

Like many of Erkmen's projects, *Plan B* engaged in an ephemeral activity to comment on a manifold site-specificity, referring

not only to Venice as an actual place, but also to the national pavilions inside the Biennale as symbols of the nation-state. It thereby pointed to the interconnectedness of the local and the global. The purification mechanism diligently performing its task inside the Turkish Pavilion became a complex metaphor for the state's political machine, working in tandem with industrial processes and businesses to generate economic growth. The side effect of this process was the waste of clean drinking water. Having visitors bear witness to such an ostentatiously wasteful process holds the promise of stimulating public action against similar injustices. As Chakrabarty points out, the overarching repercussions of such injustices may most immediately affect poorer nations, or the economically disenfranchised citizens of wealthier nations, but the long-term effects will be felt by everyone on this planet. Every visitor who witnessed the workings of *Plan B*, regardless of citizenship, economic status, or geographical location, should therefore feel marked by this injustice. The public can now engage this transitory piece by translating its ephemeral processes into a discursive form. This is how many of Erkmen's projects exist over time. Interpreting *Plan B*'s rich possibility of meanings as a statement about environmental degradation has been my contribution to such a discourse. The reader now has the option to add to it, pass it along, or translate it into assertive action.

Notes

¹ Edhem Eldem, “Water in Turkish is ‘Su,’” in Fulya Erdemci, ed., *Plan B: “Impossible Short-Circuits” and Serendipity* (Istanbul: IKSU and Yapı Kredi Publications, 2011): pp. 49–119.

² See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2009: pp. 197–222.

³ *Today's Zaman*, Istanbul, December 1, 2009, available on-line at <www.todayszaman.com/news-196145-copenhagen-failure-met-with-concern-in-turkey-across-globe.html>.

⁴ Erkmen quoted in Erdemci, op. cit., p. 180.

Berlin Golonu is a doctoral student in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester.