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ALCHEMIZING THE TRANS-LATENT:
SÜMER EREK'S SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN THE CONTEMPORARY GALLERY

Introduction

This paper explores the question of how socially engaged art processes manifest themselves in Cypriot artist Sümer Erek's transnational contemporary art installations. Erek's work, which often stem from participatory elements, are read as a materialisation of the experience of migration and trauma, interlacing personal and local histories into social and universal narratives. The aim of this paper is two-fold: first, a questioning of the relationship between socially engaged art and the institutions in which they are shown; and secondly, an examination of how we may discuss or interact with socially engaged works on an aesthetic level. The paper does this by exploring the relationship

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between the process of participatory practices and the ways in which the resulting experience is showcased as part of an artist's wider oeuvre in the context of a commercial gallery.

Taking up Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of Hegelian aesthetics as a starting point, Sümer Erek's work is considered in light of the ameliorative effect of collective projects that extends beyond community-level engagement, reaching into personal latent experiences. The latter are read in light of what Agamben describes as 'potentiality' in relation to the creative process. By observing the stages of Erek's socially engaged art practice from the late 1990s into the early 21st century, the paper will suggest that each project taps into the potentiality of the artist by alchemizing its participants' interaction into an exploration and journey of the self. The title *Alchemizing the Trans-latent* is used to describe Erek's artistic process, particularly in relation to socially engaged projects which revolve around the themes of loss, migration and geographic and spiritual dislocation. These projects conceptualized by Erek, actualize the subjective experiences of latent trauma, forcing the participants and the artist to confront memories that exists in an inactive state, memories which have not (yet) developed or uncovered. The notion of 'alchemizing' is used to describe the process of transforming interactions between artist and participants by means of a fluid exchange of dynamic emotions and experiences in the acts of listening, documenting and display. The study concludes with a discussion on the exhibition *1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/ Sümer Erek* (2018), which showcased a selection of Erek's socially engaged projects and other works in a (commercial) contemporary gallery setting. The premise of the paper is demonstrated by the exhibition where the compilation of documents and ephemera were deliberately curated to present the

artist's self-reflective journey into alleviating his personal trauma that remained latent for forty years.

Beginnings of experience based projects

The growing number of artists and curators engaged in art as a social practice since the 1990s has shifted the status of socially engaged art from being an emerging artistic tendency to becoming a key, global aspect of contemporary art. Socially engaged practices describe art that involve participatory elements such as engagement through human interaction involving people and communities in dialogue or collaboration. Erek started his professional training in 1977, a time period which marks a significant turning point in the western art world as well as Erek's personal life. In that year, Erek survived the widely documented incident where he was kidnapped together with his friend Muharrem Özdemir who was shot dead by a fascist group in Turkey.[1] Erek migrated to the UK the following year, completing his training at the St Martin School of Art in London. He describes this as a pivotal time in the UK following the change in politics after the election of the Conservative government in 1979, coinciding with changes in art education where the content and conception of art was becoming more political and contentious. Initially trained as a sculptor, Erek recalls this as a period of change prompted by the liberalization of the global economy following the collapse of Soviet Communism, advances in technology which was echoed in the debates around formalism and the subsequent transformation of the conventional understanding of

[1] Vid: Özuslu, Sami (2013). Türkiye'de öldürülen 6 Kıbrıslı gencin öyküsü: uçakla gelen 6 tabut [The story of six young Cypriots killed in Turkey: 6 casket arriving by plane]. Lefkosa: Kanal Sim.

medium. Discussing the impact of this paradigm shift on his practice in an interview, Erek refers to the status of medium-based practices prior to the polarizing views around formalism:

> While works of sculpture were being produced paying attention to shape and form, substance-based socio-political tendencies were brought to the forefront in my painting and other works. In the art world and education, in those years, each and every discipline of art tended to be separated by rigid lines. According to the prevalent view of the period, an artist was an artist, and should act like one. Similarly, a sculptor should do the same.[2]

Heralded by Rosalind Krauss's writings from 1977-1979 and the October group, the prevalent debate sought to reinvent the medium of sculpture in particular, and sever art judgement (theory) from that of Greenbergian formalist judgement (aesthetics). Now considered to be one of the most notable victories of artistic tradition in the 1980s; Erek's artistic foundations were established at a time when art practices were transcending object-making and being taken over by the idea of an 'expanded' renewal of medium altogether.[3] Encouraged by this zeitgeist, throughout the 1980s, Erek developed a multi-media practice, experimenting with both plastic and visual materials.

Although art criticism was able to displace formalism from aesthetic taste to the theoretical field, and into practice; the art market did not follow suit, retaining the 'rigid' borders of object-based work. As a young artist, Erek was unable to find gallery representation that embraced his multi-media approach: "When I mentioned to the gallery owner that in

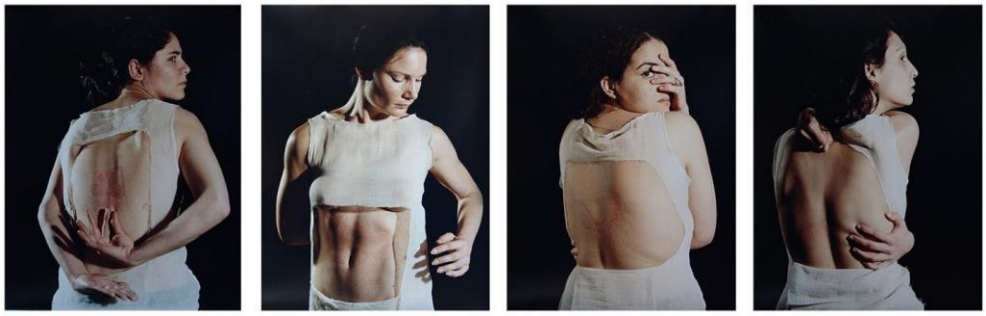
[2] Şonya, Zehra (2006). Interview with Sümer Erek: Generating Life Through Art! *EMAA Art Journal,* 6, 39.
[3] Osbourne, Peter. (2012). *October and the Problem of Formalism*. MACBA, 28, 12.

addition to my work in painting, I also were engaged in sculpture, he had asked me how I could ride two horses at once; and I had replied separately. He told me that this was not possible."[4] Disappointed by the art market and unwelcoming galleries, Erek decisively retracted from catering to such institutions, and devoted his practice to projects and conceptual work that could flourish and exist outside the capitalist system: "in defiance of the dictate of the rule of money, and at times revolting against it, and sometimes because I had no other options available, I tried to engage in transactions which did not value monetary exchange."[5] Historically, such 'transactions' were largely known as 'community art' during the 1970s. Over the decade, the term fell out of favour by the 1990s and was replaced with the term 'socially engaged art'.[6]

In the 1990s, the end of Thatcher's prime ministry and the creation of the National Lottery in 1994 paved way for the artistic boom of the decade in Britain. At the same time, the path from 'community art' to 'socially engaged art' marked a transition from the politicised and collectivist action of the 1970s towards individual-focused art programmes supported by Public Funds. Socially engaged art and conceptual practices became widely prevalent in England, making it acceptable for different disciplines of art to intertwine, at the same time becoming the antithesis of the art market due to the fact that such works cannot be owned, preserved, or exhibited easily.[7] Thus, Erek had found his niche: "So now

[4] Cit.: 38.
[5] Ibid.: 42.
[6] Matarasso, Francois (2013). All in This Together: The Depoliticization of Community Art in Britain. ed.: Erven, E. Community, Art, Power: Essays from ICAF 2011. Rotterdam: ICAF, 215.
[7] Vid.: Helguera, Pablo. (2011). *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Jorge Pinto Books Inc.

riding more than one horse became acceptable."[8] Rather than producing object-based works, he began conceptualising, organising and executing projects internationally.



[Fig. 1.] Sümer Erek, *Footnotes*, 2000. Digital print on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Footnotes, *Visibility/Invisibility* and the journey of the self

Following smaller performance-based projects in 1999, Erek initiated the project *Footnotes* (1999–2000) which consisted of a series of exchanges between artist and participants carried out in three stages. The first stage invited participants to sit in front of a video recorder and recount an event that had left a mark or lasting impression on their lives. In this one-on-one dialogic exchange, the artist repeatedly asked the same question, as the participant summarised the story several times, becoming shorter in each telling. Like simmering water, the emotional impact was boiled down to a concentrated version, which in the second stage, was identified or defined in the form of an object or imagery that could symbolise or represent the story. The imagery or representational symbol was then carved into wax, pouring plaster into the cavity to form a physical object; literally turning the symbolic negative scar into a positive manifestation. The plaster object was then pressed against the

[8] Cit.: 38.

bare skin of the participant until a visible imprint was made. In the final stage, the participant was photographed, wearing uniformly cut out muslin shirts to frame and reveal the trace of the mark, maintaining the discretion of the secrets shared. The dialogue, making of symbolic object and the carefully composed process of photographing the ephemeral mark were repeated for each individual participant.

The project initially began with 3 participants, whom the artist encountered randomly and asked to join the project. Over the course of one year, the project grew to include 30 participants. Similar to what are considered precursors of socially engaged art exhibitions, like *Culture in Action* (Chicago, 1993), *Sonsbeek'93* (Arnhem, 1993)[9], *Footnotes* was a context-oriented project working with migrant communities in Stoke-Newington. Erek conceptualised, organised and executed the project in order to discover or reveal moments, events, traumas that have left an indelible mark on the participant's psyche. The artist's interest in human responses to experiences of loss, migration or trauma continued as a persisting theme, and was explored in a new social context in the project titled *Visibility/Invisibility*.

[Fig. 2.] Sümer Erek, *Visibility/Invisibility*, 2002. Digital print on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

[9] Birchall, Michael (2015). Socially engaged art in the 1990s and beyond. *Social Sculpture re-visited*, 25. ONCURATING.org, 13.

In 2002, the artist was commissioned by Islington City College to work with migrant youth residing in North London. During his one-year residency, Erek carried out an interactive process, similar to *Footnotes*, where he asked individuals to recount their feelings on the last day at the place they left behind and the feelings on the first day of arriving to their new countries. Their experiences were transcribed and stitched on to muslin sheets, which were photographed veiling participants' faces. In *Rethinking Art History*, Donald Preziosi discusses the nature and process of aesthetic creativity in relation to the predominant conception of art-making in the West, which since the Renaissance has been "a formal transformation or translation of originary sensory perception… an originary view of an artist that is transformed in a metamorphized vision by the artist."[10] Here, the relationship between art and society is based on production and consumption, where the artist creates a product that is appreciated and (passively) consumed by the viewer. The nature of social capital in socially engaged practice, like *Footnotes* and *Visibility/Invisibility*, is complicated by diluting the translation of the originary view of the artist and by involving more interlocutors in the exchange. In Erek's projects, the authorial voice is not only shared, but the roles of producer/consumer are reversed. This reversal impacts the reception of projects, which considerably differs from the reception of other forms of art-making that have clear, authorial centres of production. Pablo Helguera points out that the term 'social practice' often leads to the misconception that there is a "critical detachment from other forms of art-making (primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist) that is inherent to socially engaged art, which, almost by definition, is dependent of the involvement of others besides

[10] Preziosi, Donald (1989). *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a coy science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 21.

the instigator of the artwork."[11] This can obscure the artist and the individuated practice under the guise of a participatory collective authorship. Erek's projects appear as platforms for experiences and narratives of others, and often do not offer any reference or resemblance to the artist's life. This supposed detachment of the project from the personality of the artist can be misleading. In fact, in several interviews, Erek has made a clear connection between his socially engaged practice, creative process and personal life, stating that they are inherently intertwined and interdependent:

> art is grasping and creating things that others have missed seeing, feeling and hearing; and sharing them with feeling and joy. Art can be shared but not self-life. Every person lives their life in their own body, even if sharing a life with a spouse. If one is interested or sensitive towards the other's life, then they will try to understand the other but only to the extent that their 'level' permits. Here, getting to know the other is tantamount to knowing one's self."[12]

Erek's statement is in tune with the premise of psychology, which suggests the following: "that which does not concern you, which has nothing to do with you, is of the greatest personal significance."[13] Reaching an emotional pandemonium through his participatory works, Erek was able to confront his own past which started with his encounter with an unfinished portrait of Muharrem Özdemir. The portrait acted as catalyst for the transnational project titled *Unlived Days* (2017-2018). This multi–layered episodic work was first performed under the title

[11] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 4.
[12] Şonya, Interview, 30.
[13] Keegan, Paul (2002). Introduction. Freud, Sigmund. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* London: Penguin, xxxi.

Stand in Rememberance [Anı Duruşu] (2017) in Istanbul, marking the fortieth anniversary of the killing of Özdemir on December 7.

[Fig. 3.] Sümer Erek, *Stand in Rememberance* [Anı Duruşu], 2017. Digital print on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Here, an image of the unfinished portrait of the deceased was folded into a paper boat and released by the artist into the Marmara Sea. This private act was documented by an invited viewer, capturing the intimate moment with a photograph. The second part consisted of the artist producing fourteen–thousand–and–six–hundred unique images of Özdemir, one for each day taken from Özdemir's life to the present day. Following the first exhibition of works at the Hôte Gallery in Brussles, Erek noted that *Unlived Days* was "[his] way of coming to terms with what happened, not only of losing [his] friend but of somehow surviving."[14] By focusing on Özdemir's life, or rather, on his unlived days, Erek objectified his own traumatic involvement in the loss by repeatedly recreating its symbolic image. Similar to the participants' repetitive narration of personal events in *Footnotes* and *Visibility/Invisibility*, Erek

[14] Çerkezoğlu, Simge (2018). Üç Kurşun Beni Öldürmedi, Daha Da Güçlendirdi [Three Bullets Did Not Kill Me, They Made Me Stronger], *Yenidüzen Adres Kıbrıs.* n. 353. p. 7.

transports this method into exploring the self through others: "Especially in participatory studies based on individual subjects, I tend to discover my own psychic journeys. But this awareness is a situation that is realized by the time distance rather than the natural fabrication of the production process. It's a bit like swimming in the ocean, giving in to my unconscious, and finding myself on the shore of a long journey."[15]

[Fig.4.] Sümer Erek, *Unlived Days (Yaşatma),* 2017. Digital print on paper. AKM, Nicosia. Courtesy of the artist.

In the showing of *Unlived Days* (February-March, 2017), the images were accompanied by the performance piece *Reading Wall*, consisting of forty written statements by family members, close friends, and acquaintances of Özdemir, which were translated into several languages and read out loud by fourteen performers.[16] The polyphonic voices echoed the multiperspectival representation of experience in earlier socially engaged practices, involving interactive dialogue and story-telling. Contrary to the discourse of participation, Erek does not diffuse the artist's authorship into collaborative activities, but rather transforms the

[15] Bardak Plumer, Esra (2019, January 15). Personal Interview with Sümer Erek.
[16] The project *Unlived Days* took place in London, Istanbul, Nicosia and Brussels, the *Reading Wall* was performed only in Brussels but exhibited in the Art Rooms Gallery, Kyrenia, whilst the performances *Stand of Remembrance* only took place in Istanbul and Nicosia.

overall experiences of subjects' into an exploration and journey of the self.

Translating the latent and the potentential-not-to

By Erek's own definition, over the course of several decades, the process of socially engaged projects is said to have in time caused the artist's latent trauma and emotions to manifest themselves. This process of artistic creation (aesthetic production) in the absence of work can be discussed in Girogio Agamben's terms as a 'mode of being as a potentiality', a mode that not only exists as an active force exerted against or in opposition to an external force or threat but one that is in the mode of being as a capability of development. While Agamben's vocabulary and tactics concerning aesthetics shift significantly over the course of his career, he consistently maintains that a deep affinity exists between art and potentiality.[17] Agamben's discussion of the act of creation emphasizes an act of resistance (in reference to Gilles Deleuze), and takes its cue from Aristotle's following statement from the Book of Theta of *Metaphysics*: "[in] order for there to be potentiality at all, and therefore any sort of change to happen, the potentiality to be or to do something must also equally entail the potential not to be or do that thing."[18] Here, impotentiality does not mean inability or impossibility, but rather signifies the potentiality not to be or to do. This is what distinguishes potentiality from actuality (the way in which potentiality realises itself in the act). Agamben defines potentiality in relation to the creative process: "The artist has a potentiality because it can create, but

[17] Maxwell, Jason (2011). Aesthetics. *Agamben Dictionary*. Murray, Alex (ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 22.
[18] Attell, Kevin (2011). Potentiality/Impotentiality. *Agamben Dictionary*. Murray, Alex (ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 159-160.

also because it cannot create, thus it exists in relation to its potentiality even when s/he does not exert."[19] Potentiality is thus regarded as inherently two-sided as both potentiality and impotentiality; a central doctrine for Agamben's thought, which constitutes the ontological underpinning of his work from the mid-1980s.

In light of this, if we were to discuss the latent (: the dormant feelings of unresolved trauma fostered by loss, migration, dislocation) as potentiality/impotentiality; it would be a way to identify Erek's artistic process in relation to his socially engaged projects; thus the projects can be seen as the actuality in which the potentiality/impotentiality (the latent, that which exists but have not yet manifested itself) realizes itself in the act. The significance of this relation is the emphasis on actuality (being) as it exists and is observed retrospectively, through inner subjective experience; and not come into being by means of external forces on the artist, out of thin air. The premise of conceptual art and its strong relation or application to socially engaged art thereby becomes a passage to the act where impotentiality sets itself aside, suspends and turn back upon itself, and yet is not totally destroyed or left behind, making actuality not just the realisation and fulfilment of the potentiality-to-be, but also the private negation of the potentiality-not-to-be.[20]

Erek's personal experience of the trauma of being abducted, physically assaulted, and losing his close friend Muharrem Özdemir in 1977, as well as his subsequent migration to Great Britain are all factors directly affecting his creative capacities to conceptualize and execute projects:

[19] Agamben, Giorgio (2014). *Resistance in Art*, European Graduate School Video Lectures.
[20] Cit.: 159-160.

"In the process of producing art takes place in a platform which encompasses the intertwining of individualism with the command, and the local with the universal, consciously or intuitively, the concepts and contents that I have chosen always harbors this totality."[21] Although the process is said to have not been conscious or predetermined, in hindsight, Erek makes direct references to how his socially engaged projects has fed into his personal journey. In fact, Erek describes his journey as one he takes through others; through exploring subjective experiences of loss, trauma and migration: "retrospectively, I've healed myself, not by looking at myself but through listening to others."[22] Accumulation of these revelatory experiences, vocalised and materialized by participants, can be seen as raising the awareness of the artist's own subjective experience. As the artist is not experiencing the trauma himself, the traumatic experience is kept in suspense as a potential, whilst the subjective experience of his role in the project becomes his potentiality-not-to.

Culmination of project based experiences as exhibition

In 2018, Sümer Erek organised *1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/Sümer Erek*, a large-scale exhibition which can be described as an anthology of the artist's socially engaged projects presented alongside a history of the artist's training and initiation into participatory and multimedia projects. The exhibition took place at the Art Rooms Gallery, significantly marking Erek's first exhibition to take place in a commercial art gallery in Cyprus. Over the course of that year, fragments of projects and early works had been shown in alternative spaces such as derelict buildings, underused state-run exhibition halls and private property around the

[21] Bardak Plumer, Interview.
[22] Çerkezoğlu, Üç Kurşun [Three Bullets]. 10.

island, ultimately leading up to *1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/Sümer Erek*. The organisation and execution of the exhibition, similar to Erek's previous projects, was initially developed as concept and then carried out incrementally, in three stages.

The first stage took place on October 3rd, 2018, in the form of a *vernissage*, presenting blank sheets of paper and empty frames with captions as index of artworks that would be (re)placed by the second stage of the show later that week. The intention of the first advertised date clearly indicated the lack of works on display, with the subheading 'Reception without exhibition', simultaneously managing the expectations of and whetting the interest of viewers. The artist received viewers in small groups, leading them through the space filled with blank pages and frames, narrating the stories behind works that could not be seen. The artist's interactive performance, accompanied by a vocal guest reciting obscure yet familiar melodies from local folk songs, invited viewers to listen to the represented subjects' stories before seeing them with the hopes of engaging with the work on an emotional and spiritual level. Here, Agamben's description of 'emotion' in reference to Gilbert Simondon's definition becomes useful; emotion becomes a way in which "we relate to the preindividual. To have emotion, to be moved, is to feel the impersonal within us, to experience Genuis as anguish or joy, safety or fear."[23] In other words, the emotional connection 'Reception without exhibition' sought to engage, on one level, was to thwart the critical framework imposed by aesthetic judgement, and on another level,

[23] Agamben, Giorgio (2015). *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books, 15.

worked to interrupt the act of viewing on a deeper level by reminding us the works' origins.[24]

[Fig. 5.] Sümer Erek, *1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/Sümer Erek*, 2018. Installation views. Art Rooms Gallery, Kyrenia. Courtesy of the artist.

Erek's hesitation to present the documentary elements of his socially engaged projects directly to an unknowing audience stems from what can be described as a distrust towards how society responds to art. Since the 1980s reinstitution object-based works prevailed into 21st century practices, the dangers remain of aesthetic engagement on a purely visual level of taste remains. This is the sense in which Agamben's call for the "destruction of aesthetics, [which] aims to return to the origins of philosophical thought and to uncover forgotten and fundamental ways of conceiving our world-way that have become buried in confusion and convention."[25]

> Perhaps nothing is more urgent-if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time-than a destruction [distruzione] of aesthetics that would, by tearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the systematic study of the work of art.[26]

[24] Agamben, Giorgio (1994). *The Man Without Content.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 45.
[25] de La Durantaye, Leland (2009). *Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 29.
[26] Cit.: 6.

Agamben's strategy of 'destruction' follows Martin Heidegger's understanding of the term not as an annihilation but as dismantling, the goal of which is to reveal the concealed, to glimpse what has been so long viewed through what Coleridge called "the film of familiarity" that it is effectively hidden from view.[27] Aesthetics, at its most basic level, frames its understanding of art within the subject/object dichotomy: a divide between the art 'object' and the experiencing 'subject'. In this sense, the dismantling of aesthetics seeks to make possible the transformative rebirth of art as something other than a subject's experience of an object, to exercise its potential-not-to.

At the second stage of *1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/Sümer Erek*, viewers were invited to return to the space on October 5th, 2018, for an 'Exhibition without reception' presenting the actual drawings, paintings, residues from previous installations, performance videos and documents of projects carried out between the years 1973 and 2018. The show was arranged in five main sections: 'Foundations', 'Journey', 'Soil Breath', 'Revive', 'Decay-Fire-Sea', each room carefully curated by Erek to reveal the interconnectedness and persistency of the themes of loss, migration and subjective experience through grouping the motifs of stitch–work, imprints, mark–making (doodling), and geographical and spiritual dislocation. The titles of the rooms, such as 'Journey' played on the semantics of referring to the common subject-matters explored in the exhibited projects such as geographical and spiritual dislocation, as well as to the artist's own self-journey.

The individual artworks and documented projects become examples of what Roland Barthes calls a 'lexia', or 'unit of reading' in a larger

[27] Murray, Alex (ed.). *Agamben Dictionary*, 91-92. Also see de La Durantaye, *Agamben: A Critical Introduction* on Heidegger's definition of destruction, 28-29.

narrative.[28] Discussing the emergence of a narrative quality of major retrospective exhibitions in the 1990s, Sayre associates the reading of a display with Barthes' analysis of reading a text: "The text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to the main one; the codes it mobilises extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable."[29] Likewise, the exhibition layout sought to disarticulate power relations by setting up a non-hierarchal, anachronic narratives. The display of the final photographic stages of projects such as *Footnotes* and *Visibility/Invisibility,* portraits and subjective experience in particular, strictly based on real subjects and actual events, could be viewed as central to Erek's work; transposing facts into the figments of memory, trauma and loss. The conceptual framework of each work, which often act as a catalyst for others, place the participant as a central protagonist of each lexia. Intimate dialogues that took place as part of the process are contrasted against the publicity of the gallery; charging the room with a voyeuristic curiosity, without infringing on the confidentiality of its subjects.

Conclusion: looking beyond the aesthetics of the collective

The centrality of people, subjective experience and day-to-day relationships have come to be defined as the medium of socially engaged art, ranking experience and engagement as primary features of the creative process. The inter-human elements of socially engaged art have

[28] Sayre, Henry M. (2009) 1990-2005: in the clutches of time. *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*. ed. Jones, Amelia. Massachusetts, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 115.
[29] Ibid., 115.

been extensively discussed in terms of relational and dialogical aesthetics where participants together with artists work in and at times against institutional spaces as co-authors of artworks.[30] The aesthetics of socially engaged art transcends the object-oriented approach to art and asks for more than a consideration of the final outcome. Rather than observing the final outcome as a finished aesthetic object, audiences are presented with and invited to view the intricacies of a completed process, one that includes its organization, execution, and possible continuation. This also pre-supposes that the process and resulting outcome of socially engaged practices, unlike the traditional conception of art-making, delineate a collective rather than an individual vision or journey that is detached from the artist. However, as demonstrated in this paper, this detachment can be misleading and can overlook the role of such works in the artist's self-journey, the catalytic impact on forming subsequent projects as well their retrospective exhibition and reception.

The rising prominence of socially engaged practices, subsequently followed by the establishment of higher education programmes since 2005, suggests that "the model is not only becoming more institutionalized, but also professionalized, and perhaps even commercialized."[31] The neo-liberalisation of socially engaged practices prompt critical attention, beginning with the basic questioning of the relationship between participatory socially engaged art, social capital and civil society as well as how the practice relates to the cultural

[30] Vid.: Bourriad, Nicholas (2002). *Relational Aesthetics.* Dijon: Les Presses du reel; Kester, Grant. (2005). Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art. Eds. Kocur, Z. and Leung, S. *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*. Oxford: Blackwell; Finkelpearl, Tom. (2013). *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation,* Durnham, NC: Duke University Press.
[31] Carrigan, Margaret (2017). What Happens When Social Practice Art Meets the Market? *Artsy*.

institutions in which they are made and shown.[32] Sümer Erek's artistic practice works with and against the parameters of 'socially engaged art', whilst its defining features such as 'participation', 'human interaction' and the primacy of emotional and spiritual experience form the core of his projects. underlining the reasons as to why participating is important as a project: "it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production."[33] In line with Guy Debord's indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism, socially engaged art can be viewed as an art of action, where audiences are encouraged to engage with references to community and collectivity in order to maintain "a critical distance towards the neoliberal new world order."[34]

Erek's projects oscillate between Claire Bishop's definition of participatory projects as an opposition against dominant market imperatives and, its illusive function as a process of amelioration.[35] This contradiction is further heightened by the display of works in a commercial gallery setting. Since many works go against the logic of the capitalist market by challenging traditional collecting practices, the exhibition as a whole questioned the neoliberal idea of community and the experience of social problems on a collective and individual level. Erek recalls the uneasy relationship between the showing of his socially engaged art projects and the commercial function of the gallery:

[32] Gallilera, Izabel. (2017). Points of Contention: Socially Engaged Art Practice in Contemporary Theory. *Socially Engaged Art after Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*. London, New York: IB Tauris Publishers, 18-19.
[33] Bishop, Claire (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, 11.
[34] Ibid., 12
[35] Cit., 14

> I am trying to conduct my art work on a platform devoid of any worries associated with marketing. Professionalism requires that finished (completed) art works are presented in institutional space and commercial galleries. In a sense, moving the production process into commercial art spaces entails forcing the boundaries of such places. Interactive and performance works which takes place in gallery space institutes an unmarketable resistance structure.[36]

1973-2018 Ülmen Aygın/Sümer Erek brought together hundreds of hours of interviews, one–on–one interaction, excavated residues of past performances alongside pieces never before revealed; creating new meanings and infinitely changing with every interaction. The third and final stage of the project, which was to take place as a *finissage* was cancelled by the gallery due to disagreements, beginning with Erek's refusal to price or sell his work. In what could be called his most ambitious multi-faceted work to date, the exhibition presented layers of polyphonic voices, which pushed the boundaries of what social practice can be as well as its relation to the commercial gallery, in turn raising the question of whether the viewer/participants were up for the challenge of engagement with such a hefty load.

Thinking back to the performative opening 'Reception without exhibition', on the surface it can be seen as a withdrawal from exercising optical engagement, opting to ask audiences to first engage with the content (before object of its manifestation); whilst on the other hand, it can also be read as a participatory project in itself that raise issue with the 'potentiality' (in the Agambenian sense) of socially engaged art. The

[36] Bardak Plumer, Interview.

artist enacts through the body the underlying narratives of the exhibition before the audience can see the actual works themselves; reiterating the inextricable link between the artist and the collective participatory works. Each subject, presented within strands of exploration of individual subjective experience, carries the artist's authorial presence, whether this is on, in-between or behind, the surface of visibility, deeming himself invisible yet always present. This open exchange attempts to blur the subject/object dichotomy and consider the shift that occurs in the aesthetic paradigm of socially engaged art within the institutional context of the contemporary gallery. The resultant cumulate, curated and performed by Sümer Erek, gives birth to a new experience as past projects act as footnotes to his ongoing journey of the self.

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