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As told to Sara Wintz, 2951 words.

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# On letting things grow over time

Curator Ekrem Serdar on investigating the threads connecting film and textile design, rethinking the often harmful ideologies behind technology, and considering the ways in which we can create change in small yet tangible ways.

**I wanted to start by talking about the exhibit you curated recently at Squeaky Wheel, Punctures: Textiles in Digital and Material Time. The exhibit connects media arts and textile production, rethinking our relationship with common tools that we use every day. What inspired you to organize a show that links media arts with textile production?**

I started noticing connections in the technical and social histories of textiles and media around seven years ago. At the time, as a student in the Department of Media Study at SUNY Buffalo, this was due to an interest in the actual apparatus. For example, I learned that the Lumiere brothers based the intermittent mechanism of their *cinematographe* (a projector/movie camera) on sewing machines. Many male producers hired women to be editors because cutting and splicing of images was seen as similar to sewing work. I was also watching Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* over and over again, and saw how Elizaveta Svilova, the film's editor, intercut herself cutting the film with women working in a sewing factory. (Hito Steyerl has a great talk asking why the film isn't called *Woman at the Editing Desk*.)

On the other hand, I was doing a lot of work looking at the history of the first Turkish films, which coincides with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the emergence of all these nation-states around the region. While the first Turkish film doesn't exist (a longer conversation for another time), what does exist is the first film made in the Ottoman Empire, which is a short film made in modern North Macedonia by the Manaki Brothers, now called *Grandmother Despina* or *The Weavers*, from 1905. It depicts an old woman weaving, and textiles kept appearing then in other works about and from the region. I'm thinking of the last shot of Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*, which shows the hands of Arshille Gorky's mother, but also Eytan Ipeker's *Dantelaci (The Lace Peddler)*, which depicts a traveling lace seller in the mid-20th century, still multicultural Istanbul, right before the pogrom of 1955. I was thinking of all these deeply violent moments in the region, and also how these filmmakers are looking at textiles to think about heritage, resilience, liberation, and time.

All of these connections came together in ways, and I kept digging and finding other artists who've been invested in these intersections for a long time from Annabel Nicholson, Beryl Korot, Sabrina Gschwandtner, Mary Stark, and many others. It seemed to offer a way to think about labor, power, and time in a way that felt revelatory. While I don't think it's as much of a concern any longer, there was a long period when filmmakers talked about their work in reference to other arts, whether it be "cinemapoetry," chamber films as Maya Deren said, or film as sculpture, and so on. It's like, okay, but why not film as textiles? All of these thoughts coalesced and that was how *Punctures* came about.

**It's so easy to forget that film is a textile, that it originated as something tangible. When and how does media become tactile?**

It's always tactile, it just doesn't always seem like it is. Naturally celluloid is already a physical strip of film that you can cut and stick together and scrape off, that can hold individual images. Sabrina Gschwandtner, who I mentioned earlier, makes "film quilts" by gathering discarded 16mm and 35mm film that depict weaving, hands at work, textiles, and she makes three-dimensional objects with them that sit in light boxes, so you can see the images in the frames. It's a really interesting way to think about a format that is essentially linear, in a three-dimensional, non-linear way. Stephen Monteiro makes a really lovely case for digital in his book, *The Fabric of Interface*, which addresses how we interact with touch screens, like pinching and so on, and how they're partially derived from the ways we interact with

textiles.

**Why is it important for us to be reminded about the material quality of media?**

When you realize you can touch something, it can ignite a sense of play and wonder, which I think is especially important for media that are often presented as if they can't be controlled outside their bounds. A film or video progresses linearly, but looking at, say, Sabrina's work, you realize the different kinds of time and the nature of juxtapositions that can come about. With digital arts, which seem much more ephemeral, it's the same; what's a gesture that can change how we interact? Also, these seemingly ephemeral things are very much material, depending on very large, environmentally awful capitalist infrastructures.

**You've been curating at Squeaky Wheel since 2015. What's it like to curate there? What have you learned from that experience, so far?**

Squeaky isn't a microcinema or a contemporary art gallery. We're a media arts center, founded specifically to give people access to low-cost equipment and media arts education for youth and adults. The way our exhibitions and events are part of that is what's most inspiring, especially in the kind of vision our executive director Maiko Tanaka is envisioning. When I was doing microcinema screenings in Austin and before, you know, we'd have a screening, do a Q&A, and go out for drinks. And that's great. It's something that we do here too. But with Squeaky, and the fact that we do all these things—several youth programs, all this production happening, all the time—what's been most exciting is thinking about the potential for these programs to work together. When we had an exhibition with Sondra Perry, she led a workshop with our youth where she taught them how to use Blender, and talked about her work, and how to think about how these seemingly neutral technologies, like digital media, actually have very destructive ideologies with them, and biases within them, but also how one can upset that. And now many of those students are using Blender all the time. I get a real kick when I meet former youth students, who've moved away and are visiting, and see them making their own work.

All that has been leading a lot of my thoughts and interests to thinking about other kinds of institutions that attempt to change how we may relate with art, and who that "we" is. I was reading this book *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood*, which documents the artist Andrea Franke's thesis project where she opened a daycare in a gallery, accompanied by all this research on daycares in her area and how cuts to social services were affecting people. A good chunk of the conversation of course shows how limited most art organizations are for parents, and the project really points to some needed but also inspiring questions. What would it be like to build an art institution around daycare? Maybe that's an awful idea, to have everything be part of the art land, but it's just really inspiring to think about how things can be different. If we switch these common structures, somewhat, what can that mean for the ways in which we care for artists and audiences? Who then gets to be there? What kinds of work and conversations can come out of that? Working at Squeaky has been really inspiring in that regard.

**When you curate, who or what do you always keep in mind? What's your curatorial process like?**

Whether independently or at Squeaky, I tend to be attracted to artists who think about media in ways that are, loosely speaking, critical and invested in imagining different ways of relating, being, and thinking. Many of the folks I've had the pleasure of working with are thinking through how these technologies embody harmful ideologies, but also think about what the future can look like, and how these tools can be put to other uses. In terms of process, it's changed over the years. As I mostly used to be a film programmer, it involved a lot of digging, finding underseen films or figures. Film programming doesn't have to be solitary, but I think it can be. Nowadays, at least at Squeaky, it's less digging, and more conversations with artists, and listening to partners, students, and other audience members. If it's an artist who doesn't live in Buffalo, I try to think of a couple people in Buffalo who would be interested in their work, because, again, it's much more fruitful for me to see these relations. It's not common that I run the Q&As, as I tend to invite others to be in conversation with a visiting artist, and I love doing that kind of match-making.

**You're originally from Ankara, Turkey, and you completed your B.A. and your M.F.A. at SUNY Buffalo. When did you move to Buffalo, and why?**

I moved to the US and to Buffalo in 2001. I think the University of Buffalo was the only US school I applied to, everything else was in Canada. I don't really remember why Buffalo, but I think I opted for the US as it would probably look better on my resume when I returned to Turkey. At the time, I didn't think I would stay here. That was the fall of 2001, a couple weeks before 9/11.

**That must have been a wild time to move to the US, especially from Turkey.**

It was, but it was also very instructive in how it opened up Turkey as a country to me. We're such a nationalistic country, and seeing a ton of flags and that kind of hateful discourse and patriotism was very recognizable. While I was naturally thinking of the United States' position as a superpower at the time, and Turkey as an ally/subject of that superpower, it mostly opened up Turkey's own history of oppression in the region.

When I moved here, I was already thinking about the possibilities of what film could do politically. Whether it could be a tool to mobilize people, and so on. Ever since then, I've gotten deeper and deeper into thinking about it. At the time, I was thinking about it in a very utilitarian way. Now, it's more about, "Okay, so what are the possibilities in which media can help us think about our lives differently,

and think about the structures that we're around differently?"

**Was there one experience that really brought to your attention the ways that film can mobilize people?**

Well, in a negative way. I was at a sold-out screening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, while also hanging out with a lot of anarchist crews. I got really, really disillusioned by the possibilities of large-scale, industrial films that play in movie theaters, to actually do anything. I don't remember when *Fahrenheit* came out, a little before the 2004 election. Then, of course, George W. Bush got re-elected, and it was awful. Despite all that, despite all of the hundreds of thousands who got together to protest in DC against the Iraq War, it didn't necessarily do anything. Which feels naive, but I was younger too.

At that point, I started thinking about working on a smaller scale. Instead of mass protests, what can we do amongst 10 people, or 20 people, or 30 people? That's been much more generative, I find. Not in a direct, structural way, but more sort of like, believing that such a longing can be generative, giving, loving, transformative.

**It's about seeing something large that was meant to have monumental impact and did not, and so, deciding instead to do the work on a much more microscopic, in comparison, scale, and believing in making an impact long-term.**

Yes, totally. And, to play devil's advocate to myself, there are certainly works of art that have influenced, in a sort of direct way, laws or policy, or an accumulation of voices helps influence that. At this point, I don't really know about dismissing the utility, or lack thereof, of something like *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It's just not something I'm interested in.

**When you think about working on a smaller scale, what are some examples of that work? How does it manifest in the real world for you?**

The way it manifests for me is through holding attention over time, and trusting that work over time, one step at a time. That can be following an artist's work over time and seeing how they change, how their work changes, and how their work changes relates over time. Or sort of trying, and not always successfully, but trying to provide certain structures where people can feel comfortable, and at ease, curious, generous. I've been trying to be much more deliberate about setting up Q&As, as they are one of the few public moments that organizations provide to audiences, where they can have a voice. So many Q&As tend to, somewhat understandably, prioritize the artist, but it really has to be for the whole room. There are so many bad Q&As, but some of my favorite moments have been witnessing conversations between artists, moderators, audiences, and guests.

**As a co-founder of Experimental Response Cinema (2012 to 2015) you presented programs like Experimental Cinema from Turkey, Experimental Film on 35mm, drawing from artists like Yoel Meranda, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. In 2009, you curated FRAMPTONIA: Hollis Frampton's \*Hapax Legomena & David Gatten's The Secret History of the Dividing Line. As someone who has been writing and thinking about experimental film for a long time, what do you like about experimental film and what do you dislike about experimental film?**

It has a limited use. I got drawn to it after that period of Michael Moore disillusionment, as it held a kind of promise of integrity. But I don't know if I care that much about the term "experimental film" anymore. People work in a lot of different modes and speak to a lot of different histories. "Experimental film" as a term encompasses some of these histories, and people, and ideas, many of which are still so exciting, but as a scene, at least in the US, it can have a history of being rather white and insular.

**How did you create a path outside the established system?**

There were films I wanted to see, and it just seemed easier for me to write the grant application, book the films, learn how to use the projector, set-up the sound, pitch it, and show it—rather than bother other curators. It came about because I wanted to see things that weren't accessible to me that I kept reading about and was interested in.

**It sounds like you got your start by doing it yourself.**

No, not at all, it was always with others. My first grant application was to show films by Hollis Frampton, and I did that with my friend Scott Puccio. In Turkey, all the screenings we did came about as a bunch of us, including Eytan Ipeker and Yoel Meranda, met on a Turkish Experimental Film Yahoo Group, and started talking and working together, and then I lugged a 16mm film projector to Turkey, which then broke because I didn't think of the frequency difference in the countries. And then I lugged over another one. In Austin, with Experimental Response Cinema, I knew Caroline Koebel, and then I emailed Scott Stark, who I had never met, but had seen his films, then met Rachel Stuckey, and Tara Bhattacharya and Jennifer Stob, and we were all driven by showing some flicks and seeing things that weren't being shown in town. I feel very lucky that I've always been in communities and groups of people who are supportive, with shared excitements and interests.

**Remind me how you became part of the literary scene in Buffalo? Do you write poetry?**

An early mentor figure in Turkey was the playwright Memet Baydur, who had a wealth of knowledge about poetry, literature, film, and art. I certainly modeled myself after him, so I was already predisposed in a sense. When I moved to Buffalo, I didn't really know what to do in my free time other than watch movies, but one of the main places I always hung out was Talking Leaves Bookstore. I would just spend hours there,

chatting with folks who worked there, bothering them about this or that book, and it was through Talking Leaves that I met a lot of poet folks. Everybody in my department seemed invested in trying to be a Hollywood filmmaker, or something like that, and I wanted to talk about Ozu and the nature of adapting short stories, like the worst 17-year-old, and they were down.

**Do you think about your experience at Talking Leaves as something you're trying to create for other people when they participate at Squeaky Wheel?**

The people who worked there brought an excitement of discovery, but also matched my own, and it was really joyful. I hadn't thought about it like that [in relation to Squeaky Wheel], but it's a nice goal.

Ekrem Serdar Recommends:

"I started this year thinking I would read a lot of novels, and all I did was read one short story. What's been most nice this year for me has been re-engaging more with poetry again, which I hadn't read intensively in quite some time. Not that I'm a good reader, but I just like reading. I've had a really nice, calming, and lovely time picking up a slim volume and just spending a day with them."

*Whereas* by Layli Longsoldier

*Material Girl* by Laura Jaramillo

*Kith* by Divya Victor

*Love, Robot* by Margaret Rhee

*Humanimal* by Bhanu Kapil Rider

Name

Ekrem Serdar

Vocation

Curator

Fact

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