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Keynote Talk: From Analog to Digital, Fictive vs. Documentary: An Ongoing Journey

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Abstract. This talk will focus upon a personal update of my sojourn as an artist/academician - a journey that has led me from the analog to the electronic medium spanning a timeline of 30 odd years. The exploration, still in progress, will start with city planning, architecture and photography where I acquired, and developed my analog skills. Following this, I will focus on my encounter with the digital revolution, right at a time when the foundations were being laid at one of the leading institutions of the world. I will then ponder on the possible common grounds between analog/digital also by bringing in notions such as serendipity, surprise, uncertainty, inadvertence that lie at the heart of my creative practice. These will constitute the grounds upon which I base my computational art experimentations and my academic research on various transformations in contemporary aesthetics that I believe arose out of digital creativity. Since my main visualization area is photography; indispensable conceptual components such as representation, real, surreal, objectivity, subjectivity, construct will be mentioned and linked to an empirical process based practice.

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1 Artist Statement

Photography is an opportunity for me to find things people ignore and bring them forward to make people reconsider their ideas. I am not interested in extraordinary things since they are always covered and receive more attention due to mankind's unending interest in celebrities, fame, sensation... I try to concentrate more on ordinary things and catch possible latent extraordinariness in regularity. It is easy to take ordinary photos of extraordinary things but more challenging to take extraordinary photos of ordinary things. It is possible to say I tend to concentrate on extracting some peculiarity out of the ordinary. I attempt to defamiliarize ordinariness, render it ambiguous by alienating it from its familiar context and finally make people to 'see it afresh.'

Photography records the surface information, where one can only depict the exterior features of objects (color, texture, shape, etc.) and the resulting visual representation cannot incorporate the internal condition/content/soul. I also aim to make photos that

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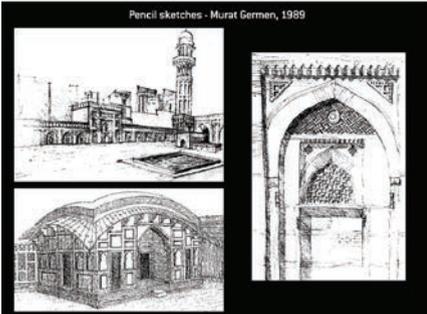
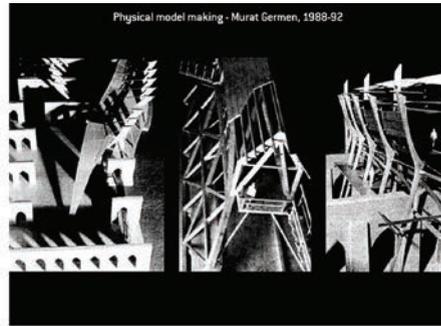
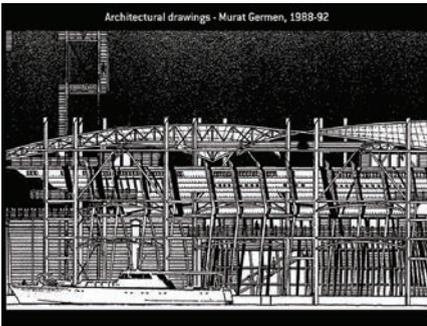
carry the many traces of time, multiple dimensions of space and finally create photos usually invisible to the naked eye. The basic idea is to form a personal visual accumulation through time and space that supposedly give us more insight/clues than a single photograph. I see multi-layered photography/chronophotography as gates to augmented perception, surreal encounters, creation of new worlds and self appropriation; since I do not believe in ultimate objectivity in photography and “Truth” with the capital T. Personal delineations of temporary yet experienced smaller realities are truer than imposed institutional “realities.” The key is reflecting the inner world with a genuine, idiosyncratic way: “Do not follow the suggested agenda/trend, do your own thing...”

The combination of digital means and artistic practice is of prime importance. The computational dimension is indispensable and allows me to visualize anything that I perceive/conceive. The technological advances in imaging and its post-processing changed the way I observe, imagine, create and share my artworks.

Appreciated keywords: Hybrid, mediation, anonymous, praxis, perception, plurality, unexpected, evolution, as is, as such, deconstruct, odd rhythm, indeterminism, absorption, alternative, shift, adaptation, genuine, defamiliarization...

2 Analog Background

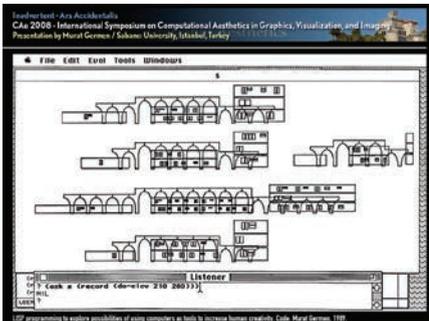
While having been educated as an architect at a time when computers started to be highly influential in the design and art worlds (very beginning of 1990 s), I also had the chance of having been exposed to analog methods in the creation process. This enabled



me to get to know various materials, experience how they feel, touch and smell, as opposed to just assigning them as a surface map on a 3D model without knowing how people will react to it. Being familiar with materials also helped me to speculate on how they would fail, and in turn, how this failure would lead to a particular result that would add something to the creative process.

3 Transition to Digital – Coding

When I was a student at MIT years ago, I took an experimental computer programming class involving LISP programming. The course was led by Aaron Fleisher & Earl Mark. The experiment was on the exploration of using computers as tools adding to human creativity. In my final assignment, I wrote a code, which engaged 7 nested levels of random procedures and the aim beyond this was that every time the code was run I would obtain a different result. There were three algorithms that controlled different components of an architectural façade: Arches, storeys and windows. The idea behind was very simple: Computers can add to our creativity by offering many more alternatives than we can produce in a much shorter period of time. Finally, humans are still the ones to choose from these alternatives and this is a perfect collaboration of ‘homo’ and ‘machina.’ This procedure can also be considered ‘stochastic’ since there are again elements of randomness and a certain level logicity involved.



4 Digital - Serendipity

Creativity is stochastic and assumptive in nature. The importance of randomness in the creative process must not be ignored, underestimated or intentionally disregarded in a condescending way. Notions of chance, randomness, or unpredictability are much important, especially when it comes to artistic creation.

In addition to above notions, serendipity can be seen as the expected contribution for making expedient discoveries by coincidence, by chance. To put serendipity into work, there is need to accumulate a list of questions that need solving, acquaintance with already existing answers, and their use in daily life. Only when this knowledge is present, ‘chance’ can take its part in establishing the perfect milieu for the ‘problem’ and the ‘solution’ to find each other. If there is already a great deal of knowledge

accrued in our minds about the problem and the requisites for the solution, chance adds the final piece to the puzzle. It is when we can start to talk about a traditional ‘prescriptive, authoritarian and rather conventional’ aesthetics vs. a new ‘generative, irregular, unprescribed’ aesthetics.

The outcomes of software ‘failures’ in digital technology made a similar type of aesthetics emerge: Glitch aesthetics. The ‘dirty’ and sometimes ‘chaotic’ nature of glitches made things look much more organic and human, as opposed to mechanically computerized.

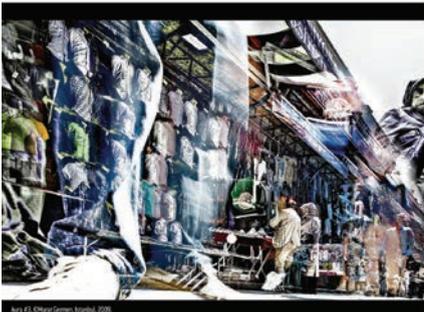
Though the accidental dimension in art looks more compatible with analog practices, there are various instances it finds its niche in the digital world as well. Mystifying benefits like freedom from preconceptions, momentary skepticism about planned course of action, avoiding mechanical thinking/prejudices, reaching a more natural/authentic result, discovering unusual and unique aesthetical domains, etc. will always make ‘ars accidentalis’ an indispensable part of art practice.



5 Digital - Palimpsest

Photography is one of the creative fields at which technological advances influence artistic expression the most. The ease of manipulation brought by software and extra features available in cameras made artists (using photography as an articulation tool) reconsider their visions, themes, narration, syntax and ways of sharing their artwork. It is quite obvious that artists, who are aware of the complexity and particular advantages that this technology brings, indeed end up with a novel aesthetics of photography. In addition to the regular montage and collage methods remaining from the old analogue days, digital imaging techniques allow artists to work with notions like augmented perception, chronophotography, subreal encounters, pictorialism, palimpsest-like superimposition, interlacing, simplification/minimization, creation of new worlds, delusion, synthetic realism/artificiality, appropriation.

The painterly effect obtained as the result of the digital superimposition process reminds us the very analogue concept of palimpsest (Greek “palin,” again; “psēstos,” scraped) which is a re-used papyrus or parchment manuscript in which the original text has been washed or scraped off and a new one substituted. The modern version of this archaic surface of knowledge which allows accumulation of information is the Photoshop canvas, where you can completely cover a layer behind yet still make some details emerge from beneath. This possibility of layering various data from different sources one on plane is a more complex form of the good old analogue collaging & montaging methods and enables artists to reach a richer expression through superimposed pluralities.



The “Aura” series consists of photo-composites obtained with the combination of Photoshop and Photomatrix Pro in order to perform HDR imaging. Four or more photos from the same angle are used for each of the plates from the series. All multiple-photo groups, recorded inanimate objects still, yet animate subjects in different positions/movements due to passage of time and slow shutter speeds. Superimposition of four photos resulted with the particular aesthetics of the constant appearance of immobile objects and the dynamic intricacy as a consequence of layered mobile subjects. The aim in multiplying the photographic renderings of these mobile subjects, is to reach a similar complicated result to the notion of merging reflective analogue visual data with its reflexive digital one.

6 Digital - Augmented Perception

Though there are studies on exceeding human sensory capabilities, our visual perception still takes ‘what the eyes see’ as the basis of apprehension. In this case, artists who intend to go beyond what one can see with the naked eye, take advantage of software. These digital means enable artists to assemble and convey information in a holistic manner that is otherwise not possible to record in a single photographic documentation act. The resulting totality leads to a particular aesthetic form which turns out to be the synthesis of individual forms, in other words a ‘sui generis’ situation. One can interpret this as a cubist approach.



Periods included in single photographs are usually and naturally much shorter than periods documented in video works. Yet, when it comes to combining photos taken at different times on one photographic surface, it becomes possible to see remnants of longer periods of time. Performing time lapse photography and compositing images as a durational pattern of many traces left by different moments, lead to the positive notion of timelessness (lack of time dependence) due to the plural presences of time at once. Substance becomes multi-layered and hierarchy disappears: All elements are relatively equal parts to the whole.

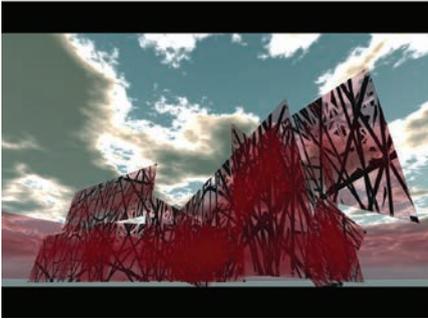
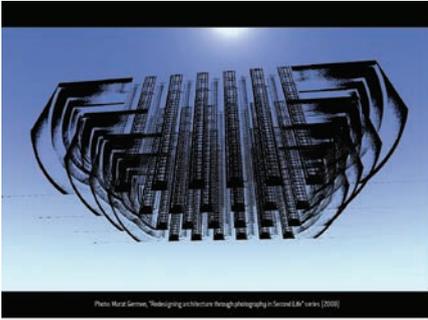
An accumulated photographic rendering of one place with various lights, movements, figures, facets, objects and subjects coming from discrete slices of time, allows a richer visual definition of the particular milieu that can be a more faithful description of the observer's personal experiences. Resulting images of such accumulations are usually visual experiences impossible to the naked eye.

7 Digital - Construct/Second Life

There are various offline and online 3D environment alternatives at which one can carry out virtual construction experimentations. Second Life (SL) was the one that was selected among these since it had a powerful 3D construction interface. More importantly, SL is a global(ised) milieu on which you can have people from all over the world try 3D creations interactively. Second Life (SL) has recently been quite popular as a customizable virtual environment. Yet, most took it as a game setting and since SL requires more self-motivation and guidance as compared to online game platforms, they did not exactly find what they were looking for. According to some SL experts, this customizable virtual environment is ideal for creative projects to be realized as 3D volumes, as it allows you to build anything without rules/regulations and has quite an intuitive/advanced 3D modelling environment.

I wanted to take advantage of SL environment in order to test what I have been proposing on performing architectural design with the aid photography. During this investigation process, I have used my own photos which were the products of both artistic and professional photography, turned them into 1-bit black & white images with threshold command in Photoshop, saved them as transparent PNGs, mapped them onto transparent planes within the metaverse and finally built volumes to be "photographed" using SL software's snapshot feature.

Staging a succession of planes devoid of the typical depth of field, with all its planes kept clearly and no shadows cast (due to online rendering limitations in Second Life), leads to an idiosyncratic perception mode that further fosters the concept of constructed reality and creation of a personal world. This personal world exists in the virtual world and the particular experience of the constructed reality takes place through the help of a concept that we can call "telepresence" which focuses on the relationship between an individual and his/her personally mediated environment.



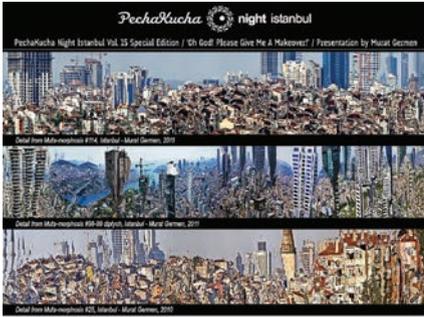
8 Digital - Cityscapes/The Birth of the Series Titled “Muta-morphosis”

The concept of ‘muta-morphosis’, a combination of the notions of mutation and metamorphosis, and the connected artwork series was obtained by reducing panoramic images on one axis. The image compression points to the dynamics between the urban components that can persist and the ones that give up, vanish in the various historical, residential and business urban districts.

The unique aesthetics of urban compression that resulted after content-aware resizing, does not refer to the typical condensed image where each image component is affected by the single-direction scaling and gets excessively slender and tall. Rather, it is a textural fusion of intertwined image blocks that stayed relatively recognizable after the compression. The subsequent ‘collage-city’ pattern displays a structural connectiveness to my previous architecture and city planning background.

The formation of perspective in these works is different from that of photographs taken in a single shot and the scene depicted includes different time periods and spaces, though adjacent. The two-vanishing-point perspectives of the single-pivot-point panoramic imaging is diminished to an almost unnoticeable or flat perspective after the one-axis contraction in the horizontal array. Muta-morphosis series fits contents of multiple glances into one, visualizes what is there in a more condensed way. Photographs do not thoroughly convey what the naked eye sees, they include their author’s interpretation, emphasize priorities in his perception. In other words, photos expect to be read like a novel and not like an objective/scientific/factual body of text.

Though photographs in this series are taken in various cities, metropolises in the world; majority of them depict Istanbul, as the Ottoman miniatures do. The author neither tries to beautify Istanbul more than necessary as old generation photographers did, nor picture Istanbul's spot ugliness excessively like new generation photographers prefer.



9 Mobile Imaging - Activism

The democratization of image making brought by mobile devices and resulting increase in the introduction of personal narratives forming a collective pool of experiences can be exemplified with the recent social movements like the Arab Spring or the Taksim Gezi Park resistance in Turkey.

The plurality of different, or even opposing informal individualities is central to the concept of a developed culture. The pool of images created by “amateurs” carries the potential of being truer in the sense that they are neither commissioned by hegemonic press agencies (Reuters, AFP, etc.) nor taken by professional photographers who are very experienced in creating photos as instruments to be exploited by prevailing nations. In other words, there is an increasing autonomy of the making of images (pictures) and decreasing significance of photos of commissioned by official/private institutions to clean their images (appearance). Visual appropriation, manipulation and control of the world are not only in the hands of exclusive people/institutions anymore.

What we individually create nowadays is not a representational proof that will serve the official history dictated to us, it is rather our humble personal observation that has a destiny of its own in terms of sustainability. The image no longer serves to signify the object; but, rather, suggests it, uncovers it, makes it subsist.



Urban transformation is Istanbul



Urban transformation is Istanbul



Water rights & hydro-electric power plants



10 Conclusion – Significance of Documentary Photography

The works I have shown under various themes are all fictional works that I created in the digital realm. Though some of them were, in fact, documentation of “real” moments, cases, times, spaces; various images were merged together in order to be able to convey any visual information, story that is not visible to the naked eye.

Following my intense experimentation with digital time-space making, I decided to concentrate more on documentary work, in addition to my ongoing practice in computational art. The Gezi resistance movement was the main reason why for this shift. Freedom in Turkey is under big pressure lately and the only thing that the government is interested in is mega projects that will bring excessive profit to pro-government construction companies. Since I am quite experienced in professional photography, I chose to focus on documenting the numerous immense construction projects that turn Turkish cities into vast uncomfortable building yards, under the name of urban transformation.

In addition to documentation of urban environments, I recently started to record the disproportionate number of hydro electric power plants that supposedly contribute to Turkey’s energy need; yet, in reality, emerge as excuses to privatize water rights, that publicly belong to all of us. The main question that arises in this case can be: Why favor documentary photography lately? The answer is easy: Because sometimes, truth is stranger than fiction...

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