

Eastern Art Report:

Plan B / Ayse Erkmen, 2011<sup>i</sup>

Pavilion of Turkey – 54th International Art Exhibition, Biennial of Venice

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Ayse Erkmen's installation *Plan B* draws on the ineluctable and complex relationship Venice has with water. Her project transforms the venue inside the Arsenale into a complex water purification unit, where machines perform as sculptures, encircling the audience inside of the filtration process that provides eventually 'drinkable' water. Each component of the emergency purification unit, the high pressure pump, reverse osmosis membranes, pre-filtration and ultra filtration systems, storage containers and tanks, all has been separated out inside the space, disseminating the machinery throughout the room then reconnecting the elements with extended pipes. Erkmen choreographs the elegant industrial forms to create a space where the audience is part of the process of transformation. At the end of the process, the purified water is returned to the canal: a futile, yet courageous gesture against the overwhelming scale of the canal and the ocean.

This futile, almost utopian gesture of cleaning the canal and the ocean 'drop by drop' is reminiscent of the heroic act articulated by the 'scapegoat' character in the renown novel of Boris Vian, the *Heartsnatcher* (1959), who daily fishes junk the town has dumped out of the river with his teeth. Such a romantic act bares the shame of the citizens. Although the attempt to clean the water proposes a common point, *Plan B* stands against such nostalgic whimsy. It instead suggests a counter to the populist 'productivist' discourse of global capitalism, which infused into every corner of our lives. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue in their epoch-defining work *The New Spirit of Capitalism*:

"The constant reintroduction of capital into the economic circuit with a view to deriving a profit –that is to say, increasing the capital, which will in turn be reinvested– is the basic mark of capitalism, endowing it with the dynamic and transformative powers that have fascinated even the most hostile of observers."<sup>ii</sup>

Peter Sloterdijk's definition of contemporary society as "fanatical adherents of explosions, worshippers of that rapid release of a large quantity of energy"<sup>iii</sup> explains a great deal in this context. We love energy, machines, production, speed, mobility, powerful actions and heroic moves, the peaks of festive moments, psychedelic explosions, even 'revolutions', exemplified in Western media reactions to the recent Arab revolts where the motivation for revolution is portrayed within the context of populist 'freedom' discourses and a democratic agenda. We love majestic ends and new beginnings. In the 60's there were criticisms of such radical acts in the name of new beginnings. The *Homage to New York* (1960), for instance, the self-destructive machine by Jean Tinguely obliterates itself at the end of its performance in reference to the modernist maxim 'creative destruction'. Referring specifically to the reconstruction of New York.

Ayşe Erkmen's water filtration system, on the other hand, doesn't have a spectacular start or end but it works constantly in a circuit. It neither proposes a new techno-scientific discovery that can clean the canal and the ocean at the blink of an eye. It doesn't propose radical acts: instead it works by purifying a modest amount of water that it eventually returns to the canal. Its vibration slightly resonates on the floor, affecting the audience physically. However, there is no product gained at the end aside from the canal receiving a relatively insignificant quantity of fresh water. There is no moment of catharsis available, as with Jean Tinguely's machine.

Expressing Erkmen's typical attention to form and function, the project abstractly conveys the systems and processes that affect us daily: blood circulating through the body, Capital flowing through borders, the flow of goods across the oceans, the mechanisms of government and authority, the supply of natural resources critical to survival, to name just a few possible compass points.

Formally, Erkmen's practice often comments on minimalism's relationship between industrial form and the body. This installation generates a visceral experience for viewers who are embodied within the mechanism or process of transformation, and therefore, implicit in the transformation that takes place. It questions the relation between the macro and micro layers of systems: something much greater than the scale of individual acts, but at the same time they are inextricably bound.

While proffering a poetic reference to the potentiality of change, *Plan B* is simultaneously a subtle and witty critique of the euphoria for unsustainable quick-and-easy short-lived solutions and changes within the complex systems and structures that surround us.

Strategic planning', 'high priority', 'highly confidential', 'worst-case scenario' and 'Plan B' –all such terminology was borrowed from military, defence and managerial systems. They allude to the 'tactics' that are played out globally by intelligence services, military and trans-national corporations. This structural terminology has seeped into other fields like ecology and environmentalism, medicine and health, information technologies, computer sciences, implying 'urgency', 'seriousness' and 'necessity'. And it has also been adopted into an everyday lexicon where the terminology circulates in more casual contexts to refer to vacation plans, after-office-hour-meetings with friends or going to a concert, where it mocks the seriousness of the terminology's origins.

'Plan B' is loaded with diverse meanings and references besides referring to the back up plan when the hypothetical 'Plan A' fails. In the context of an art project, it certainly suggests the development process that any project goes through. The plan b option becomes a common topic of conversation in the build up to the Venice Biennale with the myriad of planning and production issues it presents, and the competitive temperament that its scale and style provokes. It alludes to the 'seriousness', 'urgency'<sup>iv</sup> and 'complications' involved in the preparations of the Venice Biennial as a major global event, but at the same time, it is an ironic critique of this.

Erkmen's project *Plan B* juxtaposes three incompatible parts; the **Venice Biennale** phenomenon; **Plan B** –and its loaded terminology– and a **water purification unit**, the embodiment of the production and transformation of water. This collision creates a parallax gap that opens the possibility of looking at these unrelated parts simultaneously, potentially sparking an understanding beyond what the individual parts can propose.

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<sup>i</sup> This curatorial statement is composed of parts taken from the “Plan B: Impossible Short-Circuits and Serendipity” essay of Fulya Erdemci, published in the book “Plan B, Ayse Erkmen”, co-published by IKS V and Yapi ve Kredi Publishers, Istanbul, 2011 on the occasion of Pavilion of Turkey, the 54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2011

<sup>ii</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, New York, 2005. pg 5

<sup>iii</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Radicant*, Lukas & Stenberg, New York, 2009. pg. 177.

<sup>iv</sup> The use of “Emergency” Water Purification Unit in the project was a practical necessity, but, it became an integral part of the conceptual framework as a result of what Ayse Erkmen calls “serendipity”.