

Interview with ELMAS DENIZ  
[1:11:24]

2 August 2007

NA: Tell me about how you first came into this whole community.

E: First of all, that your point...you said “local identities.” And when it comes to K2, just because of the location of K2—it’s in Izmir, the SW coast of Turkey—3 million people live there, and there’s no CAC or anything. So, it’s a kind of a lacking of space, I mean, a platform, a museum, an anything. That’s the reason K2 really became a multi-functional place: it became a museum of the city, alternative place of the city, and it’s for new artwork. It’s a kind of hub. Especially for the local identity: ok, from the distance it seems like there is a Turkish identity in Istanbul and Izmir both, but when you make the scale smaller, then there’s a difference between the cities. When we start something in Izmir, also we recognize the things about like, Izmir, how people have ideas about Izmir, and also everything is super international right now. There are different layers in this. Now, I can tell about how we started:

Actually, K2 started in 2003, but actually who started this place was a group of artists. We first did a group project with 3 artists, 1 curator-artist, 1 architect, and a graphic designer...we built our venue—our exhibition venue and it was a portable art gallery [*Kutu project*]. And we were all coming from Izmir and then we just show it, first we built in a contemporary museum of art in Istanbul, and now it is probably lost. And we showed there. The same people are working in K2 right now. We started that 2003 and we find a building in Izmir. The first year we were more trying to communicate with the local art scene, especially in Istanbul, and we already had contact with the artists, it’s more like personal contacts.

NA: These were the artists that you were getting to come to Izmir with K2?

E: No, it was not a kind of exchange. Actually, we were coming to Istanbul to be able to be exist even. Because if you are making art, if there is no audience, if there is no place, if there is no space, then you are not an artist. So, you have to move somewhere to show your art. In the city, most of the people, they were moving to other places just to be able to keep on doing art. Of course, I’m talking about the contemporary art. These are the things, like how we started.

NA: So, all of these—like this group of artists from Izmir—came to Istanbul to do art, but then you opened a center in Izmir. What were the discussions or how did that happen? Why did you feel that it was necessary or a good idea to put a contemporary art center in Izmir?

E: If you asked this question a few years ago, I probably would have told a kind of big lie. Because at that time it was really important that why you start was a kind of, more, bigger ideas or something. But actually what I saw right now, is just “need.” Just a simple

thing.

NA: There was a vacancy, there was a hole...

E: Yeah. So we need this kind of thing. And also we were living in Izmir, I am still...so it became necessary. Also, to be able to represent yourself properly you have to create your own thing where you are staying. Otherwise, it became a kind of exportation. You have to export yourself to somewhere else and then it became an issue of representation. But if you do it at your own environment, then it has different meaning. So then, we can come to the point to talk about local identity or something.

NA: What's so interesting about K2 (and I apologize for making comparisons to Platform, because it's a different set-up), but there are two things about it 1) you show Turkish artists much more than Platform does and do shows that involve more artists from Turkey and 2) I'm assuming you engage a bit more with the local community, whereas Platform has a great attendance rate from Istiklal, but doesn't attempt to do things with the Istanbul community. What are your feelings on those points?

E: Yea, it's true that we are showing more Turkish artists. But actually, I'm not sure if it's a kind of...Well, we have also start to get the problem with the audience, to be able to get them into K2. Because I think contemporary art is a quite new issue for Turkish people. Even art doesn't have a kind of established system. Then, you are also trying to quite establish a brand new one. So, it's taking time to get their interest—especially, I'm talking about the people outside. I think, if I compare with Platform, yea, maybe we have more audience in that sense—more local audience. But I'm not sure about this.

NA: What kind of local projects have you done? Have there been actual attempts of K2 projects to reach the locals in Izmir?

E: Actually, we were trying to survive, trying to keep, to set sustainability. It was the most important problem for us, because K2 has totally different setting than any other institution I know. It seems quite like a working like an institution—all decisions and how it's working—but basically all the workers are artists and also, none of us are getting paid for our work. From the outside, it seems like people are getting paid and it's a great gallery space and even we have a library, but when you look closer, it's a totally unbelievable setting—beyond the imagination.

NA: What do you guys do for funding? Do you go by individual project?

E: One of us, she's also working with us, she's actually an art historian more than being an artist and she comes from a kind of wealthy family. She got the building and is paying rent, electricity, water...these kinds of things, those kinds of expenses. When we have a project, we are just trying to find money, like, additional money. But, it's also not so much. I mean, we don't have a kind of influence? (11:00) system or we are not paying

artist fees, even though we are working for free. So artists who want to work with us already know the setting. Most of the artists who participate in an exhibition in K2 they already know where they are going to show and in which conditions. They also like it, because it's totally not an institution, or, it's a kind of totally free space to...

NA: A lot of what I'm dealing with is part of the conceptual space of the center...like when exhibitions happen there, how are artists dealing with that space? What do you feel the K2 space *is* for artists? How do they treat it? When they know they are going to be exhibiting there, do they try new things more, do they change their working habits, or their art products?

E: I'm thinking...I'm a little bit critical today, so I'm not going to say something good really. It's quite personal actually...because once we had an exhibition with the Turkish artists from the young generation. The question was: ok, we come together in many different exhibitions in Turkey or abroad (because we come from the similar generation, so they're picking us). Then, we decided to make it without a curator and in K2...

NA: Is this the *Punctured Tyre* exhibition?

E: Yes. And so we were having an emailing to each other... before the exhibition we started this. And the people...we were all talking about the freedom. I remember that, because for me it's also still a big question. And I said, 'ok, well you're talking about freedom, but I'm going to tell you something: I'm an artist and I am already living in a gallery space, because I am working there and I already have. So, I'm just asking to you: what is freedom then?' I mean, I am totally free to do whatever I want, but there is no freedom like this. So this was a question for me. So when you ask, does artists do some experimental things or is there any interesting project? No. This very international art world, it is impossible to do something really, hardcore experimental. Because when you do this, you are totally out of the discourse and if you are out of the discourse, you are not able to exist. So it's...I think it's a kind of strange thing that of course being critical is interesting, or criticizing the institution and such, but again you are in the middle of thing.

So this is what I'm thinking about K2. This is my self-criticism about K2 and also of myself: yea...it can be more. Maybe later on it will be more. It's also based on experience. Like, in the first four years we were only thinking about how to get people here. This kind of simple question. And the second question: ok, we already got all those people here, so now what are we going to do? Maybe we should work more internationally, because it's kind of time and also it will help to artists who live in Izmir who are totally local and don't know anything about what's going on. And then, it worked out. And also we get these international sort of things. First, we were much more linked with Platform and Istanbul, but now we start to create our own. But maybe from now on, these are the questions.

I am also organizing an event in K2. This is the first time I'll be, let's say, "curating." I'm

initiating a project and it also started with the idea of closing the gallery. Because I really wanted to close the gallery, because it's not working.

NA: What is "not working" about it?

E: I mean, this is basic. It's like, having only a space is nothing. So what you are saying is totally right; becoming a platform is more important than only being a space. I mean, we don't have any problem with the space. You can show outside, in your house, or anywhere. That can also be more interesting.

NA: You have one international artist-in-residence at all times, right?

E: Right now one...actually, we have 16 studios, but we can only afford this, because it's also linked with ?, an experimental residency.

NA: You started mentioning about bringing in international influence...and this is a devil's advocate type question: when you are trying to really figure things out or trying to create experimental work or have discussion that is in some way original and not connected to this global community, is it better or worse to have a lot of international influence?

E: Well, good point, because you said "influence." I think it is too late to say it influenced, because nowadays, especially in the last five years and because of Istanbul Biennial and Platform, it's already a kind of good point to create a kind of art knowledge. I mean, it's working here. So being international is more related with transnational relations. It's a kind of exchange, it's more than influence. But of course, there are some things that we have to think come with the territory. There are certain differences for sure.

NA: I just wonder...if you're infiltrated with so much of the outside world, then do you feel a pressure perhaps to become part of that, instead of doing your own original works with your original thoughts?

E: Actually, these kind of spaces—artist-run or alternative, let's say—those spaces help a lot to see what's going on, really. As an artist, right now I really have quite a lot of experience about what's going on, because most of the artists are only interested with their own stuff and what they are doing. So I think artist-run spaces, those kind of spaces and experiences, helps a lot to see what's really going on. At the beginning, yes, I've been thinking and totally maybe the wrong way, that maybe we should be making it more international. Of course this idea is quite appealing, but also brings you to the wrong point sometimes. Nowadays, it's really shifted into more rich kind of thinking [and interaction.] Maybe we should keep something, that we shouldn't change it, because otherwise it's going to be...because this is the problem of the internationalism anyway, these homogenous productions...

NA: ...which is precisely what I'm trying to study. My biggest fear is that to the international community Turkey gets clumped into this globalizim art trend, but I think there's something specific to Turkey—there's always something specific. So what I'm trying to feel my way through is a different way of describing this work—not how they use the Turkish flag and Ataturk—but that there is something going on here that, of course, stems from a shared experience.

E: Yea, but I think people get rid of this, because of all the long years and years.

NA: And I think that ultimately this can be part of the definition: this idea of shedding or getting rid of or assimilating...

E: Personally, I think the balance is really important. What you are saying is totally wrong, but some aspects are totally true. So, I totally understand what you mean. Sure, we need a kind of continuous dialogue to be able to understand each other better, but when we talk I can already consider that you are aware of things, that you've made research. So I'm fine with what you are saying, but...

NA: Tell me what you think is wrong...

E: For example, when you insist on “local” and trying to keep those things in artwork, or even in text or anything, then you will fail. But you can see from these two aspects [local and global], from inside and outside and it's really complicated.

NA: What I am realizing more and more is that when I first got here I felt very caught in defining “local.” And you can't do it. And then, for a while, I felt like I was thinking of it as just part of global...

E: I can tell you what is most local here...Many people think that the most local thing is dealing with the political issues (especially local policies) or dealing with the historical (especially traditional) arts and stuff—very exotic stuff sometimes—but I think the more local issue is that everyone is trying to establish something here. Establishing a country, which is created really a top-down model and then everything gets really corrupted, because of this reason. And then all of us—artists, art critics, and all people in the art world—they are like pioneers of something. This is the most local thing for me.

For K2, I get just get crazy about this archive and being archivist. It makes you unable to speak even. So, I think it's really important...I'm coming to local right now...it's really important to create your own knowledge from the point that you are coming from. In that sense, it's really important to look from that local point. So I think the most local thing here is about just trying to establish or start something. All the artist initiatives have this kind of importance. They are the beginning of really early models of the big institutions. Which is nice really, because look at Platform: he [Vasif] is an independent curator and he just comes here and makes this institution. He just gets support, even by

himself. So when you look at K2 as well (I mean, not right now, we are working there, but it's going to be that the country and economy is expanding) so it will get more and then it will become the contemporary art museum of the city—if you look at the future. The important thing is that if we have this independence, if we don't have institutions supported by some government policies, then how can we use it more openly? Also, this must be the problem of Platform and it's our problem as well: how can we use this freedom, then?

NA: What do you think of the Garanti sponsorship of Platform then?

E: I think I'm fine with it. I think it's fine. I mean, it's more clean than many things I've seen in this art world, believe me. And you need money to survive...

NA: I think what's interesting about it, is that even American institutions that are sponsored by big names like that, often, the museum of the institution won't sign anything that the [bank] names get to have their name on it. That it gets to called "Platform Garanti" is noticeable from the outside, although here it works relatively well. It's not like Garanti has any control over what Vasif is doing...

E: I think Vasif is controlling over Garanti. And this is the same thing with our space. Aysegul is working with us, but she is sometimes taking part in things, sometimes not. Everything happened by itself, which is nice, because we all started and we just try something and then find it really stupid to do and then we change it.

NA: No one is "marking" your progress...

E: So all the development by itself...Even the positions in K2...For example, Borga is much more into curating things, like putting artwork in a space or showing artwork. I'm much more into these theoretical aspects of the things. I'm the thinker there. And Aysegul is really good with the...how can I say it...guests...she is good at hosting. She has good relations with also the other cultural institutions. I think everybody kind of...

NA: fills in where you need them...

E: And even our website is done by an artist who studied painting. These kinds of things...

NA: Let me ask a question and this is not something I love to ask: When you have exhibited abroad, do you feel like people have tried to do the "local" thing to you, try and position you as a Turkish artist in the sense of your work?

E: Yeah, sometimes. I even did a work on it—*the collector's cabinet*. It's a kind of sculptural object and a book. I did it in Amsterdam. It's also coming to, really, all the things I told you about archive and everything.

I got an invitation from a museum—a really old and small museum in Amsterdam. I was supposed to choose an old artwork from this museum and be influenced by something... blah blah. I just wanted to choose the museum itself and they said “ok.” And then there was kind of an expectation from me that I am coming from Turkey and maybe I will deal with the scarf issue—and they were really expecting these things (and this is typical)—and I said, ‘no, no, I am going to work on the museum itself. Also, I want to work on the Western hegemony on arts and culture.’ So those cabinets are really “curiosity cabinets,” the 16<sup>th</sup> century ideology to collect all things in the God’s universe.

So I built a work in which the furniture and the drawers are not working. They’re fake drawers. So when you look from a distance it seems like you can open the drawers and see what is collected inside, but sure it’s not working. And this is the work that I did. And it’s totally being against this self-exoticization. Also, it was much more related into looking back to history—like, how it started then. How come the question can be only from one way? Like, why can’t I ask a French artist why he is not doing something local?

I think you get my point. But also, it’s really hard to survive like that, because I’m not that kind of popular artist...maybe because of these certain expectations. I can’t represent well. If you have those kind of ideas, then it’s good for research, maybe for books, and maybe it’s not even contemporary if you look from that stance.

NA: My focus isn’t work that “looks” Turkish.

E: I think it’s really better to look at the same question, but look differently.

NA: There was a man here looking to do a film documentary on the Istanbul contemporary art scene...and he asked why I was interested in studying here. I gave a similar answer: what is more exciting to me about being in Istanbul right now is not the big Biennial, but it’s the artist initiatives. It’s being done here...it’s not being exported. I think that’s what makes this vibrancy that the outside world sees.

E: Also, what is important...exactly the same thing...we were living in Izmir and moving to Istanbul to show our work. And the same thing in Istanbul...all the artists would have to move somewhere to show their work if there was nothing in Istanbul. Then it’s really important to have something here, then, you can host people, which is quite important. Then it makes the situation—I’m not going to say equal—but more balanced.

NA: I’ve just been going down many different paths. After talking to Pelin Uran I started looking at identity philosophy, which has really helped...Also, the idea of a circular definition: you have to have one to have the other, you can’t always separate.

E: Actually, this is also true that you always have double sides. When you read an article,

you are thinking, you are just comparing and thinking all those things. And even it can be creative sometimes. So somebody is saying it's totally 'blah blah blah, something,' and then you find it interesting from the point of where you stand. I am doing these things. I can give an example:

This archive thing. I was reading an article (and it had nothing to do with the archiving), but it said this one thing: Archiving is creating beaurocracy. And I though, yeah, for the Western world, yes. But when you look from my own point, in Izmir, then maybe we need to do some ground [work...?]

NA: Well, Platform...when you ask Vasif what the main mission of Platform is and he says "the archives," it's the library more than anything...more than the exhibitions, more than the residencies...and you kind of have a different approach...

E: It's certainly true. I didn't know he had that idea, but....

One more thing: that we became more (if I need to generalize things)...even though artists are really little, everybody is a kind of philosopher-thinker, everybody is a kind of art critic, or everybody is kind of directing in an art institution—everybody has an idea of what they are doing and how they position themselves, because they have to face these questions all the time. So, I think, there are only a limited amount of artists doing art, without facing these questions. I don't know really, but maybe....like some really international, well-known, established Turkish artists.

NA: Which names are you thinking of?

E: Kutlug Ataman. Of course, he can deal with it. Haluk Akakce. Ayse Erkmen. Nobody is going to ask her about being Turkish or something. So, when I pretend same as her and it's not working—so it's like, why are you thinking that? I'm just totally international artist. I'm going abroad, showing my work there, we have internet...come on!—but it's not just this of course. There are some aspects that are true.

NA: You did university in Izmir, right? When you were growing up, how much did you know about that older generation of contemporary artists, like some of the names you just mentioned, but also Halil Altindere or Gulsun Karamustafa? Were they on your radar? Did you know a lot about them and care about their work, or because there weren't these archives, did it matter?

E: In Izmir, the art academy, I think everywhere in Turkey is more or less the same. Very conservative. I think it was really conservative and... Well, anyway. We didn't see so much about the really first generation of contemporary artists or the rest, because this old-school thing was full in the art academy. Nowadays, it's changing, but not properly even. The art education was stuck in the '60s, like it was even so new or something, but it's just because of the ideas of the professors in the art academy. So, the magazines...



Vasif started a magazine and now Halil running a magazine, these had quite an effect. And then internet started. And now, I think personal web blogs are working really properly. It's cheap and almost everyone is using it. People are really using it like—you can't publish a book, but you can just *publish* your thing in the net. I think it's just going to change everything drastically.

NA: But for you growing up, did you look at that work? Did you see it? Did you have opinions about it?

E: For art, yes. But it was totally, as I said, like an old-school thing. Not the new stuff. Even though I studied at the fine arts high school, which was quite new I think when I studied, because I already studied 11 or 12 years of art, I think the last year of the high school I just learned that there is something like a Biennial. The first time I heard about it. And then later, when I go to the university, I already know about the Biennial and everything and I started to search by myself in the internet. So, I started to fight with the lecturers at the art academy which became a problem and it cost one year for me, because I couldn't pass the class. The reason was that I didn't produce enough, but the same year I had two exhibitions in Istanbul. This looks really personal, it might sound quite original, but it's the reality. So, I think this is the basic problem in Turkey: the equality.

For example, I couldn't go on studying, but when I want to apply for something abroad they are asking me, have you gone to upper-graduate something, or like MA or something? And if I am more open-minded than the professors in the academy, then why should I go there? And how can I explain this to the people who are asking me for the MA? So, these kind of things I think are going to be more problematic in the years to come.

NA: Because it's not changing really.

E: It's changing, but...

NA: But it's not changing at the academic level it seems. I mean, it's changing, as you said, in terms of this blogs or magazines, so that there's this wider reach of education. But within the institution, people still seem to think Mimar Sinan is a waste of time, if what they're doing is "contemporary" art.

E: I don't know how it's going to change, but sometimes it's really hopeful that it can create really good...I mean, I studied in a really f\*up academy, but then I am fine. Even it can be more useful, because also if there's good education, it's also another problematic that each student becomes the same, which is also another problem. I mean, I don't know which one is better.

Ok...everybody acceptable. Good!

You all know everything. Good!

So everybody's critical. Good!  
Ok, I'm against the institutional. Great!

So, at the end I think the best is (it's horrible), but "do it yourself."

E: Are you fine with your research here? I'm just curious about that...I'm sure that you have some expectations and what you're going to see here, and what's your real opinion?

NA: My real opinion is just that...ya know, when I first came...

[discusses specificity of original proposal and what I expected to find vs. what was found and about thesis research during my time in Istanbul, how I went about it, what I discovered, what I hope to process in my final writing] 50:00-53:00

E: Your question is different, so it's good that you are asking to Banu. For me, it's the most interesting space in town that Banu is running. Maybe I should criticize it just a little bit...and this best artist collective (and this is the only one) is Oda Projesi. They are not running right now, but it is like working collaboration. And working in totally different method than ever, so I think it's quite interesting. The other places that I have a little bit...I mean, I also have the same criticism for K2 as well, but it always has the kind of luck of being in another city. Just being a space is not working. But in the years it's changing and getting more refined. And K2 really became a self-education place. That I can even speak in English now...in the beginning you cannot even imagine, it was taking me hours to reply to an email!

NA: How was the final product of the exhibition "Punctured Tyre" in your opinion? Was it successful in conveying those discussion ideas or did it get lost?

E: If you asked the same question to all the participants, they would each say something totally different. So I'm going to try to not make it just my opinion. I think it didn't work...it failed at some rate and it didn't fail at some rate. Again, I am making a double expression, but it's the reality. Because the exhibition and the works and all the relation in the works was quite interesting and I think it worked really well in that sense. But for me, the basic idea was coming together to get out of this being under curator's concepts and this umbrella. Coming together and the aim was examining our works better. To learn better about ourselves, what they are really doing. This was the basic aim.

I think it's again a group exhibition...I think group exhibitions have problems within itself. I mean, if you really want to know what the artist is doing, then a group exhibition again is already an existing concept that you are coming together for some specific reason. Maybe we should do some serial, solo exhibitions. Then, we could (all the 7 artists) can write or interview or something, so it can be more...

NA: [58:00-59:30 discussion about interview with Ahmet Ogut and his ability to think

about East and West in his work. Did some of that response come from the discussions of the *Punctured Tyre* exhibition?]

E: We were all really free for what we wanted to do. We were there with our already existing practices. We didn't try to produce...most of us didn't try to produce any work. Also, there was no topic, so it was ourselves putting our works there.

NA: To go to the reverse side...do you think it would have ultimately been better if it were curated?

E: Yeah, this was a question I also had at the end. But also, there are some different different layers in this exhibition. Also what happened was...the first suggestion was, all the Turkish young artists especially—Ahmet, Erinc, and Leyla—and everyone agreed on this idea, except me, and Borga and Gulsa? was totally neutral. The idea was not to put new media in the exhibition, because this was a kind of filter for ourselves that all the young generation thinks that the best contemporary art is only possible with the new media. So, we are also doing...Ahmet is making drawings and I am also making drawings and sculptures and things, but I would like to show video. And my question...a little more further...then, when they told to me “hey, we have an agreement, that you can't, we already talked about it.” And I said, “well, we are trying to underline something, but I am afraid of underlining something at the back page.” Because we are in Izmir and Izmir already has a kind of label that everyone who comes from Izmir is producing hand-crafts, painting, that kind of thing. It's big problem, because you don't need to see the rest, because you already have an idea. Like a Nordic painting—are you going to be interested in any of them? No, because you already have an idea. And in Izmir that was happening, which was not true, because there were only few artists that were known in Istanbul in somewhere. So, when I saw this I thought, no, we are underlining totally the wrong thing. If we say we are not going to show video or this stuff, I mean, it's totally the wrong place. This was my idea.

So, what was interesting, also, was that I could see the different layers in the exhibition. Everybody was thinking and sort of picking different parts and making it important. For example, if you ask Erinc, it would be important for him to show his art in Izmir. For me, it's nothing to do with that. Or, when you ask to Leyla, for her it would be interesting to show without the video or without sound or anything. So for me, it was much more important to set an exhibition without an umbrella concept and also a kind of statement that planned for us. Like, we didn't decide and we considered something mostly. Even to being a young artist, for example. Even we are falling into this trap of calling ourselves coming from the same generation. It was a little bit trying to get out of this, but the final product, for me, was the same.

But I am coming back to my first idea that stopping the gallery space, not even doing the exhibition...I mean, I'm totally thinking a nihilist concept. But it's such a normal thing...

NA: I was also impressed by the amount of publication that K2 has done.

E: In K2 I totally decided that we needed a discourse in order to be able to walk on it.

[1:05 to 1:11 K2 will be in 2007 biennial...talks about project and publication]