

**Aquatic Memory**

**Hera Büyüктаşçıyan in conversation with Basak Senova**

Hera



Büyüктаşçıyan, *Places water holds together*, 2009, installation view, Istanbul.

Photo credit: Hera Büyüктаşçıyan.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan is a storyteller who processes extensive research on historical and cultural narratives mostly based on her Greek-Armenian roots that manifest in long-term projects. Büyüktaşçıyan uses the notion of the 'other' and combines it with the concepts of absence and invisibility in order to compose an imaginary connection between identity, memory, space and time, using metaphors such as water to consider the politics of memory and identity, and opening up new narrative scopes around the notion of otherness. Recent works enquire into the meaning of 'absence' within collective memory, with a focus on urban transformation, which causes disappearance, invisibility, isolation and otherness within the framework of communities, time-space and memory. In this interview, Basak Senova talks to Büyüktaşçıyan about her artistic approach while considering the topics that hover around Büyüktaşçıyan's projects with a focus on her recent work, *The Recovery of an Early Water* (2014), which was developed for the *Jerusalem Show VII: Fractures*. *The Recovery of an Early Water* was based on reanimating a historical water supply of the old city so as to create a public space by providing access to a closed territory and forgotten memory.

**Başak Senova:** How do you define 'story telling'?

**Hera Büyüktaşçıyan:** Story telling is a type of dialect that is structured to make certain realities and histories 'unforgettable'. It is a way of putting life in words. For me, it is an instrument that is used to explain 'truth' in a different sense through which it becomes easier to accept certain aspects of life.

**BS:** The act of story telling is predictably committed to memory and the re-construction of memory. Does your work also intend to employ storytelling to communicate personal narratives and concealed memories?

**HB:** In a sense, it is very much connected with time and life itself, but it also enables people to experience different timetables at the same time, and let them gain new ways of seeing. On the other hand, I believe that personally, story telling makes certain realities about life and memory easier to accept and enable you to better deal with the tension of the matter's realness. The language of story telling encourages the listener or the audience to accept, face and also begin to question things by positioning themselves within the narrative: this is something I do myself very often whilst listening

to a story. In the same way, the narrations I create are intended to allow the audience to put themselves on the other side and allow the piece, as well as the spoken-memory, to continue living in this way.

**BS:** Most of the stories that you seek and/or process through your works are connected to water. What is the correlation between water and memory in your field of research?

**HB:** Water is the ultimate source and the instrument that nurtures our memory. Different than all the other elements, it has a multitasking poetic reality, which reflects, connects, divides, purifies, dissolves, maintains, emerges, hides and transforms each and every fragment of life. Similarly, memory itself has the same aquatic quality. It is beyond time and space. Whether hidden or visible, water connects and imbibes all sorts of existences within itself just as the mental space stores a huge variety of fragments of time in its depths. In this sense, I think water reflects the fluid ground of memory.

**BS:** How do you translate the notion of forgetting from this perspective?

**HB:** With the notion of forgetting, memory either lets its fragments sink to the depths of our bottomless mental topographies or emerges with the tidal movement of remembrance. All these metronomic movements mark out timeless liquefied narratives that constantly flow within our minds. Living in a city like Istanbul, where its blueness occupies one's vision and mind so as to contemplate the depths of its memory, one also thinks about forgotten moments and memories that perhaps lie dormant, or out of sight.

**BS:** How does the city of Istanbul affect your fields of interest and research?

**HB:** Inevitably, Istanbul enabled me to learn about reading time and its reflection in water. Since I became primarily interested in the underground water storages and cisterns of the city, I began to discover the correlations of memory's invisible sites while looking into the aspect of water. I think this connection is also the point where the

physical meets the subtle and where the past, and its history, meet the present. In this sense, I am more interested in analyzing the relation of what is below the water, in terms of invisible histories as well as what is above, floating towards our current reality.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, *The Land Across The Blind*, 2014. Exhibition view, Galeri Mana, Istanbul, 2014

Photo credit:  
Galeri Mana



**BS:** Let's talk about the projects exploring water in Istanbul: I am thinking about two specific projects, dated 2009: *Changeables & Transformables* and *Places Water Holds Together*.

**HB:** *Changeables & Transformables* was a project I realized with Remo Salvadori in the first part of the exhibition series *Lives and works in Istanbul* (2010). Throughout the process, which focused on how the city could be interpreted with the five elements, I started to concentrate on the city's relation to water. Water plays a transformative and changing role as the substance that both connects main lands, cultures, and languages, and separates them at the same time. In this respect, Istanbul's identity has been closely related to water throughout its history. Taking this as my reference point, I began to focus on cisterns: 'sources' that feed the city invisibly. During my research on cisterns that have existed in the city since Byzantine times, I discovered a cistern that

had dried out, located under a carpet shop. The absence of the invisible source led me to think about creating new pathways for water. In this sense, using the carpet as a platform that lies between the coldness of the earth and our feet, I created a water path out of a 15-metre long carpet, on which the word 'breath' was written in 12 languages that have existed in Istanbul for centuries. As it was a machine-made carpet, the imprinted negative of the carpet was used as a reflection of this artificial waterway. I chose the word 'breath' because, the water in cisterns is also a lively organism that breathes underneath the earth invisibly.

*Places Water Holds Together* was another installation I realized at the same cistern, in the only corner where there was water left. I wrote the sentence 'Places water holds together' out of the coins from different currencies that have been thrown into the water, which has been functioning as a wishing well for visitors. In this sense, water again becomes the connector of all cultures and identities.

**BS:** Just like *Places Water Holds Together*, *It takes a few more buckets of water to turn the mill* (2012) was another site specific project that reflects on water.

**HB:** *It takes a few more buckets of water to turn the mill* was part of a group exhibition titled *Reflecting on Reflections*, curated by Abaseh Mirvali at Galeri Mana. My focus for this project was a consequence of learning about the existence of a water source under Galeri Mana, assumed to be a water well or a cistern. The hole in the ground seen in the image I presented was the only spot that proved the existence of an invisible water source under the gallery: it was proven after shining some light down below towards the hole and seeing a sparkling spot. At this point, considering the history of the topography in which the gallery was located – an area for flour mills and bakers – the existence of this invisible element came to light. Within the space I made an intervention by filling the hole with water completely as if it was level with the ground itself, creating an illusion of a real/fake liquid ground to step in. Thinking that it might become a wishing well, I installed coins from currencies that represent cultures that have been doing trade in the area for centuries, which is why I arranged the coins in the form of 'infinity', which refers to the eternal existence of water itself.

**BS:** Your research has also extended outwards, to representing other histories,

personal narratives, and political statements in other geographies?

**HB:** Water seems very silent from a distance but actually it waits to raise its voice, like when a stone is thrown into a pool. Water carries various liquefied narratives within it. Storytelling comes naturally in the same way water represents a fluid language that dissolves certain myths and histories.

**BS:** I would like to talk about the project *The Recovery of an Early Water* (2014) that you developed for *the Jerusalem Show VII. Fractures* after (re-)discovering the Patriarch's Pool in the old city of Jerusalem. This links very closely to your earlier projects.

**HB:** Yes, I came to know about Patriarch's Pool, during our trip to Jerusalem. While we were looking at the city, standing on the roof of The Swedish Institute, my gaze led me towards an abandoned area which I later learned used to be one of the water supplies of the city in the past. One source claims the water dried up around 2001. Right after seeing this area, we also noticed an old photograph of the pool within the library of the Swedish Institute. It did not seem like a coincidence: water was calling.

**BS:** Could you elaborate on the significance of the pool?

**HB:** This pool was one of the oldest water supplies within the city, like many other pools within Jerusalem and Bethlehem. However, its water was not used for drinking, but for many other uses. First, I began to research this pool specifically, but my research began to expand as I discovered that it had many other connections with water tunnels and springs.

There are interesting historical connections related to the use of water such as the story of Hezekiah's Tunnel, which dates back to the time of King Hezekiah who wanted to save the city from Assyrians. In order to make the Assyrians weaker he changed the direction of the water and reverted it from above ground to underground so that the enemy would not have access to this precious resource. Today, the tunnel he dug to enact this tactic is still accessible through the archaeological site of the City of David



and is open to visitors, who can walk through it. It's a 45-minute walk from one end to the other, with the final destination being the Pool of Siloam, which was also the pool where Christ healed the blind.

This was a very interesting coincidence for me, as I have been working with water supplies, wells and cisterns for a long time, along with the notion of blindness and seeing beyond. Through this walk, I literally experienced a walk in the dark, as if blind, and ended up at daylight. After this, I became interested in the inside-outside relationship; the fact of hiding a lively element such as water under the layers of the ground or 'inside'; the historical and biblical references of water within the city; and the notion of seeing the 'invisible' or the 'non-existent'.

**BS:** How do you perceive 'blindness'? Is it a limiting physical state or a metaphysical potential?

**HB:** I guess there are different stages of blindness. One is a limiting physical state that enables a metaphysical potential growth as you mention, and the other is acquired blindness. Apart from its physical reality, I think blindness is a state of mind and also a method that is being imposed on contemporary societies as a way of ignoring certain realities. In a way, this condition of 'looking without seeing' creates this volunteered darkness in sight which later causes all types of negativities.

By contrast, in the case of a physical blindness, vision seems to become unlimited – it knows no borders. In this dimension of sight, reality is being restructured according to the role of the senses. Here, blindness as a physical limitation becomes a state of seeing that transcends what is visible.

Jose Saramago, who uses the notion of 'seeing' very often in his writings, defines 'blindness' as 'a private matter between a person and the eyes with which he/she was born'[1]. Similarly, 'seeing' and 'blindness' is a private matter between the eyes and the intellect as a matter of choice of seeing.

**BS:** In this respect, how do you process 'blindness' in your work?

**HB:** I think I congregate 'blindness' with its reverse meanings. In my work, I'm interested in analysing fragments of time and memory that have become invisible through a certain politics of blindness, so I try to build up an experiential and experimental language to emphasize different perspectives and ways of seeing. Part of my practice is based on the experiential part of these notions so that the piece also becomes performative by allowing the viewer to become aware of their senses and mental sphere.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, *Ö Observatory*, 2012. Wooden models, exhibition view, Slakthusateljerna,



Stockholm, 2012.

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**BS:** I remember your solo show *The Land Across the Blind* (2014) at Galeri Mana, where you questioned various aspects of seeing and blindness by working with the form of certain structures.

**HB:** Yes, I call them *gadgets of seeing*: balconies, docks, ropes and so on – mostly architectural forms and structures that can be seen in public space. For instance, the balcony is, for me, more like an instrument to see things that one cannot see from the



street level. It connects the physical space to the metaphysical space through the gaze. So it connects the visible with the unseen reality. Another example would be *The Recovery of an Early Water*. The piece was trying to make a hidden aspect of life 'visible' and transform a repressed inability to see what exists at the heart of the city and its memory.

**BS:** In your work, the research phase shapes the outcome of the project, as was the case with *The Recovery of an Early Water*.

**HB:** During my research for *The Recovery of an Early Water*, I came across a book from the 1870s called *The Recovery of Jerusalem* written by two British archaeologists, Sir Charles William Wilson and Sir Charles Warren. The book includes a chapter on the waters and aqueducts of Jerusalem. The book was published by the Palestine Exploration Fund, which, as I found out, is actually based in London and has an archive as well as a library containing their letters, site drawings, and so on.

I have a feeling that the history of the site of the Patriarch's Pool, along with the lost waters of Jerusalem and the pool of Hezekiah, is trying to become visible. In this sense, as I engaged in a type of virtual excavation, moving through the memory and fragments of time, I began to feel a need to reveal the archaeological aspect to the work. This is necessary for the audience to learn about the invisible existence of the city's past from a different perspective. Water as the carrier of time and memory also carries the mind of the city: either it disappears in deep waters or it is revealed.

The main challenge of the project was how to replace or represent the non-existent water that was there. During our trip to Jerusalem, I documented construction site fabrics used in the city and similar types of semi-transparent material that passes above our heads and creates a sort of virtual sea or water layer. One of my ideas was to produce virtual water flowing out from the windows or the balconies within the space of the Patriarch's Pool, so that the water that was lost or hidden inside could burst out. To make things that are hidden or suppressed explode outwards also refers to historical, political and social situations and circumstances, for me. Waters of the past are so much connected with the waters of now, just as history has everything to do with the present.

Another option for the installation was to see things from above and below with a wooden construction that allows the audience to walk underneath and somehow experience the virtual water from beneath. I did some experiments with the same material/fabric in London during my residency at the Delfina Foundation. The piece became more like an architectural intervention by beginning from the fireplace of the library room, moving towards the outside and then flowing downwards, thus connecting aboveground with the underground.

**BS:** You also presented the research phase of the project as a spatial installation in another venue in Jerusalem, as an extension to the project. Could you talk about this?

**HB:** The place where the research material of the project was exhibited was at Nicola Zaphiriades' Shop, which was the former Greek Consulate. For me this venue was as special as the Patriarch's Pool because, on the one hand, by meeting Nicola I felt a sense of belonging to the city, and on the other hand this space carried an oddly dominant feeling of being at home. In other words, it felt like a place I have known for long time. I know it sounds very strange, but that is how it was. So I used the space as the studio or research office of the archaeologists who excavated the site of the pool as well as nearly the whole of Old Jerusalem: on one side, using the desks of the consulate, I made a study room setting, and on the other I made another intervention within the space using the same blue fabric that formed the actual installation. The idea here was that the space itself was flooding with all this information and memory, which then flooded out from this little shop.

**BS:** Can you talk about your upcoming project, *Fishbone*, at State of Concept in Athens?

**HB:** Water is again a connector but in a very incognito way. It is the different aspects and components of water that become the transmitter of certain contexts such as language. *Fishbone* is more like an attempt to remove sharp hidden aspects that seem stuck on the throat of language and memory, be it a piece of land, a particle of language, an unexpected sentence, a sour quadrat of history. It came out of a moment I recalled from my childhood due to my inability to speak Greek. A language that I feel I

have known for centuries but somehow is nailed deep inside, like a fishbone caught in the throat that won't to let the words flow out. Beginning from a personal memory, the work relates to all types of things that are stuck somewhere in a dark corridor, which cannot come out and thus creates all kinds of tension. So the urge to remove these sharp edges from within allows the water we drink to dissolve and heal the blockages in the depths of our minds.

**Hera Büyüktaşçıyan** graduated from the Marmara University Faculty of Fine Arts painting department in 2006. She lives and works in Istanbul. Büyüktaşçıyan has participated in the following residency programmes: ACSL (Yerevan, 2011); PiST/// Interdisciplinary Project Space (Istanbul, 2012); AIR-Drop (Stockholm, 2012); Villa Waldberta (Munich, 2012-13); Delfina Foundation (London, 2014). Selected group exhibitions include: Worthy Hearts (Yerevan, 2011); The Afternoon Odyssey (SALT, Istanbul, 2012); Looking for Somewhere to Land (Stockholm, 2012); Reflecting on Reflection (Galeri Mana, Istanbul, 2012); Blur (Weltraum, Munich, 2012); Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment (ARTER, Istanbul, 2013); In Situ (PiST///, Istanbul, 2013); The Land Across the Blind (2014), Galeri Mana, Istanbul); The Jerusalem Show (Jerusalem, 2014); Fishbone (State of Concept, Athens, 2015); Century of Centuries (SALT, Istanbul, 2015); 56th Venice Biennale/ Armenian Pavillion (Venice, 2015). She lives and works in Istanbul.

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1] Jose Saramago, *Blindness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), p. 30.

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## About the Author

### [Basak Senova](#)

**Basak Senova** is a curator and designer based in Istanbul. She has been writing on art, technology and media, initiating and developing projects and curating exhibitions

since 1995. Senova studied Literature and Graphic Design (MFA in Graphic Design and Ph.D. in Art, Design and Architecture at Bilkent University) and attended the 7th Curatorial Training Programme of Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam. Senova is an editorial correspondent for [ibraaz.org](http://ibraaz.org) and one of the founding members of NOMAD, as well as the organizer of *ctrl\_alt\_del* and *Upgrade!Istanbul*. She is the editor of many publications, including *art-ist 6*, *Kontrol Online Magazine*, *Unrecorded*, *Lapses book series*, *UNCOVERED*, *Aftermath*, *The Translation*, *D-0 ARK Underground*. Senova was the curator of the Pavilion of Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009). She lectured as assistant professor at the Faculty of Communication, Kadir Has University, Istanbul (2006-2010). Currently, she is co-curating the UNCOVERED (2010-2013) project in Cyprus, the 2nd Biennial of Contemporary Art, D-0 ARK Underground (2013) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Transition in Istanbul. Recently, she was appointed Art Gallery Chair of (ACM) SIGGRAPH 2014 in Vancouver and the curator of the Helsinki Photography Biennial 2014.