

Merve Ertufan

**Waiting on a Scratch
Kafakurcalayan**



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Art, existence and mind games

by L. İpek Ulusoy Akgül

When I had started writing these lines, the question “Are thoughts contagious?” in Merve Ertuġan’s first artist book *Tumbling down with careful steps* (2020) immediately caught my attention. After all, the word “contagious” has been frequented more than ever since the outbreak of COVID-19, which had fear-inducing vibrations on many, while, simultaneously, leading us to consciously meditate on the spreading of thoughts and intentions for a purposeful, sustainable and harmonious future with other living beings. Later, I stumbled upon another question in Ertuġan’s ironically titled book: “If a person climbing down the stairs comes up with an idea, but on the next step he falls and breaks his neck, would the idea have any impact on the world?” Having read these sentences, I could not help but wonder what this text would have sounded like, had I started writing it before the pandemic, in time for the original opening of Ertuġan’s solo exhibition “Waiting on a scratch” in the spring of 2020. Luckily, neither the artist nor I had tumbled down but were very much alive to further our practices and conversation.¹

Recent months revealed that the ongoing pandemic urgently required a deeper engagement with the notions of selfhood, consciousness and existence beyond life and death, apart from its seemingly more obvious impact on personal and collective well-being on top of the global conflicts that had already been going on. Particularly the quarantine period saw that the creative processes, such as art making, cooking and gardening, ease the heaviness of the survival mode, providing a much-needed pause for us to reflect on how we used to live and how we intend to live moving forward. Others were still burning to go back. For Ertuġan’s practice, things were coming full-circle during this time. While developing new works, the artist has revisited some earlier work, namely *An echo too late* (2016-20), *Can an answer be surprising?* (2017-20) and *Copycat’s strife with the Original* (2018-20) for this exhibition.

Ertuġan has been, for some time, engaging with “the microphysics of the mind”,² meticulously observing the inconsistencies, disconnects and gaps in language and habit.³ Fictions, riddles and stories often come up in her description of her work, as she has been building a conscious relationship with past experiences, self-perception and memory games. In her video *An echo too late*, which is an expansion of a previous sound piece, for example, we hear the off-sync voice of a woman—the artist—who tells us that she fails to recognize herself, while the stories of Narcissus, Khazar Princess Ateh⁴ and the artist as a young swimmer come into play. Images of eyelashes and skin appear, shrink, get blurred and merge on the black background. We are left with intricate questions around appearances, mirrors, facial agnosia and how we know who we are in-relation to our perception of self-image, hinting at the potential of becoming totally selfless while mindfully swimming.⁵

We continue to be perplexed by the source(s) of the projected text in Ertuġan’s video installation, *Can an answer be surprising?*, a textually loaded work that one can draw intellectual parallels with Thomas Metzinger’s *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (2010).⁶ We are not certain whether it is an echo or a dialogue between two people. Like the artist’s other works, this video also raises many questions around the potentials of selfhood beyond any judgement—one’s own or an observer’s, different temporalities (or the

possibility of their oneness)⁷ and what being might be beyond the ego, the physical and/or material. As the black-and-white segments of a horizontally placed oval continuously change shape and ripple, reminiscent of a distorted moon cut in half, and colors flow one after the other towards the end, the installation leaves us pondering on the intricate relationship between time, consciousness, our thoughts and the endless realities they are pregnant with.⁸

The sentence “Wait, I’m being pulled by a thought” in *Can an answer be surprising?* is also striking as many of us often experience or can empathize with this. Can we truly be present when our minds are elsewhere? In Ertuġan’s work, the subject in question is thinking but at the same time being mindful in that there is an awareness around what the mind is doing, namely following a thought. It is in such moments that masters of mindfulness and meditation encourage us to gently bring our attention to our breath and body, instead of trying to stop or push that thought away which proved not possible. In the likely scenario that we do follow the thought that pulled us in the first place, we could perhaps experience the “blindness” that Ertuġan’s kinetic work *Too much insight* implies. Here, one interpretation might be that our thoughts and insights inhibit one from knowing their own truth and selves. An alternative could be to take a few steps back from our own thoughts that masquerade as facts.

Perhaps it would be good to end at this point, by reminding ourselves that art making is one of the most authentic and existential practices like writing, and that artists are, indeed, courageous beings who dare to look at and build deeper connections with themselves, even, and maybe particularly, in the most difficult times. With each work, using her voice, words, body and autobiographical elements, Ertuġan demonstrates a genuine and continued interest in how our thoughts and memories—also the disrupted ones—are involved in contemplating what “self” can be.⁹

1 I would like to thank Merve Ertuġan for inviting me to write this text, which not only reminded me that our conversation started in our university’s corridors 15 years ago but also allowed me to notice that writing will always be an existential practice for me. Also, many thanks to Mochu for generously offering to copy edit my text.

2 Ertuġan borrows the terminology from Roberto Calasso, although she interprets it independently of its original context in his book *Ardor*.

3 Whatsapp conversation with the artist, 15.10.2020.

4 Pavić, Milorad. *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel in 100,000 Words*. Vintage, 1989.

5 The voice in the work talks about the swimming experience as being fully present in the moment, the now, and swimming not for the sake of competition or any measurable progress.

6 Metzinger, Thomas. *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the*

Mind and the Myth of the Self. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

7 I am thinking of a particular sentence featured in Ertuġan’s work, *Can an answer be surprising?* (2020): “The past turned out to be in existence / together with / in cahoots / with / what-not-yet-happened”.

8 I am reminded of a recent video conversation between Russell Brand and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, where Tolle talks about humans’ tendency to focus on doing rather than being. For further discussion on being present and expanding conscious experience such as contemplation of art, see Brand, Russell & Eckhart Tolle. “Become Awake Now!” 27.06.2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EzwvKF-o_Y. Accessed on 18.10.2020.

9 It brings to mind some of the artist’s past works, such as the videos *Sketch* (2014) and *Laylaynay* (2007) as well as object-based work *20,000 Words* (2008) that carry autobiographical elements.