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CITIES, JOURNEYS AND MENTAL MAPS; AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANZ ACKERMANN

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN ENGLISH, TRANSCRIBED BY OĞUZ ERDİN

PELİN DERVİŞ I was influenced by what Robert Schäfer - the editor in chief of Topos magazine - wrote in his article "Landscape" that appears in a publication entitled Crucial Words. He wrote: *"What is landscape really? This simple question will not permit a simple answer. Instead, any answer says more about the person replying than about the subject. The essence of landscape can only be discovered, created and formed through brainwork. It is difficult to communicate about landscape without first defining the concept..."* Now, knowing your work, thinking about your *mental maps*, I would like to raise the same question and ask: What is landscape?

FRANZ ACKERMANN Landscape, of course, is a term in painting. With painting I mean an aspect of illusion, a two dimensional thing which went through centuries like a form of emancipation. For example Hans Memling, one of the earliest painters, when the subject of landscape in his work became focus. Making a big jump to Rembrandt where landscape became very important at the end of his career. Then, up to Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie" which is a plastered piece that shows the New York City landscape in a very modern way, as a pattern... So, hopping through the centuries, landscape is not a homogeneous, closed, iconographic thing anymore. For me, it was very clear that something is missing: interruptions, forms of disorientations, scratches, accidents, even tortures to landscape, whether they are natural, artificial or urban. And I think, what Mr. Schäfer quite nicely explains for me is that we all face the situation where we like to live in the urban constellation. We have to live in urban constellations but on the other side we are trying to be more and more individuals. So a city, an urban living as a form of ideal community is facing the conflict that everyone becomes very egoistic or individual. So on these two poles, we face our upcoming problems. For me it is rethinking these things on a two dimensional level and why I want to bring them back on a lucid level is that these conflicts are visible first. They are not only sociological effects but they are also visible and that's why I started and still continue making art.

PD Thank you. So let's go further back.

FA Ok...

PD You were born in Neumarkt?

FA Yes, Sank Veit.

PD Sank Veit? This is in Bavaria?

FA Yeah.



Franz Ackermann
during installation time
at Städtische Galerie Alttötting
2009

PD Would you please tell us about the environment that you lived, about soccer, about your family? Do you have brothers and sisters?

FA Yes!

PD [Laughs] Would you please talk a little bit about that? The reason why I ask is to try to understand the seeds of your art, whether it arises from these years or not...

FA Regarding my biography, I always say with a laugh, that I can't compete with a huge biography in terms of growing up in a township or any kind of these pressures... It was a nice childhood in a small village. One hour east of Munich, I grew up with 2 sisters and 2 brothers, a big family.

PD Ah, so you were 5?

FA We were five and it was a very traditional situation. The main focus of my brothers, my dad and myself was playing soccer every day. I don't know why I started looking at artworks but when I turned 14 or 15, I started reading books and looking at plates, of Salvador Dali and Rembrandt. I went deeply into etchings of Rembrandt and Hercules Segers for example. So there was this kind of a rhythm besides school, playing soccer, and at the end of the day, being in the cellar and developing etchings of my own. My dad was astonished, got a little bit angry and shocked at the end of school when I got the allowance to study art at the high school in Munich (Akademie der Bildenden Künste). And he looked at me and said "What? What did you do? What are you doing?" And I said that's what I've been doing for five years in the cellar. And for the first time he ran down to the cellar and he looked at the small studio, it looked like a small printing cabin. So, all the etchings and all the stuff I'd developed my own, this was the starting point. Still today, when I do wall paintings with my brother, a lot of the terms come from soccer. We say "Oh what a weak artwork! We are still 2-0 back but it's not even halftime" and stuff like that [laughs] ... From Munich I started traveling to all these museums. Hitchhiking was the main transportation. I went up to the Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen, I went to The National Gallery in London - always by hitchhiking - and back when school continued.

PD Do you remember any museum, exhibition or a moment that influenced you at that time?

FA Yes, for instance, I remember that I slept at a bus stop in Copenhagen the day before I went to the Louisiana Museum. I walked over there. It took half a day and I was deeply impressed with the landscape and the first Giacometti sculptures I saw. I thought simply "That's it!" What a wonderful situation. All these modern art sculptures... Marx Ernst sculptures, all this freedom... For me it was just freedom from where I came from. And I started recognizing cities more or less at the age of 14 or 15. It sounds really strange but for a lot of young people cities are already boring and annoying. For us, it was going to Munich! Watching a soccer game was still a big event. Going to the city for a full day, or staying overnight was a big thing even when I was already 17.

PD In an article I remember reading that for you travel is a categorical necessity. Thinking about your work, this seems obvious. I am interested to hear about it, especially starting from Hong Kong where you produced your first major series of *mental maps*. What were the reasons that initiated such a focus? Why Hong Kong for instance as a starting point?

FA I started studying in Munich and just by chance it was very classically oriented: lots of drawings and paintings. I come from the printing side. Today, you can still see that my paintings have strong graphic aspects. I never denied that because I already knew that I didn't want to bring an authentic form of emotion or any kind of gesture onto the surface of a painting. So for me, a sport with a ball was much more convenient or convincing than doing gestical paintings. But I learned it and I learned a lot about it in Munich. Studying in Hamburg (Hochschule für Bildende Kunst) brought these conceptual aspects into my artwork. Until today I feel both aspects are very important. When I finished in Hamburg, there was a chance to apply for a small scholarship in Hong Kong. It was quite funny because I applied with a reason to go to a new city where I didn't understand the public signs! So in these days I made a lot of work based on emblematic questions, the significant questions about Saussure, and going to the new structuralist side from Roland Barthes and all these analytic things. With a small scholarship of 500 Euros per month in Hong Kong, unbelievable. I hopped over there and 10 days later I was already in front of a Burger King store selling tickets! This was the start in a big new city and it was so refreshing, I felt so free. I made short trips to New York, to London... And suddenly the cultural clash in Asia took place. I started rethinking about my work in terms of simply the city, fun, nature, tourist attractions, friends, how to survive, how to find the party, a place to stay at night. A lot of English people were down there in those days and I learned a lot by surviving not with a low budget but with no budget! After almost half a year of looking through the signs in Hong Kong and then neon lights, collecting newspapers, photographs, postcards, I came back to the question that even the photographing the city is not enough.

PD It's not enough?

FA It's not enough. I felt a form of emptiness. A desire to go on more profoundly and I grabbed an empty notebook, some papers from a cheap Chinese store and started redrawing certain aspects of where I liked to be in Hong Kong, where I hated to be... the forbidden city was still out there. For example there was a huge architecture that impressed me. So I redesigned and redrew that in my small cabin. We were 14 young people in our dormitory for the first 7 months. I couldn't afford anything else but even the teachers with a job were there so it was really fun. And these were my first notes. From the beginning I called them *mental maps*. Later on I've heard that this term is something already in sociology. I didn't mind. Until today, it is a 13 to 19 cm piece of paper which follows me as the main backline in my work. Even here today in Istanbul, I have these sheets with me, this is like breathing for me. And then from that point I came back overland, another half a year of traveling, going by boat to Shanghai, traveling all the way with the Trans Siberian express, stepping out one month in Ulaanbaatar, then in Minsk I got kicked out from a train and there was no other train anymore.

PD Why?

FA For my whole trip back from Beijing to Berlin I only needed 95 US dollars. Can you believe that? That's what I learned from other travelers: you should only travel in the country side between the borders and cross the country on bridges. That's what made it so cheap but in Minsk, I was on the train station for two and a half days. Emptiness and only Russian people and suddenly I got woken up, two guys with Kalashnikovs – I know it sounds really adventurous - they offered me tea and pulled me up and said "Now!" and suddenly a huge train came and it was an incredible long one like in Australia but it was completely empty. They pushed me into this train and they gave me...



From the exhibition
at Kunstmuseum Bonn
2009

Propeller
Installation view
Kunstmuseum Bonn
2009



Altermodern
Tate Triennial 2009
Tate Britain, London





Portikus
Installation view
Frankfurt am Main
1997

PD Food?

FA Not food but bed sheets. And then there was quietness and we were on the Frankfurt/Oder border in two days and they kicked me out. I didn't know what was happening then but I knew I was at the German border. I stepped out, the police asked for my passport and then I learned this was the train that brought the Soviet army from Berlin back to Russia. The withdrawal of the troops was agreed and I was part of world history (laughs). I was the only one in that direction...

And then, just by chance I met Tim Neuger in a podium discussion, I made some comments and he looked at me and said "What are you doing?" and I said "I just came from the other direction!" He was in LA and learning the gallery job at Luhring Augustin Hetzler and he said "What do you do?" I said "I am an artist" and he said "I plan a gallery", I said "Great!" So we started together in 1992 with the first show after Jorge Pardo did the design of the gallery. He introduced me to some friends: Elizabeth Peyton, Keith Edmier, Rirkrit Tiravanija.

PD And you kept your focus on that and continued traveling, visited other cities and other countries and so on. What happened afterwards?

FA This stay in Hong Kong for such a long time with a low budget made me mentally independent and today I'm not focusing too much on certain standards or values. I don't need these and they actually make me crazy. This is a very subjective thing. The interest in my work started with Tim Neuger and Burkhard Riemschneider who joined him to open the Galerie Neugerriemschneider. So now, someone was asking me about work every single day. Suddenly there is a third aspect. This is something that later on as a teacher I always repeat: there is time to create your own life beside your artwork. You travel on your own, privately or with friends, go to a party or to a soccer game without thinking about a *mental map*. But you're also doing your research while traveling with your small watercolor tools... This third aspect - showing the result somewhere - was a very important experience. I created one major work without

knowing what it would look like. For example my first trip to Brazil, we didn't know what kind of paint was around. We only had car paint from an old garage and still today it looks quite interesting. Going public doesn't mean that I know exactly what I'm bringing with me. Intervening immediately wherever I am. And this was a step by step process because I didn't have any experience at being quick or acting professionally... One of the first important shows was with Kasper König at the Portikus in Frankfurt.

PD When was that?

FA 1997... From playing intense soccer to being at a point that Kasper König is interested in showing my watercolors was only 6 to 8 years. It was a very proud moment for me but it was just... I still didn't know why these watercolors could be of value. There was a very important gap between finishing studying and traveling. Today it seems to me that a main thing for students is to finish studying and already knowing a gallery partner. For myself, traveling after studying, the sketchbooks, the photos, the first *mental maps* all this stuff came up step by step from the beginning.

PD From the cellar!

FA Yes, the main important thing for me to communicate today is a fax machine and everyone in America remarks "a fax machine!" (laughs) And on that dialog, I have the works on paper which bring me through the cities, the canvas which is stiff in the studio and the wall; architecture related interventions which bring the unknown to a fact are permanently shifting in value, right? Last year wall paintings became 100% of my daily work. For example "Wait" in London, then "No Roof But The Sky" and in between, the huge show in the Kunstmuseum Bonn, which was around ten times bigger than the "Wait" installation...

PD Let's go back to Kasper König. How did it happen?

FA I was in Berlin. One day in the morning he stood in front of my door and said "Hello, I am Kasper König" and I was just coming back from partying. I had 10 sheets of paper on the table. He is one of the most fascinating curators I've ever met. This kind of curiosity, this kind of professional interest. I just would love to see that more of the young curators would follow his track. The pictorial, the elusive questions about our world... More paintings, more watercolors in the worldwide biennials would be nice.

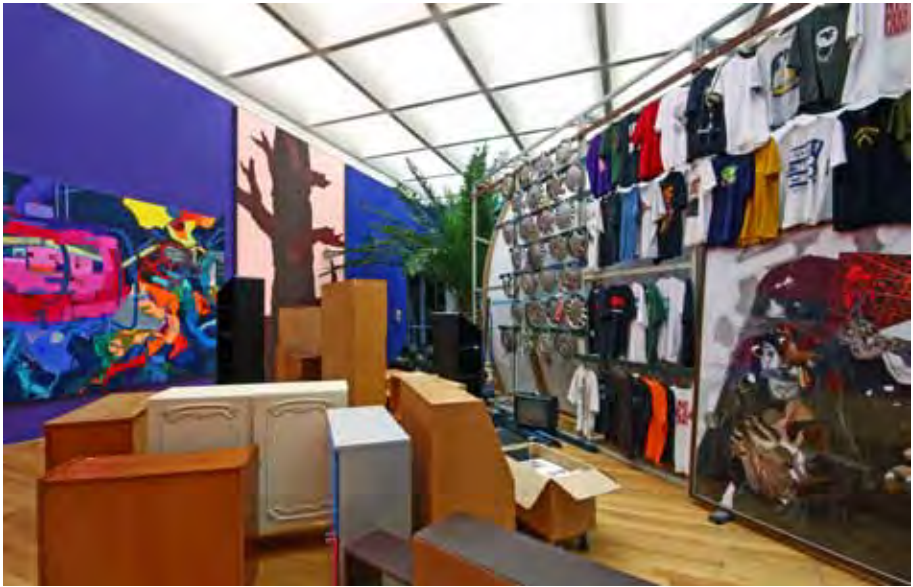
PD But your work does not merely consist of painting?

FA Exactly, because I know the weight of painting and its failures. I know what kind of belief I can set up and demolish in a painting. So taking a closer look at how I install a painting in a space, it becomes logical that other parts like television, video clips, the material installation structures are necessarily involved where I think the painting structure of this thing is weaker. So think about the early conceptual pieces of Joseph Kosuth for example, a painted chair, the definition of a chair and the "real" chair, so, text, image, physical object. I am not painting all these facts of the whole work like I did in my installation at the Tate Britain. Classical sculptors, friends and colleagues of mine, they would jump out of the window after witnessing how I act three dimensionally.

PD You are using different tools to express your conceptual ideas.



Wait
White Cube
London
2010



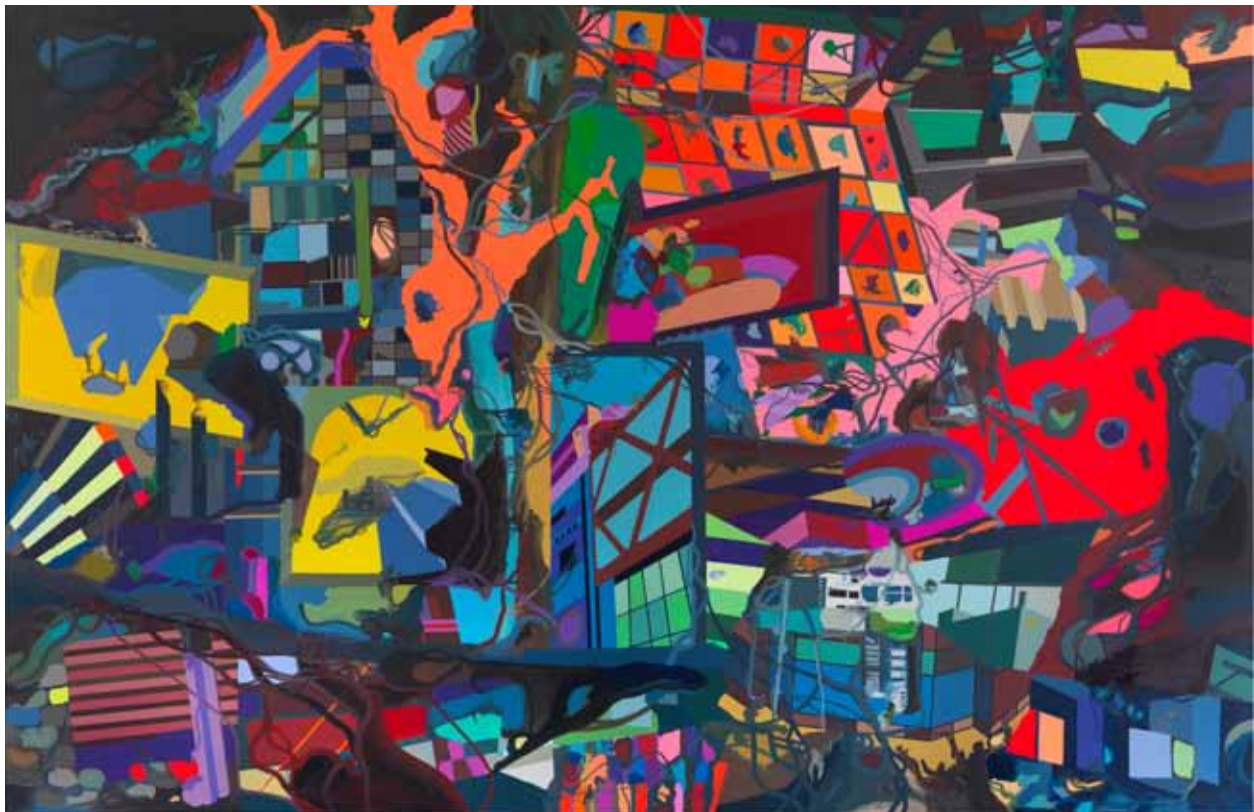
my private retrospective
Installation view
Kunstmuseum Bonn
2009



Living-Dying
Kunstmuseum Bonn
2010



From the exhibition
at Kestner Gesellschaft
Hannover
2008



Volcano
Oil on canvas
280 x 435 cm
2010

FA And there is an open thing far away from having a reference, having the question of identity. It's just like being on stage - the theatrical aspects that you can use today and the next day use something else for a new thought. I always like this idea: not to be identified by a wall painting. There is a short video clip in the installation at Tate Britain. A huge hub of world flags and besides a small clip of a Western, where James Coburn asks Bob Dylan as an actor, "Who are you?" and Bob Dylan answers as a young cowboy "That a good question!" It's a very interesting constellation, in the context of the movie he is a young boy who is very good at throwing knives. This was a symptomatic title for the whole installation that identity, individuality, being famous or being anonymous...

PD I am curious to hear a bit about your generation, in terms of influences and interactions. Other artists, literature, music, academia etc...

FA The fall of the Berlin wall cannot be repeated in terms of teaching it, the students in Berlin have to wait for another event to feel it! [laughs] What happened in Berlin was an accumulation of huge energy to all directions. We know that compared to other cities working and living in Berlin is cheap, you can have a studio. But there was no structure at the beginning. Suddenly, with Galerie Neugerriemschneider, Klosterfelde and Galerie Neu, there were 3, 4 galleries that started showing young art in relation to the established former western galleries. And we talk about 4 to 6 galleries and not over 400 like it is nowadays... Once, we met in the cellar a strange artist called Manfred Pernice. He was making small models there, came one floor up and showed them at Galerie Neu. All these artists were around. Music, literature and it was a very intense time which more and more people joined very rapidly. Berlin is a party city now and a fun city for all generations. It's a tourist city. I got gentrified 3 times from the studio which is a very normal thing. So now we have this kind of almost hedonistic attitude in relation to art. A lot of galleries, museums, you just can't do them all. Other cities in Germany underestimated the soak to Berlin, they are not well represented in the media as they should be. I still think Munich is a big scene, Cologne, Düsseldorf is a very important scene. And we will see what happens to Berlin. Maybe we all get tired there and we won't see the quality anymore...

PD [Laughs] Maybe it is time for the fourth...

FA [Laughs] Fourth gentrification. I have a countryside storage studio, one hour south of Berlin. But the fourth permanent gentrification is staying in other cities for a month, instead of three days. It is only half a year that I am in Berlin, mostly for the big canvases and in the other half of the year I am out installing and making watercolors.

PD You have been presenting your works in solo and group exhibitions since 1991. I don't know the exact number but the list is long! What's the importance at exhibiting your work to the public?

FA The audience of course, the visitor, the people who stay in front of a canvas and look at the painting, this classical thing. I followed and watched openings of my shows. I thought that this attitude related to artwork is still one of the most profound forms of looking at something. It's a 1000 year contemplation. If you think about *mental maps*, you have to walk from one map to the other. Put your nose very close to the things. What happens if I confront them with a huge canvas where they have to stand in front of them? That's why in the beginning I called them "Evasions." They have to travel with their eyes. Experiencing the physical movement becomes a visual

movement and its reverse. This was the first experience to change the attitude and it's not by chance. It is important for me. I took a look at the corridor pieces of Bruce Nauman, to Robert Morris' cages, minimal art. I studied a few months with Dan Graham in Hamburg. All these things were very important for me to learn and to analyze how I can focus on my own interest and necessity of work. So that's why these "Evasion" pieces stayed separate beside the "Mental Map" pieces because I didn't want to bring them together for the first years. Step by step, it became the issue of 'size' because I wanted them to be physical in the painting. These big paintings with one color field, this classical goddess of modernity, right? This end of modernity in my view was planned for the corridor. So it was intended that people are more in the canvas, in the color field to enjoy the piece rather than being far away. I've already seen the color fields in paintings 50 years ago. The color fields are going over a silhouette or a figure. Form and color are not linked together anymore but they have complete freedom. Plus, physical movement. So, these things brought me to this moment when size is a very important physical note. Size, in terms of immaterial surface. Also the show at the Kunstmuseum Bonn, a very large space with huge wall paintings in relation to oil on canvas paintings are in the same room. I call this attitude of making architecture "my small chapel". It looks like a small Renaissance chapel... Architecture becomes a complete illusion and watercolors fitted there as one and only form of cosmos. Coming back to the beginning topic of landscape, after almost 20 years of doing watercolors, I now have the tools to melt everything together. I am in Istanbul today with one pen but I feel free. I can observe the city, I can analyze, I can decide to install something here without using anything I ever did before or I can go up into my hotel room and make a small *mental map*. So I am "emancipated" by my own tools. I like this idea a lot and I learned it a little bit, a fuse of what Graham described to me about how to watch, how to analyze and how to focus on certain aspects.



The Rock
Installation view
Mixed media, works on paper
Kunstmuseum Bonn
2009

Mental Map: "on stage"
13 x 19 cm
1997



untitled: Mental Map
13 x 19 cm
1994



untitled: Mental Map
13 x 19 cm
1995



PD I am also curious about the future; what is the point that you are moving towards? What do you have in mind?

FA What I already mentioned is the confrontation in my daily work: I have a big part of analog material and through daily life and communication, a big part of digital material. So, what I started already in the *mental maps* or in the paintings I once worked on are becoming a collage of certain different neighborhoods. These days I am convinced that if I confront an experience in Istanbul with a *mental map* that I started in Rio de Janeiro, it is no longer a homogenous landscape, which you'll follow. It is a topographic thing, which reminds me in Istanbul the landscape in Rio. There are aspects that are different of course but there are things that are very similar. I bring them together as a conflict with the use of language. We are talking now but this conflict is based on letters and sentences, in one media. There I insist on the quality. I sometimes bring a drawing in relation to a black and white shop - which is very documentary - and bring that together with the oil painted facade of a building. So, something very impossible is functioning in my eyes and this is a form of freedom. Of course, you are pushed forward to questions about media, composition, color, form. These traditional terms are all becoming questionnaires in terms of their own neighborhood. I am not melting it down I think. So, I got the feeling that it worked very well. It's not an abstract painting in terms of an abstract question of form and color. It is a reference to our life but it is sometimes strongly coded and sometimes strongly clear. It looks like the map from Los Angeles but sometimes it looks like a map from an unknown planet. So on that point, I'm really enthusiastic about getting up and saying to myself "Come on, go ahead! This is an interesting aspect in your work for the upcoming months!"

I have a lot of aspects to clear like: The question between the color and the black and white photograph, what it means to our photographers. What it means to our oil and canvas surface. What it means to a colorful wall painting in relation to the black and white photographs. And of course I can work on them while sitting at the Bosphorus, having a cup of Turkish coffee (laughs)... It is thinking in images. And it's a lot of work!

PD Shall we talk a little bit about your exhibition "Wait" at the White Cube in London? In the short interview that I watched you say that we can talk about "a new epoch of materialism which totally changed our attitude in urban living." Adding that "if the visitor can't wait I move faster", you adopt the show for a need as such in a way making fun of "speed" that exemplifies your concerns you just mentioned. I would like to hear more about the conceptual framework of "Wait".

FA I came up with this title as a part of a full installation in the basement. It is not possible to deny the economical aspects, especially in London and New York, about this crisis of materialism. How freaky is it that people are queuing up in banks... Surveillance and this panic situation, which is in the daily newspapers but is totally absent in any painting. As an artist I tried to bring in this physical aspect of my walking through the city, a portrait of the city in my own language. So, "Wait" started with this aspect of the seven sins like you see it in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and the medieval aspect about love, eternity... I showed a short video of a lot of lockers hanging along the railway bridge over the river Rhine. Couples who are in love put them there, locked them, and threw the key into the river: love forever.

PD And "No Roof But The Sky" was 10 years ago a label from Marlboro.



No Roof but the Sky
galerie neugerriemschneider
Berlin
2010

FA Yes. Cigarettes got forbidden, the question of freedom in smoking cigarettes disappeared. It's a very interesting thing. It's something which is completely out of urban living. It's still something and, "No Roof But The Sky" is a maximum form of freedom. On one side, totally commercialized by outdoor events and industries and on the other side, they had buried it. So it's completely a myth, it's completely over, it's forbidden as a product, and it's completely a utopian relevance. And that's why "No Roof But The Sky" already shows up for the third time in my work cause it's such a permanently changing association. Unbelievable but true...

Franz Ackermann was born in 1963 in Neumarkt St. Veit. His most recent installations include "No Roof but the Sky", galerie neugerriemschneider, Berlin (2010) and "Wait", White Cube, London (2010).

Pelin Derviş is an architect. She worked on various projects ranging from urban inventory to spatial and object design in her practice (1997-2004). While working as the director of Garanti Gallery -an institution based on urbanism, architecture and design- realized many exhibitions, events and publications (2005-2010). She lives in Istanbul, working as a freelance editor and curator.

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COVER (detail)

Franz Ackermann, Volcano, 2010
© Studio Franz Ackermann
Courtesy of Galeria Fortes Vilaça
Photo Credit: Reni Hansen & Jens Ziehe



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