

MUSEUM  
LUDWIG

FÜSUN  
ONUR  
RETROSPECTIVE  
SEP 16, 2023–JAN 28, 2024  
EXHIBITION  
BOOKLET



Photo: Muammer Yanmaz

Füsün Onur was born in 1938 in Istanbul, where she is currently based. Her impressive and varied oeuvre defies categorization and cannot be assigned to any one traditional art genre. Early on in her career, Onur discovered surprising sculptural solutions through the exploration of surface and space. This formal approach was only one of many she developed. Later, everyday objects and sensuous materials were incorporated into large installations and augmented by a narrative element that continues to lend a poetic depth to her work. In her constant search for new solutions, Onur employs diverse techniques and methods that make her oeuvre particularly topical.



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Murat Germen

## *Counterpoint with Flowers* 1982 (2023)

Evoking a sea-blue dream, the installation could also represent a garden with small trees and large paper flowers. Blue foil surrounds all the elements, both natural and artificial. While these elements are varied, they still share the same spatial depth. “Counterpoint” is a musical term describing two independent melodies that together produce a harmonious sound. In this piece, Onur combines natural and artificial realms to create harmonic spatial tones. *Counterpoint with Flowers* reflects her training as a sculptor: it is simultaneously a sculptural installation and a painting that visitors can step into. Blue is a frequently used color in Onur’s work and a recurring theme in this exhibition.

Onur grew up in Istanbul and studied sculpture from 1956 to 1960 at Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts (later Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) under Ali Hadi Bara (1906–1971), who is synonymous with the period of upheaval in Turkish art that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s. As the number of state commissions for prestigious artworks dwindled, the influence of the state likewise diminished. Artists began to create their own environment in which they could experiment with new forms. Bara produced abstract constructive works that investigate the relationship between volume and the surrounding space, between fullness and emptiness. Onur was greatly influenced by his teaching; Bara encouraged his student to develop her own position through reflection and conscious perception. When she returned to Istanbul following a Fulbright scholarship in 1962 to American University in Washington, DC, and her studies from 1964 to 1966 at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Onur created abstract and constructive sculptures, as well as works that defy categorization, such as *Untitled (Shapeless Form)* from 1971 (2023) and *Untitled* from 1975 (2014).



Courtesy the artist, photo: İlhan Onur

The work consists of a soft, coiled canvas tube that can be inflated by visitors using an air pump. After a while, the tube deflates and returns to a flattened state. The notion that an artwork does not change and therefore outlasts form is prevalent in modernism. Onur foils this expectation of unambiguity, as indicated in the self-contradictory title *Shapeless Form*. The artist created the work for a group show held in a park in Paris in 1971. It lay in the grass and required the participation of visitors, which was as surprising as its form and material. Onur created this work without conforming to the expectations of Western Conceptualism and performance art of the 1970s, nor did she follow the modernist view of art prescribed by the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts. She resisted these categorizations and positioned herself outside their frameworks.

*Untitled*  
*(Shapeless Form)*  
1971 (2023)

Courtesy the artist, photographer unknown

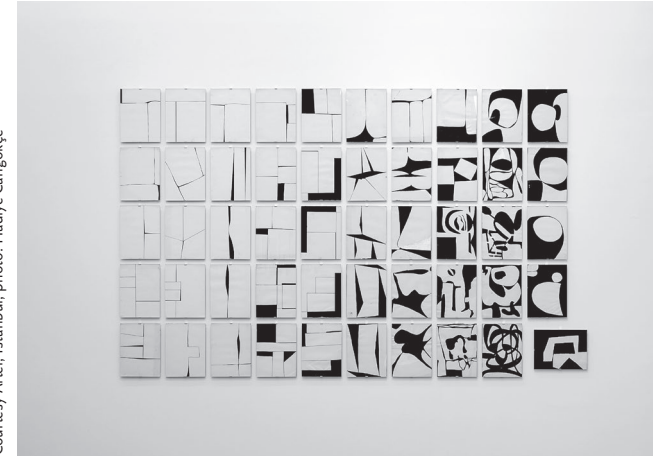


Through the transparent blue mantle of a Minimalist cuboid, two white forms can be seen: a vertical, jagged sculpture and, above it, a sphere. These forms could be interpreted figuratively as a plant and a celestial body. Onur drew sketches for the work in her copy of *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (1961) by American art historian Clement Greenberg, whose theory of the self-referentiality of art was highly influential to a generation of artists. Onur found a different solution: in *Untitled*, she views Minimalist sculpture as a vitrine for two elements that, immersed in blue, appear pictorial and enigmatic. This lends a poetic element to the work, which resists a simple description in terms of its formal elements.

### *Untitled* 1975 (2014)

*“Why should a painting stay on the wall and in a frame? Does a sculpture necessarily have to be about a figure or a form? Do painting and sculpture have to be separated from each other? What possibilities does painting have, and what possibilities does sculpture have? How are time and space used in painting and sculpture?”*  
FÜSUN ONUR, 1981

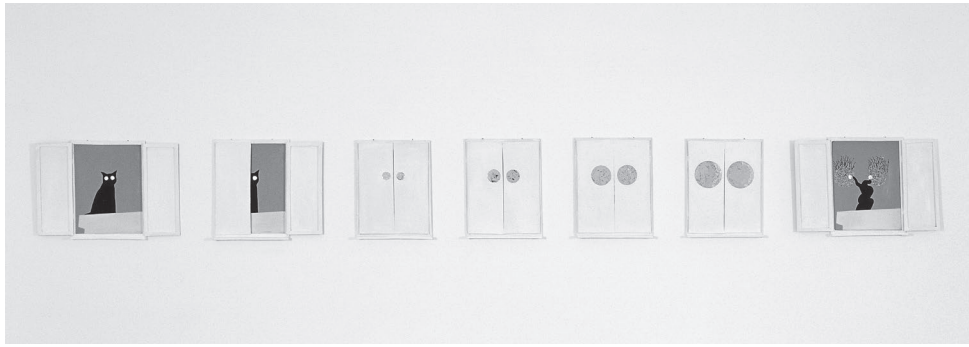
Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Hediye Cangökçe



### *Dividing Space on a White Sheet of Paper* 1965–66

Onur took only a few works back to Istanbul from her four-year stay in the United States. These include many drawings that were part of her final project at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Fifty of them are on display in this exhibition. Onur handles the surface of the paper as space, which she reveals by opening it, so to speak, with black ink. Only a few lines are necessary to create the illusion of an opening. In other drawings, the forms intersect in such a way that it is impossible to differentiate between inside and outside.

Time and again, Onur returned to the formal issue of how the illusion of space is achieved in a flat picture. In her reliefs, she uses narrative to link the transition from the pictorial to the spatial.



Courtesy Block Collection. Loan to Neues Museum Nürnberg, photo: Werner Maschmann

***From the Outside to the Inside from the Inside to the Outside***  
1976

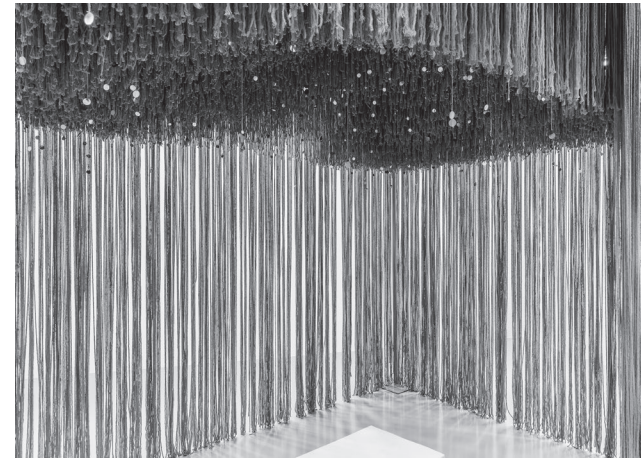
The work begins with the magical gaze of a cat at an open window. Over the course of five panels complete with shutters, the cat transforms into a flowering tree. While the first panel in the series shows the view of an interior from the outside, the last panel depicts the view of a garden from the inside.



Courtesy private collection, Berlin, photo: Nils Klinger

The four-part work tells the story of a small girl in a green plaid dress—for Onur, green is not a favored color. In four stages, the child rids herself of the background on which she is painted: with a strong jerk, she tears the canvas from the upper corners. The force causes her playthings to hop around her. In the final painting, the girl has nearly disappeared, and the red stretcher of the frame is seen instead.

***Plaid 1-2-3-4***  
1987



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Murat Germen

***Third Dimension in Painting—Come In***  
1981 (2014)

The installation creates a room within a room through closely placed blue woolen threads hanging from a rectangular frame. On the inside, the threads hang down like a voluminous firmament decorated with beads. Visitors can lie on pillows on the floor and look up. As is often the case with Onur's work, passive viewers become active participants. The installation is a sensuous invitation to experience painting spatially. In this work, Onur was reacting to the expansion of Istanbul's art market in around 1980, which saw the founding of private and corporate galleries, the organization of large shows, and an increasing number of art publications. This development was especially beneficial to painting, a medium preferred by private collectors. Onur's response to this competition between genres caused by the art market was a bold invitation to viewers to have a spatial experience with her work, one only possible with sculpture.

The art market boom in the 1980s was due to a wave of neoliberal policies already in effect before the military coup on September 12, 1980. The coup led to the banning of all political parties and NGOs. Despite parliamentary elections in 1983, the military retained the upper hand until the end of the decade. The effect this had on intellectuals and artists could still be felt in the 1990s: artists emigrated, withdrew from art for lengthy periods, or concentrated on discussions about the formal aspects of their work.



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Hadiye Cangökçe

## Icons of Time 1990

In this installation, seven frame-like constructions in different sizes are arranged in a way that resembles a group of freestanding windows or doors. These structures are partially covered in leather; the material slashed open and bulging. The objects display different ways of concealing and disclosing, linking the opaque and the transparent. A wide variety of diverse forms can be found in the details. The pieces of leather are colored or painted in delicate tones of blue, yellow, and pink. They are wound around the frames and cut to form fringes or ornamentation. In these objects, Minimalist structures as well as painterly and relief-like elements can be discerned.

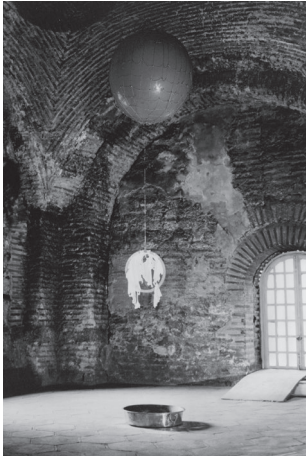


Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Murat Germen

## Dream of Old Furniture 1985

This installation consists of assemblages of furniture and found objects. A pedestal table is covered by a piece of floral sequined fabric studded with miniature animals. Over a bisected frame hangs a piece of embroidered tulle containing a green toy soldier. An armchair has been upholstered in such a way that it can no longer be sat in and painted as if it were a living and splendidly attired creature. Onur breathes new life into the pieces of furniture by combining them with a variety of everyday objects. Each ensemble can be worked into a narrative by the beholder. Are the objects animated and dreaming? Or are they the subject of dreams activated by the associations of viewers? The power of imagination enables us to become immersed in these miniature worlds.

*"I had placed the book Alice in Wonderland in Dream of Old Furniture. I forgot about it, and when I took the work out for this exhibition, I remembered. That is beautiful for me . . ."*  
FÜSUN ONUR, 2014



## *Let's Meet at the Orient* 1995

The installation was created for the 4th Istanbul Biennale in 1995, titled *ORIENT/ATION—The Vision of Art in a Paradoxical World* by its curator, René Block. The way the title is formatted indicates that the word *orientation* poses the question of direction from a fixed place. That place is the West (Occident), which orients itself in relation to the East (Orient). The term *orientation* reflects the traditional notion that the West is the center to which everything else is the periphery. Onur's contribution *Let's Meet at the Orient* makes it clear that the Orient as the Other is a historical construct of the Occident. Using simple materials—a balloon, silk, twine, and a copper washtub containing brass letters—she jettisons any form of demarcation or designation and instead creates a poetic image of the fragile blue planet Earth as belonging to no one and existing only once.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in around 1990 deepened relations between Eastern Europe and Türkiye, making Istanbul a center between the Balkans, Western Europe, and the Middle East. Curator and writer Vasif Kortun characterized Istanbul's position in 1993: "It is situated between the north and the south, and severs Asia from Europe, as a 'non-space.' The city does not have a direction of its own. Here, the geographical terminology is unburdened by the ideologies of cartographical thinking. It is not the center, for it does not revere a center, it is just there, in the middle . . ."

## *Untitled* 1993



A chair with armrests has been wrapped in a heavy chain. A sign placed on the empty seat bears Onur's name. The chair refers to the artist and serves as her stand-in. The work was created for the exhibition *Women in Anatolia through the Centuries: Women Artists from the Republic to the Present* at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. Onur associates herself with the idea of an artist who is chained to a place not of her own choosing. Is it society that assigns her this place? Or is Onur objecting to art criticism's established concept of art?

"I believe that the true work of art inherently has humanistic content and is social and political. Viewer don't look a work of art with the expectation that it will change the world or the order of things, but because they recognize in it their own possibility, their own capacity."  
FÜSUN ONUR, 1988

## *War through the Eyes of a Child, 1994*

Onur recalls how as a child, she had been struck by the “Made in Germany” label on her dolls at a time when Germany was responsible for World War II. Taking this memory as a starting point, she developed the installation *War through the Eyes of a Child* for *Iskele: Turkish Art Today*, which opened in Berlin and Stuttgart in 1994 and was her first group exhibition in Germany. At its center is a wooden table covered with a textile collage, consisting of a child’s dress surrounded by circular, black-and-white photographs of toys, primarily of dolls heads. One photograph shows the back of a doll bearing the word “Germany” to denote its place of origin. Another child’s dress hangs beneath the table. On the floor around it and tied to the table by cords are three heavy leather boots stuffed with dolls covered in black tulle. Onur also makes an appearance. On the wall, a photograph of her as a child acts as a witness to the scene. Through the title, the photographs, and the children’s dresses, Onur references the personal while arriving at a work that embraces the universal.



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Murat Germen



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: flurfo

## *Opus II— Fantasia 2001 (2023)*

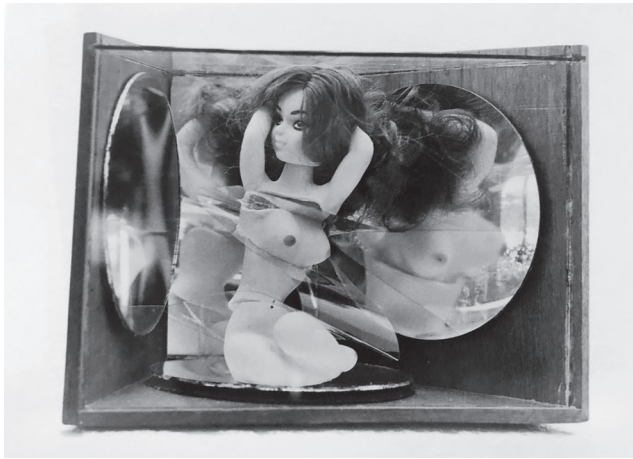
Following a distinct ordering system, pedestals, long knitting needles, balls of gold braid, and small porcelain figurines are spread across the floor of several adjoining rooms. Through these assembled elements, the scale of the exhibition rooms becomes perceptible, and they are lent a rhythmic structure. Different variations in the system draw our attention to numerous details, such as the gold cords hanging from the corner of a pedestal, creating a visual connection to the elements on the floor, or those formed into balls and placed under pedestals, causing them to tilt. The materials that Onur employs become abstracted through her formal solutions. Yet they remain recognizable, and in this piece, as so often in Onur’s work, they can be ascribed to the domestic sphere. With gentle humor, these objects rock the foundations of the traditional exhibition format, in which sculptures are usually displayed at eye level.

*“Music is also a perceived process, one for all our senses. Hard-soft, bright-dull, blue-red, hot-cold. Depending on its structural pattern, its physical reality has density, volume, weight. . . . My work is a rhythmic extension of forms. I want to lend everyday materials a meaning they did not possess before by giving them an artistic order.”*

FÜSUN ONUR, 2000



## *Nude* 1974



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: İlhan Onur

*Nude* was created in response to an art scandal. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic of Türkiye, fifty artists were invited to develop a sculpture for public spaces around Istanbul. Sculptor Gürdal Duyar created a female nude called *Beautiful Istanbul*, which was installed in 1974. However, following intense public debate, the sculpture was toppled and seriously damaged. Artists protested against this treatment of art in an exhibition at Taksim Art Gallery in Istanbul, in which Onur also participated. For the exhibition, Onur cut up a small naked female doll and placed it in a mirrored wooden box, where it appears further fragmented by its reflection. With this work, Onur criticized society's double standards: at the time, such dolls were commonly hung from rearview mirrors as car ornaments. The work also acts as a critique of traditional sculpture, in which the female nude serves as a visual representation of abstract concepts.



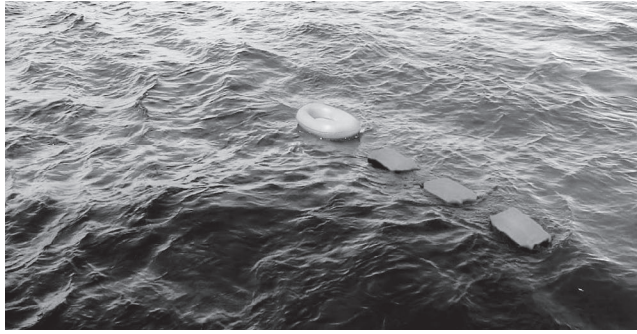
© Ali Kazma

Onur's childhood home is located in Kuzguncuk, Istanbul, directly on the Bosphorus. Until recently, she lived there with her sister, İlhan Onur, who died in 2022. İlhan had closely followed her sister's work from the very beginning, documenting it and acting as a discussion partner. In 2014, artist Ali Kazma created a video portrait of their home as part of his *Resistance* series, in which he explores how human beings transform their surroundings and are themselves transformed in the process, and the traces they leave behind. Kazma captures Onur's studio in many quiet still frames and close-ups. The rooms are filled with furniture and mementos dating back to the early twentieth century. Among the family photographs, there are a noticeable number of Onur's father, head of the science committee at Istanbul's Regional Port Authority, who, despite his early death in 1950, greatly influenced his three children—Füsün, İlhan, and their brother, Senih—as a devout man with a secular mind and also as a supporter of the newly established Republic of Türkiye. Onur's sister appears momentarily in the video, switching on a music box.

## **Ali Kazma** **Home** **(from the** ***Resistance*** **series)** 2014

*"No, I am not nostalgic.  
But you love the past.  
No.  
But you live with many  
things from the past.  
They are here and now.  
It is our present world.  
Yes."*

FÜSÜN ONUR, 2012



Courtesy Arter, Istanbul, photo: Esen Karol

## *Pink Boat* 1993 (2014)

A recurring element in Onur's work is her deep attachment to Istanbul and the Bosphorus. She continuously finds new aesthetic forms related to the strait and the experience of living by the water. Onur first conceptualized *Pink Boat* in 1993 in response to the destruction of the Galata Bridge in a fire the year before. The original nineteenth-century structure had been a floating bridge; when it was rebuilt a year later, it was constructed using piles anchored into the bed of the Bosphorus. The idea of a flexible structure that moves back and forth with the waves and currents inspired Onur to create an ephemeral work with small boats floating on the Bosphorus. In 2014, she finally executed the work, installing it in front of her house and filming the boats bobbing on the waves in an eight-hour video.

*"Wherever I go,  
I carry Istanbul  
with me."*  
FÜSUN ONUR, 1994



Courtesy Collection Işıl & Sarkis, photo: İlhan Onur

## *Legacy* 1993

Embedded into the bottom of an empty case sumptuously lined with pink satin, as if it were designed to store something very precious, are the outlines of letters forming the word "Istanbul." The void suggests that something has vanished. The case and the lustrous fabric are a memorial to that which has been lost. With this work, Onur expresses her deep attachment to the city of Istanbul, which is also linked to a feeling of loss.

## *Istanbul Obsession* 1994

Thin fabric, through which richly embroidered pieces of clothing are visible, hangs from a hexagonal frame attached to the ceiling. The forms of the hanging garments in their tower-like cover are reminiscent of the vaulted windows in Byzantine and Ottoman fortresses and mosques around Istanbul. When the work was first presented, a table with a photo album featuring old views of Istanbul stood inside. Onur's deep connection to the city goes back to her childhood. This installation conveys a warm feeling of security that contrasts with the installation *War through the Eyes of a Child*. Onur created both works for the exhibition *İskele: Turkish Art Today*, held in Berlin and Stuttgart in 1994.



Courtesy Centre national des arts plastiques,  
photo: © Fusun Onur / CNAP



1972–1996  
1996

“I am not affiliated with a doctrine or theory. Since I work by following myself, I move toward the future when I finish. I don’t think about what I have done.”  
FÜSUN ONUR, 2014

Everyday objects are carriers of memory, and thus of history. With this in mind, for an exhibition in Paris in 1996, Onur selected a dress she had bought in 1972 for her second solo exhibition in Istanbul and kept for over twenty years. Her Paris show returned the dress to the place where it had originally been made. The years between her purchase and the exhibition—1972 to 1996—are sewn on the dress, providing the work with its title. Onur filled the dress with fleece, added fabric flowers, and covered it with white tulle as a form of bidding farewell.

In 2014, Onur’s first survey exhibition was organized by Arter in Istanbul. On this occasion, several early pieces were reconstructed with the artist’s help. Onur had destroyed a significant number of works because it was difficult for them to be acquired—the art market in Istanbul was small, and private collections were few—and she lacked any means of storing them. Most importantly, after being exhibited, she believed that the works had outlived their function.



*Once upon a time...*  
2022

Onur’s home contains many small items, such as dollhouse furniture, clock towers, little angels, and other figurines. Rather than toys, they represent a miniature world of their own, and Onur uses them occasionally as part of her artistic process. This was the case with her large installation *Once upon a time...* for the Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022.

It tells the story of cats and mice from Istanbul and Venice who band together to save the world, whose natural environment has been plundered and destroyed by humans for the sake of economic growth and consumption. Small figures made from bent wire form twenty-one different scenes that are presented on tables. Augmented by found objects, these tableaux bring the adventures of Zorba, a tomcat, and Cingöz, a mouse, to life. *Once upon a time...* invites visitors to imagine shrinking—like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll—to the size of a toy or small animal and to take part in an adventure where they meet animated objects and talking creatures.



Blue light fills the last room of the exhibition. Stools invite visitors to sit and perhaps discover the small muse that gives the installation its title. Soft violin music can be heard, as if someone were playing in the next room. The violinist is Begüm Çalıklı, who wrote the composition and performed it for the recording. Onur describes how, over the last two decades, her subject has increasingly become the exhibition space, which she brings to our attention by means of only a few elements that open the imagination. *A Room with a Muse* is conceived in a similar way, evoking memories and stimulating associations.

## *A Room with a Muse 2023*

*“Music communicates  
the inexpressible that  
words cannot explain.”  
FÜSUN ONUR, 2000*

## *Program*

**Sat, Oct 21, 2023,  
from 7 pm**  
XVIII. KUNSTNACHT:  
A PART OF ART  
Event by  
jungekunstfreunde &  
job&kunstfreunde

**Late Night Thursday,  
Nov 2, 2023, from 5 pm**  
ISTANBUL  
CONNECTION

**Tue, Dec 12, 2023, 6 pm**  
Süreyya Evren  
ONE CAREER IN  
THREE PERIODS:  
FÜSUN ONUR FROM  
1950s TO 2000s  
KunstBewusst Lecture  
in English

**Tue, Jan 16, 2024, 6 pm**  
Defne Ayas  
ON FÜSUN ONUR'S  
TENDER SCULPTURAL  
INTELLIGENCE  
KunstBewusst Lecture  
in English

#MLxFusunOnur

## *Art education*

**Every Sunday 3–4 pm**  
Public tours in German

**Every Saturday 3–5 pm**  
Kunst:Dialoge  
(in German and English)

**Every Sunday 11:30 am–5:30 pm**  
Open studio

A catalogue will be  
published in German and  
English by Verlag der  
Buchhandlung Walther  
und Franz König, Köln.

### *Curators*

Barbara Engelbach  
Emre Baykal

### *Text*

Barbara Engelbach  
Emre Baykal

Katrin Sauerländer  
Sriwhana Spong

Angelika von Tomaszewski

### *Translations*

Tas Skorupa

### *Design*

Yvonne Quirnbach

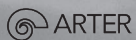
### *Paper*

115 g Circlesilk Premium White  
FSC recycling

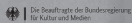
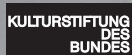
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the artist

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