

It was a summer day when Marco Polo appeared before Kubilay Khan. The emperor, certain that the Venetian would be describing some unheard of city that morning, said: So, tell me.

Marco Polo, in his voice still bearing the impressions of the city from his most recent travel, begins his narration:

This city is from the future. It's called The Exploded City. Those who live there have emigrated from faraway lands, with dreams of traveling to the future. When they realized that there was no finding the future, they decided to build this city. It is said that hundreds of different languages, such as Otesian, Bosnian, Albanian, Kurdish, Castilian, Irish, Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Anglo-Frisian, and other Saami, Altaic, and Slavic languages are spoken in this city. These people who don't speak each other's language, instead of creating a lingua franca, have learned to communicate through looking into one another's eyes. Not before long, they taught me this eye language as well. In this city, all the other remaining languages are like a constant background noise. They actually resemble the besieging of the city by various types of birds.

Excerpt from *Exploded City*

Ahmet Ögüt's *Exploded City* (2009) envisions an imaginary metropolis comprising real buildings, monuments, and vehicles from across the world. Plucked from their original contexts in Turkey or Ireland, Yugoslavia or Great Britain, India or the United States, Lebanon or Spain, they coalesce as a single urban center in an installation of scale models and in a text that weaves each site together through experiential description. In this, the work directly channels Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, a book of fantastical descriptions of cities visited by the explorer Marco Polo. Polo's narrations are barter of the imagination given to the emperor Kublai Khan, of invisible cities, seen only by Polo during his travels, and willed into existence for Khan through narration. In great detail, language allows Polo to supersede the logic and limitations of architecture and physics and to imagine cities whose logic is borne not through function but through imagination. Similarly, Ögüt's *Exploded City* is an impossibility—buildings separated by distance and time made into a whole that defies reality—placeless and timeless. In Ögüt's description the city is a vibrant metropolis, full of life, with one of everything and three hotels. There is a mosque and a library, a bar and a club, a museum and a university, a federal building and a bank; there is music and drinking and dancing and a wedding. But as these mundane activities unfold, they do so in and around projections into the future of more unusual circumstances—a hotel that will burn to the ground, a wedding that will be bombed, a school that will be raided, a bus that will explode. And

the logic of this city becomes apparent, where these sites of terrorism and violence have been reconstructed together in the moments before their devastation.

Like many artists working today, Ahmet Ögüt conceives projects flexibly across a range of media that cycle through his interests—the status of images in relation to memory and history, anecdotal narratives and how they intersect with official histories, local contexts and how they echo internationally, for example. For Ögüt this manifests in a larger desire to explore in his work “the symptoms and gaps of social and political hysterias, and ideologies of chronic systems,” revealing the connections between things—be it a collection of buildings, a specific material like asphalt and its symbolic associations to power, or a collection of stories and their shifting resonance across a spectrum of everyday experience.

As evidenced by the Calvinesque text of *Exploded City*, Ögüt is continually interested in storytelling, in particular the possibilities for narratives to be constructed from the anecdotal and incidental in ways that both highlight and subvert the relationship of reality to surreality. *Today in History* (2007) forms a compendium of such stories through the trope of the newspaper column, recounting forty years of minor occurrences, from the first escalator in Turkey to a library that travels by donkey to a car built piece by piece over a period of eight years, to the shooting of Hrant Dink, a Turkish-American journalist. Ögüt's act of drawing neutralizes the stories—the genesis of each true story is obscured—whether collected by Ögüt from print or eyewitness sources, with the status of official or anecdotal news. Time collapses between them, as well as their original contexts, so that each paraphrased story is now understood in relation to the others, its plausibility or lack thereof complicated by the creation of associations between the banal and the remarkable, the political and the personal, the absurd and the ironic, the local and the international.

Exploded City is constructed partially by the anecdotal and incidental—form gleaned through the rare photograph of an unremarkable structure before it figures remarkably in violence, or the memory of someone who lived near to a building and knew the contours of its façade before it disappeared. Through this process of research and reconstruction Ögüt gives visibility to these now invisible structures, but also raises questions about their visibility or lack thereof in their pristine original state. Depending on who we are, where we have lived or traveled, we may have primary visual recognition of a particular building, but most will be unrecognizable, unidentifiable. Much like Ögüt's drawings, the aesthetic uniformity of the models serves to normalize the heterogeneity of their sources. Their semi-anonymity highlights the commonality of architectural forms of institutionalized modernism, and the political symbolism they imply and that serves as a target for terrorist action.

Ögüt has played with the symbolism of modernity in several works, notably *Ground Control* (2007–2008), a minimal installation in which the entire floor of an otherwise



Ahmet Ögüt: *Ground Control*, 2007–2008; 1,312¹/₃ sq. ft.; installation detail view from Kunst-Werke, 5th Berlin Biennial; courtesy of the artist. Photo: Uwe Walter.

empty gallery is covered in asphalt for the duration of an exhibition. It's a surprising gesture, pulling a decidedly outdoor material indoors; materializing the symbolic value of an omnipresent but overlooked material by sharpening and condensing our physical relationship to it. The title implies one symbolic marker, that asphalt is the material applied as a control over the world, sealing out uneven nature; leveling and unifying space, signaling modernity and progress. The material itself implies the designation of space for public use through the building of infrastructure—marking the arrival of modernity and interconnectivity to far-flung areas, now rendered “visible” and “present” through their connection to a larger system.

These questions of visibility and connection, of what and where in the world becomes visible to us and how, which sites across the world can be linked together, is also implied in *Exploded City's* conjuring of buildings in their pristine state. When we speak of the whole world, as *Exploded City* does, we cannot speak of collective consciousness without some self-consciousness. But acts of terrorism and violence are episodes in which the connections between places, between politics and daily life, between the individual and the larger world, nationality and war, are thrown into sharp relief. And we are made to see these places that for most of us never existed in our consciousness, and how they connect to ourselves, in concrete terms of war or policy and in abstract terms of fear and empathy. In these moments, the variables of distance, speed, and time that keep us from knowing these places through our own experience collapse.

Distance, time, and speed—measures by which our relationship to reality is shaped and through which disparate lands are connected—are also implicated in the

exhibition's second work. The film *Things We Count* (2008) pans slowly across the retired fighter planes at an airplane graveyard in Arizona's Sonoran desert, as a voice counts them one by one in Kurdish, Turkish, and English. The planes are monumental, but in their inertness, they are divorced from any sense of action or function, while the counting emphasizes their multiplicity. Together these factors conspire to nearly transmute the planes to the status of models, symbolic forms that gesture toward the action of fighter planes in tragically connecting countries through war and destruction. The counting, in the languages of faraway lands, also signals this contradiction of connection and disconnection; reduced to the simplest unit of language—numbers—the voiceover will nevertheless not likely be comprehended by the listener across all the languages. And pointedly, the reality that we are interconnected, that countries like Iran, Iraq, and the United States are so implicated with each other in politics and wars and conflicts, and yet do not share the collective understanding of something as simple as numbers, shows just how big and how small the world is simultaneously.

Exploded City is a small world unto itself, a self-contained model; models are copies, and like copies they exist as memories, memorials, monuments, ghosts. In some sense *Exploded City* is all of these things, but Ögüt's act is not one of simple commemoration, it is one of invention, and so *Exploded City* takes on the character of a fable, a deliberate conflation of fact and fiction. Its tone rejects moralizing, instead accepting the gaps and lapses between us, how the tragic is inscribed within the banal, hope and perseverance are injected within destruction, absurdity injected within reality.

Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

Ahmet Ögüt: video still from *Things We Count*, 2008; DVD, 6:20 min.; courtesy of the artist.



Ahmet Ögüt: *Exploded City*, 2009; scale model buildings, vehicles, mixed materials; 169 5/16 × 189 × 63 in.; installation detail view from Pavilion of Turkey, The 53rd Venice Biennale; courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV).

Born in Turkey in 1981, and living and working in Amsterdam, Ahmet Ögüt recently co-represented Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Past solo exhibitions include Künstlerhaus Bremen; Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona; Platform Garanti, Istanbul; and Kunsthalle Basel. Recent group exhibitions include Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; De Appel, Amsterdam; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Malmö Konsthall, Sweden; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; the Berlin Biennale; 3rd Ghangzhou Triennial; SITE Santa Fe Biennial; and Kiasma, Helsinki. Ahmet Ögüt received his B.A. from the Fine Arts Faculty of Hacettepe University in 2003 and his M.F.A. from the Art and Design Faculty of Yildiz Technical University in 2006. This is the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States. Upcoming solo exhibitions in 2010 include Museum Villa Stuck, Munich; Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig; and Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney.

ARTIST TALK
Sunday, January 24, 3 p.m.
Gallery 1

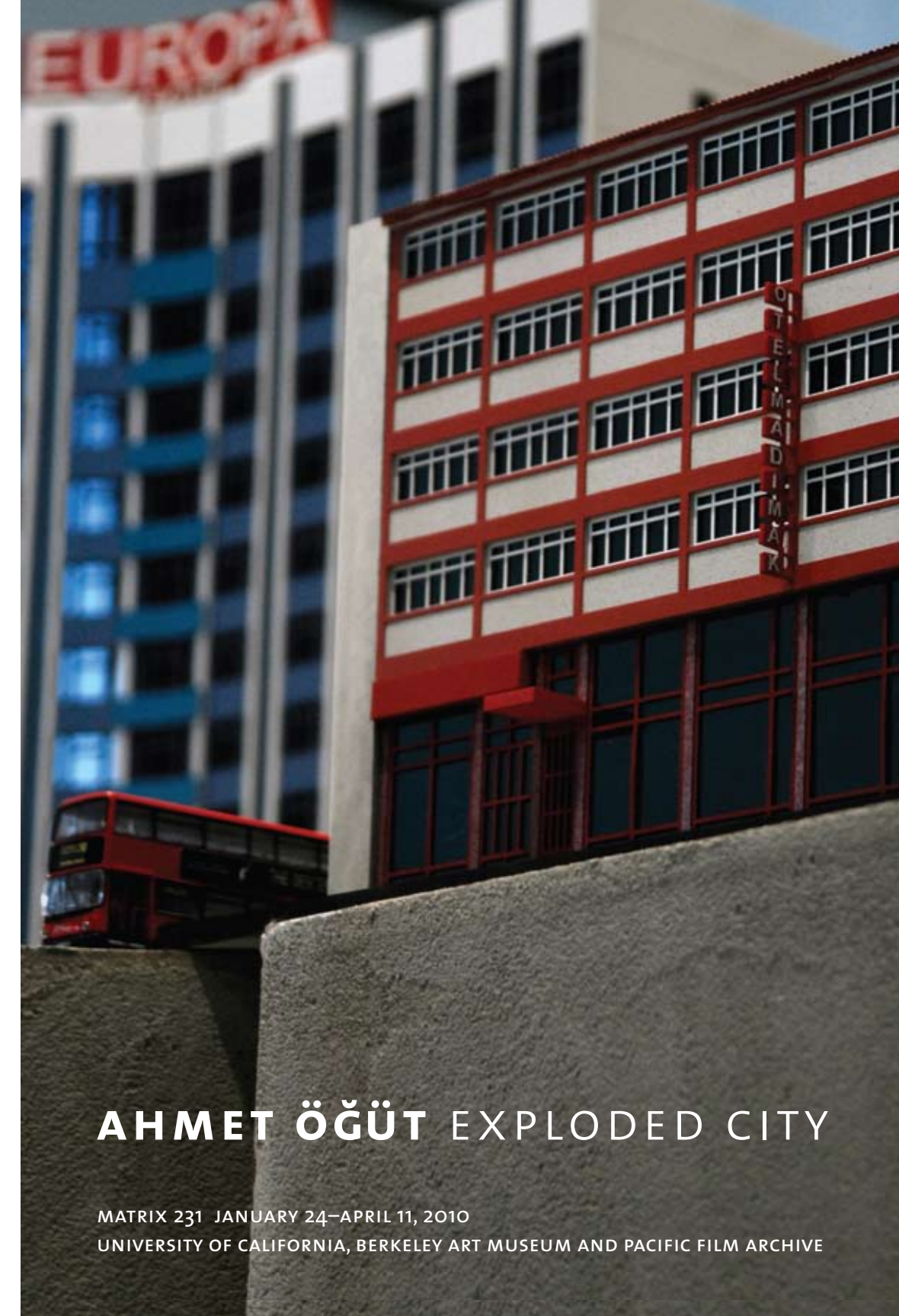
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The *Exploded City* installation was originally commissioned by Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) as part of the Pavilion of Turkey, The 53rd Venice Biennale.

FRONT Ahmet Ögüt: *Exploded City*, 2009; scale model buildings, vehicles, mixed materials; 169 5/16 × 189 × 63 in.; installation detail view from Pavilion of Turkey, The 53rd Venice Biennale; courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV). Photo: Can Kungor.



AHMET ÖĞÜT EXPLODED CITY

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