



Abbas Akhavan. *spring*. 2021. Frost, copper piping, freezing mechanism, cinder blocks, found water fountain, lights and pump. Installation view of *Once Upon a Time Inconceivable* at Protocinema, Istanbul, Turkey. Image courtesy of the artist, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver and The Third Line, Dubai. Photography by Zeynep Firat. © Abbas Akhavan and Protocinema

HONOURING A DECADE

Celebrating its tenth anniversary amid the pandemic and a disrupted art scene in Istanbul, the cross-cultural nonprofit **Protocinema** recently staged *Once Upon a Time Inconceivable*, a dynamic group exhibition showcasing installations and multimedia works by nine global artists.

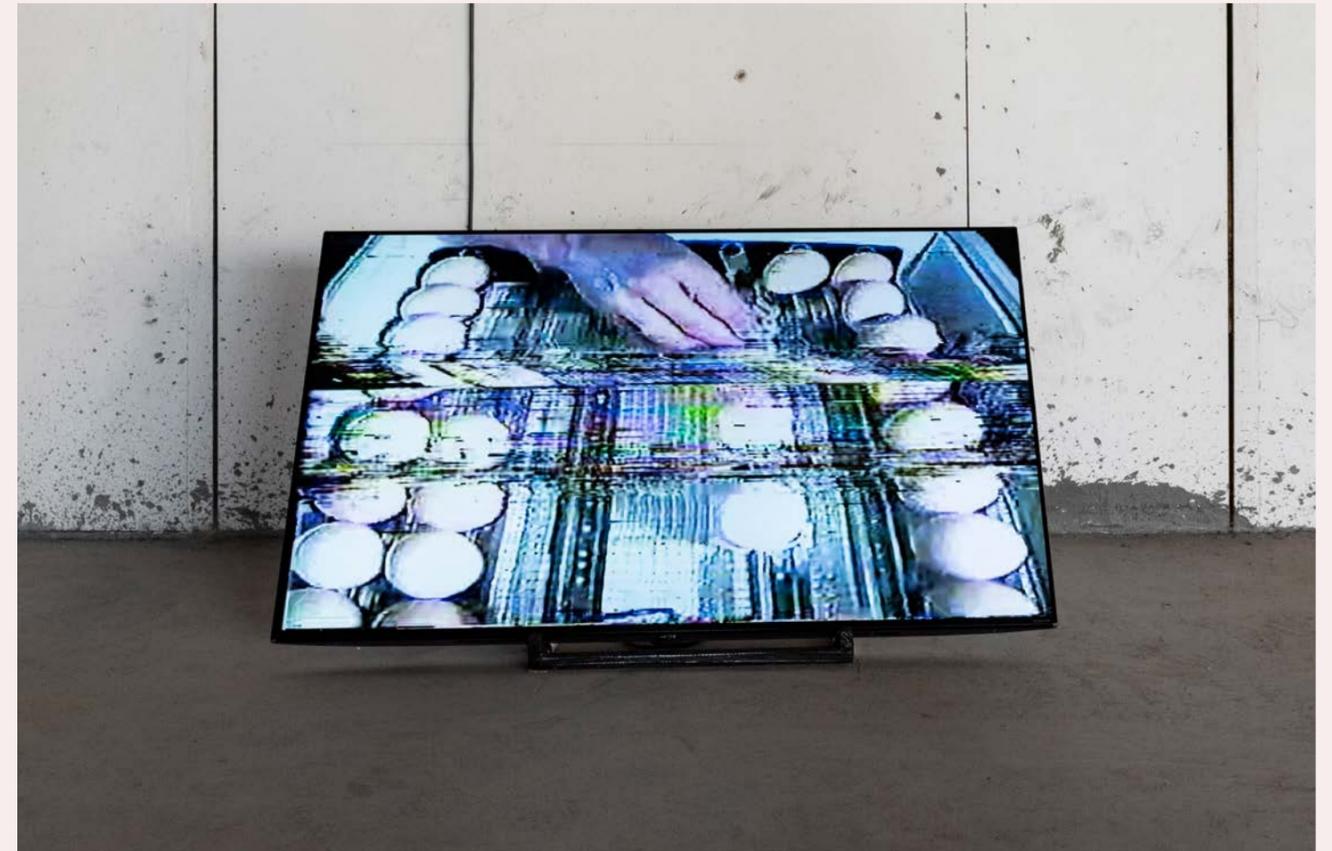
Words by Ayla Jean Yackley

Shifting concepts of time and space are constants running through exhibitions staged by the art nonprofit, Protocinema. Based in Istanbul and New York and untethered to a physical gallery, founder, director and curator Mari Spirito has spent a decade working across time zones and cities to show art in venues as discrete as a bakery, church, barbershop or disused shoe factory.

To mark the peripatetic Protocinema's decennial, Spirito again urged us to rethink our relationship with time and place, both of which have been warped by the coronavirus pandemic, with *Once Upon a Time Inconceivable*, which ran until 10 October at Istanbul's Beykoz Kundura. "Anniversaries are to mark time, but in

the past 18 months, we've all lost this perception," Spirito said. "In moments like these, where we're in crisis or in a different context, that's when we have realisations that affect our perceptions, which is what this show is about."

Protocinema embraces the kinetic, taking its name from German filmmaker Werner Herzog's description of the cinematic quality of the world's oldest known cave art. Having jettisoned the white cube, Protocinema never returns to the same venue for shows that are described as "site aware" by Spirito. "Mari helps us to look at space with a fresh eye," says Istanbul-based artist Hera Büyükaşçıyan. "There is a huge difference between seeing these



Paul Pfeiffer. *Orpheus Descending* (still). 2001. Video installation, 75 VHS Tapes. Duration: 75 days. Originally commissioned by the Public Art Fund and installed at the World Trade Center and the World Financial Center, New York, 15 April–28 June 2001. Image courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photography by Zeynep Firat. © Paul Pfeiffer

works in a gallery and seeing them in a place like Kundura. The work is more alive, our bonds with it more organic."

The former manufacturing plant on the banks of the Bosphorus was the staging ground for nine artists from Turkey, Britain, Canada, Mexico and the United States. Each work engaged with another, erasing boundaries and often converging the past with the present. Paul Pfeiffer's *Orpheus Descending* was displayed for the first time since 2001, when it was installed in New York's World Trade Center three months before the destruction of the twin towers changed the world. The video documents the life cycle of a clutch of chickens as they hatch from eggs and grow into adults in 10 weeks. Showing the grainy, old-tech video, originally shot on VHS tape, on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was a rueful reminder of the innocence that we have lost along the way.

Zeyno Pekünlü's *Without a Camera* (2021) fast-forwards with frenetic footage from 325 different videos, shot with mobile phones, GoPros and robot cameras, of people working, playing and coexisting with machines. In this remake of the Soviet documentary *Man With a Movie Camera* from 1929, which showed off filmmaker Dziga Vertov's experimental techniques, Pekünlü

subverts his treatise, showing how humans are now the accessory, not the master, of technology. A third video, Amie Siegel's *Quarry* (2015), slowed us back down. A meditative study of marble from its source in the wilderness of a Vermont quarry to luxury apartments in Manhattan, the film's beauty belies its blunt revelation of our unquenchable extraction of natural resources.

Marble is the unseen motif in Büyükaşçıyan's sculpture, *Skin Deep* (2021), an examination of the Turkish government's decision last year to convert the World Heritage Site museum Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Christianity's greatest cathedral for nearly a millennium, Hagia Sophia served as a mosque for 500 years following the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul. The mutable nature of something as seemingly eternal as Hagia Sophia "is a reminder that impermanence is the only constant," Büyükaşçıyan said.

The carpeting required for Muslim prayer now blankets Hagia Sophia's ancient marble floor, distorting its acoustics. "The marble was not merely an architectural choice, but had spiritual reason. It was the divine echo that merged human spirituality with the unseeable," the artist pointed out. In *Skin Deep*, Büyükaşçıyan drapes brown- and cream-coloured carpet squares, typically used



Banu Cennetoğlu. *IKNOWVERYWELLBUTNEVERTHELESS*. 2015-ongoing. 24 helium-inflated mylar balloons. Image courtesy of the artist and Rodeo Gallery, London/Piraeus. Photography by Zeynep Fırat. © Banu Cennetoğlu



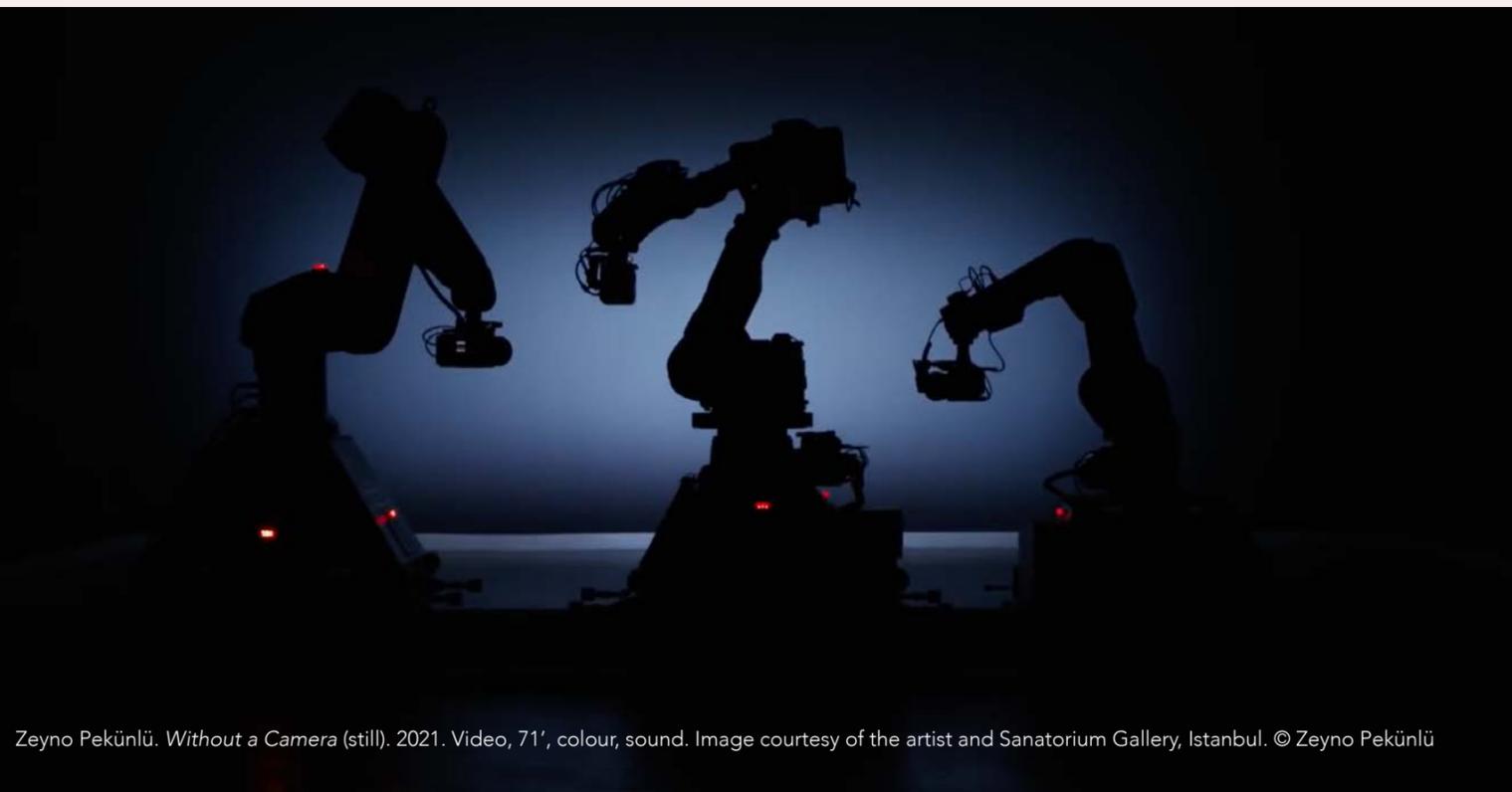
Gülşah Mursaloğlu. *Merging Fields, Splitting Ends*. 2021. Potato-based bioplastic, thread, steel, water, heating plates. Dimensions variable. Photography by Zeynep Fırat. © Gülşah Mursaloğlu and Protocinema

to muffle sound in recording studios, from a wooden skeleton, then spills them out in waves across the floor. The work also recalls Kundura's current use as a film set for television and movie productions. The flimsy façades of imagined Istanbul neighbourhoods are "all a shell, or skin, that we shed and yet it carries forth the past," the artist explained.

Toronto-based Abbas Akhavan's *spring* (2021) seeks to halt time by freezing the water in pipes from public fountains. It served as a counterweight to Gülşah Mursaloğlu's *Merging Fields, Splitting Ends* (2021), in which heat accelerates the breakdown of strands of bioplastics made from potato and arranged over six water-filled buckets sitting atop hot plates. British artist Ceal Floyer's *Overgrowth*, from 2004, distorts the scale of a bonsai tree whose image is projected on a slide. In another work, she inserted a door peephole onto a window overlooking the Bosphorus, tempting the audience to defy absurdity and peer through to find a whole new view.

Other sparing interventions include Mario García Torres's *Spoiler* series: posters hung from the walls that reveal the endings of popular movies. Banu Cennetoğlu's *IKNOWVERYWELLBUTNEVERTHELESS* (2015-ongoing) is 24 black letter-shaped mylar balloons floating near Kundura's ceiling depicting our capacity to deny reality. Just as the helium escaped the balloons over the course of the show, so too does our faith deflate.

After so much loss during the pandemic, Spirito had considered skipping an anniversary event. Concerns about safety continue to disrupt the art calendar; in Istanbul, organisers of the Biennial were forced to postpone this year's edition until 2022, prompting some galleries to scrap their autumn shows. That was precisely what compelled Spirito to push forward – by standing still. "Doing something here, at this moment, for this anniversary, is about choosing to be where you are and honouring that," she said. 



Zeyno Pekünlü. *Without a Camera* (still). 2021. Video, 71', colour, sound. Image courtesy of the artist and Sanatorium Gallery, Istanbul. © Zeyno Pekünlü