

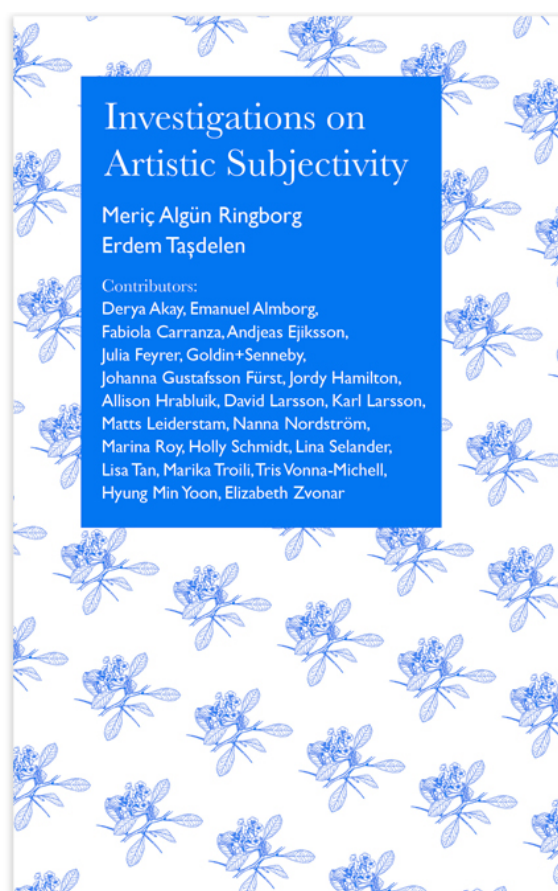
FEATURES



Artistic Subjectivity: In Conversation with Erdem Taşdelen

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Meriç Algün Ringborg and Erdem Taşdelen, *Investigations on Artistic Subjectivity*, 2015.

How does society conceive of the artist's role? Meriç Algün Ringborg and Erdem Taşdelen took Marcel Proust as a starting point for answering this question. Three years ago, the Turkish-born artists (now based in Stockholm and Vancouver, respectively) convened around Proust's seven-volume, 1.3 million-word magnum opus *In Search of Lost Time* to develop a blueprint for thinking about artistic subjectivity.

Amid literally hundreds of characters in the novel, the duo focused on just the three artists: Elstir (a painter), Bergotte (a writer) and Vinteuil (a musician). After extracting every segment involving these characters, and any other passages that refer to “art” in some way, they had a narrowed selection of roughly 62,000 words to work with. From there, they deduced 10 general statements that would function as the foil for contemporary reflection.

They then invited 40 artists working in Stockholm or Vancouver to participate by responding to 10 authoritative statements: “An encounter with a great artist is the occasion for the discovery of a general intellectual truth,” for example, or “Reality is merely an opportunity for artists to expose their genius.” The varying results were published in book form as *Investigations on Artistic Subjectivity*, which launched this May in Vancouver.

Some artists had kneejerk reactions. Some declined. Many responses make obvious the evolution of artistic practice from skilled labour into that of observer and author. In the end, the project captures a moment in art history, which Algün Ringborg at one point refers to as “the post-post-post times,” and about which Taşdelen observes that “everyone wavers, no one is that sure of what they think, it’s much harder to come to conclusions, [and] Truth with a capital T is no more.”

Jaclyn Bruneau spoke to Taşdelen about the genesis of the collaborative project, *In Search of Lost Time* and how the turgid, obscure artist statement that has become standard fare is actually just a symptom of weak work.

JB: Can you define “artistic subjectivity” at its broadest?

ET: “Artistic subjectivity” is the totality of social beliefs regarding the characteristics of people who make art. Some of these beliefs seem to shift over time, whereas some seem to persist longer and turn into widely accepted stereotypes. I would call these “myths” in the sense that Roland Barthes uses the term, because I don’t think there are any essential qualities that artists should or can possess.

JB: In the beginning conversation in the text, it sounds like a project involving Proust came before the decision to do an investigation on artistic subjectivity. Can you go a little further back and speak to how you and Meriç came to know each other and how this project came to the fore?

ET: Meriç and I met back in 2004 when we became classmates during our undergrad at Sabanci University in Istanbul. We have maintained a close friendship since, despite her moving to Sweden in 2007 and me to Canada in 2008.

I started reading *In Search of Lost Time* at a time of distress a few years ago, and devoured

all seven volumes of the novel within a few months. Meriç and I often share literary recommendations with each other, and in this way we've probably read a lot of the same books. *In Search of Lost Time* was one of these, and being so rich in content it gave us a lot to discuss. Neither of us was particularly experienced in collaborating with other artists, but we figured we could collaborate on a project in order to think together on the same topic. Since we were already talking about Proust a lot at the time, the idea of working with that novel came quite organically. And artistic subjectivity is something we both pay close attention to in our individual practices, so that became the focus that steered our discussions.

JB: What was it about *In Search of Lost Time* that seemed ripe for an exploration of artistic subjectivity specifically?

ET: *In Search of Lost Time* is the longest novel ever written, and naturally speaks to many different themes. It is the story of an anonymous narrator who is addressed as Marcel only once, which gives us reason to believe he is modelled after Proust to a certain extent. This narrator is an aspiring author writing about his experiences at length, often turning them into philosophical deliberations. One of the prominent themes in the book is the nature of art and what it means to be an artist. The narrator has very specific beliefs about the role of the artist, and in addition to talking about his own artistic production, he explores these beliefs through a few artist characters that appear throughout the novel. But because the novel is so lengthy it is difficult to piece these ideas together to form a coherent picture at first reading. So we decided to extract these parts and analyze them as a whole, which allowed us to see how artistic subjectivity is portrayed in what is regarded as one of the most important works of literature in the early 20th century.

JB: You raise an interesting question about the artist's responsibility to articulate (or not). In the introduction, you speak about the artist statement and its discontents, which makes me think about didactic panels, curators' notes and press releases as well.

There's a break between the object and the subject of the work, one that has become so closely associated with viewing contemporary art. As difficult as the writing around the work can be (Meriç even says, in regards to the artist statement, that "the moment you write it down, it dies"), it seems irremovable from the process of producing and presenting. Given these tensions, what are the redeeming or beneficial qualities of the writing that accompanies artworks—or, how do you approach that process on your own terms?

ET: Personally I have no problem if the work is accompanied by a text to provide context for it, and feel that my work often does require that. We live at a time of heightened

intertextuality, and cannot always expect the audience to glean the process behind a work or the references it makes just by looking at its visual manifestation. I think the problem arises when that accompanying text uses a language that doesn't consider its audience. Perhaps this is a harsh thing to say, but in many cases this is because there really isn't much to be said about the work in the first place, and this fact is veiled by words that look as though they came out of one of those contemporary-art statement generators. I am really quite tired of reading generic press releases that in actuality don't say anything substantial about the work. If the work itself is a strong work, I believe it is possible to hint at its complexities with a brief description that can provide access points to multiple audiences.

JB: In reading, it was almost stressful how unending the possibilities feel, how impossible it seems to *arrive* anywhere, but nonetheless worthwhile to continue. Have you thought about expanding the project or doing another incarnation of the publication, perhaps in a different locale?

ET: I think the overwhelming nature of the possibilities is what makes this an artistic research project rather than an academic one. We are careful in stressing that this book offers just a few snapshots, and not an exhaustive thesis on what artistic subjectivity is or was. There are many layers of subjective decisions involved in the making of the book: Proust's thoughts; our interpretation of his thoughts in the form of 10 concise statements; our selection of artists; their interpretations of the statements, and so on.

We limited our scope to Stockholm and Vancouver because these are the cities where our artistic production was fostered, where we emerged as practicing artists. The possibilities, as you say, were endless, so this limitation gave us a manageable framework. Initially we were thinking about the project as a comparison of how the contributing artists would respond in the two cities, but in the end, after receiving the responses, this seemed unnecessary and contrived.

We have not discussed the possibility of doing another iteration of the same project yet. A book like this requires a lot of time and effort to produce, and would not have been possible without the generous support of the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Perhaps, one day, depending on funds available to us, we could do a sequel of sorts.