Necmi Sönmez



Ars Accidentalis #02, 2008 C-print + Diasec 69 x 200 cm

# The Reshaping of Cityscapes: "Muta-morphosis" and "Facsimile." Horizontal Diminution and Vertical Expansion as Metaphor in Murat Germen's Photography

The tide was out; the beach was deserted; lazily flopped the warm sea. The sun beat down, beat down hot and fiery on the fine sand, baking the grey and blue and black and white-veined pebbles. It sucked up the little drop of water that lay in the hollow of the curved shells; it bleached the pink convolvulus that threaded through and through the sand-hills. Nothing seemed to move but the small sand-hoppers. Pit-pit-pit! They were never still. (Katherine Mansfield, "At the Bay," in *The Garden Party*, New York, 1922, p. 28)

One of the most significant characteristics of
Murat Germen's photography is the way the artist's
concepts shape cityscapes around metaphors
that might seem surreal and constructed at first.
By presenting the viewer with narrative riches
that are based both on documentation and
abstraction, he adopts a specific stance in the
face of "facts" we see at the extremely expansive
growing process of cities and metropolises. It is
through the experimental tools of photography
that these lavish metaphors develop a unique
language of contemporary image-making. Murat
Germen's work is impressive because it interprets
the present; however, it develops its metaphors by

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challenging the sediment of the past and present, often via an "analytical" approach that interrogates the roots of the distortion in the architectural texture of the world's cities. In his works Germen adopts an approach reminiscent of the palimpsest so as to establish a dialogue between classical and modern, traditional and contemporary and, most importantly, between the emotional and the rational in order to develop different metaphors. This definition, exclusively based on the results of horizontal diminution and vertical expansion in Germen's works, is the basis of an observation of what "exists" by keeping problematic adjectives such as documentary, abstract, poetic, monumental or romantic at arm's length. The aspect of this observation that deserves closer examination is the way it departs from the artist's own internalization process when dealing with topics from undiscovered or different points of view. Germen displays a conceptual approach whatever his chosen theme may be, because he does not create photographs if he has not internalized the issue, nor does he surrender his individual point of view to excitement, joy or enjoyment.

## The Formative Years

Family constitutes one of the most important formative elements in Murat Germen's life.

The artist was born in 1965 as the only child of Aydın Germen, an urban planner, and Ayşe Yaltırım, a painter.<sup>2</sup> Germen comes from a family that on both sides has roots in the Ottoman aristocracy and bourgeoisie, whose members played active roles in the political, scientific and artistic scene. He made the fitting decision not to discuss his family background so as avoid an unwanted effect on the reception of his works. His mother, Ayşe Yaltırım (b. 1936), is the daughter of Samiye Yaltırım, sister of the eminent poet Nâzım Hikmet (1902–1963), who had been forced into exile owing to the injustices he suffered in his own country. Murat Germen is thus Nâzım Hikmet's grand-

Germen completed his secondary and high school education at Saint-Joseph French High School (1977-1983). The artist once used the following words to describe this period, aptly summing up his background: "I was a blend of my mother's practical side and my father's theoretical side." Germen was still quite young when his family made him feel the responsibility of being a close relative of the famous poet. Germen persistently remained silent as concerned these potentially valuable kinship ties, ones that could have been used to open various doors, particularly in the art world. Nâzım Hikmet, in addition to being a very

important modernist poet, was and still is an iconic all the sources of knowledge and educational figure in Turkey.

From 1983 to 1987, Murat Germen attended the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Istanbul Technical University, and he owes the first instance of deep-rooted influence on his training to the studies he conducted there. During that period, he frequently used the Nikon F2 camera his father had given him to take photographs, thus creating a visual archive; when he set out, mostly on foot, to discover the various corners of Istanbul, he had already been overcome by the passion for Istanbul that would follow him throughout his life and greatly influence his artistic research. His deeper understanding of form during his academic education is important because it helped orient him towards architecture as a creative field within the discipline of urban and regional planning. Among the various options for study abroad, Germen chose to continue his education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an academic institution that would provide him with the most elite architectural education. He applied for a Fulbright grant and, thanks to his high grades, and his consciously determined attitude, he was awarded one. Germen was well aware that the privileged architectural education at MIT was a blessing for him, and he was impatient to absorb

means at his disposal.

Although he began taking photographs within the conceptual framework of architecture, his increasing interest in the practice paved a new path for the young architect. Upon completion of his postgraduate degree at MIT, Murat Germen received the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) Henry Adams Gold Medal, awarded to top-ranking students, thus successfully reaching the end of a dreamlike educational process of experimentation, discovery and questioning. Among the many scholarships and travel grants he earned for his creative activities, the MIT Photography Grant awarded to him by the MIT Council for the Arts in 1991 stands out as an important step that influenced his development. This should be regarded as the second significant turning point in Murat Germen's biography. Although he had now added an M.A. in architecture at MIT to his B.A. in urban and regional planning in Istanbul, Murat Germen decided to focus on photography as his primary occupation. Knowing that, thanks to his diploma from the Department of Architecture at MIT, every elite architectural office in Istanbul would be ready to

roll out the red carpet to have him work there, one

question arose in the artist's mind: what sort of

future or means of development would his decision to take photographs offer him? Leaving aside the debate as to whether photography is or is not an art, what sort of environment awaited a creative intellectual working in the field of photography in 1992, besides professional work in the advertising industry? Taking into account this and other similar questions, Murat Germen's choice to return to Istanbul, and his plan to shift from architecture to photography, is a step that only a passionate and dedicated creator could take.

He was determined not to practice architecture, or to work as a commercial photographer, however. Germen believed that the best thing for him to do was work at the university, and he became a lecturer at the Department of Interior Architecture at Bilkent University in Ankara, the first private university in Turkey, where he taught several courses between 1993 and 1994. During that period, he regularly took photographs for his own archive, and he discovered that color photography was more suitable to his vision; he continued to take photographs in Ankara, a city that was undergoing radical urban change. He was receiving commissions from numerous respectable publishing houses and architectural offices, and his projects and publications had also led to his being recognized as one of the few creative artists



Homo vs. Machina #02, 2008 C-print + Diasec 80 x 120 cm 7 eds. + 2 AP



Aura #04, Istanbul, 2009 C-print + Diasec 100 x 150 cm Unique edition

in Turkey who was devoted to establishing the foundations of the theory and practice of a "new photographic aesthetics."

The end of the 1990s bore witness to a rapid

commoditization process in every field of the visual arts, particularly in Istanbul. Soon, photography also began to feel the impact of the market for contemporary art that was blossoming as never before. Germen perceived photography as a "medium" that occupied a position that could critically examine the relationships between architectural interpretation, urban transformation, and the periphery and the center. Also in light of the *Trilogy: Kid, Staircase, Train* exhibition held in 2006 at Istanbul Fotoğraf Merkezi (Istanbul Photography Center), where Germen first shared works that involved digital editing with the viewer, we can safely say that the artist's personal photographic attitude underwent a sharp turnaround between 2005 and 2012, eventually evolving towards its most radical conclusions. The artist supported many of the series he produced in that period (Muta-morphosis, Industry as Icon: Industrial Aesthetic, Construct, Obscura Lucida, Aura, Way, Ecce Homo, Facsimile, Erasing Memory, %5) with seminal texts that could almost be read as manifestos, and that persistently developed his photographic editing on a conceptual basis.4

Perhaps due to the influence of his well-established architectural education, he departed from "urban dynamics," and used his lens as a magnifier to focus on the "problem-ridden areas" of the city.

# Mapping Global Cities with an Unknown Cartographer

The construction and reconstruction of city spaces are primary themes for Murat Germen. How is urban space made, how is it recounted, what intentions are revealed by the way in which urban themes are represented, and how do these images endure in collective and cultural memory? Germen's photography interprets the cityscapes from multifarious points of view, almost mapping them anew. He leaves the viewer to assess the outcome of implementations that should never have been carried out, and handles the cultural reasons for "being misunderstood, or misinterpreted" often by presenting the state of visual contamination visible to all. Without recourse to abstraction or poeticization, Istanbul becomes the main subject matter of Murat Germen's photography, displaying an almost crystallized state, owing to the fact that it is "real" down to its smallest detail. Many layers of moments, processes, plans and dimensions are presented simultaneously and all in one fell swoop on the photographic

surface, so that Murat Germen's photography possesses an encompassing aura that could be regarded as the whole of different perspectives, of paths covered with determination, thus leaving behind a unique trace. In his work the artist focuses on various kinds of cityscapes of Istanbul, which is always in a permanent and eternal "trial and error" process. However, he does not attempt to reconstruct the blind spots in an art-historical or archaeological sense, nor to make a complete image visible again. He is much more interested in the impact and significance of the surrealistic gaps, between real and reconstructed images. Germen visualizes the unseen parts and characters of the city from different perspectives. An abstract cartography<sup>5</sup> emerges, which indicates in-between spaces, gaps and interpretations. This manner of mapping Istanbul examines today's political, economic, and social issues, and it is linked to the current debate on the boundaries of mega-cities. The pictorial results of the *Muta-morphosis* and Facsimile series emerge as the representation of a dispositive in the form of semi-abstract images. Though these semi-abstract forms appear to be formless, they actually open space up in two ways. As pure photography, they tie in with the tradition of classical landscape photography;

but these forms are also associatively linked to

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cartography. This is an art capable of inventing space and representing interactions. The planar quality of the photographic images opens up pictorial spaces for new objects and dimensions. The impression of a map grows owing to a shift in the proportional dimension of the large-sized prints in the *Muta-morphosis* and *Facsimile* series. These ongoing series can be conceived as impression strips from a Mesopotamian or Babylonian cylinder seal. Germen is committed to a version of photography that moves forward without there being any designated message, any recognizable motif. At first glance, his works from *Muta-morphosis* and *Facsimile* are, as a rule, planar and sometimes painterly in concept. A second look, however, reveals their understated subtlety. In an interminable work process, the artist has applied many, in part abstract, in part distorted, layers of cityscape one over the other so that, instead of a panoramic and therefore "unequivocal" picture plane, before us is a "narrative continuum" in many gradations. The passage is fluent between conceptual and accidental strategies and the disorder filling the surface of compositions in a glazed-over narrative, so to speak, opens up hitherto unseen, partly surrealistic and bizarre forms, making these conceptual frameworks. Murat Germen gives two works multilayered in more than one sense. These

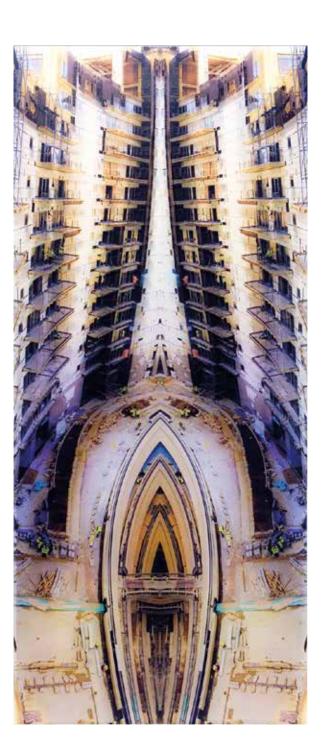
strange forms are related to reality, but they are totally autonomous. Like impressions from a Hittite cylinder seal, Germen's unique forms in Muta-morphosis and Facsimile are based on the idea of mental mapping.<sup>6</sup> Mesopotamian cylinder seals were once used as an administrative tool, an elegant form of signature for high state civil servants, and as jewels and magical amulets. Germen's forms comprise many real details from cityscape in color prints. Some are large-scale Diasec works, while others are smaller in scale, revealing mapped images from global cities. For this publication, Murat Germen has chosen works from *Muta-morphosis* and *Facsimile*, hence, produced between 2010 and 2015. The first impression is that these vertical-format works were conceived in common, and created with horizontal and vertical digital compressions. Upon closer examination, one discovers that works from both series reveal very inconspicuous places from world cities, as well as iconic views that disturb the flow of narrative in the image. Both series present evident similarity of fragmentation in different ways. It is important to Germen that his works offer the viewer an authentic physical encounter, which is encouraged by their important interpretations of these series:

The concept of "Muta-morphosis," a combination of the notions of mutation and metamorphosis, and the connected artwork series was obtained by reducing panoramic images on one axis. The image compression on the horizontal level points to the dynamics between the urban components that can persist and the ones that give up, [that] vanish in the various historical, residential and business urban districts.7

The Facsimile series is obtained by selecting a single horizontal line, very near the horizon which happens to be the threshold between überland and underland, and extending this line towards the bottom. The visual result of this extension, composed of thousands of a variety of thin and thick vertical lines in numerous colors, refers to the various chrono-layers that a city accommodates in its history.8

Both series, *Muta-morphosis* and *Facsimile*, start with unseen images from Istanbul followed by other global cities. As a passionate citizen of the world, Murat Germen does not just focus on

the many changing faces of his native city, but on those of other world metropolises as well, thus establishing a different kind of equilibrium between "visible and invisible social dynamics." This equilibrium needs to be assessed not only in terms of the criteria of visual arts, but also in terms of the "change in acceleration" taking place in social, economic, political and industrialization processes, first in Istanbul, then in other global cities. In these works Germen uses two different visual tools, "horizontal diminution" and "vertical expansion," as metaphor. The title of this essay also emphasizes the contradictions inherent in reality and fiction, that is to say, an aporia. The concept of "aporia" was first used in ancient philosophy to refer to a perplexing difficulty or—in a broader sense—a conflict situation that arises as the result of two contradictory but nonetheless plausible and interconnected standpoints.9 The horizontal diminution of "muta-morphosis" is based on the idea of multiplication, while a vertical expansion of "facsimile" focuses on reduction.10 The strange world of the unknown cartographer overlaps with different interpretations and an interest in the man-made cityscapes. These fragmentations and particles of reality are necessarily structurally overdefined, but they pave the way for a totally new version of temporality. The artist restores time with



Soul of the Place - Genius Loci, 2007 Pigment print on CNC carved 12 mm Plexiglas® 65 x 150 cm Unique edition

a space. He exposes himself to the opening of an enigmatic image, which resembles the structure of the symptom, hence, creating surreal analogies. What renders Germen's photography in Mutamorphosis and Facsimile unique is the way in which he "distinctly" reveals, through the use of metaphors, the tempo of acceleration in social change, without further recourse to description or rhetoric. This approach which reveals the various layers of global cities in essence, without criticizing, questioning or comparing, is first and foremost of a humanist nature; therefore, it does not emphasize either the human figure itself or its portrait, but, rather, its labor, its dedicated effort, and its creations. The city, fields of industrial production and nature shaped by the human hand form, as a *leitmotif*, the backbone of Murat Germen's photography, and this should be seen as an internalization of both series. The artist often performs this internalization in a manner that goes beyond photographic technique and assumes the character of contemporary art; it also reveals the development of his "personal point of view" through a challenging and genuinely interdisciplinary process.

A Coffee-Cup-Reader's Version of the Future Perception on its own becomes a differentiated

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questioning of the series *Muta-morphosis* and Facsimile and, in the end, also of our personal capability for differentiation and conceptuality. Whereas in a work such as *Chicago* (2014) in the *Muta-morphosis* series layers of city seem to open up like thinning fog, in *Facsimile*, the works Dubai (2013), Shanghai (2014) and Athens (2014) "zip" the form (akin to the pure abstract paintings of Barnett Newman), which the color gaze plummets. These forms, sharply contoured, become open gaps. An additional opening occurred essentially through dimensions in the color fields of Barnett Newman. Here the artist halts the process, stops the flow of digital zips, creates enclosures and coloristic zones. And then it becomes a question of what medium has in fact entrapped our eye. The planar quality of zips, their lack of any illusionary depth, open up a pictorial space, beyond the photographic images, for new objects and dimensions. Germen's works also celebrate color, movement and light, with amazing non-Western narrative structures: "The lack of a single perspectival structure due to multiplicity of perspectives after compressive panoramic imaging can be linked to Ottoman miniatures, which in turn, connects the global contemporary representation to its local traditional counterpart."11

Like a coffee-cup-reader's version of the future,

Murat Germen painstakingly collects visual impressions from the world around us—on walks, on his travels with the camera or the magnifying glass, for the most part with one eye trained on the natural phenomena. And the portrayal of light in these works also has to do with the emotionally affecting play of light in different spheres and cultures, as well as with the experience of illumination.

Düsseldorf, June 2015

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palimpsest, accessed on 22 June

<sup>2</sup> All biographical data is from private interviews and

correspondence with Murat Germen conducted from 9 November 2012 to 30 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Murat Germen in an email dated 30 January 2013.

<sup>4</sup> http://myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/muratgermen/su\_yayinlar-2/, accessed on 23 June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'œil cartographique de l'art* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1996), pp. 160-70.

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/?title=Cylinder\_seal, accessed on 24 June 2015

<sup>7</sup> Murat Germen, New Turkey (Istanbul: Masa Publications, 2013),

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aporia, accessed on 22 June 2015. <sup>10</sup> Private interview with the artist, Istanbul, 28 May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Murat Germen, *New Turkey*, p. 22.

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# Biography

**Exhibitions** 

Born in Ankara, Turkey in 1965, Murat Germen is an artist using photography as an expression and research tool. He holds a MArch degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he attended as a Fulbright scholar and where he received the AIA Henry Adams Gold Medal for academic excellence. He currently works as a professor of art, photography and new media at Sabanci University in Istanbul, and has contributed articles and photo series on architecture, photography, art and new media to a wide range of magazines and books. Frequently invited to hold lectures on pertinent topics, past symposia and conferences include SIGGRAPH, ISEA, Towards a Science of Consciousness, CAe, CAC2, EVA-London, eCAADe, and ASCAAD.

His exhibiting career includes over eighty shows both in Turkey and throughout the world (United States, Italy, Germany, UK, Mexico, Portugal, Uzbekistan, Greece, Japan, Russia, Iran, India, France, Istanbul. Canada, Bahrain, Korea, Dubai, China, Sweden, Switzerland, and Egypt). Currently represented by artON (Istanbul), ARTITLED Contemporary (Netherlands/Belgium) and Rosier Gallery (San Francisco), more than three hundred editions of his artworks are in eminent personal collections, and several in those of Istanbul Modern and Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art (Istanbul).

# Solo Exhibitions

• A City Transformed: Images of Istanbul Then and Now, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada.

# 2015

- Ankara: From Pioneering Modernism to Revivalist Mimicry and Fake Futurism, Erimtan Archeology and Art Museum, Ankara.
- %5: Hydro-energy and Water Rights, Milli Reasurans Art Gallery, Istanbul.

• Facsimile Vol. 2, C.A.M. Gallery, Istanbul.

- Muta-morphosis, C.A.M. Gallery, Istanbul.
- Muta-morphosis, ARTITLEDContemporary, Herpen, The Netherlands.

## 2010

• Way, Istanbul Modern Photography Gallery,

## 2009

• Aura, C.A.M. Gallery, Istanbul.

# 2006

• Trilogy: Kid, Staircase, Train, Istanbul Photography Center, Istanbul.

• Industry as Icon: Industrial Aesthetics, Garanti Gallery, Istanbul.

# 2003

• Istanbul: Crossroads of Religious Architecture, O. Malley Library, Manhattan College, New York.

# • Beyoglu, Beyond the Walls: Insights from the Grand Avenue, Yapi Kredi Culture & Arts, Istanbul.

# **Group Exhibitions**

# 2017

• In Search of the Present: Arte, Comunidade, e Transnacional Urbano. Galpão Bela Maré Art and Cultural Center, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Curator: Parvez Mohsin.

- Izmir: A Legacy for Tomorrow, Arkas Museum, Izmir, Turkey.
- Monograph titled New Turkey in the Photobook exhibition, Athens Photo Festival.
- Things That Count... Things That Don't, Turkish Contemporary Art Show. Curator: Pamela Cardwell.
- Cappadocia Struck, Cappadox International Art Festival. Curator: Fulya Erdemci. Nevsehir, Turkey.

• Abrazo Interno Gallery at the Clemente, New York.

- Mythologies, 3rd Mardin Biennial.
- Young Collectors 2, collection exhibition. Curator: Marcus Graf. Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art.

# 2014

- Gala Modern, charity auction at Istanbul Modern,
- Fotolstanbul, Besiktas International Festival of Photography. Curators: Attila Durak, Jason
- Urbane Landschaften KölnIstanbul Boris Becker & Murat Germen. Curators: Barbara Hofmann-Johnson, Necmi Sönmez. Labor Gallery, Cologne.
- Autonomous and Beautiful, 20th-year Turkish Contemporary Art Exhibition. Curator: Hasan Bulent Kahraman. Akbank Art Center, Istanbul.
- Istanbul Modern collection exhibition, Landskrona Photography Festival, Sweden.

- Istanbul Modern collection exhibition, Bahrain National Museum.
- Sublime Porte: Art and Contemporary Turkey. Curator: Parvez Mohsin. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery, St. John's University, Queens, New York.
- Flash Back on Photography, Pro Art Gallery, Dubai.
- Alienation/Estrangement, collection exhibition, Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul.

# 2012

- Selection, Akbank Private Banking Lounge, Contemporary Istanbul Art Fair '12.
- Encounters: Contemporary Art from Turkey in Korea. Curator: Hasan Bulent Kahraman. ARA Art Square, Seoul.
- After Yesterday, Istanbul Modern Photography collection exhibition. Curator: Engin Ozendes. Istanbul Modern Photography Gallery, Istanbul.

# 2011

- Unbounded, Elgiz collection exhibition, Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary, Istanbul.
- Humankind, New York Photography Festival, powerHouse Arena, Dumbo, Brooklyn, New York. 2010
- Lives and Works in Istanbul, workshop series exhibition, Victor Burgin workshop, Tophane Antrepo No. 5, Art Port, Istanbul.
- Port Izmir 2, International Contemporary Art Triennial. Curator: Necmi Sönmez. Austro-Turk Tobacco Warehouse, Izmir, Turkey.
- Chaotic Metamorphosis. Curator: Burcu Pelvanoglu. Proje4L Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul.
- Infinite+, collection exhibition. Curators: Deniz Artun, Done Otyam. CerModern Museum, Ankara.

# 2009

- Brid6e: Galata Photographs. Curator: Engin Ozendes. Orangerie du Sénat, Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris.
- G.D Art and Technology A Story Narrated by 18 Contemporary Artists. Curator: Ludovico Pratesi. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

## 2008

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- Becoming Istanbul. Curators: Pelin Dervis, Bülent Tanju and Ugur Tanyeli. With the collaboration of Garanti Gallery (GG, Istanbul). Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM), Frankfurt.
- BAF (Butterfly Art Foundation) international exhibition, Lalit Kala Academy Gallery, Thrissur, Kerala, India.
- Turkish Realities: Positions in Contemporary Photography from Turkey. Curators: Celina Lunsford, Necmi Sönmez. Fotografie Forum Frankfurt.
- Turkish Photography Today. Curator: Anastassia Zlatopolskaia. FotoDepartament, St. Petersburg.
- Urban Jealousy, 1st International Roaming Biennial of Tehran. Curators: Serhat Koksal, Amirali Ghasemi. Hafriyat Karakoy, Istanbul.
- Selected Works: Untitled #9 + Brid6e. Vicious Circle #1 + Reconstruct #02 + Kanyon #03, Museo de Arte Moderno, Toluca, Mexico.

# 2007

- Brid6e: Photographers in Galata, concept exhibition. Curator: Engin Ozendes. Istanbul Modern, Istanbul.
- Virtual Architecture: Reconstructing Architecture through Photography, Siggraph 2007 Art Gallery, San Diego.

# 2006

- Reading the Space as an Entity, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, Siggraph 2006 Art Gallery, Boston.
- (screened video work made of photographs and video clips), Beyond Media, International New Media and Architecture Festival, Florence.

• Let Me Honestly Tell You... / Industrial Architecture

• Making of Istanbul Modern, concept exhibition. Curator: Fulya Erdemci. Istanbul Modern, Istanbul.

# 2003

• The City Called Istanbul: 50 Outstanding Names of Contemporary Turkish Photography, Decatur House Gallery, Washington.

• Istanbul: City Where Faiths Meet, Milli Reasurans Art Gallery, Istanbul.

# Murat Germen is represented by

art ON Istanbul http://artonistanbul.com

ARTITLEDcontemporary www.artitled.com

Rosier Gallery www.artnet.com/galleries/rosier-gallery

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