

THINKING BEYOND YOUR WALLS

FÜSUN ECZACIBAŞI

Chairman of SAHA Association,
collector and patron



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Füsun Eczacıbaşı

As this is the place for collectors, very briefly I would like to go through my own voyage as one. I was very lucky to study architecture in an Academy of Fine Arts. Architecture School was the only division where they didn't select students by evaluating talent but rather on the national examinations in science, maths and general subjects. Otherwise, being terribly bad at drawing, I wouldn't have made it there.

In the first year we studied in the same studio as the talented ones from the art departments and learned how to look, how to see, how to draw and how to express. New colours, textures, shapes and ideas expanded and enriched my world. I was the astonished little Alice walking through this enchanted world, 'the wonderland', for six years until I finished my master degree.

The very first pieces of art we had as students were those we gave each other as gifts or tokens of friendship. One day in my final year, when I was already working part-time in an architectural firm, a friend told me that the family of a dear teacher who had passed away was selling a few of the artworks he had acquired during his residency years in Paris. He showed me the some works they were selling.

One was a small (35 x 27 cm) Arman piece, a collage with made from a golden metal plate with a layer of paper behind that you can move and make the work appear to have different depths. At that time, still a student and earning little through my part-time job, I was not able to afford any of the other works on offer but somehow was able to buy this piece by Arman.

This was how it started around 30 years ago... As you all know, once the bug is in here, there is no escaping it. Thankfully I met my other half soon after, a person who was born in a home where art was an essential topic. It's always good to be infected together, isn't it?

We started looking at and discussing art, travelling for art, and throughout this journey we naturally started acquiring artworks, accumulating a group of works

that you could call a collection. But our pleasure came mainly from seeing and experiencing art. We were never aggressive buyers. We were enthusiasts, keen to see more art and the products created by beautiful minds. We were interested in having art experiences... every year, when we were at art fairs, for example, we always found ourselves spending more time visiting museums than we spent at the fair itself. Those are the times of the year that all museums and exhibition spaces put on their best shows. We were travelling more for biennials all around the world than for art fairs.

By seeing more and reading more, there came a time when I started to realise that most of the art that makes my pulse beat faster, and which opens my eyes wider, triggers my curiosity and takes my imagination to a different world, are the ones that I cannot usually own. I became more and more interested in ideas rather than objects I could own or hang on my walls.

To this day I have goose bumps whenever I remember the epic installation *Germania* by Hans Haacke for the German Pavilion in Venice in 1993. Haacke's work was a very simple gesture: he simply shattered the floor of the national pavilion. As you approached the entrance, a huge photograph of Hitler blocked your view into the space from which a strange scraping sound reached your ears. When you entered you saw that this huge space was completely empty with the exception of the excavated floor and the text 'Germania' on the wall. I remember all the visitors were in awe, walking over the debris and recreating the destructive sound of the past. It was a reference to the problematic history of the pavilion, the original of which was demolished by Hitler in order to build a more impressive and monumental one. The creativity, the emotions and the curiosity triggered was unparalleled by any art form I had ever experienced before. This work is still being discussed and admired today.

Well... can you own this piece? What if no one was interested in supporting the production of it?

Obviously the works that talk to the public, the works that create dialogues and need wider audiences with which to interact, are the artworks you cannot hang on your walls.

In today's world where humanity faces so many complicated problems, I believe art cannot rest only on pleasing the eye but needs to deal with other issues. Art needs to trigger questions, to create a dialogue. I believe art is the perfect language for communicating different ideas, beliefs and policies. I hope art maintains a mission on that front.

Talking about art maintaining a mission, the most amazing example is to be found in your country and is by your legendary artist. There is no other artwork in history that depicts the horror and the pain caused by war or that talks about the victimisation of humanity. The mural-sized painting commissioned by the Spanish republican government in 1937 gives a message that no history lecture or lecturer would ever be able to give. Relevant then, today and tomorrow.

I am talking about *Guernica* of course by the great Pablo Picasso.

Where are today's *Guernicas*? Who will commission them, who will enable them? There is a certain moment when, as an art enthusiast, you begin asking these questions. Then you start thinking and looking beyond your walls...

Naturally, as the years passed, in addition to my schoolmates I got to know a lot of artists and curators, and became close to many of them. I became aware of the production phase of their practice as well as the art they created. I not only witnessed their joy and excitement when preparing for an exhibition, but also saw their frustration at the lack of resources and funds for reaching the public, for making art for bigger audiences... I observed their desire to express themselves non-commercially... I saw them invited to participate in international exhibitions but unable to get the support necessary to realise the production or their participation.

At this point I should mention that unfortunately in our country there is no government support for contemporary art. When an artist was invited, even to the most important international exhibitions like dOCUMENTA or the Venice Biennale, there was no support for their participation. Sometimes their galleries or collectors would provide support, but as you can imagine these are only temporary solutions: they are not sustainable and reliable funding mechanisms. Also, the financial support given by individuals was usually restricted and never enough to realise projects with a substantial impact or scale. Another way to get support is, of course, through the sponsorship of corporate institutions, but most of the time the aim of the artist and the cooperate body are not especially aligned. It is done more for PR purposes and I'm sure we have all witnessed exhibitions where the sponsors' names are emphasised much more than those of the actual contributors or the content of the show.

I don't want to be unfair to anyone. Of course there are some private art institutions working hard on their missions, but naturally all are focused on their own programmes. They cannot take an interest in art projects outside their planned programme due to limited funds or the main purpose of the institution.

In this restricted world, I was not the only person to witness the same problem, the same need... I was not the only one being approached to provide personal support to certain projects. More than five years ago, eight friends and I started talking about how to develop a model that is focused on providing one of the most important missing links in our local art ecosystem. We had collectors, museums, galleries and art contributors, but there was no philanthropy for art with the sole purpose of supporting and enabling.

Our group of nine founders decided to establish an institution to help our artists and curators interact with cultural networks around the world and to participate in the cultural dialogue.

We began by researching and studying different models. We had many meetings and discussions. We listened to different opinions and, most importantly, listened to the artists. We focused on those methods that avoided situations where patronage becomes a burden on art and artists, or those models that promoted themselves and overshadowed the artists.

We are all familiar with today's art world where consumption, power and money are forcing the boundaries. They become the leading force, such that art loses its purpose, meaning and sincerity. The term art can easily become blurred when patronage takes over the role of the art professionals, decision makers and experts.

From the first day, the consensus among the founders on how to do this was very clear. We wanted to leave the stage to art and artists, and as far as possible stay away from any kind of visibility as patrons.

I recently read an article about literary translators that I liked a lot. It said the highest achievement of a translator is to disappear. This was one of our mottos from the outset.

Another essential focus was the philosophy of the institution. We could have established the necessary funds through a much smaller group of people, but we wanted to create a model where the institution's power was more than financial. Achieving the funds from 100 people instead of ten is to offer support that is larger than the financial support itself.

Our members who are here and the ones who are at home... they are strong believers in SAHA's mission. They are its biggest asset, the power of our organisation. And because all members make equal donations, ours is a very democratic institution. A collective approach gives it substantial strength.

After five years, SAHA is now established as a hybrid model that emphasises the merit and the knowledge of art institutions and art professionals rather than relying upon the personal tastes and agendas of its supporting founders, members and corporate entities.

As an organisation, SAHA is never involved in the selection of projects to be supported, nor does it exercise any authority or right over the content that is featured, selected or accepted. SAHA does not impose or propose artists and works directly to institutions in order to safeguard the independence of both the institutions and the artists. It is completely their decision as to who is invited and what projects are realised. Most importantly, SAHA makes no claims to ownership over the works it funds.

Over the years since SAHA was established, we've come to realise that providing monetary support is often not enough and so we have begun implementing an approach that is more resourceful in many respects. As an organisation, we negotiate on behalf of artists where necessary, expand their networks beyond designated projects, and provide advocacy and know-how in different measures.

Our aim is to promote a healthy and sustainable ecosystem for art in and from Turkey. As SAHA, we act as a facilitator in the project development phase. We try to create a platform that enables diversity, where individual perspectives and opposing ideas coexist. This support is given not only to artists but also to curators, writers and researchers. We invite international curators for research and provide accommodation for their stay.

I should mention another fact: getting tax-deductible status for an organisation for contemporary art in Turkey is nearly impossible. As a matter of fact, SAHA donors do not receive any tax deduction: everything is down to their generosity.

Of course, not having government support or any benefit by way of a tax deduction is not the only obstacle art faces in our country and in many other places of the world today. We witness some attempts to silence art and artists.

The number of works we are able to support grows with every year that passes. Artists and curators who were neglected in our part of the world now participate in international cultural dialogue and communication. Today, most major art institutions and art organisations have established a relationship with SAHA and it is their first point of contact when they think of inviting an artist from Turkey.

Today, SAHA has more than 100 members and its impact has reached levels beyond our imagination. All our members cherish a new level in their relation with art. We all enjoy the collective voyage from being consumers to being enablers. We all enjoy appreciating ideas rather than objects. We all enjoy thinking beyond our walls.

MB: What is, in your opinion, the meaning of being a responsible collector?

FE: I believe the first responsibility is to artists. First of all, we need to take care of the work and we need to know the work that we own... what it is. We need to be able to talk about it. We cannot say that just because we like the colours, we own it and we hang it on our wall. Whenever it is needed for an exhibition, we should lend it, because we don't own it... we just hold the work. One day we may feel we no longer have any emotional relationship with the work, but taking it to an auction I believe is unfair. We should immediately inform the artist and the gallery, so they can decide what to do.

We should also follow the practice of the artist. It is not just owning the work. It's not just an investment. We should really love it. But there is also a responsibility to the galleries. I believe galleries are very important. My speech was about the non-commercial work but I am a strong believer of supporting the galleries, because they are the ones who work more for the artists, the ones who make publications, who introduce them to museums... they dedicate their lives to the artist in the long term. We are in and out, so we should be very supportive of the galleries. If we promise to make an acquisition we should fulfil that promise. People often reserve a work, say on the first day of an art fair, then on the second day decide not to buy it. The whole enthusiasm of the collectors is already gone by the second day. And then people think it a clever idea to buy art at ten or twenty percent less from an artist's studio. If you kill the galleries, you can benefit from one acquisition but the whole ecosystem will be dead. Buying through the galleries instead of directly from the artist is something you should be very careful about. I believe it is something very important. Sometimes philanthropic projects are too spontaneous... I've seen impulsive attempts that die out after two or three years.

MB: After the willingness to enable the art production there was first a research, trying to know what is more necessary. In your program and process transparency is a basic feature not only in terms of budget but on the way you relate to artists, the concept of a democratic institution... How important is transparency and good practices to achieve the right impact?

FE: I think it is the most important thing for us. First of all, we collect the donation of many members. It's their money that makes the funding mechanism of the organisation. So we need to be very careful how it is spent. We should publish every year how that money is spent. It's their right to see that. The

other thing is to be very transparent to the artists about our methods, because every artist thinks his work is more important than the next one. And every collector has an opinion about an artist. But it's not about liking their work. It's about international dialogue. It's about including them in a certain context, in an efficient way. There are art professionals out there. It's not our decision who to include in their exhibitions. So being transparent on that point is very important. Now artists know that it is not us who make the decision – it's the art professionals. The projects for which we provide funds are the ones we believe make an impact. Obviously we want to see our artists in dOCUMENTA, for instance, to be included in that dialogue, but there are moments when we just don't know, so we have an international board. And it's their opinion, not ours. There are certain clear things that we can decide, but there are others where we seek advice. It's so important at this moment. There are many examples where artists come to us saying I know that this institution is going to apply to you, but don't spend your money on my project because the production is already done. So they protect the money of SAHA believing it will come back to them. We can spend it on a new production. So transparency is very important and in that way we are trusted.

MB: I think it is very important to widen the concept of transparency.

FE: Of course. Every year we do an audit and it's put on our website.

MB: Could you please explain what kind of experiences you have learned from and carried to your network like the Tate International Council & Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee or the Art Basel Global Patrons & Cities Advisory Board, among others?

FE: Of course, museums in London or New York are luckier on that front, but it's not only having an international committee. It's more about being open to other cultures and to internationality. I learned a lot from Tate in seven years. I started on their Middle East and North Africa acquisitions committee. Then I became a member of the international council. Tate became a rare museum because they are interesting in showing artworks from all over the world, instead of focusing on a small geography like Europe or Britain. They also have many acquisition committees. They're not symbolic, they really work. The curators go to a region and make research. Many times we had curators coming to Istanbul. We invite them, provide accommodation. And now in the hanging of the new Tate extension there are some works from Turkey together with wonderful artists. Tate really interacts. I learned this from Tate: how to make it happen. It's not only having committees, it's about being international. Personally, I was

not only interested in sending our artists abroad to other venues, but bringing them to Turkey to look at our art. So, those networks work both ways. If you are a collector and only look at your own area, why should others be interested in your area? It works both ways. It should be a mutual relationship. And with connection to North Africa and to South America, Spain really is in the middle of everything!

MB: You and all SAHA members are serving a purpose. The consequences of your commitment: production of certain kind of works, strengthen the scene, networking, exchange, foster contacts... have an extraordinary value. What do you believe is the main motivation for your members? What are their expectations?

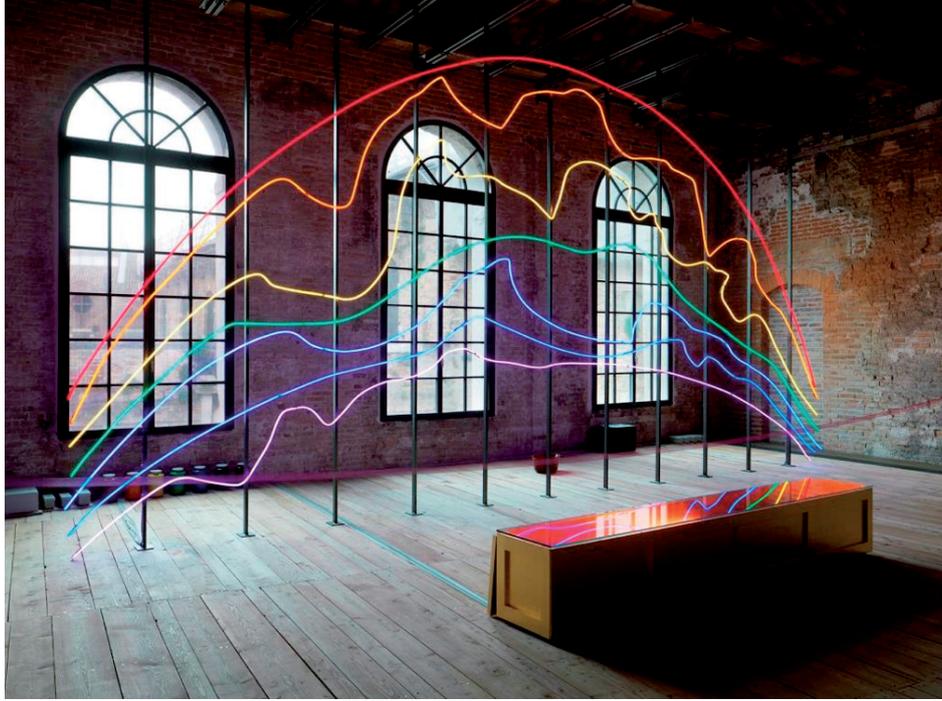
FE: I wish some of our members who are present here today could answer that. Of course, we have members of five years and others of six months. It's a process. We come to a conclusion or state of mind together. In the beginning some of us could easily understand it as a social club to go on these nice trips together, see nice art and meet wonderful people. Although we all enjoy it knowing that it's not just that. We enjoy being enablers. We have a huge participation at our annual meetings. We discuss our future projects and everyone wants to be more involved. I wish we could have more committees in which member could be more involved but we don't because our mission is just to collect funds. We don't want that professional attitude, to be the professionals for art. I can say that we recently looked at the research that Lumberg made on 10,000 fundraising philanthropic organisations in the United States. The retention rate is around 42% and ours is 92%. I guess the members are motivated!

MB: Is SAHA a sustainable organization? Tell us more about your budget, the number of projects, how do you choose them...

MB: The budget is around 600,000 € per year. It's not huge but it makes a difference. We have a good retention rate and also don't rely on just one person, so the budget is reliable. We have 100 members as well as five corporate sponsors who accepted from the start not to use us for PR purposes. In total, this budget has supported around 200 artists and about 100 projects. Some are big in scale, like the Istanbul Biennial or the main curated exhibition at the Venice Biennale and also the Turkish pavilion in Venice. So one might cost 50,000 €, another 5,000 €. Sometimes we carry money over for the following year. We now know that next year will be Venice, dOCUMENTA, Munster and the Istanbul Biennial. With the Istanbul Biennial we always provide funds equally to all artists from Turkey, so they are free to think bigger.

So those are the budget numbers. How the artists are chosen is always the art professionals' decision. They'll come to us and say they're curating this or that, or they want to make a research, or they want to send their co-curators to Istanbul... so that's where we start.

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56TH VENICE BIENNIAL, PAVILION OF TURKEY
SARKIS
RESPIRO, 2015
CURATOR: DEFNE AYAS



SUPPORTING
CONTEMPORARY
ART FROM
TURKEY



Fusun Eczacıbaşı is the co-founder and chairman of SAHA Association, an independent non-profit association that supports contemporary art from Turkey. She is also a member of Tate International Council (IC), Tate Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee (MENAAC), Art Basel Global Patrons, Art Basel Cities Board and International Friends of dOCUMENTA.

Fusun Eczacıbaşı has been actively involved in many NGOs focusing on human rights, women rights, nature preservation and education.

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