:MENTALKLINIK

The Istanbul-born Brussels-based artist duo alchemises a bodily
experience with the alluring promises of technology.
Words by Osman Can Yerebakan

:mentalKLINIK. *FRENEMY*. 2022. Video. Colour, no sound, loop. Motion design by Infin. 1 minute, 58 seconds. Installation view of *LOVELESSNESS* at Eugster ll Belgrade, 2022. Photography by Ivan Zupanc. Image courtesy of the artists and Eugster ll Belgrade

Glitches, glitter, and grids… :mentalKLINIK has been traversing the territories of the analogue and cyber for over two decades, with gnarly familiarities as their weapons of attraction. From confetti-vacuuming iRobots on Sisyphean chores to *FRENEMY* (2022), a nihilist AI with magnetic deadpan eyes, the artist duo Yasemin Baydar and Birol Demir's multidisciplinary practice reconfigures experiences associated with the tangible at the realm of immaterial desires.

Since joining forces in Istanbul in 1998, the Brussels and Istanbul-based artists have defied many forms of categorisation in an industry fascinated by classification. Are they painters, if not sculptors? Are they critical of technology or infatuated by its possibilities? Is this a real floor-cleaning robot? "We have been hacking each other's thoughts along the way," Baydar tells *Canvas.* "We are in a zigzag of manipulating one another's ideas until we reach a final concept."

:mentalKLINIK emerged during a critical transition worldwide, at the dawn of a migration towards the digital, and the positioning of their breakthrough on this juncture let the artists maintain a two-sided outlook towards everyday rituals, both online and off. "We saw the era without the computers and gradually switched to online," Baydar says. Demir remembers a show they opened in 2017 at Dubai's Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, titled *Truish* in which asked questions about the outcome of this duality: "How can art lie when the reality is not

true enough?" The show had included *Time* magazine covers spoiled with store-bought stickers of popular emojis at a time when Trump administration-fuelled disbelief in science and liberal politics was sweeping the global media. Diluted and ridiculed, the presentation of internationally credited information distributed on printed media captured society's broader suspicion towards digital data. Since then artificial intelligence, ChatGPT and the metaverse have all come along, evolving the collective cynicism into a Stockholm syndrome-like affair. "When facts are disappearing, how can art capture the reality?" Demir asks. "We don't have time to digest every fact, so we take what we are presented with via online as the truth," explains Baydar.

The *PROFILE* series (2014) from almost a decade ago includes tempered glass surfaces covered with micro-layered polyester films that read advertisement-like descriptions of fictional individuals. Named after everyday people such as Lucy, Amari or Anthony, the textual portraits – "our version of hyperrealism," the duo explains – embody the promise in character-making on social media where performance of an identity substitutes for the self. "The abundance of questionable truths," Baydar adds, "leads the way to its presentation today almost exclusively online."

Flirtatious with a broad range of media, :mentalKLINIK remains loyal to dissecting our relationship with reason in a landscape triggered by

:mentalKLINIK. *EMMA*. 2014. From the series *PROFILE*. 2014. Tempered glass, micro-layered polyester films. 110 x 160 cm. Image courtesy of the artists
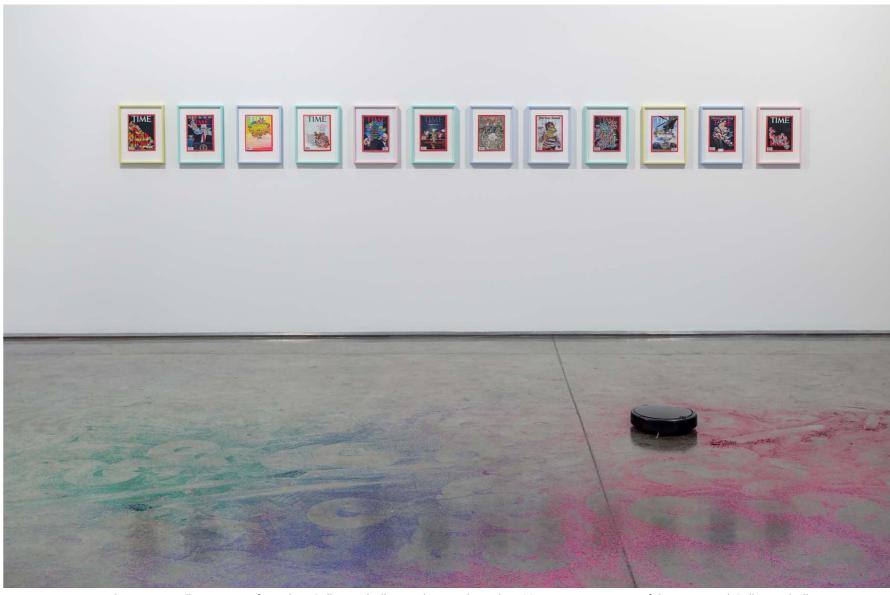
:mentalKLINIK. *Some-Time 1704*. 2017. *Time* magazine 3 April, 2017 issue, stickers, artist's frame in acrylic resin and natural minerals. Image courtesy of the artists and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

:mentalKLINIK. Installation view of *Truish* at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, 2017. Image courtesy of the artists and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

physical and immaterial uncertainties. They rather approach each concept with clinical interrogation, in an attempt to settle on the most fitting material and visual composition in the service of their end goal. An "obsession" with the contemporary moment, according to Baydar, guides their material tendencies, "as well as aesthetic choices." She expresses an interest in "everyday readymades and how we can present them in unexpected ways, not necessarily through high technology." They are often attracted by sleek surfaces, such as the titanium covered or anodised aluminum wall works, *Double Deal* (2023), in their recent solo show, *PARADISE ON SALE*, at Istanbul gallery Dirimart, but "we also tap into today's economies too," she adds. They utilise a high-speed camera for their video works, such as *BITTERSWEAT* (2015). "When a short moment is stretched through this technology, the viewer questions if the footage is real or AI-generated," says Demir. "Those ambiguities are left unanswered."

Playfulness is a binding agent between a material palette and the narrative. In the ongoing *BITTER MEDICINE* series (2020), an iRobot roams the gallery space in an attempt to clean a glitter-covered floor. Futile and hypnotic, the domestic gadget's invasion of the white cube is further ridiculed with the flamboyant mess that both beautifies and degenerates an interior reserved for art. A familiar house member – albeit soulless and made out of metal – presents itself as an eerie intruder devoted to a glamorous letdown. "We have an army of iRobots at our studio," Demir admits about their obsession with the service device, "but we never use them at home – they are our actors, not servers!" Baydar adds: "As :mentalKLINIK, we are two people, but we always try to define our work by building a third."

In 2020, the vacuum cleaner's 24-hour daily journey over a floor awash in multi-coloured confetti for over four months at Borusan Contemporary was live streamed on the Istanbul institution's website.

The robot's poetically tragic labour-intensive performance was a result of the artists' manipulation of its brain. They removed the gadget's trash collector but placed a weight instead to hide its absence, as well as adding metal bits over its sensors to further confuse its software patterns. "Its moves are based on all kinds of wrong data because of the glitches we create," Baydar explains. The machine's random and renounced drift against perpetual surveillance not only complicates its raison d'être but also challenges the viewer's point of seeing art. Boredom enters the picture, as well as technology's interruption into the sterile art space. "Art, like technology, is a form of service," proposes Baydar, "and indeed we are intrigued by art's non-functional aspect – it is a playground that can remove us from the daily routine and present itself like a surprise."

Collaboration has been the duo's main strategy in handling techno-psychological curiosities; in their early days, they had around 100 collaborators. "A poet, software writer, film theorist, sociologist and even a mathematician – whom we all consider as friends – became our collaborators for different projects," notes Demir. Today, this sense of collectivity finds its reflection at their studio practice. Their workspace

inside a large complex at Brussels's Zaventem area moonlights at a gathering venue, "and sometimes a club!" says Baydar. After the pandemic, the duo saw the potential in their studio to host various kinds of programming. "Our desks become the stage and we always have confetti and neon lying around anyway," she adds. They sometimes assume the DJing task or invite colleagues to perform or for a panel discussion.

:mentalKLINIK is currently working on a project called *Lunatic Poets* (2022–ongoing), a group of digital characters created with the Unreal Engine tool. "They are street poets who inhabit the cyber space and are awkward beings who live in isolation from the everyday world," Baydar explains. The artists call the texts uttered by the characters "contempoetry." The portmanteau term swiftly encapsulates the duo's overall approach to art-making. "Our aesthetic is a combination of the physical and the ritual," she adds. In the twisted knot of the bodily and the meta, the artists eschew a hierarchy between the two seeming binaries and instead manipulate the linear process of a feeling or an advancement. "Our poets are not lip-synching to our poems yet – we are wary of them and they are wary of us," Baydar concludes.