

## **DISSERTATION REVIEW**

**Submitted by:** Dr. Kathy O'Dell

**Title:** Associate Professor of Visual Arts–Art History & Museum Studies (retired Aug 2023)

**University:** University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Baltimore, Maryland, USA

**For:** Ms. Dilay Kocogullari

**Born:** 25 May 1982

**Dissertation Title:** “Responses of the Body: Under Different Social Structures”

**University:** Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Poland

**Field:** Art

**Discipline:** Fine Arts and Art Conservation

It has been my pleasure to review Ms. Dilay Kocogullari’s artistic and written materials for her doctoral degree from the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design. Given that she attained a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Intermedia & Digital Arts (IMDA) from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in 2019, I shall start my review with a description of that program and the candidate’s performance within it. Establishing Ms. Kocogullari’s previous graduate school journey will set a context for my assessment of her doctoral work and also contribute to your institution’s (albeit optional) requirement for reviewers to speak to the PhD candidate’s “previous artistic, didactic and organizational achievements.”

The IMDA MFA program at UMBC has been known since its launch in Fall 1993 for its insistence on an interdisciplinary approach to art-making, and on the necessity of privileging ideas and concepts over tools and toys. What is common knowledge now was not so well known at the program’s inception 30 years ago: Technical mastery and expertise are essential in the digital domain, but without students gaining a deep and broad understanding of the philosophical, conceptual, historical, and theoretical contexts in which they are engaging with technologies, their creations may well lack the spark that not only sustains innovation but furthers discovery and creative growth in their chosen mediums. Toward that end, IMDA is a three-year program, while many MFA programs in the United States are only two. Our program is rigorous, requiring: a balance of coursework in all areas just cited; intensive critiques in production-based classes; half-day midterm reviews with a select team of Visual Arts faculty members; and full-day reviews with

all 24 faculty members at the end of each semester (UMBC's academic year comprises two semesters). Students go up for candidacy midway through the program, at the end of their third semester. If successful, they then select their MFA Committee, with whom they meet at least monthly for the remaining year and a half, while meeting more often with their Chair throughout that time period. The program culminates in three assessable outputs: (1) an installation/exhibition, which is part of the annual group IMDA MFA Exhibition at UMBC's main on-campus gallery, the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture; (2) a 5,000-word written thesis; and (3) a one-hour public oral defense, at which a panel of internal and external questioners, who have seen the exhibition and read the thesis, pose questions they have prepared in advance. Ms. Kocogullari excelled in all three of these measures. Her stellar success was confirmed when the "IMDA Friends & Alumni MFA Award" was bestowed upon her. This annual award is the result of an outside juror visiting the exhibition, reading all candidates' theses, and selecting the candidate who produced the strongest exhibition, on balance with the strongest written thesis.

Ms. Kocogullari economically described her MFA exhibition project in her PhD written dissertation document, but her brevity prompts me to provide additional details. Titled "Toward the Healing of Souls: Crocheting, Collaborating, and Commemorating," Ms. Kocogullari's thesis project was remarkable in vision, scope, content, and form. She, along with dozens of individuals in her home country of Turkey who contributed to the project, crocheted hundreds of white pouches resembling the shape of ovaries. For her exhibition, Ms. Kocogullari filled these pouches with soil and grass seeds, then hung them from the gallery ceiling and walls, creating a memorial to Turkish women who had been murdered during an uptick in femicide in her home country. It's notable how proactive Ms. Kocogullari was in gathering support for her project from Turkish women and men who shared her feelings about the ever-increasing number of femicides in their country. A public talk she gave about her project in summer 2017, when she was in Turkey, was covered by several local newspapers, and word of the project further spread through Facebook and Instagram, with some 70 individuals gathering on a regular basis to crochet pouches for her thesis exhibition, to discuss femicide and violence in their country, and to lend excitement to Ms. Kocogullari's exhibition in the United States as a way of spreading awareness abroad of a national problem in her home country. Ms. Kocogullari was acutely aware of the need to represent her collaborators' contributions adequately and appropriately. Just before the exhibition, she returned

to Turkey to conduct interviews with collaborators about their experiences participating in this project. Audio excerpts from the interviews, plus video documentation, were included in thesis exhibition, and the names of all contributors were listed on the walls, alongside the hundreds of pouches, which Ms. Kocogullari had filled with seeded soil. Knitted tubes, resembling fallopian tubes, connected the pouches and were also filled with seeded soil, which sprouted grass over the course of the exhibition. Visitors were asked to water the pouches and tubes to keep the grass alive, thus engaging actively in the issues the installation conveyed. In her MFA written thesis, she explored the design of Turkish cemeteries as the model from which she borrowed the design of her own project, as well as the dynamic of collaboration and the metaphysics of meditation that accompanied the activities of crocheting and knitting that, she convincingly argued, could be transformed into political activism.

Three semester earlier, for her candidacy review, Ms. Kocogullari had presented an installation representative of her research in both biology and art, dealing thematically with infant cardiac disease. The installation included video footage she had taken in a cardiac unit in Turkey, showing the technique of a parent rhythmically slapping their baby's back to help keep the cardio-compromised infant's heart beating. The screen, on which this close-up image of an adult hand and a tiny baby's back appeared, was partially shrouded by a white hospital bedsheet. Viewers could only see the full image by physically interacting with the installation – by making the choice to pull the sheet aside, by intentionally taking the time to watch the video, and by purposefully attempting to understand the images' meaning. The process of understanding was furthered by viewing Ms. Kocogullari's projection on the adjacent wall – an animation in which she juxtaposed and superimposed images of infants' hearts and Turkish olives. The relationship of the hearts' and olives' shapes stood in formal and conceptual tension, given the almost-certain short life span of a baby's cardiac-diseased heart (only 1% of infants with heart disease survive) and the long-term life span of a Turkish olive tree (average 500 years). These data were available in well-composed wall texts. The ambient sound – that of flesh striking flesh, as the parent smacked the baby's bare back – accentuated Ms. Kocogullari's points regarding fragility and resilience of life, as well as the practical necessity of proactively attending to medical research needs in the under-funded area of child heart disease. Visitors' engagement with the installation and its attendant issues was strengthened by Ms. Kocogullari's quietly depositing into each visitor's hand the number of olive

pits equivalent to the average weight of an infant's heart. This haptic act was as subtle as it was powerful.

I have gone into detail here to show the type of cross-disciplinary BioArt work that positioned Ms. Kocogullari well for your PhD program at Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design, a setting in which she could continue to make contact and collaborate with both science- and art-based researchers and take her work to new and even more remarkable levels – which, to my mind, she has amply achieved. It is apparent from the list of organizations in her “Didactic Achievements and Experiences” document – organizations where she collaborated on exhibitions and participated in a residency – that she continued to take the initiative to reach out to organizations and potential collaborators, as she had done throughout her MFA at UMBC. While here, she was clearly at ease in making productive connections with colleagues in the Department of Biology, but also completely comfortable connecting with off-campus researchers at, for example, the Baltimore Under Ground Science Space (BUGGS) in downtown Baltimore. In both on- and off-campus venues, she methodically ran the type of preliminary experiments that would pave the way for her project having to do with yeast infections and how such conditions can serve as, or be visually represented by means of, “portraits” of the individuals who experience them – that is, part of the dissertation project she would ultimately undertake with all of you at Eugeniusz Geppert.

Having established the context of “previous artistic ... achievements” for Ms. Kocogullari's subsequent achievements in your doctoral program, I now turn to my “analysis and evaluation” of her “artistic work” and her “description of the work (written part)” of her PhD dissertation.

I am profoundly impressed by the ways in which Ms. Kocogullari has expanded her work in the arts and sciences through her engagement with your program, especially given the context of the pandemic. Her exploration of a medium new to her – glass – will, I believe, prove to be the keystone in the archway that she has consistently been building between her two disciplines (biological sciences and visual arts) since long before she entered either of our programs (to wit, her two undergraduate degrees, one in Biology in 2004 and one in Plastic Arts in 2009, to say nothing of her Master of Arts degree in Painting in 2011). Despite the pandemic, she was able to focus on learning how to work with this new material in highly effective ways, combining it with the multitude of materials with which she had previously become skilled, and to carry out an

impactful dissertation project. It was not lost on me that, of course, glass had always been a part of her experimentation in science labs: The slides on which samples are viewed under the microscope are made of glass, as are traditional petri dishes. So, to investigate this specific material for its capacity to carry meaning beyond the realm of the practical within the sciences was astute on Ms. Kocogullari's part – a step waiting to be taken, in a way – and very effective.

Using the material in the creation of *The Glass Book* – the first of the three installations in her dissertation project – to construct the pages of an oversized book in which each of the six pages represents one of her six human subjects, was a stunning way for Ms. Kocogullari to demonstrate a number of key concepts at play in her project as a whole. Two examples of my claim: (1) the use of glass signals the need for transparency in order for viewers to expand their understanding of the effects of cultural, social, and political environments “in,” as Ms. Kocogullari points out in her written dissertation, rather than “on” the female body (viewers get to see into the bacteria and fungi issuing from the subjects' skin and bodily fluid samples that are set into the letters on the book's pages); and (2) the thickness of the glass that Ms. Kocogullari used signals both the inherent fragility of the material (like the fragility of body parts and their fluids) and the capacity for it to be made thick (and additionally protected by Plexiglass) in order to build up its stability and prevent breakage (like the capacity for women to be strong and stable if their corporeal being is assessed and attended to properly). I was also struck by Ms. Kocogullari's careful choice of text to present on each page, sampled from the six women's writings about their sensations when ill. That the letters of the words were filled with agar, along with the bacteria and fungi cited above, meant that their appearance would consistently change, as the meaning of everyday language changes over time.

In the second and third installations, Ms. Kocogullari used petri dishes as both backdrops and frames for the “portraits” of her six subjects. Here, I very much appreciated Ms. Kocogullari's deliberate disruption of the conventions of portraiture. Unlike the traditional goal of the portrait artist to create a one-to-one, almost photographic, likeness of their subject, Ms. Kocogullari took the path of conceptual compilation. At the same time, the photograph-as-such is not left behind. Each petri dish in the second installation comprises photographs, selected by the subjects, of themselves and/or female relatives, plus bacteria grown from the subjects' saliva mixed with Ms.

Kocogullari's own biological material. This mix conveys how no individual stands alone. Rather, they represent the sum of their parts, and those parts include not only their own living biological material but others', not only their own appearance but others', and not only the place where they were born but all the places they have ever been. Moreover, nothing will remain the same in these portraits, for the bacterial growth in some instances will over time entirely cover the photos. The petri dishes in the third installation feature objects that each of the six women selected for their personal value and sentiment – objects like a house key, bracelet, eyeglasses. This time, however, the objects are set in place with paraffin, showing how the memories these objects carry are precious enough to be preserved.

Also notable, to my mind, was Ms. Kocogullari's decision to set up an introductory space to the exhibition wherein she simulated the space in which she had conducted research for the resulting installations that visitors were about to see. This choice squarely situated her work in the context of BioArt by bringing together the science lab and the art exhibition space, and also carried forward the sensibility that BioArt is rarely an individualized form of production. As visitors enter the exhibition, they instantly meet the artist at work, suggesting that they, too, are about to become part of the work. This sensibility is also realized in *TISSUE\_LAB*, in which Ms. Kocogullari collaborated with another artist, Ali Kanak, this time to focus on the biodiversity of lived space rather than the human subject. Here, visitors were more directly encouraged to participate by taking samples from the environment outside and inside the exhibition space, examine them, and enter their findings into a visual database of the environments' inherent textures. I appreciated Ms. Kocogullari's decision to include *TISSUE\_LAB* in her written dissertation because of the connections to her dissertation project per se.

I've integrated my analysis and evaluation of both Ms. Kocogullari's "artistic work" and "description of the work (written part)" above, but a few more words about the latter: I was taken by the rhetorical economy and cohesiveness of Ms. Kocogullari's writing. Almost every section reads as a compact argument unto itself. This is perhaps most true in the "Theoretical Background" section. I find that many graduate students ultimately tend to isolate their investigations of theory from the content and form of their artistic work to the degree that it really is not possible for the viewer/reviewer to make a connection between theory and practice. But Ms. Kocogullari's

selection of theorists who have informed her production – Donna Haraway, Megan Smitley, Marietta Radmoska, and Rosi Bradotti – was spot on and well-articulated. At every turn, Ms. Kocogullari’s choices and theoretical commentary made sense when I considered her artistic work. Her discussion of ethics was especially nimble, though I might have liked to see this theme carried through the discussion of Eduardo Kac, but this is a minor criticism. Also notable was her section on “Inspirations.” Each artist she cited – Heather Dewey-Hagborg, Anna Dumitriu, Johanna Roko, Teresa Murak, Stephen Wilson, and Ken Rinaldo – has a direct tie to her work that is made even clearer by virtue of her writing. I might have liked to see Ms. Kocogullari comment on other artists who have used glass or Plexiglas in their making of books (e.g., Australian artist Adele Outteridge in her 2004 *Vessels* series and/or Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson in his 2013 *A View Becomes a Window*). These works do not qualify as BioArt, however, and I do respect Ms. Kocogullari’s staying on course with works rooted in both the sciences and visual arts. All other sections of the written document are clear, coherent, and relevant to the development and outcome of her artistic works. I might only have wanted to see more interview clips, perhaps in the form of an Appendix, but the samples provided were enlightening.

A word about visual documentation: It would have been optimal to have seen Ms. Kocogullari’s doctoral artistic works in person, of course. But her photo coverage is beautiful and thorough, successfully conveying the content of her work and its material and conceptual details, her attention to craft, and her interaction with the human subjects whom she asked to participate by way of being interviewed and sharing personally valued items (*The Glass Book* installations) or encouraged to participate by sampling the environment and contributing their findings to a database (*TISSUE\_LAB*).

On a purely technical level, I was pleasantly surprised to encounter so few typos, missing or repeated words, etc. It is nearly impossible to present a perfectly written document in one language, let alone the two or three in which she had to be thinking and researching throughout her doctoral work. If Ms. Kocogullari were to decide to publish her dissertation in English, I might suggest a slightly different order of sections and, of course, corrections to the handful of technical errors I encountered. But again, this is a minor observation, one meant to be constructive and collegial.

Finally, and hearkening back to my reference to Ms. Kocogullari's discovery of glass and its role in the trajectory of her work, I proffer that attaining her PhD will mark Ms. Kocogullari's passage through a now fully key-stoned archway. Beyond that archway lies an unquestionably virtuoso and successful career, in which she will no doubt continue to experiment with glass in strategic ways, making her work shine in the area of socially engaged, feminist, BioArt practices. Thus, based on my analysis of her written thesis and creative output, it is without reservation that I recommend that Ms. Dilay Kocogullari be awarded an academic PhD title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation, with distinction.

Thank you for the opportunity to learn about Ms. Kocogullari's doctoral work, to analyze and evaluate the materials thereto pertaining, and to submit this review.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathy O'Dell', with a stylized, cursive script.

Kathy O'Dell, PhD