

Osvaldo Romberg's Installation, *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*

Osvaldo Romberg'in Enstalasyonu, *Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1*

Sevgi Aka, *Department of Visual Communication Design, İstanbul Topkapı University*

Abstract

This exhibition review within the disciplines of contemporary art, installation art and architecture, focuses on artist Osvaldo Romberg's installation *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir* (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1) exhibited in the PORTİZMİR'07 *Mirage and Desire* Contemporary Art Festival, Izmir 2007. In *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*, Romberg lays a footprint of Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov's Home-studio. The artist also integrates a text from the *Aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges.

This research draws parallels between Romberg's installation, intersecting cylindrical structure of Melnikov's home-studio and the ideals of Soviet Union. The notions of non-hierarchy, equal distance to the center and equal distribution of the building's weight are visible in Melnikov's architecture who removed columns as central carriers. These notions can also be seen in the book *Aleph*, for the *Aleph* is a sphere. Whoever looks at *Aleph* sees simultaneity and infinity.

Accordingly, this study inquires how Romberg revisited historical contexts and used these two references to convey his concerns on simultaneity and infinity. He invites the viewer to develop a new perception towards world history, time and space and interrelatedness of histories and places. To conclude, this review aims to reinterpret Romberg's work in light of these two references.

Keywords: Osvaldo Romberg, *the Aleph*, Konstantin Melnikov's home-studio, installation, Translocation, Portizmir'07, simultaneity.

Academical disciplines/fields: Visual arts, contemporary art, installation art, architecture.

Özet

Çağdaş sanat, enstalasyon ve mimarlık disiplinlerine dahil bu sergi inceleme makalesi sanatçı Osvaldo Romberg'in 2007 yılında İzmir'de gerçekleşen, PORTİZMİR'07 Serap ve Arzu Çağdaş Sanat Festivali'nde gösterilen *Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1* eserine odaklanır. *Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1*'de Romberg, Rus mimar Konstantin Melnikov'un ev-stüdyosunun taban alanını üretir. Sanatçı aynı zamanda yazar Jorge Luis Borges'in *Aleph* kitabından bir sayfayı eserine ekler.

Bu araştırma Romberg'in enstalasyonu, Melnikov'un ev-stüdyosunun kesişen iki silindirik yapısı ve Sovyetler Birliği'nin idealleri arasında paralellikler kurar. Merkezi taşıyıcı olarak kolonları ortadan kaldıran Melnikov mimarisinde yapının hiyerarşik olmaması, duvarların merkeze eşit uzaklıkta olması ve bina yükünün eşit dağılımı görünür kavramlardır. Bu kavramlar *Aleph* kitabında da mevcuttur. *Aleph* parlak bir küredir. *Aleph* bakanlar eşzamanlılığı ve sonsuzluğu görür.

Böylelikle, bu çalışma Romberg'in tarihsel bağlamları nasıl tekrar yorumladığını, eşzamanlılık ve sonsuzluk kavramlarını bu iki atıfla nasıl sunduğunu inceler. Sanatçı izleyiciyi dünya tarihine, zaman, mekân ve tarihin birbiriyle ayrılmaz ilişkisine yeni bir bakış açısı geliştirmeye davet eder. Son olarak, bu inceleme iki referans üzerinden sanatçının yapıtına eşzamanlılık ve sonsuzluk kavramları üzerinden yeni bir yorum getirir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Osvaldo Romberg, *Aleph*, Konstantin Melnikov'un ev-stüdyosu, enstalasyon, Translocation, Portizmir, eşzamanlılık.

Akademik disiplin(ler)/alan(lar): Görsel sanatlar, çağdaş sanat, enstalasyon sanatı, mimarlık.

- **Corresponding Author:** Sevgi Aka, Görsel İletişim Tasarımı, İstanbul Topkapı Üniversitesi.
- **Address:** İstanbul Topkapı Üniversitesi Balat Kampüsü: Ayvansaray Caddesi, No:45, 34087, Balat - İstanbul
- **e-mail:** sevgiaka@topkapi.edu.tr
- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-6568-3629
- **Available online:** 20.09.2022
- **doi:** 10.17484/yedi.1144139

Received: 15.07.2022/ Accepted: 26.08.2022

1. Osvaldo Romberg's Installation in Portizmir'07, *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*

This exhibition review focuses on the work of the Argentinian artist Osvaldo Romberg (1938-2019), *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1)* which was exhibited in PORTİZMİR'07 Contemporary Art Festival, *Mirage and Desire* (07.09.2007-07.10.2007). The curator of this large-scale exhibition was Emmy de Martelaere and the co-curator was Ayşegül Kurtel. As part of Osvaldo Romberg's larger translocation projects which are large-scale architectural installations, in the *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*, Romberg lays the full-scale footprint of Melnikov's home-studio, in the French Cultural Center in İzmir (Figure 1 and Figure 2). As stated in his website: "Through this technique of translocation, Romberg raises the questions of geography, erasure, heritage, echoes, ellipses" (Romberg, 2009). The artist also integrates a text from the book *the Aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges (Figure 4).



Figure 1. *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1)*, O. Romberg, 2007a.

According to the description in Portizmir'07 *Mirage and Desire* exhibition catalogue (2007), the architectural installations of Osvaldo Romberg invites the spectator to immerse into the place and experience it physically and spiritually becoming "the metaphor of himself and of this space which also visually and virtually penetrates the architectural space." (Portizmir, n.d.). Romberg creates symbolic spaces and deconstructs outlines of plans. In this way, his works revisit historical contexts and experiences while highlighting lost utopias.

For the exhibition in Izmir, Romberg chooses to deconstruct a plan of Konstantin Melnikov (Figure 3) and build the footprint out of bricks. Melnikov (1890-1974) was one of the most innovative architects of Russian constructivism. He constructed his home-studio between 1927-1929 for himself and his family. His house is an international icon of the Modern movement. For Osvaldo Romberg, one of the main features of Melnikov's famous home-studio architecture was the interlocking cylindrical form. According to Cecil (2006), "large internal spaces were possible thanks to innovative building techniques introduced by the architect such as self-reinforcing floors." The house was economically extremely efficiently built through the use of peasant building techniques.

Melnikov's main concern and search was "economic housing that would respond to the climatic and cultural demands." (Martínez Otalora et al., 2020, p. 384). The house consists of two cylinders with equal diameters juxtaposed with each other. In early 20th century, consciously using environmental control methods, (Otalora, et al., 2020, p. 384) the design of the house optimized "the surface volume ratio through the use of cylindrical shapes. Among the properties of the cylinder, it can be observed its smaller

surface of contact and greater volume compared to a cube.” (Martínez Otalora et al, 2020, p. 390). In other words, one could fit in a larger volume in a cylinder than in a cube: “...the cylinder is more compact than the cube and this difference decreases the amount of material used for the construction.” (Martínez Otalora et al., 2020, s. 390). In addition to the decreased amount of material necessary for the building's construction, the building's shape was designed to prevent heat losses and optimized the conditions for the winter period (Otalora, et al, 2020, p. 391).



Figure 2. *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir, (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1), O. Romberg, 2007 (S. Aka kişisel arşivi, 2007).*

While working as an artist assistant of Osvaldo Romberg in Izmir, he emphasized (O. Romberg, personal communication, August 29, 2007) that the lack of internal column support carrying the main weight of the architecture was connected to the non-hierarchical structure of Soviet Society. The artist explained that, through the method of interlocking cylinders the architect eliminated the need for four columns carrying the weight of the building. Since cylinders do not have corners, his innovative technique allowed the weight to be equally distributed to the whole cylinder, serving as a metaphor for the principle of equal distribution in socialism. Furthermore, the walls are in equal distance to the center of the circles and there is no formal hierarchical order. Romberg pointed that, for him Melnikov's formal choice and underlying ideology of the Soviet Union were connected and was a significant aspect for his work.

According to the description of Romberg's works in the text of his 1996 exhibition at the Ludwig Museum '+2000 /-2000. Even' An Installation at the End of the Millenium, his works offer an experience of simultaneity that is not fixed in particular time and space. For him different histories mix into each other and terms such as West and East, North and South seem unimportant: “Romberg, as an alchemist, recombines these words to create aphorisms by which he comments about universal truths and human feelings” (Ludwig Museum, n.d.).

Allowing the spectator to experience a simultaneity, his works stress the “indivisibility of human experience, the impossibility to separate the past from the present and the far from the near.” (Ludwig Museum, n.d.). He invites us to develop a new perception towards world history, time and space and interrelatedness of histories and places (Ludwig Museum, n.d.). As a member of today's transnational and multicultural world, Romberg uses the text from the book *the Aleph* by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (Figure 4). While Romberg's translocation installations are constructions presented in different places at the same time, reminding us of possible communication channels uniting distant places and people (Ludwig Museum, n.d.), Borges displays similar interest on infinity and simultaneity in *Aleph*.

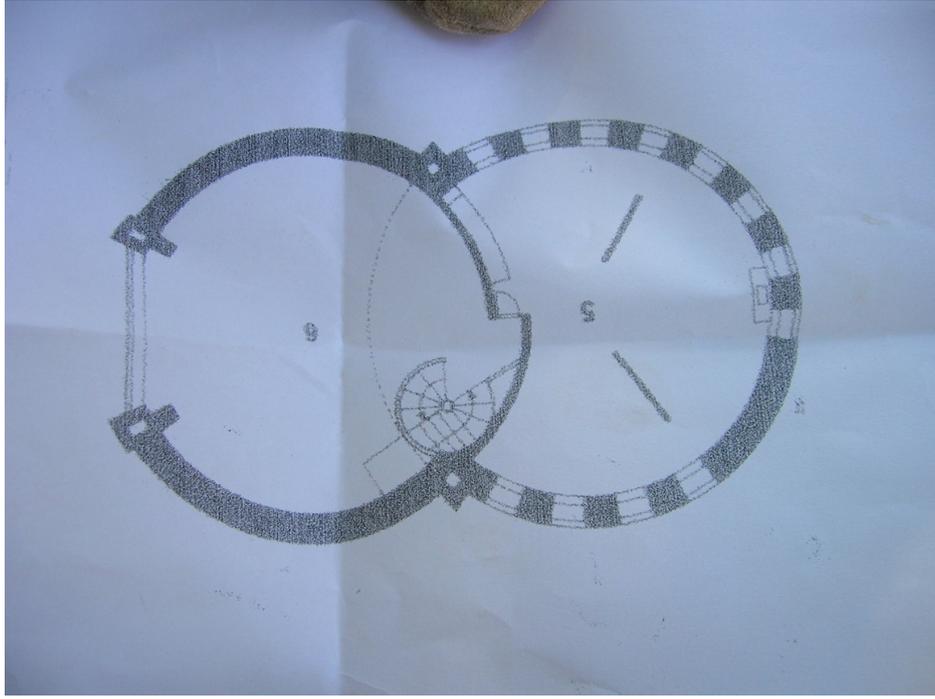


Figure 3. A Plan of Melnikov's Home-Studio used for the Installation of Osvaldo Romberg, 2007 (S. Aka kişisel arşivi, 2007).

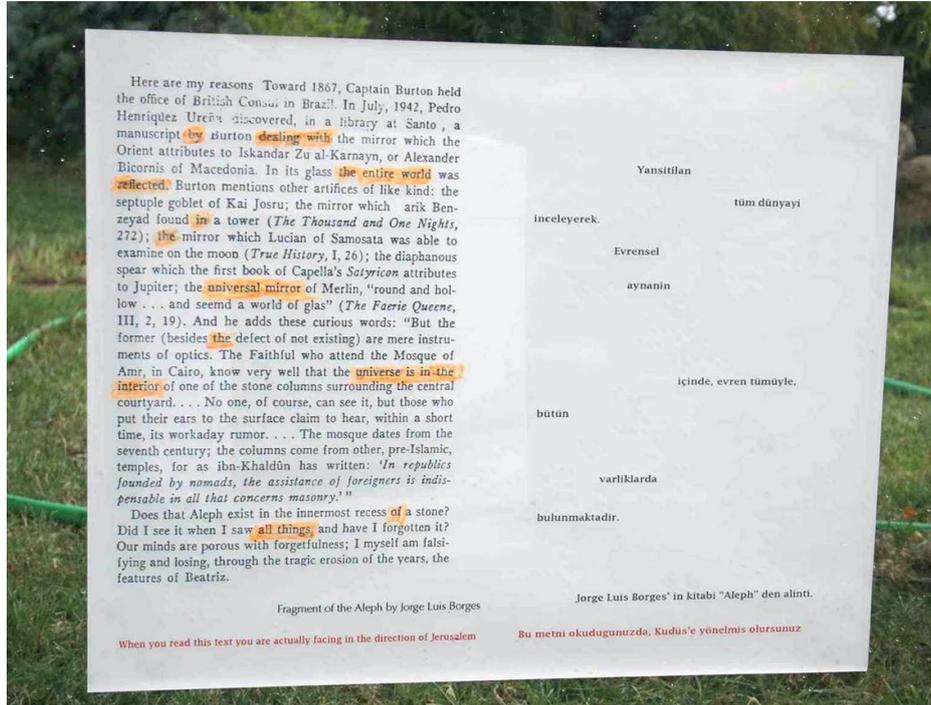


Figure 4. The text of *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*, (*Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1*), O. Romberg, 2007 (S. Aka kişisel arşivi, 2007).

Aleph "a bright sphere about an inch in diameter, is a magical microcosm, a point that contains all other points in the cosmos. The Aleph makes all things visible without diminishing them or making them overlap" (Borges, 1971, as cited in Thiem, 1988). Whoever gazes into the Aleph, can see everything in the universe simultaneously (Borges, 1971, p. 10). Moreover, Romberg added a page from the story, highlighted certain words and transferred these selected words to the blank page in Turkish (Figure 4). In this way, these selected words spread in the blank page, created a second meaning out of the existing

story. The highlighted words form the following sentence: "By dealing with the entire world reflected in the universal mirror the universe is in the interior of all things." (Romberg, 2007b). This coincides with Aleph's characteristic "a magical microcosm, a point that contains all other points in the cosmos" (Borges, 1971). The artist's intervention of the text alters the viewer's perspective and the possible meanings inside the given text can be gleaned. In addition to that, a note below reads "When you read this text you are actually facing in the direction Jerusalem" (Romberg, 2007b). This bodily repositioning of the viewer also refers to the Jewish roots of the artist. It adds another symbolic and contextual space to the installation, which one can only relate to by facing. Similar to visions seen in Aleph, Jerusalem is not there, but the viewer connects to it by repositioning and choosing his/her angle.

To conclude with a final observation connecting all the dots, the Russian and Argentinian artist Osvaldo Romberg gives reference to circular, spherical works of the Russian architect Melnikov and the Argentinian writer Borges. Therefore, Romberg's installation, as part of his translocation projects, can be seen through the perspective of the Aleph, a space that contains all other points. It also shifts our understanding of linearity of time into simultaneity. The presentation of this kind of work *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir*, in a city like Izmir, combining the traditional and the western, located at the 'West of the East and East of the West is also worth paying attention to. Izmir's position allowed a strong flow of communication (Portizmir, n.d.) connecting and containing many layers of civilizations and histories. Finally, the last part of Romberg's highlighted text "the universe is in the interior of all things." (Romberg, 2007b) not only frees us from specificity of time and place but also proves his thoughtful consideration of formal and conceptual aspects of his work.

References

- Borges, J. L. (1971). *The Aleph and other stories 1933-1969*. Bantam Books.
- Cecil, C. (2006). The Melnikov house-studio. In *Haspel J, Petzel M., Zalivako A. & Ziesemer J. (Eds.), The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism*, 73-74. https://www.icomos.org/risk/2007/pdf/Soviet_Heritage_17_III-3_Cecil.pdf
- Ludwig Museum (n.d.). *Osvaldo Romberg: "+2000/-2000. Even" An installation at the end of the millennium, 28 May 1996-30 June*. <https://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/en/exhibition/osvaldo-romberg-2000-2000-even-installation-end-millennium>
- Martínez Otalora, J. D., Bolshakova, M., Rojas Celis, A. P. & Almonacid Lara, F. H. (2020). Melnikov house a bioclimatic analysis. *24th International Conference Of The Iberoamerican Society Of Digital Graphics*, Colombia, 384-391. <https://doi.org/10.5151/sigradi2020-53>
- Portizmir'07. (n.d.). *Mirage and Desire Serap ve Arzu [Exhibition Catalogue]*. <https://portizmir.org/wp-content/uploads/portizmir-1-book.pdf>
- Romberg, O. (2007a). *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1) [Brick, marble bank, a text]*. <https://www.osvaldoromberg.com/Translocation-Melnikov-s-House>
- Romberg, O. (2007b). *Scale of Melnikov House from Moscow, to Izmir (Moskova'dan İzmir'e Melnikov'un Evi, Ölçek 1) [Installation]*.
- Romberg, O. (2009). *Translocation: Melnikov's house*. <https://www.osvaldoromberg.com/Translocation-Melnikov-s-House>
- Thiem, J. (1988). Borges, Dante, and the poetics of total vision. *Comparative Literature*, 40(2), 97-121.