Check Valve:
An infrastructural inversion

Kerem Ozan Bayraktar's solo exhibition titled *Check Valve* is taking place at SANATORIUM's new venue in Karaköy between May 23 and July 12, 2025. We reflect about the nature of an infrastructure through the works in the exhibition

Kerem Ozan Bayraktar, Early Celebration, 2025, Site-specific installation; pink cement decorative pool structure with exposed plumbing, construction-type lighting, confetti remnants, used fireworks, plastic containers filled with liquid, variable dimensions. Photo: Zeynep Fırat, courtesy of SANATORIUM

Text: Öznur Karakaş

The text you are about to read is a meditation on Kerem Ozan Bayraktar's solo exhibition *Check Valve*, presented at the new venue of Sanatorium in Karaköy. It traces the pathways of thought that unfolded during and after my visit; an experience shaped not only by the materiality of the space-specific installations, but also by the artist's own reflections, generously shared as he guided me through the exhibition. It therefore inhabits a space of reverberation that lingers between the exhibited work, Kerem's spoken commentary, and the threads they generated in my own thinking, a meditation that I prefer to call *diffraction*.

Diffraction, as articulated by Donna Haraway and later expanded by Karen Barad, resists the gesture of first reflection, then critique. It doesn't seek to mirror, to clarify, or to unveil some latent meaning presumed to lie behind the work. Instead, it refers to the active co-generation of meaning in material-semiotic encounters wherein differences make a difference. It is not reflection, as it doesn't presume to inform on some meaning that stands apart from the exhibited work.

This, perhaps, is the first thing to say about Kerem Ozan Bayraktar's exhibition: meaning is in-the-making, emergent within the porous boundaries of the exhibition space, a space that feels at once like a site-in-progress and a structure already evacuated of its original purpose, the installations exhibited therein, and in my case, the artist's own words describing it all. The site suggests both an unfinished construction and a long-since abandoned one: scaffolding without blueprint.

On the first floor, we encounter what appears to be an empty urban pool, caught in an ambiguous temporal loop. Is it waiting to be filled, or has it already been drained? Is this a beginning or an aftermath? The installation offers no certainty. And crucially, there is nothing here to *reflect*. No clear surface upon which the audience might see herself returned. Instead, there is a suggestion, perhaps only an echo, of water: a presence both spectral and suspended, sensed more than seen. And our engineers, no doubt, know exactly how to contain and direct it once it arrives, just check the diagram affixed to the wall, the design that quietly insists on its own authority over flow.

Around the pool are buckets of pink liquid, contained, and unmistakably more paint than water. A liquid potential saturates the air, hovering between the virtual and the actual, awaiting actualization, or already dissolved into oblivion. If it once flowed, it now circulates otherwise; deterritorialized, redistributed, uncontained.

On the screen, footages of fountains from various cities flicker and loop, yet the space we are in is rock-solid, construction material quietly asserting itself above and around the cement floor of the pool. It is the built-in infrastructure that remains: the quiet architecture designed to sustain flows of all kinds.

Susan Leigh Star, in her seminal article *The Ethnography of Infrastructure*[1] refers to infrastructure as "both relational and ecological", as something that means "different things to different groups, part of the balance of action, tools, and the built environment, inseparable from them, frequently mundane to the point of boredom." The pool-to-be, or the-pool-that-has-been, is just such an overlooked relational infrastructure. It is indeed, mundane to the point of boredom, if it weren't for the allusion to *play* that the artist -to our rescue- has aspired to evoke. Fluid-less as it stands, a splash of pink and gold confetti, scattered around the pool, echoes the memory of a moment: something has happened here. A party, perhaps. A celebration. Joy, summoned into presence only to be retracted the moment it was evoked. Indeed, "when is an infrastructure finished, and how would we know that?[2]" where the not-yetness, and has-alreadyness of the pool gestures toward the various loops that infrastructure is designed to sustain: loops of circulation, delay, redirection, and return. It alludes to the recursive rhythms of "seeing and naming things differently under different infrastructural regimes" where function is never fixed, but reconfigured with each shifting context, each temporal fold.[3] And, perhaps, the need for a check valve to direct the flow?

1   Star S. L. (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. American Behavioral Scientist 43, 377-391.
2   Star S. L. (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure, p. 379.
3   *idem*.

On the second floor, there lies a structure somewhere in between a scaffold and a display case, it is at once a skeletal support system and a provisional architecture of presentation. It is composed of raw industrial scaffolding, its steel pipes weathered and utilitarian, interrupted only by two vertical poles dipped in pink, once again a gesture of play or perhaps a signal, a flash of engineered absurdity. The element of joy in the mundane boredom of infrastructure.

What it holds is a suspended surface: a matte, metallic plane from which hang a series of blueprint-like diagrams. These technical drawings, rendered on paper and pinned with precision, gesture toward the materials that hold the infrastructure together: pumps, valves, fluid systems, perhaps even the speculative organs of circulation. There is something provisional in its stance, as if it might be dissembled at any moment, and yet also something declarative: it insists on being read, inspected, decoded.

The entire construction hovers above the ground, held up by nothing more than its own logic of utility. It seems to belong to a site still under study, a laboratory of public works paused mid-thought. And yet, like the pool below, it refuses to function as fully realized. It exhibits, instead, the fragmentary diagrams of possibility. It does not carry flow; it speculates on how it might be carried.

This is infrastructure as epistemology: a way of knowing through assembly, provisionality, relationality and suspended function. And perhaps, like a check valve, it too operates in one direction only, allowing the concept to pass through while holding something else in suspension: what might have been built, or what still resists being seen.

And on closer inspection, one begins to sense not only the fragmented nature of the depicted components, but also the quiet insistence embedded in the instructions themselves: the inevitability of decay, the transience of encounter, the slow unraveling of systems once thought stable, the futility folded into every blueprint that seeks to hold the uncontrollable in place. And how infrastructure becomes visible precisely when it breaks. What emerges is less a manual than a murmured elegy, a manifesto against imagining infrastructure as a seamless totality. Here, failure is not an exception but a built-in-rhythm, a structural hum. The diagrams resist closure, and in doing so, pay homage to the precarious balance of homeostasis: delicate, partial, always edging toward collapse or adaptation. Just as the meticulously recorded board meeting minutes displayed on the wall now bear the gnawed traces of worms, decay turned annotation, consumption turned commentary; time has inscribed its own edits on the archive, revealing once again that every system speaks most clearly in its erosion.

On the wall behind the vertical pink poles, a screen loops short clips excerpted by the artist from a range of films, each chosen for their utterance of a single word: *system*. The repetition is uncanny, almost comical in its inevitability. A variation of "system is broken" echoes faintly in the background, becoming a kind of ambient refrain. And yet, as we turn back to the blueprints, those plane, technical murmurs pinned along the metallic skin of the structure, we begin to understand: the system must break in order to be sustained. Its continuity depends not on stability, or totality, but on rupture, maintenance, recalibration. What we are offered here is the slow dawning that systems are less architectures of permanence than fragile cycles of failure, response, and reconfiguration.

Knowing these diagrams are AI-generated, or better yet, mediated; we begin to see the algorithmic system embedded in the relational ecology of the infrastructure. The algorithm becomes one more conduit through which flows are directed, diverted, or stalled. Its entanglement further diffracting authorship, agency, and precision, and not by adding a technological gloss, but by drawing us deeper into the recursive loops of system failure and contingent repair.

It too becomes part of one of the questions the installation raises: if the system breaks, who notices? Who patches it? And how do the emergent traces, be they algorithmic, mechanical, organic, or purely conceptual, coexist in the shimmer of that aftermath?

The AI-mediated piece on the wall seems to evoke one such aftermath: a landscape from a drowned world where the check valves have come undone, and containment has ceased to function. What we see might be what remains after the system has failed to hold. The water is unretained. It looks like a speculative trace of what happens when regulation falters: not a catastrophe, but a quiet, saturated aftermath. A soft aftermath that resists resolution, inviting us to dwell in the residue of failed control.

And the *we* here is miniscule in scale, like a figurine, a toy, a joke folded into the corner of a flood map. A presence so reduced it verges on the absurd, dwarfed by the scale of the failure it inhabits. A model of control lost in a terrain that no longer responds to command. It is a quietly devastating reversal: the blueprint doesn't guide, it mocks. The diagram doesn't instruct, it enacts. And we, within it, are barely there: tokens of an intention long since submerged.

On floor minus one, we descend into an audio installation that channels the pulse of infrastructure through an uncanny register. Here, AI-generated songs murmur from the walls, folding into the space like steam. Their rhythm is faintly reminiscent of human-made lo-fi R&B: slow, intimate, almost sultry. But there's something off-filter, too polished, too recursive, too machinic. A romantic, inhumane hymn rises through the static, a ballad not to lovers but to cyclones, valves, grinders and rags.

This is the poetry of material components doing their invisible work. The algorithmically stitched lyrics recount the labor of filtration, grinding, skimming and sludging.

Here, the AI-generated lyrics drift through the space with a strangely tender cadence:

"Cyclone chambers spin the grid,
dense bits settle, forced to sit.
Sand and gravel form a bed,
water moves on straight ahead."

The verses are plainspoken, procedural: language lifted from the manual, rerouted through affect. But in their mechanical simplicity, they acquire a quiet lyricism. The system speaks in sediment and flow, in instructions turned lullabies. What emerges is a kind of infrastructural pastoral: the choreography of matter as it obeys, resists, and continues.

This is not metaphor, but material poetry. The voice, neither fully human nor entirely machine, chants the labor of sorting, sifting, and sedimenting. It is the sound of a process narrating itself, with no need for embellishment. And yet, there is something moving in the rhythm, in the weariness of repetition, in the intimacy of the overlooked.

As the track loops, it becomes a dirge for filtration, a love song for the unseen parts that keep things moving until they break. It is not a call to action but a whisper from the depths of function. ✂

Kerem Ozan Bayraktar, Modulators, 2025,
35 drawings produced using a plotter with a blue ballpoint pen on A3 technical drawing paper,
29.7×42 cm (each).
Photo: Zeynep Fırat, Courtesy of SANATORIUM

Kerem Ozan Bayraktar, Purification, 2025, Words and music generated by artificial intelligence,
Five-part composition, Digital recording,
unlimited edition.
Photo: Zeynep Fırat, Courtesy of SANATORIUM

Kerem Ozan Bayraktar, Labor, 2025, 1/150 scale model figure set, resin casts, 10×6.5 cm (each).
Photo: Zeynep Fırat, Courtesy of SANATORIUM

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