

Subject: becoming places

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Becoming Places.2001

One of the critical features of contemporary art in Turkey is a speculation on the tension between the home (the private) and the street (public). The social composure of this geography has experienced traumatic changes, and the articulation of the notions of "public" and "private" as based upon Western European dualities is a rather weak way of describing such changes. For the duality to make sense, the terms have to be oppositional, reciprocal and applicable across languages. But, there is no Turkish word that corresponds to the "public," and instead of "private" we use terms like "home" or "intimate." Hence, it is necessary to articulate new concepts of difference instead of describing things as lacking (such as the description of East as a deficient or incomplete West) or through received terms such as "public" and "private" that become over time, the hollow index. "Becoming a Place" is not interested in how geography, urbanization, and the conscious or unselfconscious histories of difference force a particular mode of production. It is rather interested in how modes of production leak information about difference itself. The dissipation of private life for the benefit of the public (European social democracy and the welfare state), the increasingly privatized regulation of the public sphere, and the economies of experience in the global cities, command a lot of attention. But, there are also other problems such as the home and the street; the urgent and far reaching urbanization of rural cultures; the stamina and resistance of traditional cultures to urban modes; the organization of inner spaces; and the appropriation and ownership of public areas. Issues such as this not only determine the traffic of objects, but also the formation and the control of the body in the social sphere.

The exhibition will present a series of works and proposals by artists from Turkey and artists who have worked in the Turkish context. The strata of the exhibition looks at the physical changes in the organization of the home and the street, immigrations both within the country and from the outside, the anti-legal capitalism, the ad hoc organization, the problematic of adaptation of a received system of

culture and the continuation of tradition, the construction of visibility, and finally laying claim to public space.

The severity of domestication, civility and acceptance of the conditions of life that one notices in many of the artists in Turkey has been quite perplexing for me. This servility is pervasive and covers most intellectual fields. It could be said that this was a result of the 1980 military dictatorship, that produced remarkable depoliticization and aphasia. Such an explanation however, stops short of explaining the new middle-class that had emerged in the late 80s. This new social entity was remarkably entrepreneurial in the matters of body (remember the low-brow society magazines and the "Tan" newspaper concept that used to cater to the middle classes being product of as well as the producers of the new culture of the day). In a sense, notions of humility, empathy and shame had evaporated. Direct participation died out and got replaced by a kind of individual politics (coinciding with the age of narcissism). This provides a summary explanation of the transition from the dictatorship to the motherland party years. Hence it would be inadequate to articulate the issues of the acceptance of conditions of life as a given or as a by-product of the coup, it points rather to something that runs deeper and stronger. Hence, the question, "was it always like this" is a legitimate one that I do not know the answer of. Although a fatalistic approach to life is not what one would expect from an urban artist, it seems to be one of the things that anchors this geography. Most artists from this place are the epitome of the not-avant-garde, i.e. there is no imagination of the possibility of fighting one's way out of the system, no visible transgressions, and no road maps.

I am not trying to describe an other geography by way of a deficit that the original portends to have. The larger issue would be if some of the operational commonalities can be called into question. This is when we can begin to discuss the site of presentation, the place where art is exhibited, presented, shared and even exchanged. There is no doubt in mind ever that such a space has to be public. Each society has zones that can be described in some way as public space. Calling into question the possibility of any kind of public space, be it regulated or not, would undo the possibility of any kind of contemporary art. But instead of focusing our attention on the sites of communication (the public sphere), let us imagine the

mental geography where the work is thought out and conspired. This is inevitably the home. It is also inevitable that we will not look at only the work itself but the conditions of its emergence, and emergencies. What is the middle space between the life-style of the artist and his/her work? My interest is in the space between the lifestyle and the work, in the difference it communicates. I am trying, you may say, trying to change temporarily, the tools of understanding.

A particular slant among some of the artists in the exhibition, despite their differences when looked from a distance, is their conservative decency. For example, Bülent Pangar and Aydan Murtezaođlu live in a self-perpetuating continuum of accepted norms, they do not take risks. There are neither self-imposed exiles, nor down and out trips or sojourns abroad. Pangar has no desire to learn a language other than Turkish, and Murtezaoglu is a master at (un)promoting herself. Now let's look at some of the works: Pangar uses his family in virtually all of his photographs with the immediacy and urgency of family as an already here material. One can easily look back into history of late Ottoman art, the painter Osman Hamdi's use of his image and family in various guises. The difference between Hamdi and Pangar is that any representation Pangar uses, the tableau suggests plausibility. The family as a victim of some horrendous catastrophe: the son going mad and killing his family; all the family dead on the floor as victim of a gas leak, the father doubling as a mafia honcho praying with a pistol tucked in his belt, the daughter as the recipient of family violence.... Whereas Osman Hamdi's recodified appearance were improbable, a Muslim cleric organizing his body in a curiously European fashion, or a young woman in a tempting pose, almost levitating over a Koran stand! The difference is that Pangar does not transgress his class or milieu. For Pangar, home is the odd micro cosmos of the society, permeable to the outside forces. Hence, he charts out the interior as a reflection of yellow journalism that became so pervasive in the society of the late 1980s to 1990s Turkey.

This is in strong contrast to Tina Carlsson's photographs of a specific home in Ankara where she and her daughter stayed for a time. She is married to a Turkish man. The photographs are taken by her and her young daughter. While the images suspend any notion of documentation by uncanny angles, strange but exact details and little vignettes, the overall feeling is

one of a powerful closure. What we keep on seeing is a place where women spend long periods of time. The daily work is overwhelming, the whole house turns into a production area, the vegetables are peeled and skinned in the dining room the place where the laundry is also left to dry on a makeshift rope. Come the evening, everything would return to impeccable form. The television set, one notices, is covered by a simple textile to ward off dust. While this may be due to an instinct of ornamentation and conservation, what it really does is to domesticate and contain the outside that leaks in from the TV. The set is more of an object than a transmitter, just as the windows are there, but you can hardly see the outside through the tulle and the curtains. Here is a beautiful difference of cognition, not only between the images of the mother and daughter, but also between the no-name and all-too-common household bathing in a Nordic luminosity, albeit in Ankara, and Pangar's gaze of the insider that makes an ironic joke from which he himself is not impervious.

Yet another spin arrives in Murtezaođlu's *Top/less*. The work is based on posed family portraits in which the sitters are slightly uneasy, obligatory smiles frozen on their faces. The photograph is taken at home, perhaps in one of these spaces that divides the living and dining room, as the middle class used to call them, between the salon and the *salle-à-manger*. Apart from the young girl, the artist herself, decked in a red top, nothing stands out; there are no highlights, and the figures fade into various shades of greys and browns, on the verge of invisibility. The girl provides a momentary semblance of life, but it seems inevitable that she will turn into others and settle into the same destiny as she grows up. The old lady anchors the photograph and completes the cyclical destinies of the family. Two half balls in reddish pink, placed where her breasts will blossom, express her desire to claim her sexuality, eroticizing and short-circuiting an image that is otherwise suffocatingly dull. The little girl was the artist some 25 years ago. Murtezaođlu returns to the image and looks at it from the angle of the viewer. The half ball breasts are a both a resignation and transgression projected onto the screen called the past. What Murtezaođlu contests and accepts in a most subtle way is what the sociologist Nilüfer Göle has described as "self limitation." The title of the work *Top/less* is not supposed to be a catchy, far from it, it points to a regulation of the social sphere by a

series of unwritten but well known norms. Hence, we can speak of a notion of religion society.

If there is a private, the opposite would be the public, the “anonima,” the street as scenery, the sphere where the body is a performing subject and a projection. One looks outside (either from the inside or from the outside), but can one look inside from the inside? This is what Murtezaođlu does. But, as the writer here, I am not inside. I can only imagine the inside. I produce, potentially, an imaginary inside. If there is a rupture in the paradigm I have loosely described above, it is in the early works of Halil Altýndere. His works were blatantly provocative, leaving the artist vulnerable, open to aggression, and in this sense one could look at it from within a tradition of the avant-garde.

Take for example *My Mother Likes Pop Art because Pop Art is Colourful*. The old lady sits on the floor on multicoloured quilts and pillows. She holds a book in her hand. She looks at it attentively and respectfully. The book is called “Pop Art”. Issued by Taschen, one of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe paintings adorns the cover. Hence we look at two women at the same time; the old lady’s decent and well mannered posture and the pleasure inducing image of Monroe. A sign of lack of wealth in our times is the abundance of bric-a-brac and colour in modest houses. This colourful universe in this room points out possibly to modesty, and rural living style. The book is almost attached to the lady’s hand by someone else, as she is in all likelihood, illiterate. She looks, but she cannot read, the position itself implies another way of reading, at best reciting. But, the colours of the cover are in perfect harmony with the colours of the interior. Could the circulation of cultural forms be often based on a loveable misunderstanding? In order to read *Pop Art* — Nilüfer Göle suggested to me in a discussion —, she must stop being the mother, and leave her corner. But, she does not bulge. To stand up, get vertical, and get out is what the “modern” ego would do. But, to read *Pop Art* without leaving one’s habitus and one’s posture, would mean a change of the social imaginary. I think this is where Altýndere is located, it is his third space. The mother’s feet are bare (yes, she is the artist’s mother), and shoes are taken off when entering the home, leaving all residue of the outside world, outside. But, the outside sneaks in the form of a book, and doubles by the artist’s presence in the room. His mother’s misunderstanding of *Pop Art* has to do as well with the peripheral artist’s

traditional way of reaching knowledge through glossy international publications, but we won't talk about that now.

In *Long Live Evil* we see two men, one with long hair. He looks like some kind of sleazy Turkish movie character who has over identified with the roles he plays. The other has darker skin, he is wiry. Both of them are ready for trouble. The image has a bit of the aura of the early 70s; cheap shades, long Marlboros (the label that used to be smuggled in from Bulgaria in the 70s) on their lips. The Marlboro may have as well been stashed in the ankle socks. So many images flow through this single image, namely the early 70s shantytown hero of rural background, the kind of hero that walked straight into his destiny, into the things that would kill him. It brings to mind the great film artist director Yılmaz Güney who was on an accelerating collision course with the state.

Altýndere's image refers to early Güney films, when he would act in local remakes of gangster movies. Always on the side of the destitute from the ghetto, Güney would look amazingly cool or over the top depending on how prejudiced you are. This seems to be the reference for *Long Live Evil*, appropriating Güney's pre ideological lust for revolt.

But after all, we are in the relative safety of the home, the place where artists conspire from. Home as a site of conspiracy keeps recurring in the works of many artists. Home offers a respite between identity as self limitation and the emancipatory individualism.

Not being impervious to police raids, coal stove poisoning, and now earthquakes, the safety of the interior is certainly contested. But, it is a sphere in which speculation and inspiration takes place. If I over summarize, in the modern times, the "local" artist used to re-live the experience of modernism. The outer shell was avant-garde, yet the core was domestic, and there would be an amazing distance between the production and life attitude. What seems to have changed is that in these days, the home/interior has not only become an accepted way of being in the world, but it is also the conspiracy ground of new work.

When we step outside, something else happens. The building and the neighbourhood in which *Proje4L* is located is a starting point for a number of proposals for the project. One is Gülsün Karamustafa's *Men Crying*, a three monitor video installation. The museum is on the borderline of two dissimilar neighbourhoods;

between Istanbul's pre-eminent new business center —the Levent-Maslak corridor— and a much older working class neighbourhood, Gültepe. The working class neighbourhood is a reminder of the factories that were supplanted by the business towers, such as the high rise in which the museum is located. Karamustafa was the artistic director of a feature film (A Sip of Love) about 15 years ago. During the preparation of the sets and the shoot, she spent a long time in the homes, shops and streets of this neighbourhood. In one way, she has returned to the neighbourhood, and collaborated once again with the director Atıf Yılmaz to make three short videos in the style of the early 1960s black and white films. In each video, a famous male movie star ends up crying in solitude. Men crying! The idea of men crying ("men don't cry") in public space may look inadmissible, but men cry in private or secretly. I remember as a child the loud sobbing of the father of a friend of mine in the cinema way in the back seat. Sometime during the movie, he would move to the back and take out his cloth envelope I suppose. When the lights were back on, it was as if nothing had happened. This reflects upon the notion that contrary to all claims, in Turkey men are not macho at all. One can clearly see this in the representations of the male, there are no erotic images, and no sculpted male hood. Here, men are ultra domestic, as a friend puts it, "they cry because they do not grow up!, because the distance between the mother's and wife's bosom is short and straight!" In Esra Ersen's video of the hamam, we arrive at a gender exclusive space where two women gossip endlessly and in a non-chalant way about nothing. They exchange intimate details of their life heedlessly. In the video This is Disney World Ersen "interviews" street kids with glue sniffing addiction. As much as the hamam is turned inside out to disclose intimate knowledge, children who are supposed to be under the protection of their families are running the streets. It is pertinent that Ersen has picked up on the phenomenon of private parts flowing into the public space, something that this culture is experiencing in increasing frequency, goes against all I have written about in the above regarding a conservative society. This is because Istanbul itself is becoming a brutal megalopolis.

A very specific universe within the new global Istanbul is the anti legal capitalism, the under-belly, the parallel economy that Hüseyin Alptekin has elaborated over the last decade. As Erden

Kosova writes on Alptekin's paillettes "... today examples of cultural barter between different social segments are all around us: the guts of the megalopolis are certainly supreme sources of an innovation thirsty high design industry. Yet just after appearing on the streets of posh neighbourhoods or in the pages of fancy magazines, the products of fashion designers or spin doctors in the advertisement machine reveal their fragility to be re-appropriated by their original source. Fake copies of designer clothes, circulation of non registered excess stocks, an anti legal capitalism in short, summons back the use of masses. This mutual process of taking & giving between kitsch and glamour also informs the material Hüseyin Alptekin uses in his recent projects. Originating from the drag clubs, the paillette ornamentation was transferred onto the high street billboards and the showcases of DKNY or Esprit and is now stuffing the stalls of cheap markets and jumble shops. Cyclical modes of consumption, however, are the primal concern of Alptekin's paillette panels. Utilisation of kitsch and glamour in the series starting with the inscription Love Lace is rather a means to proceed into a gaiety on the visual surface: a cheering which renders the sociological invisible..."

If this anti legal economy is the only one Istanbul has, if this city has rendered its minorities invisible — as it has done so all through the last century — Alptekin restores an empathic dignity in his photographs of hotel signs, individuals and paillette productions.

In the new megalopolis, the street is a no man's land. A moment that this makes itself evident all over the city is during the Muslim feast of sacrifice that Pangar has photographed and reassembled in a series of arrangements for two years. Although the ritual calls for the animal's blood to seep into the earth, it's not so easy to find a good patch of land anymore. The sacrifice takes place in a no man's land, by the side of highways, in abandoned lots where transitory spaces are set up for selling, sacrificing and portioning the animal. High-rise buildings loom in the background. Two disparagingly discrete, and ominous images converge. It is convergence such as this that has lead Eric Göngrich to canvas the whole city from the position of an outsider. Göngrich uses, intentionally, the touristic apparatus (the camera, the guidebook, the slide projection), but only to reveal their deficiencies. As a result, he brings back to the exhibition a book of impressions (a guide book?)

called the “picnic city*”, a double screen slide projection, and summary drawings on a formica board (a plein air painting?).

Reminiscent of Göngrich’s slides of peculiarities, are Hakan Gürsoytrak’s paintings. The difference between the two is that Gürsoytrak’s paintings themselves are peculiar. Gürsoytrak’s paintings seem to come from photographs taken in purposeless fashion. They are finished with wide strips of paint enveloping the image; other times left incomplete signifying a haphazard formation. Light, greyish, weary tones, and short strokes, are kindred to the unfinished images they produce. There is nothing monumental about them. The canvases feel aged. The oil paint having been absorbed by them, makes the canvases look arid. The surface has provisional additions like plaster waiting to be cleaned off from new buildings.

Gürsoytrak’s images are about a spontaneously produced, dried out world suspended between the rural and the urban. It is filled with men who seem to be bored by their sheer abundance, mutated beyond a point of no return. They walk around aimlessly or meet around an ugly table arrangement. It is impossible to discern who is who, or even for the image of any of them to stick in the mind.

Because of their intimate size, humorous subject, and their visual and structural poverty, it is not possible to establish a distanced view from the paintings. Gürsoytrak seems to be after a particular painting mode that corresponds to the way houses are constructed in the city.

Oda Projesi (The room project) is a three person group that operates out of a room in the Galata district of Istanbul. In the late 19th century, Galata was the most important financial district, the livelihood of which came from the port and the banking, now it is a dilapidated place occupied by mostly first generation immigrants to the city. Filled with many hazardous sweatshops, the district does not make possible any kind of new construction to accommodate the growing families and provide a sense of belonging to a place. Oda Projesi have been working with the children there for more than four years, and operating as a conduit between the artists and their immediate neighbourhood. Only a few of the projects are open to general public, and art practice is only one of the many things they do with the children. For becoming a place, they will bridge relations between the persons, communities and institutions in the neighbourhood, and the exhibition, as well as the museum. Such bridges are required in a

situation where the city is becoming increasingly segregated and filtered. Can Altay's interview with Erden Kosova in this book look also at this unconscious filtering process among other things.
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