Editors’ Note

The third issue of the Red Thread e-journal comprises of critical case studies, essays, and interviews that come from the region the journal has been focusing on from its inception, and that discuss the different forms of struggle devised by socialities that can be considered "disprivileged" in economic, social and political terms and the intricate and usually complex relationship of artistic and activist practices to these groups. These muted groups which are either marginalized, displaced, or fragmented through state policies hand in hand with globalized capitalist transformations have their own particular strategies of survival and resistance against dominant politics of visibility and representation, as well as desires and fears that both disconnect them from and connect them to wider scale changes in urban contexts. Our aim in preparing this issue has been to interrogate a set of interrelated questions at that interval: in-between national/transnational spaces of capital and localities of practice, in-between controlled public spaces and public acts, in-between different forms of gentrification and emerging forms of belonging, in-between memory and counter-memory; in other words, in-between forced abstractions and dispersed yet novel materializations.

We find the focus on the interval especially productive. The interval exists in-between visibility and invisibility. Visibility and invisibility are usually set opposed to each other, the former implying a more democratic relationship to the community granted visibility. However, in neoliberal times, invisibility inheres in the proliferating forms of visibility sustained by the entrenched yet virtual positions of capital. Disprivileged groups are either turned into objects endorsing research and policy-making, or they are captured within the dominant tropes of representation in the media for visual consumption and surveillance, reminding one the concept of "poverty porn." In both cases they are abstracted from their locality, political efficacy and demands for equality. "What is politics?" then becomes a crucial question for artistic and activist practices that aim to go beyond simply pursuing policies with regard to producing more visibility. We consider Rancière’s concept of equality inspiring for articulating politics. For Rancière, radically different from policy that concerns governing and creating community consent, and which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions, the politics of “equality consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains emancipation" ("Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," October, 61, 1992, p. 58). Rancière claims that the process of equality is a process of difference, but difference does not mean confrontation of different identities. The enactment of equality is not the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question, but belongs to a particular topos of an argument - an interval: "The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being together to the extent that we are in between-between names, identities, cultures, and so on" (p.62).

The contributions to this volume attempt, in different ways and through particular cases, first to critically delineate the intervals in the face of current policies and transformations, and also dwell on the possibilities these intervals present for politics. They seek ways to pierce the "rubber wall" in Alexander Kluge’s terms, produced by the eradication of common spaces of encounter in politics and that efface the addressees of politics. The cases are particular yet comparable. It is worth the comparison for thinking about new political possibilities that can be embraced particularly by art, activism and interval modalities that are articulated between these two fields - with a call for modesty, persistence and readiness to withdraw in relating to the socialities they interact with (as exemplified in many of the contributions to this edition). Jean Francois Pérouse has said in our roundtable discussion which was part of an effort for collective thinking with potential authors on this issue: "in one way or the other art takes on the responsibility of making sense of our lives, but there are different practices of making sense; maybe from here we can think about a common understanding. Not one sided, like ‘I will tell you what happiness is,’ but in a reciprocal way."
Monsters that Remember:
Tracing the Story of the Workers’ Monument in Tophane, Istanbul
Meltem Ahiska

Hope is a memory that desires.
—Balzac

What could Balzac, the great novelist of the nineteenth century, have meant when he said that “hope is a memory that desires”? Interestingly, both Roland Barthes and David Harvey, who wrote at different times on very different subjects, refer to the above quote by Balzac in order to emphasize a distinct critical attitude to the present. Barthes’ concept of the pleasure of writing feeds on a memory that desires, because for him an influential piece of writing is nothing but an unfinished or lost one, since one could not have written it herself/himself, and one always needs to re-write, thus re-find it. Writing is a desire to re-write, says Barthes (2010: 132). In a very different vein, David Harvey quotes Balzac to argue that we need a “space of hope” that is nourished by memories, but only activated by a certain desire to change the present (Pender, 2007: 21). Despite the differences of their subject-matter, both authors share the concern of seeking hope in the desire to change the incomplete or destroyed present. The present can neither be taken as a fixed point of arrival from the past, nor merely as a point of transition to the future. Walter Benjamin had already pointed to the potential of memory for changing the content of the present in connection to the past and argued that “what science has ‘determined’ remembrance can modify. Such remembrance [Eingedenken] can complete what is incomplete (happiness) and make incomplete what is complete (suffering)” (1999: 471). The desire to re-write or re-build a space of hope runs against the dominant power imperative in our societies to celebrate and consume the present, as if it were a wrapped-up commodity with a capacity to deliver us smoothly to the future.

Monuments, as typical landmarks of “modern national society” have been part of this power imperative. Monuments have been erected with a claim to embody the will to remember; yet, paradoxically, they have mostly served to reify the present as a fulfilled moment of arrival, canceling the need to re-find and remember the past in the present. In other words, they contribute to the closure of the past as a dead body. As Harvey has noted, “the authorities want to corral memory into a monument; they wish to memorialize and monumentalize in some way or other. They don’t want it to be alive, they want it to be dead” (Pender, 2007: 21). However, monuments do not just kill memory, they also forge a regime of memory and desire that serves power. The monumental seduction, for Foucault, represents “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (1983: xiii). The monuments are dead but alive, or “undead” like vampires, seducing people to play a lethal game with power. “The monument is essentially repressive. It is the seat of an institution (the church, the state, the university). Any space that is organized around the monument is colonized and oppressed. The great monuments have been raised to glorify conquerors and the powerful” (Lefebvre, 2003: 21). They usually ask for more blood for keeping alive the spirit of the imagined community, which they claim to represent.

I argue in this article that monuments lead a life of their own in between life and death. One needs to question their “life” and the desire that derives from that within the frame of power in both its productive and destructive capacities. I take up the issue of monuments in Turkey in that interstice between life and death—or in other words, in their “monstrosity.” The depiction of monstrosity with regard to monuments in Turkey not only resonates with the terms of a current public debate on monuments, which I will elaborate on later in the article, but also invites a new discussion on memory/counter-memory. The term “monster” points to unacceptable forms of

1 A shorter version of this paper was presented as one of the plenary lectures at the ASCA Practising Theory International Conference and Workshop 2011, later it was published in the special issue entitled “Turkishness and Its Discontents” of New Perspectives on Turkey 45 (2011). We are grateful to the New Perspectives on Turkey journal for their permission to republish the article in Red Thread.
life, cast aside as “abnormal,” and can be of use in tracing how certain memories are crushed or abandoned and become aberrant. I contend that remembering cannot be understood as a process of invoking the past in its entirety; instead, it should be studied through its destruction, hence through the fragmented traces in the present. This is important not just to introduce plurality into the field of memories, but also to notice the workings of both constructive and destructive dynamics of power in the process. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, “(t)he clashing and ever more fragmented memory politics of specific social and ethnic groups raises the question whether forms of collective consensual memory are even still possible today, and, if not, whether and in what form social and cultural cohesion can be guaranteed without them” (2003: 17). If the consensual memory that monuments “normally” assume is so problematic today in contested and fractured political histories of nation-states such as Turkey, the “monstrous” may reveal the counter-memories of destruction against the oppressing imperative of official history.

In order to discuss monstrosity, power and memory, I will focus on a particular monument in Tophane, the Workers’ Monument, which has been subjected to destructions ever since the time it was put in place in 1973 and which still stands in the same place as a crippled and unidentifiable body. I will argue that the story of the destruction of the Workers’ Monument cannot be read independently of the performative command of the state, best observed in erecting Atatürk monuments all over the country as visual embodiments of power and furthermore securing and protecting them against destruction by the force of law.

Visits to Tophane in search of the culprits of violence and destruction

The fragments of memory can be found in particular sites. Yet, the relationship of memory to locality is highly complex. If, as Arjun Appadurai has reminded, locality is always a historical context that is relational and contextual and does not directly refer to the site per se, then one has to produce the locality. I find Appadurai’s emphasis on the production of locality especially insightful: the “task of producing locality (as a structure of feeling, a property of social life and an ideology of situated community) is increasingly a struggle” (1995: 213). Then the researcher also shares a responsibility within that struggle, which would mean that she has to re-visit the locality several times, each visit with a different scale in mind, yet each embracing the same persistent question about the forces of production and destruction. This could be a way for tracing the historical and social palimpsest of memories. Therefore, I suggest to take the reader to several visits to Tophane, to the site of the Workers’ Monument, in order to contextualize the process of its destruction and to trace the monstrous memories it may embody.

At this point, I should note that Tophane is an old district very close to what is considered the cultural center of Istanbul. Tophane has a long history: from a dock area in the Ottoman times, over an early example of a “free industrial zone” in the first years of the Turkish Republic with an automobile assembly factory of the Ford Motor Company, 2 to forced changes in its ethnic make-up through displacements and migrations, it is now an area of art venues, including the Istanbul Modern Art Museum. The dock warehouses (antrepo) on the shore of Tophane are silent witnesses to these changes. They once hosted maritime trade, then an industrial complex, now contemporary art and international cultural events, such as the Istanbul Biennial. The social impact of the not yet realized and highly debated Galatatop project in the same region, which is envisaged to extend over an area of 100,000 square meters and to contain a series of luxury hotels, restaurants and shops around a port for international cruise ships, is yet to be seen. In this process, we see an intermingling of capitalist and nationalist impetuses that could be interpreted simultaneously on the local, national and global scales. For example, Pelin Tan’s comments are interesting in that they show how the recent changes in Tophane are informed by larger-scale dynamics; she has diagnosed the change in the “locality” through her own observations interpreted in the light of a critique of neo-liberalism: “The change began when the ‘rather ordinary’ little house of the muhtar [municipal officer responsible for and elected by the

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2 Researched and analyzed in Aslı Odman’s continuing PhD thesis, The Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History, Boğaziçi University.
neighborhood] was converted into an Ottoman-style wooden house. The whole process was finalized within a few weeks. The structure is now shining in the middle of the Tophane Park, fulfilling the desire for the revitalization of ‘pure’ Turkish identity” (2007: 487). Yet, as Tan has noted, this re-invention of an Ottoman neighborhood amidst the gentrification of the area, “would naturally be experienced as completely asynchronous by residents” of Tophane (2007: 487).

The existing population of Tophane at the moment mostly consists of migrants with Arabic origin from Eastern parts of Turkey, who practically replaced the non-Muslim minorities—Armenians, Greeks, and Jews—who were forced out of Istanbul through hostile nationalist campaigns culminating in the violent events of September 6-7, 1955. There are also Kurdish and Roma people living as minorities in the district; they are subject to discrimination by the majority of the residents in the locality. Therefore, the majority of “the people” in Tophane are already complicit with the hegemonic practices and discourses of the state; furthermore, they are known to have “strong” ties with extreme right-wing parties, such as the Milliyeti Hareket Partisi (MHP, Nationalist Movement Party) and the Büyük Birlik Partisi (BBP, Great Unity Party), as well as with the pro-Islamic Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) in power and the municipality represented by the AKP in Istanbul, through the existence of political and religious organizations in the district. Yet, “the people” in Tophane also constitute a social group that is underprivileged and highly vulnerable in the face of the recent transformations. As I have noted above, Tophane is undergoing a rapid process of change, renovation, and re-building—the newly founded art galleries being one of its apparent symptoms. The recent and proposed transformations in line with the gentrification process in Istanbul threaten most members of the existing population in Tophane with displacement.

My first visit to Tophane, the site to which we will return at different moments in the article, is motivated by a recent incident. On 21 September 2010, when five newly founded, neighboring art galleries in Tophane jointly organized a Tophane Artwalk (a name advertised in English) for a simultaneous opening of art shows in the galleries, there was a violent assault against a group of people who came to the openings. A group of men, allegedly from the neighborhood, armed with iron sticks and pepper gas, fiercely attacked the men and women who were enjoying their drinks and chatting with each other in front of the galleries. Several persons were severely wounded, while others fled in horror. The incident triggered a major debate in Turkish cultural and political circles. While the police was obviously indifferent to the assault and no serious legal action was taken against the aggressors—in other words, the incident was apparently hushed by the authorities—there was a heated debate among various intellectuals, and they were highly divided in their reactions. It was as if all that was at stake were interpreting the possible motives of the locals leading to the aggression, but not finding and penalizing the actual aggressors. The Islamist and conservative intellectuals argued that the reaction of “the people” from the district

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3 For a historical account of these incidents, see Güven (2006). For an article that interprets the attacks against the exhibition titled “Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary” at Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları, Istanbul, 2005, see also Ergener (2009).

4 The artists and gallery owners made a declaration after the event, claiming that this was a pre-planned and organized attack and not just a spontaneous fight with the local residents and insisted that the perpetrators be found. They also pointed out the passivity of the police during the attacks. Seven persons were taken in custody after the incident, but were soon released. The Istanbul Governor Hüseyin Avni Mutlu, on the other hand, attempted to present the incident in his press release as a simple feud between the local residents and the art crowd, due to the latter blocking the pavements during the so-called Artwalk (Radikal, 22 September 2010). The Tophane news website, which claims to be the voice of the neighborhood, had a very aggressive tone against the galleries and their crowd, accusing them of introducing moral deterioration to the neighborhood (www.tophanehaber.com).

5 The incident immediately triggered various reactions from intellectuals, and there were heated debates in the media. For a comprehensive and critical evaluation of these debates, see Tuncay Birkan, “Tophane Saldırısı Sonras: Mutenalaştırma ‘Tahlilleri’” (Birlikim Gündem, 8 October 2010); Süreyya Evren, “Tophane Saldırısının Ardından Belirlenen Resmi Açıklamanın Bir Reddi” (Birlikim Gündem, 14 October 2010).

6 Tuncay Birkan made the very important point that the “analyses” immediately after the incident, especially from the “left camp” which saw this incident as a reaction of the local residents to the capitalist gentrification in the district, instead of inquiring about the specifics of a possible organized fascist attack (which had its antecedents in the district), could be read as a symptom of the anti-intellectualism and self-hatred of the leftists. “Tophane Saldırısı Sonras: Mutenalaştırma ‘Tahlilleri’” (Birlikim Gündem, 8 October 2010).
of Tophane against the art audience was of a moral and religious nature, since those artsy fellows were drinking and enjoying themselves out in the street and especially since most women were dressed in miniskirts and outfits with low cuts, going against the religious and moral sensitivities of the locals. Many left-leaning intellectuals, on the other hand, thought that this was a necessary, even revolutionary reaction of “the people” against the gentrification of the district, aided by the upper-class world of art galleries, the gentrification which displaces or impoverishes the lower strata; other, still leftist, but so-called secularist or laïque intellectuals claimed that the conservative “people” of Tophane were to be blamed, since they had no taste for art and no tolerance for secularism, multi-culturalism, and modern life-styles.

Although it is not possible to go into the details of the incident and all the different positions in its aftermath, I find the debate highly significant for revealing how “the people” in the district were taken as a whole and ascribed certain qualities, either negative or positive, without much need for further specific inquiry. This reminds one of Yael Navaro-Yashin’s analysis of the discourse of “civil society” imagined as the site of “the culture of the people” after the 1980s in Turkey, producing a reified construction of “the people.” Her research has revealed how this construction has been enabled by Islamist politics through a discourse of society against the secularist elites and the state, and how it was soon adopted by the so-called secularist elites evoking a similar construct in a competing way (2002). I would furthermore argue that the way in which “the people” have been instrumentalized in the above discussion is symptomatic of a certain crisis of representation: while the locals do not have many opportunities to vocalize their problems and demands, let alone their memories of the transformations in the district, their motivations are over-interpreted according to differing political ideologies.

I contend that neither theories of gentrification, nor easy assumptions about either the conservatism or the resistance of “the people” of Tophane can be explanatory on their own. Although there is a misleading myth of a unified neighborhood, as has been critically noted by the social geographer Jean-François Pérouse, the district is quite heterogeneous in terms of its population and has a long, layered and complex history, with which one has to engage before generating any interpretation of the recent attacks against the art galleries. But my aim here is not to add yet another interpretation to the existing ones regarding the above incident. Instead, I would like to make a detour, tracing the story of a forlorn object—the broken Workers’ Monument—in the same district, not very far from the site of the incident, in order to problematize the representations of the “locality” and “the people” that are produced today, so as to reflect on what remains unrepresentable within the complex history—in other words, to reflect on the problem of power, history, and memory/counter-memory.

The invisibility and visibility of the Workers’ Monument

Years ago, when I was a politically active university student at the end of the 1970s, it was of great concern to us leftists that the Workers’ Monument in Tophane had been attacked by fascists, a term that we used for those organized groups that were extremely violent against leftist organizations and people and seemingly against anything that represented socialism, such as the statue of a worker holding a sledgehammer. I must say that we did not really know much

7 “Drinking” and “mini-skirts” were repeated themes that surfaced in several news items about the incident. Yasin Aktay has provided a wider context, arguing that the new “life-styles” that are being imported to the district go against the “family life” established in this “neighborhood” (“Tophane’də Mahalleye Baskı”, Yeni Şafak, 25 September 2010).
8 The most extreme interpretation in this vein came from Ferhat Kentel who has argued that the attack against the galleries in Tophane had a class base, which opposed the intruding gentrification and alienating capitalist relations into the locality; therefore, one should consider this reaction as an attempt of “protection” or even “resistance” by the locals (www.marxist.org, 6 October 2010).
9 The novelist Ahmet Umit has best exemplified this attitude in an interview, calling the attack a “barbarism” that goes against the spirit of Istanbul, against modernization, against art, against multi-culturalism and tolerance (Hürriyet, 9 October 2010).
10 The novelist Ahmet Umit has best exemplified this attitude in an interview, calling the attack a “barbarism” that goes against the spirit of Istanbul, against modernization, against art, against multi-culturalism and tolerance (Hürriyet, 9 October 2010).
11 The photograph of the original statue taken before its destruction represents a particular monumental style resembling the Soviet workers cult in the 1930s.

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Yeni Şafak 2010. See also Pérouse (2011).
about the history of the monument, why and by whom it was built, but we took it as a symbol of our socialist struggle. And we grieved its destruction in that framework, without actually knowing who, and with what motives, was responsible for its destruction. That was before the 1980 military coup, an important rupture in the social, political and economic history of Turkey. Much later, in the 2000s, whenever I mentioned the broken Workers’ Monument in my social memory course in the Department of Sociology at Boğaziçi University, as a memory trace that keeps returning to me, none of my students were aware of its existence. Then, I also began to have doubts whether it still existed, or even whether it had existed at all. Although it is placed right at the center of the Tophane Park facing a very busy central avenue and although one passes the park quite frequently, the broken monument had apparently grown invisible over time. I always thought I should look for it, but then, whenever passing by, always forgot to check if it was there. It was as if one avoided such a sight, as something disturbing, something alien, yet so much imbued with the memories of a past time.

The Austrian novelist Robert Musil has written that “there is nothing as invisible in the world as a monument” (cited in Huysssen, 2003: 32). Here Musil is referring to a pacifying closure brought by the monumental. However, in the case of the broken Workers’ Monument, the monument became invisible not because of a closure, but because of an open wound, which, when “normalized,” can also be pacifying for a different reason. When discussing the selectivity of remembering as always informed by the present context, Freud has argued that forgetting shields against unwanted and shocking registers of memories. In Turkey, the memories of the 1980 military coup and the political struggles that were crushed by its violence are still far from having been worked through, and the traumas still have debilitating effects on society. Yet, I should add that the present is never perfectly closed in a traumatic case, as the present also bears the potential to unexpectedly bring back unwanted memories as the return of the repressed.

The Workers’ Monument did return indeed. I will now dwell on how the broken monument has just recently become visible once again. Two incidents had an impact.

First, on the night of 15 March 2010, the artist collective Hafriyat organized an art event that aimed to secretly “steal” the Workers’ Monument, just to create awareness about its presence and to make the monument visible. The artist group said that,

in this project, which may be regarded as a ‘memoir-memory’ initiative aiming to raise awareness of collective memories, Hafriyat Group builds its approach upon a temporary displacement of the Worker statue in collaboration with the Yeni Sinemacılar and Hazzavuzu art groups. The project derives from the discreet removal of the statue and the recording and documentation of responses from the public and state institutions, as well as all forms of related

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12 The military coup in 1980 was one of the most significant events in Turkey’s history and has set a harsh rupture point, leading to radical changes in the texture of society under the surveillance of a violent military dictatorship. Political organizations and parties were banned; thousands of people were arrested, tortured and killed; many went into exile; many disappeared. At the same time, the economy was liberalized, prioritizing the market as the new motor and mirror of society and producing new discourses about desirable ways of life. See Gürbilek, 2011.

13 Hafriyat, meaning “excavation” in Turkish, is the name of a group of artists who defend autonomous principles in art production. They refuse to engage in conventional art practices and instead emphasize collective work that deals with the excavation of cultures and memories in the modern city for creating new spaces of life. They opened their own venue in Karaköy in 2007, which hosted many politically spectacular exhibitions before closing down in 2010.
publications, news, documents and information. And of course, in this open-ended project, the invisibility of the Worker statue is used to make the issue visible in all its contexts (Akagündüz, 2011: 177).

However, while the project was being executed and recorded at the same time that night, “the people” of Tophane, as it was reported in the media, noticing that there was some activity around the monument, stopped the artists and claimed back their broken monument. This is a very interesting claim that I will discuss below. Nevertheless, albeit a “failure,” the art event enjoyed media coverage, bringing back to us the image of the broken monument.

The second incident that contributed to the visibility of the Workers’ Monument is more recent and has also introduced the term “monster” in relation to monuments. In January of 2011, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan, visited Kars, a city on the Turkish-Armenian border, and when he saw the tallest “civil” monument of Turkey (approximately 30 meters high), the Humanity Monument, under construction there, he called it ucube, literally meaning “monster.” The monument, sponsored by the previous mayor of Kars, is designed by the sculptor Mehmet Aksoy, with the declared purpose of sending messages of friendship to the Armenians across the border. Actually, it is so tall that it can be seen from Armenia, the artist has claimed.

However, the Prime Minister was quite straightforward in disclosing his dislike and consequently advising that the “monster” be demolished. The term “monster” quickly circulated in different circles and triggered yet another debate on the question of monuments in Turkey. Interestingly, soon thereafter, the term “monster” was associated with the Workers’ Monument in Tophane. In the media there were articles arguing that in Turkey most statues and monuments suffer from vandalism, carried out either by the people or by the state itself, and that the Workers’ Monument in Tophane should be remembered as a typical example. In fact, these articles pointed to the broken Workers’ Monument as a monster. Now, so many years after its

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14 Many newspapers covered the art event, publishing the image of the broken monument and making statements such as “The art event failed. The Hafriyat Group planned a good ‘action’ in order to attract attention to forgotten and destroyed statues. The worker statue in Tophane was going to be stolen one night. However, it turned out that the residents somehow wanted to lay a claim to their statue.” Radikal, 24 March 2010. See also Banu Güven, "İççi Heykelinin Çilesi,” Radikal, 3 April 2010.
15 Hafriyat’s video work, which tells of the process of the art event and which is named Seventh Man (after John Berger and Jean Mohr’s book A Seventh Man, 1982) was shown as part of the art exhibition Tactics of Invisibility, co-curated by Emre Baykal and Daniela Zyman, in Vienna, Berlin and Istanbul in 2010-2011. Although the art video Seventh Man aims to reveal and discuss the issues around the Workers’ Monument, it does not really reflect on the “reaction” of the “people” in Tophane during the art event.
16 The previous mayor, Naif Alibeyoğlu, was a member of the AKP, but due to conflicts with the party resigned in 2008 and transferred to the opposition party, the Cemhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, Republican People’s Party).
17 Mehmet Aksoy is an established sculptor in Turkey, also known for the controversies around his artwork. His statue Perlier Ülkesi, which was placed in the Attnpark in Ankara, was removed in 1994 by decision of the Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek of the AKP, with insulting words such as “I spit on such art.” Aksoy took the case to court and won, after which the statue was re-erected in the same spot. See Mehmet Aksoy’s book of interviews (2009).
18 The former mayor of Kars wanted a monument that could be seen from Armenia. The sculptor Mehmet Aksoy emphasized in his interviews with national and international media that this monument symbolizes peace and not enmity, as do monuments of genocide. He criticized Erdoğan’s insulting words and insisted that he had a contract with the municipality; therefore, the monument could not be demolished. He also filed a lawsuit to cancel the decision. The issue raised a big debate in society. Many people signed petitions against the decision. A public meeting was held in the Beşiktaş Akatlar Kültür Merkezi to discuss the issue of the “monster statue,” and the painter Bedri Baykam, who was publicly speaking against the demolition of the monument, was stabbed by an audience member as he walked to his car after the meeting. Later, a group of intellectuals and artists went to Kars to protest the decision to demolish the sculpture (Cemhuriyet, 23 April 2011).
19 After Erdoğan’s declaration, there were also debates within the government, and while the Minister of Foreign Affairs supported the Prime Minister’s verdict, the Minister of Culture attempted to give another interpretation, according to which the word “monster” had not been used for the statue, but for the neighboring shantytowns; he also suggested that the monument would not be demolished. However, Prime Minister Erdoğan affirmed that he had used the word “monster” for the monument, re-emphasizing that it was very ugly and that such an artwork could not be accepted to stand so close to the old Islamic monuments of Kars, such as the Seyyid Hasan al-Harakani Shrine and Mosque (www.dha.com.tr).
construction and the long process of its destruction, the media has urged the public to take notice of the tragic story of the “monster” in Tophane.

How did this monument turn into a monster, and what does it signify? How does it relate to other monuments that have turned into monsters? And specifically what does it say about “the people” of Tophane, as suspects of many violent incidents including the recent attack against the art galleries, when they claim back the monster as their own monument? This seems to be a curious case, and at the same time a horror story.

**Monsters, monuments, and power**

Georges Canguilhem has argued that “what is contrary to life is not death but monstrosity” (cited in Ancet, 2010: 18); monstrosity is the inability to recognize a living being as living. Similarly, the French philosopher Pierre Ancet has claimed that, although it is a liminal concept like death, monstrosity is different from death. Death imposes a necessary external limit, while the monster threatens from the inside. Thus, Ancet has defined monstrosity as a problematic field of humanity, rather than simply being the form of the Other (2010: 21). It cannot be simply defined as an “alterity” that is projected away from the self; instead, monsters evoke a painful interrogation about both the Other and the Self (Ancet, 2010: 2).

The meaning of the monster in popular usage is not independent from its disturbing connotations. Ancet has cited Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire who as a zoologist in the nineteenth century specialized in the classification of anomalies and deviances from the “normal” structure in living beings. He created the concept of “teratology” (the science of monsters) and claimed that, “for the people, the monster is something whose appearance always leads to astonishment and that always disturbs” (cited in Ancet, 2010: 24). Ancet has furthermore argued that the mentioned disturbance implies that the subject who looks and classifies the anomaly is rather central to the definition of the monster: the monster does not exist apart from the very judgment of difference. In Braudotti’s words, “the monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity” (1996: 144, emphasis mine).

The critical discourse on monsters emphasizes the normativity that weighs on the labeling of a living being as a monster, as a way of refusing to recognize another form of being, which seems alien yet threateningly familiar. The monsters have an excess that makes them both too visible, yet at the same time invisible: “Just as too much light creates a blind spot at the center of the field of vision, the excess that characterizes monstrosity could lead to an invisibility behind the visible” (Ancet, 2010: 31) Therefore, has argued Ancet, the monster does not refer to a particular object, but to a highly subjective experience. It tells us more about the subject than about the object. Similarly, Margrit Shildrick has noted that “the monsters that engage us most, that command intricate explanation, are those which are closest to us, those which display some aspect of our own form, and speak both literally and metaphorically, a human language” (1999: 81).

Until now we have referred to organic “monsters” that are born from a human being, but cannot be accepted as human. In fact, the first denigrating utterance of the word ucube by the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan was back in 2008, in order to characterize the Roma neighborhood in Sulukule, Istanbul, as a monster, before he used the same word again for the Humanity Monument in Kars in 2011. The Prime Minister was then reported to say: “We will get rid of the monster,” pointing to the existing conditions of life of the Roma people in the Sulukule district. These words are significant in that they reveal how racist discrimination turns the local people who have been living in Sulukule for about a millennium into monstrous objects that should be discarded during the “contemporary” transformation of the city.22 But what happens when the

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22 In the opening ceremony of the Akaretler Sıraevleri in Beşiktaş, Istanbul, a series of historical buildings which constitutes one of the first examples of community housing in the Ottoman Empire and which have been recently renovated to be turned into luxury shops and hotels, Prime Minister Erdoğan gave a speech about the importance of the ongoing transformation in the city. During his speech he also mentioned Sulukule, characterizing its present condition as a
term “monster” is used for a monument, an artifact—that is, not for a living being? It is noteworthy that the boundaries between the living and the non-living are blurred here. This is exactly how Ancet has utilized the concept of the “fantastic” in relation to organic monsters. He has argued that in the perception of a monster there is confusion with regard to categorization in terms of differentiating “human art” from the “natural.” The natural is mostly likened to an artifact, as if it was artificially created by human art. The monster as a living being, such as the Roma people in the above example, is turned into an object and not regarded as human. Ancet has named it a “natural-artifice” (2010: 97). However, in the case of monuments, I contend that it must be just the opposite. The same failure of categorization holds, but this time the monument is treated as a living being, and not as a product of human art. Could we call this artificial-natural?

In a short story about the Workers’ Monument in Tophane, probably written in the late 1970s, the author Refik Yoksulabakan has narrated the destruction of the monument in such a way as to evoke the artificial-natural. The story constructs a fantasy of revenge, in which first the broken hands (holding the sledgehammer) of the Workers’ Monument and then the entire destroyed body walk away from its place to haunt the “monument-breakers” (antikranlar), as the author calls them, and claim the workers’ rights back in a nightmarish setting. The blood dripping from the monument as it walks away implies that this is not just a work of art, but also a living body. And is it not this conception of the artificial-natural that has played a role in the destruction of monuments, as we have witnessed in many parts of the world, especially during the collapse of the former “communist” regimes? The surviving monuments now live as monsters in the memory parks of many cities. Svetlena Boym has noted that

the violence against monuments at the end of the Soviet Union paradoxically revealed that the art of monumental propaganda, dreamed up by Lenin in the first years of the revolution, clearly had succeeded in one thing: blurring the relationship between actual agents of power and their monumental incarnations. If the perpetrators of the crimes were never punished, at least their monuments would be (2001: 89, emphasis mine).

Boym has regarded that the monuments were symbols of power and as such became scapegoats onto which anxieties and anger were projected:

Symbolic violence gives instant gratification—the intoxication of revenge; yet there was more to that monumental catharsis. This was the only collective attempt on the part of the Soviet citizens to change the official public sphere without intervention from above, by using direct action, not private irony, jokes or doublespeak (2001: 89).

Boym is right to point to the symbolic incarnations of power in monuments and interpreting their destruction by the people as a way of re-claiming the public sphere. Yet, there is another crucial dimension about power here. I would say, in the light of the above reflection on the concept of the monster, that monuments are not just symbols of power. Although their meanings are produced within a regime of representation, they also function beyond and above
representation. They commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings, as Arthur Danto has said. They are there to immortalize a mythical memory that constructs an imagined community through an intricate play with life and death, and by blurring this boundary. Monuments deny death by giving life to the dead, but they also deny life since they are nothing but stones. Monuments petrify life in a way that buries the living, according to Nietzsche’s disdainful remarks against the monumental. In that sense, they are the artificial-natural or, in other words, always already non-organic monsters.

Reflecting on the always already monstrous character of monuments, I do not suggest discarding the question of monuments altogether. On the contrary, the ongoing political debates in different parts of the world regarding how monuments should be built reveal a lot about the relationship between power and memory. I would say what is at stake in these debates, such as in the controversial cases of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, or regarding the various examples of counter-monuments in Germany, is exactly about how the monument relates to the dead and the living.

27 Foucault has embraced Nietzsche’s concept of genealogy to criticize the power discourse of monumental history and to evoke a different conception of historical knowledge and counter-memory (1977).
28 The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, designed by the American-Chinese-American artist Maya Ying Lin, stirred a great debate right after its completion in 1982. The black color and the V-shaped, horizontal design of the memorial were heavily criticized, and the artist was accused of not really understanding the conventions of patriotic commemoration due to her marginal position as Chinese-American woman. According to Maria Sturken, this memorial “functions in opposition to the codes of remembrance evidenced on the Washington Mall. Virtually all the national memorials and monuments in Washington are made of white stone and constructed to be seen from a distance. In contrast, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial cuts into the sloping earth: it is not visible until one is almost upon it; if approached from behind, it seems to disappear into the landscape. Although the polished black granite wall of the memorial reflect the Washington Monument and face the Lincoln Memorial, they are not visible from the base of either structure. The black stone creates a reflective surface, one that echoes the reflecting pool of the Lincoln Memorial, and allows the viewers to participate in the memorial; seeing their own image reflected in the names, they are implicated in the listing of the dead. The etched surface of the memorial has a tactile quality, and viewers are compelled to touch the names and make rubbings of them” (1998: 164).
29 The Berlin Holocaust Memorial was designed by the US architect Peter Eisenman and opened to the public in 2005. It consists of 2,711 massive rectangular stones on a sloping stretch of land (19,000 m²) between East and West Berlin. There are no plaques or inscriptions, or religious symbols at this memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe. Each stone is unique in its size and resembles a tombstone or a coffin. The designer aimed to re-create the sense of loss and disorientation that the Jews felt during the Holocaust, as one walks in a labyrinth of pathways between the massive stones. Although the meaning of the memorial is produced interactively with the visitors, the stones are coated by a special solution that protects them against graffiti. The memorial was controversial from the start, and the controversy continued after the opening. There have been many critics who found the memorial too abstract and criticized it for not providing historical information about the Holocaust.
30 The Parque de la Memoria is Argentina’s first state-funded monument dedicated to the estimated 30,000 desaparecidos (“disappeared”) who were victims of state terrorism in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. The park’s website describes the memorial as “a gash, an open wound in a grassy hill.” The park covers about 14 ha and is located along the Rio de la Plata, a river into which hundreds of victims of the military junta were thrown from planes. The decision to construct a memory park was made in 1998, and new artworks are being added to the park to this day. There are different sculptures and monuments within the park, including the Monument to the Victims of State Terror, which bears walls on which the names plaques of the disappeared are continuously added as the documentation of the state terror expands. Huyssen has said that the project of the memory park has become contentious even among the opponents of the regime who worry that the park project may become just “another figure for forgetting” and that “it may take away from the active political struggle still being waged by the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo” (2003: 100).
Yet, Huyssen has emphasized the creativity of the project in the way in which it references other legacies in the world: “We are remembering students and workers, women and men, ordinary people who had a social vision at odds with that of the ruling elites, the church, and the military, a vision shared by many young people across the globe at that time, but that led to imprisonment, torture, rape, and death only in a few countries of the world. Thus the memory park in Buenos Aires is more than a national monument. It is also part of the global legacy of 1968, together with the mass shooting of students in Mexico City and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, perhaps its darkest and most tragic part” (2003: 104-5).
31 James Young has discussed very interesting artworks designed by German artists and sculptors such as Jochen and Esther Gerz, Norbert Radermacher, and Horst Hoheisel, which deal with the memories of the Holocaust in a way very different from conventional memorials and monuments. Young has pointed to these as counter-monuments because these artists, “instead of searing memory into public consciousness, they fear, conventional memorials seal memory off from awareness altogether. For these artists, such an evasion would be the ultimate abuse of art, whose primary function to their minds is to jar viewers from complacency, to challenge and denaturalize the viewers’ assumptions.” Among other examples, I find Jochen and Esther Gerz’s work especially challenging. They designed what they call the Gegen-Denkmal (counter-monument) in Harburg, “a somewhat dingy suburb of Hamburg,” populated by a mix of “Turkish guest-workers and blue-collar German families.” “Unveiled in 1986, this twelve-meter-high, one-meter-square pillar is made of hollow aluminum, plated with a thin layer of soft, dark lead. A temporary inscription near its base reads—and thereby creates
the living. All these controversial cases have raised debates about how the commemoration of the dead should find life in the present. Will the monument replicate the general patriarchal canons embodied in the state and reproduce the memory as an eternal dead body, or will it open a space for expressing the differences and various temporalities of lived experiences? Will the monument fix the present as it is and create complacency, or will it convey a sense of elsewhere (Lefebvre, 2003: 22)? These are critical political questions that lie at the heart of how to remember.

I would argue that the concept of artificial-natural may be illuminating for understanding how the modern state commands or attempts to command memory. Here it is not so much the ideology of the state or the representation of the state that I am dwelling on, but the performative command of the state that is legitimated by and gives legitimacy to disregarding and even destroying the forms of living for the sake of a closure of a dead body of norms—in other words, to petrify the living memory so as to keep the state, as a non-living body, alive. The power embodied by the modern state turns life into a political question of government, as is well known from Foucault’s analysis of governmentality and bio-power (1990; 1991; 2003). The government of life is intrinsically related to the critical question of dividing people into who must live and who must die, which Foucault explicates with regard to state racism (2003). However, Michel-Rolph Trouillot has reminded that the state cannot be reduced to government:

...though linked to a number of apparatuses not all of which may be governmental, the state is not an apparatus but a set of processes... its materiality resides much less in institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power (2001: 127).

Then, as Navaro-Yashin has shown in her study of the faces of the state in Turkey (2002), the state is not solely an empirical category; it cannot be recognized as such, but only through its effects on society. I would furthermore claim that these effects, while on the one hand giving a class-based order to life in the capitalist society by deploying material resources as well as language, knowledge and affects in a particular way, also feed on death. In other words, the state also enacts the capacity (and delegates the capacity) to destroy particular forms of life through social processes either before or beyond the law, thus transforming death into a mystical and mysterious source of life for the continuity of power. Therefore, it is not only the ordinariness of the state that we must take notice of (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 135), but also its mysterious spell. It must be this spell of death that the state constructs and propagates through various means, including monuments, to which Foucault has referred when mentioning fascism in connection to monumental seduction: loving power and desiring “the very thing that dominates and exploits constituents in—German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkish: ‘We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice’” (Young, 1993: 30).

32 Achille Mbembe has criticized Foucault for merely focusing on Europe and offered the concept of necropolitics to point to the limits of bio-power particularly in the colony where the state of exception reigns. Necropolitics is a term to “account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (2003: 40).

33 Navaro-Yashin has said that “instead of looking for the state in tangible social institutions or statey persona, the sites of everyday life, where people attempt to produce meaning for themselves appropriating the political, ought to be studied as a central domain for the production and reproduction of the state” (2002: 135).

34 Timothy Mitchell, writing on state effects, has argued that “mundane material practices take on the appearance of an abstract, non-material form” (1999: 77). Trouillot has formulated four distinct, yet related state effects: an isolation effect, an identification effect, a legibility effect and a spatialization effect (2001: 126). On the other hand, Fernando Coronil’s analysis of the Venezuelan state as “magical” has shown that state effects are always historically constructed, mainly in connection with the regulation of economy and class structure, thus pointing to the necessity of a historical ethnography of power (1997). In this vein, the Marxist critique of capital as the dominance of dead labor over living labor can be related to the dead body of the state.

25 Svetlana Boym has cited Dostoevsky’s thought-provoking phrase: “mystery and authority” should be seen as clues to power (2001: 99).
us” (1983: xiii). When one embraces the logic of the performative command of the state, paradoxically death, even one’s own, can become desirable.

Simonetta Falasca Zamponi has analyzed the master narratives of history/memory in Fascist Italy by emphasizing the mythical appropriation of the past as a “sacred” tradition nourished by violence. Mussolini had said: “We must act, move, fight, and if it is necessary die... It is blood that moves history’s wheel.” Zamponi has commented on these words by arguing that “violence was sacred, and sacred were those who promoted it” (2003: 53). In Zamponi’s words, “fascism imposed an artificial, aauratic tradition that, through recourse to aesthetic politics, and by appealing to history as its cultural legitimatior, crushed the modern individual and presented Mussolini’s regime as the authentic and true expression of the Italian ‘community’” (2003: 68).

Although one needs to differentiate between totalitarian and so-called democratic regimes, and even between different cases of fascist rule in modern history, the power of nationalist modern states share some common characteristics in the way in which they appropriate the past in order to create an artificial “aura” of the state which feeds on violence and death to nourish a particular community.36

The auratic tradition of Atatürk Monuments and the artificial-natural

Drawing on the previous section, I argue that the contemporary discussion about Turkey’s monuments that turn into monsters cannot be separated from the field of the state practice of erecting Atatürk monuments all over the country since the late 1920s. As Navaro-Yashin has argued, “statues of Atatürk, though dead stone, have a life for those who revere them” (2002: 198, emphasis mine). For Navaro-Yashin, “the Turkish state materializes in peoples’ (semi)consciousness in the figure of the person (man) of Atatürk in the objectified form of statue, bust, portrait, or badge” (ibid).37 I suggest that one can locate the history of the Workers’ Monument in Tophane exactly in this magical and mysterious, yet highly contested terrain.

The building of Atatürk monuments as a way of visualizing and immortalizing the new Turkish state started when Atatürk himself was still alive. Aylin Tekiner in her comprehensive study about Atatürk monuments has considered the construction of an Atatürk cult starting in the late 1920s as a key feature of Turkish nationalism. The image of Atatürk was sacralized and eternalized through various representations, including monuments. Although Atatürk38 contributed to the building of the cult by attributing to himself certain unique characteristics (which later were replicated in the ideological texts of Kemalism),39 and although he was in direct contact with the sculptors who created his first monumental representations and although he even made interventions concerning the content of representations,40 it is noteworthy that Atatürk never personally attended the inauguration ceremonies of his own statues and monuments. Tekiner has interpreted this as a strategy of distancing his person from the monumental representations so that they will replace him and proliferate the “sacred” images of the regime (2010: 98-99). Atatürk must have been aware that monuments lead a life of their own, but it is not known whether he was ever uneasy about the fact that the concrete twins of his own body were already a distorted copy—a monster.

36 The monopoly of violence that the modern state holds in Weberian terms can also be thought of in this respect. The state uses violence not for reasonable ends, but to assert its opaque truth. As Jean-Luc Nancy has argued, “Violence does not serve a truth: it wants instead to be itself the truth. In place of the established order, about which it wants to know nothing, violence substitutes not another order, but itself (and its own pure disorder). Violence—that is, its blows—iis or makes truth” (2005: 17).

37 Esra Özyürek has also discussed Atatürk monuments in relation to the production of state effects (2006: 95).

38 By taking the surname Atatürk, meaning Father-Turk, Mustafa Kemal already designated himself as the procreator of the Turkish nation.

39 In a long speech he gave in 1927, known as Nutuk, Atatürk produced the constitutive narrative of the nation, in which he positioned himself with attributes such as the savior, protector, constructor, educator, mentor, guardian, leader, and father of the nation (Parla, 1994: 167-168).

40 Atatürk posed as a model for foreign artists such as Krippell and Canonica and suggested several figures to be included in the monuments. For example, for the Taksim Republic Monument, he demanded that the images of General Voroslov of the Soviet Red Army and of the Ukrainian General Frunze be included, since they had shown their support for the new Turkish Republic through their visits to Turkey (Tekiner, 2010: 98).
Erecting statues was a novelty for the new Turkish regime. The Ottomans did not approve of statues due to what is interpreted as an Islamic prohibition of figurative visual representations of living beings.\(^{41}\) However, the prohibition is a debated issue in Islam;\(^{42}\) furthermore, it is not particular to Islam, as there is also a biblical commandment that forbids the making of representative images. Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis of why a “fabricated god” was forbidden in the Jewish as well as in various Christian traditions is of interest for reflecting on the monstrous character of monuments in modern times:

...the commandment forbids the making “of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth,” that is, of anything at all. Above all, however, it forbids the making of sculpted images (the insistence on sculpture and on sculpting is striking, in all the texts related to the biblical corpus as well as those in the Talmudic and Hassidic traditions). The commandment therefore concerns the production of forms that are solid, whole, and autonomous, as a statue is, and that are thus destined for use as an idol. The question here concerns idolatry and not the image as such or “representation.” The idol is a fabricated god, not the representation of one, and the contemptible and false character of its divinity derives from the fact that it is fabricated... What is condemned, therefore, is not that which is an ‘image of’ but rather that which asserts its presence only through itself, a pure presence in a certain sense, a massive presence that amounts to its being-there: the idol does not move, does not see, does not speak... and the idolater, facing the idol, also does not see and does not understand... Thus the idol is not condemned as imitation or copy, but rather in terms of its full and heavy presence, a presence of or within an immanence where nothing opens (eye, ear, or mouth) and from which nothing departs or withdraws (thought or word at the back of a throat or in the depths of a gaze) (2005: 30-31, emphases mine).

In the light of the above analysis, it is striking that the forbidden idol in religious tradition as the fabricated god can gain a legitimate ground, with modern states opting for the position of the fabricated god. I would say that the fabrication involves both “reason” and “affect.” If “modernity” is the realm of the former, nationalism with its religious overtones fuels the latter. The state poses itself as an artifact,\(^{43}\) with idols that, in Nancy’s words, do not move, do not see, do not speak; in other words, the state is a non-living body. However, the state also mystically blows life into the artifact, appropriating the nation as an organic construct, with metaphors of community and family. Thus it eternalizes its being, by invoking the artificial-natural and commanding the idolater to have faith in the dead idol, as if it were alive. It is not surprising, then, when the Turkish state decided to erect Atatürk monuments as a way of propagating and personifying the ideals of the new regime, it made references both to “Western civilization” and

\(^{41}\) Tekiner has given a detailed account of how in the nineteenth figure sculpting, including a few statues, entered Ottoman society, yet created conflicts due to the Islamic ban on figurative visual representations. Especially three-dimensional statues were banned because they were considered coming closest to icons, as their shadows fall on the ground. Thus, while paintings and photographs eventually found their way into Ottoman society in the nineteenth century, commissioning a statue, as a representation with a shadow, remained highly problematic until the founding of the new Turkish Republic (2010: 32).

\(^{42}\) Köksal Çifçi, who has written on the problem of painting and sculpture in monotheistic religions, claims that there is only one verse of the Koran that can be interpreted in that way, but when examined more closely one can see that the verse only prohibits idolatry and not painting and sculpture as art. Çifçi also examines the hadith of the Prophet Mohammad in that framework and comes to the conclusion that the prohibition does not exist in the religious sources, but only in practice, historically starting from the Abbasid Empire in 750 (2008). Ahmad Mohammad Issa has similarly argued based on a close examination of Islamic sources that the prohibition does not derive either from the Koran or the hadith (1996). According to Jean-Luc Nancy, although there is a prohibition of representation in the Islamic tradition, “it should be pointed out that the commandment as such does not figure in the Koran but has been extrapolated out of it through interpretation” (2005: 30). It is interesting to see how popular Islamic authorities interpret the prohibition today. According to a popular Turkish Islamic website, the prohibition concerns only humans and animals, which are considered living beings with souls, while trees, mountains and other organic or non-organic things in the world are left out of the scope of the Islamic ban on figurative representation. Particularly, a representation is prohibited to have a shadow on the ground, as a living being does. The website deems that photographs are acceptable since they are not to be seen as representation, but as a direct physical emulation of an object. www.sorularlaislamiyet.com/index.php.

\(^{43}\) Margaret Sommers has interestingly argued that the “modern” state has been categorized as “artificial” in a binary relation to the naturalized existence of society predating the state, as assumed in liberal theories (1999).
nationalism, to both reason and unreason, at the same time in order to confront the disturbing problem of idolatry that derives from the traditional ban on figurative representations of living beings in Ottoman society.

On the one hand, erecting statues was justified by references to progress, as Atatürk and others formulated in various speeches and texts. In this respect, Atatürk monuments were the symbols of progress and civilization. On the other hand, Atatürk was shown as a semi-god, due to the growing cult of Atatürk, which contributed to his monuments being regarded as equally sacred. However, in Atatürk monuments the constitutive source of the sacred was both outside and inside, both “rational” and “irrational.” In this curious combination of secular progress and sacredness, the performative command of the state has been shaped and put into practice in a way that evokes the formula of the artificial-natural, as one of the early ideologues in Turkey said: “The dead rule the living. This is an undeniable fact in the lives of every nation. But great events or great men cannot be considered dead. The nations build monuments in their name in order to keep them alive. They make them immortal through artworks” (cited in Tekiner, 2010: 58).

From the first Atatürk monument in 1926, to this day, there are certain recurring themes that reveal the “fantastic” (in the way in which Ancet has defined it) aspects of state power. All these themes are related to a particular performance of power, as I have discussed above; yet, at the same time, contestation, opposition, or absurdity surround them.

One such theme is foreignness, reminding of Nancy’s depiction of the foreign god in connection to the idol. The first Atatürk monuments were designed by invited foreign artists, either German or Italian, who not only introduced the know-how and technology of sculpture, but also, in that particular historical context, the features of a fascist aesthetics to Turkey. The foreignness of the artists soon led to the worry among the national elites that “they” could not really know and understand “our” national leader, hence “our” national values. For example, the Taksim Atatürk Monument (1928) by Canonica, an Italian artist, even inspired a poem by Mithat Cemal Kuntay, expressing feelings of resentment. The poem is interesting in conveying the ambiguity of the living and dead aspects of the monument. It says: “Of course you, as everybody else, know

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44 For example, Atatürk said: “our nation which is enlightened and religious will develop sculpture to the highest level, which is one of the beneficiaries of progress, and every part of our country will proclaim the memories of our ancestors, and of our children who will live in the future, with beautiful statues” (1959: 66-7). Tekiner has added that, although Atatürk mentioned ancestors as subjects for statues, during his lifetime there were no monuments erected other than those of Atatürk, except for the Unknown Soldier Monument (Meşhül Asker Anıtı, 1925) and the Martyr Kubilay Monument (Şehit Kubilay Anıtı, 1932).
45 The first Atatürk monument in 1926 set the architectural and symbolic blueprint for later monuments. It is noteworthy that in this monument Atatürk faces Anatolia with his right fist raised towards Europe, representing the position of the new Turkish Republic between Turkish culture and Western civilization, the East and the West. I have written on the boundary management of East and West in Turkey under the concept of Occidentalism (Ahska, 2010).
46 Atatürk was often referred to as a divine being, sometimes compared to a prophet in many ideological and literary texts. The religious imagery employed to describe his persona points to the appropriation of religion for nationalistic ends, as Yael Navaro-Yashin has discussed to refute the binary of religion/secularism in Turkish nationalism (2002). Esra Özyürek has cited the words of Nezih Araz, a devoted Kemalist writer, to discuss the godly power of Atatürk: “For the first generation of the republic, Atatürk was not a human but almost a god from Olympus. He was an abstract concept, a godly power that could make the impossible possible and perform miracles. Even if people saw him on the roads of Ankara, in his car, in the National Assembly, and sometimes in schools, sport arenas, horse races, they actually could not perceive him” (2006: 109).
47 The first Atatürk monument was built by Heinrich Krippel and placed in Sarayburnu, Istanbul. It is interesting that Istanbul was chosen as the site for the first Atatürk monument, because in early national history Ankara as the newly built capital city of the Republic was opposed to Istanbul as a place that symbolized the old decadent regime. Tekiner has interpreted this as part of symbolic warfare against the opponents of the new regime in Istanbul (2010: 70-71). It can also be interpreted as a way of re-possessing Istanbul and re-claiming the monumentality of the Sublime Port of the Ottoman Empire.
48 Nancy has noted that the word eila is one word used for “idol” in the Book of Exodus, which designates a “small divinity, false god,’ again ‘foreign god”’ (2005: 145, n. 10).
49 Mithat Cemal Kuntay was a writer who lived in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods and is known for his rhetorical nationalist poems. His only novel, Uç Istanbul, was adapted for a TV series in 1983.
who He is/But you cannot give voice to Him, He is ours/Is it possible to represent Him with these hands?/Anyway... tell me what is the material you used, stone or iron?”

On the other hand, the entry of new and inexperienced Turkish sculptors into the field produced concerns about technical perfection. There was a constant anxiety whether monuments looked like Atatürk, coupled with other anxieties in what positions or outfits to represent him. The problem of resemblance triggered many debates about Atatürk monuments: governments canceled some projects before they were erected; others were removed; still others, with “erotic figures” such as nude males, were “emasculated”; or the monuments were “exiled” to other, less visible parts of the country since there was a concern that they did not represent the leader correctly. One of the most interesting examples of this kind clearly demonstrates that Atatürk monuments were treated as artificial-natural entities. In Afyon, an Atatürk monument created by a non-professional sculptor and placed in front of the district governorate building in 1980 was highly disproportionate, with an enormous head and short legs. After 25 years, the “monstrous” statue was noticed by some “experts” who advised that it should be removed. However, since an Atatürk monument could not be destroyed according to custom and law, the only legitimate way to demolish it was to bury it underground without giving it any harm (Tekiner, 2010).

The third theme is the instrumentalization of Atatürk monuments for the sake of power. Atatürk monuments were regarded as sacred in rhetoric, yet over time they were reproduced with apparent pragmatic interests only to signify and secure power. Despite the political conflicts regarding the heritage of Atatürk, each political party that came to power proclaimed its presence by erecting further Atatürk monuments. This eventually led to an incredible proliferation in their number. Especially after the 1980s, with the help of mechanical reproduction of prototypes in factories, Atatürk monuments were standardized (thus eliminating the anxiety of resemblance) and put everywhere, with minor variations for the specific purpose, not only by the state, but also by various public or civil organizations. Atatürk monuments were...

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50 “Elbette bilirsin O’nu herkes gibi kimdir./Lakin O’nu sen anlatamazsın O, bizimdir./Bilmem ki bu ellerle O temsil edilir mii?/Her neye... Nedir malzemem taş mı, demir mı?” (cited in Tekiner, 2010: 103) The famous poet Ahmet Haşim also critized the first Atatürk monument: “What more can be said about this pile of bronze?” (cited in Tekiner, 2010: 73).

51 The first Turkish sculptor who created an Atatürk Monument was Kenan Yontuç who personally worked with Atatürk as a model. However, his statues of Atatürk were criticized for being non-proportional and showing him older and weaker (Tekiner, 2010: 114).

52 Although Atatürk presented himself to society not as a military commander, but as a civil leader in Western dress after the foundation of the Republic, the majority of his early monuments show him in military uniform, and in several he is riding a horse (Tekiner, 2010: 75). However, there were also other aesthetic attempts to idealize his persona. In the 1935 monument in front of the Kayseri Textile Factory, Atatürk is presented as a non-professional sculptor and placed in front of the district governorate building in 1980 was.

53 There are many examples of controversial Atatürk monuments in Turkish history. For example, the Atatürk monument in Samsun (1982) was removed in the same year in which it was erected, by order of the military dictator Kenan Evren, since the monument contained several naked male and female figures. The monument was kept in a storehouse for eighteen years and then restored to its place in 2000. The Malatya Atatürk Monument (1947) contained a naked male figure, which was later emasculated by vandals, and a leaf was placed over the genital area when a minister came to visit the town. For the details of this amusing story, see Yasemin Ozcan Kaya, http://kayiskent4.blogspot.com.

54 The way in which Atatürk monuments are used for pragmatic ends found its first examples during the Democratic Party era in the 1950s. Although highly critical of the previous CHP regime, and although they made ample use of religious icons, the Democratic Party strategically embraced the heritage of erecting Atatürk Monuments as a token of power (Tekiner, 2010: 161). Later, Atatürk monuments became a mere symbol for Turkish nationalism and were employed to signify power. For example, a member of the “Turkish resistance organization” in Cyprus has narrated how they erected the first Atatürk monument in Lefkoşa (Nicosia) in 1962 and guarded it day and night (Hürrüyet, 15 August 2010). During the so-called “Cyprus Peace Operation” in 1974, Atatürk monuments were erected in the “conquered” areas by the intervening Turkish forces. It is common knowledge that after each military coup in Turkey, in 1960, 1971, and 1980, a new wave of erecting more Atatürk monuments came. Especially after the 1980 coup, there was a mushrooming of Atatürk monuments all over the country, which Tekiner has named “statuomania” (2010).

55 According to Esra Özyürek, there was an “exponential increase in the already ubiquitous images of Atatürk” in the late 1990s. It seems that there was an “appropriate picture of Atatürk for every trade” (2006: 93). Özyürek has discussed how the images also vary in their form and content. As opposed to his “fierce looks” in the pictures and monuments of the earlier decades, now Atatürk images depict a “jovial bourgeois” who enjoys life; the images are deployed in various media ranging from T-shirts to mugs, from badges to stickers, as well as being utilized in advertisements. According to Özyürek,
adapted to different and even quite remote themes. One of the most absurd examples is the Atatürk monument (1993) in front the Blind People’s Foundation Building in Istanbul, representing Atatürk holding a blind person’s cane. This is an example that radically empties out the intended meaning.

The reception of these monuments also requires further reflection. On the one hand, Atatürk monuments were declared to be sacred and came to reference the ultimate and unchanging code of “modern” Turkey; on the other hand, there are abundant examples that show how Atatürk monuments were attacked: they have been riddled with bullets and set on fire by different segments of society in different instances. Some conservative intellectuals as well as many lay people refer to them as “Beton Mustafa” (Concrete Mustafa). In an amusing anecdote, villagers in the eastern parts of Turkey tell the minibus driver that they want to get off the bus at the concrete, meaning at the Atatürk monument. Against these resentful practices of denigration and destruction, there has been a special law since 1951, which protects Atatürk monuments. The law deems that anyone who publicly insults the memory of Atatürk and/or in any way destroys statues, busts and monuments that represent him is to be severely penalized. Thus, what concerns us here is the oppressive norm that secures Atatürk monuments as the ultimate code of modern national life, while their meaning is already emptied out and dead in everyday life, as the popular word “concrete” denotes. Atatürk monuments increasingly appear as monsters, now that not only their number, but also their size is exaggerated. Besides the

the popularization and also miniaturization of the images of Atatürk point to important social and political transformations. First of all, in the 1990s, there emerged increasingly pervasive competing images of Islam, and Kemalism became a personalized attitude and responsibility in the privatized public realm. There was also a growing commercialization in society, which equally affected the Atatürk cult; in the 1990s, there emerged a different kind of Atatürk’s gaze. Özürek’s contention is that the state ideal was being transformed into a new understanding of governmentality. While the monumental images could be seen as a metaphor for the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public life, the miniature images belong to the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject (Özürek, 2006: 102-103).

56 Tekiner has provided the image of this strange Atatürk monument in her book (2010: 226). She has also cited other absurd examples with regard to the use of the Atatürk cult, such as the placement of a passage from the Nutuk that metaphorically talks about fire (“Big fires are set by little sparks”) on the facade of a fire station (2010: 192).

57 There are even legal frameworks that are still valid and determine how Atatürk busts and pictures are to be placed in schools and public buildings. For example, according to the official guide for the inspection of primary schools in 2009-2010, there must be an Atatürk bust in the garden of the school; it should be regularly cleaned and cared for. Inside the classrooms, the Atatürk picture should be placed above the writing board, above which the Turkish flag should be hung. The lyrics of the national anthem should be placed to the right of the picture, while Atatürk’s address to the youth, from the Nutuk, should be placed to its left. www.mufettisler.net/.../112-resmi-ikogretim-okullari-tiftis-rehberi-.html

58 The first recorded attacks against Atatürk monuments occurred in the 1980s. Because of the destruction of Atatürk busts and monuments by some religious sects was considered a “scandal” and led to the enactment of the law about the protection of Atatürk monuments. However, attacks continued over the years. Nowadays, it is common to read once in a while a news item about different kinds of attacks against Atatürk monuments, such as painting, burning, shooting or breaking off parts, in different cities and towns of Turkey. Some of these attacks transmit messages of political protest, while others seem without a particular reason. In most cases, absurdity reigns again due to the blurring of the boundaries between what is alive and what is dead. For example, in Bingöl, a man in an economic and psychological crisis climbed up an Atatürk monument with a gun in hand and threatened the authorities that he would shoot Atatürk if they came near him. In Denizli, a fourteen-year-old boy was arrested because he broke parts off an Atatürk monument by throwing stones; he defended himself by saying that he and his friends were curious to know if the Atatürk monument was alive. Yıldray Oğur, “Türk’ün Atatürk heykelleriyle imtihamı,” Taraf, 16 January 2011. Cihan Tuğal has also cited how Atatürk monuments have become targets in radical Islamic protests in Turkey (2009).

59 The phrase is used in informal conversations with reference to Atatürk statues and monuments, and is familiar to many people in Turkey. Ahmet Turan Alkan, in an article praising Atatürk, remembers the days in his childhood when he first heard the phrase “Beton Mustafa” and complains how the image of Atatürk propagated in official circles (such as in schools) and the one evoked in informal dialogue contradict each other. “Atatürk Asıl Şimdi,” Truva Gezi Dergisi, December 2008.

60 The first article of the legal code accepted in 1951, which is still valid, reads: “anyone who defames and curses against the memory of Atatürk will be sentenced to one to three years of heavy imprisonment. Those who ruin, break, mutilate or defile a statue, bust or monument that represents Atatürk or those who ruin, break, mutilate or defile his tomb will be sentenced to one to five years of heavy imprisonment. If anyone abets a person committing the above-mentioned crimes, he will be penalized in the same way as the perpetrator.” In negotiations on behalf of the European Union, the legal code of 1951 has been critical of this code, along with others, as an obstacle to freedom of expression, which in turn has incited a nationalist defensive attitude.

61 “The 1980 military junta was very successful at covering national time-space with giant representations of Atatürk. In addition to naming all major physical projects for Atatürk, including the largest dams, bridges, and airports, it also covered the mountain slopes with his picture. In 1982, the junta made a mountain portrait of Atatürk in Erzincan, which covered a
increasing number of miniaturized images of Atatürk adapted to commercial purposes (Özyürek, 2006), projects for bigger and bigger Atatürk monuments compete in every part of the country, leaving little space for discussing the relationship between artwork, the public space, and the so-called “people.”

The fate of “civil” monuments: The history and memory of the Workers’ Monument

Contrary to the dominant trend of filling public spaces with an ever-increasing number of Atatürk monuments, on the fiftieth anniversary of the republic in 1973, the CHP, a center-left party then in power, decided to erect particularly in Istanbul “civil statues and monuments” for the first time. Twenty statues were commissioned from different sculptors of Turkey, giving them autonomy to choose their subjects, to be approved by the selecting committee. One of these turned out to be the Workers’ Monument. Actually, to build a Workers’ Monument was the idea of Vedat Nedim Tör, one of the oldest surviving Kemalist cultural elites from the first years of the republic and, interestingly, an apostate communist. His idea was to build a Workers’ Monument dedicated to the Turkish workers who were being sent to Germany since 1961, their number having reached 865,000 already in 1973. The monument was to be placed just across from the Public Labor Employment Office, which functioned as the German Liaison Office in Tophane and which had an infamous reputation for the humiliating medical examinations of the worker candidates by German doctors. The artist Muzaffer Ertoran, based in the Academy of Fine Arts, located also very close to Tophane, had already worked on a model of a workers’ statue, and so he was commissioned for the work. Soon after the monument was erected, the first attacks began. First the fingers, then the sledgehammer, then the arm was broken; the face

7.5-square-kilometer area. The choice of a mountain slope as a canvas for Atatürk’s portrait is symbolically meaningful; it establishes an iconical relationship with the leader and the mountains, implying that the leader and the state he founded are as old and as stable as the mountains. Moreover, through his location on mountaintops, Atatürk is seen as above and beyond ordinary human beings. Even today the Turkish army covers mountain slopes with giant pictures and phrases of Atatürk such as “Happy is the one who says I am a Turk.” The production of such paintings increases at times of political crisis, and the images especially abound in the Kurdish regions of the country” (Özyürek, 2006: 103). The Atatürk, Republic, and Democracy Monument (1999) in Bejiktas, Istanbul, which is 35 meters high; the Turkish Revolutionaries and Atatürk Monument in Manisa, which is 65 meters high and the third-biggest monument in the world; and the Atatürk-Relief/Mask in Buca, carved onto a mountain slope, are some striking examples of gigantic Atatürk monuments. It is curious that the dominant type of “civil” statues in Turkey is those of local products and specialties in every small city and town, such as the sculpture of a melon in Kırkağaç, a watermelon in Diyarbakır, a meatball in İnegöl, cats in Van, an eau-de-cologne bottle in Balıkesir, a colchicum plant in Safranbolu, a corncob in Alibeyköy, pistachios in Siirt, a lemon to Germany. Therefore, I prefer to call it the Workers’ Monument rather than “Worker Statue,” as Akagündüz refers to it. Meaning: it is within a certain convention of representing workers, very similar to the style of socialist realism starting in the 1930s in “communist” countries, and with the deliberate monumental aim to commemorate the workers being sent to Germany. Therefore, I prefer to call it the Workers’ Monument rather than “Worker Statue,” as Akagündüz refers to it. Vedat Nedim Tör was a member of the illegal Turkish Communist Party and also temporally acted as the head of the Turkish Worker and Peasant Socialist Party (Türkische İşçi Çiftçi Sosyalist Fırkası) in the 1920s. After leaving the party, he purportedly submitted all party documents to the government and testified against the communists in the infamous Communist Arrests in 1927, for which his former comrades blamed him as traitor. Later, Vedat Nedim Tör worked in different government organizations, including the radio. He wrote books and published journals. He also served as a cultural consultant for Yapı Kredi Bank and then for Akbank before his death in 1985.

76 These were “Beautiful Istanbul” (Güzell İstanbul) by Gürdal Duyar, “Worker” (İşçi) by Muzaffer Ertoran, “Architect Sinan” (Mimar Sinan) by Nusret Suman, “Two of Us” (Ikimiz) by Namık Denizhan, “Unity” (Birlik) by Mehmet Uyanık, “Rise” (Yükseliş) by Buhar Mavitian, “Rain” (Yağmur) by Ferit Özsen, “Abstract Compositon” (Soysut Kompozisyonu) by Füsun Onur, a statue by Seyhun Topuz, “Abstract Statue” (Soysut Heykele) by Tamer Başoğlu, “Abstract Statue” (Soysut Heykele) by Yaşar Gobey, “Abstract Statue” (Soysut Heykele) by Metin Haskı, “Naked” (Çiplik) by Kamil Sonad, “Figure” (Figür) by Zerrin Böülübay, “Abstract Statue” (Soysut Heykele) by Ali Teoman Germaner, “Solidarity” (Dayanışma) by Zühtü Mürdvidoğlu, “Echo” (Yankı) by Hüseyin Anka Özkan, “Abstract Statue” (Soysut Heykele) by Kuzgun Acar, and “Spring” (Bahar) by Hakki Karayiğitoğlu (Tekiner, 2010: 182).

75 Murat Akagündüz from the Hafriyat artist collective has described the statues ordered in 1973 as the first “non-monumental” statues in the history of public art in Turkey (2011: 172). I agree that for many of these works the description may hold true, yet I think the Workers’ Monument is monumental both in its style and in its intended meaning: it is within a certain convention of representing workers, very similar to the style of socialist realism starting in the 1930s in “communist” countries, and with the deliberate monumental aim to commemorate the workers being sent to Germany. Therefore, I prefer to call it the Workers’ Monument rather than “Worker Statue,” as Akagündüz refers to it.

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76 John Berger and Jean Mohr’s book A Seventh Man (1982) gives a very important account of the workers sent from Turkey to Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, with striking photographs of workers being subjected to humiliating procedures. There are now suggestions that the Public Labor Employment Office building should be converted into an Immigration Museum and that the Workers’ Monument should be repaired (Doğan Hızlan, “Göç Müzesi Kurulmalı,” Hürriyet, 4 December 2007).
Monsters that Remember: Tracing the Story of the Workers’ Monument in Tophane, Istanbul
Meltem Ahiska

was covered with tar, and finally the face was completely destroyed. The artist repaired the monument several times, but the attacks were persistent, and after a while it was left to stand in that crippled way to be further worn down by environmental conditions. The artist Müzaffer Ertoran has said in an interview: “I fixed it a few times. But now, I’ve let it go. For years, they have been breaking a piece off it every day. Yet, it’s still not all consumed. When a machine comes and rips it off the ground, I will say: ‘Oh, finally, it’s been depleted’” (cited in Akagündüz, 2011: 177). It is as if the statue could neither live, nor completely die. Ertoran’s words obviously remind one of threatening monstrosity in between the living and the non-living.

We must note that out of the twenty statues and monuments built in 1973, only eight survive today, since others also had their share of destruction by “the people,” or since they were removed or destroyed by local authorities for different reasons. At this point, I find it important to re-emphasize the connection between the obsessively erected Atatürk monuments in Turkey under the protection of the law that criminalizes their destruction and the many cases of destruction of “civil” statues and monuments in public space, mostly regarded as permissible. These are two faces of the same coin, of the productive and destructive capacities of power that I have discussed above. Akin to theories that refuse to treat the state and society as two independent entities, I would say that the interdependent official/civil binary structured within the performative command of the state produces the ground for deciding which monuments are allowed to survive and which are left to perish.

Some would see the problem of monuments in Turkey merely as an aesthetic question. It is indeed an aesthetic question, if we do not take aesthetics as separate from politics. Ranciere has argued that the relational character of politics and aesthetics concerns the reconfiguration of a different regime of perception and signification, a new “distribution of the sensible” and “political subjectivation” (2009). For Ranciere, the process of political subjectivation consists in “the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the visible” (2009: 49). Ranciere’s emphasis on a different regime of perception is closely connected to the question of monsters, if, as Ancet has said, the subject who looks and classifies the anomaly is rather central to the definition of the monster. Then it is highly problematic that many opinion leaders in Turkey reproduce the hegemonic normative aesthetic and political judgments to assess the question of monuments that turn into monsters. For example, many would say that the actual and potential vandalizing of monuments is a symptom of “underdevelopment” or “lack of modernity,” blaming the state for indifference against art and/or the people for being uncivilized and under the influence of Islamic traditions. Even Murat Akagündüz from the Hafriyat group, which attempted to make the Workers’ Monument visible, has pointed to a “skewed process of modernization” (2011: 172).

In a different vein, Uğur Tanyeli has argued that neither Islamic values nor an aesthetic problem related to “untalented sculptors” can explain the “problem” of statues and monuments. For him,

67 “Naked” in Gülhane Park, “Figure” in Harbiye, “Abstract Statue” in Bebek Park, “Solidarity” in Fındıkö Park, “Echo” in Gümüşsuyu Park, “Abstract Statue” in Gülhane Park, and “Spring” are the surviving statues, and one may add to them the “Worker” in Tophane Park, although severely damaged, and “Beautiful İstanbul” which has been moved from one place to another over the years (Tekiner, 2010: 182).
68 Trouillot, citing the significance of Gramsci and Poulantzas’s elaborate conceptualizations of the state, has said: “one cannot theorize the state and then theorize society or vice versa. Rather, state and society are bound by the historical bloc which takes the form of the specific social contract of—and, thus, the hegemony deployed in—a particular social formation” (2001: 127). Navaro-Yashin has particularly dwelt on the false binary of the state and society in Turkey to provide an anthropology of the Turkish state through different moments of its materialization in society (2002).
69 Emre Aköz, a well-known columnist writing on the issue of the “monstrous” Humanity Monument, has complained that there are very many monstrous statues in this country, including Atatürk monuments; he does not want to see them around and instead personally prefers the statues of Giacometti, Brancusi, and Henry Moore. “Uçube Heykellerle Dolu Bu Memleket,” Sabah, 14 January 2011. Mümtaz Türköne has similarly proposed that Atatürk monuments are “monstrous” and regarded the problem as an aesthetic one: “It is true that our culture and tradition keeps us away from sculpture. But this distance cannot be an excuse for the lack of aesthetics of the statues interspersed throughout this country.” Taraf, 14 January 2011.
70 Akagündüz has said: “Despite the scope of the dramatic relationship social perception forms with contemporary art and its object, it may be argued that the evolution of the perception of sculpture from Islamic thought—where the statue is regarded as idolatrous, as the shadow it casts on the ground is considered as figuration—to monumental statues is a step forward towards modernization. Yet at the same time, the fact that attacks on civil sculptures continue to be regarded as natural casts a rather telling light on the direction of this step forward in a skewed process of modernization” (2011: 172).
the problem is the persistence of a “traditional” conception of the public sphere in Turkey; public only signifies belonging to the state, and only statues that are deemed sacred to the state are made visible in and for the public.  

While Tanyeli’s problematization of the public sphere in relation to the state is meaningful, his reference to a lack of a “bourgeois public sphere” (in Habermasian terms) in Turkey cannot avoid replicating the problematic normative judgment about (Western) modernity and its others. When looked at from the vestige point of the norm, the other cannot but seem monstrous. Thus, instead of replicating normativity and consequently re-producing monstrosity, I have emphasized the need to historically trace the destructive and productive capacities of state power and argued that the monuments that turn into monsters are to be seen as symptoms of the performative command of the state that displaces or destroys the memories and capacities of lived experience, particularly those that belong to what is homogeneously referred to as “the people.” This is a political and aesthetic question at the same time.

So far, we have been speaking of monsters. But they also speak; they are not mute. They speak in their own ways, which is mostly threatening to the “normal.” Their ambiguity goes against the closure of normativity as standardization, as Shildrick has said about monsters (1999: 79). In that sense, monsters are witnesses to the catastrophe of modern history and have their own memories. Their forbidden shadows fall on the official and oppressive versions of history, making it once more contestable from within. When the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan called the Humanity Monument on the Armenian border a monster, he said: “We will not let this monster cast a shadow on our history.” When he said “history,” he seemed to point to the historical Islamic treasures of Kars. But his words can easily be interpreted in the context of the official denial of the memories of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey.

Etyen Mahçupyan has made an important intervention in this respect, opposing the way in which the question of the “monstrous statue” has been discussed in the mainstream media which mainly focus on freedom of expression and public art in Turkey. Mahçupyan has rightly claimed that the government’s judgment about the Humanity Monument is of specifically political, rather than of a general aesthetic concern; it should be read as a clue that the state aims to destroy the political messages of the statue about Turkish-Armenian relations. Now that the gigantic Humanity Monument is being sliced into pieces to be carried away, it constitutes yet another violent moment in the national history of Turkey.

Conclusion: Representation and counter-memory

In the concluding part of the article, I will briefly comment on art in relation to the memory of monsters. Let us go back to Tophane, from where we started. In the art venues in Tophane,

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71 From his presentation entitled “Statues in the Public Sphere,” delivered at the symposium on statues in the Istanbul Modern Museum, 25 April 2006.


73 Turkey officially denies that the “so-called Armenian Genocide” happened in 1915 and fiercely defends its stand both in international diplomatic relations and against critical historical statements about the issue. However, the question of the Armenian Genocide has become a much more visible, albeit highly contested, subject within Turkey in the last decade. The conference organized by Boğaziçi, Bilgi, and Sabancı Universities in September 2005 in Istanbul, entitled “Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire,” was one of the first attempts to historicize the question. The Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink’s assassination in 2007 was also a turning point, paving the way for further debates, exhibitions, conferences, and publications of both academic research and memoirs pertaining to the tragic events—the massacres, deportation, and exile of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century.

74 “Gerçekliğin Kaypaklığı Üzerine,” Zaman, 26 January 2011. For another article commenting on the connection between the demolition of the monument and Turkish-Armenian relations, see Markar Esayan, “Özet: Aliyev İstedi, Erdoğan Yıktırdı,” Taraf, 1 May 2011.

75 The sculptor Mehmet Aksoy claimed that it would be extremely difficult to demolish this gigantic monument and that it would take years during which possible national and international reactions should be able to stop the demolition. However, after the affirmative decision of the municipal council of Kars, the demolition plan was announced. The 300-ton monument would be sliced into 18 pieces and kept in a storehouse. The demolition started with the head of the monument being cut off on 25 April 2011, ironically one day after 24 April, which is commemorated as the day when the Armenian Genocide started in Turkey in 1915. Just before this article was to be submitted, there were news in the media that the Kars Municipality had decided to build a statue of a Kaşar Cheese and Honey (as specialties of the town) in the place of the demolished Humanity Monument, once again affirming the euphemistic attitude that simultaneously produces and denies violence. See note 62.
critical art now increasingly finds space. Many of the critical and political artworks aim to make visible repressed historical and contemporary issues in Turkey (such as the violations of human rights, the war against the Kurdish people, and the Armenian genocide) and to deconstruct the narratives and icons of official national history. Thus, it is not uncommon that there are also works critical of the idol of Atatürk.76 An artwork by Extramücadele,77 exhibited in Tophane at the Non Gallery, showed Atatürk as a fallen angel, when the violent attacks against the visiting crowd in front of the galleries occurred in September 2010. A year later, in the art space Depo, again in Tophane, the artist Vahit Tuna showed an interesting statue that created the automatic effect of an Atatürk bust in a school garden from afar, but in fact it was a bust of Anthony Hopkins,78 playing with the anxiety of resemblance that I have mentioned above. Both works critically deal with the power effects of Atatürk monuments. The seemingly conservative and religious people of Tophane, on the other hand, have shown either outright hostility or, at best, indifference to the examples of critical art in their district. However, if we re-visit the artistic intervention of the artist collective Hafriyat, which tried to steal the broken Workers’ Monument, we are confronted with the enigma that the people re-claimed their monstrous monument. Murat Akagündüz, a Hafriyat member whom I interviewed, has said that this was not really the outcome that they expected. They considered possible problems with the authorities, such as the police, but not with the people. Many people from the neighborhood that night told the artists that they had lots of memories surrounding this “stone,” without actually naming it. In their childhood they used to play on top of it; they grew up with it. Children still play around it, without being aware that it once was a monument. And they would not want to give it away. They embraced the object in a spiritual way, in Akagündüz’ words.79 Pelin Tan has also commented on the incident that night, saying that

…the residents of Tophane, who generally spend their days in the park playing football, organizing neighborhood activities, drinking coffee and tea, and selling odds and ends, suddenly became aware of the old Worker statue. As Hafriyat was trying to remove the sculpture, people sought to understand why the action was happening, and most residents responded that the sculpture (which they did not want to call by its title, as speaking of a Worker would imply a reference to leftist ideology) had emotional meaning for them (2011: 149-50).

On the other hand, the vice-president of the municipality who was accidentally there that night was only concerned whether the artist group had official permission to remove the statue.80

One needs to think further about the emotional meaning that the broken Workers’ Monument has for the residents of Tophane. It is obvious that it has nothing to do with the intended or publicly attributed meanings of the monument. The residents of Tophane even refrained from saying its name. This “stone” is something that belongs to them, even though it may be a

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76 The Hafriyat art collective opened an exhibition of posters in its Karaköy venue, with the title Allah Korkusu (The Fear of God) on November 10, 2007. Some of the posters exhibited there drew fierce reactions from the media, and consequently an official investigation was opened especially about three posters, one of them showing Atatürk with a blank face. The poster designed by Hakan Akcura was referring to the taboo of portraying the image of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam and implying the divinity ascribed to Atatürk, as well as Kemalism as a way of worshiping in Turkey. More recently, an exhibition in Beşiktaş Plaza organized by the Bimeras Culture Foundation was attacked by several members of the CHP, since it showed an icon of Atatürk in addition to icons of the three major religions in the world, again implying that the worshiping of Atatürk is a religion. Yasin Aktay has discussed the exhibit and the reactions, which have been compared to the attacks in Tophane. “Tophane ile Beşiktaş’ın Arası,” Yeni Şafak, 18 October 2010.

77 Ekstramücadele, which means “extra struggle,” is the name that the artist Mehmed Erdener publicly uses when he exhibits his critical and mostly controversial artwork.

78 Esra Özyürek has discussed the taboo of portraying Atatürk, very similar to the taboo of representing the Prophet Muhammad. For this reason, it was not possible for any actor to play Atatürk in film for a long time. “But the taboo was first broken in 1981 when a movie about his life was released for his one hundredth birth anniversary. It is significant that the first actor to portray Atatürk was not Turkish but Belgian... at the end of the 1980s, Turkish actors started to play Atatürk in movies, and by the late 1990s, there were almost no limits on who might perform as Atatürk” (2006: 111). Vahit Tuna’s work, which is part of his exhibition at Depo, entitled Hep Seyirciyiz Zaten... (We Are Just Spectators Anyway...) makes reference to this anxiety by evoking the figure of Anthony Hopkins, who was one of the candidates to portray Atatürk in a film in the 1990s. See Pınar Öğünç, “Bir Atatürk Büstünün Arkeolojisi,” Radikal, 17 January 2011.

79 Interview with Murat Akagündüz, February 2011.

80 Interview with Murat Akagündüz, February 2011.
monster. However, one should be wary of rushed alternative explanations. The possible meanings that the locals may be attributing to the “stone” are not actually representable within the dominant “distribution of the sensible” today. The non-representability points to a void in the locality, which the ongoing economic, social and cultural transformations attempt to cover up with polished facades. Nevertheless, one should not give up the struggle for interpretation as a way of producing and re-producing the locality: “In an age in which globalization produces new forms of locality that still have to find a vision of another future than that offered by neoliberalism, market ideology, and media triumphalism, memory of past hopes, after all, remains part of any imagination of another future” (Huyssen, 2003: 105). Thus, we can dwell on possible meanings as a starting point for a different engagement with the locality. It is possible that the locals of Tophane may be embracing the “stone” for strengthening their ties with the place, especially with the fear of displacement evoked by the recent transformations in the neighborhood. They have their own discreet memories around this deformed stone body, and they probably recognize themselves in its process of destruction, as people who have been muted and who have no means of representing themselves other than in hegemonic idioms, mostly as delegated agents of violent practices of power within the performative command of the state. These, and many other questions not yet formulated, remain to be substantiated through the fractured memories and experiences of the locals.

Yet, the Workers’ Monument as a monster continues to remember. It bears the memories of the artist who constructed it; of the workers who went to Germany only to be classified as second-class guest workers there; of the socialists who took the Workers’ Monument as a token of their struggle, mostly forgotten and buried in the past now. It points to the violent memories of urban transformation, which displaced large segments of non-Muslim minorities from Tophane during the 1950s and now threatens to displace the once-newcomer migrants, too. It points to the memories of having to live in fear of the state which Atatürk monuments signify for many people in Turkey. It also points to the very displacement and destruction of memories. It is but a frail witness to the past under the threat of extinction. It is a symptom of its own processes of destruction, displacement and excess, which turn the remains of the Workers’ Monument into a counter-monument. It is a counter-monument because it cannot in any way commemorate the past or celebrate the present. It cannot console its viewers, either about the workers’ situation, or about the civilized modern status of Turkey. Instead, it troublingly points to the frailty of life and memory in the face of the power of the dead and deadening body of the state. Yet, it is also a frail source of hope if we hear Derrida, when he says: “a future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would be already a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant” (1995: 307).
Monsters that Remember: Tracing the Story of the Workers’ Monument in Tophane, Istanbul
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Monsters that Remember: Tracing the Story of the Workers’ Monument in Tophane, Istanbul
Meltem Ahiska


When Matter Becomes Cultural Politics: 
Traps of Liberalism in the Tenth Sharjah Art Biennial 
Angela Harutyunyan

In the core of cultural politics is ultimately the act of naming. In fact, cultural politics itself is nothing but a negotiation of language, assignment of concepts, construction of frames as well as demarcation of the boundaries of what is to be included and what is to be left excluded from discourse. Constituted through statements and utterances that become legitimized in societal, cultural, institutional and legal frameworks, cultural politics is a terrain upon which struggle for identity, representation and recognition takes shape. As such, its inception and basic premises rely on the liberal bourgeois notion of the public sphere as a consensual site of contestation and reaffirmation of identity, representation and recognition, with tolerance in mind. In this formulation, the notion of the public sphere as theorized by Jürgen Habermas as a space of non-intervention by the state and market interests with the ultimate result of reaching a majority consensus is articulated.

The industry of cultural politics with its insistence on identity and representation has more often than not coincided with various economic liberalization programs, “open door” policies, globalization of financial markets and accumulation of the public good into private hands of ruling elites in various post-peripheries, from the former socialist bloc countries to the Middle East and beyond. These newly emerging economic structures seek cultural representation in the public sphere in order to render themselves concrete and visible, while translating material struggles into the domain of cultural representation. Thus, structurally and with its demand for adequate representation of various identities (be those religious, gender, race or class based, or professional, national, international, transnational, cosmopolitan, etc.), cultural politics is a hegemonic discourse that with its proliferation and expansion into new territories has followed the trajectories of the global capital, which seeks to render itself in cultural terms. The form that its re-enactment in different contexts has taken has varied and even created the illusion of singularity and local contextual specificity. Even though the content of cultural politics may assume various shapes according to locally specific articulations and discourses, its structural condition remains as a homogenizing principle. The ideological operation of this liberal discourse is to relocate struggle from the materialist domain of class into the domain of cultural representation that a variety of enterprises in Western Europe and North America and beyond have been engaged with.

With the institutionalization and internationalization of what came to be termed contemporary art practices in the Middle East since the late 1990s and early 2000s and the production and circulation of specific desires for identity and representation that rely on the mechanism of post-colonial counter-transference, the region has become a fertile ground for the operation of cultural politics. The operation of post-colonial counter-transferences as transferred onto the field of cultural production, representation and reception, is based on the misconception and misrepresentation of the Other. For instance, a curator from Western Europe proposes a local artist to present his or her authentic voice to international audiences, whereas the production of authenticity by the local artist always already incorporates the expectation of the curator that the artist imagines. Because of the distinct colonial history of the region as well as its position as a figure of difference (in relation to Western Europe and North America), cultural politics with its liberal framework of tolerance achieved through debate and dialogue could be accommodated comfortably both within the already existing and newly created institutional structures of art production and reception. The resurgence of cultural politics in recent years in debates, interventions, actions and other practices surrounding contemporary art, its institution, production and reception in much of the Arab World and the Middle East has created a

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1 I am grateful to Tammer El-Sheikh for his suggestions and insightful comments upon reading the draft of this paper.
2 Jürgen Habermas, Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into the Category in Bourgeois Society. MIT Press, 1991.
3 I have borrowed the term from Vardan Azatyan who uses it to denote a vicious circle of misconception and misrepresentation; the colonized subject imagines itself through the eyes of the colonizer according to the image of the latter that this subject has constituted in its mind. Mentioned in a private conversation.
polarization in various spheres of cultural practice. Here, usually, cultural politics is enacted and exercised between various generations of artists, critics and their hangers on who represent the different poles of the debate, those who “speak” in the name of the nation, authenticity and tradition, those who “argue” in the name of contemporaneity and those who act in-between. It is not that before the age of cultural politics there were no inter-generational, inter-ideological and even formal debates surrounding art and culture in various contexts of the Middle East, but that now, these debates are framed in the name of cultural politics as a legitimizing instance, as a figure of authority that licenses utterances, practices, attitudes and positionings. Petitions are signed, articles published, press conferences arranged, exhibitions curated, and all in the name of cultural politics.

The debate on agency, cultural production, artistic practice and mainstream vs. marginal is framed within the liberal discourse of cultural politics even before the debate initiaes, thus glossing over the material conditions in which operators in the art world function in both local and transnational contexts. It is precisely within the cultural political debate that dichotomies between brave outspoken artists and autocratic rulers, between the good intentions of contemporary art to enlighten society, to mend social problems and to reveal oppressive systems of domination and their monarchic or corporate patrons, is both exaggerated and intensified. Both sides of the cultural political debate – be those the rulers or sponsors vs. the contemporary artists, or the latter vs. the “fine artists”– have high stakes in this polarization since within this discursive framework legitimation is achieved through “othering” each other. In short, the contemporary artist needs the traditional fine artist armed with modernist notions of authenticity, tradition and originality in order to establish himself or herself as the heroic other. It works the other ways around as well. In a related and similar operation, a monocratic ruler of an Emirate in the Gulf needs the veneer of the contemporary artist’s work and the art event as well as the phantasmagoria of contemporaneity to project himself as an enlightened king. And this is an act of cultural politics at its best. The contemporary artist needs the generous funds from oil and sweat money to realize a work or gain the symbolic capital of the big well-produced event in which transplanted art audiences discuss, debate and have occasional cocktails, in order to gain recognition within a framework whose terms and conditions he himself did not set. Yet, the artist needs to distance himself from the ideological and economic framework in which the event operates, and specifically, from the benevolent emir who acts as the main patron of the event.

The emergence of cultural politics at the heart of the debate on art and culture in the context of the Arab World does not merely follow the neoliberalization of various economies and the emergence of economic governmentality but also a parallel, yet not unrelated paradigm of cultural diplomacy and so-called “soft hegemony” that has engulfed the post-9/11 era and has recently entered a new stage with the UAE acting as the prime funder of artistic production and representation from the region of North Africa and the Middle East. As Hanan Toukan states, “It is within the framework of international cultural diplomacy that the transnationalization of contemporary arts production has been financially enabled in the parts of the Arab region that produce some of the most interesting works around which much of the Gulf art industry revolves.”

A good case in point, in which cultural politics with a liberal framework and in the context of a transnational art event was reiterated in the name of free expression, is the tenth edition of the Sharjah Art Biennial in 2011 curated by Suzanne Cotter and Rasha Salti with Haig Aivazian and produced by the Sharjah Art Foundation. The scandal that arguably received more coverage in the art press than the Biennial itself overshadowed the discussion upon the merits and pitfalls of curatorial work and artistic production. It was triggered by the dismissal of the director of the

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4 Bassam el-Baroni proposes a typology of art career tracks, which he calls fine art, contemporary art and fine contemporary art. Interview with Bassam el-Baroni by Hassan Khan. Part I and Part II, in Art Territories, April 25, 2011. http://www.artterritories.net/?page_id=2063
6 In a note published on April 17th Salti and Aivazian express their discontent over the issue: “It is deeply disheartening to witness the biennial’s complexities, poetica and considerations overcast by this crisis, and its bold proposals contrived to
Sharjah Art Foundation since 2006, Jack Persekian, over Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil’s work. The latter entitled *It Has No Importance* and installed in the public space of the Heritage area, was deemed offensive by the public in Sharjah and removed from the site, once the flown over and transplanted art audiences, myself included, embarked on their return flights.

Allegedly, the work contained graphic language enacted by a rape victim during the Algerian revolution, an excerpt from a play written by Benfodil himself. I will not go into the factual details of the incident since it has been extensively covered and discussed in the press. Neither am I interested whether Benfodil’s work was indeed the only reason behind Persekian’s dismissal, or whether there was an inner or inter-emirati politics that conspired against the powerful director of the Foundation, or it was simply time to de-identify the institution from the person. Instead, what concerns me here is the way in which *matter becomes cultural politics* and more specifically, the ways in which a specific rhetoric of freedom of speech and expression, anti-censorship and cultural sensitivity was being formulated around the art event and the subsequent incident. This rhetoric was produced and enacted by those condemning the act of censorship as well as those who argued for sensitivity towards local contexts. At times, such as in the case of Salti’s and Aivazian’s statements, these two positions overlapped. In a statement issued on April 7, 2011, they offer: “We believe the mission of art is to defend freedom of expression, challenge prevailing misconceptions and defy the complacent silence of injustice and despotism. We are also adamant believers in dialoguing with audiences in a manner that is aware and respectful of social sensitivities.”

What followed were multiple statements by international art and cultural organizations as well as individuals, more or less unequivocally condemning the act of censorship and expressing support for the fired director. On one occasion, AICA, the International Association of Art Critics, published the following statement:

...In this regard, on behalf of our membership, we strongly condemn the censorship of Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil’s installation ‘Mapartliche’ / ‘It Has No Importance’ during the Sharjah Biennial. Art that is socially and politically engaging often raises difficult, challenging and provocative questions but in an open and free society the right to freedom of expression has to be respected."

The iteration of this rhetoric was wrapped up and entangled with the avant-gardist notion that art should be a radical, daring gesture that would act as a provocation on general morality and common sense.

In addition, it is ironic that the theme of the Biennial that engaged various sites in Sharjah was treason, insurrection and corruption. Entitled *Plot for a Biennial*, the conceptual framework of the event played with the double notion of plot, as a cinematic and literary device, an evolving of a narrative in a theatrical sense and as a conspiracy. Responding to the curatorial propositions variously, the artists produced works that either dealt with the proposed curatorial framework directly, referred to it indirectly or ignored it altogether. Through these resonances and dissonances they created a variety of interconnected threads that could only be deciphered by biennale-goers/viewers after walks through the sites and venues. The viewer’s experience was affected by the chosen duration of engagement with specific works and the memorial reconstruction of these engagements. In the labyrinthine structures of the Heritage site as well as the reconstructed old houses in which works were displayed, there lay hidden plots, conspiracies and acts of treason which were manifest only if one could “read all the fine print.”

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7 Rasha Salti & Haig Aivazian’s Statement, “Reaction to the Termination of Jack Persekian as Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation,” http://sharjahcalifornia.wordpress.com/rasha-salti-haig-aivazines-statement/
8 http://www.aica-int.org/spip.php?article1164
It is when the local population read all the fine print that Benfodil’s work appeared to be an act of treason, an offensive gesture that created a rupture between the inhabitants of the place and international art audiences. As it turned out, the controversy over Benfodil’s work was not merely based on its content, but also the specific positioning of it in the Heritage site where “children play after school, where families wander together on the weekend and where people pass on their way to religious services at the neighbouring mosque.” Not only was the site a “culturally sensitive” location, a public space where the local residents would spend time, but also the artworks installed in public areas appeared to be more or less the only ones that were received by the residents since it was often too intimidating for the locals to enter the Sharjah Art Museum, at least in the presence of the international crowd. However, since it is quite obvious that there is no one public for the Biennial, it should also be noted that there are various hierarchies within the publics, such as those Sharjah residents with passports, and precarious foreign workers whose “bare life” is exposed to the biopolitical order of wealth and status within the Emirates. Thus, which one of these publics initiated the outcry against Benfodil’s work and which one of these publics is empowered to articulate a demand or a complaint, remains a question, however one with a likely answer.

No doubt, while not a planned plot, the incident surrounding Benfodil’s work enacted the title of the Biennial in a very ironic way, thus unwittingly becoming a performative tableau vivant in which the gesture of treason in the work turns into a plot in life. This logic is always already inscribed in the very gesture of treason, in the heroic avant-gardist figure of the daring artist who exposes injustices, violence and maladies of a given society. He does so in a way that the gesture becomes a blatant slap on society’s face. According to Vardan Azatyan whose text “Against Betrayal” was published in the context of the Biennial’s Manuals of Treason, the figure of the traitor/author as gesture “is based on the seduction of negative dialectics: the declaration of oneself as negativity, as an exposure of those structures that have produced you.” Thus, as Azatyan continues to argue, treason as gesture is inherently situated within the liberal framework of transgression that completes the very norms it claims to transgress. It does not question “the connection between the critique it proposes and the latter’s material environment.” In declaring his/her own negativity as a gesture, the traitor is caught up in the fascination with the effect of the affect that the gesture produces. Again, if we refer to Azatyan, who in turn refers to Deleuze’s interpretation of Spinoza’s life, it is in the liberal environment that heterodox acts can flourish. In this vein, if Benfodil’s work could be accommodated within the liberal framework of the Biennial itself and act as a gesture of cultural politics within that framework only (within the curatorial agenda, amongst the international visitors, published reviews in the art press and so on), it could not be accepted as a tolerable act of transgression in the non-liberal context of Sharjah. Instead, here it acted as an offense directed towards the fundamental principles upon which a specific religiously conservative community is bound. Once the temporarily assigned liberal framework of the art event collapses with the departure of international artists, curators and journalists, the real of the locality becomes manifest. Since the inherently liberal framework of the art event within the material and social conditions in the UAE is virtual, mobile, temporary

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10 From an email sent to the Biennial artists by Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi, President of the Sharjah Art Foundation, on April 13, 2011.
11 HG Masters writes in Asia Pacific: “Local sources told AAP that the outcry likely came from the many Emirati families who were attending a heritage festival in April in the historical neighborhood where the biennial’s exhibition spaces and Sharjah Art Museum are located.” Director's Ouster Jeopardizes Sharjah Art Foundation's Future, April 18, 2011. http://artasiapacific.com/News/DirectorsOusterJeopardizesSharjahArtFoundationsFuture
13 Ibid.
14 It is not accidental that after multiple petitions initiated by “anonymous public” as well as the curators’ statements after the censorship of the work and Persekan’s removal from the position of the Foundation’s director, the work became a prime example of cultural politics within a liberal framework, as an epitome of free expression and an authoritarian refusal to engage in dialogue. Salty says: “The significance of what’s happened is that an artwork that proposes a very bold and defiant engagement with the language of Islamic jihadists can cause so much fury and outrage that it annihilates the possibility of discussion.” Quoted in “The End of Sharjah’s Biennia?,” Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, The Daily Star, April 14, 2011. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Apr/14/The-end-of-Sharjahs-Biennals.ashx#ixzz1Y1aoMlU
and transportable, once it vacates the site, it gets transported into another temporary space of debate on censorship, free expression and the artist’s right to act radically.

Hanan Toukan poses the question of censorship in relation to radically different cultures compared to those of liberal democracies at the core of the debate over the incident in Sharjah and Persekan’s subsequent dismissal. She states:

Questions that immediately arise include how one negotiates the role of censorship in a place where the very act of censoring is enshrined as a necessary cultural norm and a social value by regime and society alike. Additionally, the question of where one draws the line between supposedly agreed-upon social values based on local cultural sensitivities and violent acts of suppression in the name of “cultural relativism” becomes ever more pressing.15

However, I believe that posing the question of censorship and its negotiation with local cultural contexts still remains within the paradigm of the enactment of cultural politics. (It also supposes that there is no similarly engrained cultural need and mechanism for censorship in the liberal West.) There is a way to break from its hegemony, if one focuses attention on the very material conditions upon which art is represented and consumed in the context of the UAE and its economic and ideological relationship to sites of cultural production such as Beirut, Cairo, Ramallah, Tehran and others. But this is a topic of another discussion that the parameters of this review permit.

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15 Toukan, ibid.
**When Duty Calls....:**  
**Questions of Sensitivity and Responsibility in Light of the Tophane Events**  
Banu Karaca

But I think that sensitivity is also a good counselor when it comes to enforcing one's interests.  
Johannes Rau¹

Don't worship my hurt feelings, Mr. Intentional.  
Lauryn Hill²

On the evening of September 21, 2010 the Tophane Art Walk, a coordinated series of exhibition openings centering in large part along Boğazkesen Street in Istanbul, marked the beginning of the art season after the summer break. Shortly after 8pm, a mob of around 20-40 people attacked the galleries and their visitors one by one, undisturbed by the police for the best part of around 30 minutes, if not longer.³ Tracing the Artwalk almost to a T, they left a trail of destruction, injury, and maybe most importantly—intimidation. Some present stated that they recognized their neighbors among the attackers, but that it were also neighbors who came to their aid, and averted much worse damage than both the visiting crowd and the galleries had already incurred. While a variety of theories explaining the event was quickly at hand—questions related to divergent (or rather clashing) life-style choices of the inhabitants and gallery visitors, local political orientations averse to the thrust of the artworks and the (at least presumed) progressive political stances of the gallery visitors, conservative elements emboldened by the recent government party-led constitutional referendum⁴ violently reacting to alcohol consumption on the street, the inequalities brought on by and underlying gentrification processes—none of them seemed to be able to fully account for the events of that night. While especially the daily newspapers and network TV jumped to fold the Tophane “mahalle baskısı” [lit. neighborhood pressure] into the referendum and, by extension, Islamist conservative politics, it was clear early on that this particular explanatory model not only painted a facile, wholesale picture of a neighborhood and its inhabitants, but also decontextualized the event from the actual place in which it had occurred.⁵ After all, this was not the first time that bats and fists (and in this particular instance, pepper spray and frozen oranges) were used in a highly coordinated manner, nor that organized intimidation had made itself felt in Tophane: protestors fleeing from the police, be it on MayDay 2009 or on the occasion of the IMF meetings in Istanbul in October of the same year had been met with similar violence.⁶ Özen Yula’s play Yala ama Yutma [Lick but don’t Swallow] scheduled to open in February of 2010 at Kumbaracı50, a performance space in the same neighborhood, was cancelled when the Islamist daily Vakit rallied against the show, and elicited threats from Tophane as well. This, of course, does not come to mean that the actors in

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¹ Quoted from former German President Johannes Rau’s 100th anniversary address to GEMA (Gesellschaft für musikalische Aufführungs- und mechanische Vervielfältigungsrechte), a German performance rights organization. While Rau referred to copyright interests in particular, it has become customary to employ his quote referring to enforcing one’s interests in general. For the full speech, please see [http://nobby-bell.privat.t-online.de/gema_rau.html](http://nobby-bell.privat.t-online.de/gema_rau.html).

² Quoted from “Mr. Intentional” by Lauryn Hill from her album [Lauryn Hill Unplugged](http://www.nobby-bell.privat.t-online.de/gema_rau.html) (2002).

³ Eyewitness and news reports vary in terms of the number of attackers (20-50) and the length of the attack (30-45 minutes), parts of which, it seems were observed by police officers who did not intervene until back-up arrived; e.g. see [http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?Type=RadikalDetayY3&ArticleID=1020654&Date=25.09.2010&CategoryID=77](http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?Type=RadikalDetayY3&ArticleID=1020654&Date=25.09.2010&CategoryID=77).


⁵ The constitutional referendum package introduced by the Justice and Development Party was approved through 58% of the votes, and frequently regarded as a vote of confidence for the governing JDP and Prime Minister Erdoğan.


⁷ For an intervention that connects these previous attacks to the one on the galleries, see Süreyya Evren, “Tophane Saldırısının Ardından Belirlenen Resmi Açıklamanın Bir Reddi,” [Birkit](http://www.birkit.com), October 10, 2010.

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all of these instances were necessarily the same. Still, that the media did not make any of these connections and drew no parallels between these events remains in itself quite notable.

Rather than attempting a comprehensive description or detailed analysis of the Tophane attack (the exact causes and motivations of which are to date still subject to substantial research to be fully understood), I try to offer some thoughts on two strands of discourses that were produced in the aftermath of the attack and the significance they might have within the wider fields of cultural policy (as enacted by the state) and cultural politics (in the sense of critical cultural and artistic contestations from “below”). The first of these strands is the official reaction to the event, exemplified by the statements of the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, on the day following the attack. The second pertains to the ways in which –at least in some part– debates on the role of arts spaces in gentrification processes were conducted in the weeks after the attack. While this article centers on questions of responsibility in two different but interrelated areas, official cultural policy on the one hand and the cultural politics of arts spaces in a neighborhood such as Tophane on the other, I do not mean to equate these two registers of responsibility. Yet, in order to arrive at more just cultural policies and a politics of more socio-economic equity both of these areas need to be critically investigated.

When Duty Calls ...: No One to Answer but the Sensitivities of the People

In contrast to other incidents in which arts events have been hampered, artworks suppressed, artists targeted and intimidated or outright censorship has been enacted, the Tophane attack markedly differed in that –at least at first sight– the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, took a seemingly strong position on the event, if only by being on site the following day.

It might be a stretch to categorize the Tophane attack as an act of censorship per se, since the structure of the attack made it difficult to discern if and to what extent artworks were of concern to the perpetrators. The fact that according to eyewitness reports some attackers yelled at the gallery visitors that they should “go (back) to Nişantaşı,” seems to at least indicate that the arts crowd, if not the artworks were perceived as undesirable. Publicly available statements from the neighborhood (including from the Tophane Haber website –a portal dedicated to news pertaining to this area of the city) seemed focused on the comport of the gallery visitors, specifically during openings when people stepped outside for a conversation and/or for a smoke with their drinks in hand. But as Galeri Non, and its exhibition by Extramücadele featuring among other plays on Turkey’s official iconography a sculpture of Mustafa Kemal as a “tilted” maybe even fallen angel in the gallery window, were the first to be hit, questions lingered if this was due to the content of the exhibition or to its location: Galeri Non is the first contemporary art venue uphill when canvassing Boğazkesen from the south east. Either way, it is important to note that the attack has left a question mark for some of the arts spaces, about whether not only certain kinds of behavior, but also certain artworks and artistic contents might not be compatible with the neighborhood they were (to be) shown in. That in the months following the Tophane attack police details were present during openings, and visibly so, in front of each art space might have exacerbated this kind of unease and might have had a delimiting effect in itself.

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7 For a critical discussion of these concepts and their partial convergence, see Mark Stevenson, “German Cultural Policy and Neo-Liberal Zeitgeist,” PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review 22, no. 2 (1999): 64-79.
8 Nişantaşı is a central district of Istanbul, which is both residential and houses some of the most expensive shops, restaurants, cafes, bars etc. in the country.
9 The work entitled Melek Atatürk ya da Rodin Kemalist Olsaydı (Angel Atatürk or If Rodin Were A Kemalist)[2010] can be seen at http:// galeri m on.com/extram ucad e le .
10 If previous examples are any indication, police presence at art openings have not made artists feel safer. Quite to the contrary, when the Hafriyat collective called the police after their exhibition Allah Korkusu [Fear of God] had been targeted by the daily Vakit, the arriving police detail actually found some of the artworks questionable and attempted to open an investigation against them. For a more detailed account of this particular case, see Banu Karaca, “Images Delegitimized and Discouraged: Explicitly Political Art and the Arbitrariness of the Un speakable,” New Perspectives on Turkey 45 (2011): 155-184.
Broadly televised, Günay together with Istanbul’s governor, Hüseyin Avni Mutlu, first visited the targeted galleries before embarking on a tour of the neighborhood and talking to its “people.” The Minister made a series of announcements at different stops. Because there was no singular press release from official sources, I center my discussion on a selection of news clips that have been made available online by the respective news programs. One of the most broadly cast statements was the following made by Günay exiting Outlet Gallery: “While we are trying to eradicate terror throughout Turkey, we will not tolerate and allow such a display to be exhibited on the streets of Istanbul.”

Much could be said about the parallelism Günay invokes between terrorism and the Tophane attack, as he takes the opportunity to reference 30 years of war with one single sweep; yet, it is the second part of the sentence that is more important for the purpose at hand. Whereas the media highlighted Günay’s qualification of the event as intolerable and his condemnation of the use of force as evidencing the “tough” and “clear” stance taken by the Minister, it is worth noting that he first chose to point to the display of violence that the event produced. This concern about the visibility of violence and the rupture in or on stain on Turkey’s image it produces comes up towards the end of his visit in a clip broadcasted by Kanaltürk. After opening a box of chocolates to be distributed to neighborhood representatives as the symbol of an amicable resolution of whatever grievances or tensions there might have been (a gesture manifesting the literal translation of the Turkish expression “tatiya bağlamak,” i.e. “tying into sweetness” or smoothing things over), Günay stated: “It is by no means acceptable that we punch each others’ faces in front of foreigners or in front of their eyes.”

That it was the international visibility of the event, rather than the event itself that was troubling to the Minister is not surprising when one considers Turkey’s longstanding concerns regarding its perception abroad. Given the fact that representatives of foreign cultural institutions were present during the attack and that Istanbul as one of the 2010 Cultural Capitals of Europe was even more in the international eye than usual, it stands to reason that these factors contributed considerably to the Minister’s quick presence—and some of his stern remarks.

In another televised moment, Günay stressed once more that there was no excuse for the attack, no matter what had transpired as to “provoke” such a reaction in the neighborhood. Another clip features him talking to residents who express that their previous complaints related to the disturbance of public order by gallery visitors had fallen on deaf ears. Here the Minister is seen impressing on them that they have to get in touch with the respective authorities. But we can also find a notable instance in which his statements start to oscillate and take on a particular, relativizing register. Consider the following quote: “No one has the right to impose their Anatolian ways of living to Istanbul, but no one has the right to dismiss the customs and traditions of the people here (meaning: in Tophane) either.” It is the conjuncture, the “but” of this statement and its rationale that is significant. At first-sight it could be categorized as signaling even-handedness, a call for mutual respect and sensitivity in dealing with each other. Yet, I want to propose that when brought together with Günay’s and his departments’ statements and (in)actions—and those of their municipal counterparts in Istanbul— in other instances when art has come under attack, and juxtaposed with the actual mandate and mission of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, a different picture emerges. To give but two examples: in late 2008 an aid

12 “Yabancıların veya onların gözü önünde birbiriinin yüzümü zıplayamaması katıya kavul edilemez.”
13 Banu Karaca, “Images Delegitimized and Discouraged.”
to the Public Relations Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ibrahim Yazar, threatened to withdraw funding for the Culturescapes Turkey festival organized in Switzerland in 2008 if a scheduled screening of Hüseyin Karabey’s Gitmek, a film notably funded by the very same Ministry, was to go ahead. In an Interview with Kai Strittmatter, Yazar explained his motion to censor the screening of the film as being based on the film’s premise of a “Turkish girl” falling in love with a “man from Northern Iraq,” i.e. a Kurd. Strittmatter tried to explore further what Yazar found objectionable in this relationship and asked if it would not even be desirable for more Turks and Kurds to fall in love with each other. Yazar answered: “Of course, in normal times everyone can fall in love. But we live in times of terror. I am a representative of Turkish sensitivities [sensibilities].”

In Yazar’s statement it is again the qualifier “but” that underwrites his censoring motion, and that he takes to represent “Turkish” sensitivities. It emerged quite quickly that Yazar had acted without the direction or the knowledge of his superiors. Yet instead of rectifying Yazar’s unsanctioned actions, Günay chose to state that censorship efforts on part of his department were never intended, but in the same breath justified Yazar’s threat to the organizers as they had included a text on the film in the program that referred to southeastern Anatolia as Kurdistan—a move, that according to Günay, his department had been unable to remain silent to (“Türkiye’nin bir bölümünün bir başka isimle isimlendirilmesi karşısında sessiz mi kalmalıyız?”). It is a similar “but” that director Okan Urın encountered when trying to put on the play Yala Ama Yutma at Kumbaracı50 in Tophane. After the scandalization of the play by the daily Vakit based on the synopsis of the piece in which an angel returns to earth in the body of a porn actress, the troupe first received email threats and then had their space shut down by the municipality, supposedly due to a missing fire escape. Although the space was open to use again shortly afterwards, the troupe had been severely discouraged and intimidated by the events, and decided to cancel the play. Urın describes the appearance of Minister Günay on CNN on February 12, 2010 where he was asked about his assessment of what had transpired at Kumbaracı50: “I am someone who is against censorship, but I also think that artists have to be respectful towards some of the values of society.” Urın noted that if a cultural minister, regardless of having seen the play or not, makes such a statement, then “the people of Tophane say, ‘mind your step’ to Kumbaracı50: We’ll come with bats and feel justified in doing so.” Notably, no one seemed surprised about the particular inflection of Günay’s statements. A few words about the general thrust of cultural policy under the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) governments and since the 1980 coup d’état might be of use, both to contextualize the above examples and to explain further why expectations on part of the art world towards official cultural policy are rather low, if not non-existent.

Contemporary art in Turkey has developed largely outside the patronage of the state, and maybe even despite the state. It is not only the fact neither the Ministry of Culture and Tourism nor local government agencies have established standing provisions to support independent art spaces and artistic production through public monies, but that contemporary artists have —by and large— rejected any dealings with the state—including voicing demands for more funding and support. This is in part because of long-standing and calcified notions of the arts having to be in service of the state on part of successive governments. In addition, the structural violence enacted by the Turkish state and the systematic oppression of free expression have also engendered a legacy of distrust among artists towards the state. This stance has to some extent softened, most recently

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17 Okan Urın during a panel discussion entitled “Censorship in the Contemporary Arts” at the Fourth Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop, Istanbul, May 28, 2011.

18 The film sector with its particular financing structure and needs has been a notable exception in this regard.
in the period of Istanbul Cultural Capital of Europe tenure where funds both from the EU and Turkey were funneled through government agencies. While European sources of support both in the form of funding schemes and of foreign cultural institutions based in Turkey have impacted the contemporary art scene considerably,20 arts funding has largely come—as more than just a mixed blessing—from the private sector. Entering quite willingly into a peculiar (and mutually beneficial) division of labor with the state by funding arts projects, providing exhibition spaces and opening museums, corporations and industrialists have often patched-up the void in structural arts funding through their PR budgets, all criticisms of the influence of private monies in the Turkish art scene notwithstanding. In comparison to previous governments, the JDP has often been accredited with being more open to at least logistically supporting the contemporary arts, particularly on municipal and local levels,21 and creating conditions that have led to the invigoration of especially Istanbul’s art world. The JDP has also undoubtedly recognized the importance of the arts as an image and marketing factor, especially abroad. The advanced openings of two high-profile locations, the İstanbul Modern Museum (December 2004) and the santralistanbul exhibition complex (July 2007), that perfectly accommodated Prime Minister Erdoğan’s schedule—EU accession talks in the first, national elections taking place in the second instance—are just two cases exemplifying how adept the JDP has been in claiming the success of contemporary art from Turkey at strategic points.

Yet, cultural policy officials have seemingly felt uncomfortable with contemporary artistic production and have frequently confined themselves to the rather narrow definition of traditional arts, and—in the past few years—to heritage-based flagship restoration projects. This discomfort might also account for Günyay’s seeming hesitation—or unwillingness—to identify the attacked venues in Tophane as what they actually are, namely arts spaces. In the publicly available online resources, he refers to gallery owners as “our friends who are opening new businesses here” [burada yeni işyerleri açan arkadaşlarımız],22 and condemns those standing by idly while businesses are being attacked [burada işyerleri saldırıya uğrarken].23 While in another context he might be commended for highlighting the labor of artists and other cultural workers as a legitimate way to make a living [“burada çalışan insanlar ekmek parași kazanmak için çalışıyorlar”]24 or plainly representing productive contributors to society, the complete disregard for the fact that they were indeed art spaces that were attacked is somewhat at odds with his official function—or evidence of his solely functionalist view of the contemporary arts as a “sector.”

But apart from the contentious relationship that the JDP seems to have with contemporary art, the point I want to emphasize here is that whenever art or artists have come under attack, the Ministry and its municipal counterparts have failed, time after time, to step up for the arts as they should by definition and as part of their pronounced duties. Articles 26 and 27 of the Turkish Constitution guaranteeing the freedom of expression and of the freedom of the sciences and the arts respectively not only have to be understood as protecting the arts, but also as mandating the state to support the arts. Yet neither the government at large, nor the cultural ministry in its different incarnations has taken up the responsibility for this mandate. However, Günay and his colleagues are by no means exceptions: Looking back over the past 30 years, Fikri Sağlar’s initiative to lift bans on literary works instated by the military junta stands out as one of the few instances in which a minister of culture has taken a clear stance on suppressed artworks.25 In

When Duty Calls...:  
*Questions of Sensitivity and Responsibility in Light of the Tophane Events* 
Banu Karaca

contrast to this kind of endeavor, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism remained deafeningly silent when Ayşur Doğan was being booed off the stage during a concert in the Istanbul Jazz Festival series in July 2011, for the sole reason of signing in Kurdish. By remaining silent, those whose official duty it is to be advocates for the arts, thus legitimized a discourse in which the usage of Kurdish was equated with terrorism as well as the much cited “Turkish sensitivities” in the wake of the deaths of Turkish soldiers.  

When it comes to freedom of expression, Ertuğrul Günay has mastered the skill of dabbling in the repertoire of sentiments instead of clear political positions. This became clear once more when he commented on the banning of journalist Ahmet Şık’s unpublished book in March 2011. The Minister proclaimed that he observed the banning of a draft of an unpublished book with “apprehension” [kayışi] and that he found the situation “worrisome” [sikinti verici].  

It is not that these feelings are expressed that is problematic, but the seeming exclusivity with which his statements do not go beyond diagnosing them. Instead of taking a clear stance, and taking up the responsibility of unequivocally defending the freedom of expression, the arts and sciences—which also encapsulates the freedom to publish— as it is mandated by his office, Günay limits himself to a solely emotive stance.

Here, as in his comments on the Tophane event, Günay relied on a frequently employed rationale in Turkish politics, that of deflecting issues of politics and power to that of sensibilities and sentiments. This is not to say that these sensibilities do not exist, but the question remains whose sensibilities and sensibilities are deemed legitimate in political discourse and whose are not. Is it not, as Pelin Başaran too has recently stated, that when the “sensitivities of the people” [halkın hassasiyetleri] are cited as grounds for relativizing the suppression of free expression, artistic or otherwise, that it is the sensitivities of power that are, in fact, at stake?  

Seemingly veiled in the language of the voiceless, victimized masses whose sensitivities are presented to be violated, and supposedly speaking for them, this discursive mode not only cuts off any further debate but also paternalizes those who are supposedly spoken for. The exclusive retreat to sentiments thus forecloses discussions of rights (on part of the artists) and responsibilities (on part of cultural policy officials), and legitimizes political indifference to different types of repression and—ultimately—violence.

**Debating Gentrification after the Tophane Event**

On November 3, 2010 an *Açık Masa* event at the arts space Depo dedicated to the “Social dynamics of the city and its relations with contemporary art production” took place. Put together by Pelin Tan and Yaşar Adanalı, the evening focused on the rapid urban transformation and gentrification that Istanbul had gone through in the past 10 years, and also tried to shed light on the Tophane attack. The event thus opened a discussion on the question to which extent art is a conduit of, but also a possible site of resistance against gentrification processes that, in short, goes something like this: Equipped with little economic but much cultural capital, artists and arts organizations repeatedly go into neighborhoods that are marked by disinvestment. Once a “scene” manages to establish itself in a respective area, the mechanism of gentrification starts to set in: restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques tend to follow in the trail of art. A formerly “problematic” part of town gains attractiveness and becomes an object for “redevelopment.” Speculators, developers and investors appear on the scene, converting the artistic allure into higher rents, raising the cost of living in a given neighborhood. Most artists and arts organizations as well as most of the long-term residents are not able to meet these new costs and have to leave the neighborhood to start the cycle somewhere else, anew.

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26 For an extensive collection of news items on the incident please see [http://www.siyahbant.org/?page_id=335](http://www.siyahbant.org/?page_id=335).


29 *Açık Masa* (lit. open table) is a “sharing platform which has been initiated by artist Mürüvvet Türkylmaz in 2000.” For detailed information, please see [http://acmasa.blogspot.com/](http://acmasa.blogspot.com/).
Among the speakers was the late Şaban Dayanano who had been working at Depo, which is also located in Tophane, since the former tobacco warehouse had been converted into an arts space, and who had, in fact, formed a vital link between the arts space and the neighborhood of Tophane. Opening his presentation with the words “I was very surprised to hear that the Tophane attacks were seen to be connected to gentrification,” Dayanano stunned the audience, but also drew attention to different interest groups and power struggles within the neighborhood.

And indeed, over the following weeks and months, while it crystallized that gentrification had a part to play as it had undeniably impacted the social make-up of Tophane, it seemed that those who had instigated if not coordinated the attack were actually not among those disenfranchised by gentrification, but most possibly among the real estate owners in the area. Apart from the opposition of urban planning activists, it seems that it has been mainly these real estate owners and the judiciary that have been in the way of Galataport—a redevelopment project aiming to transform the area extending from the Golden Horn to the outer boundaries of Tophane from a residential neighborhood with small businesses into a shopping and entertainment complex. This group apparently managed to galvanize local discontent that not only centered on crowding sidewalks and drinking in public, but also on stories that inhabitants had been verbally harassed by a group of gallery visitors (one prominently circulating story recounted that a fully veiled woman was heckled as “the reason Turkey does not get into the European Union”). Transcending the focus on the gallery openings (which, after all, happen only once a month or even less frequently, once every two months), the discontent was also geared against the increasing number of hostels, cafés and bars and their clientele, whose behavior too was experienced as disruptive and disrespectful to the neighborhood. While visitors and gallery workers experienced the Tophane attacks as unprovoked and shocking, signs of growing dissatisfaction were found in abundance on the Tophane Haber website after the attack. Especially in the sections with readers’ comments, residents voiced grievances on how specifically openings—most probably due to their high visibility—were impacting their neighborhood. Complaints—and threats—to at least some of the galleries had apparently been made before (most notably during an opening at Rodeo Gallery one week prior to the attack). Although this did not come to mean that the residents of Tophane found the attack justified, it made clear that the communication between the arts spaces and other residents of the neighborhood was broken, or, was not as strong as formerly assumed.

In their seminal article “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan forcefully stated that “[i]t is of critical importance to understand the gentrification process—and the art world’s crucial role within it—if we are to avoid aligning ourselves with the forces behind this destruction.” Their call to responsibility on part of arts spaces, artists—and arts audiences—although issued almost 30 years ago, and in the context of the Lower East Side in New York City, still holds true today. To be clear, with this quote I do not mean to make a wholesale and facile critique of arts spaces located in the area. In contrast to the arts spaces of the Lower East Side, those in Tophane never fashioned themselves as urban pioneers and marketed themselves as “warriors at the new urban frontier” who conquered new, unchartered territory as Neil Smith had diagnosed in his essay “Class Struggle on Avenue B. The Lower East Side as the Wild, Wild

30 Originally opened to bidding in 2005, the project has—so far— not been realized. It is interesting to note that during his opening speech for Istanbul’s 2011 Shopping Fest, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that if the Galataport project had gone ahead as planned “we would not have seen the hideous events of Tophane.” See “Galataport Bitmiş Olsaydı,” Tophane’deki Çırkinlikleri Görmezeyecektik,” Cumhuriyet Online, March 25, 2011, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?kn=6&hn=228170.


West.” They have also been much more sensitized to the issue of gentrification in general. But like in the Lower East Side, many arts spaces and artists have gravitated towards Tophane and found refuge there, because they have been out-priced in those areas of Beyoğlu or Nişantaşı that are more centrally located. Artists, arts organizations, and arts spaces, commercial and noncommercial, frequently cite their own precariousness as the basis of their choice for gallery or studio locations, or, for that matter living arrangements, in areas that are still close enough to the urban center to pull visitors, but marginal enough to be affordable. Deutsche and Ryan’s invitation to rigorously analyze the role of art, its spaces, producers and visitors, and the kind of developments that follow in their wake, is also a call to acknowledge the implicit complicity of the art world in gentrification processes; a complicity that is structural and goes beyond all individual intentions. Surely, the independent arts spaces and galleries of Tophane and the impact they have on the neighborhood cannot be equated to that of the IKSV (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts) with its concert hall, design shop and restaurant in the adjacent Şişhane district, where drug addicts along with small businesses and residents have been displaced to make way for luxury lofts, upscale restaurants and bars. But the dynamics of gentrification transcend the efforts of individual artists and arts spaces to foster good relations with other residents in the neighborhood they are located in; it is their mere presence that already contributes to gentrification processes. As Deutsche and Ryan argue, strong local solidarities against urban redevelopment initiatives have to be build, which might or might not be possible in Tophane and its complex make-up, but have to be endeavored if one is serious about struggling against gentrification.

One small business owner, who has lived and worked in Tophane all his life, relayed to me that he knew the people who had formed the mob carrying out the attack against the galleries. In fact, he himself had at different occasions been targeted by the very same people as they have aimed to control and designate where locals can sell their products. Although having been victimized both through physical intimidation and economically, the shop owner sympathized nonetheless with the thrust of the attack as a way of demanding respect for the way of life in the neighborhood that he thought was under threat. However, his account also spotlights the possible nexus around which solidarities might be established in the future.

While the Tophane attack cannot necessarily be explained out of the dispossession and displacement that characterizes gentrification processes, and although diversity of lifestyles and the changing socio-economic make-up of the neighborhood too, have to be considered, it nonetheless allowed for the problematic of gentrification to be broadly discussed among those working in the context of Istanbul’s art world. These discussions could potentially be a first step in assuming the kind of responsibility demanded by Deutsche and Ryan, and maybe even to foster the kind of solidarity between art world actors and their neighbors in Tophane necessary to resist gentrification based on their shared, if divergent, precariousness.

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24 Deutsche and Ryan elaborate on the necessity to acknowledge this complicity further by stating that “[f]or despite their bohemian posturing, the artists and dealers who created the East Village art scene, and the critics and museum curators who legitimize its existence, are complicit with gentrification on the Lower East Side. To deny this complicity is to perpetuate one of the most enduring, self-serving myths in bourgeois thought, the myth that, as Antonio Gramsci wrote, intellectuals form a category that is ‘autonomous and independent from the dominant social group. This self-assessment is not without consequence in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import’” (Deutsche and Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” 102).
De-spatialized Space as Neoliberal Utopia:
Gentrified İstiklal Street and Commercialized Urban Spaces
Yaşar Adnan Adanalı

Today Istanbul ranks seventh among world cities in the number of foreign visitors and international meetings it hosts and fifth in the number of dollar millionaires living within its premises. It is possible to list many other striking statistics about Istanbul. What these numbers indicate is that Istanbul is moving at a fast pace towards becoming a global city and it finds its place in the world city map as a global magnet of capital and people. “Global city” is a project made possible via the reproduction of the city in the framework of processes of capitalist accumulation and mechanisms of neoliberal production and consumption. This project consists of spatial, economic and social processes as well as those that are by content and application political.

Although Istanbul’s current transformation has been presented as a non-Western miracle of development in the face of the destructive effects of economic crises, it is actually possible to think of this transformation as a “skillful” application of well-known global(urban)ization strategies by an alliance formed between the state, the capital and local governments: (a) The segmentation of the city into detached islands through the construction of profitmaking fragments of the global urbanization catalogue, such as shopping malls, gated communities, mass housing settlements (TOKI: Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Housing Development Administration of Turkey), residences, plazas, airports, techno parks, golf courts, cruise harbors; (b) rendering lower and middle classes “powerless” in the face of this transformation by means of forced evictions and legal pressure in order to secure the land necessary for the construction of these urban fragments; such that social and class-based segregation is conducted alongside spatial segregation; (c) the production of urban corridors and transportation infrastructures that will facilitate the flow of capital, goods and humans between these fragments of the urban catalogue. Consequently, while prioritizing the city of fluxes composed of corridors to the city of integrated urban spaces, Istanbul’s global(urban)ization project constructs wealthy spaces on the sites of poor spaces. Lower class neighborhoods inhabited by the city’s poorest, which at time same time carry the highest potential in terms of the rising value of urban land, are refashioned by local municipality-private sector partnerships and allotted to new Istanbulites with highest cultural and economic capital (such as local and foreign executives working in sectors that are in great demand in the post-industrialist era like finance, design and informatics, as well as professionals of the institutionalized field of arts and culture).

The aforementioned strategies can be explained with reference to gentrification processes inherent to neoliberal urban transformation. While these processes construct new wealthy spaces and forge new socio-spatial relationships, they are abstracted from the concrete space where the transformation is taking place; they are (de-spatialised). If we take a bottom-up look at gentrification rather than adopting the bird’s eye view of capital, we will see that the transformed spaces are renewed without respect to their cultural and ecological contexts or the existing spatial habits and relationships belonging to their inhabitants. Consequently, instead of a “rational” planning process that functions via the accumulation of consecutive stages, in line with the conjunctures of the neoliberal economy, Istanbul’s global(urban)ization project treats the city space as an abstract, empty plate (a tabula rasa) and plans, designs, and reconstructs the city and its constitutive elements from scratch on a daily basis. Whether through “soft” transitions whereby spaces are acquired parcel by parcel by real estate developers in accordance with the imposing rules of the market mechanism, or through renovation/transformation projects imposed by state-capital partnerships that do not hold back from using police force, the

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1 Photo credits belong to the author unless otherwise indicated.
The author is grateful to Yunus Doğan Telliel for his invaluable contributions and feedback.
inhabitants, the real owners of the transformed spaces, are displaced against their will. Throughout Istanbul, forced eviction does not only become the means of gentrification but an end in itself. The colorful images of the global city emerge along with conflicts and tensions. This article discusses how the local government-capital alliance imposes its vision of gentrification via commercialized and disciplined city spaces, and the rising urban opposition confronting this process in relation to one of the most important streets of Istanbul, a city on its way to becoming a global city.

Forced Eviction Map (2009)

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4 The transformations have traumatizing consequences: being forced to leave the place one lives in, the deepening poverty of the already poor, the feelings of desperation, the destruction of their houses, the rapid and unfollowable changes that take place in daily realities and shatter conventional value judgments. Especially those people who have been completely excluded from decision-making mechanisms, who cannot express their opinions, and can only become witnesses to their own “destruction,” experience intense (structural) violence. For areas at risk of forced eviction throughout Istanbul see the Forced Eviction Map.

4 Mapping Forced Evictions in Istanbul Workshop participants, organized by Yaşar Adanalı, Can Altay and Philipp Misselwitz, information graphics by Studio Matthias Görlich.
İstiklal Street

Through the construction of a couple of churches and embassies, İstiklal Street, which was only a pathway amidst a “desolate, wide and green” area until the mid 19th century, developed rapidly into Ottoman Empire’s non-Muslim center of life. “Grand Rue de Pera,” which had been on the rise since the 1850s, represented the most “Western” face of the Empire in terms of architecture, demography, and lifestyle. Paul Imbert records that in the year 1869 there were 277 Muslim, 91 Armenian Gregorian, 28 Armenian Catholic, 85 Greek, 65 Latin Catholic, 29 Jewish, 40 Bulgarian and 7 Protestant students going to Galatasaray High School, which stands right in the middle of İstiklal Street. With the arrival of Belarusians who escaped the Soviet Revolution in the aftermath of the First World War, the street experienced its heyday during the first 30 years of the republican era. İstiklal Street symbolized the “European” face of the young Republic that aimed to “modernize” through Westernization. The street became filled with patisseries, cafés, theaters, movie theaters, and hotels. The anti-minority politics that intensified in the aftermath of the Second World War, the September 6-7 (1955) İstanbul Pogrom and the rising ethnic tension between the Turks and the Greeks in Cyprus hastily brought an end to cosmopolitan İstiklal and its non-Muslim population. The abandoned houses in the area welcomed the newly arriving poor, who were coming into the city as a result of intensified internal migration. In time, following its social transformation, the built environment was perceived as an area of “decay” and became associated with poverty, crime, drugs and prostitution, and was referred to as a “den” by those in power. The street, which was pedestrianized and applied “make-up” in the late 1980s, was rediscovered and the gentrification of Asmalı Mescit and Cihangir, two neighborhoods located at two opposite ends of the street, began and was aided indirectly by the artists who settled here. New cafés, restaurants, bars and boutiques rapidly opened. The rising street life was restored its hybrid and “original” character with the high immigrant population and urban poverty surrounding it. This was also the period when political activism on the street was high on the rise. For instance, on a Saturday in mid 1990s in Galatasaray Square, a group of

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6 Fahri, Aşım (2010) İstanbul’un 100 Cadde ve Sokak. Kültür A.Ş
7 The poverty-stricken Catholic community of the Keldanis, whose cultural heritage is increasingly on the verge of disappearance, whose cultural heritage was increasingly on the verge of disappearance, were forced to immigrate to Istanbul in mid 1980s. Özdemir Kaptan explains their choice to seek refuge in Tarlabası neighborhood in Beşiktaş as follows: “The reason why a small and weak community such as the Keldanis finds refuge in Beşiktaş is nothing other than Beşiktaş’s mysterious and time immemorial tolerance to people who would be considered foreigners in other parts of the city.” (Ibid, 123.)
mostly Kurdish mothers, whose children had “disappeared” (actually became victims of unresolved murders) during the civil war, started their silent protest resembling that of the Mothers of the Plaza Mayo in Argentina. They have been meeting for the “disappeared” every Saturday ever since on the same square. Many leftist groups also meet in buildings around the street while their sympathizers sell their newspapers on the street.

This is a space that is full of ambiguity and variety, can host different social and economic relations, intertwines the formal and the informal, is hard to contain and discipline, and therefore it can be identified as a relatively “democratic” space. This originality is interwoven with its cosmopolitan history described briefly above. It has come to be known as “an urban space that has not been barely a mirror reflecting foreign cultures or a melting pot erasing diverse cultures, but instead one that lets different cultures flourish independently while creating an original synthesis above them all.” What caught the attention of 19th century travelers, what “left them amazed was, among all other things, this mixing of different elements, the plurality (of languages, races, attires), the cosmopolitanism, namely, the co-existence of what is considered civilized and barbarian, the old and the modern.” While 21st century travelers are fascinated with the same sense of originality, İstiklal Street is rapidly entering a new era as a result of İstanbul’s global(urban)ization process and the “reclamation” of the street by capital. How long the street will be able to protect its historic originality becomes questionable.

Today, over two million people walk up and down İstiklal Street, which is about two kilometers long, every day. This massive human flow is accompanied by a massive capital flow and its transformative effects. Along with its side streets and the neighborhoods surrounding them, it has become a showcase where the gentrification process in İstanbul can be observed and intensely experienced. Led by market economy actors, the gentrification process that takes place on the basis of singular enterprises, parcels or buildings is deeply felt as it starts transforming the spaces of daily life.

**Real Estate purchases and sales, the seeking of profit, foreign investors**

The real estate investments of big local and foreign capital play an important role in shaping the transformation of İstiklal Street. Sales and purchases conducted by investors expand in volume every day as properties are hurriedly handed out. For instance, MANGO, which already has a store on the street bought a building, previously owned by İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality and managed by Istanbul Cultural and Artistic Products Corporation under the name İstanbul Bookstore, for 54 million Turkish Liras. A few months earlier, the Dutch firm VastNed, which makes major investments on European main streets, paid 29.5 million Euros and bought the Yapı Kredi building standing next to Galatasaray Square located in the exact middle of the street. Aside from this, the same firm has also taken over a series of buildings on the street for 90 million Euros. UK-based Eastern European Property Fund Limited (EEPFL), founded in order to “profit from the real estate opportunities” arising in Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria, also bought a total of 9 buildings, large and small. Kazak Capital Partners, on the other hand, had made an entrance in Beyoğlu by buying Komando Han, one of the most significant buildings in Galata.11

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8 Ibid. 124.
10 [http://www.eepfl.com/portfolio](http://www.eepfl.com/portfolio)
De-spatialized Space as Neoliberal Utopia: Gentrified İstiklal Street and Commercialized Urban Spaces
Yaşar Adnan Adanah

On the left, former İstanbul Bookstore which was sold to MANGO. On the right, the recently opened Demirören İstiklal Shopping Mall.

In tandem with the thrilling pace of real estate investments made by local and foreign capital, institutionalized art centers sponsored by major banks (Garanti, Akbank, Yapı Kredi) and corporations (Sabancı, Koç, Borusan), as well as prestigious stores owned by big brands (Lacoste, Nike, Converse, Mango) are opening on the street. İstiklal Street comes to fore as an attractive investment site for shopping malls for the first time in its history. These examples demonstrate how the space itself is perceived by capital as playing a central role in accumulation processes, and how urban transformation and cultural policies are intertwined. The real estate activity and the spatial transformation observed on the street and its surroundings can be considered within the framework of İstanbul’s image as the “coolest” European city and certain discourses related to “brand cities” that developed after 2000 and have supported this image such as the status of 2010 European Capital of Culture. Below you can see the sale sign for an old building in the center of Tophane. Tophane, a neighborhood right below İstiklal Street, has gone though a transformation itself that parallels the history of the street, turning “gradually from a cosmopolitan center of İstanbul into a poorer neighborhood associated with violence and drugs, and later with conservatism triggered by internal migration.” And now Tophane is being gentrified with the pressure of capital. The real estate firm which posted the sale sign is looking for both local (satılık) and foreign (for sale) clients. The emphasis on “The Private Collection of İstanbul 2010 Capital of Culture” placed on the top is the most striking element of the sign. The fact that a building that has no official connection to the Capital of Culture status is presented as if it is an art piece that real estate “collectors” should not miss, demonstrates how the strategies of market actors are in sync with İstanbul’s brandization on a macro scale.14

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12 Among recent investments perhaps two neighboring buildings have caused the most controversy: the street’s first shopping mall, Demirören İstiklal, and the historic Cercle D’Orient building which has the Emek Movie Theater under its roof, and is currently awaiting reconstruction in order to become the street’s second shopping mall.


14 http://www.falisingalata.com/index2.php?sayfa=emlak_detay&emlak_id=280604}
The temporary privatization of public space and the advertising sector imitating the street

While private spaces on the street are increasingly found on investment and profit-seeking international investors’ portfolios, the street itself, along with its public spaces (squares, streets, building fronts etc.) is temporarily privatized for marketing national and international brands. Bound neither by time nor by space, capital assigns this temporariness a continuous and permanent character. Kilometers long illuminated decorations that carry advertisement boards, which appeared first as New Year’s decorations never to be removed again throughout the year; the gigantic product dummies, which advertise various brands and occupy corners of Taksim, Galatasaray and Tünel Squares; the projections on building surfaces that first appeared as guerilla-art to be domesticated soon by the advertising sector are all on their way into becoming the unchanging decorations of the street. The advertisement installations that are placed right next to city sculptures in public spaces obliterate the distinctions between the public and the private, art and advertisement, the spectator and the consumer, thus commercializing not only the functions of space but also the space itself.

Product dummies of diverse brands remain on the street throughout the year

The advertising sector implements its strategy of “advertising as if it is not an advertisement” in urban spaces by imitating the major actors of the street, such as street vendors or political activists. In 2011, the multinational firm Vodafone was one of the most successful firms applying this strategy. One day a group of people wearing red walked down the street with placards, chanting slogans and holding up their fists. These people who, at first sight, looked like a group holding a political demonstration, were actually none other than Vodafone’s advertising agents. Later, on another day, all the simit [bagel] vendors on the street turned into mobile advertising stands. For yet another campaign, many young people wearing American football uniforms blocked the dense traffic of the street for a Vodafone advertisement. These firms and their consumer products do not only occupy visual and written media but also make room for themselves in urban life on a daily basis, hence leaving no room for breathing in public spaces. This suffocating development can be described as an “urban problem” both in relation to urban
design and aesthetics, and to the enclosure, homogenization, privatization and commercialization of public spaces.

İstiklal Street’s simit vendors turned into Vodafone advertisements
The municipality as an actor that facilitates gentrification

Facilitating the operation of the capital-oriented urbanization vision through planning, handing out construction licenses and taking security precautions, Beyoğlu Municipality comes to fore as one of the most important actors of the transformation of İstiklal Street and its environs through gentrification. The Municipality which openly displays its “graceful, high-quality, orderly” urban vision in the above billboard going back and forth between a car advertisement and municipal propaganda, perceives İstiklal Street and its surrounding environment, which “is full of ambiguity and variety, can host different social and economic relations, intertwines the formal and the informal, and is hard to contain and discipline” as an urban space that necessitates radical intervention. On one hand the Municipality renews the streets and sidewalks made up of asphalt and concrete using “stone,” which is a nostalgic element in the imagination of historic İstanbul, or with less costly imitation-stone concrete, and applies make-up on building fronts by doing coat-work, and thus is engaged in an act of “beautifying” the built environment. On the other hand, using the municipal police, it takes precautions to contain and discipline what is perceived as the colorful, and perhaps a little “unruly” elements of the life on the street, via issuing severe restrictions regarding street musicians and activists, sidewalk cafés, and tables and chairs placed the streets. Such that there is an attempt to squeeze these elements that are relegated to the outside of a controllable, decent and disciplined Beyoğlu Project, into specific spaces and narrow borders by the enactment of coerced and forceful policies. The fact that the police (and the municipal police), who represent the “cold, boring and austere” face of the state drive around to maintain public security in the latest technology “cool,” cute and prestigious Mini Cooper automobiles suiting the image of the global city and its beautified streets, and advertise them and take photographs with tourists, instead of driving locally produced cars with which they are associated country-wide, gives us clues to the characteristics of the new “order” of the street. While the Municipality carries out spatial interventions to facilitate the flow of foreign and local capital, it also aims to domesticate İstiklal and its social and economic environment.

15 Another example to the beautification work going on İstiklal Street is the “Beautiful Beyoğlu Project.” As part of this project, which was initiated in early 2000s when Kadir Topbaş was elected the Director of İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality, a series of aesthetic interventions were planned. The most striking one was the replacement of all store plates on the street with homogenized gold print on walnut wood plates.

16 For a deeper discussion of Beyoğlu Municipality’s table and chair restrictions see:
A conceptual tool: Cloned cities / streets

While the street that has come to function as a disciplined consumption center hastily loses its diversity and originality, the number of chain stores owned by multinational firms and big national brands rapidly increase. Stores that could be found in any shopping mall in Istanbul are now present on the street and are increasing in number. Along with the process of the shopping mall-ization of the street itself, shopping malls, which can be described as contradictory to the “spirit” of this space have opened, and there are plans for more. While these new consumer spaces lead to the closing down or changing of hands of the street’s long standing enterprises one by one, Istiklal Street is becoming similar to any main street that could be found in any other city of the world. The homogenization of spaces cannot be considered without reference to the social relations formed on these spaces. For instance, while the numbers of political activists who shout slogans and sell newspapers on the street are in decline, the number of the fundraising staff of institutionalized international non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace, World Wildlife Foundation, and Amnesty International, who could frequently be encountered in any other consumer city on the world, are on the rise.

The UK based New Economics Foundation uses the term “clone town” to refer to the reflection of the processes of gentrification on main streets. Every year they keep accounts of this cloning process by observing and reporting on UK’s cities and main streets. Why is the homogenization of city centers a problem? Does the “spread of cloned cities and the horrific homogenization of main streets create any concerns other than aesthetic ones?” The report entitled Reclaiming Main Streets answers this question as follows: “We think so. Yes, distinctiveness and a sense of place matter to people. Without character in our urban centres, living history and visible proof that we can in some way shape and influence our living environment we become alienated in the very places that we should feel at home.”

Of course they also explain how the problem goes even beyond this. They aim to offer a different vision for main streets: a vision that develops distinct experiences for main streets, which would not only depend on the existence of consumers but would support a better life for all. “If we are to meet a range of challenges that we face, from climate change to the economic crisis, we need to bring our high streets back to life. Where loss of genetic diversity threatens the survival of species and makes natural ecosystems vulnerable to collapse, clone towns imperil local livelihoods, communities and our culture by decreasing the resilience of high streets to economic downturns and diminishing consumer choice.” It is possible to think about the problem of cloned cities and main streets on a national scale, beyond the particular example of Istiklal Street. The shopping malls that occupy all corners of the country and big chain stores, cafés, retail stores, cosmetic stores, supermarkets and technomarkets rapidly spreading on main streets, and drugstores awaiting new legislation to do so, give us an idea about the horrific potential of “clonization” and the transformation that is the future of main streets and cities.

İstanbul Shopping Fest as a Cloning Event

İstanbul Shopping Fest (ISF), organized by a partnership between public and private enterprises, took place for the first time in Spring 2011 and went on for 40 days. It was held under the roof of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the office of the Mayor of Metropolitan City of Istanbul, was supported by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and Turkish Exporters Assembly, and was coordinated by Council of Shopping Centers - Turkey, the Turkish Council of Shopping Centers and Retailers, and the United Brands Association of Turkey. The event aimed to “transform Istanbul into the shopping, culture and entertainment center of the world.”

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17 It has to be noted that upon the September 6-7 (1955) İstanbul Pogrom most non-Muslim artisans had to leave their workplaces and were forced to hand them over to others.
18 Click here for the latest reports.
This consumption event where shopping malls and big brands were promoted also took place on some of the major main streets in Istanbul such as Abdi İpekçi, Bağdat and İstiklal Streets. While marketing İstiklal Street with the slogan “Turkey’s most eclectic street” it was as if the event tried to conceal the above-explained process of urban transformation and shopping mall-ization in general, and in particular the loss of the actual “eclectic” character of the street and its transformation into another main street in any global city as a result of such consumption events, as well as the fact that this happens not only through a process of capital-led gentrification but is also directed by public policies.

The transfer of public energies and resources to events such as Istanbul Shopping Fest, to problematic urban developments such as Demirören Shopping Mall, and to big capital in general, highlights the capital-oriented ideological content of urban transformation that is explained in the beginning of this article, and reminds us of the building blocks of neoliberal ideology. On one hand, what is taking place is a process of market fetishism that makes references to concepts such as privatization, flexible labor markets, non-producing state, small bureaucracy, good governance; while, on the other hand, economic policies facilitate capital accumulation for the sake of big capital directly through the use of state and public resources. Just as it happens when banks are rescued in financial crises; Anatolian rivers and waters are sold to firms for the building of hydroelectric power stations; public land is transferred to the private sector via the Housing Development Administration of Turkey; public land is expropriated and privatized through urban transformation laws and policies; and consequently when all state resources are mobilized for the sake of big capital.

But where are public resources and energies when it comes to the rapid closing down of many unique and independent places that make up the “eclectic” character of İstiklal Street because of the gentrification process in general, and the developments such as Demirören Shopping Mall in particular? Here are three closed veteran movie theaters Alkazar, Emek and Rüya, within a 50-meters radius around Demirören Shopping Mall. The director of Atlas, another veteran movie theater on İstiklal that struggles for survival, answers the question “is everything alright here?” in such a way that clearly explains the process: “Not really, because matters are complicated. We know the reason; it is the shopping malls. People prefer shopping malls nowadays. Movie

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19 Under the control of the current government, Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ), which was founded in principle in order to meet the housing needs of the poor citizens, has been radically altered in structure and in function, to turn into a central government institution which has absolute authority over public land. Through partnerships with the private sector, it facilitates the building of real estate projects targeting low, middle and high income groups, on treasury property or urban renovation areas it sees fit and acting like a private company it sells residences to citizens through “mortgage loans.”
theaters like ours, which are old and relatively small when compared to the ones in shopping malls, do not attract as many customers as they did in the past.”

Civil disobedience and reclaiming public space

“Public space has lost its ‘Public’ nature. Private companies own the buildings, the windows, the walls, the bus stops, the phone booths. Communities are bombarded by advertising messages every day. Communities need a balance. Take back some of this space for beauty, art, humor, thoughtfulness, inquisitiveness, questioning, color, texture, interaction and fun.”

This action, which is taken in opposition to the privatization of public spaces in Madrid, is a hopeful example of urban opposition, because it reclames the “public nature” of public spaces in our day when all parcels of public land are “occupied” through the process of gentrification and through “consumption madness” events such as the ISF. MaSAT (Madrid Street Advertising Takeover) brought together a total of 106 artists and activists. “The third in a series of civil disobedience projects intent on changing our expectations of public behaviour in our shared environments” targeted bus stops in four different locations in Madrid. The act was planned to include only written works so that 106 individuals coming from different backgrounds, such as sociology, education, law and art, could express themselves equally on the streets. In contrast to capital’s strategies homogenizing the urban space, they aimed to explore “the possibilities available when we open up our public environment in a truly public way.”

Recently, an important act of civil disobedience inspired by a similar discourse took place on İstiklal Street. The targets were: the new shopping mall owned by Demirören Group of Companies, the historic Cercle D’Orient building hosting Emek Movie Theater which has been closed for the past two years and is now awaiting its own transformation into a shopping mall once the court case is finalized. While these two buildings symbolizing İstiklal Street’s past (Emek Movie Theater) and future (Demirören Shopping Mall) clearly illustrate the transformation that is taking place on the street, the action which demanded the reopening of Emek Movie Theater and the destruction of the shopping mall, represents in one sense, the present, in other words, the critical threshold that we are passing through today and the maturing urban opposition.

Demirören İstiklal, which opened its doors in April 2011, received criticism based on a variety of perspectives and coming from diverse segments of the society. Because it was built right in the center of an urban protected area, it should not have received a license from the municipality and should not have been able to meet the regulations of the Council for the Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage and the present legislature on protection. “Some how” the obstacles were overcome. During the construction period, other registered parcels in this building block were either destroyed or engulfed by the shopping mall. The threat it constitutes for many historic buildings around it and the irreversible damage it has caused them have been frequently expressed. There were others who opposed this shopping mall project for the increased intensity it would cause in the already heavy pedestrian traffic on the street. People wrote and spoke about the fact that the movie theaters, stores and the Virgin Megastore under the mall’s roof would negatively effect the bookstores, unique stores and movie theaters on the street, namely those elements that give the street its character and are already closing down one by one. For instance, Ağa Restaurant, one of the most beautiful restaurants in Beyoğlu, was closed down after years of struggle. Similarly, as soon as the shopping mall opened, one of the

20 Beydergi, April – May 2011.
The patisserie İnci, which has been serving its customers since 1944, is within the block that awaits demolition and carries on its legal struggle with forced eviction. Musa Ateş, in charge of the patisserie, answers the question whether this long standing enterprise will be closed, as follows: “The patisserie İnci is not closing, it is being closed down... A remodeling is on the agenda for the past 10 months. It is still going on. We are the only ones who opposed it. They appealed to court and now the trial is proceeding... If this place is closed I will not re-open İnci anywhere else. Why should I, while we need to preserve this cultural heritage, some people are destroying it. They do not care for human rights or divine rights. These rights are destroyed. Now is the time to put an end to such mistakes.”

On the other hand, the neighboring Cercle D’Orient building (and Emek Movie Theater within), which is actually owned by the Social Security Institution, thus is public property, receives no support from the local municipality, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism or the Renovation Board. On the contrary, these public actors intend to privatize the building block, forcefully evict the enterprises within and to build a shopping mall covered with a “historic looking” facade. Almost all the enterprises, including Emek Movie Theater, have rolled their shutters down.

The patisserie İnci resists forced eviction

acting on these feelings and to prevent such mistakes, many city activists gathered together on April 17, 2011 in response to Isyanbul²⁴ Culture and Art Variety’s call “We are taking Emek Movie Theater back.” Hundreds of organized activists marched towards Yeşilçam Street where the theater is located, chanting the slogan “Emek is Ours, Istanbul is Ours.” Through their Theater and Cercle D’Orient Building unjustly and unlawfully ceded to capital belong to the Social Security Institution, in other words, to the public, to us. Hence, without doubt, any usage right on this space belongs to the public and is thus collective. What we deem essential and legitimate are not the interests of the Mayor of Beşiktaş, the Minister of Culture and Tourism, the members of the Renovation Board, or firms such as Kamer Construction, but the well-being and the decisions of the public. We believe in the necessity of claiming public commons against commercialization of artistic and cultural production and against the privatization of public spaces. That is why, we openly declare that we are reclaiming Emek Movie Theater, in opposition to the arbitrary lawlessness of those in power!”²⁵

²² Professor Haluk Gerçek from Istanbul Technical University defines “crimes against the city” as follows: “The city is usually compared to a living organism. In order to raise its standard of living, you need to first heal its sick, fragile constitution and unclog its arteries. However, even before that, you need to stop ‘mad projects’ that destroy the city’s future in an irreversible manner. These are not visionary projects that will heal the present unhealthy constitution of the city or that will ‘boost’ it, but are decisions that should be evaluated as ‘crimes against the city.’” (radikal.com.tr / 22.05.2011)
²³ Beydergi, April – May 2011
²⁴ There is a word play here. In Turkish, the word “isyon” means “rebellion.” So when the letter “ı” in the word “İstanbul” is changed with the letter “y”, it turns into Rebellion-bül. (Translator’s note.)
²⁵ http://emeksinemasi.blogspot.com/
Protestors at a film screening on the street between Emek Movie Theater and Demirören Shopping Mall

The group left Taksim Square marching down on İstiklal Street towards Emek Movie Theater and occupied Demirören Shopping Mall, where they chanted the slogan “Exit Emek Movie Theater, demolish Demirören Shopping Mall” and held a long sit-in. Months before this action, in order to protest the construction of Demirören Shopping Mall, which was rising as a masterpiece of the chain reaction becoming a global city – urban transformation – gentrification – cloned cities, people were making a call to boycott these consumption temples of the neoliberal city. At the point we arrived today, we can anticipate that beyond and besides this particular boycott, the struggle to reclaim such spaces and the city in general will grow to be more effective and become more extensive, and the relationship city dwellers form with spaces in the city will be transformed radically. Moreover, we can expect that this transformation will not only take place on the level of expressing opinions and participating in decision-making processes, and those who are excluded from decision-making process will problematize politics itself on much more general terms. The fact that the search for a just city acquires meaning with respect to spatial democracy seems to become clearer every day.

Exactly at this point, if we leave the radius of the street to focus on the city in general, in Istanbul, an important period for societal actors started after the year 2000 when the construction of the neoliberal city was accelerated by urban transformation projects. The urban poor who live in shanty towns without legal security; residents of the city center whose living spaces have been seized through legal means or market mechanisms; small enterprises who have lost their work spaces to big capital; urban and cultural heritage areas destroyed for the sake of tourism projects; urban projects based on social segregation; the dominance of insecurity and outsourcing in the labor market; the hasty commercialization of city services; and the loss of public spaces through processes of privatization, all prepare the ground for a large-scale urban opposition and also render its development imperative.

Translated from Turkish by Gülru Göker
An Interview with Erbay Yucak about Bir Umut Association
Meltem Ahiska, Erden Kosova

Can you please briefly tell us about the founding of Bir Umut [lit. One Hope] Association and the number of people involved?

Before the 1999 Marmara Earthquake we were individual people undertaking this sort of solidarity efforts. We had several though not major attempts of continuing this exercise of solidarity in the form of an association, foundation or a similar initiative. Attempts such as; starting a foundation of solidarity, collecting newspapers, running study halls in low-income neighborhoods for students preparing for the university exams, and going to Devrek after the flood, bringing an ambulance, a fellow doctor and the goods compiled here...Yet the process that intensified and in fact created, if you will, both the idea and the capacity of Bir Umut started with the 1999 earthquake.

After the 1999 earthquake we went to the earthquake zone like everyone else. Some of us were search and rescue people and some had gone there anxious to be of some use. An organization with a coordinative structure named Dayanışma Göñüllüleri [Solidarity Volunteers] was formed in Yalova, Haldere, Gölçük, Adapazarı, Düzce and İzmit by people who knew each other from trade unions, vocational chambers and political parties. Teams working in different locations were autonomous; they would get together at weekly meetings and decide on matters like what is needed in which part of the earthquake zone etc.

After a while problems were encountered regarding the legality of this organization’s activities. The procedures of both local official institutions and international relief organizations necessitated the foundation of an association. We did find the association but did not conduct an association-based activity. Both the organization and the operation of its activities were based on the principle of working groups; every field of activity was a working group.

Towards the end of the third month of solidarity activities in the earthquake zone, the Düzce earthquake happened, and every day for six months we undertook acts of solidarity in the earthquake zones. What did we do: we would go to the site of wreckage, put up tents, and try to run activities meeting the various needs of that specific area ranging from building laundromats to playgrounds for children in the tent-cities. Throughout this process we saw that the representatives of official institutions are not open to dialogue in terms of meeting the needs of the people, and that they do not listen or encourage the people who are seeking their rights.

Thus after discussing it with the Solidarity Volunteers coordination committee, we started to work towards the establishment of associations called Depremzedede Dönükleri [Earthquake Victims Associations] founded directly by the victims themselves. We did not assume any managerial positions in these associations. These were associations founded directly by the people living in these regions, whom we met in the tent-cities while distributing the relief items and in other places. After the Düzce earthquake the same association was also founded in Düzce.

In the next phase, in course of discussions regarding the future of Solidarity Volunteers Association and the Solidarity Volunteers, we encountered the issues of funding and projects. In these discussions we considered it essential to oversee the ongoing activities and efforts. As a matter of fact, at the time we were working collectively with a group of villagers to build 57 homes in three villages of Düzce; this was going to take quite a while. The state was constructing collective housing projects in the city but to those whose homes were demolished in the village the state was only giving out loans. It was impossible for the villagers to build homes with this money. Meanwhile we started thinking about how to use the relief budget created by people from Turkey living in Holland. We told the villagers, do not build prefabricate houses with this money, let the villagers get their loans from the state, add this money to that loan, let everyone work in the construction of each others’ home, let’s have a civil engineer and an assistant leading the work, and let’s thus build the homes collectively. We had meetings about this for nearly a year, and the villagers were convinced, the constructions started. The foundation that provided us with the funds from Holland approached us with the classic project mindset. Prior the launch of the constructions we discussed this approach at length with the Solidarity Volunteers and we said: “This is not how we operate. You cannot put a price on our labor or our organization. You
give this budget to the villagers. If you’d like you can join this process with your own representatives and monitor the process from within. With a right to equal representation…”

Why exactly was this so important for you?

Firstly; if strangers come and do something in their favor, this society automatically assumes there is some sort of cunning. When there is money involved, then they assume: surely there is something in it for them or else they wouldn’t do it. But this is our raison d’être, our truth. Thus a price cannot be set for it, it can’t be compensated for; no sort of self-benefit or income can be expected. Secondly; we considered it essential to be committed to undertaking local and domestic work. Undertaking an activity manipulated or supported by forces outside these processes simply due to their financial means was, in our vision, going to affect our credibility. In fact this is still the case today. This allows you to speak your mind more freely, to carry out your plans with less gratitude to others. You carry out your activities allowing less space for speculation. If what you are carrying out is correct then it is, if it is not correct then it’s not. We did not want anything to cast shadow on this simplicity, this sensitivity.

Surely we learned this through experience. We were strangers to this world, we were not familiar with projects etc. The considerations that made up our horizon were as follows: Firstly, as long as the victims do not come together and organize they do not have a chance of having their existence acknowledged; they don’t have the chance of accessing and using information, or communicating and realizing their own demands. Secondly; they need to attain a democratic level of organization free of discrimination based on political inclinations, ethnic identities, religious affiliations, gender or age. Thus there is need for a ground where solidarity and struggle, solidarity and demanding rights will be side by side. This life can’t be sustained with the solidarity of outsiders. It is necessary to build a communal and social ground paved by the solidarity of the local people. And the outsiders like ourselves should get out of the way; if people want to do things, acquire information etc, the democratic institutions of that very place should meet these demands. Thus we adopted a certain manner wherein we did not turn the developing social esteem that seemed to be favoring us, into a state of authority if you will, and did not channel this esteem to ourselves.

Surely it was not easy for us to attain this style, it was not easy holding all these discussions either, because there is also the issue of people’s different backgrounds, personal histories, consciousnesses. Ultimately we can say that the sensitivities we’ve experienced, the principles and all that we have accumulated here at Bir Umut have been acquired within the intensity of this practice. The collective construction of homes realized as part of the Solidarity Volunteers activities lasted two years and was finally concluded. During that time we remained in the life of Earthquake Victims Associations as long as our knowledge was required. For instance had the local bar associations met their need for jurists, then we would not have remained in their lives. We acted in solidarity with them on issues of law. In cases when they required the use of a technical capacity they didn’t have, for instance when they needed posters for the events they organized or public statements or similar designs, we took care to enable the development of that capacity there. We tried to do this without disrupting their way of operating. That is how our gradually diminishing role in the life of Earthquake Victims Associations has continued for the past 12 years. At first there were eight associations now there are two left. This is because the others could not be as committed to sustaining their links with the social problems at the local level. In fact, the conditions which kept these two associations up and running were present in all of them. We could have intervened from outside, rallied for this and organized it, but that’s not what we did. If the association was already doing this on its own, then we were going to support it; three associations did this and we supported them: associations in Gölcük, İzmit and Düzce.

While this process was underway in the earthquake zone, we tried to come up with an answer to the question “what can be done for the ‘probable’ Istanbul earthquake?” After 2001, we discussed the probable Istanbul earthquake equipped with the experience acquired in the earthquake region, and a little with the sentimentality of having lived in that region. When there was talk about the probable Istanbul earthquake, our knowledge about Istanbul at various levels
was troubling us due to all that we had learned. We tried to develop a structure based mostly on district initiatives, called Afete Karşı İstanbul Koordinasyonu (AKIK) [Istanbul Coordination against Disaster]. With regards the issue of preparing for the earthquake, our actual aim was to put the emphasis on public responsibility, rather than more privatized solutions like strengthening the resistance of buildings resided by those who have money. The issue of preparation was supposed to be not limited to the search and rescue trainings because, though important, these will of use after the earthquake. We continued with district initiatives’ activities focusing on what can be done before the earthquake takes place. We told them about the earthquake, about our rights, about the law... We also gave first-aid trainings etc. People were interested in our activities as long as there was talk of the earthquake. When it was no longer on the agenda, the interest disappeared. Furthermore, at the time there were interventions to the media coverage of the earthquake, for instance the Koç group intervened quite blatantly. This is because the people’s consumption habits were changing. If you are thinking about the earthquake you are not going to renew your fridge or furniture, why would you... People also started not to like talking about the earthquake. Some preferred not to talk about it due to their destitution, and some because it might devalue what’s hand, for instance their houses. So we didn’t insist much either. It was not something that could run solely on our own capacity. It was an endeavor that could be updated only if more alternative efforts were undertaken in high earthquake risk places and in cooperation with vocational chambers like the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects. And we didn’t have much of an opportunity to establish such relations.

**But meanwhile they used the earthquake as an excuse for urban transformation...**

Of course, this started with Zeytinburnu, now there is Fikirtepe, and it will continue expanding in the forthcoming processes. All in all, a year later we ended the Istanbul Coordination against Disaster. Meanwhile we continued to work with the homeless earthquake victims –those who didn’t own property– in Düzce and İzmit; we were providing them with support as they worked to become a cooperative, wanted to build their own homes collectively and continued to demand their rights. We completed the collective construction of the houses. We accomplished this work together with hundreds of people. Later there were less and less people who believed in the genuineness of this work, wishing to continue it. As a group of 20 or so people and friends who had decided to commit themselves to this, we started to discuss what we can do. There, at the end of all those practices of solidarity and discussions addressing these experiences, we decided to found Bir Umut in Kartal.

Meanwhile, even before founding Bir Umut we had a projection on the issue of urban transformation. Among us there were friends who were urban planners and public infrastructure lawyers. At the time, urban transformation was not an issue talked about on such a general level –it’s become so in the course of the past four years– but at the end of the day, the thing called urban transformation is indeed de-securitization of space. This de-securitization does not always take place through one project, sometimes they pass a highway through the area or place a crossroad, creating room for the unrightfully profit generating project of yet another capital group... The urban pressure thus created then starts to affect the adjacent vicinity: take the Pınar neighborhood near İstinye Park shopping mall became a problem for the power and capital holders. Yet residents of Pınar had assumed that the value of their neighborhood would increase with the arrival of İstinye Park. This is the sort of paradox; when they were building the skyscrapers on the Maslak axis, people living on this side of this axis or on the Ayazağa side had the feeling that they were going to have a share of the wealth. So for quite a long time, we had been trying to explain to people that this was not how it would go down. There were other friends as well; due to their expertise or sensitivity they expressed this approach too. What we did was more along our claim of not being in the position of merely mentioning these in panel discussions or in articles. It was reaffirmed by the fact that we must not assume the right to be offended by society’s visible states.

Thus we decided to found Bir Umut Association six years ago. Our decision was affected by, the earthquake victims’ movement, and the issues of urban transformation as well as the workers’ issues. There is a widespread precarization; yet there are no organizations that will address the
states of being and victimization created by this lack, and act through the perspective of creating a process where workers will become subjects in the struggle against this. Furthermore there is no solidarity with these people on issues of rights or the law. The unions and the present union movement are not taking into account these needs. Thus we also talked about this when thinking about what we can do. Another topic of discussion was concerning product solidarity. An ecological sensitivity had been developing, which was leading towards an ecological banditry where people with money can buy chemical-free products while those without money are condemned to whatever is sold in cheap supermarkets like BİM etc. At first we launched product solidarity by opting for long lasting foods that don’t go bad quickly. Then entered our lives a product solidarity that encourages the organizing of producers, takes the middleman and the merchant out of the equation where you include only the transport fees and handle your own distribution and accompany the production process.

Along with product solidarity we started efforts of solidarity on goods and employment information. The idea of employment information solidarity sprang from our observation that when a worker is laid off or quits a job s/he tells the people around, in the neighborhood or in the old workplace that s/he is looking for employment. Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) is not a well running, established mechanism. The more real and useful employment information that worker has in his/her life the more alternatives s/he will have. What does real information mean? It is the information that is not printed in the newspapers. Even hypothetically, an employed person passing on any sort of employment information to the association not knowing who will use it means that s/he has acted out of concern for somebody else. S/he does not have to be a member, this is a practice where a random passerby also walks in, gets his/her information recorded, passes on information about a job, or benefits from such information. Let’s say s/he saw a job-ad posted on a random door, s/he will go in and ask “I see you have this ad here, so do they cover social security, overtime, transportation?” There will be a dialogue of at most five minutes, s/he will note down this dialogue too, and send the information to Bir Umut e-group. We brought the issue of secondhand goods into our lives because especially in big cities people are in the habit of changing their furniture, rearranging their closets to replace summer clothes with winter clothes etc.

All this constituted a sort of frame for the issues that Bir Umut tackles. Later we founded Bir Umut in Kartal and another in Şirinevler so that there was one on this side of Istanbul as well. This was four years ago. About two and a half years ago we decided to open an office in Taksim. Actually at first we had no intention to open an office in Taksim, but urban transformation and other issues we tackle with rather necessitated an office in the city center.

In fact the Davutpaşa explosion\(^1\) had happened around then, killing 21 fellow workers. We worked for those worker families to come together and organize. We knew that in cases of workplace-homicides, a practice of drawing the families’ attention to a common struggle for justice did not exist. Parties, unions, chambers or bars did not concern themselves with this. To be fair, let’s put aside those that did care about these issues, but we didn’t know about them. However the general situation was turning into a legal effort fixated on the lawsuit for damages. When the families managed to become organized, the criminal lawsuit that could not be opened for the past 2.5 years was finally started. They gathered together at the Taksim tram stop for about 40 weeks, making statements. A group of lawyers was mobilized. Meanwhile there were friends who wanted to run Bir Umut activities in Ankara, thus Bir Umut was founded in Ankara. We tried to organize the families of our fellow workers who lost their lives at the Ostim and İvedik explosions. And we succeeded. It was the families from Davutpaşa who helped the families of victims of Ostim and İvedik explosions to organize. Gebze was a rather separate space. There were those who wanted to found Bir Umut in Gebze. We moved the Şirinevler office to Sefaköy, to support the Ayazma families who were victims of urban transformation. Ayazma

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\(^1\) On 31 January 2008 there was an explosion at an illegal fireworks factory in Davutpaşa, Istanbul that killed 21 workers and injured 117.

\(^2\) On 3 February 2011, two explosions occurring in Ankara at Middle East Trade and Industry Center’s (OSTİM) and İvedik Organized Industrial Zone respectively killed 17 people and injured many.
families’ protests were continuing in front of the Küçükçekmece Municipality. They did not have any place to leave their stuff, and nowhere for the kids to go to. So we moved Şirinevler to Sefaköy, in order to contribute to that process.

According to our membership code, it is not enough to say “I want to be a member.” Our statute requires all members to be part of a working group activity. Those who join us must say, “I will be in the ... solidarity working group, I’ll be a volunteer...” Though we have our various established principles regarding the general style, the groups are autonomous in their working methods. Thus we don’t have such a centralism, spokespeople or presidents. We have a common style and practice of work. The people who participate in the activities are the ones who explain what Bir Umut does. Even though the information on all these processes is shared equally, it is difficult for all of us to commit an equal amount of time due to “life’s own rhythm.” However everyone’s opinions on all issues are equally valuable, whether they commit three hours or three days a week.

Don’t you hold any general meetings?

We do. Each Bir Umut Association has its own assembly. Everything that needs to be talked about is addressed in that assembly and that assembly makes the decisions. But surely, though adopted by some of the people this structure is not a very common practice. Secondly –something we have recently been discussing among ourselves– we run our activities under different sorts of pressure. There are those who opt to discredit us at large, some view us, roughly speaking, as a Rotarian or an NGO activity. Then there are those who think that we have a hidden agenda and that we’re trying to organize a type of political agency. So we experience both kinds of pressure. Yet this is because of the general habits of the country’s social and political culture. This style itself is new, wherein we don’t make our own propaganda and instead work to help those who are downtrodden or totally ignored to become self-organized. Let’s say you go to a site where people are being wronged, unjustly treated, and act as a facilitator by gathering and defining the demands of the tenants and property owners... You do not forgo the concern for this effort to be manifested as an organization that comprises everyone and transforms into a process where everyone has the right to speak... And having an effective struggle to realize these demands... You can’t just write out a prescription and be done with it. It is important that it reproduces itself at every level and based on these concerns. In the adoption of practical stances also, not working with acute movements of limited number of people... Let’s say if there are a hundred people over there, it is about carrying this out in ways that enable the people in the very back to join as well, and not use a method preferred by a more excited group of five people, but with methods that allow the participation of all hundred. In order to be able to explain all this you should get to know their sensitivities, concerns. Learn what sort of connections and discriminations there are... Relations with the people known as the opinion leaders do not always guide you in the right direction; on the contrary it may reinforce yet another case of total neglect. Thus this process requires energy far more than it takes to hold a meeting, it requires one to try to attain a better understanding. Surely for some people it is incomprehensible not to expect something in return after such intense work and so much effort. This time what you get is another manifestation of what I explained regarding the issues of project and funding in the earthquake zone: the community then tests you. The elections for instance are important in this sense. People assume that you will be knocking on their door around election time. They figure, since you are now acquainted, you will come and tell them to support a certain party or boycott the elections etc. Even if we do have opinions on such issues of real politics, among all this work we adopt a stand that does not reflect the current polarization of real politics. At most, we try to develop processes wherein such atmospheres can be useful in terms of voicing their own demands. For example: We advise them to communicate their own demands to all political parties and make an evaluation among those that do accept their demands. This surely depends on how much this work has matured. This does not mean that we reject the tradition of political organizations, but we do not approve of familiar forms of political organization or representation.
It comes across as a structure developed through experience...

Actually of course when pondering on whether the action or the idea comes first, there is something created through our intellectual traditions and backgrounds and based on various undefined sensitivities and critical approaches. But was the idea we had in the beginning so “fully developed,” no it was not. Thus if you have ideas in the beginning, a corresponding climate is formed, that is if your sensitivities and focus are apt. So you must have the disposition and patience to further the inceptions you have noticed in your contact, and a consciousness open in mind and soul to interact with the people you have contacted.

There also seems to be a different needs assessment. Rather than meeting the previously established needs, what we have here is also the gradual transformation of these needs, right? For instance the process of deciding “what the neighborhood needs” is already important.

Let’s say there is a neighborhood, where there is no announced threat of urban transformation but potentially they are at risk “due to a lack of security.” If you are explaining something based on valor, you say: “Look here you are the working class, you are low-income people, they will not let you have this place to yourselves. The sovereigns, the big capital holders will take this place from you, so you must come together and organize.” Is that a statement that can solve their problem, no it is not. They know all this too; after all they’ve been living in Istanbul for the past 50 years. They’ve had some experience with the unions at the factories they worked, then there are the things they’ve seen before the 1980 coup... So when you make such statements, you end up not saying anything to them. Thus as you seek a way of saying something to them, you are not only trying to express yourself, but you are actually looking for ways to make the idea of organizing as a neighborhood relevant again. The analytical, critical ways that you are seeking through observation in order to express yourself are indeed useful things in their lives, also updating their lives. These processes are surely not easy; at that point they ask, who are you, what are you working for. Right then our own history comes in handy. After all you are not a political party, or the TMMOB (The Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects). Having a background, a CV if you will, with which you can better express yourself and your aims makes it somewhat easier to establish that bond over there...

You mentioned two different criticisms targeting your structure. These may be leftist groups, or parties; guess there have been moments when you had to confront them...

They mostly talk in our absence, not many speak to our face. Anyhow if we feel functionless in a certain place we don’t carry on. If our work there is not benefiting the people, then we kindly wish them well, give our blessing and ask for theirs. This is a true giving and receiving of blessings, not a Tayyip Erdoğan trip. In fact the conversation goes on like this: “We came into your lives to meet your such and such expectations, thinking we could be of use to fix your homes (for instance); together we went through this and that, but looking at the stage we’ve reached today it is evident that either you have taken a different path or you don’t need us. Whatever work we’ve done for you we’ve done willingly and may you benefit from it, if you’ve labored for us, hope you feel the same, and good luck to us all.” That is how we depart, of course we want the expectations to be met but we don’t think or say stuff like “were all those efforts in vain?” No labor ever goes wasted. We are not the people we were when we first started that work, and they are not where they were when they first started working with us.

Nevertheless all this becomes clear eventually when that community is solving a problem, when it is in motion. For instance it would be absurd to suddenly hold a discussion on discrimination, or on how s/he has made that discrimination visible in his/her life. Such a discussion can only emerge from a contradiction, a conflict or a problem. For instance let’s say 80 percent of the families or homeless people in Davutpaşa have a conservative disposition. There were documentary filmmaker friends who had been observing Davutpaşa since the beginning. They came by the other day saying they were almost done with the documentary and asked us to watch it. They had 70 hours of material to be used in the documentary. While watching that material it was important to observe how people talked, addressed the issue and behaved.
Towards each other at the very beginning, and how it all had changed three years later. That is what we believe in. It’s not like we have a memorized idea, a creed that we follow. Our only creed is to stand by those who have are downtrodden, those whose existence has been ignored, and to have a “useful” role in their lives, and to make it possible that they attain their personalities. So the goal is not to lead or manipulate these people. For instance the method we follow our traditional evenings is that one of our friends goes up the stage for two minutes to welcome everyone, and then the stage belongs to anyone and everyone whose lives we have touched, and they say whatever they wish to say. This is what gives us confidence. The processes we’ve been through to this day did not make us feel like we’ve done some wrong, fruitless, useless or repetitive work. On the other hand, we do not go around introducing ourselves as people who believe in and work towards such and such because we think that’s what the country needs today; we don’t, if you will, take a public position with such a claim. For example we don’t partake in platforms, we don’t make press statements. The press statements of Davutpaşa families for instance are about the Davutpaşa families, and are undersigned in their own names. There is not a single statement signed by Bir Umut and sent to the press declaring we hold such and such an opinion on this or that matter etc.

The neighborhood residents do not constitute a homogeneous entity, and people may have different interests and needs, and there is more than one state of victimization, so when you come across such conflicts how do you move beyond them?

First of all, there is a specific reason that brings us to a place. In law there is something called the “well-known case,” a case that does not require proof and is common knowledge for all. What here is the case known to all: that we have gone to that neighborhood. If we have not been invited by that community then we don’t go; we don’t say, here we are to tell you about stuff; we go there when there has been a problem. In all our practices to date, we’ve tried to get to know the members of the community, and as much as we can we’ve tried to communicate their problem to the extent that we’ve been able to understand them. We help them identify the problem. Once the problem is defined, when we reach the point of taking a stance, we try to help them understand the advantages and disadvantages of various stances that can be adopted. And sure enough that’s how we also get to understand the so-called social reality. At the end they make their own decision.

When you are dealing with such a community, your definition of victimization and the problem may not overlap with theirs. Since you are going there due to a specific subject matter, if you fail to present a holistic sociological analysis and observation addressing the reasons that brought you there in the first place, then the most you can do is to explain what you know and leave. But we are not trying to transfer our knowledge. When you try to turn this knowledge and the existing problem into a means through which the neighborhood can create its own organization, then you should proceed taking into account all these details. Ensuring sustainability, and regeneration is something else entirely. You must first observe, understand and embrace the various sensitivities of that life. If, for instance, your meeting venue is next to the mosque and you hear the call to prayer then you will take a break from the meeting. You will assume that there are religious people who will go to prayer. There should be room for those people to have the courtesy to decide whether they will postpone their prayer or not. Even if you don’t take a break, no one would reproach you; you are an outsider. It is not simple like a spectacle of giving up your seat to an elderly person. Just like you said, within that heterogeneity there are tens of different layers and your intimacy with the people grows to the extent you can see this and establish, reflect and convey its link with your reasons of being there.

The extent of our words’ reach depends on how much we are able to do this. Not everything is totally related to you, it is related to the characteristics of the problem, to the historical background of the place; but we are doing this at the very least also due to a mutual respect. Naturally a person wants other people to understand what s/he is talking about. In order to create this understanding, one should try to understand what s/he is thinking, and how s/he perceives things.
You mean, there is also an objective of transformation with regards the future as well, right, or an objective to assist in the transformation?

Anyhow, if there is a continuity and regeneration and if you too have put your mind and heart into that matter, then that process offers an activity of regeneration for everyone. It depends on your value formation and discernment of regeneration. It becomes something collectively accomplished depending on the extent it has been embraced. You don’t do things assuming if you carry out a specific thing it will change things in a certain way. But surely there is content to the things you do. And this you declare candidly. You say, that path takes one to selfishness, this path feeds this and that, the other path deepens social and class divisions whereas if we carry this out in that way it will lead to this... This is already something intrinsic to you but also depends on your ability to regenerate. It depends on your ability to present it as a problem. Since what you describe as a problem may not be recognized as such by him/her, we don’t experience it so openly and nakedly, it is experienced somewhat more indirectly. If there is a “change” it is the process itself. Thus we try to anchor ourselves to the idea of regeneration and process. Meanwhile no thought that does not nurture itself and its voice with the practice of life has any value. That is, if our thoughts and concerns belong to the future of humankind.

Are there such striking cases where the process leads to an entirely different point?

They all have such cases in their history. For example, when you first go to the neighborhood, you’ve spoken to five people at the meeting, then those five people become 55 people, then those 55 become 155... First there were no women, then women came... At first there were only leftists, and then it turned into a crowd including supporters of rightist parties alongside leftists. At first the right wing supporters did not talk to you, then they did... There are many such examples among those practices.

For example the victims of earthquake who were not property owners... Eighty percent of this group is comprised of women that we still call aunt or sister. On the one hand, a representation mechanism has been established in this group and they hold group meetings. On the other hand, women have social circles that are made up of people like themselves. We are not part of those. The fact that our dialogue continued; they embraced our dialogue with love, respect and veneration; they do not badmouth us behind our backs, all of these indicate change on various levels.

And also we respect the idea of process. This is actually our response to the debate around spontaneism and voluntarism in the framework of efforts towards “social politics.” And we believe that the processes that determine politics should also be developed accordingly, based on the maturity of the process itself. The ideal would be for the democratic organization of the neighborhood dealing with urban transformation to reach a stage where they could nominate their own candidate for the municipal council at the local elections. Therefore we are not shortsighted, but even if we succeeded in such an effort, nothing will be over. That’s why we talk about the idea of a process. We don’t limit ourselves to the meeting of one single demand. The capacity to persist will also accumulate within that process. Voluntarism, re-production and having the skills to form a mutual relationship and communication with that social nature go hand in hand.

For instance, earthquake victims in İzmit who did not own property and became homeless after the earthquake were able to move to their homes following an eight year-long struggle. So we could say now, yes our struggle is over, the tenant earthquake survivor can also be a homeowner, and take our leave. Yet when you convey the following idea, that’s where you witness change the most: "Okay, you’ve taken the house, but life does not end there. What will happen in terms of organizing life itself? Among you there will be people who will be unemployed, who will be sick... There is the issue of transportation; the model developed by the municipality will not suffice... See also, so much pesticides, chemicals are used in the food you eat, are you not going to devise your own solution to this?" If they say, yes we should, be it a hundred people or five, when you see that determination, something has changed. You see this during practices of devising...
collective solutions. For instance now, water heaters will be bought for 574 of them. They established a commission, the commission went and got an offer and presented it to the committee of representatives. Seven of them can come together and do this as a temporary board of directors. There is no longer the suspicion is one of these seven people going to take advantage of this purchase, be paid off by the seller. You see the ideological hegemony of capitalism in social life just like that, blatantly. If three people are coming together, and one of them is representing this group, it is presumed that there is a scheme going on, there will be exploitation. The society has lost faith in acting collectively. Perhaps this confirms the most authoritative character of the system. The collective acts of the past are not remembered with enthusiasm or excitement. Thus, what you are actually doing is to rekindle this sense of acting collectively that is waning, beginning to disappear. For example it’s no small thing that three or five people undertake the shopping with money on behalf of everyone and they are not suspect in any way.

When we say what sort of changes are we talking about, issues like them making peace with your religious views, attitude, you being influenced by them and vice versa, things like that. For instance, we discussed capitalism with these people in İzmit through a popular TV series. Because we don’t organize a meeting with the agenda “then why do all of these happen to us?”; our work is problem based. Yet in terms of the whys, how comes, you reflect, you share what you believe in or make of the matter not to force anyone, shove it in their face or make them think like you, but because there is such a need emerging. Of course, they also share their opinions. Then, you know, wherever the conversation goes, however much it unfolds... And this does not happen as it does with us, around an agenda, it happens with more current, popular things. That’s why we discuss justice over popular TV series, we discuss the rich and the poor and their modes of existence in social life. As long as your existence does not sustain itself along such a line in such a fundamental matter, you might become history after a while. That is, nothing but a pleasant melody.

What kind of line?

For example if we had not built those houses in the villages in the earthquake zone collectively, now these 17 villages would not have the opportunity to come together around the hydroelectric power plants (HES) issue in Düzce Aksu. Why? Because there is a relationship based on trust formed as a result of these collective houses. Otherwise, when those people in the village were thinking about what to do about this HES trouble, they would not call you, even if you were a lawyer or a judge. They call you because of this history. When such a thing happens, they say let’s also hear them out. Even if the other villages don’t know you, they tell them about you, before you have to. They say, these people are like this, they think like this, act like this, and value this. Thus you meet with 17 villages that have already come together, there is a road already open and you continue.

In terms of sustainability and re-production: option a. the capacity and maturity of that community itself can ensure this, option b, might necessitate bringing in various levels of energy from the outside. For example, one of the discussion headings on our agenda actually is: Can we accompany the process in which these social organizations can become “life organizations” that can reproduce themselves? And where will this begin and end? While all of these may seem like good things from the outside, they can’t happen only with our energy and there are others in this country who will understand this style, who have this concern and want the energy they spend to be useful for something more substantial. Here, things move beyond our grasp. Why?

Let’s say in one location you are going to work on drying out plants with women. It is not enough for them to merely think I’ll dry and sell the plant, make some money. It is also important for them to have an ecological awareness. Moreover, it is important that they have an ecological awareness which will enable them to sustain their life practice with more ecological methods within something that resembles an urban setting without reviewing the whole ecological literature, amidst that simplicity. There is a need for the reproduction of this, the creation of certain opportunities, the flow of such energies. Thus, when we think can the experience and
know-how we have respond to needs on this level, the answer is no. If we are to follow this path, then an energy that will address all these needs has to be generated.

**And perhaps this is something more political?**

Of course it is political, but not in the traditional sense. It depends on how you define being political. Rendering of a state more understandable and popular with all these sensitivities and awareness. Without confining these into a narrow discussion, or as would be said, without approaching these under the headings how will the revolution come about in this country, how will capitalism be destroyed, how will the left expand, yet simultaneously exploring all the aspects of the issue... You know, just like you said when you were explaining why you are publishin this journal, people have found one way to resolve a problem in Armenia, another way elsewhere. That is, we regard the perception of the self as the beginning and end of any idea or experience as flawed from the outset; if we think that experiences in other geographies might be useful and even generate outcomes that transcend merely abstract ideas... Yet this depends on your effort to accompany those communities in these life processes. That is to say, the process is not solely comprised of you, but it does depend on your effort to sustain your energy flow without violating the principles we talked about in the beginning, that is without being engrossed in the aura of "look, how much respect, reverence" we have.

**Are there other initiatives you would think of as allies?**

Depending on the issue, we do encounter some. For example in Sefaköy, Istanbul, friends decided to start planting crops as per the ecological product issue. They planted a 1000 square meter field. They set out by saying let’s not just be consumers, be so alienated from what we eat, adults and children all together. They had eighteen meetings on agriculture and farming. Whatever group was out there working on agriculture, whoever had a say, they tried to reach them, invited them and listened to them. In this respect, we don’t have the feeling that we know the best. Let’s say you’re working on an urban problem. You can get in touch with other groups, initiatives working on the issue. When you are working with workplace-homicides for example, you get in contact with worker-work safety groups. You don’t shut yourself off. But the problem is: all of these groups relate to the given topic through either a political entity, saying “this is how I see this county, this is how I work to change this and that;” or there is actually an opinion he supports, but he has limited himself to that subject due to his vocational formation. Therefore they don’t have methods focusing on “life,” “different aspects of life”; and they don’t say, “let’s start from the root of the matter.” We are not closed to interaction for more practical needs, but we are also aware that this is an endless and futile thing due to the current atmosphere. For example there is a solidarity initiative for ecological products. Who else is in this field? There is the GDO’ya Hayır Plataformu (Say No to GMO Platform), Çiftçi-Sen (Farmer’s Union), the Köy-Sen (Village Union). One the other hand there are those who are trying to invent the experience of production cooperatives, develop location-based practices. We know about these, and follow them as well. Or there are chambers working on urban issues and urban groups that define themselves directly through urban and space issues. We also follow them. When there is an opportunity for collaboration, sectarianism is anyway not our style, yet just as we don’t assume a position to dominate these processes, we don’t take a position insisting on collaboration. Because this kind of maturity doesn’t exist. This is also a practical thing. The rest is an aspiration, but for that aspiration to become real there should be practices taking action on their opinions, so one can follow one of those practices. Plus the issue is not our interaction with those who undertake those practices. What is important is that one community interacts with another community. And for this interaction to take place, there must be familiar practical processes that enable collaboration. Otherwise we’ll sit and talk, and understand each other there and then, but the issue is, beyond understanding each other, to increase the opportunities for the acquaintance of social practices that we are a part of and reflect our choices, opinions, sensitivities on. It is the flourishing of the desire to unite as one force and to think together. And this state cannot be created through commissioned “opposition coalition” meetings. These will only be meaningful in the sense that they are informative. Because such meetings are representative and these representations do not reflect the reality of the social struggles, they
During our first conversation you made the following observation: mass housing settlements will be the dominant urban form at least for a certain period of time in the future. And you mentioned that the current intellectual debates proceeded without an awareness of this fact. How can resistance or solidarity practices assume a stance in face of this? Can there be an alternative to mass housing settlements developed by the (TOKİ) or how can it be possible to change certain things within the framework of TOKİ?

First of all, why are we discussing this issue? Because the choice of capital to grow spatially will continue in Istanbul and Ankara and also explode in Izmir in the upcoming days unless there is a serious economic crisis, and it will continue to increase in a manner to expand to other big cities and rural areas deemed profitable. This process will continue including the more international Islamist capital that has been providing the hot money flow for many years and this capital inventing various life spaces for itself, exchanging hands etc. Even if a crisis breaks out, it may lose momentum but it will still continue. What does this mean? Since we are not realtors, if we look from social perspective, what can we say? We can say this space does not have to change in such an insolent manner, it can also change in a way that would make sense to urban planners, architects. This transformation is our reality because it generates profit. Old residents will be evicted. Actually those in charge do have a solution to this and they implement it. They build a mass housing settlement somewhere and tell people: “this has become a state council ruling, am I giving you a house you can live in; I am, am I giving you wreckage money; I am. So I am fulfilling my obligation.” TOKİ builds these settlements in Istanbul and before TOKİ, for example in the Kurtköy and Kağıthane projects, KİPTAŞ¹ built them. Secondly, migration to the city continues. Those who come to the city get by on rent for a while but being a homeowner is an important thing in our society. This is probably due to two factors: One, the issue of having to deal with landlords, and the abrasive situations created by this. Second, the idea that as long as I have a house, even if I have to work for a day’s wage, I’ll still find something to eat. Thus these processes devised by TOKİ correspond to this tendency in people.

If this tendency is continuing as such, there can’t be only one single mode of struggle against such processes. That is to say, one side of the struggle is focused on keeping your place and safeguarding your right. Secondly, if you accept to move to a housing settlement there is a different struggle at stake. Mass housing settlements are spatial designs that segregate people as much as possible, fragment the public space and relationships between people; they are places where people can’t find the space or opportunity to meet or relate to each other. Thus it is not a good thing for such a significant majority of a society –and a majority who cannot express themselves socially or as a class– to be so segregated. This is also not good in terms of the struggle for equality and freedom, neither is it good for the society’s capacity to resolve its own problems collectively. The physical and social opportunities for imagining a common future gradually shrink in mass housing settlements.

In terms of mass housing developments, perhaps the closest case of having a contrived arrangement with TOKİ was the Homeless case in Izmit. When, at the end of our struggle, the state gave us land where residences for victims of the earthquake who did not own the houses they lived in could be built, JDP officials proposed that TOKİ built these residences. We were actually going to collectively build the houses ourselves, but the community could not imagine how this would turn out, what it would take. They decided to have TOKİ build them under the condition of payment after delivery. This was not our idea. Our idea was not to sign a protocol before getting the plot. We wanted them to first give over the land to us, then to assert our own conditions. But because of our general approach we did not push too hard. We said, fine, let it be this way, at least we have succeeded at one level of the struggle. We gave TOKİ eight demands. We said, first, we want to collaborate with sociologists in doing a survey about the architectural design of these residences in order to address the needs of all the residents. We are not asking you to do this, we will do it. Secondly, since all of these people have survived the earthquake, for

¹ http://www.kiptas.com.tr/EN/INDEX/default.asp
this survey we will also get the support of psychologists. Third, it is not good for the residents to be alienated from the construction process, it is necessary for them not to be alienated, even if it is only to know what’s where when there is a problem somewhere later. That is why we would like to find a way to accompany the construction process on some level. There should be a committee working in our name. We will pay the fees of the civil engineer and others in this committee. They can come, look, take pictures, and explain things to us. The rest of the demands pertained to public spaces and other issues. TOKİ rejected all of them, even though there was an JDP parliamentarian acting as a spokesperson.

Therefore, even to begin discussing TOKİ’s anti-democratic, authoritarian, “take it or leave it” approach, these people who engage in a relationship with TOKİ need to be able to define their demands. That’s the only way they can push them. Otherwise, people like us can’t go beyond criticizing TOKİ. In processes involving TOKİ, if TOKİ is to be influenced and changed, such a struggle is necessary. TOKİ is a public institution, it uses public resources. Therefore if they ask me, TOKİ or the free market, I’ll say TOKİ. The issue is to devise creative instruments to influence it. For instance, working on the administration plans of the housing developments. To ensure that rather than being handed over to small professional companies, the administration plans are undertaken by the residents.

But there is another problem. If there is not an already existent cohesion and solidarity in that community, housing development administrators will use this to their advantage and there is no guarantee that there won’t be exploitation. In housing development processes, there is no structure for people to organize before entering lotteries individually or investing money. This is why social organization levels are essential in neighborhoods, in places that will be evacuated, or places like Fikirtepe that will undergo transformation due to the earthquake threat. Whatever you do today, you will face it tomorrow. What you do will either contribute to creating an opportunity to act together, or it will obstruct collective action. If a struggle you engage in today to claim a right can simultaneously create an added value for the future and if certain principles become internalized in the process, that is what is valuable. I mean tomorrow, when there is a big problem, if they sit around a table, reason together and decide. And if they do not discriminate against each other when they are coming together around the table. This is how such a democratic capacity grows in a society. And a true struggle for democratization is made through such existences in social life. And to the extent that this is possible, it is yet another step moving away from representative democracy and the state in favor of the truth of the existence of members of society.

Public housing development spaces will be sites of more intense tensions due to both the Kurdish issue and the nationalist conservative tendencies. In the neighborhood there is something called the street, everybody knows each other on the streets, it is also a public space at the same time. In these settlements this won’t be the case. Residents will leave their houses, take the bus or minibus... When you are sitting on the sidewalk of this space called the street, holding your engagement or circumcision ceremony there, there are many opportunities for different encounters. With the removal of the street there won’t be any positive additions to this community’s life, only a negative impact. Spaces providing the opportunity to people to come together in their differences and think collective are decreasing. Thus being concerned with this does not only pertain to the present, it also has great significance in terms of the future. In these spaces where workers, people with limited income are being congregated, certain security concerns also become an important issue. And the state tries to solve this problem by building a couple of police lodgings in the complex.

We have to do our best to increase the ways in which we can build on the accumulation necessary to attain a more equal, more free, more humane, more democratic social life in the future. Each contradiction, each conflict, each problem also bears in itself aspects that will pave the way for this. That is to say, they do not merely bear negativities. One has to see those cracks, intervals, seep through and make use of them. For example the hydroelectric power plants were such an opportunity missed. I mean even though the power plant processes seemed like such a popular climate of struggle did this turn into an ecological awareness in society? No. Was it able
to transform society’s way of relating to space towards a more peaceful approach challenging humanity’s domination over nature? No. Well, did it lead to the organization of rather heterogeneous local initiatives foregrounding such sensitivities? No. Thus each problem, each intervention cracks open a door and when that door is opened, one must sneak in. The stimulating tensions between the imagined future and the present must be experienced as deserved. We feel that not just ours but also society’s own paths pertaining to the future can be formed as such.

In the context of urban transformation, if a struggle is undertaken today at the site that is threatened with eviction, and if it is carried out on a democratic level, then even if they all leave that site tomorrow, all of this will be carried with them to a large extent, alongside the culture they’ve developed. Whatever’s in your pocket, it will be defining the new place one goes to and the new life there. For example, being able to resist when TOKİ pushes them for payments or wants to evacuate them; when there are problems in the residences; or –since the planning authority has been transferred to TOKİ– when they reduce public spaces by building an additional seven blocks. Or let’s say that’s not the case, to create processes in which they succeed in staying where they are, devising collective solutions... Something to do with mutual accumulation.

Before the 1980 military coup, there were efforts in different places to build a neighborhood collectively and to organize a life together. The language used there was very different. The language you employ now is different; instruments such as associations, platforms, cooperatives that you mention, and all these forms of struggle denote a different language. What sort of a continuity or breaks are there between the past and the present, for instance in terms of neighborhoods and also in terms of the work you do? Finally, how would you define hope and what would you like to say about it?

First of all, the issue of building squatter houses did not start with the leftist movement; it started in the 1950s. Being on the side of the workers, the left has made this an issue for itself in its political fields of influence after 1977. However, the left has approached this issue in terms of resolving a problem of the worker, therefore there has not been much thought given to the sustainability, continuity of it. Thus, many of the historical readings on such squatter neighborhoods in the academia are flawed. This is an official history, an official history confined to the left. For example when you think about 1 Mayıs neighborhood, you shouldn’t start out with the foundation of 1 Mayıs neighborhood. You should take the building of Esat Paşa mosque into consideration, which dates back to the 1950s. So what the left did back then was to ensure that the population’s housing solution practices were undertaken in solidarity as much as possible and to remove middlemen and profiteers. At the same time, due to factors such as the polarization and security issues in society, these neighborhoods were founded as places where people could live with those like themselves to the extent possible within the confines of the language and conditions of the time.

In the processes after the 1980s, those who were engaged in the struggle for equality, freedom and justice were not able to renew themselves. If you are not able to devise opportunities of regeneration appropriate to the conditions of the time and the issue at hand, and work solely with what you have memorized, your practice will fade out. And afterwards layers will accumulate on it because the values asserted by the system are more dominant and prevalent. We face this problem in the neighborhoods. When they see us they recall that time to an extent in their minds, but this does not excite them. After all this society does not forget. The problem is how you have carried and passed on your quest, struggle for equality, justice and freedom and how you’ve been able to regenerate it based on today's needs.

You look at those who are continuing with what they have memorized, they say we built neighborhoods for them, we did this and that form them... But they did not promise you a revolution, did they! They were downtrodden and you gave a hand, you acted in solidarity. They ask us, for example, okay, fine, you’re doing this but so what? So damn what, what else! Isn’t it better for these people to be strong and to work together rather than be helpless in face of these? These are the outcomes of perceiving the majority of society as those under rule and
yourself as the ruler, and internalizing such a frame of mind. The causes of this can vary from thinking life begins and ends with yourself to various political, psychological and ideological reasons.

So society does not forget behavior it respects and esteems. When do they recall it? When they see a resemblance. When it is recalled, this does not generate excitement, a boost or collision of energy, but society has not forgotten, they see your affinity with those practices. For example, when people they don’t know tell them stuff without waiting for something in return, or when they don’t discriminate against women, they spot a resemblance and act with respect.

I don’t think this society forgets anything. Yet what leaves a trace is another matter. And does this trace conflict with what you are doing today or does it nourish it? One has to dig back a little. Because sometimes it can also recall a trauma. We anyway do our best to understand the history of those places. We also try to understand what changed and why it changed. Even if they don’t communicate it we try to do this, to go back. And in the end this is what we see: Society does not forget practices that are undertaken with more humane, more democratically structured relations, efforts that are to its own benefit and that define society itself as the subject. It preserves them somewhere in its memory and recalls them when it encounters similar new practices. Therefore the issue of forgetting in discussions about the 1980 coup itself is too hierarchical, exaggerated, very unnecessary... First go rejuvenate yourself in that social life, then see if it’s been forgotten or not. This issue of forgetting depends on where and how you regenerate yourself today.

So this is where it leads to hope...

Our choice of a crow for our logo is based on the following metaphor: Go out in the morning and on the street you’ll see either workers whose shifts are starting or the crows. You don’t see anyone else. There are those who leave to go to the mosque with the morning prayer call, older people, but that’s more of a local thing. That’s why workers and crows resemble each other. And also crows are many but they are not considered birds. Workers are also many but they are not considered people.... And the reason why we say “One Hope” instead of “Hope” is: Let’s say somebody has a problem. To solve it he has gone to the Ministry of Public Work; if he is a supporter of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), he has gone to their provincial directorate; then to a person of influence, then to another, and to another. And finally he has said, “Well, apparently there are also some people who will try to help without asking for anything in return, let’s also go try them.” As if going to a preacher, he doesn’t really think you can solve his problem, but there is no place left for him to go, so one last hope, let me go there, he says.

If there is no hope for the future, there is no struggle. This is the case for society, and also the case for us. And to be able to hope you need to have an imagination pertaining to hope... We reconstruct both the language and truth of hope when we realize we can apply all these values we’ve been embracing for a long time when we encounter a bigger problem. This is a time when we have to be re-creators of the movement for conscience, justice and solidarity.

The word downtrodden [mağdur] has a connotation of being helpless but it seems to imply something else when you use it...

We usually call it being ignored, neglected. We directly use downtrodden in the scope of comprehensible, everyday language. Actually what we understand by it is being neglected Rather than an expression that renders the state of victimhood permanent, our efforts are geared towards strengthening the resistance to processes that generate injustice and violations with solidarity. Not being able to do so creates another insolvency. And it is only meaningful to the extent that it serves a practice whereby they emerge as subjects of this struggle. That’s why the first newsletter we published in titled "We Exist" ["Varız"]. We exist despite being neglected, discounted.

We did not speak in terms of the actual political forces. That’s not to say one doesn’t hurt in face...
If we are in the quest for equality, justice and freedom and want to make it possible, we start out. This is what motivates us. It is necessary to return to a different rationality and spirituality, if we are in the quest for equality, justice and freedom and want to make it possible. We don’t stand a chance, unless we create such oasis in society’s own seam, or one could say, create underground springs to nourish society. Otherwise we will be fooling ourselves, stalling, rocking the train. If we are not able to do anything else, we should at least be able to live with creating a different kind of life together with people in a village, a neighborhood, the smallest settlement unit. In the name of humanity’s ideals of freedom, justice and equality. What we have accumulated through social practices guide us; they generate hope and are also functional in terms of solving the problem of credibility. If it weren’t for the collective houses in the villages, there would not be the homeless movement, I mean the fact that something was done there catalyzed the homeless movement. If it was not for the homeless movement, we couldn’t so readily relate to urban transformation issues; the cooperative model that can be utilized by neighborhoods under threat of urban transformation could not have been established. Our ideas and intentions for society’s future cannot be realized in the name of or despite society, with platitudes or symbolic routines. History has sufficiently revealed this. Today, more than ever, there is a burning need for the truth of paving our way together with society, by trying to understand society and interacting with it.

How does the membership fee system work?

Each member determines his/her own membership dues based on their income. Everyone who contacts us knows this. We don’t hide that we are financially weak. We rent our place. Actually, we do want to move to a larger building we can share with other organizations and groups. With a common living room and offices for everybody, it would be cheaper and would provide the opportunity to join forces in different ways.

Thank you very much...

You’re welcome... We thank you for your interest and effort.

Translated from Turkish by Liz Amado
Introduction

In July 2003, an incident took place in Hasköy, Istanbul that was newsworthy, even though it was not in the papers: 5 young men around the ages 16-17 want to enter the new shopping mall that opened in their neighborhood. However, the security guard, who is also a resident of the same neighborhood, does not let them enter as per his instructions. Because according to the mall management the youth of the neighborhood are “dangerous.” The young men get angry and an argument ensues at the entrance. Among the group, a young man of 16 is exasperated with being denied entrance, and as his friends are arguing with the guard, he begins to run back and forth to crash into the large glass shop window. At his third strike, the glass shatters and the young man succeeds in entering the mall alongside the glass cutting his body. In this article, drawing on my research in Hasköy and Güzeltepe which once used to be organized working class neighborhoods of Istanbul, I will discuss the effects of contemporary capitalism on working class youth and certain forms of responses they devise in face of this. More specifically, I will explore the ways in which Hasköy and Güzeltepe youth’s struggle against social and economic exclusion is shaped by a sense of urgency—sometimes at the expense of their future— as exemplified in the reaction of the young man who finds an alternative way to enter the mall at the expense of his body.

Both Hasköy and Güzeltepe were important headquarters for the pre-1980 revolutionary socialist movements. Both have been affected by the economic and social changes following the 1980 military coup in different, as well comparable ways. Upon briefly touching on the history of these two neighborhoods and the transformation processes they underwent after 1980, I will try to explore the reaction of the neighborhoods’ youth to this transformation by looking at the ways in which they use the streets. I will discuss how the street is used by youth as a stage and a performance space and analyze how these young people exhibit themselves on the stage/street, pointing at the sense of urgency in these “spectacle.” In this article I will primarily focus on three different types of performance: 1. Walking around with new brand clothes as a manifestation of the desire to resemble the middle class. This mode of appearance on the street will be discussed under the theme of capitalism and the production of desire. 2. Young people from Hasköy who walk around middle class streets at night, deliberately striking fear in the middle class and taking pleasure in it. Hasköy’s youth portraying themselves as threatening/frightening bodies in middle class streets will be discussed in reference to class identity and the manifestations of rage. 3. The relatively small, pirate demonstrations involving Molotov cocktails and/or street confrontations in Güzeltepe. These demonstrations will also be analyzed in the context of manifestations of rage against capitalism.

Hasköy and Güzeltepe: A Brief History

Hasköy was founded as a squatter [gecekondu] neighborhood towards the end of the 1940s by migrants coming from rural areas to the city. A number of the large factories that were built in Istanbul in the late 1940s in the scope of national development policies were in the vicinity of Hasköy. The proximity of factories and houses, the strengthening of union organizations at the factories and the rising leftist movement in Turkey after the 1950s, quickly transformed Hasköy into a typical working class neighborhood. In this period, Hasköy streets witnessed marches in support of workers on strike, protests against high prices and unemployment, as well as conflicts between rightist and leftist groups.

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1 I would like to thank Eylem Akçay, Nilay Kacar and editors of Red Thread who have provided their comments and feedback to an earlier version of this article.
2 The names of the neighborhoods in which this research was conducted have been changed in this article to prevent any prejudice and to protect the privacy of those participating in the research. Hasköy and Güzeltepe are code names used instead of the real names of the neighborhoods.
Güzeltepe Neighborhood was founded almost 30 years after Hasköy under the leadership of revolutionaries. The majority of the population in the neighborhood has been Alevi since its foundation. From the mid 1970s until the 1980 coup, the neighborhood was governed autonomously under the control of revolutionary organizations. The principle of dividing land based on need was adopted at the foundation of the neighborhood realized entirely through collective communal work. Before 1980, the streets of Güzeltepe witnessed both collective struggle against the demolition of squatter houses, and collective production. At the same time, as in Hasköy, the neighborhood streets were the sites of many political marches. Until the end of the 1990s, numerous collective demonstrations supported by local businesses and the majority of the neighborhood population were organized on the streets.

At a time when squatter neighborhoods were regarded as the biggest obstacle before urban development by the urban elite in Turkey, and residents of squatter houses and thus the urban working class were regarded as “backward” villagers, workers from both Hasköy and Güzeltepe earned respectability due to their working class identities. While some workers from Hasköy and Güzeltepe actively participated in the organized labor movement to build a more just future, others, though not directly an organized part of this movement, still became workers within the atmosphere of a promising future generated by the working class and/or socialist movement. Thus, it would not be inaccurate to say that until the 1980s, workers in Turkey had both a respectable status and a dream and/or hope of redemption in this world.

However, after 1980, and especially by the mid 1990s, workers in Turkey began losing their esteemed status, as well as their hopes for the future. The primary reasons for this include the economic and social atmosphere instigated by the 1980 military coup and the violent repression of the leftist movement that had begun to re-emerge in working class neighborhoods with a history of organized left by the 1990s.

The 80s and 90s

As has been extensively discussed, the economic liberalization policies following the 1980 coup caused the organized labor force to work under unorganized, insecure and flexible conditions. While workers were rapidly excluded from the formal labor market, the constant promotion of consumer culture began to underline poverty and impoverishment in a more defined way. The fact that consumption as opposed to production assumed a central role in identity construction and ensuring respectability, contributed significantly to the loss of the respectable status created/earned through being a worker during the pre-1980s. Again at this time, the violent repression of the socialist movement led to the deterioration of the hope for “heaven”/justice on earth among the working class. However, the socialist/revolutionary movement re-emerging in particular in working class neighborhoods of large cities in the 1990s suggests that this hope was not destroyed entirely with the 1980 coup. As opposed to the 1980s, in the 1990s, the rising socialist movement and the Kurdish movement—which also began to express itself in the urban

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5 Alevism is a sect of Islam and Alevi population is a minority in Turkey. Alevi are known for their support for progressivist and leftist politics.

6 During a field research I conducted in one of the working class neighborhoods in Istanbul, I realized that the rising socialist movement in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s had a respect generating effect among the working class, regardless of whether they supported the movement or not. For example, in an interview I conducted with retired workers, a worker from a leather factory at Kağıthane, where there was an organized socialist presence, related how one day as he was doing his shopping in Şirinevler, he realized that people around him noticed the smell of leather on him. When I asked him, “Did this disturb you?”, he responded, “Disturbed? Not at all! On the contrary I was very proud people noticed I was a leather worker.” The labor and union movement of the time not only told the working class that poverty was nothing to be ashamed of, furthermore, regarding workers as the primary subject of the struggle to build a just and equal world, contributed to the establishment of a respectable worker identity. We could also assert that the songs of Cem Karaca, one of the socialist vocalists of the time, with worker protagonists and praising labor and workers were both an indicator of how working class identity was highly esteemed and also contributed directly to the construction of this identity as such.

sphere following the forced migration from villages—were repressed by state violence targeting specific places (working class neighborhoods, neighborhoods defined as “liberated zones” before 1980, neighborhoods populated largely by Alevi) rather than all segments of society. In other words, state violence was concentrated in specific territories to repress the rising left in the 1990s. For instance, the common emphasis of residents who describe the state of Güzeltepe in the 1990s is that at the time the neighborhood transformed into a semi-open prison. In this period, in addition to Güzeltepe, working class neighborhoods such as Gülsuyu, Gazi, Armutlu, 1 Mayis Mahallesi, Okmeydani largely populated by an urban Alevi and leftist population also transformed into neighborhoods where there was constant police surveillance. Identity checks were performed upon people entering and exiting these neighborhoods, people were arrested arbitrarily and at times people disappeared or were killed in unresolved murders. These neighborhoods, which sometimes even the public buses avoided because they were “dangerous,” turned into spaces where anything could happen any time. While this attributed danger led them to become detached from other segments of society and isolated them from the rest of the city, this isolation further facilitated the practice of violence in these neighborhoods as it enabled the confinement of violence to the neighborhood.

A picture of Güzeltepe in the 1990s emerging from the accounts of over 30 people I interviewed in the neighborhood can be described as follows: On the one hand a series of mass street demonstrations on numerous current political issues ranging from Palestine to the economy, from the hunger strikes in prisons to the problem of education are taking place; on the other hand, police forces with the power to take anyone from the neighborhood at any time are raiding associations and coffee houses with long barreled weapons, and occasionally displaying tortured bodies in the neighborhood to show what they are capable of. In short, in the 1990s, in working class neighborhoods with leftist backgrounds, the cruising white Renault cars [used by plainclothes cops], disappearing people, unresolved assassinations, incidents like those at Gazi and 1 Mayis neighborhoods in 1995 where shots were fired at residents resulting in deaths, led to a renewed blow on the rekindling hope for the future. In other words, in the 1990s the police forces of the state threatened the re-flourishing hope of a better world.

In terms of the history of squatter neighborhoods, the 1990s has another significance frequently pointed out by Turkish academicians: In the 1990s the working class/squatter neighborhoods were redefined. Terms such as “slum” [varaş] and “other Turkey”/“other Istanbul,” that went into circulation in the mid 1990s in reference to old squatter neighborhoods, began to be define them as spaces that were not and could never be a part of the imaginary “real” or “normal” Turkey. People living in these places began to be represented as dangerous, uncivilized, even savage and ready to strike at any given moment (Aksoy 2001, Akçay 2005, Etöz 2000, Erman 2001). I would like to characterize this period as a time when the tension between being the subject of politics and objects of anthropology (cultural other) was experienced most intensely in the history of Turkey’s squatter neighborhoods. There are two incidents in which this tension was manifested most blatantly: One is the 1995 Gazi Neighborhood incident, the second is May 1\(^{\text{st}}\) 1996. At the Gazi incident an armed group opened fire on a coffee house frequented mostly by Alevi and killed an Alevi dede [elder, spiritual leader].\(^7\) The next day Gazi Neighborhood turned into a war zone. Conflict ensued between the police and neighborhood residents. As a result of the police attack supported by special ops forces, 15 people died. When we look at the representations of this incident in the newspapers, Gazi Neighborhood is almost a novel discovery for the media. The media has discovered the “slum” that is utterly different from other spaces in the city. They ask: “Who are these people? Is this Istanbul? How can such a place be a part of Istanbul?”\(^8\) Looking at newspaper articles on the Gazi incident published at the time, it seems like they are written almost under enchantment. The middle class and urban journalists

\[\text{We could argue that state policy towards the Kurdish national liberation movement rising around the same time assumed a similar shape. Confining the violence to the officially declared “State of Exception” region prevented those living in other places in Turkey from learning about the intensity of the violence experienced in the region. In this way the region was isolated and its ties with the rest of the country were severed.}\]

\[\text{For an analysis of news featuring the slums in the media in this period, please see: Aksoy 2001.}\]
have been forced to encounter people completely unlike themselves—or at least perceived as such—in this part of the city they have never had to go to, that they have always heard about from a distance. This state of enchantment masks the political struggle, political discourse and demands of the people living in Gazi, since attention is not focused on what is said, but rather on the interlocutor and the presumed cultural difference. For example, Yağcıoğlu titles his article about Gazi, which he goes to see immediately at the aftermath of the events, “The Outcome of Different Identity, Different Culture” and asks in awe: “Slums are different worlds, I understood when I came here these are different worlds. Is this Istanbul? Will this place integrated into Europe? Is this place in Istanbul?” As can be discerned from the title of the article, for Doğan what is in essence visible is the “difference” of Gazi neighborhood and what underlies the incident is precisely this cultural difference.

Another striking event in which political actions and demands were undermined just as in the case of Gazi incidents is the May 1st demonstrations in 1996. On May 1996, before the march started, conflict ensued in the demonstration area and two young people were killed. Subsequently the conflict spread to the entire area. However, what was picked up by the news was not the killing of two people but the image of two young women plucking tulips. The incident was depicted in the media as people coming down from the mountains, refusing to be civilized (there is a headline “slum dwellers came down to the city,” for instance) and butchering tulips (Akçay 2005). Again in the same atmosphere of enchantment and awe, the question was: “How can we live in the same city with these people who don’t even respect flowers?” The fact that a rather large May 1st demonstration was organized after the 1980 coup regime; the significance of May 1st; what brought so many people together for the occasion; the death of two young men were barely mentioned or discussed.  

So this is the environment the youth of today were born to in Güzeltpe and Hasköy in the late 80s and early 90s. The youth in Hasköy, where the leftist movement lost its influence much earlier, towards the mid 1980s, were born not in a working class neighborhood with a collective liberation project on the rise, but rather in a neighborhood defined as the other Istanbul, both ostracized and criminalized as slums. More significantly, they grew up with the awareness that their neighborhood was defined and degraded as a slum and its residents were regarded as uncivilized people. The youth born in Güzeltpe in the same period grew up witnessing police violence that had become a part of everyday life in the neighborhood. They witnessed their older sisters, brothers being beaten on the street by the police and left in pools of blood. They witnessed police bullets and gas bombs flying in the air. They went to their schools regularly guarded by tanks, passing by masked police standing guard with their long barreled weapons at the street corners.

Desire and Rage

In the remaining part of this article, I will try to discuss the subjectivities of the youth in Hasköy and Güzeltpe Neighborhoods shaped in face of the transformations enumerated above in the framework of the dynamics of rage and desire. While doing so, I will exclude the experiences of the Kurdish youth who live in both neighborhoods because these young people, who came to the city after 1990 with forced migration, relate to the city and the country differently from youth whose parents were born in squatter neighborhoods. Furthermore, the existence of an organized Kurdish movement also distinguishes the experience of Kurdish youth from that of the other working class young people. Since I did not encounter any young people who support the Islamic movement or define themselves as followers of political Islam in either neighborhood, I will also

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10 Yeni Yüzyıl, 2 May 1996.
11 At the II. International congress organized in Paris in 1889, May 1st was declared the “International Day for Solidarity and Struggle.” Countries throughout the world started celebrating it beginning in 1890. May 1st was celebrated in Turkey for the first time in İzmir in 1905, and over the past century the celebrations have at times been met with the ban or restrictions of the political powers. In Turkey, May 1st is also known as the “Workers Day.”
exclude young people supporting political Islam from the analysis below and primarily focus on the subjectivities of youth born to secular and leftist families.12

Desire

In the early 2000s, shopping malls began to open at some of Istanbul’s working class neighborhoods. Hasköy is one of these neighborhoods. The mall at Hasköy contributed significantly both to the production among Hasköy youth a desire to be like the middle class and also rendered this desire very visible. With these new shopping malls, young people in Hasköy, who, thanks to the media, could envision how the middle class regarded them, that is those living in the “slums,” suddenly had to battle the ostracizing, discriminatory, degrading gaze of the middle class13 not just in middle class urban spaces, but also in their own neighborhood. The imagined or real middle class gaze that entered the neighborhood with the mall triggered the desire to be like the middle class among the youth of Hasköy. The mode in which the desire to be like the middle class is manifested most frequently is imitating the consumer habits of the middle class, in particular the their dressing codes. Most of the people I interviewed said that young people began to wear designer label clothes after the mall opened. After the mall, the streets of Hasköy began to turn into spaces where class identity, rather than being pronounced loud and clear, was concealed as something embarrassing in an attempt to resemble the other, i.e. the presumed “normal.” For instance two of the youth I interviewed express this desire to conceal their identities as follows:

“When I have to go out without new brand clothes I always walk with my head down. Because if people see me dressed like that they will make fun of me… To be honest, when I see people without designer clothes I look at them with scorn. For example, I never go to the mall with regular clothes; people should know how to dress in places like these.” (age 17)

“People come to the mall not just from here, but also from Ataköy; they come from Bakırköy, also Yeşilköy. This has changed the people here. Hasköy youth who see those with money try to keep up with them and pay more attention to their clothes, their shoes. They become wannabes, that is, they say, these guys come like this, let’s also hang out like this. They become picky about their clothes as they are going out.” (age 21)

As can be discerned from the excerpts above, one of the strategies devised by Hasköy youth to avoid being “slum dwellers” or the lower class is to dress up like the middle class and to imitate them. That is to say, to look for a way that will urgently and immediately shake the ostracizing gaze that disturbs them. The effort to look like a member of the middle class even though one is not middle class actually indicates the incredible violence embodied in the ostracizing gaze directed at those bodies that do not belong to the middle class in Turkey. This gaze is so violent that it forces those young people whose bodies do not resemble middle class bodies to avert their eyes and walk looking down14 or to conceal their class identity and dress up like someone else. That is to say that it compels youth to immediately, urgently devise a means of struggle against this gaze.

Rage

12 For a study of working class neighborhoods where political Islam is dominant, please see: Tuğal 2011.
13 Here, I am not claiming that everyone from the middle classes looks at Hasköy youth in the same way. This gaze can be real, or it can be a projection of Hasköy youth. What is more significant here is how Hasköy youth homogenize the middle class and think that these people look at them in an ostracizing manner.
14 Even though it remains beyond the scope of this article, I wanted to mention an anecdote because of the striking similarity: As we were getting on the subway with a Jamaican worker friend in New York, I was surprised to see him put on sunglasses and asked him why he did that. He said that he found the way white Americans looked at him disturbing, so he put on sunglasses and thus avoided meeting their gazes. The intensity and historical burden that forces a young woman in Hasköy to walk around with her head down when she’s not wearing new brand clothes to avoid middle class gazes and a Jamaican worker who puts on sunglasses even on the subway to avoid the racist gaze of white Americans is worth contemplating.
While capitalism and capitalist ideology produce a desire to be like the consumer middle class deemed as “normal,” the impossibility of satisfying this desire, the reality that no matter how much one strives to imitate it middle class life style will never be attained also generates a serious rage. Because Hasköy youth is not only ostracized discursively, they are also excluded from labor processes. Thus they know that they will not be able to attain middle class standards one day by working very hard. One of the principal reasons underlying the rage against the middle class is this awareness. At the same time, while they are working under very harsh conditions for very low wages, the consumer middle class shopping carefree at the mall further provokes the rage of Hasköy youth. As one young man conveys:

“Purse snatching, theft is very common here. And also, this is very determinant: not being able to afford things. People say, we work, we get paid 300 million a month, 200 of which our family will take for sure, shall we buy cigarettes or clothes with the rest? A pair of pants costs 50-60 million. Even those of us who work periodically, we say among ourselves, well, we can’t buy even though we work, what can be done? Now, a guy comes to the mall, he buys 5-6 pairs of pants, each 100 million. The young man says, I can’t afford pants for 20 million, he buys pants for 100 million. This inadvertently encourages him. Some work their ass off, others spend without a care, how can they spend so carefree? Whose money is this? Whose scheme, whose plot? Before the mall no one knew about designer labels here. What can one do, you’re young, you aspire to them. If he has it why don’t I? That’s what you think.” (age 23)

One of the spaces where the rage against the middle class is manifested is streets inhabited by the middle class. Hasköy youth, who now encounter the (imagined or real) ostracizing gaze of the middle class even on their own streets, transform into dangerous bodies striking fear on the streets they reside in turn. For example a young man from Hasköy who spends the occasional money he gets his hands on in one night at bars in Taksim where middle class youth hang out, describes this state of striking fear as:

“Hasköy, Karagümrük, Gaziosmanpaşa, Kocamustafapaşa, these four are on the police blacklist. These are the places with most cops. Here there are plainclothes cops at every corner [...]. These are also places where murders are committed most frequently. That’s what the young learn from the older. And yet despite this, the Hasköy youth does not readily give in to the police. I mean tough guys come out of Hasköy. And they’re known anywhere. Theft, cars, houses... In Bakırköy, Ataköy, the Hasköy kid harasses all bourgeois neighborhoods; he enters from the window at night, I mean he enters anywhere he can find.” (age 23)

Another youth who makes sure to walk around in designer clothes all the time explains how he fearlessly walks around middle class streets at night when the middle class is afraid to go out:

“Of course they look down on us, because we are a poor neighborhood, but we also look down on their youth. Because they are bourgeois. You throw a Hasköy boy among 50 monsters; he’ll walk out in one piece. Throw a Bakırköy boy in one glass of water, he will drown there. The Hasköy kid is not afraid of anything, but the Bakırköy boy, if the electricity goes out, he shouts “help mom.” For us, sun, moon no difference. To put it very simply, Ataköy, come 8 or 9, you see not a soul on the street. But I walk around Ataköy at 3 o’clock at night. So you see, the Hasköy kid is a rebel, a wildcat, hot shot. I mean a guy in Bakırköy, let him be the most dangerous of fellows, to me he’s nothing. He’s from Bakırköy, that’s it, segregated, excluded, raised in a bourgeois district, with a bourgeois mind. Neighborhoods like ours are Kasımpaşa, Küçükçekmece, Beşiktaş, Tarlabası,
Dolapdere, Sarıgöl, Gaziosmanpaşa. Has to be a bastard of a neighborhood, cause it is the same mentality." (age 21)

Hasköy youth, who are not considered a part of normal Turkey, who are excluded both from the labor market and the imaginary urban culture, return to the middle class spaces they are cast out from like boomerangs to scare off the middle class. As can be discerned from the above quoted statements, there is a pleasure derived from this state of evoking fear; it allows for a temporary expression and satisfaction of class rage. Unlike the past, currently class struggle manifests itself not collectively at city squares, but as a menacing ghost secretly treading in the back streets. The inexistence of the material conditions necessary to satisfy the desire to be like the middle class, and the absence of an organized working class movement that can present a future perspective which can transform rage into a productive energy, lead to the further marginalization of youth and to a loss of hope for the future. In other words, the lack of a vision of liberation/future both in the personal and in the social sense, leads the Hasköy youth to fluctuate between the dynamic of desire and hate familiar to us from the colonial context.17

In a world shaped according to consumer middle class norms, Hasköy youth, who are very much aware of the fact that unless they exhibit this consumerism in their bodies and life practices, they won’t earn respect and will be subject to ostracizing, othering words/gazes, seek salvation in trying to be like the middle class. They do this not just by imitating the way members of the middle class dress, but also by adopting the middle class gaze as can be seen in the first quote above, or by going to the bars/clubs middle class youth frequent and having/trying to have fun there. Even though undertaking certain life practices of the middle class allows Hasköy youth to occasionally experience the fantasy of passing18/becoming middle class, the confines of financial opportunities and the history of their class engraved on their bodies constantly remind them where they come from. When the middle class youth leaves the bars/clubs they enter paying a fortune by their own standards, saying the “slum dwellers are here”; when they are turned away from malls they go to for shopping on the grounds that they are deemed “dangerous”; when they are subject to ostracizing behavior at stores they do manage to enter they are repeatedly reminded that it is nearly impossible to attain the desired social status and trying to be like the middle class and not being able to so generates considerable rage. Thus as being a member of the middle class becomes a position that is desired, aspired to, it also turns into a position stirring emotions of rage/hate as a constant reminder of a shortcoming, a lack.

In Güzeltepe, still known as a neighborhood populated by socialists, the rage of youth is less complex and more direct compared to Hasköy. Here the resistance against capitalism does not manifest itself over a complex emotional relationship with the middle class, but rather through being directly opposed to capitalism and demanding a more just and equal world. While one of the first things we recall when we think of Hasköy today are shopping malls, when one thinks about Güzeltepe streets, three things immediately come to mind: 1-Graffitti – graffiti on the walls entailing the political demands of tens of different revolutionary organizations, 2-Small tanks –or as they are referred to in the neighborhood jargon, scorpions– doing constant surveillance on the streets, 3-Surveillance cameras installed at central points throughout the neighborhood. While the visibility of consumer culture dominates Hasköy, what is most visible in Güzeltepe today is state security forces. The state violence the neighborhood was subject to at various periods throughout its history still remains prevalent. With its scorpions, cameras and plainclothes cops, the state constantly says “I am here, I am watching you and I can exert violence any time.” This keeps the rage against state violence alive, while also evoking fear in the neighborhood residents.

17 One of the most significant writers of postcolonial literature, Homi Bhabha, argues that the dynamic of the simultaneous attraction to and hatred of the colonizer is one of the primary constituents of subjectivities in colonial countries. See: Bhabha 1993. Bhabha was inspired by the arguments of Fanon, who was both a theoretician and a militant of the anti-colonialist movement and explored the desire and efforts of colonized black people to become white in his work Black Skin White Masks (1952).
18 The concept of passing has been conceptualized by Fanon. In his article “The Spectacle of the Other,” Stuart Hall (1997) refers to Fanon and describes how black people adopt white people’s values and dress and act like them in order to pass from being black to white. Because, according to Hall, becoming white/passing as white is only possible through entirely detaching oneself from black culture and being assimilated into the white world.
What’s more, there is an increasing unemployment in Güzeltepe and a lessening hope for a better future.

When we look at the manifestation of this rage on the street, we see that there has been a shift since the early 2000s. Demonstrations, which used to be organized with the collaboration of various revolutionary organizations, have been replaced for the most part by marginal, more aggressive demonstrations by small groups. In addition to the mass demonstrations in Güzeltepe organized for Newroz or the anniversary of Gazi incidents, we now frequently encounter pirate demonstrations of 10-15 people. These demonstrations are usually undertaken by youth in masks aged between 15 and 18, attacking the main street from the side streets with Molotov cocktails in their hands, using garbage containers as barricades and fighting with the police. The violent aspect of the demonstrations that temporarily turn the neighborhood into a war zone leads to a double marginalization: of the youth and political organizations by the neighborhood residents, and the neighborhood itself by other segments of society in turn. By drawing attention to the form/style of the realization of the demonstrations, such actions render invisible and conceal the political demands, that is the content of the demonstrations. As is, the street transforms into a space where youth momentarily display their anger and then retreat behind the curtains. The presence of people gathering at street corners, watching the demonstrators and occasionally applauding them gives the onlooker the impression that these demonstrations are taking place on a theater stage.

Conclusion

The sense of urgency in the manifestations of desire and rage in Güzeltepe echoes the need for immediate gratification of desire and rage in Hasköy. Hasköy youth, who want to belong to the middle class but remain aware of the impossibility of the satisfaction of this desire, experience a temporary satisfaction when they go out on the street/stage as if they are middle class, yet have to confront their actual financial and material conditions when they return home with their bodies they have dressed up with a middle class look. Again, when in a similar sense of urgency they convey the rage they feel for the middle class with momentary outbursts (for example harassing the passersby on the streets of Bakırköy, Ataköy, scratching their cars, etc.) only to swiftly retreat, they are subject to the violence of capitalism in their everyday lives. The feelings of rage and admiration Hasköy youth feel for the middle class leads to a further marginalization of these young people due to the difficulty of satisfying this desire and rage through legal means. As for the youth in Güzeltepe, their display of their rage on the street at small demonstrations deemed marginal by neighborhood residents and their subsequent retreats leads not only to the marginalization of youth in the eyes of the neighborhood, but also results in harsh prosecutions, jail sentences, or youth being wounded or even killed by police bullets, since such demonstrations take place in a neighborhood under constant police surveillance. So why do these young people express their rage against capitalism and desire to build a better world with such demonstrations?

In both cases, the manner in which youth express their desires and rage –by exhibiting themselves on the street like a member of the middle class, a revolutionary hero, or a menacing body and then withdrawing backstage (to their “real” lives)– is actually directly related to the absence of an imagination of the future. A number of the young people I interviewed both in Güzeltepe and in Hasköy responded to the question “where do you see yourself in 10 years?” by saying “I don’t know if I will still be alive in 10 years” precisely because of this impossibility of imagining the future.

In his book Wasted Lives, where sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2004) presents an analysis of contemporary capitalism, he states that the present day youth has taken out waiting from wanting. Because according to Bauman in the consumer society of today waiting has become a source of shame. “The shame of waiting rebounds on the one who waits. Waiting is something to

\[19\] An admiration instigated by the desire to be like them.

\[20\] To give one example, a 15 year-old middle school student was killed in 2000.
be ashamed of because it may be noted or taken as evidence of indolence or low status, seen as a symptom of rejection or a signal to exclude” (109). In the present day society where consumer goods, information, places, people and even dreams are regarded/promoted as merely a key, a computer screen, a shop window away, the slum youth, who are criminalized and excluded from the imagination of normal Turkey and have even been constructed as the other of this imagination; for whom the distance between themselves and their desires and dreams remain nearly impossible to travel, want to urgently attain these dreams nonetheless.21 These young people who are very much aware of the fact that they are unable to earn respectability through their current social identity, try to deal with the rejection and exclusion they are subject to by immediately gratifying their desires. However, as I have tried to convey throughout the article, this effort to urgently discard their social identity leads to a further marginalization of the youth.

Youth in Hasköy who witness their parents being crushed in the same cycle of poverty for years, know that no good comes from waiting, from being patient in this world where poverty is scorned at. Or some of the young people in Güzeltepe who have observed their sisters, mothers, fathers spend years in prison, being killed, tortured, have given up on waiting and want to show their reaction immediately. While such intense injustice reproduces the desire to abolish this injustice more strongly, the expression of the revolt against this injustice with sudden acts of resistance serves to increase the youth population in prisons. While capitalism does not offer any promises for the future for working class youth, the inexistence of an organized working class movement prompts the fear of being futureless to grow even deeper.

Translated from Turkish by Liz Amado

21 For the sense of urgency created by technology in the context of present day capitalism, please see: Tomlinson (2007).
Capitalism, Desperation and Urgency
Deniz Yonucu

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...philosophy does not concern itself with children. It leaves them to pedagogy, where they are not in very good hands. Philosophy has forgotten about children.

Bernard Schlink

Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the experiences of violence and freedom of Kurdish children in Adana’s Gündoğan neighborhood populated mostly with victims of forced migration. Approaching childhood as a historical and political construct, this article primarily explores how childhood and experiences of childhood have transformed in Kurdish society after forced migration, and how children construe and express their own experiences. Subsequently, in light of daily practices and subjective narratives, the article analyzes the dynamics that politicize and mobilize children within the Kurdish movement and the politics emerging from these dynamics. This article aims to rethink freedom, struggle and the political in relation to children’s politics.

A friend of mine who was a teacher at a primary school in Yeni Bosna complained about how his students, most of whom had been subject to forced migration, were very violent: “Even high school students aren’t like this,” he said, and added: “Each month one or two teachers are beaten up by these small kids; a few teachers have started seeing psychologists. I don’t know why these children are like this; it is as if they are not children. One day, I pulled the rogue children aside, I told them, look, I am the psychopath of this school, what do think you are doing, I’ll destroy you. I know this is not something a teacher should say, but I don’t know how to cope with them. On the one hand they are thugs, yet they’re also political, they know Hayat TV, EMEP… Perhaps we want the children we see here to be like those we see outside.”

According to Nurdan Gürbilek, until the 90s, in Turkish society children were identified with innocence, fragility and grievance. Child heroes in popular Turkish films; the orphans in Kemalettin Tuğcu novels; “the Crying Child” paintings hung on shop, coffeehouse and house walls, all made reference to this image of childhood in society. However, according to Gürbilek once children began to fill up metropolitan cities due to economic and political factors, this image turned into a tall tale. That is, the image of the innocent child, “strangely, when it encountered what it signified, and perhaps for this very reason, lost its credibility.” (Gürbilek, 2001: 45). For years, children pickpockets, Kleneex sellers, stalkers and children prone to violence filled the third pages of newspapers. Yet this image of the “bad child” mostly referred to Kurdishness. As a matter of fact, the construction of Kurdish children as objects of fear in the social discourse began when they gained significant visibility in metropolises because of forced migration. However, beginning with the 2000s, Kurdish children were on Turkish society’s agenda not merely as a judicial case, but also as a political threat against the state and order. The “stone throwing child” became the image that engrained this notion in the mind of Turkish society. Subsequently, violating all international children’s rights treaties it is signatory to, and even its own constitution, the Turkish state prosecuted and arrested hundreds of children on charges of being members of a terrorist organization. This was also a sign of the panic experienced by Turkish society and state, as this time the accused demonstrators were considerably younger.

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1 This text was translated from the original published in Toplum ve Kuram no. 2 Fall 2009. We would like to thank Haydar Darci and Toplum ve Kuram for giving us permission to publish it again.

2 I have changed the name of the neighborhood as well as the names of the people I interviewed for security purposes.

3 Between the years 1984 and 1999, around one million men, women and children living in rural areas in the east and southeast of Turkey were forced to migrate due to the armed conflict between the Turkish military and PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party). They mostly migrated to urban centers like Adana.

4 Hayat TV is an independent TV channel that “aims to become the voice and face of workers, women, Kurds and all who are oppressed.”

5 Emek Partisi (Labor Party), a Marxist-Leninist political party in Turkey founded in 1996.
compared to previous years. Furthermore, with what motivation children undertook these actions and the underlying dynamics of this politicization remained inexplicable.

Two incidents in particular brought Kurdish children to the heart of Turkey’s political agenda. The first of these were the demonstrations held to protest the killing of 14 PKK guerillas with chemical weapons in 2006. During these demonstrations that were launched in Diyarbakir and spread to other regions, 12 people were killed including 10 children and youth. Following the police attack on a group returning from the funeral of one of the guerrillas, the violent conflict between the police and children lasted for days. In the speeches he made at the time of these demonstrations, the prime minister threatened the Kurdish people: “Be it women or children, our security forces will take all necessary measures against terrorist conspirators. Control your children” (Türker, 2008). As for the media, the dominant discourse was that the children were used by “malevolent people.” The same year, with the amendments made to the “Law to Combat Terrorism,” the scope of “crimes of terrorism” was expanded and in this way it would now be possible to prosecute “families who sent their children to demonstrations.”

Children once again stormed the public agenda in 2008, when they made radical protests not just in the Kurdish region but also in Western metropolises following the allegation that Abdullah Öcalan was tortured. Hundreds of children and youth were arrested during these incidents. Once again nobody could make sense of these events, as politics was not an arena for children. The elite discussed how these psychologically disturbed children could be rehabilitated. The media once again claimed that these children had been brainwashed. With the headline “Spare the children sirs,” the newspaper Radikal depicted the children as innocent and pointed to the “terrorist organization” as the responsible party (10 February 2008). It was implied that there were attempts to “win over” these children by giving them bananas and candy. On the other hand, as the children were being harshly punished, the media raised no objection to such severe measures. In Adana, where children who had participated in the demonstrations were punished with prolonged prison sentences, the decision to revoke access to health services for uninsured “families who sent their children to demonstrations” was proclaimed by the Governor İlhan Atış himself. Atış was telling the children, “we love you more than your parents do,” and adding with great irony: “Dear children, we don’t want any of you to be at places with molotov cocktails. We don’t want you to throw stones at the police, the gendarme, or to hospitals and health clinics where they are treated, to the neighbor’s car, or the ambulance taking your neighbor to the hospital. We want all of you to go to school. We don’t want any of you to get involved in drugs, to collect paper from trash, to help out your family by selling Kleenex between electric poles. Because we will provide all of this for you. This great state will provide it.” Nonetheless the report drafted by the Human Rights Association Diyarbakır Branch clearly documented the state violence inflicted on children (Activity report, 2008).

Meanwhile the increasing population of Kurdish children was depicted in mainstream media as one of the biggest obstacles before Turkey. If Kurdish people continued to have so many children, by 2050 the Kurds population would outnumber the Turkish population. In one of his columns, Fatih Altaylı was urging the smart, educated (Turkish) middle classes, who have the means to offer their children a good education, to have more children. Altaylı continued: “We are decreasing, they are increasing. The best way to fight this is to have more children. For those like us to have more children.” (Altaylı, 2007)

The perception of children as a symbol of the rising Kurdish population also constitutes the backdrop for the fear and hatred directed towards them. Interestingly, in an effort to put a stop to it, those who criticize the exercise of oppression and violence on Kurdish children are trying to

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6 For the amendment (law no. 5532) to the “Law to Combat Terrorism” please see: http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/Metin.Aspx?MevzuatKod=1.5.3713&sourceXmlSearch=&MevzuatIliski=0
remind society that they are only children. And yet the very reason children are subject to violence and oppression is the fact that they are children.

**The Category of Childhood**

Childhood is usually perceived as a transcultural and transhistorical category (Neyzi, 2001). However, social historians and anthropologists have challenged this perception with their work. For instance, social historian Philippe Aries, who argues that the concept of childhood did not exist until the 17th century, before when children were perceived as miniature people, asserts that between 1660 and 1899 the organization of the family changed and became child-oriented (cited in Maksudyan, 2008: 3). On the other hand, historians such as Robert Jütte and Erving Goffman who borrow from Foucault’s conceptualization of modern power claim that conditions for children have worsened with modernity because children were “institutionalized” under the discipline of orphanages, penitentiaries, and boarding schools in this age. Thus, in modern society children were not perceived as objects of attention as claimed by Aries, but on the contrary, as people who had to be disciplined through the discursive and non-discursive practices of modern power (ibid).

The emergence of the notion of childhood coincides with the advent of the bourgeois family. According to Kemal İnal, the modern paradigm of childhood has two fundamental bases: bourgeois values and science. In this period, not only childhood but also education and family were restructured (İnal, 1999: 63). To reproduce its own lifestyle based on individualism, the bourgeois family needed a certain understanding of childhood supported by science. According to Aries, the exclusion of children from the adult life was legitimized through the knowledge generated on childhood: Children were defined as ignorant, weak, irrational, and extreme/excessive. Therefore they had to be under surveillance, educated, and disciplined. Furthermore, children were essentially innocent and good, thus they had to be protected. Adults on the other hand were defined as rational and temperate and this definition elevated them to the status of observer/monitor and ruler (cited in Gürbilek, 47). This understanding based on the notion that children should be protected, disciplined, and educated created an age-based power dynamic between adults and children.

Beginning with Aries, social historians have analyzed how children and the category of childhood have been perceived by adults throughout history. However, how children construed and conveyed themselves and their experiences was not investigated (Hughes and Sargent, 1998: 15). In this context, Veena Das suggests that anthropology excludes the voice of children (Das, 1998: 174). Nonetheless, recently anthropologists have begun to focus on how children express themselves and how they make sense of their experiences, while also underscoring that the category and experience of childhood varies with time and space. These studies also began to challenge the concept of generation. Generation was generally perceived as a “social cohort based on age” with historical and biological connotations. Yet, with recent studies there emerged a tendency to express generation as “processes through which social identities and political projects are symbolically produced, reproduced, and transformed” (Collins, 2004: 13).

Actually, if we bear in mind that the hierarchy based on age and exclusion rests on constructed dichotomies, we could assert that not only childhood, but also youth and adulthood are political and historical constructs/categories. According to Jean and John Comaroff, the concept of generation is “not a chronological category, but rather a social, relational and political concept with deep material roots” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 10). Along these lines, Scott asserts that the control mechanism of the modern state regime depends on defining the population in reference to categories such as childhood, youth, and adulthood (cited in Durham, 2000: 114). In this context, studies in this field underline that youth is also a product of modernity and the meanings attributed to this category differ in different historical contexts (cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). According to Comaroffs youth have been excluded from the economy by being confined to a lengthy education process. Just as childhood was attributed qualities of purity and goodness, youth was laden with recklessness, excitement and the future of the nation (Comaroff
and Comaroff, 2000). Similarly, Foucault emphasized that modern power operates through constructed categories. According to Foucault, certain forms of behavior and existence are deemed problematic at certain times in history. These forms of behavior and existence become the objects of discursive and non-discursive practices of power. Foucault coins this process as the “drama of truth.” When people believe in the validity of these categories, they also accept to become the subjects of experiences associated with these categories. Foucault illustrates this by pointing at how concepts or forms of behavior such as insanity, illness and crime are deemed problematic and transformed into abnormal experiences. Discursive and non-discursive practices are utilized in the process of defining these categories and attributing certain forms of behavior to them. Discursive practices are constituted through disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry and criminology which have claims to truth. As for non-discursive practices, they include institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools and penitentiaries that provide the necessary conditions for the production of scientific truths (Foucault, 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective, we could argue that childhood is constructed by discursive practices such as law, psychiatry and medicine, and non-discursive practices such as the school and the family.

Childhood and youth studies constitute different disciplines in academia. However, recent anthropological work underlines that no clear line can be drawn between childhood and youth particularly in the 21st century. If we take a look at the representations, self-representations and daily experiences of children and youth, we find that it is very difficult to make such a distinction. Transnational migration, increasing child and youth population in metropolises, new modes of communication, civil wars, low-intensity conflict in postcolonial societies have led to a reconsideration of generational categories (Comaroff and Comaroff; Neyzi; Durham). Sharif Kanaana argues that young people joining the intifada leads to a type of “terminological uprising” in Palestinian society (cited in Collins, 2004, 38). Stating that the age category these young activists struggling against the occupation belong to remains unknown, Kanaana notes that the meanings of words traditionally employed to depict certain age groups have “either contracted or expanded” (ibid.). According to Kanaana no concept employed neither in English nor in Arabic suffices to define the young men in the intifada (ibid.).

As for Turkey, we see that Kurdish children, who were initially perceived as a judicial matter and later as a political threat due to their political practices, have gone through a transformation. Then what sort of a childhood is constructed and experienced in Kurdish society? What sort of a history and memory constructs this childhood? How can we understand this “generational uprising,” the children’s entrance into the political sphere, in particular in the 2000s when the low-intensity conflict has ended and peace has become more debatable and plausible? In the remaining part of the article, I will try to analyze the category of childhood and childhood experiences in Kurdish society based on the field research I conducted in Gündoğan neighborhood in Adana.

**Childhood in Kurdish Society**

Gündoğan neighborhood was founded by Kurds most of whom were forced to migrate to Adana after the late 1980s and built shantytowns at the empty lots on the periphery of the city. Since most of the people who were subject to forced migration had been politically active in the Kurdish movement in their villages, they continued to support the movement when they came to the city, and thus from the outset Gündoğan was founded as a rebel zone of PKK. However, while until the mid 1990s Gündoğan remained a neighborhood where the state could not open a police station and the police could not enter since they were bombed at each attempt, it went through a transformation with PKK’s change of strategy and militia’s retreat to the rural. The police station set up at the center of the neighborhood, the “reading houses” founded by radical Islamist organizations, emerging gangs and rapidly spreading drugs radically changed the texture of the neighborhood. It should be noted that children (and youth) are both the subjects and objects of these transformations, because those who use and sell drugs, join gangs, frequent “reading houses” are mostly children. Moreover, since the early 2000s children constitute the most mobilized and most radical fraction of Kurdish resistance in the neighborhood. This also points at the necessity to rethink the political. Because these political children also join gangs in
the neighborhood, they steal and partake in “criminal” incidents. In return, the gangs in the neighborhood also participate in political demonstration and protect children in conflicts with the police. This indicates that with the war and struggle at hand Kurdishness has transformed into a political identity for everyone. Subsequently, very diverse political subjectivities emerge beyond the customary political subject. Whether people join radical Islamist organizations, use drugs or join gangs, since they relate their entire grievance to their Kurdishness, they can somehow enter the political sphere or else politicize other spheres. In this context, I propose that the shift in what is political should be read as the politicization of everyday life.

On the other hand, it is necessary to reflect on the politicization of Kurdish children not merely as a matter of children/childhood, but also in relation to the transformation experienced by Kurdish society, given that the mobilization of children signifies the politicization of all segments of Kurdish society. The families of most of the children I interviewed were victims of forced migration. These children were born in Adana and therefore did not experience forced migration, yet they grew up with stories of forced migration and state violence. This is also effective in the transformation of the category of childhood in Kurdish society because children, appending their parents’ stories to their own, internalize the memories of the families and create a different history and memory for themselves. For this reason, when a ten-year-old child talks about himself, he talks about the village he never saw or the migration he never experienced. In other words, this child’s history extends further back than his actual age.

It should be added that even though these children did not experience forced migration first hand, they have lived through its aftermath. They have been born into an environment where state violence was intertwined with urban poverty, discrimination and exclusion. Therefore it is not only the memory of violence transmitted to children that reshapes the category of childhood in Kurdish society, but also the experiences in the city. While the adult members of the families have a difficult time adapting to urban life, children who are literate, who speak better Turkish and thus have a higher chance at employment redefine power relations in their families, and more generally in Kurdish society.

In order to discuss the transformation of the category of childhood in Kurdish society I would like to return to Aries. Aries states that childhood is constructed in the bourgeois family. There are two reasons why such a childhood is not construed in lower classes: (1) Because child mortality rate is very high among poor families, the child is not regarded as a permanent being. (2) Because children in these families start to work very early on, they enter the adult world very young, thus encountering institutions such as factories or police stations much earlier. However, with the 20th century, and particularly with the foundation of the nation state, education has spread to all segments of society and has even become compulsory. Therefore even though the category of childhood is not constructed in the same way in every society, it could be argued that this category has expanded beyond the bourgeois family, especially in the 20th century. Still, there is a different dimension to the transformation of this category as experienced in Kurdish society: Kurdish children, who construct themselves as political subjects, occupy the street and can be controlled neither by the state nor the Kurdish movement, have a claim to power. In other words, Kurdish children do not simply share adults’ power by working; they also limit the power of adults by constructing political subjectivities and creating their own political space. Hence, contrary to the dominant discourse in the media according to which children are used by adults, with their political subjectivities Kurdish children produce a politics that is capable of transforming even the discourse and practices of the Kurdish movement.

**Childhood according to Kurdish children**

Mainstream media frequently emphasizes that “stone throwing children” see political actions as a game. And yet children say it is not them but rather the adults who view politics as a game. According to children adults don’t take politics as seriously as they do because while they attend “fun” activities like Newroz, concerts and festivals, “they’re not around when it comes to serious demonstrations and protests.” Children also play games but the game they most frequently play is called “Apoism”:
Halil: We play Apoism in the neighborhood. Four-five policemen, four five revolutionaries, we shout “Bij Serok Apa” [Long live our Leader Apo] on the streets. We shout Öcalan and the police attack us.

H: Who wins?

Halil: Who do you think, the Apo people. We shoot bird rubber at the police.

Murat: When we do so, we actually shoot our own people.

Halil: But you know, it’s a joke.

M: What if it hits his head. Cracks his skull?

Halil: We shoot their knees.

M: That’s worse, he can’t run at demonstrations.

In this environment where politics has penetrated all spheres of life, even the subject of games is the struggle between the police and the Kurds. Furthermore, since these games always turn into political actions, the distinction between game and reality also becomes blurred:

Halil: Well, we’re already training the neighborhood. Now, three or four of us become police, and there are three or four protesters, I’m a protester, I’ve got two kids with me, we shout in the neighborhood, we go to the fascists’ district. All the women in the neighborhood are JDP supporters. We shouted, bastards of Erdoğan can’t wear us down, they looked at us, one said don’t shout man, and I said, what’s it to you fascist. She pissed me off. I looked, you know we’re in action… Now we are running, fighting with the police, the police you know, I said they’re from us. We entered the side streets, broke the windows of cars in the fascists’ neighborhoods. The woman shouted at us, we beat her up, bam she’s on the ground, then we broke her windows with bird rubber.

If even games turn into political actions and if adults are accused of playing games while they claim to be political, how are we to understand childhood in Kurdish society? I asked Murat what childhood meant to him. He responded:

M: The moment people listen to me, then I’ll be grown up.

H: Well, for instance if you compare yourself to a 20 year old in your neighborhood, how are you different?

M: Like he’s grown up, doesn’t have too many problems.

H: How so?

M: For instance children have more problems. Some go smoke hash, others smoke cigarettes, steal, but at least grown ups get family support.

H: How so?

M: How should I put it, for example, a child like me, he smokes, but he doesn’t have cigarettes. So he goes and steals. But a grown up doesn’t have such a problem. He has money, he doesn’t have a problem.

H: So then children steal more?

M: Yes.

H: Did you ever steal?

M: I did.

H: What did you take?

M: We stole a bike, there.

H: What did you do with the bike?

M: We sold it. We made six million. The bike had a flat, we sold it for cheap.

H: So you’re saying children have more problems, and what’s more no one listens to them?

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8 Halil is the youngest child of a family from Mardin who were subject to forced migration and came to Adana. Halil is 13 years old, and the family has a total of twelve children. He goes to primary school and sells simit [bagels] in the neighborhood in his free time.

9 Murat is 14 and goes to primary school. He works at the neighborhood tea house in his spare time. His family is from Mardin and were subject to forced migration and came to Adana in the early 90s.
M: Yes, for instance, we see this in the party as well. When a child says something, they don’t care. If a grown up does, they immediately listen. I mean when I grow up I’ll attend meetings, where I’ll be heard and followed. Because children don’t really have a say. Grown-ups think they know better.

For Murat childhood means not being heard and not having a say in the adult world, and having many problems. I asked Halil the same question:

Halil: Living your life, now we were walking around, I saw everyone swimming in the pool, we also went in and swam. Since we are children, now someone is doing something, we also join the game. Someone says, come let’s play hide and seek, we play. I think childhood is a good thing. It’s a lot of fun. It’s better to be a child. When you grow up, all these troubles, electricity bills, water bills. Tax for that, or you need to buy a table for the house, all sorts of problems. But mine is not a full childhood, it is half and half. Half childhood, half politics. Sometimes we have fun, we go swim, hang out with neighborhood kids. And sometimes when there is a demonstration off we go with the neighborhood kids. Half and half.

H: What do you think about children participating in politics?
Halil: Well it’s very good, we learn early on what’s what, who’s a jackal.

H: When will you be completely grown up?
Halil: Two-three years.

H: So then childhood will end?
Halil: Childhood will end one day, and one day youth will end, and one day old age will, and then life ends.

H: Do you want childhood to end?
Halil: I do, I mean what is this. See my pockets, I don’t have even 50 liras.

Halil defines himself as half-child. He says that adults have more responsibilities, especially financial responsibilities, and therefore childhood is better than being an adult, yet Halil himself works to help out his family. Actually, in Halil’s family, it is only the children who work. On the other hand, the childhood we are accustomed to is not only not having any financial responsibilities, but also being indifferent to these matters. Yet everything Halil talks about regarding childhood pertains to economic hardships a family may face.

When it suits them, children also use their childhood. For instance they use slings they call bird rubber when fighting with the police. And they use tree branches and IV drip tubes to make these slings. Yet pharmacies in the neighborhood don’t want to sell IV drip tubes to the children because they know that they use them to make slings.

Halil: I got hit with a lot of bird rubber there, eight or nine times. They were all looking at me and pulling. I ran, bam, bam, bam.

H: Does the police shoot bird rubber?
Murat: They can’t hit us without bird rubber. But our stones don’t reach them, we don’t have bird rubber.

Halil: I do. I shot it once. One I hit a policeman on the head, he ran off. He was a plainclothes cop.

M: We ask for serum at the pharmacy, they don’t give it to us. They say you are making bird rubber.

Halil: They don’t! Come I’ll by you 250 of them. You know Aksoy pharmacy when you enter the neighborhood, on the right, they give it there.

M: Pharmacies on the main street also give it.

Halil: Those don’t anymore, I went, they don’t. Now I went, the woman said what are you going to do with it, I said I’ll go to the village. She said here take it. I took ten.

M: And I said my mom is sick, she needs an IV, we need tubing, they gave it.

Murat looked down and clasped his hands before him as he uttered the last sentence and he spoke in a very low voice. Then all the children began to laugh.
Actually children are also influenced by the dominant discourse directed at them. They also think politics is a more suitable sphere for adults than children. Yet as “young revolutionaries” they go into politics to understand “what is what,” who is good and who is bad.

For Murat, the way to learn is not education but politics. He thinks he’s gotten to know people and life through politics. In the interviews I conducted with Murat and the other children I also tried to talk about “non-political” issues, for instance their family relations. But they grew very bored with these questions, and for example after a while Halil said “let’s move on to politics.” I also interviewed Murat for the second time and we talked more about his family and work. After this interview Murat said, “this hasn’t been a good interview at all.” For the children, the political and their experience in politics renders them “knowledgeable.” This is why Murat thinks that the knowledge he has acquired in politics in three years is more valuable than the knowledge a teacher acquires in twenty years outside politics. If one of the things that distinguish an adult from a child is experience and knowledge derived from this experience, from the children’s perspective their participation in politics and the significance they attribute to political knowledge breaks this dichotomy between adulthood and childhood.

However, at the same time, for these children childhood implies having more problems than adults because the environment they live in forces them to steal. And while they are among the major actors in the struggle carried out on the street, childhood means their voices are not heard in the political arena dominated by adults. Children say grown-ups don’t listen to them because “they think they know better.” According to children the only thing adults do is to prevent them from being active in politics. However, based on the observations I made during my field research I would argue that children are gaining power within the movement nonetheless. For example, in the association at the neighborhood children and youth are influential in the decision-making mechanisms. What’s more, the manner in which children take action also influences the politics of adults. With their radical actions, children thwart any other form of politics in the neighborhood, because almost all demonstrations they partake in end in conflict. This tension between adults and children can also lead to a division in politics. For example during a press statement while the adults were bargaining with the police, children were shouting radical slogans. The police said the statement would only be allowed if there were no slogans. The adults were trying to hush the children. Then the children gathered together and talked; they decided to stay quiet and let the adults do their thing and then hold their own demonstration at night.

The memory they inherit, the violence they are subject to, the altered family relations and difficult life conditions construct a different childhood for Kurdish children. In return, children use this and produce political subjectivities to struggle against mechanisms oppressing them. As Halil says, the children in Gündoğan neighborhood are half-children. Like adults, they are burdened with the past and they struggle for power.

**The repertoire: Inherited Language, Common Experiences**

As mentioned above, almost all the children I interviewed were children of forced migrant families. Most of these children between the ages 11 and 16 have been born in Adana after the migration. Thus, these children who have not directly experienced neither the blatant state violence in the villages nor the forced migration, have grown up with stories of violence recounted by elder family members. Murat recounts his family’s migration story as follows:
As can be discerned from his narrative Murat has not witnessed his family being subject to forced migration, but he recounts these stories as if he himself has experienced them. Not only the detailed information and his articulate and lucid style but perhaps more significantly the grammar he employs transforms the story into a testimony. The inferential mood in Turkish is mostly used to describe events the interlocutor has not personally experienced but rather heard about. The simple past tense on the other hand is used to narrate the events experienced by the speaker. While Murat uses the simple past tense as he recounts events he has not experienced, it is only when he talks about a more difficult incident such as rape that he employs the inferential mood. His use of the simple past tense indicates that Murat has internalized these stories he has heard and he turns them into a testimony. Another important aspect of Murat’s narrative is the use of the pronoun “we.” When he says “and we couldn’t take it,” he is actually talking about a time he was not yet born.

As a result, entering circulation in the private and public sphere, stories of violence transform into anonymous experiences. I noticed this particularly during an interview I conducted with an 11-year-old boy named Eren. In order to be able to understand what sort of an environment politicized and mobilized children I also wanted to speak to a child who wasn’t mobilized within the Kurdish movement. I would thus be able to make a comparison. I knew Eren and his family personally and thought that he wasn’t one of the “stone throwing children.” However, during the interview Eren said that he participated in the demonstrations and elaborated on the incidents:

E: You know there’s the field in the neighborhood, we used to go here, light a fire, shout slogans, and we’d run away. We do demonstrations in the neighborhood for the freedom of our people. One day we did one, okay, the police came, they’d followed us, we threw stones and split. Ran off to the side streets. I mean no one forces us. We go, put three four tires on top of each other, we burn them, the police come. We throw stones at the police. When they catch us they beat us real hard. And at that moment there were police there, we shouted slogans, they slowly began to approach us. We immediately picked up stones and threw at them. The police were slowly coming towards us. We ran away to the back streets. We do the demonstrations for the freedom of my people.

After the interview, Eren said the stories he told were made up. Having overhead a conservation I had with a friend, Eren had learned that I could not finish the field research due to the operations against DTP\(^{10}\) at the time. And he lied to me to help me out. Yet interestingly enough the made up stories Eren told were very consistent with the stories I heard from other children. How was it that these non-experienced experiences, made up stories of state violence and resistance could be conveyed in such detail, consistency and lucidity? Another question might be posed from the theoretical framework in which violence stories are discussed: Violence and trauma literature often assert that stories of violence cannot be recounted because the act of narration itself shatters the integrity of language, the body and the individual (Scary, 1985). However the

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\(^{10}\) Democratic Society Party (DTP) was a party in the chain of political parties established by the Kurdish Movement in Turkey. It was founded after the ban on Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP). DTP was banned in 2009 and was succeeded by Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).
Interviewees’ lucid and consistent rendition of stories they have experienced and/or that were transmitted to them suggests these stories have been told multiple times. All of this indicates that we need to re-conceptualize the relationship between memory, violence, trauma and the act of telling. Studies on memory usually approach trauma from an individual and psychological perspective. Since this literature situates the individual at the center and focuses on the impossibility of talking about trauma, it entirely disregards the political and the social (Radstone, 2008: 36) and overlooks the fact that politics is precisely concerned with dealing with trauma. Thus, the stories recounted by children can be understood not in relation to trauma and memory, but rather through the relationship between the act of telling and community. Their stories derive power from repetition itself, from telling and listening repeatedly (Üstündağ, 2005). At the same time, these violence narratives and experiences transform into a collective repertoire that any of the children may draw and elaborate on and perform. In this context, the interaction and transmission (post-memory) between politics, struggle and generations provide children with a narrative space. Hence trauma does not break down subjects; on the contrary it constructs them. Additionally this repertoire created by the perpetual circulation of stories also shapes what the children understand from Kurdishness and being Kurdish. Children, who attribute all their suffering to their Kurdishness, transform this identity into a node where injustice and violence can be expressed by repeatedly telling stories of violence.

H: What does being Kurdish mean to you?
Murat: Not giving their rights.

Some situations I encountered during the interviews also led me to consider the relationality between individuals and narratives. I had to conduct most of the interviews in crowded environments; therefore the interviewee’s friends were also present during the interviews. They frequently intervened and started to tell their own stories. I initially tried to stop these interventions but eventually I noticed that everyone actually told similar stories or rather one collective story. The story of the person I interviewed turned into a theme and everyone added their own story to his lifeline. For instance when the narrator described the burning of his village everybody recounted how their own village was burned. Or when the somebody recounted how their house was raided by the police, everybody described the police house raids they experienced. Furthermore, the testimonies of others reminded the interviewee of other stories. In this respect, various testimonies recounted by different people lead to the construction of a singular story and a collective repertoire through repetition. This repertoire provides subjects with a ready-made language to convey experiences they would not be able to recount personally. In other words, this language comprised of collective experiences and narratives offers the children the possibility to attach meaning to daily practices and the history of the Kurdish struggle. For example I asked one of the children why his family migrated to Adana. He said he didn’t remember. Other children intervened during the interview and told their own families’ stories of migration. Later, one of the children asked why I did not ask the interviewee about their migration, following which the child I was interviewing said, “you had asked and I hadn’t remembered. But I think my father said...” and told a story very similar to the others’.

In a research he conducted on African societies, anthropologist Charles Piot asserts that individuals cannot be considered independent of the social context and community dynamics that define them (Piot, 1997: 17). According to Piot, people in these societies are defined, and even constructed by social relationships. For this reason, he proposes: “people don’t have relationships, they are relations” (ibid.). Piot describes a fluid, diffusive subject that is permeable and pluralistic in its relation to other subjects (ibid.). Such a conceptualization of the subject might be useful for understanding the political subjectivity of Kurdish children. Because what facilitates the construction of relational subjects, and determines how childhood is and will be experienced is the constant remembering and transmitting of a common history and experiences. Evidently the constant rendition of violence stories is linked to experiences in urban life. Victims of forced migration were subject to blatant state violence. Yet, the violence did not end when they migrated to the city but rather took on different manifestations; moreover it was combined with different forms of violence such as poverty and exclusion. The stories told about the violence in the village provide the children with the backdrop to recount the difficulties
experienced in the city today. In other words, rather than the past being a trace in the present, the present becomes a trace in the past, because more implicit forms of violence such as poverty and exclusion encountered in the city today are expressed with more difficulty compared to the open state violence in the past. Stories of violence from the past help children make sense of the hardships today and to denominate the discrimination in the city.

On the other hand, the circulating stories also signify an empowering form of knowledge for the collective subjects. The knowledge constituted by experience and the act of narration denote the oppression of Kurds and the cruelty of the state, yet the loss and grievance experienced by the Kurdish people is expressed with rage as opposed to grief. According to the children no matter how much violence the state exerts, it will only serve to amplify their rage. This knowledge is also the very factor that motivates children to participate in demonstrations.

Kuto\textsuperscript{11}: See, two three years ago I would slander DTP, but my grandfather died, my father told me things, how they burned the village and stuff, my uncle’s incident. And since two three years I became like this.

As illustrated in the quote above, the knowledge devised through witnessing violence or internalizing the testimonies of others mobilizes children. The repertoire I talk about includes not only the violence stories form the villages, but also pertinent current political developments. Children closely follow discussions around the Kurdish issue on the TV and the internet. For instance a child was wounded during a demonstration in Hakkâri. The next day DTP organized a protest against the military operations in Adana. Before the demonstration, one of the children came out of an internet cafe and said “the boy in Hakkâri has become a martyr.” The demonstration was about to start and the news immediately spread. The children were saying this news had to enrage them more, so “they’d fight harder with the police.”

All the children I interviewed were in primary school. They said that teachers constantly tried to influence them through violence and persuasion. Children who closely follow political developments regarding the Kurdish issue over the media are also constantly discussing this issue with their teachers at school.

Murat: My teacher says there is democracy, what democracy I say, he says what do you mean there’s no democracy. I said for example Ahmet Türk spoke Kurdish in the parliament, why was he banned. He said that’s the parliament, Turkey’s official language is Turkish. I said why does the prime minister speak it, he said that was for a TV channel opening. I said so why do they speak English, French and that’s not banned but Kurdish is. The teacher was now silent. The teacher almost took our side. There is a teacher, we say are you Kurdish, he says yes, but it is like Turkish blood flows, I feel Turkish he says. For example, you know we said they don’t allow speaking Kurdish, we were in Turkish class, I brought this up. I said to the teacher why did they immediately stop the broadcast when Ahmet Türk began to speak Kurdish, he said that’s the parliament, Turkish is spoken there, I said Obama spoke English, they speak all sorts of languages. Be quiet, he said, I said well why did they exile Ahmet Kaya? I said they exiled him because he said he’d make a Kurdish song, there you are oppressing the Kurds. He says be quiet to everything and when you continue, he comes and hits you. \textit{Edi bese} [enough already].

Halil: See, we speak in Kurdish with our friends in class, and the teachers say why do you speak Kurdish. We say if we are Kurdish we will speak Kurdish. If you are Turkish you speak Turkish. You say yourself there is democracy in Turkey, if there is democracy don’t we have a right to speak.

Kuto: Well, like we always shout slogans in the class, we’d also do it outside but there are cameras. A hundred people, you know we’re all Kurdish so we gather together a

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\textsuperscript{11}Kuto is the son of a family from Batman, who were subject to forced migration and came to Adana. He is 16 and goes to primary school and also works at a barbershop in the neighborhood.
hundred people, we shout. We don’t shout outside because there are cameras, but in class we bang on the desks, “we are not terrorists, we are PKK guerillas.”

H: Don’t you have any decent teachers?
K: No, all of them are scum.
M: They say there’s one very good teacher but I didn’t see him but they say he’s very good.
K: For example the other day a teacher’s jacket was stolen, he called us, we’re anyway the dirtiest in the school, we have a few more friends, we’re all in the same class, he called us, said if you don’t bring my jacket back I’ll have you kicked out of school. There is a DTP supporter girl, probably all her family is from DTP, she held the teacher’s bag, the teacher beat her up and she beat the teacher up. I saw the teacher crying and we shouted a slogan, “we’re not thieves, we’re students.” As we were going out the door, I kicked him, he fell down, didn’t see us, everybody split. I shout next to him, I support Apo, he says I’ll get you kicked out of school, but can’t do anything either.

All these quotes indicate that the school has become a field of struggle for teachers and students. The presence of these children at school, their discussions, political motivations not only disrupt the spatial organization of the school as a state institution, but also challenge the foundations the school or education constructs itself upon. Only one of the children I interviewed stated that he would continue his education after primary school. And he said that the reason he wanted to continue going to school was because he wanted to be a lawyer, because Kurdish people need lawyers since they are constantly arrested. Other children said that once they finished the compulsory primary education they would not go back to school. So these children either completely reject education or they want to continue because they think they can use the education they receive in school to support the Kurdish movement.

Violence and Freedom

Violence is a constitutive element in all social relations in the neighborhood. Everything, including bodies, is made sense of in reference to violence and violence becomes a way of life. What’s more, the language of violence is the only language children have. The narratives of all children begin and end with stories of violence. Thus violence becomes the primary theme of narratives. According Paul Ricoeur, “the event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated” (cited in Feldman, 1991: 15). And in this context since violence determines what can be narrated and what is not worth recounting, it also constructs the structure of the narratives. One of my initial questions at the interviews pertained to where the interviewee was from and why they migrated. Since the village is coded and remembered as the space where state inflicts violence, everything related to the village and migration is framed by state violence:

Berivan12: I don’t remember much but I remember they beat up my parents in the house. They searched the house inside out, took away the books, tapes they found, everything. They burned all those books they found right before our eyes. Well, for example we had photos, our albums, pictures from the mountain, they burned them all. Horrible things happened. They were plainclothes cops and at the time those were very cruel. You didn’t know when they would come. They’d come trashing in, kicking down doors. And the moment they beat my mother I can remember even now. They pulled my mom’s hair, beat up my father. It really offended me. They dragged my older sister out like this. I remember. They stayed in jail one night. My sisters and brothers were tortured there.

Kuto: They bombed my grandpa’s village, launched rockets. Two years ago we went you know, and this happened three-four years ago. And my grandpa died last you know, it

12 Berivan is the only one among the children I interviewed who was not born in Adana. Her family is from Mardin. When Berivan was eight her family migrated to Adana due to the military oppression in their village. She goes to primary school and works at a hair dresser.
was about a year ago, the soldiers had planted mines, I mean to shoot the guerillas, and then as a passenger minibus was passing through, my grandpa was in it, we also had another relative, like four people died there. Then my younger uncle, if he lived now he’d be like thirty, they threw him in a well. They raided my grandpa’s house, for you know aiding and abetting, they fed those on the mountains and stuff, they came, raided, and my uncle was playing by the well, they pushed him, he tripped on the fence, he tripped and fell into the well.

However the language of violence is not only used in the village narratives, but also when talking about the urban space, due to the violence experienced at the police station, the school, at home and on the street. Yet the narration of the violence in the village (the past) is very different from the narration of the violence in the city (the present). Even though the children have not experienced it themselves, they employ a language of victimhood as they coherently and lucidly describe the past events of village burnings, torture, death and loss of everything. In these stories while Kurdish people are depicted as the objects of violence, the state appears as the subject of violence. As I mentioned before, the reason why these stories are told over and over again in the same way is that this blatant state violence creates the legitimate ground for the children’s present politics. On the other hand, even though the experiences of children in urban life are not so different from the experiences in the village, today’s hardships are expressed with considerably more difficulty. Children have a preset language, collectively formulated and transmitted stories, that is, an entire repertoire to depict the state oppression in the past. However, they have no such repertoire, preset language or narrative to convey the hardships of the present; they need to create their own language and stories. Thus things pertaining to the present are either told in fragments or not conveyed at all. What’s more, children construct themselves as both the object and the subject of violence in their narratives. Thus, the language they employ is not one of victimhood, but to the contrary, one of resistance to injustice. Yet this injustice refers not to the present but rather to the past. In other words, children say that their struggle is against the injustices their parents or the Kurds in general have suffered in the past.

The children mobilized within the Kurdish movement organize various demonstrations and actions. Since, compared to the past, it is now youth and children who are more active in politics, the police are more focused on these groups. Thus the children are routinely subject to police violence:

Berivan: They constantly raid houses during demonstrations... They were insulting. The words they used, the cursing, such ugly curses no one would use, really. As if we are abandoned, helpless. Actually if DTP party was not behind us, it’s like we’re abandoned... Plainclothes picked us up at school, we went in cuffs and stuff, what they asked at the interrogation: so who will save you, the party? That’s the question they asked, they said are you going to the party, anyway, you can’t even say yes, they didn’t give us a chance to respond, and of course they beat us up some. We’ve got used to getting beat up by them, seriously.

Most of the children spoke about how they felt abandoned in state institutions such as the school and the police station. On the other hand, DTP appears as an institution that gives them a sense of belonging and protection. In arguments and fights, while Turkish children threaten to turn in Kurdish children to the police, Kurdish children threaten to turn in Turkish children to DTP. Since being in custody and under arrest have become prevalent experiences for children, the routine police violence creates an antagonism between the state and the children. Because their encounters with the “others” outside the neighborhood are shaped by violence, what they deemed worthy of telling me as a researcher mostly consisted of stories of violence.

Erhan: For example one day I hadn’t gone to the demonstration but I got caught, just like that, without asking any questions they attacked me.

H: How old were you then?

E: I was eight. Even when I was eight they took me without asking any questions, I stayed in custody for two days. Then even though I was eight they took me in custody. It
Haydar Darıcı

Violence and Freedom: Politics of Kurdish Children

The political violence in the neighborhood is not limited to this: The police regularly raid houses. Actually almost all the children I spoke with in the neighborhood have also been taken into custody or were arrested at least once for thievery and fights. The school is also one of the spaces where children are subject to violence. All the children recounted how they have been beaten by teachers for their political opinions and practices. Moreover, Kurdish children are taken into custody, and are even arrested because of the slogans they write in their notebooks, political discussions with their teachers and fights and quarrels between Turkish and Kurdish students. Plainclothes and uniform police go around the main streets of the neighborhood at all hours throughout the day and stop children for random identity checks.

Erhan: I don’t know, the police ask for ID cards out of the blue, for example he asks, did you go to jail for politics, for this or that, they say they trick you, don’t they. They give you money to do this, they say, yet it’s all lies, I mean they’re making things up, they give you money, they you this and that. They say for instance, the child is on trial, he says I did it for money, but it’s a lie, it’s police pressure. It’s all pressure, all a lie, for example he says I caught your friend as well, I know this very well, they immediately throw bait, I caught your friend, he gave your name they say, I say bring my friend and we’ll talk then. Bring him if you caught him.

The violence in the neighborhood is not confined to the school, the police station or the street, and neither are the police and nor other representatives of the state the only ones who exert violence. Violence has spread to all spheres in the neighborhood; it is also a defining element of family relations.

While children of families subject to forced migration are born into an environment where displacement is amplified by other forms of violence in the city, parents undergo a second defeat in the city as they have difficulty in adapting to urban life. During the field research, I observed that in most forced migrant families the father did not work, and children provided for the family. The reason why fathers don’t work is that while they had a certain status in the village, they’ve become unskilled workers in the city. Job opportunities for them are very limited as well: they work in construction, sell produce at open markets or become street vendors. And most fathers
do not want to work because they think these jobs are humiliating. However, children have more job opportunities as they can work as apprentices at barbershops, carpenters and tailors. Also since children go to school, they speak better Turkish than their parents, and undertake significant bureaucratic responsibilities for the families such as paying bills, preparing the necessary documents to collect aid distributed by the governorship or municipality. Since some parents know no Turkish, their children take them to the hospital. All of these put children in a position of power inside family relations. Furthermore, since children regard themselves as more political than their families and are in fact more active in politics, a form of familial relationship we are unaccustomed to emerges. Children think their families have been intimidated and silenced by state violence. However, children share the information that the state oppresses Kurdish people through the media, and in particular the internet. According to them, unlike their parents this knowledge of oppression leads to rage against the state. At the same time fathers who lose their status and power within the family exert more violence on the children to reestablish their authority. Most of the children I spoke to said that they were often beaten up by their fathers:

Murat: When my father hit, he’d jump on the sofa and hit, jump and hit. He was overweight, and large. He’d hit me in the stomach, does it hurt, he’d say, when I said it did, he’d hit me more. He says, where does it hurt, where, I say here, then he hits, bam bam (laughs).

Children themselves become inflicitors of violence. In response to the violence directed at them, they exert violence on their teachers, the police, even their families. Violence thus becomes the determining factor of children’s experiences and the basic structure of their narrative. Interestingly enough children offer rational explanations as to why they become subjects of violence: For them violence is the only way to avoid more violence.

Erhan: What’s the police to do, if you don’t resist, if you shrink before them, they’ll begin to crush you. When you resist, they can’t do anything. If you don’t resist, the police beats you up, comes to your house and beats you, if you resist they know you’re not scared, they can’t do anything. So if they swear you should swear right back. But if you’re scared, they crush you more. They do more. And the police are also surprised, they’re surprised, how can they shout back at us at this age. I mean, you know they are surprised, how can they push back, they are surprised. There is surprise and there is fear. You know, if they are doing this at this age, what’ll they do in the future. Anyway they fear children the most. The police, when I first went in, in front of the school anyway the police hit one of my relatives, we fought with the police, so we aren’t afraid of them. I mean they hit one of us, get their club and hit us, we take the club and beat him up. It happened many times, we even crushed one’s head, we were taken to court for it.

Murat: The teacher is afraid of Erhan (Erhan walks in at that moment), no Erhan, I have nothing against you the teacher said.

E: You know that teacher, I beat that teacher up. We’re in class, now he’s walking around the kid next to me, you know looking for an excuse to beat him. He came and went, came and went, the kid did something, he immediately walked towards him, was going to beat him, just as he was about to hit him, I hit him. Since that year he doesn’t touch me.

Kuto: The other day you know there is a ruler, aluminum, now we were talking with friends, I said something, I saw the entire class was laughing. I gave the finger behind her, ooo she said, the woman hit me, hit me, it didn’t hurt, finally I looked, it hit the bone, I got angry, I got up, held her hair, slapped her, come touch me again I’ll hit you more I said.

Beating teachers is the only way to avoid being beaten by teachers. Attacking the police (or not being scared of them) is the only way to avoid police violence. Children devise these strategies based on their own everyday experiences. For example they have learned from experience that if they fall down as they are beaten by the police, they’ll get hit more. Their joining or wanting to
join gangs is also directly linked to this situation because they think if they have the gang behind them no one will dare touch them. In this context these children most of whom smoke hash, voluntarily assume the identity of a psychopath identity when need be. This psychopath identity awards them an immunity among family and friends. At the same time the children also inflict violence upon themselves. One indicator of this is the countless razor marks on the arms of most children in the neighborhood. They also scratch the skin on their arms with matches and write words like “hate,” “rage,” “revenge.” It should be noted that the children also feel a sense of belonging to the neighborhood via violence and struggle. With their demonstrations, conflicts on the street and their political groups they make the neighborhood—and in the respect the city— their own. I asked them if they wanted to go back to their hometowns:

Erhan: I’d stay here (Adana), you know I’ve set up everything here, I mean I got to know my people, I mean I wouldn’t leave the people I’m together with. The party things, my friends, that’s why I can’t leave.

Erhan says he does not want to return to his hometown because he can’t leave his people and the party, yet the hometown he speaks about is Diyarbakır, which is considered the capital of Kurdistan and the center of Kurdish politics. However, it’s not just Erhan who thinks this way, none of the children I interviewed or talked with want to go back to their hometowns. This does not only imply that the Kurdish movement has transcended the borders of Kurdistan, it also shows that, as I mentioned above, Kurdishness is not defined in reference to a piece of land (or language) but with struggle. If Kurdishness is a resistance for these children, then Kurdistan signifies not a resistance but a defeat. As I previously noted, the village is defined and recounted by them only as a space where the state exerts violence. Yet Gündoğan neighborhood is recalled and narrated as the center of a large resistance and a rebel PKK region. Thus the children feel a belonging to Gündoğan, but they also say they are fighting to found Kurdistan. Where is this Kurdistan? Where will this Kurdistan be founded? I think Kurdistan no longer signifies a specific region; it rather transforms into an empty signifier that is always a bit distant for the children.

Until now I tried to depict how children become both the subjects and objects of violence in a neighborhood where all relationships are defined through violence. If a non-violent space and non-violent relationship cannot exist in this environment, how are we to understand the children’s politics constructed around violence? If children render the urban space their own through violence and struggle, and can exist through violence, what is the relationship between violence and freedom? And in this context how can we conceptualize violence and freedom? I will try to respond to these questions with reference to Georges Bataille.

Bataille argues that what defines a society is not production relations as claimed by Marxists, but rather the consumption relationships, that is how the surplus energy produced (“accursed share”) is consumed (Noys, 2000: 103). According to Bataille, the struggle for sovereignty is actually a struggle about how the useless and thus consumable “accursed share” is consumed. Along this line, what constitutes the accursed share in the society I am trying to depict? The foundation and operation of capitalism is linked to the control of demographics. Joost Jongerden argues that the modernization of Turkey is a geographic project because since its outset, the minority population has been forced to migrate from one place to the other with the aim of establishing control and producing Turkish citizenship (Jongerden, 2007: 281). In this context, the Turkish nation state (and the Ottoman empire in its final period) has constructed itself through its mode of intervention to the minority population, which it has regarded as a surplus. We always see Kurdish people being accused of having too many children. In other words, Kurds are accused of having more children than they can productively consume. Kurdish children constitute a surplus neither the state nor the society can consume productively. They are perceived as excess since they are not considered to bear the potential to reproduce either the state or the family. On the other hand, according to Judith Butler bodies which are constructed in public space as social phenomena bear traces of social life entailing various conflicts and struggles (Butler, 2005: 26). In this respect, Kurdish children’s bodies become the transmitters on which the violent history of the Kurdish people, PKK’s struggle in the cities, and the “future” dreams of Kurds are
ingrained. And this reveals the reason why Kurdish children are feared and loathed so while childhood is associated with innocence. Kurdish children in urban space become the source of the demographic fear of Turkish society. Symbolizing the increasing Kurdish population, they become a “demographic ticking time bomb” for the Turks (Collins, 61). And for this reason, the bodies of Kurdish children become a site of struggle. While the state tries to control these bodies perceived as objects of fear, children claim their own bodies and assert sovereignty over them through their practice.

Drawing a link between sovereignty and freedom, Bataille analyzes how oppressed people are liberated by performing sovereignty. According to Bataille, violence’s potential to transcend boundaries and norms places violence at the heart of all kinds of struggles for freedom (Noys, 66). Since sovereignty only comes to be through violence when boundaries are trespassed, actually the moment of violence and the moment of freedom are the same thing. Thus Bataille states that the liberation of the oppressed is only possible with sovereignty and violence, as violence corresponds to the moment when the oppressed confront those in power, risk their lives and thus transcend the norms of the sovereign (ibid.). When a person comes to the point of “nothing to lose,” when he sacrifices all that is holding him captive, including his own body, he consumes his own energy and attains the inner experience of sovereignty and thus becomes free (French, 2007: 115). Because when the oppressed transgress norms, when they break off the production relations in which they are produced and reproduced, they also break the mechanism that consumes them. However, the moment of freedom and the moment of defeat come simultaneously because violence that transcends all norms is also a form of self-destruction. Therefore, “waste is a tragic and lived experience” (ibid., 24).

In this neighborhood I am trying to portray, the state asserts its sovereignty by transgressing all norms, and controlling children’s bodies with violence, torture and arrest. On other hand, children constantly perform “there’s nothing left to lose.” While the sovereign is trying to decide how to consume these children it regards as a surplus, children reassert control on how their bodies will be expended by transforming their bodies into both subjects and objects of violence. By transforming their bodies into objects on which they inscribe “hate” and “rage”, by hurting themselves, they turn their bodies into the embodiment of the rage and hatred towards the state and existent order. Thus, they surpass all norms in the performance of expenditure.

Conclusion

It is interesting that this mobilization of Kurdish children that is on Turkey’s agenda has started after the end of the “low-intensity conflict.” How are we to read this radical mobilization of Kurdish children in the context of the 2000s when negotiations between the EU and Turkey gained momentum; reform packages for democratization and minority rights were introduced; particularly in the increasingly hopeful atmosphere of recent years when the feeling that “we’ve never been closer to the solution of the Kurdish problem” is prevalent and the “Kurdish opening” has created hope in everyone? I think this discrepancy necessitates asking the following questions: What really is the Kurdish problem? How can the Kurdish problem be resolved or is there a solution to the Kurdish problem? Apart from the issues expressed in the language of macro-politics, what are the problems encountered in everyday life?

Erhan: Our resistance to it (the state) will always be there. Even if it doesn’t happen, if we can’t succeed, if we can’t win anything, I mean we’ll always resist.

The radical stance of Kurdish children against the state; their struggle nourished by rage and desperation as opposed to a liberal hope; their refusal to engage in a rational negotiation with the system can make possible the imagination of an alternative politics. However, as Kurdish children are constructing a political subjectivity without protecting themselves, accepting all risks and surpassing all norms, and in this context experiencing actual freedom in Bataille’s terms, they are also being subject to open state violence by getting arrested, being tortured and killed in this environment where power is divided unequally.
For Kurdish children the reason behind their oppression is the state and its institutions. Yet as they are struggling against the state, they also transgress the norms of their families, even those of the Kurdish movement. They do not reject the Kurdish movement; they define themselves within the movement and regard Abdullah Öcalan as a leader, a figure who mobilized them. However, they transform the politics of the Kurdish movement form within. What DTP has to forget in order to engage in actual politics –politics of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and negotiation–, the children constantly remember in everyday life. The history and language they acquire from their families reminds them of state violence each and every day. Their everyday encounters with representatives of the state (police, teachers etc.) reproduce among the children the knowledge that ordinary Turks also play a part in this catastrophe. Even though DTP urges them to forget all these in the name of reconciliation and peace –or perhaps precisely because of it– these shape the children’s conceptions. However, what is significant here is that in the Kurdish movement a different political style emerges in a different generation. And this implies that the trajectory of the Kurdish movement will be shaped by this struggle between different generations. It should also be noted that children’s politics exists on an ambiguous temporal and spatial ground, therefore neither the state nor the Kurdish movement can understand this politics. On the one hand this politics defies norms, boundaries, social and legal laws. On the other, these semi-autonomous organizations produce alternative practices and discourses without rejecting Kurdish organizations or the representatives of the Kurdish movement. Even if they use the same slogans as the movement, they imply different things. For example one child says they fight for Kurdish identity. When I asked him what he meant by Kurdish identity, he said that their identity cards should read “the Republic of Kurdistan” and they should have their own country.

The political subjectivities of Kurdish children points to the possibility of an alternative politics that can transform the demands and the political discourse of the Kurdish movement. Furthermore, Kurdish children’s stories present us with possibilities to re-conceptualize freedom and struggle: Freedom and struggle is not achieved through the language of reconciliation and victimhood, but rather through violence and sovereignty.
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Violence and Freedom: Politics of Kurdish Children
Haydar Darıcı

I. Introduction:

The political-practical and conceptual aspects of “poverty” and their implications for discussions on “citizenship” in Turkey constitute the subject matter of this study. Here we develop two interrelated arguments. Firstly, we draw attention to “locality” as a mediator of experiences, and discourses and structures of poverty. We argue that the homogenizing concept of poverty should be re-thought in relation to locality and in its double articulation in the era of globalization. The concept of “locality” that appears in our discussion is doubly articulated in the following manner: On the one hand, it is a space over-determined by global structural tendencies of capitalism, shaped by the practices of the state and local governments, infused with various discourses on various issues including human rights, citizenship and identity. It transcends boundaries of the specific locality in that sense, and connects to wider networks of practices and meanings. On the other hand, locality is also the concrete place that is constructed and transformed by the experiences and agencies of the people living there; it has its own specific history. The second thesis we elaborate in this paper concerns another striking feature of this era, namely the growing inadequacy of the existing political authorities such as the state, political parties and trade unions not only in regulating the economic sphere but also in channeling the forms of being political. Therefore, we suggest that dealing with poverty in its widest sense has to take cognizance and care of new political forms that bind the “self” and the “community” in different ways. Here we should underline the crucial role that local governments play in producing and sustaining these new political forms that surpass the limits of national citizenship.

Thus the relationship between the experience of poverty and the locality and its implications for political processes is a complex question. In other words, a thorough examination of poverty calls not only for a detailed analysis of economic processes, both nationally and globally defined, which lead to material deprivation in terms of access to basic necessities of survival for certain household; but it should also entail a problematization of locality textured by various kinds of social hierarchies and tensions including class, gender and ethnicity and their political manifestations in relation to the experience of poverty. This point has wider implications in terms of the historical construction of citizenship and ensuing rights associated with it. In order to tackle this complexity, first we would like to point to certain themes that appear in our specific research, and which reveal the moments of contestation and tension between wider economic and political processes and political agencies. Then, we will reflect on the capacity of poverty as both an enabling and disabling concept for policy development in the light of our empirical findings. We hope that our discussion will contribute to current debates on the contemporary connections between poverty, human rights and citizenship.

II. The Setting

Drawing on the results of a larger research project, we chose to focus on Kavakpınar district in Istanbul to illustrate and develop our arguments. Kavakpınar, which is administratively part of Pendik local government, is a locality significant in many respects for discussing questions regarding poverty. First of all, Kavakpınar with a population of more than 100,000 people is a shantytown area with many “illegally” built houses which developed after the 1980s with the outward expansion of metropolitan Istanbul as a result of heightened waves of migration. However, what differentiates this area from some other shantytowns in Istanbul is the fact that it was designated as an “industrial area” in the city plan and consequently a multitude of industrial plants flourished in the district particularly in the 1990s. There is also a newly built airport since

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1 This article was commissioned by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and published on their website. We would like to thank Meltem Ahiska, Zafer Yenal and TESEV for giving us permission to publish it again.

2001. The close proximity of the residential areas to the industrial facilities ranging from small scale manufacturing enterprises to large-scale industrial plants owned by well-known national companies gives rise to severe environmental problems in the area. We will see that this conflict between the “industrial” and the “residential” use of the land also leads to serious political contestations between the local government and the people.

Secondly, Kavakpinar is a district populated by migrants mostly from the central and the eastern part of Turkey; the population is dominantly composed of Alevi and Kurds. The ethnic and religious identities in the area are evoked in the narratives and practices of the people not only in terms of stable “identities”, but also in their complex trappings of the marginalization of Alevi and Kurds, and their struggles against their exclusion in Turkish political history. Given the economic hardships and the low level of public services in terms of health, education and infrastructural facilities in Kavakpinar, the ethnic and religious identities find a fertile ground to be easily translated to issues of economic power, more specifically to the conflict between the “rich” and the “poor”. This point takes us to the third point that characterizes the social and economic setting in Kavakpinar, which is related to the patterns of employment in the area. This point is particularly important for revealing the major class and gender components of poverty. Most of the inhabitants of the district have not had access to formal education and are obliged to work in temporary and poorly paid jobs without any employment rights and security. The gendered aspects of employment are particularly significant given that in-house informal employment is very common in the majority of households in the area. Women mostly work at home producing or finishing commodities such as garments, matches and soap for national and/or global patrons. The use of child labor in these kinds of economic activities is also common in the area. It is especially striking that except for few men, people in Kavakpinar are not accepted as workers in the neighboring factories and cannot enjoy the relatively stable conditions of formal employment. Hence, majority of men in Kavakpinar is either unemployed or resort to informal income-generating activities of various sorts. This leads to further marginalization but also to searching new forms of political struggle. The fourth significant factor related to the above point then, is the specific forms of agency, especially of women, for being political. There is a women’s group in Kavakpinar which has been active in organizing meetings and street demonstrations struggling against local and environmental problems. These women have also been involved in creative practices, writing and performing plays mostly around women’s issues for long years. Women’s agency is worth analyzing to show what is at stake in the gendered constructions of national citizenship. It also reveals different conceptions of the self in relation to poverty and politics, to which we will come back in our discussion.

To sum up, the widespread existence of informal employment, the severity of environmental problems particularly including water and air pollution and existing ethnic and religious cleavages among the inhabitants are the major features that characterize the social and economic setting in Kavakpinar. We suggest that the complex interplay of these characteristics has important consequences for how poverty is experienced, expressed and defined in different ways by the local inhabitants. These factors are also important for the emergence of novel political forms of resistance and the development of oppositional discourses—articulated mainly around issues of human rights and identity politics— against the dominant power structures, which are instrumental in challenging the existing construction of national citizenship. Let us now try to give brief snapshots from the history and present of Kavakpinar to further discuss the above points and elaborate on these arguments.

III. Exemplary Cases of Social Contestations and Being Political

The first case that is related to the major areas of social conflict and subsequent instances of political mobilization concerns the ongoing political debates about the current state and the future of gecekondu settlements. The recent amendments in the penal law drafted by the AKP government attempts to regulate the very persisting and wide-scale problem of squatter houses in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul. These amendments should also be seen as part of the political and social reforms oriented toward accession to EU membership. The amendments prohibit the building of new squatter houses and lays out the procedures for the demolition of the existing
ones by the local governments. This has led to practices of demolition of houses by the police forces in different parts of the city recently. The new policy of demolition is differentiated from similar previous practices in Turkey by its new concept of either monetary compensation or resettlements in new housing projects. However, it continues to generate conflicts between the inhabitants and local government actors. One striking example comes recently from a neighboring district to Kavakpınar in Pendik. In Aydos district, people have been opposing demolitions in an organized way. They have recently organized a representative neighborhood committee of about 20 persons, which, supported by the direct action of the population reaching to 2000 in number, was influential in confronting the local government practices of demolition. The struggle of the local people resulted in halting the local government’s action in late October this year. Only 14 houses were demolished, the rest remained in place. Kavakpınar people whom we interviewed cited the “Aydos incident” which had wide media coverage as an important victory. They see it as a model to be followed to stop the already started demolition process in Kavakpınar too. In this regard, they particularly emphasized the role of the neighborhood committees in the coordination of resistance activities and mobilization of the people.

Our informants in Kavakpınar also noted that they have their own history of confrontation with the local government. They were involved in organized direct action to raise issues especially against the harming effects of the industrial plants in the area. They have organized several petition campaigns for sanitizing the stream running in the area polluted by the stinking wastes of factories. They also protested the bad smells coming out from the biscuit and confectionery factory. Many of them see the factories as the main sources for deteriorating the conditions of life in the locality. Furthermore, the existence of the factories does not contribute to their livelihood, since they do not have any job opportunities there. Instead, they are employed in temporary and lowly paid jobs. In fact, they initially had been thinking of protesting the installation of factories in this area, however, due to some people’s expectations of possible employment (which was not met in the end) they could not have an organized movement for that end. Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned instances of organized protest bring the majority of community in direct encounter with the local government. In fact, according to our informants, despite the ongoing conflicts, the local government seems to be only accessible authority for making demands.

The strategic formulation of these conflicts and resulting confrontations with the local authorities are more than often embedded in the narratives of the rich against the poor. Here we should note that the conflict of the rich and the poor manifests itself in spatial terms. For example, the demolition of squatter houses in the neighboring districts and in Kavakpınar is interpreted by many of our informants as local governments favoring rich people and giving them a space for building their villas, while taking away the land from the poor. There is a long history of fight over land in Istanbul, with increasing commodification and speculation especially in the recent era of globalization. Very much informed by the trends of commodification, the inhabitants reclaim their history of once capturing the “valuable” land, and defending it against the rich. In this very process, they define themselves as the poor. So we see that the locality mediates the discourses and experiences of poverty.

The conflict ridden encounters between the inhabitants and the local government does not only evoke narratives of economic inequalities but also induce articulations around the tensions and conflicts between religious-ethnic identities. This is reflected in another important case of political struggle. The Alevi people, who comprise more than half of the population in Kavakpınar, have long demanded the establishment of a cemevi. The demand for cemevi has recently initiated a political campaign again directed at the local government. The main objective of the campaign is getting a specific place for founding and opening a cemevi. Some of Kavakpınar residents meet regularly to discuss various issues and strategies to this end. Cemevi in that


\[4\] On the transformation of the real estate and housing market in the last several decades, see Çağlar Keyder, “The housing market from informal to global,” in Ç. Keyder (ed.), Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999.
respect is not solely regarded as a religious center, but rather more as a cultural center, in which the community can organize cultural events, start educative and training courses, and a kindergarten that would be open not only to Alevis but to all, as emphasized by many of our informants. Here we see that the strategic positioning of Alevi identity becomes instrumental in claiming rights in a specific locality, and hence practicing citizenship.

In fact, the political campaign for the establishment of a cemevi in Kavakpınar connects with the wider problems and demands of the Alevi community in Turkey about the recognition of their religious differences by the larger society and especially by the authorities. By making references to the history of the Turkish nation in which Alevi people were marginalized, our informants claim their rights as Alevis. Yet, they refuse to be labeled as a “minority” group—a term in the agenda nowadays due to the EU oriented initiatives re-defining both Alevis and Kurds as minority groups. Their rejection of the minority status, despite the new rights that the status entails, shows that most Alevi people regard themselves as an integral part of the national community. Hence they seek sameness with the larger society as well as the acceptance of their specific differences. They also believe that they share common problems with the Kurds in the region as they are exposed to similar mechanisms of exclusion and injustice. However, the religious differences matter. Most of our informants privilege the Alevi identity as opposed to other political stances in the community, articulated by some socialist parties for example, that regard the whole community, be it Alevi or Kurdish, as oppressed people. The more desirable basis for politics for Alevis then is not the unified ground of being oppressed or excluded, but the religious-ethnic identity. This is not an essentialist and separatist definition though. One should be attentive to the strategic positioning of the identity vis-à-vis the locality. The way Alevis formulate their identity, and explain their demands, such as the opening of a cemevi in the district, are manifested as reclaiming a space in the locality. As in the words of one of our woman informants, “there is an ongoing fight to claim a space in this district, the opening of mosques one after the other is an indication of that. Why can’t we also capture a space?”

Not only class and ethnic-religious identities but also gender identities emerge as a possible arena of social contestation where we encounter with new political forms grounded in the experience of poverty. The case we will now turn our attention is illuminating to explore this point. The informal global economy penetrates to the locality by soliciting cheap labor, especially from otherwise unemployed women. Women are approached by some representatives of big firms who do not reveal the name of their companies or their global connections, and are given work such as knitting sweaters, embroidering garments, or making and filling matchboxes, to do at home. The work is labor intensive and very badly paid, as well as having no fringe benefits or long term security. Here it is interesting to notice how the informal economy reinstates the handcraft at the expense of the autonomy of the worker. What is even more interesting is to see how the flexible model of production of the informal economy inspired some women in Kavakpınar with the idea to be their own patrons by making similar kinds of handcraft products to sell in the markets. Although this did not turn out to be an economically successful venture, the very process of thinking about this project brought women together. The women’s group established in that process, which we come to know during our fieldwork in Kavakpınar, deserves more analytical attention. This is a group of about 15 women who have been regularly meeting every Monday since the late 1980s until last year.

Women in this group define themselves as Alevis, housewives and mothers with very little education and no political background. One woman says that they even had no understanding

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about politics or political parties before, and were told whom to vote by the men in their household. So in their gathering, women decided to educate themselves, reading books and articles especially about childcare. They were especially sensitive about environmental and health problems. They actively participated in the organization of struggles against the bad effects of pollution or thick layers of mud in the streets. They also discovered through television that the 8th of March was women’s day. They planned special activities for that day, writing plays and performing them. The plays were mostly about women’s problems, such as the problems of giving birth to too many children, the problem of infertility, the conflicts of mother-in-laws and young brides. They performed the plays in local venues in the district. The gathering of women, which found radical and creative expressions in the public realm, soon generated conflicts between men and women. Some leading women in the group were labeled as “prostitutes” who had bad influences over other women. Their husbands forbade some women to join the meetings. However, the unexpected success of the performances of women on stage had a positive impact on the community. Men eventually helped women to perform at other venues in different districts; some even had bigger ambitions of moving them into mainstream theater. The activities of women not only transformed the community giving them new hopes of being integrated to the larger society, but also radically changed women themselves. They narrate their experiences as providing them with new skills and self-confidence in public life, making them more powerful citizens. They are no longer afraid to go out alone in the public, nor discussing with authorities, such as the police or the doctor. They have also acquired useful skills in contacting the local government to put forth their demands. They are now active in calculating strategies to make their demands for cemevi accepted by the local government.

IV. Some Observations on the Conceptualizations of Poverty

The sites and themes of conflict discussed above raise several significant points and questions to discuss the concept of poverty. Our findings in Kavakpınar are mostly in line with what other studies on poverty in Turkey reveal. For example, in one of the most recent and wide scale studies on poverty which attempts to analyze the “cultural and social formation of urban poverty” through the narratives of the poor, Necmi Erdoğan shows that the “poor” is not a homogeneous entity. Furthermore, he argues that the conditions of the “poor” cannot be known as such, since those people who may be objectively at the very end of the distribution of resources in this country are positioned differently within a variety of social and cultural settings. They are not only affected variably by their experiences of age, gender and ethnic identity; their own narratives about poverty also vary. Therefore, the study makes it very clear, that the aim is not to “know” poverty, as if it is an object to be known, but to “listen to” the poor, in order “to understand the political and cultural processes in which the poor are included/excluded; to understand how the poor are positioned in the social hierarchies and relations of power; and how they are represented and represent themselves within that process.”

Our aim has been very similar. Therefore, a comparative evaluation of our findings with this much larger scale study would be meaningful. Erdoğan points that representations of wealth/poverty has a much longer history compared to the recent conceptualizations of poverty in policy oriented reports of World Bank or NGOs or the new representations in media. He argues, with reference to Gramsci that “commonsense” images and feelings of poverty have residual “folkloric” and “utopian” elements that contribute to making sense of being poor. We may argue, then, images of the poor as contrasted to the images of the wealthy have been a major theme in many oral and written cultural representations in this country dating back to ancient times. These themes mostly relate to seeking justice, whether put in religious or secular terms. This ancient and hidden language of the poor has also been the subject matter of modern Turkish literature.

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9 Ibid.: 9.
9 The most prominent authors that readily come to mind about different representations and discourses of poverty in Turkish literature include Orhan Kemal and Latife Tekin. In various novels and short stories Orhan Kemal has dealt with the experience of poverty. Latife Tekin, on the other hand, particularly in two of her novels –Berci Kristin Çıp Masalları
utilized to make sense of the present conditions in different ways. And these very differences convey the sociologically significant and complex dynamics that structure poverty today. We can illustrate this point by returning to our informants’ own representations of poverty.

The members of the women’s group in Kavakpinar told us that poverty is basically about inadequate material conditions. It means not having enough money to take care of basic needs, such as food and health. It also means not being able to take good care of children. For example, one could not send her daughter to university – although she was successful in the exams – just because the family could not find the money to pay her fees. This statement dramatically reveals the extent of material poverty, given the fee for state universities is minimal in Turkey. However, just after these comments relating poverty to material conditions, the women proudly asserted that their “souls” are rich. The wealthy may have the means but they are less rich in humanly terms, they never share their resources with others. But the poor have always been generous and in solidarity with each other. This split made between the material and the spiritual resonates not only with the popular representation of poverty in films and media, but with also Erdoğan’s comments on their study. They also have come across these kinds of remarks with spiritual overtones which emphasized that the poor have richer “souls” in their research. In these kinds of statements we can find the traces of the commonsense imagery of the rich and the poor, yet their meaning goes beyond commonsense.

The above examples point to a distinction in the subjectivity of the poor as well. This distinction can be conceptualized by marking the difference drawn between the “real self” and the “fluid self”. The real self, according to Erdoğan is the site of imagined agency through which the poor person attaches morality to her deeds, justifying them in the more general meaning map of justice. The real self is evoked in spiritual terms and gains an imaginary substance. However, the fluid self is much more multiple, fragmentary and strategically positioned. The fluid self can only speak in the discourse of others; it is often self-contradictory. The poor people may blame their own ignorance for their poverty and thus reflect the other’s point of view, or they may attempt to integrate themselves to hegemonic ideologies in various ways. While the real self posits difference from the wealthy, the fluid self tries to equip itself with discursive tools to eradicate the “hurting” difference. As Erdoğan subtly discusses, the “wounds of difference” are socially inscribed on the bodies of the poor.

We find the strategic positioning of the subjectivities very important for our discussion. We furthermore argue differently from the above mentioned study on poverty that, individual narratives although important sources of knowledge, are not enough to understand the strategic positioning of subjectivities of the poor. As we have stated before, the positionings should be analyzed in relation to locality. Relational analysis is important at this point. The locality both produces positions for creative strategies of the self and confines the subjects to the rigid boundaries of the place. The general tendencies mapped onto the local, namely the growing power of local governments, the speculation of land, and the tendencies of informal economy situate the poor people in positions of conflict with the localized manifestations of power. As in the case of demolitions, or in the building of factories, mosques or villas in the area, the use of space becomes a site of political negotiation. The poor people adopt the positions opened in that negotiation to defend their own space and struggle to reclaim more space within the locality for their political and cultural activities. In this process they become active citizens and articulate their fluid subjectivities in globalized discourses about ethnic identity, citizenship and human rights. They speak as global subjects to make political criticisms in terms of environmental and health problems. But on the other hand the locality literally confines them. As our women informants told us, they usually cannot leave their neighborhood due to lack of money to travel to other parts of the city. “They cannot even go to Pendik” for leisure activities. Women are

and Buzdan Kılıçlar—, engage with the same issue. A recent example from Turkish literature on this point is Gaye Boralıoğlu’s Meşcalı.
usually confined to home and men can best go to the coffeehouses in the district. This makes the space even more significant in dealing with the conditions of poverty. For this reason, transforming the space, such as opening a cemevi as a cultural center, becomes an important political demand.

V. A Discussion on the Questions of Citizenship and Poverty

But how to explain women’s more emphasized creative agency in Kavakpinar? This point brings us to the gendered construction of modern citizenship and its relation to social processes of exclusion and marginalization. In other words, if we are to avoid essentialist assumptions on gender, we should look for both the local and national dynamics of gendered citizenship and how they relate to poverty.

Questions of citizenship are usually posited within a discourse of civil society where individuals assume and enjoy their citizenship rights. In this perspective, the development of civil society is also considered as a key force that checks and safeguards the tacit contract between the state and the individual. Liberal theories that formulate citizenship and the ensuing rights within this kind of a formal model of contract are criticized for ignoring that the assumed individual is male. In other words, especially feminist scholars have criticized theories of citizenship for their male bias. According to Pateman, women have been subordinated to men in the conjugal contract and enter the public realm only through this subordination, which is rendered invisible within the category of the “private.” The liberal theories do not only make the subordination of women invisible, but also miss the exclusions based on the substantive meanings of citizenship. Critiques of the liberal framework point to questions of identity and participation within a collectivity, national identity being the most significant collectivity among others. According to T.H.Marshall, citizenship is “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. Once participation in a community is evoked as a norm of citizenship, then it is apparent that who do not have the status of full members would be excluded. Nationalization of citizenship, in this perspective, entail not only participation but also discriminations and exclusions of certain groups that are considered as lesser members of the national or moral collectivity, such as the poor, some ethnic groups, women, migrants, etc. Some of these discriminations and exclusions may have legal manifestations, as the current debate over “minorities” or gender in relation to legal reforms in Turkey show; however, some of the exclusions operate despite the law. They owe their legitimacy not to law but to cultural perceptions based on hegemonic nationalistic conceptions.

We would argue that citizenship, in its two separate yet interconnected meanings-the formal and the substantive- is based not merely on a logic of exclusion but a logic of alterity. We owe this term to Engin İşin’s illuminating work on citizenship. According to İşin, logic of alterity is a dialogical relationship that simultaneously constitutes both insiders and outsiders. Logic of alterity would mean that the excluded others are not merely left out of the collectivity of “normal” citizens, but they are implicated as others in the constitution of the experience of citizenship, which is itself a space of political contestations and negotiations. For example, women’s involvement in both civil society and nationalism convey the logic of alterity. Women are not only excluded but also included in the collectivity by their “difference”. According to Pateman, “The creation of modern patriarchy embodied a new mode of inclusion for women

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14 Anne McClintock makes a similar argument based on historical analysis: “The Code Napoleon was the first modern statute to decree that the wife’s nationality should follow her husband’s, an example other European countries briskly followed. A woman’s political relation to the nation was thus submerged as a social relation to a man through marriage.” (1997: 91). "No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism” in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives, eds. A. McClintock, A. Mufti, E. Shohat. University of Minnesota Press.
that, eventually, could encompass their formal entry into citizenship. Women were incorporated differently from men, the ‘individuals’ and ‘citizens’ of political theory; women were included as subordinates into their own private sphere, and so were excluded from ‘civil society’ in the sense of the public sphere of the economy and citizenship of the state. But this does not mean that women had no political contribution to make and no political duty to perform. Their political duty (like their exclusion from citizenship) derives from their difference from men, notably their capacity for motherhood.”

Analyzing national framework of citizenship through its logic of alterity, shows that motherhood is a pivotal category through which women are ascribed a status in a collectivity, albeit not the same status with men in the civil society. This analysis would better illuminate the dynamics of agency of women in Kavakpınar. While being subordinated and dependent to men in their role as national citizens, for example in their voting decisions, women could become politically active by prioritizing their role as mothers. They have organized their group to learn more about “modern child care”, to fight against environmental problems to create “healthy life conditions for their children” and earn money to take “better care of children”. Erdoğan also mentions that the poor women in their study had a strong emphasis on the care for children. Motherhood does not only open a subject position for women to be active; it also provides a medium through which they become “modern” subjects by eradicating the “hurting” differences with the wealthy. Reading modern books and articles on childcare and health is an indicator of this. Furthermore, women in Kavakpınar told us that they have organized a series of “panel discussions” in their houses, inviting men and children to discuss “openly” about their problems in a “friendly dialogue”. The impact of TV programs is clear. The way the self is posited in this new form conveys the aspiration and desire to be “modern”. It is not only an imitation of others though. By actively using and transforming the space of locality, women attempt to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. They also fight against the “symbolic violence” that the labels, such as “ignorant”, “uneducated”, that are bestowed on them produce. Another striking example comes from their creative writing. An “advertisement” staged in the intermission of one of their theater performances, brilliantly plays with the “difference” and the desire to be the same. The “advertisement”, which according to them “expresses poverty”, shows to the audience that the poor people do not need washing detergents, since the stains are only caused by the food rich people eat (chocolate, oily food, etc) but “poor only eat bread and drink water.” Here the contrast between the rich and the poor is sharply put. However, by playing with modern forms such as the “advertisement” women take place and produce within a symbolic language presumably shared by the whole society.

Women’s desire to be integrated to the larger social community, and their ways of struggling surpasses the limits of national citizenship. They do not regard the existing political forms, such as political parties and the state as desirable means for being political. Women make it very clear that they do not trust either the existing (including socialist) parties or the state. Their only demand from the state is expressed in the words, “we do not want anything from the state, let it only accept us as citizens”. They regard political parties as being harmful for the potential unity of the community, and criticize their politics as being abstract and blind to local problems. However, in making claims about their locality and their own position within it, women utilize the discourses of citizenship and human rights in different ways that connect to gender, ethnicity and the desire to be modern. We see an adoption of modern discourses, such as rights and citizenship by women in their mobilization; but we also see creative ways of performance to transcend the limits of the modern subject positions, and to establish communal forms of action and solidarity. We have argued in this paper that these new ways of being political have been made possible by the dynamics of global economical and political tendencies.

18 They themselves give examples how these stigmatizing and discriminating terms are projected unto them in their encounters with authorities, especially medical authorities in hospitals.
19 Nazan Üstündağ deals with a similar question in a different conceptual frame. She argues that the “politics of universality” that the growing global capital introduces to heterogeneous real life temporalities within which govermentality operates, produces a tension that incites new political agencies to perform in the public sphere. She
In very general terms, parallel to the declining capacities of nation-states in regulating the economic and political field, local governments and their policies have increasingly gained more importance in terms of delineating and characterizing the parameters and the qualities of politics around the issue of poverty. It is not coincidence that the legal reforms that “prepare” Turkey for EU membership, tend to empower local governments. However, it would be naive to think that the empowerment of local governments could devise efficient ways of dealing with poverty, given their limited democratic structure. They are still very much shaped by the centralized national party politics and its hierarchies that resonate with the logic of alterity that the hegemonic national community is structured by. Marginalized ethnic communities, women and the poor in general are excluded from participation in local politics, yet they are included as the necessary “base” for votes. The typical strategies employed in the political campaigns of mayor candidates demonstrate this very clearly. These campaigns invest in the needs of “bare life” to manipulate political decisions, and by distributing free basic goods to people try to “buy” their votes, as the current mayor did in Pendik.

The bare life in the form of bio-power has been the very ground for political power in modern societies. Governmentalization of basic human needs means constructing the docile objects of power and politically shaping the subjectivities accordingly. Thus the homogeneous category of the “poor” as the needy is created. The objectification of the poor in terms of “bare life” positions them as the victims whose needs will be catered by governments, i.e. local governments in this context. Yet, we argue that the growing importance of local politics designate locality as a significant site of political struggle. The subject positions opened up in that struggle contribute to new forms of agency that the poor utilize to assert their “humanity” in a globalized world, by claming more space, by transforming the space and making it a culturally and environmentally a better place to live in. The poor never represent themselves in the terms of “bare life”. Their subjectivities are split between positing the real “difference” of the poor and the desire to be same with others. The splits are meaningful for showing that the poor resist to objectification and victimization by adopting hegemonic modern discourses. This is nothing to be idealized or dismissed as mere ideology. It only shows that poverty apart from being a social problem, is a problem of socially and culturally positioned human beings.

VI. Conclusion

We would like to emphasize some points that we deem to be important in our discussion. Firstly, the question of poverty cannot be reduced to the process of material deprivation; it is a much more complicated process, which involves cultural exclusion/inclusion practices particularly on the basis of gender and ethnicity. The complex consequences of symbolic violence and the “wounds of difference” that marginalize the poor and the various forms of struggle against them should be integrated to the analysis of poverty. On the one hand, the locality opens up subject-positions for the poor to adopt and utilize various discourses for acting and speaking “politically”, but on the other hand, the same locality imprisons and deprives people of means to transcend
their immediate “bare” life conditions. Secondly, the significance of the local governmental organizations as critical actors in the negotiation and the resolution of the demands and struggles concerning the human rights issues should be considered. In that context, the dynamics of the locality have to be rethought in connection to global tendencies. This could open a space for rethinking the question of citizenship beyond its conventional understanding; and contemplate about other forms of citizenship, such as urban citizenship. Last but not least, the environmental pollution as one of the defining features of our case study in Kavakpinar raises a number of questions about the relationship between the conception and the experience of poverty, human rights and the built environment. We propose that a thorough analysis of poverty should include environmental degradation and its implications for both the operations of exclusionary dynamics overriding the conditions of poverty, and creating subjectivities for the poor in combating them.

The self-narratives of poverty evoke residual worldviews and “real” experiences that cannot be contained in the representations of poverty that tend to objectify the poor in general terms. Hence the importance of listening to the poor. An old Alevi man asked us in the beginning of our interview whether we were journalists. Learning that we are university professors, he said, “It would be better if you were journalists. We want to be heard”. Then, it is a real challenge for us academics who want to study poverty to learn how to listen to the poor and create new ways to make them heard.
On Cultural Agencies and Its Possible Effects
Oda Projesi, Erdoğan Yildiz

We are trying to rethink the contact between artistic practices and various pursuits for alternative politics, and underprivileged social groups deprived of visibility. Hereby we present a conversation where Erdoğan Yıldız, who has been a resident of Istanbul’s Gülsuyu-Gülensu neighborhood for 28 years and a social and political activist in various dissident urban movements, and members of the artist collective Oda Projesi, who took part in the Cultural Agencies project realized in the same neighborhood from 2009-2010, reflect on their common experiences.

Oda Projesi [lit. “Room Project”] is an artist collective run by Özge Açıkkol, Güneş Savaş and Seçil Yersel. The project was initiated in an apartment situated in Istanbul’s Galata district and invited artists and individuals from different disciplines to the neighborhood to realize joint projects. Inhabitants of the neighborhood also participated in the projects as actively as possible rather than becoming mere spectators. Since 2000, Oda Projesi has been focusing on urban spaces in terms of their different uses, production of relationships, changes and potentials and continues to work on projects questioning what private and public spaces are and to whom they belong.

The Neighborhood

Seçil Yersel: We at Oda Projesi, experienced a neighborhood in Galata for eight years in a rather intensive fashion, in terms of both daily life and the effects of the project, and this turned out to be an experience that profited us in every field in which we became active. It is thanks to our experience in this neighborhood that we are currently reflecting on spaces, their possibilities and the relationships they produce. The neighborhood also became a concept of reference we frequently employed in the two-year long Cultural Agencies project. Taking into account both Oda Projesi’s Gülsuyu-Gülensu experience and Erdoğan Yıldız’s personal experience of Gülsuyu-Gülensu, which practices, would you say, do these neighborhood experiences overlap with and what kind of proposals emerge as a result?

Erdoğan Yıldız: “Neighborhood” is now a hotly debated concept in both academic circles and the media, and as such it is critical and deserves attention. To be frank, there is no prototype neighborhood. Istanbul counts numerous neighborhoods with diverse representations, housing internal consistencies and different dynamics, such as Başıbüyük, Sulukule, Tarlabası, Gülsuyu-Gülensu and Yakacık. For instance, Başıbüyük, a conservative neighborhood, and Gülsuyu-Gülensu, one with an elevated political awareness and strong solidarity networks tend to produce very distinct reactions. The foundational dynamics of Gülsuyu-Gülensu are very unique. This settlement was born as a typical squatter [gecekondu] neighborhood in the 1950s and mainly received immigrants from the provinces of Tunceli, Sivas and Erzincan, with a large majority of Alevis, translating into a political tendency to the left of the political spectrum. Albeit housing a number of different cultures (Alevis and Sunnis, Turks and Kurds, secular-minded people and Muslims etc.), it remained immune to the destructive conflicts shaking up the society at large, and on the contrary, turned into a neighborhood capable of solidarity and common reflexes. This presented a potential for organizational purposes. Here you can find hometown associations, mukhtar’s offices, religious communities and various political organizations. The definition of neighborhood needs to be situated in such heterogeneity; singling out a unique aspect and trying to define the neighborhood on that basis would be misleading. On the other hand, the neighborhood can react differently when there is an intervention by the state or public agencies, and when people come to the neighborhood for an art activity.

Seçil Yersel: In my experience, whenever we talk retrospectively of the period of five years when we lived and produced in Galata, we always use the term “neighborhood” to refer to the indeed rather limited number of people with whom we were in touch with back then. Thus we, too, tend to contribute to the creation of a neighborhood myth as such. Perhaps we attribute a favorable
meaning to it. And maybe we tend to interpret the micro scale relationships that we witness as strategies and tactics, and feel a need to relate them to other dimensions present in the city, an urge to expand these relationships across the urban space, or attribute value to situations which we rarely experience in urban life and yearn for. While posing such questions as, what is the stance of the artist in a neighborhood in the context of a rapidly changing urban structure, or how does s/he relate to the space, to the people around him/her, the street, the passers-by, etc., we come to question dichotomies like people vs. artists: Who feels like an inhabitant of the neighborhood and who does not? The neighborhood myth is something actively created and also desired and needed in the given urban structure. Upon close scrutiny, this structure reveals itself to be very productive and open to creativity. Instead of preserving the myth status and sticking to such an outlook, I am thinking, what kind of practices does this myth engender when it interacts with daily life –can we analyze that?

Erdoğan Yıldız: The neighborhood is in constant flux, it is never stagnant; it constantly generates reflexes, just like a living organism.

Seçil Yersel: An initiative spread over two years, the project Cultural Agencies fused itself with the daily life of a neighborhood, and yielded a formation and an area of influence falling outside the usual rhythm. It was extraordinary in that it was not preplanned to be imposed to the neighborhood as such; it has managed to create its own space and came to being gradually, it has been shaped during the process, and it has taken root in the neighborhood despite having a specific deadline. How can we narrate the short-lived experience of the project Cultural Agencies in Günsuyu-Gülen? What kind of collaborations and anticipations did this project engender?

ÖZge Açıkgöl: The project started off along the conceptual framework formulated by the architects Philipp Misselwitz and Nicolaus Hirsch. The objective of the project was, in a nutshell, exploring how cultural production —which tends to concentrate at the city center, particularly Beyoğlu— would function in the peripheral neighborhoods of the city. Various neighborhoods including Günsuyu-Gülen were initially considered for the project. Oda Projesi joined the project team in the next stage. In that period our team consisted of the project coordinator Ece Sarıyüz, project curators Philipp Misselwitz, Nicolaus Hirsch, and Oda Projesi. Günsuyu-Gülen was a neighborhood with a high potential for cultural production. It was already a vibrant neighborhood housing cultural events authored by civil initiatives and organizations. We in the project team had a long debate as to whether we needed to join a formation already present in the neighborhood or to launch the project in a completely independent space. In the end, we decided that it would be better to establish our own space, due to the existing political discrepancies among various factions in the neighborhood. We rented a squatter house, and for about a year, strove to bring about its complete spatial and social potential. In the first workshop, held prior to the rental of the said space, urban planning students from Frankfurt’s Städelschule and Mimar Sinan University analyzed the structure and formation of the cultural spaces in the neighborhood. Following this workshop, the structure of a cultural institution was laid out. We evaluated what this structure corresponded to in Günsuyu-Gülen and how it could become functional. The said structure comprised the following units: office, library, activities, archive, collection. Although seemingly borrowed from some Western cultural institution, each unit was actually incorporated into the Cultural Agencies structure through its presence in Günsuyu-Gülen. The neighborhood does not have well-defined cultural institutions that are familiar to us; however, there were traces of cultural institution units, such as “libraries” in the neighborhood associations or hometown associations, or “collections” comprising various items brought from villages; “communication” was maintained through slogans scribbled on houses and plain posters employing a specific language, or sometimes temporary stalls or megaphones; “activities” corresponded to neighborhood festivals, for instance. In this sense, the politically challenging stage of the project was creating a comprehensive neighborhood archive, which had not previously been created due to political reasons, or maybe simply because it was not deemed necessary. For this purpose, we carried out intensive oral history efforts, which led to the
formation of a significant oral corpus pertaining to the neighborhood. As for the collection, which we conceptualized as an archive of neighborhood-specific knowledge, we explored the individual archives of the inhabitants and tried to join these together. In fact, the main axis of the project seemed to shift from an analysis of the given structure towards a focus on its past and formation in order to grasp present cultural mechanisms. In keeping with the neighborhood’s basically oral culture, on Fridays we held debates bringing together somebody from the neighborhood and a guest. For example, artist and feminist activist Canan Şenol came together with Sevim Şahin, a locally active nurse from the GÜlsuyu Health Clinic, to discuss common issues such as gender, disciplining of bodies in fields of power, and being a woman in GÜlsuyu-GülenSu. Or, event designer Erdem Dilbaz was invited for a get together with the members of a local activists’ cooperative. In addition, the artist collectives YNKB and Etcétera and artist Burak Delier worked on long-running projects in the neighborhood. There are vast differences between the first neighborhood experience of Oda Projesi and this one. Looking back to our identity in Galata, upon entering the neighborhood we had acted as “neighbors” rather than “artists”. Oda Projesi was established three years after our first step in that district. In GÜlsuyu-GülenSu, however, we were there as artists coming to the neighborhood with a team and various financial resources. The difference between our status in Galata and that in GÜlsuyu-GülenSu was therefore as large as the difference between a guest and a neighbor. We always had to assume the position of a guest.

**Seçil Yersel:** The frontiers of the neighborhood are redrawn with the advent of outsiders—those coming for work, those coming for political organization purposes, researchers, municipal officers, i.e. people who do not reside there. This in turn is closely related to the identity of the newcomer and the relationships she has. In this process, I had the impression that the geographic location of GÜlsuyu-GülenSu was very, very important. GÜlsuyu-GülenSu is situated on top of a hill, and as such, access is meaningful and possible only for those living or working there. It is not a place of transit, it is a last stop; therefore circulation and mobility do not exist and you immediately become visible once you arrive there as an outsider. GÜlsuyu-GülenSu has been the place where I felt like I was in a neighborhood most strongly, perhaps because I had transformed it into a metaphor in my mind. Neighborhood as a large house with invisible gates; that is, a thoroughly autonomous space, well-organized and complete with neighbors, where streets can be conceptualized as halls or maybe even living rooms, and houses as rooms. And indeed this space incorporates certain public elements such as the local market open on Wednesdays, political rallies and gatherings in its streets, minibuses racing by and the shabbiest public buses anywhere in the city. GÜlsuyu-GülenSu is indeed redefined with the arrival of each newcomer; its terminology, dress code may change, your smile, gaze or posture might shift.

**Özge Açıkkol:** Indeed, GÜlsuyu-GülenSu can be said to resemble a “fortress,” a structure which we had to contemplate thoroughly during the project. I do not want to make a sweeping generalization, but considering that most art “spectators” in Istanbul are attracted inside an art gallery by its window design, geographically speaking the “spectators” in GÜlsuyu-GülenSu had to be the neighborhood’s inhabitants anyway. As such, what we have here is a direct, closed circuit project. In the project, outsiders to the neighborhood somehow became direct participants, rather than mere “spectators.” Indeed the project’s production level superseded its consumption level. I don’t believe that the self-distanciation of the inhabitants from the project is caused solely by their discontent with “urban transformation” and the possible damage that can be inflicted on the neighborhood by such projects. It is also due to the problem of creating a common language. These results come about naturally once you incorporate yourself into daily life through a project which is flexible, albeit with fixed boundaries. That is because, there is a large gap between daily life and “institutionality.” Besides, the inhabitants naturally feel a certain reserve towards big capital, which finances the project. As such, this attempt to realize a local, small-scale project through the backing of big capital did face headwinds, owing to the tension between the big and

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the small. This tension is not unique to the Gülsuyu-Gülenisu context; this debate, although not so old, does already have a certain history behind it. Is the artist a worker? Is culture an industry? These are issues hotly debated across the world. In this regard, I believe the project could have better shared this common concern with the inhabitants.

Erdoğan Yıldız: The project Cultural Agencies had numerous aspects open to observation and monitoring. For example Cultural Agencies, as an outsider initiative, incorporates itself into the neighborhood which is a closed phenomenon complete with its own codes and lifestyles, and this initiative experiences a certain “tissue compliance” or “tissue mismatch” with the local relation network; furthermore the artist collective Oda Projesi also joins in this experience.

Seçil Yersel: There was a large range of reactions. Some of the reasons why the project caused discomfort were: it had EU backing; its financial structure rested on the euro; European and American architects, artists, tourists or foreigners visited the neighborhood on this occasion; the project prioritized “culture” which is opposed to the concerns of the inhabitants related to sustaining their livelihood; the neighborhood’s daily life was recorded as part of the project; photo and video shoots were deemed threatening by those unaccustomed to cameras or disapproving of the police CCTV [“MOBESE”] and tanks placed in the neighborhood. Besides, who were we to abandon our comfortable houses and existence to launch a project in a politically dynamic neighborhood with a leftist background—even claimed to be home to illegality by the mainstream media—, whose housing rights were currently under threat owing to urban transformation? This project seemed especially peculiar among similar neighborhood projects implemented across Istanbul, or even Turkey. An old squatter house had been rented, we were to stay in the neighborhood for a whole year, and we would work on a research project to be implemented in a gradual rather than snappy fashion. It was a rather peculiar project, which initially raised “doubts,” and establishing trust required time, effort and common experience.

Erdoğan Yıldız: However, institutions well-established in the neighborhood, such as Sanat Hayat Derneği [The Art & Life Association] and Temel Haklar Derneği [The Association for Fundamental Rights] can also receive similar reactions; the neighborhood might at times remain indifferent to them as well. As such this is not a reaction reserved to outsiders, but a stance stemming from the neighborhood’s internal dynamics. Nevertheless, the said reaction of the neighborhood does not necessarily lead to conflict or tension. To the contrary, the artist Burak Delier’s² work, for instance, has been perceived as a kind of artistic activism propping up the neighborhood’s resistance strategy, or its reflexes against urban development plans. When considered as a process in which both sides influence and learn from one another, this space can well become an integral part of the neighborhood and can engender different kinds of production. Nonetheless there remains a certain pitfall: One must avoid nurturing the neighborhood resistance myth and stay clear from categorizations such as “progressive artists.” These are dodgy concepts. An attempt at reading a neighborhood solely through such characterizations would be deceiving. It would be wrong to infer from our conversation that the neighborhood is inherently a center of resistance, and to objectively qualify it as such. This is because totally different individuals experience other types of relations behind the scenes of this resistance. At the present we are going through an historical period as regards the neighborhood’s future. Istanbul is undergoing an enormous transformation since the 1990s and 2000s. Let’s take the Anatolian side, say from Kartal to Kadıköy, along the E-5 motorway: You will be surprised by the large number of hospitals, shopping malls, high rise buildings and universities on both sides of the road. Cases in point would be the ongoing works of the rail system, the construction of “the world’s largest” courthouse, the upheaval of the Kozyatağı region in parallel with Istanbul’s transformation into a financial hub, or simply, Maltepe University situated in the wooded area behind Gülsuyu neighborhood or Acıbadem University adjacent to the Gülsuyu overpass. Simultaneous with this overhaul is the shift of industrial plants to the outskirts of the city. Accordingly, only a handful of

² in May 2010, Burak Delier, a long-term resident artist of Cultural Agencies, set off from questions such as “Can we conceptualize architecture in a different fashion? Which of our desires, wishes and needs remain unrealized due to lack of energy and means in daily life?” in line with the inhabitants’ suggestions and interventions and organized local reunions with them. The resulting ideas and propositions were exhibited at the local Aydın Kebap Restaurant, on dinner tables.
the neighborhood inhabitants work in factories at the present. Large numbers work in service jobs such as cleaning, security, and construction. At this point the critical question becomes: in such an intensive process of transformation and upheaval, how can “old” squatter neighborhoods like ours subsist and preserve their texture of social, cultural and economic solidarity? Can solidarity-based planning prevent the victimization of the inhabitants and their expulsion to the outskirts? Alternatively, can we protect our habitat with a perspective of the kind “We are pleased with our life in the neighborhood, we created these neighborhoods through resistance and sacrifice, we shall never let outsiders intervene, if necessary, we shall resist with all our might”? –indeed we do have such a tradition, unlike other neighborhoods. I believe that the answers to these questions lie in the oral history conversations that we have undertaken.

Seçil Yersel: How did the experience of the Cultural Agencies Project alter your relationship to your own neighborhood? Prior to the project we were not acquainted. Just before its start, we were hastily introduced to you as a key figure very active in the neighborhood. In time, you played the role of an agent, an intermediary between the project’s objectives and the neighborhood. In fact, you were one of the people we most frequently resorted to, or a kind of consultant, even though you did not have an official title.

Erdoğan Yıldız: For me, participating in this project corresponded to setting out to rediscover the internal relations of the neighborhood. To give examples, although for years I had participated in political action, I can say that among the Gülşuyu Gülensu Shop activities, the trip to the Istanbul Biennial with the neighborhood inhabitants, the April 23rd Children’s Day events organized with the kids in the neighborhood, as well as the culture and arts conversations held on Friday evenings bringing together diverse interlocutors around a variety of subjects were all very stimulating. On the other hand, every interview part of the oral history study revealed hitherto unknown aspects of the neighborhood. When we first started debating an oral history study in the neighborhood, two possible drawbacks occurred to me. First, would these records have a negative impact on any current or future “political” action in the neighborhood? Second, would there be any risk of exposing through such interviews any of our friends involved in current political action? However the overwhelming feeling was that, if we did not somehow kick-start such a study right away, it could soon be too late for those inhabitants at 70-80 years of age and with a history of participation in local revolutionary action between 1978 and 1980. In fact, when dear İlhami (Akdeniz) passed away, it felt like bidding farewell to a vast ocean of experience without placing the smallest drop of it on record. By contrast, when we lost our beloved Müzaffer (Bahçetepe) to cancer, I felt that we were on the right track by recording these interviews. Our objective in launching this study was including everyone who had contributed to the formation of the neighborhood, without any discrimination. Without ever letting our sentiments take over, we invited everyone we could reach. This meant ensuring the participation of people from a wide array of political tendencies, religious denominations and geographic backgrounds. Naturally, we could not reach out to everyone. We truly wish this as of yet incomplete effort to be continued. We, the inhabitants, profited largely from the skills and knowledge of our friends, including academics, urban planners, architects and artists. I can say this much: the establishment of a link between artistic creativity and a local organization is the key to redemption, not only for the neighborhood, but also for the artist.

Seçil Yersel: The Gülşuyu Gülensu Shop opened its doors on June 24, 2009, with the primary objective of creating a platform for recording and sharing the neighborhood’s collective memory via a series of interviews initiated just before the inauguration. Our intention was to document individual histories as well as the past and the possible future of the neighborhood through a number of video interviews with inhabitants from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. These interviews, numbering around 50 at the
present, shed light on the period from the 1950s to the 1990s. After due editing, these interviews will be brought together in a book and published. In this sense, the project will generate significant feedback to the neighborhood.

**Art and Urban Transformation**

**Seçil Yersel:** Based on my experience during the one-year period and its aftermath, I can say that the question of the right to housing serves as a unifying, homogenizing platform in Gülsuyu-Gülenşu. You share the same roof and the same ground. In other words, people share the same concern despite differing ownership rights and land register statuses.

**İnönü Yıldız:** It is poverty that underlies this, to a certain extent – I mean, the awareness raising, unifying effects of poverty... Actually I would also like to discuss the question of gentrification at this point. In the eyes of the inhabitants, gentrification corresponds to displacement, because the most direct consequence of this process is urban transformation, which will result in the poor being replaced by the rich and moved to the outskirts of the city. However, if I am not mistaken, in other countries gentrification concerns abandoned buildings or economically distressed areas artists squat and practice their arts. And in this way these distressed areas are gentrified. Our case is different. Now, if we take the Tophane incident for example, it looks as if art galleries, their owners and the artists are the agents of gentrification. It is a tricky issue, because it is too important a subject to be limited to the relation between the artist and the neighborhood. On the other hand, art and artists can become active in spaces other than art galleries. For example in our shop [Gülsuyu Gülenşu Shop], on April 23rd, artists held an arts event, during which we got together with local children. As children built their dream houses out of cardboard boxes, they were accompanied by musicians Boris Vassallucci and Louis Coulange. As such, they showed to the children that April 23rd can be celebrated in another fashion. Accordingly, I believe that artists can play an important role in rethinking the whole concept of gentrification, and making references to other spaces.

**Özge Açıkkol:** Gentrification can be seen as an urban dynamic. It seems like the Turkish gentrification experience started out as an informal one. Just like the way rural migrants summoned their relatives while building a squatter neighborhood, those who purchased houses in districts of gentrification, e.g. Galata, spread the word to their friends, saying “There is a bargain apartment on such and such street” etc. Although there were many complications as regards ownership rights, apartments were bought and sold. That is to say, this city generated gentrification just like it had previously created squatter neighborhoods, albeit due to different needs. These days, if carried out by the state itself, gentrification is called urban transformation, which is a large-scale, top-down, and therefore more dangerous process, which utterly neglects the grassroots level and people’s actual needs. Gentrification is more of an organic process, and it creates its own feedback. Actually the issue about artists is a rather practical, in other words economic one, because these districts are cheap and somehow “attractive” in the eyes of artists and art galleries. Anyhow, what is important is not their presence there, but rather their relationships with their surroundings or the absence of such relationships... Sure, they are not obliged to establish such relationships, yet contemporary art is intertwined with political questions and as such almost begs for such a relation, from an ethical point of view. In a sense, it is a bit weird to organize an exhibition on problems similar to those experienced by the inhabitants and not to invite them. In any case, if you are in a “neighborhood,” do you have any chance of avoiding all interaction with the neighborhood? What is important here is, as Erdoğan has suggested, unleashing the power of art. Yes, art does have a unifying and transforming power... I am not suggesting here that art should be instrumentalized, but since such a power exists, it is in the artist’s hands to employ it in this “mutual relationship”...

**Seçil Yersel:** Actually the question long since debated by Oda Projesi has once again come to the fore with this project: “How to conceptualize the relationship between art and those socialities traditionally assumed not to follow art?” The artist is expected to be visible in a certain space; it is a very delicate line, like an unwritten agreement; attempts at infiltrating daily life always lead to question marks and debates. They used to say to us “What do you think you’re doing in
On Cultural Agencies and Its Possible Effects
Oda Projesi, Erdoğan Yildiz

Gülsuyu-Gülenusu; there is no culture or whatsoever here; go to the city center, go to Nişantaşı”... We received a similar reaction from our own artist friends while carrying out our project in Galata: “Leave the neighborhood alone, don’t confuse the kids”, they said. At this point we could take up the concept “tissue mismatch” mentioned above. What is a tissue mismatch? What can it tell us about the Cultural Agencies project? I believe that tissue mismatch is an important source of friction. Anyway, doesn’t hypothetic compliance lead to repetition and mediocore cooperation?

Erdoğan Yildiz: The population of Gülsuyu-Gülenusu brushes the 50,000 mark and unemployment is a significant concern especially among the youth. The neighborhood history goes back to the 1950s: it had an important left-wing potential in the 1980’s, and still stands out as a very dynamic and vibrant neighborhood, capable of sticking together and avoiding conflicts in every period, despite its cosmopolitan character. It set an example for many similar neighborhoods in the mid 2000s by resisting urban transformation. It brought cases against the municipal zoning plan, collected petitions for the annulment of the plan, managed to transform this process into a grassroots neighborhood organization, and established street-based representative committees and neighborhood assemblies, thus asserting its will as a neighborhood not “in itself” but “for itself.” The main concerns of its inhabitants are poverty and unemployment. Since the people have very limited access to health, education and transportation services, participation in cultural events, eating out, going to the movies or making a journey are perceived to be luxuries. Naturally, this is one critical reason underlying the indifference towards the artists visiting the neighborhood. Nonetheless, I say it would be an exaggeration to talk about a tissue mismatch.

Özge Açıklol: I guess tissue mismatch can be countered with various interactions and relations. In a sense, tissue mismatch is fabricated politically... Just like the tension between the urban and rural areas, or between the city’s center and periphery... In Gülsuyu-Gülenusu, we encountered two definitions of culture. The first group said “here culture does not exist,” whereas the second insisted “this is our culture.” Although Gülsuyu-Gülenusu and similar neighborhoods do harbor a brand new culture owing to the urbanization of different rural cultures, this is not considered to be “culture” as such—which is one big challenge in itself. Actually urban culture is a result of such cross-fertilization; there is nothing such as a purebred urban culture. Or, we could talk about tissue mismatch in the event of gentrification, since dissimilar people start to live together in the same area then; that’s where the possibility arises.

Seçil Yersel: Actually gentrification has started in the West, and in the USA in particular, much earlier than in Istanbul, and artists there have long since tackled this experience. They have set important examples before us. Artists have seriously debated issues such as, should we express ourselves and share our work in art galleries or instead create independent spaces, and if so, what should such spaces be like? This is a very recent issue for artists in Istanbul, as far as the interaction among artists or the artistic production practices are concerned. There are a number of different spaces evolving in parallel, such as art galleries established by banks, private galleries, or spaces of artist initiatives. Their geographic distribution reveals a certain map, but this map harbors only a handful of examples where work is produced in collaboration with the location. The artist can be said to have the right, desire or need to an existence in an arts gallery, without any outside contact. However, since there are scarce examples of alternative pursuits and there is no platform for debate, artists are frequently blamed and vast generalizations are made about them. They are accused of deteriorating these neighborhoods or triggering change. Let us imagine that artists take the map of Istanbul complete with possible urban transformation areas, and analyze and discuss their relation to these spaces. In terms of urban transformation, Istanbul is home to many practices worthy of lengthy debates, planners come up with numerous alternative plans, and architects come together to work on these issues; however, the transformation the city is going through is a very new issue for artists both in terms of dealing with it and in terms of getting involved. As a result, I consider such events to be very
"stimulating" in a search for a new language, and they present an opportunity for a fresh start. When something comes up, we struggle with its results. There are significant experiences, but these do not go hand in hand with urban transformation and the actual struggles in the city. There are a number of urban movements, which open up a space where artists can feel at home, undertake joint projects and engage in fruitful collaboration (I am not talking about making public art but a conceptual engagement); however, the said space is—though it might sound a bit harsh—monopolized by architects, urban planners and sociologists. Artists are told to do their thing in Nişantaşı.

Eroğan Yıldız: I think I can mention a case in point: last year, we got together as a group of people from the neighborhood and visited the Istanbul Biennial for the first time in our lives. If it wasn’t for the Cultural Agencies project, we would never ever have done that. And, there we saw that artistic works are created with the manipulation of diverse materials. Instead of using its capacity to make great contributions to neighborhood organizations or grassroots resistances, art prefers to dwell or express itself in the center, and the resulting elitist attitude glosses over—or intentionally avoids—certain opportunities, leading to significant polarization and adversity.

Seçil Yersel: This can change only if artists, producers of art and culture feel such a need. Besides, I think that we should also talk about the definitions of being a local, an inhabitant of a neighborhood. Or, what is entailed by living in a given district, and claiming certain rights and thoughts in this regard, versus living there for a limited period and laying claim to totally different rights? All these are questions pertaining to the future to be directed at artists, arts galleries and ourselves. Because, the language and concepts have now rendered certain things so visible that it is not so simple to merely remain a user. If you say “I moved here because it was cheap” and cut it at that, then you shall miss the opportunity to do something for the future. You do not have to become a local or take refuge under such an umbrella, and can rather stay a nomad, but still become engaged there. There is a great potential there and is worth thinking about.

Eroğan Yıldız: As an inhabitant, I believe that if art is to preserve its critical perspective and remain dissident in such a polarization—if such a polarization turns out to be unavoidable—it must be ready to pay the price of an attack or vandalism directed at art. Wasn’t it Edward Said who expressed his belief in the intellectual’s duty to side with the oppressed, while throwing stones across the Palestinian border? Secondly, the relation between art and the neighborhood, between artists and inhabitants needs to be enhanced. Here, art and artists need to clarify their stances. For whom do the artists produce their works, and what is the result? This needs to be well thought. On the other hand, there is an urgent need for questioning the distance between the language of art and the language of the inhabitants, and for an alliance that will be born from this. Because, I believe that such experiences can help dissolve the present tension and lead to a serious coalition process. In the final analysis, artists and inhabitants are fighting for the same thing—call it an act of emancipation, a process of becoming human. Across the world, people live a wild and inhumane life. We need to become more human, we need to be emancipated, and I think, artists and their mutual relationship with the inhabitants can play a crucial role in making the neighborhood heard and visible. I think gentrification is not a humane process, it is inhuman. It makes the artist a prisoner, and forces the inhabitants to close into themselves. In short, the artists and inhabitants need to nurture much deeper relations in the process of emancipation and humanization. If we limit art to the center, the voice of the peripheral neighborhoods will become even feeble.

Özge Açıkkol: That is exactly where the project Cultural Agencies comes in, because, by definition, it provokes thought on being an “agent”... As such it is a criticism of the stern, top-down, “corporate” perspective. It seeks answers to the question “What does it mean to be an artist in Istanbul, or to be a space of cultural production and presentation?” Actually we are pretty much under the influence of the neighborhood since the Gülsuyu-Gülenşu project. We had a first-hand experience in Gülsuyu-Gülenşu, where joint resistance is not a romantic need, but a
concrete and successful initiative. Therefore it is important for art to infiltrate daily life. Gülsuyu-GülenSU provides an achieved example, and we can learn a lot from it. I am talking about the exact opposite of artists going somewhere and “teaching” the locals; I am talking about learning from the forms of resistance present there.

Translated from Turkish by Barış Yıldırım
An Interview with Pelin Demireli, Neşe Ozan and İlhan Sayın about Their Solidarity Work with Sulukule Residents
Balca Ergener, Asena Günal, Erden Kosova

In November 2005, Istanbul’s historical Sulukule neighborhood (that is, Neslişah and Hátice Sultan districts) was declared Area of Renovation under the Law No. 5366 (Law on the Renovation and Reuse of Dilapidated Historical and Cultural Immobile Assets). Since then, the neighborhood has been subjected to numerous questionable policies and has largely been demolished. The Sulukule Project, practically an urban exile campaign, resulted in the expulsion of impoverished Roma people from their habitat through an extensive use of state power, whereas their former properties made certain individuals rich. As such, one of the oldest known Roma settlements was demolished to be replaced with villas, boutique hotels and shopping malls, and its inhabitants were victimized. The former tenants in the neighborhood were driven to Taşoluk, at 40 km to the city center, and cut off from their habitat and livelihood. Eventually all of the families sent to Taşoluk had to sell their new houses and move back to near Sulukule, since they could not afford the credit installments. Majority of the house owners, for their part, had to sell their ownership certificates to third parties. Finally those who neither had a certificate, nor could prove their tenant status, were thrown to the street. Sulukule became one of the symbols of urban transformation; despite resistance, international pressure and all the solution-finding efforts, urban injustice could not be avoided. Numerous NGOs, independent activists, academics, university students and volunteers sided with the Roma of Sulukule in this process. Together with Neşe Ozan, Pelin Demireli and İlhan Sayın, who continue to show solidarity with the people of Sulukule after its demolition, we have discussed working with an impoverished community victim of urban transformation, the needs of the community, its relations to the state, the state’s view of them, and the shared experiences of production.

Erden Kosova: When did you start to work in Sulukule?

Neşe Ozan: My first visit was in 2007, when the neighborhood was still there and the demolition was just beginning.

Pelin Demireli: I went there first in May 2008 for supervising children’s school studies, and when large-scale demolition was already taking place.

İlhan Sayın: I started to work there after the demolition was completed, on the occasion of the workshops at the school...


Erden Kosova: If I am not mistaken, later on, you got together and started working in a common space.

Neşe Ozan: In April 2010, Sulukule Gönüllüleri Derneği [Sulukule Volunteers Association] was established, and we continued our efforts there. In fact, the last round of demolitions was completed in May 2008. It was almost two years later that the association was established. In the aftermath of the demolition, most inhabitants were still around, scattered outside the demolition area and we couldn’t just take leave. We continued our efforts.

Asena Günal: Do you recall your first visit?

Neşe Ozan: In Sulukule, the turning point was the year 2005. When I had visited in 2007, they had razed a couple of houses to the ground, here and there, as if pulling out teeth from the jaw. I visited the neighborhood when in a gathering a friend of mine active over there said, "We need support; we could use your help if you’ve got the time."

Pelin Demireli: I was participating in the gatherings of the platform and receiving their news via e-mail. They said that they needed more people for supervising children’s studies, and that’s how I joined in. However, I realized that for this you needed to be well-educated in math, Turkish, etc. and decided that it would be better for me not to get involved in it. That’s how we launched the cooking workshop. Nalan (Yırtmaç) was organizing a caricature drawing workshop at the time.
Ilhan Sayin: I was in the clay workshop.

Pelin Demireli: We were already friends, and we soon came to collaborate there.

Nese Ozan: And that’s where I met you guys.

Asena Gunal: As far as I can figure out, prior to your visit you did not have plans for organizing workshops, and the initiative was more or less shaped there, in practice...

Ilhan Sayin: Exactly, things started to take shape during the process.

Pelin Demireli: If you are an outsider participating in those meetings, you cannot immediately have a firm grasp of what’s going on. It was only later that I was truly involved. I was about to give up, saying, I cannot help children with their studies, it’s best if I don’t start at all, maybe I can contribute in some other fashion… Than a man grasped me by the arm and said “Our kids earned enough points from the exam to start the Anatolian1 High School, but they demand a 500 TL tuition fee.” We thought “How come!”, and started thinking together with David (Arribas Cubero) of Sulukule Activists about what we could do. So my first contact was with that family. Then I went to the school to ask about the tuition fee. I collected money from here and there in the last minute, and paid 200 TL, saying that the rest would follow… Then I paid a visit to the Provincial Directorate of National Education: It turned out that the so-called tuition fee was indeed totally illegal. The officials made an immediate phone call and warned the managers of the local school that they had to protect the children in question and even cover their expenses. Well, the 200 TL was gone, yet still we had managed to get four children enrolled —and that without any extra expenses such as uniforms and toolkits. Now, all four of them are in school. I have learned that the school once again asks for tuition fees this year, albeit at a lower rate.

Erden Kosova: I remember you said in a previous conversation that the governorship indeed has certain funds for such socially disadvantaged people; however, these are hard to access, the population does not know about them, they do not demand it or the resources are not channeled in the correct fashion...

Pelin Demireli: Indeed, everything flows from the center to the periphery, rather than the other way around. As such, parents of school children do not even think of visiting the Provincial Directorate of National Education in Sultanahmet. Actually it is not illogical, because you should normally be visiting the local official in your neighborhood or district, rather than making the journey to the city center on every occasion. It is virtually impossible for those on the periphery to access the material or immaterial resources that I have been talking about.

Erden Kosova: In any case, the state mechanism is pretty much programmed to select, eliminate and exclude on a social basis.

Pelin Demireli: Actually, even the banks tend to reject these people. We had secured for them assistance payments. They were supposed to go to the bank and simply draw it, that is, everything was ready and they had right to that money. However, the security guards did not let them in. We had to intervene even in such a simple matter.

Asena Gunal: Now, the municipality that provides assistance is also the one responsible for the demolition of people’s houses, right? It distributes coal, foodstuff, etc., isn’t it?

Nese Ozan: They sometimes give out foodstuff, but the municipality has razed their habitat to the ground and is not concerned about the rest. In other words, it treats Roma exactly the same way it treats other poor people. I think provision of assistance, too, completely depends on political inclinations. For example, in education, there is what you call conditional cash support.

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1 Anatolian High School is the name given to high schools in Turkey that admit students based on their score in a nationwide exam and usually provide education in a foreign language.
People meeting certain criteria can apply for it and receive a monthly payment of 30-35 TL. Nonetheless, we participated in a meeting by the Directorate of National Education and learned that in the eastern and southeastern provinces of Turkey people can receive a monthly assistance of 250 TL per child. The school managers told us about it.

**Asena Günal:** Conditional cash transfer is a World Bank project and is implemented via the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation. For instance, it covers the vaccination costs of children aged between 0-6; for those over 6 years, it pays -if I am not mistaken- 30 TL for each child on condition that they attend school regularly. Could you be talking about some other scheme? Is it the state that pays for it?

**Neşe Ozan:** It is the state that pays, on condition that every single one of the children attends school. In the said region, the Kurdish provinces that is, the schooling rate is low, particularly among girls –this is a fact. We can go on and think that this is a *bona fide* attempt to promote schooling, nevertheless the schooling rate in Istanbul’s Roma neighborhoods is even lower than that in the Kurdish provinces. In Sulukule the rate of illiteracy stands at 31%. Can you imagine that??! It is just ten minutes on foot to the nearest prefecture. So, the question is, why isn’t the incentive in the Kurdish region extended to these districts, too? We woke up to the situation in the National Education meeting I mentioned above and demanded the same assistance for the Roma. As a result, they allocated a monthly payment of 100 TL for 40 children and 150 TL for high school students, for over 8 months.

**Pelin Demireli:** Still short of the 250 TL.

**Asena Günal:** Are the families informed about these?

**Pelin Demireli:** Even the teachers, the school managers, and the officials at the District Directorate of National Education are not informed...

**Neşe Ozan:** Since there are too many people in need of assistance, the general tendency in public agencies is to hush things up. They do inform those in a desperate situation, but if you think about it, how can you decide as to who is really in need and who is not! Teachers do not even visit the houses of the impoverished. They might or might not greet them on the street. They make rather unsound decisions based on hearsay, or on the way somebody is dressed.

**Pelin Demireli:** They make payments according to certain criteria; however, in the case of the Green Card² for example, we see that there are virtually no palpable criteria. You might very well get a Green Card without meeting the requirements, or might not get it even if you fully meet them! It is totally up to the official in charge.

**Neşe Ozan:** In the case of the Green Card and social assistance, they check via the land registry, whether the applicant has any property. Some applicants turn out to be proprietors –but no one asks what kind of a house it is, or what proportion of the real estate belongs to the person in question. For example, one such elder lady from the hood was denied the Green Card, on account of the fact that she had real estate. Indeed she holds 1 in 480 shares of a certain property. It would not even occur to her to write a petition outlining this fact and she cannot do this on her own. We learned about it, met with the deputy governor and resolved the matter. There is no other way. And then, when another similar situation comes up, don’t expect the bureaucracy to solve the problem automatically this time. That is, there is no progress in terms of rights. You will again have to show the same effort for that second case. In other words, we make no headway. Just imagine the amount of time and energy wasted.

**Asena Günal:** I think, although you first went there with certain ideas, you have encountered different needs and you have found yourself playing a different role.

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² Green Cards are issued to those who do not have social security and can prove that they are below a certain poverty line so that they can receive healthcare.
Neşe Ozan: Exactly. We tried to draw on our given education and accumulated knowledge to reach out to the people in need, and share our knowledge with the locals.

Erden Kosova: Then there is the fact that, you are stronger since your position and background is more reliable. Maybe if the people from the neighborhood went to these authorities by themselves, they would not be taken seriously.

Pelin Demireli: That is an important factor, but information is the key. I learned a lot in the Sulukule process, such as what can you achieve at the Directorate of National Education, what are your rights, etc... I mean, even I did not know my rights, none of us really do. Not even a university degree guarantees that. For example rent increase is a concern for all. If you do not know your rights in that matter, anyone including the landowner and lawyers can deceive you. I think that is where efforts concerning children should be concentrated. As you know, children constantly tend to ask “Why?” We suppress those questions and on the way to adulthood we get accustomed to not asking. When someone asserts an idea with confidence, you tend to take it for granted. I had to visit the Directorate of National Education at least five times on behalf of the children, before learning what was exactly required. How could I have known about the tuition fees for vocational high schools? I had to learn that through first-hand experience. If you lack that knowledge, you are obliged to believe what the others say, and cannot question them. In consequence, you get into a bind and waste too much energy, which forces you to give up after some time. How could you expect these people to leave their children alone at home for numerous visits to the Directorate of National Education... Who will pay for the bus fare? They can only go to nearby places on foot...

Erden Kosova: So, whenever a certain need came up, you achieved certain results. I guess than many people must have come to you with further demands as regards contacts with the authorities...

Pelin Demireli: Their needs are endless. Their houses have been demolished and there is a very urgent need for housing. Numerous further needs come up like in a chain reaction. Many children cannot go to the school simply because their address changes constantly and they are not registered. The so-called E-School system still does not recognize certain streets and accordingly the parents living on those streets cannot enroll their children in school. What are they to do? No one cares! You can supposedly access everything online but you simply cannot get your children enrolled in school.

Asena Günal: The tuition fee is a serious disincentive, a factor of exclusion. The Ministry of National Education practically ignores the matter; it does not allocate sufficient funds for schools and the schools are left on their own to meet all expenses from electricity to janitors’ salaries.

Pelin Demireli: Why would the school management ask for money from parents, and not from the central administration?

Asena Günal: In a similar vein, hospitals charge patients rather than asking the Ministry of Health for funds... What we witness is the withdrawal of the state from every area.

İlhan Sayın: In the beginning of every school year, it is explicitly declared that no tuition fee is to be collected, but nothing changes in practice...

Asena Günal: According to one study, school tuition is one significant reason for student absenteeism. Tuition fees and lunch money can be serious deterrents. The Social Policy Forum of Boğaziçi University has suggested that the state should provide free lunch in primary schools of impoverished neighborhoods. Only then can schools become accessible for those children – otherwise the chances are slim.

Erden Kosova: What do the inhabitants think about these? Following the demolition, was there a tendency to not send the children to the school?
Neşe Ozan: I can say that everyone I met is keen to send their children to the school even though they themselves haven’t been able to go to school. However, after their third visit to the National Education they simply go “enough is enough” or when the school keeps asking for more and more money, they are discouraged and send their children to work. But scholarships and conditional cash transfer does motivate them. Otherwise, why would they keep their children from going to the school? I know but a single kid who dropped out of high school, and believe me, he had valid reasons...

Neşe Ozan: He fell in such utter poverty that he had to quit.

Pelin Demireli: That family was cut off from the neighborhood. They were really having a tough time, because they were hemmed in by the blocks of TOKI [Housing Development Administration of Turkey] on one side, and the ancient land walls on the other... The mother was obliged to take care of everything, such that she finally quit urging his son to attend school and preferred him to work. Of course he couldn’t find a proper job. He worked somewhere but didn’t receive his salary, which was a meager 50 TL per week anyway. Indeed it was this kind of material hardship that urged us to start our efforts with women.

Pelin Demireli: Before going on to our work with women, we should also mention the problem of people without identity cards. Issuing identity cards for undocumented individuals was our toughest challenge and we couldn’t succeed. This issue is also closely related to the agenda of the women’s movement. Say, a woman is officially married to a man, but then she has a child with some other man. The newborn is registered under the surname of her official husband, not the biological father.

Erden Kosova: The biological father has to establish paternity, that is...

Pelin Demireli: On the other hand, if the man begets a child from a woman other than her wife, say he is married to Ayşe but has a child with Fatma, than he can establish paternity for Fatma’s newborn! In other words, the man’s marriage poses no problems, but a married woman is finished for good!

Neşe Ozan: She has got no chance. For instance, a woman was married to a foreigner for money, so that the guy could obtain residence permit. Thus neither the man nor the marriage was real. Meanwhile the woman had a relation with another man and gave birth. The woman and the biological father could not establish paternity for the child.

Erden Kosova: Because the official husband has to give his consent in writ, right?

Neşe Ozan: Even that isn’t enough, the man and the foreigner must divorce. The child of a married woman is considered to be the offspring of his official husband.

Pelin Demireli: Plus, even after divorce, the ex-husband is still considered to be the father of a child born in the first 300 days, that is, 9 months and 10 days. Thus a virtually non-existing man is declared the official father. You have got to get in touch with that man. You go to the bar association, hire a lawyer free of charge, file a lawsuit, and then the man must show up and declare that he is not the father to these kids. Even that doesn’t do the trick, you need to produce DNA tests which cost vast sums like 3000-5000 TL... One family has three such kids.

Neşe Ozan: The real, biological father is there saying, these are my children, I have taken care of them -but to no avail. The woman says, I have given birth to them and this man is their true father; the children call them mom and dad; but the state couldn’t care less.

Erden Kosova: How much do these arranged marriages bring to the women?

Neşe Ozan: We know of one such marriage in exchange for 100 dollars; but it is real difficult to annul the marriage. Then there are weird problems related to identity records, caused by
incorrect or deficient data entry. For instance, one woman got married 19 years ago and then divorced. Then she had another marriage which also ended in divorce. She goes to the prefecture to apply for social assistance, and it turns out that her first divorce has not been recorded; she is technically still married to that first guy and is denied assistance money on account that there is someone who can take care of her. The woman cannot be expected to keep the divorce decree for 19 years, to show it on such an occasion. Plus, the divorce was filed in some other city, not Istanbul. Now she has got to go there to find the official resolution and then file a lawsuit again... Simply unbelievable!

Pelin Demireli: Another example: One high school student had lost his identity card and we went to the civil registration office to issue a new ID. However, according to the official residence record, he is living with his father, not his mother. I said "What more do you want? Here is his mother; must the father also come all this way? The mother is here, and the father is registered in the residence record. Will you keep us from getting this boy enrolled in school, due to an omission in your records?"

Asena Günal: In such cases when the Roma themselves demand their rights, they are usually denied, and not even taken seriously. Technically identity and residence records are supposed to bring all such information together in a centralized, electronic database.

Pelin Demireli: But, like Neşe said, even the teachers don’t know where these families live. Since I had taken a couple of children I knew to the school on registration day, the teacher gave me a list saying, "These children did not come, could you go and find them?" So I am the one who is supposed to wander the streets and fetch them.

Asena Günal: You are expected to deliver social services...

Balca Ergener: They talk about centralization, but you are denied a simple ID card; technically you do not exist...

Asena Günal: Did the inhabitants of Sulukule start telling you about their needs on your first visit right away, or was their first reaction “Who are you people?” Did you go through a process of building trust?

Neşe Ozan: We went there and joined an ongoing campaign. Most of the locals did not know what to do and were in a desperate situation. Of course not all of the inhabitants were in the same situation, it isn’t so. Indeed some people profited from the demolition. It would be more correct to see it as a process yielding winners and losers. A small group of landowners with numerous houses benefited handsomely. However it was a true catastrophe for small property owners, for instance retired people who had nothing but their home and pension to fall back on. What is a 65- or 75-year-old supposed to do? Then there was the problem of properties shared among numerous individuals, which triggered rows inside families. And let’s not forget the tenants. It used to be possible there to get a roof above your head for just 50 to 100 TL per month. On the other hand there is a group of jackals, shall we say, who intermediated in real-estate sales and worked for the rentier. They became rich on commission fees. This group immediately came to terms with the municipality officials. That’s what always happens in such cases. They worked together hand in glove! Maybe they already had had connections previous to the demolition.

Indeed Sulukule comprises two separate neighborhoods: Neslişah Sultan and Hatice Sultan. The more impoverished Neslişah Sultan was where the Roma were concentrated. The other neighborhood, closer to Edirnekapı, was mixed and relatively wealthier. It housed a large number of people from Amasya and Siirt, who are not Roma. Judging by how property changed hands in this whole process, one can say that the wealthy dwellers of Hatice Sultan came to absorb the habitat of the poor.
Erden Kosova: When you say “absorb,” do you mean that they caused the poor to lose their property and be pushed out?

Neşe Ozan: Basically, yes. All of this will become clearer in time. I am just sharing with you my personal observations.

Asena Günal: Didn’t Hatice Sultan undergo demolition?

Neşe Ozan: Yes there was demolition in that quarter, too.

Asena Günal: So the people from Siirt and Amasya were not spared.

Neşe Ozan: Of course, their houses were also demolished, but remember, they are a wealthier bunch. And they knew how to grasp the first opportunities to arise... They delved in the process and got hold of other people’s properties.

Pelin Demireli: Property owners are deemed to be right holders. A right holder can purchase someone else’s property at a cheap price in the first six months. The property prices are now 5 times higher. The value of the real estate increased in folds.

Neşe Ozan: What did the poor property owners do? They couldn’t be part of the urban transformation game and sold their properties to the first bidder at a price slightly above that offered by the municipality. Say, the municipality offered 50 and they sold it for 70. Most of these first buyers were the wealthy lot from Hatice Sultan. It is my impression that at least one part of that bunch absorbed the property of the poor through such transactions. I can’t claim that this is true for every case, since I lack the data; but I did observe this general tendency.

Asena Günal: Consequently, the houses were demolished and everyone was sent packing to the TOKİ blocks in Taşoluk.

Neşe Ozan: No, only the tenants had the right to an apartment in Taşoluk, not the property owners.

Asena Günal: I have read that all those sent to the TOKİ blocks returned to around Sulukule in time.

Neşe Ozan: Yes, especially to Karagümruk.

Pelin Demireli: The area is hemmed in by the land walls and the municipal pool, etc. So what’s left is a half-moon shaped lot.

Asena Günal: How could they find a house in the environs? It must have been rather difficult, with the relatively higher rents, I guess?

Neşe Ozan: At least three times that in the old neighborhood. They change houses frequently, sometimes leaving behind rent unpaid.

Pelin Demireli: Taşoluk is a case all by itself. We visited the boarding school over there to see whether the children could be sent there for one semester. It took us five hours to get there, without any stopover. Imagine how far away it is. Besides, there is no life, no job opportunities around –it’s a ghost town. It is in the heart of the forest, on top of a hill, close to the Black Sea, with clean air. May be great if you are retired, but no work to be found anywhere!

İlhan Sayın: Not even a retired person could survive there. It is an isolated hilltop, there is nothing around.
Pelin Demireli: Then there is the financial aspect. The natural gas bill, the doorman’s pay, plus the credit installments for the apartment... It is not as if those houses were granted for free. That’s another prevalent misconception. On the contrary, the houses cost around 100,000 TL. It would be much better for them if they could purchase a house in the old neighborhood, which was cheaper.

Asena Günal: I remember the ceremonies when they were given their proprietorship certificates.

Neşe Ozan: They were indebted.

Erden Kosova: How can they get rid of that debt? Or can they?

Neşe Ozan: They hand over the contract with the bank. Normally, in other TOKİ housing schemes, you can hand over the contract only after a specific period of time, not in the first year, anyhow. However the game had been fixed so well, the run of events was so well planned, that no such clause had been placed in the contracts with the inhabitants of Sulukule –the contract could be transferred as soon as the house was received. Thus, some of them signed the contract, and had to transfer it even before the houses were ready; whereas, some tried to settle in the TOKİ houses a couple of months later... They couldn’t hold on for more than seven or eight months though. Of course, the transfer sum varied according to the date of transfer. The first people to give up transferred their contracts in exchange for a mere 4.000-10.000 TL. Those who tried to stay for longer eventually did so in return for 25.000-30.000. Later on, at least some of them returned to the environs of the neighborhood.

Pelin Demireli: What else could they have done but transfer? Your house has been demolished, and your promised new house is still not finished; some are to be delivered in two years. Where are you supposed to live for two years? Some children tried to make use of the rubbles left from the demolition to construct shabby houses or huts, thinking they might move in there in the future. People were put in such a desperate situation. The urban legend goes “They were given free housing, but they didn’t like it”; even the people living close to the neighborhood believe that. Once again, disinformation comes up as a critical issue.

Neşe Ozan: All these events need to be examined. A second round of profiteering took place in Taşoluk. For instance, who purchased these houses in such a profitable manner? Of course the payment conditions are really tough on the tenants, simply because the household income is very low, they are very poor. However, the payments can be afforded by members of the lower middle classes. A family with an income of, say, 2000 TL can hold on and finish paying the credit installments. It isn’t such a bad investment either. Indeed you get to own a house by paying only 300 TL per month for fifteen years.

Erden Kosova: I think all this process was run by well-organized interest groups. Coming back to the founding of your space... How did you decide to launch activities oriented to women –as a result of the economic hardships faced by those coming back, or were there other urgent needs or issues at play?

Pelin Demireli: We always wanted to do this. When we were working with children we also wanted to get together with the women and unemployed men in the hood. Indeed many inhabitants take up home-based work for a number of companies. However, only after delving in their lives did we come to grasp the intense exploitation of home-based labor.

Asena Günal: What kind of work do they do at home?

Pelin Demireli: Making parcel boxes out of cardboard, attaching evil-eye beads to pins, and other domestic work. It turns out they are paid just 10 TL a day in the parcel business. The whole family works for close to 24 hours, at least 12 hours, and most of the time they don’t even receive the 10 TL. The situation is worse than China, in other words. We didn’t have a well-thought-out plan, it was all pretty much incidental. David was studying handicrafts at Mimar Sinan University.
Wandering around Küçük Ayasofya district in Sultanahmet, he came across a small workshop for hand printed scarves. He went in and talked to the owner, who, seeing our interest in the issue, offered training the women. Then we and the women started to learn the craft gradually. Later we launched production and started considering establishing a workshop.

İlhan Sayın: Veliye Özdemir Martı’s print scarf workshop follows the classical Anatolian tradition. She trained us in the workshop. I joined in later on.

Neşe Ozan: We are much indebted to her.

Pelin Demireli: She dreams that one day one of her students from the workshop will become a master, in the classical print scarf tradition. Well, time will tell.

I wasn’t there when it all began, Neşe and David were. It was they who organized the workshop. The workshop was established jointly with the women, that is, we are all part of the staff. All decisions are taken together, including such issues as the division of labor, pricing, and the distribution of the proceeds. We manufacture printed shawls, bags etc. and the production systems comprises the stages of print, dyeing, ironing and packaging. Prior to setting the final sale price we first determine the pay for every task, say 1.5 TL for prints, 2.5 for dyeing, and 1 TL for ironing. The result is a production line where skilled and unskilled women, and even children can work... All of us, including me, have utter confidence in the system. We are all partners and we are all producers.

Asena Günal: Did you organize the sales network through acquaintances?

Neşe Ozan: We made the best of every opportunity. For example, on New Year’s Eve, the daily Hürriyet sent our shawls as gifts to its clients. The ad agency Rafineri designs products for us as part of its social responsibility efforts. For example they came up with the idea of manufacturing embroidery inspired by the renowned Turkish singer Orhan Gencebay and even held an exhibition of these.

İlhan Sayın: We received help from our friends for the marketing of the shawls or the provision of designs. One friend of ours had provided us pictures of the Ahtamar Church in Van, and I transformed them into graphic designs to be employed on scarves.

Neşe Ozan: Many artists gave us support. İlhan, Nalan, Çağla, and other names from among our friends... The support was considerable.

Many things need to be sorted out: Putting the children in school, issuing Green Cards or IDs, providing doctor’s prescriptions... The main question that bothered us was as follows: Outsiders cannot assume all such responsibilities for the rest of their lives; so, how can we empower these people via solidarity?

Erden Kosova: The creation of self-sufficiency...

Neşe Ozan: I find it crucial. Avoiding the formation of relations of domination, of fraud among them, and encouraging solidarity... Our work with the children was fruitful, simply great; how can we make possible long lasting achievements with the adults, too? We constantly asked ourselves this question while we were there. Our work with the women overlaps with such a pursuit. We can’t know where this effort will end up, maybe it can reach a totally unforeseen level –with a little bit of luck. But if you ask me, what really counts is for every such activity to turn into an experience of democracy –for them and for ourselves. Even at such a small, modest scale, it is crucial. They must become a self-sustaining community, forging ahead with internal solidarity rather than with funds granted from the outside. Once they become self-sustaining, they can establish a school for their children, build an arts center, you name it...
An Interview with Pelin Demireli, Neşe Ozan and İlhan Sayın about Their Solidarity Work with Sulukule Residents
Balca Ergener, Asena Günal, Erden Kosova

We tried to make this clear from the start: Since many people are in need of jobs and the number of jobs is limited, we must give priority to the most needy. But, how shall we decide on who is the most needy? If our decision to this effect gets a positive reception from the community, then it means we are in the right track. Because, they know each other’s situation very well. Such a decision is correct if no one objects. Secondly, it is crucial for them to do each other favors without waiting for anything in return. If we work in the neighborhood long hours, day after day, without any compensation, then they should also be able to do so.

Pelin Demireli: Of course; they are each other’s neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. They need to ask themselves, where is my neighbor gone, is she OK, might she be sick, what happened to her house, etc.? This has become a very urgent need after the demolition of the neighborhood. In the past, such relations used to be tighter.

İlhan Sayın: Last year, the women had stopped visiting each other. Now they have once again started organizing get-togethers.

Neşe Ozan: Or say, we are doing a scarf printing workshop with a group. All of a sudden, another group of women, who are not in the workshop that day, show up to serve us lunch and tea. It is very important that they demonstrate such friendship and solidarity. Thirdly, everything is transparent and everyone knows how much the others make. They have a clear idea of how much they gain and how much the others gain. Fourthly, like Pelin said, we planned the job like a manufacturing line. The women are trained in the workshop and work at home, in groups. Due to the division of labor, every stage of production is dependent on the previous stage, and affects the next one. As such, quality became everybody’s common concern, embraced by the whole community.

Pelin Demireli: For instance, say that 100 shawls proceed in the production line, but it turns out that there are problems in print, knitting, dyeing, etc., which translates into a loss of 20%. Once people observe such problems, they pay more attention to what they do. Because, if someone makes a mistake in 10 out of 100 shawls, those who are next in the production line stand to lose.

Asena Günal: It is very interesting that further problems have not come up in relations concerning money.

Neşe Ozan: Some people were offended, saying "Why didn’t you include me in the print job," "why didn’t you invite me today?" etc., but in general people understood that we see everyone as equals and we don’t favor anyone in particular. Therefore, fortunately, all such problems are avoided for the time being.

Pelin Demireli: Since we have a limited experience of such a work process, it took time and experience to settle certain things. All right, I had started out with total belief and persuasion, but the actual workings had to be sorted out in practice. We share the proceeds without paying anything to intermediaries. We don’t have a boss, an employer, or a coordinator.

Neşe Ozan: In home-based work in general, contractors bring work from a factory; the work passes through the hands of a number of intermediaries before reaching the actual producer. At every stage there are parasites who ask for their cut. The producer is thus left with a very small share of the pie...

Asena Günal: I guess home-based work, especially piecework, continues in the community. Are you doing any work in this respect? The unionization or association of home-based workers is a hot topic these days. It could be good to inform them about these developments.

Neşe Ozan: This is our train of thought: We must stop mourning a demolished neighborhood, and enhance this working group that we have established. A new life is being created here and we have to jointly cater for the needs of this new life. What comes next must be a more participative process, since there is a difference between being present from the start, and joining in later.
There are a number of new participants. I believe that if we can create the conditions for systematic work, our numbers can easily increase from 30 to 50, and why not, even to 100.

Pelin Demireli: What’s more, we are really having a great time together. At first, making money was people’s sole concern, but later on they started having a good time, because, say, there is no designated cigarette break, all you have to do is just get out and puff one. If we start feeling hungry, we stop work and sit down at the table. There are no fixed hours, no card punching...

Neşe Ozan: I believe the breaks are even more important, since that’s when the women share their experiences, talk about husbands, etc.

Asena Günal: Do you have plans for work involving the men, too?

Neşe Ozan: I always talk about working with “adults.” Women need to be given the priority, sure, but it shouldn’t be limited to them—I would like to include the men, too.

Pelin Demireli: For instance, while delivering the shawls the buyers mentioned producing shoes. We talked with a couple of people, but the general reaction was negative. We had visited the Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu workshop to learn about dyeing work. There we saw men doing the dyeing, that is, the local men can join in our work if they feel like it.

Asena Günal: Aren’t they willing to join in? Or is it that you haven’t invited them?

Neşe Ozan: A bit of both, actually. We didn’t have the chance to prepare the ground for that. But I hope that we can try to establish a similar system with men and youth as soon as possible.

Asena Günal: Going back to talking about the husbands during the breaks, I imagine that naturally you discuss problems specific to women, right? I am sure that some of these women are victims of domestic violence. Did any of them stand up for their rights? What you do comes very close to what feminists are trying to do, such as capacity building, establishing solidarity and a democratic mechanism...

Pelin Demireli: Honestly, I learned all about it in Sulukule. Beforehand I wasn’t so close to feminism. Now the conditions oblige me to become a feminist: from the IDs of children to the quality of the home-based work... How can one not take a stance against such problems?

Neşe Ozan: I witnessed a number of cases of violence against women. We directed some of our friends to the Mor Çatî (“Purple Roof” Women’s Shelter Foundation) –we didn’t have an alternative–, but just as it happens in many other cases, the women couldn’t make up their mind and continue, some of them could not even go to the initial meeting. We are really groping our way through darkness, learning through trial and error.

Pelin Demireli: The women are not the sole victims of violence. Children are also frequently beaten up. In such cases, we try to nourish dialogue. Since our focus is on solidarity, we make the women feel that in case they don’t stand up against it and defend themselves, their children and their acquaintances, we can’t do it for them. They are pretty much aware of this. I don’t consider myself as some expert who can alter their behavior. Since I am no expert, I go “This is where I stand, it is great if we can collaborate, if not, too bad.”

Erden Kosova: Could it be that you found it easier to work with children and women in the first place, in terms of communication?

Neşe Ozan: In fact, as we witnessed the trauma experienced by the children, we gradually decided to start working with the children. Then, we came to realize that working with the children naturally entails a communication with the mothers.

Erden Kosova: What did the work with children consist of?
**Neşe Ozan:** In 2007, a number of activities were conducted with the kids in the hood, in houses and coffeehouses. One winter, we brought the children to the workshops at Bilgi University on the weekends. Then we thought about carrying out something in the neighborhood. We took an abandoned shop and jointly established a space for children. The result was something like the house made of confectionary in the Hansel and Gretel story. It was painted in beautiful colors; the children just loved it. There were painting, clay, caricature and rhythm workshops.

**İlhan Sayın:** I wasn’t there. I joined later on, during the activity in the schools.

**Neşe Ozan:** Some reading and writing, then of course geography lessons... The Chamber of Urban Planners paid a visit and delivered a fun lesson in geography; then, an introduction to English – a bit of everything you can think of. Later on, we started utilizing the whole neighborhood as workshop space. During one summer we worked among the ruins of the land walls, or beside a garden wall, or in Sezer’s lot... Then they played open air games in Uncle Asım’s garden, conducted a clay workshop and a kite workshop... Then there was the circus workshop, which lasted one month. I guess it must have been a very interesting experience for the kids. I think we managed to awaken in them the feeling that learning can be great fun.

**Pelin Demirel:** Then İlhan Koman’s sailboat Hulda arrived, and they conducted great workshops with the kids. They were giving guided tours on the boat and holding workshops at the same time. Besides, in such groups the children frequently asked us questions like “Were you successful at school?” Normally the children don’t have similar examples in the neighborhood. Because all children go to school, they are also motivated to do so. They want to do what their peers do and socialize in the same fashion. The kids of the hood share the same experiences, but once they get out of the premises – and they have to – they immediately realize what’s going on. And it is their most natural right; they want to be a part of it.

**Erden Kosova:** Can you work with women and children simultaneously?

**İlhan Sayın:** I work solely with women. Anyhow, we can’t spare more than one or two days; and there is no time left for the children. But we have a reading room in the premises and the children go in and out while their mothers are there.

**Balca Ergener:** And you also help the children in their school studies?

**Pelin Demirel:** We support them in their schoolwork – in our joint space or in the houses. We have a library and the children can borrow, read and return the books.

**Balca Ergener:** I was wondering about Nalan’s Voltron pattern used on the print scarves. Do they like it? I think it’s closely related to the events in the neighborhood in a way, right?

**Nalan Yırtmaç:** There, we used photographs from not Sulukule, but the Fener-Balat district. You must have a better idea of how they see Voltron, as I haven’t worked much among the women.

**Pelin Demirel:** One day, I had taken an old bed sheet to the workshop, saying we could use it to try patterns. They went “Let’s print the Voltron on it.” I guess they like that pattern. All decisions are taken jointly. Say, we decide to produce a table cloth, we decide on the pattern to use and where to place it... Since the capital invested is very limited, we have a margin for trial and error. That’s an advantage.

**Neşe Ozan:** I think that business has a future. They are yet to come up with their own dyeing techniques and designs. This is just the beginning. We just recently started adapting Voltron to serigraphy.

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**Footnote:**

1 A pattern made from an artwork by Nalan Yırtmaç titled “Yıkılan mahallelerin, yerinden edilenlerin gücü adına!” [By the power of demolished neighborhoods and displaced people!] (2010).
İlhan Sayın: Yes, this is only the beginning. The production process is more or less settled, but women can do a lot more. My only worry is, will they be able to continue on their own, once we are not there?

Neşe Ozan: That’s the main concern. They must continue the business and avoid any relations of supremacy. Otherwise, if some start dominating the others, it means that all our efforts were in vain; we might as well forget all that we have worked for.

Erden Kosova: It is not only the ultimate result that counts; tons of experience has accumulated on the way. Even if the designated ideal cannot be achieved, there was a lot experienced during the process. The present scheme may eventually dissolve; still it will leave traces among the people.

Translated from Turkish by Barış Yıldırım
The term Universiade is composed of University and Olympiad. It designates a biennial multi-sport event, the second largest in the world besides the Olympic Games. The 25th Universiade took place in Belgrade, in July 2009. At the same time, Serbia held the presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an international initiative which aims at improving the socioeconomic status and social inclusion of Roma. The Decade of Roma Inclusion consists of European integration organizations, global financial players, NGOs and national governments.

At the temporal conjunction of the Decade and the Universiade, certain phenomena come to the fore, which define reality in Serbia and Europe and can be understood as a paradigmatic example of the discrimination that Roma face today – discrimination that has to be defined as structural and institutionalized as it traverses the social fabric and its institutions so deeply and systematically.

Before we can reflect on these events, we have to make ourselves aware that we cannot refer to human rights that are regulated by international conventions or national constitutions, because there is no such thing as universal human rights guaranteed by the present world order. There is only the power of capital, and related to it, the power of sovereignty that determines who does and who does not have the right to be human and therefore have human rights.

Sport is one of the key elements of national cohesion and national pride in Serbia. Athletes are considered to be international ambassadors of Serbian superiority. Roma, on the other hand, are constructed as a threat to the Serbian national body, and the visibility of their discriminated position endangers the international image of the nation.

From July 2008 to July 2009, Serbia held the Roma Decade’s presidency. During this year, one would expect Serbia to make serious efforts towards improving the discriminated position of Roma and decreasing the effects of a policy of anti-Romaism that has lasted for centuries in the region. The opposite was the case. What we witnessed was the total disregard of the Decade’s objectives and even an intensification of discrimination by Belgrade authorities, citizens and media. At the same time, all public attention was drawn to the international sports event Universiade.

Because of the lack of infrastructure for accommodating the eight thousand international athletes and officials of the Universiade, the city of Belgrade made a deal with a private investor, the multinational consortium Blok 67 Associates. The consortium consists of two companies. The first is Delta Real Estate which is owned by Miroslav Mišković, Serbia’s biggest tycoon, who owes his wealth to his closeness to the former regime of Slobodan Milošević and its war politics. The second is the Hypo Alpe-Adria-Bank, one of the numerous Austrian banks exploiting Eastern European markets. The city provided public land on which the private investors erected a building ensemble called Belville, which is French for “beautiful city.” The buildings were used to accommodate the international guests during the Universiade and its flats, shops and offices were ready to be purchased from the consortium after the end of the event. Belville was

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1 This text is the script of the film with the same title, based on the text “Contention of Anti-Romaism as a Part of the Process of the Decoloniality of Europe” by Ivana Marjanović, published in: Reartikulacija 7, http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=647. For the need of the film, that was produced in 2010, the text was extended, edited and adapted by Eduard Freudmann and Ivana Marjanović. The images presented in this text are taken from the same film (“Uglyville. A Contention of Anti-Romaism in Europe”, Serbia/Austria 2010, 58 min., English).
strategically located next to the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, Delta City, which is also owned by Miroslav Mišković. This proximity brought in extra profit as the international guests of the Universiade mostly spent their leisure time shopping there.

Having lived in Europe for centuries, Roma must be considered as a constitutive part of it. They settled long before the concept of nations was constructed, thus we could ask on which basis they are regarded as something exterior which must be “included.” Therefore, the concept of inclusion, pushed by the Decade of Roma Inclusion, seems paradoxical. But if we take a look at how power functions and to which extent coloniality (Quijano 2007) is embedded in capitalism, we realize that it is not a paradox at all.

Hundreds of thousands of Belgrade citizens reside in so-called “informal settlements,” settlements that are not part of the regulated framework of the government. It is said that they cover 43% of Belgrade’s residential area. Although their legal status is equal, there is a tremendous qualitative difference between informal settlements inhabited by non-Roma and most of informal settlements inhabited by Roma: the Roma settlements are in constant danger of being demolished and have no chance of becoming formalized. These facts, and the poverty level of the inhabitants, turn most informal Roma settlements into slums.

Whenever a slum is about to be demolished, the authorities as well as the media, conceal the history of racism and discrimination. They do not ask why Roma are forced to live in miserable conditions and why the segregation within the social fabric is so extreme. They do not mention how deeply the reasoning of the so-called “majority population” is rooted in racism and how this racism makes it impossible for most Roma to access regular education, have legal jobs, social insurance or proper housing. They do not pose the questions why the average Roma are seven times poorer than the average non-Roma citizens and their life expectancy is half as high, why Roma are forced to dig in garbage bins in order to survive and are dying of diseases that are regarded as eradicated in Europe. They do not mention that Roma in Serbia live in perpetual fear of being exposed to attacks by fascist groups or police violence, that they get beaten to death and their houses are set on fire; nor do they mention that Roma are illegalized by being deprived of basic legal documents and are thereby completely invisibilized when it comes to citizenship and civil rights.

Exploring contemporary racism in Europe, Manuela Bojadžijev explains: “Like anti-Semitism, neo-racism is an ideological practice, in which its specific object is constituted and constructed. This presumption implies a crucial challenge: something that does not exist, such as race, is coming into being through different forms of praxis by individuals, groups, institutions, or states and therefore a reality, a social relation and a policy. The fiction of race is produced by a vast number of narrations: gestures, rituals, images, texts. [...] Ethnicity and race – to take up a metaphor of Adorno – is a rumour, once it is the rumour about the Jews, the other time the rumour about the migrant or the refugee” (Bojadžijev 2006).

To understand the events around the Roma Decade and the Universiade, we must return to the core of capitalist exploitation, because its mechanisms still define human relations. The core of capitalist exploitation is the colonial history of Europe and slavery that was conducted for the sake of capitalist progress and the development of western Europeans. For centuries, colonial history has been and is normalized by European knowledge production, such as schools and university books, encyclopedias, artworks, etc. Colonialism is thus trivialized, and thereby justified, as the modernization of so called backward areas, as spice trade, geographical discoveries or Christianization missions, and not named as cruel exploitation, mass murder, enslavement and expropriation in the name of European progress and modernity.
The history of the construction of the Delta City shopping mall and the athlete’s village Belville began with destruction. Both complexes of buildings were erected onto the ruins of Roma settlements, which had to be erased before starting the construction. First, the inhabitants were expelled from their homes, prior to the construction of the shopping mall. Several of them settled a few hundred meters away. Then, two years later, prior to the construction of Belville, they were expelled from that location as well. Both expulsions did not cause any public attention, nor did anyone protest. Finally, in order to accomplish the total cleansing of the territory around Belville, before the beginning of the Universiade, the authorities decided to erase the last remaining parts of the Roma settlement in spring 2009.

Roma in Serbia are caught in a net of state politics that is spun by the interests of capital and should be termed necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). Its authorities and businessmen acquired their governing knowledge in the 1990s within Milošević’s turbo-fascism (Papić 2002). The remnants of the ideology that ethnic cleansing and genocide was immanent still determine present Serbian politics and its propagators are still represented in the Serbian parliament and government. We have to bear this continuity in mind when we contemplate the conjuction of two governmental initiatives prior to the Universiade. One was a public campaign launched by the Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning. It depicted a popular Serbian sportsman, the notorious nationalist Novak Đoković, swinging a broom like his tennis racket and calling out to his fellow countrymen, “Let’s Clean Serbia!” The other governmental initiative is the necropolitical spatial plan to erase the Roma settlement next to Belville.

While the government plastered Belgrade with the campaign’s giant billboards, the media and politicians prepared the field for the eviction of the settlement by addressing the broad anti-Romaist consensus in Serbia through typical racist propaganda.

The media focused on constructing the contrasting image of a kind of “Uglyville” that allegedly popped up overnight and was growing out of control. It was reported that the organizer of Universiade, the International University Sports Federation, insisted on the removal of the eyesore before the beginning of the event. One thing was made perfectly clear: Roma would not be allowed to pollute the beautiful image of Belgrade and Belville that was supposed to be presented to the world.

Colonial history determines the present. Normalized, it is perpetually maintained in the First capitalist World and outside of it through migration politics, globalization, debt slavery, ongoing confiscation of natural resources and contemporary wars and invasions. The colonial matrix of power and racism, as its main technology, is not only functional outside of Europe but also within it. It subjugates all those who do not fit into the category of so-called “white Christians,” the ones who are constructed as the most worthy.

After the public opinion had been prepared, the operation could start. One early morning in April, several bulldozers guarded by the police began the eviction of the inhabitants of the settlement and destroyed around 40 houses. The demolition came like a bolt out of the blue for the inhabitants. Most of them were even prevented from rescuing their personal belongings from their homes before they were destroyed.

Being constructed as people of color, and assumed to be pagans, Roma were targeted by the colonial matrix of power beginning with the time of European modernity and enlightenment. For centuries, kingdoms, holy empires, totalitarian regimes and democracies of Europe issued great many decrees and laws to torture, banish, enslave, expel and exterminate them. Examples are numerous from the 16th century on, from England, Romania and Nazi Germany to contemporary Europe. Roma were slaves of Christian monasteries and other feudal rulers; they were banished from many countries; they were marked with branding irons; they were forbidden to use their language or marry among each other; children were abducted from their parents to be brought up in Catholic families in the Habsburg Empire; they were massively exterminated by the Nazis...
throughout Europe; Roma women were coercively sterilized until the 1980s in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Sweden, Norway, with recent cases having been made public in the Czech Republic. In collaboration with EU candidates, as part of their application process, Germany has been expelling Roma and deporting them to their countries of origin. In Italy, a state of exception was proclaimed in order to fingerprint entire Roma communities, including minors (Jeremić/Rädle 2009; Rights Groups Demand European Commission Clarify Its Position on Fingerprinting Roma in Italy 2008). Roma have recently been exposed to pogroms, murder and expulsion all over Europe: in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia and Slovakia, as well as in other countries (Petrova 2004; UN Presses Czech Republic on Coercive Sterilisation of Romani Women 2006; Rakić-Vodinelić/Gajin 2009; Ostojić 2006; Snapshots from around Europe. Report reveals that Romani women were sterilized against their will in Sweden 1997).

As a reaction to the demolition of the settlement, something exceptional happened. A series of public protests were organized in the streets of Belgrade. They were initiated by the inhabitants and joined by Roma representatives, NGOs, activists, students, independent cultural workers, artists and other citizens in solidarity.

One has to bear in mind that Roma living in slums are extremely deceived, blackmailed, silenced and frightened by authorities, and thus they hardly ever formulate their demands publicly. Being at the very bottom of society, what is just something for others, is everything for them. They have the most to lose and – as personal and historical experience has taught them – the least to win. The protests against the demolition have shown that this is not the ultimate rule. They mark one of the important moments when Roma resisted and gained something.

The protests attracted the attention of international humanitarian organizations and put public pressure on the city decision-makers to an extent that they had to momentarily interrupt what they had started: the total erasure of the settlement. Nevertheless, the mayor insisted on the demolition of the settlement, because he said it would endanger the growth of Belgrade. As a concession to the protests, the city authorities offered what they called a “temporary alternative accommodation” to some of the now homeless Roma by installing a few modified freight containers in a village near Belgrade. This village is well-known, because a Roma teenager was killed there two years ago. As soon as the news spread, the villagers started to protest against their potential new neighbors; a reaction that is a common practice in Belgrade whenever it is rumored that Roma should be relocated to a certain neighborhood. The villagers burnt down one of the containers and announced that they would burn down more with the Roma inhabitants inside, in case they dare move in.

The mayor expressed his understanding of the behavior of the villagers and announced that all inhabitants who do not hold a residential registration in Belgrade have to return to their home towns; the city would pay for their one-way tickets. Finally, in order to stop the protests, one of the organizers was arrested. He was accused of having rented houses in the settlement; a “delinquency” that no one had ever heard of before.

The constellation of the Romani Decade consists of proactive and reactive players. The proactive ones are the main powers of contemporary capitalism and those that maintain its status quo: the World Bank, the Council of Europe and its Development Bank, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Open Society Institute and the United Nations Development Program as well as other UN sub-organizations. These agencies’ engagement in globalization processes and in the European colonial project of the past and the present, warn us against being naïve and believing that the Decade is about the elimination of discrimination and poverty of Roma (Bello 2005). It rather gives us information about the functionality of the colonial matrix of power in the context of the European Union and global capitalism.
The events at the conjunction of the Roma Decade and the Universiade show that it is not discrimination that is unacceptable. On the contrary, it is needed, because it sustains the capitalist system. What is unacceptable is the visibility of discrimination, because it disturbs those who are supposed to believe in the justness of the system and bears the potential to make them realize that Belgrade’s slums result from inequality and exploitation and not from discrimination as the widespread racist stereotype of Roma, who are poor because it “suits their nature,” wants to make them believe. The visibility of discrimination decreases the value of the investors’ real estate, and it decreases the value that Belgrade gains by organizing the Universiade. It obstructs the pleasant panoramic view and reminds one too much of the Third World rather than of Western Europe, which is the object of fixation of every Serbian citizen. The visibility of discrimination interferes with the athlete’s quality of life and that of the white Serbian-Orthodox family who bought the appealing flat from a Serbian war profiteer and his Austrian capitalist partners. All in all, it is that very visibility that endangers Belgrade’s growth.

The reactive players of the Decade are Eastern European countries that either recently joined the EU or are about to join in the near future. One could think that the absence of Western European countries results from the fact that Roma are not discriminated there, and thus no need for such a program exists. As we know that this is not the case it becomes clear that the Decade is in fact about the inclusion of the new and future EU countries and serves as a tool that enables Europe to ensure Roma’s position in the colonial matrix of power. The ideology behind it is a neoliberal capitalist ideology rooted in its colonial past, which uses racism as a tool for exploitation. Its goal is not to bring pluriversality of human relations, but to enforce the inclusion of Roma in the capitalist system of exploitation. Inclusion, thus, does not mean that Roma will have equal rights, but it means that they will be exploited in a more subtle and low-key way as is the case in Western EU countries.

As the Universiade approached, it turned out that the total eradication of the settlement would not be possible due to the protests, so the sovereign power reorganized its strategy. Two weeks before the opening of the Universiade, a metal fence was erected around the settlement, justified by referring to the security measures for the event. In order to invisibilize the settlement, a banner was installed onto the fence, which was guarded by security staff and police. The inhabitants were blocked from leaving the settlement and were threatened with arrest if they were to be seen in the streets around Belville, particularly if caught searching for secondary materials in trash cans. Therefore, not only was their freedom of movement withdrawn, but they were deprived of their existential basis by being prevented from carrying out regular daily work in the streets of Belgrade. Surprisingly, the Delta City shopping mall was not fenced in for security reasons, commodities were in circulation and profit was accumulated without any barriers.

Giorgio Agamben refers to the camp as the biopolitical paradigm of modernity. He claims: “To an order without localization (which is the state of exception, in which law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a dislocating localization that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken. The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the zones d’attentes of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities” (Agamben 1998).

This situation caused actions by citizens in solidarity, publicly demanding that the fence had to be removed. An international petition and a web campaign were launched, unofficial and official gatherings, workshops and food preparations were organized in the settlement and activities were initiated that aimed to inform the athletes, international delegations and journalists that what was going on behind the so-called “security fence” was not a film set, as the Universiade’s
organizers wanted to make them believe. A press conference that was organized in the settlement pressured the authorities so they removed the banner and thereby re-visibilized the settlement. The solidarity actions form a crucial element of the process of the decolonization of knowledge that the activists started to undergo, which represents the dismantling of internalized colonialism, as well as detecting one’s own position in the colonial matrix of power. Only when their knowledge is decolonized, can subjects delink from the colonial matrix of power.

The living conditions of Roma in slums, their reduced life expectancy, their constant historical and contemporary exposure to violence and death, their illegalization through deprivation of citizenship, the fact that they can be expelled from their homes at any moment, have to be understood in relation to the concept of necropolitics: exposed to the power of death and made invisible when it is about civil rights, while on the other hand, visible when it is about exploitation and the need for the cheapest labor force.

Achille Mbembe argues that the notion of biopower is insufficient in accounting for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Therefore, he introduced the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death worlds. “Those are new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe, 2003).

To understand in which continuity the recent concept of inclusion, proposed by the Roma Decade, is embedded, we have to take into consideration that Roma are confronted with two categories of strategies that were conceived for dealing with them as the othered: incorporation and excorporation. Incorporation has to be understood in the literal sense of including an exterior element in an already conceptualized corpus. Excorporation refers to the exclusion of an element that is considered to be interior to that corpus, respectively one that is really or assumedly in the process of incorporation. At first, incorporation and excorporation may appear antagonistic, but in fact they relate to one another in continuity and complementation.

Excorporative strategies have been practiced since the first day Roma have lived in Europe to this very day and range from expulsion to existential extermination. Incorporative strategies can be traced back to the era of enlightenment when forced assimilation was first imposed. However, their emergence cannot be understood as a paradigmatic shift. First of all, both strategies are coexistent, those who rejected incorporation through assimilation were excorporated through expulsion or extermination. Secondly, assimilation itself has to be considered as both, an incorporative as well as an excorporative strategy, because its mechanism of incorporation requires the excorporative act of exterminating all differences of the subjected individual. Finally, as the Nuremberg Laws and Shoah evidenced, assimilation does not protect the subjected individual from existential extermination.

Marina Gržinić proposes to think about necropolitics as the re-politicization of biopolitics and its genealogy. She claims that necropolitics, primarily envisioned for Africa and the Third World, develops a different biopolitics and that is taking place in the First capitalist World more and more. “With this proposed ‘transformation’ of biopolitics into necropolitics,” she states, “I am NOT asking to de-link biopolitics from necropolitics, but to understand that the maximization of exploitation and expropriation of life, labour, and ‘humanity’ is put forward here and now by capital asks for the reformulation, or, better to say, re-politicization of biopolitics!” (Gržinić 2009).

Although assimilation is still the most practiced strategy the othered are subjected to, additional incorporative strategies have meanwhile been conceived, such as integration or inclusion. Contrary to assimilation, integration does not require the total abandonment of all differences.
and accepts a certain extent of heterogeneity of a social group. At the same time, it demands the structural, cultural, social and identity incorporation of the othered. The strategy of inclusion departs from the assumption that a certain heterogeneity marks normality. It does not denominate the othered as an other, but pretends to include it in a participatory manner. The fact that both, integration as well as inclusion, are found in the pedagogical concepts of integrative pedagogy and inclusive pedagogy is symptomatic for the way the othered are perceived by dominant society: As an emotional infantilized object that is not able to speak rationally for itself, but has to be domesticated, civilized and educated by the rational constant of the dominant society.

Describing assimilation through the internalization of coloniality, Jelena Savić explains that in order to be part of society one has to be “normal” – meaning, having white skin and being rich. Those who cannot color their skin have no other choice than “to become invisible in the mass, to look as white and rich as possible, to be educated, employed . . . not to be exposed in any way . . . not to declare yourself as Rom or Romni, to insist as little as possible on your difference. . . not to look as a Rom or Romni, not to speak Romani language in public space, not to walk with a group of greater number of ‘evident’ Roma,” but instead “to be silent and laugh at jokes about stupid Roma men and venal Roma women, to pretend that you don’t see poor Roma in the streets nor the rude treatment of female Roma beggars with babies, to agree on the proposition that everybody can succeed only due to his/her own work, that Roma like to live like that, on the street, and that you have nothing to do with this Roma . . .” (Savić 2009).

Unlike assimilation that exterminates any difference, the strategy of inclusion accepts difference to a certain extent: as long as it can be regulated and controlled to prevent the obstruction and endangerment of the growth of capital. Exoticized Roma music is welcome, because it fertilizes consumerism. Roma women are coercively sterilized, because their children demographically endanger the body of the nation and the capitalist order.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion must be seen in relation to EU security politics: Roma should be prevented from migrating from poorer Eastern European countries to richer Western European countries. Thus, the participating countries are required to improve the living conditions of Roma, thereby securing that Roma stay where they are. The recent case of hundred Roma migrating from Romania caused immense panic in Germany. After being expelled from a park in Berlin, they were paid money to return to Romania (Fuchs/Marschall 2009)! This panic actually results from the fear that a growing number of Roma could reveal anti-Romaism in Germany, the country in which anti-Romaism had been exercised in its most extreme form. After Porajmos, the genocide of Roma people conducted in the Third Reich, it had been switched to a kind of slumber mode, due to the lack of its target objects. The re-visibilization of Germany’s latent anti-Romaism would disprove the Western European cultural-racist conviction of being less racist and thereby more civilized than Eastern Europeans.

In the end, we can conclude that the concept of incorporation and its strategy of inclusion are ideological concepts targeting the production, reproduction and maintenance of hierarchies and relations of domination, because they do not depart from the equality of people, but from their inequality. This means that they take an ideological division that was invented and maintained by capitalism for granted. Based on this, however, a setting where one is part of the corpus “per se” or by “nature,” whereas the other has to be incorporated, cannot lead to any promising anti-discriminatory politics. The only way to eliminate discrimination is to eliminate the system that produces it.
References


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Antiziganism and Class Racism in Europe
Vladan Jeremić, Rena Rädle

The Roma have a long history of migrations that repeatedly brought repression to their people over the centuries. European countries began introducing laws against migrating peoples (i.e. nomads, travelers) in the mid-fifteenth century. Migrants were perceived as an unsettling factor, even as threatening and invading groups that jeopardized the safety of the majority populations. Without a registered identity, many Roma remain completely isolated as citizens in the societies on whose territories they live. Being constantly relocated and repopulated, many have been migrants over the centuries; even within the boundaries of the countries whose citizenship they hold. Apart from accusations, disappointments and misunderstandings in their relations with the majority population, we are still facing deep discrimination against Roma, which has its roots not only in ethnic and cultural racism or anti-Roma sentiment, but poverty and nomadism are threatening factors for all of those who live in social systems based on the system of ownership, accumulation of goods and territorialism. Western policies have tried for centuries to include the poor in the system of social protection, or to get rid of them: to banish or eliminate them. Roma are, for the most part, an ethnic class characterized by extreme poverty that can present an obstacle to national or European integration. It appears that the relation between Roma and non-Roma is, first and foremost, defined by the borderline between wealth and extreme poverty.

The situation of Roma in EU member states and in countries populated to a greater extent by Roma, such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav republics (especially Macedonia and Serbia) is precarious. One of the basic problems facing a Roma man or a woman is the issue of belonging to a marginalized social class that is exposed to drastic pauperization, in addition to the problem of the national identity itself—the fact of being Roma.

Various forms of ethnic and class racism against Roma are appearing throughout Europe. In May 2008 in Naples, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s government implemented a state of emergency regarding nomad settlements and communities on the territory of several regions in order to legitimize the fingerprinting of the Roma population. This law is very reminiscent of anti-Roma laws dating from the Middle Ages, and of the darkest periods of European history in the 20th century. The general situation of migrants in Italy is difficult and the violent activities undertaken by the fascist right targeting Roma have reached a peak in the burning of entire settlements, the destruction of property, and the forceful eviction of Roma communities to locations outside certain metropolitan areas in Italy. The most drastic examples of this kind have happened in Livorno, Rome, Naples and Milan since 2006 to today.

Similarly in Finland, a settlement built by Roma emigrating from Romania to Helsinki in search of a better future was destroyed. During our visit to Helsinki in March 2009, we took part in a public discussion organized on the occasion of an exhibition held in the Helsinki City Museum about the history and culture of Roma, titled Watch out Gypsies: The History of a Misunderstanding. This visit further convinced us that impoverished Roma are being actively prevented in their attempts to migrate.

Strict EU laws prevent Roma from living or working in alternative ways and thus they are not seen as “fitting in” with the EU reality. The most harrowing images, however, come from Hungary, where an actual hunt on Roma communities has been ongoing since the end of 2008. The killing of Roma families by neo-Nazi groups is an example of the worst kind of racist persecution of people in the middle of Europe. Whether they live in EU or non-EU countries, Roma are subject to a deep and unexamined Europe-wide hatred. It is symptomatic that direct violence against Roma is most intense in places where a great gap exists between those profiting from neoliberal reforms and a local population on the verge of poverty.

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2 Security a la Italiana: Fingerprinting, Extreme Violence and Harassment of Roma in Italy, Report, European Roma Rights Centre and others; 2008, Source: www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications.php
3 Source: http://www.hiap.fi/index.php?page=304&ab=0&event=137
4 Source: www.hel.fi/wps/portal/Kaupunginmuseo_en/Artikkeli_en?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=;Museo/en/museum+news/news+and+events/leave+your+roma+prejudices+behind
European Slums

UN-Habitat’s Global Report distinguishes six different “cities” with specified class actors and economic functions: there is the luxury city, the gentrified city with advanced services, the suburban city of direct production, the city of unskilled workers, and finally the city of permanently unemployed “underclass” or “ghetto poor” with income based on marginal or illegal activity and direct street-level exploitation. This last city is the informal city or city of illegality. The poorest Roma settlements in Serbia and throughout Europe can be qualified as slum cities typically associated with the global South. The UN-Habitat’s Global Report on Human Settlements from 2003 defines slums as settlements with poor access to drinking water, sanitation and other infrastructure; with poor housing quality, over crowding and inhabitants with uncertain residential status. These characteristics provided by UN-Habitat can be applied to more than a hundred Roma settlements in Belgrade. The composition of the population and their status in Belgrade’s slums are diverse. There are cases of Roma who have managed to secure registered residences in Belgrade or who are indigenous. There are also the Roma refugees from Kosovo who may represent between 20-40% of the population in a given settlement in Belgrade. A number of inhabitants are economic migrants from southern Serbia, from places where no economic existence is possible. A large number of inhabitants are Roma asylum seekers from Western European countries and the EU, who were deported back to Serbia by the Readmission Agreement. A number of inhabitants in these settlements are not of Roma descent, just the poorest of the poor, refugees or the socially excluded.

The current stratification of European societies which is particularly evident in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, may cause social unrest in which Roma might play an important role as a trans-national ethnic group. Non-controlled Roma migration to countries of Western Europe is not desirable, even though the borders are open. It is not surprising that there is a strategy to “solve the Roma issue” in these countries. The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 gathers together the countries of Central and South Eastern Europe, international and non-governmental organizations (like the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, United Nations Development Program, the Council of Europe, Council of Europe Development Bank) and Roma civic associations. The objective is to improve the status of Roma and “close unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society.” In addition to areas of major concern (housing, education, employment, and health), special attention is given to the elimination of discrimination, the reduction of poverty and the improvement of the position of Roma women. Including representatives of Roma communities in all processes is the basic principle. The policy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lend money to countries which meet the requirement to privatize territory, real estate and resources brought devastation to local economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1980s, and it lead to the elimination of the middle classes and “slumization” of entire regions. The Decade of Roma Inclusion is intended to lead to the nominal equality of Roma communities in the countries participating in the Decade, in order to legitimize their deportation from EU countries back into to their “native countries.” At the same time, the elite that carried out the inclusion by controlling financial and other aid is being supported. This is counterproductive to the development of Roma communities as self-organized political subjects.

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6 The challenge of slums - Global report on human settlements 2003, UN Habitat; Source: http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/GRHS.2003.3.pdf (website is currently not in function)
7 Some estimates put the number of Roma in Serbia at 600,000 although the 2002 census only registered 102,193 people as Roma. The number and condition of Roma children and young people can be best understood from the following data: “According to the UNICEF report on the condition of Roma children in the Republic of Serbia (2006), almost 70% of Roma children are poor and over 60% of Roma households with children live below poverty line. Children are the most imperiled, living outside of cities in households with several children. Over 4/5 of indigent Roma children live in families in which adult members do not have basic education.” Cf. Government of Serbia, “Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status in the Republic of Serbia” - Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 55/05, 71/05 - Correction, 101/07 and 65/08), Belgrade, April 9, 2009; Source: www.humanrights.gov.yu/dokumenti/roma/strategija_april_09.pdf
8 Source: www.romadecade.org/
Under the Bridge - Belgrade: Participatory Happening

While traveling through Belgrade, driving along the E–75 international highway and crossing the Gazela bridge that connects central Belgrade with New Belgrade, we came across the poverty-stricken Roma settlement in the area of Staro Sajmište. The first time we met people living under the Gazela bridge was during the gathering of artists and activists working on the project Under the Bridge Belgrade, which we organized together with our colleague Alexander Nikolić in December 2004. This gathering turned into a great happening that lasted eight hours, during which the settlement’s residents, both Roma and other refugees, invited all those present to light a fire and stay with them at the settlement.

One of the project’s participants, David Rych, wrote a piece about our gathering under the Gazela bridge and stated that: “The ‘artist like Mother Teresa’ can only be a misconception, unless the quest for relevant support will necessarily lead to approved models of inclusive community work, something that would require time and commitment with regard to every single case. There are a number of issues that have been clearly addressed by representatives of the Roma community mentioned above. An additional objective of entering unfamiliar hardship for the sake of cultural work could be to translate these transitions into a more comprehensible image of the ‘real.’ Clearly, we’ll have to acknowledge the incompatibility of reality lived by individuals and groups on opposite synapses of our societies, nations or other categories of distinction and dissolve the reality of ‘the Other’ as one more component of a mutually shared entity and investigate and visualize the mechanisms of exclusion the dominate system applies with regard to marginalized positions only. Some of the visitors might have been introduced to a local situation in order to initiate contributions to that very common reality. A few others might continue similar work in different locations. And, of course, some might never come back. Not there, not elsewhere where the most ‘subaltern’ live. Sometimes the frontier is your doorstep...”

During the following few years, several artists continued their activism with the community under the Gazela bridge, contributing either reports or artistic interventions. Several Vienna-based artists are currently publishing a tourist guide for the Gazela settlement.

Belgrade authorities have been trying to evict the inhabitants of Gazela and several other Roma settlements for some time now. Deportation and relocation is, however, not triggered by the community’s miserable living conditions or the settlements’ or the Roma’s class status, but allegedly by planned infrastructure works and the current reconstruction of Gazela Bridge. In 2005, Belgrade City Hall proposed an idea to relocate the Roma living in the Gazela settlements and to move them to the Dr. Ivan Ribar neighborhood in New Belgrade, which triggered protests by the locals. Although this protest represented open hostility toward Roma, New Belgrade residents claimed that the issue was not racism, but fear of filth and a decrease in real estate prices: “We have nothing against Roma, but we fear that their customs and culture will not fit in the city environment,” said one of the residents. “There will be problems with hygiene. How will any of us sell their apartment if there is such a settlement right next to us?” A similar protest happened in September 2008, when the residents of the Belgrade suburban neighborhood of Ovča tried to block initial work on a new Roma settlement there. “We have nothing against Roma, we would react the same way if some other ethnic minority were to inhabit Ovča. The problem is the fact that the relocation of 130 Roma families would significantly alter the national structure of this population. This will have a catastrophic effect on our tradition and way of life” – explained one of the Organization Committee members who is a member of the Romanian ethnic minority.

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9 David Rych, “Under the Bridge – A derivé to a topos of social relevance or... ‘a visit to the zoo’?” Under the Bridge Beograd, Biro for Culture and Communication, Novi Sad, 2005, p. 34-37.
10 Tanja Ostojić, Open Studio of New Belgrade Chronicle, 2007; Source: www.tanjaostovic.blogspot.com
11 Lorenz Aggermann, Eduard Freudmann, Can Gülçü, Beograd Gazela Reiseführer in eine Elendssiedlung, Drava Verlag, Klagenfurt, 2008
13 Source: www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=09&dd=24&nav_id=320375&nav_category=12
New Belgrade’s Belville: From Participation to Direct Action

Belville is the name of a new residential complex in New Belgrade, built by “Bloq 67 Associates Ltd” – a company founded by Delta Real Estate (owned by Miroslav Mišković, Serbia’s richest tycoon) and Hypo-Alpe Adria Bank.14 Their aim was to build business offices and apartments for athletes taking part in the Summer University Games in June 2009 in Belgrade, while after the Games, the apartments are going to be handed to new, predefined owners.

On April the 3rd 2009, in a sudden action with mechanical-diggers, forty houses were demolished in a Roma settlement that had begun taking shape during the last five years in a location near Belville. The decision to demolish the Roma houses was made by Belgrade’s Secretariat for Inspections. City Mayor, Dragan Đilas, said on this issue: “Whoever is illegally occupying a part of city land in places planned for infrastructure facilities cannot stay there. It has nothing to do with the fact that the people in question are Roma or some other ethnicity. A few hundred people cannot stop the development of Belgrade, and two million people living in Belgrade certainly won’t be hostages to anyone. This practice will continue to be implemented by the City Authority in the future. Simply, there are no other solutions.”15

The police assisted in the demolition of the settlement by securing the diggers, without giving residents the time to rescue their belongings. Several inhabitants had to be practically drawn out of the ruins at the very moment when one digger was clearing the area. As we were close by, we joined our neighbors from the very beginning of this action in Block 67. As an act of protest against the demolition of homes, Jurija Gagarina Street was blocked around noon that day. The settlement’s inhabitants then organized another protest in front of the Belgrade City Hall. No one addressed the displaced Roma residents from Block 67 who gathered in front of the Belgrade City Hall that evening. The protest continued the following day. The citizens’ protests were soon joined by several NGOs. Pushed by UNHCR, the WHO and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the Belgrade city authorities tried to calm the issue. The “solution” was to set up residential containers in the suburban neighborhood Boljevci that very night. The bureaucratic apparatus that was set in motion to “solve” this issue in the field soon proved to be non-functional. We learned that a Roma teenage boy had been killed several years ago in Boljevci. So there is a logical question: why was it decided that the containers should be placed in this very village? Boljevci residents blocked roads demanding the removal of residential containers for Roma: “If you don’t remove them, we will burn down both the containers and those trying to move in them,” one person from Boljevci said. The protests by Boljevci residents had violent moments: attempts were made to set fire to the residential containers and thus to prevent Roma from moving into these temporary facilities. The incident resembled an open racist revolt. Mayor Đilas said: “I can understand the fear of people from Boljevci, because they were to have as neighbors people who, in part, do not even have personal ID cards. It is not known who they are,” and added “all those who do not have a residence in Belgrade must go back to the places they came from. It is legally right, it is the basis for everything, and there will be no negotiations with the OEBS, UNHCR, or NGOs on this issue.”16 So, as far as Đilas was concerned, the Roma issue was “solved” by placing three Roma mothers with children into containers in Mirijevo, near the old Roma settlement. The majority of the people still have no alternative solution. Although Serbia is currently presiding over the “Roma Decade” in 2009, city authorities didn’t have a plan for alternative housing at the moment the houses were demolished. It took three protests and pressure from international organizations to stop the media lynch of the Roma and to try to find a solution for alternative housing.

Our documentary Belville was filmed during the ten days when these events happened, and we took part in them directly as active participants fighting for the rights of our neighbors. The film

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14 Source: [www.belville.rs/kosmorni.jsp](http://www.belville.rs/kosmorni.jsp)
15 Borba, April 3, 2009; Source: [www.borba.rs/content/view/4472/](http://www.borba.rs/content/view/4472/)
16 YUCOM, Regards from Šaban Bajramović, Peščanik; Source: [www.pescanik.net/content/view/2970/61](http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/2970/61)
was recorded spontaneously while things were evolving over a period of several days and nights. In the evenings we would review the material together; people could see themselves and things they hadn’t been part of during the day; we would listen again to the statements of politicians and UN-officials; a raw cut would immediately be on the internet. It was an immense motivation for the people that there was a camera documenting what was going on. Through the montage the density of the events was reduced and brought into a shape that allowed for an understanding and analysis of the events. The video was first publicly viewed in the Belville settlement. The process of recording was a process of witnessing, self-reflection and learning with the community. The video Belville is conceived as a didactic tool. It is screened in educational workshops, conferences dealing with the issues of Roma rights and European fascism, in campaigns for Roma refugees’ rights to stay in their country of asylum and, last but not least, at art exhibitions. The documentary was premiered in the Cultural Centre of Serbia in Paris where it was included at the last moment in our exhibition previously called Psychogeographic Research. On 27th of May 2009, the film was shown at the settlement in Blok 67.

In our view, political art has to communicate its message at various levels. Its activity and reception cannot be confined to the privileged aesthetic gaze and the exclusive context of contemporary art. Formalism and references to aesthetic norms reassure the viewers in their self-perception and turn the artwork into just another lollypop in the candy store. Art is more than that; it can develop methods for putting theory into practice. The specific potential of art is based on the fact that it can simultaneously practice, analyze and criticize a method or concept. But, art does not take place in a laboratory situation. The artist must be conscious of the consequences, implications and circumstances of production and consumption. Needless to say, the production of art is subjected to the same relations of exploitation as other forms of production in capitalist society. But this doesn’t mean that we are condemned to reproduce the existing conditions in our society. Our task is to use artistic production against the matrix of exploitation and in this way to turn the situation upside down.


This version of the text is stemming from two resources: text Antiziganism and Class Racism in Europe and text Power Relations in a Nutshell: On the Video Works Belville and Gazela written by Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle and published in the notebook of the seminar To Think (Film) Politically: Art and Activism Between Representation and Direct Action, edited by Jelena Vesić and published by DelVē/Institute for Duration, Location and Variables in Zagreb in 2010, pp. 50-67. The updated version of the text is edited by Jelena Vesić in collaboration with the writers Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle.
Look for New Partisans: A Conversation with the Authors of the Video ‘Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story’
Jelena Vesić

Conversation with the authors of the video Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story where we discuss contemporary anti-fascist struggles, particularist politics and historical consciousness through the issue of the politization of art by means of language, form, representation, participation and direct action

Jelena Vesić: Your new video Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story is an analysis of a concrete situation. It opens with the representation of Belgrade city government’s violence against the Roma population living in the vicinity of the luxurious Belville district, from where they were forcefully exiled on the occasion of the University Games in the summer of 2009. At the same time, the work addresses a more universal political issue, that is the severe polarization of various existing positions into oppressors and the oppressed: in this case, the city government, war profiteers and business tycoons vs. the disadvantaged – workers, NGO activists, war invalids and minority groups. You also established something that we could call “the horizon of historical consciousness,” represented here by a choir of dead Partisans who comment on the political dialogue between the oppressors and the oppressed. The main political message is based on the idea of class struggle, and is proclaimed by the Partisan choir addressing the oppressed. In short, they state that it is necessary to unite in a collective struggle as opposed to the current strategy of identitarian politics. How did you decide to portray precisely this political moment and represent it through precisely these social characters?

Dmitry Vilensky: For us, it was very challenging to work with the realities of Belgrade’s social and political life. We were lucky to have enough time to research the situation with the help of friends and local experts. We met Vladan and Rena and started the dialogue. Chto Delat had already developed a certain way of working in our first “songspiel” Perestroika. The Victory over the Coup and we wanted to develop this further by including the element of dance. We dreamt of making a real musical... Coincidently, we took the case of the Roma settlement as a departure point and it proved to be a very important case as it was coupled with such a global event, the World University Games. The decisive point, however, was that Vladan and Rena took an active part in the protest campaign defending the rights of Roma settlers and we took this event as a starting point in the construction of the script, which was based on the principle of typicality. Why typicality? –we can ask and simultaneously offer some arguments. The realist approach, which we investigate in our work, is achieved not through the depiction of the concrete and particular (which is the case in mainstream contemporary art, where identity politics is hegemonic in representation), but the typical. As Engels famously put it, realism’s principal task is “the truthful reproduction of typical characters in typical circumstances”1. The typicalist approach allows us to think and embody the problematics of contemporary society as an integral system rife with contradiction and in need of transformation. So, we constructed fictional characters, which from our point of view are representative of the general antagonistic struggle in any society. At the same time, we suggested analyzing the complex problems that constitute the pitfalls and limits of these individual and identitary struggles. We very much respect these struggles and consider them to be very important, but we also think that there is an urgent need to reconsider them as new forms of class struggle. In our scenario, the group constructed of differently oppressed people is confronted with the exaggeratedly “old-fashioned” rhetoric of the dead Partisans. Through this confrontation, we have tried to demonstrate how hard, almost impossible, it is to articulate and come up with a new universal language, which is able to fuse together different forms of “minoritarian” politics. Like Perestroika, this work too concerns the difficulties of developing a common language and solidarity. At the same time, I hope that it does not imply political melancholy as the ultimate state of things but tries to think further ahead and to open up new political horizons –the last address of the choir is: “Close your ranks, comrades! Look for the new partisans!” It is a direct agitation and proposal for the continuation of the militant struggle for emancipation.

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Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: Partisan Songspiel... deals with the moment in which the cannibalization of a society takes place. During the last two decades, our society existed as an isolated camp where everyday life was monopolized by corrupted politicians and ruthless tycoons. After the catastrophe of the wars in the ex-Yugoslav countries, which unfolded in the manner of mutual extermination, there followed the economic polarization and discrimination against a large part of the population. It was the Roma that were most gravely affected by this. Many of them ended up homeless and deprived of any state protection. The scenario of Partisan Songspiel... aims to present the most extreme positions in post-war and post-transitional Serbian society and to present them in their typicality. Two extremes, the oppressors and the oppressed, define the current composition of society as a whole and indirectly describe the bleakest everyday lives of the majority of people. Partisan Songspiel... takes place in an old factory that looks like a post-Fordist slum. In his essay “Planet of Slums,” Mike Davis argues that national and local political machines accept informal settlements as long as they can maintain political control and extract direct financial benefit. These almost feudal relations of dependence on local police or important players in certain political parties and non-governmental organizations are deeply rooted, and disloyalty may cause the destruction of the slum itself. The four oppressed characters “inhabit” this metaphorical slum of an abandoned factory: Worker, Roma Woman, Lesbian and Veteran. Their personal stories are stereotypes constructed from public testimonies or interviews produced by the media, referring to recent events in Serbia. The worker who cut off his finger, the leader of numerous hunger strikes, is a victim of shameless privatization and tycoonization, which forces companies into bankruptcy. For us, the important question is how to unite the discriminated class today in the fight against capitalism? Which one of our characters is actually a possible revolutionary subject? The Partisans as the “historical voice” recall the legacy of solidarity in the struggle against fascism, but also in the struggle against neoliberal particularization and the atomization of the social sphere. An important moment in our film is when the Partisan choir addresses the oppressed and makes a call for unity, primarily addressing the worker as the guardian of the historical torchlight. However, unity within the slum is uncertain and it remains unarticulated and fragmented until the very end.

Jelena Vesić: Would you tell us something about the mode of production you selected for the Partisan Songspiel...? How does this mode of production compare to, for example, art-activist films dedicated to the same situation that you take as the point of departure of this video? How do you perceive the difference between the “video reportage” (or concepts of art based on “political participation” and “direct action”) and the method of “high art” (concepts of art based on “contemplative experience” and “production of social consciousness”)?

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: Taking artistic practice primarily as a system of actions while also being active in the field of contemporary art, we believe that the experience of political reality as well as the active and public stance of the artist can produce “real knowledge” and a transformative experience. This approach also reveals social mechanisms and norms in which we operate and offers a clear insight into contemporary political realities. The conditions of production are inscribed into the product and are always reflected in our artistic work. Our recent video Belville, which you refer to under the label of “video reportage,” emerged as a concentrated result of our active participation and media activism during the protest against the violent eviction of Roma families and the tearing down of their homes in New Belgrade. The video reveals the relations and power mechanisms between all the actors in the conflict: the Roma, the mayor, investors, journalists, international mediators, politicians, police, activists, etc. Our artistic/activist practice and direct contact with the actors involved enabled us to analyze and display this situation in its full complexity. The film was first screened in the settlement of the protesters and is part of our ongoing artistic/research project about the situation of Roma in Europe. Meanwhile, one of the huge mahalas of Belgrade, where part of our project Under the...
Bridge took place in 2004, has been completely torn down and over a thousand people have been temporarily resettled into containers on the periphery of the city or deported to Southern Serbia. Right now, we are preparing video stories that will trace the destinies of these families and will be shot by the inhabitants themselves.

Dmitry Vilensky: The distinction that you emphasize is one of the crucial issues for contemporary debates on “political art.” The task of “spreading the information” is important and valid, but then we should ask another question: where are activist-artists spreading this information and are their goals different from the goals of “engaged” journalists? I can criticize this situation from the inside because I have been involved in making important documentation of various local struggles in Russia for different activist groups, making them accessible online. I find that very important but at the same time there is something very unsatisfying in it. The most unsatisfying factor is when these things appear not just online (where they must be) but also at art venues. On the one hand, I would definitely prefer to see this stuff at exhibition venues rather than any “higher form” of the propaganda of commodity fetishism and sophisticated entertainment. But this doesn’t mean that we don’t have a problem here—there is also an ethical problem—it always looks quite obscene when the “art crowd,” who don’t give a fuck about these struggles, watch them at their “beautiful gatherings.” Therefore, I think this isn’t the time for mixing the functions of information and art. Art has an amazing power to inform too, but it should be realized in another way—just to briefly say that it should question art and its history, it should question the medium (because why should we trust that what is presented is true?); it must show and problematize the position of the speaker (Who is speaking in the film? What is the political identity of the privileged person with the camera?) and there are many other questions. I think that without tackling these questions, there is no possibility to speak from within the art world about political issues, especially in a direct documentary form. When we start to ask these questions, then we clearly step aside from the documentary and reveal the construction of the whole film as it discloses itself as something else. From its emergence, realism set itself the task of uncovering the meaning of reality in its development. This task, however, is also a political task. Documentarism helps us rethink the problem of mimesis that has plagued traditional art forms like theater and painting (this rethinking began with the Brecht-Lukács debate) and tackle the problem of authenticity at another level. As Brecht proved so precisely then, authenticity has nothing to do with the “simple photographic reflection of reality.” Authenticity is based on the work’s construction, for even in the most “faithful” documentary film “there is no material that is free of organization.” That’s why for us the “reactionary” medium of songspiel and musical – where everything is openly constructed and estranged and where we take full political responsibility for the speeches and political statements—somehow becomes a way of dealing with the limitations of documentarism, in trying to break away and reach a truly realist position in art. We have discussed all these problems through the reactualization of Godard’s famous question How to Make Film Politically?, to which we dedicated one issue of the Chto Delat newspapers. Brecht and Godard are important sources of influence and reference for the activity of our group and we take into account the obvious relations between these two names. What is important for us today is to arrive at a method that enables us to mix quite different things—reactionary form and radical content, anarchic spontaneity and organizational discipline, hedonism and asceticism, etc. It is a matter of finding the right proportions. That is, we are once again forced to solve the old problems of composition whilst not forgetting that the most faithful composition is always built on the simultaneous sublation and supercharging of contradictions. As Brecht taught us, these contradictions should be resolved not in the work of art, but in real life. The most important point about which we are in agreement on Brecht is in sharing his short statement “That’s great art: nothing obvious in it!”.

Rena Räde & Vladan Jeremić: For us, the most interesting of Brecht’s conceptions is to see the audience as an active partner that completes the theatre play through its actions in the real world. Brecht used to rewrite his plays and adapt them to current situations. He understood theatre as an open and interactive media. Today Brecht would perhaps include in his work the

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telecommunication media such as the internet or media hacks, in order to make political agitation possible. Partisan Songspiel... has the classical structure of a Greek tragedy with protagonists accompanied by a chorus giving comments and judgments through recitations. As in Brecht’s dialectical theatre, there is an absence of cathartic resolution, which leaves the viewer feeling uncomfortable. A tragedy without catharsis—it’s actually a nightmare, a horror story without an obvious exit. After all, we have to ask ourselves if it is possible to produce a progressive shift in the audience with this kind of tragic surrealism.

Jelena Vesić: The video Partisan Songspiel... is based on the collective work of, first of all, the Chto Delat group and Biro Beograd, but also of many other contributors and active participants. The making of a political film also implies a capacity to articulate a common position; it can be a model for the fullest unfolding of the entire collective’s creative powers, with each participant acting as an equal co-creator. What does collective authorship mean to you? How would you describe it in terms of production, collaboration and content?

Dmitry Vilensky: For me, collective work is something produced by a group of people with a clear understanding of interdependency —meaning that no one from the group could do the work alone or with the help of paid professional labour. So, the whole work is based on an intensive process of discussing and negotiating. On the other hand, we fully recognize that such a classical film medium, which we used for the Partisan Songspiel..., is very oppressive and hierarchical, so we had to mix collective decision making with trust in individual professional skills. I would say again that, in political terms, we are trying to build a new form of collective work by combining collective identity and providing a space for all the singularities involved. That’s why it was important for us to mark the work as a Chto Delat film and specify all contributors who worked on the film, in the form of temporary art-soviets. Also, I insist that we must differentiate between collective naming and branding —of course with the full recognition of the dangers that any collective faces when operating in the professional conditions of cultural industry. I would suggest that the true value of the collective is the political positioning and the building of its own broadly recognizable political context. Here we are coming to the crucial distinction between corporate identity or individuality, and the collective. The collective is about striving for non-alienated labour, equality, solidarity, self-help, sisterhood and so on.

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: The methodology that was developed in previous Chto Delat film projects was offered to us as a collaborative tool. One specific methodology was predefined: what a Chto Delat film should look like. We made our work within the framework of specific categories and roles characteristic for such film production. Apart from the more defined roles and positions in this working process, we would also like to stress that there were many voices from Belgrade and Russia that helped a great deal, by offering interesting ideas and comments before and during the making of the video. The film was directed by Olga Egorova Tsaplya; Vladan Jeremić, Rena Rädle, Dmitry Vilensky with Olga Egorova Tsaplya were assistant directors, scriptwriters and stage designers; the music was composed by Mihail Kutlik, the costumes designed by Natalya Pershina Gluklya; the choreography was created by Nina Gasteva and Olga Egorova Tsaplya, and editing and post-production was done by Olga Egorova Tsaplya and Dmitry Vilensky. The production was realized in Belgrade by Biro Beograd —Biro for Culture and Communication Belgrade during July 2009.

Jelena Vesić: I would like to conclude this conversation by returning to the first question in relation to your intention to present a contemporary leftist quest for the new “politics of equality.” You narrate this search starting from the oppression of the Roma community in the capitalist-fascist society of contemporary Serbia and ending with the historical revolutionary message of Yugoslav partisans. How do you see this circle of struggle, also in the context of numerous presentations, interpretations and debates of your video in the past two years?

Dmitry Vilensky: It’s important to mention that all our work is related to the situations of transition and instability, which is the case in Belgrade as it is in Russia ... but also everywhere. This instability is multidimensional, but we can also read it in terms of the atomization and precarity of the resistance. The title of our video precisely signifies this quest for the new “politics...
of equality.” Yugoslav partisans are the embodiment of the true heroic position in the struggle against fascist-capitalist axis, and frankly, we very much lack this archaic type of self-sacrificing struggle today. However, our intention was not to make the “partisan choir” in our songspiel to be so dominant – we hoped that our “identity groups” would play a central role in terms of the identification with the audience. But it turned out that the Partisans became a much stronger voice. Some people reacted to it, reading the appearance of the Partisans as an “empty political offer” coming from the horizon of long gone times. I would say that this is a misinterpretation because *Partisan Songspiel...* doesn’t agitate the desire to repeat old politics but looks for a new desire and politics that must acknowledge the messages of past struggles and bring them into accord with the new class composition. Nonetheless, without a clear articulation of fidelity to the old struggle, we can hardly move forward. And we hope that this is quite evident in our work.

**Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić:** Partisan chorus appears in the form of a “singing monument” which discusses the situation and supports the oppressed. The Partisans act as a collective reminder and alter ego, showing the deep historical perspective in which we can find the key for understanding the current unsatisfactory situation. What is important is that the rhetoric of the Partisan monument belongs to the years before 1948. The partisans represent fighters who fought and fell in the Yugoslav People’s Liberation War. The scenery for the Partisan monument is a collage of two existing monuments, one from Serbia and the other from Croatia, made by sculptors Sreten Stojanović (1951) and Franjo Kršinić (1954).

This conversation is an edited and updated version of the text originally published in the *Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art: Retrospective 01*, exhibition catalogue, Zorana Dojić and Jelena Vesić (eds.), Prelom Kolektiv, 2009
Artistic and Theoretical Strategies Challenging Racism

Suzana Milevska

During the last several years in my academic research projects and in my curatorial practice, I addressed artistic research and production dealing with one extremely urgent issue: the racialised relations in our contemporary society along with their historical and epistemological genealogy.\(^1\) There were several urgent reasons that led me to this newly developed focus in my work (that I pursued in parallel to my other previously developed interests in postcolonial critique of hegemonic regimes of representation, gender, and feminist art practices and participatory art in the Balkans and Eastern Europe). However there was one major misconception concerning race and racism that was the main trigger because it was shared by many of my colleagues in the Balkans.\(^2\) Here I am mainly referring to the stereotypical assumption that came about on several occasions when racism was mentioned in artistic and academic contexts: that racism is something that does not concern “us,” people from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and because Europe is predominantly “white” we are far from racism, that is “this” phenomenon necessarily related to “races” in the most simplistic biological way of understanding races -as a division among people between black, white, or yellow races.\(^3\)

Needless to state here, such a division based on biology and genetics is informed by the obsolete ideology inherited from the colonial past and nobody seriously would subscribe to it in scientific circles today. The return of the repressed notion of racial difference sounds even weirder today after even the Genome project repudiated it as unviable and moreover, scientifically unprovable.\(^4\) Elsewhere Paul Gilroy points to perhaps the most important issue with any racism: that in racist discourse the society conceptualises the subject (or group of subjects) that is perceived as the other, the different, both as a problem and as a victim.\(^5\) As a problem because it disturbs the established order of sameness; as a victim because the compassion that accompanies the victimisation is a kind of redemption. “Racialized resistance” and solidarity, on the contrary, require an action towards getting away from the perpetuating cycle of problem and victim and is more difficult to realise.

Nevertheless the fact is that very little is done in the academic and theoretical fields of research on racist mechanisms and cultural phenomena related to race and racialisation in the “white” spaces of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where many ethnic minorities are treated as the “other” race, and not always based only on their different skin tone.\(^6\) The question what is race if not biology lurks behind any attempt to discard the essentialist views on race. Some theorists are not ready to abandon the importance of the issue of visible difference entailed in the skin colour.\(^7\) The problem of understanding racism in countries where racist outbursts became everyday practice is not only an issue of visual distinction.\(^8\) This is actually only an excuse for the

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1 2008-2010: The Renaming Machine, series of exhibitions, conferences and seminars, Ljubljana, Skopje, Pristina, Zagreb, Vienna; 2010: Call the Witness (curator), BAK, Utrecht; Roma Pavilion (author of the title and initial idea, researcher and collaborator), 54th Venice Biennale; Roma Protocol (curator), Vienna Parliament.
2 I am referring to several discussions in which I’ve heard similar statements; for example, to one discussion during the conference of City of Women Festival that took place in Ljubljana in 2004. The panellists Nirmal Purwal and Ajalika Sagar (Otolith Group) were attacked from the audience for talking too long about racism.
3 However, Paul Gilroy points out to another danger: identification based on “sameness.” In a conversation with Tommie Shelby, Gilroy interpreted the notion of racial identity: “I’ve always tried to unpack the notion of identity significantly. So when you say racial identity, I immediately triangulate it: there’s the question of sameness; there’s the question of solidarity (which we’ve already dealt with); and there’s the issue of subjectivity. So, identity can be unpacked into at least three quite discrete problems, which are usually lumped together when we speak of identity.” “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia,” a conversation with Paul Gilroy by Tommie Shelby, Transition – An International Review, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, 18 July 2009.
5 Paul Gilroy, There Ain’t No Black in Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation, Houston A. Baker (Foreword) (Chicago, IL: Chicago University, 1991), pp. 11-12.
6 I specifically refer to events that we have seen in the recent years: cases of violence towards Roma and their expulsions, dislocations and deportations in France, Romania, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovakia etc.
undertaken collective actions against the different, for some aims with different backgrounds, mainly economic and territorial interests rather than mystified hatred.9

In this particular text I want to focus on several art projects and artistic and/or research strategies undertaken by artists who recognised the urgency to react against the racialisation of Europe and act in solidarity with the communities that are undermined, marginalised and even whipped out from their long-term lived territories (think of Roma all over Europe, Albanians from Serbia, even Serbs from Croatia). The unknown facts about the Roma Holocaust, the wars in Yugoslavia, the secretive sterilisation of Roma and Sinti in Slovakia and the Czech Republic or the Hungary National Guard are just a few of the examples that have been tackled in some of these projects in a vigorous and activist way. Artists in these projects offer very specific artistic and research methods combining art, activism and public media, thus attracting the attention of the general audience that is provoked to think seriously about racism in the more neutral and relaxed environment of the art context rather than while watching the politicised and gruesome news on TV. Moreover, artists often manage to achieve much more than journalists with documentary information, particularly when, equipped with their artistic curiosity and fragile sensitive approach they enter the highest realms of political hierarchy to fight the societal causes that they turn into an artistic project, or the other way around. Perhaps to achieve serious social changes through art is not the main function of art and it is too much to expect, but our civil responsibilities often sound more urgent and provoke more attention when shared with artists.

This text explores art projects that address the possible entanglements and causal relations between the long suppressed, forgotten and carefully regulated truths from the past and the new protocols that are issued and proliferated time and again by different governments and institutions and ultimately cause the controversial present condition of Roma and other “racialised” minorities. I argue that these artistic projects remind us how urgent it is to recognise the reawakened conservatism, nationalism and racism that today obviously operate under the auspices of neoliberal capitalism, and to tackle it through vigorous actions. I want to argue that particularly important for understanding the recurrence of racism is the linkage between racism and well-known capitalist appropriation methods: protocols for security measures; regeneration for tourism and creative industries; strict policies against travellers, refugees and sans papiers, etc., that all lead to certain disappropriations. In the diplomatic context and in the judicial sense the term protocol refers to an agreed set of conventions including arbitrary rules, procedures, or ceremonies. They are related to the regulation of international relations and are usually issued as supplements or amendments to an existing law or treaty. Therefore protocol represents a recognized and generally accepted system or order of acts that should be applied for the better communication of the agreed rules.

Today the general state protocols seem to exclude Roma and other minorities and immigrant communities through a similar strategy: by constantly introducing new protocols specifically targeting certain communities. By doing so the neoliberal state produces a double bind action with which it first proclaims the targeted community as an exceptional population and then creates exceptional protocols that leave these people outside of normality and common rule, as a kind of sealing of all stereotypes and prejudices. In line with Hannah Arendt’s arguments in regard to the fraudulent “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” (forged around 1900), any protocol actually presupposes and projects a kind of danger that gives way to a justification of the newer and stricter regulations. The controversial expulsion of nearly 1000 Roma from France, who were sent to Romania and Bulgaria, was based on a personal memo from the French president Nicolas Sarkozy and followed the French government’s orders based on the newly introduced strict security bill LOPPSI2. This is only one of the most recent obvious examples to how protocols are put at work.

Some of the artists that are discussed in the continuation of this text not only critiqued but also tried to divert these laws and protocols and attempted to use them in an opposite direction: against racism itself.

I will start with a project that still deals with racism against African people but is based on European ignorance or, more precisely, with the European embracing of the issue. Sasha Huber’s art project Rentyhorn was launched in 2008 on the peak Assizhorn. This Swiss-Haitian artist imagined her project as a follow up to the official campaign De-mounting Agassiz [Démonter Louis Agassiz]. Huber’s project called for an official renaming of the peak as Rentyhorn (Renty was a Congolese slave photographed by Agassiz) because it bears the name of Louis Agassiz. Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807-1873) was a famous Swiss glaciologist, palaeontologist and Harvard professor, who was known for fostering problematic concepts about racial difference among people.10 Agassiz’s contribution to racism was by no means unique for his newly established context of a flourishing career in the USA. However he lent his name and scientific credibility to racism thus establishing its legitimation. Moreover today he is held responsible for the genre of scientific racism. I want to argue that, although indirectly, racism and the particular racist theory of Agassiz are still circulated and celebrated throughout the places and institutions named after him. There are still other mountains, towns, neighbourhoods and various institutions (mostly in the USA) that bear the name of Louis Agassiz.11 This makes Sasha Huber’s project Rentyhorn that is entirely devoted to the question whether we should continue to put up with the long inherited racist “monuments” extremely relevant. Therefore, regardless of the obvious fact that projects such as Rentyhorn cannot lead to the complete eradication of racism, art activism and other similar performative art practices convincingly intervene within certain unquestioned visual and nominal spaces of racist discourse by inserting the suppressed knowledge about racism.

It was not before September 9, 2007, that the Swiss Federal Council (Government) officially acknowledged his “racist thinking” but declined to rename the Agassizhorn summit.12 This moment marks a missed opportunity and moreover the ultimate failure of the Western democratic system to recognise a great potential: the potential that lied in the eventual execution of such a performative act by a simple renaming of Agassizhorn, which could signify the abolishment of the legacy of Agassiz’s open advocacy of racism, and thus would help to revert the hypocrisy regarding racism in Europe today. One could easily realise that by getting away with the half-way decision, the Swiss Government had failed to officially admit the fact that not only is the racist discourse still viable and widely present, but also, indirectly, it is even praised through celebrating the name of one of its most prominent proponents.

Regardless of the double-faced justice of European Democracy and the Swiss Government’s decision, artist Sasha Huber (currently based in Helsinki) succeeded in drawing again the general public’s attention to the same issue: to the particular campaign De-mounting Agassiz [Démonter Louis Agassiz] that was initiated by Hans Fässler. Through her art project she emphasised the urgency of discussing racism in Europe and moreover, of looking for ways of standing against it.

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11 According to Wikipedia these are only few places that still bear Agassiz’ name: Agassiz, a small community located in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley, USA; Mount Agassiz, 13,899 feet high peak in California; Agassiz Township in Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, USA; Agassiz Peak, San Francisco Peaks, the second highest mountain of the U.S. state of Arizona at 12,356 feet; Lake Agassiz, USA; Mount Agassiz in California’s Palisades; Mount Agassiz, Utah, in the Uinta Mountains; Agassiz Peak in Arizona; Agassiz Glacier and Agassiz Creek in Glacier National Park, Montana, USA. In addition, several animal species were so named, including Apistограмma agassizi [Agassiz’s dwarf cichlid], Isocapnia agassizi [Ahassiz snowfly], and Gopherus agassizi [desert tortoise].
She followed the already existing initiative to change the name of the well-known peak with a proposal to call it “Rentyhorn,” after the name of the Congolese slave, a proposal that she distributed to many institutions and relevant individuals (such as Kofi Annan).

This particular name proposition was triggered by the fact that a photograph (daguerreotype) of Renty was commissioned by Agassiz in order to serve as a proof of his belief that there was an unbridgeable difference between Afro-Americans and people with white skin. Renty’s photograph belongs to the long tradition of photographic representation of the “inferior Other” and therefore deserves the central role in Huber’s project. The photograph taken on a plantation in South Carolina in the 1850s was used by Agassiz as an image that was supposed to illustrate his theory that blacks were inferior to whites, but, meanwhile, it became a monument to the manipulative power of the scientific implantation of various meanings to images. The simple frontal portrait photograph stood for everything that appalled Agassiz, particularly the radical difference that, for him, derived from the simple genetic parallelism of different origins and thus lent itself to a scientific justification of slavery.

Sasha Huber’s Haitian background is not a non-related coincidence, though. Her project is profoundly motivated by the troubled past of the Haitian slavery resistance movements and its goals. “The goal of this liberation, out of slavery, cannot be subjugation of the master in turn, which would be merely to repeat the master’s ‘existential impasse,’ (Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind) but, rather, elimination of the institution of slavery altogether.”13 Sasha Huber’s video performance Rentyhorn and the exhibition in Helsinki (that among the other archival elements included the video record of the performance executed on Agassizhorn) call for a very small effort to take this urgent step in making a clear cut break with racist discourse and to overcome “Agassiz’s gap.” Her project transforms the whole debate in the art circles and thus allows us to address the issue from within the future, supposedly from a time without Agassiz’s “peaks.”14 However by not making the decision to change the peak’s name, the Swiss Federal Council only proves that humans have yet to climb the mountain of democracy, mutual understanding and tolerance to the different.

The Roma Holocaust, forced nomadism and racism during and after the wars in former Yugoslavia are just a few of the issues addressed by contemporary artists from the Balkan and CEE region. These urgent social, economical and political issues put side by side with the effects of contemporary state protocols such as displacements and evictions, property looting, unequal human rights, discrimination in education, etc., speak volumes. For example, Romani culture is diverse and full with contradictions on its own, so it is difficult to define it under one umbrella definition and this is often used as an excuse for different policies, decisions and protocols designed for Roma by not-Roma that obviously wrongly assume that Roma are not capable of producing societal and political formations, structures and discourses. Therefore in this context I find it important to focus on different protocols of communication and representation of Roma issues by focusing on the artistic discourses and productions of Roma artists.

Artist and filmmaker Milutin Jovanović in his semi-documentary Migration (2011, 18’) focuses his attention on the lives of the displaced inhabitants from a former Roma settlement. The Gazela settlement that existed under Belgrade’s Gazela Bridge was destroyed on 31 August 2009. Given the order of the Belgrade Mayor, 114 of the families living there for several years were forced to move to six sites on the outskirts of Belgrade to live in metal containers, while the other 64

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14 What Sasha Huber actually recorded was her flight with a helicopter over the Agassizhorn at the end of August 2008 when she successfully landed on the peak and put a plate on it in memory of the slave Renty.
families were transported to parts of southern Serbia. In the video the audience is invited to follow the story line as it evolves through the eyes of Jovanović’s friend Gagi, one of the residents of the new Roma settlement where some of the evicted Roma families were forced to move after the Gazela settlement’s destruction.

Gagi borrows a camera and starts shooting his own documentary about his neighbours’ disappointments in the labyrinth of narrow streets and tinny container-homes in search for eye-witnesses’ testimonials. Thus the means of representation are owned and taken over – they are “mastered” and used in order to overcome the existing regimes of representation. However, Gagi’s potential witnesses have already been silenced by the warning protocol: they are threatened not to speak publicly about their daily survival in incredible inhuman conditions.

The main issue that Schmiedt explores in this and her previous work Vermächtnis (2010-2011) dedicated to the artist Ceija Stojka (a Roma woman painter, musician, and writer from Austria who survived three different concentration camps), is very similar to a question asked by philosopher Giorgio Agamben: “What is the juridical structure that allowed such events to take place?”15 While fighting historical amnesia, the documents and oral testimonials that the artist collected for many years warn us both against racism’s eternal return and against the aporia of the “proxy witness”: the survivor’s testimony as “a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech [...] an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking.”16

Crazy Water Wheel by Alfred Ullrich (two-channel video installation, 18’ 38") consists of two videos. The first one is showing only a loop of the turning wheel of a watermill. The wheel brings to mind the Romani flag that also has a wheel. This video comments, therefore, on the old stereotype of Roma people as exotic creatures full of wanderlust, genetically incapable of leading sedimentary lives in a house without wheels. The filmed watermill lies in vicinity of the Nazi extermination camp of Dachau so the wheel also refers to the eternal recurrence of racism. The repetition is not perfect and sends ambivalent message because the artist allows subtle details to transform the scene, thus perhaps pointing out to the slow change in the Roma situation.

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While working on the project *Call the Witness* my main aim was to put under pressure the hegemonic regimes of representation as well as internalized strategies of self-representation that are imposed upon individuals through biopolitical structures dominant in our contemporary world. Certain questions such as the following needed to be asked: Who has control over the means of representation and who has the power to reproduce and distribute certain dominant cultural and moral principles? Or to give a more concrete example, who has the freedom to erect a platform where Roma artists and Roma in general can utter their urgent statements of self-determination and act as agents empowering the Roma minority? 19

The internalization of the regimes of representation, identification, self-essentialization and racism create a threatening cycle, from which one most urgently needs to seek a way out. Some aspects were necessarily incited by the urgency to address recent cases of individual and collective displacements, evictions, and deportations of Roma citizens from their homes in many European countries. In light of the current neoliberal capitalist advance and its thirst for cheap or even free land, these political manoeuvres should come as no surprise. 20 It is also important to point to the severe breaching of human rights that is occurring, and ultimately to search for new

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19 Perhaps some clarification of the term "Roma" and its uses is called for here. It was accepted in 1971 during the first truly transnational Roma congress, which took place in Orpington (near London), in order to circumvent the derogatory connotation of the labels “Gypsy” or “Tzigan.” Today it serves as an umbrella term for many different names that various Roma communities use for self-designation, but is not accepted by some of them.
20 Because most Roma do not possess legal property documents (even after having lived for decades on the same piece of land), their land is instead appropriated “legally” and becomes available for development and gentrification, “urban regeneration” in the neoliberal parlance. Racist outbursts and riots usually facilitate this process, which resonates with philosopher Hannah Arendt’s statement from *The Origin of Totalitarianism* that racist ideology helped to legitimize the imperialist conquests of foreign territories and the acts of domination that accompanied them.
Artistic and Theoretical Strategies Challenging Racism
Suzana Milevska

methods for recognizing and fighting against contemporary racism that are re-contextualized through an evocation of certain racist contexts from the past.

The expelled, the displaced, the ghettoized, the imprisoned, the war refugee, or any free but marginalized Roma are the speaking subjects in the previously explored projects: the Roma artist’s subjectivity is the witness, and he or she speaks for the ones who cannot speak.21 One pressing question to be asked is how Europe is to negotiate the newly formed Roma subjectivities when social and political functions are always already “marked by the split between the referent and symbolic,” to quote philosopher Julia Kristeva, when speaking subjects are divided between the past overburdened by annihilation and obliteration and the yet-uncertain future.

Agamben’s “right to be sacrificed” is not what this amounts to today: it is rather the right to live on equal ground with the majority regardless of one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or cultural background.22 Even if one may not be capable of transcending racism (as political geographer Arun Saldanha has argued23), or of unravelling all inherited contours and inflexions of representation, one should take on board the responsibility to utter one’s own testimonies against injustice and discrimination; to decipher and unsettle new instances of racism, in all its disguises and to denounce them loudly; and to use any possibility to call for radical action that affirms solidarity in difference, cohabitation and compossibility.24

The postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy suggests:

[...] in order to do effective work against racism, one had to in effect renounce certain ontological assumptions about the nature of race as a category, which cheapened the idea of political solidarity, in my view, because it said that solidarity somehow was an automatic thing, that it would take care of itself. But I believe that solidarity -as you, I think, believe- doesn’t take care of itself, that we have to do things to produce that solidarity.25

Unfortunately the contemporary art scene is still not ready to accept contemporary artists coming from different backgrounds and prefers to hear about all those issues from familiar voices of already accepted artists who are more fluent in speaking the language of the majority on the art scene. So I finish the text with one question: how many names of Roma artists do you know?

21 Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz, p. 146.
25 Gilroy, “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia.”