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If I can't dance, it is not my revolution

Barbara Heinrich

As Halil Altındere came from Adana to Istanbul in 1996 to complete a post-graduate degree in painting at the Marmara University, there was an independent, autonomous and vibrant art scene in Istanbul, not to mention the Istanbul Biennial that was being prepared for the road. In a tense political climate, partly shaped by state repression, and partly by the rise of nationalist tendencies and terrorism, and the emergence of neo-liberalism; the transformation from tradition to modernity, the relationship between center and periphery, globalization and regionalism, and issues around the social condition were being renegotiated in art. From the beginning Altındere was one of the main protagonists of this generation, but not only as a visual artist. As a curator he has been critically dealing with the definition of authorship in the evaluation of art and with the exhibitions he organized he has also been an important link between Istanbul and his fellow artists from other regions of the country. As co-editor of the art magazine *art-ist Contemporary Art*, and through the publication of exhibition catalogues and books such as *User's Manual: Contemporary Art From Turkey, 1986-2006*, he substantially contributed to the debates on contemporary art.

As an attentive, sensitive and precise observer with a keen sense for grievances of any kind, he accompanied the developments in contemporary art and Turkish society, interfered and provided a provocative front not just for creating conflict, but primarily for setting out a discussion.

Community, society, government, authority, power and control, institutional critique and subcultures are the central themes in the work of Halil Altındere, whose,

installations and objects, utilising especially the media of video and photography, would be characterised through the pictorial-compositional workings of painting. He is not a studio-artist; his preferred place of production is the street, where he draws his material from the environment of everyday life and questions the meanings of things through manipulating found objects from real life. Altindere's works explore the questions of how we define society, what mechanisms hold us together and the role of politics, taboos and traditions in this process. The works deal with self-assurance, cultural identity, nationalism, chauvinism, opposition to authoritarian structures and the status quo within the field of art while also referring to one of the strategies of Altindere to use the language and symbols of the system that he criticizes. *Love It or Leave It* (1998), a work that was exhibited in 2004, at the 5th Cetinje Biennale as an outdoor billboard, is a good example of this approach. The artist found a graffiti of the Turkish flag on a wall in Istanbul, framed with a slogan that originally came from Benito Mussolini, to be read against the backdrop of the emerging right-wing Kemalist ideology, neo-fascism, nationalism and ethnic discrimination in the nineties. In Altindere's photo two pedestrians pass in front of this statement, each in a different direction, as if to symbolize the two choices that the graffiti suggests. However, the passers-by look like they walk past the graffiti without taking notice, they seem to ignore what's written there. So, is there a third way?

This photograph not only operates in close connection to the work titled *One Turk Equals The World* (1998), but also builds on earlier work where Altindere modified official documents of state such as passports, stamps and banknotes. The aim here is to disrupt the systems of representation of the state as well as identification with the system. Among these works are the image of a bill on which Atatürk's hands cover his face as if he was ashamed, fake postal stamps with portraits and names of Kurds who disappeared under Turkish police custody, and identity cards, showing men and women with bare upper chests. The manipulation of and alienation from these emblems through copying or by transforming visual signs, provocatively questions the monopoly of power, control and the security approach of the state and should be read as a resistance against repression. A continuation of this discussion is seen in the work *Capital* (2008), which deals with political ideologies, their

enforcement and consequences. The pages of the philosopher and social theorist Karl Marx's "Capital: Critique of Political Economy" are cut out so that a gun could be placed in the book. From this pairing of capital and violence the question of what has become (and is still becoming) of the social revolutionary ideas and concepts that represent a counterpoint to the prevailing models of society arises.

It is with the multi-part photo series, *Emma Goldman* (2009) that Altindere deliberates on the subsistence and validity of this original design and its significance in the present time. Emma Goldman (1869-1940) was an American anarchist, feminist and peace activist who played a crucial role in the development of anarchist political philosophy in the US and in Europe. Goldman rejects the state, capitalist economy and religion as oppressive institutions, because through their views they are in conflict with the human quest for freedom. She put forward the thesis that human beings are by nature social beings and solidarity can only be realised when these institutions are abolished, with the goal of a society in which all faculties and individuals can express themselves freely. According to her beliefs, all sorts of direct action, including the use of violence among other things, was necessary for revolutionary change. Goldman was imprisoned several times because of her speeches and writings, and finally in 1919 she was expelled from the country. Altindere has borrowed some quotations from Goldman, like "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution", adopted these accordingly and transferred them onto golden necklaces to appear like they were handwritten. These pieces of jewellery were worn by young women, dressed in black (the color of anarchy) looking at the camera rather confident and even defiant to a certain extent. "I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck" or "Women need not always keep their mouths shut and their wombs open" are some of her statements pointing at the right of self-determination in life beyond tradition, social norms and patriarchal repression.

There are also a number of works in which Altindere has dealt with the role of police and army. However the artist does not leave it at addressing forms of power and oppression, but also deals with forms of resistance. One could look at *The Monument of Direct Democracy* (2008) in this capacity, a work that had been

conceived in 2005, only to be realised for the exhibition “Istanbul Next Wave” in Berlin. In front of the building where the exhibition takes place is a patrol car upside down on its roof with its blue light still on. Here is a monument winking at revolt. The irony here is that although the power of the state has been completely overturned we can still hear the sounds of the usual police announcements from the radio that is intact.

Oil paintings such as *Hurriyet* and *Newsweek* from 2009 onwards, deals with the third power in the country, the media. These works transform the content and layout of Turkish daily newspapers and American magazines to uncover their power of manipulation through texts, words and images.

Halil Altindere has repeatedly dealt with the mechanisms and criteria of the art system. These issues include the role of institutions and curators in the art market, as well as the role of the artist. For example, a criticism of the museum as an institution is reflected in a performance of 2000: The photo shows the artist urinating between two paintings on the wall of the Musee des Beaux Arts in Nantes, while there are museum visitors visible in the background. Altindere does not slow down when the subject matter is curators. During a fellowship at Nantes, he sprayed the words “Fuck the Curator” on the wall of his studio, just to see if this act of vandalism would be accepted as art. It worked, and the artist was invited to Manifesta 2, where he presented a multi-part photo series called *Russian Roulette with Curators*. Altindere did not leave it at criticism, in the following years he organized exhibitions such as “I am Bad and I am Proud” (2002), “I Am Too Sad To Kill You” (2003), “Free Kick” (2005) “Be A Realist, Demand the Impossible” (2007), “When Ideas become Crime” (2010), to oppose the mainstream or as he put it himself, to show the possibility of a different world.

The relationship between art and money is the subject of various works. Altindere realised the work *Miss Turkey* in 2005, a series of nine performances, staging the theft of the famous painting *Mehmed II* (1480) by Gentile Bellini, from a bank in Istanbul (that was not informed about the performances), including the arresting of the offender by the armed police. The question is what values deserve to be protected? And would the same effort be in place for a work of contemporary art?

For the 9th Sharjah Biennial he prepares the *Portrait of the Sheik* (2009). The work is based on a painting that Altındere saw at the Museum of Sharjah. It shows a classical portrait of Sheikh Sultan in a typical sovereign pose, who is at the same time represented as a scholar with a book in his hand. The artist has hung this image on the wall with hinges so that it hides a safe - an allusion to the opening of new markets and the current economic boom experienced by contemporary art in the United Arab Emirates. On the occasion of the “Second Exhibition” at ARTER Istanbul, which was dealing explicitly with the role of art institutions and offering an institutional critique, Altındere presented the *Portrait of a Dealer* (2010). He hung a portrait in a gold-leaf frame on a red wall staged like a museum, with red carpets and cordon. Only in close inspection do we understand that it is actually not a painting, but a video. The video shows gallery owner Yahşi Baraz with his head pierced through a painting of artist Burhan Doğançay. Doğançay is considered an important representative of modernism in Turkish painting from 1970s and 80s, whose paintings are being sold for remarkable sums today. He was being represented by art dealer Yahşi Baraz. Who, in 1998, organized an exhibition on abstract tendencies in Turkish painting, at a time when contemporary Turkish artists were freeing themselves from academic traditions and conventions to find new forms of expression, and a critical and conceptual art was emerging. Earlier on, as a reaction against the conservatism and ignorance of the institutions that were completely ignoring these new tendencies, Altındere and Serkan Özkaya had taken two paintings of Doğançay from the hooks on the wall on the occasion of an exhibition opening to waltz with them. Ten years later Altındere brings art dealer Baraz and one of the paintings once more together in a video in reference to the current debates concerning modern and contemporary art.

Another topic of Altındere in this context is the role of the artist. For his first solo exhibition in Istanbul in 2008, as part of the Adventures of Istiklal series at Yapı Kredi Kazım Taşkent Gallery, he programmatically and ironically decides on the title “I’m not sure if this is an exhibition”. The only work that is shown at the exhibition is a life-size wax figure of the mustached Pala the Bard, a marginal figure in urban society, known to everyone on Istiklal Avenue (who also appeared in a photograph titled *Super Türk* by Altındere in 2002). The figure stood in the street outside the

entrance of the gallery, which remained closed to the public for the duration of the exhibition. The artist not only thwarted the expectations of the audience but questioned the potential of art exhibitions at conventional venues. Through bringing art back onto the streets, the work can be read as an appeal for intervention or as a plea to consider alternatives.

In 2009, Altındere shot the video *Who shot the artist* (2009). The video starts with a scene showing a shopping arcade with shops and strolling pedestrians. In the next shot, we see the artist himself, moving towards us, engaged in a monologue. From the side of the camera a gun held by an anonymous perpetrator comes into view, a shot is fired and a blood stain appears on the white shirt of the artist. However, he continues walking and talking. More shots are fired, the people passing-by are irritated, but no one does anything. The work focuses on the recurring attacks on critical intellectuals; the assassinations, the violence and censorship, the tacit consent of the majority of the population - and yet it implies that the artist can not be silenced.

Self-Portrait (2010), however, is a brief comment on the attacks that Altındere was exposed to over and over again, perhaps a comment on the seemingly hopeless futility of our actions or the obstinacy of society: the artist lights up a cigarette with an issue of the art magazine *art-ist* that is in flames.

Halil Altındere is never just an indifferent observer or a distanced provocateur, but places his criticisms at the heart of the system and uses the exhibitions in which he participates as an opportunity to reach the largest possible public for his issues.

In 2005 when he was invited to documenta 12 to develop a project with reference to the city of Kassel by the request of the curators, Altındere responded with the proposal of *15 Minutes of Freedom*. The concept was proposing that some prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment in the Kassel Penitentiary, would be flown for fifteen minutes over the city and various venues of documenta, hanging from the skids of a helicopter during the first week of the exhibition. The proposal made reference to one of the *leitmotifs* of documenta, referring to the fragility and the

exposure of human existence, and was intending a change of perspective: The prisoner, caged and under continuous watch would for a short time be free and view the world that he can not participate in from above. Conversely, those who watch this action, would be curious rather than in control. Due to extensive bureaucratic obstacles, the proposal could not be realised and instead the work *Dengbêjs* (2007), which referred to another *leitmotif* of documenta 12, namely the question “Is modernity our antiquity?”, emerged. The video opens with a shot over the rooftops of a big city. Then we follow two men on their different paths through the alleys and streets of this city, past shops, crowded places and deserted back yards, coming to a traditional Mesopotamian wooden house, where they meet up with two other men. In a room decorated with carpets and cushions they sit together in a semicircle drinking tea and then start singing. One by one they deliver different stories: of unrequited love, of betrayal and pain, of homeland and historical events, of oppression and loss, of self-determination and justice. As one of the men goes outside, for the first time we see the wooden house in all its grandeur and traditional design. Then suddenly the noise of the street is heard, which also reveals the location of the meeting place - he is not, as might be expected in a rural setting, but is standing on the roof of a modern, mirrored skyscraper in the middle of Diyarbakır, one of the most densely populated cities in Turkey.

The word “deng” comes from Kurdish and means sound. *Dengbêjs* are vocal chroniclers who transmit culture as the carriers of old stories of Kurdish community, and they exist even today, despite all the modern information technologies. They give individual and collective experiences that were never written down, not just a voice, but they ensure that these stories survive and are not forgotten. In this work Altindere wanted, as he himself says, to show that the modern and the archaic, the traditional and the contemporary exist in layers and that they can enrich one another.

Life in the tension between tradition and modernity is also the theme of *Mirage* (2008), consisting of a video and a three-part photo series. The work is about the planned giant Ilisu Dam on the Tigris valley at the border with Syria and Iraq, through which the water supply of large cities like Istanbul would be secured, but the

livelihood of many villages and important cultural sites of Mesopotamia will be flooded and lost. The view is first directed towards a barren, dry landscape and the only sound we hear is the wind. From a distance, a construction vehicle approaches, an excavator, in the raised shovel of which are several men murmuring prayers. Their heads shake to the rhythm of the vibrations, while the excavator moves back and forth. Then the camera pans back into the landscape and shows a man in a prayer pose kneeling on the dusty ground with his head buried in the sand. Beside him stands a woman with a knee-length polka dot skirt. Her attitude speaks volumes: She stands confident in high-heels with her legs astride and simply does not match the stereotype of a Turkish woman from the provinces. Nothing happens, and both remain motionless. Then a light-skinned, narcissistic postured, shirtless bodybuilder appears who puts on a show with his muscles in the barren desert landscape, the suntanned man looks pretty absurd in contrast to the one traditionally dressed - pretentious masculinity versus the casual. While the men on the excavator now continue her prayers kneeling in a semicircle, a young man pours water from an Evian plastic bottle onto their heads. The camera travels through a mountainous, still, barren landscape and arrives at a river valley. Right next to the water, there is the lifeless body of a pregnant woman. Kneeling beside her is a man trying to revive her by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The video ends with the view of a deserted village on this river.

Altındere has taken up the same subject in *Oracle* (2010) once again, a video mixing scenes from a dream and reality with each other. The camera circles a tower, a minaret, rising from the water. It is completely silent, no sound is heard. The place is surrounded by water with empty houses on the shore. A man in a suit is swimming. An old woman sits in a clay house with basic facilities that is part of a larger estate, and reads the fortune in coffee cups. The man in the suit now surfs on an ironing board. In the courtyard of the estate stands a young woman holding a naked crying baby in her arms and points a gun at the viewer. Before the court is a group of elderly men lined up, motionless, while another man on a Segway electric scooter crosses in front of them. The man in the suit is now buried upto his chest in the dusty ground, under the scorching sun. Several traditionally dressed women, walk singing through the countryside, past ruins and disappear behind a hill - exodus into

an uncertain future. While their voices are still audible huge wind turbines appear in the red sunset. A man digs into the dusty ground with his bare hands in twilight and finds light.

An important stylistic device of Altindere is his light-hearted, ironic and laconic humor that is translated into strong and meaningful images putting our standards of value at stake. His anarchic and subversive critique of the state and its ideology, and his skepticism of mainstream institutions have set new standards in progressive contemporary Turkish art. His works are political and yet so subtle that they can not be reduced to political statements. Especially in his late works, Altindere finds poetic and lamenting images, and demonstrates that art can be a response to authoritarian structures and deadlock conditions.

In a self-portrait from 2010 the artist shows himself as a house husband. He stands in the kitchen wearing a white apron stirring various ingredients together with the drill in his hands. Retreat into privacy? Or rather, an alchemist, who is cooking up something?

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