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Halil Altindere
His head in his hands

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Culture or cultures? Are the west and its citizens meant to be subject to or even produce a single dominant culture, based on some notion of origins and place, or are they part of a plurality of cultural assumptions and attitudes that form and reform with the passage of time? These questions continue to tie contemporary western culture and society in knots. While the blind confidence of the imperial centuries has been gradually undermined, no similar degree of certainty has come in its wake. How much or how little multi-culti, multi-ethnic, multi-racial is acceptable has become a dog-whistle issue for politics and media? How is the decision made, by whom and on what basis are the confines of the stage on which society plays out its anxieties. The questions they raise haunt everything in this apparent twilight of western European hegemony – from academia to popular journalism, from culture to sport, from politics to advertising.

To say the least, this is an unfortunate turn of events: unfortunate because it threatens to awaken the barely sleeping demons of an old belief in Aryan, Christian supremacy; equally unfortunate because it doesn't need to happen. Western Europe's comforting myth is that it alone is 'original', the rest of the world copies, while it innovates. Sometimes the copies are improvements (see the USA), sometimes failures (see the USSR) but mostly they are just inferior. When those areas that the west chooses to define as outside itself use inspirations from the west, they are understood at best to be expressions of universal values, at worst to be dull plagiarists. When western modernist artists adopt expressions from elsewhere they are generally understood to be making discoveries and finding their inner voice. The problem is partly one of authority and identity - the idea of sources, origins and provenance – terms that bring us close the currencies of art history and the art market.

It should be clear by now that such distinctions between west and non-west are simply unconscious prejudices, based on assuming power relations have cultural justifications. Underneath the rhetoric of genius loci and cultural particularism, the mesh of hybrid links forged throughout history is patently obvious. Multiculturalism is not a recent phenomenon and it is usually through encounters with difference that new forms are created. Thus, while the anxieties of the present may be understandable, they are not acceptable. The past needs to be understood differently and one way to stage such necessary reinterpretations is through art and exhibition-making, a process to

which these practices are well adapted. Yet, even within the art world, progress is slow. Focusing in on the artistic manifestations of the wider debate, we find that even a hugely influential exhibition (and gesture) such as the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris obsessed about the authentic quality of expression of their 'non-western' artists while never applying the same criteria to artists from within the curators' own geographic ken. Nevertheless *Magiciens* offered a profound challenge to western art history that has not been addressed as much as one might have expected in the subsequent nearly 25 years. The general approach to art exhibitions and collections programmed in the west is still largely devoted to an understanding of creative language based on European Modernist precepts. While changes are afoot, the lessons of *Magiciens* or indeed recent *Documentas* are only now beginning to be encoded into European (and US) programming and collection policy.

This short introduction serves as what I believe to be a necessary context through which to speak about Halil Altındere's exhibition in Madrid. Altındere is a Kurdish-Turkish artist based on Istanbul. This is already a triple qualification when it comes to cultural origins and identity. He speaks from and for a Kurdish community of artists; he runs into problems with the Turkish state authorities; while the cosmopolitan past (and future) of Istanbul offers him a platform from which to operate. Perhaps it is not coincidental that his first major international solo exhibition is in Madrid. The Spanish national capital shares with Istanbul a common sense of old imperial grandeur and centrality that is at the core of its self-understanding. It is an imperialism of an older kind than the 19th century land grabs and one that contains unexpected parallels with Istanbul in an oppressive colonial narrative – be it the shameful historical treatment of indigenous minorities or the pressing contemporary claims of Kurds, Armenians, Basques or Catalans. Having a Kurdish artist like Altındere appearing in a Turkish celebration in Madrid is therefore not without its ironic timing in view of the fissures emerging in the Spanish nation state, but the artist's Kurdish roots are more significant to this exhibition than just this historical coincidence.

Both Madrid and Istanbul can be said to have slightly neurotic feelings of marginality in relation to the hegemonic Western European discourse discussed above. They are part of the main narrative but always threatened by a slightly supercilious glance from the 'core west', as though they arrived to late and with the wrong fashion sense. This marginality is felt differently by those doubly excluded because they do not identify with the national cultural consensus as shaped by an internationally representative city. Thus the extra antagonism that Bilbao feels for Madrid or Diyarbakır for Istanbul. In each of these cases, that double sense of distance coincides with a coherent but parallel (sub)national and linguistic identity that feels the need to assert itself through politics, and sometimes civil violence. For Altındere, consequently, the task of representation his work carries is also a double burden – to be Kurdish in Istanbul and Kurdish-Turkish abroad. It is a task he does not necessarily embrace but it is given to his work nonetheless.

Accepting this situation as inevitable, Altindere plays with the changing status of his identities and the expectations around them. He borrows from a palette of historical and modernist sources; he makes up absurdist scenarios of exotic Istanbul, Anatolia or Mesopotamia while translating and publishing important theoretical work in Turkish; he supports fellow artists while provoking the ire of the guardians of Kemal Atatürk's legacy. There is always an immediacy about his work that is compelling to see. The images he makes, or the video scenarios he edits, have a surrealist touch that is borrowed from European prototypes but adapted to the age of narrative art. Much appears tongue in cheek at first glance. This is evident from his earliest collaged or manipulated photographs such as *Homage to Toulouse Lautrec* and cuts a straight line through his maturing oeuvre to scenes from the *Mesopotamian Trilogy* where a businessman walk on water or a minaret emerges out of a lake.

This hybridising of cultural sources and activities reflects a certain dynamism that is to be found in the former Ottoman territories these days. Although I hesitate to say so for fear of exaggeration, it does feel as though the changes that the globe is currently undergoing are of epochal importance. By recognising the transformative nature of what is going on at the economic and political levels, it may help the west construct a much needed new map of the world in its head. For Altindere belongs to a generation of artists emerging not only in Turkey but also in a number of neighbouring states for whom the artistic products of modernism and post-modernism are effectively antique forms made for a past society. They are 'our antiquity' in T J Clark's use of the word; a past that is gone but yet remains a source of contemporary possibility.¹

A loose community of artists confident in grasping this condition exist in the geographies outwith the core western states. Not all of them know each other, but they might include, in no particular order, Sener Özmen's direct

¹ To quote T J Clark's crucial observation in full: "Now I sit down to write my introduction, I realize that what I had taken for a convenient opening ploy – the fragments, the puzzling scholars, the intervening holocaust – speaks to the book's deepest conviction, that already the modernist past is a ruin, the logic of whose architecture we do not remotely grasp. This has not happened, in my view, because we have entered a new age. That is not what my book title means. On the contrary, it is just because the 'modernity' that modernism prophesied has finally arrived that the forms of representation it originally gave rise to are now unreadable. (or readable only under some dismissive fantasy rubric – of "purism", "opticality", "formalism", "elitism", etc.) The intervening (and interminable) holocaust was modernisation. Modernism is unintelligible now because it had truck with a modernity not yet fully in place. Post-modernism mistakes the ruins of those previous representations, or the fact that from where we stand they seem ruinous, for the ruin of modernity itself – not seeing that what we are living through is modernity's triumph. Modernism is our antiquity, in other words, the only one we have." Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a history of modernism, University of California Press, 1999.

reflections on life in Diyarbakır, the subtle refusal to submit to historical determinism in the work of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut with artists such as Rabih Mroué, Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, Hassan Khan performance and video in Cairo and, in their different ways, the fictions of Khaled Hourani and Khalil Rabah in Palestine. West of Istanbul, this unavowed group might also encompass Dan and Lia Perjovschi in Romania, Erzen Shkololli in Kosova, Luchezar Boyadjiev in Sofia and IRWIN in Ljubljana. All of the above, along with Altindere, seem to breathe in hybridity and diversity without concern. They have a capacity to mix and sample without hesitation, making fictions that play with documentary or other given material or, when it doesn't exist, simply manufacture what is needed, while their artistic practices are always combined with organisational and community responsibilities. The liberation from discipline that their practices represent is perhaps best illustrated by the text of a film called *The Old House* by Rabih Mroué. To the backdrop of a house suspended between demolition and construction, the artist recounts a short narrative about the equal value of 'remembering and forgetting' when trying to grasp meaning in the world. This is not a repetitive process because that would imply an origin that could be repeated and as Mroué says: '...what know we of beginnings?'. This 'we' that is never described in the text but could, in one possible reading, refer precisely to this loose group of artists, individuals we who have already moved beyond an understanding of modernity as a part of contemporary reality and understood it as antiquity, a doctrine that is still largely heresy to large parts of western Europe. Thus released from its dictates and forbidden zones, these artists can make art and tell stories about and for their here and now and share that with a broad international audience.

I recalled Rabh Mroué's film when I first saw the photograph called *Carpetland* by Halil Altindere. The work shows a quite vast, flat landscape on which are spread thousands of traditional Anatolian carpets. They are withering a little under the hot sun. At first the image might suggest a mass outdoor prayer hall but it is actually more or less what its title suggests. Here newly manufactured carpets are being aged by the weather for sale as 'authentic' old carpets in the tourist bazaars of Istanbul. This play with the land of Anatolia and Mesopotamia as the 'historical weight' behind new, commercial Istanbul touches in the politics, memory and clichés of the region in a similar way to Mroué. While Beirut is known for tumbling architecture and burnt out buildings, the Asian part of Turkey is a traditional carpet- or kilimland, an artistic practice associated with the origins of the Turks in Central Asia. Thus, to see this tradition both commercially exploited and spread out on the land that the Turks came to occupy is to invest the image with a hybridity of antique and contemporary references crossing time and place and culture. These radical juxtapositions of technology, culture, tradition and innovation are constantly present in the Mesopotamian trilogy where difference simply co-exists, often humorously. One example may serve for many others. In *Dengbejs*, the singers of Kurdish love songs and political protest seem completely bound within their cultural essentialism. These songs were banned for a time under the Evren dictatorship in Turkey and

represent something pre-Islamic in Kurdish culture. Yet, when the camera pans out to reveal the ancient wooden building where the singing takes place, we find it perched on top of a ten-storey skyscraper in the centre of a bustling, contemporary Diyarbakir. These buildings on top of buildings, which are common in South America and Africa as well, are perfect examples of hybrid, provisional architectural solutions, designed for need and unconcerned of their literal lack of foundations. While questions could rightly be asked about their long term safety, they represent a way of dealing with the migration of forms and cultures that is hard to dismiss as simple copying or inferior versions of the supposed original.

Which brings us back full circle to where we started thinking about culture or cultures, essentialism or hybridisation. In Altindere 's work, symbols are in flux, moving backwards and forwards in time, yet what remains a constant, literal presence is the earth itself. Throughout *Mesopotamian Trilogy*, and other works, people are buried in it, others discover sources of light or till the soil with tractors. This earth is what literally grounds us; positions us in relation to the spinning of cultural history all around. It is humans who are malleable, while always being located and having to manage the environment in which they find themselves. When Altindere covers his face on his Turkish identity card, his head in his hands, we perhaps come closest to how we operate outside this earthy tactility (*Dances with Taboos*). In the face of cultural, linguistic and national identifications, humans seem quick to classify others but when faced with the need for self-definition, it is always nuanced, full of denials or merely partial agreement. A double consciousness seems to operate here and Altindere's achievement is to give concrete form to this doubleness in a series of works that are diverse in media but united in their concern for what it is to be a person under the sun.

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