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METAPHOR FOR A NEW ORDER

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In 1998 Halil Altindere had already been established in Istanbul for two years, at a moment when the city was in a state of ferment. He had come from Adana, the capital of Anatolia, in whose university he had studied. At that time, the general climate, which offered an obvious tension and simultaneously an open door to all possibilities, provided the context in which an artistic environment evolved that attracted the eyes of the (art) world to it. Stimulated by a series of successful biennales, Istanbul transformed itself into the mirror of the world. Turkey was the place in which to test to what extent the new world emerging after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the fall of the World Trade Towers in 2001 was expanding and was capable of incorporating, or at least understanding, its new limits. Istanbul thus became a microcosms, a field in which reality could be experienced in various ways, a fertile space for personal relationships among artists and one in which Halil Altindere could operate.

In that same year, 1998, Halil Altindere created two very similar photographs. Both depict his mother sitting on several cushions in what seems a living room in a home somewhere in Turkey, possibly outside its most populous city. Everything seems to indicate that both images were taken within a few minutes of each other. In both photographs she holds a book published by German publishers. One of them is a best seller from the publisher Taschen, the book Tillman Osterwold wrote to disseminate Pop art to a broad public. Richly illustrated, its cover features the most iconic image by Andy Warhol, one of his portraits of Marilyn Monroe. It is a book that even today circulates widely among a broad section of the public and can be easily acquired for a modest price. The other book is more academic. It is a catalogue published by the IFA (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) for the exhibition *Fluxus in Deutschland 1962 – 1994*, which soon became one of the principle references for the study of the art movement. One of the curators of that show, René Block, is precisely an early advocate of Turkish art and responsible for the exhibition by Halil Altindere in Berlin. The titles of these photographic works are *My Mother Likes Pop Art, Because Pop Art is Colorful* and *My Mother Likes Fluxus, Because Fluxus is Anti-Art*.

These two photographs, the tension created between both of them and with the observer, the themes they address, the mechanisms they set in motion,

and the readings they generate provide a good manner of understanding the work of Halil Altindere. We enter the familial intimacy of the artist. The person depicted is not just any woman. Of course, he is not the first to include his mother in his works. Warhol himself photographed, painted, and filmed his mother Julia. So did Picasso, Lucien Freud, and David Hackney. Nevertheless, there is an additional dose of sincerity in this image and little interest in constructing a staging. The photographs seem snapshots, pictures strictly for familial consumption. The surroundings of the house, the proper presence of the mother, all indicate that they belong to an everyday world, hardly sophisticated, remote from the context of the exhibition where they will probably be shown. This is an honest self-reference. It is also a manner of reclaiming his origins: a Kurd raised in provincial Turkish cities who arrived as an adult in the big city and became an artist of international renown, but who at the same time admits that he questions the influence of the major Western art movements. The works play with this double identity: they transport the world of art to the living room of the house he grew up in and at the same time they transport this living room and his mother to the exhibition spaces where he is praised thousands of kilometres away.

Pop and Fluxus coexisted in the same time period. They emerged at the end of the 1950s and proliferated during the next decade. They belong to a moment when the world was firmly based on two superpowers, each one with its constellation of satellite states. A moment when everything that took place outside of the outline defined by the West was considered practically irrelevant, at least as regards culture. It was an era when prosperity began to reach the middle classes as a way of sanctioning progress. In the interchange of exhibitions carried out by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1959, the Americans countered the promises of socialism with comfort, not presenting in Moscow the benefits of their constitution and system of checks and balances, but the replica of a suburban house full of household appliances. Envy our prosperity, not our liberty. That was the wonderful house that three years previously Richard Hamilton, the founder of British Pop Art, had ironically and iconically celebrated in *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* Yet in that world of comforts the solidity of the modernist discourse was about to collapse. Almost anyone could enjoy a cold beer from the fridge, a significant post-modern achievement, but there was no way of referring to a single manner of explaining and understanding reality. This is the moment that Marcel Broodthaers portrayed with melancholic simplicity in his film *La pluie* (1969), in which one sees him trying to write a text under the rain, only to see how the ink dissolves in the water and impedes him from creating a story. The great narratives are no longer possible. At least, a single great narrative does not exist, that which emanates from a Western, white, masculine, heterosexual,

and healthy source, that which fuses hegemony, dominion, and authority. In other words, that which determines who could and who could not write history (of art). Now Altindere confronts us with the vision of the West, or more precisely, of Western art, of a Kurd woman in the living room of her home in which she has control of the parameters under which one sees art. Suddenly, two of the pillars of contemporary art – played out by men, whites, Anglo-Saxons, Germans in the majority – are held in the hands of a person who possibly had not ever thought of interfering in them.

Pop and Fluxus are just as present in Altindere's modus operandi. His use of disparate elements from the visual tradition of contemporary Turkey is Pop art, just as his practice of taking and altering symbolic elements of the system that he places under scrutiny. The *nüfus cüzdanı* or identity document is for Altindere what the tin of Campbell's soup is to Warhol: an immediately recognisable space to manipulate. Only that here it is much more charged with connotations. Other elements of his visual vocabulary are not properly Turkish, such as that wink to the use of the comic in *Homage to Mladen Stilinovic*. This Pop art attitude is also the source for that approach to contemporary anguish, lightened with a slight dose of cynicism and nostalgia. Just as Pop art is his taste for captivating and beautiful images and for gleaming, such as the dazzling gilding of *Mobese*.

Altindere has taken from Fluxus the link of the work of art with its revolutionary quality, adding to the "flood and tide" that George Maciunas called for. Likewise derived from Fluxus is the objection to the fetishisation of the work of art, the simplicity, the humour. The questioning of all art realised beforehand – or more precisely – of all forms of art practiced previously is drawn from the same source as well. Fluxus is the attitude of the thief in the portrait of Mehmed II in *Miss Turkey*, seemingly taken from a slapstick comedy. Surrounded by the police, and after threatening to shoot himself, he feints shooting the head depicted in the painting that he carries in his hands, as though by destroying the image of an oil painting he would finish off the icon. But perhaps most important, is that from Fluxus he takes his conception of art as performance or the result of a performative practice. Although formalised in various media, the action itself, or the trace of its result, traverses almost the entirety of his oeuvre.

The photographs also refer to the book, the object, and its significance. Turks have learned about art via books. In the pre-Internet era (*My Mother...* is from the same year when Google was founded), the book and the slide were the only ways to approach art. And it is precisely another book that allows us to continue penetrating the work of Altindere. *Das Kapital* is an object-sculpture from 2008. Once again a German is involved, since the work refers to *Capital*:

Critique of Political Economy by Karl Marx. If on the outside the book has a normal appearance, inside its pages have been precisely cut away to hold a revolver. Such weapons appear occasionally in his work: the revolver in *Russian Roulette with Curators*, the pistol held by the girlfriend as well as the thief in *Miss Turkey*, the weapon that is fired several times at the artist himself in *Who Shot the Artist?*. A literal reading of the work leads to a first conclusion. Capital and violence are assimilable. Nevertheless, it also leads to a second one: Is it legitimate to defend ideologies with arms? A source so apparently neutral and so incontestable such as UNESCO has written about the text of Marx's *Capital*: "The writings of Marx and Engels were rigidly interpreted and used to justify repression and the absolute control of the state over the individual. In many African, Asian and Latin American countries, Marxism was a main source of inspiration for liberation movements."¹ In other words, an object which is covered by an innumerable number of layers of ideologies, with ramifications that reach almost the totality of human activity and which has conditioned all of the subsequent political and economic thinking.

Sureyya Evren synthesises Altindere's ideological position as an anarchistic, anti-authoritarian critique, an opposition against conservative structures as well as against the orthodox policies of leftist Marxism. The same author also explains the incomprehension of Turkish leftism towards Altindere, which has ended by ignoring him. He rejects neoliberal dogmatism just as much. As René Block insists, Halil Altindere is not a strictly political artist, but an artist who thinks and acts politically. Barbara Heinrich remarks that as an agitator, Altindere stirs up discussion, conflict. Occasionally, this ideology takes form in more specific political issues, such as that of access to water in the dry lands of Anatolia that appears as a subplot in the *Mesopotamia Trilogy*. In any case, his work continually expresses a contestation of the notion of authority. Time and again, any hegemonic position, whether of power or control, is questioned, when not made an object of ridicule. At the same time, he takes a critical position as regards the concepts of nation, state, and at the very least questions the meaning commonly accepted of cultural identity.

That irony is one of his principal tools should therefore not surprise us in the least. Irony is one of the most effective mechanisms for questioning power, for challenging it and letting it fall into its own contradictions. Irony does not exist by itself: It occurs, it happens. It requires the complicity of the transmitter and the receiver. It occurs when someone says something and perhaps, only perhaps, actually wanted to say the opposite instead. For this reason the agreement between both parties that what has been said is ironic is indispensable. Irony represents an open field, open to multiple interpretations,

¹ Fuente: Unesco, 2012. Propuesta de inclusión en el Registro de la Memoria del Mundo a cargo de los Países Bajos y de Alemania.

a form of transferring the mental exercise to the observer. In short, a first-class political tool. Halil Altindere employs irony constantly. In general, his manner of employing it is by using the quotation of something already existing, but effecting a single change that alters its meaning completely. It is the case of a work previously cited, *Mobese*, in which he reproduces with precision a mast and telescopic cameras, yet in gleaming metal. The reproduction of an element of control inspired by one situated in the central square of Istanbul, Taksim, is contradictorily exalted in the museum, although perhaps doubly exposed: it makes visible what was made to not be seen. This type of activist micro-practice is what Nuria Enguita refers to in her essay in this catalogue: formulas that do not aim to confront the system in its entirety, but rather set in motion mechanisms of short-circuiting that “interfere, resist, and decolonise” certain symbolic spaces that seem beyond the reach of political debate.

Another more subtle variation of irony occurs in the work *Homage to Mladen Stilinovic*, which demonstrates Altindere’s reverential respect for the Croatian artist, his manner of understanding artistic practice, his commitment, and his ethics. The work is an oil painting on canvas in the form of a speech bubble with the phrase “An attack on my art is an attack on socialism and progress”. The painting is hung at a height that allows anyone who stands near the red wall to appropriate the phrase. This is a game of successive displacements, which each time add another level of irony. The artwork alludes to one of the slogans of Tito’s regime that stated, “An attack on the legacy of the Revolution is an attack on socialism and progress”. A sinister manifesto that condemned any dissidence: whoever criticises is against us. We can imagine that the phrase might have been continued with something along the lines of “and will therefore be purged.” In 1997 Mladen Stilinovic took this phrase and effected the first displacement, printing in Croatian “An attack on my art is an attack on socialism and progress” in red letters on a pink background. Thirty-five years later, Altindere realises a second displacement in creating this work. The third displacement is the appropriation that the visitor makes when he or she stands underneath the speech bubble. In each one of them a new level of irony is added, each time refuting the unfortunate origin of the work a little more.

Sometimes this irony can lead to the absurd. The illogical, the paradoxical, or the incoherent are often linked to one another in Altindere’s work. At a first watching, *Miss Turkey* strings together situations that challenge normality, such as two teams playing volleyball on the street, taking advantage of the red traffic lights. The powerful scene in *Oracle*, in which a man dressed in a business suit surfs on an ironing board in the centre of a reservoir, contrasts with the minaret, which is real, that emerges from the reservoir’s waters.

In his text written for this publication, Charles Esche refers to the enlargement of geographic and conceptual horizons experienced by art after the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*. In the 1990s globalisation accelerated to speeds unconceivable till then. This interest in the non-Western grew with each one of the new biennales, to the point of questioning the very concept of “Western”, itself perhaps the greatest Western invention. I would like to insert a brief personal note here. I got to know Halil Altindere in Istanbul during the winter of 2006. We met in the lobby of the Grand Hotel de Londres, where I was staying. After a long talk he responded to my invitation to carry out a project in Barcelona, an exhibition with only one work produced specifically for that show, with a negative answer. Altindere mentioned then that he only exhibited his work in group exhibitions. Individual shows did not form part of his expectations nor his interests. Those great global conventions, rooted in the arguments that Esche explains, have taken him to Documenta or the Sharjah Biennale, places where art itself is tested. Wandering the craggy terrain of institutional critique, he sets out to address the “assumed normalities” employed in contemporary art. Normalities that imply assuming as incontestable certain forms of producing, contextualising, and receiving art, just as much as those that have to do with its insertion as goods in a market. Normalities that maybe are not that normal.

In Sharjah the operation was relatively simple. After noticing the solemn portrait of the Sheikh in the entrance to the museum hosting the exhibition, Altindere proposed its duplication, installing this other portrait in such a way as to reveal a closed safe whose contents remain hidden from us. However, at Documenta 12 the process became more complicated. *15 Minutes of Freedom* was the title of his unrealised work, which incidentally brings us back to Pop Art and the period of fame that Warhol conceded to every mortal. A work whose realisation caused difficulties for almost all of its interlocutors. The idea was simple. Parodying several well-known real or cinematographic prison escapes, he proposed preparing a group of inmates from the local prison to be hung with all the necessary safety apparatuses from a helicopter so that they could visit the Documenta from the air. The selected inmates were those with the longest sentences, for whom the quarter of an hour of flight could represent one of the few moments of – literally – feeling the wind of freedom in their faces. Altindere, moreover, confronted one of the overall ideas for the 2007 Documenta, the fragility of human existence, by suspending a man in mid-air. At the same time, he questioned the insertion of the work in the confused panorama of an exhibition as materially and conceptually ambitious as Documenta. In practice it was all not so simple and his proposal collided against the institutions. Ultimately, accepting the impossibility of realising it, his work *Dengbêjs* was

shown instead, the video that constitutes the first part of the *Mesopotamian Trilogy*, together with *Mirage* and *Oracle*.

As I write these lines, a few weeks before the exhibition's inauguration, Altindere is still working on *The Monument of the Illegal Street Vendor*. This is not the first wax statue that the artist has made after the enigmatic man of *Telephone call from Istanbul* or the minuscule *Guard*, a guard who inspires little confidence given his small stature. The street vendor is once again one of those socially invisible persons whom Altindere grants full prominence. He is placed in front of his wares, probably in the streets of Istanbul. He sells those copies of handbags by Prada or Gucci that populate the sidewalks of half of the world's cities and which make up a sizable percentage of global commerce. An illegal hawking illegal merchandise. Culture or cultures? Essentialism or hybridisation? Asks Esche in his text. A black man, probably of African origin, sells, in the streets of a meeting place between Orient and Occident, handbags designed in Europe and meant to be sold in wealthy countries, from the United States to the Gulf States to Japan, but manufactured clandestinely in Southeast Asia. A Pop metaphor for a new order whose map no one has yet been able to draw, perhaps because it is impossible, but for which Altindere provides us with the tools for critical analysis.

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