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Halil The Hype

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1

We are in 2019. This is a year of “moon fever” – the 50th anniversary of man landing on the moon. Conquest of the outer space by man. The image of the astronaut are becoming “trendy” again. However, it’s also interesting to note that, at the same time, for the last few years, what was one of the hottest topics across the world was much less glorious: the fate of refugees of civil wars and other dire situations of humanity have become preoccupied by many across the world. Images of human disasters have been circulating side by side with some of the most glamorous ones of human success... One must ask: who is a real human? Who are we? Are we heroes and losers? Are we angels or devils? At the end, we are probably both in one body, and just like all planets, all existence of things and life has always a bright side and a dark side; and they are always mingled... which one should we trust and embrace? Eventually, what is real and what is unreal? Searching for truth can lead to violent conflicts and wars because those in power always tend to hide the truth from us. Eventually, are we creating monsters that are out of our control and potentially destroy us? Or, in fact, are we creatively – through our desires, imaginations, fantasies and their “artistic” and technological implementations, or, industrial and cultural products, destroying our own lives?

Can this kind of opposing but intrinsically connected aspects be reconciliated? Or we are destined to live within the uncanny conditions that they both set up for us all together? A couple of years ago, in his exhibition in N.B.K. Berlin(2016), Halil Altindere already celebrated the event of Moon Landing. He did it in his own way, with a direct concern with “The Dark Side of the Moon”: He took up the job of combining a space engineer and a humanitarian activist to design a “Space Refugee Colony” on the Mars for refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., rejected by many European countries. The outer space seems to be the only place where the refugees can find shelters. Then, he invited Muhammed Ahmed Faris, a former hero of space conquest and current war refugee recounting his story of raise and fall in the geopolitical history of his “motherland” Syria, and across the entire Arabic world. In the meantime, one can experience landing on Mars wearing a VR device... Faris’s story, as well as the sufferance of the refugees are so true. On the other hand, all together, things appear to be so surrealistic, like in a real Science Fiction!

This overlapping and blending of reality and fiction, the real and the surreal, with the help of the VR device, in the spatial environment created by the artist, provided us a kind of “augmented” perception of reality. This, magically, generates a perceptive

mode that is able to turn the real even more real, namely, “hyper-real”. However, they are absolutely unreal.

The artist, as a central strategy of his work, plays a game that intrigues and defies our conventional perception of the real:

*“In Carpet Land, I wanted to make a piece of that looked like Land Art, but which wasn’t really. I wanted it to look fictional, to look staged, but it was staged. It resembles the gesture that I want to make through the hyperrealistic sculptures too: because they look so real, but when you approach you realize that they are not real.”*¹

However, the truth is that this is a new world in which the catastrophic reality of violence, wars and poverty can turn someone like Faris, a national hero, into a homeless refugee – not to mention those “average” citizens. At the same time, the ultimate symbol of the triumph of modernity and progress made by man – Moon Landing and exploration of Mars – can also be seen as the origin of the disaster since all these greatest achievements are results of competitions between super powers, which, ironically, have always been launched for the goal of creating peace for the world, at the price of sacrificing the lives of thousands of hundreds in various forms of conflicts. More complicated and dangerous is that this can lead to an ultimate mutation and self-destruction of humanity itself. Hannah Arendt’s 1963 comments on our conquest of space pungently brings the question to the point:

“At this moment, the prospects for such an entirely beneficial development and solution of the present predicaments of modern science and technology do not look particularly good. We have come to our present capacity to “conquer space” through our new ability to handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth. ... All our pride in what we can do will disappear into some kind of mutation of the human race; the whole of technology, seen from this point, in fact no longer appears “as the result of a conscious human effort to extend man’s material powers, but rather as a large-scale biological process.” Under these circumstances, speech and everyday language would indeed be no longer a meaningful utterance that transcends behavior even if it only expresses it, and it would much better be replaced by the extreme and in itself meaningless formalism of mathematical signs.

*The conquest of space and the science that made it possible have come perilously close to this point. If they ever should reach it in earnest, the stature of man would not simply be lowered by all standards we know of, but have been destroyed.”*²

Half a century later, we have much more developed technologies and hence managed to live in a much more comfortable, convenient and “smarter” environments while our imaginations of our future and even our mutation as human

¹ “Halil Altindere in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist”, in “n.b.k. Ausstellungen, Band 21, Halil Altindere”, Berlin, 2016, Verlag der Burchhandlung Walter König, Köln, p.58

² Hannah Arendt : The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man, 1963,

<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-conquest-of-space-and-the-stature-of-man>

race in much more audacious and “heroic” way. Post-Trans-Humanity is in vogue. One can now even imagine to “solve” the problem of human trauma caused by the human conflicts and violence – with conquest of the space as its ultimate symbol – by transferring the problem of refugees to the space itself. Arendt’s warnings becomes even more accurate and timely.

Once again, we have to pose the very classical questions raised by Paul Gauguin again: “Where Do We Come ? What Are We? Where Are We Going?”

2

In fact, Halil Altindere began all his work as an artist, and as a human being, by juggling with these questions: originated in the Eastern part of Turkey from a Kurdish family and now living in Istanbul, the “modernized heart” of Turkey – a nation-state somehow artificially founded and developed upon the process of political-economic-cultural transformation of the world driven by the expansion of Modernity, he would be among the first to raise this kind of questions since he has always been experiencing with the most complicated conditions of existence. But Halil Altindere’s own raise, as well as those of several generations of his “compatriots”, incarnates intensively the process of living through the process of the construction and evolution of this modern nation – a reality thrived from a kind of mythical and even utopian ideal of total revolution to transform a collapsing empire into a secular realm – and its recent deconstruction in the name of “post-modernization”. In the process, a reality has been born out of a political fiction, the Kemalist secular and Westernized nation-state. Then, it has been gradually replaced by another fiction that is turning itself into another reality... Between the real and the unreal, there is no longer real distinctions. One has to trust what one “sees” as the real thing. But, it collapses immediately. This process of collapse, full of activities and violence, happens in a way that no one can actually comprehensively perceive, and, therefore, understand reasonably. All real things are turned into unreal again, or, in fact, larger than real, therefore, hyper-real!

It’s in this wresting with the tension between the real and the hyper-real that Halil has to question his, and his contemporaries’, identity and destiny:

Am I a Kurd? A Turk? Or, a world citizen? Where can we find the proper place for one who carries all these?

Then he became aware, these are all false questions: indeed, it’s all about how to survive in the social, economic, cultural and political conditions that impose these categories on every individuals. The problem is who is ruling the world, and who is being ruled... and how all these are happening. In other words, how has the power system been unfolding to form the society in which everyone is assigned a role? And this process is the essential force to format the conditions of our life, namely “reality”, in which everyone has to choose one’s way to survive through confrontations and conflicts one another. In other words, the reality is a battle field

full of confrontations between various camps: the powerful, the rich, the marginalized, the poor... Here, Halil Altindere is particularly interested in exploring and manifesting the way how the marginalized survive and attempt to exist with dignity. Starting from himself being a Kurdish young man looking for a position in the impossible negotiation with his own identity complex and the historic-political pressure – his early works *Dancing with Taboo* (banknote and ID) (1998) and *Hard & Light* (1998) in which the political destiny of the nation, the fate of the self and the power of money, as well as sexuality, are messed up together, among others, are pungent examples. Then, having moved to the metropolitan city of Istanbul, he turned his attention to people who shared similar conditions of survival at the margin, those who live on the street. In *Who U Looking At* (2002) and *Miss Turkey* (2005), using a basic handheld video camera, he tried to awaken our attention to watch events which are “usually invisible” – homeless street kids, little actions of disturbance of urban order...

Then, at a certain point, Halil Altindere decided to make his representation of the marginal people in a more “monumental” form. He resorted to a classical mode of representation of historic figures: wax sculpture. Instead of making statues of political or cultural celebrities, he introduced those quasi-anonymous “little men” that he encountered every day on the street, often “illegal” or homeless. *Pala the Bard* (2008) is a replica of a man named “Pala” hanging around on the main commercial street Istiklal Caddesi, dressed in full costume decorated with pins with Turkish nationalist emblems such as the national flag, portraits of Ataturk as well as Islamic prayer beads... *Guard* (2012) is a dwarf dressed in security guard uniform, at once serious and amusing; *The Monument to An Illegal Street Vendor* (2012) presents a whole scene of an illegal street vendor – probably a undocumented African refugee – selling counterfeit designer bags; then, a *Mad Man* (2008), hiding at a street corner, with a gun in his hand, seems to wait for the right moment to commit an act of murdering... These are not only 3-D images of marginalized people. More critically, turning their living bodies into “hyper realistic” replicas in wax, with full details and “true colours”, they are by no means vivid re-rendering of their living bodies. Instead, they have been abstracted from their living contexts, emptied of their internal substance – spirits and souls. They always stare emptily into the void as if they came from the land of no-hope, and were heading for the realm of the no-future. They are suspended in an endless in-betweenness... a hyperreal limbo.

Being shown together, these wax statues can form a scene. But this is a kind of Beckettian scene: empty, uncertain, eternally waiting for the coming of someone, actually, of something, with a sense. In other words, they form the most typical “social space” of a society in which shopping has, under a system of totalitarian control by the economic and political “1 percent”, replaced literally all forms of human exchange. With the development of “social media”, in this ultimate age of consumerism prompted by the mode of online existence, this system can only render every individual much less singular and much more unsocial... In this light, Halil Altindere’s wax statues, rather than incarnations of individual characters, are in fact closer to 3-D printed objects. Once realized, they have lost all singularities and become the Same, instead of the “Selfsame”, as Byung-Chul Han described in his

“The Expulsion of the Other”³. In other words, they are portraits of ourselves “living” in a collective mode of non-existence in this time of the domination of “the Global”⁴, in this age of “Capitalist Realism” – to borrow Mark Fisher’s concept – when the ideology and dominance of the capital has become omnipresent and indispensable like air, appearing in diverse forms ranging from neoliberalism to “social democracy” as well as “a *Children of Men*-like authoritarianism”.⁵

Signs, or, representations of the capital power is everywhere. Artworks are now often seen as signs of success in this omnipresent system of value rather than expressions of human emotions, aspirations, imaginations and social ideals, or the sensible as Jacques Rancière incited us to share⁶. The cult of the Capital is an indispensable form of expression of the imposed faith to the power of the capital and a practice of political correctness for everyone. Its utmost representation can be found in the colour of Gold! Fetishism of gold is everywhere. Halil Altindere understands it perfectly and decides to appropriate it in many of his works as the best way to denounce the alienating reality looming upon very details of our life space. He applies the strategy of *détournement* to produce some fetishist objects that blend together symbols of wealth, power and violence. But they appear to be uncanny and surrealistic: *Golden Gun* (2015), with four triggers, alludes both to Meret Oppenheim’s *Fur Cup* (1936) and James Bond’s high-tech gadgets in the film series 007 – in fact, it was used in one of Altindere’s own “action film” as a prop. Then, in *Hrant* (2015), he forged gold coins in memory of Hrant Dink, the murdered Turkish journalist of Armenian origin and longtime dissident of the government: does political resistance, eventually, have to end up becoming a sign of wealth? On the other hand, we now live in an age of total surveillance and control. Every move one makes is systematically recorded and recognized by the authorities. Should we celebrate this ultimate success of technological “progress” leading to a “perfect harmony” of society⁷? Setting up a golden pole with four golden CCTV cameras, in *Mobese* (2011), does Halil Altindere suggest that CCTV, plated with gold, has then become the most beautiful Totem that everyone should worship to?

“This is the best era, people don’t need freedom!” A Chinese rocker Li Zhi sang this and got banned by the authorities recently.⁸ And this kind of censorship is also no news in Turkey, and everywhere else across the globe. But more censorships happen, more artists try to invent astute ways to divert it and counter attack it, often

³ Byung-Chul Han : *The Expulsion of The Other*”, Polity, Cambridge, 2018, ref. 1. *The Terror of the Same*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Fisher : *Capitalist Realism, Is There No Alternative?* O Books, Winchester, UK, Washington, USA, 2009 P. 78

⁶ Jacques Rancière: *La Partage du Sensible*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2000. also ref. www.multitudes.net/le-partage-du-sensible/

⁷ For example, to achieve the realization of a “harmonious society”, the Chinese Communist Party and government has been developing an omnipresent system of surveillance in all public spaces with over 200 million CCTV cameras so far while it owns the most powerful internet fire walls and online control system monitoring almost all communications between citizens. A new “Social Credit” system is rapidly put in place to control the every behaviours of every inhabitant... More and more countries are inspired by this kind of “innovative” technologies and adopt it voluntarily as a policing tool.

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www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3012782/outspoken-folk-rock-singer-li-zhi-disappears-china-tightens, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKYfH3N9KzA>

with playfulness, humour and irony. Altindere's Mobese is a brilliant example of such an counter attack.

3

Popular culture, entertainment of all sorts – television series, action films and folkloric music, etc. are another key element to format our mode of perception of the real world – we tend to resort to an alternative world of imagination, through entertainment, to escape from the hardship of reality. Halil Altindere, like many of his artist friends, is deeply interested in appropriating the forms of popular entertainments and turn them into his own means of social critique. In his films *Angels of Hell* (2014), *Escape from Hell* (2016), he set up scenes of violent gang fights mingling with kitsch romance, as well as cowboy style adventures, shifting between luxurious urban street and remote exotic “no-man’s lands”. Then, in works like *Wonderland* (2013), rap music helped Altindere to probe into the urgent problem of gentrification as result of neoliberal globalization while *Homeland* (2016), mixing all kinds of trendy ways of living, from Yoga practicing to drone piloting, provided the most sarcastic background for us to confront the burning challenge of the crisis of refugees... In these films, the antagonists are all kinds of power gamers. On the top, there are rich businessmen, brutal drug dealers, complotting politicians and transgender celebrities, At the bottom, there are street kids, poor peasants and innocent victims of geopolitical wars, namely refugees... When the top ones play, they carry out insane acts of corruption and violence – exaggerated actions turn them into ridiculous jokes and bad comedies. Then, at the bottom, the unpowered population tried to find out whatever possible solutions to continue to live, even attacking the police and finding ways to fly over the barbed wires stopping them on their way of exile... However, this kind of seemingly comic scenarios are in fact deeply tragic. They are “hyper realistic” pictures of the Turkish society, and probably, all the society in our era – “the best one ever”!

Despite of deeply involving with fiction making, Halil Altindere has never left the real street. He always returns to the busy streets of Istanbul, among others. In his inquiry of the meaning of the real in the society of Capitalist Realism, Halil mounted a powerful and incongruous spectacle in the street. For his exhibition at the Yapi Kredi Cultural Center, Istanbul in 2008, instead of using the interior space of exhibition. He decided to close up the center and install the “hyperrealistic” wax replica of Pala the Bard in front of the gallery, right in the heart of the busy Istiklal Caddesi, where the original figure was always seen by the passersby loitering – in fact, Pala had become an integrate part of the street-scape. However, this gesture of re-situating has by no means rendered his sculpture alive like Pygmalion. On the contrary, this “recontextualization” only makes him look even more empty, more “dead”... And eventually, he, or, in fact, it, can only be seen, or, appreciated(?!), as a perfect incarnation of the dead body of the Society of the Spectacle as Guy Debord qualified.

Then, how to render creation, or the making of the real, really alive again? The street remains the most fertile ground for this kind of endeavor. The question is not only how to reintroduce the “performative” mode of representation. It's more efficient to

act directly in social events – in other words, carrying out “direct actions” to provoke actual social change. As a first step towards this kind of experiment, he turned a police car upside down to become a *Monument of Direct Democracy* (2009, Berlin). Then in 2013, he collaborated with the workers of a bankrupted clothes factory (Kazova) in Istanbul. After intense protest actions, the workers took up the failed factory and organized themselves into a cooperative to relaunch the production. To support their action, Halil Altindere invited his friends from the art and culture world to mount a street event, a fashion *défilé* in the middle of the busy Şişli district. The fashion show, echoing the Gezi park occupation and protest next door, was unfolded in a carnivalesque ambiance, with music, dance and beautiful people wearing T-shirts printed with images of tools of protest and the sacred phrase: # *resistanbul*... For once, in the mood of festivity, an economic and social trauma was turned into a “happy end”, or a “happy beginning” for a possible new life. A common dream of achieving a better future was realized for a while and shared by people of different social classes. This is a spectacle of living ones. We are no longer beholder but participators in the making of the spectacle... How much time can it sustain? How much time can it last before it’s turned into a “hyper realistic” representation? It’s the real question. And the hyper Halil has tried a lot of thing to answer it...

Rome, 3 August 2019