

NOISE AND TRANSLATION: REMAPPING HABITUS ACROSS THE US/TURKEY BORDER

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Theorist Gayatri Spivak wrote of the politics of translation as being intrinsic to the construction of meaning if one looks at language as being central to that locus of meaning. Asking the question of why recurrent issues emerge is not enough, but examination of the phenomenology of dialogue between these milieux can lend insight into the experiences of who have traversed spaces which, in their own way, have been everything yet nothing.

Gayatri Spivak wrote of the politics of translation as being intrinsic to the construction of meaning if one looks at language as being central to that locus of meaning. But we can use the distance between root languages (Altaic for Turkish and Anglo-Frisian for English) as metaphor for distance between cultures, to the disjuncture of a notion of home, the translation of meaning, identity, and trans-mapping of cultural mythologies. For many artists crossing into the position of geographical otherness, the issues of translation, dislocation, and nomadism reemerge within the work. How does translation of alterity of space, time, culture and identity evidence itself through the milieu of cultural production? Asking the question of why recurrent issues emerge is not enough, but examination of the phenomenology of dialogue between these milieux can lend insight into the experiences of artists who have traversed spaces which, in their own way, have been everything yet nothing. This is not a space of universals, but a heterogeneous discursive space arising from the shock of dislocation. For our purposes, this disjuncture involves America, the fading center of the world, and Turkey part of Europe, Middle East, and Eurasia and center of Byzantium, the reemergent center of the world. In this paper, we will examine works by Turkish and Anglo-American artists who have either worked, studied, or created in the other country. In doing so, we will explore points of translation, transmapping of meaning, and concurrent cultural threads, not insofar to reduce this matrix of relationships, but to consider points of liminality expressed by the work of these artists. This simultaneous locus of commonality and dislocation becomes the expression of "others" who have themselves been influenced by that "other" place to reflect on their own hybridity and alterity.

As a brief aside, I believe that this process of cross pollination is part of a rich historical conversation over the past 150 years, starting with Osman Hamdi and the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Istanbul. This continued with the Military Painters, A and B schools of the Early 20th century, who were in dialogue with European artists and schools[1]. More recently, the Istanbul Biennale has been a lively forum for cross cultural conversation, and some argue constitutes a key platform for the emergence of the Contemporary in Turkey. Of note are the Third "Production of Cultural Difference" [2] which expanded its scope under the leadership of Director: **Vasif Kortun** and the Eighth, under the curatorial leadership of ProspectOne curator Dan Cameron. This last instance has led to his curation of the first show at the C24 gallery, the first Gallery in Chelsea NYC that focuses on Turkish Contemporary art [3]. All these events are merely a trajectory of Turkey's interaction with Western contemporary art, and is the subject of a book in itself.

But what are key to the work of many artists working across borders are issues of transcultural translation, liminality, politics, notions of home, and mappings of mythologies, of which we will discuss translation first, which is core to the process of cross-cultural interpretation. Gayatri Spivak, in her *Politics of Translation* [4] writes of the dialectic between logic and rhetoric, where between the regular logical order of words, sentences and paragraphs lie the pauses and gaps that constitute rhetoric. The logico-rhetorical dialectic intrinsic to translation creates semilologic “frayings” that present many risks. These include violence to the subject through misreading and colonization of the other. However, Spivak also posits that the desire to translate creates other discourses. The desire to translate is borne from a love of the subject and as such, creates a space for the cohabitation of the subject and the translator. Even though the translator cannot inhabit the location of the other, the creation of a space in which the translator can attempt to identify or empathize with that other out of love for the subject. This, I propose, serves as a plausible situation for many of the artists here, and as an apologia for any mismappings I may author here.

Another notion that emerges in the work is the notion of home, its construction, habits, and the role that global nomadism plays in cultural production. In a workshop that I co-facilitated at the Cura Bodrum residency on the Bodrum Peninsula in Turkey, the consensus was that we construct the notion of home through aspects of the Heimlich by bonding home to a place, things, or people, like family or colleagues. In addition, home could be ascribed to sets of habitual practices, as suggested by Chicago-Istanbul artist Sevgi Aka.[5] However, this is challenged when individual enters Deleuzian nomadism that moves the body across space, which breaks the hegemonic discourse of boundaries such as those imposed by the nation state. This is in agreement with David Morely, in *Home territories: media, mobility and identity*[6], that describes a “geographical promiscuity” and deterritorializes the individual from practices of language and custom of their point of origin. This creates a liminal mode of being, establishing a space of alterity where one’s identity may have a starting point for its vector of flight, becomes, as Bhabha would put it, hybridized [6] – being an aggregate of experiences accumulated while in the process of motion. It has been said, “We are all aliens”, and perhaps it is the contention of the notion of home that brings this assertion into relief. We are Others when in the other country, but also return as dislocated/deterritorialized aliens as well, or at least arrive less familiar with the implication of home.

Hale Ekinci, in her *Alligator Skin Box: Memoirs of a Young Nomad* [7] playfully intersperses her nomadic dislocation of self through a series of surreal vignettes mixing her experiences in Turkey and Chicago that have existed as online media, single-channel projection, and interactive sculpture. In pre-release versions (not seen here), all her pieces are subtitled phonetically in English, but with the Turkish alphabet. Therefore, “I should do that” would be spelled with Turkish descenders for the “sh” and the like. Stories like her childhood neighbor Arzu distributing bulgur balls out her apartment window and her boyfriend being eaten by an alligator skin box on a bus take on an added disjunctive quality when subjected to the act of subtitling (reserved for foreign movies). It becomes more so when that subtitling is a transcoded/transcultural language barely accessible to either culture. Ekinci is a Deleuzian nomad who has slipped the bounds of her borders, but now inhabits both and neither. But what happens when the communication between cultures shifts to that between species?

Zeren Goktan’s *Aboveground*[8] chronicles the activities of Eastern “pigeon-raisers” who have analogues in Europe and the US, but has very ingrained traditions in the areas she studies. Within the video, the pigeon raisers exhibit great intimacy with their birds, handling them with great care, their hands resembling forms of sign language, signaling a resemblance to interspecies translation. Goktan relates that this avocation is male-centered, although she constantly searches for women engaged in the practice, to no avail. This “hobby”, as the men state, keeps them from what is considered less desirable activities,

such as frequenting coffee houses and playing cards. Furthermore, what is discovered is that this is one of the few spaces in which the men can actually openly love. *Aboveground* examines an expected space of male predominance which is also a site of intimate translation, which is interesting for its relation to its culture as well as its relation to the global nature of the practice.

Iz Oztat's *Reliquary*[9] inhabits another sacred space, that of the reliquary. The work mimics a reliquary of the Prophet in which was related to this author contained a tooth. In this case, Oztat has placed an heirloom seed in the place of the sacred tooth. Such a placement suggests the holiness of the seed in future days in light of genomics, but also calls into focus critical issues of human agency. Placed in context of the referent (an Islamic reliquary) the dialogue of the tooth with the seed calls into question a faith in the Prophet (tooth) with seed as signifier of human agency or holiness of Creation. The question that comes to mind is critical discourses about corporations such as Monsanto and the primacy of nature bring forth a complex narrative, especially when placed in the context of a farm in the Midwestern United States, which is where it was exhibited.

Chicago/Istanbul artist Sevgi Aka's *Gulf Gossip* project[10] is based on the interjection of noise into subsequent rounds of transmission and how we increasingly misunderstand one another with as stages of translation increase, like the classic "telephone game". Based on Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Happen*, mediations of the event, in this case, depictions of the Gulf War, are reiterated by successive redrawings of representations of Gulf War images. All but one of the participants are female, between the ages of 9 and 81, and the subject abstracts with successive stages, taking forms of nature scenes and increasingly generic affective responses as time progresses and entropy increases. This piece comes from Aka's frustration with global mediation of the subject, with the injection of noise into the mise en scene with successive iterations of retelling, and the commonalities and misunderstandings these communication presents, cross cultural or not. This translocation of information also plays itself out in terms of identity as well as the nomadic individual inhabits the globs and McLuhan's global village of information.

The mapping of information as identity and political representation plays a central role in Ali Mi-harbi's *Delegations*. As the visitor interacts with the piece, which consists of an LCD display and camera combination, they "see a real-time processed image of their faces, constructed using the combination of statistically extracted face features of that country's members of the parliaments." [11] *Delegations* is a representation of political representation as identity of the viewer, framing her in terms of the political landscape of the country of exhibition (Turkey, South Korea, or Mexico). This piece calls into question the fracturing of mediated identity, not only in Donna Haraway's cyborg agglomerate structure, but also the composite identity of the political individual in terms of the place the piece is viewed.

The idea of place is dealt with in N. Eden Unluata's series of books on urban excavations[12]. In this series, Unluata constructs a truly nomadic space, in this case from the artifacts of Paris or Montreal or Istanbul by enacting a series of chance operations for collage within his book-as-doorway. While in the third space (especially Paris), he engaged colleagues from Turkey and the US through Facebook as random number generators so that he could select entries from phone books, video collections, and other ephemera. The door is a liminal space that suggests passage, perhaps for him as much as the visitor-interactor as they peruse the contained videos (via iPod), images, and texts. The *Urban Excavations* are a place where he and the visitor occupy a liminal third space between places by placing all the excavations of place within the door while potentially occupying none. This also is congruent with his audio piece, *Digital Tunnel*, in which he deals with being of mixed birth, and is not "X" (insert identity here)

enough, and chooses to drill a “digital tunnel” into his countr(y/ies) of exile, and exist as a cybernetic nomad.

But when speaking about liminal discourses in transcultural art of artists who have occupied the opposite space, it is important to mention the work of Chantal Zakari and Mike Manden in their book, *The State of Ata*. [13] Manden identifies as American Jewish, while Zakari is Levantine Turk, as signified in their book project, *The Turk and the Jew*, places them at times in a minority position either in the US or Turkey. This fact gives rise to sharp irony when speaking of a famous photograph of Zakari holding a portrait of Mustafa Kemal, (also known as Atatürk, the father of the modern Turkish state) before a Islamist parade in Ankara. The result was a mass media sensation in Turkey, where Kemalist and Islamist positions sought to place the image, and Zakari and Manden with it, as everything from a heroine of the Republic to promoters of Israeli propaganda. However, at a 2011 talk at the School of the Art Institute [12], they stated that the photo was purely taken as a composition for the book *State of Ata*, and the media controversy placed them as a fulcrum between contrasting politics outside their original intentions.

The enmeshing of the political upon the space of the other is no stranger to New Media. American Andy Deck created *AntiWar404* as part of the 2010 Istanbul WebBiennial. As Deck states, *AntiWar404* “catalogs the various anti-war initiatives that have gone offline since the rise of the Web in the 1990s (with thousands of projects started in opposition to wars in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. But these online media projects have tended to be unfunded and temporary.” [13] The site catalogues these now absent sites in an elegiac move as a global gesture towards cyber-amnesia and the elision of memory in the age of Google. Deck’s sensibility is also reflected in a 2010 interview with Alper Güngörmüşler, Deck reflects on his time as a teacher in Izmir in 2005-6 where the IT department of the university where he taught had banned articles from CNN because they contained the word “nude”. The problem is, as Deck states, that “In understanding how people reconcile themselves with limitations of their freedom and awareness, you can go a long way towards understanding culture and ideology.” This is not to say that the US does not censor certain sites, such as Wikileaks, but Deck’s discourse seeks a comparative dialogue between cultures that shows the ideological terrain of any society through the examination of the disjunctures of what is allowed to be seen and what is unseen.

Another existential disjuncture experienced by cross-cultural artists is that of cultural mythologies, that is the mythology of the other that is brought into relief through the shock of the real. In Mark Slankard’s *Toplu: Landscapes of New Turkish Suburbia*, he documents the emergence of the large-scale residencies of Toplu Konut, beginning in 2008 [14]. Many of these sites are just placed upon empty fields on the outskirts of Istanbul, either in degrees of completion or as neat high-rise condominiums. He also contrasts this with *gecekondu*, or quickly built residencies constructed without permit on public land. The contrast of these sites is stark, and differs sharply from the mythological romantic landscape of palaces, mosques and ruins of Slankard’s guidebooks.

The difference between the romanticized and the real is also illustrated in Patrick Lichty’s panoramic series, *Modern Ruins* [15] captured through composite cellphone images on the Bodrum Peninsula. The sites illustrate construction that he infiltrated during the summer of 2010 which began “on speculation” and then lie fallow when potential buyers failed to materialize the sites. These include unbuilt apartment buildings, similar to Slankard, and hillside villas. These structures merely add to the barnacle-like encrustation of white structures on the idyllic peninsula. *Modern Ruins* Lichty’s extant work with sub/urban sprawl and juxtaposes it with the idealized landscape of the Classical ruin. In the body of

work, there is also the 400 B.C. Bodrum Ampitheatre behind chain link fence contrasted against an abandoned contemporary spa, giving an abject read of the projected image of the romanticized ruin, and in part, correlating it to narratives of global millennial sprawls.

Conclusion

Upon engaging this topic, I realize that there are many more artists that could be included, and that many more dialogues could be engaged. The threads of inquiry discussed herein are only a few of a complex skein of interaction for which an entire thesis could be written. Furthermore I would like to be self-reflexive and problematize my propositions and artistic correlations as possibly being coincidental or merely results of the human condition. Ascribing commonalities to large sets of works using just the parameters of cross-cultural habitation runs the risk of conceptual colonization. However, I would like to argue that although heterogenous, I believe that there are effects of cross-habitation that have created certain discourses in these artists work, and reflect the cross-pollination between our cultures, however directly or indirectly. The cultural differences between Turkey and North America represent a degree of alterity to one another that the impact of the other and the translation of experience is a transformative one. In this essay, I have considered the issues of translation, alterity, identity, the notion of home, and mythology as touchstones on a much larger conversation of commonality and difference. Global society and recent economic and political situations events are bringing the US and Turkey closer together. As curators like Cameron and the artists in this essay explore the transcultural space between our two regions, this cultural exchange will not become only useful, but necessary. It is my hope that this exploration yields useful insights into the trans-art of the dialogue of US and Turkish cultures, and such a dialogue will grow and bear much more fruit.

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