

## Totalitarians Concealed in the Storage Space of Individuality

**The group exhibition “When the Present is History”, with contributions by international artists, and Dilek Winchester’s exhibition “Attending the Void” objectify the universal struggle of the individual with the social and the totalitarian using the at times surprising, ungraspable language of contemporary art.**

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Curated by Daphne Vitali, the exhibition “When the Present is History” is on view at Depo until November 11. As I viewed the exhibition both during the opening and upon a second visit, I was able to perceive how Istanbul was already so familiar with this statement.

What triggered me to think this was as I walked down from Galata to Karaköy—accompanied by the artist and art critic Begüm Bitir<sup>1</sup>, who had walked around wearing a hijab at last year’s Contemporary Istanbul art fair, making visible the quickened heart palpitations of art enthusiasts—I had seen a coffee mug at a design store. “They call it chaos. We call it Istanbul.”

First of all, “When the Present is History” is an act of exhibiting that exposes the spirit of our times in various forms and shapes, revealing how the right and the wrong, the legitimate and the illegitimate, the trustworthy and the unreliable play hide and seek in this tough, chaotic, self-gestating cosmos. Supported by Goethe Institut, Foundation for Art Initiatives and SAHA, the event brings together 17 international artists on the two floors of the institution in this country where the now becomes “history” moment by moment, becoming a visual rally in this “just environment” where the business man Osman Kavala, who is the founder and the initiator of Anadolu Kültür, the institution behind Depo, has been imprisoned for two years.

Doubt is the most important guide to this exhibition en route to the shared de facto/active reality, also called the “public conscience” by some. It is such that this place functions as a social laboratory that is able to draw people across disciplines, including those of communication, sociology, psychology as well as academic fields, supported by the labors of tens of people and functioning as an “identification terminal.” The event demands an extended time, an instinct of comparative analysis and an absence of prejudice from its viewers.

The works perform an autopsy “from tape” to the genetics of the image and the form or the text and the documentary, almost constructed with a textual, documentary collective character. An international debate, both aesthetic and demographic, is produced with the viewers as well as with their own contents. Contemporary artists from Turkey, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Germany, France, Czechia, Serbia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Belgium and the USA, present to us valuable works that constantly deal with the Bermuda triangle of news, discourse, and ideology.

For example, the 27-minute, two-channel media installation Malastrada film-*An Anthropological Television Myth* (2011) takes as its departure point the TV channel archives across Italy, bringing to Depo the social and political implosions of the country between 1990 and 1994 through images and sounds that are coming off of two different boxes, not dissimilar to puzzle pieces. The work by M. H. Bertino, D. Castelli & A. Gagliardo carries the potential of the archive producing a conflict with its own constitution and its function, enabling a criticism to emerge on the presence (or absence) of “media”. As the academic Yusuf Devran touched on in his work *News-Discourse-Ideology*, this two-channel video installation produces an important self-criticism about the “rhetorical elements that are frequently used in news.” These rhetorical elements are not able to distance themselves from the critical arrows of many of the works at Depo. According to Devran’s thesis,<sup>2</sup> these are listed as “repetition, comparison, exemplification, providing evidence, using witnesses, depending on expert opinion, using metaphors, irony, definition, making use of vowel

<sup>1</sup> <http://begumbitir.com/portfolio/items/face-of-the-other/>

<sup>2</sup> Yusuf Devran, *Haber, Söylem, İdeoloji*, Başlık Yayın Grubu, 2010

harmony, creating rhymes and rhythm, producing seriality.” In other words, the exhibition at Depo is a place where media is struck with their own weapon as the drill for “lying” with real bullets produces a very interesting intermediary/in-between surface.

If we continue with Italy, Alessandra Ferrini’s work from 2018, which questions another event in the country’s history, is *Qaddafi is in Rome: the Expanded Script*. In this work, the artist focused on a meeting between Silvio Berlusconi and Qaddafi in Rome in June 2009. Ferrini’s micro-manifestation of the media’s perception management and production mentality can be analyzed through the exhibition at Depo. The artist transmits different sources and information on top of each other with a justified ‘paranoia’. In this sense, the information, sound and image integrations of each scale are designed as ‘reality’, in an atonal composition of truth. In the absence of the audience, as if a person has a memory loss problem and is trying to remember themselves as this work again, again, embodies time; this repetition also emits visible pains of legitimacy.

A similar feeling is evident in the Czech artist Zbyněk Baladrán’s 9 minutes and 40 seconds video. The artist, weaves certain and hidden (implicit) phrases on 16-millimeter ‘educational’ and ‘official’ images that have been transferred to SD video. The work is titled *Working Process* (2004) and makes us experience the complicity of the text and image again. As a ghost memory call that invokes the spirit of George Orwell, it also refers to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s “Manufacture of Consent” in the terms borrowed from Walter Lippmann. This eerie work also ruthlessly tests the systematic conservation, sorting, appraisal and storage practices of classical archeology with a visual metaphor.

Going back to Italy, Rosella Biscotti’s work from 2010-2012 brings the “April 7 trial” of 1983-84 back into the agenda of Istanbul. This trial of members of the leftist-revolutionary movement “Autonomia Operaia” is scrutinized both as a text as an audio recording; the viewers are thus able to listen in on Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, who were among those prosecuted. As Daphne Vitali, curator at the Athens National Contemporary Art Museum, underscores, this exhibition at Depo reveals a sculptural attitude towards how information can be represented in a “sincere” and “naked” manner. Artists are able to take on archival or anti-archival attitudes in order to attend to the collective or public needs and this exhibition is a valuable anthology that reveals these attitudes. It would also be important to mention Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet’s *Waiting for a Manifestation* that has been ongoing since 2014 and which was realized in Istanbul through the efforts of Furkan Akhan and Kadir Çelik. With the halo of “universal-iconic” relies on the “odd number system”, filling one of the walls on Depo, etched into memories with its patience and serenity. This fragile, hand-written monument is relegitimized by all memories that are caught by themselves, becoming the pulse of the times of the exhibition.

In the exhibition at Depo, a work that repeats and represents itself conceptually comes from Eric, born in 1973 in Salt Lake City, USA, with the last name Baudelaire, an ironic coincidence. *Chanson d’Automne*, 2009, refers to the global financial crisis with its title and brings together a bunch of replicas of the September 2008 newspaper The Wall Street Journal. Eric Baudelaire, who introduced some words to each other and turned them into comrades in these independent texts with an ordinary but rather self-preferred choice, emphasized these words in red by Paul Verlaine’s “Injuring my heart / Heartfelt violins in the fall / Uniform / Sadness” as a camouflage. The fact that these are code words to refer to the Normandy Operation, a critical moment in World War II, and consequent acts of sabotage, strengthens the fertile ominousness of this work.

Ege Berensel’s three-screen video installation, *Women’s Films* (2019), is charged with the dignified silence of resistance, resurrection, and recycling. Produced with the support of SAHA, the artist, born in 1968, makes a restorative confession to three women filmmakers and film groups, whose 8mm and 16mm films from the 1970s were lost through three political, found films. Berensel performs a similar honor and sincerity restoration through found 80 dia negatives in his work *Strike* from 2019. In many of the works in the exhibition, including two supported again by SAHA, artists Banu Cennetoğlu (*14.05.2019*, 2019) and Barış Doğrusöz (*12 Minutes 12 Seconds*, 2019) make efforts to reveal a recycling and ethic curiosity based on an almost revolutionary, utopist outlook. These artists, in other words, surrender to other paradigms and dreams through ready-made

objects and subjects that are surrendered to the mind and conscience for a freedom of expression that they deserve. Furthermore, the same sensibility can be seen in the works of the Greek artist Eirene Efstathiou (*Fortifications Typology (an Overview)*, 2014 and *Other Things Happen in December Besides Christmas*, 2015). The artist traces the Civil War in Greece and as a consequence, exhibits cold-blooded doubt towards the images of “truth” that are attributed to the public and media.

Speaking of the copy and the original, it would be appropriate to refer to Ivan Grubanov, whose installation from 2011, *Dead Flags*, is made up of the flags of the Former Yugoslavia, remnants of which are visible on the floor of Depo. The desperate protection of the halo of a socialist, repressive country that no longer exists is exhibited through its most symbolic object through old, dirty flags that the artist found in the most bureaucratic institutions. Born in Belgrade, Grubanov’s work is in dangerous harmony with the work of the Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevičius, who uses the films produced by the Eastern Germany State Film Studio—*Into the Unknown* (2009). In the film, people of various vocations, represented in the images of the 1970s and 1980s, are in a “totalitarian harmony” that begs the question of whether or not they are actually free, thus becoming extraordinary testimonies. At this point, let’s quote this question from the exhibition’s publication: “The flow—twenty years ago—took away the system. Although most people in the film are still alive, their archetypal imagery has changed and as such, their existence continues only in the images produced by DEFA. The images have disappeared, fashions are temporary. Is this problem specific to that “state socialism” system?”

An important video installation with a global feeling is by the artist Johan Grimonprez, born in Belgium in 1962. Johan, who lives in New York and Andros, intersects the dystopic classic from 1965 “Alphaville” by Jean-Luc Godard, an avant-garde figure of French New Wave Cinema, with a presentation by the contemporary thinker Michael Hardt. It feels as if you are in a 15-minute melancholic conversation with Hardt, who suddenly hosts you in his mental shelter, making it appear as if you are alone in the world with the troubles of human beings and the world in an intimate setting. The work’s title, “*every day words disappear. Micheal Hardt on the politics of love*”, feels like an electronic message in a bottle that was left in the information waves of our day from Hardt in 2016, who was preoccupied with the politics of love.

Another work that includes this feeling of exiled fraternity within these piles of affinities and knowledge is by Stefanos Tsivopoulos, born in Prague in 1973; the work carries traces of the grief and destiny subtexts of the works by Barış Doğrusöz and Banu Cennetoğlu. Titled *Archive Crisis, Shaking the Shelves of History* confronts us with huge, ominous collages in which the artist’s research of over a decade focusing on the Greek media. The elements of knowledge, memory, document, and waste produced by the event together with the ominousness that is attributed to the three piles of posters from 2019 is referred to through the work of the Greek artist Yota Ioannidou, born in 1976, who brought performative, documentary images that refer to the first terrorist act that took place in Greece in 1896, thus becoming part of the discussion.

Ranging from the excerpt to the remnant and from there to the forgotten, artists are supported by the power of doubt and who have transformed the exhibition into a site of unregulated freedom of expression rally, and among these artists is Vangelis Vlahos, born in 1971 in Athens. Vlahos’s work, which was exhibited in 2017 in Athens, *Objects to relate to a trial (Nov17)* deconstructs the “17 N Case”, which was highly attended in March 2003 by the public. As with many other works, the artist’s attitude of “being thirsty for the truth” makes me think about the abhorrent murder of Hrant Dink, a human rights activist and investigative journalist, founder of the Agos Newspaper, and the Memory Site that was founded to address what he represents. Vlahos further exhibits the ferry line project between Syria and Greece, which was worked on extensively for a period of time through an installation, “Bridge”, that includes tens of found photographs, each functioning as a micro memory container that are listed off without commentary, spectrally.

The exhibition “When the Present is History” at times negotiates and at times debates the official and the unofficial histories, which is thickened by the acoustic expression of the work Correctional

Facility (Breitenau) by Ines Schaber and Avery Gordon, produced for dOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel, Germany in 2012.

This work, which is evocative of Osman Kavala, the entrepreneur, cultural worker/supporter who has been imprisoned for over two years and whose efforts were critical in establishing Depo and the existence of their neighboring Açık Radyo, analyzes and criticizes the impact, power, and publicness of various institutions across the world including old prisons, correctional facilities and concentration camps.

As such, the exhibition at the entrance of Depo by Dilek Winchester, "Attending the Void", subverts all exceptions through various sculpture pedestals that are brought together from local and international institutions through a "contemporary" exploration and as pieces of socio-archaeological host-evidence, all found and objectifying all the issues we discussed thus far.

*This article was commissioned by SAHA from Evrim Altuğ in September 2019 and was published as part of the SAHA Art Writing series.*

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