

## **Subjects that don't count. Places that are not important. 5 Artistic Approaches**

---

SUSANNE BOSCH

### **SPACE/PLACE**

»Space« is a key term and a basic concept of my artistic work. In its specific spatial context I understand each place as conditioned by history, material qualities, movements, activities, and narratives. Urban interventions and the design of concrete locations must respond to the context of the given urban composition and to deal with the present situation.

#### **Public space**

As an artist my interest focuses on functional architecture and everyday structures, on situations and activities of people who use and appropriate public space. I prefer to work in and with public spaces than to work in white cubes of the art world. I like the idea of an artist who serves the urban community through interventions in everyday places instead of attracting experts to specific venues such as art galleries and museums. As an artist I am creating (new) spaces through physical installations I place in public spaces. These interventions provoke experiences in the social space of perception and narratives by the audience.

#### **Time**

Time passes. According to our perception, time passes as an even and regulated flow. On the other hand, our perception of time is also subje-

tive. It moves at different paces and does not always remain constant. We all experience a non-homogeneous sense of time: caught up in some active pursuit, a look at the watch after 10 minutes reveals that three hours have passed by...

### Time in Istanbul

I lived in Istanbul for 6 months in 2003 and I arrived with a very superficial knowledge about the culture. My impression of Turkey was dominated by my understanding of the Turkish migrants in Germany. Being a foreigner in Istanbul made me feel closer to the notion of »otherness« and migration, even though my circumstances were highly privileged: I had a monthly budget, a big apartment in Nişantaşı, a curator to take care of me, a German passport and a ticket back home (which at the time I wish I would not have had). As a woman of »typical German« appearance, my project in Istanbul began with unplanned, spontaneous story telling on the street: people stopped me, asking where I am from and often in perfect German, they would tell me about their lives as migrant workers in Germany. In this way began my artistic journey into the world of migration in Istanbul. Since that first journey, »migration« is a fundamental aspect of my artistic practice and it has become part of my life. Years later I became a working migrant myself, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

### Migration: Turkish imaginaries

From a contemporary German perspective, Turkey is well known for emigration of Turkish workers to industrial sites and cities in Germany and western Europe. Looking at a larger historical perspective, one becomes aware that Turkey has always been a country of immigration, due to the nature of its former empire and geographical location. The former Ottoman Empire embodied a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. From its capital, Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire, stretched far into both eastern and western territories.

After the formation of the Turkish Nation by Atatürk in 1923, more than 1.6 million people immigrated to Turkey, mostly from Balkan countries and the Soviet Union seeking political asylum. The majority was recognized as refugees and was resettled to third countries such as Canada and the United States by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the late 1980s, this pattern began to change as increasing numbers of asylum seekers began to arrive from

Iran and Iraq, as well as other developing nations. Half a million mostly Kurdish refugees from Iraq also migrated to Turkey between 1988 and 1991, as well as Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims), and Bulgarianized Turks in 1989, 1992-1995, and 1999. Recently, Turkey has become known as a transit country for »irregular migrants« from Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan on their way to the European Union. Turkey is also a destination for undocumented migrants from former Soviet Bloc countries. Until now, mainly Muslims or people from areas belonging to the former Ottoman Empire were successful in their immigration to Turkey:

»Legally, Albanians, Bosnians, Circassians, Pomaks, Tatars, and Turks – mostly from the Balkans – will be able to immigrate to Turkey, while others will face a closed door. Minorities claiming a link to Turkey who are not Sunni Muslims, that is, everyone from Armenians and Assyrians to Greeks and Jews, as well as unassimilated Kurds and Alevis, will find it difficult to immigrate. Such a policy will not be in harmony with the emerging European Union »common« immigration policy, which increasingly emphasizes civic connections to host territory, employment prospects, and cultural diversity, rather than a prospective immigrant's ethnic or national origin as grounds for immigration.«<sup>1</sup>

Many people don't plan to migrate to Istanbul; most people merely pass through the city on their way to somewhere else.

»It is very difficult to estimate the numbers of irregular immigrants in Turkey. However, figures ranging from 150,000 to one million are often cited. To these groups must be added trafficked people, particularly women. These are people who have either been coerced or deceived into traveling to Turkey for commercial sex work, and remain in Turkey against their wishes. There is also an increasing number of EU member-state nationals engaged in professional activities who are settling in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, as well as European retirees in some of the Mediterranean resorts. They, too, constitute a relatively new phenomenon in terms of immigration into Turkey, and their numbers are estimated at 100,000-120,000.«

This paper introduces five artistic works to explore the issue of migration in Istanbul. Four works are from Turkish artists based in Istanbul, while the fifth example is example of my own work as a temporary

---

1 See Kemal Kirisci, Center for European Studies, Bogaziçi University, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=176>, 16.11.2006.

guest to Istanbul. The focus of this paper is the relationship these artistic observations establish with the construction and constitution of Istanbul's public space and spheres.

»Subjects that don't count, places that are not important« explores how artists use subjective-artistic narratives to visualize the meaning of migration for a personal biography. The artistic works also show how public political spaces reflect the structures in which migration is embedded. In all projects interviews make up the basic material, which mostly made using video- or other multi-media language tools.

### »Unawarded performances«

In her video the artist and filmmaker Gülsün Karamustafa focuses on six Moldavian women who work illegally in Istanbul. Drastic political changes in Eastern Europe that were accompanied by the fall of the Iron Curtain led many women to come Istanbul in search of work. These women are skilled, yet their qualifications as nursery-school teachers or post office workers aren't considered valid in Turkey, especially without legal working papers. But the Moldavians are welcomed workers as their Gaugasian language is close to modern Turkish. Most of them find work as domestic servants, taking care of children and tending households of wealthy families.



Figure 1: Film stills »Unawarded Performances« by Gülsün Karamustafa, 2005, photo by G. Karamustafa.

Gülsün Karamustafa's film is based on interviews she conducted with Moldavian women caring for elderly ladies. Usually elderly Turkish women live with their daughters who care for them, but the older women who appear in these films belong to the generation and class who were educated under Atatürk reforms and western values.

As most of the Moldavian domestic workers have no legal working papers they caution public spaces and spend most of their days at home taking care of elderly ladies. In her film the artist introduces wealthy middle-class apartments in which these women spend most of their time. The interiors of the apartments are very tidy, silent, and empty; like a private house as a contemporary prison. The Moldavian women, most of them middle aged, proper and correct looking, never worked as servants before and were confronted with poverty after political changes and failure of economy in 1989. In the interviews these women, now domestic servants, speak about their backgrounds, their life back at home and their working conditions in Istanbul.

With the title »Unawarded Performances« Gülsün Karamustafa refers to the unnoticed disposition of the women who dedicate their lives to un-skilled, but necessary jobs in wealthy households. The video shows contrasting structures of class, living conditions, and gender rolls presented by the Turkish and Moldavian women. Sometimes the Moldavian women are portrayed together with their employees, other women remain anonymous; without legal working papers they all fear the police and deportation. As he agreed with the women, Karamustafa only allows screenings of the film outside Turkey. Listening to the stories of the Moldavian women, the audience is challenged by the everyday reality of illegal migration. A notion of victimization expressed through political transitions emerge in Karamustafa's portrayal.<sup>2</sup>

### »The picture of my life«

Belmin Söylemez realized her film, *The Picture of my Life*, in 2003 for the artist group *Oda Projesi* together with the photographer Orhan Cem Çetin. The film was produced in preparation for the 8th Istanbul Biennale.

It is a documentary about and with the people of a little street in Galata, which focuses on the Kurdish population who made their home in Galata after escaping the grinding poverty and bloody conflict in south-eastern Turkey, where Turkish security forces battled Kurdish separatists on and off since the 1980s.

The new home for these Kurdish families is in the vicinity of an old 16<sup>th</sup> century tower in Galata, a former Greek and non-Muslims neighborhood at the north side of the Golden Horn. Since the riots against the

---

2 For more information see: <http://www.projektmigration.de/english/content/kuenstlerliste/karamustafa.htm>, 23.11.2006.

Greek of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1955, many houses in this area were abandoned and eventually taken over by Kurdish migrants from East-Anatolia.

The film tells two stories: With the questions »This is the picture of your life. Do you like having your picture taken? Do you have a favorite photo of yourself? How do you pose? How did you look?« the local Kurdish population was invited to pose in front of a professional photographer in any way they wanted. The photographer also invited them to show an older photograph of themselves they liked. Many women showed photos of former times and talked about their villages, which they miss. With her video Söylemez captures the entire situation around the photo-session, the private homes, the discussions about the old and new pictures and the process of posing in front of the camera.

As some of the women spend most of their life inside, locked in the apartments with their children, pictures are taken in front of the living room furniture. Other women chose the Galata tower to be in their photograph like a souvenir, already aware that they might not live there forever. The teenagers make no references to villages, but to film stars, to Spanish soaps and city life, to friends and family. They consider Galata their home and obviously enjoyed the fact that they lived close to the heart of a 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer and fashion center. It seems that through their new homes in Galata, these rural Kurdish migrants are confronted by urban spaces in a new way: they live between Istanbul's European center, between shopping streets, prostitution quarters and traditional styles of living.

Migration and space: Immigration has an impact on the identity of urban spaces and local places; at the same time migration profoundly affects the sense of place of local communities.



*Figure 2: Film still »The Picture of my Life« by Belmin Söylemez, 2003, photo by B. Söylemez.*

In the past few years »revitalization« projects have been taking place in Galata. Being so excellently located, it was only a matter of time before urban transformation with its capital-oriented face reached the neighborhood. In 2005 the art project Oda Projesi<sup>3</sup> lost their space in Sahkulu Street. In fact, residents in the entire neighborhood lost their homes to new development, leaving the Kurdish rural migrant population with repeated resettlement narratives.

### »Brothers and sisters«

The video »Brothers and Sisters« (2003) by Esra Ersen begins with the following subtitles as a group of black men stand in front of a neo-renaissance building:

»Steve from Somalia stands at the seaward gate of the main train station that hosts most of the memorable scenes of old Turkish movies when immigrants from rural regions face for the first time a big city in front of Haydarpasha train station's gate. Steve is deceived by a guy who takes his money in order to take him illegally to Hamburg. The boat leaves him at the port of Haydarpasha instead of Hamburg. Standing in front of the station building designed by a German architect a century ago, he still thinks he arrived at that European city he so long dreamt of.«

The location this scene takes place is Haydarpasha. It is the main train station on the Asian side of Istanbul. Leaving the neo-renaissance German style station building behind, a panoramic view of Istanbul's historic skyline emerges.<sup>4</sup> For many migrants arriving in Istanbul from the East, this is their first view of Istanbul, a first view of Europe on the

---

3 For more information about Oda Projesi see [www.odaprojesi.org](http://www.odaprojesi.org).

4 Its construction started in 1906 by Otto Ritter and Helmut Conu, two German architects who chose a neo-renaissance German style. They designed a large building, much in accordance with the ambitions of the German investors who were building the Istanbul-Baghdad Railway and undertaking the consultancy works for the Istanbul-Damascus-Medina Railway. Haydarpasha was an important link in the railway chain of the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway scheme, part of the German Empire's strategic plans to gain control over the trade routes between the East and the West in the late 19th century by building a railway connection between Germany and the Persian Gulf, thus by-passing the Suez Canal. The station was put into service on August 19, 1908 and formally inaugurated on November 4, 1909. More information about the railway station: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haydarpa%C5%9Fa\\_Terminal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haydarpa%C5%9Fa_Terminal), 23.10.2007.

other side of the Bosphorus. Haydarpasha became an important site in the narratives of migrants.

Assuming the role of a social anthropologist, the artist Esra Ersen spent six months working with a group of illegal African immigrants stranded in Turkey and in the uncertainty of their lives in their European and African futures. Ersen becomes acquainted with their everyday life, describing their cultural milieu and the limitations of their social environment in her video.

In the interviews the African men demonstrate how well they know the city: they describe the peaceful middle- and upper class neighborhoods of Istanbul on the European side, as well of Beyoğlu's active nightlife. They define their own neighborhood, Tarlabası, a neighborhood right next to Beyoğlu, as the »grand finale of Istanbul, the deadly place«, an »atrocity«, a term to describe crimes ranging from acts committed against a single person to acts committed against an whole population or ethnic group. Tarlabası is described as a »refugee camp«, »the location of discrimination against the black community«.

Tarlabası is a densely populated maze of narrow streets that wind between crumbling Ottoman-era houses built on a hillside. It's located next to the commercial and cultural heart of Istanbul and, yet, most Turks consider Tarlabası a no-go zone. After decades of speculation the now run-down area Tarlabası is currently facing a gentrification-plan motivated by the real-estate boom in that central area of Istanbul.



Figure 3: Film stills »Brothers and Sisters« by Esra Ersen, 2003, photo by E. Ersen.

Ersen is always close to her subject; the viewer gets an idea of the everyday life and the nearest surroundings of the interviewee.

The situation of the African refugee community is made explicit through individual stories: Children of African migrants, born in Turkey, who have no chance to go to school due to their illegal status. Or of the death of an asthma sick refugee who was kicked out of the hospital. The hospital administration feared that the patient might not be able to cover

the medical costs. Or of an African woman afraid to go out because Turkish men treat them like whores. They never walk alone.

»The community only feels at ease at places where the city's characteristics do not prevail: Nightclubs, shopping mall, parks, and hotels, McDonald's«. (quotation from the film »Brothers and Sisters«, Esra Ersen 2003).

In the new global interconnectedness, these anonymous places are a coherent part of city landscapes, similar in different metropolis worldwide. It makes the »illegal« African feel at home, being part of the globalized world, in Europe or elsewhere, where he or she intends, or ends up arriving.

### »In transit«

Filmmaker Berke Bas introduces in her documentary three migrant families, an Iraqi Arab family, an Iraqi Kurdish family and a Nigerian couple who are »in transit« in Istanbul. All of them are waiting for visas and work permits that never seem to arrive, stuck between the a remembered past and an imagined future. In 2003 Berke Bas accompanied the families who all lived in Tarlabasi, for a year throughout their daily lives.

The Iraqi Arab family, an engineer couple with three children, well educated, arrived in Istanbul in 2000. Before their arrival, they imagined Istanbul like Rome. Living in Tarlabasi, they were very disappointed. They are illegal immigrants. The local grocery store is their also mailing address. Every day they go there to check for the arrival of their Canadian visas. Huda is an electrical engineer, fluent in English, she teaches English to Iraqi refugees; Sadoon is an engineer and writes visa application statements for other Iraqis. Their story ends when the Canadian visa finally arrives and Berke accompanies them to the airport until the security check. A happy end.



Figure 4: Film stills »In Transit« by Berke Bas, 2003, photo by B. Bas.

Paiman, Ramadan and their four children moved to Istanbul in 2000 from Kirkuk, Iraq. They are Kurds. Ramadan traveled as illegal immigrant to Europe in 2003. Since then, the fairly young Paiman – she is about 35 years old – lives alone with her four children in Tarlabası and it seems that Ramadan does not send money. The film leaves the viewer wondering if he has abandoned his family in Istanbul. Harem is Paiman's youngest son and about 11 years old. As he started working full-time in an auto-repair garage he did not speak a word of Turkish. Hemen, the oldest son is about 17 years old. He takes the role of the father and makes decisions for the family and his mother. They live in the ground floor apartment. The neighbors living above them use their back terrace – where Paiman hangs clothes for drying – as a rubbish dump. At night the family barricades the apartment door. Paiman is scared, everyone knows their situation.

Transit families lead a life devoid of basic rights: no legal documents, no work permit, children with no access to education, limited access to health care, and language barriers. They live in constant fear of the police and the threat of deportation, intimidation from the neighbors, and subject to discrimination or blamed for drug dealing and robbery. Daily life is only supported by informal jobs and charity from churches. Life seems to have stopped and everyone hopes that it will start again if they reach a Western country.

Berke Bas shows more of Tarlabası, the kids on the street and the general atmosphere of the area. In an interview, local teenagers from Tarlabası state that they find the Iraqis problematic, their clothes are out of fashion, they do not speak good Turkish, they do not like the Turks, they think this is their country.

### **First step to leave Turkey – Visa queues**

Known as a country of emigration, large numbers of Turkish people migrated to western European countries, particularly West Germany as the early 1960s. Emigration continues today through family reunification schemes and the asylum track.<sup>5</sup> In Istanbul the difficult process of migration becomes visible in specific locations in public space.

Once I decided »migration« to be my research focus, I started to look out for evidence of migration in the public domain of Istanbul.

---

5 K. Kirisci, Center for European Studies, Bogaziçi University, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=176>, 10.11.2006.

Lines of people in front of European embassies attracted my attention, as I noticed that these kinds of gatherings of people waiting patiently on the street for hours or days are not seen in other places in Istanbul. Taking a closer look, I discovered an industry around these queues: Copy services, shoe cleaning, tearooms, translators and solicitors offices.



*Figure 5 and 6: Visa queue next to the French Consulate and at the side of the German Embassy, Autumn 2003, photos by S. Bosch.*

I figured that the queuing takes place in the streets to the side or back of embassies, never in front of the main entrance or at the representative entrance. The way in which this queue were organized raised many questions, questions which I ask people waiting in line. In interviews, several Turks commented that this time-consuming system reflected the unwillingness of an economical and political system to let people pass easily, on the contrary, there is no way to make previous appointments and consultancies. That expresses most likely disrespect towards the migrating population.



*Figure 7: Adems Cay Garden, since 1981 next to the German Embassy, 2003, photo: S. Bosch*

Next to the German embassy, where the people with visa application waited, a tea house caught my attention. The tea place was a tiny hut, contrusted from left-over wooden panels, about three meters square in size. Both the outside and the inside of the teahouse wallpapered with images of ideal Turkish landscapes.



*Figure 8 and 9: Adems' Cay Garden, detail exterior and interior, 2003, photos by S. Bosch*

Adem, the owner, started his business in 1981 and since then his tea-place opens every night at 1 am, when people start to line up at the embassy hoping to get an appointment the following morning. Adem and I became friends. I was allowed to interview people, who came to his place about their imagined futures in Germany. My parallel conversations with Adem himself, were about his perception of Turkey as a place, from which there is no need to leave. As a convinced Kemalist, the interior of his improvised tea space was collaged with portraits of Mustafa Kemal Atatuerk, the founder of modern Turkey.

## **Mobile economies**



*Figure 10: Photocopying and lamination service, Galata Bridge, 2003, photo by S. Bosch.*

Mobile economies are another way in which migration is visible in Istanbul's public spaces. Without official aid or a work permit immigrants are forced to do all kinds of work to survive. A plethora unimaginable of services is available on Istanbul's streets; all for very little money.

Nowadays legal migration happens within a framework of carefully negotiated bilateral agreements: governments make cautious decisions about migration, which are included in their development plans.

Similarly, migration today is not based on personal decisions, but often part of a government strategy to import or export workforces. Migration is an integrated part of the ruling economic system, supplying industry with an informal reserve.

### **Longing for a safe home**

At the same time, I met Adem I also encountered a completely different and more invisible attempt of migration through Mehmet. Two colleagues of mine introduced me to Mehmet, a Kurd from Mardin near the Syrian border. Mehmet had turned his back on Turkey by going to Germany in 1992. Two of his older brothers were killed accused of being members of the PKK. His family lost its peace, and he never had the opportunity to improve his chances at home. After nine years in Germany, his political asylum was refused, he had to return to Turkey and landed in Istanbul.

His story made me aware of human trafficking in Istanbul: where it takes place, what it costs, who implications it has. Mehmet worked in a hotel in Aksaray, which is part of the district of Fatih on the Historic Island of Istanbul. In this busy neighborhood, which is frequented by mainly Russian and Bulgarian business people, people who are willing to cross borders illegally and are prepared wait for the traffickers to pick them up.

Mehmet worked in return for food and shelter at the hotel. Having now legal papers, he was highly dependent on his boss, a man from his village. Mehmet told me about his desires for a safe home. Through his story I was reminded of an encounter I had in Berlin in 2001 when I met several Bosnian war refugees. One of the refugee women told me that we was traumatized twice: Once through the war at home and once in Germany by not receiving a visa and legal status with permission to stay in Germany for years and years. She talked about the fact that her life had stopped years ago, and she does not dare to settle down until she is certain she will not have to move again.

In October 2003 Mehmet disappeared for almost a year. I believed him dead, but one day he called me, when I was already back in Germany, to tell me that he was living a happy life somewhere in Germany. I did not ask how he got to Germany with his history of refused asylum applications.

Forced or voluntarily, migration is a process similar to traveling. It is more about the movement or travel between places than about arriving at a particular destination. It is always about the desire to arrive somewhere, to find a place as home. I wonder if Mehmet found a home in Germany after making a second attempt.

When I myself returned to Germany in 2004, my artistic research on Istanbul took several new turns. I took part in an international conflict transformation training as I felt the need to improve my skills as a public artist who deals with conflict. I used that training to clarify my role as an artist in situations of conflict. The other aspect was to transform my interviews, my written material, images, and my experiences into a shadow theater I was invited to perform on the streets of Istanbul in September 2004 (*Hic bir gidememek*/to arrive nowhere, LOCK YOU MIND, 2004). Back in Germany I started to focus on the Turkish community in Berlin. I made contacts and started to learn a lot about the perception from the other side of migration.

### **Art as a public medium: Expression of realities of migrants' lives?**

There are similarities between the art works presented in this article which all deal with migration. All of them represent illegal and precarious situations of populations through individuals. Migrant children and adults live in inhuman conditions for an unknown periods time. They have no regulations which they can turn to, no official help. But even as Europe is like a fortified castle without an entrance, some »loopholes« like Istanbul still exist and that is experienced as a situation of hope for some.<sup>6</sup>

---

6 Today, officially sanctioned immigration into Turkey has for all intent and purposes dropped to a trickle. Turkey allows nationals of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and the Central Asian republics to enter the country quite freely either without visas or with visas that can easily be obtained at airports and other entry points (K. Kirisci, Center for European Studies, Bogaziçi University, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=176>, 10.11.2006).

All the locations introduced in the films and documentaries are in the heart of Istanbul. In this cosmopolitan space they remain anonymous in the urban crowd and are visible in their own networks at the same time. Often living in now run-down areas in the city center, which will soon be part of urban transformation programs, the undocumented and unwanted migrant groups will be pushed out again, to the edges of this massive city, where they will be even less visible and less part of globalized Istanbul.

All individuals introduced in these artworks share their attempts for economical survival, for safe homes and dignified environments, their longing for reunification with family members in common. To achieve their goals or just to survive, migrants turn to illegal strategies. Migrants become criminals.

### **Subjects that don't count. Places that are not important**

The artistic interest of this »in limbo« situation seems obvious; it is a reality that offers un-structured and un-shaped situations. The border crossing to human rights, illegality and contested territories interferes in the artistic practice.

Even if a personal biography told in this artwork might be connected to a criminal act, all of the artists take position, evoke empathy and understanding for the specific conditions of the persons affected.

I believe that there is a secret admiration for the people who cut their roots and start a lifelong nomadic traveling movement, as many migration biographies show. You never arrive, settle down, and assimilate fully. Most likely, you become a mobile force constantly overcoming all kind of necessities for stability and consistency. On one hand it fits very well into the idea of modern neo-liberalism, mobile workforces and at the same time it fits to the idea of an artist. What hits hard, is the price paid for this kind of life (loss of social networks and family, loss of physical or psychological health). As one of my interview partners, a retired Turkish worker in Berlin said: »If I would have known the price I paid to earn money, I would not have done it«.

While being in Istanbul and getting more and more involved in individual, difficult biographies of migration, I started to question: How much an of an artistic approach might change or improve the situation? Does any kind of representation or research on migration change anything in the lives of individuals? Is the documentary or aesthetic transformation of the situations of any use for the migrants, for the wider so-

ciety or for the artist him/herself? However, I believe that art have impact on people thinking. An art piece may reach a target group that usually might be quiet protective about the kind of information it receives.