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Photographic Gestures & Situated Belongings

In this presentation I will look at how three different contemporary photographers approach understandings and experiences of borders and belonging in relation to the geographical areas mostly but not only of Turkey and its bordering regions. I will look at Turkish photographer Serkan Taycan and then British photographer Vanessa Winship approach the subject, and then I will change geography and make a connection to a series that deals with some contested spaces in North America, made by Andrea Geyer. I will suggest that part of what appears in the meeting with these works is an understanding of cultural belonging which moves *beyond* the discursive and representative, and also, in the case of the first and the last series, that significant similarities appear as the photographers direct the camera towards lands which have been the object of struggle for many centuries.

In most current discussions around the construction of cultural identities there tends to be a lot of focus on the construction of belonging as a discursive process, constructed through different culturally available narratives ... and images, in particular photographs, tend to be evoked in terms of representations through which identities are constructed, or as signs at play in the processes of identification. The first series of photographs, by Serkan Taycan Memleket (Homeland) series consists of a set of images depicting the people, objects, and landscapes of small town and rural Eastern Turkey, areas in which the photographer himself used to live as a child and teenager. The Memleket-series deals expressly with the notion of belonging, according to the photographer himself as well as the connotations of the title, but rather than taking on the culturally available narratives of identity cognition, which are what is usually discussed in relation to these notions, the images pay attention to the bodies, the objects and the sites around which narratives of identification are being constructed, including the affective and emotive through which we interact with these spaces, all those aspects of belonging which don't fit into articulated stories and are thus usually left out of the discussion.

The starting point of the Memleket series is found in a very specific and personal experience of returning to places where the photographer once lived. In the depictions, however, there is no dividing line between the objective and the personal, between history and memory, but as in any situated act of belonging, these levels

participate on equal footing and intermingle. And one of the most apparent common narratives of belonging that the series relates to is the story of national belonging, which has played a significant part in most struggles over land in the past couple of centuries, but which has been particularly marked in Turkey since the Republic was founded in 1923. Reminders of the presence of the national narrative return in different shapes in many of the photographs; in the star and crescent painted in white on the side of a mountain, or in the photograph of Atatürk, Atatürk's address to the youths of Turkey and the national anthem above the blackboard of a classroom in the town of Muş. In the last decades, nationalistic narratives have been challenged and deconstructed repeatedly from many fronts. Nevertheless, sentiments of nationalism remain, in the photographs of the Memleket series, however, I suggest that the expressions of national belonging come forth as they exist beyond the different and often conflicting articulated narratives of nationalism, and thus as it exists beyond the reach of deconstruction. In remaining with the photographs, a momentary reversal of the way in which cultural belonging is usually understood comes forth, as the embodiment and materiality of lived life is placed at the center, and the discursive is directed to the margins.

Other works reveal a fascination with some of the same notions, such as again the expressions of an insistent nationalism, as for example George Georgiou's series on Turkey, which has recently gained a lot of attention and is now being exhibited in MOMA as a part of an exhibition called "New photography 2011". I won't discuss this particular series further, because of the time limitation, but instead move on to another series named *Sweet Nothings*, taken by British photographer Vanessa Winship, which deals with deals again with the topics of borders and belonging, according to the photographer herself. The photographs depict schoolgirls in their uniforms in the borderlands of Eastern Anatolia. Each picture is framed in a similar way, with one or two girls in the foreground taking up most of the frame, and in the background we see either some small houses or department buildings, or again the background of a classroom with the by now familiar features. The classroom and the school uniforms with their embroidered collars, again speak of the attempt to construct a common story of national belonging in a space where other stories have often been told, and still are being told, a fact which has often lead to violent conflict in the areas. The photographs, however, while in the best of cases probing us to find put more, in themselves tell nothing of the historical events underlying these stories, nor about the narratives that are constructed

around these events today. They explain nothing of the “causation, process, relationships” that underlie a particular situation. But at the same time, this “poverty” of the photograph to explain is connected to its strength and its ability to instead reveal those aspects that don’t fit into the stories. I suggest that in *Sweet Nothings*, as in the Memleket series, the congruities of articulated narratives of belonging are belied by the complexities of the visual information presented, the materiality as well as the affective and the emotive in the acts. What is not grasped in the narratives are for example the different intentions by which the subjects fill up the frame of the image, a sense of the way they squeeze the arm of a friend or a sister or hold one arm around her as if to protect her or show that they belong together, or even just the feel of an ill-fitting uniform with a tight collar.

Lately some writers on photography, such as Ariella Azoulay and Susie Linfield have been criticizing the approach to photography as either the still generally common position in which the subjects or objects depicted are encountered as entities found ‘outside’ the images, or the more academic version in which the focus tends to be on photography’s inability to make any kind of statement about “reality”, or its failure to represent. Rather than not looking, or remaining with the conceptual, which often becomes the solution, both Azoulay and Linfield advocate for moving altogether beyond these kinds of readings, which are really just two sides of the same coin, and instead approach the photograph relationally or as an embodied meeting. Moving beyond the representational allows us to recognize and remain with precisely those aspects that don’t fit into the articulated stories. But also, I suggest that this approach allows us to move beyond the idea of Otherness in approaching the photographs. Seen from a representational perspective, the subjects of *Sweet Nothings* are easily locked into a position of representing, or in the alternative critical reading, failing to represent, for example the internal Other of Turkey, the villagers or the “uncivilized”, or the ‘external’ Other of Europe or the West, depending on which context they are seen. In either case, the awkwardness of the subjects risk being left to the mercy of viewers who are likely to construct the subjects as inherently Other, or as “empty signifier(s) of the exotic and of affliction”, as Azoulay puts it. Approaching the photographs instead as an embodied meeting the girls will never be mistaken for ‘signs’, but will remain living subjects with their own highly complex embodied stories of situated belongings. What comes forth is the impossibility of putting in place or grasping the ideas or facts about an Other, and the

potentiality of reaching an embodied understanding of the complexity of the Other and his/her existence beyond the conceptions and projection of one's own position.

Moving to an entirely different geographical space, German born artist/photographer Andrea Geyer in her series *Spiral Land*, place landscape photographs and close ups of the land dispossessed from Native Americans through colonization, which has been contested throughout the twentieth century until today, together with written quotes from a range of different sources. The photographs are black and white and un-intrusive, sometimes beautiful in the sublime sense and sometimes plain or even seemingly insignificant. Together with the quotes, however, the land comes forth as an object of consumption, covered under layers of demands, desires and expectations. This one quote specifically talks about the eye of the camera as part of gaining possession of something. While some of the quotes, like this one, speak of ownership and conquering, many others however point to the uncertainty and ambiguity of what appears in the images, and what happens when the perceiver stops making claims to the land and actually starts perceiving. I want to refer to a discussion that Geyer had with Susie Linfield earlier this year where they discuss the potential of photography in evoking violence through its absence. They talk about the potential of a seemingly 'silent' photograph, to not halt the viewing experience at the initial reaction of distancing oneself as a viewer from the content of the image. There is an interesting connection to be made here to Lebanese artist writer scholar Jelal Toufic's thinking around trauma and how certain events, such as the more emotionally charged events of human history, seem to withdraw themselves from representation. Toufic uses the metaphor of the event as a black hole, and the event horizon that surrounds it as the limit at which any attempt to refer to it is halted and 'sucked away'. The more complicated questions and attempted representations that surround a certain event, such as is the case with the more contested events of history, the stronger the energy to suck any claim to representation into the giant vacuum cleaner of oblivion. But in contrast to this representative amnesia is the land itself, and the potential of its more silent photographic evocations to create a presence in which the past is still remembered, not as a factual series of events, but rather as an ongoing presence that still has actual repercussions in the way that we act, feel and think in the present. Rather than a representation, in which the past is packaged and sealed off from the perceiver,

the significance lies in the space or event within which the image in its uncertainty and vagueness is allowed to speak.

Not making the mistake, however, of misrecognizing that the space in which Geyer constructed her projects and the work of Taycan is in any way the same, I think it is possible to make a connection between what happens in the process of perceiving between the two. What comes forth in both series is a sensation of the land and the physical spaces in which significant events of the past have been acted out and which are still violently contested today. Taycan's landscape photographs are as silent as the landscapes of Geyer's Spiral Land. Even as a village of Ardahan in north eastern Turkey, near the Georgian border, is given space in center stage, it is the muteness of the surrounding land that comes into sight. At the same time, in the dialogue between the perceiver and the images, the layers of events taken place in the land emerge, as a crack in the landscape of the province of Kars, near the Armenian border, bring to mind the layers of narratives placed upon the land itself, stories of the divisions between peoples throughout history, such as in this space the disputed massacres of Armenians before and during the first world war

Directing the camera to the objects, bodies and the land itself brings out the extent to which these are used as pawns in the struggles over authentic belongings to a particular place, as well as sense of how embodied belonging is lived, felt and enacted through situated bodies, rather than articulated through language and concepts – it opens up the possibility of an alternative understanding, in which the stories and narratives are found at the margins, and the land as well as the un-dissected life that is lived on it takes precedence.