Emergency Takeoff: on Halil Altindere’s Köfte Airlines

"*Köfte Airlines* retraced a trail uncannily similar to that of its subject, from Germany to Turkey and back along a zigzag of uprooted expectations." Matt Hanson writes about Halil Altindere's work in the context of the refugee crisis, as well as the effects of the current oppressive political climate in Turkey on artists and cultural practitioners.

A single artwork / Matt Hanson July 6, 2018

In 2010, the legendary iconoclast Sukran Moral received death threats after climaxing her pro-sex exhibitions in the spirit of nudist feminism with the performance of *Amemus (Lovemaking, 2010)* at the Casa dell'Arte in Istanbul. In the Anatolian East, the seasoned sculptor Mehmet Aksoy saw his 30m-high statue destroyed after prosecutors alleged that he insulted Erdoğan, and, in 2011, sought to incarcerate him for 56 months. His piece, *Monument of Humanity*, symbolized Turkish-Armenian peace close to the border. Next, professing Islamist nationalism, the Erbakan Foundation raided the 11th Contemporary Istanbul art fair, targeting a sculpture by Ali Elmacı, titled I Can't Reciprocate Your Feelings Osman III (2016). The artist took it down to prevent violence. Ali Gürsel, the fair's chairman, later returned it to its booth. Back in eastern Turkey, in March of 2017, the journalist Zehra Dogan received a prison sentence amounting to two years, nine months, and 22 days, for painting a Kurdish village after the Turkish military destroyed it (Banksy spotlighted her work for one of his latest murals in New York).

Censorship in the arts in Turkey has gone from bad to worse in the last decade. Visual artists have not been immune to the political flak that had devastated Turkish literary culture, from the emptied halls of academia to the disemboweled newsrooms of every last opposition paper. Since the infamous failed coup on July 15, 2016, the prevailing unconstitutional, state-of-emergency purge has driven painters, performers and freethinkers to the edge of reason, some beyond the border, others behind bars. For those creatives and intellectuals lucky enough to evade outright exile, imprisonment, and all forms of silencing, there exists a self-imposed pressure to speak truth to power, coursing the stream of artistic practice into a political roast on full heat.

In light of the results of the June 24, 2018 elections, Erdoğan could remain in office until 2028. As the country fears worsening economic decline, the Turkish people wait for the self-described conservative, neo-Ottoman president to fulfill his promise to end the unconstitutional state-of-emergency, which is jailing and silencing the voices of intellectuals and artists, unchecked, as his Justice and Development Party continues to overhaul the Turkish state.

Köfte Airlines, outdoor installation view, Vienna.JPG

[1]Halil Altindere, Köfte Airlines, outdoor installation view, Vienna

Within such occupational hazards, Halil Altindere [2] has remained a force of nature since his emergence in the high-octane 1990s, when provocative new art thrived in Turkey. It was then that Sukran Moral could perform such works as Bordello *[3]* (1997) out of a brothel. She now remembers it fondly [4] as a time passed, as work of the kind that would never have seen the light of day in the present, stifling climate of cultural production as it survives under the top-heavy world order (she might prefer it be topless). The 1990s scene in Turkish art has sustained its voice in the recent reopening of SALT Beyoglu [5], perhaps the most centrally important and culturally outspread of all arts institutions in Istanbul's core. Its exhibition "Continuity Error [6]" is on display till July 22, showcasing a survey of the artists Aydan Murtezaoğlu and Bülent Şangar, whose introductory performance *Unemployed Employees - I found you a new job!* (2006-2018) gives voice to a contemporary generation of underemployed youth from the global middle class, before winding upwards to highlight works from years gone by with a taste for the Turkish word *hüzün*, meaning melancholic hope.

Altindere is a non-medium-based Turkish artist of the "95 Generation". His disciplines range from video to sculpture, photography, installation, and performance, as well as various curatorial and collaborative efforts. His work for the 5th Istanbul Biennial in 1997 and Documenta 12 (2007) gave him certain prestige. His film, *Wonderland* (2015), entered the MoMA collection in the year of its production with a PS1 exhibition in New York, from May to September. Its depiction of the Romani rap group Tahirbad-ı isyan from Istanbul stresses a theme crucial to Altindere's focus as an artist keen to expedite the dissemination of minority voices around the world, from the heart of one of the world's profoundest East-West civilization clashes. His works document the greater narratives of creation and destruction, encompassing ancient times in the lives of Sulukule communities, whose

roots hail from the Byzantine era, yet who face passive and often direct state aggression under the all-consuming eye of gentrification.

In Istanbul, he is currently represented by PILOT Gallery, a stellar, pithy outfit based in Cihangir, the downtown district where Orhan Pamuk lived before leaving the country due to political harassment. It is still one of the city's most stylish neighborhoods, on the European side of the Bosporus. The gallery opened In October of 2011 with an exhibition by Altindere, titled If I Can't Dance It's Not My Revolution *[7]*, curated by René Block. PILOT then identified Altindere as "one of the leading figures in Turkish contemporary art practice", punctuating his name with an exclamation mark. *If I Can't Dance It's Not My Revolution* refers to a paraphrased motto inspired by Emma Goldman, the larger-than-life historical figure responsible for leading the early labor rights movement into the 20th century, and for conferring on the world the activist rites and intellectual medicine with which to treat the ongoing global crises of immigration, work and gender inequality.

If I Can't Dance It's Not My Revolution utilized wearable art emblazoned with the words of Goldman. A sculptural work in the form of a police car appears as the show's centerpiece, and in his second PILOT show, Reality Is Elsewhere *[8]* (2015), the video *Angels of Hell* (2014), had a priceless cameo of an Atatürk-lookalike stepping down from a helicopter. Altindere has a consistent, continental sense of scale. His *Mesopotamian Trilogy* (2007-2010), for example, spans such massive subjects as the controversial Ilısu and Birecik Dam projects. For its first chapter, *Dengbêjs* (2007), referring to a tradition of Kurdish storytelling, he intended to airlift a prisoner from Kassel jail in Germany, but the courts rejected his proposal.

Köfte Airlines, Sadık Pasha Mansion, Cihangir, 2017 (1).jpg **[9]**

[10]Halil Altindere, Köfte Airlines, Sadık Pasha Mansion, Cihangir, 2017

The scale by which Altindere tells his tales of oppression and power, and all with a counterintuitive logic, has increased exponentially throughout his career, leading to a high point that defies expectation. *Köfte Airlines* (2016) premiered at the 9th Berlin Biennial, commissioned by HAU (Habbel Am User) as a co-production with PILOT Gallery to take part in the Berlin Art Week, at the festival “The Aesthetics of Resistance. Peter Weiss 100”1. The show meant to appreciate the Peter Weiss novel by the same name, published in 1975, a book that ingeniously combines art theory with the historical conflicts of the early 20th century. HAU saw parallels between Altindere and Weiss, as kindred minds dismantling the patriarchal and nationalist structures that prevail in such disenchanting nation-states as Turkey.

Köfte Airlines visualizes the confrontation of perspectives on the crisis, when a travel billboard appears along the EU asylum route in Berlin, Vienna, and Turkey’s overpopulated westward horizon, showing the faces of its victims riding on a cartoonish exaggeration of the meatball dish that nourishes migrants from Anatolia to Damascus. And yet, the exiled are not inside the plane. They are exposed, visible, they stand out, unsafe, unserved, unfed, a microcosm of the ridiculous incompetence of seven years of corrupt humanitarian efforts and unceasing imperialist war that have failed to provide the essential needs of a 21st-century diaspora who continues to risk life and limb by hitching a ride out, on the wing but flightless, desperate, and willing to brace the cold headwind upward into the Earth’s bleak, unpeopled, heaven.

Walter Seidl curator of the exhibition What is left [11] from Q21 creative space at MQ Wien [12]

Walter Seidl, a co-curator of of *Köfte Airlines*' second exhibition in a 2016 group show at MuseumsQuartier Wien, told *Voice Republic* [13]: "[Altindere] ironically names the airplane Köfte Airlines, not only relating to the köfte meatball dish popular in Turkey and the Middle East, but to the name itself, which can also be used with vulgar meanings in Turkish"2. "What he addresses," Seidi claims, "is the politics of the EU and especially of Ms. Merkel over the last year, to make it easier for migrants to come to Central Europe. It was soon abolished and now a lot of migrants have to look for more dangerous routes to make it to the EU." It seems that the metaphors Altindere has used in this work remain today as urgent as an emergency takeoff for the over three-and-a-half million Syrian refugees [14] who seek asylum in Turkey.

Earlier in the year of its exhibition, in January of 2016, Kaya Genç, a Turkish literary critic and author of *Under the Shadow: Rage and Revolution in Modern Turkey*, conducted a rare interview with Altindere for the Los Angeles Review of Books. Altindere had then recently edited a 664-page book titled "User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary Art in Turkey 1975-2015" (Berlin: Revolver, 2015). Genç introduced the three-way conversation, also with art critic and post-anarchist theorist Süreyyya Evren, by citing a number of "surreal" imprisonments and wild foibles, concluding that in Turkey, "...life imitates art 24/7". He confirms what his foreign friends have understood about Istanbul, that it is often in small art galleries where Turks are freer to voice issues that can never appear in mass media. In a way, the alternative routes that Turkish artists take to gain professional recognition mirror the underground paths that forced migrants increasingly endure from the Middle East to the EU. As Altindere concluded in his 2016 conversation with Genç: "Turkey's contemporary art scene began to internationalize in the early 1990s. It works like this: they first make appearances in Turkey and then get recognition in Europe."

Through the third exhibition of *Köfte Airlines* in Osnabrück, Germany, as part of the Çanakkale Biennial's cancelled resettlement following the failed coup of July 2016, *Köfte Airlines* itself retraced a trail uncannily similar to that of its subject, from Germany to Turkey and back along a zigzag of uprooted expectations. Since its first exhibition, the piece has confronted skeptics who were mystified by the live installation of refugees atop "Uçak Restaurant", a köfte kitchen housed in a decommissioned airbus3.

Altindere gives few interviews, though after Köfte Airlines appeared he did speak out to comment on the nature of his work as a political statement. In September of 2016, for the English-language Berlin rag, Exberliner [15], he told the art writer Amanda Ribas Tugwell: "When I was invited to have a solo show at NBK, I wanted to do a project on the refugee crisis. Then I got the invitation from HAU and I offered them Köfte Airlines, and then I got the invitation from the Berlin Biennale and I decided to link all of the works. In *Homeland* you can see references to *Köfte Airlines*. When Abu Hajar, the rapper and activist in *Homeland*, was in Istanbul, I introduced him to Muhammad Faris, who was one of the first to watch the work. He really liked it – he cried, told me he agreed with Hajar and said, 'We have a *homeland*, and one day we will go back.'"

- 1. Its exhibition had indoor and open-air versions at HAU2, a venue next to Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), which also showed a thematically related work by Altindere, the popular video installation, Space Refugee (2016) based on the life of the Syrian cosmonaut Muhammed Ahmed Faris [16].

- 2. Seidi might be referring to the expression “köftehor" which translates as something like "lucky beggar" while sometimes used in an endearing way, as a parent to their child, like "you little rascal". Also, interesting - in Farsi, köfte means "beaten, slapped"
- 3. Some questioned the authenticity of its composition, suspecting Photoshop. In turn, PILOT Gallery defended the integrity of the piece and Altindere’s peerless originality by showing the video of its making at his solo exhibition “Welcome to Homeland [17]” during the 15th Istanbul Biennial in September 2017.

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[4] http://www.artefactmagazine.com/2018/03/07/sukran-moral-a-story-of-violence-sex-and-success/
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[11] https://vimeo.com/187982408
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