Stories in Reverse

Following his current solo exhibition, “Stories in Reverse”, at Piartworks in Istanbul, Huo Rf talks with Merve Akar Akgün about memories, commonality, queer culture, and artist’s privacy.

Conversation / Merve Akar Akgün December 1, 2017

Huo Rf (born 1988) is a young Turkish artist based in Istanbul. He is a graduate of the Fine Arts Faculty at Balikesir University and one of the co-founders of an Istanbul-based artist collective called “Signs of Time”. His work deals with gender issues and questions of identity. It focuses on the tension between the individual and society in light of social and cultural norms.

This conversation was conducted following the opening of his second solo exhibition “Stories in Reverse” at Piartworks in Istanbul.

Betzalel, fabric and polaroid photo, 56,5 x 30,5 cm, 2016

[1]Betzalel.

2016

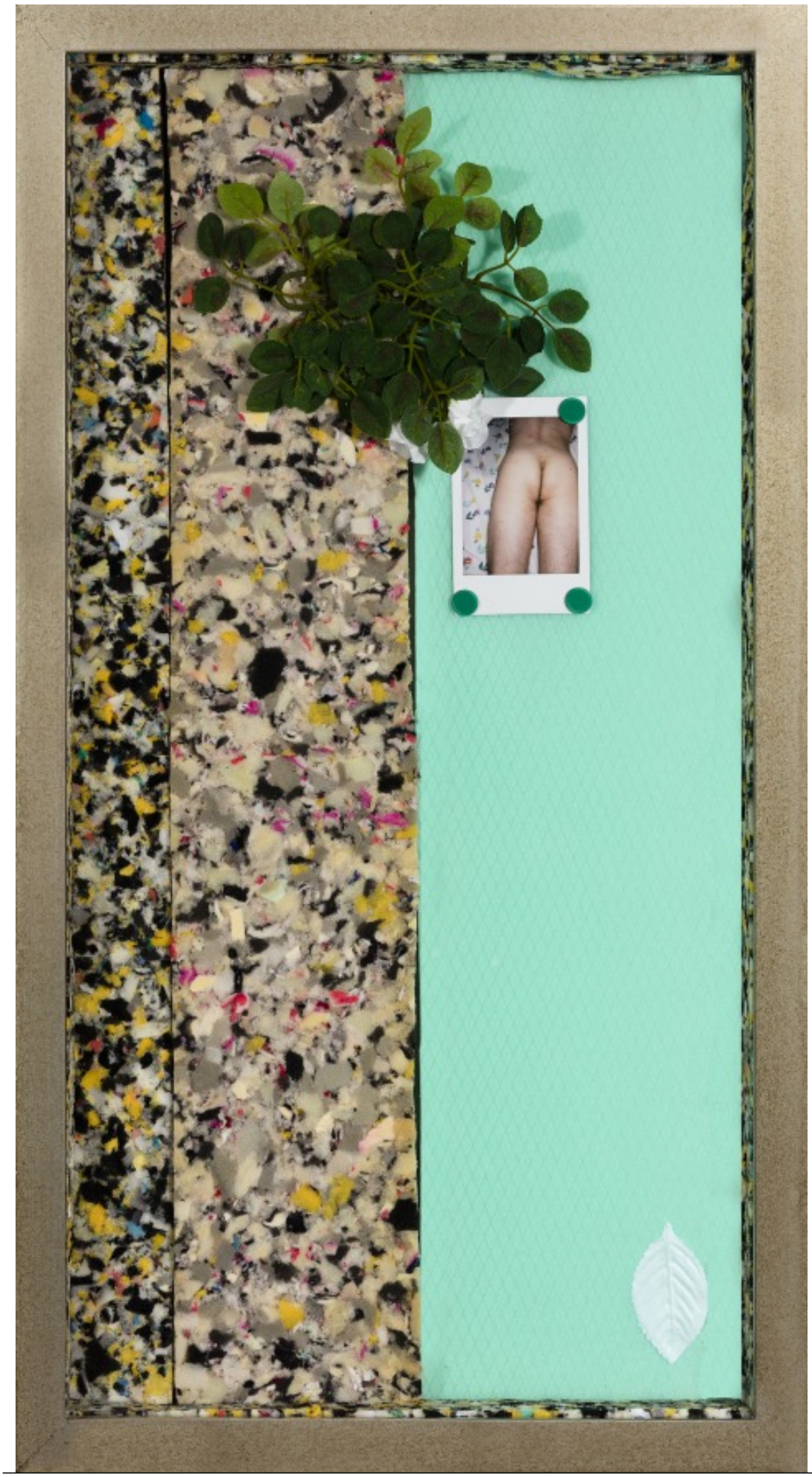
fabric and polaroid photo. 56.5 x 30.5 cm. photographer: Chroma Andre Carvalho / Tugba Carvalho

Merve Akar Akgün: In your current show, you exhibit works from the “Homotopia” series. In most of them you integrated a polaroid photo of a naked man you had shot from behind. Could you talk about the role of male nudity in your work?

Huo Rf: I believe that the use of male nudity not only challenges social norms according to which we are obliged to cover our genital parts in public, but it is also an attempt to examine the principal borders of the question of the artist’s privacy. The nude photos are taken from behind and there are no identifying characteristics in them, and yet each of the works has a title that includes a male's name. Even though these names have cultural, religious, or ethnic significance, it seems that each name represents a unique individual.

I believe that artworks reveal the artist’s experiences and life, even if not directly or intentionally. This is the nature of art and being an artist. Privacy is quite tricky. I don't exactly know whether we pay enough attention to it or not, but probably we have started not to, with all the technological developments. We all fall into its trap from time to time. Every image or sentence that we share in the social media becomes public. Each one of us perceives privacy differently. There are many TED Talks (like Glenn Greenwald’s talk [2]) on privacy issues. As I understand it, privacy is shaped according to our responsibilities. But I cannot define it in general terms. I can only talk about my own experience.

Mehmet, plastic material used for insulation, plastic flowers and polaroid photo, 56,5 x 30,5 cm, 2016 **[3]**



[4]Mehmet. 2016

plastic material used for insulation. plastic flowers and polaroid photo. 56.5 x 30.5 cm. photographer: Chroma Andre Carvalho / Tugba Carvalho

MAA: So, do you feel that by giving up privacy art is linked to sacrifice? What were your sacrifices for becoming “Huo Rf”?

HR: You sacrifice whether it is desired or not. Although art feeds us all, it is not a bed of roses. Although it might seem like it sometimes, art is not a space free of reality. Like people all over the world, we wake up every day to unfamiliar news, or news that we dislike. While wars and terrorist attacks happen, we try to produce art. This might mean that we are adapting to pain too fast. But it also means that while the world tackles multiple crises, art can only take up a small space. On top of that, only limited numbers of people have access to art. And, thereby art producers struggle to survive. Hence, every artist, not only me, carries a responsibility and makes sacrifices under the same hard conditions. But nonetheless, we never stop! We rather use the challenging conditions to yield new stories which we keep exposing to the public.

Huo Rf - Stories in Reverse **[5]**

[6]Huo Rf. Stories in Reverse

Installation View. photography: Onur Gokce

MAA: How would you describe the role of art today?

HR: I agree with what Hito Steyerl has written [7] a few years ago: “Contemporary art thus not only reflects, but actively intervenes in the transition toward a new post-Cold War world order. It is a major player in unevenly advancing semiocapitalism wherever T-Mobile plants its flag. It is involved in mining raw materials for dual-core processors. It pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart…”.

I usually prefer to be a little distanced from “political art” per se. But I believe that every artist is political on a different level. Artists can be direct or indirect in their use of politics. My work is concerned with the invisibility of queer culture in Turkey and elsewhere. As part of my research I was deeply influenced by Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye'de Queer Kültür ve Muhalefet *[8]* (*The Sexuality Conundrum: Queer Culture and Dissidence in Turkey,* 2012) - a precious book about queer culture in Turkey, edited by Serkan Delice and Cüneyt Çakırlar.

Afran, fabric and polaroid photo, 56,5 x 30,5 cm, 2016 **[9]**

[10]Afran, 2016
fabric and polaroid photo, 56.5 x 30.5 cm. photographer: Chroma Andre Carvalho / Tugba Carvalho

MAA: How did you come up with the idea of Homotopia?

HR: A few years ago, when I started working at Rampa Istanbul as a gallery assistant, the first exhibition that I worked on was called "Heterotopia [11]" (1992-2011) - a series of works that were created in the framework of the continual collaboration between Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin and Michael Morris. I was really inspired by their works and in a way it became part of my life, of my own story. "Homotopia" is a product of an individual reaction. It is an attempt to tell my own stories, based on different personal encounters, and influenced by the barriers that were set before me. I used various materials, diverse bodies and different identities to tell my own stories, to portray my experiences. The result was open-ended collages.

Huo Rf - Stories in Reverse **[12]**

[13]Huo Rf. Stories in Reverse

Installation View. photography: Onur Gokce

MAA: Can you talk a bit about the process of your work?

HR: Nicole O'Rourke, the exhibition's curator, followed the works chronologically. Eventually she had as much control over the process as I did. I care about this commonality of ours. A completely different set of memories than mine was helping me to approach the work from a different angle. This was exactly what we put the emphasis on. What does a male nude body, photographed from behind, tell? The answer to this question is taking shape by integrating the different memories of all those who were involved in the project. What do these bodies, which we have never met, which we are not familiar with their clothing, ethnic backgrounds, or jobs, stand for? How are they shaped? This pure encounter only made sense and got its shape within a mine of communal information.

For instance, when I was working at Rampa gallery we reproduced one of Gülsün Karamustafa's works, *Objects of Desire*, for her retrospective at Hamburger Bahnhof. This work is reflected in one of my works through the fabric in the background. The ribbons I used in another work are related to another work by Karamustafa called *New Orientation*. I used these memories to create new stories and portraits.

MAA: You also published a book in parallel to the exhibition under the same title. It seems that the book is much more than an exhibition catalogue. What is it inside? What was the purpose of the book?

HR: I wanted to move beyond creating a catalogue that focuses solely on the exhibition. The result was a book that was created collectively. Not only me, but also fourteen friends of mine were involved in the book. It was beautifully designed by “Girls on Their Way Home”, Kevin Pfaff and Yada Tomomi.

Nicole O’Rourke, the curator, penned the story of how the exhibition came into being. She wrote about our muses and our references. Another curator, Merve Elveren, came up with stories that were inspired by the stories behind my works and coincided with her own references to create something new.

My artist friends, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan and Gülsün Karamustafa, were acquainted with many of the works in the series and became part of the book as well. We decided to include an interview I held with Karamustafa for the magazine Sanat Dünyamız about “Chronographia”, her exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof. This interview points to the inspiration that I got from her. A foreword by Karamustafa accompanies it. My mutual experiences with Büyüktaşçıyan’s turned into a poem that she wrote accompanied by three photos that she took upon my request. Within the book, there is also some documentation of the production process, and chapters that include works by artists from “Signs of Time”, an independent art initiative that I founded at 2012.

The book gives shape to a certain period of my life: my stories, experiences, inspirations and references. This book that sets off out of personal encounters has turned into an independent work, a new dimension in my body of work that includes a lot of different experiences.

Huo Rf’s exhibition “Stories in Reverse” [14] is on display at Piartworks Istanbul through December 8, 2017.

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Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Betzalel%2C%20fabric%20and%20polaroid%20photo%2C%2056%2C5%20x%2030%2C5%20cm%2C%202016.jpg
[2] https://www.ted.com/talks/glenn_greenwald_why_privacy_matters
[3] http://tohumagazine.com/file/mehmet-plastic-material-used-insulation-plastic-flowers-and-polaroid-photo-565-x-305-cm-2016
[4] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Mehmet%2C%20plastic%20material%20used%20for%20insulation%2C%20plastic%20flowers%20and%20polaroid%20photo%2C%2056%2C5%20x%2030%2C5%20cm%2C%202016.jpg
[5] http://tohumagazine.com/file/huo-rf-stories-reverse-1
[6] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Huo%20Rf%20-%20Stories%20in%20Reverse%20-%20IMG_6867.jpg
[7] http://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/
[8] http://www.metiskitap.com/catalog/book/5442
[9] http://tohumagazine.com/file/afran-fabric-and-polaroid-photo-565-x-305-cm-2016
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Afran%2C%20fabric%20and%20polaroid%20photo%2C%2056%2C5%20x%2030%2C5%20cm%2C%202016.jpg
[11] http://blog.saltonline.org/post/96075421469/h%C3%BCseyin-bahri-alptekins-suitcase
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