

Creatures from the South East. Şener Özmen

(Asli Serbest, Mona Mahall, 2019)

Şener visited our still empty place in Mitte to fill in German forms. It was the third time that he came to Mitte for those forms, as if forms and Mitte belonged together by nature. There seems to be absolutely no Mitte without forms. Those forms that all pose the same question: Are you still a displaced person? But in Mitte, places are rare (img1), to say nothing of their costs.

Şener mentioned that he finally wanted to do a feature film. A thriller about the kidnapping of Tracey Emin? we asked, remembering the first lines of his Story:

“Abdulkaki Readymade welcomed the twenty-first century in the castle, with plans of abducting Tracey Emin, the pampered girl of Young British Art. There were neither any windows nor a door in his modestly furnished room. That did not disturb him at that moment, and besides, he could share now the excitement of the swallow that was trying to put its nest in the corner of the ceiling.”¹

We met again at the empty place in Mitte to fill in forms. Şener has now his own ashtray—an empty glass of olives—placed on the exterior window sill. He talked about the West’s issues with Frankenstein and his plans to move to the US. He addressed his desire to make a feature film. While we were discussing the exhibition space of his show at Pilevneli Istanbul, we were looking at the video works that it should host: added up to exactly 89 minutes, they take the same time as one episode of “Tatort,” the most German of all German TV series.²

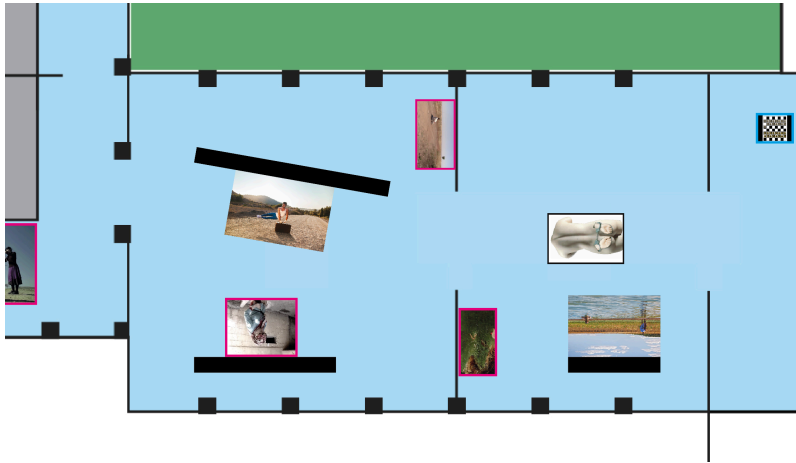
Projected onto the floor plans of the gallery (img2), the videos announce themselves to be a feature film composed of episodes, arranged in space, not in linear time. The performance of this episodic film is bound to its existence in and through the particular space. It constitutes itself in the space and shows its seemingly discontinuous episodes in consistency to ultimately formulate a political existentialism. The implications are in fact existential, —apart from the Story of Tracey Emin— not so much as a Tatort crime story, but rather as science fiction.



Img1: Map of Refugee housing, Berlin, Nov. 2018, Mitte is marked with a star.

¹ Şener Özmen: The Story of Tracey Emin, Diyarbakir, 2000

² “Tatort” (Crime scene) is a police procedural television series that is aired since 1970 on the main channel “Das Erste” of the German public service broadcasting organization ARD, on Sunday evening, just after the 8 o'clock Tagesschau news.



Img2: Floor plans, Pilevneli gallery space with a layout of Şener's episodic film.

Epeisòdion

The episode might be an “addition,” as the old Greek word literally translates; yet, it has never resulted from a simple act of accumulation. Rather, the episode has been “coming in besides,” thereby referring to the dialogue inserted between two songs in a Greek tragedy. Its interruption in the performance of the choir turns out to be that of several creatures approaching from the southeast in the trailer for “A New Hopelessness.” These guerilla creatures, sometimes referred to as the Sand People, ride on a bantha, an elephant-sized beast with ram horns that they jump onto from a rock. Wearing goggles, mouthpieces and filters (sometimes jumping rope), they are said to be mutated humanoids. Their speech approaches animality, a sphere, where the dramatic Greek dialogue seems to fail; where there are already announced the cracks in the Greek system that will follow in various of Şener's episodes. Hopelessness might be fueled by the observation of these cracks and failures of the (art) world. The new aporia is an old one, that there is no overcoming the Western system, in spite or because of its failure: Just sat bent over at the brim of a fountain, Icarus, a.k.a. Şener Özmen, still falls into the water backwards; Aphrodite appears handcuffed on the back.

That Aphrodite comes in the form of a statue (made in China), does not mean she would not take part in the episodic film. Neither does it make her the spatial element typical of a state-of-the-art video installation. Aphrodite is no decorative element whatsoever, she embodies her own episode —better: episodes of rewritten histories and mythologies. Her performance in these episodes can never end or even progress in the conventional sense of fixing her origin; it can only be her episodic restatements at different places. Even though she appears as a distinctly Greek Goddess here, she might translate back into the more powerful and older incarnation that happens to be Ishtar the Goddess, an important figure of the Neolithic cult and associated with an ancient civilization of a matrilineal social formation in the region of Mesopotamia. Has Ishtar —in handcuffs— been kidnapped from her context and transplanted to a European mythical island (Germany)? If this is in fact an earlier case of abduction, the Tracey-Emin-episode would appear in a completely new light.

Doppelgänger

Kidnapping is understood as an unsymmetrical process: to do and to undergo, to commit and to suffer; even when there is no reason (money, attention) for the crime, the idea of the inequality between the positions persists. Between Abdülbaki and Tracey, however, this stated inequality, the difference between superior and inferior, between active and passive, proves wrong: in the course of the story they start negotiating on equal terms; Tracey maintains:

- “- I also know some of your people.
- Us? Who are we?
- Turkish artists and curators.
- So what?
- Vasif Kortun, for example. I think he is working now for the new exhibition of Ankara Association of Plastic Artists. I can help you to participate in it.
- Oh, yeah? Meanwhile, I am not a Turkish artist. And how you going you to do that? Will you seduce that guy?
- Don't bother your mind. I'll do that. Do you accept the deal or not?
- I do not! I would like to deserve it.”³

In this sense, the gap between kidnapper and kidnapped does not exist. Obviously, Abdülbaki and Tracey share the same space, that is, a black box video art gallery cum castle, where they get close. As is known from many films, captor and captives not uncommonly develop a relationship during the intimate time spent together; in the castle, Abdülbaki and Tracey behave like a couple. And, they are not the only ones: Şener depicts pairs walking through snow, working on bubble wrap, singing together and diving for secrets. They are all doppelgänger, either twins who were separated at birth, archetypes or clones, anyways "ones who go twice" to form symmetrical couples. These couples inhabit Şener's episodic film on an every-day basis, yet produce absurd situations. Their doubling allows them to combine disparate things and moments: a diving brawl that ends with the attempt to catch a ride while in a diving suit, a refugee gymnast (and his shadow) on a suitcase, on the road, a song that makes the faces of the two singers bleed.

With their doppelgänger, the episodes emerge simultaneously as humorous, uncanny, and terrifying situations. They show humor and terror, delight with unsolved contradictions and pain with unshriven conflicts in regards of a failing reality; they depict the old desire and new hopelessness of someone as alien as someone who fell from the moon⁴ and landed in New York City to look at Manhattan's skyline.

Doppelgänger are said to be those "people who see themselves." They are their own actors and the audience in the front row seats of the show; they are their own artists and spectators, mirroring both positions. In that, doppelgänger help to unmake the assumed difference between active producer and passive recipient, between kidnapper and kidnapped; between Şener and the spectators of his videos who see, feel and understand the episodes to the extent that they are themselves doppelgänger of the artist; they do their videos as the artist has done them, translate in their own way what they are looking at, connect what they see with what they have seen, done and dreamed. In this sense, doppelgänger stand for and act on the transgression of roles, territorial borders and implied hierarchies; ultimately, they

³ Şener Özmen: *The Story of Tracey Emin*, Diyarbakir, 2000, p. 28

⁴ The moon reference is borrowed from Friedrich Schiller who once remarked that German Romantic writer Jean Paul was as alien to him as someone who fell from the moon.

move on and over the edge between art and politics, where emancipation means “the awareness and the enactment of that equal power of translation and counter-translation.”⁵

Water

In its space, the episodic film is neither about participation (as planned and expected coproduction of an experience) nor about that immersion that completely envelopes the spectator/artist within an encompassing set and closes off the outside world (which most often happens inside a black box exhibition space). There is no need for that sort of cohesive environments, where the water in Şener’s water-episodes would expand into the gallery space —as a pool or blue light, or any other form of pervasive setting. The episodes do not aim at governing the spectators by making them participants in a spectacular production or illusionistic construction. Rather, they come as prosaic sequences in a hard-edged flatness of the images, screens or projections that they are after all. In emphasizing their condition and limits as objects of different material properties inhabiting one common space, they show themselves as parts of this space, more precisely: as parts of the episodic film existing in and through the particular space. Spectators move through this space, through the exhibition that they share with Şener’s objects.

Of course, there are not just objects; Şener’s subjects virtually join the things and beings in the gallery space —virtually because they are quite outside the space depicted in the videos and photographs, but still addressed: the creatures approaching from the southeast, bringing their beast with them; the curator held at gunpoint by the artist who is unhappy with the honorarium —he is anyway here, it is his gallery after all. There are the ones downstairs who are given a sign to be quiet in a photograph with a man lying on the ground and the ones who are given a sign to not get closer. These figures are all displaced from, but referred to in the images. It is, therefore, not far to seek them in the gallery space, where they share their separation from the images with the spectators who move through the exhibition hall.

In this sense, immersion is very much a quality of Şener’s episodic film: spectators and protagonists are virtually present (presence is said to be the highest degree of immersion) within the space, where they can, at any moment, move on and over the edge of the water. This virtuality makes us sense the water, in which the Roman is taking his bath, while his servant is waiting for him in a classically composed landscape of one part water, one part shore and one part sky. We feel the exhaustion of the gymnast and his shadow practicing on the suitcase through our own specific kinesthetic receptors that exist for detecting stretching in muscles and tendons. We sense the menace that is the artist, and the pain in the neck that our nationalism is causing. We also feel the presence of and care for the family that Şener has with him in all of his lonely episodes. Ultimately, we recognize the edges that we don’t dare to move on or over: into the catastrophe of displacement, the hopelessness of flight and the fatal violence of war, where a divested man is warped around a stone.

Stones

“Stones, like us, stand at the intersection of countless lines crossing one another and receding to infinity, at the center of a field of forces too unpredictable to be measured; and we awkwardly call the result chance, hazard, or fate.” (Marguerite Yourcenar)

Loaded onto the girl’s paper boat, stones share the existence of a precarious and uncertain becoming, finally, a going down. That they are 99 in number, green in color and called by their names, does not attribute humanness or divineness to them. Rather, these

⁵ Jacques Rancière: The Emancipated Spectator, 2004 online. Retrieved 08.03.2019 from <http://members.efn.org/~heroux/The-Emancipated-Spectator-.pdf>

stones appear as things in relation to any kind of things, any kind of matter whatsoever, including organic matter (the matter that gets called “human”), bodies, entire populations, concepts or ideas. When the stones that the girl collects at the beach in a mirroring bowl and sends off in a soon overloaded paper boat on the Bosphorus; when these stones are given names, survival is addressed: that sur-vival to which Derrida referred as the relation between subject and proper name.⁶

The proper name emerges in the call upon the other, in the call to and from the other. It might emerge when, in French, a stone/pierre is called by the proper name Pierre. There is no difference to be heard between pierre and Pierre. The issue is: While, as Derrida stated, the pierre/stone easily translates into another language, because general nouns belong to a language, Pierre cannot be translated. To translate Pierre to Peter would mean to re-name a subject and to lose the homophonic effect of the French pierre and Pierre. Therefore, Pierre would have to cross linguistic borders so that it entered a foreign territory disrupting the unity of its new language. Pierre’s sur-vival then depended on whether this was allowed or not. Yet, the political-kinetic (existential) problematic is that stones do not swim so that they will probably not even arrive at any border at all. The girl, while loading the boat, gives names to the stones, implying that these things (or any kind of things whatsoever) are treated discretely so that they can be identified —if they appeared and disappeared, fused and multiplied, naming would become difficult or impossible. In the course of the video, the naming, however, becomes more of a counting of names, similar to the numeration of artist names in another episode: Located in an open and flat landscape, Şener would, while counting the names of contemporary artists, move further away from the foreground to disappear over the horizon —with him the sound of his voice and the spoken words. Through the operation of counting, the (god’s/ artists’) proper names are transported into a different and distanced field, where they lose their ground to call upon the other, to call to and from the other. In being counted, the names turn into general figures, into an index, or a system that leads from the concrete event into an abstract domain.

Star Trek

The travel back from an abstract domain can (theoretically) go through an advanced transporter technology, that is, an applied political existentialism reacting to life’s experiences, the choices that have to be made and the responsibility that has to be accepted. Yet, Şener’s attempts to start the teleportation fail. Even going back to a first generation mode —he draws a circle on the floor to position himself within an old-fashioned transporter chamber— is useless. The reasons might be technological: Thick stones could cause a reduced range of the transporter (improbable: the distance Şener wants to cover is just a few thousand kilometers while the transporter is actually designed for distances up to 40.000 km). Dense metals, solar flares and other forms of radiation, including electromagnetic and nucleonic and affected-by-ion storms could disrupt or prevent the transportation (improbable on earth). Even telekinetic powers and brute strength could stop the process.

The failure could after all be caused by current global processes, where the world has become more open to flows of capital and commodities but more closed to the circulation of human bodies. Strategic subjects therefore prefer to become logistical objects, and form logistical populations in order “to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without

⁶ Jacques Derrida: *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit, Stanford 1995

friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to connect without interruption.”⁷

However, Şener is a Marxist (all Star Trek members are), striving for the post-capitalist classless society, where the shift from “necessity” to “freedom” is possible. In this post-scarcity system (a democratic confederation) beings (extraterrestrials and cyborgs included) focus on personal development as well as on participation in scientific and cultural exchange with other societies. Together with Lenin and Marx, who is already sitting on his packed bags, Şener tries to energize the transporter beam, while it is still not exactly clear, whether he wants to send their atoms and the bits, or just the bits. It is one of the few episodes, where Şener is speaking after all: repeatedly, just one word: energize (while hitting his communicator).

Speechlessness

Şener’s refusal to speak throughout almost the whole episodic film lets appear the noise of his suitcase on the ground, the flushing of the chessmen and the car crash not far from the divers. His silence might possibly be the anticipation of speech, but it is definitely the appreciation of what is around and not said. Perhaps it is even the idea that speech is happening in the moment when nobody is talking: when two divers fight and leave the water, holding hands, to catch a ride.

Şener’s speechlessness might be the call to listen to the noise that is the music of the Kurdish song performed by two girls and to the music that is the noise when three robots play their operational piece. His silence remains when he shouts for the teleportation, while the harsh critique that he leaves unspoken rings in the ears. For Şener the absence of speech is the presence of radical rebellion.

The episode starts with the red colored trailer showing a man with a gun and playing the song *Bad Love* by Ray Charles and Diana Ross. In a middle-class apartment with armchairs and a glass coffee table a man and a woman are sitting in front of each other in silence; she is chain smoking, he is desperate. The song *Det Nye Riket* by Norwegian black metal band Dimme Borgir is playing. It becomes silent: Is it Over? It’s over, the woman replies. *Papa Roach* by hardcore punk band Blood Brothers starts playing. The man lets a shopping basket down through the window —the camera image rotates at high speed from inside the basket. The kiosk owner fills the basket that the man pulls up again —the camera image rotates. He takes out a gun to turn it on the woman. The image freezes and turns red, when we hear *Bad Love* by Ray Charles and Diana Ross again. “A new Hopelessness” might be the next trailer.

⁷ Stefano Harney, Fred Moten: *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Wivenhoe 2013, p. 91