

Compilation 5

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I Was Happy When I was a Virgin- KUBA as a mode of de-regulated Experience.

Irit Rogoff

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Küba, a 40-monitor installation by Kutlug Ataman, takes its name from an area in Istanbul inhabited mostly by Kurdish migrants. In one section, Mehtap, one of the occupants of Küba – burdened by children, step-children, extreme poverty and without access to anything outside the immediate surroundings – tells us that she was very happy when she was a virgin. Happy before marriage, children, dislocation, domestic isolation and the trappings of a regulated adult life in extremely difficult circumstances. In the proliferation of narratives that grow to make up the site of Küba in this installation, we often hear of the clash between the drive to try and imagine a life and the demands of 'regulated experience'. In this installation Küba becomes the performative space in which migrancy, poverty, cultural alienation, gender discrepancies, the state of living under the constant shadow of political hostility, etc' are woven together into a large swathe of experiential narratives that together become the voice of a community of individuals. On the one hand this is without doubt life in extremis, on the other the narrative that emerges is neither pathetic nor demanding an empathic response from the viewer. The encounter with migrants and their lives among us requires a mode of engagement that tests to the limits the modes of representation we have at our disposal; neither description, nor analysis of the conditions of people's lives, nor well intentioned empathy are equal to this task. In this work we can locate another model,

neither analytical nor descriptive, it proposes that we might become partners in a mode of 'address'. By 'address' I mean a reciprocal relation in which someone has something to say, has the voice and the narrative structure to convey it and assumes a listener who is an active participant in an exchange. In an address it is perhaps not the actual conditions being described which demand the interaction with the listener, as the ability to articulate and the conviction that such an articulation is one's assurance of 'being in the world'. Within an address we have to reflect on how we might listen rather than on what we are hearing and that begins the work of an equal exchange between protagonists and viewers.

To address this dichotomy I would like to draw on the term 'state philosophy', as used by Deleuze and Guattari, and how this idea can be applied to a notion of 'state experience'. I will focus on how Kutlug Ataman's work snatches experience back to some kind of 'deregulated experience', which both describes a given reality but also dares to speculate about possibilities. The narrative spatialisation of Küba is the zone of this deregulated experience.

Ataman's work is often taken to represent Turkish culture or to be informative about conditions in Turkey. Although much of the subject matter is located in Turkey and explores unique subjectivities within Turkish culture and topography, it does not in any way function in a documentary mode. Instead, fact and fiction are combined in highly edited narratives that produce 'mini-films' in which characters and scenarios unfold. While there is much to understand about the extraordinarily tense and composite culture of Turkey from within these works, this is neither their aim nor their performative stance. In actual fact, the works all start from a stance of 'extra-territoriality' with men and women who are either marginal or located at oblique angles to society and who undo any normative assumptions about the place or its culture. In most of Kutlug Ataman's works the protagonists address us and tell of their experience, in their

unique and often unexpected voices. In fact, Ataman's work snatches the notion of experience away from the state and its normative regulations; birth, death, marriage, profession, citizenship, rights and legalities. Instead his video installations and films work to produce a de-regulated world, one in which experience cannot fit into the categories produced by state bureaucracies but produces its own fantastic narratives as a way of locating itself. Because the link of the work with actual social realities is circuitous, complex and highly inventive it cannot be embedded in straight forward factual contexts about Turkey, or Istanbul, or the status of women or gays in the culture, or whatever other categories it seems to be invoking.

On being puzzled;

The following are some initial thoughts entitled "I Was Happy When I was a Virgin" and which try to think through some notions of 'state experience' and of *Küba* the art project and *Küba* the place in Istanbul as efforts at creating zones of 'deregulated experience'.

Ataman's work is not only *about* experience it is in itself a form of experience and one that defies conventional viewing relations with art.

So why has this experience, the experience of working with Ataman's work, been so puzzling for me? Because the bulk of the work that Kutlug has produced as art work (to distinguish it from his work on feature film which is quite different) is made up of great swaths of talk, hours and hours of people talking at you, great long streams of language that floods over you, a Sheherazade like experience of being seduced by eccentric and extravagant unfolding narratives that get more and more detailed, more and more complex, following their own weird logic of streams of consciousness. They are seductive stories for sure but they are also a mode of address and as such they demand a response. When I first worked with these pieces I watched hours of tape every night in order to be able to write for

an exhibition in Vienna and then would go to sleep and dream in Turkish monologues, a language I do not understand or speak. It was a very limited and unsatisfactory response to the address I had experienced; an address to be seen, to be heard, to insist on one's reality, to be allowed to mix fact and fantasy as the building blocks of the narrative of ones own life.

The puzzling nature of the encounter with this body of work then, is how to relate to being addressed? I think this is significant enough to make a point of it – this work is not documentary, it is not a body of information about a place, or a demographic, it is not social or cultural history – it is an address and it demands a response. If we were to leave Küba with some notion that we knew something about Kurdish migrants into Istanbul or about Ghettoised ethnic communities – we would have failed it. If however, we open up some speculation about how to listen, how to hear this, if we understand that what is being addressed are the limited categories and tropes that we think in, then that address has indeed taken place.

Now, I am a theorist and that is significant because it is my mode of address and it too makes a demand. A demand to entertain with me the possibilities of critically inhabiting the edges of paradigms and of unsettling assumptions and of imagining other possibilities than those we have been habituated in. So what I offer here is a theoretical perspective into the dimension of 'experience' that I see being played out before us in Küba.

"I Was Happy When I was a Virgin" Deleuze and Guattari, speaking of the official lineages of philosophy as 'state philosophy', say that it populated by "bureaucrats of pure reason who are in historical complicity with the state." Their discourses, that of these bureaucrats of pure reason, "are of sovereign judgement, of stable subjectivity legislated by good sense, of rock like identity and of universal truth". State philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari maintain, is representational thinking, thinking

which is analogical – it seeks to establish a correspondence, a similarity of thought, an analogy between the subject, its concepts and the objects in the world to which these concepts are applied. This supposed unity is obviously a hugely privileged assumption. Sitting here amidst the inhabitants of Küba it seems laughable that one could posit a world so without ruptures, fissures, chaotic disruptions and necessary mobilities, that might allow one to sustain this fantasy of unity between the subject, its thought and the objects in the world to which this thought is applied.

Obviously, Deleuze and Guattari are highly critical of ‘state philosophy’ and they offer their own brand of vertiginous contingency, of process in flight, as in direct opposition to the rock like identity of official thought that supports and sustains the state.

Taking off from their critical characterisation of thought, I wanted to think about a parallel proposal, that of ‘state experience’ – it seems to me that ‘state experience’ is experience that can only be understood through the markers that frame and legislate experience; birth, marriage, profession, war and the legal parameters of belonging; location, home and citizenship.

Much of the discussion we encounter concerning experience focuses on the demise of its force and authenticity. In “The Poverty of Experience” Walter Benjamin locates the horrors of World War 1 as emblematic of a modernity that wreaks havoc with a notion of having an individuated and recountable experience.

Giorgio Agamben in “Infancy and History” laments the sensory bombardment of humdrum contemporary urban life that has robbed people of the ability to have or to speak of their experience.

Kate Love reads this, far more interestingly, as “neither the

events of modern life, nor the individuals who experience them, have sufficient authority, to render them as experience”.

Love’s interpretation made me think back to my not too distant life in California where there was much preoccupation with multicultural pedagogy. Of great concern was the often-observed exhortation to minority students to ‘speak from their experience’ – thus setting up an assumption that majority students had no experience, because experience was equated with oppression, suffering and marginality of one kind or another. These were the breeding grounds for ‘authentic’ experience and these were the legitimations of its authority. The issue of who could hear, of how they could hear, of what they had at their disposal to comprehend what they heard, never entered the picture. The entire scenario operated through moral guilt – those who do not suffer, who are equated with the forces of oppression should be made to sit and hear – but can they hear?, how would they know how to hear? the notions of address and response I spoke of earlier did not figure into the discussion which largely followed the logics of ‘state experience’ operating the binary dichotomies of belonging/unbelonging.

In Küba , something very different takes place and I would propose that it is the constitution of an alternative zone to ‘state experience’ that of ‘deregulated experience’. Women speak of marriage as a necessity, a required right of passage. They speak of children as an incontestable but grim reality that requires Herculean efforts. Men speak of work or the lack of it and of fighting. There is little pleasure in any of these markers of a regulated adult life and there is absolutely no unity of subject, thought and encompassing world. There is nothing and nowhere to belong to and the village that was left behind is never a site of nostalgia or a possible site of return. Pleasure only enters the monologues through the unexpected kindness of strangers, the loyalty of friends, the solidarity of the fight, the ability to make a picnic out of disparate scraps or to beg enough outside the Mosque to afford 3 meters of cloth. Every so often people say

that Küba is leftist but they never detail its politics and we assume that they occupy a generally oppositional space. Certainly their encounters with authority, the police or the school board, are instances of hostile clashes in which they are positioned outside of the protected space of Turkish law and citizenship. Their Kurdishness is usually referred to via their lack of spoken Turkish and the difficulties and isolation that dictates.

And so the act of speaking, the topography that is constituted by these 40 voices and all of the others that they reference in their stories, this little Küba army of talkers, produces a zone of 'deregulated experience'. Grounded in actual suffering it transcends its material harshness to become a gesture, demands a mode of listening that cant simply be explained by knowing more about the miseries of what it is to be a poor Kurd within the Turkish megalopolis. Rather it dares us to listen differently, speculatively not empathically, to spatialise and to imagine space when that much grief and discontent and sheer bloody language is enfolded in its midst.

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Archive of Suburban Dissent 5 - Sea of Fire

Lidwien Van de Ven, Gal Kirn, Niloufar Tajeri

April 14th, 2018

This text is based on a conversation between Gal Kirn and Lidwien van de Ven on the topic of the *Sea of Fire*, or the Burning of Bandung.

Burning of the City as a Start of Anti-colonial Struggle

Sea of Fire, or what is called *Bandung Lautan Api*, emerged in the context of a still fresh occupation by imperial Japanese forces in World War II. Indonesian combatants who fought off the Japanese occupation received an ultimatum on March 24th, 1946 by British forces and Dutch Army Troops to disarm or leave the city. The Indonesian resistance found itself under the layering of different colonial oppressions, and as a response to this ultimatum around 200.000 inhabitants burned their homes. One cannot confirm the precise number, but most of the Southern part of Bandung was burned. The old houses are currently located in the Northern part of the city. A story goes that it was a young journalist Atje Bastaman who witnessed the burning of Bandung from Mount Leutik, a hill around Paeunpeuk, and saw how Bandung turned red. This made it into the headlines: "*Bandoeng Djadi Laoetan Api*", though due to lack of space was shortened to "*Bandoeng Laoetan Fire*".

The burning of the city followed a strategic decision by residents to not only flee the city, but to also prevent the Dutch Army Troops and the British Allies from taking full control in the citizen's place. The city was taken back for a short period, but had to be left behind again for forests and for undetermined time. The strategy of burning parts of the city is reminiscent of guerrilla fighting, which takes place

in urban surroundings, and can lead to riots and ultimately *burning*: be it historically through the symbolic burning connected to the food and stores that decided to raise the price of bread and other necessities; buildings that represent local symbols of power, such as job centers and police station; or police/colonial vehicles.

In the case of the *Sea of Fire* the political act of burning was radicalized, as it was connected to the space one holds dearest. This is not only how resistance takes place and people gain the time necessary to leave the city, but allows for the demonstration of political will: *the occupiers will not be able to really occupy our space, live in our houses, we would rather burn our homes than live in these homes under foreign occupation*. No matter how strategic the decision to burn Bandung was, some combatants stayed in the city and fought the occupation forces. One specific action, the suicide of Mohammad Toha, is worth recollecting. Toha was a member of the Indonesian militia and succeeded in smuggling several sticks of dynamite into the Dutch military Headquarters in Dayeuh Kolot. Once inside he was able to detonate the dynamite amongst warehouses of ammunition, killing himself and several Dutch and Japanese troops in the vicinity. The explosion created a small lake in Dayeuh Kolot, which triggered the metonymic vision of a lake and fire.

While retreating to the countryside, Ismail Marzuki was inspired by the *Sea of Fire* and added twist to his well-known poem, by altering last sentences of the song “Halo, Halo Bandung”. This became a popular song at the time. Meanwhile Bandung has since the postcolonial times, organizes yearly commemorations around monuments and locations in the city that relate to the events of 1946.

Hello, Hello Bandung

The capital of Parahyangan

For so long I'm in distance, I cannot see

Hopefully now we meet again
And after that, no more inquisitive feeling.
Hello, Hello Bandung, a city of full of memory.
For so long, I want to meet you.
Whilst my soul and desire in my body
We will meet again.
Hello, Hello Bandung, the capital of Periangan
Hello, Hello Bandung, a city full of memory
Now, she has become a Sea of Fire.
Lets reclaim her again, *Bung* (comrade).

Extended lyrics

One version of the song

1946 news: "How extremist I leave behind South-Bandung"

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The Sea of Fire, drawing



Indonesian armed resistance leaving the burned Bandung.



The monument to Sea of Fire