Figuring a Queer Aesthetics and Politics of Urban Dissent in Istanbul

by

Sinan Cem Goknur

Department of Computational Media Arts & Cultures
Duke University

Date: ___________________
Approved:

_____________________
Mark Olson, Advisor

_____________________
Frances Susan Hasso, Co-Chair

_____________________
William Seaman

_____________________
Esther Leah Gabara

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Computational Media Arts & Cultures in the Graduate School of Duke University

2020
ABSTRACT

Figuring a Queer Aesthetics and Politics of Urban Dissent in Istanbul

by

Sinan Cem Goknur

Department of Computational Media Arts & Cultures
Duke University

Date: ______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Mark Olson, Advisor

___________________________
Frances Susan Hasso, Co-Chair

___________________________
William Seaman

___________________________
Esther Leah Gabara

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Computational Media Arts & Cultures in the Graduate School Duke University

2020
Abstract

This dissertation is a theoretical and art/archival practice-based exploration of aesthetic-affective resistance to neoliberal recuperation of urban space that not only constitutes a physical manifestation of capitalist accumulation by dispossession, but also serves to aesthetically valorize affluent middle-class normativity. Through archival research, I discuss the rise of aesthetic-political dissidence against the rent-seeking displacement of the minoritized in Istanbul, and follow its trajectory from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. Using visual analyses, I theorize the aesthetic strategies of cultural-political dis-identification from the presiding logics and affectations of neoliberalism. These aesthetic strategies include satire, valorization of the obsolete, discarded, devalued and superfluous, and the fragmental provocation of memory to keep the lived history of Istanbul active against neoliberal erasure without monumentalizing a particular historical narrative. The art practice component of this dissertation provides self-reflection on my art works that draws upon aesthetic-political developments in Istanbul. In my discussion, I also put my art practice in conversation with queer temporality, utopian realism, and a queer-feminist ethic-erotic that orient us to social practices of production, reproduction, and subjectivization based on relational principles driven from sensuous reciprocity that go beyond the familial and the naturalized, and that the dominant political-economic order renders unfeasible.
## Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................... vii

1. Introduction: Figuring a Queer Aesthetics and Politics of Urban Dissent ................. 1  
   1.1 Theory, Practice, and Praxis .................................................................................. 5  
   1.2 Theoretical Groundings ..................................................................................... 8  
   1.3 Neoliberalism and the City .............................................................................. 15  
   1.4 Turkish-Style Neoliberalism ............................................................................ 18  
   1.5 Chapters .......................................................................................................... 23  

2. The Politics of Repression and Art of Dissident Desire in Istanbul ......................... 26  
   2.1 Urban Culture and Artful Dissent .................................................................. 28  
   2.2 Cultural-Political Dissidence at Crossroads ............................................... 33  
   2.3 Dissidence and its Discontents: Current vs. Contemporary Art ................. 40  
   2.4 Winding Paths of Cultural-Political Dissidence ............................................ 49  
   2.5 Contradictions, Humor, and the Queer Art of Defiance ............................ 53  

3. Social Reality and Urban Development in Istanbul ................................................. 69  
   3.1 Urban Realism and the Art of Shame .............................................................. 72  
   3.2 The Underpass of Urban Development ........................................................... 80  
   3.3 Urban-Rural Political Economy and Cultural Consequences ....................... 87  
   3.4 The Urban Aesthetics of Alternative Nostalgia ............................................. 110  
   3.5 The Dialectics of Whiling Away Time in the City ....................................... 124
4. A Queer Art of Aesthetic-Affective Dissidence........................................... 131

4.1 From Queer Futurity to the Utopian Uses of the Erotic .............................. 134

4.2 Aesthetics of Collage and Double Exposure .............................................. 139

4.3 Shared Lines (2014) .................................................................................. 146

4.4 queerXscape (2019) .................................................................................. 156

5. Conclusion..................................................................................................... 178

References....................................................................................................... 185
List of Figures

Figure 1: Nalan Yırtmaç (Hafriyat artist), "Disastercity Collage 7," 2012 ................................. 60
Figure 2: Nalan Yırtmaç (Hafriyat artist), "Disastercity 8," 2012 ........................................... 61
Figure 3: Newspaper Clipping on Hafriyat October 25, 1997 .................................................. 69
Figure 4: Halil Altindere & Sener Ozmen, Untitled Installation, 1996 ................................. 77
Figure 5: Halil Altindere, "Dance with Taboos," 1997 ............................................................... 78
Figure 6: Hakan Gursoytrak (Hafriyat artist), "Expressway," 1995 ....................................... 83
Figure 7: Posters from Chamber of Architects, the Union of Chambers of Architects and Engineers, and ODTU architecture department’s events, 1977 – 1979 .......................... 103
Figure 8: Antonio Cosentino (Hafriyat artist), Volkswagen 69, 2003 .................................... 115
Figure 9: Dervis Aslan (Bodyshop artisan & farmer), "Dervis’ Truck," 1997 ......................... 120
Figure 10: Charlie (Hafriyat artist), "Skewers," 1997 ................................................................. 121
Figure 11: "Bostan of Gezi,” images from Bianet ........................................................................ 122
Figure 12: Charlie (Hafriyat artist), "Eat Drink Shit,” 1997 ....................................................... 123
Figure 13: Istiklal Street between Landmarks ............................................................................. 141
Figure 14: Video Projections on the Marmara Hotel (2009). Photo by author .................. 141
Figure 15: Video Projections on the Galata Tower (2009). Photo by Andrea Steudel de Jesús .......................................................... 143
Figure 16: Architectural rendering of the site in 2012 ............................................................... 152
Figure 17: Photo of the site before 2003 with Woolworth Co ............................................. 153
Figure 18: Photo of the public park before its demolition in 2014 ........................................... 154
Figure 19: Architectural rendering of the One City Center’s private park ............................ 155
Figure 20: *queerXscape* installation view ................................................................. 158

Figure 21: Burj Al Babas housing development, a ghost town in Turkey .................. 160

Figure 22: *queerXscape* installation view, mode 1 .................................................. 163

Figure 23: *queerXscape* installation view, mode 2 .................................................. 164

Figure 24: *queerXscape* installation view, mode 3 .................................................. 166

Figure 25: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 1 still................................................................. 167

Figure 26: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 2 still................................................................. 168

Figure 27: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 3 still................................................................. 169

Figure 28: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 4 still................................................................. 171

Figure 29: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 5 still................................................................. 172

Figure 30: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 6 still................................................................. 173

Figure 31: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 7 still................................................................. 174

Figure 32: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 8 still................................................................. 175

Figure 33: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 9 still................................................................. 175

Figure 34: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 10 still............................................................... 176
We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future ... Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.

—José Esteban Muñoz

The realization of art as principle of social reconstruction presupposes fundamental social change. At stake is not the beautification of that which is, but the total reorientation of life.

- Herbert Marcuse

This dissertation originates from my personal participation in the cultural-political struggle in Istanbul, Turkey during the mid-2000s when the LGBTI+ movement started to converge with self-organizing artists in the city. This encounter was a coming together between dissident artists and activists whose struggles for social change were respectively forged at the margins of politics and art in Istanbul. A common denominator between these groups was their discontent with the lived reality of Istanbul’s urban transformation under the political economy and governmental rule of a nationalist, militarist, and increasingly religious neoliberal order.

Neoliberal urban policies that increased privatization and reduced restrictions on real estate development did not only destroy the historic fabric and natural resources of Istanbul. The city’s social texture and culture were also severely impacted by the rent-seeking changes. Starting in the mid-1980s, real estate profiters, mainstream media, and political authorities frequently provoked neo-conservative social identifications with Islam, Turkishness, and “family values” in service of urban renewal. These discourses particularly targeted those who were marginalized along the lines of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class. Urban renewal became not only a means to make speculative profits on urban land and accelerate wealth accumulation, but also a means to exacerbate social conservatisms and right-wing values. The mainstream media and political authorities with investments in construction, real estate development, and finance sectors sought to mitigate the deplorable social reality of urban land extortion by criminalizing and banishing those who they could most easily displace. For example, leveraging “family values,” transsexual sex workers were driven out of Cihangir, Istanbul in the mid-1990s, from Eryaman, Ankara in the mid-2000s, and from Avcilar, Istanbul in later 2000s despite the fact that these people had been living in these neighborhoods for many years. The norms that were projected as traditional family values constituted the presumed if not also mass media imposed cultural standards of an imagined affluent
middle class forged anew in the scaremongering and profit-driven climate of an increasingly class-segregating urban space.

In the face of the cultural normalization that accompanied Istanbul’s neoliberal transformation, dissident artists and activists developed cultural, political, aesthetic-affective modes of resistance based on the lived realities and everyday consequences of this process, particularly as they pertain to non-normative, minoritized, and otherwise devaluated experiences of life in the city. This dissertation brings to light a particular constellation of these efforts that were centered around the artist collective, Hafriyat (1996 – 2010), whose gallery space in Karakoy served as a hub that facilitated collaborations between artists and activists between 2007 and 2010. During this time, I was an organizer at LambdaIstanbul and the cross-pollinations between contemporary art and activism left a lasting impact on my understanding of the dissident possibilities of art in intersection with politics.

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which dissident artists and activists contended with the ideological normalization of neoliberalism that was taking shape around them. I focus on the ways in which dissident aesthetics resisted the neoliberal logics of rent-seeking, accumulation by dispossession, privatization, securitization, and erasure that became lodged in the normative cultural codes, tastes, and affectations of Istanbul’s urban life after the 1980 military coup. In response, artists and activists
developed aesthetic strategies for dis-identification from the presiding logics and affectations of neoliberalism through deployments of satire, aesthetic valorizations of the obsolete, discarded, devalued, and the superfluous, and persistent provocation of memory traces in an effort to keep the lived history of the city active against neoliberal erasure without monumentalizing history in a particular narrative.

Even Hafriyat’s name was a satirical choice. In Turkish Hafriyat means “excavation”. It is a word that references proliferating signs of “excavation services” for construction and the never-ending digging in the city which was turned into a giant construction zone in which Hafriyat artists dwelled. I trace Hafriyat’s main aesthetic dimensions and strategies through close readings of their artworks and by situating them in the history of the shifting political economy of Istanbul. I hope to convey that artworks intervene into the historical context out of which they emerge. They serve as a means to contend with this history; they provide an aesthetic, poetic, and sensorial realm through which to connect with real life, present or the past. They also intervene into this reality by potentially exposing, pushing back, and/or reconfiguring logics, perceptions, and affectations that conform to dominant ideology. By discussing artworks in connection with the political economy and vice-versa, I aim to clarify the cultural-political stakes in aesthetics of dissent, and discuss the ways in which they go about grappling with them.
Combining archival research that I conducted on Hafriyat at the SALT Research Library archives in 2018 with reflections on my own lived experience and artistic practice, I provide historical context for the convergence between self-organizing artists and activists that rekindled dissidence in Istanbul, a cultural-political milieu of opposition that had been largely suppressed following the 1980 military coup. In addition, by unpacking how a set of artworks produced by Hafriyat artists responded to the political economic shifts and social tensions in the city, I contextualize and discuss the broader cultural-political stakes of aesthetic dissidence in contemporary art after the mid-1990s in Istanbul, of which Hafriyat was a prolific and influential example. Last but not least, I discuss my own interrelated aesthetic pursuits through two art projects that I undertook during my tenure at the practice-based PhD program in Computational Media, Arts, and Cultures at Duke University.

1.1 Theory, Practice, and Praxis

The Graduate Program in Computational Media, Arts, and Cultures at Duke University is a new and experimental program that encourages students to combine theory and practice as methods of inquiry, critique, and intervention into social, cultural, and political conjunctures. One way to think about the relationship between theory and practice in this context is that the critical faculties associated with theory offer ways to
ground practice, while the experimental openness of practice expands possibilities for theoretical linkages between interdisciplinary domains.

In my case, by combining a scholarly and artistic approach, I tried to grapple with the subversive capacity associated with queer subjectivity and art in relation to neoliberal power from a critical angle that remains grounded in the queer political hope of the improbable without losing sight of the grim faces of the actual. The adjective “queer” in front of “aesthetics” and “politics” has allowed me to think through these phenomena beyond the quagmire of the present. This is not to say that the present conditions and the history of these notions do not matter, they matter in a constitutive capacity; however, as a transgendered person, a queer outlook for me is by virtue oriented towards subversive openings within social, historical and even biological constitutions. I understand my artistic and scholarly pursuits as dwelling in the tension between the dominant political and economic exploitation of the contradictions of our social, mental, and emotional constitution as humans and the subversive capacity of the affectively stimulated state of our relations, perceptions, and senses for social transformation.

Theory (i.e., scholarly research), practice (i.e., aesthetic production), and praxis (i.e., queer grassroots organizing) have constituted the three distinct yet interdependent dimensions of exploring the conditions of possibility for liberatory social change for me.
Although organizing, art practice, and scholarship can intersect and overlap in substantial ways, it helps me to think of them as respectively prioritizing relational intuition and social praxis; sensorial intuition and affective action/reflection; and analytic intuition and textual knowledge. The distinction helps me honor their relative autonomy from each other (i.e., no dimension could be subsumed or rendered subservient to the other) and mark them as particular territories of knowing the world and at times in contradictory or conflicting ways. Not to mention, I came to know these modes of seeing, thinking, and doing through the overlapping yet distinct “worlds” or “social fields” of academia, the so-called art world, and grassroots activism. There is a way in which these different modes and fields can undermine each other. For example, academia can act as the ultimate arbiter of people’s intelligence and motivations as well as artistic and activist competence; art can exploit academia and activism merely for publicity sake or as raw material to turn into art; activism can become the ultimate source of self-righteousness and readily cast away art and academia as parasitic handmaidens and entertainers of the bourgeoisie. However, there is also a way in which these dimensions work synergistically and help me recognize that each are prone to errors and limitations yet they can offer much needed stimulation, inspiration, and perspective, especially when a line of perception and action becomes dismal in one mode, and other modes breathe new life to resume a path of transformative motion.
through their own channels. After all, they offer overlapping but distinct forms of contending with the harshness and cruelty of the world and of extending the possibilities of perception and action for its transformation. This is how pursuing the traces of collective dreams and labor for another world in organized action, in aesthetics, and in scholarship has helped me remain committed to such efforts that are oriented in this direction regardless of the actual likelihood of a profound social transformation in my own lifetime. This manuscript, the two exhibited projects that I describe in Chapter 4, and the lived experience of organizing stand in a complimentary theory-practice-praxis relationship in this exploration. All of these elements, entangled, constitute my dissertation project.

1.2 Theoretical Groundings

Art and organizing are some of the key dimensions with which dominated and minoritized positions along the lines of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality have made oblique entries into institutionalized politics to which they have limited and rarely influential access. The Marxist-Gramscian concepts of ideology (i.e., ruling by ideas) and hegemonic struggle (i.e., the struggle over the integration of complex and contradictory perspectives in society into a particular political agenda) were further developed into analytic frameworks to study cultural-political developments by scholars of media, communication, and culture, especially by the Frankfurt school, the Birmingham school,
and Latin American cultural studies. My introduction to such frameworks was through Jesús Martín-Barbero’s 1987 book *Communication, Culture, and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*. In this book, Martín-Barbero puts forth an understanding of mass mediated culture as a site of conflictive negotiations between variegated and uneven segments of society. Far from being a level playing field, this conflictive site is imbued with hegemonic efforts to cover over the conflict between classes and assure the active consent of the dominated by producing a uniting resolution at the level of imaginative symbols. While accounting for the overwhelming resources and influential capacity of the state and the capital over mass mediated culture, Martín-Barbero works with a nuanced understanding of power that allows him to center his work on the variable and unruly participation of the dominated in the process of mediation, thereby allowing him to steer clear from patterns of cultural pessimism. In that sense, Martín-Barbero’s work builds on and reverberates with other notable thinkers of popular resistance and agency such as Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Mikhail Bakhtin, Martín-Serrano, and Néstor García Canclini.

My understanding of culture in relation to social change builds upon theoretical frames that pay attention to the cultural mediation of uneven socioeconomic power,

---

social tensions, and economic contradictions along with the inevitable subversive openings that arise within social production of culture because of the heterogenous and contradictory demands that get placed on it. In addition, my understanding of cultural-political resistance draws on José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification as a theoretical framework for understanding subversion and resilience. Through this notion, Muñoz theorizes the survival tactics and strategies of minoritized subjects “who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates.” Such strategies and tactics of survival delineate the subversive means to negotiate a majoritarian cultural-political sphere that continuously works to assimilate, elide, or punish those who do not conform to its normative impositions. Muñoz proposes disidentification in contradistinction to identification, as well as to counter-identification, as a third mode of dealing with dominant ideology:

Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counter-identification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.

For Muñoz, this distinction serves to underline a mode of queer survival and dissidence that is often ignored or undermined by the strictly binary framing of dissidence based

---

5 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications queers of color and the performance of politics. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
6 Ibid, 6.
7 Ibid, 11.
on an opposition between identification vs. counter-identification. Through underlining disidentification as a third mode of dissidence, Muñoz is able to account for experiences in which queer people have been able to turn a terrifying scene of blatant exclusion, humiliation, and homophobia into an exhilarating erotic encounter that motivates becoming and acting queer. Although this distinction is helpful in that sense, I am equally interested in the resonances between counter- and dis-identificatory positions in this project. For example, queer valorization of the abject or the mode of encountering humiliation and devaluation with erotic desire resonates with satirical devaluation and ridiculing of dominant notions of value and power. These resonances allow me to think of dissidence as an inclusionary space of counter- and dis-identificatory subject positions, reflecting the convergence between queer and not necessarily queer but affiliated modes of cultural-political dissent in Istanbul that I deal with here. Furthermore, I would argue that, in the political context of Turkey, a clear contradistinction between disidentification and counter-identification is not easily tenable because of their intertwined history. After all, in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, dis-identificatory and counter-identificatory positions have similarly suffered from the counter-revolutionary attacks of the military’s ruling ideology. During the junta regime of the 1980 military coup, queers were picked up, imprisoned, and tortured for corrupting social order alongside the leftist revolutionaries. The extent of
reactionary violence and repression that could be devised under an unchecked alliance between state and capital became apparent in Turkey in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup. The 1980 coup was first and foremost deployed to eradicate the leftist political mobilization comprised of numerous and more than occasionally antagonistic strands of revolutionary, utopian, counter-identificatory positions. The unified power of state and capital channeled through the iron fist of the military ended up dealing an effective blow to the leftist opposition of this period. However, these variegated and intersecting strands of counter-identification nevertheless have survived in ways that more than occasionally overlap and crisscross with dis-identificatory positions articulating a common discontent with the present. This is not to say that there isn’t antagonism and conflict among the discontented; conflict is endemic to political and creative community. Nevertheless, these positions continue laboring to enact permanent structural change vis-à-vis the dominant ideology’s normalization of the current incarnations of the state and society. This labor ranges from everyday subversive gestures of dissidence associated with queer visibility to hardline revolutionary determination performed by political prisoners. As such, it would be hypocritical of me to call the sphere of dominant ideology inescapable in Turkey when many people have taken and continue to take extreme steps to indeed escape it, as was most recently the case for the revolutionary leftist music band Grup Yorum members, Helin Bölek and
Ibrahim Gökçek, who died as a result of their hunger strike in prison in protest of the legal system that denied them a fair trial. Bölek and Gökçek are but two among countless in the country who have been forced to such extreme measures to enact their determination to not bow down to the organized intimidation and normalized logics of subjugation and injustice. Although I see the productive force of Muñoz’s distinction between counter-identification and dis-identification, in this dissertation, I work from a mode of thinking that bridges dis-identificatory and counter-identificatory positions as constitutive and interrelated—but not homogenous—dimensions of the cultural-political sphere in Istanbul, Turkey.

The counter- and dis-identificatory modes of cultural-political struggle that I outline here pertain to the artistic and activist strategies of encountering the contradictions of urban life through dwelling in the plethora of aesthetic and sensuous experiences that mark daily life in Istanbul. Throughout the dissertation, I discuss the intersections between these encounters and the ethical confrontations that they engender regarding the post-coup economic and political re-organization of the city that has significantly exacerbated the city’s commodification and the power-stricken differences in urban living.

When I say contradictions of urban life, I mean to describe contradiction across layers of abstraction: from the macro layer of social, political, cultural and economic
(infra)structures to the micro layer of subjectivity and embodiment, with the understanding that they are deeply interrelated. Queer-feminist thought has worked to emphasize the ethical and political significance of these connections. Especially the connections between the transitive layers of embodiment, subjectivity, and systemic organization of economic exploitation and identitarian subjugation have been underlined by feminists of color such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Toni Cade Bambara⁸, Cathy Cohen⁹, and Audre Lorde¹⁰ during the 1980s and 1990s. This emphasis was picked up again by queer studies in the mid-2000s.¹¹ With this, queer-feminist scholarship reiterated its analytic insistence on the inseparability between state, economy, and culture, suturing “the various and at times contradictory uses of the term neoliberalism to mark economic, political, social and cultural changes during late capitalism.”¹² My analytic approach draws from this line of thinking and applies it to a historically and geographically grounded exploration of aesthetic dissidence that accounts for embodied, psychic, social, and economic registers.

---

1.3 Neoliberalism and the City

In this dissertation, neoliberalism refers to institutional and discursive adjustments that reconfigure our living in late capitalism. In terms of institutions, neoliberalism refers to the tidal wave of reforms that spread across the world after the mid-1970s, that are broadly characterized by privatization, financialization, accumulation by dispossession, and upwards redistribution of resources. My dissertation particularly focuses on the ways in which these shifts restructure living and become visible in urban development; for example, the gentrification projects that treat historic urban space as a resource to be redistributed upwards, or the brand new class-segregated settlements that accommodate widening income gap and social polarization. Since the onset of neoliberalism, many cities around the world have become subjected to transformation under a real estate development-driven model. In this economic model, it appears that the realm of social policy such as urban planning becomes de facto surrendered to speculative profit opportunities of real estate and construction sectors. These sectors function as an essential engine for the financial sector that relies on debt generation and circulation, all contributing to the disproportionate benefit of the most powerful segments of the society. Such a lopsided development is accompanied by a deliberate attempt to erase the historical role cities played in class struggle as “the centers of

---

conflict, change, and transformation.”\textsuperscript{14} Regarding this aspect, I follow Grace Kyungwon Hong\textsuperscript{15} and Sarah Schulman\textsuperscript{16} in their understanding of neoliberalism as a complimentary epistemological structure of erasure and re-programming of memory and experience; a form of gentrification of the mind that accompanies gentrification of material world.

Scholars studying neoliberal urbanism have pointed to art’s utilization in service of gentrification. Depending on the analytic approach to the process of gentrification, artists could be seen as the driving force of change\textsuperscript{17} or as a symptom of a complex web of larger institutions that deploy culture—among other markers—as a means to revalorize neighborhoods for profit.\textsuperscript{18} In contrast to gentrification of New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1980s, where the city government, investment capital, and the arts establishment colluded in the wresting control of a long-standing working class neighborhood and turning it over to real estate developers,\textsuperscript{19} the role of art in Istanbul’s gentrification process, at least until recently, has been less direct. Modern and


\textsuperscript{15} Grace Kyungwon Hong, \textit{Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).


\textsuperscript{17} David Ley, \textit{The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).


contemporary art became a recognized tool of attraction only after the mid-2000s. Turkey’s first privately funded modern and contemporary art museum, Istanbul Modern, was opened in 2004 as part of a new branding strategy for the city to attract transnational capital. As I discuss in closer detail in Chapter 2, contemporary art was put in direct service to a form of historical revisionism by the privatizers of the field; performing, once again, what Hong frames as an epistemological structure of erasure and Schulman calls the gentrification of the mind.

I see this dissertation as contributing to the resistance against this generalized process of neoliberalism. In the face of current erasures of dissident histories, I reconstruct a critical juncture in one of the minor lines of city’s cultural-political history. The mid-2000s were critical in terms of a budding confluence between art and activism in Istanbul. The crosspollinations between these domains bore unexpected fruit during the month-long Taksim Gezi Park protests and the collectivist occupation of the park in 2013. After this point, the Islamist neoliberal government in Turkey, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, from here on AKP), started mobilizing everything in its power against cultural-political dissidence. These include the more recent defamation campaigns and baseless conspiracies that try to connect the spontaneous developments of unarmed and non-violent civil disobedience in 2013 with the failed coup attempt of 2016. Hundreds of people associated with Gezi protests, many
of them activists and cultural workers, are unlawfully detained and dragged into never-ending court cases in which they are accused of terrorism and even treason. The AKP regime is trying to become victorious by erasing memory traces of autonomous dissidence and re-writing history in its own negative image. This dissertation contributes to efforts to keep these and prior memory traces of dissidence alive.

1.4 Turkish-Style Neoliberalism

Although neoliberalism has substantial overarching commonalities across the world, my dissertation is first and foremost geopolitically situated in Istanbul, Turkey, and it is important to understand how the global force of neoliberalism has been articulated in relation to Turkey’s specificity. Istanbul has been at the forefront of Turkey’s particular neoliberal development that has evolved into what recent scholarship aptly terms as neoliberal Islam. Following Cihan Tugal and Evren Savci, I see de-leftification as a key component of this development. For Tugal and Savci, de-leftification captures the post-1980 repression of leftist politics through coercion, censorship, and capitalist privatization and re-structuring of cultural production and

---


dissemination in the country. The dissident cultural-political milieu I discuss came into being after this process. The rise of the autonomous-anarchist tendencies in contemporary art, as well as movements that are articulated from subject positions such as feminism and queer politics, are commonly understood as political mobilizations that were previously overshadowed by vanguardist, masculinist, and heteronormative tendencies within the left. At the same time, in the aftermath of a programmatic erasure of leftist history and thought in Turkey, in order to maintain their radical transformative edge and not dissolve into liberal conformism, these mobilizations need to excavate historical lines that cut them from or connect them to the longer history of social struggle for liberation. In this dissertation, I tried to recognize those connections and breaks that I could locate.

The neoliberal turn in Turkey and the introduction of a right-wing conservatism in the form of ‘moderate Islam’ dates back to the military coup of September 12, 1980. This coup was instrumental in the strong-armed implementation of Turkey’s economic liberalization program as a key testing site for a joint IMF-World Bank approach to economic development. The military junta oversaw the economy’s transition from a State-led development policy with an emphasis on national production and consumption to a free-market export-led development model. In doing so, the military rule not only enforced the structural adjustment policies prescribed by the IMF and
World Bank, but also preempted any organized resistance by outlawing and cracking down on all political organizing and labor union activity throughout this transition.

During the transition period, the military leaders also introduced what was referred to as Türk-İslam sentezi (Turkish-Islamic synthesis) as a social glue with the hopes of replacing “the left-wing ideas and discourse of Turkey’s youth with a more cohesive religious culture.” This step was taken in accordance with the US’ war against the threat of communism, also known as Reagan’s roll-back strategy, and contributed greatly to undermining the left and strengthening the center right in Turkey. For example, mandatory religious education was added to public school curricula in 1980. In a collaborative spirit with the center-right government of Turgut Ozal (1983 – 1994), the military encouraged the building of mosques and further expansion of religious education. For example, between 1973 and 1999, the number of mosques in Turkey increased by 66 percent. Religious orders boosted their activities in this period, setting up Quran courses; reading groups; charity foundations; women’s, youth, and mutual-support associations; and student dormitories.

The State-supported doctrine of Turkish-Islamic synthesis was early on deployed in service of Istanbul’s rent-seeking transformation. As early as 1984, the center-right

23 Ibid.
mayor of Istanbul, Bedrettin Dalan, utilized the Turkish-Islamic synthesis to shift the basis of challenges against his development plans from legal to moral. For example, suspecting land speculation as a potential motivation, when the Istanbul Chamber of Architects raised legal concerns about the mayor’s decision to demolish 350 historic Levantine buildings from the 19th Century to make way for a six-lane boulevard in Taksim, the mayor infamously responded from atop of a bulldozer wrapped in Turkish flags. In his response, the mayor assured the public that his restoration plans of mosques in the historic peninsula demonstrated his commitment to preserving the history of Turkish nation. According to him, there was no historic value for Turks in what he claimed to be crime-ridden quarters of old decaying buildings that were once home to Jews, Armenians, and Greeks before the founding of the modern Turkish Republic. In fact, the crime rates in the neighborhood was merely 3.34%, significantly less than the top four with Kadikoy with 21.7%, Kartal 15.97%, Fatih 12.73%, and Sisli 12.21%. The buildings at the time had become home to majority working-class migrants, many of whom worked in the small industries nearby; Dalan had plans to get rid of the industries too.

Moral outrage (e.g., citing urban vice to justify expropriation and displacement) became a reoccurring instigator to launch lucrative transformation projects. The LGBTI+ movement was articulated during the transsexual sex workers’ resistance against police and citizen violence and defamation campaigns that sought to drive them out of their stronghold in Taksim Cihangir in 1996. According to the published ethnographic account of Pinar Selek, as well as activists in LambdaIstanbul who lived through these years, transsexual women had been living in the neighborhood for at least a decade at that point. The main organizer of the attacks was a landowner who had known the women, a middle-aged heterosexual woman who started covering her head at the onset of the conflict, allegedly to appeal to the recently elected Islamist mayor of the neighborhood. She coordinated citizen and police vigilance against the transsexual women from a table she set up in front of her apartment building, which she covered with Turkish flags. In her alleged desire to benefit from rising property values with a clean-up, the woman strategically used Turkish-Islamic synthesis to perform a particular right-wing mode of morally upstanding citizen. She invoked a sense of moral outrage by posing transsexual women as threats to family life, illustrating the ways in which the Turkish-Islamic synthesis could be deployed against minoritized subjects, rendering them easy targets for defamation campaigns and displacement in the service of urban

real estate speculation. The dissident cultural-political constellation that I sketch around Hafriyat in the dissertation came together in response to such lived experiences and everyday social consequences of Istanbul’s neoliberalization.

1.5 Chapters

In Chapter 2, “The Politics of Repression and Art of Dissident Desire in Istanbul,” I discuss the ways in which neoliberal urban culture reflects the complex and contradictory configurations between art, desire, and power under neoliberalism with an emphasis on the subversive edge of art and desire where it intersects with queer and feminist ethics of relationality. Using an archival methodology and reflection based on my participation in this history, I provide the historical context of the convergence between the LGBTI+ movement and self-organizing artists in Istanbul in 2007, and the role that Hafriyat had played in this. I discuss the social stakes in the aesthetic and political collaborations between artists and activists at the onset of this convergence. I also discuss the contradictory implications of such a convergence in the context of the neoliberal commercialization of dissident art in the transnationally integrating and privatizing art field in Istanbul.

In Chapter 3, “Social Reality and Urban Development in Istanbul,” I draw on my archival findings on Hafriyat to examine the context in which the artists became aesthetically and politically preoccupied with the shifting texture of Istanbul. I trace the
connections between Hafriyat artists’ cultural-political drives that propelled them to engage with the social as urban painters in the first place and their aesthetic sensibilities that in turn shaped the shifting course of their cultural-political engagement with the urban. I also provide contextually-situated close readings of a selection of Hafriyat paintings. Doing so shows Istanbul’s massive transformation and the increasingly dominating role of capital after the mid-1980s in tension with Hafriyat artists’ continued investment in the avant-garde desires for the autonomy of art as an affirmation of embodied autonomous labor-power. Next, I discuss the historical development of social tensions during Istanbul’s expansion through rural and provincial migrations as well as shifts in class alliances before and after the 1980 coup; in particular, I focus on the post-1980 break in the previously growing alliance between the petit bourgeoisie and the proletariat and its impact on Istanbul’s urban culture. Finally, I offer an exposition of what I call the post-1980 “urban sensorium” in Istanbul, the shifting structures of feeling expressed in the popular culture of this period, and Hafriyat artists’ aesthetic navigation of this conflictive space.

In Chapter 4, “A Queer Art of Aesthetic-Affective Resistance,” I turn toward my own aesthetic pursuits as they have been shaped by this context. I reflect on an aesthetic-affective resistance against the neoliberal totalization of reality and insistence on no alternatives. I put my art practice in conversation with queer temporality, utopian
realism, and a queer-feminist ethic-erotic based on the works of José Esteban Muñoz, Walter Benjamin, and Audre Lorde. In this chapter I substantially engage with the two art projects, *Shared Lines* (2014) and *queerXscape* (2019), that bookend my PhD work and constitute the “practice component” of my dissertation.

The significant political potential of a dissident cultural-political milieu in terms of challenging Turkey’s neoliberal rule became clear during the month long *artful* Taksim Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the wide-reaching popular recuperation of public parks as experimental sites for collectivist practices of urban living. I examine Gezi as a symbolic and material space and site of rebellion and aesthetic creation in the city at multiple points in the dissertation. After July 2013, Turkey’s ruling Islamist neoliberal party AKP launched relentless attacks on the various organizations, activists, intellectuals and cultural workers that have become associated with this resistant urban milieu.\(^{29}\) With this dissertation, I hope to contribute to the efforts to speak the truth of dissidence in the face of a tremendously overblown and fragile power that has once again arrived at a point during which it will attempt to eradicate and manipulate our memory traces and lived experiences of how struggle continues.

\(^{29}\) One of the most internationally known cases of these attacks is the continued imprisonment of Osman Kavala on October 18, 2017 based on unsupported accusations. For details on his case, see: “Free Osman Kavala,” Solidarity with Osman Kavala, Accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.osmankavala.org/en.
2. The Politics of Repression and Art of Dissident Desire in Istanbul

In this chapter, I build upon an ambiguity common to the evocative terms of “desire” and “art”. These fairly common terms project an everyday familiarity with their otherwise complex and conflictive manifestations that traverse the body, psyche, social, historical, and economic. Although both terms are studied and historicized, they manage to remain elusive. I find this evasive quality helpful for thinking through neoliberal power, which has built its transnational hegemony on the artful and desire-provoking promises of liberal-capitalist and consumerist organization of society undergirded by market competition. The deployment of art and desire in the service of capitalist-consumerist world order dates back to the end of the Second World War with intermittent peaks such as the wave of the 1990s that linked art and desire with the hastily declared triumph of liberal capitalist globalization after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the post-2008 wave that links art and desire with economic productivity with the hopes of suturing the wounds of a major crisis in the global market economy. Yet the subversive capacity and the revolutionary political edge of these phenomena are also established in history. For example, the student and youth-led mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s around the world had a palpable emphasis on art and desire. Likewise, the feminist and queer movements of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that notably politicized the personal positioned art and desire as a site through which to confront the
messiness of our own complex motivations and allegiances while building a queer-feminist project of transformative ethics. The political implications of art in intersection with desire then cut across the transnational popularization of market capitalism and consumerism as well as revolutionary and subversive mobilizations against the economic conditions, political terms, and cultural logics of late capitalism.

In Turkey, the military-led transition into neoliberalism starting in the 1980s helped protect the state and capital from the rising momentum of the youth-led revolutionary activity of the 1970s. The 1980s were marked by the military cracking down on leftist political mobilization and cultures of opposition, and also by the attempt to incorporate the libidinal revolutionary energies of the youth into a rapidly privatizing and expanding market of mass culture.¹ The particular cultural-political milieu comprised of artists and activists discussed in this dissertation was formed in response to the shifts in politics and culture after the 1980 military coup, working at once with and against the military-authoritarian limits imposed on life and the excess of provoked desire. Although the paths of the artists who were congregated around the art collective Hafriyat and the LGBTI+ activists crossed in the mid-2000s, these dissident entities of culture and politics in Istanbul were formed during the mid 1990s. In this chapter, I will

---

discuss the moment of intersection and ensuing overlap in the mid-2000s as well as contextualize the rise of urban dissident culture in the post-1980 period in Istanbul.

**2.1 Urban Culture and Artful Dissent**

Urban politics under neoliberalism is a topic that has interested me for a long time as my sense of political belonging and intellectual commitments were very much forged in the LGBTI+ movement that overlapped with self-organizing feminists and a group of politicized artists in the mid-2000s in Istanbul. These dissident groups can be broadly understood as cultural-political responses to the development of neoliberal power in Turkey. An aspect of neoliberalization after the 1980 military coup in the country was the capitalist recuperation of desire through the proliferating channels of mass culture. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, in accordance with developments around the world, desire and its artful expressions were largely mobilized in the service of revolutionary demands by the youth-led movements in Turkey. The violent blow of the 1980 military coup crushed the provoked desires of these generations with a severe human toll and a long-lasting political devastation in the country. After the coup, the terms in which desires could be expressed became subject to a new regime of culture in which leftist political articulations were censored and

---


marginalized, while consumerist and chauvinistic articulations were bolstered and legitimized. In connection with this trauma, leftist thought and culture in Turkey became largely subject to a relentless process of erasure and censorship. In some accounts, this process rendered the 1970s in Turkey as a simultaneously lost and mythic period because of which a comprehensive introspection regarding the contradictions within the left – for example conservative reflexes regarding gender and sexuality or nationalism - remains largely incomplete. In this regard, the dissident cultural politics that I discuss here should be thought not only in light of the commercial recuperation of desire aimed to keep it subservient to capital; but also in light of the certain conservative postures in the Turkish left that scorn all desire performed in ways that it does not recognize as respectable, that it sees as excessive and thus regards as capitalist corruption. In contradistinction to these, what I found common to the political orientation of queer organizers and the self-organizing contemporary artists in Istanbul was the political openness to the sense of desire for its subversive capacity without guarantees. This was likely because both groups had a knack for mischievous and defiant ways to navigate hegemonic frames of perception, and their critical approach

centered on subversive possibilities of contradictions. For example, the operation of desire through sensuous appeal of commodification could be criticized for its service to an economy that subjugates even the wildest excesses of human existence to the utilitarian logics of profit. On the other hand, the seductive force of commodification primes us to be transported out of the actual order of the world where pleasure is made subservient to reproduction of the system into a realm of sensuous excess where pleasure reigns. In this whiplash, queer activists and artists could identify a subversive potential for disidentification with the utility and exploitation of sensuousness in favor of it becoming a basis for a different paradigm of life.

The artist collective Hafriyat (1996 – 2010), a group with which I came in contact as an LGBTI+ organizer in 2007, provides a concrete lens through which to understand the aesthetic and political stakes in the collaborative alliances between self-organizing contemporary artists and queer activists in Istanbul in the mid-2000s. Hafriyat was neither a queer-identified nor activist group by definition. They were a collective of dissident artists whose preoccupation with urban life and street culture led them to find affinities and collaborate with minoritarian activists in Istanbul. These artists’ openness to the excesses of popular culture allowed them to put aesthetics back in conversation with the social in the 1990s and forge a new take on social realism, or in this case perhaps more aptly described as urban realism with a critical eye on the margins. It also
led them to open and run an independent art space, Hafriyat Karakoy (2007 – 2010), where they encouraged and facilitated cross-pollinations between art and political action. It was in this space that the LGBTI+ movement in Istanbul organized its first queer art exhibitions starting with the group show Makul/Reasonable in 2008 as a form of cultural-political intervention into civil society to push for social change.

Hafriyat collective was founded in 1996 by three painters, Mustafa Pancar, Antonio Cosentino and Hakan Gursoytrak, but over the years the group had a fluctuating number of members, reaching 14 artists from interdisciplinary backgrounds in 2007. These artists were loosely connected through their preoccupation with the material, cultural, and political transformation of Istanbul. Through aesthetic explorations of the everyday implications of massive structural changes in the city and by dwelling in the vital power of details, these artists chose to pay attention to not what these shifts revealed but what they obscured. Most of these artists were born in late 60s and early 70s. As such they grew up during Turkey’s transition into free market capitalism under a military-nationalist and staunchly anti-communist state after the 1980 military coup. Their early affiliation with social realism was in reaction to the post-coup

---

8 Mustafa Pancar, Antonio Cosentino, and Hakan Gursoytrak, Hafriyat II (Istanbul: Passion Art Center, 1996).
art climate in Istanbul that they perceived as conservative, dull, and disconnected from the cultural-political dynamism of the post-coup contradictions and social tensions palpable in the urban texture. However, they were equally estranged from the iconography of a bygone social realist imagination, which I discuss in Chapter 3.9 In the post-coup climate, they believed social realism could no longer be about sentimentalized depictions of grievances or the idolizing images of the workers but about the fractures, unexpected consequences, and double edges of subversion in a cultural and political reality dominated by an amalgamated ideology of militarism, capitalism, and nationalism. The generation of artists that came of age after the 1980 military coup witnessed the fast-paced cultural and economic changes in the country alongside persisting turmoil in society mainly through the proliferating channels of news media and popular culture under a privatizing cultural sector.10 These artists strove to critically reconcile their observations of the changing urban texture around them and their own experiences in the city with pieces of the larger social reality that they collected from the media and re-processed through the intellectual and aesthetic lenses that they adopted and developed. I feel a personal affinity with this experience from a queer angle. The

10 Hafriyat artist Neriman Polat since the mid 1990s has been producing multimedia works engaging with the privatizing and proliferating mediascape in Turkey; see Hakan Gursoytrak et al., Hafiyat: Falsche Welt = False World = Yalan Dunya (Munich: Rathaus Galerie, 2004), 21.
social and political outlook of our time on the one hand reflects a depressing reality that
limits the embodied and social possibilities of life in deeply unfair and uneven ways
according to the logics of subjugation and exploitation. On the other hand, I believe that
a transgendered embodiment is predicated on a sense of reality that exceeds the actual
in so far as it incorporates the imagined or the potential. It is also predicated on a
subversive gesture in the face of the actual conditions of a gendered reality. This is not to
say that being a transgendered person constitutes any political or transformative power
in and of itself. Such an embodied transgression nevertheless points to the seams and
cracks in the totalizing narratives of sex and gender through which transformative
connections with other ideological seams become possible, seams where challenges to
hegemony can flourish and motivate a collective mobility for structural transformation.

2.2 Cultural-Political Dissidence at Crossroads

I became a part of the LGBTI+ movement in the mid 2000s in Istanbul, which at
the time was organized only on grassroots and voluntary bases. The LGBTI+ movement
started to have a substantial collaborative connection with politicized artists during
2007, which was a turning point. Artists who were either also activists themselves or
who otherwise had ties in the LGBTI+ movement played a crucial role in initiating and
developing ties between the LGBTI+ movement and the contemporary art scene in
Istanbul. Some of these are established contemporary artists today such as Erinc
Seymen, Ilhan Sayin, Aykan Safoglu, and Gozde Ilkin. The overlapping names in the LGBTI+ political struggle and contemporary art have grown substantially since the initial contact in 2007. While I was trying to reconstruct this history with the help of fellow artists and activists in Turkey, I was reminded by Ilhan Sayin and Aykan Safoglu that 2007 was a significant moment of cultural-political cross-pollination between not only the LGBTI+ movement and contemporary artists, but also among the various segments of the cultural-political field that contributed to the struggle for radical democracy.

In 2007, the assassination of journalist Hrant Dink, an Armenian citizen of Turkey, brought together self-organizing activists, artists, academics and cultural and political associations to put pressure on the state for a thorough and transparent investigation of the murder. The revered journalist and the founding editor of Agos, an Istanbul daily published in Armenian and Turkish established in 1996, was shot and killed in front of his newspaper office by a 17-year-old Turkish nationalist on January 19, 2007. Hrant Dink was well-known among queer organizers and those who pursued minoritarian politics for the democratic transformation of the state and the society in general. He was among a handful of political figures and an even smaller number of journalists who forged ties with the LGBTI+ organizers, allowing political conversations to develop outside of the sensational and extractive approaches that the movement was
more familiar with. On January 12, 2007, a week before his murder, Dink had started a
new article series in Agos with the title “Why was I Chosen as a Target?”.
In the series, Dink questioned the scapegoating process that he faced during the infamous Article 301
prosecutions that charged a number of intellectuals with insulting Turkishness.

These cases were brought on by an ultra-nationalist clique of prosecutors led by
Kemal Kerincsiz and targeted public figures who crossed the nationalist red line
regarding their accounts of the Armenian genocide by naming it a genocide. In 2006,
these cases gained national and international media attention in connection with
Turkey’s accession negotiations with the European Union. The cases against high profile
authors such as Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak were dismissed on the basis of technical
juridical solutions, allowing the government to argue that the Article 301 did not
constitute a limitation vis-à-vis European standards on freedom of speech because it was
not enforced against speech critical of the state. Hrant Dink, on the other hand,
received a six-month prison sentence. He questioned the motivations behind his case as
ethnically motivated and exposed distressing details about his process including threats

dink/hrant-dink-articles/728-why-was-i-chosen-as-a-target.
12 Richard Lea, “’Insulting Turkishness’ case reopens against bestselling author,” The Guardian, Jul 07, 2006,
13 Ibid.
14 Hrant Dink, “Why was I chosen a target?” Agos, January 12, 2007, https://hrantdink.org/en/hrant-
dink/hrant-dink-articles/728-why-was-i-chosen-as-a-target.
and intimidation tactics by unknown people he thought were linked to the state. Between January 12 and January 19, Hrant Dink published two articles that voiced his disappointment in the decision, contrasted his outcome as a minority Armenian citizen of Turkey with other intellectuals whose cases were rather quickly dismissed, and announced that he was getting ready to take the decision to the European Court of Human Rights for he strongly believed that he was falsely convicted.15

Hrant Dink believed that what triggered the nightmarish process that led to his imprisonment sentence and turned him into a defenseless “enemy of the Turks” in the mainstream media was a piece of investigative journalism he published on February 6, 2004 about Sabiha Gokcen, an iconic figure in Turkey as the first female combat pilot in the world and adopted daughter of the founder of the modern Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The article contradicted the official accounts on this figure by revealing her background as an Armenian orphan who lost her parents during the forced migration of Armenians in 1915.16 The media was shaken at first with both negative and positive comments after Hurriyet, one of the major newspapers in the country, picked up the

story in its headline on February 21, 2004. Shortly after, the Turkish General Staff released an official condemnation memorandum that deemed the opening up of a national symbol such as Sabiha Gokcen – not only the adopted daughter of the founder of the Republic but also the first female pilot and the idealized symbol of modern Turkish Republican women - to this kind of discussion a crime against national integrity and social peace. Hrant Dink believed that this was the starting moment of a behind-the-scenes involvement in his case by influential state forces whose presence he said he could sense throughout the process, especially in the formal and informal warnings and threats he received but could not clearly see or identify. His assassination caused public uproar, and his memorial service brought out over one hundred thousand people into the streets. The assassination added to the sense of urgency for the necessity of collaborations across minoritarian cultural-political entities in Istanbul.

The Hafriyat artist collective opened its own independent gallery called Hafriyat Karakoy in May 1, 2007 with a politically charged “May 1st” exhibit. Hafriyat provided this space for the meetings of the January 19 initiative dedicated to Hrant Dink’s cause.

The initiative brought together various politically aligned segments in the struggle for radical democratization. On the first anniversary of Hrant Dink’s assassination, the January 19 initiative organized an exhibition at Hafriyat Karakoy called “Munferit” (January 19 – February 9, 2008). The word “Munferit” means “isolated” or “sporadic” in Turkish, and is often used by official authorities in Turkey to dismiss politically suspect murder incidents as random acts of violence as opposed to organized and programmatic attempts to silence dissidence. For this exhibition, the gallery space was painted black and on it were printed the names of 4,000 people whose politically suspect deaths were still unresolved, some of them since the 1980 military coup. These 4,000 names were gathered from an estimated 17,500 such cases.20

The LGBTI+ movement itself was no stranger to violence protected or directly inflicted by the state on the queer residents of Istanbul. In fact, one of the key developments that helped articulate the queer political struggle in Istanbul in the 1990s was the forced displacement of transsexual sex workers from their stronghold in Ulker Street in 1996, and the collective resistance against their state-sanctioned expulsion.21

State-sanctioned violence, especially violence that is officially mobilized and/or tolerated

in the forced displacement of minoritized populations, is a re-occurring theme in Turkey’s political history. The forced migration of the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire in 1915, also known as the Armenian genocide, is the first example of this occurrence with large-scale devastating outcomes. The September 6 & 7 pogroms in 1955 in Istanbul, which caused the majority of remaining Greek residents to leave Istanbul, is an example after the establishment of Republic of Turkey. The forced migration of peasants from villages in the Kurdistan region of Turkey between 1984 and 1999, which caused over a million people to be displaced, is a more recent example.\(^{22}\) Ulker Street was an example of the neoliberal manifestation of this logic, which seeks to displace ‘undesired’ minority groups for rent-seeking purposes under the framework of ‘urban renewal’.\(^{23}\)

Hafriyat’s gallery space, which was open from 2007 until 2010, offered the LGBTI+ movement a venue to curate queer art exhibits for the first time, expanding its cultural-political pedagogy and action.\(^{24}\) Although I personally did not start practicing art systematically until 2009, I was deeply affected by the politics of the improbable I

---


saw coming to shape at the intersection between self-organizing artists and activists in 2007.

2.3 Dissidence and its Discontents: Current vs. Contemporary Art

The minoritarian cultural-political struggles I outline here were embedded in layers of intersecting but distinct scales of power struggles in the city. These ranged from local subcultural networks, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations to transnational cultural and political funding structures and programs. While pursuing archival research on Hafriyat and the larger context of post-coup contemporary art in Istanbul, I started to realize the ways in which these intersections complicated the politics of dissent after the mid-1990s. I realized that by the early 2000s artists in Istanbul were already conflicted about the role dissident art was playing at the hands of influential capitalists who accelerated the privatization of the art field. In the early 2000s, dissident art became sought after by the bourgeoning private art institutions in Istanbul, which were funded by large corporations because of the transnational appeal of contemporary art. Political art from Turkey, and especially art that was critical of the Turkish state was well-received in transnational networks and centers of contemporary art. Artists who were gaining transnational recognition and attention in this capacity helped legitimize a contemporary art field in Istanbul that was unapologetically critical and political. However, these artists were also dragged into an ideological frame that
sought to separate the state from capital, further pushing the neoliberal myth that pitched capital as a liberating force against the repressive state. Artists from Turkey, who were rightfully critical of the military state and its ethnic-political atrocities, gendered and sexualized repression, and anti-democratic impositions, were becoming incorporated into a historical revisionism that erased the strong alliance between capital and military during the 1980 military coup. At stake was a new phase of neoliberalism that equated military repression and democratic limitations with the official state ideology of Kemalism and its statist roots and promoted a pro-business moderate Islam as its antidote. The incorporation of state critique into historical revisionism amounted to the utilization of minoritarian cultural-political dissidence in ways that perpetuated the conditions they struggled against.

Contrary to sharp distinctions between “alternative” and “establishment,” the alternative sub-field of the arts that Hafriyat occupied was never isolated from the larger institutional dimensions of Istanbul’s art world. These artists, who at the time were self-differentiating themselves by taking on the name “Güncel Sanat” (current art) as opposed to “Çağdaş Sanat” (contemporary art), have arguably been the foremost fuel in Istanbul’s rise to become the “hot spot of global art” between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s.²⁵

Istanbul’s rise as a cosmopolitan center for contemporary art is intricately connected with the city’s insertion into globalized competition to attract transnational capital, or, as Çağlar Keyder and Ayşe Öncü put it in 1994, “the globalization of a Third World metropolis.” 26 The process had actually started shortly after the 1980 military coup but accelerated significantly after Turkey became an official candidate for accession to the European Union at the Helsinki summit of the European Council in 1999. 27 The rise of a self-differentiated “current art” movement during this accelerated stage marked, on the one hand, the re-politicization of the art milieu in Istanbul after what these artists saw as a repressed and conformist period dating to the 1980 military coup. On the other hand, the new field also affirmed the transnational utility of contemporary art as a branding tool for globalizing cities at the hands of private art institutions and cultural foundations funded by some of Turkey’s largest transnational banks and conglomerates. 28

Based on this, art critics, writers, and independent gallery owners with personal histories in the leftist struggles of the 1970s such as Ali Artun and Feyyaz Yaman have questioned the radical political posture within current art discourses in connection with its incorporation into institutions that have been at the forefront of art’s utilization in the service of the city’s branding to attract transnational capital and in the art field’s privatization. For example, the prominent curator and self-declared founding father of the current art field (güncel sanat in Turkish) Vasif Kortun attracted persistent criticism from both Artun and Yaman. Kortun’s dominating persona rendered him the spokesperson of contemporary art in Turkey—which he claimed did not exist before güncel sanat—in and out of the country in conjunction with his advisory and directorial roles in the establishment of Istanbul’s first private modern and contemporary art museums, and his curatorial rise to transnational prominence through the biennial circuits.\(^29\) In 2007, Vasif Kortun started to promote a political narrative to explain the

---

\(^{29}\) Vasif Kortun played a formative role in the direction of Istanbul’s transnational art biennial starting in the early 1990s. He has been in the advisory board for Istanbul Modern and was the founding director of Garanti Bank’s Contemporary (“Current”) Art Center (Platform Garanti Güncel Sanat Merkezi in Turkish). He served as curator in Biennials in Istanbul, Taipei, Sao Paolo, Venice, Tirana, and Albisola. He has been the chairman of the board at the Foundation for Arts Initiative, successor to the American Center in Paris since 2016. As an alumnus of NYU, his first directorial role in Turkey was as the chief curator and director of the 3rd IKSV (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts) Istanbul International Biennial in 1992 where he implemented the “single curatorial” model that was followed then on. Between 1994 and 1997 he served as the founding director for the Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College back in the US. Kortun returned to Turkey in 1997 and was the founding director of the first private “current/contemporary art” museum Project 4L Istanbul Museum of Contemporary (Current) Art between 2001 and 2003 and after 2003 became the founding-director of Garanti Bank’s contemporary art platform and SALT research.
difference between the terms “current art” (günçel sanat) and “contemporary art” (çağdaş sanat) in ways that situated current art in opposition to contemporary art. He subsequently associated çağdaş sanat with modernism, elitism, secularism, republican corporatism, authoritarianism, and top-down statism. Kortun’s stance roughly reflected the antagonistic discourses between liberal capitalist Second Republicans and Neo-Kemalists who wanted to restore the nation to its foundational secularist and statist principles in the mid and late 1990s.

Vasif Kortun’s unified positioning of the heterogeneous “current art” field—I would argue with autonomous-anarchist political inclinations if anything—as diametrically opposed to such an overgeneralized account of “contemporary art” in these particular terms is significant. Although it has radical political implications in the abstract, it also reproduced the liberal capitalist oversimplification of the political stakes in Turkey’s democratization that was circulating in national and international media in support of the pro-Islamist pro-business conservative democrat AKP administration.

---

Such a narrowed lens was indispensable for the charming impressions made by the so-called Turkish Model enacted by the AKP government between 2002 and 2013.\textsuperscript{32}

The Turkish Model came to represent the recipe for democratization in the Middle East through the marriage of formal democracy, free market capitalism, and a toned-down conservative Islam.\textsuperscript{33} Until its fall from fame when the Turkish government brutally repressed the 2013 Gezi Revolts, the model was trumpeted by global business circles, celebrated by international media, and embraced by regional and national elites.\textsuperscript{34} Before this turn of events, the model exuded a hopeful outlook. It relegated all criticisms of the Turkish Model to secularist, modernist, elitist, Kemalist, authoritarian, statist, corporatist, or militarist tendencies, which were positioned as a reified cluster of stagnancy and obstruction standing in the way of Turkey’s democratization through the dynamic and flexible pro-Islamic, pro-business, liberal-conservative populist AKP government.

If anything, Vasif Kortun’s 2007 re-mapping of dissident art onto this dichotomy was a sign that neoliberalism was gaining hegemony by defining the history of democratic struggles in Turkey against state militarism. In parallel with AKP’s rise to power, the notion of a democratic struggle started to become appropriated by a pro-

\textsuperscript{32} Cihan Tugal, \textit{The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism}, (London: Verso, 2016).
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
business coalition between the liberal elites and the center-right politicians. We only need to turn to history to see the major fallacy in this premise. The military junta that seized control of the country’s government in 1980 was the guarantor of Turkey’s economic liberalization through a Milton Friedmanite recipe that relied on anti-democratic presuppositions such as the drastic limitation of union rights.Military control and center-right liberalism were the two main constitutive elements of the 1980 coup, which foreclosed democratic processes when leftist mobilizations were at their historical peak in the country. In addition to repressing leftists, the coup restructured political institutions to increase military oversight, accelerated liberal economic development, and promoted the so-called Turkish-Islam synthesis with the hopes of easing political opposition to military rule.

The interdependence between military tutelage and capital is perhaps best encapsulated by the words of the president of the Confederation of Employer Associations of Turkey at the time, Halit Narin, who welcomed the coup: “for twenty years the workers had the last laugh, now it is our turn.” After the coup, it wasn’t only the workers who cried. The new government repressed opponents of military rule.

37 Tanil Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 102, no. 2/3 (June 2003).
across classes, those who disagreed with dismantling the welfare state, and all non-normative or minoritized citizens along the lines of ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality who dared challenge the desired harmony of the military imposed Turkish-Islamic synthesis as social glue.

The state-sanctioned and rent-seeking displacement of transsexual sex workers from Ulker Street in 1996 and its moral justification in the media was an example in which the minoritized bore the burden of the post-coup liberal conservatism. After the coup, Istanbul’s liberal makeover to attract transnational capital relied on an accompanying conservatism to justify the grievances of this process. The increased impoverishment of segments of the working class and their expulsion from central neighborhoods was justified by demonizing the injured and inciting fear among the propertied classes in ways that affirmed rent-seeking renewal of Istanbul as the urgently necessary and morally upstanding thing to do. Ethnic, religious, gendered and sexualized minorities and new immigrants in the city were among the easiest targets of this process.

It was in response to this pattern that the LGBTI+ activists and the young artists of the 1990s questioned and rebelled against cultural normativity and ideological manipulation. Following the transexual sex workers’ riots in Ulker Street against the violent intimidation campaigns for their expulsion, the LGBTI+ movement appeared as
an organized force to push back against the reinforced and intensified marginalization of LGBTI+ people in Istanbul’s burgeoning neoliberal social order. Likewise, artists who rebelled against the conformism that plagued cultural production in the country took up taboo topics in their works, such as the military’s ethnically targeted fight against communism in the Kurdistan region of Turkey and middle- and aspiring middle-class values and expectations regarding family and desired living that were being dynamically reshaped alongside the city. Between 1995 and 1998 in Istanbul, the Plastic Arts Association of Turkey invited experimental works by youth under the name of Youth Action Exhibits. Young artists responded with works that explored aforementioned taboos in connection to systemic predominantly state power and the lived experiences of the everyday. After 2000, the consequences of the post-1980 liberal-authoritarian amalgamation were hegemonically redefined by business leaders, pro-business politicians, and national and international media outlets in ways that rendered capital as a liberating force against the state.39 Along with this redefinition, artists and activists whose work since the mid-1990s pointed to the negative effects on the minoritized were paradoxically used to legitimize more liberal capitalism for progress and more Islam for social moderation, with religion moderated by the free market rather than the state.

2.4 Winding Paths of Cultural-Political Dissidence

A macro level examination of the social context I outlined in the previous section is necessary to see the complex interactions between the uneven forces of state power, capital, cultural institutions, and self-organizing entities as they intervene into the mechanisms of normativization and perception. At the same time, in order to account for the nuances of these interactions, it is important not to overshadow capillary historical flows. The cultural-political struggle of self-organizing artists and activists in Istanbul was after all forged within and against dominant forces, based on the recognition that social power is capillary rather than monolithic and can take different directions in everyday practices.

The cultural-political impact of dissident artists and the LGBTI+ movement between 1990s and mid-2000s could be dismissed as a minor disturbance when compared to the national and transnational force of cultural industries, institutions, and political mechanisms that impact society. James Baldwin observes that the power of such cultural-political disturbances is not in their capacity to directly operate on culture but rather in their fermentation of the social and cultural yeast that is secreted cunningly and unfailingly through the cracks of everything that a society is compelled to hold sacred as a way to channel public discontent and panic into complacency.40 Following

---

Baldwin’s analysis, queer cultural-political dissidence in Istanbul dwelled in the cracks of the heteronormative morality that was being vigorously mobilized in the media and on Ulker Street to vindicate rent-seeking displacements and upward redistribution of the city’s resources. The heteronormative moralizing mobilized in the media and on the street was mixed with anti-communism, ethno-nationalism, and religious conservatism as demonstrated by the involvement of far-right youth groups and the support of the newly elected Islamist mayor of the area, Nusret Bayraktar. Bayraktar had a personal agenda to eradicate sex work in Beyoglu and close down lawfully permitted brothels but stopped pursuing this agenda in the face of strong opposition.

Many of the artists who later came to be part of the current art movement expressed collective political and aesthetic upheaval in group shows such as the Youth Action exhibits organized between 1995 and 1998 in Istanbul. They turned a keen eye on the myths, idols, and icons of the heightened social-political conflict in the 1990s and the gaps and frictions between media representations and what they saw on the streets. The media was privatizing rapidly, proliferating, and became all-encompassing in this decade.

---

42 Ibid.
right political leadership under tight military supervision. Many works in these shows pointed to crises of identification with rightwing militarist efforts to integrate Turkey into global capitalism. The predicaments of social identification during this period occurred in a context of exclusivist nationalism, cultural ethno-religious conservatism, and direct and covert police and military violence against the Kurdish liberation movement and leftist mobilizations, which overlapped. The Youth Action exhibits were condensed urban subculture responses to these predicaments in a mass-mediated culture in a time of heightened censorship.44 Art critics of the time remarked on the art exhibits as breaking from the apathy and indifference expressed by the art establishment after the 1980 coup to social and political tensions in the country.45 The energy of the exhibits was likened to the art atmosphere of the 1970s.46 In short, these shows were a testament to the artful desires of aspiring artists who were compelled to engage with art and society beyond the priorities and limits imposed by the art market, art institutions, and culture industries of their time.

Between 1995 and 2007, new or revamped private art institutions supported by rapidly proliferating capital harnessed the challenge to the previous art establishment in Istanbul. The rebellious energies of the artists in the 1990s, who expanded the

possibilities of aesthetic expression in form and content against state repression, and their discontent with what they saw as a socially disengaged and stagnant art milieu in Istanbul became the fuel for private institutions’ rise to dominance. The stakes of cultural-political dissidence not only vis-à-vis state repression and cultural conservatism but also in conjunction with the rising pressures of transnational capital through the rapidly privatizing art field was captured within the current art movement as early as 2005. In the independent and artist-run magazine Art-Ist, art critics Sureyyya Evren and Erden Kosova discussed the difference between the conjuncture of the Youth Action art exhibitions out of which they themselves emerged, and the new art climate in 2005.47 Contrasting the autonomous energy of this mid-1990s that allowed artists to forge side paths and capillaries vis-à-vis the dominant art milieu of this time, Evren identified a difference in the orientation of art production in the aftermath of privatizations and the artists’ incorporation into transnational networks of art:

International connections, new crop of buyers and cultural selectors that are watching here, internationally sustained organizational opportunities, these things that connect the artists to the (transnational) networks of success, these things that offer ready highways of asphalt make it much harder to open new goat paths of ideas and drives.48

Perhaps it was in response to these changing circumstances that the Hafriyat artists felt motivated to open up the independent art space in 2007. Against the new

48 Ibid.
pressures of conformity, their gesture was a stubborn invitation for the proliferation of
goat paths of cultural-political dissent in the city, intersecting at autonomous initiatives
such as their gallery space and arriving at a peak in the Taksim’s Gezi Park during the
month-long civil disobedience and collectivist occupation of the park in 2013. In an
effort to flesh out these winding and tangled capillaries, I will turn to the humor that
gained prominence during the Taksim Gezi Park protests in 2013. This affective strategy
of dissent was one of the most salient aspects of the aesthetics and politics of Istanbul’s
artistic milieu after the mid-1990s.

2.5 Contradictions, Humor, and the Queer Art of Defiance

I see affinities between queer politics and art in terms of their mischievous and
defiant navigation of hegemonic frames of perception. In response to hegemonic
confinement, both queer activists and dissident artists in Istanbul were exploring the
expansive possibilities of language and aesthetics to play with normative patterns of
perception and affectation in an attempt to reverse the course of cultural complicity. In
addition, in their criticality both modes account for subversive openings in the material
and phenomenological constitution of the social and the subjective. For example, the
consumerist function of desire and sensuous appeal could be criticized for perpetuating
an economic order that subjugates even the wildest excesses of human existence to the
utilitarian logics of profit. On the other hand, the seductive force of consumerism relies
on its products’ capacity to transport people out of the actual order of the world where pleasure is made subservient to reproduction of the system into a realm of sensuous excess where pleasure reigns. The aesthetics and politics of queer dissidence work with such subversive edges where these possibilities of subversion intersect with radical relational reciprocity.

In Hafriyat’s art, the keen attention to the sensory and affective paths of relating to objects, other beings, and the city itself has appealed to me strongly. Through this attention, these artworks were capable of conveying the fact that the relational paths on the one hand constituted the increasingly pervasive impositions of the state and the capital to reproduce social and personal relations in their own image. On the other hand, they constituted the repository of our aroused and frustrated desires for a socially and bodily fulfilling connection with ourselves, each other, and life that neither capital nor state has been capable of delivering. The critical capacity of art in holding and conveying this tension has been very appealing to me.

The more the affective promises of hegemony in terms of fulfillment, wholeness, harmony, and happiness proliferate in the everyday, the more intensely blares the gap between this promise and the actual emotional state we find ourselves due to the disastrous consequences of neoliberalism (e.g., intensified ecological devastation, heightened social disparities and the violent reinforcement of social hierarchies, etc.) The
result is an affective whiplash that hegemony once again attempts to appease and cover up. In response, Hafriyat artists, with whom I aesthetically identify, frequently turned to humor to refresh the contradictions that link affect with structural and material conditions.

A biographical connection I share with Hafriyat artists is that many of them had some form of experience working with humor weeklies. Humor weeklies in Turkey build on the long-standing tradition of satire – hiciv and taşlama in Turkish – that undermine presiding lines of logic and affectation through engaging with contradictions of power and its social effects. The illustrated weekly humor gazettes (mizah gazeteleri) in Turkey originated in late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Ottoman Empire and many managed to survive the transition from the Ottoman rule to modern Turkish Republic.49 Because of their critical distance to ruling order, they have come under recurrent pressures of censorship.50 Considering the fact that the Turkish state has been effective in blocking the left from power, these magazines often resonated with leftist political opposition.

50 Note that Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been among the most notorious politicians that perpetually worked to intimidate political cartoonist and eradicate popular criticism of himself through frequently taking cartoonists to court for litigation.
A considerable number of Hafriyat members apprenticed with the renowned cartoonist Oguz Aral, the founder of Turkey’s widely popular humor weekly Girgir, during their youth in the 1980s and 1990s. My initial introduction to the realm of cultural production was through cartoons that I practiced by imitating styles from these weeklies which I read avidly. In the early 2000s, Oguz Aral’s prominent proteges, the late Galip Tekin agreed to look at my drawings and extended an informal apprenticeship. I would say this was my formal introduction to art, although Tekin despised everything about contemporary art and vehemently distinguished the humble craft of cartooning from that pretentious world. At the time I had no reason to think twice about his insight especially because my only exposure to artists was his friends who stopped by to visit him in his tiny office. Located at the entrance of the three-story dance club that he ran, the room was more a closet that fit his desk, a couple chairs, and a stray cat. He placed an extra chair to the side of his desk to allow me share the drawing surface with him. The remaining chair hosted a procession of random and usually eccentric visitors passing through to say hello throughout the night. Even with visitors, he hardly ever stopped drawing. He had mastered the art of holding engaging conversations without lifting his pen or his head.

---

51 Oguz Aral encouraged youth to submit caricatures to the weekly, a selection of which he would publish on the last page of the magazine. He would send detailed feedback on each work submitted, and pay the students generously for works that he picked up for publishing. Students whose works were regularly chosen would be eligible for apprenticeship with Gigir team on site.
Although my late mentor had convinced me that the worlds of the illustrated humor weeklies and contemporary art were like water and oil, once my path crossed with Hafriyat, it became clear to me that there could be significant overlap. One reason I was immediately attracted to Hafriyat’s aesthetics was the palpable affinity between their artistic sensibilities and those of the satirical weeklies. In the larger context of the contemporary art scene of the 1990s in Istanbul (i.e., the giųncel sanat scene), Hafriyat was not alone in its aesthetic adaptations of satire and social parody from humor weeklies. Contemporary art production between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s displayed a significant kinship to the satirical weeklies in Turkey. Artists frequently deployed satirical strategies and sensibilities in mise-en-scène photography, installation art, performance, and video. Hafriyat artists adapted this sensibility to their paintings, posters, fliers, and catalogue designs. Furthermore, a number of illustrators from humor weeklies participated in group shows and book projects that Hafriyat spearheaded.

It is important to briefly note that during the 2000s, the contemporary art field provided a privileged site of critical political expression when compared to the political cartoonists who were continually punished with high monetary fines and imprisonment. The rather grim situation of the satirists had a lot to do with then Prime

52 Bulent Sangar, Aydan Murtezaoglu, Halil Altindere, Sener Ozmen, Erkan Ozgen, Cengiz Tekin, Basir Borlakov, and Nilbar Gures are some of the artists whose works frequently deployed social parody and irony that can be linked with the weeklies.
Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s personal hostility towards being made fun of and his efforts to censor those who undermined his authority in caricatures. Contemporary art gained a relative privilege for political expression during a time when it was seen as a branding vehicle for Istanbul’s cosmopolitan appeal for transnational capital and the transnational artworld, as well as a sign of Erdogan’s commitment to liberal market capitalism. Even then, the circumstances were tenuous. For example, both the 2005 group show “Free Kick” curated by artist Halil Altindere, and Hafriyat’s 2007 group show “Fear of God,” drew police intervention and legal scrutiny. However, unlike political cartoonists who were frequently found guilty, these cases were eventually dropped.

Among Hafriyat artists, Nalan Yırtmaç in particular embodies the sensibility of satirical weeklies and translates it into her works, which most frequently feature stencil technique and collages but also sculpture, video, and photography. For example, in one of her printed digital collages (Figure 1), exhibited at Art x-ist gallery in Istanbul between December 20, 2012 and January 12, 2013, we see a man lying down in the rubble looking at a partially demolished building. The image produces diverse and contradictory affects. These range from the bizarrely appealing sense of a rather likeable cross section of a house that almost looks like a toy house with intimate and heart-warming details of a pink interior wall and tiles imprinted with pictures of fruit, to the
disturbing sense of decay mixed with pointless destruction. The man seems comically relaxed and self-content, even proud as if looking at his own masterpiece, maybe anticipating his profits from this project and dreaming up his next entrepreneurial move to grow his bounty. On the other hand, he may just as easily be crushed and abandoned to the point that he can do nothing but carry on as long as he can with his daily activities as if he was never forcefully displaced from his demolished house. In my informal conversation with the artist, this work appeared to be among her least favorites in terms of execution and aesthetic achievement. I nevertheless highlight it here because it boldly captures the ways in which her works intersect with popular satirical sensibilities that perpetually put a comical finger on how an economy of destruction operates systemically and on our psychic drives, needless to say with furiously uneven outcomes. In the reality of Istanbul’s urban transformation under the gradual economic re-structuring of the country according to “post-Washington consensus-based attempts aiming at the creation and protection of the institutions supporting market-based allocation of resources,” the incongruous readings of the image appear possible. After all, the early crop of contractors—many of them originally from humble provincial and aspiring middle class backgrounds—used the yapsatçılık model discussed in Chapter 3 to

---

their advantage and mastered the bourgeoning municipality-business relations of the privatizing economy to make a fortune and gain full political control.

Figure 1: Nalan Yırtmaç (Hafriyat artist), "Disastercity Collage 7," 2012

To fully convey Yırtmaç’s use of the range of social parody and satirical techniques, I would have to share the whole constellation of over 25 works in the show, which is not possible. To illustrate my point further, I contrast this image with another from the same exhibition. In Yırtmaç’s Disastercity 8 (Figure 2), the painting (acrylic and

---

54 Nalan Yırtmaç, Disastercity Collage 7, 2012, Digital Collage. Image courtesy of Nalan Yırtmaç
stencil technique on canvas) offers us a view of entrepreneurial achievement when this spirit catches under its wings the storm of neoliberal progress, meaning access to transnational capital at bargain rates with immunity from legal repercussions for irresponsible and corrupt behavior.

Figure 2: Nalan Yırtmaç (Hafriyat artist), "Disastercity 8," 2012

---

Nalan Yırtmac, Disastercity 8, 2012, Mixed Technique: Stencil, Acrylic. Image courtesy of Nalan Yırtmaç
Although captured at Istanbul’s heights, the view does not induce vertigo. Rather, it projects a sense of down-to-earth humor that is tragicomic for those who lived under the profoundly fraudulent conditions of Turkey’s real estate economy that shot the two buffoons represented, and others like these to the top echelons of society; in fact, higher than any previous echelons in Republican history in terms of accumulated wealth and immunity from laws.

The man on the right, depicted in long shorts, is Ali Agaoglu, one of Turkey’s foremost real estate developers and richest businessmen. He is the son of a relatively successful building contractor, but developed his father’s business with his own particular approach starting in 1981. He is frequently compared to Donald Trump for reasons that are beyond their shared sector of choice. Much like Trump, he too is a capitalist-populist who has invested a lot of money and effort into becoming a media clown since the early 2000s. He too is an avid promoter of the kitsch aesthetics of wealth to lure and housetrain young middle and working-class desires into increasing their dependency and debt to the upper classes. He too perpetuates fantasies of living in a luxury complex with a helicopter pad for fast trips to the grocery store. He too is famous for unlawful and reckless business practices but gets away with them thanks to the protection of his business partners and ideological accomplices in positions of power.
The man on the left, depicted in a white t-shirt, is Erdogan Bayraktar, who was the Minister of Environment and Urban Planning of Turkey at the time this painting was produced. Bayraktar also comes from the real estate sector. Before he became a Minister in 2011, he was the president of Turkey’s state-established Mass Housing Development Administration, the infamous TOKI. He was in charge of the organization between 2002 and 2011 and oversaw the controversial transformation of the institution from the supplier of subsidized loans to low-income housing projects between 1984 and 2002 to a central agency of privatizing public land and resources and a clearing house for real estate development operations under the AKP regime.56

The Ottoman land regime that considerably limited private property on land, largely inherited by modern Turkey, was significant in these developments.57 The Turkish state-owned most of the unoccupied land in the country. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the availability of state land at the outskirt of cities had facilitated the informal settlements of rural and provincial dispossessed who migrated into major cities after 1960. Even after the spread of squatter settlements, the state continued to own a vast land stock, about a third of the total geographical area of the country in 2000.58 The AKP government passed laws to transfer control of this uncommodified land from the

57 Ibid, 141.
58 Ibid.
former Urban Land Office to TOKI in 2004.\textsuperscript{59} Through supplementary legislative changes, the government also enabled TOKI to facilitate and oversee the privatization of previously uncommodified land for real estate development.\textsuperscript{60} Not only the vast stock of land at the outskirts of the cities but also the former industrial sites that sat on state land in urban centers were transferred over to TOKI; rendering its land resources extremely valuable.\textsuperscript{61}

With comprehensive adjustments in law over the years, TOKI has effectively become the headquarters of the housing sector and drove Istanbul’s urban development and gentrification in collaboration with private developers while enabling business benefits in proportion to closeness to the ruling party.\textsuperscript{62} AKP’s TOKI system is a marriage between the neoliberal privatization of state resources and Islamist clientelism. Under AKP rule, the massive legislative changes granted TOKI the right to establish its own companies and develop partnerships with private companies.\textsuperscript{63} Through these adjustments, TOKI gained the right to directly drive a wide range of built environment projects, including mass-scale low income, middle income, and luxury housing, commercial towers, and shopping malls, as well as infrastructural projects in

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 132.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 130.
cooperation with private companies in a revenue-sharing model.\textsuperscript{64} Between 2003 and 2013, TOKI was granted authority to carry out urban planning and regeneration projects in squatter settlements, historical areas, and dilapidated inner city zones; it went from controlling 16.5 million square meters to 194 million square meters of state-owned land and was granted virtually limitless development rights in areas that were declared to be “risk zones”.\textsuperscript{65}

Roughly a year after the exhibition of Disastercity, Erdogan Bayraktar was forced to resign from his position in an effort to contain a corruption scandal that erupted between him, his son Abdullah Oguz Bayraktar, and Ali Agaoglu that rapidly spread all the way to the then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and his family. The same year, the Gezi uprising erupted in Istanbul and spread around Turkey, where millions took to the streets for a month and self-consciously used satirical wit and humor in their dissident push back against authorities until the government retracted its plans to demolish Taksim Gezi Park (a public park at the heart of Istanbul’s Taksim neighborhood) to develop a shopping mall and mosque complex in its place. Within roughly a year, the cases of corruption allegations were dismissed. Ali Agaoglu resumed his self-branded role as the \textit{architect of life} in Istanbul by pillaging, decimating, and proudly developing

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 131.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 131; Note that much of Turkey is easily declared as an earthquake risk zone, which has been the case that legitimated the spread of urban renewal projects throughout the country where old apartment buildings are torn down and rebuilt by state orchestrated and subsidized private contractor arrangements.
ambitious housing projects including what he claims to be *Europe's largest luxury living complex* near the endangered Northern Forests even after the Istanbul Chamber of Architects acquired a court order to stop construction. A year later, the AKP government was nearly ousted during the June 2015 elections when it lost its parliamentary majority. The AKP party responded by provoking ethnic strife, going after political opponents, brokering a new conservative coalition with the ultra-nationalist right, re-instating his power often by small margins followed by massive changes in the legal system and ultimately changing the entire regime and the election process to his advantage.

The humor of the neoliberal absurdity in Turkey is hard to disentangle from grief. In the exhibition catalog for Hafriyat III, held at the Ataturk Cultural Center between October 21, 1997 and November 6, 1997, artist Caner Karavit uses the phrase “alaysi kederler,” meaning ironic grief, to point to Hafriyat artists’ aesthetic response to this. Ironic grief is a form of expressing anguish through joy, and as such it tugs on the transitive tensions between forms of despair and forms of dissent, one of the critical contradictions that lie at the heart of disillusionment and social transformation. The joy found in such an expression is not far from the kind of joy James Baldwin identified in Blues music:

> And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a

---

true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist.\(^{67}\)

In ironic grief, the joy comes not only from the courage to confront the affective depth of reality, but also from undermining the ways in which the dominant principles that configure social reality at this particular conjunction pass as the ultimate truth of life. In a kindred fashion to ironic grief, Baldwin suggests the notion of passionate detachment:

> So that it’s this passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness, this ability to know that, all right, it’s a mess, and you can’t do anything about it ... so, well, you have to do something about it.\(^{68}\)

In the face of deliberate blocking of political channels for emancipatory transformation, passionately detached or ironically grieved engagements with the contradictions of our social and embodied conditions help configure our relationship to these pressing tensions beyond pessimism or optimism and against disaffection. The depth of feeling in such configurations become the very threads with which dis-identificatory and subversive schemas of meaning and affectations are woven.

The 2013 Gezi uprising was an exemplary moment during which the dis-identificatory affectation of “enough is enough” erupted into a myriad articulations and actions of dis-identification with authority. After days of clashes with the police and incessant doses of tear gas, large crowds started expressing that tear gas was not going


\(^{68}\) Ibid.
to deter them by chanting in unison that they had become addicted to it and were ready for more. In response to the Prime Minister’s attempted humiliation of the protesters, calling them a handful of riff raffs, protesters grew in numbers and strongly self-identified as riff raffs, popularizing it with the motto “every day, I am riff raff’ing”. What ensued was a month-long collective engagement with dissent and subversion to curb self-serving, unchecked, destructive manifestations of ruling power. It was one of those rare times in Turkey’s history when the hegemonic defacement of long-standing emancipatory political struggles in the country—for example, of the labor movement, the Kurdish liberation movement, and the queer and feminist movements—was questioned publicly. In the face of systemically deepened boundaries dividing people along the lines of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, a mutual dissent against repression across these boundaries had a chance to unfold. The ruling response has been vehemently violent, coercive, and profoundly manipulative. The comprehensive backlash illustrated more convincingly that goat paths of dissidence, these disturbances and fermentations that ooze through the cracks despite hegemonic efforts to manage and conceal, these affective means of keeping contradictions alive seriously threaten systems of domination and exploitation.
3. Social Reality and Urban Development in Istanbul

In the SALT research library archives, I found a 1997 newspaper clipping about the art collective Hafriyat (“Excavation”) that piqued my interest. In the account, the young painters position their work away from the commercial concerns of the art market, underline the social realist dimensions of their experimental paintings, and contrast them with earlier incarnations: “Social realism is neither fists raised up in the air, nor depictions of chains, nor iconographic images. For us, social realism is a human’s ability to look at the city in which they live”.

Figure 3: Newspaper Clipping on Hafriyat October 25, 1997

---

I found compelling this definition of social realism as one’s ability to look at the city in which one lives. First, it sets up a notion of looking and perception as a socially engaged and politically charged act, perhaps even a curious artistic quest. It comes across as an invitation or challenge for each person to cultivate their own ability to look at the city in which they live. Their proposition works against grandiosity by scaling down to the observing person. They suggest that the capacity to look at one’s own city is something to aspire to, and hence renders the act as non-trivial. In Turkish “to look at” also means “to attend to” and “to care for,” so the artistic capacity they call for is perhaps built between these meanings. In the original Turkish phrase, a person’s ability to look at the city in which they live comes across as a yearning for the courage to confront the city with all the contradictions present. Finally, Hafriyat artists evoke the Marxist tradition of social realism, which hinges on an aesthetic tension between iconic depictions or projections of a proletariat uprising on the one hand, and searching for the social conditions of the marginalized in the chaos and fragments of the city on the other hand.

The 1997 news story in Hurriyet Daily was published a year after painters Mustafa Pancar, Antonio Cosentino, and Hakan Gursoytrak exhibited their first collective show, “Hafriyat,” in May 9 – 29, 1996, at the Kare art gallery in Istanbul. Hakan Gursoytrak explained in a 2018 interview I conducted with him that the Hafriyat
artists have known each other since art school, they shared a common interest in the social and material dimensions of urban life, and they decided to work together as a collective to continue producing and showing without having to complete for survival and conform to the tastes and desires of the art establishment. The collective grew within months with the inclusion of painter Murat Akagunduz in their second group show, “Hafriyat 2,” from October 17 – November 17, 1996 at Passion art gallery in Istanbul. By 1997, Hafriyat had incorporated new artists as well as new art disciplines beyond painting. Their 1997 show at the Ataturk Cultural Center was pivotal in this regard, setting them on a path that eventually led them to become an interdisciplinary group with a flexible structure and a fluctuating number of members that reached 14 core members in 2007.

In the first decade of Hafriyat, before they opened their independent gallery space Hafriyat Karakoy in 2007, the collective curated and organized group shows in other galleries (such as Kare, Passion and Elhamra in Istanbul, and Rathausgalerie in Munich), public institutions (such as Taksim Ataturk Cultural Center in Istanbul, Anadolu University in Eskisehir, and ODTU Art and Sciences Symposium in Ankara), and experimental places (such as empty buildings in Istanbul). Between 1996 and 2007,

---

2 Hakan Gursoutrak, Interview with author, September 12, 2017.
over the course of eleven shows, Hafriyat brought together more than thirty artists who live and work in Istanbul. Some of them were outsider artists although the majority were professionals.

3.1 Urban Realism and the Art of Shame

Hafriyat artists were among the generation of artists whose aesthetic approaches grew in reaction to the sterile taste of the art market, the narrowly professionalized and formalistic concerns of the dominant voices in the art field, and the earlier aesthetics of socially engaged art in Turkey. Mostly having born in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s, this generation of artists witnessed Istanbul’s massive expansion after the 1980 military coup, from under 3 million in 1970 to over 12 and a half million by 2010. They also witnessed Istanbul’s increasingly polarizing urban reconfiguration that reflected the post-1980 switch in state policy from national developmentalism to neoliberal capitalism, and the concurrent effects of rural to urban migration and Istanbul’s accelerated integration into the networks and markets of transnational capitalism.

Istanbul’s neoliberal transformation had started shortly after the 1980 coup; however, the political economic developments following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1980s had a remarkable impact on this process. Turkey’s integration into the post-Soviet transnational order was far from smooth. On

---

4 Istanbul’s current population is estimated to be over 15 million.
the economic front, the volume of transnational capital flowing into the country increased after the full liberalization of capital in 1989. Subsequently, the speculative nature of transnational capital rendered the economy highly unstable and volatile, culminating in 1994 in Turkey’s first major economic crisis of the post-coup period. Following the crisis, Turkey implemented an IMF-prescribed fiscal austerity program to stabilize the economy that increased the burden of economic growth on the laboring sectors of society while continuing to spiral out of control and rendering government incompetent.

On the political front, along with increased discontent with economic mismanagement, the existing political parties and the official state ideology of Kemalism were facing considerable challenges from political Islam on the right and Kurdish liberation on the left. Furthermore, the state’s hegemony was weakened significantly by a series of corruption scandals, including some that pointed to deep state relations between ultra nationalist politicians, high ranking bureaucrats, military officials, and the Turkish mafia. The combination resulted in discontent and protests across wide sectors

---

6 Ibid.
8 There is a famous traffic accident that took place on Nov 3, 1996, widely known as Susurluk accident, that initiated public discussion on deep connections between police, government, and organized crime in Turkey. In the crash between a truck and a Mercedes Benz, the four passengers, three of whom died, were
of society. In response, the state turned rampantly violent, first and foremost directing this violence against the Kurdish liberation movement. One reason behind this aggression, or rather its “justification for the public opinion,” was the Gulf War in 1990 and the formation of a de-facto independent Kurdistan in the northern region of neighboring Iraq. The post-Soviet altering of borders around Turkey was decisive in how the Gulf War was interpreted in the country. On the one hand, it was seen as a strategic opportunity to “develop” in terms of influence, prestige, and geopolitical authority in the region. On the other hand, there was an acute fear that the surrounding noose of Western imperialism would tighten and that Euro-American control, both in the region and in the country, would increase. Any form of pressure regarding human rights violations in Turkey by European institutions was used in the media to corroborate the argument that Turkey was confronted with a Western conspiracy.

During this time, military nationalism rose to the level of ethno-religious fanaticism. Social policies were now supervised by the military and subject to “military solutions”. Systematically after 1990, the military razed and emptied villages in Eastern

identified as top officials from the police, government, riding with mafia leader Abdullah Catli who was sought by Interpol with a red alert at the time. After this revelation, investigative journalists such as Cuneyt Arcayurek published documentation that traced the formation of the deep state to the Turkish arm of CIA-supported anti-communist forces during the Cold War, known as counterguerrilla.

9 Bora, Tanil. “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey.” The South Atlantic Quarterly 102, no. 2/3 (June 2003).
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
and South Eastern Anatolia (the Kurdistan region of Turkey) for the stated purposes of “controlling” the guerilla insurgency lead by the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK from here on). According to estimates, anywhere between 900,000 to over a million people were displaced and had to move to the cities, mostly Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Diyarbakir, Adana, Mersin and Bursa between 1984 and 1996 as a result of these policies. A significant portion of these migrants ended up in Istanbul, the largest city and economy in Turkey. Like the previous waves of rural and provincial migrations, the migrants largely settled in squatter neighborhoods and shantytowns in the dilapidated parts of the inner-city such as Tarlabasi or on the outskirts of Istanbul.

These developments and the lived experiences of what was happening in the country were largely censored and marginalized in Istanbul’s art milieu due to conformism and fears of political repercussions. Hafriyat was part of a frustrated generation of artists who were experimenting and pushing to expand expressive capacities for artists. The Youth Action series (1995 – 1998) were a significant intervention in this regard. Starting in 1995, over the period of four years the Plastic Arts

---

Association in Istanbul issued an annual open call for experimental works by artists under 35 years from around the country. These exhibits drew high enthusiasm from young artists who had very limited opportunities to show politicized work otherwise. The lack of a jury process in these exhibits allowed so-called “risky” and “marginalized” art to find an outlet in the “capital city of art” in Istanbul. Although not members of Hafriyat, artists Halil Altindere and Sener Ozmen were two of the prominent figures in the rise of a dissident contemporary art scene (güncel sanat) in Istanbul in the mid-1990s.

The artists who were recent graduates of Cukurova University in Adana in 1996, made an entry into Istanbul’s art milieu with a collaborative installation piece that they exhibited at the Youth Action 2 exhibit, *Deterritorialization*, held at TUYAP Istanbul Exhibition Centre between July 12 and 21, 1996. In this piece (Figure 4), artists displayed the list of villages and towns that were depopulated by the state, accompanied by magnified images of their national identity cards in which their mouths are erased.

Outsiders to Istanbul at that point, Halil Altindere and Sener Ozmen, had first-hand experience of state violence and censorship. Their families were displaced respectively from Surgucu and Idil in the 1990s; however, there was a state imposed and media endorsed moratorium on these developments which was matched by silence in the art milieu outside of the Kurdistan region, including in Istanbul. Their piece was among the first to break this silence.
Halil Altindere’s “Dance with Taboos” was exhibited during the 5th International Istanbul Biennial in 1997 (Figure 5). In this iteration of the work, Altindere, who at this point had gained transnational recognition, no longer had his mouth erased. Instead, he juxtaposed a magnified image of his national ID card (in which he is hiding his face) with a magnified image of a 1,000,000 Turkish bill, in which Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, is hiding his face.

---

The gesture of covering the face with hands brings to mind a person facing a disaster. One may do this out of disbelief, grief, fear, regret, or shame. Out of these possibilities, shame had strong resonance in the 1990s. Although the hegemonic restoration efforts tried to shame people demonized in the media as terrorists and criminals, the exposure of economic and political corruption and levels of violence and repression it would take to continue with the liberal-authoritarian route to affluence was enough to show that it was the leaders of powerful institutions and beneficiaries who should have been ashamed. Shame can be a source of revolutionary disidentification. In

---

a letter to his friend Arnold Rouse in 1843, Karl Marx observed that shame is a way in which people process their realization and recognition of the emptiness of patriotism and the abnormity of the capitalist state system by turning their anger inward. Marx thought that if a whole nation could really experience shame, it would become like a lion, crouching ready to spring. Marx’s use of the word “really” implies obstacles in front of our capacity to contend with the full depth of this feeling towards transformative openings. In the 1990s in Turkey, one of the biggest barriers to metabolizing the generalized experience of shame on the basis of being systematically subordinated was concerted efforts to re-channel pain and shame onto Kurds, poor people, and transsexuals among others. Halil Altindere’s work pulls on and reframes these tensions and sensibilities.

During the 1990s, while the state was scrambling to manage economic and political crises amidst corruption scandals, the media frequently shared staged images and video footage of “criminals” and “terrorists” in police stations. In these staged events, detained criminals were recorded while standing next to the evidence they were supposedly caught with. The men would always cover their faces or look away from the camera, with “evidence” neatly piled next to them: narcotics, stolen goods, fraudulent

19 Ibid.

79
items, ammunition, weapons, and explosives. Halil Altindere, a Kurdish citizen, made this work in 1997 when Kurdish civilians could be detained, imprisoned, and tortured at will for mere suspicion of being linked to the PKK. The military terrorization of Kurds in Turkey was directly connected with the state’s fear of losing full hegemonic control in the midst of an economy spiraling downward. In the beginning of the year 1997, 1,000,000 Turkish Lira was worth less than $1 USD, by the end of the year it was merely worth 50 cents.

3.2 The Underpass of Urban Development

Hafriyat’s interest in the urban street grew within the political dynamics of the 1990s. In response to the rift between what was said in the media and what was seen on the street, Hafriyat artists developed aesthetic strategies for in-depth inquiry and reflection into Istanbul’s social, physical, and everyday reality. Hafriyat’s collective aesthetic is best understood as a constellation of singular approaches to realism that are built on a three-pronged tension: the tension of urban infrastructure (i.e., the built environment and its uses), the tension of urban crowd (i.e., social makeup at any given time and its transformation), and the tension of urban temporality (i.e., the social organization or time, and the passage of transient life). These dimensions were articulated in connection with the political economic and social context of an expanding and shifting Istanbul.
Istanbul had been a central destination for rural and provincial migrations since the 1960s. However, its expansion was accelerated after the 1980 military coup causing substantial transformations in urban texture. Hafriyat means “excavation” in Turkish. The artists chose this word in reference to the proliferating signs of “excavation services” for construction and the never-ending digging in the city during Istanbul’s post-coup transformation from “a tired city whose glory resided in the past into a newly-imagined global metropolis”\(^\text{20}\) geared for a new era of accumulation.

Hafriyat delved into Istanbul’s urban reality shaped by this ambition. In this process, new senses of urban aesthetics and new urban dreams of life were being formulated and forged. Hafriyat artists took particular interest in the rifts occurring between the planned and the unplanned, the idealized and the practical consequences of this transformation. They searched for Istanbul’s urban esprit in these rifts as these pointed to the social and cultural frictions and also the moving pieces of a city in flux.

Hakan Gursoytrak’s 1995 painting, “Expressway” (Figure 6), exhibited at the group show Hafriyat held at Kare art gallery May 9 – 29, 1996, is a case in point. The highway – the more lanes the better – has taken on a special symbolic meaning in Turkey because throughout the 1980s and 1990s, political leaders and the media managed to turn it into a key indicator of governmental success, modernization and

---

progress\textsuperscript{21}. Turgut Ozal promoted this image vigorously. He led the ruling center-right Motherland party (ANAP) that oversaw Turkey’s economic liberalization after the 1980 military coup –as the deputy prime minister for the junta regime (1980 - 1982), the elected Prime Minister (1983 – 1989), and the 8\textsuperscript{th} President of Turkey until his death in 1993. The highway and its urban incarnate, the expressway, became a prophetic sign of Turkey’s much desired graduation into the rank of “First-World” countries with admired modern technological prowess and acclaimed social and economic prosperity.

The highway was one of the preliminary sites for the privatization of state services during the country’s transition from national developmentalism to free-market capitalism under IMF’s guidance after the coup.\textsuperscript{22} In the early 1980s, Turgut Ozal, in his role as the deputy prime minister, invented a heterodox transition scheme to neoliberalism called the “build-operate-transfer,” a framework that allowed for the privatization of public projects through public-private partnerships. With this turn, highway construction offered a vast frontier where state-private construction sector relationships could flourish, and the new era of formal and informal accumulation of capital could be ushered in. Ozal’s ANAP government passed a set of laws that

\textsuperscript{21} All governments, but particularly center-right governments led by ANAP, DYP, and AKP parties, have marketed new highways and expressways constructed in their term of power as the material indication of modernization, service, and accomplishment under their leadership.

extended authorities and financial resources of metropolitan municipal governments.\textsuperscript{23} The allocation of national tax revenue to municipal administrations was increased from 6.4\% to 13.3\%. New legal provisions allowed metropolitan governments to levy and/or increase local taxes and charges on activities ranging from sports and entertainment to tourism and advertising. Furthermore, between 1983 and 1989 Istanbul raised an estimated $900 million in loans from abroad for infrastructural projects.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{expressway.png}
\caption{Hakan Gursoytrak (Hafriyat artist), "Expressway," 1995\textsuperscript{25}}
\end{figure}

Hakan Gursoytrak’s painting (Figure 6) provokes the contradictory images of the expressway as the negligibly utilitarian and the monumental, the uninhabitable and the

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
vital, the liminal yet (logistically) central, the dystopian and the utopian, the fast and the frozen space of urban life. The painting disturbs the myth of the expressway as a fast, efficient, goal-oriented transitory infrastructure of modern technological prowess.

Unlike the idyllic images of American beltways with a beautiful view of the cityscape in the horizon, this one offers nothing, not even a spacious sky. It represents the immediate and the mundane—if not also claustrophobic—reality of a concrete underpass. And although the painting is of an “expressway,” we hardly see the motorway. It could have as well been an urban square without the landmark or a neighborhood corner or a space where homeless people may take shelter. It is as if either the people were teleported into the scene or their daily background was cut off and replaced with this empty concrete setting.

In the top left corner where we catch a glimpse of the actual motorway, we only see a pair of legs walking on it and another person about to enter on foot. It seems as though people forged footpaths on and under the mythical pathway of speed and progress to go about their daily lives. The infrastructure was clearly not built in a way that “centers” the daily life of those in the picture. The painting evokes the aftermath of major infrastructural “improvements” first undertaken in the 1980s to boost Istanbul’s appeal as an up-and-coming global city.\textsuperscript{26} The globalizing makeover of Istanbul between

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
1983 and 1990 not only allowed the center-right ruling party to award highly lucrative public works contracts, concessions, and tenders to politically favored businessmen and investors. It also radically transformed the nineteenth century texture of the city. The urban makeover involved destroying large tracts of historic inner-city neighborhoods especially around the Gold Horn shores and up to the Taksim Beyoglu district. The old streets along the shores of the Golden Horn were bulldozed, some 30,000 buildings were demolished, large numbers of small manufacturing establishments and working-class tenants were evicted, and a number of squatter neighborhoods were cleared. These areas were replaced with new throughways, underpasses, and overpasses that came to be lined with monumental middle- and upper-middle class apartment blocks and gated communities.

Unlike the view from a car window, Gursoytrak’s painting of an urban expressway delivers a pedestrian’s impression. If the expressway reconfigures the urban imagination of life as a fleeting link to the future and the distant, in this painting it confronts us with a relationship to the present and the here on the lower scale and slower pace of the everyday. The environment depicted in the image is bleak, showing a ridiculously vacuous and overbearing expressway that is far removed from the driver or

\[27\] Ibid.
passenger unless a person walks on the asphalt, waits for help on the roadside, catches sight of a gruesome roadkill, or stops or slows down for an accident. The promises and new appetites implicated in the modernizing infrastructure of a globalizing city seem unwarranted here since they are not matched by employment opportunities that provide commensurate income, new upscale living and working spaces that replicate those in leading global metropoles, or prospects for “graduating” to the consumption and leisure standards of the most affluent countries. Removed from the signs of valorized speeds, postures, sensibilities, appearances, ambitions, and wealth that the expressway is destined to reproduce and facilitate, we are left with a view of its polarizing consequences, revealing the expressway as a mediator between a largely uninhabitable materialization of life and the dreamy excitement of unfulfilled passions and desires.

It is not easy to read people’s emotions in Hakan Gursoytrak’s painting (Figure 6). Half of the people seem caught by the moment of their own daily matters and thoughts, for example a woman to our left is trying to keep her balance while descending down the slope carrying bags. The remaining people seem to be intently looking back at “us” or the artist capturing the scene. The emotional effect is strongly directed at the outside of the painting, not allowing the viewer to retreat or disconnect as if reading a newspaper story about “these people” trapped in the tensions of “their
world”. Although their gazes meeting ours is where the contradictory tensions of urban reality become most acute, we cannot easily extricate this effect from the environmental weight of the expressway itself. The expressway commands our visual attention and provokes our sensorial memory or perhaps its repressed absence regarding our relationship to something so familiar—a daily infrastructure that both exudes and conceals the contradictions of capitalist modernity in which it is lodged and which it facilitates.

### 3.3 Urban-Rural Political Economy and Cultural Consequences

Migrations from rural and provincial areas have been the most significant source of Istanbul’s growth since the 1960s.\(^2^9\) Turkey’s population was over 70% rural in 1960, today it is less than 25% rural.\(^3^0\) The first phase of urban expansion in Istanbul took shape between 1960 and 1980. The economy of Turkey between 1960 and 1980 was driven by national developmentalism through a policy of import-substitution industrialization. This policy was replaced with a market driven neoliberal economic directive after the 1980 coup. Accordingly, the housing and employment policies related


to integrating rural migrants into the city also changed. Social and economic policies as well as tension between social classes in the city, navigated through culture discourse, underwent substantial shifts between these periods.31 For example, the image of the rural migrant changed from a (hopeful) revolutionary comrade in the 1970s to an invader, pillager and profiteer of urban land, resources, and culture after the 1980 coup. The conditions that undergird this shift are important to investigate because they haunt Hafriyat artists’ urban realism as well.

Hafriyat artists were compelled to address the reality of a city that was comprised of over 50% squatter housing by 1980. In the introductory text to their 1997 group show at Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM), artist Caner Karavit writes:

The social realism of the new generation is neither the nostalgic meanings offered to us by the previous period nor the images of the previously oppressed (fists raised in the air, thick-wristed workers, tired miners coming out of the pit, peasants hoeing in the field, etc.)...

During the first half of the 1980s when shanty constructions accelerated, with the (government’s) permission to add additional stories (on top of these dwellings), the (resulting) rentier opportunism fanned the flames of illegal urbanization that this generation got to witness as a ‘new social reality’. This undeniable reality has a power-act that perpetually transforms the urban fabric. All of this becomes visible by the gecekondu32 (illegal squatter dwelling) that all of a sudden appears on the side of the road that we pass daily, the institutional excavations that divide that road into segments, the floods after rain due to these excavations, the pillaging of public lands and old works of art35 in the city. That is to say, excavation (hafriyat) encompasses the oppressed city by

32 In Turkish “gecekondu” means ‘landed in the night’, the term refers to the squatter dwellings that are built illegally and hastily.
33 Caner Karavit uses the phrase “eski eser” which literally means old works of art but he implies sites, buildings, artifacts that were part of the older fabric of the city.
splitting everything in it. The effort to express this (reality) in the best way is a form of action for the strollers of the city\textsuperscript{34} who are able to watch it at the point of explosion.\textsuperscript{35}

The frequent shifts in Turkey’s main mode of capital accumulation illuminate how social tension between classes was transfigured into hostility between rural and urban identifications in Istanbul. One outcome of mass urbanization after the 1960 military coup was that urban culture became a site of revolutionary struggle based on a burgeoning class partnership between the rural dispossessed cum urban proletariat and the urban petit-bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{36} After the 1980 coup, with the state-imposed market domination over culture, the social tension around rural-urban identification became a prominent theme of mass mediated culture because it sold, and there was a lot of emotional material to tap into like the disappointments and disillusionments with loss of collective power and hope. Shifts in political economy and class alliances in Turkey’s republican history undergird the rural and provincial expansion of Istanbul and its

\textsuperscript{34} Caner Karavit uses the phrase “kent gezginleri”, which can be translated as the strollers or the wanderers of the city; of course this brings to mind Baudelaire’s “flaneur” and Walter Benjamin’s engagement with this figure as the struggling subjectivity of the (sensitive) petit-bourgeois at the onset of the petit-bourgeoisie’s entry into the marketplace before becoming fully conscious of this new mode of existence as ‘commodity’ (through ‘labor power’) and hence before wanting to proletarianize as such.

\textsuperscript{35} Caner Karavit, Hafriyat III (Exhibition Catalogue) (Istanbul: Ataturk Kultur Merkezi, 1997).

\textsuperscript{36} Although terminology regarding social class formation and grouping of social segments is a matter of debate within Marxism, I use petit-bourgeois to encompass small proprietors, salaried professionals, and students in line with Nico Poulantzas’ 1974 classification. A more up-to-date term that encompasses these segments as well as the workers is the “precariat”, but for my purposes the distinction helps point to the rise and fall of class alliance between proletariat, sub-proletariat, and the petit-bourgeoisie before and after the 1980 coup in Turkey.
hybridized everyday culture, as well as the rise of rural-urban strife in the city that carried neoliberal Islam to power.

The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 as a single party system that initiated industrialization policies called étatism. In this model, the state was the primary mover of capital accumulation, with industrialization policies that stressed one-party nationalism and a view of the state above and outside the social classes of civil society. In the 1930s, the bourgeoisie in Turkey benefited immensely by “obtaining market monopolies through the state economic enterprises, exclusive import licenses, credit from state-controlled banks under very favorable terms, and lucrative contracts from state firms to undertake major construction projects.” The final gift of the étatist state to private capital came during the Second World War, when the state switched to deficit financing and high-taxation of the peasantry (at this point over 80% of Turkey was rural) and non-Muslim bourgeoisie. Accordingly, private fortunes were amassed primarily in the hands of the Muslim bourgeoisie while the general economic condition of the war years was marked by “high inflation, scarcity, hoarding, and black markets.” Workers’ wages declined by about 30% during the high inflation years of the

---

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
war and did not return to their prewar levels until 1948. The étatist state’s hegemonic compensation idea for the peasant majority of the country was the ‘land reforms’ which was a source of conflict with a segment of the bourgeoisie, the large landlords. Only after the Second World War, with the US hegemonic ascendancy over world economy and politics, did it become a tangible option for the bourgeoisie in Turkey to serve its own broad interests through more direct political rule.

Étatism emerged after the First World War during a hegemonic crisis in the capitalist world order with the fall of the European hegemonic domination, which yielded weakening ties between core and periphery countries. The US ascendancy to power especially after the second world war opened up new possibilities of accumulation and political power for the bourgeoisie in Turkey. A broad sector of this class became allied with the US economic mission led by Max Thornburg in 1948 that spelled out a vision of direct rule by the bourgeoisie and the dismantling of étatist and protectionist industrial structure in favor of expansive business opportunities in foreign trade and distribution, especially in agricultural exports and manufacturing imports. After the introduction of the multi-party system under internal and external pressures (a

---

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
restrictive parliamentary democracy system that outlawed communist parties by Article 141 and Article 142 of the constitution), the Democrat Party led by the wealthy landlord Adnan Menderes came to power in 1950 with the support of all fractions of the bourgeoisie as well as large sectors of the frustrated peasantry.\footnote{Ibid.}

Under Democrat Party rule, Turkey’s economy (i.e. its main mode of capital accumulation) not surprisingly strongly emphasized agricultural and raw material exports in exchange for manufactured goods.\footnote{Ibid.} The policies were favorable to the Turkish economy until the mid-1950s because of high exports of wheat and chrome.\footnote{Ibid.} The subsequent decline in world market demand for raw materials, combined with unfavorable agricultural conditions for wheat production, created a foreign exchange crisis that brought this model to an end by the 1960 coup.\footnote{Ibid.} The military harshly put the bourgeoisie back into its place by executing Adnan Menderes, which was also interpreted as the forceful domination of military-bureaucracy partnership over democracy, industrialism over agriculture, and (“Western”) urban modernity over provincial and rural traditions and ways of life.

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
With the 1960 coup, the mode of capitalist accumulation shifted to import-substitution industrialization.\textsuperscript{51} Large landowners and big agricultural merchants were among the first to adapt their businesses to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new nationalist economic policies of accumulation.\textsuperscript{52} Benefits included protectionism, overvalued exchange rates, cheap credit, tax exemptions, and deploying state enterprises in the service of growing private manufacture industries to provide them with key intermediate goods such as steel, aluminum and petrochemicals at prices below cost of production.\textsuperscript{53} The state attempted to strike a hegemonic balance by extending certain concessions to popular sectors as well. In terms of industrial workers, one of the significant concessions that also had an impact on the petit bourgeoisie was the 1961 constitutional changes that granted and extended rights in support of trade unions and professional associations. As a result, the 1960 military coup also attained a reputation as the only ‘\textit{progressive coup}’ in the coup-laden history of Turkey. The extended rights and liberties quickly became a thorn in the side of the state due to increased political mobilization on the part of the laboring sectors throughout the 1960s.

In 1971, following another military intervention, most of these concessions to labor were

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
revoked, and revolutionary political organizations were strictly restricted and abolished.\textsuperscript{54}

In the early 1970s the state’s ‘ethno-nationalism’ came to a head with the leftist notion of the nation as a site of anti-imperialist struggle for the independence of all peoples. In 1971, the military imposed martial law in industrial centers such as Istanbul and Ankara as well as Kurdish majority cities and towns in Eastern and South Eastern Anatolia, a process that continued through 1973. It is worth comparatively noting that in 1970 the government of Iraq agreed to recognize the Kurds as one of the two peoples constituting the Iraqi nation, acknowledged Kurdish languages, and granted a substantial degree of governmental autonomy in Kurdish areas. The Turkish state and the successive governments, in contrast, increased military oversight in Kurdish majority areas, cracked down on political mobilization, implemented language restrictions, and refused to recognize democratic demands including those regarding culture. On July 20, 1971, the state went so far as to abolish the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TIP) because it passed a resolution protesting the repression of the Kurdish people.\textsuperscript{55} The leaders of TIP received sentences of up to 15 years imprisonment on charges that

included following separatist policies. One of the revolutionary student leaders, Deniz Gezmis, had received a death sentence in 1971 and was executed in 1972. Before being killed, he stated: “Long live a fully independent Turkey. Long live the noble ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Long live the struggle for independence by Turkish and Kurdish people. Down with imperialism. Long live workers and villagers.”

During their rise to power as right-wing liberal leaders, both Turgut Ozal in the 1980s and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the 2000s frequently referred to this 1960s history while strategically erasing the class dimensions and antagonisms, including between private capital and the managerial class of the state, both of which wanted to control ruling power. The AKP in the 2000s managed to reconfigure the 1960s according to identitarian logics: Secularists (implying ‘elitist’ with the help of US media framing) dominated Muslims (implying ‘the masses’). This allowed AKP to “reclaim” the Democrat Party “heritage” as the struggle to “bring to power millions who were downtrodden, excluded, and belittled.”

The post-1960 economic directives implemented agricultural price support to help the incomes of middle and higher brackets of propertied peasants as well as large

56 Ibid.
scale capitalist farmers. In terms of the rural dispossessed who ended up in industrializing sites, the most significant concession for the purposes of this dissertation was the state’s precarious toleration of squatting, allowing rural migrants access to state-owned vacant land in cities as a transitory space to deliver laborers from peasantry into the urban labor force of the new economy. Import substitute industrialization brought waves of rural migrants into the cities in search for work in the expanding economy of urban manufacture industries. The most prominent site of this growth was Istanbul. By 1970, more than 44% of all private manufacturing establishments employing more than ten workers were located in Istanbul, accounting for 51% of total employment in private industry in Turkey. Unable to afford city rents, migrants occupied and built squatter housing in empty spaces within the inhabited city first and then in low-control agricultural zones on the outskirts of Istanbul. Between 1960 and 1980, the rural and provincial migrants appropriated vacant state-owned land in and around the city and

---

built neighborhoods relying on their own collective labor. The squatter settlements were precariously tolerated by the state to accommodate low wages. However, the squatters also faced deterrence strategies in terms of lack of municipal support and intermittent demolition campaigns. By 1980, more than half of all housing in Istanbul was estimated to be illegal squatter dwellings. Therefore, Istanbul was in effect a squatter’s city.

The conditions between 1960 and 1980 that triggered the substantial waves of mass migration from rural and provincial posts to Istanbul gave rise to a new phase of dialogic urban-rural cultural innovations. Istanbul is the center of mass-mediated culture and entertainment in Turkey. For this reason, it is also the privileged and conflictive site of cultural negotiations regarding social tensions. In line with the economic directives that brought migrants to the cities, the 1960 coup also ushered in an air of revived nationalism that contrasted everything ‘yerli’ (the immediate translation is “local,” another translation would be “native,” and the word also connotes “national”) to ‘yabancı’ (which translates as “foreign”). In 1961, even the work permits of foreign musicians who played in entertainment clubs and music halls in Istanbul were revoked

---

63 Ibid.
to make space for “yerli” musicians.\textsuperscript{65} It was under the dual circumstances of a revived national zeal and the reality of large waves of rural migrations from Anatolia that the urban cultural producers in Istanbul took a renewed interest in provincial and rural Anatolia for cultural innovation.

The nationalist reflex took hold in response to the economic downturn that preceded the 1960 coup, which was interpreted as foreign powers seeing to drain national wealth and resources. In fact, the downturn was due to a foreign exchange crisis triggered by unfavorable conditions for raw and agricultural exports. The subsequent regime of import-substitution industrialization capitalized on nationalist sentiments to justify nationalist developmentalism. The nationalistic spirit shifted the existing cultural climate. The innovative edge of culture turned its focus from the international sources of inspiration (most prominently ‘Western’ or Euro-American mass mediated culture) inwards to the cultural hinterlands of Istanbul, Anatolia, and a renewed interest in cultural authenticity.\textsuperscript{66} In line with this development, the urban reception of rural migrants until 1980 was relatively positive compared to the period after the 1980 coup. Nurdan Gurbilek, for example, recounts “one of the complaints most often voiced since the 1980s is the invasion of the big cities by rural migrants. There

\textsuperscript{65} Derya Bengi, \textit{A Kind of Electricity Appeared in Outer Space: Musical Turkey in the 1960’s (Exhibition Catalogue)}. Translated by Baris Yildirim and Liz Amado. (Istanbul: DEPO, 2011): 32

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
had been shanty towns in the big cities for some time, but the ‘loss’ of Istanbul came to be voiced most often then… There was arabesk music in the 1970s, but people only began to complain about it in the 1980s; arabesk became the name not only of a style of music … but whatever was ‘uncultured’.”

Between 1960 and 1980 a dialogic form of urban-rural cultural production became palpable first and foremost in music. This was a two-way development. From the mid-1960s, pop musicians started turning to the countryside to incorporate Anatolian themes into their songs, leading to a new urban form of ‘folk’ or Anatolian pop. The development of Anatolian pop echoed if not competed with the Republican regime’s earlier efforts to ‘folklorize’ the popular culture of Anatolia (albeit with an ethnic emphasis on Turkishness) in ways that served official desires to forge an authentic national cultural identity. The musicians’ search for authentic cultural innovation in the 1960s initially overlapped with the post-coup nationalist hegemony that emphasized “yerli” (local/native/national) economy. However, by the 1970s, the genre, which had gained popularity especially among the urban youth, took a critical stance against the state and acquired a revolutionary radical leftist emphasis. The

67 Ibid, 74.
68 Ibid.
counterpart to the development of urban folk (i.e., Anatolian pop) music was the emergence of a highly melodramatic, eclectic, lowbrow urban popular music. This genre was developed and popularized by rural and provincial migrants in the city. The music was a migrant’s homesick adaptation of folk music into the new conditions and possibilities of the city. Although the genre emerged in the late 1960s, it only became recognized under the term ‘arabesk’ after the 1980 coup.71

Arabesk is a label for a diverse genre of musical forms and styles that includes “taverna” (live music played in taverns), “fantezi” (emphasizing instrumental performance, at times associated with self-indulgent excess by the performer), “damar” (recent colloquial term designating heavy emotional affect), and various other riffing and free style interpretations of rural and classical (Ottoman court) music forms.72 This genre adapted and incorporated a wide range of ‘new’ transnational influences also including the electro-guitar and synthesizer as well as musical soundtracks from Egyptian popular cinema.73 Until the mid-1980s, arabesk faced a heavy-handed bureaucratic reaction that kept it off official broadcasting channels as an undesirable,

72 Ibid.
73 Note the Egyptian radio with powerful broadband frequency was a highly popular alternative to the national public radio of Turkey through the 1930s and 1940s. See Martin Stokes, The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 42.
degenerate trend in popular taste.\textsuperscript{74} Regardless, it continued proliferating through live performers in working-class taverns and the commercial cassette market.\textsuperscript{75}

By the 1970s, the genre had spread to cinema through musical melodramas featuring popular arabesk musicians.\textsuperscript{76} The cinema of Turkey in the 1960s demonstrated strong social realist tendencies focusing on the conditions of impoverished village life, class struggle, as well as rural migration and urbanization.\textsuperscript{77} Although the pinnacle of social realist cinema in Turkey is identified between 1960 and 1965, arabesk film incorporated this heritage, particularly the subgenre of ‘romantic realist films’ where social realist filmmakers attempted at “deeper personal analyses” through the themes of love and intimacy.\textsuperscript{78} Rather than a strong analytic focus, Arabesk movies foregrounded the emotional landscape of the protagonists that were going through harsh struggles with intimacy against the backdrop of an unjust, corrupt, and inhumane urban social order.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 94.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 87, 119.
\textsuperscript{77} Asli Daldal, Art, Politics and Society Social Realism in Italian and Turkish Cinemas (Istanbul: Isis, 2003).
\textsuperscript{78} The example films Asli Daldal provides for this subgenre are: Memduh Un’s “Kızıklı Canaklar” (Broken Vessels, 1961), Halit Refig’s “Yasak Ask” (Forbidden Love, 1961) & “Sevistigimiz Günler” (The Days We Made Love, 1961), Atilla Erdoğan’s “Denize İnen Sokak” (The Street Descends to the Sea, 1960), Erdoğan Tokatlı’s “Son Kuslar” (The Last Birds, 1965), and Tunc Basaran’s “Murtaza” (Murtaza, 1965).
In the 1970s, the urban folk and arabesk music converged around the themes of social protest.\textsuperscript{80} During this time, the lyrics became rebellious against the exploitative social and economic order imposed upon the people as ‘faith’ and expressed desire for a better tomorrow.\textsuperscript{81} The convergent politicization of these genres was in conjunction with the rise of the revolutionary labor movement, which had a strong presence in Istanbul. In the 1970s sizeable squatter neighborhoods in Asian and European sides of Istanbul had become left-wing strongholds with some districts even proclaiming to be “liberated zones”.\textsuperscript{82} The revolutionary left was organized in squatter neighborhoods, labor unions, professional associations, and public universities alike, and reached its climax in Istanbul between 1976 and 1980. This was the period when the rural dispossessed, proletariat (i.e., formal workers), sub-proletariat (i.e., informal workers), and the petit bourgeoisie found a rebellious political alignment around the shared promise of a better life, forming an ‘urban public’ for the first time in the country’s republican history without state patronage (and despite the military intervention of 1971), as a result of autonomous dynamics of urbanization.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Derya Bengi, \textit{A Kind of Electricity Appeared in Outer Space: Musical Turkey in the 1960’s (Exhibition Catalogue)}. Translated by Baris Yildirim and Liz Amado. (Istanbul: DEPO, 2011): 112.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
During the 1970s, the Chamber of Architects, and the Union of the Chambers of Architects and Engineers, as well as architecture departments in Universities organized public seminars and workshops promoting participatory local governance and urban-rural planning for and by laboring *class and sectors*. Three posters from Yılmaz Aysan’s exhibited personal archives advertised such events (Figure 7). Yılmaz Aysan is an architect and graphic designer who was active in the leftist organizing of the 1970s. In 2013, he organized an archival exhibit at Depo art space in Istanbul (February 8 – March

---

85 The professionals distinguished themselves from the workers but self-identified under the umbrella of labor as indicated by the way this is referred to in the posters as “laboring class and sectors”.
These were posters, covers for magazines, books, and LPs designed for left-wing political parties, trade unions, underground movements, and collectives by artists engaged in the struggles for democracy and socialism. I came across these posters during my visit to Depo. The first is a poster from a seminar series on local governance by the Chamber of Architects on December 21 & 22, 1978. The theme for the event reads “the ways and methods for the participation of the laboring class and sectors in the decision processes of local governments”. Yılmaz Aysan’s design contrasts the hierarchical organization of the governing class and sectors with the horizontal placement of the laboring groups, depicted with icons suggestive of peasants and workers as well as professionals and intellectuals. The poster in the middle advertises the seminar on “local governments & power structure” organized by the United Chamber of Architects and Engineers on November 17 & 18, 1977. The poster on the right announces the conference on participatory urban planning, “Participation of People in Rural and Urban Planning,” co-organized by the Chamber of Architects and the architecture department of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara on May 29, 1978.

The 1980 coup decisively attacked and constitutionally restricted all the urban public platforms of the laboring class and sectors, seeking autonomy from capital as well
as from the state in their approaches to social and political questions arising in cities expanding as a result of rural migrations. Although it is hard to account for the wide-reaching and long-enduring impact of the coup’s indirect toll, cultural critic Nurdan Gurbilek provides a concise summary of the repression that directly followed the military intervention of September 12, 1980:

The army took over the government and silenced the voices of opposition in particular the opposition left, which had in the 1970s achieved a mass status never seen before in Turkey’s history, thus establishing ‘economic stability’ on the stage of a society cleansed of all tensions, all protest, and all opposition, legal or illegal. In order to “place upon sound foundations a democracy unable to control itself,” political parties, political associations and trade unions were shut down; the constitution was altered. In order to rescue Turkey from ‘deviant ideologies’ and ‘destructive and separatist foci’, dossiers were created on nearly 2 million people; hundreds of thousands were arrested and hastily tried. Over five hundred people were sentenced to death, fifty of them executed; hundreds died under torture; thousands lost their citizenship. Books, magazines, and films were destroyed by the thousand. Within two years the military institutionalized their position of control over political power and then withdrew. The leader of the junta, Kenan Evren, served as president of the Republic from 1982 to 1989. In the 1983 elections the (center-right liberal) Motherland Party (ANAP) came to power in a discreet collaboration with the military.87

After 1980, the switch to an export-oriented open-market economy led by an entrepreneurial spirit resulted in a rapid expansion of the economy through 1989, largely thanks to close co-operation with the IMF and the World Bank, which provided massive financial support to the country.88 At the apex of the liberalization program in

88 Turkey’s economy was championed in the international media as a “miracle” in the 1980s. However, for a more nuanced understanding of this miracle, see: Altan Yalpat, “Turkey’s Economy under the Generals.” MERIP Reports, no. 122 (March 1984): 16. https://doi.org/10.2307/3011798.
1989, Turkey fully opened to international capital investment,\(^8^9\) expanding the entry of foreign capital from $50 million in 1980 to over $1000 million in 1990.\(^9^0\) In the meantime, real wages decreased by 18% between 1983 and 1988,\(^9^1\) leading to polarized consequence for Istanbul’s social and spatial urban development. The city was at once the principal recipient of increased capital flow and migrants, and the largest site of loss for the laboring classes. After 1983 Istanbul’s governments set in motion rapid and comprehensive changes, dramatically altering the city’s nineteenth-century texture. The first mayor after the 1980 coup, Bedrettin Dalan of the ruling party ANAP, raised an estimated $900 million in loans from abroad for Istanbul’s restructuring with major financial support from World Bank to “clean” the Golden Horn area from smaller manufacture industries and workers’ settlements.\(^9^2\) While certain segments of the political class and the bourgeoisie may have dreamed of commodifying Istanbul in the service of unhinged capital accumulation, it was only after the 1980s that they were able to mobilize resources to accomplish their goals at an unprecedented pace. Mayor

---


Bedrettin Dalan was nicknamed "the bulldozer" as he evacuated the desirable inner-city lots of small manufacturing industries in the mid 1980s, moving all the ‘unsightly’ realities of material production and waste to Istanbul’s rural hinterlands.\(^{94}\)

For the laboring sectors, the great majority of which were migrant laborers living in squatter dwellings, the most significant shift was the ANAP government’s entrepreneurial incentives to legalize and eventually financialize the settlements.\(^{95}\) Between 1983 and 1988, a set of laws were enacted to recognize and upgrade unofficial squatter districts in line with World Bank recommendations to legally permit squatters to develop their plots up to four stories.\(^{96}\) In other words, in the face of growing economic precariousness and eradicated prospects for collective bargaining, workers’ grievances and anxieties were redirected to incentives to turn their make-shift settlements into sources of revenue generation by commodifying plots and encouraging the building of extra floors for rental purposes.


\(^{94}\) Note that Keyder and Oncu do not discuss the developments after Istanbul’s migrating of its industrial sites out of the city. The relocation of industries into the countryside and hence out of urban sight and out of urban mind devastated established farming communities and villages due to concentrated industrial toxins in rivers with low to non-existing environmental protections. Ergene river, a few hours north of Istanbul, is a good example. The river sustained farming communities and villages along its shores until the 1990s, the relocation of industry to this region complemented with eased environmental regulations as economic incentive caused the river to be thoroughly decimated within only a couple of decades, largely bringing an end to village life in the area and forcing villagers into towns and cities.


\(^{96}\) Ibid.
The financial investment required for multistory building construction was beyond most settlers’ means and thus it actually attracted and facilitated a contractor model, known as yapsatçılık (‘build-and-sell’). In this entrepreneurial model, the contractor or “yapsatçı” fulfills construction tasks for his/her share in flats to be built. Considering that by 1980 more than half of Istanbul’s population was living in squatter settlements, this endeavor created a significant shift in Istanbul’s spatial texture. Instead of the village-style single story architecture with garden space for growing food and keeping animals, squatter dwellings largely turned into concrete-built apartment blocks informally called ‘apartkondu’, a hybrid between ‘gecekondu’ and apartment buildings favored by middle-class citizens. In terms of social effects, the model contributed to a rent economy and the intensification of the land mafia in squatter neighborhoods, while granting the contractors most of the burgeoning rents.

For the professional and technical segments of wage-labor, the hegemonic concession offered new career opportunities, lifestyles, and consumption habits commensurate with the wealthier areas of the world. The adapting members of these

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
groups largely took up residence in the high rises and gated communities that proliferated along the new throughways of Istanbul. 102

The significantly weakened status of labor organizations, educational institutions and professional organizations that previously served as platforms for contact between the proletariat and the petit bourgeoisie, as well as new levels of polarization in employment, incomes, and use of urban space, recoded social tensions along the lines of properly urban Istanbulites and rural or provincial outsiders.103 This explains the post-1980 popularization of the image of the rural and provincial hordes as invaders, pillagers, and destroyers of Istanbul’s wealth and aura.104 During the 1980s and the 1990s, the disorientation and discontent regarding Istanbul’s drastic transformation was expressed as nostalgia. For example, media authors positioned themselves and residents with comparable or aspiring socioeconomic status as the properly cultured and genuine owners of Istanbul, which they portrayed as once upon a time an enchanting city with a disappearing charm because of rural and provincial contamination.105 These discourses not only justified and provoked chauvinism as a means of capitalist apologetics but also

102 Ibid.
104 Ayse Oncu has examined the rise of authentic Istanbulite discourses as a middle-class reinforcement of cultural borders at a time when globalization gained momentum in blurring local-global distinctions.
accommodated the massive gentrification operations that destroyed historic texture and pillaged urban spaces in the central areas of the city. For example, between 1986 and 1988, 350 historic buildings\textsuperscript{106} in Taksim Beyoğlu district were illegally demolished to accommodate a six-lane boulevard so that a resurrected pedestrian mall reminiscent of the district’s 19\(^{th}\) century commercial atmosphere would be conveniently accessible from the airport.\textsuperscript{107}

In a sharp contrast to the dominant culture’s push to channel the heightened discontent into a hostile nostalgia turned against rural and provincial migrants as well as the urban poor, Hafriyat defiantly grappled with these effects through a reflective nostalgia that attempted to break with nostalgic conservatism.

### 3.4 The Urban Aesthetics of Alternative Nostalgia

I approach nostalgia as an effect of the shifting structures of feeling in the post-1980 era and a response to comprehensive changes in the two crucial sites of everyday experience and perception, the urban cityscape and mediascape. This section discusses the cultural appeal of nostalgia as a viable response to these shifts, as well as the

\textsuperscript{106} Most of the destroyed buildings were 19\(^{th}\) century architecture built by non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Assyrians, and Levantines that had changed hands or abandoned during the 1923 population exchange, the 1942 Wealth Tax, the 1955 Pogroms, and the 1964 Citizenship Law and resettled by migrant squatters.

dissident transfiguration of nostalgia in Hafriyat’s aesthetic, in contrast to its common deployment in the service of reactionary tendencies

Raymond Williams offers structures of feeling as a methodology to investigate cultural experiences while they are still in social process. Williams notes that an alternative definition to the structures of feeling could be structures of experience. Ultimately, the term marks “specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought.”

Structures of feeling, as a framework, intervenes into the reduction of the social to fixed forms, whereby culture and society are grasped in a habitual past tense, and thus the living present is by definition always receding. In a setting where the social is largely perceived as always past, in the sense that it is always formed, the need to find other terms for the experience of the present becomes acute. According to this framework, when the social is regarded as the fixed and explicit (i.e. the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions, etc.), all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed, explicit and known is grasped as the personal, and then even the personal is drawn towards fixed, receding forms. This approach offers

---

109 Ibid.
110 Ibid, 128.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
compelling insights into the rise of the personal as the locus of progressive politics in response to the confinement of societal politics to the “there is no alternative” outlook of neoliberalism. It also illuminates the subsequent identitarian restrictions that strain the dynamic and politically transformative capacity of the personal.

For Williams, although the conventional schemas of meaning, belief, and explanation are available, they cannot constitute a complete inventory of social and material (embodied) consciousness, leaving gaps between received interpretations and the practical experiences of daily life. Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness because it is actually being lived and not what is thought is being lived. The tension between the available interpretation and the actual experience often manifests as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency.” Such nebulous states drive emergent cultural forms, marking a zone of interpretive and expressive malleability and openness through which new ways of relating to experience can develop. This zone is also a significant site of conflict and negotiation between rejecting or protecting the socioeconomic hierarchies and principles of capitalist-colonialist modernity.

114 Ibid. 131.
115 Ibid, 130.
Hafriyat artists engaged with the unease, stress, displacement, latency in Istanbul’s transformation in ways that cultivated a strong desire to pursue the truth of the ever-shifting city and its urban culture. They pushed back against the nostalgic urban elitism that merged with Kemalism in the second half of the 1990s and became the dominant mode of the mediascape at the time. They also challenged its counterpart, the capitalist integration of the masses into neoliberal urbanism.

Hafriyat artists grappled with the shifting structures of feeling during the mid-1990s. Nostalgia has been identified as one of the stronger cultural responses to neoliberal capitalism, especially in countries once deemed to belong to the second or third world. As a cultural practice, nostalgia’s forms, meanings, and effects can vary. Svetlana Boym offers a tentative typology that identifies two main types of nostalgia, the restorative and the reflective. Nostalgia is a pseudo-Greek word coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688 that comes from the roots of Nostos (“return home”) and algos (“longing”). According to Boym, “restorative nostalgia stresses nostos and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction” of the lost place and time, whereas reflective nostalgia

---

118 Ibid, xv.
119 Ibid, xviii.
“thrives in algia, the longing itself.” Boym argues that restorative nostalgia channels the discontent with present conditions into the promise of a return to mythic and idealized origins. In contrast, reflective nostalgia expresses a remorseless dissatisfaction with the present and rebels against it by stubbornly “lingering on the patina of time and history” to keep afloat “the dreams of another place and another time.”

After the 1980 coup, restorative nostalgia thrived in its nationalist and religious revivalist inflections: the cultural climate was forcefully cleansed of the revolutionary left and Marxist, communist, and socialist schools of thought. The government tolerated the social democratic wing of liberalism as the new radical limit of the left. The ideological terrain of legitimate politics was significantly slanted rightwards. At the same time, capital investments were funneled into culture, subjecting the field to a market ultimately freed by the military. One way that Hafriyat artists pushed back against this conservative domination was by digging deep in the shifting structures of feeling that gave nostalgia its cultural validity. They consciously lingered on the senses of unease, stress, displacement, and latency to confront the reality that these senses point to with its full complexity, inclusive of its emancipatory latencies. By doing so they could redeem

\[120\] Ibid.
\[121\] Ibid, 41.
\[122\] Ibid.
nostalgia from its conservative – if not outright fascistic – deployments and open up a channel of detour into what Boym defines as *reflective nostalgia*.

Figure 8: Antonio Cosentino (Hafriyat artist), Volkswagen 69, 2003

Antonio Cosentino’s Volkswagen 69 (Figure 8) is a case in point of such a reflective nostalgia. This painting provides us with another glimpse of the urban expressway. The painting assumes the vantage point of perhaps the driver but more likely the passenger who is traveling while standing in a crowded *dolmush* (a kind of

---

jitney) in Istanbul. The content of the image is not easy to decipher at first sight. For those of us who have lived in Istanbul, however, a sense of familiarity intertwined with the disorientation is produced by the chaotic and blending forms in the painting. The painting gives a sense of the daily experience of urban transportation in Istanbul and the distortions produced by trying to catch sight of something as we pass it in a fast-moving vehicle. There are nebulous forms that look like they are on the verge of clarity. There are perhaps suggestions of the sea, a mosque, a cluster of apartment buildings, an underpass, some distant hills with greenery, another dolmush, an island, a road lamp, a vibrant Istanbul sunset. Then there is the inside of the dolmush, the items and decorations in the front panel, such as the intimate touches of the vase and the flowers, the Arabesk cassette tape, the overflowing ashtray, the ghostly glance of the front mirror capturing the side of somebody’s face. In time, some out-of-place but nevertheless fitting elements appear, like the basic standard faucet in the bottom right, or the tin olive oil can in the middle left, which most people in Turkey would know as a commonly repurposed item for planting flowers, for weighing down outdoor umbrellas against the wind, or even as a mold for concrete in construction.

These partial, overlapping, misplaced forms seem to mimic and provoke memory of the mundane and outmoded bits of Istanbul’s fleeting and disintegrating visual memory. When conjured up with such aesthetic care and awareness, the painting
stimulates nostalgia as a lucid dissatisfaction. It is lucid in the sense that it does not uncritically seek remedy in the “phantasmal, parodic rehabilitations”\textsuperscript{125} of the past, in contrast to the neo-Ottomanist nostalgia of the Turkish-Islam synthesis promoted by Turgut Ozal after 1980 or the neo-Kemalist longing for the golden 1930s in the 1990s, which resurrected cultish reverence for Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the secularist founder of the modern Republic.\textsuperscript{126}

Hafriyat’s reflective nostalgia foregrounds a yearning for autonomy from the capitalist militarist (and increasingly ethno-religious) seizure of culture and politics, which was the undergirding principle and outcome of Istanbul’s intensifying commercialization. In the face of the new urbanism in which speculative profits aggressively drove urban development and reconfigured the spatial texture as well as the temporal rhythm of Istanbul, Antonio Cosentino’s painting points to a utopian present where the past is not simply rehabbed and glorified or eliminated altogether. Instead, the past is woven into a plenitude of existence among the perpetually outdated yet persisting objects of daily life. In these repurposed and intermingled fragments of

the living past, Hafriyat artists must have found sensorial access to present and future potentialities that existed within and despite the forcefully imposed regimes of production, consumption, and relations in the city.

Hafriyat artists’ dissident aesthetics point to the residual elements of culture (in its broadest sense of human practice) for their possible alternative and oppositional relation to the seized cultural system. Raymond Williams distinguishes the residual from what he calls the archaic, or that which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, examined, and even consciously revived, as in restorative nostalgia. Residual, in contrast, is understood as formed in the past but still active in the cultural process as an element of the present. Williams continues:

Thus, certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual (this being its distinction from the archaic) which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture.

Hafriyat’s aesthetic points to the residual elements of value in everyday urban social and cultural practice in Istanbul. These fragments foreground senses of passion and beauty that are perpetually incorporated into renewed and intensified pacts between capital and the state, and yet also stimulate the notion of ‘alternative’ regimes

127 Ibid, 122.
128 Ibid.
of production, sociality (inclusive of relations with objects and living beings other than humans), and temporality by way of pointing to what has become obsolete, discarded, devalued, surplus, excess.

One of the guest participants in Hafriyat’s 1997 exhibition, “Hafriyat 3,” was Dervis Aslan, a professional artisan rather than artist from one of Istanbul’s small manufacturing and automotive repair sites. The photograph “Dervis’ Truck” (Figure 9) displays a giant sculpture of scrapped metal pieces salvaged from large damaged and discarded vehicles. It is unclear if Aslan undertook this work specifically for the exhibition, for his own pleasure, or as a part of his daily livelihood (e.g., his welding practice).
The scrap vehicle nevertheless stands like an homage to labor in the face of Istanbul’s massively reproduced and rapidly devalued urban materiality. In a complimentary fashion to Dervis’ truck, another Hafriyat artist, Charlie, foregrounds repurposing as a means to reforge relationship to urban materiality and living.

---

In the same 1997 exhibition, “Hafriyat 3,” at the Ataturk Cultural Center in Taksim square, Charlie, a musician who holds odd jobs, submitted a photograph depicting a modified wheelbarrow he had repurposed for pleasure. Charlie, who does not disclose his last or official name, takes the wheelbarrow when he strolls in search of the bits of idle green lots in Istanbul for picnicking. In this photograph, the wheelbarrow-grill is seen on an edge overlooking plots used as ‘bostan,’ vegetable

---

gardens or orchards, with scattered buildings in the further distance. During the 2013
Gezi uprising, anonymous activists squatted small plots in public parks and stalled
construction sites around the center of the uprising. They repurposed and marked these
sites as dissident “bostans,” evoking Istanbul’s 1,500-year-old urban agricultural
tradition, which has been threatened with extinction by the rise of real estate to the
highest profit sector in Istanbul.131

Figure 11: “Bostan of Gezi,” images from Bianet132

Charlie’s mid-1990s photograph may have been taken along Istanbul’s walls,
originally built during the city’s founding as the capital of the Roman Empire. Some of
the flanks butting up against the remnants of the city walls were sustained as small
farming plots well into the 2000s. The wall ruins by Edirnekapi also provided plenty of
idle and out of sight areas unregistered vendors used for the popular late-night flea

(July 2004): 284–304.
132 Beyza Kural, “Gezi’ye Bostana Gel!” Bianet, June 7, 2013, https://m.bianet.org/bianet/ekoloji/147367-gezi-
ye-bostana-gel.
market (4am to 9am). Waves of gentrification especially after 2010 substantially altered the flanks and their use. Charlie participated with three of his eccentric functional wheelbarrows, repurposed for an idler’s eating, drinking and shitting. Chances are he had these for his habits of urban living; dragging them in his searches for vacant and green lots to join other idlers, trespassing and making leisurely use of Istanbul’s rapidly privatizing and transforming urban scape. This time, they were also displayed as sculptures, in Hafriyat’s exhibition “Yalan Dünya” (False World), which took place in Rathausgalerie in Munich between May 13 and June 27, 2004.

Figure 12: Charlie (Hafriyat artist), ”Eat Drink Shit,” 1997

The artistic images of the faucet and the olive oil container in Antonio Cosentino’s painting, the truck parts in Dervis Aslan’ sculpture, and Charlie’s wheelbarrows are all in some way objects, aesthetic experiences, forms of urban living seized from the cusp of obsolescence. In addition, their aesthetic turn to these details mark a desire to break out of the dominant schemas of value, meaning, and beauty that normalize the neoliberal regime of urban living through configuring our relationship to objects, each other, living beings other than humans, the city, and life more broadly. Although their intervention is oriented to the immediate temporal and spatial context around them, these works also evoke an anarchistic mode of relating that Walter Benjamin has discussed through the figures of the collector and the flaneur.

3.5 The Dialectics of Whiling Away Time in the City

In Walter Benjamin’s thought the images of the collector and the flaneur intermingle through the chaotic quality of passion – the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memory, while the flaneur’s passion borders on the chaos of the urban crowd. These chaotic passions hold true for Hafriyat artists’ relationship to urban objects (i.e. micro and macro elements of Istanbul’s built environment), the urban crowd

(i.e. the social dynamics of Istanbul), and urban memory (i.e. the passage of life and the organization of social relationships to time in Istanbul).

As early as 1997 at the onset of their collective practice, Hafriyat artists must have been aware of this connection because the artist and art critic Caner Karavit referred to Hafriyat artists as *strollers of the city* in his catalog essay for Hafriyat’s 1997 exhibit in Ataturk Cultural Center in Taksim, Istanbul. Actually, Karavit used the phrase “kent gezginleri” in Turkish, which can be translated as the strollers or wanderers of the city. This brings to mind Charles Baudelaire’s figure of the *flaneur* as the idler-intelligentsia of 19th century Paris, a cultural figure of resistance against the city’s transformation to serve the political-economic needs and principles of modern industrial capitalism. Benjamin analyzes this figure as the struggling subjectivity of the (sensitive) petit-bourgeois during a period of its substantial deterioration.  

After the intelligentsia’s forced entry into the marketplace as commodity through intellectual and artistic labor power, but before its members were fully conscious of this new mode of proletarianized class existence, the figure of the flaneur marked the creative deployment of an eccentric and stubborn form of individualism that resisted social integration into the logics and habits of life dictated by the new stage of capitalism.  

---

135 Ibid, 35.
136 Ibid.
Hafriyat artists nevertheless signaled a kindred desire for aesthetic and political autonomy from state and capital despite the odds. In contrast to the more direct connections drawn between the flaneur—and the avant-garde at large—and the particular bourgeois characterization of autonomy through the figure of an uninhibited, independent, and rational subject free from the pressures of the need of survival, Hafriyat artists’ search for autonomy was oriented towards collectivism and the everyday negotiations of survival. Hafriyat aesthetics engage the tension between a critical asocial orientation and an intensified desire for connecting with the built environment, everyday objects, people and other living beings that constitute this urban ecology.

Benjamin explained that in the face of massive pressures of normalizing capitalist industriousness to match the expanding appetite of capitalist accumulation by the modernizing capacities of industrial technology, the flaneur tried not to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure. Benjamin elaborates:

He goes his leisurely way as a personality; in this manner he protests against the division of labor which makes people into specialists. He protests no less against their industriousness. Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flaneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail. Taylor—who popularized the catchphrase "Down with dawdling!"—carried the day … Rattier wrote in 1857 in his utopia Paris n’existe pas: ‘The flaneur whom we used to encounter on the sidewalks and in front of shopwindows, this

nonentity, this constant rubberneck, this inconsequential type who was always in search of cheap emotions and knew about nothing but cobblestones, fiacres, and gas lamps, … has now become a farmer, a vintner, a linen manufacturer, a sugar refiner, a steel magnate."¹³⁸

The flaneur’s empathic affinity with the commodity form was on the one hand a class presentiment and on the other hand a self-affirming if not self-aggrandizing means to endure the powerlessness of petit-bourgeois solitude because of a lack of effective class mobilization against the industrial capitalists bulldozing all that stood in their way to increase wealth accumulation:

To be sure, insofar as a person, as labor power, is a commodity, there is no need for him to identify himself as such. The more conscious he becomes of his mode of existence, the mode imposed on him by the system of production, the more he proletarianizes himself, the more he will be gripped by the chilly breath of the commodity economy, and the less he will feel like empathizing with commodities. But things had not yet reached that point with the class of the petty bourgeoisie to which Baudelaire belonged. On the scale we are dealing with here, this class was only at the beginning of its decline. Inevitably, many of its members would one day become aware of the commodity nature of their labor power. But this day had not yet come; until then, they were permitted (if one may put it this way) to pass the time. The very fact that their share could, at best, be enjoyment, but never power, made the period which history gave them a space for passing time. Anyone who sets out to while away time seeks enjoyment. It was self-evident, however, that the more this class wanted to have its enjoyment in this society, the more limited this enjoyment would be. The enjoyment promised to be less limited if this class found enjoyment of this society possible. If it wanted to achieve virtuosity in this kind of enjoyment, it could not spurn empathizing with commodities. It had to enjoy this identification with all the pleasure and uneasiness which derived from a presentiment of its own determination as a class. Finally, it had to approach this determination with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Ibid, 89.
Liberal consumerism provokes and attempts to configure our modes of desiring in ways that channel all class positions into becoming dependent on and indebted by the process of chasing after and competing for wealthy middle-class living while increasing class inequality and securitization to ensure social order. Hafriyat’s works intervene into this model for Istanbul, the leading city and experimental ground for Turkey’s economic and cultural neoliberalization after the 1980 military coup.

The radical political potential of the figures of the flaneur, collector, and perhaps Benjaminian thought that resonates with Hafriyat’s and my own aesthetic and political propensities is the perception of crisis as the appearance of a dialectic in images (i.e., *dialectical image*) or as “the laws of dialectics at a standstill.” This differs from a conception of crisis that solely focus on its morbid symptoms. Benjamin does not ignore the grim reality of crisis. He nevertheless maintains an analytical insistence on freeing up the future by placing a taboo on it. Benjamin’s dialectical image cannot be used as a predictive or prescriptive device for the future. Rather, it functions like a bulwark against pessimism and the foreclosing of forward movement in the midst of acute apprehension. The dialectical image grounds the churning present in resurging bits and pieces of what should have otherwise been irredeemably lost or obliterated by the

---

victors of history. Benjamin’s approach suggests that while history is skewed toward reflecting the achievements of humans cultural, technical, and skillful capacity to master and control objects, nature, and each other, signs, flows, and objects of the past can nevertheless be wrested from the heap of history. A cultural propensity for nostalgia in times of crisis then can also orient us toward the minor and discarded pieces deemed useless by the powerful but offering potential for dialectical flashes and leaps out of the quagmire of the present.

This line of aesthetics and politics requires facing the past, present, and future. Benjamin articulates a productive approach to history and progress in times of crises:

Surely time was felt neither as empty nor homogeneous by the soothsayers who inquired for what it hid in its womb. Whoever keeps this in mind is in a position to grasp just how past time is experienced in commemoration: in just exactly the same way. As is well known, the Jews were forbidden to search into the future. On the contrary, the Torah and the act of prayer instruct them in commemoration of the past. So, the future, to which the clientele of soothsayers remains in thrall, is divested of its sacred power. Yet it does not for all that become simply empty and homogeneous time in their eyes. For every second of the future bears within it that little door through which Messiah may enter.

In the face of shifting structures of feeling and instability, Benjamin observed that fascism responds by offering violent restoration of myths to freeze the flow of time and liberal-capitalism by offering the phantasmagoria of the marketplace as narcotics. An amalgamation of these strategies is being offered today in Turkey under the

---

authoritarian turn of neoliberal Islam. The minor and scattered but resilient and resistant strands of cultural-political dissidence continue responding by rekindling memory traces of the urban that hums dreams of solidarity, collectivity, autonomy, justice, and reciprocal passionate encounters with others.
4. A Queer Art of Aesthetic-Affective Dissidence

My artistic work, a subset of which constitutes the practice component of this hybrid dissertation, has been a pursuit using different forms of representation and expression and conducted in different historical moments and settings over the past few years. The work has been motivated by a yearning—possibly desire, possibly passion—for the unfeasible. I understand this yearning to be the queer kernel of my work because the aesthetic impulses are palpably connected to my experience of queer sexuality and gender (mis)identification even as their trajectory exceeds my sexual subjectivity or gender identity.

The two art projects discussed in this chapter, *Shared Lines* (2014) and *queerXscape* (2019), are my explorations of urban neoliberalism and the aesthetic-affective dimensions of resistance. Urban neoliberalism has sought to restore wealth accumulation through dispossession after the economic crises of the 1970s and the 1990s, and has reinforced heterosexist, majoritarian, bourgeois capitalist normativity to manage its social crises. These shifts point to the direct material rewarding of the affluent middle classes and the aesthetic valorization of middle class living at the expense of particularly working class and other minoritized forms of socio-cultural and aesthetic practices of living and belonging. My artistic practice strives to push back against these material,
aesthetic, and affective pressures that force all urban practices and possibilities of living and belonging into assimilation or annihilation.

Normative logics of capitalist accumulation and reproduction under neoliberalism have most recently turned its focus on alterity and art. The celebratory discourse of diversity often serves to frame racial and sexual alterity as an overlooked and underutilized resource of capitalist productivity, and gloss over racialized and sexualized exploitation as an integral characteristic of capitalism. Increasingly since the 2008 economic crises, art enjoys a similarly exuberant limelight that renders it as the neglected engine and the creative glue of a disintegrating economy. At the same time, these recent valorizations of art and alterity almost always predicate on a competitive performance of self-assimilation and utility to capital and its needs and desires. Those who do not or cannot conform are pushed into intensified dispossession. Another line of aesthetic-affective resistance in my work aims to confront the mechanisms of neoliberal valorization of alterity and art that operate with a reinforced sense of normative incorporation or annihilation.

The aesthetic, cultural, legal, and moral ascendancy of wealth that is so visibly performed in the neoliberal re-structuring of cities contribute to the social disillusionment regarding the autonomy of aesthetics, culture, justice, or morality from capital. From a minoritarian—and Benjaminian—perspective, this process marks a crisis,
the disintegration of the authority of the web of institutions and perceptions that could once delineate the hegemonic majority and hold the variegated pieces of society together. Such a crisis not only points to the stirring tensions and panic of disintegration, but also toward a liminal and ambiguous possibility of social transformation and historical redemption. Another line of aesthetic-affective resistance in my art practice aims to dwell in this liminal zone and the improbable glimpse of utopia. A liminal approach to utopia (i.e., a break with the repressive order of present reality) connects it intimately and dialectically with the catastrophe (i.e., the destructive perpetuation of repression). Such a connection not only acknowledges the morbid symptoms of a disintegrating order but also allows us to think and feel the potentiality and the concrete possibility of another world.

In my understanding, with the help of Muñoz’s and Benjamin’s works, this another world or utopia serves less as a future projection of mythologic perfection than as a mechanism of turning crisis into awareness, and ruin into revelation about the truth of life that exceeds the prison house of the present. This understanding constitutes a queer and Benjaminian imaginative gesture that opens up the present to the long-standing dreams and practices of utopian social relations while freeing the future from territorialization, reification, and foreclosure. In another words, queer aesthetic-affective dissidence for me maps radically new and rekindled fantasies of utopian collectivity out
of the wreckage of memory and history, while cultivating a collective openness and presence to apprehend the full historic weight of disasters and potentials, of subjugation and utopia, of reality and illicit dreams. My art practice is oriented to this line of aesthetic-affective dissidence.

Before I discuss the two art projects, Shared Lines (2014) and queerXscape (2019), I expand upon queer desire as the queer kernel of my practice in connection with queer utopian futurity.

4.1 From Queer Futurity to the Utopian Uses of the Erotic

Following José Esteban Muñoz, a queer utopian futurity for me strives for openings and points of dislocation in the otherwise totalizing sense of the present quagmire. It is a mode of desiring for a utopian relationality with and within life in the present that defies the ultimately cultural yet naturalized logics of capitalism and heteronormativity. As a transgender person, for me it is also a mode of knowing in my body a subterranean line of repressed reality that is very much lived in the present yet remains outside the hegemonic frames of meaning and acknowledgement.

Since childhood, my gendered reality was in opposition to the reality around me. My early strategies of coping with this did not focus on the possibility of a transformation in the future, at least not until I found a political community. Rather, the isolation and not knowing anything about queer culture while acutely aware of my own
queerness resulted in melancholia—for a time when I could pass better, or when gender mattered less—and a longing to break out of the prison house of heteronormative logic and life practices. Because of my embodiment, I palpably understood and felt the untenability of totalizing claims and assumptions regarding human physicality, desires, and relationality, whether they were a result of custom, common sense, or scientific knowledge. Regardless of their truth content however, heteronormative reality based on these claims and assumptions was effectively being reproduced and reinforced in the everyday practices of the social, of which I too was an ill-fitting part. Then again, I lived among people, many of whom one way or the other took issue with how things were. They too seemed to not take this reality as the ultimate truth. Perhaps because they experienced the heavy material burden of this obligatory reality and its injustices pertaining to their own condition, many people saw it as imposed and were ready to dismiss its totalizing nonsense. In that attitude of skepticism and dissatisfaction, I could recognize some sort of kinship that could delineate the terms of our multi-dimensional struggle. My understanding of queer aesthetic-affective dissidence has been attracted to the fantasy of political alliances to grow out of that potentiality.

The affective space of living in conflict with reality can be complex. At the very least, for me it has included disillusion, disorientation, estrangement, skepticism, melancholia, humor, dreaminess, scatteredness, and a passionate and pleasure-seeking
yearning for utopia. For me, utopia is somehow intrinsically queer because rather than a specific destination or a scripted trajectory, it feels like an orientation, reminding me of how queerness is understood as a sexual orientation. Utopia for me is a desire to relate within and to the world with passion and pleasure. It is a spark of inspiration to overcome practices of living that traps us in relations of subjugation, exploitation, accumulation, competition, control, extortion, and rent-seeking. It is an unscripted drive to overcome all that consolidates and naturalizes the current organization of economy, society, and relationality, its uneven distribution of benefits and its historical and ongoing toll of violence, injustice, and repression.

Like José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*¹, Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” helps me think through my own experiences of queer desire, passion, and pleasure-seeking as a generative and transformative means to relate to the world and form emancipatory alliances. Audre Lorde elucidates these enigmatic phenomena as the erotic, “a resource within each one of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, it is firmly rooted in the power of all our unexpressed and unrecognized feelings.”² Lorde defines the erotic as a depth of feeling and “a measure

---
between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.”\(^3\) The erotic constitutes a queer feminist alternative to the male modes of power (e.g. power by subjugation, dispossession, and/or control) in so far that our capacity for sensation and feeling—our sensuality—replenishes our ability to fathom with the chaotic and vulnerable aspects of openness between embodied constitution and life, and propels emancipatory efforts based on this knowledge despite systemic suppression, trivialization, and exploitation of the erotic. The erotic for Lorde functions as a bulwark against the generalizable despair, disaffection, resignation, numbness, abnegation, self-denial, and underlying fear that we are unable to grow beyond distortions we may find within ourselves that lead us to accept facets of our oppression. Through the erotic, Audre Lorde connects her queer feminist of color politics with earlier struggles against capitalist-colonialist alienation and assimilation. She underlines that the erotic puts us in touch with the depth of our internal capacity for joy and satisfaction. Once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire to call forth a radically different organization of life. In such a calling forth, Lorde insists on the connections between the erotic (the sensual), spiritual (psychic and emotional), and political to resist the flattening that can occur in each domain: flattened sensation in the realm of the erotic, flattened affect in the realm of the spiritual, or flattened self-interest in politics. These connections point to the

\(^3\) Ibid.
affective, cognitive, and social-practical labor that Lorde saw as necessary to build a radical queer and feminist of color politics that aspires to further struggles against patriarchal domination, capitalist exploitation, and colonial logics of control.

Lorde inherited this struggle from her most immediate forebearers and comrades in the African American civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s in the US, but also from national and transnational radical movements from generations prior. In this way, Lorde’s articulation of the uses of the erotic puts forth an aesthetic, ethical, and political project that seeks passionate and embodied ways to grapple with the legacies of revolutionary struggle in the US and around the world. Such a project thereby gives new breath and power to revolutionary ideas and practices of the past in the aftermath of the neoliberal declaration of the end of radical history and the subsequent attempts to erase radical legacies.

Lorde’s queer feminist theorization and politicization of the erotic resonates deeply with my experience of queer passion and desire for things that are often cast aside as out-of-bounds—at best unfeasible, and at worst, punishable—such as a demand for a non-repressive order. Reading her work now also exposes me to one of the

---

4 See for example, Aime Cesaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* for a brief and powerful articulation of this intervention in 1950 from the point of the Negritude movement.

5 I am indebted to Grace Kyungwon Hong’s *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, which provides close readings of the theory of difference as articulated by Audre Lorde and other feminists of color in ways that leverage these works against the onslaught of neoliberal erasure of radical history.
essential sources of queer feminist ethics that has given me strength in navigating the complex realm of the erotic as a transgender person and in forming cultural-political-intellectual alliances through it with others who struggle against the quashing of the pieces of humanness in us “that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust.”

4.2 Aesthetics of Collage and Double Exposure

I have intentionally practiced art since 2009. My art practice, like my politics, is inspired by the possibilities of sensuous connections with and within life, the political-economic organization of which has to be changed to enable and support social relations of production, reproduction, and subjectivization based on the principles of sensuous reciprocity, autonomy, and collectivity. Art allows me to imagine an outside of the totalizing logics, schemas of meaning, and compulsory social practice of reproducing reality the way it is. This “outside” does not have to be understood in terms of transcendence or a separate realm but can mean cracks, oddities, contradictions, estrangements, and outsiders within, pointing to the concrete possibility of another world. Aesthetic realism affords otherwise improbable or even impossible interjections and constellations of reality because it can defy the constraints of the spatial and

---

temporal dimensions of the now and here. In my artwork, I frequently use superimposition and collage to produce disruptive and contrapuntal compositions of reality.

My first artistic coming out (i.e., art shared with an intentional audience) took place during the LGBTI+ pride week in Istanbul in 2009. I had recently joined an urban interventionist art collective and launched guerilla video projections on two landmark buildings that bookend the annual LGBTI+ pride march in Taksim-Beyoglu, Istanbul. The first building was the Marmara Hotel located across the Gezi Park in Taksim square, which roughly marks the gathering space for the LGBTI+ pride marches before the crowd walks down Istiklal Street. The second building was the Galata Tower that is located at the other end of Istiklal Street.

---

7 LGBTI+ pride march in Istanbul has become a mass demonstration starting in 2007. However, since 2015 the marches systematically face excessive police brutality and its procession down Istiklal Street is staunchly blocked by a militarized riot police force.
Figure 13: Istiklal Street between Landmarks

The guerilla projection of the Istanbul pride week announcement (Figure 14, left) turned the Marmara Hotel into a grandiose banner for the LGBTI+ pride week.

Figure 14: Video Projections on the Marmara Hotel (2009). Photo by author.
The stop motion video animations of ten faces going under drag transformation (Figure 14, right) inserted a carnivalesque image of gender transgression into public space via the tallest building in Taksim square. The hotel staff and the customers inside the building likely had no idea but the projections were visible from a wide range of space outside the building. My fellow collective members and I were located in a building facing the hotel and used a bright projector to execute the intervention.

Using the same technique, the guerilla projection of queer symbols and celebratory LGBTI+ messaging on the Galata Tower (Figure 15) produced another illicit and ephemeral travesty of urban monumentality on the other end of the Istiklal Street. This time the intervention had to be cut short, as the police caught on to us within roughly forty minutes. The police had some confusion about how to go about our detainment as I argued that light projection had no harmful consequences and what we did was art so it could not be illegal. While a couple of the policemen I talked to seemed lenient, one of the officers seemed alert and called in a higher rank official. Coincidentally, fellow LGBTI+ activists watching and participating in the intervention saw this and reached out to a visiting European Union human rights commission member who happened to be with them during the LGBTI+ pride march earlier.
At the time, EU officials and members of international human rights organizations visited Turkey rather frequently to monitor Turkish state’s agreement to improve human rights as part of the country’s candidacy process to the European Union (EU). In these visits, they would also reach out and talk with LGBTI+ organizations and interview activists. During the EU accession process, Turkish state officials were motivated to keep relatively positive relations with international associations and project a liberal outlook. After the EU commission member intervened, even the unwilling and agitated policemen agreed to let us go. The higher rank police officer who was called into the scene admonished me for “almost inciting a state crisis”. One of the
police officers who had been quiet the whole time whispered as he was leaving that he liked the lightshow.

Another major event that motivated me to pursue this dissertation at Duke University was the Gezi Park Uprising in 2013. The ways in which aesthetic-affective resistance was mobilized and enacted by such a wide and heterogenous sector of the urban population affirmed my attraction to art’s capacity to stimulate at least the collective disruption of a totalizing imposition of reality in the here and now. The Gezi uprising also excited me about the ways in which aesthetic-affective dissidence could facilitate a glimpse of a utopian reorganization of social reality based on collectivist, autonomist, and sensuous possibilities of relationality in the present.

The two art projects discussed next, Shared Lines (2014) and queerXscape (2019), expand upon these experiences and inspirations. Both of these works allude to the shared pressures of real estate capital that reshape Istanbul, Turkey and Durham, NC in ways that exacerbate and concretize late capitalist land extortion and seizing of urban life. In most ways, Istanbul and Durham are nothing alike. However, the synchronicity of a wave hitting both places like some form of gold rush was unmistakable to me. Pursuing the aesthetics of superimposition and collage allowed me to work with affective and material resonances and dissonances within such synchronicity. The digital photo and video collage in my work, like the superimposition of projections on urban
texture, is kindred to the effect of double exposure in photography that connects us with memory while breaking down the illusions of photographic reality. I remember coming across and marveling at a photograph with unintentional double exposure as a child. I thought it was magical. I also remember that it was shocking and disturbing. Perhaps I had taken photographs for granted, like a window through which to look at the past. Like the idea of a vivid memory, photographs affirmed the past as intact and frozen in its moment left behind. I think the double exposure broke the illusion of preserved reality but made photography appear more ghostly to me. In retrospect, I think it felt ghostly because it allowed me to grasp loss palpably as visual disappearance and touched on a structure of remembering that is less photographic or intact than fragmented, less spatial than sequential, less orderly than chaotic. And I think there was something more immersive in that mode of remembering, almost like a double exposure in real life between now and then, here and there. Because of this affective connection between present reality (now and here) and other modes of being (then and there), and because such a connection undermines reification of life as is, I feel compelled by the aesthetic affordances of collage and superimposition.

Collage and superimposition also touch upon the experience of growing up in Turkey during an accelerated transnationalization of culture. The self-awareness about borrowing, adopting, and translating cultural forms, styles, language, and perspectives
dispel hegemonic cohesion of culture in both directions and potentially make way for a radical re-suturing of aesthetic, affective, and linguistic paths to connect with each other and with broader life out of the fragmented pieces of culture.

4.3 Shared Lines (2014)

In the summer of 2013, the government’s increasingly authoritarian and arrogant attitudes combined with a recently launched wave of comprehensive gentrification of Taksim area incited mass protests over the planned demolition and re-development of the Gezi Park, a central public landmark near Taksim Square. During the same time frame, downtown Durham was rapidly becoming the area to offer the highest returns on investment in anywhere in the Triangle. Shared Lines, a participatory art event that took place on April 12, 2014 in downtown Durham, drew on connections between these developments.

In late May 2013, a small group of activists who had been engaged in grassroots organizing against the onslaught of rent-seeking gentrification in Taksim, Istanbul called for a sit-in at Taksim’s Gezi Park to stop the public park’s demolition and provisional replacement with a massive shopping mall and military museum complex. The park was frequently attended and utilized by queers and sex workers for causal hook ups in

the night. The plans to demolish it in this regard would also contribute to normative cleansing of this area. This was one of the reasons why queer activists were among the first to join the sit-in. The sit-in was to stop the construction machines from bulldozing the trees as the initial step of the transformation. The police intervened with excessive use of force hoping to quickly uproot the protesters and allow the machines to proceed with knocking down the trees. Instead, a massive uprising broke out that the government could not control for over a month. The protests dispersed across multiple cities in Turkey and the number of protesters in Gezi alone reached over a million. Hundreds pitched tents and started living communally in public parks around the country. Over the month, police incessantly attacked peaceful demonstrators with tear gas, sound bombs, rubber and plastic bullets, and chemically infused water cannons, causing at least 8,000 injured and four deaths in Gezi Park alone.

When I heard about the protests, I returned to Turkey to be with friends and fellow organizers who took to the streets. The heightened creative and subversive energies were palpable and alive. The park and its immediate surroundings were barricaded off, creating an enclave of utopian collective experience that was, however, encircled by riot police who intermittently attacked. During the stretches of calm, the public park was part commune, part outdoors festival, part massive tea garden, part school yard, part camp site, and part spectacle.
During the violent times, sound bombs, water cannons, plastic bullets, tear gas, riot police erratically snatching, dragging, and beating people were also common in Gezi Park. When these things started going off at random, I could feel the anxiety rushing through my body. Only the courage surging through the crowd kept me from giving into the deliberately provoked panic. The experience of collectively recovering from fear often rendered feasible the next opportunity to overcome intimidation. The falsified coverage of events was all over social media, and the government’s unconvincing justifications for the use of excessive force against visibly non-violent protesters caused some shifts in the public perception of state violence. Even some who previously thought state violence in Kurdish-majority areas was justified due to guerilla activity posted social media comparisons between Istanbul and Kurdish provinces, asking if the state had been lying all along.

There was a day when Istanbul’s governor announced from the TV channels that the police was going to do a major intervention that night and that he was specifically reaching out to mothers to call their children back home for he was no longer able to guarantee their safety. Instead, at night women who said they were Gezi mothers came and lined around the periphery of the park, declaring “if the governor is no longer capable of ensuring the safety of our children, we figure we will do it ourselves”. Upon their arrival, the atmosphere shifted profoundly. There was no intervention that night; it
may have been one of the most exuberant nights. Some people carried a grand piano to the stairs at the entrance of the park by the Taksim square and gave a concert. Everywhere was jam packed with people basking in the light of the moment of collective courage and solidarity against the odds.

There were other remarkable signs of shift in normative perceptions. Likely because of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s public performances of indestructible masculinity and machismo, a majority of the protest chants directly targeted and undermined his masculinity. This also meant that many of these chants were ferociously homophobic and misogynistic, which alienated a substantial segment of the protestors. When confronted by the expressions of this alienation, a group of soccer fans paid a visit to Lambdalistanbul’s Taksim office and apologized, bringing along a confiscated riot gear they seized from the police as a souvenir, and expressed their admiration for the bravery and the wit of the LGBTI+ participants.

When I returned to Durham in August 2013, I was still processing my time back home in Turkey. I was stirred up and energized by the repetitive experience of confronting fear and garnering collective courage. I had recently moved to Durham at that point but could notice the pace with which it was transforming. New and rehabbed buildings were popping up rapidly and all seemed to be catering to the various shades of the affluent middle class. Just a few streets down from where I lived, rows of
apartment complexes were emptied and majority Latino and black residents disappeared. The buildings were demolished and replaced with more expensive housing. This upscale transformation was a rapidly spreading pattern in and around the downtown area.

My main collaborator on this project, Jesa Rae Richards, and I had discussed the unprecedented pace of the most recent wave of urban transformation in Istanbul, in her hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and in Durham. When I heard that the Carrack, which used to be a non-profit art space, was going to move because the building was set to be torn down, I shared with its director Laura Richie the developments in Istanbul and how people revolted. We discussed the very palpable connection between Istanbul and Durham, as if they suffered from a common disease.

Laura pointed out some resources where I could learn more about the plans for Durham’s transformation. I learned that three historic buildings were to be demolished along with the adjacent green lot that functioned as a tiny public park. The historic buildings included the Woolworth Five & Dime where black students from NC Central University organized and executed the February 1960 lunch counter sit-ins against racial segregation. The real estate developer who purchased these buildings from the city in the mid-2000s was Durham-based Greenfire Real Estate Holdings. In fact, the company had purchased 28 properties in Durham’s city center for redevelopment using the
public-private partnership model. Michael R. Lemanski, who started and led Greenfire, has over the years advised “more than 100 local governments on how to create public-private partnerships and attract private investment into distressed areas” with the help of the UNC School of Government.⁹ He was “a frequent lecturer at UNC and Duke on public private partnerships, real estate development and finance,” advertised his company’s website.¹⁰

The public-private partnership model in the US involves millions of dollars of tax incentives and other means of public subsidy of private development plans. In 2012, Greenfire sold their downtown portfolio (i.e., the real estate term for a cluster of buildings) to Austin Lawrence Partners, based in Aspen, Colorado, for $3 million while retaining a small ownership stake.¹¹ The historic buildings Austin Lawrence Partners bought were fire damaged but not damaged enough since the Carrack worked out of one of them. When the buildings were categorized as public safety hazards, demolition restrictions for historic preservation no longer applied. I quickly realized that this particular example was a drop in the bucket of Durham’s gentrification, but it was one that splashed the highest. In 2014, the three historic downtown buildings and the

¹⁰ Ibid.
adjacent park were scheduled to be torn down and replaced by a 300-foot 26 story building offering retail space, offices, and high-end residencies.12

In turn, downtown was going to look revitalized and attract just the right kind of people that the developers described in their fantasy drawings (Figure 16), meaning as opposed to people who had already been there (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Architectural rendering of the site in 2012 13


Like a fairy tale, the fantasies of these developers were going to be granted simply because they had $70 million to overpower a city in which the yearly median household income in 2012 was $52,115; when adjusted to African Americans only, the median income drops down to $39,989. In addition to realizing the magic handover of the people, the company also handed over the park that was previously open to the public (Figure 18) to the sixth floor of the luxury tower (Figure 19).

14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
Today the tower is finished and is called “One City Center”. Its branding motto is “One City Center, One Future, One Landmark, One Durham, One Downtown, One of a Kind, One Community, One Vision.” It is hard not to compare that to Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s branding of the country under the one-man regime that he instilled recently: “One State. One Country. One Flag. One Nation”.

Figure 18: Photo of the public park before its demolition in 2014

---

In response to these changes, Jesa Rae Richards and I decided that a participatory art event at the public park would be a meaningful place to ask the question: how might people in contexts that are otherwise so far apart seize their shared moment? Other fellow artists Drew Anderson, Ariel Springfield, Billy Dee, and Randall Leach joined us to realize the event on April 12, 2014. In preparation, I selected and showed five images from the Gezi uprising to 12 people who lived in Durham who may or may not have heard about the uprising. They each chose two images and described what they saw as if they were trying to help someone “see” it without looking at it. I audio-recorded these descriptions and later stitched them in a collective voice where multiple people

Figure 19: Architectural rendering of the One City Center’s private park

described each scene complementing, contradicting, completing, and redirecting each other’s sentences, adding texture to descriptions. On the evening of April 12, 2014, we set up two video projection stations with overhead cameras to capture live drawings, loud speakers to play the collective narrative of the images, and a community mural area at the downtown park that was going to be demolished. While the narratives played out of speakers in a publicly audible manner, artists Billy Dee and Randall Leach – who had not seen the images or heard the recordings prior to the event – reconstructed what they were hearing in live illustration, captured and projected in real time onto the wall surface of the historic buildings adjacent to the park. Participants and passersby who were watching the performance and hearing the descriptions were invited to contribute to a mural for which we provided a collection of cut out images and wheat pasting materials. There were fliers and pamphlets available for those who wanted information about the event, the park, the upcoming developments in the vicinity, the demolition plans for the historic buildings and the park, and the Gezi uprising.

4.4 queerXscape (2019)

In June 2018, I participated in the organization of a political art action show in Istanbul, “Sinir/Siz” (June 25 – July 8, 2018), against the government-issued ban on all
events organized by LGBTI+ groups in Turkey. For this show, I produced a short video collage animation titled “Ruya/Dream” that followed a fictional queer scrap collector who walked through Istanbul’s surreal looking but actual real estate development zones collecting and shedding pieces of memory mixed with fantasy. When I returned from field research in Turkey to Durham in 2019, I wanted to expand upon this work. I prefer working in collaborative and dialogic settings so I reached out to a fellow queer artist in my department, Max Symuleski, thinking our shared interest in collage and queer perspectives on the normative destructiveness of this world would be mutually generative.

I was drawn to Max’s aesthetic sensibility, especially their collages in which they rework “consumerist” imagery from the 1960s and 1970s US popular magazines. I showed Max “Ruya/Dream,” alluding to senses of neoliberal power and resistance at the intersection between aesthetics, politics, and economy of desire, where desire at once marks a sensuous drive of creative power, a self-propelling drive for participation in the current stage of the capitalist-colonialist world order, and a wild queer sense that notoriously causes people to question and rebel against everything they were told in search of a different world. I explained that I wanted to expand upon this work and invited Max to join me for a collaborative art show.

We decided to prepare for an immersive multimedia art installation, titled *queerXscape*, that could put our interests in conversation. We ended up exhibiting the show twice: at the Rubenstein Art Center’s Murthy Agora, Durham, NC (September 10 – October 6, 2019) and in Basement Art Space’s inaugural group show “Breathing without a Body” in Chapel Hill, NC (November 16, 2019 – January 6, 2020).

Ultimately *queerXscape* (Figure 20) is an exploration of queer aesthetics in relation to the triumphant fiasco of real estate economies that we understand as a transnationally

---

22 Figure 20 as well as Figures 22 - 34 are installation photographs and screen captures taken by author.
widespread speculative engine of the market, the destructive natural and social consequences of which have only intensified over the last couple of decades. The multimedia installation immerses visitors in queer camp imageries of natural and neoliberal landscapes marked by these developments. Our work asks, could a queer retake on the sublime help mobilize a critical sensibility in a regime of power that somehow manages to undermine critical thought? Consider the ghost town of Burj al-Babas in Mudurnu, Turkey (Figure 21). This was a $200 million real estate development project that set out to vitalize the decrepit mountains with high-end fairy tale living but was abandoned because of the financial downturn in Turkish economy. Burj al-Babas caught international media attention in early 2019 because of the entertainment value in its phantasmagorical aesthetics but it is hardly an eccentric case, Turkey is filled with abandoned and underused construction projects.
Figure 21: Burj Al Babas housing development, a ghost town in Turkey

In the construction economy all over the world, we physically see the pace, scale, and technological capacity with which capital can generate worlds for its own thriving livelihood, yet these worlds frequently end up looking like uninhabitable wastelands, fraud grounds, somber sites of burial, and surreal monuments exalting repetition and decay. These sites make visible some of neoliberalism’s paradoxes. Why are housing prices so high in a housing market that is filled with empty excess? Why are basic needs

---

of populations ranging from shelter and health care to education and mobility perpetually denied and justified as fiscally irresponsible when economies are able to afford so much excessive failure? How is it that the construction industry seemed to grow at an accelerated pace around the world after the 2008 economic crash, when the speculative nature of the housing market was at the heart of the collapse?

Critical thought as early as the 1950s has seen the direction of the US’ ambitions to rise as a new breed of colonial power that led the world through: “violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity, vulgarity, and disorder.”24 Despite all the warnings, however, capitalists around the world, who are either shortsighted enough to not understand the social implications or corrupt enough to go with it knowingly, managed to seize political power and adopt some of the most socially disastrous aspects of the US economic doctrine. This is why *queerXscape*, tongue-in-cheek, turned to queer sublime.

The *queerXscape* installation brought together four large digital print collages (8 ft. by 8ft and 12 ft. by 8ft) co-produced by my collaborator Max Symuleski and myself, two video installations produced and executed by me, screen-printed cardboard sculptures produced by my collaborator, and a soundscape for a spatially orchestrated experience produced by me. Pulling images and video footage from Istanbul, Turkey,

and Durham, NC, as well as landscape photography, geology textbooks, and print advertisements from the 1960s and 70s, the tripartite installation alludes to the widespread social, aesthetic, and material consequences of real estate economies as well as to the necessity of building queer resilience and forging queer futures out of disparate scraps of the past and present. The installation cycles through three distinct modes, the first features a five-minute animation projected on a screen, the second a two-minute video projected on a push cart sculpture, and the final mode features a soundscape that accompanies four large prints on the gallery wall.

In the first mode, the five-minute-long video collage animation—an updated version of Ruya/Dream (2019)—is projected on a large screen placed amid the wall panels (Figure 20 & Figure 22). The animation opens up with a scene that replicates one of the landscapes that we see in print. This gives the sense that any of the panels can come alive and become animated in this manner. In addition to this landscape, we see other familiar elements that repeat between the animation and the other two modes. For example, a set of vandalized and graffitied construction machines appear in three modes, once in its original photographic context and then in recycled collaged forms in the printed panels as well as in the animation.
In the second mode, a two-minute video is projected onto the papier-mâché pushcart sculpture that appears to be sinking into the gallery ground (Figure 23). I produced this video based on an actual ad campaign that I came across while doing research on the real estate economy in Istanbul. The original video showcased a 2012 advertisement campaign for a luxury office and residence complex, branded Artful Living, that was leveraging “artistic disruption” for its branding success in the increasingly faltering real estate market in Turkey. By adding in images that capture some of the far from artfully seductive but instead actually spreading material, social, and natural consequences of this economy in Istanbul, and mixing in video footage from
the 2013 Gezi uprising that arose in connection with these consequences, I aimed to further amplify the unmistakable irony of exploiting the notions of creative disruption and freedom in service of the real estate capital.

![Image of installation view](image)

**Figure 23: queerXscape installation view, mode 2**

When the two-minute video on the cart comes to an end, we enter into the third mode. In this final mode, the two videos stop and fade to dark; the four large panels hung on the walls become lit so that the viewer is left only with these landscapes and an accompanying soundscape (Figure 24). My collaborator Max Symuleski and I digitally co-produced these four panels, switching the panels back and forth, adding onto each
other’s contributions. We then printed them in strips and assembled them into large panels manually. The soundscape in this mode weaves together ubiquitous sounds of urban and natural environments in a manner that correlates with the visual elements, textures, and moods of the murals. I recorded most of these sound clips in urban and natural settings in Turkey and North Carolina. The soundtrack plays at a quiet enough level to be suggestive and to allow for a further blending effect with the miscellaneous environmental noise that may come from the outside, causing some viewers to wonder whether what they hear is playback or the distant sound of the construction across the street.
Figure 24: queerXscape installation view, mode 3

The three modes cycle back and forth with mode 2 (i.e., the 2-minute video on the cart) serving as a transitional link between the other two modes, yielding a roughly 12-minute block in repeat.

In the first mode, the five-minute video collage animation, Ruya/Dream, blends together depictions of fantasy and lived reality, fragments of dreaming and memory, photo collage and animation techniques. I generated ten scenes that act as the backdrop, a few of which I will discuss here. The collages draw on a massive collection of
photographs that I have incessantly taken in Istanbul and Durham since I got my first flip phone with a camera, and from travel magazines that have featured Turkey.

Figure 25: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 1 still

The first scene (Figure 25) matches one of the digital collages that Max and I co-produced. This was to help blend the video projection with still images hanging around it. The animation starts and ends with this scene. The animation stays with the appearance of push carts in the mountain and a figure wearing a hazmat suit pushing one of them to the next scene.

The second scene (Figure 26) looks like a figment of surrealist imagination but is based on an actual photograph that I took in Istanbul. The buildings and landscape are untouched from the original photo, although I replaced the sky for consistency.
throughout the scenes in terms of texture, and added the figure of the scrap collector with the pushcart and a pile of mannequins.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 26: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 2 still**

The landscape in Figure 26 shows Istanbul’s more recent expansion towards the rural outskirts. The area shown in this image is the Arnavutköy district, which had recently become a hotbed for speculative real estate investments and development after President Erdogan’s announced his government’s plans for two mega construction projects in its vicinity in 2010 and 2011. The first would be Istanbul’s third airport, a

---

$12 billion project which has been fantasized by the President as the world’s largest airport. The second, Canal Istanbul, is a roughly $13 billion project that marks the President’s national/personal (i.e., for him these are interchangeable) achievement fantasy to surpass the Suez and Panama canals. If and when completed, the 30-mile channel would run roughly parallel to the Bosphorus between the Marmara and Black seas, and hence “duplicate” real estate areas that include Istanbul’s historically most valuable property setting.

Figure 27: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 3 still

---

The third scene (Figure 27) is based on a photograph that I had taken in Durham. This was one of the many new forest clearings that I had noticed by the vicinity of Eno River for the implantation of large-scale housing complexes to serve the needs of the upper classes. In the animation, as the person in the hazmat suit pushes the cart across the landscape, building models from architectural renderings and construction photographs in Durham pop up in the cart, sampling the aesthetics of recent suburban and urban development in the city.

Pushcarts in Istanbul are commonly used by scrap collectors, second hand object traders, and counterfeit vendors. They point to the informal and off-the-record dimensions of the Turkish economy subject to police extortion and media scapegoating for the ever-increasing scale of unaccountability and corruption in the formal economy. In 2000, the head of the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (ICC) called for the internal ministry to step in and capitalize on this economy, suggesting that “there are roughly 500 thousand street vendors in Istanbul, if each made 10 dollars a day, we would be looking at a five million dollar a day economy”\(^{28}\). This was a panic-stricken extraction call from the business class to the state during an economic crisis.\(^ {29}\) In the ensuing years, decision-makers figured out an even better mechanism for lucrative capital extraction,


\(^{29}\) The end of 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium mark a deep economic crisis in Turkey leading to the 2001 economic crash in the country.
the mortgage system supported by unprecedented access to transnational capital. Under neoliberalism, passion turned into entrepreneurial imagination and ambition is boundless, and the creative appetite of the real estate developer is only matched by that of the financier. One dreams in architectural renderings and the other in fictitious money. This dream team managed to consolidate the previously heterogenous practices of urban dwelling into mass-scale building projects, spewing massive numbers of buildings everywhere, regardless of an estimated 2 million unsold housing stock in 2018.30

Figure 28: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 4 still

In addition to the actual daily reality of livelihoods that they directly enable, pushcarts also signify all heterogeneous practices of everyday economy that discreetly inhabit every city, as well as the vicious scheme of material and social hierarchy that the poor and working classes must negotiate to survive, dictated by the whims, dreams, and power struggles of the wealthy. The uneven investment and divestment in these economies are governed and justified daily through the flexible discursive frames of formal/informal, legal/illicit, feasible/impossible, significant/negligible, vital/excess, permissible/intolerable, and moral/immoral.

![Figure 29: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 5 still](image)

Scene 5 (Figure 29) shows a marshland in Turkey on which an older industrial site was built. This site is designated to be moved, which I imagine the wildlife would be
happy to hear until I finish the sentence. The factory site will be replaced by residential
and commercial development. The AKP government is pushing to change
environmental regulation in the vicinity to open the wider area to privatization and real
estate development. As I mentioned in Chapter 2 when discussing AKP’s TOKI system,
most of the older industrial sites in cities sat on state-owned land in Turkey. The old
regime of destructive production on marshland is being pushed out by a new regime of
destructive construction and privatization through government auction, at which
neither the birds nor the majority of residents will be invited to bid.

Figure 30: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 6 still
Scene 6 (Figure 30) shows a piece of rapidly disappearing uncommodified land and a make-shift shelter for stray dogs that someone has set up. Scene 7 (Figure 31) blends in demolished housing for re-development into unoccupied land.

![Figure 31: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 7 still](image)

Scene 8 and 9 (Figure 32 & Figure 33) allude to dialectics at a standstill, blending in fable-like images of destruction and sublimation of desire as a means to act on the fleeting phenomenon of life, as well as queer pleasures of acting in life.
Figure 32: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 8 still

Figure 33: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 9 still
Figure 34: Ruya/Dream (2019) scene 10 still

Scenes 9 and 10 (Figure 33 & Figure 34) are built on the initial scene (Figure 25) where the saga had begun. I am compelled by the fleeting repetitions of memory and experience, or learning and re-learning about the world that layers on itself; the processes of coming across, forgetting, remembering, losing, finding, rediscovering. Although the same landscape, the added depth of experiences gesture to continuation and the evolving “moral of the story” that is unsettled.

The piece overall aspires to raise questions about desire and deed; the neoliberal dreams and ambitions taking concrete form under the increased financial and technological capacities of the real estate and construction businesses; the ways in which the new real estate economy provokes and accommodates senses of desirable living; and
the political agony and possibility of desire, the subversive edge of which has been a long-standing conundrum of urban modernity.
5. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I provide an account of the issues propelling cultural-political dissidence in Istanbul, Turkey at a time when the LGBTI+ movement started to converge and collaborate with self-organizing artists in the city. This convergence was a coming together between artists and activists whose struggles for social change were forged at the margins of politics and art in Istanbul starting in the mid-1990s. Their convergence in the mid-2000s allowed for a re-activated cultural-political milieu through which the artists and the activists could collaboratively launch counter-hegemonic dissidence against the cultural normalization of the logics of rent-seeking, accumulation by dispossession, privatization, securitization, and erasure, all of which shaped Istanbul’s neoliberal transformation.

A particular constellation of these efforts that were centered around the art collective, Hafriyat (1996 – 2010), whose gallery space served as a hub for artists and activists in Istanbul. By unpacking a number of artworks produced by Hafriyat artists, I discussed the main aesthetic strategies of dis-identification from the presiding logics of neoliberalism, namely: satire; an affective insistence on the obsolete, the discarded, the devalued, and the superfluous; and the persistent provocation of memory traces in the face of neoliberal erasure, as an effort to keep the lived history of the city active without monumentalizing it in a particular narrative. I discussed these aesthetic interventions in
connection with the shifting political economy of urban development in Istanbul. In this way, I attempted to put dissident art in conversation with the historical context out of which it has emerged and with which it continues to grapple.

In Chapter 2, “The Politics of Repression and Art of Dissident Desire in Istanbul,” I provided the historical background of the rise of neoliberalism after the 1980 military coup in Turkey and the re-instantiation of a dissident cultural-political milieu in the mid-1990s in Istanbul that was eliminated and suppressed by the junta regime during the military coup. Focusing on the moment of convergence between the LGBTI+ movement and self-organizing artists in Istanbul in 2007, I discussed the persisting and shifting cultural-political stakes that brought these groups together. Through examples, I discussed the ways in which dissident cultural-political actors had to navigate the risks of not only rendering art subservient to politics but also the exploitation and reification of politics in service of the arts industry under the patronage of transnational capital.

In Chapter 3, “Social Reality and the Urban Development in Istanbul,” I expanded upon the material organization of the post-1980 transition into neoliberalism in Istanbul. Elaborating on a set of Hafriyat’s works, I showed the ways in which dissident aesthetics struggled to resist and subvert not only the normative logics but also the normative tastes and affectations that undergird neoliberal hegemony in Istanbul. I contextualized the hegemonic hold of neoliberal logics and affects among the middle
strata of the society within the shifting terrain of class alliances before and after the 1980 coup. Using archival findings, I traced the connections between Hafriyat artists’ cultural-political drives that propelled them to engage with the social in the first place and their aesthetic sensibilities that in turn shaped their analysis and intervention. In this chapter, I also discussed Hafriyat’s deployment of a reflective nostalgia as a means to navigate discontentment with the present social conditions on the one hand and the rise of a conservative nostalgia on the other hand. Hafriyat’s inclinations to salvage pieces of alive and heterogenous markers of the past while resisting dominant narratives of the history was an attempt to intervene into the ways in which the widely shared discontent was being channeled onto new migrants resulting in a conservative attachment to an idealized, migrant-free, homogenous, and harmonious social past. I ended this chapter with expanding upon Hafriyat’s cultural-political approach to temporal, material, spatial, and social relationality. I highlighted a resonance between their approach and Benjamin’s earlier reflections on urban cultural inclinations that mobilize social discontent towards radical openings while remaining oriented to not the future but the past.

In Chapter 4, “A Queer Art of Aesthetic-Affective Resistance,” I discussed how queer notions of futurity, utopia, and ethics-erotic factors in my aesthetic pursuits. I reflected on an aesthetic-affective resistance against neoliberal totalization of reality by a
queer utopian realism oriented towards an erotic and aesthetic drive to forge sensuous connections in life that are often deemed unfeasible by the dominant social order, based on the ethical principles of autonomy, collectivity, and reciprocity. Finally, I described two art projects that I completed while at Duke University, *Shared Lines* (2014) and *queerXscape* (2019), as artistic explorations motivated by the aesthetic, affective, ethical, and political stakes outlined earlier in the chapter.

The ultimate goal of social resistance is radical social change. In Istanbul, self-organizing artists and activists have worked to change the course of social development from organized exploitation, domination, and injustice to a reciprocal life of autonomous participation and sensuous relationality. Although also seemingly impossible, such social change appeared feasible in the cultural-political organizing of a dissident milieu in Istanbul. This was a general sense shared by those who participated; the right-wing control over politics and state was a somber reminder that change would require persistence and perseverance, but the mounting coalitions between political positions that we can call queer, feminist, anarchist-autonomist, anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, minoritarian, collectivist, radically democratic, environmentalist, pro-Kurdish liberation, and pro-labor had started to challenge and transform hegemonic cultural-political norms in substantial ways. For example, in the first LGBTI+ pride demonstration that attracted large scale participation in Istanbul in 2007, activists who
had been organizing since the mid 1990s were in an exuberant shock with an estimated thousand around them, reminiscing the previous marches of 50 people at best. In the immediate aftermath of the Taksim Gezi Park uprising, the estimated participation in the 2013 LGBTI+ pride demonstration reached a hundred thousand people, drawing people from all walks of life like a cross-sectoral political platform of dissident difference.

The heteronormative taboo was but one among the questioned and pushed taboos in these years. Many other taboos reinforced through the Turkish-Islamic synthesis were challenged. For example, the ascendancy of Sunni over Alevi (and all other sects of Islam), Turk over Kurd (and all other ethnicities present in national make up), official history over memory (e.g., the Armenian genocide), men over women, military over democracy, state over citizen, profit over life, all of these came under intense public scrutiny.

One of the major political consequences of these developments of dissidence was the Islamist neoliberal government’s near loss of ruling power in 2015. During the June 2015 elections—albeit repeated in November 2015 with the outcome in the government’s favor—AKP lost its privilege of parliamentarian majority for the first time after 13 years. The parliamentary majority of the government was broken by a brand new left party’s entry into the parliament, Halklarin Demokratik Partisi (the People’s Democratic Party,
HDP from here on), which is a united platform led by the Kurdish liberation front that centers principles of ecology, feminism, labor, autonomy, equity, and freedom.¹ In response, AKP – which had built its liberal hegemony on opposing military nationalism a decade earlier – changed its political strategy and entered into an alliance with the ultra-nationalist right wing party, Milliyetci Hareket Partisi (the Nationalist Movement Party, MHP from here on) to regain majority. Using this ultra-right conservative block, the AKP has been working hard to crack down on opposition and dissent, adjusting laws and the regime to its purposes. The failed military coup attempt of 2016 allowed the government to run defamation campaigns on all critics and dissident voices, and launch anti-democratic and legally dubious crack-down operations on all political opposition.

Today it is clear that the ruling power takes the radical political desires that have been articulated through the cultural-political milieu of dissent and that was collectively enacted during the Gezi Park protests as a serious threat to the hegemony of neoliberalism in Turkey. Since 2015, the Istanbul LGBTI+ demonstrations have been harshly suppressed through disproportionate use of police force. Cultural workers ranging from artists, activists, and academics to arts administrator and employees of

independent cultural organizations have been facing severe intimidation campaigns including life time imprisonment. However, the heightened suppression has also taken the government further away from hegemonic legitimacy and back into the violently overblown and fragile power of the post-1980 military nationalism. In the face of this development, resistance to exploitation and domination in whatever shape or form still continue insofar as we all keep its memory traces alive.

---

References


Bora, Tanil. “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey.” The South Atlantic Quarterly 102, no. 2/3 (June 2003).


Staff, Reuters. “Turkish Property Firms to Slash Prices in One-Month Drive to Revive Market.” Reuters, May 15, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-


