Oblique points of Entry

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Coming to a conference dealing with Contemporary Art in the Middle East, one has by necessity to question not just the validity of its geographical consignment (The Middle of Whose East ?) but also of what discourses frame it ? The problem at hand is one of differentiating between the foregrounding of globalization that is founded in a notion of circulation and/or of regionality that is founded in a notion of relationality. If a regional exercise in highlighting the artistic and institutional/cultural production of the broader region, then one has to find a relational language to characterise some underwriting common ground. If seen within the overarching framework of globalization then we need to think of what kind of circulations, internal and external, these forms of cultural production are undergoing. This becomes an even bigger set of problems when we acknowledge the degree to which the art market with its voracious appetites for both new products and new regions with emergent markets potentials – is actually spearheading the onslaught of interest in the region and its cultural activities.

Given that the title of this conference has set us the task of thinking about the relation *between* the global and the regional vis a vis the so called Middle East, I would like to bring two terms that help me think through the problematics of this turbulent geography.

One is the concept of 'Regional Imaginaries' and the other is the one of 'Exhausted Geographies'. These terms provide the 'oblique points of entry' of my title. These oblique points of entry are ones that refuse the straight forward ones - the straight forward and seemingly normative designation of nation, region, identity, discrete histories, contradictory belief systems, military and territorial conflicts, divergent civic imaginaries, differing experiences of colonialism, not to mention wildly divergent chronicles of post colonial liberation and national formation. Such a refusal of conventionl designations dictates that we come up with other categories, ones that cut across, and mix up and invent shared locations and histories. Categories that are not content with what we have but hypothesize the question of 'what if'? as Wael Shawky did when he posited much of the region as directly constituted by what the Crusaders did to the many Arab and other belief communities that populated the region or as Kutlug Ataman did when he designated a Turkey that was not identified as Ottoman or Republican but rather out of the long submerged footprint of ancient Mesopotamia ? When these artists move away from recent history or recent geography they are not romantically lost in the mists of time, producing a quasi fictional history for a troubled present, nor are they didactically claiming that todays problems are grounded in the deep structures inherited from ancient histories - they are however producing acts of dislocation - in my terms they are 'exhausting' the geography of modern day nationalism, of endless conflict, of colonially established borders and divisions and identities, of global alliances stemming from the Cold War and of new multinational corporate trade routes and introducing other, speculative possibilities of what we might align ourselves with, or imagine as having ghostly echoes of within ourselves.

But first what are these 'global' and 'regional' that are here positioned as binary opposites ? Is there a different understanding of them in the art world than there would be in discussions that focus on the circulation of goods, labour, capital, information, arms, etc' while at the opposite end of the spectrum are the assumptions of a local, regional knowledge borne of proximity and close attention to actual lived conditions on the ground ?

When we juxtapose these two terms we acquiesce in the belief that these are two mutually opposing logics and that we need to make choices between them. We either ally ourselves with the global forces of 'Empire' or we investigate the conditions close to us as divorced from these, as unique and specific to a locale, as refusing some kind of overarching homogenisation, or subjugation.

But of course it is never that simple and the global is made up of numerous registers and textures of the local that weave around each other and defy a dominant logic. Recently in discussing the last 3 years of dissent around the globe and of the so called 'Arab Spring', Saskia Sassen said very astutely that this may not have been easily identifiable as driven by a common denominator of overthrowing unconstitutional tyranny or refusing the dominant logic of capitalism, but rather that for her it was 'the work of citizenship'. Instead of the usual banalities concerning the political effectivity of Twitter or Facebook or mobile phone technologies as producing instant convergences, producing spontaneous insurrections, Sassen claims that they are united by a particular new form of ongoing labour, the necessary labour of citizenship. How interesting it is to think that the world is not being swept up by protest and resistance but rather by an ongoing process by which the very notion of how to be a citizen is explored, expanded and reinvented. This is the local and the global dancing with each other, weaving and ducking - not a set of individually given rights, but a stable from of work in facing political precarity. Citizenship in the era of neo liberalism is a problem encountered around the globe, while various local conditions elicit different forms and confrontations with it.

But the problem is that the local, the regional does not just furnish the global with various modes of inhabitation - it is also a series of explicit blockages and stoppages - our region is an endless war zone of infer national and supra national and just plain national, conflicts. The intra-national conflict of Israel Palestine is an exhaustion of efforts to divide and contain that do not stand the test of daily life and the endless carnage in Syria is an exhaustion of formally redundant cold war superpower politics, that are clinging to old old spheres of power and influence around the globe.

And here is where my notion of ‘exhausted geographies’ comes in, in the need to in some way to exhaust the belligerent geography of our region. The entire terrain of this conflict-riddled region is sustained by the internal and external tensions of unbreachable borders, politically driven restrictions and the willingness to uphold divisions borne of enmity. Added to these are the sepia coloured traces of a series of alliances that can barely be understood within contemporary realities – Israel and the United States, Syria and Russia, half forgotten echoes of the Non Aligned Movement, of Pan Arabism, of Jewish diaspora politics

If subjects are not liberated out of boundaries by the universalist claims of globalization, or cosmopolitanism, can these same somehow implode through subjects’ different inhabitation of them – i.e. not a resistance to boundaries but Instead subjecting them to a different form of occupation which in turn loosens their grip on our understanding of our positionality. Therefore I’d like to focus on the uneasy life of boundaries as they fail to do what they have been set up to do; police the arbitrary structures of division and containment. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida in “The Eyes of the University” – ‘Boundaries, whether narrow or expanded do nothing more than set out the limits of the possible ‘. How then can we put forward an engaged discussion of place or location that is not held capture by the logics of division and containment? that does not, again and again do the work of setting up conflict and reconciliation in terms of a binary of engaged protagonists. Even when these protagonists are entirely committed to transcending their conditions and location, they are still doing so from the opening shot of being situated subjects.

Perhaps one of the ways of doing so is by an understanding that Geography is not location but a situated knowledge – who we are, where we are, what we know, who we learn from, what we encounter, – what our heritages and allegiances are – has always been linked to geography not as a set of locating vectors but rather to yoke places to traditions and trajectories of knowledge. Each place ‘knows’ differently and if they are not to be related to one another in dated and irrelevant notions of ‘knowledge from the centre’ vs. ‘knowledge from the periphery’, then how might they produce circular movements of knowledge, which defies geographical subjugation?

The concept of ‘exhausted geographies’ that I am trying to discuss here, is a concept that is trying to work against the grain of both the boundaries of the possible and of location as the site of identity and knowledge.

navigation.

And so I have been thinking of exhaustion in relation to political conflict, not a mode of opting out and withdrawing, but as one of recognising the limits of a logic that has dominated that conflict for most of its duration. . I suspect that this will take the form of an act of treason, in Deleuze’s sense of treachery , a refusal to support and sustain that which demands it of you because it claims to support and sustain you -- for in the realm of living out long term political conflict, treason and exhaustion are not unrelated to one another.

Conflict requires energy, resources, enthusiasm or fatalistic resignation. It demands clear cut positions which in turn demand to be defended at all costs. In situations of on going conflict, in those places and spaces in which it has been going on for what seems like an eternity, a certain moment of recognition invariably comes in which all of the efforts and sacrifices, the losses, injustices, oppressions that have been perpetuated and endured suddenly seem to be propagating the very thing that they seemingly attempt to resolve. That is the instance of treason, the moment in which one refuses to read the scenario in the terms that it has set up for itself and reveal it to be the mechanism of its own perpetuation. When one is deeply in the grip of a narrative, every detail of it assumes great meaning, but when its right to grip you is questioned these twists and turns that have sutured us in as a complicit participants are revealed to be preoccupied with little but their own legitimation. And so the minute internal differences of this minister saying this and the other saying the opposite, of successive prime ministers and presidents offering plans and road maps and revised borders, of political prisoners being released on the back of one political incentive, only to be re-imprisoned or assassinated as part of the next wave of retaliations or of shifts towards an increasingly hard line tactic – all of these stage themselves as earth shaking developments within the inner workings of a logic that is closed in on itself , as all such logics are. The exhausted geographies of which I speak are the material manifestations of what I am trying to describe, territorialities and territorial claims that cannot sustain themselves.

In inhabiting long term and chronically unresolved political conflicts, such as the one that has been ongoing between Israel and Palestine for some 60 years, we come to moments of total exhaustion. This sense of exhaustion derives from spent energies, disappointed good intentions, numerous conflict related deprivations on all sides, the utilisation of bankrupt models of political analysis, the inability to foresee a constructive future strategy and numerous other dimensions of living out a long term conflict. I am thinking of the time and the energies spent in being critical, in resisting, of the construction of great projects of critical theory and the deconstruction of the dominant ideology, of the writing and teaching and protesting and having angry arguments over family dinners , of saying or thinking without saying that I never again want to have to spend an evening with someone who does not share the belief that the occupation of Palestine is the degree zero, the foundational cause, the absolute limit state , of everything that has gone so wrong in our Middle East. Amongst the friends who belong to the community of the critical, some times these moments of exhausted recognition can be seen as a turn to cynicism, an opting out, a withdrawal , a turning inwards – but that seems to me to be saying there is no other way of living out political conflict but in energetic engagement with it on its own terms.

At these moments of political exhaustion, we might actually exit a mode that seeks resolution to conflict and enter another temporality which is one of 'inhabitation'. These 'Exhausted Geographies' are neither the maps or the traces of territorial entities but rather the 'lines of flight' that exit from such enterprises into an imaginative sphere that would produce a different set of relations between the components; a move from binarism to dispersal. Thus an ‘exhausted geography’ is not a territorial entity but rather a temporal one, a suspension of both the time and the terms framed by the state. It is if you like , the move from treason which holds the subject juridically to the structures and rules of state institutions such as army or public institutions, or to the ideological convictions which underpin political parties and social movements – to the moment of betrayal. An act, betrayal, which has as much to do with giving up something oneself, as it does with letting down the expectations of those around one. It is also an act of self-excommunication.

An ‘exhausted geography’ then is not one that has collapsed but one that is subjected to daily instances of non-support, it is not held or maintained , it dos not ground our knowledge or delimit our sense of what can be inhabited. An ‘exhausted geography’ recalls Toni Morrison’s ‘floodings’ , a powerful wish to go back to some formless state of connectedness that does not adhere to the planners and architects vision of what is utilitarian or prudent or acceptable – but rather a state that is grounded in forms of relatedness, to what had once been and what might once still become.

Within the realm of culture we might be able to routinely practice such ‘exhaustion’ through the sacrifice of grounding principles and clear cut identities.

There is a film that received considerable international attention several years ago entitled ‘Ajami’ (Director Skandar Copti , 2008) and which takes place in the largely Arab neighbourhood of the title, located in contemporary Jaffa. It is a skilful and powerful drama about the lives of Palestinian Arabs within contemporary Israel; the financial hardships, the tensions, displacements, the discrimination of the authorities and the invisibility and marginalisation of this large and regionally deeply rooted group of people. But more than anything it is an instance of ‘geographical exhaustion’. Within this film we find a fractured condition in which the Israeli state which is clearly the oppressor of this population is at the same time largely irrelevant and unacknowledged within the complex structures of their daily lives. This does not come about as a result of direct resistance, it is not about political action but about the dispersal of power structures at the heart of a situation in which the state is seemingly in total control, a dispersal which comes about through a shift in consciousness rather than in power relations. Within the film power and authority is not in the hands of state agencies such as the army and the police and the judiciary although they are present and they react and exert their considerable force – but they are simply a reactive force at the edge of the action. Within the heart of the activity being described, a tortuous tale of gang warfare, drug dealing, inter ethnic relations between Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Jews, family pressures and generational gaps, gentrification and its ensuant displacement of the local population – within all of these the actual decisive power is in the hands of various unacknowledged authorities. Among them are the court of elders overseen by a Bedouin sheik, a middleman who brokers cash payments to cancel out honour killings, a rash of retributive fires and murders and maimings that are a substitute for any legislative framework. The state, in the form of the police and the army, and the all dominant structure of the family are always three steps behind all this action and are always blinded by their inability to recognise another parallel regime that operates informally but with a ferocious hold on a population for whom the state of Israel is not an identity but an inconvenient and oppressive bureaucratic hindrance. The monolithic identity (Jewish, Israeli, European) that seemingly characterises the state is thus unravelled not through opposition but through dispersal. If it cannot sustain the totalisation it aims for in writing this multi ethnic space under the aegis of one dominant identity, if all of its efforts to divide and contain and control produce nothing but lines of flight that are fuelled by the craving for drugs, or the sexual lure of the exotic or by simple curiosity or by the economic dependence that the oppressed have on the oppressors – if all of these are actually writing the terrain of everyday life – then this is a case of the enactment of ‘geographical exhaustion’ as I have tried to articulate it. An unravelling of that which cannot contain because its logic cannot compel and its conviction cannot extort faith.

‘Exhausted Geographies’ then are the sites of a multiple ‘swarming’ in which none of the liberal motions of tolerance, or acceptance or mutual co-existence can survive since they are the extension of a dominant ideology in the throes of recognising its own limits. Instead these exhaustions signify the suspension of that logic and an unbounded state of its borders.

As part of the work on an exhibition entitled “De-Regulation *with the work of Kutlug Ataman”[[1]](#footnote-1) -*  The artist Stephan Roemer and I spent a while in Istanbul researching and locating a visual essay in the city[[2]](#footnote-2). As neither of us had much topographical knowledge of the city, we decided to ask friends and acquaintances to take us on daily walks to their favorite parts. Each day the narrative repeated itself in almost identical form – our different guides, all highly critical and theoretical colleagues, members in one capacity or another of the contemporary art world with no apparent nostalgia for by gone days in any way whatsoever, would point out various buildings and sites and say “*you see, there were the Armenians, the Jews, the Greeks, the Cherkessians, the Copts, the French, the Genovese etc’ etc’ – and now they’re all gone and we are here alone* “. Needless to say , events that took place long before any of these people’s birth. For a teeming city of some 16 million inhabitants, with trade and migration flowing through it constantly, this was an odd sentiment indeed. To us visitors, it felt as fully and energetically inhabited as a city might be. These references to a larger past self, an extended body of people, a cosmopolitanism of multiple inhabitants, a set of links to other places and territories resonated with me for some time, and the question – what kind of past formation ?, what kind of extended topography was so imprinted in the minds of our guides – that looking around they felt its lack so keenly that it slightly overshadowed its present energetic realities ?

Furthermore the question arises of how does this manifest itself within contemporary art and culture, not as backward looking nostalgia , but rather as a daily practice of thinking oneself as differently located and differently linked to geographical and other formations. Our Istanbul guides seemed to me to be practicing a form of ‘regional imagining’ a relation to place and space that projects upon it a series of possible expansions that are not perhaps materially available, but that have deep roots within what we perceive as the realm of the possible. It is a projection that has nothing to do with expansion but rather with the effort to think one’s self in another relation to the world. And as such it works against the strictures and limits of nationalism: of that which bounds us within a geographical terrain in the name of a shared identity, a shared topography, a shared history and a set of claims to separatism and particularism.

‘Regional Imaginings’ then would seem to me to be an alternative, or a parallel *non identitarian* practice. A practice that does not feel obligated to root one exclusively in either material histories or in purely fantastical projections, opting instead to piece together a location from fragments of what was and of what might be, simultaneously. An attempt to both activate and actualize notions of location away from being ‘located’ by an authority of knowledge or a political authority ( Being Turkish, Being Middle Eastern, Being of the Muslim world, for example) and towards a notion of ‘(self) regioning’ a notion I borrow from Heidegger (Gelassenheit) and which focuses not in trying to figure out what one’s identity might be as a given, but in trying to produce a set of relations in the world which might locate one.[[3]](#footnote-3). This discussion exists in the tension between the nation sate, aspirant communities and ‘Empire’. Each one of these emerges from a different set of desires; nation states- from the desire to find a collective identity in a narrative of nation as differentiated from other entities understood as nations, divided by borders and legitimated by mutually recognised authorities be these historical, military or bureaucratic. ‘Aspirant Communities’ on the contrary then are those who feel neither recognized, externally defined or visible – they emerge from a fracturing of the older models of nation sate, the geographically named region or the ethnic community and they struggle to both define themselves and gain recognition through an alternative set of criteria, defined from within ratherb than from without. As for ‘Empire’ Negri and Hardt use the designation ‘Empire’ to denote *“the globalization of capitalist production and its world markets … the capitalist project to bring together economic power and political power”[[4]](#footnote-4).* A new set of relations in which economies trump other sets of connections and affiliations.

But do all of these sufficiently explain the ‘affective’ , the emotional intensification of signs, through which so many of these ‘regional imaginings’ operate ?

And so I come to the writing of this text with several questions; questions to do with this cultural, topographical layering of numerous coexisting narratives and time scales, and questions of how these operate in relation to a national cultural identification. Other questions about a new ‘becoming’, of how do new regional formations come about and do creative practices have a part in shaping them? Thus for example the contemporary art world in Turkey has set itself the task of becoming the hub of a Balkan, South Eastern Europe / Middle Eastern artistic sphere as has been evidenced in several of the recent Istanbul Biennials and in the work of such arts organization in the city such as Platform Garanti. There have been several excellent studies about the role of historical repression and the repression of memory within public and private culture in Turkey – but the questions I am trying to pose here are different, they have to do not with the active forgetting of uncomfortable or guilty histories but with the ability to transcend restrictions by imagining oneself onto a much larger world, in which patterns repeat and refer to one another, both historically and spatially. Such forms of ‘self regioning’ stemming from geographical exhaustion, have become the hallmarks of some of the most exciting and innovative artistic practices to emerge from the region – Walid Raad, Wael Shawky, Akram Zattari, Kutlug Ataman, Skandar Copti among may others whose close and destablaising gaze is enabling us to posit new and spatially complex sets of historical self location.

1. MuHka Antwerp 2006, Herziliya Museum of Contemporary Art 2008, Balhaus Naunyn + KunstRaum Bethanien , Berlin 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . www.De-Regulation.org [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Heidegger, “Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking,” in *Discourse on Thinking [Gelassenheit—1959]*, translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 63-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri “Empire”, Cambridge Mass. 2001, pp.8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)