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Fragmented Spaces of Appearance: Thinking with Hakan Topal's "Temporary Assembly of Living Things" exhibition at Depo Istanbul

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My Body, Your Body, and the Body of the World

In the video ***Soil.Water.Ash. II (2022)***, we cruise at a steady speed and altitude, following a bird's-eye view shot from a drone. Is the topography below the surface

of the Earth or scorched and wounded skin? Then, we encounter a group of men, women, and children, some standing, others sitting down on white plastic chairs, holding their hand-crafted placards: "Kiss the bear, protect the green." They look like the mythic creatures imagined by those who once inhabited the same lands. However, the medical masks that cover their faces reveal they are our contemporaries. Could the red pine in the background have witnessed a centaur? I could have thought this image was a photograph if it wasn't for the wind softly combing the leaves in the scene and the smoke rings rising from the bonfire. It's as though I'm looking at a stiller-than-still image that's breathing.

In his field notes about the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protest movement at Zuccotti Park in New York City, anthropologist Michael Taussig writes that he was especially struck by the statuesque quality of many people holding up their handmade signs, which looked like extensions of the human figure. Taussig noticed sign holders as "stiller-than-stillness" because they were posing for the photographers. Or, instead, "because the sign is being made to pose for the camera with its very stillness calling to mind...that wonderful line of Adorno in which he tells us that the trick to Benjamin's style is the need to become a thing in order to break the magic spell of things."¹ A similar magic unfolds in the video, which portrays the resistance of the people of Ikizkoy village in Southwest Turkey who have been protesting since July 2021 the expansion of a nearby lignite mine threatening to suffocate the last patch of forest in the area.

"Bir ağaç daha eksilmeyeceğiz" (We will not be one tree less). These words are written on the Ikizkoy protester's banner, making it seem that they are not holding a vigil for the trees but position themselves as trees. Taussig observes that our capacity for mimesis has remarkably increased in the age of planetary and political meltdown. The existential threat has made us realize what that we have overlooked, and now "we have begun to sense our animal selves, plant selves, and insect selves."² Taussig sees this increase in the mimetic faculty as an opportunity for the "mastery of non-mastery" as a non-domineering, ethical stance towards the world.

Stiller-than-Still

Still Life, 2012-16

On December 28, 2011 in Roboski, the Turkish Air Force bombed near the Iraq-Turkey border a group of Kurdish civilians who had been involved in the routine

practice of smuggling gasoline and cigarettes, killing 34 people. Most of them were teenagers from the Encü family. According to the Turkish Air Force statement, the group was mistakenly identified as members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In Hakan Topal's breathing video portraits of the Roboski families, time stands still as the living and the non-living inhabit history. Mothers hold framed photographs of the deceased that appear as sacred extensions of the self, more alive and present than those who remain. Holding our breath, we are bearing witness to their demand for justice and look into the void of its absence.

Militaries, backed by the legal shielding of states, have created a post-humanist "apparatus of distinction" through a complex array of institutions and actors that render questions of accountability and justice unresolved. They function as an operational technology and as a force that generates liminal, border-crossing subjects as aggregates of data instead of human beings. Military lawyers and other state organs produce new legal categories such as "collateral damage" to reclassify people killed unintentionally by drones and to justify casualties. *Still Life* underscores the confrontation of law and ethics and poses crucial questions: Can there ever be ethics of violence? Does the legal justifiability of violence render it ethical? How can we make sense of the persistent demand for justice despite all odds?

Patriarchal Performances of Benevolence

Golden Cage, 2022

Ancient Egyptians thought non-human animals were the incarnation of gods on Earth. They worshipped the sacred ibis as the god Thoth, responsible for maintaining the universe, judging the dead, and regulating magic, writing, and science. Like the bird itself, the stories and cultures it has animated have migrated back and forth. Across the other side of the Mediterranean, Thoth, who was represented as an ibis-headed man, metamorphosed into the Greek god Hermes, the wing-helmeted messenger of gods and the god of trickery.

As a segue into re-enchanting nature and mastering the art of non-mastery, Taussig invites us to think about the mimesis between the wing of a bird and an airplane and asks: "Have you never wondered how a cross-section so cunning and simple can lift you off the ground?" "But, if the bird's wing," and the cultures it inspired, "is a gift to civilization, what does the bird get in return?"³ Confinement?

It's the same sovereign power that threatens the existence of hundreds of species. It renders villagers exilic on their own land in Ikizkoy by facilitating the expansion of a mine that materializes in Topal's work as a "golden cage" in Birecik to "protect" another species, the northern bald ibis, in a bizarre performance of benevolence through confinement. It's the same state that builds walls. It treats bodies crossing borders as aggregates of data to be eviscerated by its disembodied weapons of destruction that now make a territorial claim on an otherwise migratory bird. We bear witness to yet another selective distribution of value on a complex geography of a multitude of appearances and languages. It's not only humans who are the "collateral damage" of the interrelated processes of perpetual wars, the extractive logic of capitalism, and environmental meltdown. The northern bald ibis (kelaynak) had already been an endangered species due to the pesticides used across its migratory route. When Palmyra fell to the Islamic State (ISIS) in Palmyra, it faced total extinction, and the Birecik Kelaynak Reproduction Center decided not to release the birds from their confinement. The patriarchal power of refugee camps and "holes of oblivion" is reproduced here in the name of protecting kelaynaks. Relief from precarity and vulnerability is undoubtedly welcome, but does the expansion of carceral powers in the name of protection address the structural forms of violence and the economics that dispose certain human and more-than-human populations to unlivability?

The Urge to Appear

All three works in the exhibition speak to a profound worldly and earthly estrangement accelerated by the alliances of capitalist accumulation, militarism, and technoscience. They expose many nuanced and difficult questions. Yet, stiller-than-still subjects and images persist in their claim to be seen, noticed, and talked about in ways that matter. They do so in a context where the unequal distribution of "the right to appear" reigns.

The idea of appearance has been a crucial aspect of Hannah Arendt's political thinking. Appearance, for Arendt, is a fundamental characteristic of the world. As she writes at the beginning of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, "The world... contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal, all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient

creatures...In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing* coincide."⁴

Arendt makes an ontological claim that human beings are "possessed by an urge to self-display, an "urge to appear"; to "*make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them." And, this urge to appear can only be realized in the presence of others, and thus depends on the existence and quality of a public world. What constitutes reality for us, Arendt writes, is "being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves" "*in public*."⁵ The "common world" can "survive the comings and goings of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public."⁶

The public refers to the contingent, a fragile realm that can be founded and nurtured. Or, as it has happened with the rise of mass society, capitalism, consumerism, and modern science, it can get lost. The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of a plurality of perspectives. Arendt's definition of politics in terms of a plurality of human beings acting in concert is explicitly modeled after the ancient polis, an "organized space of remembrance" against the fragility and contingency of action. "The space of appearance comes into being wherever men [sic] are together in speech and action and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized."⁷ It implies that the space of appearance can neither be guaranteed nor preserved beyond its enactment.

It's the political arena where the true "spaces of appearance come to being," for Arendt.⁸ Only in this realm one can achieve one's own appearance and actualization. Only in this "space of appearance," grounded in the human condition of plurality, can one establish the reality of oneself, one's identity, and the surrounding world. Therefore, to be deprived of the political realm is to be deprived of reality. The space of appearance is the space that comes to being when interacting plural bodies assemble. It is a relational space of reciprocal exposure. Arendt quotes a famous sentence of Thucydides: "Wherever you go, you will be a polis" to argue that the space of politics lies between people no matter where they happen to be.⁹ It is intermittent and contingent: it exists in so far as people gather, but disappears when they disassemble.

In the wake of the Occupy movement, Arab Springs, Indignados, and the Gezi Uprising, Judith Butler revisited Arendt's concept of "the space of appearance" to reconsider it in terms of plural bodily performances. Butler also emphasizes that these bodily performances can entail speech and silence and gesture, as it is the

case in *Still Life*. Also, as Butler notes, in current social movements and resistances, the struggle is precisely for the conditions of appearing, that is, for political platforms, streets, parks, squares, and the right to assemble, as we witness in *Soil.Water.Ash*. The right to appear is related to Arendt's notion of the "right to have rights," which she had developed to critique the idea of "human rights." For Arendt, the "right to have rights" is not the right to food and shelter or protection but the right to act and speak and be a member of a political community. It is to be taken note of and to appear in ways that matter.

Artistic Research as *Poiesis* and Love of the World

I would like to conclude by drawing attention to the merits of Topal's approach to research, which is an attitude of *poiesis*, creating something into appearance, a bringing-forth, an unconcealment. This is rather than *techné*, "making," or "fabricating" as a means to an end through an instrumentalist logic.¹⁰ Instead of distinguishing artistic and social scientific research, there are two types of researchers in both fields. One kind of researcher models oneself as a laboratory scientist, treating human beings and other entities as raw data. They apply for grants with expected outcomes. The anticipated impact is carefully laid out before they have even gone into the field. I would call this type of researcher a technician. The other kind of researcher is like an initiate. Like an initiate, he cannot anticipate the outcomes before they occur in a dynamic, unpredictable field of exchange and action. He attends to individual stories, unique tales, and images that cannot be reduced to a rational explanation or bland report. At the heart of his desire is to bear witness, even if bearing witness entails attending to that which one cannot fully comprehend. This researcher is "like a shaman guiding us through a revelatory journey."¹¹ The poietic research mode is not about data gathering but listening, mutual learning, conversation, and relationship building. It involves not being a bystander but "standing with" a community of subjects. It entails care for the subject who is envisioned as a colleague, be it a human subject or more-than-human entities. It is a relationship-building process that Topal has carried out over the years, for example, with the Roboski families and the villagers who resist the expansion of extractive forces. Long before ecologically-oriented art came to occupy the mainstream in the artistic field, Topal had already begun to draw attention to the importance of place, soil, and identity in the *Void: A View from the*

Acropolis, 2006(xurban_collective) project. He has not given up his commitment to the complex themes, people, and places in the Anatolia-Mesopotamia region. This type of research is the mastery of non-mastery, including the craft to bring it forth in compelling forms. It does not mean to beautify horrors or to excuse injustice. It is a way of loving the world, *amor mundi*, as a challenge to think about what it means to be committed to the world despite its horrors and complexities instead of withdrawing from it.¹² It is the willingness to think critically about the questions which we may not always be able to answer.

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¹ Michael Taussig. "I am So Angry I Made a Sign," *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012, 25-27.

² Michael Taussig, *Mastery of Non-Mastery*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, p. 61.

³ Ibid., 5-6.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & CO., 1978, 19, italics in original.

⁵ Ibid., 21, 29-30.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 55.

⁷ Ibid., 199.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰ Here, I am adapting from the distinction Martin Heidegger draws between *physis*, *techne*, and *poiesis*. Heidegger thought that in the age of modern science, we have come to treat objects more as *Bestand* (object as "standing-reserve," supply; something to be used up and consumed, which can include humans as well as non-living things) instead of *Gegenstand* (object as something that "stands against," which grants it agency and subjectivity). See: Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings* (Ed.) David Farrell Krell, Harper & Row, 1977.

¹¹ See: Jeniffer Wallace, "The Mastery of Non-Mastery," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 30, 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-mastery-of-non->

mastery/ [accessed 19 April 2022].

¹² Here, I am drawing on Arendt's concept of *amor mundi*. See: Samantha Rose Hill, "What does it mean to love the world? Hannah Arendt and Amor Mundi," April 21, 2019, <https://www.samantharosehill.com/writing-page/what-does-it-mean-to-love-the-world-hannah-arendt-and-amor-mundi> [accessed 19 April 2022].



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