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In Relation to

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Işık Kaya

Committee in charge:

Professor Brian R Cross, Chair
Professor Isaac William Martin
Professor Ruben Ortiz
Professor Alena J Williams

2021

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University of California San Diego

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

In Relation to

by

Işık Kaya

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Brian R Cross, Chair

This text is intended as a textual reflection of my artistic work of recent years. In the broadest sense, it is an attempt to locate my strategies in image-making, my work with the camera, and my position in the field of contemporary art. This attempt is also reflected in the structure of the text. In short essay-like sections, I reflect on various issues that are either important to my practice or related to it. In the final section, I attempt to bring the various strands together in a brief discussion about my final art project.

Introduction

My practice is lens-based and therefore, I depend on things that exist in front of my lens. Working with a camera means that I do not have to start from scratch. It is more about creating a compilation or composition of things in my environment. The use of a camera forces me to focus and it demands me to have a relationship with the object in front of my lens. Thinking about how I relate to my subject becomes a physical act, becomes the search for the ideal spatial relation between me, the camera, and the subject. Therefore, it seemed to me that it is consistent to find a way to write a text that is informed by this kind of visual practice: a text that explores my relations to things that are connected to me. That is the reason why this thesis happens to be a collection of fragments and observations. In a way, it is variations of similar things, a certain form of typology. This, again, is a way of working that I am used to in my visual work. These fragments are to highlight subjects that will help me shape my future way of working.

Light

As a matter of fact, my name is the Turkish word for light¹. I find this coincidence of me being a photographer and creating images by fixing light meaningful. The medium of my choice, i.e. photography in still and moving form, has caused me to appreciate light like no other, and I am very much interested in how light changes the atmosphere as it sets an object in a scene. This interest is on the one hand formal. I deeply appreciate the colors that light brings forth, as well as the colors that light, especially artificial light, can force on things. Perhaps this is related to the fact that having worked as a photographer and videographer for many years, I learned to think through the camera, even when it is not physically between me and the world. This plays a role especially when there is little light, so my own eyes are reaching their limits. The camera can push beyond this limit, either by using extremely high ISO values or by using long exposures in still photography. Technically enhanced, small traces of light become opportunities for new images. The world that emerges in this way often seems bizarre, unreal, otherworldly.

1 “Phōtós” (light) in Greek as the root of the word “photography”.

However, I also relate to light beyond the realm of perception. Especially since today's European-influenced understanding of the world is based on the Enlightenment. Enlightenment as a metaphor of modern, European thinking is based on the assumption that the mind shines like a bright flame in the dark chaos of the world and is also directed against the dark side of the human being, that is, his natural urges. The history of enlightenment coincides with the history of the discipline of man, subjugation of nature, and the world. The “civilized” European world, equipped with the light of knowledge, has the right and the duty to adapt the world to this new order, with violence, oppression, and if necessary, genocide. The past centuries were marked by brutally advancing industrialization, which was always accompanied by the light. The most blatant example of this is perhaps the mining industry. Equipped with electric light, the tunnels became ever deeper and the finds ever larger. Industrialization of the European type means, above all, that where its light shines, the earth is subjected to its logic of exploitation in order to ensure technical progress.

The use of artificial light sources in my works operates between these two spaces. On the one hand, as something that formally excites me, that literally attracts me like a moth. And on the other hand, the light of Enlightenment, that cruel partner of a mechanized and industrialized environment. The myth of light as the bringer of knowledge seems to be only a hollow lie. Surrounded by the shadow of night, the industrialized world illuminates itself to ensure productivity at all times. Yet, it almost seems as if the vanity of this world order comes to the fore in these moments that I record with my camera. At the same time, however, the structures then cover themselves up again. It is a twisted relationship that seems to correspond to the psychological basis of global capitalism. Torn between the fascination for one's own achievements and the awareness of the damage that must be done for it.

Writing

Thinking with and through images/sounds is different from thinking with and through words, and within this difference lies the potential of ontologically new scholarly forms. This is the hope, anyway.²

2 Gustafson, “On the Importance of Being Two Faced”

I share this hope, mainly because writing just does not come to me naturally in contrast to thinking and expressing myself through images. I believe visual contributions are as much a part of knowledge production as written language. Indeed, it is astonishing to me that despite decades of expanding artistic research, the predominance of language is not much more questioned by artists. It seems undisputed that works of art are special objects, namely epistemic objects, and thus make an important contribution to human knowledge and culture, but nevertheless, the production of this form of epistemic objects in the university context continues to be subordinated to the production of text. The thesis paper requirement in the Visual Arts department is an example of this. Yet, even central figures in the history of philosophy have acknowledged the limits of language and stated: What we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.³

Perception

I believe that the totality of sensory perception is greater than the sum of its parts. Not in a biological sense, but senses understood as a central resource in the artistic process. As the interfaces between my body and the world, they are what orient me. This orientation is important to me because my practice revolves around those perspectives and angles that help me find new images. I continue to find it difficult to name why I am drawn to certain places at certain times, but I can understand and feel the impulse. I don't believe in artistic genius, but I am convinced that the sum total of what my perceptual apparatus unconsciously absorbs and processes far exceeds my capacity for conscious examination. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to sharpen these capacities that are outside of the conscious mind. For me, the abstracted perception through a camera serves as an example. It is as if my visual perception has different levels since I work with cameras. As if there is always an invisible camera in front of my eye, it hovers in front of me and provides a blurred, potential image. This image complements my perception and sharpens it at the same time.

3 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 399

Visibility

During my time as a student at UCSD, I have tried to develop and cultivate a style of working that corresponds to my personal interest in built environments. Again and again, I have found that those things that attract my attention seem to have fallen out of the visible realm, even though they are omnipresent. How visibility – or invisibility – influences our relationship to the world are themes that run through many artistic positions. Recently, Trevor Paglen in particular has received a great deal of attention for his works, in which he mainly addresses what is not visible: the infrastructure of U.S. secret services. However, there are also completely different approaches to visibility, for example, Fischli and Weiss' work, *Visible World*. This work is an accumulation of 3,000 images – displayed on 15 light-boxes or as an eight-hour video slide – show on three monitors – that bring together anything a tourist might consider interesting: desert sunsets, pyramids, houses, traffic junctions. Peter Fischli said about this piece in an interview with Frieze:

[...] you travel to a place, to the pyramids, or a beautiful beach, or the Matterhorn, whatever, and then you take these photos. There is the trashy element of there already being so very many photos of these places, but at the same time these places display a great splendor – people photograph them for a reason. And in spite of the criticism, we do not want to shut ourselves off from the splendor and beauty of these places.

Here the artists re-appropriate pictures that became part of mass culture and are therefore exposed and exploited in a very specific way – commercialized, over aestheticized, and worn out. Another example, which is also explicitly dedicated to visibility or its opposite, is the work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* by Hito Steyerl from 2013. The work balances critique and humor, showing how “not being seen” has both oppressive and liberating possibilities.

In addition to these three prominent examples, there are countless others dedicated in one way or another to the production of visibility. In particular, in many works by contemporary feminist, queer and black artists, it plays a central role in the form of reappraisal or revelation in order to continue to bring covert sexist, racist, and colonial structures to consciousness. Beyond formal and thematic differences, whether explicit or implicit, I see the focus of artistic positions on visibility as a negotiation of perceptual

principles that is highly political and absolutely essential to contemporary art. As an artistic strategy, it is widespread, and my thesis also, and perhaps above all, is related to the entry of documentary photographic and filmic positions into the contemporary art world throughout the last few decades.

Criticality

There seems to be a strong tendency to ascribe a clear, “in your face” political message to artistic practices. For many, art should clearly and openly position itself, criticize, sometimes illustrate, or dictate a message. During many encounters I had with people in this university, my work has been criticized for creating a “seductive” visual representation of politically loaded structures or for the lack of clear criticism towards things I visualize. Yet, I consider the act of choosing a certain subject over another to be a critical decision in itself and the seduction of visuals to be a commentary on the addiction to the system these structures represent. I see the subjects I choose as manifestations of power and ideology on the urban scale. These structures are a part of everyday life that is usually not a part of visual culture. They are things that are hidden in plain sight and not noticed by many.

Even if I start a project with a clear intention and a clear personal attitude, I prefer the work to have a certain ambiguity. As soon as I start to visualize a theme, I am always drawn to a visual language that, in a certain way, dedicates itself to visibility. One thinker who addresses the political dimension of the visible in his thoughts on aesthetics is the writer Jacques Rancière. In his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière himself avoids giving instructions on how a politically relevant art should be structured; instead, he examines the tensions inherent in the relationship between aesthetics and politics. He is concerned with the question: How do we perceive, what do we ignore? He notes that time and again, in art, architecture, or everyday situations, it is negotiated anew which elements are provided with a 'voice' and which are faded out and thus, excluded as noise. Relational cultural patterns and regimes of perception develop, within which the world is perceived and judged differently. It seems as if I am naturally interested in visual noise.

Oil

One of the major difficulties faced by any aesthetic encounter with oil is the apparent capacity for the substance to absorb all critique, in much the same way that it absorbs light.⁴

Especially in the context of my thesis project, which is about the urban oil industry in the Los Angeles County and the role of oil in the USA culture in general, I am concerned with noise in the sense of hidden perception and visibility that is deeply interwoven with the way we encounter the petrochemical basis of our civilization. Although oil plays a massive role in the creation of every product we as humans are surrounded by today, fuels our entire contemporary culture, and shapes global politics, we never come into direct contact with the raw material itself. It is always already utilized, mediatized, transformed, or deliberately concealed.

This is due to the fact that there is a massive interest on the side of companies to consciously lull the perception of consumers. However, it also has to do with how perception has changed massively in the modern age, especially through the development of photography. I find it fascinating that this device, which is considered to be the extension and expansion of our visual abilities, also blocks them to at least the same extent. Photography seems to make many realities invisible by making misrepresentations of society overwhelmingly visible.

Oil also has a fundamental role in the medium of my choice, not just because massive amounts of it are needed to produce, market and distribute cameras and photography accessories, or to save, store, share images online, but also because it has its historical mark in the discovery of the medium. What is known to be the first photograph in history, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826 or 1827, was created using a technique called heliography. The light-sensitive substance was a thin coating of bitumen, a naturally occurring petroleum tar which sufficiently hardened in proportion to its exposure to light. Unexposed, unhardened parts were removed by another petroleum product, kerosene, which is produced from distillation of crude oil.

⁴ Szeman, *Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures*, 155



Figure 1: *View from the Window at Le Gras*, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, 1826 or 1827

For my thesis project, I have adapted the same historical technique that invented the medium of photography. As the photosensitive material, I used tar that I collected from La Brea Tar Pits to print the photographs of the USA's cultural elements that are deeply embedded in excess oil consumption, such as suburbs, drive-throughs, interstate systems, overcrowded parking lots of shopping malls, and Carvana "vehicle vending machines". Fixing these images with petroleum on a polished, mirror-like aluminum surface will hopefully allow the viewers to see their own reflection on this raw material and the images of a culture shaped by it.

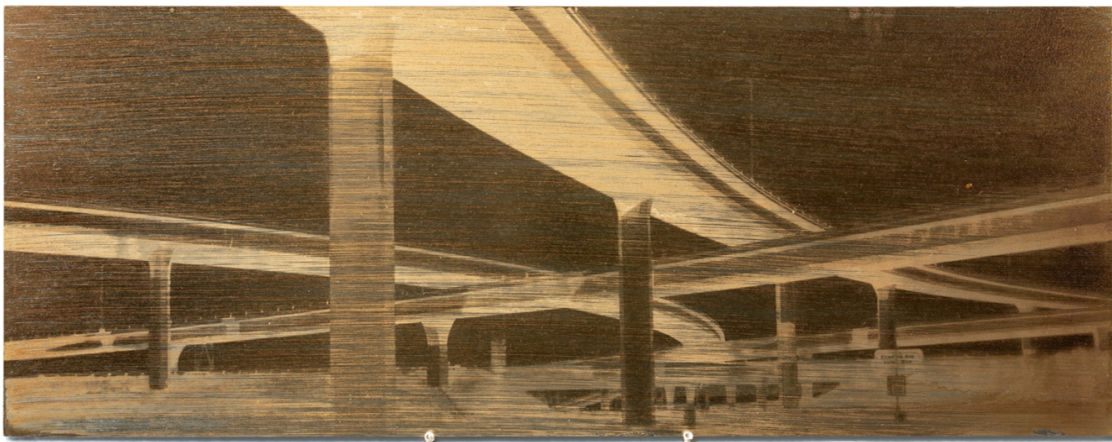


Figure 2: A heliographic bitumen print, Işık Kaya, 2021

The United States is the biggest oil-consuming economy in the world. According to the International Energy Statistics, the United States consumes more than 20% of the world's oil while only 4% of the world's population lives in this country. Although the second and third countries on the list, China and India respectively, are home to more than 35% of the world's population and almost 9 times more populated than the U.S. together, their oil consumption combined is less than the U.S. The United States Department of Defense is one of the largest single consumers of energy in the world, responsible for 93% of all US government fuel consumption in 2007. US military is a bigger carbon emitter than as many as 140 countries⁵. These numbers put things in perspective.

Upon moving to San Diego, I experienced a big culture shock. One of the first things that struck me was how urban life and culture were designed to rely on excessive consumption of all sorts of resources. My background and political views made it even harder for me to adjust to this urban fabric. I was born halfway across the world, in a city in a foreign country with an American military airbase called Incirlik. The USA used this military base during the first Iraq war and planned to use it for the second Iraq war. To be able to get the approval from the Turkish Parliament, and on a larger scale, to realize America's "Greater Middle East" project, which would allow the U.S. to have control over the whole region, they intervened in Turkish politics. Although the attempt to use the Incirlik base failed, their interventions to secure their power and interests in an oil rich region caused devastating effects in Turkish politics, including the election and the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Being aware of these events and living on a campus that used to be a military base in a city with the highest concentration of military personnel in the U.S. was a hard reality to accept. Supporting this system by living and paying taxes here contradicted with my views. This contradiction was one of my main motivations to do projects about U.S. militarization and oil dependency that caused destabilization in my region and around the world. These connections led me to look at the infrastructures of this landscape differently, learn about their histories, and try to understand the ideologies that made them possible.

5 Belcher, Oliver, Bigger, Patrick, Neimark, Ben and Kennelly, Cara. *Hidden Carbon Costs of the "Everywhere War": Logistics, Geopolitical Ecology, and the Carbon Boot-Print of the US Military*, 2019.

Undoubtedly, the other reason that makes oil dependency an urgent issue is its central role in climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has found that emissions from fossil fuels (coal and natural gas included) are the main cause of global warming. In 2018, 89% of global CO2 emissions came from fossil fuels and industry, making oil responsible for the third of total carbon emissions. This fact, compared to the petropolitical reasons mentioned above, affects every inhabitant of the planet we live on. However, I believe that the climate crises that we face today is well beyond the use of petroleum products. Simply switching to electric cars just won't solve the issue. More than our energy resources, we will need to change our infrastructures and unsustainable lifestyles.

During the research and production phases of my thesis, I came across several artists dealing with oil and other pollutant materials that made me reflect on my motives and strategies in my project. Some of the artworks that inspired me are Anais Tondeur's series *Carbon Black*, in collaboration with climate modelers Rita Van Dingenen and Jean Philippe Putaud, which uses black carbon particles filtered through breathing masks in Fair Isle to print photographs of the air they are collected from. This way of creating a material connection between the landscape and its image is what I aimed to do with heliographic bitumen prints of the Los Angeles urban landscape. Richard Wilson's installation *20:50* from 1987 fills the floor of the entire gallery space with used car engine oil, creating beautiful reflections on the surface of the black liquid, which transforms the toxic petroleum waste product into a captivating medium. Similar to this, instead of unquestionably problematizing a material, giving room for ambivalent ways of perceiving it is something I am very much interested in. And lastly, Morehshin Allahyari's series *Material Speculation: ISIS* 3D models and prints 12 statues from the Roman period of Hatra and Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh that were destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The artist contextualizes plastic used in 3D additive manufacturing as sacred and ancestral kin, “derived from petrochemicals boiled into being from the black oil of a trillion ancient bacterioles”⁶. Oil, for the artist, is more than a material that is just there to fuel our cars. It is a living matter with a vital strength that brings these destroyed deities back to life. Her artistic reframing of the material – different from the West's problematizing consumer perspectives – has been a

6 Allahyari, Rourke. *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*

fresh viewpoint.

Reality

The visual language that I have further developed during my time at UCSD thrives on translating visual realities, structures, and conditions from the world into an image that no longer looks as if it was part of our world. Many times I was asked whether my photographs are computer generated images or photo manipulations. Apart from the long exposure times I select in order to capture images at night, I do not intervene in the picture. I simply try to emphasize the hyperreality of the current state of our urban environment in my photographs through minimal abstractions. While studying the contemporary art world, I always found myself being attracted to artworks or photographs that use similar strategies. A great example would be Michael Wolf's work. In *Transparent City*, a series of photographs he took in Chicago, he creates an abstract feeling for a hyperreal environment by using a mix of clean and tight framing and unusual perspective. The windows of the high rises start to look like parts of a collage and while the wider shots are very rich in detail, he contrasts them with blurry and pixelated details showing close-ups of people in the high rises. I believe that this slow and precise way of constructing images is an essential contribution to contemporary visual culture and an aesthetic critique of pictures as proof.



Figure 3: *Untitled* from the series *Transparent City*, Michael Wolf, 2007

It seems to be a paradox that these clear and sharp pictures by Michael Wolf and the like don't carry the authority to claim reality, but it seems to be part of our media perception. Hito Steyerl made a brilliant analysis about this in her text "The Uncertainty of Documentarism":

We are surrounded by rough-cut and increasingly abstract documentary images, shaky, dark, or out-of-focus, images that show little else than their own excitement. The more immediate they become, the less there is to see. They evoke a situation of permanent exception and constant crisis, a state of heightened tension and vigilance. The closer to reality we get, the less focused and jumpier the image becomes. Let us call this the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism.

Interestingly, this analysis in a way plays into the argument of Adam Curtis in his documentary *HyperNormalisation*. The documentary argues that governments, financiers, and technological utopians have, since the 1970s, given up on the complex "real world" and built a simpler "fake world" run by corporations and kept stable by politicians and the media. Within this "fake world", these blurred images function as an implicit confirmation that the complex "real world" is full of dangers and inaccessible. However, it is enormously fascinating as a perceptual phenomenon to consider that these blurred images reflect the idea and perspective on reality more than the media involved in the production of the "fake world" has.

Depicted

I depict things that I consider problematic and this decision is politically informed. My position on the global, neoliberal economic system is clear. Accordingly, I understand my motifs as representatives of power structures that need to be massively questioned. Yet I find these structures formally incredibly exciting. The construction sites in Istanbul are one such case, as are the freeways, cell towers, or oil derrick pumps. Although I would prefer to live in an environment without them, I use them for both my daily life and artistic practice. I live and work in newly constructed buildings, use a mobile phone, as well as the highway system, and I fill up my car, with which I drive to all these motifs to record them, with oil.

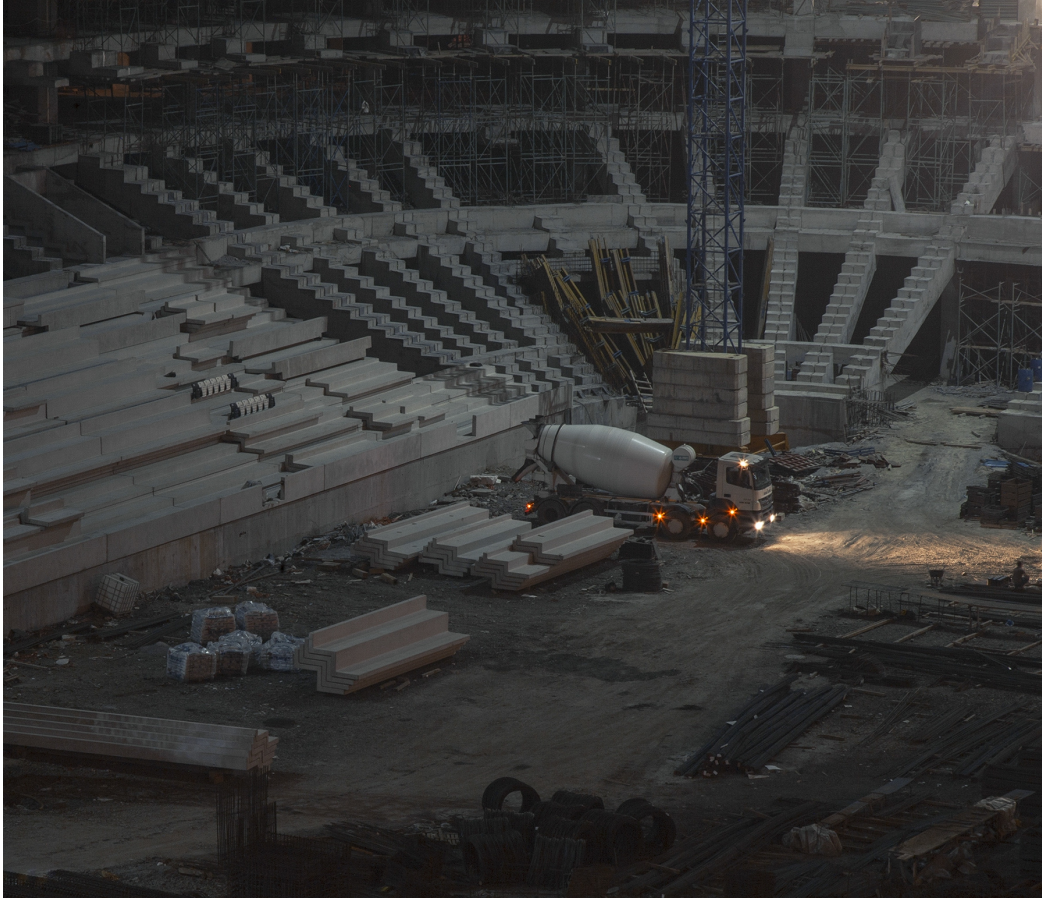


Figure 4: An image from the project *Nature-morte*, Işık Kaya, 2014

This everyday dilemma is as old as humanity itself and has accompanied intellectual history as a moral problem since time immemorial. In her speech on receiving the Adorno Prize, the philosopher Judith Butler updated the question about the problem for our time:

Adorno [...] told us in *Minima Moralia* that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”, and yet this did not lead him to despair of the possibility of morality. Indeed, we are left with the question, how does one lead a good life in a bad life? He underscored the difficulty of finding a way to pursue a good life for oneself, as oneself, in the context of a broader world that is structured by inequality, exploitation, and forms of effacement.

I want to give space to the complexity of this problem in my work and this might be one of the reasons why I am drawn to the things I depict. I see a paradox with competing attitudes and needs within me towards them: I take advantage of many things that this system offers, yet I do know this is not a

sustainable way of living. In this respect, the things I depict are complex in the sense that they are networked with my existence in an abstract but yet immediate and emotional way. Maybe this is why I try to isolate them visually. It makes it easier to understand them as physical manifestations of neoliberal politics.

Night

I take photographs and videos exclusively at night. There are several reasons for this decision, one of which is that night is the natural equivalent of an artificial space of perception: The Black Box. This important prerequisite for contemporary entertainment is rarely considered. In fact, the development of “context-free” or “neutral” spaces is of central importance. What was discussed in the art world (which is largely part of the entertainment industry) by Brian O'Doherty in his essay *Inside the White Cube* is still regarded by critical practitioners and theorists today as an important analysis of a complex phenomenon:

The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light [...] The art is free, as the saying used to go, “to take on its own life” [...] The purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings - the artworks, like religious verities, are to appear untouched by time and its vicissitudes.⁷

The set of rules for the Black Box, the dark equivalent of the White Cube, functions in a very similar way. While most of the visual arts media use the light-flooded space, the time-based media, music, theatre, and performance are at home in the Black Box. They too are embedded in a supposedly neutral space that is supposed to allow the greatest focus possible on what is being offered. Everything receives entry in a controlled way.

White Cube and Black Box are the spaces in which we condition our perception. As essential components of the entertainment industry, they become, as O'Doherty describes, quasi-religious buildings. They form the basis of our sensual education. We appreciate the works of other people in purely man-made spaces. In contrast to rituals of early cultures in which the relationship between human

⁷ O'Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube: Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 7

and nature was negotiated and celebrated, Black Box and White Cube are places where humans celebrate their relationship to themselves and their works. Through isolating designs of Black Boxes and White Cubes, creative people can present their ideas and works undisturbed by environmental influences. In the last decades there has been a shift in the use of language considering the economy: economists are talking about the performance of companies. Considering the global economy as a giant performance, the night in our neoliberal world turns into a black box where humans perform capitalism. The dramatic qualities, the theatrical and magic part of the capitalist super show come to the surface. My work is an exploration of how man's dominance over nature finds its manifestation in everyday architecture. In putting my exploration in the realm of the mysterious night which has become the black box for global capitalism, I can observe architecture as a form of set design. Construction sites, highways, antennas, oil industry – the infrastructure of our neoliberal world turns into the background of a global performance.

Art World

I think it was early on that when we started talking about the book that what I really didn't want to do is have people write about my work. [...] I didn't ask people to reflect on my work but to write about something that had some kind of real world connection.

This is something Laura Poitras said at a talk entitled "Surviving Total Surveillance" on February 6, 2016, organized to bring together artist and scholars who are also contributors to the catalog, *Astro Noise: A Survival Guide for Living Under Total Surveillance*, of her solo exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art. Her contributors included some of the spearheads of contemporary art, such as Hito Steyerl and Trevor Paglen. Laura Poitras is only one prominent example of an artist who, although equipped with an exhibition at the heart of the business, is very skeptical about being placed in the field of art and instead tries not to lose connections to the "real world" so that her work is not diluted. But what exactly does she mean when she's talking about the real world? Without elaborating on this question, it is easy to tell what it excludes: the art world.

Over the past two years, I have learned that I am absolutely not interested in the narratives of the

art world. Large parts of the contemporary art world rely on narratives that emerge from the participation in the "important" exhibitions and are often self referential. What is art, what is a certain medium? These questions then prescribe the themes about which discourses should unfold. The actual production of independent and formally interesting works seems to fade into the background. My attitude towards these things has probably developed over the years of working in Istanbul's major galleries. However, it was only here, after a job talk by Walead Beshty, that it became firmly established. The way he presented his works was traumatizing in the best sense. Beyond any sensory engagement, this artist has managed to work his way to the forefront of contemporary art with a body of work consisting exclusively of references and clever contextualization. The world enters his work only as a reference, the sweat imprint of the gallery owner on a copper table becomes a significant trace which enables him to throw in the word "Gastarbeiter"⁸. If Walead Beshty were alone with this artistic strategy, then it would be merely a marginal phenomenon that needs not be taken into account. However, he joins a whole horde of similarly practicing artists. Weaves of reference are knitted and those who have mastered the codes, i.e. speak the jargon, delve into sandbox conversations beyond the world. I am simplifying at this point, and of course, there are sufficient examples that things can be done differently in the art world. However, I notice a clear tendency that the form described has secured itself a permanent position because it corresponds to the level of organization that again secures the importance of art through text production. And this great textual fabric, in which contemporary art is also embedded, codified by thousands of scholars, is ultimately a stronghold of Eurocentric ignorance. A celebration and emphasis of European achievements soaked in racism, sexism, and classism. I have to be critical of a business that has grown on this basis.

Productivity

You reverse the perspective of power by returning to pleasure the energies stolen by work and constraint [...] As sure as work kills pleasure, pleasure kills work.⁹

I do not feel a constant urge to create. What may seem like a banal realization has important implications

⁸ German word for "guest worker".

⁹ Vaneigem, Raoul. *The Book of Pleasures*, 1979

for me in terms of how I want to develop and show my work in the future. There is the narrative of the driven artist, the permanently creating craftsman. It's not an idea I can identify with. There are few things that seem sufficiently important to me to transfer them into a visual work. Unless I feel a certain urgency, I don't get moving. Often enough I have blamed myself for this tendency and tried to find explanations for it in my biography. Nevertheless, I don't want to feel such things anymore, and looking at experiences in exhibitions, it actually seems to me to be the better choice. There are so many objects, images, and films in which I don't feel any urgency. Or if there is an urgency, then perhaps a narcissistic one, that is, in the sense that the creators merely want to secure a place for themselves in the art-internal attention economy. Of course, it feels good to see one's own works in exhibitions, in the impressive spaces of the institutions and off-spaces of this world, but the feeling of reaffirmed vanity fades too quickly, and the hollow feeling that follows isn't really worth it. It is too important to me that what I share as my work finds a certain form and can stand for itself. Quality instead of quantity.

The life's work of the Swedish Nobel Prize winner for literature Tomas Tranströmer fits into a narrow volume. He earned his living as a psychologist. Would anyone say literature was his hobby? No, he merely chose a path for himself that was not determined by the vanity of belonging, for better or worse, to a particular professional commercialization industry. It amazes me that in a business that adorns itself with great terms, claims the revolutionary and alternative for itself, and has a tendency to leftist discourse, at least on the side of the artists, so little is said about the logic of exploitation. As if the discourse on not making, which can still be traced from Lafargue to Vaneigem, had simply vanished into thin air. Instead, one continues to merrily produce objects for the next exhibition, hopes for purchases, and diligently turns along in the clockwork of art. One of the few contemporary examples of rest and refrain as an important strategy for dealing with a production logic that is also inherent in the art business is *The Nap Ministry*. *The Nap Ministry* was founded in 2016 by Tricia Hersey and is an organization that examines the liberating power of naps.

Our “REST IS RESISTANCE” framework and practice engage with the power of

performance art, site-specific installations, and community organizing to install sacred and safe spaces for the community to rest together. We facilitate immersive workshops and curate performance art that examines rest as a radical tool for community healing. We believe rest is a form of resistance and name sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue. We are very active on social media because we view our pages as one of our many tools to help deprogram the masses from grind culture.

Art Studio

The studio holds a special position within the range of human production spaces and is for many people a surface for projecting fantasies about the way artists live and work. It is neither workshop nor office, neither factory nor study room, neither laboratory nor sacred space, but a little of all of these and much more. The use of the studio stretches into different areas and fulfills a variety of functions. The studio is the physical manifestation of the artistic thinking space. The predominant cliché sees this space as a place where the artist forgets the world in perhaps highly personal processes and creates his work in solitude. I did not have a studio before studying at UCSD. Since my work with the camera takes place outdoors and the editing of the images happens on a computer, it was not necessary for me to have a separate workspace for artistic production until now. The studio on the premises of the Visual Arts Facility was therefore a new experience for me that I have enjoyed very much so far. The spatial segregation of a certain part of my work feels motivating, even if it is not really necessary for the sake of the materials used. Due to the phased closure of the campus during the pandemic and the resulting inability to access, I have already missed my studio while still studying. It is amazing how quickly this space has become a permanent part of my internal mapping. Away from all the practical aspects of being a storage and showroom, a studio actually adds something to one's thought building.

For me, thinking about this site of production of art is also interesting because, since the Gezi protests in Istanbul, I have been enormously compelled in questions that negotiate politics and space. Of course, these protests were not about free spaces for artistic production, but they were about the question of where the public sphere can take place outside of formal spaces. These protests made me aware of how much spaces affect the constitution of society and the constitution of each individual. Spaces change behavior; they can deeply intervene in the layers of our thinking and feeling. Seen in this way,

photographs of construction sites I took in Istanbul after the Gezi protests also take on a psychological quality. It is as if the cranes and excavators are only working on the material in front of them vicariously, in reality changing the psychogeography of an entire city and thus, the way its inhabitants think and feel. This thinking about spaces took a new turn with the studio I was given. Perhaps for the first time, I was able to truly comprehend how enormous the impact of, in Virginia Woolf's sense, a room of one's own is. For it was only in this studio here in California that I no longer had to share my private space with certain needs of everyday life, but can perceive it exclusively as a working space. It is a space in which my mind can breathe and expand.

Plants

Just as photography creates an image by combining light and chemical processes, plants create organic matter by combining light and chemical processes. Perhaps the similarity in these processes is one of the things that makes me appreciate both photography and plants so much. It is a nice coincidence that during my time here I was able to take care of the garden that a former MFA student had established in the Visual Arts Facility. This responsibility has led me to once again look at photographing plant lovers like Anna Atkins, Arno Fischer, and Karl Blossfeldt with different eyes.

However, even beyond the similarity in process, new references between my visual practice and gardening appear to me. Especially if I understand the garden as a place of knowledge production on a personal level. There seems to be a form of cognition that is common to gardeners, a particular way of looking at the world. A sense of this profound experience of altered perspective was given to me in particular by a glimpse into the life and thought of Lesley Stern. After an online event celebrating the publication of her book, *Diary of a Detour*, I browsed through a garden diary she kept on her website. The clear insights, simplicity of observations, and immediate experience of the world are close to my heart. For me, it is no surprise that she found comfort in planting and tending her garden while living with an incurable form of cancer.

Contemplating gardening opens up new images, attitudes, and metaphors to me first and

foremost. On the one hand, I think about the connectedness of plants to different media. Plants exist above and below ground, belonging simultaneously to two different domains. Their roots communicate with the soil, their leaves with the light and the air. Darkness and light play an equally important role in their existence. Much like analog photographs that come into the world through the interplay of exposure and development in the darkroom. From this point of view, plants and photographs are inhabitants of transitory zones. They always stand between two worlds, not as barriers but as mediating elements. Between earth and air, past and now, darkness and light. Another similarity is the perception of plants and photographs as motionless or immobile. Even though time-lapse photographs show us how much plants actually move, this movement is not visible to the naked eye. Plants and photographs have a temporality of their own that is beyond and alien to human perception. And indeed, after writing these lines, I look at plants a little differently. They suddenly seem like photographic living beings. In parallel, it seems to me that photographs now have a potential for growth.

Closing Remarks

I believe that many of the things I write about in this text led me to my final installation. As mentioned before, car culture and urban oil production in Southern California became the defining theme of my thesis project. The result is a photographic installation consisting of film and heliographic prints. The film shows Los Angeles as home to the country's largest urban oil field and refineries. In nightly shots, the landscape is being transformed into a bizarre engine, the pacemaker of the passing age of petroleum. The other component of the project, heliographs, shows places of oil consumption: the world's first drive-throughs, overcrowded parking lots, car vending machines, suburbs, and highways. These are things from the realm of the everyday in the American culture, mundane and already seen. It allows viewers to associate the material with experience. At the same time, however, these everyday motifs are embedded in a form that is completely out of the ordinary viewer experience of images. A historical method such as heliography leaves traces that emphasize the constitution of the images as made objects. Brushstrokes from applying the bitumen-lavender oil mix remain visible, dust particles become part of the

picture, and scratches take away from the perfection of photographic images that we are used to see on our screens every day.



Figure 5: A still from the film *Crude*, Işık Kaya, 2021

Further, in developing the installation, it was important for me to think about the viewer's physical interaction with the images. I wanted to break down the clear separation between viewer and image, screen and space, and try to translate the images into a more direct viewer experience. The heliographic prints do it almost automatically, as their surface practically forces viewers to explore the images captured in them. Reflections always hold back some of the image information; only through actively exploring the print from different angles allow a complete image to emerge. I try to reinforce this effect by the choice of size. The objects are small and force viewers to get close to them and create an intimate experience. They work passively by being small, so to speak.

The effect of the filmic projection, on the other hand, is absolutely active. The use of petroleum-based fabric as a projection surface in the center of the room creates an afterimage that spreads into the space. In fact, the projection is installed in such a way that viewers, upon entering the room, are immediately surrounded by this afterimage on the floor. There should be no opportunity to establish a distance from the image. Similar to the video projection, the sound recording of an oil derrick pump coming from speakers located in every corner of the gallery surrounds the viewer as they enter the space.

This sound's moaning like deep and loud tone gives an anthropomorphic quality to the machines seen in the film. Apart from the projection that extends into space and overcomes a physical distance, the sound is meant to bridge the existing emotional distance between the viewer and the cold and unrelatable world of machines and industry. I want this immediate immersion of image and sound to define the viewer's relationship to the space. In this way, that is, the use of these strong contrasts, the installation as a whole is meant to develop a completely independent relationship to reality. One that can certainly be understood as documentary, but which avoids the so-is-it. One that allows distance and proximity in equal measure and thus emphasizes even more a complex and difficult relationship to the world.

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