

BOOKS

FILMS

ARTS & CULTURE

POLITICS & SOCIETY

ROUNDTABLES

Home

Blogs

Call for submissions

Events

Contributors

Letters

Partnerships

In the News

About The Mantle

Home » Blogs » Arie Amaya-Akkermans 's blog

Mapping Uncertainties

Like

7 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2013



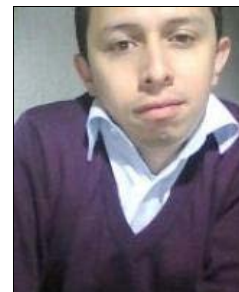
[I Know People Like This III, Arter, February 2013]

"We speak so much of memory because there is so little left of it." –**Pierre Nora**

Collecting has become one of the keywords in **contemporary art** from the **Middle East**. The institution of the collector – be it a patron, a gallery or a museum – is fraught with a two-fold obsession; one the one hand, the practice of collecting suggests a reverence for a **national history** and **heritage** that either wasn't written or is not in possession of its rightful heirs, while at the same time denotes a certain desire to close off the past – and thus, nullify its effects upon the present – by collecting it. The existence of **national museums** – showcasing antiques, national history or contemporary art – reveals that the procedure of collecting is intimately associated with establishing the limits of history through a set of **visual codes**, or, in the words of **Carol Duncan**: *"To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. [...] What we see and do not see in art museums – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity."*

The museum establishes itself not as an archive but as a **ritual** in which the nation is staged – it is primordially theatrical, more than a form of documentary. The rise of new state-of-the-art regional museums and art institutions (particularly in **Turkey** and the **Gulf states**) elicits criticism about the absence of certain larger themes that have either dominated or shaped local histories, but this criticism is oblivious of the fact that in its Western setting, the museum was conceived as an ideological narrative that would present itself as an established **political reality**. This state of affairs is further confused by the rise of collecting practices and museums at a time when Western art has not only abandoned the trajectory of **art history** as a grand narrative but also eroded the role of the museum as the sole authority of what is being remembered, turning remembrance into an activity of the present tense rather than a structure of the past. National and historical exhibitions, as per **Timothy Mitchell**, are seen with suspicion: *"The world-as-exhibition means not an exhibition of the world but the world organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition."*

From the work of **Pierre Nora** we learn that in the relationship between past and present – at the center of collecting practices – in the Middle East memory is often confused with history, in such a way that the perpetually self-enacting umbilical cord to the present is replaced by mere **representation of the past**, in the sense of a modern and alienated historical consciousness. History compensates for memory loss in such a way that in the words of **Rabih Mroué**, *"I am not telling in order to remember; on the contrary, I am doing so to make sure that I have forgotten."* For Nora, we remember only what is already forgotten and collect only



Arie Amaya-Akkermans is a freelance writer, occasional journalist, & curious traveler of lesser known corners of modern European thought.

what is already discarded. **Archives of memory** – rather than of the past – are not hierarchically ordered templates but rather labyrinths without exit: An intricate structure of interconnecting passages through which it is difficult to find one's way. A **labyrinth** suggests continuity and homogeneity of spatial experience only insofar as it is an interminable, suffocating and formless extension; walking through the labyrinth is not a matter of visual safety, but the opposite: Uncertainty is being mapped throughout.

Hale Tenger's installation "*I Know People Like This III*" presented first in the group exhibition of contemporary Turkish art "**Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment**" at **ARTER** Istanbul in January 2013, functions as one of such labyrinths. Cleverly and uncomfortably assembled at the entrance – and exit – of the exhibition space, the installation grows as a series of corridors encircled by walls constructed as light boxes that permit us see a visual journey – from a variety of sources: news agencies, archives, journalists, neglected images – through scenarios of **violence in the public space in Turkey** since the military coup in the 1980's throughout the protests in Diyarbakir, shortly before the completion of the installation. Rather than being simply an archival collection, the images are printed on clinical X-ray machines and made visible through the luminosity of the walls holding them together in horizontal grids that also carry chronological sequences. Tenger's procedure isn't simply one of displaying memory as a vast and interminable field but also of interfering with the process.

One of the common gestures of contemporary art when tackling the real, rather than juxtaposing orders of meaning through aesthetic encoding, is that the real – to use terminology of **Hal Foster** – is not a medium as it mistakenly assumed but a subject in itself as the stage of **trauma** and distress: The confrontation that the artist provokes by means of presenting the crass everyday object reveals the grotesque and the horror associated with the everyday and that is unavailable to aesthetic mediation; this confrontation is not only a transgression in the orders of beauty and composition, but to renounce a mediation between life and art, establishing formal principles of criticism within the art work, through anthropological and ethnographic methods.



[Being a Turk, 2002]

To **document history** in ways that alter the stability of remembering and collecting becomes an artistic practice in Tenger's work as the artist simulates – without irony – history not as an act of memory but as a technical laboratory procedure, about which **Hannah Arendt** reminds us: "*The fundamental fact about the modern concept of history is that it arose in the same sixteenth and seventh centuries which ushered in the gigantic development of the natural sciences.*" Accordingly, the luminous display is not that of a museum as much as it could be a newspaper archive, an x-ray laboratory and a commercial window shelf. This realistic arrangement is shocking in its unnaturalness when contrasted with the rough-edged manner in which memories are arranged spatially and stored in experience and consciousness; the dearth of explanations – either in the form of text, quotes or interventions within the artwork itself – leaves only a very minimal and liminal space for **interpretation**.

The surgical properties associated with the installation affect the viewer as a

neutral clinical diagnosis that prevents moral judgment and in the absence of judgment, there's also an absence of aesthetics – value-judgments – hence, participating in an unfinished reconstruction of memory that defies the closure of the collection and the archive and the museum, is the one only pathway available to interact with the work. The portrayal of violence is not limited to the grand narratives linked to political violence but also with **public silences** that are associated with symbolic forms of violence as repressions and dislocations: Disappearances, anonymous bodies, missing relatives or the Saturday Mothers that organize sit-ins in Istanbul demanding the right to know about the fate of their disappeared children.

In another installation of Tenger from 2002, *"Being a Turk"*, it is possible to identify a similar procedure: There the artist used only fabric dolls haphazardly positioned in such a way that the qualities associated with **individuality** are absent – a recurrent topic in Turkish art – and the formless mass of people could be led in any direction, mirroring history as discontinuous horizon of disrupted memories timed in and out by periods of police brutality and political contestations that are quickly overshadowed and hidden under the debris of official histories. While a great deal of contemporary Turkish art seems interested in personal narratives that leave open the question of history, Tenger's work seems to move in a more unsettling and vertical direction by showcasing how closed off the past has become for mere observation. The different topographies at work in her installations retain a certain critical distance that could be passed for scrupulous indifference, but on closer inspection it is possible to encounter here a visual **ethnography of trauma**.

An even [earlier](#) example of the direct relationship to trauma is presented in a work from 1993, *"Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia-Herzegovina"* that explores how memory is shaped by archiving and displaying, this time working with newspaper articles from that conflict. In *"I Know People Like This III"* Tenger offers perhaps not a conclusion but a summary of her long trajectory in artistic interventions that manipulate objects into becoming themselves, that is, political realities, by liberating their haphazard immediacy and allowing them a disclosure towards us which is more real than it usually appears in the act of collecting them and exhibiting them as political markers instead of as plain facts: It is only here that they acquire the perverse capacity to remind us that everything that is exhibited can be easily archived and forgotten.



[Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1993]