

AGAINST OBLIVION

Simber Atay-Eskier

Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir, Turkey

Abstract: TEKEL İzmir Cigarette Factory and tobacco warehouses lost gradually their functionality in XXI. Century; they have been abandoned forever and changed drastically by TEKEL privatization. These old buildings became fantastic places to realize several artistic activities there and they are transformed in nostalgic symbols to contemplate generally History of Modernism and specially Republic of Turkey's History. The aim of "TEKEL İzmir Cigarette Factory and tobacco warehouses photo-film project" is documenting last phase of decline period of these buildings and visualizing human traces. This project is a free research about İzmir. But to document and to interpret this kind of beauty is a very fascinating subject for photographers all around the world. In this context, each photographer has his/her reason in mnemonic or historical, alienated or opposite way and visual records of this kind conserve not only the blurred/erased past but process of oblivion itself.

Keywords: TEKEL, privatization, İzmir old tobacco warehouses, cigarette factory, documenting nothing, cultural memory, history.

I. INTRODUCTION

I started by coincidence to documenting TEKEL İzmir Cigarette Factory and tobacco warehouses in 2007

and I realized visual records of mentioned deserted buildings as a reflex to preserve TEKEL memory. While working in these old and abandoned places, the problematical nature of documenting "nothing" created identity crises for me. But photographing nothing is also currently very commune visual strategy for photographers who work in void atmosphere of historical buildings with traces of people who lived there long times ago. I call this kind of visual strategy as "Phoenix Syndrome".

II. COINCIDENCE

I. First had the opportunity of observing tobacco warehouses of İzmir from the inside and up close in 2007, as an organization committee member and participant artist for the I. Port-İzmir Contemporary Art Triennial. We were searching for exhibition spaces for the Triennial. But beyond that, also inviting a few of my close friends, I started taking photographs.

II. Port-İzmir's exhibitions in 2010, they were held in one center location. It was, again, an old tobacco storage (Austro-Türk) and again I joined the trip of exploration with my friends as an observer and I took

numerous photographs before the activities started. In addition, we were working in other TEKEL warehouses in the city. Eventually, we held an exhibition titled 'Memory Research and the Old Tobacco Warehouse', as part of II. Port - İzmir Triennial 2010, in K2 Contemporary Art Center; The participants were Simber Atay-Eskier, Nezaket Tekin, Suzan Orhan, Güzin Tezel, Süleyman Duman, Ertuğ Balkan. Again, another exhibition we held in this context met with art lovers in Eskişehir in the scope of II. International Midas Short Film Festival 2012, in Eskişehir Opera House; The participants were Simber Atay-Eskier, Süleyman Duman, Ertuğ Balkan, Zülfikar Soylu, Melih Elhan. We continued working in these locations. By the end of 2012, some of those tobacco storages were demolished, some of them transformed usually into parking lots, some had been through fires, and some were radically restored to build hotels and for example a guesthouse for the police department. And it was impossible to either go inside or work in some of them because of the Privatization Administration's restrictions.

After photographic records, I did one more work, a documentary film titled Tekel-Raum, 'just before!' in Tekel Cigarette Factory- the heart of the system- (Fig. 1).

Finally, during "TEKEL İzmir Cigarette Factory and tobacco warehouses photo-film project" I realized three kind of work:

I- 'Interiors' series photos (Fig.2)

II- 'After' series photos (Fig.3)

III- 'Tekel-Raum' (Directed by Talha Altunkaya, Produced by Simber Atay -Eskier (2012) (premier of this film: CCCS/BNCCS Annual Conference 2013: 'Cultural Memory' September 5-6, 9. 2013, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia)



Figure 1. Still from "Tekel-Raum" (2012) Directed by Talha Altunkaya, Produced by Simber Atay-Eskier



Figure 2. From 'Interiors' series: İzmir Tekel Cigarette Factory (2012) ©Simber Atay-Eskier



Figure 3. From 'After' series: After Damien Hirst (2010) © Simber Atay-Eskier

'Interiors' are eventually flâneur impressions; 'After' is an homage to the Deleuze&Guattari's 'percept' concept (Deleuze & Guattari ,1996: 146-151) because I

would like to construct an art gallery by my spontaneous impressions and my appropriated visions derived from Contemporary Art ,like Yves Klein's vision, Louise Lawler's vision, Damien Hirst's vision etc.

The shooting of our "Old Tobacco Warehouses" themed independent project is now complete. Some of these buildings, although very few, are still used in contemporary art activities or other photographers familiar with our works are benefiting from these places as decors. Sometimes I wonder, if I should go in spite of everything –even though neither the tobacco warehouse nor the cigarette factory remains now, if I should shoot that bare construction that now lost its function; I even attempted to do so a few times. But that aura of 'the beginning of the end' was already gone; the last traces of people were also lost. So I understood then, that the record was ended..

Within the project we began coincidentally, we created comprehensive image reserves regarding five architectural TEKEL complexes in five years. The images and records in the reserves are waiting for new exhibitions, albums and movies. Of course, we should also add that even though we formed groups from time to time, all of them are of individual quality.

A. Problem

TEKEL was established on March, 1, 1925. It is a government-granted monopoly that incorporates the tobacco industry, alcoholic beverages industry, salt industry and their services. But, "Tekel's alcoholic beverages entity was privatized in 2003, followed by the process of the privatization of tobacco factories which was completed later in 2008. This way, with TEKEL, a very important page of our national history had been closed." (Özerman, 2009 : 1). Saltpan lakes have been completely privatized also in 2006, followed by the priva-

tization of saltpan seas in 2010. With the privatization of TEKEL, the production of Turkish tobacco, which has an uncommonly good quality and a historical background of hundreds of years, starts encountering great problems. In 2002, with the new laws and regulations, support purchases end (Gümüş, 2009:230). According to the statistics of 1989, in 2006, the number of tobacco planters have dropped from 524.839 to 222.414. (Özkuş & Sarı, 2008:5). Moreover, the share of TEKEL in tobacco market has also dropped from 68.63% (2001), to 9% for %100 Turkish Tobacco and to 29% for Turkish and American Tobacco Blend (2007). (Özerman, *ibid*:1)

The nationalization attempts of the modern XX. Century is based on glorious freedom utopias. However, explaining the privatization policies of the postmodern XX. Century as well as our century, based on the reality of global liberalism is not sufficient, as the global liberalism can also be manipulated towards global and anti-utopist (Roman, 2010: 10) policies.

An important part of the Turkish Republic Culture, the TEKEL culture, has been wiped off with the aid of privatization policies. Gorgeous buildings, factories and warehouses that all belong to TEKEL, are being regarded as ordinary immovable. As a matter of fact, the related unit in the Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Privatization Administration is called "Gayrimenkul A. Ş. (Real Estate Inc.)". Moreover there is no place to custody TEKEL's Culture; there is not even a single museum dedicated to TEKEL.

On the other hand, in Turkey, the places that sell tobacco and alcohol beverages are called TEKEL vendors. TEKEL means also cigarette ,tobacco products, raki, wine, bier, liqueur ,cognac etc. TEKEL still exists in our language as well as in our everyday life. According to Pierre Nora in this context: "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent

evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand is the reconstruction always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present, history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it, it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection (...) Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative" (1989: 8-9).

B. Crisis

Interiors of deserted, historical buildings are inspiring locations. Artist/explorer/flâneur working inside experiences an illusion of being privileged. Actual present time of the outside corresponds to fantastic historical past of the inside. It is bright outside, but inside, the light creates dramatic surprises throughout the day. Some locked doors, dark passages, series of endless columns, unending stairs, collapsed floors, walls with paints peeled off, broken windows, elevators that no longer work, entwined rooms, constructional symmetries and parallelisms that are suddenly realized, all turn each one of us into Theseus. It is completely empty inside but still, traces of people are existent. Broken and worn out furniture, vindictive ivies, sacks leftover from tobacco bales, old television devices like sculptures made of dust, machinery parts, in the middle, still, mountains of tobacco dust who knows who, when swept and left like little pyramids, payroll sheets scattered around on the floor, reports, formal correspondences, lung x-rays, samples of

tobacco leaves which miraculously preserved their golden colors, a heaven of objet - trouvé! Some time just like a sound installation; Emanated silence from atmosphere! I was so happy...

But... then... something happened!

For me, being inside was based on taking photographs. As the visual recordings accumulated, appropriation of the tobacco warehouses was becoming mine but at the same time, euphoria of the location was getting lost. I had no obligation or gain but I was still working. Who was I? Why was I here? Why did I keep shooting?

- Was I a romantic flâneur, who was now walking around in tobacco warehouses and cigarette factories?

- Was I a miserable documentarian, getting my share out of the privatization of TEKEL?

- Was I a refugee of time, running from the postmodern outside and taking shelter in the modern inside?

- Was I a cultural memory militant, connected to the city of İzmir and the memory of Tekel with respect?

- Was I a mnemonic jouissance addict? It was now forbidden to smoke - I did not smoke anyway - tobacco planting was limited and there was no TEKEL. Impossibility contained by deprivation and nostalgia, had created fields of pleasure though fantastic!-

- Or was I in search of Marcel Proust who was In Search of Lost Time?

- Maybe I was a figurant in a series

III. CALLED "KAIROS VERSUS KRONOS" OR "MNEMOSYNE AGAINST SATURN"

I continued making visual recordings, my suspicions continued also. However I am /was recording nothing!..

In the fields of Cultural Studies, Memory Studies and Art-Studies, in the scope of interdisciplinary and inter-

textual relations, Philosophy has a natural essential position; but the relationship of non-philosophers with philosophy is a very delicate subject, even if only on the level of terminology. Nevertheless, I would like to resort to Heidegger with all my modesty by Graham Priest's interpretation: "... for Heidegger being and nothing is identical. If nothing is ineffable, then so is being. Heidegger states the pertinent identity as follows: 'Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same.' This proposition of Hegel's (Science of Logic, vol. I, Werke III: 74) is correct. Being and nothing do belong together, not because both – from the point of view of the Hegelian concept of thought – agree in their indeterminateness and immediacy, but rather because Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing. Heidegger's reason for supposing that being and nothing are the same is difficult to discern, but as far as I understand it can be summed up in the simple argument:

Being is what it is that makes beings be.

Nothing is what it is that makes being be.

Hence, being is nothing.

At the heart of each being is exactly nothingness. That is the essence of its being, that is, its' being. And since one cannot say what nothing is, one cannot say what being is either" (2001: 243).

If absence corresponds to presence, presence represents absence, let's return to the Photography!

IV. PHOENIX SYNDROME

Photography is both a memory-medium and an oblivion instrument. When photographers take photographs, they both make a memory-record and an oblivion record.

As photographers visualize the annihilated/ perished/ about to be perished/on the verge of being perished in deserted, isolated interior and exterior locations as a strategy of photographic language capacity, they in fact produce related metonymies for the reality they believe in, criticize and want to preserve. For example, Justin Armstrong, as an ethnographer/ flâneur/ photographer/ recorder, wandered in several abandoned towns and places of Saskatchewan, Canada and when he was in those towns, interpreted the atmosphere like this: "Here, Benjamin's 'angel of history' encounters Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope, and in this convergence, the historical fallout from the progress of time is made visible in the ruins of the ghost towns of Robsart and Orkney. In these towns, time takes on a shape of its own, it becomes present and tangible; a physical manifestation of historical accumulation emerges from these grassland ruins." (2011: 279)

Isolated, silent, empty, deserted - even though it is sometimes only on the level of impression- urban and rural areas, interior and exterior locations, have always fascinated photographers. Throughout the History of Photography -this situation is still present today - there are many documentary photographers, photojournalists and art photographers who work in and establish their poetics through these unique locations, environments and areas in question that have lost their practical functions. Of course, archeological photography and again in the frame of this theme, ethnographic photography is another subject, apart from what the memory guardians or oblivion orator photographers in question do.

Eugène Atget (1857-1927), between 1898 and 1927, working in only Paris, took the pictures of cityscapes, architectonic details, buildings' entrances, store fronts, arcades, passages, parks etc. and he

created several typologies in a consistent, obsessive and systematic way (Newhall,1984:267). This monumental documentary work (10 000 clichés) (Krauss, 1996:45) is a milestone in the evolution of photographic language. According to Walter Benjamin,... Atget's outstanding importance, who took photographs of the streets of Paris during 1900's from a point of view which did not include people, is because he fulfilled all the requirements of this phenomenon. It has very rightly been said that Atget photographed those streets as though they were crime scenes. Crime scene is also without people. Shot is realized on account of clues. Atget's photo shoots start turning into evidences throughout historical process. Hence those photographs' hidden political significance originates from this point. (2012 : 60)

After Atget, photographers continued to visualize "absent, nothing, abandoned" reality that gained different meanings throughout time. Political consciousness - just like Walter Benjamin indicated- and aesthetic creativity, hand in hand, create cultural metaphors.

At the present time ; many photographers represent this mentioned Phoenix Syndrome. If we were to give examples:

In his series titled *The Ghosts of Auschwitz - Birkenau* (2008), Cole Thomson (1954) has transformed by his auratic interpretation ,the images of visitors into ghosts of concentration camps, using low shutter speed. Through this mnemonic strategy, the absence of Auschwitz Concentration Camp and the presence of The Museum of Auschwitz Concentration Camp reciprocally and continually create each other. Thomson explains his artistic interpretation in his own website: "I had not intended to photograph during my tour

of the camps but after being there a few minutes ,I felt compelled .With every step I wondered about the people whose feet had walked in exactly the same footsteps as mine .I wondered if their spirits still lingered there today .And so I photographed ghosts”(2013).

Simon Norfolk's (1963) 'Bullet scarred outdoor cinema at the Palace of Culture in the Karte Char district of Kabul' landscape was taken in Afghanistan for his Chronotopia project (2002). On this big screen / wall screen, there are the traces of war and iconoclastic vandalism. But the surface in question is still the plane of projection where light brings image -all images! - into existence. Norfolk conceptualizes a state of Borges-like endless contemplation, carrying it to a more transcendental dimension even beyond Borges! Norfolk's cinema wall is a certain kind of Borges'Aleph. Borges explained what is Aleph: 'The Aleph? Yes, the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear - , without any confusion or blending" (1945: 6). For Norfolk: "Afghanistan keeps similar artefacts in what could be a Museum of the Archaeology of War (...) Mikhail Bakhtin called this kind of landscape a 'chronotope': a place that allows movement through space and time simultaneously, a place that displays the 'layeredness' of time. The *chronotopia of Afghanistan is like a mirror, shattered* and thrown into the mud of the past ; the shards are glittering fragments ,echoing previous civilizations and lost greatness (2005:1)

Tomoko Yoneda 's (1965) 'Japanese House 'Project (2010) is realized in Taiwan within historical houses built in Japanese architectonic style between 1895-1945. Former house of General Wang Shu-Ming, The Chief of Staff under Chiang Kai-Shek, Cidong Street, 11" I, II, III, IV are some examples from this project as

we can see in her own website (2013) In an interview with Yoneda, she explains his work: "I guess this is what drives me to create photographs about history. I want to show it from a new perspective... People should know history from all kinds of perspectives, and never forget or ignore it" (2013).

Michelle Rogers Pritzl, for her ongoing "Dissolution" project is photographing in traditional black and white way, "the physical and emotional traces of human experience found in abandoned buildings throughout the world." (2010: 100). A part of this series belongs to Chernobyl photos (2008): "even though these homes are abandoned, there is a sense of memory left inside them." She says frankly: "No matter the condition of the house or circumstances, you always find a trace of the people left there. When I go into the houses I make my own assumptions about why the homes were abandoned, but my assumptions are based on my own experiences and I'm essentially creating a narrative based on my own memories." (ibid).

One of the photographs from Çağdaş Koyunlu's (1987) Postapokaliptik (2012) titled series, is a black and white one, a melancholic İstanbul Cityscape/ a photograph of Haydarpaşa Train Station (Fig.4). As stated also by Hürriyet Newspaper, Haydarpaşa Train Station is closed forever in 18 June 2013 and has been through many fires, waiting for what its fate will be in accordance with the rent calculations. This station is one of the Modern Ottoman Architecture's most magnificent buildings. In the photo, the station building is sited out of focus (blurred), far beyond the sea with seagulls flying about. As to the foreground, there is a clear barrier constituted of a metal wall and barbed wires. Thus, the limited depth of field creates a symbolism of 'oblivion in progress '. Koyunlu says about

this project in his webpage: "We have a great desire for witnessing the demolition of the production system(...)When the world wanders as consumption on her sickbed, we create fake cheers .We carry on living unaware within the post-apocalyptic space of the postmodern times" (2013) .



Figure 4. From 'Postapokaliptik' series: Haydarpaşa Train Station (2012)© Çağdaş Koyunlu

In the city of Detroit, which its bankruptcy was officially declared on June 18th, 2013 "78.000 structures and 6000 lots were abandoned" (Feroohar, 2013:15). Detroit, one of XX. Century's most important automotive industry centers, had been in an economic and social crisis for nearly forty years .Therefore, an enormous city has become a fantastic dystopia park -like Jurassic Park - and at the same time a huge, wonderful art studio! Throughout the years 2005-2010, Yves Marchand (1981) and Romain Meffre (1987) photographed those urban ruins that are an indication of decline, with a perfectionist interpretation, in color, and realized an epic work by

reflecting that existing glorious past, in spite of everything. Marchand and Meffre explain the work in their website: "Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our societies and their changes, small pieces of history in suspension .The state of ruin is essentially a temporary situation that happens at some point ,the volatile result of changes of era and the fall of empires .This fragility, the time elapsed but even so running fast, lead us to watch them one very last time :being dismayed, or admire, making us wondering about the permanence of things. Photography appeared to us a modest way to keep a little bit of this ephemeral state" (2010).

In conclusion, visual records are authentically against oblivion; But on the other hand, constructing the past by nothing and hoping to reveal unknowable meanings of the past by photography act is - like phoenix burnt but raised from the ashes- a vanity of photographers. As Borges said in his ' POEMA':

El olvido, que purifica / The oblivion that purifies

La memoria que elige y que reescribe / the memory that chooses and re-writes

El hábito que nos ayuda a sentir que somos inmortales/ the habit that helps us to feel that we are immortels. (1988: 92).

REFERENCES

- [1] G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *Felsefe Nedir?*(Trans.Turhan Ilgaz), İstanbul:YKY,2012.
- [2] T.Özerman, "*Tekel, Özelleştirilmesinin Sonuçları*" *Mülkiye Dergisi*, vol. 262, p.1, May 12 2009.(Online). Available: [http://www.tekgida.org.tr/ Oku/225](http://www.tekgida.org.tr/Oku/225)
- [3] <http://www.oib.gov.tr/portfoy/tekel.htm/2013>
- [4] A.H. Gümüş , "*Türkiye'de Tütün Politikaları, Pazarlama Sorunları ve Çözüm Önerileri* ", Sector Report, 2009. Tütün Ekspertleri

- Derneği İzmir (Online) Available: <http://www.tutunekspor.org.tr/>
- [5] İÖzkul & Y.Sarı, "Türkiye'de Tütün Sektörünün Durumu,Sorunları ve Çözüm Önerileri"(2008).Paper presented at 2. Ulusal İktisat Kongresi,DEÜ,İzmir,Turkey. (Online) Available: <http://www.deu.edu.tr/ozkul.pdf>
- [6] M. Roman, "Coordonate a le disputei dintre post modernitate și modernitate", *Revue des Sciences Politiques* 25,p.10,2010. (Online) .Available: http://cis01.central.ucv.ro/revistadestiin_tepolitice/
- [7] P. Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (Trans. Marc Roudebush) , *Representation* 26, pp.8-9, Spring 1989.
- [8] G. Priest, *Heidegger and the grammar of being* in R. Gaskin, (Ed) *Grammar in Early Twentieth Century Philosophy*, New York: Routledge,2001.
- [9] J. Armstrong, "Everyday Afterlife Walter Benjamin and the politics of abandonment in Saskatchewan, Canada". *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, p. 279, May 2011.
- [10] B.Newhall, *Storia della Fotografia*, (Trans.Laura Loviseti Fuà), Torino:Giulio Einaudi,1984
- [11] R.Krauss, *Teoria e storia della fotografia* , (a cura di Elio Grazioli) ,Milano:Bruno Mondadori,1996.
- [12] W. Benjamin, *Pasajlar* , (Trans.Ahmet Cemal), İstanbul: YKY, 2012.
- [13] <http://www.colethomsonphotography.com/> 2013
- [14] J. L. Borges, *Aleph*, (Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author), 1945. (Online). Available: <http://web.mit.edu/borgesaleph-1.pdf> 2013
- [15] S. Norfolk , *Afghanistan* ,Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing,2005
- [16] <http://www.tomokoyoneda.com/> 2013
- [17]"Remembrance: An Interview with Tomoko Yoneda", (Online). Available: www.tokyoart_beat.com/ 2013
- [18] M.Rogers Pritzl , "Dissolution Project", *Black & White Magazine*,vol.73, p.100, March 2010.
- [19] www.hurriyet.com.tr/.../23537351.asp 19 June2013
- [20] <http://www.behance.net/cagdaskoyunlu>
- [21] R. Foroohar , "Broken City"; *Time* ,vol.182,No:6 ,p. 15, August 2013
- [22] www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/ the Ruins of Detroit /2010
- [23] J.L.Borges, *La cifra*, (a cura di Domenico Porzio) Milano:Oscar Mondadori,1982

