Mobilizing Memory
Interview with Ayse Gül Altinay and Isin Önol

Katy Deepwell

HAFIZAYI HAREKETE GEÇIRMEK: KADINLARIN TANIKLIGI MOBILIZING MEMORY, WOMEN WITNESSING was an exhibition organised by Ayse Gül Altinay and Isin Önol at the DEPO, Istanbul, 5 September- 3 October 2014. This interview with the curators took place by email in November 2014.

Katy Deepwell: Can you explain your curatorial motivation in bringing together the women artists for this show?

Ayse Gül Altinay: Although women have been central to contemporary struggles over memory (especially memories of violent pasts), neither the gendered aspects of mass violence nor the gendering of memory struggles have received adequate attention in public debates. In this exhibit, we wanted to make visible the many creative ways in which women and women artists have attempted to witness memories of violence and the struggles over such memories. The exhibition came out of the work of an international network of academics, artists and activists,'Women Mobilizing Memory', that emerged from the Women Creating Change Initiative of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Social Difference. Some of the questions we wanted to address through the exhibition and the accompanying workshop were: What is the role of witnessing in practices of resistance: including resistance to enforced silence and forgetting, to state power, and to inaction? How do women mobilize memories to bear witness to unbearable acts of violence, from genocide to occupation, from forced disappearances to the daily acts of being "***brought into line***"? How do they organize, analyse, cope? How do they make the future from their act of witnessing? And how do we all relate to their witnessing and to their making of an alternative future? As Jean Howard and Marianne Hirsch emphasize in their introductory text to the exhibition catalogue, the artworks in the exhibition resist monumentality in favour of intimacy, pointing to alternative modes of remembering and

Gülsün Karamustafa ***Meydanin Belegi/ Memory of a Square*** **Double channel video**

commemorating violent pasts. Of course, the effort to explore such alternatives need not focus exclusively on women artists. Doing a follow-up exhibition that is not limited to women artists, but continues to explore the gendering of memories and memory struggles would also be fascinating.

Katy Deepwell: Ayse, do you feel that the gendered dynamic in this exhibition tends to emphasise how the majority of women can only watch and observe, because they are rarely fighters? And a civilian population in modern warfare are typically victims of war, and so women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of war in terms of loss, bereavement, disruption to their lives and homes if they have to flee, as well as the consequences of rape and sexual violence? Is the agency in the term "*mobilization*" a way of regarding observation as tied to activism (to claims for social justice) and not as a passive activity?

Ayse Gül Altinay: I think the exhibition shows women as actors in many different capacities, and not only as victims. As the title suggests, the "***mobilization of memory***" is a key feature of the exhibition. We are interested in exploring both the ways in which memories (of wars, genocides, and of state violence of various sorts) are mobilized as acts of resistance, and the ways in which resistance is conceptualized and remembered. In all of the works, we either have the woman artist "***remembering***" or "***bearing witness***" as an act of resistance, or her work documenting, archiving, reflecting on women's memory work as resistance. But what is resistance? I think, this is one of the underlying questions in the exhibition. One can read a few of the works making the powerful claim that survival is an act of resistance – and encourage us to move beyond the dichotomy "***women as victims vs. women as fighters***". Survival itself is a long process that involves many many acts of resistance. Survival does not end with staying alive. For instance, the video installation of the Memory Center focuses on what it means to survive as a woman in a patriarchal society, facing a militarized, patriarchal state after having a partner disappear. It presents their lives as an ongoing struggle to survive physical state violence, economic violence, psychological violence, gender-based discrimination, and to re-position themselves as women in the patriarchal context in which they live. In addition to these daily acts of survival, they continue to "***hold the photograph***" in memory of their disappeared partner, challenging state authority and public memory. In the absence of any mechanisms of coming to terms with a painful internal war experience, by holding their photographs and sharing their personal memories of disappearance, they are indeed holding an uncomfortable mirror to the state that desperately wants to "***forget***" them, as well as to other citizens, who are ready to forget and move on with their lives. This is not a passive mode of observing or becoming a victim. They turn their victimization into an active survival and resistance to state violence, official history, and political memory. At least three of the works in the exhibition, by the Memory Center, by Aylin Tekiner, and by Nar Photos, bear witness to this multi-layered act of surviving and remembering as resistance by the families of the disappeared. The Palestinian women, having to face the daily task of living under a heavily militarized occupation, are also depicted in Emine Gözde Sevim's photographs as survivors and resisters, and not only as victims.

Another dichotomy that the works in the exhibition unsettle is the personal vs. public/political dichotomy. Gülsün Karamustafa's powerful video installation, for instance, forces us to explore the continuum between the "***domestic***" realm of home and the "***public***" square (Taksim) that has witnessed many acts of state and communal violence, as well as of political protest, through the years. Hera Büyüktaşçiyan's family video from the Taksim Square also explores this continuum and the working of what Marianne Hirsch would call "***postmemory***". Similarly, by inviting us into the "***homes***", through audio family stories and photos of the "***walls of mourning and memory***", of the activists whom we are familiar with from the Galatasaray Square where the "***Saturday people/ mothers***" meet every Saturday, Aylin Tekiner is making us curious about the connection between the personal and the public/political. Gülçin Aksoy's unsettling installation, where the body of a teenage girl is separated from the head (in a hood) with newspapers depicting militarized state violence during the 1980 military coup, make the link between the personal and the political even more explicit. In Lorie Novak's *Random Interference* – where we see the personal and political always interacting, interfering, interweaving – you have images of the woman as victim and survivor (and rarely as fighter or protestor) in the front page photos of the *New York Times*, and Lorie Novak as a woman reader struggling with memories, postmemories, and the heavy weight of witnessing. In her work, and in Emine Gözde Sevim's, in particular, we are invited to reflect on our role as indirect witnesses (through photographs and the media), which adds another layer to the questioning of the personal-political divide and the effort to rethink it as a gendered continuum.

One subtle subtheme in some of the works in the exhibit is the concept of "***family***". Susan Meiselas and Silvina der Meugerditchian, in quite different ways, draw connections between family photos and stories, and national narratives of belonging and violence. The Memory Center video installation draws attention to the break up of families through the disappearance of a (male) partner, and the process of making up a new family form, with the woman as the single parent and the single resister to ongoing state violence as well as to patriarchal restrictions. The formation of this new family form involve many layers of survival and resistance. Nar Photos, on the other hand, present women's acts of public resistance to different forms of state and gender violence in the form of a family album. Here, you have an added challenge to the heteronormative, patriarchal family form – and not only in the visuals and stories of LGBTI activists. Women's many acts of solidarity and resistance (presented in the form of a family album) point to the possibilities of imagining alternative "***families***" formed through political activism.

Lorie Novak *Random Interference* (2012-2014) Computer-driven randomized image sequence www.randominteference.net

Katy Deepwell: Can you tell me more about the project that the exhibition arose from? Who was involved?

Ayse Gül Altinay: The international network 'Women Mobilizing Memory' that emerged from the Women Creating Change Initiative of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Social Difference, had its first meeting in Santiago, Chile, in December 2013, and the second meeting in Istanbul in September 2014, hosted by Columbia Global Centers, Turkey, Depo, and Sabanci University Gender and Women's Studies Forum (Gender Forum). In addition to very inspiring and challenging academic presentations by young scholars from New York, Santiago and Istanbul, as well as by more

Above: Emine Gözde Sevim *Dis Ses/ Voice-over* (2014) Above: exhibition view. Right :details of video and computer, interactive computer based application www.voiceoverproject.org Development: Dmitry Krasnoukhov, Design support: Olena Bulygina.

widely known academics such as Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, Diana Taylor, Alisa Solomon, Marita Sturken, Leo Spitzer, Andreas Huyssen, and Sibel Irzik, there are artists and writers involved in the network. Photographers Susan Meiselas and Lorie Novak, fiction writer Nancy Krikorian, artists Silvina Der Meguerditchian and Aylin Tekiner, feminist activist and writer Soledad Falabella, and theater professor and performance artist María José Contreras, as well as Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia, Carol Becker were all integral to the Istanbul workshop, as well as contributing to the exhibition. The exhibition has been possible precisely because this network is daringly, humbly, genuinely challenging all borders, whether they are disciplinary or in the form of high walls between academia, art and activism. This is challenging for everyone participating in the network, but also deeply rewarding – and opens the path for new modes of collaboration and creativity to emerge. I, for one, had never imagined myself becoming the curator of any art exhibit. And here I am, a part of the curatorial team... It happened in the process of the creative exchange that has been taking place in this exciting and transformative feminist international network, where art plays an integral part in thinking about and analyzing political and social issues.

Katy Deepwell: Were the artists you invited involved in this initial project? And how did you select them with Isin? Had you worked with any of them before?

Ayse Gül Altinay: Susan Meiselas, Lorie Novak, and María José Contreras were present in the Santiago meeting, Nancy Kricorian attended the interim meetings in New York, Aylin Tekiner and Silvina Der Meguerditchian joined us for the workshop in Istanbul and became integral to the larger project. The other artists contributed to the exhibit with their creative works and joined us for either the special workshop meeting with the artists or the public panel, where we had both academics working on memory and art and artists themselves presenting to an unprecedented audience (both in terms of diversity and numbers).

The exhibit began as a wild dream when, in September 2013, Marianne Hirsch, Leo Spitzer and I visited Depo, an amazing art space in Istanbul, and had a welcoming and enthusiastic reception from Asena Gunal, the feminist director of Depo. We had no resources for organizing a major international exhibit, but we had a group of very enthusiastic dreamers. With Rana Zincir from the Columbia Global Centers Turkey joining in this group of enthusiasts, as well as Jean Howard, Diana Taylor, Susan Meiselas and Lorie Novak from New York, we began to roll. Asena, Rana and I came up with the initial list of possible artists whose works spoke to the concerns of the network, at the same time as we sought to find a curator who would be able to join in an ambiguous and challenging process of curating an international exhibit with almost no budget and multilayered concerns and

Silvina Der-Meguerditchian ***Families 1 and Families 2*** **(2013) Laminated digital print and wool**

questions that crossed the boundaries of academia, art and activism. When we realized that Isin could temporarily relocate from Vienna to join in the curatorial team, we were thrilled. She took it from there and turned the exhibition around, making it real and exciting and adding many new layers to it. Our only regret is that, due to limited time and resources, we could not get more artists from Turkey, and no artist from Chile. We hope that as the work of the network continues and expands, we will be able to involve more artists in this ongoing conversation and exploration. Personally, I experienced the process of curating the exhibit with this amazing group of women (including the artists themselves) as beautifully transformative, challenging, and fun at the same time. I will remember it as the best possible example of feminist collaboration and creativity, which will be hard to match in the future!

Katy Deepwell: With the conflict with Islamic State and Syria/Iraq on the borders of Turkey and a new flood of refugees from the region, the reception of this exhibition must have had an added urgency?

Ayse Gül Altinay: Absolutely. This context made our work both more difficult (as it highlights many urgent needs, including security, food, and shelter) and also more timely. One cannot understand and address the current wars in this region without contextualizing them in the recent history of related wars and struggles. The exhibition offered tools for such contextualization, as well as tools to imagine creative modes for struggling with wars and their memories in all their gendered dimensions. We had more than 200 people – from diverse circles and backgrounds – at the exhibition opening, and almost as many during the public panels, which suggests that this was indeed a timely effort that corresponded to people's needs and curiosities.

Katy Deepwell: Isin, the exhibition and the essays in the catalogue raise an interesting set of problems about how a camera might witness events and record them and how this is different from the ways in which women's memories and responses to war – to the loss, pain and suffering caused by conflict – actually operate. Some of these ideas about how the camera records centre on the idea that the camera is somehow a blank recording device or "*neutral*", but how we look at images and respond to them triggers memories and ideas in which it is just not possible to be unmotivated or unmoved. Can you explain how these distinctions operate in some of the works, which deal with trauma, war and pain?

Isin Önol: Each work at the exhibition, one way or the other, deals with the recording devices, with a desperate attempt to save the memories from State violence. Each artist intuitively chooses, either to record, or bring back into the audience's memories previously recorded images, to present alternative histories to the ones that are produced by the dominating voices or the state as the hegemonic *status quo*. Naturally, neither the operators of the devices, nor the witnesses or even the audiences witnessing the pain of the other, are objective. They are all biased in terms of the particular memories that they have experienced. The works at the exhibition may give various answers to this question. Some directly take up the role of the camera in so far as they make the audience witness the events, whereas others collect the existing information and present them as proofs of suppressed facts. Others use the images more strategically to create narratives based on a range of facts that they have experienced in the past. Such a selection deals with the notion of power that rules over histories through particular means in the transmission of information and collection of images.

In her work *Voice Over*, for example, Emine Gözde-Sevim uses 75 photographs that she took in Palestine and Israel in 2010. For the exhibition, apart from creating a web-based platform, she has created a video with the sequence of these photographs mimicking a slide projection, creating timeless images out of the photographs that were taken only a few years ago. Silvina Der-Meguerditchian on the other hand, attempts to bring together the memories of the divided Armenian families that were either massacred in 1915 or detached from each other, as they had to migrate as a diaspora of survivors. The collective act of stitching the collection of photographs created an Anatolian carpet that, on the one hand, brings back the suppressed story to where it belongs and where it might be solved, and on the other, creates another domestic gesture that closely and affectionately communicates with the audience, encouraging reminiscences about divided families.

Katy Deepwell: Can you describe some examples of works in the exhibition and discuss your own interests in some of these artists in more detail?

Isin Önol: When Hera Büyüktasçiyan used found footage from the family archives to produce her work *Red Line*, she knew that the video of the four or five year old girl from 1962 would represent something more than that

Right: Hera Büyüktasçiyan *Kirmizi Hat/ Red Line* (2014) video installation, wooden box, pedestal, digital monitor

when we view this footage in the context of a family history. The film shows a nice little girl in Taksim Square, filmed by her grandfather, Theodoros Adamandidis, a Greek, but its peaceful moment was filmed just seven years after the violent events of 5-6 September 1955, when fascist groups, notoriously sanctioned by the state, attacked the minority, mainly Greek, community and this led to the emigration of a vast number of ethnic Greeks from Turkey. This silent video was projected hidden in a dark box, and as such it not only shows a cute girl being filmed, it also reveals the memories that were silently kept within the family that the artist witnessed throughout her youth.

Similarly, with *Anonymous*, Gülçin Aksoy, generously discloses another personal experience of state violence that

Gülçin Aksoy*ANONIM/ Anonymous* (2014) Installation: sack, video, print on paper.
Aylin Tekiner *Duvarda/On the Wall* Photography and audio installation. Photos: Fatih Pinar
Hakikat Adalet Hafiza Merkezi / Truth Justice Memory Center *Holding up the Photograph* (2014) 3 channel video
by Hatice Bozkurt, Özgür Sevgi Göral, Özlem Kaya. Editing: Burcu Kolbay, Lara Güney

she had to face as a child after the 1980 military *coup d'état*, yet thought she needed to be quiet about. However, the anonymity of people that were killed or forcibly disappeared, that she witnessed as a child in the newspapers everyday appeared to be more critical for her than her own direct experiences. They both bring together the personal and political expressions in a very effective way.

Then, Gülsün Karamustafa, in her double channel film *Memory of a Square* blends together the found footage and a narrated film around the memories of the Taksim Square. The recent memories of the Taksim Square with Gezi Uprising inevitably come to the mind of the viewer today, however, these works remind the audience about the longer history of the square which has been the site of many suppressed memories of state violence. The various strategies used in this video work reveal individual experiences amongst what is also known by everyone. None of these works needed to say more to communicate with local or historically aware audiences in Istanbul whose lives have been part of this collective memory.

Katy Deepwell: The exhibition has a focus on women's activism against war, with protests of mothers in particular, holding up images of their loved ones on demonstrations. Can you say some more about this?

Isin Önol: This was probably the most significant aspect of the exhibition as it spoke straightforwardly to the audience. The three channel video work *Holding up the Photograph* by Truth Justice Memory Centre, and the photograph, text, sound installation *On the Wall* by Aylin Tekiner provided the most direct immersion for the audience to encounter what the families of the forcibly disappeared people had to experience. The Saturday Mothers/People who are the represented in these works have been protesting every Saturday at 12pm at a square on the main pedestrian street of Istanbul. The Saturday, beginning 1 November 2014, was the 500th week of their protests and finally masses of people joined them. As their act of the protest had been repeated every Saturday, it had become somehow invisible both for the state and the public. Both of the works aimed at opening

Above: NarPhotos *Hatirda Kalan / Remaining Memories* (2005-2014) Installation, Photographs, photograph albums.

up a space for the Saturday Mothers to be visible as influential individuals who have been determinedly seeking for justice for so many years. The Memory Centre lets us listen directly to the wives of the missing beloved ones in video recordings of their intimate stories, which helps the audience to imagine the missing person vividly. Tekiner, on the other hand, follows the traces of the missing persons in their homes, showing us the photographs, which are carried and held up every Saturday, in their domestic spaces. When we stand in front of Tekiner's photographs of their photographs, we can listen to the importance that these photographs have in the sound recordings and read the text-based accounts of the relatives of the missing people.

Katy Deepwell: In the exhibition there are strong differences between documentary works which seem to include some images "*restaged*" for the camera/ reconstructed to recall events like Karamustafa's work, some "*real*" recording which are filmed at protests events as they unfolded (like Susan Meiselas or Memory Centre) and other more poetic works like Lorie Novak's *Random Interference* which creates a poetics of memory and loss in complex collages and overlaid images? I realise that you are trying to show a broad dynamic of approaches amongst women but could you talk about how you see the differences between these works?

Isin Önol: Susan Meiselas founded the *akaKURDISTAN* archive work as a web project in 1998 as an attempt to build a platform for collective memory, for people who did not have a national archive. She has continually collected the material sent by Kurdish people from all around the world, but mainly from the areas unofficially named as Kurdistan, and those in Turkey or Europe. What Meiselas did for the exhibition was to reconstruct the historically suggested abstract map of Kurdistan, and then pin to the map booklets that consist of collected texts and images. Just like the works by Tekiner and Memory Center, Meiselas brought the voice of the individuals subjected to the state violence directly to the audience of the exhibition. These are not simple records: they are texts and images brought intimately to an audience that is confronted with small stories through which they can assemble a larger history.

With their work *Remaining Memories,* Nar Photos make a similar attempt to reinstate memory and not only display the images of the significant moments of demonstrations, festivals, protests and other collective acts of resistance, but also provide for us the stories behind them. The people we see in these images become more familiar to the beholder because they are presented in a setting consisting of family albums, domestic tables and objects, as well as the texts.

Lorie Novak's work *Random Interference* is another example of a work using a domestic setting. Novak has been

Susan Meiselas *akaKURDISTAN* (1997-2014) Map painted on wall and 17 booklets with rings and chains. Booklets Turkish translation: Gülin Ekinci http://www.susanmeiselas.com/akakurdistan

collecting the *The New York Times* over the last fifteen years and photographing the texts and images from their front pages. With a computer-generated program, she presents these photographs randomly. She also added images from Turkey and other places in the course of the exhibition. She has shown these images not on a computer screen but a living room TV monitor. The randomness and omnipresence of the news images were in an inevitable dialogue with Aksoy's collection of anonymous disappearances in the newspapers.

Katy Deepwell: As well as these contrasts between women, there is also a strong contrast in the exhibition in how the women artists selected have also represented men: either as active soldiers as in Emine Gözde Sevim or as lost brothers, fathers, sons and male relatives in the photos recorded in Aylin Tekiner or Silvina Der-Meguerditchian?

Isin Önol: The representation of men is rather more explicit in Karamustafa's video, where the men of the house actively take part in the political events outside, and the women are depicted in the domestic environment within the given narration. This, of course, characterized the conditions of the past that she depicts in the video. On the other hand, the absence of men in the video of the Memory Center is important. In the course of preparing the documentation and interviews for the preparation of the book *Holding Up the Photographs: Experiences of the Women Whose Husbands were Forcibly Disappeared*, the team of the Memory Center deliberately went to the houses of the interviewees when the husbands and other male relatives were not at home, so that the wives of the missing men would freely tell their memories. The invisible male image is also strongly present at Hera Büyüktaşçiyan's work. The grandfather of the artist is continuously present behind the camera, almost forcibly filming his little granddaughter, determined to capture her cuteness. These gestures by the artists indicate how men can be represented differently, more obliquely, rather than in the more obvious images or voices of men that happen to take place in many other works about war.

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Ayse Gül Altinay lectures at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University and is author of *The Myth of the Military-Nation: Militarism, Gender and Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Artists in the Mobilizing Memory exhibition were Gülçin Aksoy, Hera Büyüktaşçiyan, Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, Hakikat Adalet Hafiza Merkezi (Truth Justice Memory Center), Gülsün Karamustafa, Susan Meiselas, NarPhotos (Serra Akcan, Fatma Çelik, Gülsin Ketenci, Aylin Kizil, Serpil Polat), Lorie Novak, Emine Gözde Sevim, Aylin Tekiner. All photos, courtesy of the artists and curators.