

Two or three things

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

Already the title of this exhibition, *2 or 3 things I know about Turkey*, is open-ended. We are immediately presented with a set of questions: What does it mean to know something about Turkey? Why specify and yet not specify the number two or three things?

At first glance, we can note that there are two leitmotifs installed in one exhibition space. Yet there are “two or three” things; not two, not three, not “two *and* three” things suggested by the exhibition’s title. In other words, the focus of the exhibition title is “or” rather than “and”. This former conjunction is used in order to link alternatives (“the sounds of a race car *or* a musical score”), as a means to introduce a synonym or explanation of a preceding word or phrase (“music is an organized series of sounds, *or* a composition”).¹ Yet by departing from two, rather than one, also allows for both “and” and “or” (“music is a series of sounds *and* so is the racetrack recording, *or* composition”). In essence the conjunctive *or* is a binary term, but in this context the word seems to be doing something else – perhaps providing a third alternative. So how are we to interpret this gesture?

The first thing: İlhan Usmanbaş

Using different media fragments in an essayistic format this section attempts to frame the double nature of İlhan Usmanbaş’s search for a Universalist style of music while he simultaneously was employed as a state composer – implying a National Republican agenda.

The soon 97-year-old experimental composer İlhan Usmanbaş is a second-generation modern Turkish composer. He belongs to the generation that comes after the *Turkish Five* and who was opposed to their folklorist republican musical ideals. In its place, Usmanbaş was fascinated by notions of Universalism and was significantly stimulated by Schönberg’s twelve-tone theory. His works have been noted for their freedom of form and include such diverse techniques as neo-classicism, aleatoric music, serialism and minimalism. Usmanbaş has composed over 120 works to date but despite his prolific and intrepid work Usmanbaş remains surprisingly unknown in his homeland Turkey.

For Mike Bode, artistic practice is a form of rehearsal, or a learning process, where an artwork endeavours to create a space for thinking. Bode says: “It is about learning, both for me as an artist and for the spectator.

The work can also be seen as a kind of landscape painting, anyone can decipher a landscape and find or discover something depending on their position.

The work utilizes many different ready made media fragments in an assemblage and in an essayistic mode, which places the artistic focus not on the production of visual material but rather on the framing and organization of the material itself.”²

The second thing: The İstanbul Park Formula 1 Race Track

We went to the track construction every week, saying “It’s impossible, it will not be ready on time.” There was still so much to do ... The highway, the roads, the track... The weather conditions had gone bad, it was rough between TOBB, ITO and the state. The

last two months we had been working 24 hours a day. Two weeks till the race, we had the opportunity to take a few cars and make an unofficial test. Of course at that stage, the paint was coming off in one place, the asphalt was not done in another place, we wanted to go in and try the system but they told us the cameras weren't on; we weren't able to do anything. When the teams started coming on Monday, kilometers of artificial lawns were still being laid. Everything was done in the last week.³

Serhan Acar

In August 2002, the 57th Government granted approval and state guarantees for the F1 Turkey project and the track was inaugurated on 21 August 2005 and has been named the best racetrack in the world by Formula 1 Chief Executive Bernie Ecclestone. However the audience never really found their way to the races and despite investment of vast sums of money and the track was closed only six years after its opening. Today it stands as a utopian monument or Coliseum with an uncertain future.

Following the international ambitions, intentions and demise of the İstanbul Park Formula 1 racetrack in Akfırat village east of İstanbul, we are here presented with a series of interviews together with footage and renderings from the racetrack as well as memorabilia and magazine clippings to periodic recording of roaring engines. The soundtrack, or the sound of the track, inevitably overlaps the avant-garde compositions of Usmanbaş, creating a strange kind of audio-mirror between the works.

Or, the third thing:

Since I cannot escape the objectivity crushing me, nor the subjectivity expelling me, since I cannot rise to a state of being nor collapse into nothingness, I have to listen, more than ever I have to look around me at the world, my fellow creature, my brother...

Jean-Luc Godard, *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*.⁴

The two things described above are amalgamated in the exhibition space. Presented in a fragmented and semi-narrative format, each part unfolds an inherent narrative of its own – two different contexts, histories, successes and failures. In this way, the overall presentation – its performativity if you will – seems to be an attempt to reflect the nature of the exhibition's subject matter.

It is an exhibition made up of many different types of media (music, film, YouTube clips, texts, interviews, photographs, music scores and notation and magazine articles etc.) each with their own time loops or displayed formats that are abridged or “edited together” through the spatial arrangements of installation itself. For instance the dramatic sounds of Usmanbaş music which is played in the space mixes at times with the sound of racing cars from video sequences from some of the actual races taken from YouTube and projected on the walls and creating momentary confusions as to what we actually are hearing. At first encounter the only obvious connection between the two parts (Formula 1 racing and/or atonal music) is this sound. Yet at a closer look it becomes clear that the pairing of content and form also gives rise to an imaginary “third space” in the attempt to explore the representational strategies of real and imagined places.⁵ As the

distinctions between projection and reality merge one might even say that this is an attempt to access a deeper understanding of Turkey on a meta-level. Or perhaps an attempt to articulate various successes and failures caused by a particular a cultural and political restlessness.

As such, this third space attempts to engage with Turkey on a metonymic level, through historical notations. That does not mean that work is attempting *explain* something. Rather than being a Hegelian synthesis, the exhibition seeks out some kind of in-between as a means of framing a cultural poetics and describing the transformation of ideas, time and space in Turkey. A constant re-boot. An “or”. Instead of an archival, journalistic or documentary based artwork (although some parts may appear that way), we find an arrangement of possible interrelationships that create a third *thing* between the other two. Because what does it mean to know something about Turkey? And aren’t two things we know in fact always three?

In this sense, the exhibition seems to access something in the Turkish social, cultural and political landscape from the outside. It asks how to deal with altering cultural values in a restless political and cultural environment.

The questions are asked on an existential rather than socio-political level, but in a country with several cultural and political shifts within a very short timespan certain specific political implications are inevitable. How should for instance an audience response be understood from the perspectives of a State sanctioned composer, an international large-scale sports event supported by the State or the contemporary art scene? Why does Usmanbaş still remain so unknown?

Why did the general public abandon the İstanbul Park Formula 1 Race Track so quickly? Is cultural heritage defined by the present or could the present be understood from the horizon of these cultural policies of the past?

The answers to these questions are detailed, since they are posed from one particular practice to another – from an artist to a composer, or from an artist to an enthusiast who opened a racetrack. Being situated is always present since the answer also connects to larger questions about which roles an artist can take in relation to the exhibition space, the creation of his or her own subjectivity, the movements of history, day-to-day politics and so on.

The two or three things at stake here go beyond knowing something about Turkey. It is about what it means to know something at all and how culture functions in relation to capital, institutional agendas or populist settings and how to sustain culture in a state of constant memory loss and societal unease that these factors create. The social condition, in which memory is disturbed, is global. One effect of such amnesia is the inability to imagine the future. An incapacity to talk about the “or”.

¹ Alternatively, “or” simply used to connect two numbers that represent two alternatives: two or three, not one exhibition or two installations; to be or not to be. Or, it used to connect alternative terms for the same thing represented by a number: two or three, the composer, or writer. Or, it used in correlation: two or three, either two or three; two or three or things, meaning whether two or three might make a difference. Or, it used to correct and rephrase what was previously said: two or three; two, or rather three, things about Turkey. Otherwise it could be “or else”, or a sign of uncertainty: two or three; it’s either two, or three.

² Mike Bode in conversation with the author, January 2018.

³ Serhan Acar, TOSFED Assistant Director of the period. “Rüzgar gibi geçti” (Gone with the Wind), Atahan Altınordu, p.90-100, Socrates 03, June 2015, Can Yay. İstanbul.

⁴ My translation from Godard’s French film.

⁵ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994