

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

A Dreamlike Distortion of Turkish Patriarchal Society

In Lara Ögel’s work, structures of power appear encoded in unexpected ways and emerge from the most commonplace situations.

Ari Akkermans | December 1, 2016



Lara Ögel, “Come Back! All Is Forgiven” (2016), installation view, Protocinema, Paris (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

PARIS — The construction of the video “Home Dream” (2016), projected on one of the walls of a stone-lined storefront in Le Marais, reminds the viewer of the techniques of avant-garde filmmakers like Farocki or Godard, not only in the use of soft montage (uncomplicated juxtaposition) to establish a visual code for thinking about something, but also in the

attempt to disestablish authorship, featuring characters with limited personalities reducing the field of human action almost to automation. In this piece, Turkish artist Lara Ögel worked on a similar principle, collecting images and sequences from the public domain in order to build an almost anonymous architecture of the domestic: What is the dream of a home and homemaking? Through what kind of images is this dream articulated, and how does its fantasy world affect agency? The subjects in the montage are almost theatrical, as if they couldn’t exist outside this frame of reference.

Yet Ögel's visual poetry is neither abstract nor ideological. Behind this dream-world lurks the potent words: "I shudder with guilt as I look at my future." The accompanying melody is a song by the great Turkish classical singer Müzeyyen Senar, setting to music a poem written by İhsan Naif, a young woman who lived in the Ottoman society of the late 19th century and was befallen by a tragic event: When she was just 13, a man attempted to kidnap her, staining her honor and causing her to be sent away by her father as a young bride to İzmir. The poem, "Kimseye Etmem Sikayet" ("I complain to no one") is the gloomy tale of a long exile against her will. Yet Ögel, who was born in İzmir and lived in the traditional quarter of Nişantaşı where Naif lived before her exile, is concerned with more than the obvious aesthetic of the absented female voice. In her work, structures of power appear encoded in unexpected ways and emerge from the most commonplace situations.



Lara Ögel, "Come Back! All Is Forgiven" (2016),
installation view, Protocinema, Paris

In her current exhibition, *Come Back! All Is Forgiven* (her first presentation outside of Turkey), the video "Home Dream" appears alongside two other video works, "Dream Sequence" (2016) and "Agustos" (2016). A polyphonic stream of consciousness sets the background for a centerpiece installation (titled after the show) made of iconic street bollards from both Istanbul and Paris, aptly called *baba* (father) in Turkish slang, which

are used to control traffic or obstruct passage in urban space. Understood by Ögel as phallic objects, they are a metaphor for the patriarchal social order in Turkey where movement — physical, intellectual, political, and ultimately spatial — is tightly controlled and prescribed. The story of İhsan Naif, though distant in time, is paradigmatic of the present situation in Turkey where the female body is often at the receiving end of state-sanctioned violence.

But the history of bollards in Istanbul presents Ögel with a twofold opportunity. On the one hand, one can look at how these objects are dealt with in popular culture — often mutilated, uprooted, moved, or painted over, but never destroyed and eventually returned to their original location — as a humorous metaphor for a rigid social order. But they also fall within a new vocabulary of urban spaces that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries with a new technological order, at the heart of which was the centralization of power and the engineering of social life. Bollards are not

unique in this process; we are talking here about the introduction of widespread phenomena such as master plans, social housing, commercial boulevards, public squares, and passages. Ögel's history of the city — a mismatch between a new technological imaginary and the old social order that is still prevalent, led her to read the city through the writings of Walter Benjamin.



Lara Ögel, "Come Back! All Is Forgiven" (2016), installation view, Protocinema, Paris

Early in 2015, the artist began a long-term engagement with a group of Turkish and German artists around Benjamin's obscure but influential *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which culminated in 2016 with the exhibition *Past, in Each of Its Moments, Be Citable*. There, Ögel presented the sculpture "Grey Matter" (2016), which was based on the suppression of graffiti in public spaces in Istanbul since the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Today,

graffiti is quickly covered by the municipality in grey and white, giving the city a new face in which discarding utterances of freedom in civic life has become tantamount to the discarding of cultural objects and the falsification of history – now it is not history but the present itself that is being falsified. The bollards in Ögel's current exhibition recreate this space of transition in the present and address the dreamlike distortion effect of modern life upon our memory, showing how this has transformed our understanding of both time and the past.



Lara Ögel, "Grey Matter" (2016)

In Benjamin's text, a quotation from German historian Leopold von Ranke — "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it really was" — is given the following explanation: "It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." This is one of the book's key passages, written in 1940, at one of the most crucial moments of danger in the course of World War II, when a Nazi victory seemed almost

unavoidable and "moment of danger" took on a whole new meaning. Benjamin's

understanding of history is not that of a cyclical accumulation of events or a chronology, but a complex anthropocentric time-structure that encompasses ideology, politics, and the imagination. In this passage, breaking from the Christian understanding of history as a destiny, he distinguishes history from time or even merely the past, attempting to reconstruct the concept of history as an image.

History thereby becomes, in Benjamin's own words, "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never is seen again." In our current political climate, when the images of history and the present (a post-image lack of correspondence between truth and reality, often scrutinized only by the loop of mass media) merge with the subconscious sequences of dreams, memories, advertisements, and expectations, it is no longer possible to recognize the boundary between image and subject, between danger and fiction, however inescapable the presence of imminent threats may be. The interface in Ögel's *Come Back! All Is Forgiven* between these aspects of our everyday experience (of a moment of danger) is subtle but pointed, yet never articulated as a master narrative or countercurrent; rather, everything remains intimate. Bringing her work to Paris in fact amplifies the conversation with Benjamin by not restricting it to the temporal mood of just one place.



Lara Ögel, "Come Back! All Is Forgiven" (2016), installation view, Protocinema, Paris

The installation is not total or immersive in the sense that particular details still matter, and therein lies the poetics of Ögel, a conceptual artist animated by objects and images as much as by writing and seeing. Since her recent solo exhibitions in [2013](#) and [2014](#), which concentrated on personal narratives built around a collection of found objects, the artist has begun to move in the direction of much larger questions, without giving up on the

open-endedness of an aesthetic process: looking from a window into another window, or gazing into a fragment of a window that once belonged to the artist's grandmother's house in İzmir — perhaps a reference to İhsan Naif and the theme of flight and liberation that punctuates the new work. Yet Ögel's reading of Benjamin is very far from the decadent aesthetic tropes we usually find in art. In between so many obscure passages, Benjamin's reading on the wall about the critique of liberalism is sharp and clear for us today. "The current amazement that the things

we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”

Come Back! All Is Forgiven *continues at Proto Cinema (5 rue Notre Dame de Nazareth) through December 4.*