The Art of Migration

*Contemporary Visual Artists beyond the Boundaries of Turkey*

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Contemporary Visual Artists beyond the Boundaries of Turkey

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Abstract

This article explores mobility and migration from Turkey to Europe and its role in the making of trans- and international (artistic) identities. It specifically investigates the articulation and dynamics of hyphenated European-Turkish identities, and new forms of European and diasporic citizenship through the work and biographies of contemporary visual artists originally from Turkey who have left their ‘home’ for various reasons (migration, education, or artist residencies). What makes these artists particularly pertinent for an investigation of new forms of identity, citizenship-making, and belonging in contemporary Europe is that their art cannot exist without either Europe or Turkey. By concentrating on their art, this paper focuses on a new way of thinking about the immigration experience and the politics of belonging through an investigation of how these artistic trajectories are mapped in a transnational context through a number of different cities including Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Istanbul.

Keywords

Contemporary art, Immigration, Mobility, Transcultural art

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Introduction

“Migration is a historical as well as a trans-historical concept: transhistorical in the sense that people and cultural forms have always migrated; historical in the sense that the character of migration has changed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While the term migration refers to population movements either within nation states or across their borders, modern migration movements are more complex and diverse.”\textsuperscript{1} The art world boasts of many ‘immigrant’ artists, now traveling and working between the West and the non-West, North, and South. They are now attaining a completely new status as world travelers, carrying out a veritable exchange between cultures and peoples.\textsuperscript{2} I would like to suggest a new way of thinking about the immigration experience: not as a fixed and static point or a landing, but rather as a dynamic trajectory. Commencing in a ‘someplace’ of origin (in this case, Turkey) and eventually leading to a city in another country, via the ‘arrival city’ with its economic, educational, political, and cultural life, this dotted line is a tangible reality in the minds and lives of most immigrants.

Transitoriness is frequently defined as a state antithetical to belonging: between stable states and homes. One of the aspects of globalization has been the identification of a new social group expanding constantly. In a country such as Turkey, the fluidity of borders – geographic, psychological, and symbolic – is graven into the national consciousness. As the focused selection of artists in this article attests, the common thread that binds contemporary artists originally from Turkey (active in Turkey or elsewhere) is a state of being that encompasses many voices and multiple places, and an understanding that home is a zone that we actively create which can be later remade, and remade again.

This article explores mobility and migration from Turkey to Europe and its role in the making of trans-and international identities. It specifically investigates the articulation and dynamics of hyphenated European-Turkish identities, and new forms of European and diasporic citizenship through the work and biographies of contemporary visual artists originally from Turkey who have left their ‘home’ for various reasons (migration, education, or artist residencies). What makes these artists particularly pertinent for an investigation of new forms of identity, citizenship-making, and belonging in contemporary Europe is that their art cannot exist without either Europe or Turkey. Concentrating on their art as ‘snap shots,’ this paper focuses on the politics of belonging through an investigation of how these artistic trajectories are mapped in a transnational context through different cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Istanbul.

The exploration of aesthetic dimensions of cultural products and works of art created by artists who engage themes such as migration, transculturation and cultural translation will be the focus of this article. This is what makes concentrating on a number of artists originally from Turkey that has emerged since the 1990s a rewarding exercise, for the reason that the artists have no choice but to engage – which may also mean through disengagement – with Turkey and its numerous stereotypes and assumptions. The artists in focus are models of cultural pluralism: having trained in Europe, while maintaining an art practice indelibly tinged with

\textsuperscript{2} Hanru, Hou and Gabi Scardi (editors), Wherever We Go – Art, Identity, Cultures in Transit (Milan: 5 Continents, 2008), 15.
Turkish experience, whatever that may be in their or our eyes and therefore become examples of the global worldview that is a hallmark of contemporary art. As Mieke Bal and Miguel A. Hernandez-Navarro write, “migration becomes a double movement, a double metaphor: of transport, hence of instability – the first movement; and subsequent productive tensions – the second movement. Every culture has the aesthetics it deserves; contemporary culture, we contend, has therefore a ‘migratory aesthetics’.”

As Frederick N. Bohrer notes, “[Stuart] Hall makes the case for understanding concepts like belonging and homes in the context of migration, statelessness, diaspora and similar features of a globalized world. Counterintuitive as it may seem, this conception is already with us, rooted in the trajectories of transnational life.” As we come to see identity in the interplay of various dynamic forces, it follows that identity itself is not fixed, but fluid – not given but performed. In this context, Hall writes: “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact… we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” In his terms, we see an identity constituted within representation. That is, it is a sense of oneself and others that emerge in the making, not one designed to correspond to some prior, exterior condition. It comes about not through reiterating but rather questioning and recontextualizing inherited cultural practices.

As Katherine Pratt Ewing argues, “the concept of hybridity is not a good model for analyzing how people caught between cultures actually negotiate identity, because it does not explain how individuals manage inconsistency through a variety of cultural and psychological strategies that generate multiple, contextualized identities.” She later states, “that an ideology based on multiculturalism and celebratory hybridity imagines homogeneous collective identities that hamper recognition of the actual heterogeneity”.

For Turkey, these oscillations are particularly pronounced, no less because its modernization had always sought the integration with the West. For those Turkish artists who are on the global art stage, a common thread is the many slippages that occur from (non)belonging, or in other words in forms of identification that are “yes...but”. The artists and works below have been chosen for the extent to which they exemplify the contemporary and always evolving notion of the ‘fluid space’. This is the space where cultural legacy and inheritance is not abjured, but rather exposed for its heterogeneity, and its constructive capacity to shape and re-imagine itself as they destabilize clichés. In order to give an example from possible routes of mobility or

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7 Ibid., 285.
8 See Lora Sariaslan, ‘They are all Turks, but very very nice’: Re-placing contemporary artists of Turkish origin’, *European Journal of Futures Research* 2016 4, 3. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40309-016-0084-2
the different trajectories of immigration, this article will focus on artists who come from the Gastarbeiter background (Nasan Tur) or move to Europe due to parents who wanted to migrate for a better life (Anny and Sibel Öztürk), and lastly, migrating as an adult primarily for education and a better life (Servet Koçyiğit).

Nasan Tur

Born in Offenbach in 1974, Nasan Tur currently lives and works in Berlin. The son of Gastarbeiter, he positions himself firmly in the Berlin art world and possesses a varied practice that ranges from sculpture, drawing, video and photography to performance and installation. Keeping observation, analysis, and reproduction at the heart of his oeuvre, Tur works with political ideologies, subliminal messages, as well as symbols of power and dissent.

“The attempts to overcome visible and invisible borders, at least symbolically or metaphorically, through cultural practices must therefore ultimately include a serious rethinking of how art can be meaningfully and productively linked to political activism in the context of migration.”9 As Nasan Tur says, “I see myself as a political person, so I am therefore also a political artist. However, I believe my task as an artist is not to pursue politics, but rather to seriously and critically address political themes that considerably influence our lives in society. This also means producing uncomfortable and challenging works.”10 Tur turns into a prime practitioner of what Mieke Bal and Miguel A. Hernandez-Navarro write as “art can enact small-scale resistances against the status quo”. And moreover, “art works as art because it works politically.”11 So, too, does Nasan Tur.

The variability of people’s perceptions and reactions depending on their cultural background make up the most important part of the social context that Tur observes and describes. Elemental, human, and yet at times difficult to analyse, humor can be political and is an entry point into diverse cultures as well as a strategy to survive within it. Tur enables a case to focus on how humor works as a captivating mode of expression, a cultural product, and topic for discussion, despite its levity. Humor is a constant in human lives, ever present, although ever-changing, and inextricably tangled up with art. Examining humorous art in its full complexity, however, can reveal not only witty and strategic manipulations but also layered meanings and aesthetic sophistication. Humor surprises and grabs our attention, and that is precisely why artists employ it… and what better place to start from but the self. Needless to say, self-portraiture has a long tradition. As the first ‘snapshot’ of the artist, I would like to focus on a rather contemporary example of a self-portrait by Nasan Tur where he practices multiple identities. Prior to applying for his German identity card, Tur grew a moustache in order to look like a ‘typical’ Turk and then had his photo taken in this manner. The result is that his ID card shows the photograph of a young man with moustache, apparently fitting to the Turkish name documented on it, however, for the artist, the photograph was a personal performance and experience.

“When I applied for a German documentation, I grew a moustache for a few months that

9 Moslund et al., 8.
11 Bal et al., 9.
would better reflect the stereotype of the Turk in Germany. This alteration on my face had a great impact on my daily life. People’s reaction to my appearance changed completely. In the circles where I usually hang out, I suddenly became unpopular, I was negatively judged and considered not sexy by women while, by contrast, I was greeted with a friendly ‘Selaam aleykum’ when I passed by Turkish and Arab cafes and gained enthusiastic compliments from my uncles and aunties. I had my photograph taken with this Turkish moustache and I passed it onto the authorities for the issuing of the passport. Now I am the owner of a German passport with a photo that conforms to the cliché of the typical Turk, but in reality, has nothing to do with me.”

In his Self-Portrait (2000) (Fig. 1), Nanan Tur embodies the reinforced national stereotype of a dark-skinned Turk with a moustache on a German identity card, a ‘place’ where everything is in German, and where the Turk is absent. The moustache, as the cultural Turkish ‘suffix,’ is not translated into German. The work is not a representation of Tur, but a parodic mime of stereotypes of ‘authentic’ Turkishness that reflect only our projections of identity; and indeed, it undermines any claims to fixed or authentic identity. Although enjoying growing the exaggerated ‘Turkish moustache,’ Tur was also aware of a clear change and increasing process of exclusion from his own circles. In addition, the fun was not extended to the border controls where he was not only seen as foreign but also threatening and therefore inspected.

A passport or an identity card lies on the border of private and public, individual and ordinary. It is a tool of altered heterogenic significance when abroad, and simultaneously a definer of identity through national affiliation. In a humorous way, Tur demonstrates that identity depends mostly on diverse forms, namely contact with others and their reading or reception of the signs. Comparing ‘presumed’ or ‘pre-conceived’ Turkish and German stereotypes, he examines the subject of identity and its social implications. The work is humorous and ironic, yet, investigative and critical at the same time.

Achille Bonito Oliva, the artistic director of the 1993 Venice Biennial and one of the earliest art critics and curators in Europe to discuss the effect of globalization on art writes:

“A work of art comes to function much like a mixer, blending together diverse languages while causing traditional aesthetic categories to dematerialize. It acts on the viewing public with the alienating force of reality in motion, by the ability to affirm its own lack of consensus. Its consistent nature of diaspora springs from a tradition going from the historical avant-garde to trans-avant-garde, and it witnesses that art is autonomous and that it cannot operate according to the principles of identification. Contemporary art successfully exploits the overcoming of traditional barriers, to gain access to the rapidity of itineraries that play on the principle of

Fig. 1: Nanan Tur, Self-portrait, 2000. Original German passport, 7x10 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

contamination. This principle counters the risk of standardization, which is the consequence of telecommunication and globalization. On the one hand, such a principle makes the most of trespassing and cultural interaction; on the other hand, it affirms that the individual artist has the right to produce unexpected and amazing forms, stemming from a symbolic scheme that is free from hierarchy.\textsuperscript{13}

Nasan Tur knows that humor can be a catalyst. His interest in socio-cultural critique is present even more humorously in \textit{Somersaulting man} (2001-7) (Fig. 2). Conceived as a form of continuous cultural study, this work documents the artist somersaulting through different cities around the world. The enjoyable absurdity of the childlike, playful somersaults in front of the steady camera and set against the cacophonous metropolis, can flip easily into a questionable action at the thought of the physical strain and feeling of the rough tarmac on the artist’s back and shoulders. The video shows the artist and passers-by who are confronted with the rapid somersaults of a man reacting similarly in all the cities: amused and bewildered, apprehensive and inquisitive, as well as skeptical and doubting the mental stability of this tumbling man.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{Nasan Tur, \textit{Somersaulting man Istanbul-Tokio-Frankfurt-Paris-Mexico City-....}, 2001-2007. 4 digital videos, each 5.5min loop. Courtesy of the artist.}
\end{figure}

through the streets and squares of Istanbul, Frankfurt, Mexico City, Paris and Tokyo.

The *Somersaulting man* is an ironic symbol for anything considered different, with which Tur explores the boundaries between the normal and abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable, offering a unique hands-(and body)-on approach to dealing with society at large. Partially touching the ground and partially in air, the act of somersaulting can also be regarded as pal-intropic, meaning that which “turns again – which keeps turning” which loops back or “turns back on itself” or is “back-stretched” – a going back to oneself, a flipping back to oneself, a sort of system of *renversement.*

14 Hence, the child-like performance of Tur can indeed be seen as the embodiment of the artist going back to him/herself. Tur provides strategies for looking at the many ways in which cultural identity is configured and (re)positioned. This includes the expression of cultural identity through mechanisms that do not necessarily confirm or deny, but rather renounce belief and conviction.

The topic of the self and identity continues in Tur’s oeuvre through one of his latest pieces. *Who am I?* (2017) (Fig. 3) is a continuation of his work that focuses on who we are. Created on a (seeming bathroom) mirror that has steamed up and the only part that is visible is cleaned over manually. This is precisely the section of the mirror that visually connects the viewer to the work by allowing to view/see him/herself. Below one sees the question “Who am I?” written as if with a finger on the surface of the steamed mirror. The work creates a genuine conversation with the viewer and asks the fundamental question of who we are. Reminding one of the Libyan poet Khaled Mattawa who in his attempt to sum up his sense of being and belonging writes in his poem *History of my Face*: “Is that my face I see/ reflected in your eyes?”

15 In a gesture reminiscent of cleaning the surface of the mirror and making it visible to the viewer, Tur enables the possibility to get awareness to what it means to see rather than a thing that destructs the ability to

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Fig. 3: Nasan Tur, *Who am I?*, 2017. Mirror, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist, and Dirimart, Istanbul and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.


see (in this case the steam). Reminding us of Mieke Bal’s analyses how ‘facing’ operates visually, socially and metaphorically, where she eventually proposes dialogic ‘interfacing’ to be the basic principle of intercultural contact as well as a universal foundation for identity and subjectivity. In Bal’s own words, “instead of ‘to be is to be perceived’ and ‘I think, therefore I am,’ facing proposes, ‘I face (you), hence, we are.”

Tur toys with what to show and what to hide, encouraging the audience to consider the moment and the eternal existential question. He lets us ponder the extent to which our sense of (cultural) self is an active inner dialogue of comparison and affinity.

Anny and Sibel Öztürk

The work of Anny and Sibel Öztürk looks directly at the topic of migration and mobility through the lens of the Gastarbeiter. Officially starting with bilateral recruitment agreements in 1961, the influx of guest workers was initially a business transaction between states, originally aimed at recruiting a foreign work force for Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands for a limited period of time with the notion that they would be ‘guests’ and eventually return to their country of origin. However, this ‘transactional migration’ in post-war Europe transformed all the countries involved economically, politically, socially, psychologically, and artistically as the duration of stay went beyond the desired period, and as the ‘guests’ brought over their families, and settled in their new ‘homes’.

What is of specific interest is how migration with its results as a social and economic phenomenon has recently been represented through the prism of contemporary art. The subject of Gastarbeiter creates the crux of Behind the Wheel (2003) (Fig. 4) by Anny and Sibel Öztürk. In this installation, the sisters depict the annual trips back to Turkey. Outside is brought inside, and the older model Mercedes Benz with Offenbach license plate is placed in the exhibition space, with its rooftop luggage carrier packed with suitcases and a rolled up carpet on top. The vehicle’s interior is decorated with streamers, doilies, blankets, and pillows. One can hear music alongside voices and laughter that remind us of the absent travelers. With maps illustrating the route, drawings (gouaches of moments in the journey), texts on the walls (speaking of longing for the grandfather, the south, the sea), this story tells of the communal experience among the Gastarbeiter, presenting us a (re) creation of an annual journey between Germany and Turkey. Through this work, the Öztürk sisters turn their family trips into a collectively shared experience and memory, and their experience and memory into an art installation.

Although Behind the Wheel might be viewed as a typical work created by the daughters of guest workers, it is an exception as the two sisters Anny and Sibel Öztürk have a rather different

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16 Moslund et al., 13.
17 Sariaslan 2016.
(hi)story. Anny was born in 1970 in Istanbul and her sister Sibel in Eberbach am Neckar in 1975. As Anny and Sibel recall:

“Our parents left for Germany in 1972. Their decision was made more from a desire for adventure, wanderlust. Both journalists, well off and with one child, they set off to see the world. They did not go to make money. They went to experience something new.”

Both sisters grew up in Germany and studied at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. When Anny is asked how being born in Istanbul and spending most of her life in Germany has influenced her art, she responds:

“My home is in more than one culture, this fact is a reality for a huge amount of Europeans and by no means an exception. This has a big influence on my work and on the collaboration with my sister Sibel. Many of our works are based on memories. Most of them refer to shared familiar memories. Therefore we have reference fields whose character differentiates in a cultural context, Germany, and Turkey. Both are inextricably linked with each other.”

In pursuit of a better understanding of how ‘belonging’ relates to what Frederick N. Bohrer calls “the globalized, fractured, and transnational world of our time,” Bohrer suggests a “re-thinking of the idea of ‘belonging’ and reconnecting it with its linguistic roots.” He informs us that before the English word ‘belonging’ implied ‘possession,’ or ‘some form of ownership,’ it originally meant ‘a much looser sense of correspondence… between two things’ that may be ‘equally long, corresponding in length, running alongside of, parallel to, going along with.’ Bohrer goes on to explain that “belonging is not in any sense about necessarily in the same place but rather about two things sharing something significant, wherever they are located” and that ‘belonging’ only becomes evident through some degree of distance, that the two require each other. Thus, we conclude that the English word originally had spatial implications.

What the Öztürk sisters do on a personal level is to record and present their memories and subjective experiences which constitute the basis of the work, and on a general level, the work connects simultaneously with the artistic and non-artistic communities in-and-between these countries, as this is a vision commonly experienced during the summer holidays. Behind the Wheel takes the actual mobility of the Gastarbeiter, folds and presents it back to us. The cliché of the Gastarbeiter family, an image of the Turkish worker and his family going back to the ‘motherland,’ is in front of our eyes. The sisters give an artistic visibility to this journey, spatial implications and its participants although they are physically absent. But where does Turkey stand for these artists? How do they ‘fold’ Turkey into/with Germany? Anny Öztürk responds:

“Our connection to Turkey is strong… in our hearts. The language I use when thinking, dreaming, and speaking is German. My Turkish is more of a foreign language. I always

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want to live in Germany, but I want to be buried in Turkey with my ancestors, with my family.”  

Through their work, we can see how migrants transform geographic and cultural boundaries, and how such ‘travels’ potentially change and challenge presupposed understandings of identity.

Servet Koçyiğit

Born in Kaman (Central Anatolia), Turkey in 1971 Servet Koçyiğit resided in Ankara while studying engineering at the Middle East Technical University, and then moved to Amsterdam to study at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (1993-1997) and later participated in the De Ateliers residency (1997-1999). Mobility is a focal concept in the work and world of Koçyiğit. “When I decided to study art, I thought I should leave Turkey and find somewhere where I can learn and practice art with much less limitation,” is how the artist describes his move to the Netherlands. After 10 years, he decided to ‘look back’ to Turkey again in spite of feeling that “going back would be a step backward, but as usual in art and life nothing is that linear, a backward step could be a forward one”. During his time in Istanbul, he created pieces that would later be presented in the 9th Istanbul Biennial of 2005. The installation Blue Side Up and the accompanying photograph Eskici (Bric-a-Brac Seller) became a turning point for the artist, and foreshadowed his future production in relation to Turkey.

Blue Side Up (2005) (Fig. 5) challenges the usual artistic presentation format, as

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21 Ibid.
it includes a motor and track upon which a broom made from a wig sweeps the exhibition space. The broom goes around the rooms in a monotonous motion, depicting a portrait of feminine domestic life evoking the literal translation of the Turkish phrase ‘turning my hair into a broom’ used by Turkish housewives to express frustration towards their spouse. Koçyiğit’s inspiration of the mundane daily routine of a housewife governs the artwork providing a narrative of everyday existence conditioned by cultural convention and tradition.

There were other components to the installation: a refrigerator with a half open door that had made a dent literally in the floor with its opening and closing with the sentence “Sometimes I check the fridge ten times to see if it is really closed” with its letters made out of crochet (Fig. 6). The laborousness and repetition of such paranoia is reflected in the intricate stitching, undertaken by two old ladies, to contain a phrase that can be read and checked via the fridge time and time again. After spending weeks working together to create a decoratively patterned text, the final work takes seconds to read and is essentially functionless. It also reveals an essential dichotomy between visual and verbal language highlighting the artist’s interest in the value of local crafts and time.

Everything (2009) (Fig. 7) embodies the text ‘Everything you heard about Turkish men is true’ in lace. The perfunctory nature of the statement is no different than the prejudice it affirms. Koçyiğit contrasts this with the slow production process of the lace that women embroider over the course of months.

As the hand crochets the letters into words, the movement of the hand, parallels that of how narratives move and circulate. Through a sentence that triggers one’s memory, or preconceived notions and past feelings everything one reads and hears, merges with what is in front of them. Certain dichotomies frame this work, masculine and feminine, tradition and modernity, experiences and expectations, past and present. He detaches these dichotomies from their contexts,
and then abstracts, critiques, and exaggerates them and then presents them back to us.

Although his work is not limited to it, a survey of Koçyigit’s practice—which in addition to photography includes video installation, sculpture and two-dimensional works—reveals his dedication to exploring nation and belonging according to shifts, overlaps, and unaccountable modifications. His recent engagement with mapping takes his work to a new phase, as the artist comprehends the world around him by surveying, measuring, marking, tracing, collecting and (re)creating information. Adding the representational language of mapping into his long-standing artistic vocabulary of handcraft, Koçyigit moves into a new territory in his work since 2016: imaginary maps that connect the real geographies to his imagined ones through textiles. He appropriates this system of data compression to depict imaginary geographies on hand-sewn surfaces in his new collages. He initiates a personal investigation into limits, borders crossed, and obstacles that await through this mapping project.

Through his imaginary maps, Koçyigit creates statements on politics, current affairs, and geography. The intertwined themes of statelessness, citizenship, and migration become key subjects. His works break down the complexities into bite-sized pieces, showing how each part functions in relation to the whole; thus, he proposes an insight into how the system works and, moreover, offers a new version. As he unfolds alternative histories and cultural mappings, he incorporates diverse textiles to weave together different geographies, histories, and presents them on one canvas. Through the colorful pieces of textiles, Koçyigit constructs political spaces. His art operates through them and also results in them. This is why it is profoundly political, not as a side effect or thematic preoccupation but qua art. He reveals what frontiers have done to societies and what societies are doing to frontiers.

Because textiles are portable, wearable and displayable, their performative qualities result in the multivalent meanings that Koçyigit presents in his work. Textiles internally represent a confluence of messages because they operate within multiple systems of signs/costume, ceremonies of state, memorial display, and personal/cooperative/national identity to name a few. Perhaps more than any other art form, textiles amplify and even reveal the appreciation of the inherent flexibility of signs. Servet Koçyigit, well aware of this power, has been searching and acquiring diverse textiles in his motherland of Turkey and this quest (still) continues in the different countries that the artist lives in and visits. *East By Night* (2015) (Fig. 8) is his first work that

![Fig. 9: Servet Koçyigit, Golden Lining, 2016. Textile collage, embroidery on textile, paint, 120 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.](image-url)
illustrates an imaginary territory composed of cotton fabrics with floral designs that are widespread in Turkey.

In *Golden Lining* (2016) (Fig. 9), the dominating material is the Dutch textile created for the former colony of Java produced in the Netherlands, and (ironically) exported to the island. This illogical flow of commerce becomes one level of the work. In addition, the golden thread that dominates the composition becomes a web, similar to the colonial times, and reaches its peak through the depiction of a boat, once again, depicted with golden thread. Its shimmering presence becomes the embodiment of the social, political and economic aspects of the source of the metaphorical golden lining, that of the colonial past. Servet Koçyiğit creates fertilization between the layers of the various textiles rooted in diverse cultures acquired in the Netherlands connoting their colonial past. These differences create images that turn into imaginary maps.

In *Agent Orange* (2016) (Fig. 10), Koçyiğit uses textiles with diverse colored camouflage prints mixed with pink strips that turn into rivers, mountains or oceans through the vibrant blues, or by an orange stitching connoting a borderline. Playful at first sight, upon closer inspection, these pieces turn into an artistic commentary on the current world affairs and suggest the mutating and changing nature of borders, territories, and communities. He once again shows us how textiles are interwoven with notions of identity, status and power through their transformative nature.

When one thinks about the stages in which the work is created, it is not much different than the historical manner in which borders have been created and institutionalized through maps. In different countries, from Turkey to the Netherlands, the artist searches for different textiles, mostly with cultural or historical significance. He cuts the textile, a violent act, in different shapes marking frontiers, limitations and borders. At times, the shapes overlap, or at times extend the frontiers. He has even created a special zone with pink stripes over the land – isolating one zone over the others. Once he completes the textile canvas, he staples it to the stretcher, in a way concretizing his imaginary map. The juxtaposition of motley civilian
patterns with those used for soldiers’ uniforms highlights the unwelcome truth that the two are seldom if ever separate. Textiles are also an apt metaphor for the fluidity of cultural movement and cultural exchange, since textiles were always in some way included in the trade routes since antiquity. We can also recall the paintings by Venetian artists like Carpaccio from the end of the fifteenth century in which the city is bedecked with sumptuous carpets and its citizens in rich silks and damasks.

Just like in most of Koçyiğit’s works, the title has a twofold meaning. The title Agent Orange is borrowed from the military and defense system. Agent Orange – or Herbicide Orange (HO) – is one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the U.S. military as part of its herbicidal warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War (1961-1971). The US troops sprayed 72 million liters of herbicides over the surface of South Vietnam. The aim was to deprive the Vietnamese resistance of concealment, and to destroy crops, thereby forcing farmers to leave their lands and thus undermining local support for the guerilla. The most used defoliant was Agent Orange, which was sprayed from airplanes and came down as a white mist. It was given its name from the color of the orange-striped barrels in which it was shipped. Hence, Koçyiğit’s title creates a web of connections and affiliations. Moreover, this title perfectly matches the military feel of the work, created through a multiplicity of camouflage textiles that the artist purchased in different markets in the Netherlands. He enriches the composition by the further addition of the different historical sites that ISIS has destroyed in recent times. Simultaneously, by creating imaginary maps, Koçyiğit points out the ‘must-haves’ of any country, its historical landmarks. However, instead of presenting the ones that exist, he focuses on the destroyed elements, questioning the system of creating nations, borders and landmarks. What happens when they no longer exist, does the country cease to exist, as it was once known?

Playing immaterial subjectivities against the map’s conventional material objectivity, these works confront us with both likeness and strangeness. The places they map are very much the ones we inhabit. Whether or not we belong in them, they represent a world that surely belongs to us. Furthermore, they show a conception that fuses uncertainties, fears about place, with physical and locational complexities involved in mapping.

We can call Servet Koçyiğit’s maps organic not only to emphasize their paradoxical realism, but also their inherent openness to subjectivity. The act of viewing itself becomes a sort of transnational movement. In contrast with the daunting objectivity of political maps, Koçyiğit presents a subjective, even living map, which contains the same places but in the way we really know them, in relation to our own changeable location. It is not a map where we can find our home or point of origin more easily, but rather, and far more valuably, one where we can locate ourselves, as we move, here and now. Koçyiğit’s work is full of fascinating plays on mapping. It questions almost every aspect of the ostensibly shared world the traditional map enforces. His maps do not retreat from describing the world in familiar geographic terms; rather, they have additional elements, which overlay, and undermine established conventions.

Koçyiğit does not reject or erase his context of origin, but rather employs his background, experiences and encounters as the sources from and through which he can create both an individual as well as artistic agency. Servet Koçyiğit reflects on the meaning of place – a reflection linked to his own autobiography. He generates a new way of looking at the fragmented reality that makes up our present. The artist’s commitment to charting new territory signals a shift
in artistic language, and taking the idea of mapping in its broadest sense, initiates a personal investigation into the limits and borders crossed, as well as the dangers and obstacles that await.

A (possible) conclusion

One must not see the hyphenated identities of European-Turkish, as a binary but on the opposite as a composite, as a combination. What brings these artists together is the fact that they do not reject or erase their contexts, but instead, (they) are taking and using their background, feelings, experiences, and encounters as the source to create both an individual as well as artistic means to, not only, engage the viewer, but also, to challenge the *doxa* on a transnational level. Both migration and artistic praxis are far from a uniform or evenly shared experience. Hence, the trajectories of these artists involve not just a rethinking of the Turkish artscape, but also that of Europe, invoking a whole new transnational and transitional space within which the artist is both an observer and an author. These snapshots enable us to highlight the creative function of art as well as the potentialities and consequences of approaching art and migration from a variety of aesthetic frames of thought and modes of experience that interact with, challenge, contribute to or expand the perspectives on migration provided by sociological, political or historical discourses and analyses.23

What the theater scholar Azadeh Sharifi writes about European theater and players might be a relevant lens, as the focused visual artists help us “advocate a ‘post-migrant aesthetic’ that can help transform the exclusive self-conception of European art towards a more inclusive and manifold consistency.”24 These artists have ventured out of the confines of ‘assigned’ representations and have allowed themselves to explore the ever-shifting topography of belonging and non-belonging. As a feature, or a quality of a world in which mobility is not the exception but becoming the standard, art is a method that these artists use to root themselves in various regions of Europe. Mobility is imperative to their endless pursuit of transformation and change. Point of departure is the observation that migratory experience cuts across and connects that, which is usually considered to be separate entities. The hyphenated artists that have been the focus, bring these qualities together. Their work convey the complex and stratified character of today’s society, and reflect a composite world, with fluid borders and broadened horizons, a world permeated by tension, but one that is culturally rich and fascinating. These artists re-examine, reflect, and narrate multiple identities, geographical imaginations, and experiences as their work carries traces of diverse cultures, languages, codes, traditions, and challenges. Their artistic practice succeeds in generating a private and public recognition and invokes a new form of citizenship based on art – a citizenship that both defines a new identity, but also can be the basis for agency and life strategy.

23 Moslund et al., 10.
24 Moslund et al., 19.
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