

Asli Seven

Documentation

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Logistics of the Living (Variations on a Crystal Case)*

*They read Botanic Treatises.
And works on Gardenin thro' there,
And Methods of transplanting trees
To look as if they grew there.
(...)*

*They read in arbours clipt and cut,
And alleys, faded places,
By squares of tropic summer shut
And warm'd in crystal cases.*

Alfred Tennyson, "Amphion", 1842¹

No discipline has influenced the fate of the colonial endeavor as much as botany in the 19th century. A hybrid fascination with the lush, tropical plant life and for the industrial and economic benefits of the newly discovered species drove not only the colonial settlers, administrators and scientists, but also members of the elite in metropolises to collect, study and display plant life from the colonies.

The global circulation of non-human living beings, however, was nonexistent, at least not until the 1830s. Transportation was by sea only. It took weeks or months for a ship to get to the ports of London, Bordeaux or Amsterdam. As almost 90% of the plants that were shipped from the colonies in Asia, Africa and America were dead by the time they arrived in Europe, botanists were appointed to these "floating gardens", as they were referred to at the time, to care for the plants, but to no avail. The solution came from an unlikely source in the form of a small glazed case that revolutionized the global colonial infrastructure.

Dr. Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, who was a plant enthusiast, physician by profession, tried to grow fern and moths in his garden but failed at it due to the polluted London air in 1829. The accidental growth of moss and fern inside a sealed bottle where his moth cocoons were buried allowed Dr. Ward to observe "the moisture which, during the heat of the day arose from the mould, condensed on the surface of the glass, and returned whence it came; thus keeping the earth always in the same degree of

¹ Lord Tennyson, Alfred. "Amphion", 1842. <http://www.public-domain-poetry.com/alfred-lord-tennyson/amphion-464>. Last access 22 October 2020.

humidity”². Thus, the Wardian case, which allowed plant life to survive in autonomy inside a sealed box, was invented.

The so-called crystal case that could enclose and sustain “squares of tropic summer,” as Tennyson once wrote, defines a pivotal aesthetic regime within modernity and historically unleashes one of the most pervasive human actions on the planet at an unprecedented scale, namely the global trade and manipulation of plant life and interference in ecosystems. With it, the late 19th century saw an accelerated spread of invasive plant species in all directions, as plant acclimatization, industrial agriculture and bio-patenting turned out to be the vital forces sustaining European colonialism. The Wardian cases were the smallest and the most vital link in terms of the networks of exchange between the small-scale botanical stations in the colonies and the spectacular political and scientific powerhouses in Europe: Kew Gardens in London and, a bit later, *Le Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale* [The Garden of Tropical Agriculture] in Paris. These institutions lead the selection of industrially and economically profitable species of plants, and their distribution across the globe, in order to replace less viable species and establish vast zones of monoculture.

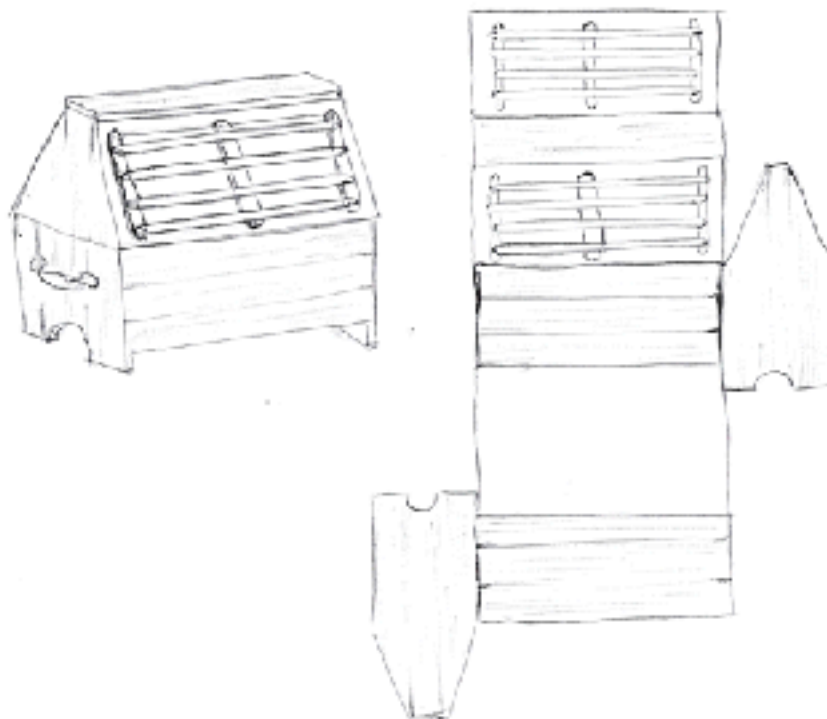
From a conceptual point of view, the object itself condenses two modernist imperatives in their apparent contradiction and fundamental entanglement still operative today: conservation and display. The Wardian case is at once an object, a space and a tool. It is not only an integral part of the colonial infrastructure with its portable size and protective design; it is also the ancestor of the present-day terrariums adorning our homes and our gentrified neighborhoods as commodities, and our schools as pedagogical tools. Moreover, it is a miniature greenhouse, a glass box of autonomous life on display, and a scheme for the accumulation of knowledge, capital and attention, all at the same time. As such, the Wardian case collects, displaces and isolates plant life, and serves as a display device that absorbs the gazes of the onlooker on its glazed surfaces.

Over time, the Wardian case diverged in design, as their functions evolved in two directions: logistics (transportation) and display (exhibition). Following the recommendations of *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle* [The Museum of Natural History] in Paris, dating 1877, in its transportation function, the dimensions of the case needed to ideally be 100x50cm—height varying between 70-100cm. The base had to be elevated for protection from seawater. The upper part needed to have a frame to accommodate the glass, supported by wooden beams every 7 or 8cm. A wire fence had

² Ward, Nathaniel Bagshaw. *On The Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases*. London: John Van Voorst, originally published in 1852. <https://archive.org/details/ongrowthplantsi00wardgoog>. Accessed on 22 October 2020.

to cover the whole to shelter the glass against frequent impacts at the deck. Inside, the seedlings were planted, preferably in wicker pots to isolate them without breaking, within a careful layering of humid clayey soil that was followed by good quality soil mixed with compost. The soil was, then, covered with a bed of straws, which, in turn, was secured by wooden beams to prevent frequent tremors from affecting the plants³. In terms of protection, covers and layers, this design had diverged from the exhibitionary type of the Wardian case, which laid flat on the ground. Instead of solidity and insulation, it prioritized visibility.

Let's take this object-space-tool, and attempt a spatial reasoning test in reverse: unfold this crystal case into its parts and lay it flat. What does it shelter and what does it reveal? What does it truly care for?



³ Taken from “Caisses Ward”, *Magasin Pittoresque*. Paris, 1877, pp. 383-384. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k31460s/f388.item.planchecontact>. Accessed on 22 October 2020.



The description above, of how to best secure a Wardian case, regardless of what it is that it carries, besides a utilitarian understanding of the category of “plants”, is a poignant example of life reduced to a method of governance. On a symbolic level, “life”, as an attribute, abandons the biologically living and its relational conditions of existence. The necropolitical capture of life in order to produce capital also curtails generative potentials not just in the biological realm, but also in the cultural and epistemological sense. Life primarily becomes a feature of the death-distributing infrastructure: growth of productive and reproductive networks, with accumulations of capital and cycles of returns on investment, surrounded by protective measures—material hardware, as in the Wardian cases, and software as in epistemic violence, insurance policies and catastrophe bonds.

There is a paradoxical relationship between what an unfolded Wardian case shelters and reveals, in line with its conservation-display function: the closed-off and wooden surfaced ones materially cover the plants as they reveal the colonial logistics of

power, whereas the exhibitionary ones lay bare the display device in all its theatricality: procedures by which plant life is extracted, isolated and reduced to an image on a grid, as much as it reveals the gazes collected on its surfaces.

And what if we imagine it not only laid flat, but also pulled inside out: does it not look like a theatrical décor or a model house where plants become cut-out fragments? Could we interpret the case as a stage, and the plants as puppets?



*Fécondation de la Vanille, 3^{ème} Temps
(d'après les archives du Jardin d'agronomie Tropicale)*



*faire chanter une gueule-de-loup
(d'après Youtube video « Snapdragon
singing Coldplay »)*

When life is symbolically taken away from the living milieu and transferred to become a characteristic of human infrastructures of knowledge and capital, plants do seem like lifeless pieces that need human manipulation to be artificially inseminated, to breed, to travel and to sing a song.

There is, however, another way of looking at this. Humans do not process visual/spatial information without some form of identification. The mimetic bond goes in both ways, affecting the mime's identity – or the puppet master's: every time we manipulate a plant, in some tiny fragment of our consciousness, to a minor degree, we become one – or we think we do. Instead of holding on to the old and exhausted idea of autonomy and purity (be it of species, of knowledge categories or of artistic mediums), we could rewind and try to stay still for a minute in the midst of transition: between mask and persona; between the organism and its surroundings, between the ghost and the mime. Yes, the ultimate problem is, indeed, that of distinction: between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between knowledge and ignorance, as literary critic Roger Caillois put it a long time ago⁴. But we could also explore the possibility that we have been—and still are—collectively suffering both from legendary psychasthenia and universal tropical neurasthenia⁵.

Text & Drawings Asli Seven

**Written in response to Abbas Akhavan's work presented at Parc Offsite, Montreal, CA. Commissioned by Protocinema as part of "A Few In Many Places", 26 September - 30 Novembre 2020.*

⁴ Legendary psychasthenia is used, here, as the disturbance of the relations between personality and space, as does Roger Caillois in "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", October (31), Winter 1984, MIT Press, pp. 16-32.

⁵ Universal Tropical Neurasthenia was a diagnosis in early 20th century colonial medicine, with symptoms ranging from exhaustion, amnesia, sun-pain, neurosis and suicide, affecting colonial settlers in tropical zones and thought to be an effect of tropical light. Anderson, Warwick. *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

ARAZI OLMAK

Asli Seven, Curatorial Research

28 August– 29 September 2018

I.M.C 5533, Istanbul



Arazi*

Terrain, Land, Plot, Ground, Territory, Field, Landed Property, Landscape

Arazi Olmak*

1. Escape, Bunk, Decamp, Sneak Off, Fade, Take to the Woods, Head for The Hills, Cut and Run, Get Away, Duck, Evade
2. Evade, Dodge, Avoid a Duty

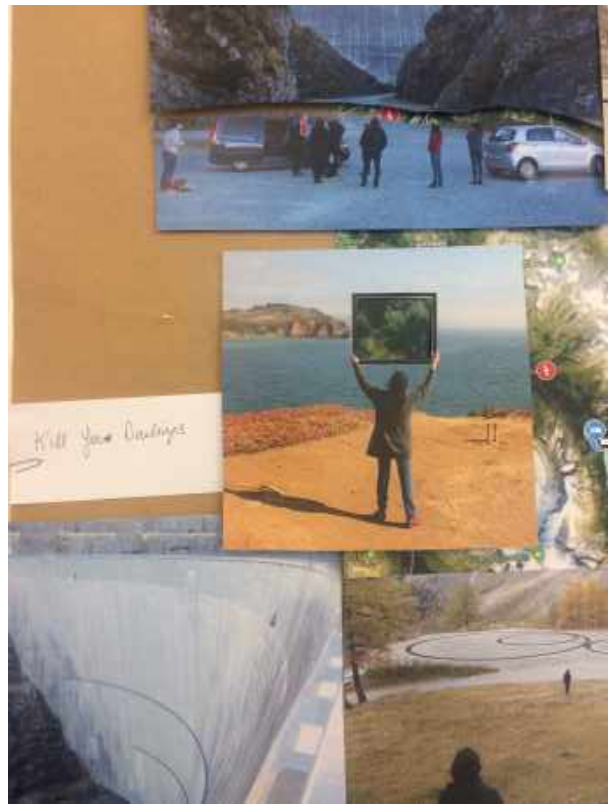
The Turkish expression “Arazi Olmak” originates from the military context, bringing together the idea of camouflage and territorial deployment, as well as strategies of evasion during mandatory military service. As such, and in common use, it stands for an act of disappearance, a disappearance into the ground, or the landscape, in order to avoid an unwanted encounter or an unwanted duty, it’s an act of evasion by way of making oneself invisible against the backdrop of a surrounding landscape or environment. When translated literally, it means, “being the land” or “becoming the ground”, or possibly, “becoming one with the landscape”.

Drawing upon the multiple translations/meanings of the word “arazi”; and of “arazi olmak” as both expression and literally; this is an experiment in deploying spatially within 5533, a curatorial research, which takes as its subject matter how infrastructural and intangible forms of violence become embodied through landscape and built environment.

It asks whether and how a curatorial research might take up space and be communicated visually through a space; and whether this spatial deployment might become the ground upon which collaboration takes root. It is carried out through a temporary retreat from visibility into a space for work, research and production, while at the same time, it observes what it means to withdraw from visibility in times of ongoing trauma, as a strategy of escape into latency.

**This project was made possible with the support of IMC 5533 and the Foundation For Arts Initiative's (FFAI) travel research grant, distributed through m-est.org.*

**** Respondents and Contributors:** Onur Ceritoglu (artist, architect); Merve Unsal (artist, writer, curator); Mari Spirito (curator, Protocinema); Nancy Atakan (artist); Bettina Hutschek (artist, curator); Fatma Belkis (artist); Iz Oztat (artist); Aylin Ertem (artist, Sihirli Tohumlar collective); Neriman Polat (artist); Yasemin Ulgen (curator, Bibucuk collective); Ayse Ceren Sari (energy and climate change economist, Bibucuk collective); Rachel Weston (OSCE expert on electoral processes); Didem Erbas (artist); Ali Taptik (artist, architect, writer); Lara Fresko (curator, researcher, Cornell University); Volkan Aslan (artist); Elif Kamisli (curator, IKS); Onur Yildiz (researcher, SALT); Fatma Colakoglu (curator, SALT); Hera Buyuktasciyan (artist); Yasemin Ozcan (artist); Ibrahim Cansizoglu (art historian, curator); Fuat Esrefoglu (designer); Luiza Margan (artist); Zeynep Oz (curator); Onder Uluc (civil engineer, dammed constructions); Ali Cabbar (artist); Fahire Kurt (arts writer); Tania Feldzer (architect); Emre San (academic, philosophy); Gizem Karakas (artist, curator); Doris Benhalegua (curator, galerist); Elif Akinci (curator)



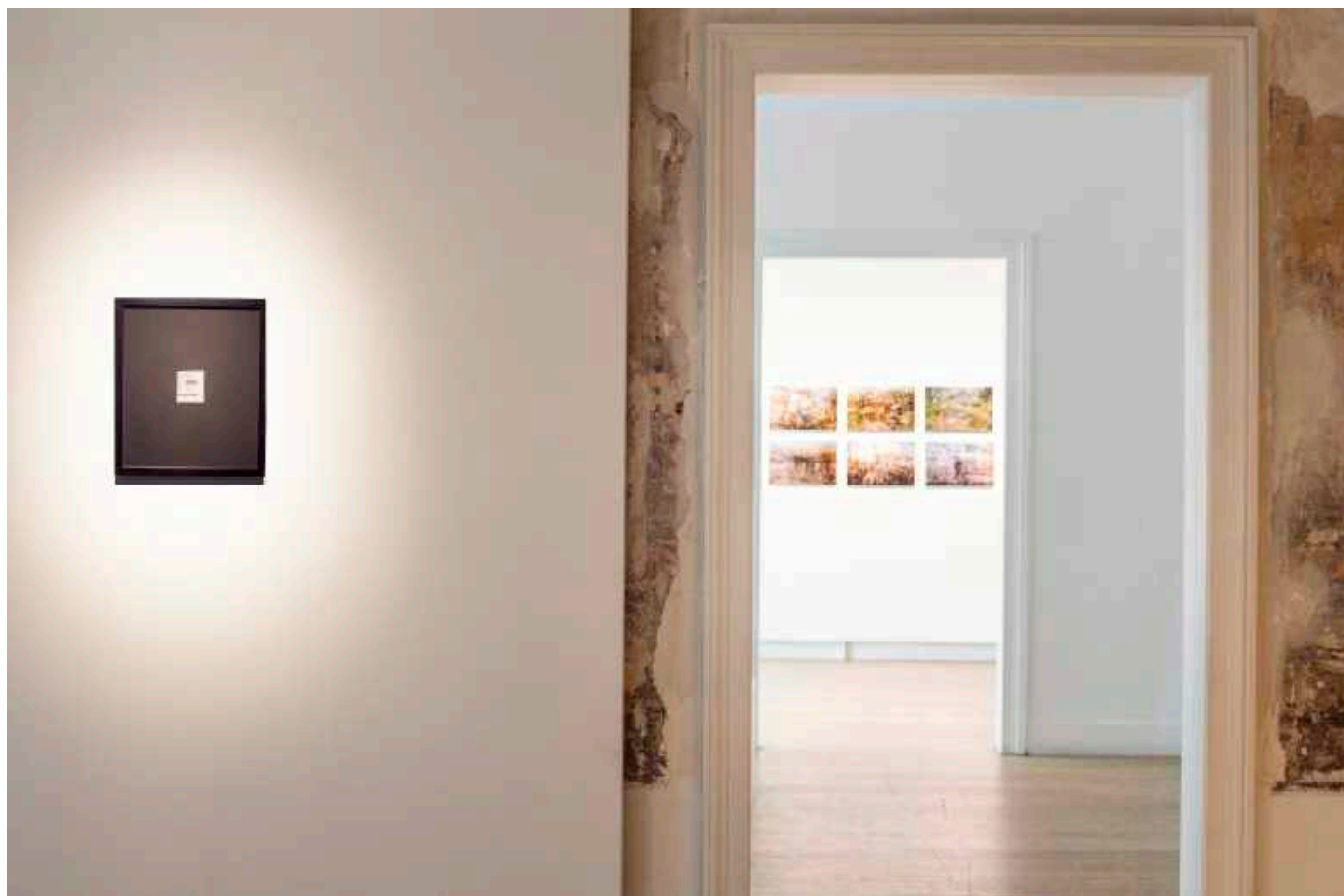


NOW YOU'RE FAR AWAY

Merve Unsal

15 June – 22 July 2017

Galerist, Istanbul





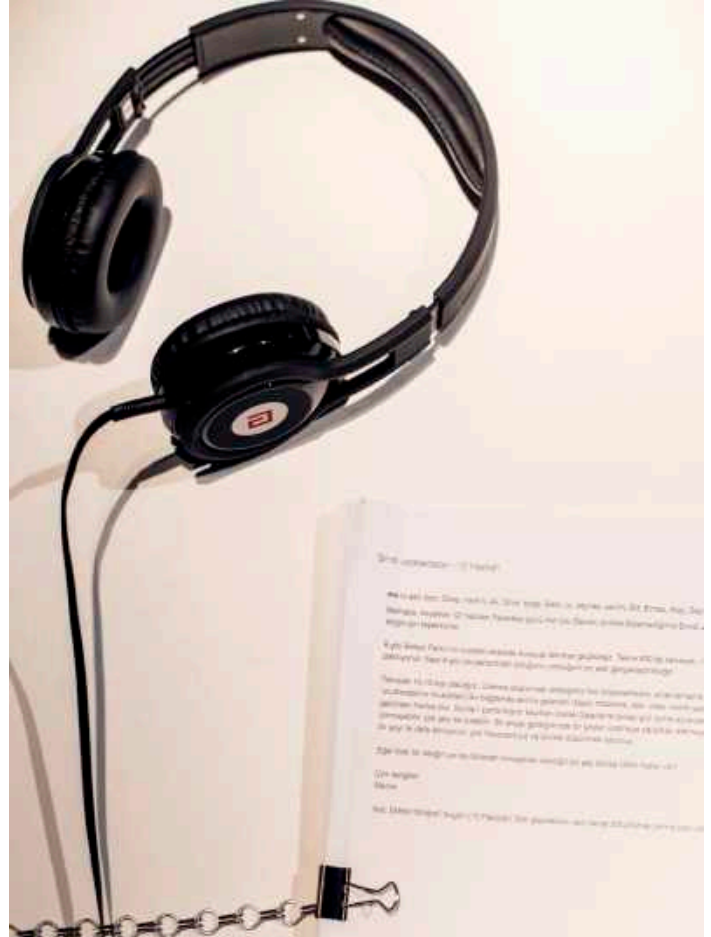
Longing for Distance*

What confers photography its documentary status is the uncoded nature of the transfer from the natural world to the photographic image. But at the same time, this illusion of veracity or of continuity with the natural world depends on an act of isolation or selection of something from the continuum of reality, by a frame, which is at best arbitrary. This “paradox of the uncoded message” is at the origin of the relationship between photographic image and text, and points to the necessity of clarifying the ‘presence’ within the image by way of a descriptive text, what we commonly refer to as ‘captions’ or ‘legends’. In other words, the verisimilitude of the image is always obtained at the cost of an arbitrary distance, a gap, which is, after-the-fact, filled by narrative. Now you’re here – now you’re away. It is within this distance that desire, imagination and longing find their space, and fiction – as a means to reach any meaningful ‘truth’ – can be born. A quick search into the etymological origin of the technical term ‘legend’ leads us to this primary function of storytelling in relation to images and their documentary status: what used to refer in the 14th century to a “narrative dealing with a happening or event” becomes a fixture of photojournalism in the 20th century, all the while preserving its primordial relationship to fiction.

This same distance – and its potential loss - is the focus of Merve Unsal’s exhibition “Now You’re Far Away”. In the two series of works presented in the exhibition, “The New York Times Photographs” and “From a Window”, this “happening or event” in need for narrative or explanation appears to be the image itself. In both works, instead of functioning as ‘windows to the world’, images take on the appearance of screens blocking our gaze. Instead of expanding our views and perspectives beyond our immediate reach they refer only to themselves.

This screen effect is most visible in the series of projected videos, “From A Window” where Unsal creates a temporal expansion of still images of window frames by way of a voice-over. Windows, as the birth site of the landscape genre, have long functioned as seeing devices of their own kind. We’re accustomed to consider them as transitory spaces between interiors and the outer world, between our private spaces and the public space. This paradigm assumes as a matter-of-fact, a clear division between culturally organized interiors and exteriors and relatively stable boundaries separating privacy from public space – the separation is what makes negotiation and transition possible, along with desire

and imagination. In contrast, looking through Unsal's window frames, our gaze either meets the façade of a building in narrow vis-à-vis, or faces the blinds covering a series of balconies. These opaque surfaces - blinded windows, balconies or straightforward walls - block any kind of projection. In frustrating our gaze, on one hand she sends it back on the medium itself and directs our attention to the narrative at hand; on the other she conveys a sense of entrapment within the domestic space; an absolute retreat from the outer world that revokes all possibility of transition or negotiation between inside and outside.



“From a Window” functions on two levels. While the photographic images themselves resonate with the current loss of distance between public and private realms in Istanbul, the artist’s voice narrates a split monologue about desire through everyday objects and gestures, referencing images from popular culture. These monologues reveal a retreat towards the mundane. Through these narratives on the relationship between air conditioning machines and the loss of one’s sense of smell; how nylon stockings conceal and reveal something at the same time; the setting of bridges on fire and seeking to hide inside cabbage leaves, Unsal scratches the surface of our projected fears and desires. The situation is somewhat reminiscent of secluded characters in Chantal Akerman’s films, trapped in the performance of daily routines and intense monologues spiraling towards neurosis. In one of the videos, we hear the following: *“What would happen to our desires if we were in a vacuum? Desire is something you become aware of only in its absence, as if it were only felt through its lack”*. For any kind of representation – or desire - to be possible we need the gap created by the double process of abstraction and identification. There can be no love without distance. When either one of the two factors of the equation - distance or and identification - is lost in the ‘real’ world, can we recover it through a meditation on imagery and the nature of photographic image?

From her use of photographic still image through window frames to computer and smartphone screens, in the “New York Times Photographs”, Unsal’s main focus is the contemporary, algorithm-backed regime of visuality under which we live. Along with our digitally empowered mass media, we have turned the

world into images. In this new regime, the image is no longer evaluated in relationship to a natural or living reality from which it isolates and reflects a portion or a moment. Instead, we are faced with an ever growing archive of superimposed images of news reporting that circulate endlessly through the digital networks, serviced through our cherished screens as customized products by the ever growing intelligence of algorithms.

The 14 images selected from the artists' "New York Times Photographs" covers a span of 8 years of New York Times journal's image-based news reporting and refers to the condition of this digital archive managed and serviced by the algorithm that sends us back and again to the confined bubble of our own interests and values based on the history of our searches. Each composite image is obtained by collapsing all photographs composing a slide show displayed on the newspaper's website under a single headline. The resulting images are beautiful, hazy, dream-like abstract compositions. In some cases a pattern or a grid becomes visible. In others, the blue of the sky is recognizable despite the layers of human figures and other shapes obscuring it, and a sense of horizon is discernible. By color-coding their arrangement, Unsal points to their interchangeability as detached surfaces. These images do not refer to any reality beyond or outside of themselves. They are not photographs claiming to silently witness the course of life on the planet. What the algorithm achieves is a final rupture with the necessity of representation – with any claim to veracity outside of its coded conventions, furthermore, a final rupture with any truth beyond its own frame. The accompanying titles – news headlines – do not come to fill a distance, to explain or narrate an event. Instead they replicate the opaqueness of the abstract screens they accompany: did you like "an enemy evaporates"? You might also enjoy "a friendship comes with a toll" or "luck trumps death".

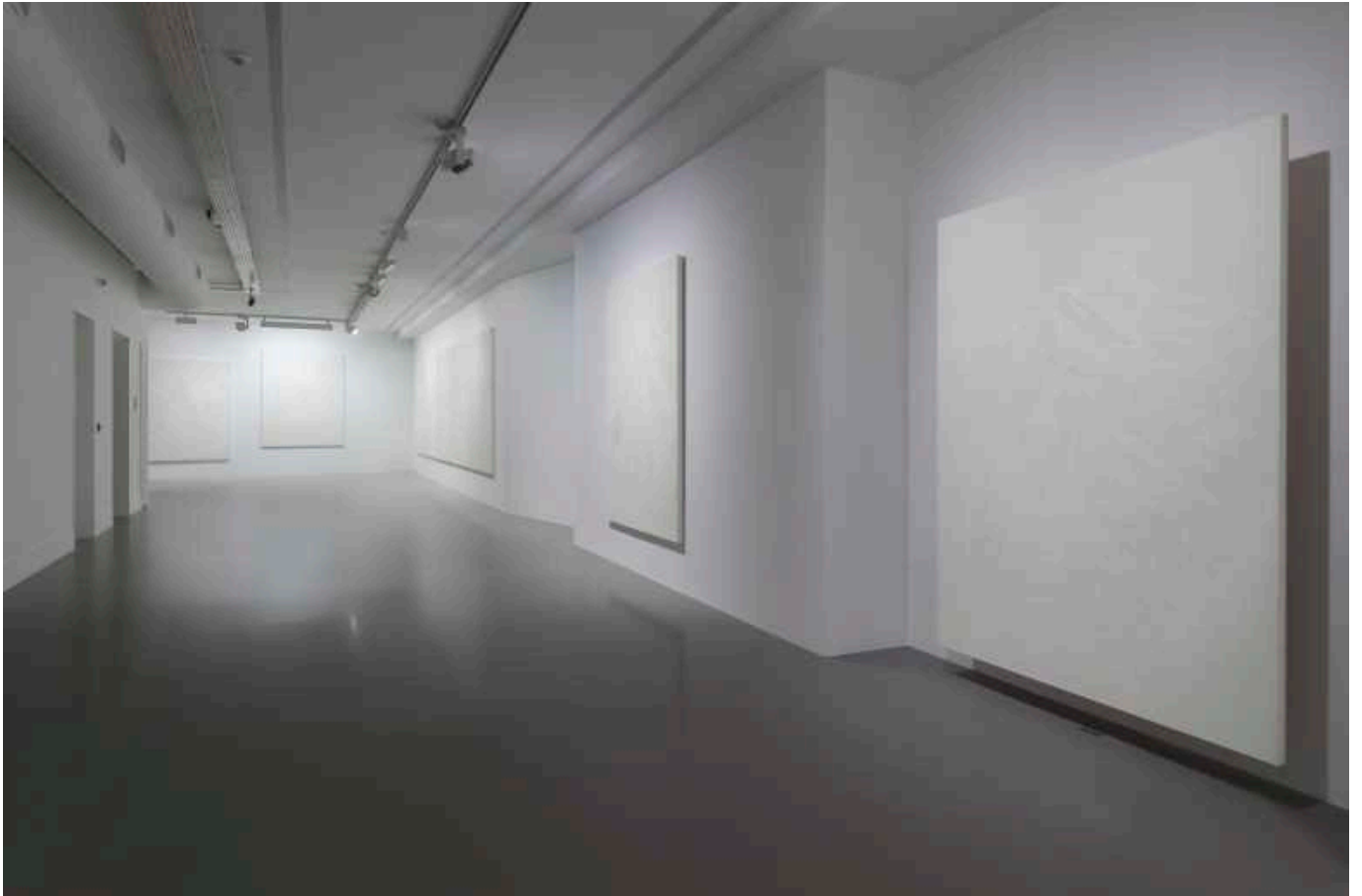
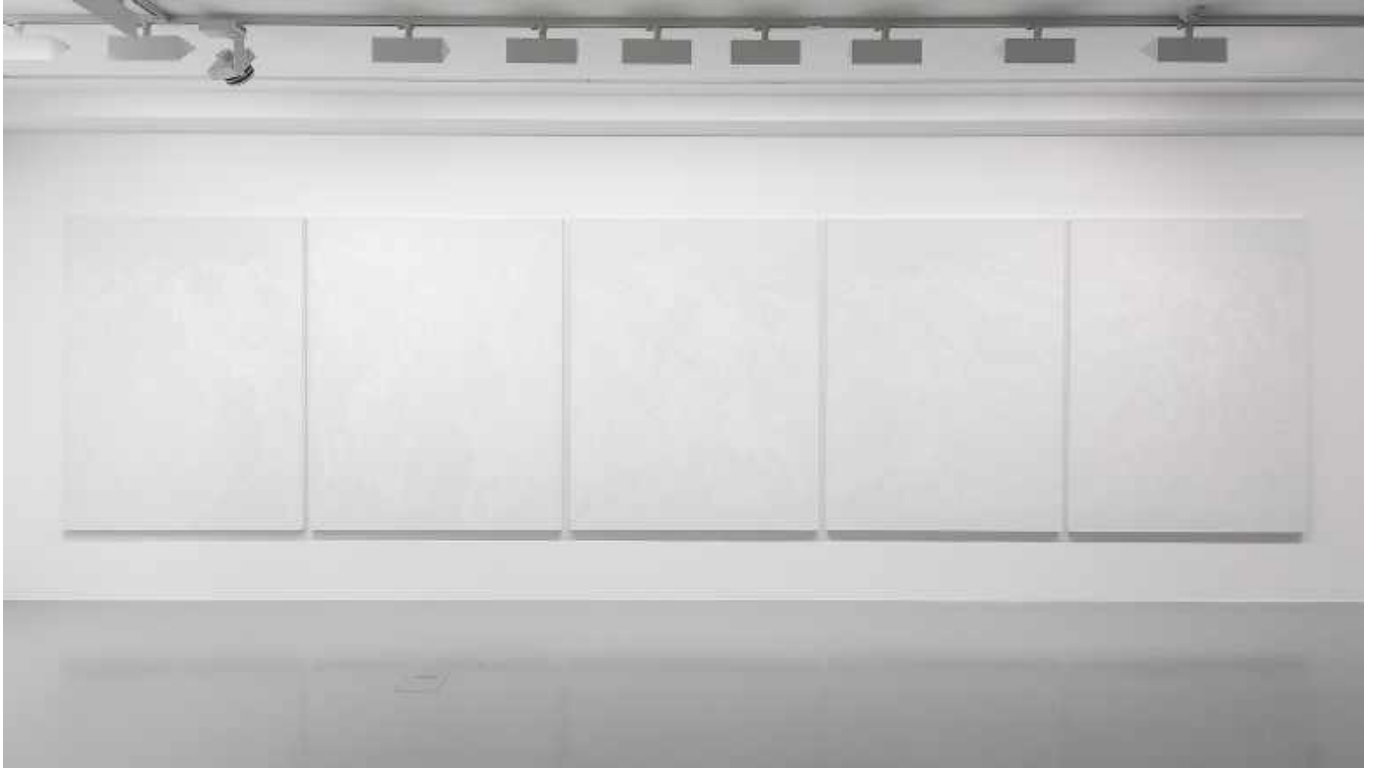
These two works operate in conjunction with a happening Unsal staged a few days prior to the exhibition opening. Conceived as a secretive and furtive action, eponymously titled "Now You're Far Away" gathered a selection of 15 people invited to a boat ride on the Bosphorus – on one of those boats that operate regularly for marriage proposals and declarations of love in written words projected on the lower surface of the Bosphorus bridge. Punctuating this maritime course, the words "Now You're Far Away" were projected during 5 minutes on the bridge-turned-screen. These words were chosen clearly in reference to Zeki Muren's song and its various dedications, retakes and repetitions over decades, bringing about a sense of longing and memories specific to moments in Turkish popular culture of the last 40 years. But longing for what?

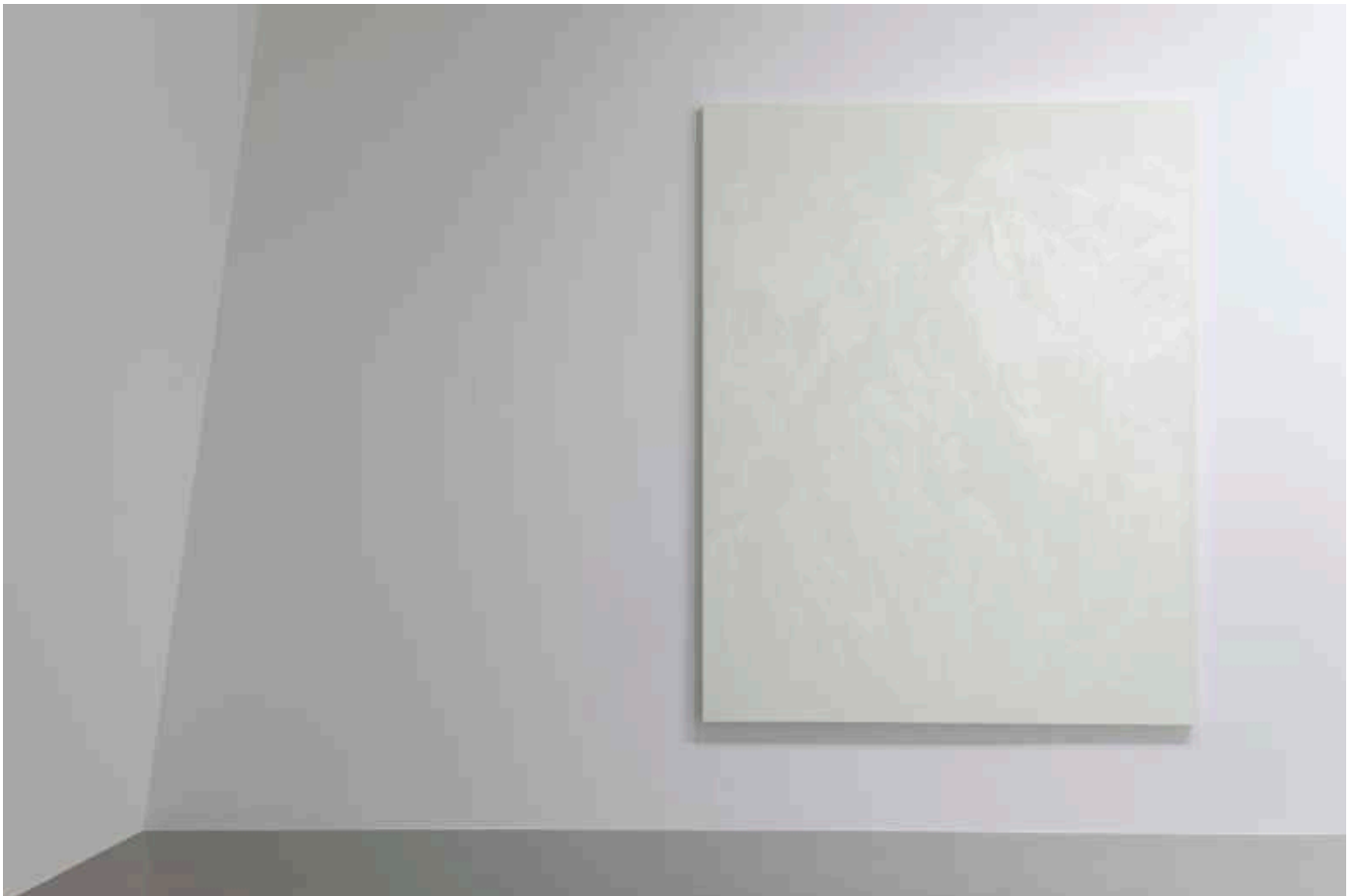
During the two hour span of this secretive night cruise, Unsal's guests were asked to bring an image, text or object that would "speak the unutterable". In the face of a growing ideological apparatus that demands from reality to strictly conform to an image it has fabricated and disseminated, in a context where the relationship of the image in question to truth no longer matters, what is expressed in Unsal's action and exhibition is a longing for that distance where desire can exist, and an attempt at recovering it.

**Text written by Asli Seven, accompanying the exhibition, June 2017*

*Print Design: Ulas Ugur
Installation photos: Elif Kahveci*

Murat Akagunduz | Vertigo
ARTER, Istanbul
24 March – 15 May 2016





Murat Akagündüz's exhibition *Vertigo* brings together 11 paintings from the "Kaf" series. In this new series the artist depicts some of world's highest mountain peaks as seen on Google Earth. How is the act of painting transformed once we rely upon the mediation of digital data to depict an actual physical landscape? The exhibition thus refers to the ontological consequences of such digital mediation in our relationship to the Earth and its implications in terms of vision and image production. While the series, named after the Kaf Mountain, emphasises a mythological narrative, each painting in the "Kaf" series takes its title from the latitude and longitude coordinates defining the position of the image on Google Earth. Akagündüz offers us views over the peaks of the Alpid Belt, spreading across three continents, and provides us with the coordinates of the Kaf Mountains at the same time.

In juxtaposing mathematical exactitude with the perceptually challenging monochromatic use of the colour white, Akagündüz's intention is to explore the minimal conditions of visual representation. The "Kaf" series, in its search for a language using different shades of white, winnows down the minimal conditions of pictorial representation to a bare-bones relationship between light and shade and approaches the threshold of visual perception. In "Kaf" paintings, the line of the horizon is either invisible or it escapes the eye by merging with the upper corner of the canvas. Taking a satellite view upon the earth the paintings represent a vertical, groundless perspective. As the horizon is nowhere to be found, our sense of being grounded in space is unsettled and a sense of vertigo sets in. This vertigo effect is also echoed in the spatial construction of the exhibition through a subtle intervention on the walls delineating the first floor of Arter.

"Kaf" paintings bring the process of emergence of image to the eye and to memory, between appearance and disappearance, through reverberations in time. At first sight, these appear to be abstract fragments that are difficult to read in terms of their relationships of scale to the reality they were cut off from. The even distribution of light on the entire surface and its movements through various shades of white, by evading the eye, catch and hold the gaze. The stains, which slip away and alter the moment we think we have caught an image, are contiguous with the void and create a silent space of tension.

Vertigo denotes the dizziness and loss of balance felt when a subject or the objects surrounding them appear to be moving in space. As reflected through Murat Akagündüz' "Kaf" series, vertigo is a relational phenomenon, it points both to a spatial disorientation on psychological and physiological levels, and to an uncertainty regarding subject-object relationships as perceived within space. By opening up a space for silent contemplation, the paintings invite the viewer to sense new possibilities held by this loss of ground and to produce a new perception of the world. *

**Text written by Asli Seven for the exhibition brochure, March 2016*

Vertigo Poster & Book Design: Fevkalade

Architectural Advisor: Duygu Dogan

Installation Photos: Ali Taptik

Landscape Reverberates: Kaf Paintings in Sound

Upon the invitation of Asli Seven, two musicians, Atay Ilgun and Gokce Akcelik composed experimental sound interpretations of Akagunduz' Kaf series. The public was invited to spend long lengths of time in Arter's first floor during two performances and to contemplate the paintings while listening to their acoustic manifestations, enhancing in sound the visually resonating effect of Akagunduz' white-on-white depictions of mountain peaks.



Left: Atay Ilgun's performance, 12 April 2016, Arter, Istanbul. Photo by Asli Seven.

Right: Gokce Akcelik's installation & performance, 10 May 2016, Arter, Istanbul. Photo by Cagla Koseogullari.

Atay Ilgun performed a 40 minute experimental sound piece composed using the scanned versions of the Kaf paintings on view at Arter. Using the digital data obtained by the distribution of light and color on the surfaces of paintings, Atay Ilgun adds yet another layer of digital mediation upon Akagunduz' landscapes obtained through Google Earth. The performance took place on 12 April at Arter and was conceived as a collective listening session inside the exhibition space.

Gokce Akcelik's 30 minute musical composition played in loop and took on the idea of resonance in the form of a sound installation during an entire day on 10 April. Inviting the public to circulate inside the exhibition space, Akcelik transformed the space into a sensorial landscape with varying resonance effects and enhanced the perception of the exhibition's architecture through sound, in response to the spatial implications held within Akagunduz' paintings.



Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (2013-present), Mercer Union, 2015, detail. Courtesy of the Artist, Mercer Union and The Third Line.

SPRING 2016 | ARTEZINE

Reimagining Nature as Culture: Expanding the boundaries of making and thinking of art in the Anthropocene

By Asli Seven (<http://arteeast.org/author/asliseven/>)

“Perhaps, the moon landing was one of the most demoralizing events in history”
Robert Smithson[i]

“We are being exposed to a catastrophe of meaning.
Let’s not hurry to hide this exposure under pink, blue, red or black silks.
Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening to us:
Let us think that it is we who are arriving, or who are leaving”
Jean Luc Nancy[ii]

It was in a symposium in 1970 that Robert Smithson cast his shadow of doubt over the preconceptions of ‘the moon landing’: perhaps all it did was to reveal what a closed system planet Earth was. Or for that matter, a ‘horrible pigpen’ of pollution, violence, blood and waste comparable to ‘the island’ in William Golding’s seminal novel *Lord of the Flies*[iii]. The image couldn’t be more relevant today as the Anthropocene is proposed as a new geological epoch marking the human impact on the Earth’s ecosystems. Faced with the specter of extinction, the theoretical debates surrounding the Anthropocene are caught between two opposing directions, namely in and out of the Earth. The futuristic fantasies of ‘transhumanism’ push the modernist logic to its extreme to achieve a human figure detached from nature by technological hybridization, residing in abstract networks of information, colonizing space and mining asteroids. On the other hand, much of contemporary philosophy and social sciences strive to make sense of the finitude of our planet and to recompose the ontological premises of modernism, such as the great divide between culture and nature forcing us to conceive the end of nature resulting human activities. How are we to account for the entanglement of mineral life and biological life, of cultural forms and nonhuman beings, of the timescales of human life and geology with our modernist knowledge and institutions? And more particularly, how do we understand contemporary art in the Anthropocene when both natural and social sciences, propelled by these questions, seem to be undergoing a paradigm shift[iv]? If there is any critical potential in this new grand narrative, it requires a deeper look into the particulars of historically and geographically located compositions and practices. Only then we can learn how to define the Anthropocene and to contextualize its encounters with art[v].

Bearing in mind these observations along with the speculative space that the “How to Think the Anthropocene?”[vi] conference in Paris opened up, the following is an attempt at reading two bodies of recently produced art works — *Study for a Monument* (2013-present) by Toronto-based Abbas Akhavan and *Who carries the water* (2014-ongoing) by Istanbul-based İz Öztat & Fatma Belkıs. Both works suggest new configurations tying humans to nonhumans, recent history to geological time, political violence to environmental factors within systems of meaning where nature and culture appear in a complex entanglement. Standing against the pull of a ‘future perfect continuous tense’[vii] that evades the forces of gravity of both the present and the local, they are anchored in the topographies of the Middle East, and critically engage with the historical building of museums and exhibitions within the wider context of modernism.



Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (2013-present), cast bronze, cotton fabric, dimensions variable. Installation view, Mercer Union, 2015. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist, Villa Stuck and The Third Line.

Initially commissioned by the Abraaj Group Art Prize[viii], Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument* consists of a series of bronze cast plant specimens. Spread horizontally on white cotton sheets on the floor, each species is represented by its constitutive parts (stem, leaves, and petals) similar to botanical plates whose scales are blown up to human proportions. Traced by the artist in the collections of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew[ix], they are native to the region lying between the rivers of Euphrates and Tigris (Ancient Mesopotamia or present-day Middle East) known for its much-coveted fossil resources. The destruction of salt marshes by Saddam Hussein to control resisting marsh Arabs, and the Gulf War have drastically transformed their native habitat. The oxidized color of bronze and imperfections resulting from the casting process in Akhavan's work give these plants a post-apocalyptic feeling and a look of petrified fossils at the same time. The sculptures are at once buried and unburied much like the memory of war in this land. This simultaneous movement of sedimentation and unearthing encapsulates the geological time, centuries of colonial expropriation, post-9/11 asymmetrical warfare as well as the lifespans of plants and human beings. They convey a sense of loss crawling back from past times and a form of evidence for an ongoing catastrophe. The birth of the Neolithic with its bronze weaponry and domestication of species is seconds away; the history of conflicts over pipelines seems to extend forever.

The display of *Study for a Monument* is simultaneously reminiscent of forms of legal exhibit, scientific evidence and funerary rituals (the white sheets alluding to cotton burial clothes). Through this sculptural gesture Akhavan brings into critical focus at once the history of museums rooted in the 19th century modernism and the contemporary commodification of artworks in global circulation with their relevant condition reports. The historical construction of the art field is inseparable from that of the modern museum and its exhibition formats, namely by abstracting things from their 'living' contexts and displaying them for the viewers' gaze. The viewer experience inside the museum is a subjectivity-forming experience: it calls for the reproduction of that same abstraction process in the spectator's mind and body[x]. Referenced by Akhavan in his research, the European natural history museums, for example, are places where this regime of scientific objectivity, the stabilizing effect it produces on the material world, the gaze it calls for along with the observing modern subject were born. The contemporary art gallery, on the other hand, pushes this abstraction to the extremes by 'purifying' works of art from any cognitive or perceptual interference from the outer world[xi]. Condition reports, mentioned earlier, are also constitutive of this process: required by the global circulation of artworks as commodities, they submit works of art to a quasi-scientific scrutiny, establishing their status as 'pure objects' to be displayed inside the 'white cube'. Through their display, the plant sculptures become the site where distinct histories converge and multiple abstractions are disclosed, revealing the underlying modernist constructions around museums and contemporary art exhibitions.



Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Monument* (detail), 2015, Cast bronze, cotton fabric, dimensions variable. Installation view, Mercer Union. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line.

The size and material of Akhavan's sculptures also reference the history of public monuments and statues as 'dead people cast in bronze'[xii], erected, replaced or destroyed over the course of recent political changes. The plant species in this work are monumentalized and broken down at the same time, reminiscent of two seemingly opposing conceptions of nature that coexist in contemporary discourses: its exploitation as a resource and its reification as a space to be preserved. There is a spatial and temporal unfolding of the work in one's mind: images of mass funeral ceremonies; public statues, vandalized, demolished and dragged through streets; species and entire ecosystems imagined as future fossils; human bodies, plants and artworks displayed lifeless on white sheets for us to see, commemorate, witness and attest. By activating multiple contexts, *Study for a Monument* extends its scope beyond the exhibition's own time and space, and accomplishes what Jean Luc Nancy calls for: to remain exposed to catastrophe in the face of a 'mastery over nature' gone mad that "bends under its power not only lives in great number (...) but 'life' in its forms, relationships, generations and representations"[xiii].

There is a cognitive trap in conceiving nature either as a resource to be mastered or pure space to be preserved, which reiterates the modernist divide between nature and culture. Expanding the boundaries of artistic practice through ethnographic research, İz Öztat and Fatma Belkis redefine the way our contemporary culture constructs what it means to be human by extending the condition of humanity to nonhuman beings and recognizing them as partners in co-creating the world. Recently commissioned by the 14th Istanbul Biennial, *Who carries the water* (2014-ongoing) is an installation composed of multiple pieces including *Will Flow Freely* (2015-ongoing), a series of naturally dyed and woodcut printed kerchiefs hung on hazelnut sticks; *Actions That Do Not Benefit The Country* (2015), an installation of hazelnut sticks, carobs and beeswax; *In The Rivers North of The Future* (2014-ongoing), a series of watercolors on paper, and *Scapegoat* (2015), a basket woven with crafted hazelnut sticks and carobs. An eponymously titled text accompanies these works crystallizing the key issues that are explored in the installation[xiv]. Culmination of a year-long research and multiple field trips to valleys across Turkey that witnessed many resistances against the construction of run-of-the-river hydroelectric power plants since 1998[xv], the work draws on the local community's struggles against the privatization of their environment and relies on anonymous local knowledge as well as the practices of commoning in its production processes, materials and forms[xvi].



İz Öztat & Fatma Belkis, *Will Flow Freely* (detail), 2015, Naturally dyed and woodcut printed muslin, hazelnut sticks. Photo by Fatma Belkis. Dedicated to the public domain

This multivocal and performative text is told by a number of humans and nonhuman participants in dialogue form. What is significant here is that, the representation of the landscape and its elements cease to provide a backdrop for the human figures and their actions, while the river, trees, goats and the fog become actual figures with their own voices and actions. Human beings in turn fade into this new texture as they enter into a mimetic fusion with the landscape[xvii]. When the flow of the river is interrupted, the peasant is tongue-tied. When the river flows into the pipeline instead of its natural bed, the philosopher loses the metaphors to create concepts. And the spruce, when fog disappears, is advised by the psychologist to seek refuge in fairytales, a human-made cultural form. Through these transitions among human bodies and minds, natural elements and cultural forms, the classical figure/background hierarchy disappears and a dense texture made of relations emerges, in which the local inhabitants, the outsider researchers, plants and animals, tales and cognitive processes, natural elements and technical tools are all embedded and act upon one another as constituents of a relational ontology[xviii]. This web of relations binds not only beings, bodies, objects and language from the valleys, but also the artists themselves and their work. By using materials and techniques that are in a mutualistic relationship with the ecosystems and refuse to use electricity in the production process and display, the artists multiply the contexts of inscription of the work creating a critical continuum between a biennial and experimental practice and research in alternative economies.

İz Öztat & Fatma Belkıs, *Scapegoat*, 2015, Installation view from the 14th Istanbul Biennial, Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren. Dedicated to the public domain

Museums and biennials still stand as the sites where post-capitalist modernity constantly furthers the limits of its own operations of abstraction and reflects back on itself by allowing for repressed forms of relationality between objects, humans and nonhuman beings to resurface. This usually comes at the cost of perpetuating the epistemic divide between what we see in an exhibition and the world we live in, while conserving the stabilizing effect of the exhibition on the material world[xix]. The absence of electricity in the display of *Who carries the water* that might seem as a simple gesture at first breaks with the modernist exhibition design providing a space of abstraction, inscribing the work in a continuum with the outside world. The contrast achieved within the biennial framework in turn sheds critical light on the objectifying effects of display conventions. Through Öztat and Belkıs' refusal to use electricity, along with the dedication of all the works to the public domain[xx], *Who Carries the Water* can be interpreted as a performative

gesture that operates at the threshold between art, ethnography and political engagement. Moreover, it lays the grounds of an indigenous framework for a potentially decolonizing thought and practice on art and museums in the Anthropocene[xxi].

Engaged in the questions posed by the Anthropocene, many critical debates and exhibition practices today highlight the role of research and contextualize exhibition making as an interdisciplinary space that triggers an understanding of complex ecological changes affecting the world[xxii]. The challenge then is to adjust our thinking about museums as incubators of research and artistic practice shaping our subjectivities and understandings of our relationship to the material world. While İz Öztat and Fatma Belkis's *Who Carries the Water* takes inspiration from forms of indigenous resistance to activate new potentials for change within the contemporary institutions, Abbas Akhavan's sculptural installation *Study for a Monument* reveals the commodification of art and its mechanisms. The latter also brings together humans and nonhumans in the memory of violence in the Middle East and in the historical construction of our cultural institutions. Refusing to ignore the political potential around multiple crises announced by the Anthropocene these works demand us to articulate the existing relationships between culture and nature as well as the political implications of exhibition forms and institutional practices...

- i. Robert Smithson, 'The Artist and Politics: A Symposium' in Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings* (University of California Press, California, 1996), pp.134-135.
- ii. Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes* (Fordham University Press, 2015), p.8.
- iii. Robert Smithson, *Ibid.*
- iv. The entanglement of nature and culture announced by the Anthropocene is challenging the disciplinary boundaries of both social and natural sciences. This paradigm shift was at the center of many presentations during the conference "How to Think The Anthropocene" organized by Philippe Descola at College de France, Paris, 5-6 November 2015. <https://anthropocene2015.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/conference-presentation/> (<https://anthropocene2015.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/conference-presentation/>) (Last accessed on December 14, 2015). Notable in this regard is also the ontological turn in anthropology as outlined in Amiri Baraka, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell (eds.) *Thinking Through Things* (Routledge, London, 2007).
- v. A notable recent publication dealing with this question with contributions by artists and theorists is Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Open Humanities Press, London, 2015).
- vi. "How to Think the Anthropocene?" organized by Philippe Descola at College de France, Paris, 5-6 November 2015.
- vii. The expression is borrowed from philosopher? Isabelle Stengers, who uses this temporal dimension to warn against the theoretical desire to "swallow" the mess announced by the Anthropocene in a continuity "to be theorized in a single shot" in a "trendy race for the most radical manner of moving away from a human-centered view", especially in the artworld. Isabelle Stengers, Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin, 'Matters of Cosmopolitics. On the Provocations of Gai' in Etienne Turpin (ed.) *Architecture in the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2013). Bernd Scherer eloquently expresses another way in which our present is constantly accelerated by borrowing from the future through a financial tool, the credit. "The Anthropocene Project" Conference held at Tate, London, July 2015.

- viii. The work has been exhibited across Europe, Middle East, Asia and Canada: Abraaj Art Prize (Dubai, 2014), Guangzhou Biennial (Guangzhou, South Korea, 2014), Villa Stuck (Munich, Germany, 2015), Mercer Union (Toronto, CA, 2015), artspeak (Vancouver, CA, 2015).
- ix. Established in 1840 and hosting the world's largest collection of living plants alongside over seven million preserved plant specimens, the Kew Gardens are a magnificent model of 19th century representations of nature in rationally organized and highly controlled spaces.
- x. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990).
- xi. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside The White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986). Also, on the production of subjectivities by the museum: Hito Steyerl, 'Is Museum a Factory?', *e-flux journal* #7, June 2006 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/> (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/>) (Last accessed on December 12, 2015)
- xii. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (Columbia University Press, 1999).
- xiii. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ibid.* p.11.
- xiv. "Following the privatization of energy production through a series of legislations, which allowed the leasing of water use right of rivers to private energy companies for at least 49 years, AKP government launched an aggressive program targeting 2000 small (and large) hydroelectric power plants by 2023. Although run-of-the-river-type hydroelectric power plants are treated as Renewable Energy production solutions globally, the implementation in Turkey, which involves removing the water from its bed and taking it into pipes to run it through multiple turbines, deprives all living creatures from their life source". Extract from the artists' public presentation in the framework of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, 2 September 2015.
- xv. All the structural elements in the installations are supported by hazelnut sticks which are used extensively in daily life in the valleys, as a support for the body and the plants, for herding animals and carried by women when confronted with armed forces. To cite one example, *Scapegoat* takes its form from the baskets used on slopes to harvest hazel and tea, is shaped in relation to topography and acts as a metaphor to the social fabric.
- xvi. The full text of *Who Carries The Water* can be downloaded and read here: <https://archive.org/details/WhoCarriesTheWater> (<https://archive.org/details/WhoCarriesTheWater>) (Last accessed on December 18, 2015)
- xvii. This interpretation is in part indebted to the notion of figure/ground developed by Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman for the exhibition "Forensis" that was held at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, in 2014, as a "fertile frame for art history, aesthetics and within the core relational circle of the Anthropocene, translates to the relationship between organisms and their environment; between processes of figuration and engineering of backgrounds; the co-relation, the co-production between *Umwelt* and figures such as Humans". Anselm Franke, 'The Anthropocene Project' Conference held at Tate Modern, London, July 2015. Audio files available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/anthropocene-project> (<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/anthropocene-project>) (Last accessed on December 12, 2015)
- xviii. The basic principle of a relational ontology is that the relations between entities are more important than the entities themselves. In contemporary anthropology, the four ontologies of naturalism, animism, totemism and analogism elaborated by Philippe Descola and the concept of perspectivism developed by Eduardo Viveiro de Castro – with its emphasis on the Amazonian idea of a multiplicity of natures within a single shared cultural substance – offer a

multitude of insights into different modes of coexistence between human and nonhuman beings, cosmologies distinct from and irreducible to modernist naturalism. Philippe Descola, *Par-delà Nature et Culture (Beyond Nature and Culture)* (Paris, Gallimard, 2005); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere. Four Lectures given in the department of social anthropology* (Cambridge University, February-March 1998, HAU Books, 2012) <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/masterclass/issue/view/Masterclass%20Volume%201> (<http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/masterclass/issue/view/Masterclass%20Volume%201>) (Last accessed on December 14, 2015)

- xix. For this issue of the modernist abstraction – the autonomy of modern institutions of knowledge, including language, and the concurrent dynamics of purification and mediation where the modern museum is inscribed. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993).
- xx. *Who Carries The Water* is in the public domain and the works can be reproduced, modified, and distributed without permission, even for commercial purposes. The text is copyleft, offering the public the right to freely distribute copies and modified versions, with the stipulation that the same rights be preserved in derivative works. With this gesture, Öztat and Belkıs also put practices of bio-patenting under criticism. For further analysis on the subject see Vandana Shiva, *Corporate Control of Life*, Documenta13: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts, (Hatje Cantz, 2012).
- xxi. On the potential of indigenous knowledge and practice towards decolonizing thought and moving away from the conditions that created the Anthropocene, Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene”, Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Ibid.* pp. 241-254.
- xxii. For a few examples and accounts of such practices, see: Clementine Deliss, ‘Collecting Life’s Unknowns’, *Decolonizing Museums*, L’Internationale Online, 2015, pp. 23-34 and all of the subsequent contributions; “The Anthropocene Project” at HKW in Berlin which is detailed by Bernd Scherer and Anselm Franke at the ‘Anthropocene Project’ conference held at Tate Modern, London, July 2015, audio files available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/anthropocene-project> (<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/anthropocene-project>) (Last accessed on December 11, 2015)

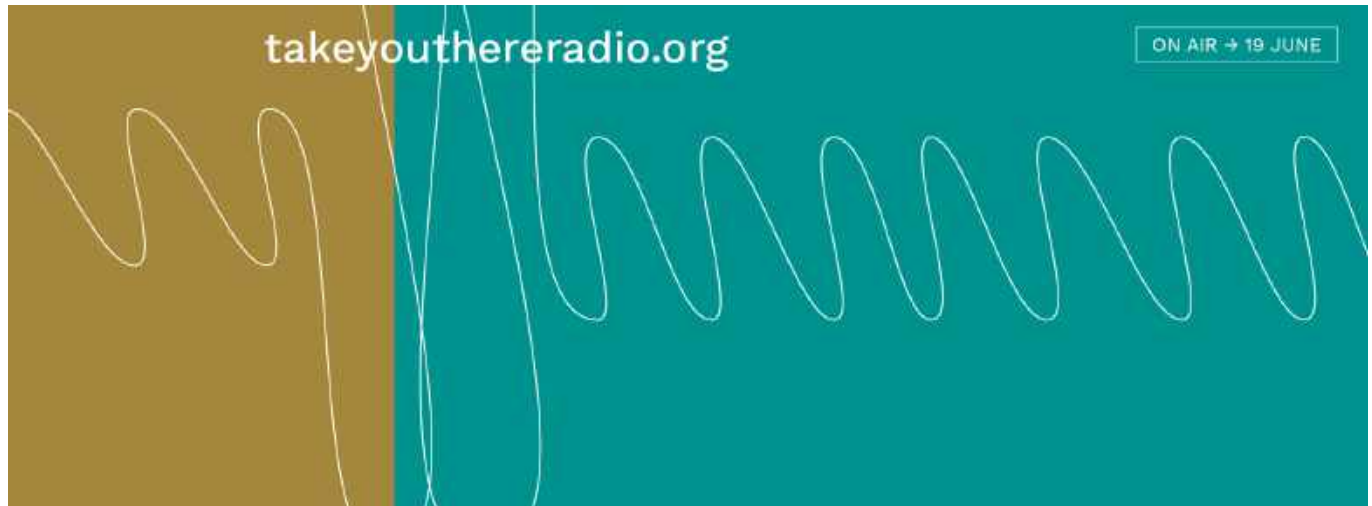
About the Author: Aslı Seven (<http://arteeast.org/author/asliseven/>)

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Take You There Radio

29 May – 23 June 2015

MAGASIN - CNAC, Grenoble, France



Resident artists: Antoine Boute, Dafna Maimon, Itziar Okariz, Simon Ripoll-Hurier
Short and long distance collaborations: AB Records, Autumn Ahn, Céline Ahond, ALLGOLD, Andy Hope 1930, Manon Bellet & Erik Kiesewetter, Pierre Beloüin, Birthstone, Blasterama Radioshow, Blood Blog, Alessandro Bosetti, Kyle Bravo, Brice Nice, Jacques Brodier, Jane Cassidy, Arianna Cecconi & Tuia Cherici, Sabrina Chou, Cloudnumber (Fullfridge Music), Stephen Collier, Sym Corrigan, The Cosmopolitan Shepherd, Louise Culot, Tom Dale, Danny, Marie-Michelle Deschamps, DJ Matty, dose rate sound system, Merve Ertufan, Amanda Feery, Maxime Guitton & Jelena Martinovic, Deniz Gul, Mikhail Karikis, Camille Llobet, MACON, Mambo Chick (Palmwine Records), Joël Massey, Miss Kim, Denis Morin, M-O-R-S-E, Estelle Nabeyrat, Neon Burgundy, Jérôme Noetinger, Anouchka Oler, Optical Sound, Sergio Padilla, Jean Jacques Palix, Anne-Laure Pigache, Lili Reynaud Dewar, Sahel Sounds, Satellite Jockey, Mark Schreiber, Shelter Press, Matthieu Saladin, Taylor Lee Shepherd, Nick Stillman, Isabelle Stragliati, Armando Andrade Tudela, Julien Vadet, Loïc Verdillon, Very Primitive, Vox Project (Reoseb), Wounded Wolf Press, Xeno and Oaklander.

A curatorial collaboration between Betty Biedermann, Sophie Lvoff, Martina Margini, Theo Robine-Langlois, Asli Seven and Chloe Sitzia, Take You There Radio is a temporary radio project as exhibition streaming on the internet. Take You There Radio aims to transport participants and listeners to another place on an individual and shared level— a type of metaphysical travel that has occurred within audiences since the birth of radio as a popular media. The project takes place in collaboration with four artists-in-residence and with the participation of interlocutors from long and short distances who premeditate and improvise radio interventions.

The programming of Take You There Radio revolves around the core themes of space and time travel as experienced through altered states of consciousness, narratives of science fiction, utopian ideals, appropriation of socio-political topics by amateurs, investigation of sound in language and music, as well as radio station as a structure for predictable patterns with mysterious outcomes. Participants created radio-specific art pieces in Grenoble using resources provided by the Take You There Radio curatorial team: a sound recording studio inhabiting the physical space of the Conciergerie, a resource center and listening room free to the public, and counseling from radio professionals as well as theorists from various fields. Along with the traditional radio schedule, improvisation took place during the web stream broadcast in the form of prank phone calls, love letters, DJ sets, live interviews, tutorials, and more. As part of the exhibition program, a series of workshops for local teenagers were led by the curatorial team and invited instructors.



Studio Take You There Radio, Conciergerie, Site Bouchayer-Viallet, Grenoble. Photo by Sophie Lvoff.



Studio Take You There Radio, Conciergerie, Site Bouchayer-Viallet, Grenoble. Photo by Sophie Lvoff.

takeyouthereradio.org was broadcast online for 5 days, nonstop 24-hours a day. The studio of Take You There Radio hosted the public with improvised listening sessions between 30 May - 19 June 2015, Wednesday to Sunday, from 5pm to 7pm. The studio turned listening room was open to public from 19 through 23 June 2015, Wednesday to Sunday, from 2pm to 7pm. The content produced and broadcast by Take You There Radio is relayed by our partner radios: Radio Campus Grenoble 90.8 and r22.fr (Espace Khiasma, Paris).



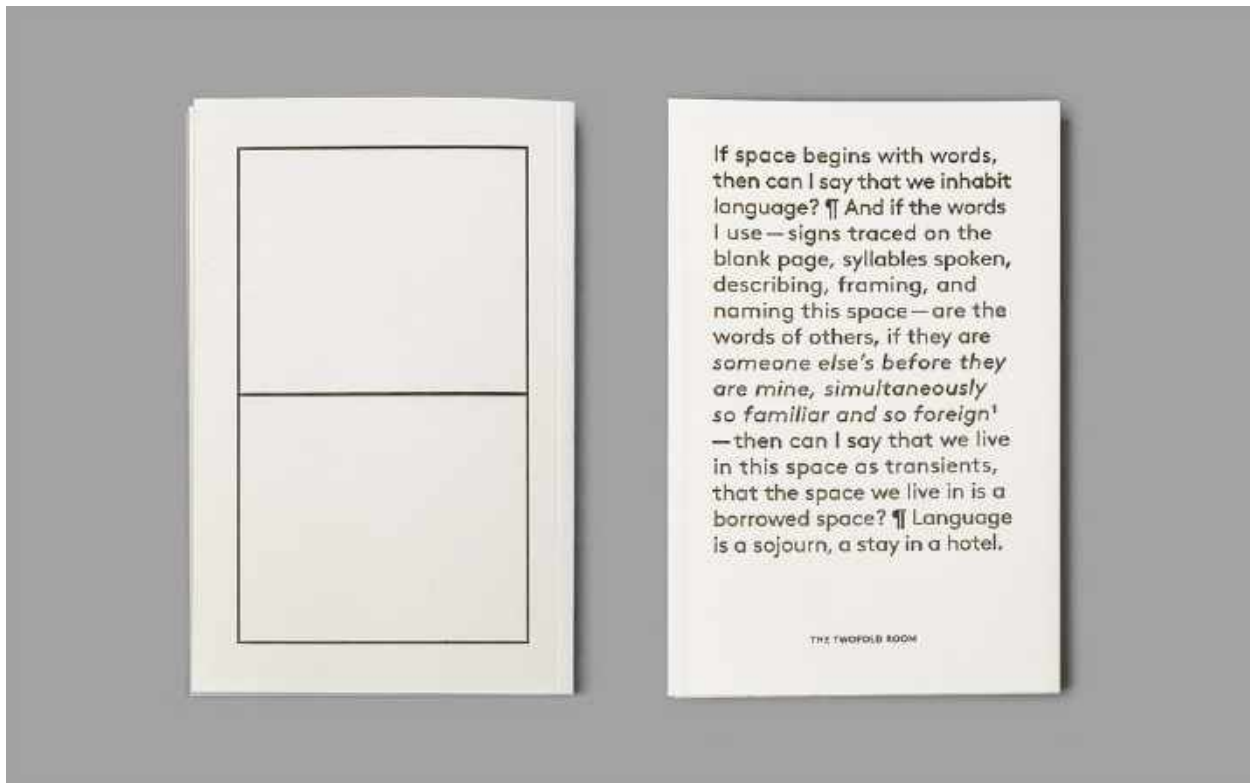
Left: Anouchka Oler performing live, 19 June 2015. Right: Antoine Boute recording in the studio, 8 June, 2015. Photos by Martina Margini.



Lili Reynaud Dewar live performance, 22 June, 2015. Photo by Sophie Lvoff

The Sound of Language

An audio documentary by Asli Seven for *Take you there Radio*. With: Louise Culot, Marie Michelle Deschamps and Deniz Gul.



Marie Michelle Deschamps, *The Twofold Room*, artist book, 2013.

The sound of language is a series of audio documentaries exploring the relationship between sound and language through processes of translation and mimesis at work in different cases of invented language and artistic practices aiming to bridge oral and textual linguistic expression with music. To what extent do human voice and body participate in the meaning of words? What kinds of situations of intersubjectivity or isolation are behind some of the cases of language invention? From graphical musical notations to improvised music, from mimetic gestures to the invention of phonemes, from poetry based on linguistic memory to text and to sound interpretation, there is an array of practices and methods on this continuum between the two poles of abstraction and codification on one hand and of improvisation and synesthetic, affective correspondences on the other.

The wala wala language, a blend of Mandarin and Congolese invented on construction sites in Congo is explored with Louise Culot, a researcher who has worked and published on this case and provided the sound recordings of wala wala. Marie Michelle Deschamps's recent sound piece "don't trip over the wire..!" was based on her correspondence with Louis Wolfson, the author of "Le Schizo et les langues" who developed a unique method of phonetically and etymologically deconstructing the English language. Deniz Gul recently collaborated with 5 musicians from Chicago, US, to transform her experimental text "5 Person Buffet" into a musical performance. Through the sound works of 2 artists, 1 language invention and in-depth interviews, the series asks the initial questions of a long-term research, presents its first findings and arrives at a new set of questions. Each interview lasts 30 minutes and is based on the work of a participant who is interviewed, the sounds of the language in question and/or sound elements from the artwork are edited into the interview.

Listen: 6 Conversations on 5 Person Buffet in Full:

<https://soundcloud.com/asli-seven/5-person-bufet-in-6-conversations>

Extract > 10 Minutes:

<https://soundcloud.com/asli-seven/extract-6-conversations-on-deniz-guls-5-person-bufet>

Walk on til The End

Produced by Jelena Martinovic, Maxime Guitton and Asli Seven, with the participation of Simon Rippoll Hurier, Martina Margini and Chloé Sitzia in Grenoble.



Photo by Martina Margini.

“Walk on til The End” is a sound edit by Asli Seven: the recording of a conversation-while-hiking between Maxime Guitton and Jelena Martinovic, on alpine expeditions and near death experiences, mixed with a selection of music by Maxime Guitton. The sound of the alps and their steps gives rhythm to this conversation that takes as its point of departure Wade Davis' account of the British assaults on Mount Everest in the early 20th century, *Into the Silence* (Vintage, London: 2012). The musical selection was edited in so as to resonate at times with surrounding noises, at others with the content and the rhythm of the conversation.

Listen in Full:

<https://soundcloud.com/asli-seven/walk-on-til-the-end>

Extract > 10 Minutes:

<https://soundcloud.com/asli-seven/extract-walk-on-til-the-end>