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## **Movement research to re-think modernity within the trans-national**

Programmed by Farah Aksoy at SALT Beyoğlu between June 27 and August 30, 2019, *Forward! March* by artists Maris Andersson and Nancy Atakan looked at the foundations of physical culture practices in Turkey's modernization period through the lens of the Swedish approach to gymnastics at the beginning of the 20th century. We are publishing the text that Rana Kelleci wrote on the exhibition for the AICA Young Critics Prize.



I catch Maria Andersson's five-minute video *The Traveler* (2019) at the scene when a group of people are passionately singing the Youth March on top of the Atatürk Monument in Taksim Square. This sound inevitably gives me goosebumps just as it had throughout the first twelve years

of my life on national holidays. While we might not feel a deep commitment to the patriotic and national values of the march, singing this melody and the lyrics alongside a group of people evokes strong emotions in most of us. This shared emotional response among citizens of Turkey is also confusing—is this a learned response that is derived from the Turkish nationalist agenda or does it correspond to universal emotions of unity and togetherness?

At the expansive entrance of SALT Beyoğlu that opens to Istiklal Avenue, we encounter the Youth March, which is the soundtrack to Andersson’s video. As the viewer walks into the high-ceilinged, rectangular exhibition space, they become aware that they are also stepping onto an almost-real-sized basketball court—they are surrounded by the gray dashed lines of a sporting venue. In the video, Andersson reveals that the Turkish Youth March is an adaptation of the Swedish folk song *Tre trallande j  ntor* (*Three Singing Girls*). This information that greets viewers as they enter the venue not only points to the international permeability of the cross-cultural, but also questions the boundaries of appropriation within the framework of the notions of the nation-state and sports.



The exhibition *Forward! March* by Maria Andersson and Nancy Atakan, which was on view between June 27 and August 30, emerges from a micro-historicization practice based on the life of

Selim Sirri Tarcan, who is considered to be the founder of the physical culture practices in Turkey. Tarcan's interest in the sports, as well as political reasons lead him to the Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet (Royal Central Gymnastics Institute) in Stockholm for a year and upon his return, the physical culture practice system that is aligned with the values of the Republic of Turkey is established under his guidance. The character of Tarcan embodies a most controversial exchange era in the history of transition between the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, forming a convenient foundation on which modernization (or what some synonymously dub Westernization), which corresponds to the numerous reforms and transformations of perception in the fields of government, culture, private and public spaces.

In the book that accompanies the exhibition that narrate his trip to the North, Selim Sirri Tarcan writes, "Of course a necessity has emerged for small states alongside this: To live! To not be stepped on by the foreign! To not be repressed!" (1) These sentences seem to have traces of the anxiety of the people, intellectuals, dynasty and court bureaucrats of the empire, which was rapidly declining economically and politically. How will the Empire respond to the changing world, how will it realize its authority? Tarcan's recipe was "to be a man with a brave character, equipped with knowledge and a solid body." Art historian Wendy Shaw considers these three elements, which she considers within the perception of "the whole person," as the basis of modernity. The solid and strong body ideal encouraged by Tarcan is "an essential component in the development of a national and indirect anti-colonial identity." (2) Robust peasant and worker statues erected in urban squares in Hitler's Germany, former Yugoslavia or Soviet Russia, were also carriers of similar ideals. The parallels between physical virtues and national consciousness and modernity can be clearly seen in Tarcan's sentences.

In this respect, it may be meaningful to approach Atakan and Andersson's research-based works in the exhibition, keeping the discussions of modernity (and / or westernization) that have accelerated in the last few decades at eye level. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasabalı, in a book that collects and opens up to discussion modernity and national identity in Turkey, summarize the direction of the discussions that have been led by both secular and Islamist intellectuals and claim that the general sense that the Turkish modernity is a success has shifted towards seeing this process as a failed attempt to embrace the values of the Ottoman-Turkish society. (3) This critical field, which is in dialogue with the right-wing politics of the last twenty years, definitely include a potential to heal. Artistic practices that research alternative narratives, such as the exhibition *Forward! March*, open up ways to be able to assess modern values beyond nations and cultures.





Nancy Atakan, an American citizen who has been living in Turkey for more than fifty years, and Sweden-based Maria Andersson, deal with often-shared historic notions and visual lexicons that have defined the concept of the modern and which have emerged in the 20th century. Atakan's series of drawings, *My Name is Azade (Freedom)* (2014), and Andersson's artist book *Anthem*s (2015), which make visible the artist's personal experiences with modernity, provide historic narratives that embrace subjectivity. *Anthem*s surround the columns at the exhibition site and a page from this book is quite striking within this framework:

Medical gymnastics

as

re-creation

of lost unity

The presence of the nation-state, competition, and economic development, unity in the same place sounds strange. But modernity, including these elements, ironically incorporates the potential for unity. In Atakan and Andersson's individual and collective productions, shared aspects of rival nations and cultures are explored. This is most obvious in the *Transformation Series* from 2019 in which two-dimensional figures cut out from felt are creating a choreography, reaching towards eternity (just like the old photographs featuring the gymnastics schools in Stockholm, which accompany the exhibition). The form of the shadow, which makes visible only the movements and the contours of the bodies, strip them of their identities and integrate them into an archaic harmony. Positioned at the entrance to the exhibition *Rotating Time* from this series whispers the cross-temporal vision of the exhibition as well as the melding of the past, the present, and the future to the viewers from the very beginning.

The artists' research on Selim Sırrı Tarcan lead them to his two daughters who are pioneers in modern dance and therapeutic gymnastics, Selma Mimaroglu and Azade Kent. Tarcan's daughters Mimaroglu and Kent make it possible to deepen the research on modernity in relation to women's voices and positions.

At this point, it would be meaningful to remember a determination of art historian Ahu Antmen on this subject. Antmen proposes to consider the image of women as an indicator of modernity. (4) As we can trace in parks, city streets, mosque entrances, theaters, operas, and paintings that depict women, women were now present in the Europe of the 20th century and of course in the Ottoman Empire and Republic of Turkey, in an unprecedented manner; although their participation is limited, it is there. This makes it possible for the whole society to make progress and to contribute to the ideal of development. How do women who are now participating in social and professional life experience modernity? Within the framework of the patriarchal weight of historicization, this issue can lead us to a wide and virgin field of research. Practices that reveal the presence of women in history, making visible their names and output are gaining traction in contemporary artistic production. Alternative methods provide inputs that help get acquainted with and comprehend other groups that have been left outside of dominant narratives.



Nancy Atakan's *My Name is Azade (Freedom)* must stem from a similar curiosity. Azade Kent's story is relayed visually and verbally in a first-person narrative, or in other words, directly. While this is a fictional narrative, Atakan underlines the urgency of women narrating their own stories. In an interview with Merve Ünsal, Atakan points out that she wanted to work with the story of Azade precisely because Azade is from a social class that is often disregarded—the Ottoman elite. (5) The artist thus becomes a historian and perhaps adds to history a protagonist that she would want to see as a figure in that narration.

The word *azade*, which means to be free of, stands off-balance within social reality: What does freedom entail for the Ottoman-Turkish woman? What are the differences in the meaning of freedom within nations and cultures and could the local and universal meanings be negotiated at this point?

The other sibling Selma Mimaroğlu is brought together with the pioneer of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, in Maria Andersson's imagination. It is true that Mimaroğlu traces the steps of Duncan, as we find out through the research presented in the exhibition. The video work that Maria Andersson places at the end of the exhibition on a white pedestal, a small-scale video that could almost be missed if one doesn't pay attention, reveals a black and white recording of a performance by

Duncan in front of a male audience, accompanied by a sentence that is in an infinite loop: "...the dance of eternity is the dance of the future is the dance of the past..." (6)

Isadora Duncan's free-spirited dance is an experimental practice by contemporary performance artists, where the possibilities of space and existence are explored. I think that art practices similar to those in the exhibition *Forward! March* have also conducted movement research in history. They swirl their arms and eyes in space, hitting stories that have not been seen, heard, or deliberately ignored with every move. Maybe it is only possible to calibrate the elements and contradictions of modernity with a similarly open approach.

(1) Şimalin Üç Diyarı: Finlandiya İsveç Danimarka (Three lands of the North: Findland Sweden Denmark)

(2) Shaw, W., *Gymnastics of Memory*. Atakan, N., Muller, N., Shaw, W., Tunalı, Y., Ünsal, M. (2016). Nancy Atakan: *Passing On*. Heidelberg: Kehrler.

(3) Bozdoğan, S., & Kasaba, R. (Eds.). (1997). *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*. Seattle; London: University of Washington Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnnwt>

(4) Antmen, A. (Ed.). (2013). *Kimlikli Bedenler: Sanat, Kimlik, Cinsiyet*. İstanbul: Sel.

(5) Ünsal, M. *On Stories, Bodies and Collectivity: An Interview with Nancy Atakan*. Atakan, N., Muller, N., Shaw, W., Tunalı, Y., Ünsal, M. (2016). Nancy Atakan: *Passing On*. Heidelberg: Kehrler.

(6) "...the dance of eternity is the dance of the future is the dance of the past..."