

Koken Ergun: Personal works of public ceremonies

Koken Ergun's work is about ritual. That is, *about* ritual, circling contemporary popular ceremony as its subject of examination, picking at the unwitting detachment and wilful fervour of its participants, looking at what we would see on the television and at what we would not, pointing as much to its ragged edges as its transformative social power. It records these public situations (and also sometimes (re)constructs them) not to extend them into personal or collective memory, nor as the imprint of propaganda, but as the means for a broader analysis which finds its form in a visual language that is at once off-hand, casual and precisely because of this acutely, carefully revealing. It is a practice that might be read through that to which it is opposed, to uncover the coordinates of what it is for.

Ergun's work in general, and his two signature video installations *The Flag* (2006) and *I, Soldier* (2005) in particular form a paradigmatic opposition, for instance, to Leni Riefenstahl's landmark film of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, *Olympia* (1938). *Olympia* is a work of bravura filmmaking--iconographic, idealising--in which bodies and actions become (pure) form, almost to the point of abstraction, or to a point at which they lose any semblance of human fragility; crowds without the mess of life, high divers who never hit the water, discus throwers who turn but might as well not, so closely do they resemble classical sculpture. Riefenstahl's are indivisible images, reinscriptions of spectacle. Like her fabrication of the "ancient tradition" of the Olympic torch carried by a series of athletes from Mount Olympus to Berlin--in fact a fiction existing solely in the film and only subsequently adopted as a feature of the build-up to the Games--they are absolutely invested in the generation of myth as if the film is in and of itself a ritual. What it proposes as aesthetic, if not also ideological certainty, Ergun's videos transcribe as a question mark.

The Flag and *I, Soldier* record different events in a stadium, not in Berlin or Greece, but modern day Turkey, the exhortations of two connected annual national rituals that celebrate the founding of the Turkish republic and imprint its values onto its subjects: Children's Day held on 23rd April and the Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day held just weeks later on 19th May. Unlike Riefenstahl's, Ergun's camera occupies an unofficial position, unchoreographed and shakily recording each event as it unfolds. The margins are everything in its framings. What we see are two things at the same time, in tension: the orchestration of a mass public occasion, individuals performing prescribed roles, becoming a group and something else, their

anti-iconographic, entirely ordinary surroundings, scrubby grass, flickers of boredom or self-conscious smiles, empty plastic seats in the stadium. Both occasions eulogise the state through epic poetry with a metaphoric magnitude that is continuously undermined by the camcorder aesthetic that makes it known to us. Huge emotion is undercut by ambient noise, spectacle unravelled by an itinerant attention.

In *The Flag*, the love, support and nurturing of the country's children professed by the occasion becomes an imposition, a manipulation continuously threatened by the uncontrollable, only for it to be re-asserted. In the stands children are seen through a wire mesh fence. In *I, Soldier*, the stadium address--a poem shouted as a display of uber-masculinity by a uniformed soldier to the gentle strains of lyrical music--becomes a love song to his colleague who we see on the opposite screen in slow motion, simply turning his head, an icon occupying an altogether different cinematic register and a homoeroticism that maps onto the display of troops running, marching and performing gymnastics.

These are personal works of public ceremonies. Images divisible from the spectacle they otherwise witness. They refer back to Ergun's first video, *Untitled* (2004), in which the artist drapes himself in various headscarves as both a protest against the discrimination of a secular government and a private expression of rage that is also a parody of the Pieta. And they provide the template for *TANKLOVE* (2008), a constructed situation Ergun organised in a small Danish town recording the public's response to an actual tank rolling down their high street and *WEDDING* (2007), a three-channel video installation that documents and visually commentates the phenomenon of contemporary Turkish nuptials.

Ergun's work might most often be concerned with the rituals of his own Turkish identity, but it does so not as a closed text, to generate myth, but for the sake of its opposite. Not rituals themselves, but footnotes to the fictions they picture, these works are notes to *us* on the nature of all modern, social, political and cultural constructs.

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