



## **DISPLACEMENT OF KURDISH RECYCLERS**

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Kurdish land eviction from recycling triage on the edge of Ankara.

Self-reflection on artistic practice in the field under difficult conditions. The VideA headquarters in Ankara were the base camp for my trip to southeast Turkey in the spring of 2004. The members of the video collective have had long-term relations with a Kurdish community living on the outskirts of Ankara who had found an economic niche by recycling paper, glass, and plastic. Over the years, they had built up a prospering citywide business, which provided a living for a thousand Kurdish citizens. City officials had repeatedly fomented hostility against the community for taking up much urban space, which was constantly rising in value, and for providing lucrative services which could just as well be performed by the municipality itself. The news broke during my short stay when alarmed Kurds called VideA in the early morning hours to report that bulldozers were approaching. The callers urged someone to come and document it. On this spring morning, the city council of Ankara moved in to raze the area to the ground, evict the Kurdish groups, and take over the recycling business. This traumatizing act sent a loud signal to the Kurds in eastern Turkey that government interests will always prevail over minority claims. The military array for this operation was impressive. Within a few hours, the place was reduced to ashes. As an act of resistance, the Kurds set the garbage on fire because, for them, paper is as valuable a resource as oil is for others.

This video file is a record of people's displacement, their urban struggle, their loss of land. It is at the same time a reflection on the practice and conditions of image making in the drama of the moment when a thousand citizens lose their existence in front of our eyes. The video footage is not only implacable evidence of the event itself, it also documents an artistic practice. What does it mean to take the camera into the field, to go into the trenches? How did it get to the point where I, as an artist-researcher, stand at the front, next to the journalists, at the very moment of the incident? Without press pass or gas mask. Without any license to record images whatsoever. I vacillated between feeling the urgency of documenting the conspicuous injustice inherent in the violent act of eviction and the reluctance of representing human crisis as a spectacle. How to resist producing the ultimate image that will capture the whole drama in one frame? How to resist freezing the moment into a symbol? Before I knew it, I was in the shoes of an embedded artist immersed in the surge of human confrontation and confusion. What is the status of these images in the wider context of my ongoing pursuit of gathering visual data about the local entanglements of oil politics in the

region, an activity which left me frequently with the feeling that I was overstepping legal barriers?

The images of the battle on the recycling fields of Ankara stand for the countless violations accompanying the construction and maintenance of the oil export facilities and inflicted upon local communities. They have to stand for all the violations I wasn't able to document live and which nobody was able to capture on tape. It is as if these images have to perform an emotional transfer to other images in this project, which seem as unjustifiably harmless as the inoperative pipeline fragments lying in the grass, waiting to be buried. In contrast to these images, what is the status of the ones shot in the midst of teargas and between police formations in combat gear? Are images recorded under dangerous conditions more valuable than material found in libraries and archives? Is better knowledge that which is produced at great risk? Seen in the broader context of my research endeavors, the pursuit of hidden, secret, and restricted knowledge can be understood as cognitive methods akin to the ones used by geologists, journalists, anthropologists, or secret service agents. They all probe different sorts of sediments and plots that give meaning to the area. What is the sediment I should be probing in my fieldwork, what role do I play in this plot? My video research is an attempt to insert myself into the vector of practices performed by representatives of these different disciplines. It is not so much the capturing of a spectacular human drama that is at work here but the relentless search for the uncontrollable shoots of buried histories.

#### EMBEDDED ARTIST

On my shooting trip through the Caucasus in 2004, I followed long segments of the pipeline trajectory in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Southeast Turkey. The video captures the gigantic material and physical effort involved in building the ducts. In doing so, it contrasts most current representations of data and energy flow, which indicate a boundless and effortless, even magic transfer of energy. The field records show otherwise. The most powerful technologies are those which are pervasive and unnoticeable. Operating in the background, they connect, inform, empower, and organize our lives. To scrutinize the infrastructures physically, as opposed to just theoretically, from distance, is a surprisingly difficult thing to do. Oil companies run a severe image regime. The working conditions of an embedded artist recording the construction of a mega transnational corporate infrastructure are pretty tough. As odd as it sounds, it's risky to simply videotape a pipeline.

The difficulties in producing visual intelligence are multiple. The first problem is to find out where the construction actually takes place. This information is not readily available and the oil company is the last to tell you. The trajectory is very long and winds through difficult terrain sometimes miles away from the sparse and poorly maintained road system. It can take a seven-hour brain-shaking trip on a 4WD Lada to

reach an area where the corridor could possibly be visible. I found it one day because I happened to come across a truck carrying 3 giant pipes in the rural heart of Azerbaijan, a lucky day. His route led me straight to the construction site. To my surprise, the man who approached me was fluent in Spanish. He acted as the translator for the many Colombian workers on the site who had been employed by BP for previous pipeline projects in Latin America. The head of the operation was a laid-back Scotsman (born on Braveheart's last battlefield, he specified) who invited me for a ride along the corridor. This unusual incident could only take place far away from the watching eyes of corporate policy and decision-making centers.

More likely one is faced with problem number two which consists in overcoming the physical prevention of approaching and documenting the site. Nissan-driving pipe patrol is always on the horizon and the operators hired an army of guards among village populations to watch over the construction sites making sure unauthorized persons don't access it, not just physically but also tele-visually. This is when it becomes blatantly clear that their measures have little to do with security and everything with control over perception and representation. Their concept is that during construction image-making is prohibited and once the pipeline is buried it will be invisible anyway. The main challenge then is not an artistic one involving choices of framing, lighting and camera movements, but to go undetected: to generate images of oil infrastructures became an undercover mission. Keeping a low profile by means of general information poverty is a major concern in a project which involves such a high level of financial investment and the employment of large amounts of equipment, machinery and technology, particularly when the project runs through a poverty-stricken region whose population is entirely disconnected from the impact of the developments. But this cannot be the whole explanation. Why is it so important to keep it a secret? The ensemble of the files is an exploration of the meaning of this tube in the hidden corporate and political imaginary of this space and what function it has in their own secret ordering system.

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**Cluster:** Black Sea Files

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