NEVIN ALADAG
CITY LANGUAGE

FEBRUARY – MARCH

Nevin Aladag *City Language II* Video installation with 8 monitors Duration 2 to 4 minutes each 2009

LIFE ON THE GOLDEN HORN[1]

One might enter this exhibition with a sense of déjà vu. The works (entitled *City Language I*, *II* and *III* respectively) constituting *City Language* were originally made for and exhibited in the Istanbul Biennale in 2009. Nevin Aladag has previously shown at mother's tankstation, in *The Last Blue Sky* group show in 2007. Aladag's work is perceived to fit into a zeitgeist of migrant artists, making work that explores notions of identity and culture from within a diaspora. The fact that Aladag was born in Turkey and raised in Germany is stated at the start of most reviews of her work. A mention of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)[2] also seems obligatory – together with a suggestion that her work either addresses, or neatly avoids, the issue of East viewed by West, and the mixing of cultures between the two. The sense of familiarity that these facts give the viewer does not detract from the work: the Trobriand Island Problem[3] feels relevant here. Whether one has seen her work before, or imagines that one has heard before all that it might have to say, it would be foolish to deny that these preconceived ideas affect our viewing of the work. Further, as will become clear, the reference to the Trobriand Island problem, linking together the studies of anthropologists with those of art historians, is particularly pertinent to Aladag's practice.

The viewer enters a darkened room. Projected onto the wall, a video splits the screen into its four corners. First, in the top right quarter, a tambourine bounces across water, each lapping wave banging the jingles and beating its rhythm. The camera is fixed from a boat which pulls the tambourine along in its wake on a visible string. In the background other boats can be seen, with the landscape of the titular city behind. We hear the noises of the scene, the jangling tambourine, the slapping of the water, the boats. Then sound and visual switch to the top left corner: from a moving vehicle a hand holds aloft a ney, a traditional Turkish wind instrument and the wind whistles through it. Again the point of view is from the source of the motion, so that we are left to assume the car travelling along the road, when all we see in the foreground is bare arm, hand, ney, and in the background a passing coastline; trees, a building site. This view and its attendant sound remain, and added to it is the bottom right corner, where loose chimes clang as they tumble down concrete steps. The camera is positioned at the bottom of the flight, so that they approach us as they fall, the noise getting louder – and we can clearly see no agent of the fall at work. This quarter goes black and silent, so we are left with the ney alone, then it too goes out and we switch to the bottom left, where a saz (a lute-like instrument) lies on the ground, with pigeons pecking at bird seed scattered around and upon it. The sound we hear is therefore the pigeons, and the unintentional plucking of the strings as they seek out the seed. As with the chimes, the scene is already set – we do not see who placed the instrument on the ground. Next we cut back to the ney, then ney and tambourine, ney and chimes, cutting on and on, back and forth, until finally we see and hear them all together, with each going off in the order they first appeared, leaving us finally with the pigeons, who are then startled and fly off the instrument – the full screen goes black. Walking into the work, *City Language I*, in a gallery setting, we are unlikely to see the logic of this almost narrative structure, one corner seems at first to follow another at random. But there is an orchestrated rhythm to image and sound: an introduction to each instrument, a dance between them, culminating in an end sequence. In between switches, sometimes the camera position or focus changes – in our last view of the tambourine we see only it and the waves, with no background coast visible. As the ney speeds past, we see the Bosphorus from alongside, then later from a bridge, gradually making the city of Istanbul more recognisable, as we build our own picture from each of these glimpses. The ambient noise gives us an orientation too: people talking, human noise around the pigeons (perhaps they are in a square); the boat engines, horns and industrial sea noises around the tambourine; the relative quiet of the back streets where the chimes hurtle down, with cars sounding distant. Clearly, what we are hearing is not the traditional music such instruments are expected to make. Forces of nature – water, wind, gravity, birds – act as musicians. Yet in each we see, as visibly as the string from the boat pulling the tambourine, that they are orchestrated into this situation by the hand of the artist. They do not spontaneously perform. Even in the presentation, a constructed pattern is stressed. The split screen projection might evoke the artificiality of vintage Hollywood comedies[4], or at the other end of the spectrum, Warhol and Morrissey's *Chelsea Girls* (1966), but such a division of directed gaze is most quotidianly familiar to us in the multiple windows of the average computer screen, splitting our focus from one application to the next, and back and forth.

This cinematic multiplicity of images continues in *City Language II*. In the main exhibition space, eight monitors are arranged in a circle, facing inwards. The viewer must place themselves on the centre stage of this amphitheatre, penetrating the circle, to see the films from within. Immersed and isolated, we see on each monitor the view taken by a video camera, focused on the rear-view mirror of the car in which it is travelling, as the car moves around the city. A different vehicle (and consequently different mirror) is used for each video, a different part of the city, a different time of day. Each segment plays on a loop, each again to its own, varying in length between 2 and 4 minutes. With their own individual logic, they offer glimpses of a gradually recognisable Istanbul, receding in the mirror, and more naturally, but less sharply, approaching in the small area seen outside the confines of the mirror. That is, the viewpoint offers subtle flavours of the city – the industrial coast, the bridges spanning the Bosphorus, city shops, and houses – but, as with *City Language I*, we barely see the landmarks, the tourist signifiers of place. With the visual reference to the work of Lee Friedlander, we expect, if not a transplantation of his Americana road trips, a re-capturing of the quintessential in that vein. Aladag, however, transforms his automotive frame beyond the nostalgic evocation. These are not simply a moving version of familiar pictures, retaken in a new place. We are submerged in information: trapped within the parameters of the camera's fixed gaze, there is too much visual information to take in at once, despite the fact that the pace is at times reduced to crawling along in a traffic jam (but there's something else going on over your shoulder). Almost – and in certain

Nevin Aladag *City Language I* Video 4:45 minutes Split screen projection 2009

light over the course of the videos, completely – imperceptibly, across the mirrors in a small, faint typeface, lyrics appear etched. The words are from a selection of seemingly random English-language popular songs: "I'm not Christian and I'm not a Jew" (from Madonna's *American Life*) on a mirror showing colourful shopfronts, bin men working, pedestrians turning to look at the camera; "Can we live together like a melody?" (from Gentleman's *Tranquillity*)[5] against a backdrop of tall houses, littered with satellite dishes and with washing hanging from the windows. Music, even in this silent video work, permeates Aladag's practice, as a reflection of the way it permeates and constitutes culture.

Although the eight videos of *City Language II* are silent, it is not in silence that they are viewed. The insistent clapping of the adjacent *City Language III* resounds around the gallery. In this brief video (lasting just over a minute), shown on a loop on a single monitor, a rhythm is beaten out by a series of people filmed in profile, with only hand and forearm visible. The camera is fixed, and although it is clear that the hands belong to different individuals, and that the rhythm alternates back and forth with the cutting of the montage, we are frustrated to see more of the different people involved. Are they all together at the same time, or are they alone when being filmed? Are they contributing different rhythms, or different parts of the same music? We hungrily analyse the little information we have: wrinkles, bangles, a wedding band conjure the whole of image of an old married woman, whereas a hairy arm, shirtsleeve and wristwatch suggest a working man. It provokes, requires, us to make assumptions as we watch, a playful game but with a hypnotically aggressive soundtrack. The beating of flesh on flesh is both melodic and military as it echoes round the walls of the gallery. Through this music we try to construct people and a culture, just as we try to construct a city from the glimpses seen in the previous two works. As a sampling of traditional tunes, Aladag's work might be mistaken for that of an anthropologist, and there is certainly a documentary aspect to her practice.[6] We have returned to the Trobriand Island Problem again, and we are aware that this is a constructed situation, not a recording of an event happening. The clapping is not spontaneous, but is organised by the artist, and the resulting footage subsequently edited by the artist. Here the distinction becomes clear: she is not studying a people; she is observing the reality of people.

Throughout the videos of the *City Language* series Aladag demonstrates the power of the artist to break down and re-construct. It is a strong, directed force. Yet the pattern of the exhibition is more than the patchwork palimpsest of its previous manifestation in the Istanbul Biennale. Where before the reaction provoked involved further questioning of perspective (West to East, migrant looking back at homeland, voices from within captured) events of the intervening years have changed the global perception dynamic. As the events of the Arab Spring unfolded, in real time, streaming across the internet on youtube, facebook and twitter, the news was no longer presented in the west through the filter of well-spoken Anglophone journalists.

The socio-political polemic is the frame surrounding the work: it is not a prism only through which the work can be seen; nor is it the subject of the work itself, but its presence is a necessary context. Since Aladag's work relates so concretely to a sense of place, the idea of what it means here in Ireland is surprisingly relevant. While an anthropologist might find some pleasing links with a city on a river, a people who permeate other cultures as a diaspora, and a proud musical tradition, I will remember the lessons learned and instead see the poignancy of the questions raised by Aladag's constructed city. In a given set of circumstances, do we look forward, back or both at once? Are we trapped in the car watching the world pass by or are we the driver? Does the wind play the ney, or is it my hand holding it that causes the wind to blow through it? Does the force of my identity come from without or within? Whose rhythm am I clapping?

Mai Blount

[1] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters, published under this title, recount her journey across Eastern Europe to Istanbul in 1716, and the following 2 years she spent living there whilst her husband was the first (and entirely unsuccessful) British ambassador at the Ottoman court. Her detailed accounts of daily life amongst the upper echelons of the female enclave in which she moved were sent to leading figures of the day and circulated widely within London society, where they became hugely influential on the Anglophone perception, if not understanding, of the Orient. Currently available as *Life on the Golden Horn* (London: Penguin, 2007)

[2] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)

[3] We are not pure and seeing these works from a neutral stance, nor should we be seeing them purely as the artist wants us to see them. Nor is the artist speaking from the inside of a culture out to us – the waters are far more muddy. This evokes the problems of an anthropologist (such as occurred at Trobriand Island) who lives amongst a people, studying them from within – and then demands that their findings be accepted as complete, unbiased truth. For a more detailed exposition on the fundamental flaws of 'going native' see Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden's essay in "Art History, Art Criticism and Explanation", *Art History*, 4, no. 4, December 1981 (pp. 432-56)

[4] *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Charade* (1963) both notably feature split screens at key moments.

[5] 'Gentleman' is the stage name of German reggae star Tillman Otto.

[6] Works such as *Raise the Roof* (2007) exist as documents of performance.

Nevin Aladag *City Language II* Video installation with 8 monitors Duration 2 to 4 minutes each 2009 (detail)
City Language III Video 0:42 minutes 2009