

## On Point 2.07

### The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Art Critic

#### Mark Van Proyen

I swear, we were there on time. The website said that the recent incarnation of the Agnes Denes *Wheatfield* in Milan would be open until 8:00 pm, but when we arrived at a few minutes after five, the site was closed—this owing to the time needed for a small army of caterers and stagehands to prepare for a special event to take place under a temporary pagoda that looked like a younger sibling of the Sydney Opera House. Nonetheless, a decent view of the piece could be had from the fenced-off perimeter around it, which, in terms of square meters, was somewhat larger than the original version that was installed under the auspices of the Public Art Fund at New York’s Battery Park in 1982. Next to the entry gate was a plaque hosting the heraldic emblems of all of the project’s sponsoring entities, some corporate, some government, but mostly *fondazioni* of the type that seem to have proliferated amidst the permacrisis that is southern Europe. No doubt these entities were providing the honored guests for the ensuing festivity, conveniently coordinated with EXPO Milan, that being the most recent iteration of what was once called The World’s Fair.

As was the case with the original 1982 version, the symbolism of the current *Wheatfield* remains pointed: at the moment when real estate becomes mega-exponentially more valuable than the land’s capacity for food production, a kind of absurdity sets in, and by calling attention to this absurdity as *absurdity* (rather than as the mass delusion of “normalcy”) is the point, because food is kind of important. I am told that the wheat will be harvested in the fall, and turned into baked goods that will be given away. From the looks of the large throng of refugees from North Africa huddled in a cordoned-off balcony at the Milano Centrale train station, harvest time cannot come too soon.

One could go on to read the piece as a latter-day ode to the cult of Demeter, sung at a time when the world could really use her help. Yet another reading takes note of the location of the new version: about halfway between Milano Centrale and the new corporate headquarters of UniCredit—perhaps the largest bank in Italy. The former is the world’s most complete and dramatic example of extant 1930s Italian Fascist architecture, while the latter is a hyper-futuristic phallus that towers over *Wheatfield* and the Milanese skyline like an upraised middle finger of gigantic proportions, the *vaffanculo qua non* of neoliberal triumphalism. It was not too long ago that UniCredit lost almost a quarter of its market capitalization in a single day of financial hemorrhage in the equity markets. But now it is back—resurrected!—although one wonders how long it will be before the rest of Italy follows suit. As it now stands, the building appears as the neoliberal *yang* casing a long shadow of *Wheatfield’s yin*, a lord of the manor surveying his domain of domesticated avant-garde art.

In 1982, Denes’s *Wheatfield* seemed uncanny and almost surrealist. Part of the reason for this was its close proximity to Wall Street, which at that time had just begun to use computerized trading technologies and electronic fund transfer—removing much of the human element insofar as the international flow of capital was concerned. By placing something so economically fundamental as the amber waves of grain production in such close proximity to the circus of abstractions that was Michael Milken-era Wall Street, an obvious question pertaining to the common good was slyly raised and then answered with an immersive experience that traded intangible abstractions for the tangible reality of earth.

*Wheatfield* was and still is readable as an eco-feminist editorial on the earlier earthworks projects that were executed by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria, many initially sponsored by Virginia Dwan, who owned the gallery that sold the editioned “documentations” of said projects. These artists received a lot of attention in *Artforum* during the early-middle 1970s, but their work was far from the be-all and end-all of land art. Writers such as Anna Chave have gone so far as to read rape fantasies undergirding Heizer’s brutalist upturnings of top soil, and San Francisco’s own Kenneth Baker published an eloquent book in 2008 about the analogy that can be made between De Maria’s *Lightning Field* (1977) and the unimaginable terror of a nuclear missile exchange. It was a topic that was on people’s minds on the eve of Ronald Reagan’s first term. At that time, a kinder and gentler land art seemed to be called for, and it first came in the form of Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Maintenance Art* projects undertaken with the New York City Department of Sanitation (circa 1972), followed up by Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1976—in memory of Smithson, who had died in a 1973 aircraft accident). Alice Aycock also did work in this vein during the late 1970s, but the jury is still out as to whether

## Unfinished Centuries

### Arie Amaya-Akkermans

The circumstances were perhaps special on the early afternoon of May 31st, 2013 in central Istanbul, when disproportionate use of violence by police forces, in response to an environmental protest, escalated into one of the major popular uprisings in the history of Turkey, a country not particularly skilled at handling dissent peacefully. Yes, the circumstances were exceptional, as the reality of violence brought Turks from all walks of life together in an episodic moment of participatory democracy, albeit only in the form of contestation and not of agreement, which turned the country upside down. The complex set of relations dictating contemporary urban life means that a protest movement for the environment today is also about architecture, about housing, about inequality, and ultimately about the public and political domain.

Journalistic comparisons to Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring or May 1968, did very little to clarify what this moment of transition was or could have been. How do you address a moment of transition when you are profoundly immersed in it? This question haunted Turkish artist Didem Pekün, observing the uprising from London as a distant spectator, and then arriving back in Istanbul to take part in the protests that lasted for months and that still echo profoundly in the political consciousness of the present moment in Turkey, marked by increasing political uncertainty and the possibility of next door’s war in Syria penetrating Turkey’s porous border. Where do the borders of reality meet the horizon of what is visible to us?

These moments of convolution that all those involved in the protests remember to a degree now seem further than they really are, as if they were part of a political cosmology erasing all previous histories yet so deeply embedded in them. The protests spread quickly nationwide, and in the unexpected solidarity that is born as a consequence of losing the objective world, very few people in central Istanbul slept that night and witnessed the hundreds of protesters marching from one side of the Bosphorus Bridge to the other at 4 AM, as we broke into tears from both shock and excitement. And that was only the beginning.



Wheatfield and UniCredit, Milan, 2015. Photograph by Caroline Maxwell.

it was land art or public sculpture. Maybe the difference is not as important now as it seemed to be then, but at that time, it was crucial to divorce Earthworks from the realm of the human for the sake of calling attention to the workings of trans-humanistic geological time separated from humanistic biological time—from the standpoint of geological time, biological entities are mere infestations that come and go rather quickly. Thus, the sites of the early Earthworks tended to be the treeless deserts of the Great Basin and the Southwest, not just because they suggested the extraterrestrial topographies of vintage science fiction illustration, but because they were haunted by a remorseless indifference to the periodic bleatings that called themselves “human culture.”

George Kubler’s 1962 book titled *The Shape of Time* provided inspiration and guidance on this front (especially to Smithson), but when Denes executed *Wheatfield*, the polarity of humans and trans-humans found a different emphasis. The work did not partake in the remorseless indifference toward the human realm that gave the earlier Earthworks their sublime edge; rather, it showed a kind of nature that could, if given the chance, work in sustainable partnership with the human world, if that human world humanized itself away from abstraction, strategy, and paranoid projection. Not much sign of that ever happening.

To be forlorn is not necessarily to be forearmed. That was the takeaway from several dispersed art viewings in Italy during the summer. One of these was a small retrospective of the work of Charles Pollock presented at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, nicely coinciding with the rare presentation of Charles’s brother Jackson’s *Mural* (1943), which was originally commissioned by Ms. Guggenheim, and is now in the collection of the University of Iowa Museum of Art. Another painting by Jackson that remains in the Guggenheim collection titled *Alchemy* (1947) was also given new pride of placement, mostly to show off the stunning results of a lengthy restoration that it underwent during the past year. But Charles Pollock is a perplexity. He was ten years older than Jackson, and still managed to outlive his younger brother by 32 years. His early paintings bespoke the influences of social realism and American scene painting, and he flirted with almost every style that came along since that time, including one that was obviously and unconvincingly influenced by Jackson. But Charles’s story gets



Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Destroy your house, build up a boat, save life!, 2014-2015 and Docks, 2014. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photograph by Mustafa Haznedi.

Didem Pekün had begun her ongoing project *Of Dice and Men*, already in 2011 during an anti-austerity demonstration in London, two years before the events of Gezi Park. Upon returning to Istanbul, the artist’s lens was met with raw footage from iconic moments of the Gezi Park protests, juxtaposed by a pre-existing visual monologue, staged between London and Istanbul, in which the artist reflects on the possibility of the everyday, existing alongside so many different



interesting in 1956, the point when Jackson met his untimely death. It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and the work that he started doing soon thereafter showed it—largish and foreboding works in oil featuring the interaction of two dark, deeply saturated colors. Think William Baziotzes meets Franz Kline. Because Charles’s brother introduced him to the circle of artists that were close to Clement Greenberg in the 1940s, his work shifted again at the turn of the 1960s, this time toward the use of bright acrylic stain painting in the manner of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler. These too were unconvincing; clearly the work of an artist who was trying too hard to fit into a mode defined by the work of other artists—proof that family romances live long and die slowly. Being the responsible big brother is its own suffocating cross to bear.

My vote for the loneliest painting in the world goes to a crucifixion scene painted between 1495 and 1497 by Giovanni Donato da Montorfano. In any normal circumstance it would be worth a great deal of very serious study; a large mural-like multi-figure composition that makes brilliant use of the architectural space containing it (that being the church at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan). In fact, it is a rather epic image, and it elegantly intertwines gospel symbolism with references to the politics of the high-late-Renaissance as they might have been understood in late-15<sup>th</sup> century Lombardy—one can even see the Sforza castle in the deep background of the center of the image. So why is this painting so forlorn? If your answer was that it is located in some inaccessible mountain monastery, you would be wrong. Many hundreds of people walk past it every day, and almost no one stops to take even a momentary glance at it. Why? Because on the wall of the other end of the old dining hall that it inhabits is another large painting executed around the same time titled *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo da Vinci. Maybe you have heard of it?



Didem Pekün, Of Dice and Men, 2011. Video Loop, 29 minutes. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photography by Baris Dogrusoz.



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To live in the moment or to document the moment? A strange seamlessness foams up in between the truly cinematic and the more intimate descriptions of the everyday: a tram in London, or a window view from Istanbul. As cosmic background waves, the grandeur of the temporal ruptures; the intoxication of the future breaks through the sewn patches of the here-and-now. Passing through a number of different adopted positions, Pekün doubles and triples into persons and voices, into moments and eras, into histories and telltales. But *Of Dice and Men* is not a filmic essay about a protest movement somewhere, which sounds very ubiquitous today and not particularly incisive. The anxious loop between the everyday and the sublime and the artist’s question of whether we are able to move back and forth between them, and how, is not something specific to Gezi or Istanbul or Turkey but related to a profound moment of change and global transition of which Gezi is only a late symptom.

It is then not surprising that *Of Dice and Men* is the work at the core of *A Century of Centuries*, the exhibition curated by November Paynter that took place this year at SALT Beyoğlu, which was marked by the hundred-year commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in Istanbul, to this date not recognized by the government of Turkey. As in 2013, when the Gezi Park protesters battled the police and the clouds of tear gas, so it was in 2015 when demonstrators marching in recognition of the centennial of the genocide were followed closely by Turkish nationalists separated only by a very thin police barrier as they passed the Sinioşsogluu Apartment building that today houses SALT Beyoğlu. Paynter was primarily interested in works imbued with the memory of temporal transformations that continue to shape our present moment here and elsewhere.

But “transformation” is not strong enough a noun to denote the temporal gaps being addressed here. A transformation is merely a conversion from one symbol or function into a different one of similar value, whereas a transition implies a change in morphology, a crossover. A moment of transition is one in which the validity of certain concepts or symbols that guide us through the structure of reality begins to fail, thus we are expected to build new concepts based on knowledge of the past and wild guessing about the future. The transition is not a temporal unit but a leaped second; an adjustment that corrects time.

The installation as *if nothing has ever been said before us* (2007–2015) by Dilek Winchester, another local artist living on the islands of Istanbul—a place of exile and imprisonment in Byzantine times and later a place for minorities—takes on the polyglossic nature of Turkey in the early-20th century, rescuing cultural forms that have been buried in oblivion after the language and alphabet reforms in Turkey led to a rather violent and merciless process of homogenization and unification, which begot many of Turkey’s distinctively authoritarian and intolerant traits. Winchester’s investigation looks into Karamanlidika—Turkish written in the Greek alphabet—and Armeno-Turkish—Turkish written in the Armenian alphabet—and reveals buried chapters of Turkish literary history, where the first novels in modern Turkish were written by minority authors, using their own alphabets, but never registered in the official literary history.

In as *if nothing has ever been said before us*, Winchester explores the ideology of identity in relation to language, the title of which is based in the writer Öğüz Atay’s 1971 novel *Tutunamayanlar* (*The Dis-connected*): “We are knocking on your doors with an emotion and arrogance unparalleled in world history and without fear of seeming like those who are conected and behave as if nothing has ever been said before them.” The phonetic transcription is in Turkish but the alphabets include Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, all used extensively by the Ottoman population until the language reforms. As varieties of historical time are embedded in language, Winchester addresses the political consequences of linguistic policies and their long-term effects on the physical location of pasts: do they still shed light on us?

On the same floor, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Winchester’s neighbor on the same island, constructs a dialogue across time that complements the former’s investigation on Karamanlidika and Armeno-Turkish with a poetic utterance traveling far across eras. Profoundly engaged with the history of Greeks and Armenians in Istanbul, it is not a place of diaspora or exile for Büyüktaşçıyan but the epicenter of cultural and linguistic history of centuries. The artist travels in time and place between Byzantium, Constantin-

and re-organized: Where exactly are we when we remember? Is this a personal space or one we share with others? Navigating the no-longer and not-yet-of-consciousness, as they relate to broader frameworks that include historical and social knowledge, how do we merge different temporalities into a consistent seamless whole? While the question is not answered by the performance, the artists involved turn to movement from theoretical knowledge and attempt to create something such as movement or dance scores based on memories, which are also part of an extended web of political events and interruptions in the flow of consciousness: revolution, upheaval, dictatorship, freedom.

November Paynter’s eye and focus in selecting the artists for the exhibition expanded into a larger question about the nature of our historical consciousness, far beyond Turkey, to include Russian collective Chlo Delat’ with their performance-installation *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger* (2014) addresses forms of political organization of subjects under different forms of oppression, subtle and otherwise, and Kapwani Kiwanga’s installation . . . *rumors Maji was a lie* (2014) based on accounts of the 1905–1907 uprising in the African continent against the Germans le by a spiritual medium, resonate strongly within the exhibition, but it is difficult not to be overpowered by the loud volume of the conversation between Turkish artists, especially bearing in mind the erratic nature of contemporary art in the country, where it is very difficult to find meeting points between the practices of artists living in the same city; something consistent with the transformative moments that Paynter sought after.

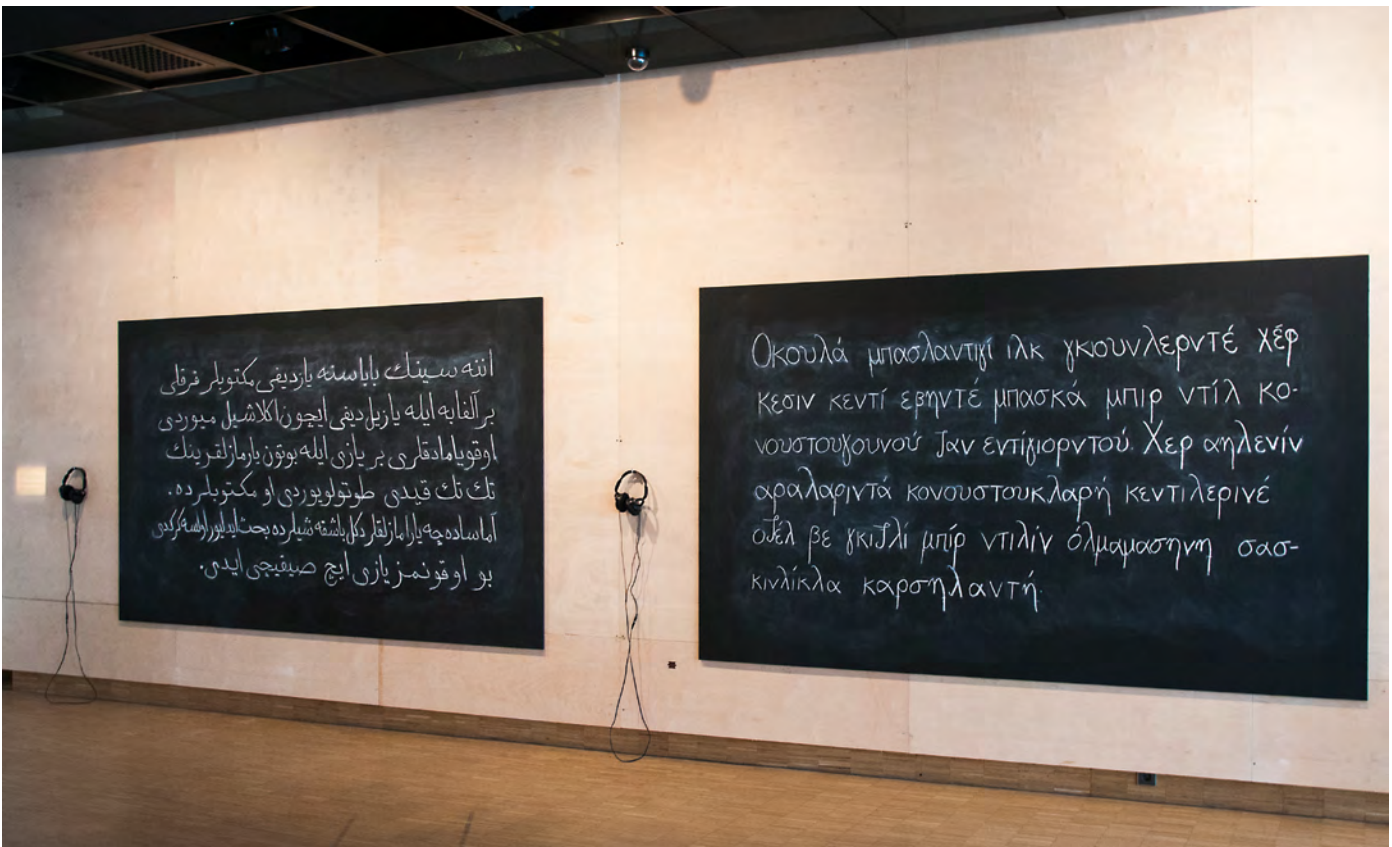
Other works in the exhibition include Judith Rauml’s *eser* (2014–2015), documenting German colonialism in Anatolia; Jumana Mana and Sille Storihié’s *The Goodness Regime* (2013), a film about the foundations of ideology and national self-image in Norway; Maha Maamoun’s videos about Egypt’s visual history; and Shilpa Gupta’s *Untitled* (2013–2014), dealing with geographical tensions between India and Pakistan. As a generalization, all the works in the exhibition investigate the becoming of our present world not in terms of causes, effects, and consequences, but under the light of how untold or obscured histories—be they visual, cultural, political, linguistic—can affect profound transformations in how we relate to immediacy or the past or not, and whether that will cause us to be derailed from the present into a frenzied state of suspended judgment where we are unable to move between past and future, between fiction and fact, between history and myth.

Almost hidden in plain view, lying quite anonymously in the middle of the exhibition, was the work that encapsulated the exhibition best. Dilek Winchester’s hermetic *Negative Epiphany* (2015) is a series of black prints made by overexposing paper, developed in traditional printing techniques and presented alongside vintage cameras from 1900–1915. The prints are not metaphorical; they stand blackened in lieu of photographs that have been shot somewhere, but that cannot be shown in the exhibition. Does this refer to images that we forgot or to objects that disappeared? To things that are not present or that have not been imagined? The work does not reveal much—a vault with indecipherable documents. The transmission of knowledge does not occur as an uninterrupted consciousness, therefore it is imperative to excavate, and to let objects speak for themselves, rather than to accommodate them.

It seems as if the central question of *A Century of Centuries* is not one of personal or even collective narratives, but what happens in politics and in artistic production when different moments in time pose themselves simultaneously as starting points of historical knowledge and as political futures. Our concept of history, as it stands today, is far removed from the way in which our ancestors looked at their narrated lives, and belongs to the 18th-century Enlightenment, in which the determinations for human experience were laid out rationally, removed from experience itself. It is a politico-philosophical concept. Historical time, should there be one, is bound up with our social and political circumstances and no longer anchored in a metaphysical hierarchy. To locate this time with precision is not merely a function of knowledge, or even of orientation, but of discovering how to move between different eras without being under the illusion that one or the other determines the whole.

What are the markers between one era and the other? Say, if you want to discuss the dividing line between the 19th century and the 20th and the 21st, what key events or places would come to mind? At the turning point between reality and belief, this long century played that of the imperialism of Bismarck’s Germany in the 1860s and that of corporate interests in the Middle East and elsewhere in 2015, is one and the same century punctuated by some of the most defining humanitarian crises of the modern era: the Armenian genocide in 1915 inaugurating the era of crimes against humanity and the indiscriminate slaughter of Syrians and Iraqis in 2015, which effectively ended that era together with international law and the international treaties enshrined to protect refugees all over the world from the horrors of genocide.

Not surprisingly, we are living in a very similar momentum, part and parcel of the same unfinished century: at the gates of a promising new world, propelled by economic and scientific growth, significant constitutional reforms and liberalization of the legal apparatus, reduction of poverty, and a fragile world peace. All of this paired with unspeakable humanitarian crises, the threat of an impending war, and the destruction of the middle classes. In order to “finish” this century, to move into the new one and pick up on the sublime that Didem Pekün was offering us in her work, it is necessary to think up forms of the future in which the current system of social and political organization will not be a “necessary evil” or an “inescapable circumstance” for those wanting to live in a democracy. It takes more than good judgment to walk into the future. It also takes imagination. *A Century of Centuries* imagines in reverse: it looks at the past as if it had shed light on the future.



Dilek Winchester, As if Nothing Has Ever Been Said Before Us, 2007-2015. Courtesy of SALT and the artist. Photograph by Mustafa Haznedi.