

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Artists from Turkey Navigate History, Memory, and Authorship

by [Nicole O'Rourke](#) on February 15, 2016



Rodney Graham, “Vexation Island [Can Sıkıntısı Adası]” (1997) (all images courtesy of Alt)

ISTANBUL — Alt, which translates to “under,” is Istanbul’s newest space for contemporary art. After descending a staircase at [Bomontiada](#), (a compound of sorts that includes Alt, a music venue, a café, a restaurant, architecture studios, and several other planned ventures), you are immediately aware that you’re in a windowless cellar beneath the ground. *If you can’t go through the door, go through the window* is the inaugural show’s title — a bit tongue-in-cheek considering the impenetrability of the exhibition space. The title perhaps says as much about the works in the show as it does about the mission of the space itself; while the doors have recently closed for an unknown amount of time due to bureaucratic reasons at [SALT Beyoğlu](#), one of Istanbul’s most important spaces for contemporary art and thought — this being just one example of the difficulties in the arts in Turkey — one might see Alt as a symbolic “window”: a new and literally underground space.

The group show, which runs alongside a solo presentation of four of Rodney Graham’s seminal video works, includes three emerging Turkish artists: Aykan Safoğlu, Hera Büyüktascıyan, and Hasan Özgür Top. The curator/director of the space, Mari Spirito (founder and director of Protocinema and former director of 303 Gallery in New York), selected the works under the umbrella of being about issues of authorship.

There is only one path through this exhibition. There are no options in movement here, despite what

the title suggests; rather, the options arise from the ways the works change your view of the space and, upon closer look, change themselves. The authorship of the exhibition, which initially seems clear and dictated by the space, is flipped by the meanings and messages of the works on view, and those meanings effectively disenfranchise the strictness of both the space and the idea of authorship. "Authorship" here is twofold: the works are about both reappropriation and reclamation.



Hera Büyüктаşçıyan, "When things find their own cleft" [Bir şeyler çatlağını bulduğunda...] (2016)

The first work in the exhibition is Büyüktascıyan's "When things find their own cleft" (2016), a site-specific installation. With it, Büyüktascıyan breaks the white walls of the space, with bricks resembling those from the original structure of the building spilling out like water from the wall. She takes the covered-up brick wall, the now-invisible history, and reverses its apparent fate; the work is as much about defying oppression and authorship as invalidating it, and despite being in a basement-cum-exhibition-space, you suddenly feel the presence of what the building was before: the old Bomonti brewery. Büyüktascıyan's installation brings forth a sense of freedom in a confined space, of unrestricted possibility and untethered authenticity.

Top's "A Gift from the Middle East" (2013) is also an installation, and it covers an entire wall of the space. From afar, this appears as innocuous as any patterned ceramic tiled wall in an Islamic tradition. But the core image that is repeated to create the pattern is in fact a zoomed-in screen capture from a YouTube video of the death of a man during conflicts in Syria. The piece is about disconnection and collective forgetting, particularly by those in the West, in terms of Middle Eastern conflicts. By disguising this image in a beautiful pattern, the horror of war is packaged or made into a commodity — a "gift" even. Top understands the intricate nature of the gift and gift-giving, in all of its cyclical manipulations and inherited associations — all while making a direct statement about ownership and authorship. In the freewheeling world of the internet age, Top references both the loss of the individual as well as the callousness inherent in the way we consume online.





Hasan Özgür Top isimli, "A Gift from the Middle East" [Orta Doğu'dan Bir Hediye] (2013)

In the back room is Safoğlu's two-channel video installation, "Untitled 'Gülşen and Hüseyin'" (2015). With this piece, Safoğlu proves himself to be a nuanced storyteller, a capable historian for "otherness," and a queerer of history. The video installation is, on the surface, about his uncle Hüseyin, one of thousands of migrant workers who moved from Istanbul to Germany in the 1960s, and the task of recreating an old photo of him using Gülşen, a female friend, as an actor in front of a green screen. From the start, the choice of a female actor gives a prelude to the type of subversive investigation Safoğlu will explore. The artist's hand is always present: both channels of the installation have the backdrop of Safoğlu's computer, and his hand is seen through the movement of the mouse and its dictation of the video. Even here we have a multilayered authorship, a once-removed and removed-again storytelling. What unfolds and bares itself in the juxtaposition of the two videos is the heartbreaking story and fate of Safoğlu's uncle, and really of all migrants who were promised a better future only to be thrust into an entirely different reality. Safoğlu reclaims history, even rewrites it.

Where Büyüктаşçian looks to the history of the building, reclaiming its past and pronouncing its presence, Top likewise takes a historical element, here the aesthetics of Islamic tiles, but in an effort to speak to the difficult present. Safoğlu, too, deals with memory and forgetting, two intrinsic factors to both the birth and death of the author, but he recreates stories and histories in an effort to remember and reconcile. The idea of the solitary author or origin is in question, and at Alt, it seems, this uncertainty is precisely the point.



Rodney Graham, "A Reverie Interrupted by the Police" [Polisin Yarıda Kestiđi Bir Düş] (2003)

**If you can't go through the door, go through the window** continues at Alt (Tarihi Bomonti Bira Fabrikası, Birahane Sokak No: 1, Bomonti/İstanbul 34381 Turkey) through March 26.

**Alt Gallery** Hasan Özgür TopHera BüyüктаşçıyanRodney Graham