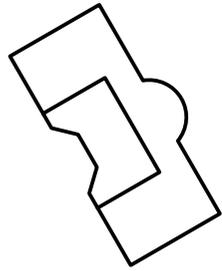


**“HIDDEN
IN PLAIN
SIGHT”**



CHELSEA HAINES

In August 1929, approximately six years after securing Turkey’s independence and installing himself as the new nation’s military and political leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk traveled by boat from Istanbul to Bursa. Along the journey down the coastline of the sea of Marmara a large plane tree captured his attention. He was so enamored by the tree that not only did he build his private residence adjacent to it, but that when the tree’s branches grew too close to the building, threatening to damage its windows, Atatürk chose to move the mansion rather than alter the tree.

The two-channel video installation *The Architect*, part of the second installment of Dor Guez’s multipart project, *The Sick Man of Europe*, opens with a description of Yürüyen Köşk, or the “walking mansion” of Yalova. The brief anecdote speaks volumes about Atatürk’s singular vision of the world, and the immense resources he marshaled to make his vision a reality. *The Architect*, however, is not just a project about Atatürk and his transformation of the Ottoman Empire into the Republic of Turkey. The architect of the film’s title is a man named Kemal P., an architecture student in Ankara in the late 1930s, who was later conscripted into the Turkish army at the tail end of World War II. One channel of the video installation reveals Kemal P.’s story through a series of thirteen photographs he and his friend Ahmed took in Ankara while on vacation from August 20–November 21, 1938. A much older Kemal P. describes each photograph in a voice-over, moving between description of the background—all newly built public sites of the Turkish republic—and the action taking place in the foreground, some of which are pictures of Ahmed or Kemal P.. The second video channel shows a freestyle drawing of each of the sites Kemal describes in pencil: Atatürk Forest Farm, Zafer Square, Güven Park, Ulus Square, and the the old Turkish Parliament. One architect’s voice and another’s hand work together to weave a story that sits in an ambivalent and constantly shifting space between public and private, nature and culture, vision and reality, memory and history.

Although they may not have been aware of it at the time, Kemal P. and Ahmed’s photographs were taken at a critical juncture in their country’s history when nationalist idealism was at its peak. Over the previous decade and a half, a vision for Turkey had been rolled out under a series of policy changes known as “Atatürk’s reforms,” which was intended to mold the nascent nation into a modern secular republic. These reforms included the secularization of the legal system based on European principles of law; heavy industrialization; compulsory education for both boys and girls; the standardization and transliteration of the Turkish alphabet into Latin script; and, on a darker note, the forced assimilation and resettlement of the nation’s non-Turkish speaking minorities, such as the Kurds, Circassians, Albanians, and Abkhazes. Domestically, Atatürk was able to successfully harness populist sentiment, as well as control of the press, to implement massive structural change at all levels of Turkish society with relatively little sustained political resistance. As the long-term effects of Turkey’s wide-ranging changes to society began to be felt, in late 1938, Atatürk died from cirrhosis of the liver, leading to a period of deep mourning across the country. Atatürk’s central and profound legacy in Turkish culture includes both his status as a pioneer of modern secular humanism and, paradoxically, his autocratic military and political rule.

Guez’s work reflects one man’s personal and conflicted memories of the military leader and the nation he shaped. Kemal P.’s sparse narration of these historical events often avoids subjectivity, only revealing personal details or emotions when they are necessary to explain something awry in the photograph, such as a random bystander standing awkwardly to the side of a shot, or a public square filled with Turkish flags during a military rally. His observations are aloof, and sometimes caustic, for example, when he describes the tears of the soldiers and old men at Atatürk’s funeral rather than his own. Kemal P., possibly sarcastically, refers to Atatürk in the film as “our illustrious leader,” and in a print interview with Guez concludes his remarks by describing the Turkish

president as a “very sick man,” alluding perhaps to his illness, or his historical position as inheritor of the Ottoman Empire. Clues from Guez’s strategic musical interventions in the narrative—in the form of a sprightly waltz or a foreboding drumbeat—add a pathos and emotional cadence to the narrative that is otherwise hard to register. Like the placid artificial lakes he and Ahmed photograph in Atatürk’s capital city of Ankara, Kemal P. mirrors the resolutely self-contained ideals of the modern Turkish republic. What lies underneath is carefully obscured and hidden from view.

Like Kemal P.’s sparse narrative, Guez’s filmic style is slow to release information, frequently zooming into a given photograph for details but rarely giving the viewer the easy satisfaction of the full image. For example, the camera slowly pans down photograph #3 to reveal first Austrian sculptor (and official artist of the Third Reich) Josef Thorak’s two colossal thinly-clad males, commissioned by Atatürk as a monument to the Turkish republic in 1935. As the camera pans down to the feet of the statues, we perceive Kemal P. and Ahmed casually posing and smiling. The reverse sequence occurs in photograph #12, a picture by Ahmed of Kemal P. posing underneath the large statue of Atatürk in Ulus Square. The camera pans right to left and then up, first showing Kemal P. in between the legs of a soldier, then up the length of the statue. Although Kemal P. and Ahmed are physically dwarfed by the enormous scale of these monuments to masculine power, the two appear amused by the visual effect in the two photos.

Photograph #10 shows the façade of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, designed by Turkish architect Vedat Tek in 1923. As Kemal P. notes, Tek’s style—the first national architectural style of Turkey—attempted to merge modern building techniques with Ottoman style references. The large arched second story windows maintain a clear Ottoman identity, but many of the building’s ornate details, with shades

of pinks and blues, are imperceptible in the black and white photograph. Later Turkish architecture, in Kemal P.’s words, has “a very masculine style,” its colorful decorative touches gone in favor of neutral palettes and hard lines. Kemal P. and Ahmed’s photographs document a crucial turning point in Turkish art and architecture, in which the Turkish government, trying fervently to throw off centuries of European orientalist fantasies of the odalisque, the harem, and the “feminine” nature of the East, pushed hard and fast for Western aesthetic ideals, favoring the muscular male body in sculpture and hard lines and modern materials in architecture.

Kemal P.’s own architectural designs are absent from *The Architect*. We don’t know if his vision for a modern Turkey would have been in line with Atatürk’s modernist forms and artificial landscapes, if they would have harkened back to the Ottoman past, or if they would have had another vision for the built landscape altogether. After the war, he never works as an architect, giving no explanation for this career change other than saying, “I didn’t want to build.” Kemal P. no longer designs, but he does collect—acquiring hundreds of photographs, mostly small portraits of men in military uniforms. A selection of these photographs is included in *The Architect* installation, and Guez has used several as source material for his scanograms. Scanograms are Guez’s name for his technique of scanning original documents in many layers in order to produce new high-resolution digital prints. Greatly enlarged from their original sizes, the scanograms in *The Architect* highlights the history and physical handling of the original photographs through their tears, creases, and discolorations over time as well as of their original formats—formal portraiture, candid, and postcards. When, in an interview, Guez asks why he amassed this incredible array of photographs, Kemal P. simply claims that he is “interested in uniforms.”

Kemal P.'s collected photographs in *The Architect* installation have been re-arranged by Guez according to typology, transforming a personal and highly idiosyncratic collection into a categorized archive for critical analysis. The impact of militarization, modernization, and standardization on the body and the psyche, alluded to in the video, becomes explicit in row upon row of photographs of men in uniforms organized by single, double, and group portraiture. To a certain degree, Kemal P.'s admiration for the militarized male body is typical of his time and place, as a symbol of national sovereignty and power. Yet his obsessive collecting of these photographs, and his close relationship with Ahmed, points to a much larger omission, one that both Kemal and Guez allude to, without ever fully acknowledging.

The Architect is the second installation in *The Sick Man of Europe*, Guez's series dealing with the legacy of military nationalism in the Middle East through the lives and creative practices of individual artists-turned-soldiers. The first installation, *The Painter*, is a story of a Jewish Tunisian immigrant to Israel who was conscripted to fight in the Yom Kippur War (or, as is known in the Arab world, the 10th of Ramadan War) in 1973. After his tank is attacked in Syrian territory, leaving most of his comrades dead or seriously wounded, the painter suffers from residual posttraumatic stress disorder, and stops entirely for almost fifteen years. The painter, identified as D. Guez, who uncannily shares the first initial and last name of the artist Dor Guez, speaks at length about his art and his experiences of war, the anger and trauma he felt, and how he eventually managed to recover, thanks to years of therapy and the love of his wife. By contrast, Kemal's only mention of war comes when he describes the weeping soldiers at Atatürk's funeral, stating that “the only other time I saw soldiers crying was a few years later when I was drafted into the army.”

Turkey remained neutral throughout almost the entire course of World War II, and only declared war on Germany in early 1945 as a precondition for inclusion into the United Nations. No Turkish troops saw battle during this period, in contrast to World War I, when the Ottoman Empire, aligned with Germany, suffered extraordinary high casualties: approximately 770,000 military casualties and almost 4 million civilian casualties, or about one quarter of the entire Ottoman population, according to most historical accounts. Every individual living in Turkey would have known someone who died in the first World War or the War of Independence that followed the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The trauma that followed was not just individual, but collective trauma, and one that Atatürk and his followers consciously tried to supersede through a new nationalism.

In *The Architect*, the image of trauma remains just outside of our grasp, in between collective memory, which is hidden in plain sight, and the personal, which is just beyond our reach. Its inaccessibility allows us to consider its multifaceted nature, and thwarts simplified narratives about nationalism and war. Guez makes sure that we keep our distance, never essentializing Kemal P.'s story.

Yet, in one instance, Kemal P. does reveal more. The film concludes with his recollection of Ahmed's death and funeral several years ago. Feeling an overwhelming sense of loss, and not knowing where to look, or what to see, he lets his camera do the seeing. Here, we have a reversal of the Atatürk narrative: sight without vision, a deliberate and self-imposed blindness that incapacitates and yet allows for survival. As Kemal says earlier in the film, “we really don't know what we shoot until we see the photograph.” The structure of vision is always partly determined by unconscious memory. And, still withholding, we never do get to see the photographs Kemal P. shot that day.

