

## Traveling without feet on the ground

“Down the way, the road's divided  
Paint me the places you've seen  
Those who know what I don't know  
Refer to the yellow, red, and green

Maybe he's caught in the legend  
Maybe he's caught in the mood  
Maybe these maps and legends  
Have been misunderstood”\*

The exhibition *Up above was fog down below was a cloud of dust* is structured to be embedded within geography since its inception as a project. Formulated around notions of the body, land, networks of communication, and distribution, the exhibition curated by visual artists Golnar Tabibzadeh and Merve Ünsal brought together 15 artists from Turkey and Iran. The process of working collaboratively is reflected in the fluid structure with which the works are exhibited, as there are no specific sections or categorizations in the exhibition. *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust* presents a structure that moves from the participating artists' bodies to intervening in the architectural elements at Depo, uninterrupted. The thematic coherence within the exhibition obscures the boundaries between the works. Utilized as a tobacco warehouse until 1950 and renovated true to its original form, the space features columns, rooms and sections that disrupt the exhibition route, thus including the physicality of space as an element that determines the direction of the project rather than serving as a “stage” for the exhibition.

When considering the project's emphasis on geography, it is impossible not to feel that there is a discrepancy between the content and the exhibition's title: It is highlighted that the participants are from Iran and Turkey, pointing to a fixed representation on paper. The acknowledgment of the geography thus promises a constellation with feet on the ground, unlike the title for the exhibition. While this situation appears to be an inconsistency, it also includes an irony that inspires the project. The state of being suspended between fog and a cloud of dust does not point away from geography: On the contrary, this state of suspension includes dimensions of geography that cannot be considered within the framework of being fixed to a spot. In *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust*, the body, the ground, and the sky are interwoven as elements that define and transform each other. The state of being from Iran or from Turkey is thus defined a fragile ground rather than as a fixed state.

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\* R.E.M. “Maps and Legends.” *Fables of the Reconstruction*, Capitol, 1987, 2nd song.

In other words, the scope of *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust* is defined by the fog that the figure with his back to us in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is watching from above, standing in for the viewer — project participant Derya Yıldız also refers to this painting in her work. However, this time, instead of looking at the sea of fog from the outside and feeling awe when faced with the unknown, the artists look at their positions as a component of that sea and invite the viewer to share this perspective. The intertwined relationship of the geological layers with culture, the occupation of the sky by the devices of power, and the existence of the body as an intermediate stop in the midst makes an external position impossible for the artists. The project proposes collaboration as a method of dealing with this impossibility. As the artists participating in *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust* collaborate with the fragile ground that they are on, they can interfere with the conditions that sustain their body as well as their relations with the land and the environment.

In his book *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, Stephen Graham points to the different ways in which the world can be perceived, ranging from skyscrapers, which are the pride of cities, to waste and land surfaces that have become human-made through excavations in the age of the Anthropocene. He claims that looking at the world from God's perspective on a horizontal surface, sharing the land over a map, would not suffice to comprehend today:

"[...] "the world's major cities are thus increasingly organised as multilevel volumes both above and below ground level. And the integration of the world's rural peripheries tightly into urban means of production, exchange and extraction means that more invisible three-dimensional architectures and geographies are growing in those places as well." (Graham, 22-23)

However, the legacy of the horizontal geography perception of the colonial past reveals itself by organizing each layer in vertical structuring. With *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust*, the artists' quest for improvement through partnership also becomes a resistance at this point. The artists are in search of reorganizing these layers by moving from the fragile positions that they are in. Memory as a site of power, the relationship re-established with the earth, and new propositions about space bring the artists together.

For example, Forough Fami and Gozde Ilkin reclaim the open endedness of memory. Fami's labyrinth made of tulle both hides and makes a mobile body reflected on the screen visible. The structure of the labyrinths, which compel those who want to travel in their memory, is broken with the intervention of Fami. The labyrinth still hides its target, but the walls that fly through the tulle do not fully conceal it. For Ilkin, memory is a fragile structure that the land can improve. Instead of ruling the land, the artist pursues a different existence, establishing a connection with the land that a fixed geographical perception cannot provide.

The transitive relationship already built between the body and space, determine the axis of *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust*. This relationship manifests itself in interventions in perspective, which in some studies envisages a view of the place. For example, Derya Yıldız takes an X-ray of the perspective layout of laser scales used to hang the works on the wall during the exhibition preparation process. The volatile red lines reflected on the wall, where there are no artifacts, pull the carpet from underneath the

viewers. Ece Gökalp reveals the fault lines of the relationship between the looker and the object of the gaze with interventions on the photo surface.

The fragility of the floor under the viewers carries the invisible, unnoticed features of the space to the scope of the exhibition. *Chorus*, in which Merve Ünsal charges the role of the tragedy choirs to the columns of the building, is an intervention that makes both the preparation process of the exhibition and the building visible through specific materials. The space is not a structure where only the works can be viewed. Therefore, the function foreseen for the exhibition also becomes invalid. Didem Erbaş applies a similar intervention to the ceiling of the space with the *Ceiling Bunker*. The ceiling, which should give confidence when viewed from below, is abstracted from this function when a temporary shelter model is hung on the beams. The viewer's fragile position also shakes the perception that the building they are in is stable.

Other examples in which the definitions of body and space are intertwined lean on the ability to change symbols and associations. *Le corps Fluide/Fluid Body II*, Neda Razavipour's sound and video installation, reflects the sonography of her chest on a pile of sand, asks where the memory is hidden within this relationship. The inside of the chest, which is a very private image, can evoke the sea or the sky on a pile of sand. The human body is like part of a sentence that has been deconstructed in Serminaz Barseghian's work, *To Re-member*. Triangle-shaped human body clichés, a multiple icon with variable meanings across contexts, are lined up in a triangular order to meet with other objects. In the performance video of Şafak Çatalbaş's *Blue Bird of Happiness*, separated by a wall, the body also plays the role of an element that disrupts the sentence. The artist is sitting in meditative poses in the middle of the places where the vertical construction is most visible, dressed in blue from head to toe. The particular blue, which is used to project images on in the film industry, appears as an exclamation point in the chaos of shopping malls with its evocation of nothingness.

These interventions, which give the impression that they are language-oriented, are well visible in the work *Being Syntactically and Semantically Dense*, which could be considered as a junction point of the exhibition space. Artist Reyhaneh Mehrad brings together sequential motifs and randomly drawn circles that express the cycle, as if to disassemble the language's work. In this fragmented sentence, it is difficult to determine the point where the meaning is hidden and the position of the subject. This is also a starting point for works in which other artists in the exhibition question their own autonomy. Setareh Shahbazi aims to make the fragility of artistic production visible by transferring the budget and accommodation opportunities allocated to her within the scope of the project to Reyhaneh Mehrad. Golnar Tabibzadeh offers a structure based on passport photographs to fix the person that each participant of the project can take ownership of one by one, thus undermining the concept of autonomy. Gelareh Kiazand's work on the same axis, *This is a Recording*, uses the video / audio technologies that claim to stabilize people and their experiences for the opposite purpose. Kiazand's conversations with other artists in the project expand rather than remain fixed as they repeat in the exhibition environment with the participation of the audience.

The artists in *Up Above Was Fog Down Below Was A Cloud of Dust*, find ways to resist the constraint of stability as they use their bodies as an intermediate space in the context of their relations with space and the environment. Thinking about Maurice Merleau-Ponty, if we accept the body as our "perspective to the world [...] where the mind invests in a physical

and historical situation” (Merlau-Ponty, 23), the interventions of the artists in the project regarding their environment are clearer. The artists are not merely presenting a scenery but they are trying to find ways to transform it through their moves towards the perceptions on elements such as perspective, space and memory.

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**Translation: Merve Ünsal**

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Graham, Stephen. *Vertical - The City from Satellites to Bunkers*. e-book, Verso, 2018.

Merlau-Ponty, Maurice. “Dünyamız Tamamlanmamış Bir Eser...” *Cogito*, issue: 88, 2017, pg. 20-28. *translated from the Turkish into English by the translator.*