

Interview with Otto Berchem, October 3, 2005
Tessa Giblin

MOVEMENT

TG

Temporary Person Passing Through was formulated as a project with homeless people?

OB

Not directly with homeless people, more with migrants. It was partly inspired by a film I had seen, called 'In This World', that was a cinema vérité story about an Afghani boy who made his way to London, and part of it was set in Istanbul. The film was partly based on the actor who played the 14-15 year old boy in the film, and was caught by the immigration police in London. So in Istanbul I wanted to work with these ideas of migration. We know the cliché of Turkey being a bridge between worlds, but I wanted to really see how it works. I was looking for foundations or shelters, either for refugees or homeless, but with the starting point being more about migrants' travel. This was how I came to think about temporary people passing through an area, or 'Hobos'. The basic idea with Hobos ('rootless migrant workers in the USA from the late 19th to the mid 20th century' – 9th I.I.B. Guidebook, pp 231.) is that they travelled and worked. 'Tramps' travelled and begged, and 'Bums' stayed in the same place and didn't work. I too was a temporary person passing through Istanbul.

TG

Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun have tried to enable a sincere discussion about Istanbul through the residency programme, rather than the fleeting comments which so many Biennales suffer from. Did your time in Istanbul help to mature your ideas, or enable a more developed, insightful project?

OB

I was ready to drop the idea if it felt forced, or unrelated to the actual situation. I wasn't going to try to fit my round peg into a square hole. It was mainly through speaking with the people from the shelters, and their interest in it, which made me decide to pursue the project in consultation with them.

UMUT ÇOCUKLARI DERNEGI

OB

So after arriving, I went around trying to find out what the situation was, and discovered that there are no real homeless shelters in Istanbul. There are soup kitchens run by the city, where there's a caravan handing out food. There are families coming, mostly Anatolian migrants to Istanbul, poor families, moving from rural areas to urban environments. But only real activity that I found was the soup kitchen. That is until I found the Umut Çocuklari Dernegi - a private foundation which basically translates as 'Youth Hope Foundation', or 'Association'. It was set up by a guy named Yusuf Ahmet Kulca, who's in his early/mid 40s. From what I was told, his family moved to Istanbul when he was a child. His mother passed away and his father abandoned him, and I believe that he and his brother lived rough, for three years in Sultanahmet, the historic area of Istanbul. He then ended up in an orphanage and was either adopted or sponsored by a family. He went to University and later basically set up this foundation trying to help kids get off the streets. They have their main offices in Beyoglu, but there are only a few people working there. There is also a day shelter for the kids called the Camsirhane, which is Turkish for laundry, where they can go to get breakfast and lunch, they can wash their clothes, take showers, and sleep during the day. If they are sick or injured they get basic medical care there. It's run by a man by the name of Cihan Çelik, who was also lived on the streets in his youth, and a woman they call 'the Mother'.

TG

It seems you determined fairly quickly that it was the situation of youth that interested you for *Temporary Person Passing Through*.

OB

Mainly because it was one way of gaining some kind of traction with what was happening in Istanbul. It didn't seem practical to go up to homeless people, the migrant community or genuine "temporary persons passing through", who are very difficult to find, let alone enter their world. I wanted to work with a group that I could develop some knowledge of, and relationship with.

TG

With this idea of 'temporary persons' did you look at how many street kids remain homeless after their juvenile years? Because from what I gather, those who are on the streets quite young are more likely to move off the streets, they are temporarily passing through that kind of lifestyle. Such as the experience of Yusuf Ahmet Kulca.

OB

I hope. During the course of the project, I found out about the different subcultures of street children in Istanbul. You have the kids selling Kleenexes, who are sometimes kids from poor families who have somewhere to sleep, but they're making money during the day. You have kids who get caught up with a sort of Fagan type character, where they have to make money or they are going to be beaten or killed.

TG: Child labour pimps?

OB: More or less indentured servants.

SIGNS

"Symbols were used to give fellow Hobos directions, find work, and stay out of trouble. Generally they were written with chalk, or coal, on sidewalks, buildings, railcars, and road signs." (9th I.I.B. Guidebook, pp 231.)

OB

Through the Foundation, I began to meet people. For example there's one place out by the airport which is like a half-way house, for people who are getting out of prison, or orphans before they join the army for mandatory services. One of the first meetings I had back in April, was with this guy named Ferhat who, I found out, also knew a language of signs. He told me that he learned it in prison, from political prisoners. Through Ferhat I learned a few things, but there was also a lot he was reluctant to tell, as if he wanted to keep the language a secret.

TG

Are there quite vital implications for the language with respect to politics, around political prisoners or refugees, talking about political affiliations or meetings which are closely guarded? Is that what he means by political prisoners knowing these visual signs?

OB

No, that was more said in passing. It struck out in my head later on – it came more to the fore. Political prisoners are possibly more educated people who are incarcerated with others who've committed assault, burglary, etc, so they use these signs as a means of communication to each other when they're stuck in different cells, or communicating when they're moving on, passing notes to each other etc.

TG

So how sophisticated is the language?

OB: The signs?

TG

Yes. I remember being interested once in the symbolic language of flowers, and discovering that for those who studied it, the symbolism was very complex. With a bunch of flowers in certain combinations you could confer very detailed instructions or sentences.

OB

That's interesting. I found about a hundred known signs. I'm sure there are more out there. I found them primarily on the net, but I don't think they are used sequentially to create different meanings. I think they are more used as a one off, maybe putting two together. But I'm far from expert.

TG

I was looking at the signs later on, which are published in the Istanbul newspaper, and thinking about how they would have activated in these *tppt*'s lives. Are they more coded than you have them translated as? An example here is 'Woman'. 'Man'. 'Grumpy Man'.

OB

That's basically what I found on the web. The meanings of these signs aren't so singular, at least not to me. For example 'Kind hearted Lady' is somebody who was sympathetic. I perceive 'Gentleman' as being trustworthy, kind-hearted man, someone who would help you, in the sense of 'you're a true gentleman.' 'Man', 'Woman' and 'Child' were interesting signs - they were scanned from a newspaper article from 1910/12 in some town where a priest and a police officer saw the signs, copied them and found out the meaning.

YOLDA / EN ROUTE

TG

The photographic format that *TPPT* took were slowly revealed throughout the spaces. They were exciting discoveries, in that they were in such a seductive format, they were hung a little bit low, and they weren't annotated as being yours. Until the Garanti Binası there was no signage with them, and the places weren't cleaned and prepped. They felt transient, hobo-like in themselves.

OB

The photographs are really the key to the project. There's the project that's out on the streets, but at the same time, apart from a few venues, they're probably invisible. People were asking - where are your signs? Well, go for a walk, look around.

TG

The signs did indicate art activity in their own right once you came to recognise them. We were looking for the Manchester Pavilion one day and came across a number of signs and knew we were getting close.

OB

Yeah – I consciously did a few areas where the art world would frequent. They were all still places that the signs related to in a genuine way, I just spent more time there. The idea with the photographs is that maybe you see the signs in the streets, and you think graffiti, or you don't notice them, and you still don't know that it's part of the Biennale. And then you see the photographs and you think, 'street scene in Istanbul', then another one in a different place, and

then you start to think there's something to these. So the photographs were like an echo of something that was happening in the streets.

TG

There was a sense of familiarity about each of the photographs, something that kept repeating, but nothing that you could really put your finger on. Compositionally the signs are not blaringly obvious. I thought that this reflected very well the inaccessibility of this language of signs for most people - for all except 'the initiated' as Charles writes about it.

AND HOW IT REFLECTED SOMETHING OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE 9TH ISTANBUL BIENNALE

OB

Yes, I was interested in having this guerrilla presence on the street, and then this hyper gallery presence on the inside. A lot of people were frustrated that I didn't give them the guide, or translation, part of which appears in the Biennale newspaper. This guide will be given to the children so that they can possibly use it if they are interested, so they have the tools to use it. The children are quite cagey about it – there's a possibility that it is being used, but they wouldn't tell me. So I didn't want to reveal that language to the entire world, all at once.

TG

Getting back to it being sectioned as *en route*: it was interesting when Charles Esche said at the opening, "... I hope in the end, that the process of the exhibition is one where you go back into the streets, between the venues, and that journey through the street is transformed, is changed by your experience in the buildings. I think in the end, if art can change the world, and I do believe it can, that is how it can do it." I thought this was very poignant for your work, the relationship between the street signage and the photographs inside. For me it was very much about reading. About reading the reiteration of the image through each of the spaces, and then about reading the streets, about having a different consideration of what was happening there, or which community was important to that location. I thought that the decision to section it *en route* mediated your experience of it in an enriching way. In general your work was to me a good example of what Charles spoke of as what they were trying to achieve in the Biennale.

OB

It was based on a genuine, personal discovery of Istanbul. At one point I got too caught up in the advice I was given on where to go, places where homeless could get something to eat - a handout - and I spent a few weeks in Istanbul without really getting anywhere. Then things clicked into place and I started including with liberty my own experience of the city, on top of the children's. There are signs in there that are applicable to the street children, but at the same time there are signs out there, which are very particular to my own experience.

TG

So somewhere you'd met a 'Kind Lady'

OB: Or where there's a 'Bad-Tempered Owner'.

TG

And is the placement of these signs about permanence? Would it have to be a place that that the person you were commenting on was going to come back to? Are they meant to activate in the long-term?

OB

Yes, I would put it on their actual building. But then the signs are already disappearing. They get worn off the streets fairly quickly. The original signs, which I'm quoting in a way, were chalk and charcoal. There are plenty of signs that have washed away. And that's the nature of the thing.

TG

But as well as it being utilitarian, in that there's a system which people can use to navigate the city, there's also a lovely, simple and sincere element of communication. I mean we all want to communicate our experiences, it's why a lot of us make art, it's why we write, it's why we speak to each other. In this sense, the signs simply communicate - they are deposited in a place for others to withdraw from. It is about socialisation. Have you ever lived as a Hobo?

OB

No. The closest I've ever come to that was when I was at high school and missed my train back to NY so I had to sleep rough in a park, which is far from living as a hobo. I've been itinerant but never yet a Hobo.

But, getting back to the temporal nature of the sign, some of them are actually permanent. There's a Neon sign for 'Kind Hearted Woman' on the shelter where 'the Mother' works - it's a very clean building so I didn't want to stencil it. I made a number of permanent signs, which included 'Free Toilet', 'Free Transport', 'Free Legal Aid' and 'Free Telephone' at the Umut Çocuklari Demegi offices. This last one was the only one that already existed.

They gave me a list that they thought I should make signs for, but they were too specific. Then again, to contradict what I just said, I also made signs that were specific, at least to Istanbul. For instance there were only three Hamams (bath houses) which would take the street children in, so I made signs for them.

I also made a series of 27 different stickers, for the children, so they can stick them up and start to develop the language. I wanted to make stickers for them rather than stencils for spray paint as there's less chance of being arrested with a sticker in your hand...

TG

Did they love it? Did they get into the fact that they had this language that was especially for them?

OB

They've just been introduced to it, and unfortunately they don't have the book yet but we're working on it this week. They'll all get books that are like a dictionary for the visual language - simple, photocopied, small enough to stick in your pocket. There are just so many parts to the project. The English definitions of these signs I've been revising along the way. For instance the sign that is a semi circle upside down with a dot in the middle, means 'Police Active' - community is intolerant to hobo's presence. Then you flip it the other way around so it looks almost like a smiley face with a little Cyclops and it means 'Police Inactive'.

Like many art projects, this and other works of mine are like a pilot. If they were really successful they would become a real-world phenomena.

TG

So if these kids started using and developing these signs as a real language and mode of communication?

OB

I would be very happy with that. That was my original ambition, but I still can't expect it.