

The Argus

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Turkish artist Ipek Duben: I want people to see what they don't want to see

[Edwin Gilson](#)

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REVIEWS

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I SOMETIMES wonder why I'm doing art when everyone is eating everyone else" says Ipek Duben. It's a hyperbolic, rhetorical question from a socially conscious artist concerned about her role in a precarious world.

While her quote might suggest an element of doubt in her creative endeavours, though, it can hardly be said that Duben is immobilised by anxious self-examination. The opposite is true, in fact – Duben is using art to explore and present social issues in her homeland

Her multi-screen installation They/Onlar, showing at Fabrica gallery in the weeks before and throughout **Brighton Festival**, focuses on marginalised and discriminated minorities in Turkey, from ethnic and religious groups such as Kurds, Armenians and Jews, to the LGBT community and women subjected to domestic violence.

She calls such people the "other's other", working on the premise that Turkish people are already classed as "the other" in the collective mind of the Western world. Duben worked hard to win the trust of such minorities before interviewing them. Their stories will be told via hanging screens and sound hubs at Fabrica in the UK premiere of the installation.

"I was very aware of the geographical specificity of the project," says Duben. "Why should anybody here care how a Jew in Turkey feels, or an Armenian, or a Kurd? But the point is that discrimination is so widespread it's like everybody is against everybody else. People in the West have had to realise they need to go beyond just cursing these people or killing them. Not everybody is a terrorist.

"I share Westerner's views towards Islamic terrorists. I hate them. I can't stand the Sharia Law. There are a lot of people that feel like that." On the week after the Brighton Festival launch, and guest director Kate Tempest's rallying call for empathy through the arts, They/Onlar feels highly pertinent.

Not to mention the fact that deep schisms in the UK and America were highlighted in such dramatic fashion last year, leaving many people to feel estranged among their compatriots. But, even with the best of intentions and an open mind, can Brighton audiences truly tap into the kind of marginalisation that Duben's subjects speak of?

The artist says that visitors to Fabrica will be "horrified to hear some of the stories of suppressed women and gay men" [to name just two victimised groups].

"That's a very good question and has been my concern all along. It depends on how universalistic people are here. I think it will create conflict in their mind. They would think of me as a Muslim, whatever that means. Duben, however, refuses to be identified as a Muslim artist or a female artist. "I am an artist, simply" she says.

The thematic narrative of the exhibition revolves around the idea of a "good citizen" in Turkey, a term coined by the marginalised – and particularly one Armenian man Duben spoke to – to describe the state's notion of an exemplary Turkish person.

"The dominant ideology belongs to the Sunni men," says the artist, referring to the majority denomination of Islam. Everyone else is discriminated against – some overtly, some covertly. The discrimination doesn't go away. That's true for Kurds and Armenians and Jews and so on – they lost their identity and, in a way, they disappear."

As Duben talks about these people, it becomes more and more understandable why they might have reservations about giving themselves – and their stories – over to an unknown presence with a video camera [hence the concealment of their faces]. Duben had to tread a fine line between subtly earning her subjects' trust and being bold enough to ask them personal, probing questions.

"It wasn't easy because people don't necessarily want to talk about histories and tragedies. Getting any gay person to come and talk to me was near impossible, for instance. I had a very hard time finding these people but I had to be direct. I went to meetings between certain groups, and I would tap on shoulders and ask people if they would like to participate in my project."

While she was able to persuade a sizeable selection of people to talk in front of the camera, there was one minority group that is absent from Duben's work. "There are no Greek-Turkish citizens in my piece because not one of them would participate. They must have come to an agreement among themselves that they were not participating in any Turkish project. That's the one group I'm missing."

In a previous project, under the self-explanatory yet complex title *What is a Turk?*, Duben attempted to unpack the Western definition of “The Turk”. She claims this characterisation has been prevalent in Western society for 500 years.

“I think my next project should be be Turks looking at the West – to see what they think about it,” she says, with a laugh, but it does seem the logical next step in her exploration of Turkish identity and the way it is interpreted around the world.

The artist is keen to stress that Turkish society is always changing [“you never know where you are”] and that there are more options available to women, for example, than ever before. She tells an anecdote from her childhood which illustrates both the cohabitation and segregation between Turkish-born people and minority groups.

“I went to school with Armenians and Jews and Italians and so on. I was in elementary school, walking on the street one day, when I heard to guys talking in a different language. At the time, the government was posting statements all over, like “Citizens – Speak Turkish”. I was only a kid at the time, so I turned around to these two guys and said “speak Turkish”. Years later I realised they were Kurdish workers. At that age I didn’t even know they were Turkish citizens.”

Duben says she “never felt discrimination” in her 26 years living in America – “for being Muslim or a woman. But that was probably because I was a ‘good citizen’, I was very modernised and Westernised.

“My husband is Jewish and American and it made me realise that I come from a majority culture. The American Jews are a permanent minority. They carry that consciousness with them.” The artist’s move back to Turkey has made her all the more aware of fundamental injustices and ideological differences between her homeland and the rest of Europe.

“It has been 40 years since Turkey applied for EU membership. In the last 15 years Turkish economy has exploded, way above that of Romania and Hungary, who joined the EU. “It has become crystal clear to the Turkish people that they would not be allowed entry to the EU because of religious differences and that the EU is a Christian club. There is no other reason in my mind for the exclusionary attitude of the West.”

Duben may be deeply worried about a number of global issues at the moment, most pressingly those of her own home country, but her work helps us to archive a greater understanding of the world we live in. It won’t be comfortable viewing, but it will certainly leave a deep impression.

If Duben herself says she was “very affected by what I learnt” from her subjects, the work will surely resonate with a wider audience. “I want the audience immerse themselves fully – to see something they don’t want to see and don’t want to know about.”

They/Onlar is showing at Fabrica gallery in Brighton from April 8 – May 29

[Peter James Field](#)

The Brighton Post

At the opposite end of the gallery, away from the individual screens, the installation is crowned with a triptych wall playing shorter clips from 19 of the interviewees. Here their stories join, with phrases carefully edited together to emphasise similarities and differences, encouraging unplanned dialogue between these fellow citizens which suggests, ultimately, the potential for unity. It’s a striking display, mostly well suited to the cool, roomy atmospherics of Fabrica – though we did feel that some of the more softly spoken testimony risked being lost above the reflected noise of the other speakers.

[Peter James Field](#)

The Brighton Post

Ipek Duben: They/Onlar

Fabrica Brighton 8 April to 29 May

Ipek Duben is surely the Grande Dame of the Turkish art World: a feminist activist artist of 75 who is still producing provocative work in a career spanning four decades. Showing all over the world, formerly as a painter, always a writer, her practice today involves artists' books, video and installation. Highly articulate, she recounts Turkish history in a measured tone that gradually divulges an impassioned critique, not only of former bloody purges leading up to the current oppressive regime of President Erdoğan, but also of the left opposition: 'He did not gain, we lost ... we have to look at ourselves.' This is the question raised by the exhibition 'They/Onlar': to examine the dilemma of Turkish cultural identity from the inside.

The outside image of the Turk has long been manipulated in western literature as the perfect puppet of the other – from Shakespear to Rudyard Kipling to the EU's stooge – but Turkey has its own 'others' and the internal divisions between its multi-ethnic cultures are equally discriminatory. Alevis are banned, Kurdish songs are forbidden, LGBT people are hounded, patriarchy and populism rule. Despite public opposition to hosting three million Syrian refugees, Erdoğan has 60% support for his domestic policies. Whereas Duben's last work considered what it is to be Turkish from her own perspective, in this installation victims of religious, ethnic or gender persecution have been invited by Duben to recount their experiences to the spectator, with the hope of inviting us 'to examine ourselves in our context, to listen, to understand to be generous rather than threatened by the Other'.

Fabrica, as a non-conformist chapel converted into a contemporary art space, seems the ideal setting for orientalist introspection. Lofty ceilings and stained-glass windows echo the crusading evangelism of Islamophobia. In haughty defiance, six framed videos are artfully posed in the dark space. Free-standing, larger than life-size portraits of diverse Turkish subjects recount their lives and problems to the camera which is focused on the whole body. Each discourse, in Turkish with English audio translation embedded in the work and edited in a seamless stream, is whispered as in therapeutic confession with ethnographic documentaries, any sign of the interlocutor is absent. At one end of the space is a low round table stood facing a triptych of three interchanging frames with clips of 19 individual stories. Duben describes the installation as a sound and light piece inviting a sense of dialogue around the global issues of migration, dislocation and identity.

Does an art context communicate a different message to that of documentary distribution? This is the challenge for artists working across media who call for a self-reflexive approach to the power relations involved in representations of the other. Besides the familiar visual self-othering in photography, artists such as Bouchra Khalili (ReviewsAM386), Kutlug Ataman, Suzanne Lacy (AM401), Amar Kanwar, Nishat Awan (AM402), Mohini Chandra and Anthony Luvera have also asked the voiceless to tell their own stories through audio visual portraiture. Intriguing, therefore, is Duben's denial of this work as 'documentary'. There exists a clear overlap between art and documentary in much

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The age-old issue within artwork of a documentary leaning has been identical to that of mainstream anthropology: opposing objective to subjective accounts. In the former, the eye is a spying eye of surveillance, dutifully detached and constructed by Renaissance perspective to place man at the centre of the universe. It foreshadows Michel Foucault's 'eminence grise' of the gaze as instrument of knowledge and control. With Cubism and Surrealism as models for a multiplicity of perspectives, ocular authority is shattered by a fragmented vision corresponding to the political crises of their time. Such a leap opened the door to the 'mind's eye', the vision of which was introspective and reflexive, awake to its subjective influence on the 'objective'.

Duben's installation manifests a reflection on such shifts. Cool, minimal and apparently objective, it is based on an observational aesthetic. Each of the six portraits delivers a subjective rant made up of stories of pain and frustration, strangely recounted with detached poise. This is far from the dramatic and dialectical montage of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch. It is closer to the earlier tradition of observational cinema, influenced by the neorealism of Italian cinema, that inspired David MacDougall's documentary use of deep focus to reveal the authentic through critical reasoning. Duben's method is similarly unspectacular. The presentation is not so much about 'showing' as about 'telling', the tales told avoid a linear narrative by their informal disposition in space and the lack of any authorial voice-over.

Polyphonic voices are embodied through strongly individual poses. They propose a corporeal encounter between subject and spectator who finds herself listening, partly as an eavesdropper, partly as a voyeur, perhaps as an ethnographer, although she remains an observer rather than a participant. Vision and voice fuse to seduce yet refuse to exchange with the spectator. Dialogue cannot take place because the spectator remains a viewer but hardly a listener. This is due to the force of the visual that dominates the delicate audio, handicapped by the voice-over tape operated on justifiable 'politically correct' grounds whereby both languages are given equal space. This does not work for both technical and physiological reasons because the human ear, unless highly trained like that of a UNESCO translator, cannot easily absorb simultaneous transmission of two different languages.

One remedy might come through the artist performing Walter Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator': 'to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another', but where does that leave dialogue with the spectator, whispering in the dark?

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Contemporary Art Magazine

Fabrica, Duke St, Brighton BN1 1AG

Ipek Duben: THEY / ONLAR



Title : Onlar exhibition Ipek Duben: THEY / ONLAR, installation view at Fabrica, 2017

Credit : Tom Thistlethwaite

Fabrica, Brighton
8 April - 29 May 2017

Review by Ashley Janke

'Onlar,' in English, means 'they' but artist Ipek Duben says the word translates more accurately to 'everyone who is not like us.' In her previous work, the artist has examined the gaze of the west on Turkish culture, where 'Turks' are seen as a Westerner's 'other.' In her multi-screen video installation 'They/Onlar' (2015) Duben expands on this topic by looking at notions of otherness within Turkey.

When stepping into the exhibition space, the darkness of the room obliterates the viewers' features. In the vacuum of light, audience members become shifting shadows grazing on the luminescence of projected figures with sympathetic faces. These figures are Turkey's 'others': Kurds, Alevis, Armenians, Jews, Rum and Romanis as well as LGBT and covered women. Twenty-four of these people appear between six individual, life-sized panels and a triptic in the back of the converted chapel, expressing their perspective and life experiences. Turkey is a melting pot of people and, here, they all appear to be speaking together.

Audio cones are hung above benches in front of each screen, creating a funnel of sound. The murmurs of 'others' fill the room, though no one voice can be heard above the rest. The story of the 'onlar' is only heard if the viewer chooses to stand before each screen and listen.

On one of the first screens to the left, a woman sits casually against a black background, her shoulders relaxed and her hands animated. She speaks frankly about personal matters as though she is talking with a close friend, and that friend becomes whoever sits in front of her. Her story is filled with pain, vengeance and courage as she describes her arranged marriage, the jealousy of her older husband, the domestic violence that ensued after they wed, and their eventual divorce. "Never trust a woman, she lies," was the advice given to her husband, she said, and that is why he beat her: to make sure she obeys. The woman dreams for her children to develop relationships that involve conversations and compassion. Her story is one of many personal accounts which require the audience to empathise as well as observe.

Across from the betrothed woman, another figure leans against a wall and details an account of her double life. Dressed in cool-grey pants, a dark blue top and a pale headscarf, the woman describes the ridicule she receives from both non-covered women and the practicing Muslim men in her life. "On one side, I was jeered at for being an Islamic feminist, and on the other told to take a look at the headscarf I was wearing and get rid of it, to free myself from its patriarchy," the woman confesses. She tells of her struggle finding a place to be accepted for her gender as well as her religious beliefs.

Duben does not impose her view on the stories of the speakers. There are no interruptions, disputes, or sensationalised messages. Instead, the artist creates a space for them not only to speak but to be heard. Her observations of 'othering' within Turkey can be applied to many fissures and subsects in other nations and communities. Although the world Duben presents is bleak, she suggests we find the light in those around us, and listen.

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Spatial Linguistics



Entering the space, audiences are subjected to multiple voices speaking at once – in unrecognisable languages – whilst blanketed by darkness. As the viewer's eyes adjust, they are invited to edge towards a figure who speaks animatedly to no one in particular. Underneath a Perspex hood, one begins to focus on the filtered English translation as the anonymous speaker, framed within a flat screen monitor, recounts their story. Each narrative is different, yet as it becomes apparent when approaching each figure in turn, dishearteningly similar. Acting as a testament to a country rich with identitarian difference, these films are representative of Turkish populations beset by religious and sexual

discrimination. Though the country has had a secular society since Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Empire and founded the Turkish Republic in 1923, artist Ipek Duben explains that “it is still fiercely traditional”, with the government advocating an Islamic “style of life” if not imploring for religious commitment from its citizens.

Acutely aware of the seemingly widening divisions within society, Fabrica Director Liz Whitehead brought the multi-screen film installation to the Brighton-based gallery after seeing it at SALT, Istanbul, struck by its resonance with issues closer to home. Originally, the work was presented in a central area identified with “the civic” – a forum for discussion upheld by Fabrica. Duben explains that she was “thrilled” that the piece was being shown in a deconsecrated church as it retains that context of community engagement, and in extension, deals with the positive and negative outcomes of organised religion. The capacity to represent issues in all their social and political complexity is characteristic of Duben, who refuses to offer simplistic resolution to conflicts, instead demonstrating how they are deeply embedded within both the exhibition space and the audience’s perceptions.

For example, Turkey featured prominently in the discourse which led to Brexit, a fact not lost on Duben, who recalls the frenzied tabloid proclamations that 20 million Turks were “heading to Europe” with dry distaste. In this context, the artist’s film *What is a Turk* (2004), which functions as something of an introduction to the exhibition at Fabrica, offers context to a history which is pertinent yet often overlooked. Exploring how European Orientalism positioned “the Turk” as its Other over an extended historical period, it was this film which encouraged and inspired the creation of the multi-screen video installation *THEY/ONLAR*, as it prompted Duben to think about who “the Other” within Turkish society might be.

This particular piece of work succeeds in both giving space to a specific sense of character discrimination with respect to gender, sexuality and ethnicity whilst illuminating both shared origins and differences. This may be a result of a lengthy gestation – ten years in the making – and because it reflects a greater depth of time through the many layers of recounted lives, all subjected to discrimination. The title *THEY/ONLAR* (“Onlar” translating to “they” in Turkish) offers a hint towards the conceptual message. Our understanding of identity, it shows, is shaped by the binary language that is used – self/other, man/woman – creating meaning by opposition. Demonstrating a breadth of cultural intersections through the plethora of voices, the installation enables viewers to reflect wholly upon the role of language in creating and sustaining prejudice but also the role it must play in finding common ground.

Laura Purseglove

Ipek Duben: *THEY/ONLAR* runs until 29 May at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton. For more information: www.fabrica.org.uk

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14/04/2017 Reviews

Ipek Duben: 'THEY / ONLAR' at Fabrica Gallery, Brighton

Artist: Ipek Duben: THEY / ONLAR

Gallery: Fabrica, 40 Duke Street, Brighton, BN1 1AG

Dates: 8 April - 29 May 2017

Website: www.fabrica.org.uk/they

Everyday us and everyday others

Review by Gulnaz Can

The hardest part of being human, is being human. A whole lot of labour goes into it, including the work of hating and discriminating, particularly when it comes to 'the others.' An exhibition in Brighton consists of oral testimonials about being 'the other', either to a whole society, or to one's own family members. The Turkish artist, Ipek Duben, underlines that this work documents minorities in Turkey in a non-documentary fashion; it is neither journalistic nor sociological evidence.

Fabrica Gallery has invited Duben to show her work *They* (2015), as a part of the Brighton Festival. The theme of the festival is *Everyday Epic*, exploring 'everything about being human'. I was sure that the exhibition would be an interesting experience for me, as I am a half-Kurdish, Muslim woman from Turkey, now living in London. Taking a train to sunny, liberal Brighton to see an exhibition telling the stories of Turkey's 'others', I thought "not necessarily 'others' to me"; but I was wrong.

Ipek Duben has been exploring identities in her works since the 1990s. She has worked around the themes of migration, violence against women in Turkey, as well as Turkish identity from a Western perspective. It is not a coincidence that this exhibition has travelled to Brighton in the middle of an international divorce. The discourse of Brexit, or of a second Scottish independence referendum has been over-saturated with 'us' and 'them', blurring the division between the two and other times rebuilding borders in

different places. Liz Whitehead, the director of Fabrica Gallery says that Turkey has become an object of interest for Britain during Brexit as a land of cultural and business opportunities. Paradoxically, I remember one pro-Brexit campaign flyer claiming the horror that 80 million Turkish people would come to the UK if it remained in the EU.

Entering Duben's installation depicting Turkish social reality feels dream-like, almost surreal. In a pitch black gallery, 6 scattered screens of people slightly bigger than life-size, either standing or sitting close to eye level, tell their stories at the same time. It feels like a crowd: meaningless chattering voices, the possibility of bumping into someone, a little chaotic... One needs to choose one person to approach and listen to in order to hear the English translation emerging from the original sound. There are no subtitles, you just need to focus. Look at the physical acts of telling: their eyes, lips and hands as they almost whisper. Then comes the story, and the chilled sense of reality in this surreal environment followed by an unavoidable step towards stronger empathy.

We see and hear people who have been historically and systematically discriminated against and marginalised: Kurds, Armenians, Jews, Alevis, LGBT, women...

An Armenian woman tells how she never spoke Turkish until primary school. She was only able to speak Armenian at home. She says that it took time for her to understand what being an Armenian meant in Turkish society, and that she could never become a district attorney or a history teacher. An Alevi man talks about how Alevis were perceived in Turkey; he heard people claiming that Alevis were so strange, they even had tails.

Another woman, who comes out as a lesbian for the first time in the interview, tells how she did not know that her father was a Kurd until she was a teenager. Her father hid this unspeakable fact from everyone until he died. A woman wearing a head scarf says that to secular men in Turkey she does not appeal as a woman, and describes how this makes her feel. All the testimonials are sincere, confrontational and powerful. Ipek Duben stresses that they are not politically correct. None of these stories are unfamiliar to me, but I also realise how easy it is to forget the daily struggles of 'others'. It is uncomfortable to listen to these stories one after the other.

On a panel of 3 screens, people appear in a sequence, one after the other as if in conversation. Duben explains that the subjects have never met each other and probably

never will. They are from different worlds although it is possible that some of them could live on the same street. Duben creates an impossible dialogue.

One may ask why they should be interested in Turkey's 'others'. The work is a sort of oral history of Turkey but it also speaks of today and of tomorrow. The testimonials are evergreen and they could be from anywhere. Duben says that there is a universal aspect to otherness. Her work confirms this.

Kate Tempest, guest director of Brighton Festival explains that when we are so busy with our own everyday lives, we are numb to 'others'. So here is the challenge: walk into this dark hall and listen, then go out to Brighton's Ship Street, turn southwards and see if you view 'the others' more or less tolerantly than before.

Ipek Duben (b.1941) is a Turkish artist who lives and works in Istanbul. She was educated in New York Studio School, University of Chicago (MA), and Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul (PhD). Recent solo exhibitions include: *Ipek Duben: What is a Turk?* The Agency, London, UK (2013); *2012*, Galeri Zilberman, Istanbul, Turkey (2012) and *Extracted Objects*, Cda-Projects, Istanbul, Turkey (2011). She has participated in the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Poetry and Exile: British Museum (2014); European International Book Art Biennale, Moscow (2014) and The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C (2010) among others.

Gulnaz Can is a Turkish writer based in London. After a 10-year career in broadcast journalism, she studied Gender, Media and Culture MA at Goldsmiths (2012-2013). Can has written for newspapers and magazines including Radikal, Agos and Pulbiber in Turkey and the Protagonist Magazine in London.

