

## **Die Landvermesserin/ The Surveyor**

If Viola Yeşiltaç had not purchased those polyurethane-coated raw cotton fabrics in Gedikpaşa which now serve as canvases for her paintings, they would have become faux leather bags to be sold at the roadside in Mogadishu or they would have been dragged to Yerevan as *fake* leather accessories. Maybe they would have turned up in Yekaterinburg as no name faux leather pants or as branded shoes on ebay if she had not spotted a sea of pixels in the weave of the synthetic leather and hence had treated them like her analogue photographs in the darkroom. Brands from Gucci to Yves Saint Laurent, from Adidas to Nike have taken a liking to imitation leather: a material that offers many advantages but also has its downsides. In choosing this material, luxury brands are actively responsible for transforming many places around the globe such as Istanbul's Gedikpaşa into *interfaces*: points of touch between legal and not quite legal ways of dealing with all things fake. Gates to a twilight zone.

Gedikpaşa, an ancient fishing and crafts district on Istanbul's historic peninsula. Once, before those many city planning barriers got in the way – the city walls, the rails, the highway with the Eurasia tunnel and the parking sites – the town was located directly at the seaside. A few stops on the outbound suburban train, just outside the Walls of Constantinople, lies *Kazlıçeşme*, the 'goose fountain'. Only thirty years ago, the tanneries were still located here. Back then, the real leather from the 'stinking fountain' was transported back to town and processed in the workshops of Armenian craftspeople in Gedikpaşa. Here, students learned directly from their masters and leather was processed into shoes, belts and bags. The children of Anatolian farmers arrived as apprentices and received meticulous training over decades. At some point towards the end of the past century, this world came to an end. The tanneries were demolished to make way for a cruise ship dock. Ever since, the ships have failed to manifest. The historic fountain with the goose relief stands alone, in the middle of a bleak industrial wasteland, missing the stench of real leather. At some point, it is supposed to adorn the atrium of a luxury shopping mall for cruise ship passengers.

That, if not even earlier, was the point when the former customers for handmade shoes from Gedikpaşa disappeared, taking their money with them. Shoes were now being produced elsewhere, in larger quantities. Old inhabitants left the district, new people came to settle here. They came from everywhere: post-soviet Eurasia, the Middle East, Africa. For a long time,



people also came from the Balkans until it was swallowed by the EU and its post-socialist migrant workers moved on to the asparagus fields and abattoirs of the West.

With each year, more and more people arrived, demanding bread.

Gedikpaşa adapted, feeding them all. The so-called *bekar odaları*, the bachelor's chambers, collective residences for new arrivals, took over the spaces where family life had formerly taken place. Traditional ateliers became global sweatshops which began to process synthetic leather. A new 'flying' middle class now gave the orders while artisanal



production of custom-made goods disappeared. Today's Gedikpaşa is a place of bottom up globalisation. Fake leather patches up holes in the world between Moldavia, Kirgizstan and Nigeria. It is a place of production and the product is proudly presented in non-white hands.

Non-white feet in imperfect leggings model the *fakes*. And last but not least, workers use their locational advantage to build alternative global trade networks with their home countries, already scheming their social ascent.

Viola Yeşiltaç, a born German Turk is not a stranger to this world: she knows it from her own double migration narrative into a new world. From Brooklyn. Back then when she arrived, and recently, under the pandemic: everything back to the start.

*“Eight hours a day, the same sequence of movements. Back then, when I arrived in NYC, I had to find ways to make some cash, which I then collected in my suitcase. I did this mainly due to assembly line work. It is nearly impossible for me to imagine doing such work for the entirety of one's lifetime. Do you then escape into daydreams?”*

*Within the last months, working at a shield factory, I would listen to one audio book after the next. The first months mainly fiction, this was the only thing that made it somewhat bearable. I automated the sequence of movements and absconded on a journey into my brain.”*

In Gedikpaşa, where she can afford to work as an artist, her internal journey leads her to China, a former stopover in her life and also Gedikpaşa's competitor in the *production of fakes*. Yet, her real encounter with the place denies her the desired canvases for her art which feature an all-over print of fake brand logos. Therefore, she decorates the bales of fabrics that she has purchased with Chinese ink calligraphy. In a final step, she blurs them, using a variety of techniques. She finds out that fake leather is not always just fake leather. There are a lot of different materialities,

sometimes featuring real depth, sometimes a tight surface, sometimes very absorbent, sometimes repelling the ink. But they all have one thing in common: polyurethane is washable and therefore these processes take place in technical analogy to those happening in a photo laboratory.

In an organic evolution of photography, the craft that the artist was trained in, the synthetic leather bales are ripped from their predetermined life cycles and subjected to dyes, liquids, light, chemical and physical influences. They are gifted with a different kind of still life, especially since they now take centre stage in the process of artistic production. This career, from material to art object, remains out of reach for the human owners of the leather bales, for the people processing them and for those who will later own the resulting commodities. One may wish to have entered this world as dead matter so as to be able to experience its bright side.



A sample that has not been repurposed for art has been placed on its ‘house’: a cheap cardboard box. This is where it poses, self-advertising. The internet is full of such kinds of images. It suffices to enter a place name and the word ‘shoe’, ideally in Turkish or English, into social media or search engines. Local producers vie for visibility at global transfer sites, at all costs. The internet has long become their *piyasa*<sup>1</sup>, the preferred marketplace. In a world of the Other’s copyright laws, producers of such visual content are simply grateful if their images are stolen and reproduced. There is no such thing as bad advertisement. After cropping shoes and shoebox out of the picture, all that is left to look at is a piece of cityscape which functions as background and model simultaneously. If one were to transfer this piece of cityscape into a

black and white colour scheme and smuggle the printed result into Viola Yeşiltaç’s photographic works, it would become naturalized there. Quite a few people, first and foremost including the author of this text, would possibly take it to be an original work of Yeşiltaç, amateurishly

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<sup>1</sup> *piyasa* (Turkish ,market‘), from Italian *piazza*, market place / square.

The simplifying language of Italian seamen, as so-called *lingua franca*, functioned as a linguistic bridge between the adjacent languages of Catalan, Ozitan, Albanian, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, ... etc. It was the source of multiple adaptations. In today’s neoliberal world, *piyasa* has become a magic word, a kind of key, for example regarding ‘global branches’. Due to the power of markets in which it is contextualized, individuals can situate themselves as liberal economic agents in the universe. They ‘place’ themselves in the intersection of its markets. The internet does not just indicate the multiplicity of *piyasas*. The development and connection of digital marketplaces drives the innovation of multiple identities in the alter-global world.

reducing it to its *sujet*.

Viola Yeşiltaç embarked on photographic walks around Istanbul, her father's hometown. She purposefully avoided anything that could be regarded as site-specific, hereby making a clear statement in defiance of orientalist expectations. Motifs that could be understood as typical of Istanbul are almost always carefully avoided. Most images could have been taken anywhere where people live and have built cities. A few images may perhaps give the impression of displaying a familiar location. Even then, their possible origins may be located within sheer endless urban geographies.

A continuously pointed angle and a reduced distance to her motifs are useful tools for Yeşiltaç, especially since she is on the hunt for archetypes. The failed, half-finished, poorly maintained things, things intended as provisional, the unforeseen, the unforeseeable, the incomplete, the uncompleted, things left behind, things out of place, things out of balance. They occur wherever spaces are supposed to be organized and transferred into another space. Where that has only been inaccurately or partially achieved. Or where it maybe was not intended at all.

Did she attempt to record her trails through the city? What would these traces have shown? How much of it was planned, what was a product of mere chance? In the world as seen through the eyes of Viola Yeşiltaç, her archetypes function like singular pixels or elementary particles which form the basis for everything. Just like the Vitruvian *modulus*, if one is so inclined. Insofar, they are omnipresent and can be localised everywhere. Everything begins with a visual survey of these imperfect modules through the camera lens; the higher order of things takes shapes on a different level. Her next step addresses the human cognitive action which joins the pixels together.

A second photo series apparently stands in stark contrast to the first group. It embodies clear shapes, perfection, precision, refinement. The desire to produce understanding and order in the world on that higher level. There is no other place than Istanbul .... where they could possibly have been taken. Oh well, Frankfurt. Because a tri-partite migration background, from Eastern Anatolia via Istanbul, on to Frankfurt and back to Istanbul stands behind this otherwise relatively unknown collection which photographically addresses this story. A nerd would have made it their life's calling to correct the eurocentrism of a history of civilization as it has been written for half a millennium, and to put it back onto its global feet. The *oeuvre* of the late Professor Szegin is dedicated to the idea of continuity within Islamic and Western civilisations. His unsurpassable

monumental work was in the making for more than half a century, he was in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> volume when he recently died at the age of 94. The idea of a common human civilisation is most convincingly visualised on the level of a reconstructed universal history of science in *flow*.

Viola Yeşiltaç is dedicated to photographically capturing the astrolabes which Szegin reconstructed based on scientific texts and illustrations from the Islamic middle ages. The collection of tools which are used to survey the world by means of astrological constellations is split between two cities. In Frankfurt, where he established his institute-in-exile, and in Istanbul, from where he had once been banned but was allowed to return to at old age, bringing with him his museum collection.

*"But how is that possible," cried K., "Surely I haven't made this endless journey just to be sent back again."*<sup>3</sup>

Viola Yeşiltaç, who identifies with the persona of K., the surveying protagonist of Kafka's *The Castle*, obviously wishes K. was in the possession of one of these astrolabes. It would have given him access to the insides of the empire. The state of things could thus have been deduced. The sheer imperfect which can only be seen through the camera and upon which the surveyor willingly stumbles wherever she goes could have been moved into the spheres of understanding.

The three series of images on fine photographic paper and polyurethane, which are horizontally spread out in the middle of the room at the Rhenania, hereby surveying it, do only appear unconnected at first glance. They already allude to a common core in a visual collection about Istanbul, a metaphor for a shared home of differences. The assemblage is still in the process of loudly and dynamically thinking about itself. At some point, in printed form, it will represent a semicolon in the artistic trajectory of Viola Yeşiltaç.

Orhan Esen, 2020

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<sup>3</sup> <http://der-wisch.net/ein-leben-fuer-die-wissenschaft/>  
<https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/fuat-sezgin-tradition-und-aufbruch>

<sup>3</sup> (Franz Kafka *The Castle*, K. at the Superintendent Page 79)  
[https://onemorelibrary.com/index.php/en/?option=com\\_djclassifieds&format=raw&view=download&task=download&fid=16534](https://onemorelibrary.com/index.php/en/?option=com_djclassifieds&format=raw&view=download&task=download&fid=16534)