

**Reflections on Movement:
New Installations in Historical Dervish Sites of İstanbul**

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*“Travel is not a new phenomenon in the history of dervishes
rather it can be understood as a continuing practice where movement in itself is central.”*

Bente Nikolaisen

Considerable attention has been given of late to many Asian, Middle Eastern, and Near Eastern artists such as Shazia Sikander, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Shirin Neshat, who have brought to the United States art forms rooted in distinctly Eastern traditions. Numerous articles, exhibitions, panels, and documentaries have highlighted these artists' integration of traditional techniques such as miniature painting, calligraphy, and ukiyo-e prints into contemporary American art-making practices. By focusing however, on what these Eastern artists have brought to the United States, this attention has overlooked that which is being sought by an equally significant migration of American artists going in the opposite direction.

I am among these contemporary American artists who have sought to connect to a traditional art making practice beyond the borders of my own country. My current series of multimedia projects are site-specific to historical sacred spaces in Istanbul, including the two oldest Sufi dervish lodges in the city: the Kadirihane and the Galata Mevlevihane Museum. As it has been for many pilgrims over the centuries, my arrival at these sites is also a form of pilgrimage, and the projects I am creating are reflections of that particular response.

This work is something I could not do in the same way in the United States, for I create from within these spaces themselves, installations that are intimately bound to the iconographies and shifting functions of those sites throughout their histories. Furthermore, having traveled from my own county to work in Turkey has offered me a distinct point of view not rooted in any particular construction of locality, but rather in movement itself.

There are many other contemporary American artists including, Bill Viola, Scott Ludwig, Philip Taaffe and Jackie Tileston, whose art is intrinsically bound to

their having traveled or lived abroad. It could even be argued that whatever form of pilgrimage it was that brought various peoples to America in the first place, has remained in many Americans' perpetual need to continue that pilgrimage on to some other place as well.

Nevertheless, to travel abroad certainly does not in and of itself constitute an act of pilgrimage. The recent book *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* makes an important distinction: "Pilgrimage and tourism differ in terms of the direction of the journey undertaken . . . The pilgrim, and the 'pilgrim-tourist' peregrinate [travel or wander from place to place] toward their sociocultural center, while the traveler and the 'traveler-tourist' move in the opposite direction." Furthermore, the contributors, whom are all social anthropologists, argue that pilgrimage is defined by and always involves a process of sacralization of movement, persons and/or places. (Coleman and Eade 18)

The Sufi image of the wandering dervish, whose patchwork cloak is comprised of various pieces of fabric from the many different places they have visited, holds a direct connection to the way I view my own art making practice. Having spent the last six years in Turkey, this country is also the fourth country in which I have lived, and one of twenty countries that I have traveled to. My years abroad have defined my art as much if not more than the time I spent in the United States. Constantly trying to synthesize my often disparate experiences, everything I do is an attempt to create unity from multiplicity.

As utterly foreign as these spaces are to me as an American, the dervish lodges provide a context perfectly suited to the nature of the work I do. The dervish's home is truly in movement, and these architectural settings comply with that need for impermanence. In a world that is constantly in a state of flux, the Sufi never seeks a fixed resting place. Dervish architecture is more often than not constructed with wood and highly prone to fire, so the structures have been constantly altered, reconfigured, and rebuilt again and again according to prevailing styles, tastes, political ideologies, and the needs of daily usage. What I create in these spaces are simply further impermanent layers in the ongoing process of reconstruction.

Kadirihane

Kadirihane is an early seventeenth century dervish lodge in the Tophane district of Istanbul. The site consists of a mosque and residence facing onto

a graveyard built over what was originally a Byzantine church. In 1996 the leader of this lodge or sheikh, spoke out on television for freedom of expression. Literally drawing fire from religious extremists who view Sufis as heretical for their use of images, dance, and music, the mosque and countless sacred art treasures were burned to the ground the very next day.

Today, caught between the fury of religious fanaticism and the disinterest, if not scorn of cultural institutions that view sacred sites as outside their domain, the mosque remains in total ruin. Large Arabic calligraphies still adorn the barely standing walls. Grape vines hang down from the few charred beams that once supported the roof. Water continuously flows from a broken fountain across the tiled floor.

Within this roofless structure, *The Geometry of Fire* project has been installed in Kadirihane's remains. Thirty of the pieces created for this installation are drawings made entirely of smoke on mirrors. The working process used is one of effacement and removal. As soot from the smoke is wiped away from the glass mirrors it forms and reveals two kinds of image: one drawn and one reflected. Placed to reflect directly onto the cemetery, the images themselves are derived entirely from archived photographs of the structure taken before the fire and from elements found amongst the graves. Positioned on the walls in and around the calligraphies, the drawings on mirrors are materially inseparable from the writing—soot being the basic ingredient in the lampblack ink from which the words were formed hundreds of years earlier.

The viewer in this space perceives themselves within the dynamic play of countless relationships. For myself personally, as well as the viewer this is precisely the state of tension that *Reframing Pilgrimage* defines as kinetic ritual "Pilgrimage is woven out of the structural opposition of stasis/movement". The viewer sees themselves ephemerally moving within a series of fixed images: smoke within smoke, reflection within reflection. Between what is lost and what is present, the viewer participates by becoming that threshold between these (Coleman and Eade 15).

Admittedly, there is something exclusive about the dependence of the installation on this kind of active participation, when the fact remains that most people will never get to visit it in person. In addition to geographical proximity, gender and religion often play a defining role in determining who is given access to sacred sites in Turkey, and who is not. A parallel web-based project has been created to not only document the installation, but in fact to challenge preconceptions of what it means to experience this place in person.

As *Reframing Pilgrimage* points out, even defining the notion of journey is often problematic, for “some Sufis have developed a concept of the inner pilgrimage by which the person visits sacred places within the microcosm of the mind and body.” The virtual space of the website offers access to certain experiences and information that are not even available when visiting the Kadirihane in person, such as text, images and sound recordings of ceremonies made there before the fire (Coleman and Eade 14).

Galata Mevlevihane Museum

If the installation at Kadirihane addresses problems of geographical proximity in experiencing a place, my project at Galata Mevlevihane raises questions about what kind of limited access is granted to people who can in fact experience the place in person.

Built in 1491, Galata Mevlevihane was the first dervish lodge located in the newly conquered city of Istanbul. With a stunning view of much of the city, the hilltop location would have been a “choice site for the dervishes, who considered heights to be sacred, the places where heaven met earth, their coming together respectfully veiled by low-lying clouds”. Centuries of urban development around the lodge however has progressively limited this “coming together” of earth and sky to something no longer visible. My project there has sought to reestablish that long-lost connection by bringing the sky back into that space (Lifchez).

The word *sema* in Turkish means sky, but also refers to the ritual dance of the Mevlevis, or whirling dervishes, the followers of Jelaeddin Rumi. With the exception of Rumi’s Mausoleum in Konya, Galata Mevlevihane was for hundreds of years the longest functioning site in the world for the performing of the *sema*, and the cultural apex for the production of Sufi art in Turkey. Countless masterpieces of calligraphy, miniature painting, volumes of poetry, and sacred music created at Galata, had an enormous impact on Sufi and Islamic art throughout the Ottoman territories. However in 1925, after the founding of the secular Turkish Republic, the lodge was stripped of its original function and converted into a government-run “literature” museum. Performance of the *sema* was strictly prohibited and the production of Sufi art in that space ultimately came to an end. Today as tourists and pilgrims from all over the world continue to flock to the site, the government has tolerated Sufi-related events only to the extent that they are presented solely for their “cultural” value.

My project addresses many of this space's restrictions on multiple levels. The pieces I am creating for this work are all being made from within the confines of the space itself. Comprised of drawings, photographs and video, the installation utilizes Mevlevi imagery from historical archives in relation to a specific solar eclipse that I documented in Galata Mevlevihane on March 29, 2006.

In the center of the Galata complex is a cistern that formerly served as the lodge's *çilehane* or underground prayer cell, where male dervishes would spend solitary periods of forty days in silent retreat. Projected into this space will be a video showing a dervish turning unceasingly above the Mevlevihane's gardens and graves. Shot during the peak of the solar eclipse, the video was filmed on the roof of the complex with seven cameras simultaneously.

The dervish in the video is Didem Edman, who in 1993 became the very first woman in Turkey to publicly perform the sema in modern times. Despite the well-documented fact that women had performed the sema together with men since the earliest of times, over the centuries the role of women became eventually restricted to viewing the ritual from behind a screen in a separate room called the *bacılar*.

The video not only documents an actual performance of the sema in Galata Mevlevihane, its projection in the *çilehane* places the image of a woman in a space where no woman has ever been. Filled with water, the room behind an iron gate remains a darkened chamber that the viewer can only look into, where light from the eclipse illuminates and sound and music reverberate. The sound too, created for this project by Mercan Dede, is that of a female voice, Azam Ali, recorded in Galata Mevlevihane singing in Persian a poem by Rumi. By means of an imagined journey, both image and sound function to draw the viewer, male and female alike, into a space in which they are otherwise physically prohibited from entering.

In *Reframing Pilgrimage*, Bente Nikolaisen explains in the chapter *Embedded motion: Sacred travel among Mevlevi dervishes*, that "Situated at the heart of Mevlevi theology is not only travel through geography, i.e. traveling to, but also travel of the mind—traveling through." Taking the idea of the "inner pilgrimage" even further, Nikolaisen points out that "the journey of the mind or the soul to reach God is intimately linked to bodily movement through ritual. Therefore, movement through geography, the soul's journey through bodily movement, as well as the process of passing the various stages of your training as a dervish all contribute to the higher goal of seeking knowledge" (Coleman and Eade 91).

Installation art draws attention to the way we experience a particular space or environment. Although an installation temporarily alters a space itself, it changes the way we move through that environment even more. The pilgrim's sacralization of movement and space certainly corresponds to installation art's visceral transformation of the place it exists in. *Reframing Pilgrimage* notes that pilgrimage as ritual and performance involves "sometimes unpredictable encounters between liturgical forms, personal imagination and memory translated into acts of the body." The confines of the çilehane function profoundly as a place devoted to the "journey of the mind", while the installation itself physically embodies this journey by making memory palpably present. In the installation, as well as the original usage of the çilehane, this place's extreme physical limitations are exactly that which enabled first the dervishes, and now the viewer to journey inwardly through active imagination (Coleman and Eade 17).

I do not expect every viewer who comes to either the Kadirihane or the Galata Mevlevihane installations to approach these sites as pilgrims do. Nevertheless, that which often characterizes a pilgrim's encounter with their destination is some form of cognitive transformation, and ideally this can apply to the viewer of art as well. In deed, memory translated into acts of the body challenges the very notion of "viewer" by including each person as performative participant instead.

(Note: *The Geometry of Fire* was created for the Kadirihane during Winter 2006. The Galata Mevlevihane installation continues to be postponed due to ongoing restoration work on the entire museum complex.)

Works Cited

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