

MARY PELLETIER

Still Dancing *With Taboos*



Turkish artist, curator and publisher Halil Altındere's exhibition *Welcome to Homeland* was held in Istanbul's Cihangir neighbourhood in September 2017 to coincide with the 15th *Istanbul Biennial: A Good Neighbor*. Installed in the Sadik Pasha mansion, a gently deteriorating historical residence overlooking the Bosphorus, Altındere presented three new works—the ground floor was dedicated to *Space Refugee* (2016), an immersive installation centred around a twenty-minute video of the same name featuring the first Syrian cosmonaut, Muhammed Ahmed Faris; while upstairs, *Homeland* (2016), his rap-music video played alongside a large-scale photographic installation entitled *Köfte Airlines* (2016). A multifaceted, multimedia exhibition, *Welcome to Homeland* underscored Altındere's evolving engagement with the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, and demonstrated a marked development in the artist's methods of collaborative storytelling. This shift in his practice notably came to the fore in his rap music video *Wonderland* (2013), in which a young rap group from the Istanbul neighbourhood of Sulukule forcefully airs its grievances against an ongoing urban regeneration project.

In examining Altındere's practice over the past four years (in particular, the four works noted above), and taking into account the immediate political and geopolitical shifts within his native Turkey, we see not only an increasing preoccupation with the idea of 'land' but also a shift in the dialogical nature of his approach. Since emerging in the mid-1990s, Altındere has established himself as one of Turkey's most provocative contemporary artists, a reputation earned through a diverse multimedia practice that succeeds in excavating and challenging oppressive structures of the state. Through sculpture, video, photographic and multimedia works, Altındere has squarely placed subcultures centre stage, investigated the ubiquity and mundanity of control and security, and oscillated between the tenets of tradition and the desires of modernity—sometimes risking his own autonomy in the face of increasing censorious governmental practices.¹ The success of these works often relies on Altındere's particular brand of cheeky irreverence and ironic, dark humour which extends to the self-referential—indeed, his exhibition *Who the f*ck is Halil Altındere?* in 2015 at the Kunstpalais Erlangen in Germany cunningly criticised the reputation-based global art scene before one even entered the building.²

The collaborative nature of his recent videoworks indicates a subtle, effective change in production as well as an ambitious expansion of subject matter to include the Syrian refugee crisis, which in the past six years has developed into the largest humanitarian dilemma in the region.³ This is unsurprising, as the influx of Syrian refugees into neighbouring Turkey has had a substantial affect on governmental and societal structures with which Altındere repeatedly engages. In doing so, Altındere has entered into a realm of contemporary art production and themed biennial presentations that quickly become mired in debates concerning ethics, morality and opportunism: is there a responsible way to make art about the refugee crisis?⁴ In taking into account the works in *Welcome to Homeland*, individually and collectively, alongside his landmark video *Wonderland*, this text will examine the visual, aural and distinctly humorous language employed by Altındere to engender a unique viewing experience of investment and engagement linked to the universal idea of one's homeland—the success of which is due in part to his position within Istanbul and greater Turkey.

In July 1987, Muhammed Ahmed Faris described to the President of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, his view of their shared homeland by way of patchy, orbital satellite television—“Dear President, I am happy to see my lovely country at the moment. I can see the beautiful coasts, the great green mountains and lands, I can see the city of Jableh and the Golan Heights. It’s incredibly beautiful, and great. I’m very happy.”⁵ Suspended 400km above Syria in Mir, a new, low-orbit Soviet-built space-station, Faris was in the midst of a public, galactic conversation with the President. As the first Syrian and only the second Arab in space, it was an official moment of national pride, documented by Syria TV and beamed into households across the country. In subsequent footage, Faris exuded cool confidence and radiated joy in equal measure—a courageous yet relatable figure, often pictured with a smile beneath his thick black moustache.

A fighter pilot with the Syrian Air Force, Faris had been chosen to undertake rigorous training for two years as part of a joint Syrian-Soviet space program. He spent seven days aboard Mir (a name which, when translated for official purposes, was heralded as “peace”) conducting experiments alongside four Soviet cosmonauts. He returned to Syria a national hero, and ranked up to major general in the Air Force and Air Defense Command. Twenty-five years after his landmark mission to space, as Hafez al-Assad’s son Bashar began a bloody governmental crackdown in response to the growing Syrian revolution, Faris defected from the regime. The sixty-six year-old national hero now resides as a refugee in Istanbul.

Faris’ life story is undeniably captivating, one of baffling irony and oppositional imagery—a heroic cosmonaut rendered stateless by a regime he once served in good faith. When *The Guardian* newspaper ran a profile on him in March 2016, their decidedly cinematic title read, “From astronaut to refugee: how the Syrian spaceman fell to Earth.”⁶ The epic nature of his biography certainly appealed to Altundere, as it would to a general audience. But it is important to recognise the visual and sensorial devices employed in the production of the *Space Refugee* video and installation which reach beyond biography to express a more universal understanding of the current refugee crisis and provide commentary on the concept of ‘belonging’ in one’s landscape.

As with most of Altundere’s artwork, *Space Refugee* evades genre definition, and requires a unique hybrid designation—perhaps docu-sci-fi-futurist being most appropriate. The opening credits show the title and Altundere’s name hurtling above the crest of the Earth, to be replaced by a collaged space station and spaceman of inconceivable scale moving slowly through space. For a few seconds, we glimpse Faris’ face, collaged so as to appear inside the spaceman’s helmet. It is curiously comical—and soon gives way to footage and audio from Faris’ space training and journey. Taking the approach of a more traditional documentary, the video transitions to a present-day interview with Faris, standing in an observatory explaining his space journey and the revolution that led to him to flee his homeland, to his new home in Turkey. In control of his own narrative, Faris’ dialogue takes a surprising turn when discussing future possibilities for the fate of the displaced Syrian population: “I hope we can build cities for them there in space where there is freedom and dignity, and where there is no tyranny, no injustice.” Abruptly, the video transitions to a landscape that resembles the dry, red landscape of Mars (filmed in the Turkish region of Cappadocia). The documentary mode continues as various NASA and space experts appear, articulating the increasing inevitability of moving human life to Mars. We learn that, through various international treaties, no one country can purport to own land in space—a utopic vision, especially when juxtaposed with Faris’ enthusiastic motivations for continuing exploration.

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Three young astronauts appear in this Mars-like landscape wearing Palmyra-branded space suits. As they play out the type of exploration narrated by the NASA experts, complete with a mini Mars rover, absurdity flirts with the reality of galactic research—suddenly Faris’ idea of Mars as a ‘safe space’ for an entire population without a country does not seem so far-fetched. In a 2015 interview with Dino Dinçer Şirin and Misal Adnan Yıldız, Altundere describes the collaborative nature of his work from a production viewpoint;

I work with the most substantial and suitable medium for what I am aiming to do. If I do not know much about the language I intend to use in my work, I collaborate with an expert. I might need a good painter, sculptor, welder, or an art director. It depends. When you get more experience and have more opportunities, you can work with better and bigger crews. Eventually you get a better result.⁷

In *Space Refugee*, this process extends to the figures portrayed in the video—the presence of scientific experts on screen grounds the visuals in fact. The gravity of this subject matter, which engages both the Syrian refugee crisis and the idea of a possible utopia, is lightened by Altundere’s onscreen depiction of comical discovery, but the installation further enhances this with a heavy dose of sci-fi kitsch. Enveloping the artworks, the darkened interior of the mansion’s ground floor glowed a neon blue, partly wallpapered with galactic scenes. Three space-suited mannequins stood on guard in the foyer. Official portraits, painted from photographs of Faris when he was involved in the Syrian-Soviet space program, depicted him primarily as a noble, fearless figure. The familiarity of this type of state-sanctioned and publicly-disseminated imagery was offset by Altundere’s use of frames edged with neon blue lights; when a full-body likeness of Faris, in his space suit, is rendered in the form of a small action figure hidden behind a clear convex dome, he plays into traditionally juvenile devices of heroic representation and celebration. The idea of ‘land’ moves from the personal and terrestrial to that of stellar aspiration, as one circular portrait suggests in a halo of words reading “Occupy Mars”.

If this installation is rooted in the idea of the future, upstairs, Altundere’s video *Homeland* (2016), takes us squarely back to contemporary politics, offering a blend of imagery that is more commonly associated with the current regional refugee crisis. This art video, made in collaboration with Syrian rapper Mohammad Abu Hajar and filmed in both Turkey and Germany, was first exhibited at the *Berlin Biennial* in 2016. Presented shortly after a change in European Union-Turkey migration policy,⁸ which saw the two entities adopt an agreement to stem the flow of refugees from Turkey to Greece under new resettlement directives, this work is an acutely political display of frustration, voiced by an exisiting refugee, Abu Hajar.

Homeland begins with a serene waterside yoga session: “Take your position as an observer... watch and listen all the voices in the environment,” the yoga instructor guides her students, a shrewd directive that perhaps applies more to the viewer than those onscreen. The serenity is soon disrupted by an electrifying syncopation, and the arrival of refugees at the beach. A drone gathering video footage holds a life buoy that reads “Welcome Refugees”.

Abu Hajar received asylum in Berlin in 2014 after fleeing Syria for Lebanon, and then to Italy. His rhyming voice-over, suffused with fervent anger, ignites the narrative as a group of refugees undertakes an imagined sea crossing drawn from news footage and mythic imagery—breaking through barbed-wire fences, navigating the waters of darkened underground mazes, and emerging from a wooden Trojan Horse. Abu Hajar is a force—as his words shift between the personal and the general, so too does the camera, volleying between images of mass migration and the rapper’s confrontational visage.

“The home is lost/the home is died/the home is behind me now,” he raps as drone footage reveals the German landscape. Ending at Berlin’s decommissioned Tempelhof Airport, now transformed into one of Germany’s largest refugee camps, the subject turns to assimilation, and the clear frustration associated with navigating a new ‘homeland’ that under these (or any) circumstances will never be home at all. Abu Hajar will not trade tabbouleh for currywurst—he will not accept cultural directives. He is determined: “I have a homeland/I have a homeland/I will return even if the time prolonged.”

An extended line of credits at the end of this ten-minute video points again to Altundere’s collaborative process: camera operators, production managers, art directors and stuntmen. The artist’s role almost fades to the background as Abu Hajar’s own artistry comes to prominence—here the young rapper has been given a platform, and enhanced by Altundere’s production, spans the realms of conceptual art and political call-to-action. In allowing Abu Hajar to voice the ‘refugee experience’ in these ways, Altundere successfully navigates a contemporary artistic landscape that is increasingly fraught with questions of ethics and morality in the race to address global crises. When comparing both *Homeland* and *Space Refugee* to the refugee-focused installations and productions of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, the difference in execution and critical reception is striking. In January 2016, when Ai recreated the photograph of a drowned Syrian infant’s lifeless body, it was rightly criticised as a disrespectful, tone-deaf stunt, capitalising on the death of a child;⁹ when he encouraged celebrities to don emergency thermal blankets and pose for photographs at a charity gala a few weeks later, Berlin’s culture secretary Tim Renner took to Facebook to draw the line between Ai Weiwei’s lifejacket installation at the Konzerthaus and the ‘obscene’ act: “When Ai Weiwei illustrates the dimensions of terror outside [the gala] with 14,000 life jackets from Lesbos, it is perhaps not subtle but effective and justified; but when the guests of Cinema for Peace are prompted by the organiser to don emergency blankets for a group photo, even if understood as an act of solidarity, it has a clearly obscene element.”¹⁰

It may be that Altundere’s more recent video production owes its success to his experience in making *Wonderland*, which received international acclaim after it was exhibited in the 13th *Istanbul Biennial: Mom, Am I Barbarian?*, curated by Turkish curator and writer, Fulya Erdemci. This work follows Istanbul rap group Tahribad-i Isyan through the streets of their native Sulukule, a six hundred-year old Roma neighbourhood at the centre of a years-long, divisive urban regeneration project advanced by TOKI, Turkey’s government-backed housing agency. By 2016, the project had already caused the displacement of lower-income Roma residents to make way for new, middle-class housing developments. While in conversation with Şirin and Yıldız, Altundere alluded to the organic nature of the video’s production: “in *Wonderland*, I did not build the structure on a pre-written script dealing with the gentrification problem in Istanbul. The main characters of the video, the members of the hip-hop group Tahribad-i Isyan, are such strong personalities. After having met them, I created the plot around these young people.”¹¹

Just as Abu Hajar presents himself as a confrontational figure in *Homeland*, so do the rappers in Tahribad-i Isyan. The video begins with a police chase, recalling the iconography of Altundere’s prior installations involving police cars; the landscape is half-slum, half-construction project. The destination is a meeting with rapper Fuat Ergin, here portrayed as a larger-than-life mob boss wearing a camouflaged fur and a comic crown. He expounds on the destruction of the neighbourhood under the guise of regeneration, issuing a satirical call to arms: “Let art and music be your armaments.” They set out into the streets, airing their grievances; “We pissed on the foundation of the newly built blocks/cos I was pissed at TOKI.”

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Over the course of the video, the rappers cross paths with a *zabit* or security guard, and swiftly begin beating him. The darkness escalates as they set him on fire—as ashes fall over the landscape, each of the rappers is shot. They continue rapping regardless, only to enter into a fight with a construction digger which charges at them like a monstrous animal. As the song comes to a close, a Molotov cocktail is thrown at a TOKI banner which erupts into a ball of flame.

In illuminating a gentrification crisis with the raw language of these young men, Altundere's video succeeds in transforming the bureaucratic nature of governmental discourse into an expression of immediate cause-and-effect. The imagery is familiar and visceral in equal measure, as the initial comic nature of the neighbourhood's youthful defense quickly gives way to vengeful murder. *Wonderland* was a standout work at the *Istanbul Biennial*, garnering international praise, and was subsequently purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In examining the video's success, it is important to note that it was produced in February, 2013 and completed before the violent police crackdown on those protesting the proposed demolition of Istanbul's Gezi Park, which began the following month. When the *Istanbul Biennial* opened in mid-September of that year, the riots had ceased, but the spirit that had spurred on months of protest continued to simmer. As a result of the political unrest, *Wonderland* resonated deeply with both local and international visitors. This critical reception also posed a unique challenge, as it became inseparable from the swell of international news coverage, as Altundere discussed with Şirin and Yıldız: "I have noticed that people have higher expectations of me since I made *Wonderland*. It moves independently, has a life of its own and is not my work anymore. All of a sudden it became a bigger entity, so it was not easy for me to make new video works immediately after."¹²

Welcome to Homeland was presented to coincide with the 15th *Istanbul Biennial: A Good Neighbor*, curated by Elmgreen and Dragset, centred around various appreciations of what makes a 'good neighbour' and the shifting concept of 'home', ranging from the local to the global. Just as the tense political climate that surrounded the 13th *Biennial* reflected the urgency of its central theme (use of the public domain as a political forum, challenging contemporary forms of democracy), so too did Elmgreen and Dragset's edition analyse a current political climate—throughout Turkey, Europe and beyond—where ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' are continually in flux. "In times where political problems are looming so large they seem ungraspable, inaccessible and unfathomable to us as individuals, we hope to bring politics home—back to its roots," the curators' introduction reads. "The microcosm reflects the macrocosm and vice versa."¹³ Though not officially exhibited as part of the *Biennial* program, Altundere's exhibition substantiated that assertion. In presenting drastically different individual accounts of the refugee journey, which in turn uphold deeply personal interpretations of 'home' and 'belonging', *Space Refugee* and *Homeland* make the incomprehensible numbers of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis accessible.

The final component of *Welcome to Homeland* acts as an ironic reminder of the limitations refugees face when they reach a destination and also serves to reinforce the scale of their crisis in considering the video's unique narratives. *Köfte Airlines*, initially conceived as a billboard and shown at *Berlin Art Week* in 2016 was installed as a wall-sized photograph. In the image, lines of refugees sit atop an airplane that boldly displays its name, Köfte Airlines with a Turkish flag painted alongside the cockpit door. The image appears digitally altered, and it is, to a degree—the tilting of the plane and the barren landscape are fabrications. In reality, Köfte Airlines is a restaurant located in a disused and renovated jetliner off the highway in the city of Tekirdağ, in Eastern Thrace, west of Istanbul. Altundere worked with the country's immigration administration, bringing together a group of refugees who wanted to take part in the project.¹⁴ A film of the production process plays alongside the wall/photo, providing

evidence of the physical collaboration for those who might presume the entirety of the photograph was a collage. The absurd title, referencing the region's ubiquitous meat dish, belies a serious question: not where the refugees will go but *how* will they go? At the time of the photograph's conception, agreements regarding the placement of refugees was at the top of the EU-Turkish political agenda—where, rather than how. *Köfte Airlines* provides space to meditate on the restricted movement of those seeking asylum, and the inhumane conditions encountered along any stage of the refugee journey. Altindere offers an absurd solution to these problems by inventing a refugees-only airline. But after witnessing the various journeys undertaken in *Welcome to Homeland*, one must ask, does it really seem that absurd?

Notes

¹ See Kaya Genç, 'Turkish Contemporary Art 2.0', Kaya Genç interviews Halil Altindere, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 16 January, 2016; <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/turkish-contemporary-art-2-0/#1>

² See Amely Deiss, Sarah Lampe, Dino Dinçer Şirin and Misal Adnan Yıldız, *Who the F*ck is Halil Altindere*, Stadt Kunstpalais Erlangen, 2015

³ See 'Syria conflict at 5 years: the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time demands a huge surge in solidarity,' UNHCR, published 15 March, 2016; <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/3/56e6e3249/syria-conflict-5-years-biggest-refugee-displacement-crisis-time-demands.html>

⁴ Rob Sharp, 'Is There a Responsible Way to Make Art About Syria?', *Artsy*, 22 April, 2016; <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-is-there-a-responsible-way-to-make-art-about-syria>

⁵ For documentary footage of Muhammed Ahmed Faris, see Rosie Garthwaite, 'From Astronaut to Refugee: The Syrian Spaceman Who Fell to Earth', *The Guardian*, 1 March, 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/from-astronaut-to-refugee-how-the-syrian-spaceman-fell-to-earth>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Şirin and Yıldız, 'Interview', *Who the F*ck is Halil Altindere*, p. 92

⁸ See Elizabeth Collett, 'The Paradox of the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal', Migration Policy Institute, March 2016; <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/paradox-eu-turkey-refugee-deal>

⁹ See Henri Neuendorf, 'Ai Weiwei Hits a New Low by Crassly Recreating Photo of Drowned Syrian Toddler', *Artnet*, 1 February 2016; <https://news.artnet.com/market/ai-weiwei-reenactment-drowned-syrian-toddler-417275>

¹⁰ Henry Barnes, 'Celebrities don emergency blankets at Berlin fundraiser for refugees', *The Guardian*, 16 February, 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/celebrities-don-emergency-blankets-at-berlin-fundraiser-for-refugees>

¹¹ Şirin and Yıldız, 'Interview', p. 91

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 94