

WARNING

**THIS AREA IS
UNDER 23 HOUR
VIDEO AND AUDIO
SURVEILLANCE**



ahmet öğüt
speculative social fantasies



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REUBEN KEEHAN

Speculative Social Fantasies is not so much a survey as a selective panorama of the work of Ahmet Ögüt, bringing together a range of recent experiments in paradox and tragedy. It draws its title from that of a wonderful commentary of the artist's work by Pelin Tan, and it is a highly appropriate descriptor for Ögüt's prodigious, precocious output. For the notion of a speculative fantasy is itself tragic—as speculation it is pure fantasy, which is to say that of all possible futures, it is the one that will not eventuate; while as fantasy, its speculative character implies that it will never escape the space of the real. Perhaps this paradox, cast back onto the realm of the social, defines the limits of possibility of the world in which we live, the very world whose absurd logic and occasional wonders Ögüt's work so frequently exposes through its subtle perceptual shifts and keenly observed re-framings.

Paradox, of course, is the unstable foundation on which all of Western philosophy teeters. The embrace of contradiction at the heart of all language distinguishes philosophy from the logical pretences of sophistry and politics. This is the secret methodology of every 'true' philosopher to work within the Platonic tradition, culminating in the traumatic radicality of deconstruction, for whom paradox radiates not from reason, but from its Other. It is toward an encounter with this Other of unreason that against all reason deconstruction strives, knowing that this encounter is ultimately unreasonable, unachievable, because, as Boris Groys would have it, "it is impossible to see darkness in the dark".

Groys's metaphor is remarkably ocularcentric. For might the denial of vision not heighten our senses to the heavy breathing of this Other? To the sweet pungency that permeates our nostrils and coats the backs of our tongues, the sharp pain we encounter when we stumble over it or the confusing pleasure we feel in its sweaty embrace? We'd be like blind men with an elephant, for sure, but the whole point of philosophy is not to claim we know the beast, only to reflect on the experience of grasping and caressing its leathery trunk, its leg or its tail. In fact, let's forget what the Other might be altogether and concentrate on what it might do. What if it tries to elude us, to attack us, to ravish us? What if it simply remains indifferent to us? Now that would be truly traumatic. And what, in our self-consciousness, tragic, never-ending quest for unobtainable wisdom, would we do if this Other



were to crack a joke? Such a scenario would no doubt elicit responses similar to those evoked by the charismatically subversive sensibility, at once darkly humorous and profoundly empathetic, that characterises Ögüt's wry artistic propositions for daily life. In Ögüt's work, the world is a panoply of gags just waiting to be discovered. All it takes is coming to terms with the tragedy and paradox of existence; only then can speculative social fantasy be understood as a force, which is to say, as a potentiality—it is the real that will not be realised but can be. Even if this limits it to the realm of ideology—and whether it does or not depends on your understanding of subjectivity—it maintains a material force.

The first thing you should know about Ahmet Ögüt's sense of humour is that it is deadly serious. His videos, photographs, drawings, actions, installations and publications are populated by the most serious of characters—cops, terrorists, stone-throwing youths, bomb-disposal robots, high-ranking officials of every stripe. They cover the trauma of guerilla warfare, paraphernalia of public security, politics of currency exchange, geographies of human movement, and the power of institutions, both social and cultural. The form that they take is doubly serious, for Ögüt rejects even the already solemn medium of documentary exposition in favour of an approach informed by conceptual art and its legacies, the tendency within contemporary art which so rigorously takes its own status as art into account that it must surely operate as the most serious of presentational modes.

But for all its seriousness, Ögüt's work is never earnest. Earnestness fixes seriousness and play as two distinct and opposing modalities; Ögüt's sense of humour allows for no such contrast. Its operation recalls the fluid relationship between seriousness and play Huizinga once identified in children's games—and at the roots of Western culture—where “the consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes the troublesome ‘only’ feeling”. Here, we might substitute “only a pretend” for ‘only joking’, for like the best of jokers, Ögüt endeavours to construct a point of identification for his audience, to allow them to participate in the foibles of his actors, even to see such shortcomings in themselves, and to do so happily. Like Chaplin, Keaton or Tati, the artist frequently appears in his own works, undertaking absurd and self-deprecating actions —‘punch this painting’ implores a recent self-portrait; you too can risk arrest to turn a Toyota into a police cruiser for no reason, suggests *Somebody Else's Car*. This isn't just comedic classicism. By not excluding possibility of being the butt of his own joke, Ögüt only underlines the joke's empathic function and broadens its potential appeal. Such jokes are shared and never traded.

As with the best jokes, Ögüt's works operate irruptively and iteratively. This is to say that they are at once temporary invasions of social consciousness by its repressed, and transpositions of the power of the irruptive moment onto the listener. To put it another way, the joke is a means by which we convince someone that a thought that has occurred to us is funny, that it momentarily reconfigures acceptable patterns of cognition and behaviour, and we do this by articulating that thought in a way that simulates for the listener the force of the thought's irruption from our subconscious. Numerous strategies—timing, rhythm, plot, characterisation—are put into motion to achieve this. Success of the joke depends not only on the listener ‘getting’ the joke and finding it funny enough to laugh, but also on the transformation of the listener into teller through the joke's repetition and embellishment, which further underlines an identification between the experience of listening and the occurrence of the irruptive thought. The joke is thus the reiterative transfer of the social repressed, the operative flipside of dramatic tragedy, whose historical function was to legitimise the event as history. But for all its transferable capacity to reorder social ego—its potentiality—the joke is limited to the field of the ‘only joking’, even if it does proceed with the utmost seriousness. The repressed idea only arrives in consciousness on the condition that it is only a joke, a kind of temporary entry visa that comes with an extensive set of restrictions.

What an unfunny definition of the joke!
What a verbose and overly analytic disservice to such vibrant work! Perhaps Guy Hocquenghem

approximates operation of Ögüt's humour better when he observes that writing “gets as close to madness as it can without ever entering into it for fear of ceasing to communicate”, that “for madness to be transmitted, it must be put to reason, that is, prison”, that he who succeeds in communicating “is a cop, and a cop that doubles as a transvestite... wearing garters concealed beneath the pants of his uniform”. This is a far more appropriate image, far closer to some of the Ubu-esque police, politicians, soldiers, clerics, businessmen and Mafiosos who inhabit Ögüt's works. And it is closer again to the tragic paradox of speculative social fantasy.

The perversion of this image lies not in what is being repressed, but the very fact of that repression. Ögüt seems aware of the frustration that the troublesome only feeling can produce—one need only watch the minute-short loop of *Light Armoured*, in which a military vehicle remains disconcertingly unaffected by rocks tossed at it from just out of view. Is there a better metaphor for the effectiveness of lofty political art? And yet on he presses, proceeding with the utmost seriousness, because art never functions as straightforward oppositionality in any case. Thus the artist's apparent fascination with the group of boys combining football and chicken on a darkened stretch of road in *Short Circuit*, pursuing their game at the risk of life and limb—and thus their capacity to pursue the game at all—precisely because of the presence of the risk. No cars are destroyed in the process, but a degree of autonomy is created all the same, however fleeting.

Ögüt's Shrigley-esque security sign *This area is under 23 hour video and audio surveillance* says it best. Power is everywhere, but not without its gaps and slippages. The precise location of these gaps and slippages is open to question; note that the sign does not divulge precisely which hour, thanks to budget cuts or bureaucratic error, the space is left unsurveyed, or indeed if this audiovisually unregistered hour is continuous or cumulative. But if speculative fantasy can accomplish anything, it will be to locate them, and, with a little prodding, make them that tiny bit wider.

* This essay is tangential version of a longer text that will appear in issue 8 of *Column* published by Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney later this year.





Images:

Front cover: Ahmet Ögüt, *This area is under 23 hour video and audio surveillance*, 2009

Page 2 top: Ahmet Ögüt, *Guppy 13 vs Ocean Wave*; a Bas Jan Ader experience (video still), 2010

Page 2 bottom: Ahmet Ögüt, *Things we count* (video still), 2008

Page 3: Ahmet Ögüt, *Somebody Else's Car*, 2005

Page 5 top: Ahmet Ögüt, *Things we count* (video still), 2008

Page 5 bottom: Ahmet Ögüt, *Guppy 13 vs Ocean Wave*; a Bas Jan Ader experience (video still), 2010

Rear cover: Ahmet Ögüt, *Light Armoured* (video still), 2006

All photos courtesy the artist

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