

## **FLASHBACKS OF A FOOL**

Is it possible to grasp the perspective of the present by archeologically excavating the movement of the immigrant? What potentials can this perspective carry? What significance can Istanbul's Italian community have in a socio-political context? What causes amnesia in relation to the recent past? And how can this amnesia be overcome? These are the questions pondered by Osman Bozkurt and Didem Ozbek's project *Flashbacks of a Fool*.

As a city, Istanbul fielded great waves of immigration during the Ottoman Empire thanks to the *Terms of Surrender* enacted in 1867 which granted Europeans the right to buy and sell property. Therefore, any European citizen was free to live and work on Ottoman land. At the command of the Sultan, European migrants were given permission to settle around the Pangalti district of Istanbul. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ninety percent of the population of the district used to be European and non-Muslim. Today, the number has dropped to just a few Levantine families.

*Flashbacks of a Fool* reflects on the presence of the Italian community around the Pangalti district during the Ottoman Empire. Excavating the region, as much as allowing themselves to chance upon situations, gave an opportunity to the artists to tap into buried layers of history, both personal and collective: and they were confronted with imprints of the minority community such as schools, cemeteries, food stores, workers' associations etc. mainly hidden behind walls.

In terms of content, *Flashbacks of a Fool* consists of a three-video installation, a visual installation, a slide projection and printed material. The three-video installation *Napoli* takes place at a grocery store in Pangalti, which was opened by an Italian in the 1950s and subsequently turned over to Turkish owners under the same name. Even though the name of the store inspired their interest, *Napoli* is not about the store's history but its contemporary incarnation and the daily interactions of consumers with the owners. The subject matter of their daily conversation varies from politics to sports and from economics to popular culture. Moreover, the conspicuous absence of the store's Italian past within the dialogues is a sign of the amnesia of the shop owners in particular, as well as signalling the amnesia of the neighborhood of its European past in general.

*Flashback/Flashforward* is a slide projection composed of 40 portraits of the immigrant members of *Società Operaia Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso* in Istanbul. *Società Operaia Italiana*

*di Mutuo Soccorso* was founded in 1863 by Italian immigrants living in Istanbul. Based on their archive, there were approximately 30.000 Italian workers registered at the association, one being the famous Giuseppe Garibaldi in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By now, the number of members has dropped to forty. The work brings together a selection of archival portraits of these Italian immigrants.

*Breaking the Waves* is an installation composed of a single image of a boat full of people roaming during the night. This image is projected on a basin filled with water and the audience sees this looped nocturnal scene reflected on the water. It is taken from Euronews and shows the illegal immigrants just before they got caught at Lampedusa, Italy in 2008.

*Breaking the Waves* immediately recalls Theodore Gericault's painting *The Raft of Medusa* (1818-1819) in which people who escaped from a shipwreck on the West African coast are depicted on a raft on the brink of starvation and exasperation. Yet the piece works like a snapshot in the audience's mind and serves to link the immigrant question to today.

*Un viaggio da sogno* is a humorous printed project which brings to mind a regular lottery. The work, which will be distributed to the audience with their entrance ticket, consists of two parts: one part will work as a give-away art piece which the audience will be able to keep, while the other half will work as a lottery ticket to be collected by the museum staff in a box designed for this purpose until the end of the exhibition. After the duration of the show, just like the idea of a lottery, the museum staff will select one of the tickets and the lucky audience member will win a trip to Istanbul when the exhibition travels to Istanbul. The work refers to the marketing strategy of shopping malls. Organizing a lottery, which usually promises the lucky consumer a free trip to European countries, serves to increase their sales. *Un viaggio da Sogno* applies this marketing strategy to a lucky museumgoer, promising a trip to Istanbul.

According to Homi Bhabha, the renowned post-colonial theorist, it is to the city that emigrants, minorities, the diaspora come to change the history of a nation. Therefore, by concentrating on a small district, the artists implicitly make the presence of the Italian community visible within the Ottoman Empire. Believing that self-knowledge is important in understanding the Other, *Flashbacks of a Fool* reflects both on the forgotten history of Italian community and also stands as a reminder of the Italian's immigrant past in this case in Istanbul. Even though Osman Bozkurt and Didem Ozbek's excavation is confined to a small district, the project aims to take it to a larger perspective and link the past to the present.