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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
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Needle Lace to Valley Walking: İğne Oyası as Landscape Ornamentation Olivia Valentine

In 2012-13, I lived and worked in Turkey, researching the traditional needle lace edging of İğne Oyası and creating relationships between this textile edge, the contemporary urban fabric, and the rural landscape of Turkey. In this paper, I will speak about my time in Turkey, presenting my research into the traditional needle lace edge of oya and my studio production, where I used my research to create this needle lace edge at new scales and in new materials and contexts.

Oya is the lace edging found on head coverings in Turkey and throughout the Mediterranean region. Historically worn by both men and women, it is most commonly seen in present-day Turkey on headscarves worn by women in rural villages. It is also a popular collectible in both its traditional form and in new uses such as jewelry and other fashion applications. This diminutive edge work is decorative in nature and has also taken on the role of public self-expression, through folklore, as I will discuss later.

I went to Turkey as a Fulbright Fellow to investigate oya and take this conventional form in new directions in two projects. In the first project, *Panorama*, I created a long strand of İğne Oyası out of balcony tarp, a material used to create edgings and awnings on threshold space of the exterior balconies found throughout Turkey. The second project, *Yürüyüş Oyası (Walking Oya)* was created in Cappadocia, a rural and heavily touristed area of central Anatolia. I created oya for the edges of the table mountains, using my body, through walking, to ornament and define the edges of this crumbling, volcanic landscape.

As I was making *Yürüyüş Oyası* in the rural landscape, urban unrest was sweeping through Turkey, sparked by the violent police response to peaceful protests in Gezi Park, in the center of Istanbul. Specifically, the protests coming from balcony spaces and the Duran Adam, or Standing Man protests challenged the boundaries between private bodies, public spaces and government interference—an unexpected and meaningful corollary with my own work.

Oya

My investigation into oya was multifaceted. I spent time at many ethnographic and private collection museums that proudly displayed a variety of textiles.¹ I befriended a textile dealer in Ankara, Alper Yurdemi, who helped me amass my own small collection of oya from the Antik Pazar. I spent time making oya with the women in İbrahampaşa, Cappadocia, learning to use both a shuttle and a needle to make different variations of their local, contemporary oya. I also spoke extensively with textile dealers in the markets of Istanbul, Bursa and Izmir, and with women selling their cast-off oya at weekly markets in Ankara and Cappadocia.

¹ Notably, I visited the Uluumay Collection in Bursa and had the good fortune of having the exhibition *Skill of the Hand, Delight of the Eye//El Emeği Göz Nuru* on view at the Sadberk Hanim Museum in Istanbul.



*Figure 1 - İğne Oyası examples, personal collection of the author.
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There are many varieties of oya, and when I began my investigations, I was fully expecting to find a range of different floral, foliate and abstract motifs, many of which have narrative, expressive meanings for the women who wear them. Most famously, the red pepper oya suggests hot or spicy (i.e.: angry) feelings, often directed towards one's husband or mother-in-law. What I was not expecting was the portrayal of entire landscapes. Mountains were featured, and sometimes trees or bushes. The action of wearing a needle lace depiction of a landscape around one's face was of great interest to me. Oya exists as a boundary between private bodies and public presentations, with the ability to give an outward projection of inner thoughts. The idea of a landscape motif serving this function fascinated me—particularly the extreme shifts in scale, and the contrast of something so big and so emphatically “exterior” playing the role of projecting emotions in a delicate edge.

İğne Oyası is the most difficult and highly esteemed form of this needle lace edge. Oya can also be made with a crochet hook or a tatting shuttle, but as in other textile techniques, these are often imitative, used to speed up the process, though always with their own particular forms and pleasures. Traditionally done in silk, İğne Oyası is a single line construction technique using a knot to create a triangular structure. It is usually built on a foundation row, either of needle stitches or a crochet chain. This foundation row is then built up, line by line, in equilateral triangles, with the knots tied on to the tips of the triangles from the previous row. The rows can either be worked in the same direction, running the thread across with each row, or it can be flipped, resulting in a diamond shaped pattern. Traditionally it is worked mostly in solid blocks

of triangle stitches, building up to patterns and motifs. The contemporary versions can be quite different, using open motifs incorporating longer connecting threads and sometimes beads. Many contemporary practitioners also use polyester thread instead of the traditional silk for its durability, strength and economy.

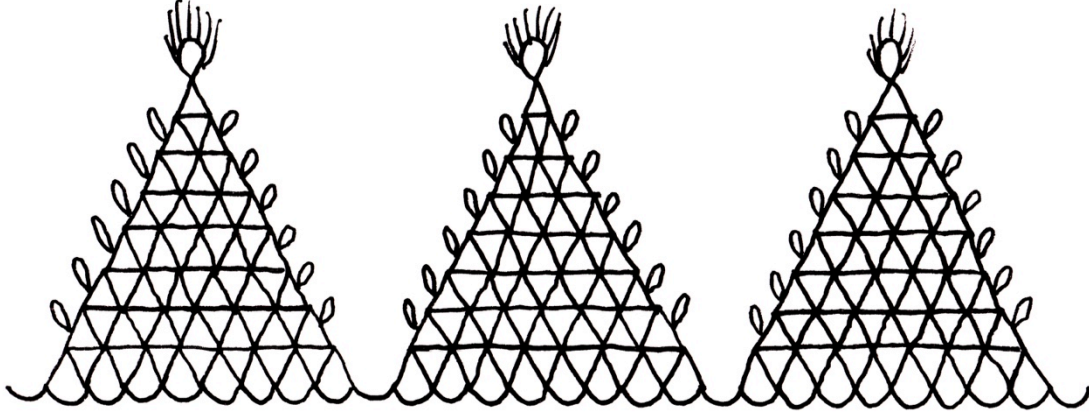


Figure 2 - Structural Diagram of İğne Oyası

Panorama

Looking at some of the oya I collected in the Ankara antique markets, I saw mountains and bushes in addition to the flowers and abstract designs that I had expected. Looking at the city of Izmir, where I lived for part of my time in Turkey, I saw a landscape of mountains and international style apartment blocks.

When I was introduced to the Istanbul-based artist initiative, PasajIST² to create a project in their space in the Halep Pasaj on İstiklal Caddesi, near Taksim Square, I thought of my mountain oya collection and the city I had at hand: Izmir. I decided to make my oya at the scale of the city instead of the scale of the headscarf, and to use the city of Izmir as the landscape of my oya. I then installed this architectural-scale oya strand around the inside of the pasaj gallery space and across the back alley of İstiklal Caddesi.

When I arrived in Turkey, I began searching for materials to use for my projects. Knowing that I wanted to work both inside and outside, durability was important, as was availability. After searching through many different markets, I found balkon branda, or balcony tarp, to be a good, locally available material to work with. Both a functional and decorative material for balcony coverings, and available in a variety of colors, it perfectly suited my needs. In addition to these functional concerns, the balcony tarp also referenced the interstitial space of the apartment balcony, which I see as the architectural equivalent to oya. The sturdy nature of the material also allowed me to work at a large scale, which was essential to transforming the diminutive oya for an urban architectural context.

² Now working under the name PASAJ.



Figure 3 - Panorama, PasajIST, Istanbul, 2013.

Taking my inspiration from the cityscape of Izmir, I developed my oia using two motifs: the Izmir mountains and the International Style apartment blocks. Using my basic knowledge of the knotted triangular structure of İğne Oyası, I proceeded to make drawings from oia pattern books and eventually translated these drawings into cutouts in the balcony tarp. The open work triangle structure of oia referenced the “mountains” of my Izmir landscape. I then placed the forms of the apartment blocks and their prominent balconies within the mountain motifs. These patterns were all drawn onto the tarp and then cut by hand, using a sewing machine to construct a long strand using the regular pattern interval of oia.

I made about 70 feet of this architectural scale oia. It traced the interior edge of the gallery space along one side, and then crossed the center of the room, transforming the oia from an edging to a boundary within the space. The oia then transgressed the threshold of the window, spanning both the interior and exterior space. It then reflected itself through the window and crossed the back alley of PasajIST to connect to the neighboring building. Using the tarp material that often graces the nebulous private/public space of the Turkish balcony, I recreated the edge of the headscarf, which demarcates the edges of a women’s privacy, at the scale of the city streets.

İbrahampaşa



Figure 4 - İbrahampaşa Village, Ürgüp, Turkey, 2012.

In April 2013, I relocated to İbrahampaşa, a small village in Cappadocia that contains a number of different edges, both spatial and conceptual. It is a place where regional tourism is slowly seeping in, with one hotel open and two more under construction. It is a place where the women are on the edge between traditional village gender roles and a new version of femininity, which

is transgressive of those traditional roles and is accessible to young women through the Internet. The village itself is also very much on the edge, between construction and collapse, with the ancient stone houses in various states of disrepair and rehabilitation. Most prominently, Cappadocia is a place where the edges between architecture and landscape are blurred, with ancient churches and houses dug into and constructed out of the soft volcanic rock that has, through the natural forces of erosion, created the landscape that make the region a tourist center and a world heritage site.

I stayed in İbrahampaşa for 10 weeks at Babayan Kultur Evi, an international artist residency run by Willemijn Bouman, a Dutch artist who has lived in the region for several decades, and who sponsors international artists to work in the village. I chose to work with Babayan due to their long-standing connection to the village and their history of successful artistic collaborations. Their connections to the village facilitated my relationships with the women and allowed me to work freely in and around the village without causing a stir.

I arrived in İbrahampaşa with the general idea of wanting to create installations in this environment that exists on the edge between landscape and architecture. I had been to the village briefly 3 years earlier, and was excited to walk in the strange, eroded landscape again. I felt particularly drawn to a specific valley with a cave structure known locally as the Tavşan Kilisesi or the Rabbit Church. It was also called the women's church, with both names inspired by the iconography of the interior paintings. It is a unique example of a carved Christian church that depicts mostly women and is thought to have been the site of a convent. The name Rabbit Church is due to a depiction of a sacrificial goat that at one point was mistaken for a rabbit.

I began my time in İbrahampaşa with daily walks, looking for possible sites to work in, thinking always of the valley I had seen three years prior. I also continued to learn oya, practicing both with a needle and shuttle, trying to see how I might relate the practice of making oya to the landscape. I hoped to take this small traditional edging out of its place in a woman's hand and insert it into the larger landscape of Cappadocia.

Emotionally, it was difficult to adjust to village life, where the boundaries between public and private are different from what I am accustomed to as an urban American woman. Young women shared their fears of the landscape and being alone. Older women thought I was crazy, walking with a pack like a donkey. My comfort in being alone in the landscape was not understood and I was often questioned and occasionally laughed at, both for my actions and for my slow, accented Turkish.



Figure 5 - Yürüyüş Oyası (Turuncu Boncuklar), 2013.

In addition to the public/private divide in İbrahampaşa and my urban sense of privacy in public space, the gendering of the public space in the village was unfamiliar to me. Women were not generally seen in the public square of the village, and mostly stayed inside and in the areas directly adjacent to their homes. Women also always traveled in pairs or groups. As a foreign woman, my gender identity was more fluid, allowing me to enter the dominantly male spaces of the village. Specifically, it was acceptable for me to spend time in the village square and at the coffee house, though I found it uncomfortable. Some of the doors in the village contained Ottoman era remnants of an even more starkly divided village, where door knockers, through their sound, and even separate doors, signaled the gender of visitors, so that a woman alone at home would never have to open the door to a man.

Yürüyüş Oyası (Walking Oya)

Resolute in my walking, I began to approach the landscape with thoughts of balloons and material installations. Another attraction of Cappadocia was the burgeoning balloon tourism industry, with tens, if not hundreds, of balloons full of curious tourists launched each morning when the weather allowed. My previous work with both helium and hot air balloons was in the back of my mind, but the dry conditions of the land that spring quickly dissuaded me from working with fire. I brought some materials out into the landscape, but the scale required to work in the way that I wanted was overwhelming, and the thought of employing plastic materials, like the balcony tarp I had used in the city, seemed inappropriate to a landscape as well cared for and lovingly maintained as that of the private family gardens that surrounded the village.



Figure 6 - Yürüyüş Oyası (Sunrise), 2013.

With these restrictions, I quickly turned away from making material installations. I decided to use the walking I had been doing as a new way of demarcating an edge in the landscape. Being a photographer, I decided to use my camera to document my walks and to trace some of the crumbling edges in the visibly eroding landscape. I started close to home, setting up the camera on my balcony, using my computer to delay and then shoot pictures at a regular interval. I would start the timer, and then venture through the valley into the frame of my camera, beginning my precarious walk along the edge of the table mountain, trying to define the edge where the horizontal table mountains turn into valleys. In my initial location, I was visible to the village, and found myself occasionally in conversation, across the valley, with others wondering what I was doing in my crazy, slow, and deliberate walk for the camera hidden from their view. As I refined my camera technique, I traveled further afield, packing a backpack with just my tripod, camera and extra clothes. While I considered getting the village women and children involved in my project, the coordination that would have been necessary to get people in cars, due to their aversion to walking so far afield, seemed counter to the self-sufficiency and mobility of the project. In the end, I used only my own body. Most of the pictures were taken entirely alone, with myself being the only person in the visible landscape.



Figure 7 - Yürüyüş Oyası (Kırmızılı Manzara), 2013.

After the photography was complete, I would make quick renderings in Photoshop of the final images, to make corrections and evaluate the day's work. In total, I created approximately 55 different compositions over the course of nine weeks, resulting in about a dozen images that were shown at my open studio in İbrahampaşa in June of 2013.

Gezi Park

As I created my walking oya pictures, political unrest was sweeping through Turkey, originating from Gezi Park in the center of Istanbul, only blocks away from where I installed my urban oya project, Panorama. Peaceful protests there were met with unprecedented police violence, sparking nationwide demonstrations and international attention.

Gezi Park is located on the European side of Istanbul, adjacent to the prominent Taksim Square, which is a huge transportation hub and a focal point for political protests. In May of 2013, on the heels of annual May Day protests, a small group of environmentalists and students gathered in Gezi Park to voice their objections to development plans for the park, including a controversial shopping mall. This small protest was met with tremendous police violence, including use of tear gas canisters as ammunition and water canons and quickly escalated to rallies in cities across the country, including Ankara, Izmir, and Antalya. The problems highlighted by the protests are deep and broad, ranging from urban development to police violence, and the extent of government power in both public and private life.



Figure 8 - Gezi Park Protests, 2013³, Photo Credit: Elizabeth Angell

In addition to the occupy-style protests that made up the core of the dissent, there were a variety of other protest tactics, taken up by Turks from all walks of life, young and old, urban and rural. While too numerous to cover here, they included people of all ages clanging on pots and pans on their balconies in the evenings, flickering lights, and Twitter and Facebook postings. One subgroup of protests of particular importance to my project was started by Turkish dancer, choreographer and performance artist Erdem Gündüz. Dubbed the Duran Adam or Standing Man protests, they started June 17th, 2013, with Gündüz standing alone in Taksim Square, in still silence, for 8 hours. At this point, the number and frequency of arrests was overwhelming, and these Standing Man protests attempted to see how far one could go in peaceful occupation of public space before the police would get involved. Could one man standing peacefully in public, be the cause of violence from the police? Could he be arrested for this? His performance/protest was met with much enthusiasm from the protesters at large, and was replicated widely, with several calls for people to simultaneously do standing man protests across the country.

In conclusion, I ask, is it possible that there is resonance between the traditional headscarf edge of oya and the protests of Gezi Park during summer of 2013? Is it that oya, a public declaration of private thoughts, might provide a historical and social context for the balcony protests and standing man protests in the face of outrageous police violence? While my situation as an American woman left me feeling out of place participating in the protests of 2013, I believe that there is a resonance between my reaction to the public/private divide as a woman in a small village and the act of standing in public space, in reaction to police violence against private bodies occupying public space.

³ The text here translates roughly to “Everywhere Gezi Park, Everywhere Resistance”

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