ASHURA
a film by köken ergun
press kit
The Battle of Karbala was a military engagement that took place on 10 Muharram, 61 AH (October 10, 680) in Karbala, in present-day Iraq, between the forces of Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph and Hussein, the grandson of prophet Muhammad. Hussein and all his supporters were killed; women and children were taken as prisoners. This battle is central to Shi’a Muslim belief in which the martyrdom of Hussein is mourned by an annual commemoration, Ashura. There are approximately 1 million Cafi’i Shiites in Turkey, most of which live in Istanbul and the eastern border town of Igdir. In Istanbul they inhabit a shantytown neighborhood in the outskirts of the city, which they started building in the late 1970s. The neighborhood is called Zeynebiye, referring to Hussein’s courageous sister, Zeyneb.

In ASHURA, artist Köken Ergun has worked in close collaboration with the people of Zeynebiye, documenting their preparations for the ceremonies in 2010.
Extracts from an interview between Köken Ergun and Ian White, from Who Am I Any-

Ian White: Maybe another way round of talking about this is in terms of how rituals func-
tion. Or how you understand rituals to function. Who is being addressed by a ritual? What
is the ritual upholding? What function does it serve? What social, political structures
does it maintain?

Köken Ergun: It almost serves everything, really. First of all it’s reflective; primarily it
addresses the community that participates in the ritual. What I have seen is that they are
making it for themselves. Rituals maintain cultural codes. For the Filipinos, they need to
have a dose of nostalgia, of remembering their home, and this is maintained by the beau-
ty contests. Like for the Turkish immigrants at the wedding ceremony, the beauty contest
is the number one ritual of the Filipino immigrants in Israel. It maintains their own com-
munity. A million miles away from home, they have a fear of degeneration, or change, or
of being affected. So it is primarily resistance to assimilation. It also creates an occasion
to get together and see each other; because they work in different parts of Israel. They
cannot say, “Come, let’s meet” like the Shiites in their own neighbourhood, because they
often work at places quite far away from each other. In the situation of the Shiites they
also maintain the community. They are also immigrants. Most of the ones in Istanbul
come from the region on the border with Azerbaijan. The bus companies in Zeynebiye
only go to two destinations, and both of them are in that border region. For instance,
there are no buses to Ankara.
The Shia movement is a political movement from very early times, and this ritual is in-
formed by the fact that they believed they had been unjustly treated by the Sunnis when
they took power after the death of Prophet Mohammed. The Shiites expected that Ali
would take power, because he was related by blood to Mohammed. But he wasn’t made
the caliphate. Then two incidents happened. First Ali’s first son Hasan was killed and then
the younger son Hussein at The Battle of Karbala in 680. It was a big massacre at Karbala.
The day of Ashura marks this day and every year, with this ritual they are remembering
and repeating the pain related to the death of Hussein and his whole family, who were
direct descendants of Prophet Muhammed. Which is very paradoxical of course, because
Muslims are killing other Muslims. In its beginnings, Islam started as a universal religion
but then it separated into these two groups: the Sunnis and the Shiites.

So, Shia is a resistance movement, a political movement, and all their rituals point
to this resistance. They have to maintain their culture. I’m sure it’s different in Iran,
because there there’s a Shia majority. In Iraq and Lebanon it’s a minority but with a
strong presence such as Hezbollah. In Istanbul though, they are just a very few. So they
preserve their own cultural codes through this ritual and they remember their past.
They have to “repeat” the bloodshed to do so, that’s why they dramatise it. This is how
they survive. They do their rituals not only during the holy month of Muharrem that
leads to the Ashura day, but every single evening, throughout the year. Similarly, I asked
the Filipino community, what would happen if there weren’t beauty contests anymore,
if somebody said, “You’re not allowed to do this anymore.” They said, “We cannot live
without it!” I asked the Turkish people in Berlin, what if something happened and the
German authorities imposed a restriction on Turkish weddings, they simply said, “We
could not continue to live.”
(…)

I.W.: There’s another important question here, to do with the sense of two things: one—permission, two—recording. And I think that that is connected to whether you regard yourself, in making the work, as speaking for your subjects, and who you are speaking to. Maybe the first thing is an idea about authority. There is a kind of cultural authority that you assume in making I, Soldier and The Flag which was generated by a deeply personal reaction in relation to these very public situations. Somehow that is where the permission came from, which seems to be extended in the other works through this sort of durational engagement with their subjects.

K.E.: I think I take permission during the process of gaining trust. But not for egoistical reasons to turn that trust into an autonomous artwork to be shown to other people. I don’t feel comfortable if I don’t have the trust between me and the people I am shooting. (…) I think I relate to the people who are subjects of my art works just like friends. If I cannot communicate with them, I cannot film them so much. First I have to gain their trust by spending time with them. For example, with the Shiite community, I first went to the Ashura ceremony in 2009. I shot that without knowing anyone, it was a test. Then I called them, then I met them in their neighbourhood, Zeynebiye, we had tea, we had lunch… I’d been amazed by the massive spectacle they’d put on stage, but was sorry that the video recordings were very poorly done. Every year they publish a DVD of the theatre play and send it to other Shiites around the country. So I told them that I wanted to come back next year and shoot it with more cameras, and they would be able to use that footage to make a better DVD of their performance. Back in Berlin I was talking to them on the phone regularly, discussing how to make a better video recording of the theatre piece. We decided that I must be there for the rehearsals. So the next year, I started going to the neighbourhood one month before the Ashura day. For the first week I didn’t have any video cameras with me. I just sat in the mosque and watched their rehearsals. We started talking and I explained to them what I wanted to do. When the right moment arrived I asked their permission and started shooting. But there were still some people in the community that I didn’t feel were comfortable being in the frame, for example the ladies who were playing the angels, so I didn’t film them. So for me, to your question of permission, it’s mutual: the permission is not only given but I am trying my best to take it. (…)

I.W.: Let’s talk about how you use the camera. For example that the subjects are shot in a way that you see the camera is being held by a person. And instead of constructing an image which monumentalizes or reinscribes the monumental nature of that spectacle, it undermines the monumental. It’s an image which includes the dirty margins of the frame, in the way that a television news camera wouldn’t. It constructs an image which is anti-spectacular, and in a way is anti-patriarchal, because it shows the gaps and the mess and a certain sort of humanity around the thing that you are documenting.

K.E.: I think that decision of using the hand-held camera and really being stubborn about it still goes back to my theatre education. (…) I have my own technique of making the camera look still. It’s a hand-held camera and many professionals are not very happy when the camera people tilt the camera, but I have found myself a technique of how to stand and I sometimes train my arm before a shoot. I try not to drink or go to parties or anything the night before. I’m really disciplined because my arm should be able to stay still for a long time. I am playing between the hand-held camera and the tripod. But when the tripod is used, I feel very dead because, as I said, I want to capture everything as it happens, not as I want it to happen. The tripod usually directs the action to happen in the frame. But in the case of my projects this is never possible. Subjects move fast in time and space. But even in TANKLOVE, something that is more constructed and less of a documentary, I made the decision, which was criticised by a lot of people, to use hand held cameras. For example there is this long perspectival shot of the tank coming down the main street. It was very static because it was directed, but I didn’t use a tripod. I think I felt this connection to holding the camera in this way first in acting school when I wasn’t included in a play they were staging because I was too young. They were rehearsing this Chekhov play and they gave me a camera to film it. And that was a turning point. I just liked what I saw in the camera, not what was on the stage.
I.W.: This is very interesting because it relates to something that you have written or spoken about before, that I’ve read in your blog. You talk about your experiences of training as an actor and finding nothing in the history of theatre between Euripides and Beckett that felt comfortable on your body. And what you’re describing now is that you have found a role for the camera (connected to you) that does feel comfortable. What’s also implicated in that? Somehow you holding the camera is also you occupying a role in this drama, yourself as a kind of equal actor-participant in what’s happening. This idea of acting is still quite key in your work, it hasn’t been erased, because the camera is still now connected to your body.

K.E.: No, definitely not, it hasn’t been erased, it is still there. I always say I hate theatre, but I also love it, because there are different forms of theatre; that’s what I meant when I said there’s nothing interesting between Euripides and Beckett. I meant it more about language, because they both knew how to speak for the theatre. And when I said body, it’s geographically related to me because ancient Greek theatre comes from where I come from. And you still see it there, in the villages, in their folklore. And then why Beckett? Because he knew how to speak, and it’s contemporary—we do have that Beckett language in daily life. Also our depressing world is really portrayed well in Beckett. Coming back to what you said about me using the camera, it’s true, at that time while shooting the play at school, I felt that I was in the theatre, but I was behind the camera. The camera was part of my body.

I.W.: I think you are describing the camera almost as a means by which you’re simultaneously included and excluded from a situation. (...) And to me this also connects to what you’ve been describing in terms of your relationship to “the group” in general. That you are simultaneously attracted and repelled by the group, that you’re kind of invited in, but you’re also simultaneously excluded.

K.E.: You mean “repelled” in a negative sense?

I.W.: No, it’s not pejorative in that sense. I mean that the group often asks you to give something up about yourself in order to become a member of it.

K.E.: And you think by using the camera I resist this?

I.W.: Well, the situation that you are in becomes one of mediation that has simultaneously to do with attraction and repulsion, or an inclusion and an exclusion. For example, by holding a camera on stage and filming a production you are simultaneously acting in it, but also excluded from it, by the very means of you holding the camera. It’s participation and exclusion. It’s access and the mark of your separation also.

K.E.: That’s true. It’s the same in WEDDING. My experience from childhood is that we wouldn’t go to these “folk” weddings, that’s how we called them. Whenever I was asked to join the Halay—the dancing circle—I would escape. When I was shooting WEDDING, I was in the Halay, but would still hold the camera in my hand. I never said, “I’ll drop the camera now, I’m with you for the rest of the evening.” The same happened in Ashura. When they were beating their chests one night, they asked me if I wanted to join them. I said, “No, I’m shooting.” There it was more difficult, because it was a more closed group, and it was really different from what I had seen before. I do want to join the group, and the next level would be to join. The next level for me would also be to question, in a very relaxed way, representing something or even documenting something. I wonder if I will come to a point when I end this documentation of groups...
Köken Ergun
Born in Istanbul, in 1976, Köken Ergun studied acting at the Istanbul University and completed his postgraduate diploma degree in Ancient Greek Literature at King’s College London, followed by an MA degree on Art History at the Bilgi University. After working with American theatre director Robert Wilson, Ergun became involved more with contemporary art, specifically video and performance. He has exhibited internationally at institutions including Platform (Istanbul), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Arts (Helsinki), Digital ArtLab (Tel Aviv), Casino Luxembourg, Heidelberger Kunstverein and Kunsthalle Winterthur. Ergun’s video works are included in public collections such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris) and Greek National Museum of Contemporary Art (Athens). A grant holder of the DAAD Academic Exchange Service and the DFG (German Research Foundation), Köken Ergun is also the recipient of the 2007 “Tiger Award for Short Film” of Rotterdam Film Festival. Having a focus on rituals in his works, Ergun has been recently collaborating with ethnologists extending his practice to academia. He is currently writing his PhD thesis at the Interart Graduate College of the Freie Universität on the subject of “Rituals of Isolation: Emotional Bonding in Wedding Ceremonies of the Turkish/Kurdish Community in Berlin”.

director’s biography
director’s filmography

2004  I, Soldier (Special Mention Prize, Zagreb Film Festival; Sphinx Award, Videomedija, Novi Sad)
2006  The Flag (Tiger Award for Best Short Film, Rotterdam Film Fest; Onda-Curta Award, Indielisboa; Special Jury Prize, Dokufest, Kosovo)
2008  WEDDING
2009  TANKLOVE
2010  Binibining Promised Land
2012  easyGay
2012  Ashura
AŞURA
ASHURA

directed, produced and edited by:
köken ergun

c-co-producers:
merve elveren, onur gokmen

directors of photography:
emre erkmen, batu tezyüksel

camera operators:
köken ergun, emre erkmen, batu tezyüksel, yoel meranda

sound:
thomas wallmann

production coordinator:
adem akdag

still photography:
emin kurtoğlu, selen çatalyürekli, gizem acarla, alp klanten

runner:
ceylan hepis

titles:
baris öktem

translation:
özge ersoy

assistant to köken ergun:
romina bulacio sak

ashura theatre play
kur'an'ın kurbanı hüseyin

written by:
sehahattin özgündüz

directed by:
hilali mahmudoglu

set and costumes:
nadir ersoy

stage actors:
residents of zeynebiye neighborhood, istanbul

voice over actors:
actors of studio35mm, istanbul

thanks:
residents of zeynebiye neighborhood, caferider, adem akdag, engin yazan, kasim nas, eray hazar,
mikail sahin, bilal sahintekin, guven dumanli,
turgay mirza yesilkaya, berkay mirza yesilkaya, muhammed kaçan,
bilege & haro cumbusyan, kunsthalle winterthur, oliver kielmayer,
dilsah mersin horoz, renda guner, ayse ozar, suat alpan,
bige ozer (istanbul biennial), suat ogut, zeynep tuna,
clemens henning von wedemeyer, tim bauerfeind, simona mihaylova,
elmas deniz, hakan ozkul, tayfun serttas and ian white

2012 © köken ergun

indexofworks.com
contact:
Onur Gökmen
+49-176-98277504
gokmen.onur@gmail.com