

# Contemporary art and the geopolitics of extractivism in Turkey's Kurdistan

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## Abstract

Discussing a body of artwork made in Turkey's Kurdistan, I explore contemporary art's potential to facilitate critical insight into the (geo)politics of ecology today. A significant strand of the growing geographical literature on art's critical potential focuses on issues of ecological import such as climate change, locating critique in problematisation of Eurocentric aesthetics for its links with colonialism and racialised humanism. Still another strand focuses on neoliberal geopolitics, appraising contemporary art's critical potential against post-political approaches to democracy, peace, and prosperity. I bring together these two strands, both methodologically and empirically, as I consider the politics of ecology in Turkey's Kurdistan, inextricably intertwined with both state-endorsed racial violence in the 20th century and neoliberal democratisation and peace-making in the 21st century. Methodologically, I develop and operationalise the concept of extractivism in conversation with recent critics of the Anthropocene thesis who foreground racial capitalism rather than humanity as the geopolitical – geological and geographical – force afflicting ecology. Empirically, I draw on the artworks under discussion to unpack how extractivism in Turkey's Kurdistan has not only continued unabated throughout the neoliberal-democratic transition from “war” to “peace” but has also structured the latter paradigm on the former, influencing realms beyond resource extraction. The resulting argument is the following. Challenging the Eurocentrism of aesthetics and/or the neoliberal post-political paradigm remain important indicators of art's critical (geo)political potential. However, a fuller appraisal of this potential also requires asking if and to what extent such challenges redistribute agency vis-à-vis power relations formed by and formative of extractivism as a set of racialised practices operating not only through industries of extraction proper, like mining, agriculture, and construction, but also through cultural ones like art.

## KEYWORDS

aesthetics, Amed/Diyarbakır, Anthropocene, ecology, violence

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*Panorama* (2007), a photograph by contemporary artist Cengiz Tekin, shows a man watching over the stretch of the upper Tigris valley that skirts the artist's native city of Amed in northern Kurdistan or, officially, Diyarbakır in southeastern Turkey (Figure 1). The valley bears the ecological imprint of Amed's thriving construction sector through new infrastructural works alongside riverbank quarries that extract the sand feeding into the hundreds of blocks rising elsewhere in the city. Amed is the unofficial capital of a region whose 20th-century history saw violent Turkification policies and the backlash they triggered, leading in the 1980s to a bloody war between state forces and Kurdish insurgents. The thriving construction sector *Panorama* shows is facilitated by war's giving way in the mid-2000s to peace talks and democratisation initiatives the government addressed to Kurds. However, a straightforward paradigm shift from war to peace is not all there is to this landscape. The man watching triumphantly over the valley is sartorially resemblant of state-sponsored paramilitaries who tortured, disappeared, or assassinated hundreds of Kurdish intellectuals and activists throughout the 1990s. The resemblance is reinforced both by the fact that under the man's foot is the head of another lain lifeless and by the work's titular allusion to the 1990s state TV show "Panorama from Anatolia" (*Anadolu'dan Görünüm*) that propagandised for the military's campaign in northern Kurdistan (Çaylı, 2016a). An art historical reference further consolidates this implication that nationalist violence has not disappeared from but rather remains constitutive of this new landscape, where peace and prosperity are forged at ecology's expense. The photograph visually quotes the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), whose landscapes enthused both Prussian nationalists in the 19th century and Nazis in the 20th century (Pois, 1993).

What critical insight into the politics of ecology might contemporary art facilitate today? As I discuss in the next section, a growing literature locates the answer in problematisation of Eurocentric aesthetics for its links with colonialism and racialised humanism, while another relevant albeit not necessarily ecologically focused scholarship does so in critique of neoliberal post-political approaches to democracy, peace, and prosperity. I interlace these literatures both empirically and conceptually. Developing the operative concept of extractivism in conversation with recent critical scholarship on the Anthropocene, I centre



**FIGURE 1** *Panorama*, c-print, 90 × 130 cm

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission

the politics of ecology not on “humanity” as the term implies but rather on the racialised (and racialising) practices that interlink colonialism and capitalism and that include cultural production as well as resource extraction proper. Hence my reference to the politics of ecology rather than political ecology. Whereas the latter is a specific field of study – one I do not directly engage here – the former indexes a broader sense of environmental politics involving “biophysical process and the nonhuman world” as well as human “knowledge,” “expertise,” and “material interests” (Turner, 2016, pp. 414–416). Empirically, I draw on a series of photographs that contemporary artist Tekin produced in the late 2000s and early 2010s. I consider them generative of insights into the politics of ecology in Turkey's Kurdistan at a historical juncture dominated by neoliberal promises of peace, democracy, and prosperity.

*Panorama* helps foreshadow my scholarly contribution. The work portrays Amed's thriving construction sector – the hallmark of the city's reputed post-conflict prosperity – as not only environmentally destructive but also grounded in the racialised violence of ethno-nationalist state-building. The image formally references a 19th-century style of landscape painting associated with some of nationalism's most violent iterations in Europe. If *Panorama*'s exploration of the relationship between the politics of violence and ecology as an art historical question critiques the (Eurocentric) canon, it does so through reflexive appropriation rather than outright disavowal. This shifts critique's focus from whether the canon is critiqued to in what specific neoliberal contexts (of both art and politics at large) and by whom it is employed for critique, and who – or what context-specific subjectivities – are given critical agency as a result. My scholarly contribution, then, involves emphasising socio-political subjectivity and agency when addressing art's critical (geo)political significance at the current neoliberal juncture in the Anthropocene or the history of racial capitalism, the foremost geographical and geological force shaping the politics of ecology. Understanding extractivism as involving cultural industries like art as well as overtly destructive industries like mining and speculative construction, I argue for an approach that not only considers artworks as food for geopolitical thought and practice but also attends to how racial geopolitics unfolds through the artworld itself and its theorisations. In so doing, I consider “geopolitics” irreducible to the work of states or corporations and instead use it to denote “the geographical representations and practices ... implicated in the ongoing social reproduction of power and political economy,” including “critical” ones productive of counterpower (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998, p. 2). Nor is the “geo” in geopolitics reducible to simply geography; I understand it to also involve geology (Dalby, 2014; Elden, 2013), an understanding crucial for approaching the Anthropocene as grounded in and productive of racial capitalism (Yusoff, 2018a).

## 2 | ART AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The past two decades have seen a growing literature on contemporary art's (geo)political implications that employs the framework of aesthetics. I discern in this literature two themes that resonate with my analytical aims: ecology and neoliberalism. To begin with the latter, neoliberalism-focused scholarship explores art's aesthetics-as-politics across various socio-spatial scales. One such scale concerns post-industrial urban space and its financial commodification. Art is considered complicit in the concealment of existing socio-economic conflicts this commodification requires and in the production of new ones resulting from it, where complicity derives not simply from artists' presence in gentrifying neighbourhoods but rather from the formal, representational, and performative techniques they employ (Andersson, 2017; Harris, 2012). However, since such techniques are also mobilised by the very technocrats and profiteers driving neoliberal urbanisation, artists' proficiency in them is also considered potent for challenging this mobilisation (Hawkins, 2010; Vasudevan, 2007), not least by creating concrete opportunities for its subversion in urban spaces (Barry, 2013, pp. 86–92; Dawkins & Loftus, 2013; Sachs Olsen, 2018). At scales larger than the urban, the neoliberal geopolitics of conflict have involved wars waged or endorsed by Western powers in the name of spreading democracy throughout the post-Cold-War world and establishing global peace. Art's critical potential in this context is seen leverageable not simply by confronting Western audiences with war's violent reality, but rather by problematising the drive for solutionist intervention and consensus characterising the very notions of democracy and peace touted by the proponents of these wars, while also indexing the dissentience-oriented political work that needs doing outside the gallery or museum (Ingram, 2011, 2016; Sachs Olsen, 2019). Methodologically, then, this literature appraises art's aesthetics-as-geopolitics against “post-political” notions of democracy, peace, and prosperity used in legitimising neoliberal policies that at once inflict and mask various forms of marginalisation and violence in cities and beyond (Doucette, 2020; Roberts et al., 2003; Swyngedouw, 2009; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014; on aesthetics beyond art, see Goonewardena, 2005; Harvey, 1990).

Another part of the recent literature on art's aesthetics-as-politics explores issues of ecological import in a way that implicates the very philosophical category of the aesthetic and its racialised Eurocentrism. Kantian notions of aesthetics are criticised for perpetuating racialised privileges that have engendered the current ecological predicament in the first place: for privileging reason or judgement over embodiment or corporeality, and counterposing humanity to nonhumanity (Jones, 2017; Straughan,

2019; Yusoff, 2015). Non-Kantian approaches are criticised, too, insofar as they have simply reversed such privileges rather than undoing them (Dixon et al., 2012; Hawkins & Straughan, 2015; Saldanha, 2012). Critics, in turn, conceptualise aesthetics as a relation that binds what these approaches have dichotomised, rather than as a trait attributable to a single constituency or phenomenon alone (Dixon et al., 2012; Hawkins & Straughan, 2015, p. 284; Yusoff et al., 2012, p. 971). Some go further by questioning aesthetics' conduciveness to overcoming Eurocentrism as required today by a critical politics of ecology, and for two reasons. First, in 18th-century Europe where aesthetics emerged as a philosophical construct, it legitimised the very subsumption of non-European relationalities, existences, and knowledges found in colonised lands and among colonised peoples that critics now seek to recuperate (Jackson, 2016; Mirzoeff, 2014, pp. 219–220). Second, art's geographical and geological significance long pre-dates the invention of aesthetics as such, especially in subsequently colonised parts of the world (Lobo, 2021; Yusoff et al., 2012, p. 971). This second body of literature, then, methodologically follows recent decolonial and posthumanist turns in the humanities and social sciences, focusing racial humanisms' role in the politics of ecology not only on art but also on its theorisation (Barker & Pickerill, 2020; Gergan, 2015; Williams et al., 2019).

My analytical lens bridges these two strands of literature by connecting the two issues they have tended to explore discretely: (1) how neoliberal notions of democracy, peace, and prosperity permeate art's aesthetics-as-geopolitics as not simply a question to be represented or resolved but an artistic-methodological one requiring constant reflection, and (2) how theorisations of art through the aesthetic are implicated in racial and colonial humanism's ongoing impact on the aesthetics-as-politics of ecology. Instances in recent scholarship, if few and far between, indicate the critical analytical purchase obtainable in making this connection. As mentioned in the introduction, one such purchase required by my empirical material concerns violence. Relevant instances in the literature commend art that approaches climate change in Australia as a legacy from colonialism's environmental violence (Jones, 2017; Stratford & Langridge, 2012), and criticise art whose production and communication of knowledge about species extinction – considered a violence in its own right – employs categories and hierarchies that originate from the violence of colonial racialisation and that dovetail with contemporary capitalism's logic of unbounded accumulation (Yusoff, 2012). While I follow these instances in adopting a notion of violence broader than the bodily violation of human beings to better grasp the link between colonialism and contemporary capitalism, my empirical context obliges me to also diverge from them. I consider the processes through which violence interweaves colonialism and contemporary capitalism as not necessarily involving a sweeping and periodised shift from one register or scale of violence to another where colonialism's historical violence inflicted specifically on the colonised gradually becomes a structural force that, whether through epistemic and communicative structures or simply through spatial ones, now envelops much larger constituencies, be they humans or nonhumans. While such shifts of register and scale do mark the context I explore here, they lend themselves neither to periodisation (i.e., belonging either to the past or the present) nor to gradual generalisation (i.e., applying evenly to an ever-increasing constituency).

To interweave, in my analysis of art's geopolitics, these relations between ecology and the violence of racial capitalism, I turn to the operative concept of extractivism. Critical Anthropocene scholarship has argued that climate change, whether in its causes or its effects, is in fact anything but homogeneously anthropic and that racial capitalism is the chief progenitor of this heterogeneity (Baldwin & Erickson, 2020; Eichen, 2020; Luke, 2020; Yusoff, 2018b). Prominent in this scholarship is a focus on extraction as a practice rooted in colonialism that racialises particular geographies and their inhabitants by reducing their worth to the quantifiably measurable and marketable value of the resources and labour extractable from them (Frederiksen & Himley, 2020; Gahman & Thongs, 2020; Yusoff, 2018a; Yusoff et al., 2012). Enablers of this reduction are limited neither to the physical act of, nor to the industries associated with, extraction proper (e.g., mining, agriculture, construction) as they also involve practices of symbolic and epistemic production including visual ones (Childs, 2020), hence meriting the coinage “extractivism.” Among the latter type of practices is art, whose extractivist origins overlap with those of the fossil fuel economy, epitomised by British colonialism's early 19th-century quest for coal that drew investment using artistic representations of colonised lands and peoples as extractable resource (Malm, 2017, pp. 19–20). Ongoing implications of this overlap are explored most comprehensively by Gómez-Barris, whose analysis of extractivism centres on politics of visibility and invisibility. If “[h]istorically, the extractive view rendered Native populations invisible,” the “vertical” or “planetary” gaze it instituted enables extractivism in novel ways today: for instance, by making extraction and extractors invisible through “opaque nodes of digital information ... hidden away from public debate,” while “rendering natural deposits of human and nonhuman life transparent” to extractive activity (Gómez-Barris, 2017, pp. 6–8). Gómez-Barris is careful to avoid reproducing extractivism's planetary gaze through her own critical analysis, hence her extensive discussion of art from within “the extractive zone” that challenges “Eurocentric, high modernist, and totalising visions of differentiated planetary life” by using trans- and counter-visualities such as “shadow play,” “seeing from below,” and “listening to the water” (2017, p. 16).

This literature's attention to the racialised visibilities and invisibilities that feed into and result from extraction proper, not least through artistic practice, informs my conceptual operationalisation of extractivism for empirical analysis. I follow especially Gómez-Barris' attention to art that addresses extractive activity from within zones of extraction and to the increasingly



complex workings of contemporary extractivism that escape erstwhile visual geopolitical dichotomies of visibility versus invisibility. As I discuss examples of Tekin's art that both show and operate from within Amed's landscapes where extractive activity has not only survived but also thrived during the transition from decades of racialised violence into a neoliberal project of peace, democracy, and prosperity, I am guided by the following question. How might such art help locate the Anthropocene in both the history of racial capitalism and its current neoliberal iteration, or grasp the geological and geographical politics that both derive from this history and assume new features at its present juncture?

The way I explore this question is informed by my fieldwork in Amed, where I spent the better part of the 2018–2019 academic year. While my empirical focus was initially on architecture rather than art, during my fieldwork I got to know Tekin, visited relevant sites with him, including his native neighbourhood on the Tigris, and eventually became a close collaborator of the independent artist-run initiative he co-founded in the city in 2017. If this story resonates with the growing interest in critical insights obtainable through collaborations between geographers and artists (Hawkins, 2019; Sachs Olsen, 2018; Tolia-Kelly & Raymond, 2020; Wylie & Webster, 2019), in my case, collaboration constitutes less an empirical source than the reciprocity through which I have related to the artist and his hometown; it informs my methodological-political premise rather than analytical credibility or legitimacy. In fact, the argumentation below draws significantly from my own “creative critical interpretation” as a method that avoids “assuming the power of art” and acknowledges scholarly analysis' impact on the “relevance and effects” of artistic practice (Ingram, 2011, p. 218). I draw on interpretation not to suggest that the meanings I invoke are the only possible ones but to avow the fact that the critical and political significance of cultural practice is not self-evident and is rather constituted actively, if partly, through analysis and debate (Dawkins & Loftus, 2013, p. 666; Ingram, 2011, p. 222; Ingram et al., 2016, p. 636; Stratford & Langridge, 2012, p. 839).

### 3 | EXTRACTIVISM THROUGH WAR AND PEACE

Extractivism's history in northern Kurdistan stretches back to the 1930s, when the nascent Republic of Turkey's official policies on the region, openly speaking of it in colonialist terms (Jongerden, 2007, pp. 173–217), employed extractivist methods especially in northernmost Mesopotamia. Between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s, the state intensively measured the upper Tigris and Euphrates rivers for extractable water, built a bespoke railway to reorient the copper and silver extracted from around Amed towards western Turkey, and even renamed cities, including Amed, to reflect this resource extraction (Çaylı, 2021). In the 1970s, the state launched its “Southeastern Anatolia Project,” a series of mega-infrastructure undertakings in upper Mesopotamia. In the mid-1980s, construction began on the project's first three major dams (Harris, 2002); two were planned for the Tigris, just south of the river's northernmost headwaters and about 50 kilometres upstream of central Amed. In 1990, when work on the dams had just begun, the government amended legislation outlawing private construction along Turkey's maritime and riparian coastlines. The amendment was that the Tigris river was redefined as originating from 100 kilometres downstream of its headwaters where the two dams were being built (Kurt, 2015), with central Amed situated almost exactly halfway through this stretch. Therefore, by the 2000s when the dams began operating, their ecological impact was not limited to riverbank geomorphology but also included industrial sand-mining activity along the northernmost 100 kilometres where legislation effectively denied the Tigris its river status (Çaylı, 2021).

In each period mentioned above, extractivism targeted not only the Earth but also its residents directly and corporeally. Simultaneously with 1930s enterprises in resource extraction, the state conducted a violent campaign north-west of central Amed to subjugate semi-autonomous Kurdish-Alevi tribes to its new taxation and conscription regime (Kezer, 2014), thus aiming to extract their capital and labour. In the 1980s, the “Southeastern Anatolia Project” was pushed through by a junta government whose policies were ardently neoliberal and whose most violent effects were on leftist and pro-Kurdish political movements (Zeydanlioglu, 2009). In 1984, the (outlawed) Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK began its insurgency against state forces, followed in 1987 by the latter's declaration of a region-wide emergency rule that remained effective until 2002 (Jongerden, 2007, pp. 85–86, 138–146). The war turned particularly violent in the 1990s, as state-backed paramilitaries carried out assassinations and disappearances and the army conducted village evacuations to control territory, triggering mass rural-to-urban migration especially to the region's unofficial capital Amed (Jongerden, 2014, pp. 166–167).

The deceleration of armed conflict throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s – the period when the artworks discussed below were produced – followed the capture of PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and his subsequent life imprisonment. In the 2000s, pro-Kurdish politics shifted focus from independence to democratic autonomy within a federal Turkey (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2013). Unofficial peace talks began between the PKK and the state, which, accompanied by a truce, came to be known as “the resolution process” (Başer, 2014, pp. 64–70). But the same period saw extractivist activity continue unabated and even accelerate due particularly to a construction boom. Using the ceasefire as an opportunity to consolidate both military and

civilian infrastructure, the state embarked on a set of projects, including high-tech military outposts, tens of hydropower dams, and airports (International Crisis Group, 2014, p. 37). Throughout the early 2010s, Amed's urban centre nearly doubled in size. Controversial construction projects afflicted even the city's historic district, which overlooks the Tigris and whose ancient walls eventually gained UNESCO World Heritage status in 2015. The controversy was that these projects' stakeholders included much more than just the pro-Kurdish political movement's usual adversaries such as state authorities or pro-state businessmen. They also included members or supporters of the movement itself, not least the metropolitan municipality and various district municipalities that since the mid-2000s had been run by pro-Kurdish politicians (Çaylı, 2016b). Such projects constituting Amed's construction boom during this period were fed by the industrial sand quarries that mushroomed along the upper Tigris, where the 1990 legislative amendment deprived the riverbank of protection.

Amed's period of "peace" witnessed significant developments in contemporary art, too. They were preluded by the city's first-ever contemporary art exhibition, titled "Art and the City" and staged in 2001 by a group of local artists, including Tekin (Özyurt, 2002). Most of the group's members had met in the late 1990s while studying fine art at Çukurova University in the eastern Mediterranean city of Adana, 500 kilometres west of Amed. In 2002, Amed's first contemporary art exhibition venue, Diyarbakır Arts Center, was founded by Anadolu Kültür (literally: Anatolia Culture), a not-for-profit company based in Istanbul and spearheaded by western Turkish individuals from the worlds of business, art, and cultural policy. Still active, Anadolu Kültür aims to "develop civil initiatives nationwide" by organising "cultural programs across Turkey in partnership with non-governmental organisations and local institutions" (Polo, 2018, p. 96). In fact, Diyarbakır Arts Center was the project that founded Anadolu Kültür and remains one of its only two institutions, the other being a central Istanbul exhibition space established six years after Amed's. Using funding from the European Union and its prominent member states, Diyarbakır Arts Center's work in the mid-2000s focused on bringing contemporary art exhibitions held in the West (both western Turkey and beyond) to Amed, examples being the displays it hosted as part of the Istanbul Biennial in 2005 and 2007 (Kuday, 2019, p. 57). Throughout the same period, the generation of Amed-based artists who had organised the city's first-ever contemporary art show in 2001 began exhibiting in Turkey and internationally. But they were largely absent from Diyarbakır Arts Center's programmes even as the institution frequently relied on them to chaperone artists and curators visiting Amed, for instance by taking the latter on a tour of the city's touristic sights.<sup>1</sup>

If, in the mid-to-late 2000s, Amed's first generation of contemporary artists found a wider platform outside their hometown than inside it, this process was not entirely frictionless. Some of these frictions are demonstrable through Tekin's experiences. In 2005–7, the North Rhine-Westphalian government's cultural exchange programme "Transfer" partnered with a group of Turkish universities to organise a series of exhibitions involving artists from this German region and from Turkey, including Tekin and another Amed-based artist. When a press release called the artists' hometown a "Kurdish city" (Stadt Münster, 2006), all Turkish partners but one withdrew from the project, displaying the nationalist reflex that sees any reference to Kurdishness as separatism. In 2008, Turkey's first-ever, and then-nascent, modern and contemporary art museum hosted an exhibition showcasing the Austrian corporation Verbund's collection, whose only two artworks from Turkey included a video co-authored by Tekin and another Amed-based artist. An exhibition review in one of Turkey's most popular national dailies opined that the exhibition's curator "foregrounded the artists' Kurdishness before their Turkishness" and that their inclusion was a last-minute decision driven by the collector's business interests as a hydropower company looking to enter Turkey (Ergun, 2008). The Amed-based artists were excluded from the exhibition catalogue. Throughout the period, Tekin also experienced friction with non-Turkish actors due to perceptions of identity. Cases in point are the invitations he received to participate in the 2009 Venice Biennale collateral exhibition "Planet K," which sought to serve as a pan-Kurdish pavilion (<http://rebiennale.org/it/planet-k/>), and in the 2013 show "Amed" held at Vienna's Welt Museum, which showcased the city's "culture" including its "copperware" (Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, 2014, p. 93). Tekin declined these invitations on grounds of their essentialist approach to identity, which he saw evident in politicians sitting on their curatorial boards simply by virtue of being Kurdish or in their conceptual framework resting solely on the showcasing of localism (C. Tekin, personal communication, July 2020).

In short, if throughout much of the 20th century extractivism involved overtly violent racialisation in Turkey's Kurdistan, when overt violence decelerated at the turn of the 2010s, it both remained operational and expanded its social reach by permeating such cultural realms as contemporary art, not least during the latter's formative years in Amed and the region. Noteworthy in this respect were the struggles that Tekin and some of his fellow first-generation Amed-based contemporary artists experienced in being recognised for their art rather than for being from Kurdistan or Amed. Whether resulting from the celebration or deprecation of this aspect of the artists' identity, these struggles were rendered all the more complex because Tekin and his confrères were not simply ignored but rather expected to perform types of labour that reduced their worth to that of a local representative. This methodologically extractivist expectation at times also embroiled Tekin in extractivism proper (i.e., resource extraction), such as when it deemed him a mere window-dressing for a hydropower company's business interests or an item of local material culture alongside such items as copperware.

## 4 | INTERROGATING EXTRACTIVISM THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART

It was against this background and in this context that Tekin produced the body of work discussed in this section. The section is structured to facilitate my argument about the work's potential contribution to a critical geopolitics of the Anthropocene. As foreshadowed in the introduction, my argument is that this contribution hinges on methodological reflexivity – on how artworks address the geopolitics of both art itself and life at large – of both visually charged ideologies and their empirical consequences. Tekin's work enables this reflexivity by mobilising two art-historical devices: style and medium. To begin with the former, recall the artwork that introduced this paper, *Panorama*. Its extraction-afflicted landscape references not only Amed's recent history of dirty war driven by Turkification policies and its present-day construction boom but also Romanticism and thus art's own historical implication in violent nationalisms and in their geographical imaginaries of identity and civilisation. Therefore, in saying *Panorama* mobilises “style,” I mean neither a taxonomy nor an individual technique, but rather a visual quotation of existing artworks recognisable to those versed in art history as emblematic of historical movements or schools (Elsner, 2003).

Two further works mobilise style in this way: *Nature Morte* (2007) and *Here Is No Water, Only Rocks* (2010). *Nature Morte* references Van Gogh's 1890 painting *Wheatfield with Crows*, one of his final before he died at 37 (by suspected suicide), which portrays the fields where he received the fatal gunshot. Tekin captures a man lain lifeless in a wheatfield, with a pistol in his right hand (Figure 2). If the formal reference to Van Gogh invokes suicide, the location and the man's outfit foreground the invocation's socio-political significance. The outfit recalls 1990s urban Kurdish insurgents. The location, northern Kurdistan, is one where war may have decelerated but its architectures continue to tower over the landscape – note the watchtower-like structure at the top right – and whose wheat figures prominently in mainstream histories of civilisation as state-building (Scott, 2017, pp. 55, 128), earning this region the celebratory status of a civilisational cradle (Izady, 1992, p. 24). That the work couples this celebratory association with invocations of war and late 19th-century landscape painting's pastoral reverie indicates the role that geography and its representations – whether historiographical or artistic, and however benign – have played throughout modernity in disciplining heterogeneous lands and peoples into monoliths (Andersson, 2017, p. 547). This coupling also speaks back to the work's art historical reference; it invites reflection on the political-ecological context of Van Gogh's psychological tribulations, which originated from his time in a Belgian coalmining town with appalling labour and environmental conditions, and which ended in Provence where he sought refuge from industrialisation to no avail (Celestin & DalMolin, 2007, pp. 135–137; Harmann, 2015). Interlinking this context and that of Turkey's Kurdistan in the 2000s draws attention to the historical and geographical inequalities that determine one's ability to opt for an anti-modernist pastoral escape and that differentiate between the lived experiences of typological landscapes such escapism involves – even those as seemingly uncomplicated as a wheatfield (Woodring, 1977).

*Here Is No Water, Only Rocks*, at first glance, offers a view of Amed's renowned basalt-dominated rocky landscape (Figure 3). A detailed look, however, reveals the children hidden behind the rocks, gazing back at viewers. If the title's emphasis on waterlessness invokes extractivism's impact on the upper Tigris that became palpable in the 2000s, its reference to rocks, coupled with the work's visual incorporation of children, links this environmental issue with war's repercussions in the same decade. Specifically, the link made here is with the phenomenon known as “rock-throwing children” (*taş atan çocuklar*), Kurdish urban



**FIGURE 2** *Nature Morte*, c-print, 130 × 180 cm

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission





**FIGURE 3** *Here Is No Water, Only Rocks*, c-print, 80 × 150 cm

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission



**FIGURE 4** *Normalisation*, c-print, 90 × 120 cm

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission

youths who constituted the single most persistent political force on the streets throughout the 2000s as they continued to protest against state forces in the region's major cities. If these children effectively challenged the decade's mainstream characterisation as one of a peace that is deliverable top-down and sweepingly beneficial, the media's portrayal of them – heavily reliant on visuals – “depoliticised” and “infantilised” this challenge and the shortcomings of the “resolution process” it exposed (Erdem, 2014, pp. 55–56). That the children face the camera reverses the media-endorsed gaze. That they do so from behind the rocks burdens viewers with the responsibility of an inquisitive gaze. At a level broader than this, the work's title and the landscape it portrays invoke the theme of water and rocks that figured prominently in northwestern European painters' late 18th-century uptake of the Picturesque and that contributed to the rise of nationalisms in their home countries – for instance, in England through artists like Cozens and, subsequently, Turner (Cunningham, 1981, p. 11).

A second triplet of works mobilises the artistic device of medium: *Normalisation* (2009), *Sand* (2012), and *Here Is a Base Station* (2013). *Normalisation* portrays a seemingly ordinary day in the life of a family inhabiting an old house; they are sat on a sofa in their lounge, likely facing the TV that is the room's focal point (Figure 4). Upsetting this ordinariness, however, is the hole being dug up in a corner of the room, already to a substantial depth. If digging the ground is always already evocative of extractivism, here it assumes a context-specific meaning due to the violent episode that preluded the Republic of Turkey: the state-organised violence that targeted Armenian and Assyrian-Syriac populations throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries and that amounted to genocide. Indeed, the house *Normalisation* captures is in Eğil, a town 40 kilometres north of central Amed which hosted a significant Armenian population prior to the genocide, and which today hosts one of the first two dams built on the Tigris in the 1990s. The genocide resurfaced in the public eye in the 2000s when deceleration of armed conflict led growing numbers of tourists to visit historic towns and cities across Turkey's Kurdistan – a process then widely called “normalisation” as per the work's title. Such towns and cities began to capitalise on Armenian and Assyrian-Syriac architectural remnants to expand their heritage tourism offering, while also witnessing the proliferation of treasure-hunters who, often with the authorities' condonation, dug up former non-Muslim homes for riches reputedly buried under them (Biner,



2020, pp. 33–100). The specific manner and locality in which *Normalisation* features digging, then, situates the region's recent experiences of extractivism within its longer-standing histories of genocide.

Unpacking precisely how *Normalisation* mobilises medium self-reflexively requires revisiting the 2000s global artworld and the rise therein of artistic/curatorial methodologies such as Relational Aesthetics (RA) and Useful Art (UA) that proposed to fundamentally reconsider contemporary art's politics of medium. Uniting these otherwise discrete methodologies was a non-representational approach to artistic medium. RA based its political offering on situations that engage audience participation and embodiment rather than on artistic representation, intention, and expertise (Bourriaud, 2002). UA did so by refusing to simply represent socio-political problems or their potential answers, instead prioritising the delivery of workable, context-specific, and situated solutions to them (Bruguera, 2011). Therefore, a shift from visual representation to an experiential convergence between art and life outside art animated both RA and UA – manifested in the former through art's reframing of life, and in the latter through art's measurable amelioration of life. This shift also drew criticism to both methodologies for dovetailing with neoliberalism: UA with the neoliberal state's deflection of its duty to resolve social issues (Gogarty, 2017), and RA with the experience economy's commodification of social relations (Downey, 2007) or with the post-ideological celebration of “participation” as singularly sufficient for progressive politics (Bishop, 2004). Nevertheless, such methodologies have remained influential outside of the artworld's epicentres, including in Turkey and especially on works exploring violence and ecology.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, usefulness and relationality characterised Western actors' contemporary artistic enterprises in Turkey's Kurdistan, as epitomised by Diyarbakır Arts Center in the mid-to-late 2000s. Its founders ascribed to the Center the pragmatically useful roles of introducing art to the region, motivating its young creatives, and educating its citizens (Madra, 2008, p. 107), while project coordinators articulated their mission in terms reminiscent of RA: “opening up a public forum” for “expressing oneself through art” rather than “doing politics” (Erciyes, 2008).

*Normalisation's* politics of medium merits reconsideration against this surge of artistic interest in nonrepresentational methodologies. Consider the work's attitude towards art's usefulness. As Tekin is on principle against photomanipulation, *Normalisation* required a house that he could actually excavate. He thus found a family that wanted their house repaired and then used a significant part of his budget for the repair works. If the excavation seen in *Normalisation* was pragmatically useful, the artist has not publicly disclosed this aspect of the work and has thus avoided deriving artistic significance from it. The work is not indifferent towards relationality, either. For instance, its visual treatment of ordinary citizens – the family whose home is portrayed – as more prominent photographic subjects than the excavation worker echoes RA's scepticism towards expertise and its interest in platforming participants who are not artists. The work moreover centres an act – digging – deployed by contemporaneous RA-inflected and extraction-themed artworks like Ahmet Ögüt's *Black Diamond* (2010) that invited audiences to discover a diamond hidden in a coal heap at a prominent Istanbul contemporary art venue, and Michael Sailstorfer's *Folkestone Digs* (2014) that did so with gold bars buried under a south-east England beach, both awarding their trophies to discoverers.

However, contra RA's celebration of immersive participation, *Normalisation* does not portray the family members as engrossed in the excavation, despite the occasion's extraordinariness – one goes about his daily business, another is entirely indifferent, the other two are glancing over the hole only distantly – and orients them all towards a television set, a most prominent visual-representational apparatus. This portrayal, combined with Tekin's insistence on the representational medium of photography, prompts critical reflection on methodologies that premise contemporary art's political significance solely on nonrepresentation. In fact, this insistence has led figures from the western Turkish contemporary art scene to deem his work limited in its exploration of such materially engrossing issues as violence and ecology, deprecating it for remaining two-dimensional and representational.<sup>3</sup> My point is that *Normalisation* escapes just such deprecations whose approach to the politics of medium dichotomises representation against nonrepresentation or multidimensionality – a dichotomy also problematised by recent scholarship on art's aesthetics-as-geopolitics (Andersson, 2017, p. 552; Ingram et al., 2016, pp. 646–647). But there is another, analytically more propulsive argument to make here about how the Western contemporary art scene's increasing pervasion of Amed encountered by the city's artists, with condescending expectations regarding what artistic media they ought to use. My argument is that these often-uneasy encounters require attention when appraising art's aesthetics-as-geopolitics in such reputedly post-conflict contexts as Turkey's Kurdistan around the turn of the 2010s. For they indicate the important role that cultural spheres like art play in extending unequal power relations shaped during periods of overt conflict into those deemed post-conflict.

*Sand*, the second work that engages self-reflexively with the question of medium, echoes *Normalisation* in that it also portrays the everyday setting of a family's lounge (Figure 5). A little girl is seated calmly as if on a break from play, while a middle-aged man is hanging a framed sunset photograph on the wall. All seems quotidian except the sand that covers the floor from wall to wall. Differently from *Normalisation*, however, this is the lounge of a modern home, the kind that has proliferated in Amed since the late 2000s when the city began experiencing a construction boom. In the framed photograph hung by the man, the sun is setting over water, fulfilling the promise of a pleasurable waterscape vista that figured



**FIGURE 5** *Sand*, c-print, 70 × 100 cm

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission



**FIGURE 6** From the series *Here Is a Base Station*, postcards, 12 × 17 cm each

Source: Reproduced with the artist's permission

prominently in local authorities' plans in the late 2000s to embank the city's Tigris coastline for recreational purposes. That this is a modern lounge in an increasingly built-up city associates the sand less with the beach than with Amed's booming construction sites fed by tens of quarries dug along the Tigris. *Sand* draws a stark separation between waterscape and sand-scape, not only spatially but also sensorially. The sandscape is treated as the stuff of embodiment, whereas the waterscape is relegated to the visual domain. The residents of this expanding city may have been promised a pleasurable experience of the river to offset urbanisation's ills, but extracted sand is all they get. The resulting gloom becomes more palpable the longer one studies the scene, not least because of how, on closer inspection, both the girl and the man look rather jaded, contrasting with the beachy feel of the sunset and sand. The *mise en abyme* eventually confronts viewers with their own appetite for pleasurable views. In hanging this frame, does the man seek to cheer up his home in an otherwise monotonously urbanising city? Or does he aim to feed the contemporary art viewer's quest for packageable and consumable images, diverting this objectifying gaze away from his family? *Sand*, then, highlights not only the symbiotic relationship that binds recreation-oriented preservation to profit-driven construction and that is central to capitalist urbanisation, but also photography's fundamental role in sustaining this extractivist symbiosis.

Finally, *Here Is a Base Station*, a series of nine photographs produced as postcards, shows cellular base stations mounted in the early 2010s in Amed's brand-new neighbourhoods that had formed around the arterial roads the municipality built in the late 2000s and that had doubled the city's urban area (Figure 6). The stations were built to resemble Amed's heritage landmarks, like its iconic bastions and rectangular minarets, but, at the outset, bore no signage regarding their function. Given the health risks base stations pose within a certain diameter, the guise prompted Amed's residents to lobby the municipality for appropriate signage. At a time when the city's first pro-Kurdish mayor was completing his second term in office, the campaign faced him with the novel challenge of a popular, non-partisan demand (Aydeniz, 2013, pp. 94–95), fundamentally contrasting with myriad contemporaneous instances where “urban activism” coalesced with “municipal power” into a single “bloc” in Amed (Guvenc, 2019). The same mayor's tenure saw major enterprises in not only urbanisation and infrastructure but also heritage tourism as evidenced by the renovation of Amed's Armenian and Assyrian-Syriac churches and its ancient, now UNESCO-listed walls. These enterprises are not irrelevant to the postcard format of *Here Is a Base Station*. Recall that the postcard was invented in mid-19th-century western Europe simultaneously with the industrialisation of tourism, heritage, and urbanisation and that visuals promoting these industries, not least on postcards, enlisted Romanticist landscape painting and eventually photography, helping these burgeoning visual-cultural enterprises prosper (della Dora, 2007). The work, then, does not only suggest an expanded notion of extractivism as a force that operates through heritage, tourism, infrastructure, and urbanism, but also prompts critical reflection on the visual arts' historical role in enabling its operations as such.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Tekin's artistic decisions appropriate the Eurocentric canon to enable multiple layers of reflection on the ways state-endorsed violence, colonialism-driven racialisation, neoliberal projects of peace and democratisation, and the industrial commodification of the Earth have intersected in Turkey's Kurdistan and beyond, and have done so both in or through the artworld and outside it. In a context where a long history of racial violence and colonialist enterprise combines with new-fangled essentialisms that confront artists like Tekin with various, if mutually conflicting, expectations regarding who they ought to be, what they ought to represent, and what sort of value their art ought to proclaim, engaging the canon by staking a self-reflexive claim to it has critical geopolitical significance. This significance not only resonates with but also expands on the trope of “Turkishness” as a way of “looking at the Kurd” but “seeing anything but a Kurd” that has figured in Mucahit Bilici's (2020) essays on “Turk–Kurd relations.” It engages critically with multiple gazes arising from the imbrications of colonialism, Turkification, and neoliberal marketisation, which may as much impose essentialist ideas of Kurdishness on, as altogether refuse to see a Kurd in, the subject being gazed at but which all objectify the latter as an extractable resource. The critical engagement at work here involves not simply a reversal of such gazes but rather a signalling of their complicity in racial geopolitics. To return to my main question, then, Tekin's work and experiences demand approaching art's critical geopolitical significance to current debates around the Anthropocene not simply as a question of whether visual and epistemic canons or Eurocentrisms are critiqued. The imperative, rather, is to ask who is considered capable of expressing such critique in ways they see fit – including appropriative ones – and how this contestation over agency implicates artistic practice (and its theorisations) in the very object of criticism.

If this imperative, as I have suggested, is largely underexplored in the literature on art's geopolitics, a couple of exceptions exist that are perceptive even as they remain inexhaustive. Note a brief rejoinder where Catungal (2019) thinks with the Canadian First Nations artist Kent Monkman's work to propose “situatedness” as central to art's decolonial potential. Catungal's proposal resonates with my analysis; both focus not only on problematisation of Eurocentric canons but also on who gets to problematise them. Doing so recognises the critical significance of self-reflexive appropriations (rather than straightforward dismissals) of the canon that mobilise “agentive depictions of Indigeneity in the landscape to unsettle the settler colonial and racial aesthetics of landscape art” (2019, pp. 152–153). Consider, also, Tolia-Kelly and Raymond's (2020) work on “decolonising museum cultures,” which approaches decolonisation as an infinitely open-ended imperative to contest the unequal distribution of agency and the relations of power structured by racial capitalism, rather than as definitively accomplishable through artistic and curatorial practice or theorisations thereof. These emphases on the situatedness and open-endedness of the decolonial imperative resonate particularly strongly with critique of the Anthropocene thesis' individualist (whether heroic or villainous) imaginary of the human for conjuring the white male European coloniser as the sole bearer of socio-political agency and thus foreclosing other agencies and subjectivities (Davis et al., 2019).

Beckoning to such agencies and subjectivities but also the work they might do *collectively* has been my intention in interweaving, through the concept of extractivism, the racialised geopolitics of quantifiable valuation and objectification that permeate various industries – both those of extraction proper and cultural ones like art. If Tekin's art signals the complicity of the artworld and its audiences in these racial geopolitics rather than supplying them with formally radical visualities that undo the



extractive and Eurocentric gaze on their behalf, the effect is not a damning verdict but an invitation to think and work together by shouldering a part of the decolonial imperative proportionate to one's ability and positionality. This invitation has particular urgency in a "colonial present" whose coloniality turns on "a nostalgia" not only for the very cultural forms that "colonial modernity has destroyed" but also for the colonialist "privileges and powers" of formalising both "good" and "evil" in other, objectified existences and practices than one's own (Gregory, 2004, pp. 5–12). I have aimed to do my part in addressing this urgency by appraising art's critical geopolitical significance as unformalisable and, thus, responding to the invitation that marks Tekin's work and that calls on each to contribute their share to the collective work of undoing extractivism rather than assume it accomplishable by artworks or artists themselves.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Indeed, it was with Tekin's solo exhibition in 2008 that the Center began to organise original exhibitions that showcased contemporary art from Amed. The only near-precedent to this was a repeat event of the sort the Center held in its first years, an exhibition originally curated by René Block as part of the 2004 Cetinje Biennial, Montenegro. The three Amed-based artists participating in this exhibition, including Tekin, used their artist fees to fund its being brought to their hometown and restaged at the Center (C. Tekin, personal communication, February 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> Cases in point include the "Office for Useful Art" established in 2017 at Turkey's foremost contemporary art institution Salt, and the Anthropocene-themed 2019 Istanbul Biennial curated by Relational Aesthetics' founder Nicolas Bourriaud.
- <sup>3</sup> In the late 2000s, several curators responded to the body of photographic work discussed here by encouraging Tekin to shift to videography instead, as they considered videos sensorially more engrossing and logistically more advantageous than photography (C. Tekin, personal communication, July 2020). As recently as May 2020, following a talk I gave on Tekin's work, an influential Istanbul-based art critic responded that he had "always criticised" it "for insisting to remain in the realm of representation but, having heard your take on it, I can see the rationale behind this insistence" (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F3aaw3yIAo> Accessed May 2021).

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