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Portrait of Ali Kazma. Photograph by Başak Ersoy. Courtesy Ali Kazma.



ALI KAZMA, *Rolling Mills*, 2007, still from single-channel video installation, 9 min 5 sec. Courtesy the artist.

## REPLACE, ALTER, ADORN ALI KAZMA

PROFILES BY HG MASTERS FROM MAY/JUN 2013

Ali Kazma is quite clear. On the day we meet for lunch in Istanbul in early March, he makes it clear that he is not in Turkey. He is “underground,” trying to concentrate on editing during this brief two-week stint back in the country. He is also clear that he is making an exception to talk to me, for which I am grateful. Above all, he is clear that “Resistance,” the new project he is producing for the Turkey Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, is a series of between 12 and 15 high-definition videos, each between five and nine minutes in length, to be shown on five large screens.

We don't make small talk. Within two minutes, Kazma is articulating what he wants to say about his subject—the human body—“as a platform of resistance to the horizontalization and the complete abstraction and codification of the world,” the ways in which it is “poked, written on, operated on, transformed, used to perform and appropriated in the form of the robot.” He jokes, “I am interested in how the body can be like an embarrassing cousin who shows up at a party at the wrong time. You get hungry, you get fat, you get sick, you have gas, your eyes go bad. The body needs constant care and attention. It takes you places and gives you unique experiences, but it can also really embarrass you and let you down. And, ultimately, it *always* lets you down.”

Kazma has a wry sense of humor. His other mode of speaking is quite critical—he can be brutally clear about what he doesn't like. “This condition [of the body] is completely overlooked by the new code of the world, which is: *You can do it! Think positive! We can all do this and we can all do that.* But, in the end, this is a very one-sided, ideological and cynical outlook. The body is such an obvious point of resistance. I cannot exchange my experience for yours. This uniqueness is what still stands as one possibility to resist the bulldozing of all values.”

At the time of our meeting, he had finished five of the videos for “Resistance,” after recording footage at more than 16 locations, including New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo and Istanbul—all major urban centers that he sees as epicenters of what he and I conspicuously do not call neoliberalism, but which, between the two of us, we understand nonetheless as something like “the way we live now.” In these works, Kazma is also examining spaces of bodily transformation or control—their architecture and design, in addition to what goes on there. His list of such locations includes the interiors of the Galatasaray High School in Istanbul, a Turkish prison, a New York theater, a London tattoo parlor, a Berlin robotics laboratory, a film set in Paris, hospital operating rooms and weight-lifting gyms—all places where the body is shaped, altered, confined, displayed and adorned.

The cycle of videos is not a new turn for Kazma. He describes it as an intensification and expansion of his ongoing “Obstructions” series (2005–), which presently is comprised of 16 videos focusing on people at work—a taxidermist, a ceramicist, a clock-maker, a chef, a brain surgeon, dancers, a factory worker making jeans, a steelworker and others. These videos are characterized by a silent fascination with the process of labor. There are no narratives or voice-overs, just a precise attention to the details of how these individuals use their tools and interact with the products of their vocation.

In all of Kazma's works, the subjects come through on their own terms. He explains to me how over time he has developed tactics to disappear in front of people, even though he is holding the camera. He stands at an angle, he moves slowly to avoid alerting them when he is interested in something, he doesn't ask questions. He says that the people he films quickly get absorbed in their tasks, but his favorite moments are the irregular ones when the routine is punctured—for example, he loves it when someone drops something.

Kazma began making videos in 1998 while studying film in New York, but he prefers the art context to the film one. He felt like an outsider in the latter, as he was never interested in making narrative works. Once you give up on this, Kazma explains, you are relegated to the genre of experimental filmmaking—which, he laments, is considered by the film industry, and even by film festivals, as “the ghetto or dustbin.”

Kazma's videos are as handcrafted as a video can be. They have a single creator. He shoots all of the footage himself. He does the sound. He edits them himself. Although the Venice Biennale commission necessitated hiring a producer to help him access certain sites, he does not collaborate; instead he forms deep personal relationships with his subjects.

When discussing “Resistance,” I ask him how his series compares to those American television programs that depict extreme surgeries, or glorify the brutal and often gruesome acts of transformation that people undergo. Kazma replies simply, “Because they are doing it, I have to do it.” He wants to return the human body to dignity. For him the ethics of filmmaking and representation are clear. His responsibility, in terms of bringing new images into the world, is to avoid creating crass sensationalism or pornography, which level experiences to those found in other forms of violence. It is his duty, he says, to distinguish between what he finds obscene and what is necessary, and to make sure that the images themselves correspond to the reality he witnesses. Quoting John Berger's *Art and Revolution* (1969), he says, “The essential quality of the legless man is that he is alive, not that he is legless.”

Kazma explains that his images are what teach him, and that he remains interested in learning how to live, how to be free of the defeatism occasioned by this unnamed thing that we aren't calling neoliberalism. He points to his arms, his head, his chest, saying that something might be clogging an artery *here or here or there*. He says we carry death, in order to live freely. He smiles.