

The violence in belit sağ's *cut-out* (2018) is a material one. The images of the victims she reproduces are passport photos or studio photos, which cut their bodies at the shoulder or at the neck. In some cases, the photo is washed out or bears the lines of photocopying. In the case of the final image, where the body has been pasted onto another piece of paper, the video's narrator speculates that "the shoulders must be in the other photo." In this way, *cut-out* painstakingly attempts to read the lives of those represented through their backgrounds. She imagines their lives, their families, and their vacations through the traces of clouds, walls, photo studio backdrops, and the furniture that remain. To emphasize the importance of the background, over the course of the video, the color of the screen is keyed to match the background of the photograph. In broad swathes of digital color, sağ speculatively reconstructs mountains, sea, and sky in order to replace these various figures in their environments.

sağ's struggle with the limits of the background for these visually dismembered bodies is not dissimilar from what historian Saidiya Hartman has described in her writing on critical fabulation as "a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives."<sup>1</sup> For Hartman as well as for sağ, the production of backgrounds where they are scant or entirely absent is mobilized against the constraints of historical archives and legitimized methods of storytelling. Consequently, fashioning backgrounds is a political and historical act of the redressing the violence inflicted on the people represented here.

Backgrounds give the world its shape. Our bodies are shaped by both the spaces we occupy and by the objects we come into contact with against a background. In her essay, "Orientations Matter," Sara Ahmed mobilizes phenomenology to examine how both objects and subjects have backgrounds. She explains,

A background can refer to the ground or parts situated in the rear, or to the portions of the picture represented at a distance, which in turn allows what is "in" the foreground to acquire the shape that it does... We can also think of the background as having a temporal dimension. When we tell a story about someone, for instance, we might give their background: this meaning of "background" would be about "what is behind," where "what is behind" refers to what is in the past or what happened before... the past of an individual [and] other kinds of histories which shape an individual's arrival into the world.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, backgrounds are not only material but also refer to the values, aspirations, and histories that underpin us.

In *cut-out*, belit is confronted with the problem of not having access to this temporal background—that is, the social, aspirational, or familial background. Consequently, the video's solution is to focus on the background that we understand as spatial or representational. But, it is worth noting that a third background comes into focus here: that of the observer. Ahmed notes that the conditions for the emergence of an object as an object also "depends on the arrival of the body that perceives."<sup>3</sup> We are directed by our backgrounds, she concludes, and this has implications on how the object is perceived. In this way, the object and its background becomes a question of the role of the narrator, the artist, and the perceiver. How is the perception of the artist or the viewer transformed when we encounter the object? How are our backgrounds transformed by this encounter? How do our backgrounds orient us toward the future?

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<sup>1</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 26 (June 2008), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations Matter," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 239-240.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.