


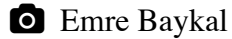
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Turkey Pulse

Why Turkey's performance artists take to streets

Nazlan Ertan December 21, 2018

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Emre Baykal

One of the objects displayed in the exhibition "This is Not a Performance" in Istanbul's Daire Sanat

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Article Summary

Turkey's best-known performance art work is the dignified immobility of a man at the height of the Gezi Park protests five years ago; many young artists have followed in his footsteps since. Gallery. The hose refers to a police chief who used to beat the homeless and transgender women with a hose in Tarlabasi district.

ISTANBUL — Located in a narrow, high-ceilinged apartment in Istanbul's bobo Cihangir neighborhood, "This is Not a Performance" is not an exhibition for those who prefer traditional art. Used black duct tape, with strands of hair and bits of skin stuck to it, cover one wall. A pink porcelain sink, broken and soiled, stands in a corner; a plastic bag filled with water in another. Through the black earphones suspended from the ceiling, the recorded voices of the performance artists explain how they have used these objects in their past performances.

The black duct tape belongs to Ozlem Uslu, who taped it on her body and asked the audience to take it off in a performance Nov. 11. Some tore at the tape savagely while others did it more carefully, afraid to hurt the artist. The pink sink was part of an 11-day performance on the past and present of Tarlabasi, a marginalized neighborhood just a stone's throw away from the chic Cihangir area.

"These are neither installations nor a documentation [of past performances]," Simge Burhanoglu, the curator of the exhibition, told Al-Monitor. "The exhibition aims to showcase the remaining solid objects from past performances, accompanied by voice records of the performance artists. We want to create an understanding toward performance art by focusing on the process, the effects of it on the performers and the interaction with the audience — both during the performance and in its aftermath."

Burhanoglu has been a key actor in the development of Turkey's budding performance art, which has been one of the least developed disciplines of contemporary art in the country until half a decade ago. A former ballerina who has done her post-graduate studies in London, Burhanoglu came back to Istanbul in 2013 with the idea to promote performance art; she started forcing open the doors of private galleries and biennials to include live art works.

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Istanbul, the first live art platform to unite and support performance artists in new projects. Since then it has presented some 30 performances, including the recent one, "Needed: You."



Ozlem Uslu's black duct tape from her performance Tape, November 2018. (photo by Emre Baykal)

In Turkey, where nude statues in public spaces are discreetly moved indoors or removed altogether by censorious public authorities, works of art attacked by hooligans hell bent on maintaining public decency and political plays closed down, more and more young artists have been turning to performance art to make their angry voices heard.

For many Turks and foreigners, the most memorable performance art in Turkey was that of Erdem Gunduz — the “Standing Man” — who stood in dignified silence at Istanbul’s Taksim Square for eight hours at the height of the 2013 Gezi Park protests that shook the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

“[Gunduz] certainly showed the key role of performance art in the country,” Burhanoglu told Al-Monitor. “He was an inspiration for us because he showed all too plainly the role performance art can play when people feel helpless, immobilized, frustrated or alone. Art also has the power to heal, to make connections.”

Although Turkey's most-talked-about performance was by a man, this is a sector where women have a strong presence, both in Turkey and globally. Most of their work has been provocative, brutal and, often, physically risky.

In 1974, Marina Abramovic, the self-coined “grandmother of performance art,” placed 32 objects, including roses, cotton, nails, knives, chains and a loaded gun on a table in a Belgrade gallery and invited the audience to use any of the objects on her. After six hours, the gallery stopped the show when a member of the audience pointed the gun at Abramovic. She had already been whipped, stabbed and pierced with pins.

Nearly 30 years later, Nezaket Ekici, a Turco-German disciple of Abramovic, tied strands of her hair to the ceiling of a cell in Sinop Prison, known as the Alcatraz of the Black Sea. During the one-hour performance in 2006, Ekici tried to free herself from the 100 white strings that tied her to the cell — either by cutting strands of her hair or tearing them off her skull. The performance aimed to draw attention to the act of self-liberation, as well as the plight of the many prisoners in Turkey, including this particular prison's famous inmates such as Sabahattin Ali, the author of "Madonna in a Fur Coat."

"There are many lesser known pioneers. Theirs were not an easy task. Few of their performances were recorded or digitalized," Leman Seveda Daricioglu, one of the new generation of performance artists, told Al-Monitor.

Daricioglu, who has an undergraduate degree in sociology, is heavily invested in the creation of Performistanbul Live Art Research Space, which will focus on archiving, documenting and exhibiting performance art. It will have a specialized library with an archive of more than 7,000 physical and digital resources.

A gauntly thin brunette with large eyes and the words "hic et nunc" ("here and now") engraved between her jutting collarbones, Daricioglu has launched various performances since 2014, most of which explore the concept of good-evil, fear, death, sexuality and collective memory.

"I see the body as a laboratory of fears and emotions. I try to question and overcome my fears through performance art," she told Al-Monitor.

"I donned an olive-green cloak and went out to Tarlabasi for 11 days, in search of objects and stories to collect," she said of her 2017 performance called "Empoisoned Princess." The name is a reference to the district that was a residential area for diplomats and high-level businessmen in the 16th century Sublime Porte. After the 1990s, it became home to Romans, Kurdish migrants from the southeast of the country, asylum-seekers, the LGBTI community — particularly transgender women — and sex workers. With the neoliberal urban politics in 2010, the municipality attempted to "cleanse" Tarlabasi and started a major gentrification process in the area.

"What I wanted to do was to have an urban mapping, revealing lost memories, gone residents and keep the memory, the intangible heritage there," Daricioglu said.

One of the things that she discovered was the legacy of Hortum Suleyman, a local police chief known as Suleyman the Hose because he used a hose to beat homeless people, junkies, transgender women and sex workers.

"When a young man talked to me about Hortum Suleyman with admiration for the way he saved the families there 'from the danger posed by transsexuals,' I felt tears stinging my eyes. What sort of empoisoning makes you see transsexuals — who fear oppression themselves — to be considered as a potential danger? Then I went back to the studio and wrote it all down," she noted.



*Leman Daricioglu tours Istanbul's Tarlabasi district for her performance "Empoisoned Princess" in 2017.
(photo by Derin Cankaya)*

The white pages filled with furious scribbles in black felt-tip, the crushed pink sink and three hoses — in yellow, red and green placed in the shape of a rainbow arc — are part of "This Is Not a Performance."

"Performance art has developed considerably," said Deniz Can, curator of "Alarm," an exhibition that used both performance art and multimedia portraits to protest censorship. "It has now become part of the portfolio of many galleries and biennials, which would have never considered it a decade ago," she told Al-Monitor.

Asked why women dominate this field — particularly with live art that involves physical risk and pain — Can replied with a question, "Given that the female body is the target of censorship, political rhetoric and abuse in Turkey and globally, is this surprising?"

"This Is Not a Performance" runs until Jan. 12 in Daire Sanat Gallery.

Found in: Art and entertainment



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