

ISTANBUL: HALE TENGER and MÜRÜVVET TÜRKYILMAZ

by Deborah Root



In Hale Tenger's recent exhibition at Istanbul's Galeri Nev, *Strange Fruit* (2009), we walk through a dense wall of feathers into a darkened room illuminated by slowly moving stars. In this alternate world, a globe is suspended from the ceil-

ing and we hear strange, ethereal music. In a second room, an inverted globe is suspended, this time with political entities clearly marked, but with the names of nations and cities printed right side up.

The installation's name is taken from the song made famous by Billie Holiday about lynching in the American South, and here the Earth itself becomes a strange fruit hanging and tormented in the heavens. With the dreamlike aria, sung by Constance Vicdan Begard and arranged by Tenger's long-time collaborator Serdar Ateşer, the music sometimes runs backwards, sometimes forwards, reminding us that time is in a constant state of flux.

The piece is extremely beautiful, yet it evokes a certain sad yearning: for innocence, for an undamaged universe. This vision of loss, and the gravity of human experience expressed in this work, has absorbed Tenger's interest for many years. Yet there is no cynicism. *Strange Fruit* asks for a kind of compassion, and a recognition of the preciousness of the world we inhabit. What creates problems are political and national entities, which turn the Earth on its head.

Originally from Izmir, Tenger has lived through many changes in Turkey. Increasingly, her work has been concerned with the loss—the damage to people, to community and to the Earth. This is a natural progression from her earlier work, which engaged with Turkish history and identity and contemporary politics, and was often marked by the hear/see/speak-no-evil monkeys that appear in several of these pieces. Tenger's sense of the political has been expansive, ranging from the conceits of the Enlightenment and scientific knowledge to the position of Kurds in Turkey, to gender, as in her 1990 work, *Portrait of a Woman*, which consisted of a noose-like braided rope set with protruding thorns. But a sense of what has been lost, or deliberately forgotten, has informed her investigations from the beginning.

Sometimes this forgetting is political. Modernity in Turkey became an explicit project when the secular state was established in the 20s. Islamic institutions were closed, and the Turkish alphabet changed from Arabic to Latin script in 1928. In the name of protecting the constitution, the army engineered several military coups. Turkey remains a strong ally of the US. The existence of a "deep state," in which different, hidden loci of power intersect, began to be recognized in the 90s. But, although some

of her work concerns the Turkish experience, Tenger's vision is larger.

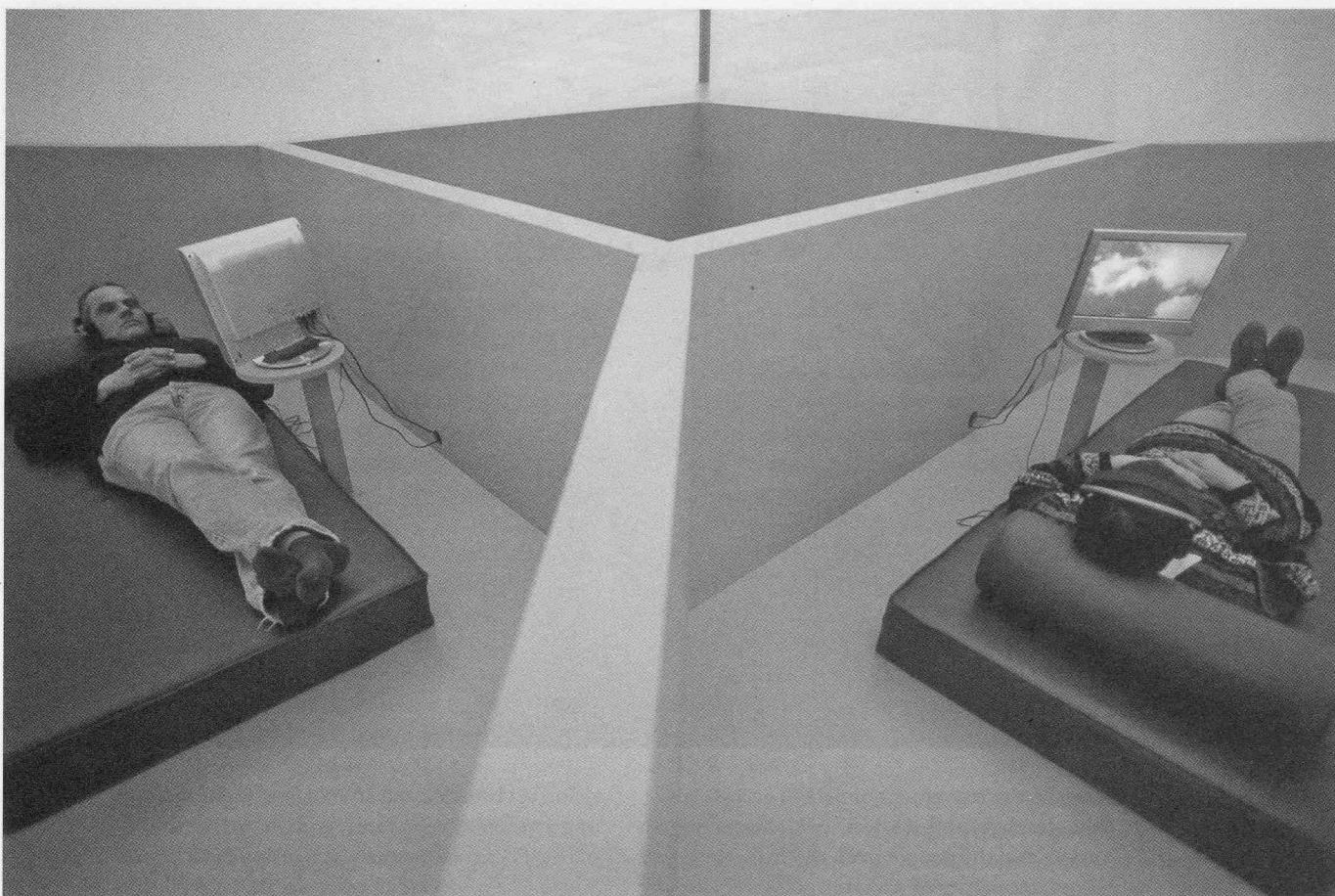
For the 4th Istanbul Bienali in 1995, Tenger constructed a guard's booth, which she surrounded with a barbed-wire fence. In this installation, entitled *We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside/We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside*, the viewer must decide whether or not to enter the enclosure. (Inside the booth was paraphernalia one might expect to see in a real guard's booth in Turkey: a scenic calendar, scenes of Istanbul, a radio and a glass of tea.) The presentation of a choice means that, as viewers, we had to ask ourselves which position we took, recognizing that in some profound way we were participating in what happened both inside and outside the fence. Were we the guards, were we the prisoners, or both?

Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993) links scientific discourse, museums and media, and the way the science of race both constructs false differences and speaks to common origins. The ethnic cleansing of Bosnia was the end result of a certain kind of nationalist politics, a nationalism that exists in many places and which, in a less extreme form, can be promulgated by state institutions such as schools and museums. For this piece, Tenger filled 864 glass jars with water and placed them on metal shelves in a basement room. Inside the jars were newspaper articles about the war. Some were text, others were photos, one was a graphic of religious symbols. In the room, recordings of interviews with Bosnian refugees in Turkey could be heard, arranged by Serdar Ateşer to come through at different volumes—some loud, some soft—a witnessing of the war through personal stories.

Tenger thus reminds us that what we see in a museum display is the completed narrative that tells a story of evolution of a nation, or of the genealogy of style. A cohesive entity is constructed out of the ephemera of the past. Although we see what is included, what has been excluded is not always obvious. Tenger is concerned with the traces, with what is left behind after an event. In the suffering of war, we are left with newspaper accounts and testimonies, and with an ineffable sadness.

In her video work *Beirut* (2005–07), Tenger

PREVIOUS PAGE
Hale Tenger, *Strange Fruit*, 2009. Mixed media installation including video and audio.
Music: Heitor Villa-Lobos arranged by Serdar Ateşer.
Dimensions variable
PHOTO: LAPEPER AYTEK



Hale Tenger, *Never Land*, 2001, Fabric dolls, audio, fabric, wood, iron, 4 LCD monitors; video, 5', music by Serdar Ateşer. PHOTO: HALE TENGER

deals with the traces of violence in public space. In 2005, Rafik Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb in front of the St. George Hotel in Beirut, an event that led to political crisis and unrest. The luxury hotel was damaged and during its renovation remained empty. Tenger travelled to Beirut during the renovations and filmed the hotel. The video stays on the hotel's façade as curtains flutter in the empty windows. As the light darkens to night, the curtains begin to flap violently. In the background the sounds of explosions and sirens are heard.

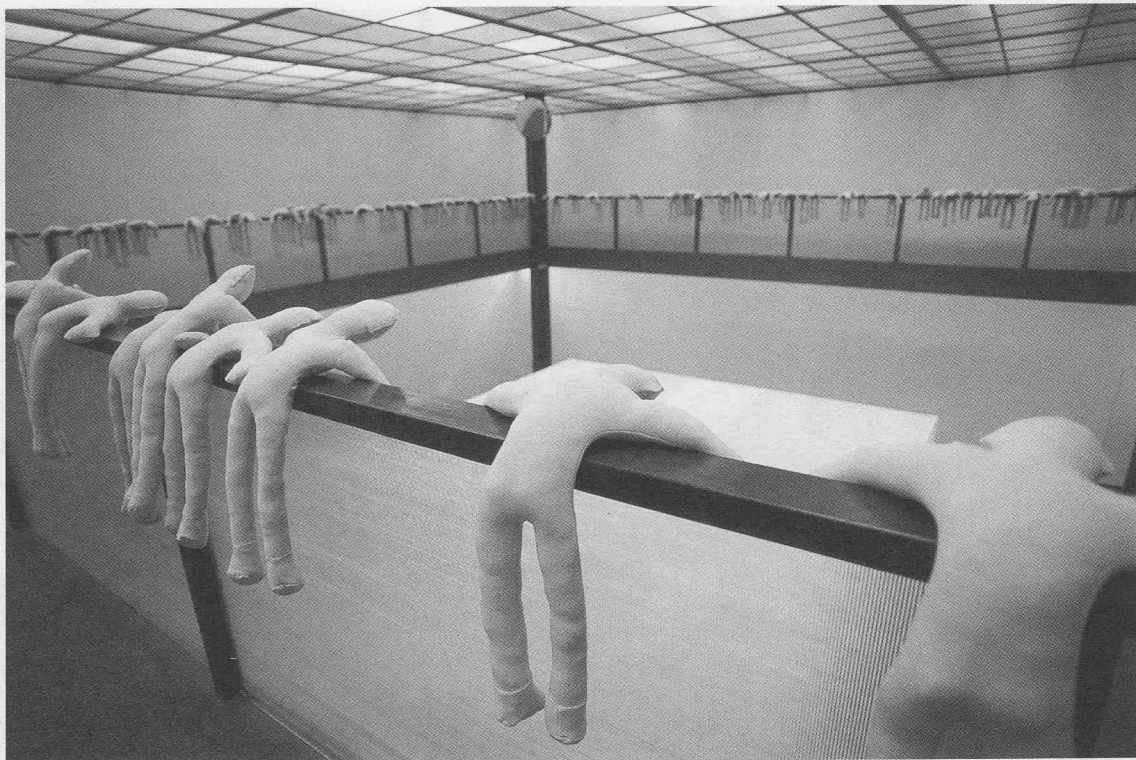
The repetition of the empty windows creates a faceless screen that refers both to destroyed luxury and to the violence that accompanies it, and also to the repetition of sounds that resonate across space. Gazing at the hotel's empty windows, we wonder what went on inside those rooms, what kinds of personal stories they witnessed, what kinds of deals were brokered in the hotel's back rooms. The car bomb exploded at a particular historical moment, but the shifting sky marks the passing of time, the inevitable turning of the days. The fact that night is when the winds blow most violently also points to what takes place under the cover of night.

In *Never Never Land* (2001) beige fabric dolls hang over a railing, seemingly gazing down on the gallery space below. These dolls resemble a child's toys, but the way in which they evoke surveillance as they flop forward like dead things imbues them with creepy

menace. The viewer walks into an enclosed space covered in white cloth, lies on a bed and puts earphones on. Music flows through the headphones, and on the television set beside the bed images of clouds drift by. Here, the natural world has become a vestige of the real. This work evokes our mediated relation to nature, yet the bed also refers to psychoanalysis, and to the experience of alienation that appears in so much of Tenger's work. As in *Strange Fruit*, Serdar Ateşer's music creates a dream-like state that allows us to experience the work as a slice out of time.

Also from Izmir, Mürüvvet Türkyılmaz began to exhibit in the late 90s. Her installations are complex personal meditations on the movements of people across space and time. Much of Türkyılmaz's work is characterized by what she calls script-writing, which comprises written texts and drawings running across the walls of exhibition spaces, the content of which includes stream of consciousness, memories and whatever is taking place at the moment of writing. The scripts are written in various languages and the text, rather than being a device that informs the viewer, becomes a visual recording or tracing of what takes place in time.

Certain objects reappear in Türkyılmaz's installations: we see the repetition of flags, but not those of any particular country; rather, they are a recognizable shape that alludes to nationalism. Another image is the suitcase, which



Hale Tenger, *Never Land*, 2001, Fabric dolls, audio, fabric, wood, iron, 4 LCD monitors; video, 5', music by Serdar Ateşer. PHOTO: HALE TENGER

refers to the movement of people across Anatolia, teachers and soldiers travelling to eastern Turkey and the people from the east moving to the western cities of Ankara and Istanbul. Suitcases remind us of journeys and of the impermanence of place, as well as the idea of a past that is at times geographical, at times, personal.

The café chair also appears as a leitmotif in her work, which we first see in 1997's *The Face of Placement*, installed in Bodrum Castle on Turkey's Aegean coast. This particular chair was constructed out of newspaper pulp from which the text had been removed. Because cafés in Turkey are traditionally the province of men, the café chair is seen as a male object, here speaking to a cultural practice that, perhaps, can be changed. The chair also refers to a kind of stability but, as a piece of furniture, it can be moved from place to place.

The aforementioned objects are all imbued with both personal and larger meaning, and indicate how the personal experience intersects with the larger world. Yet there is also something slightly melancholic about the way our lives consist of traces, of the everyday, of the past, and of seemingly random constellations of objects and events.

The script-writing in Türkyilmaz's *Point of View* (2000) covers a wall and is interspersed with tiny drawings. In other sites, the script becomes a line that meanders around the room. These writings recall the mythology of the spider goddess, who wove the world through the lines of their webs. Here, the scribbled lines of text lacing the walls operate as a kind of web, drawing the viewer into Türkyilmaz's world.

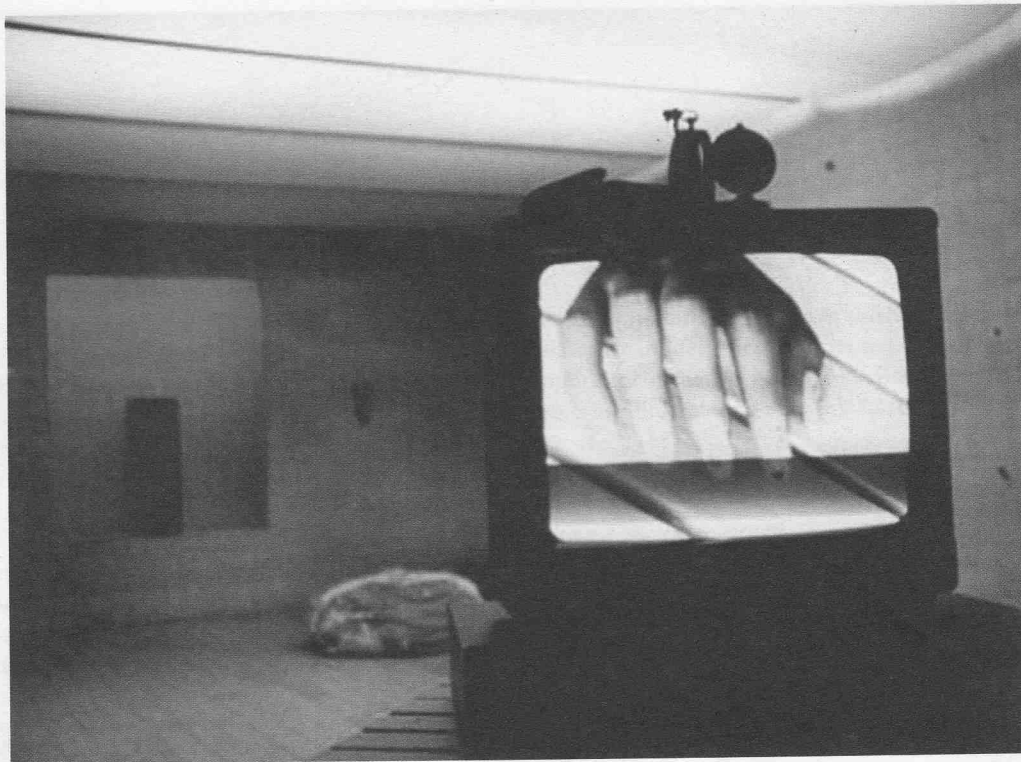
In *Etc.* (2003), script-writing is combined with collected objects. In this installation, a tele-

vision set broadcasted an image of impatient fingers tapping on a table, and on the tile walls of the exhibition venue was a script Türkyilmaz had written, recording what she heard around her and processing a trace of reality that reflects the shifting nature of time. Juxtaposed against objects collected in the past, the writing chronicled what was taking place in the present. A small niche contained a glass of water, which moved with the vibrations of sound emanating from elsewhere in the installation, and a pouf chair painted with the image of a globe lay on the floor, inviting viewers to sit. The pouf pointed to modernity in its globalized form, changing shape as people sat in it. The sound of tapping fingers emanating from the television resembled the sound of marching soldiers, yet also referred to boredom and irritation.

Türkyilmaz's installations are generally very site-specific, and their reflection of place becomes a kind of map-making. Their site-specific quality is apparent in *Queue*, a piece she made for the Havana Biennial in 2003. Here, she contrasted the ordered, measured life of the everyday against intuition and personal associations. Again there was a chair, to which was affixed a photograph of a queue of refugees from the Spanish Civil War entering Havana. Lying on the chair's seat was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* covered with a Cuban newspaper. On one wall the script intersected with neutral objects and on the other with personal items. On the floor next to the chair was a home-made compass.

A favourite installation is *Fence* (2003), in which a ragged line of needles was set into the wall, moving vertically up to the ceiling. The thread passing through the needles' eyes

RIGHT
Mürüvvet Türkyılmaz,
ETC, 2003, script-drawing,
objects, video, sound
installation, Maçka Sanat
Galerisi, Istanbul.



ABOVE
Mürüvvet Türkyılmaz,
Queue, 2003,
installation detail, 8th
Havana Biennial.

originated from a vial of iodine on the floor and, over time, the thread became red as the iodine travelled up the wall. This minimalist piece was a highly personal way of engaging with the world, elliptical and layered with meaning. As viewers, we were invited to construct our own meanings. Images of iodine-soaked thread recalled the way iodine marks the existence of a wound, yet heals it, suggesting how sutured skin retains a scar, and the notion of a social fabric; also a novel read about lace-making and prophecy; the sensation of iodine on a wound—each part of *Fence* looping back to personal associations and memories.

Some of Türkyılmaz's work has explicitly social connotations. In *Money-box* (2002), she installed a blue plastic globe on the sidewalk of a wealthy Istanbul neighbourhood. The globe resembled a recycling container, and passersby

discarded papers inside the globe, which were then collected by poor children to sell. In *Between you and me* (2004), she drew script on the wall with a red and blue copy pencil, and affixed objects from petrol stations to the wall between webs of red and blue writing. Here, the objects had little personal resonance; they were cold and metallic, and as industrial objects had no colour. As in *Queue*, she made a primitive compass out of a string suspended in a glass of water, which in turn led back to the objects. Again, the script-writing on the wall recorded what was taking place at the particular moment of writing, providing a temporal rhythm to the static objects.

Recently, Türkyılmaz has been involved in collaborative works with Selim Birsell and others. In *Boz-Yap Döşeme*, a collaboration with Birsell, the gallery floor is strewn with giant puzzle pieces covered with different fabrics and images. These represent multiculturalism and the way different elements of a society fit together to make a whole. Normally, one can play with puzzle pieces, but these are too large and heavy. Because the viewer is invited to walk on them, playing with the puzzle requires one to change one's own position. ♦

• Deborah Root is a writer and critic interested in intersections between visual arts, cultural politics, and contemporary theory. She is the author of *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference*, and is currently based in Toronto.