Gezi Park: One Year Later

Gregory Buchakjian, photograph of Istanbul's Tarlabaşı neighborhood that was due to be demolished. May 6, 2013, a few weeks before the Gezi Park demonstrations started. Courtesy of the artist.

On the 28th of May last year a number of environmentalists gathered to protest the demolition of Gezi Park in Istanbul. The ensuing events were of a proportion that became impossible for the world to ignore. Everyone was watching Istanbul, for it seemed to address an uncertainty that resonates with our times, a crisis. A crisis is an encounter with something that is not in the past or the future, yet not of the present. The word comes to us from Latin Medicine; a moment of criticality, where a judgment must be made at a junction where it is unclear of the outcome.

A couple of weeks after the Gezi Park protests erupted I travelled to Istanbul on a whim after my original planned itinerary fell through. What I found was a tempestuous city between two places that are themselves momentarily undefined. "Asia" on one side, "Europe" on the other. It was here that I met Arie, an *homme de lettres* if there ever was one. From what I would come to understand, Arie is not really "based" anywhere. His entire life appeared to me to be always transitory. In other words, he was someone decidedly of our times.

As I write these words thousands are being displaced, ripped from their homeland. Closer to home, those who are more fortunate are being evicted from their homes. Perhaps most radical of all however, is that those who are more privileged still are also being displaced; the technology that engenders our age and fuels our economies has not left anyone untouched as it rips us from our bearings, splaying the pieces of our identity across a global field. It is no longer the case that man is not master in its own home, for man no longer knows where home is. Our thoughts are everywhere, and yet nowhere, floating in what is now "the" cloud.

This issue of *SFAQ* is the "Asian art" issue, but more and more such designations have become meaningless. Indeed, it is precisely a crisis of meaning that defines our time. A hall of mirrors with no exit, and for many—no entrance. It is this mode of reflexivity and reflectivity that is so encapsulated by last years protests in Istanbul, a country that projects, as our narrator imparts, "Asia on the walls of Europe, and the other way around, without ever truly arriving."

Peter Dobey
San Francisco, 2014.

Gregory Buchakjian, *Battle of the Hotels, Gardens of the Excelsior Hotel*, from the *Abandoned Dwellings* in *Beirut Series*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

By Arie Amaya-Akkermans

It all started with a conversation. Photographer and art historian Gregory Buchakjian had come to Istanbul from Beirut and we walked around the Galata neighborhood, settled since Late Antiquity, taking notice of architectural details in the decaying buildings. What used to be the thriving Jewish and Greek quarters of a once cosmopolitan city, Galata now felt like it was disappearing. It was not that the quarters were empty, on the contrary hordes of tourists filled its corridors and ubiquitous boutique hotels. It was that the old mansions, many turned to squats or vandalized, sat crumbling, sealed, and abandoned. Their presence turned to invisible space that was neither private nor public. For Buchakjian, whose photographic work and research focuses on abandoned houses in post-war Beirut, the process at work in Istanbul was similar to the fate of his hometown, and indeed, much of the region: The obliteration of public spaces spans across much of the Middle East, only to be replaced by liquid and easily malleable commercial venues without memory or history. The model of Gulf architecture is cookie cutter: Vertical spaces heavily guarded behind VIP walls, ground spaces scrubbed of all historical references and virtually no sites for general assembly.

That was in May of 2013, and Istanbul still seemed content. Yet one could feel a certain anxiety, a rush, a sense of delay, a historical "accumulation." Down from Galata, around the port neighborhood of Karaköy, active since Byzantine times, one could observe Istanbul closer to its edges: The industrial warehouses, and once upon a time mansions overlap with cheap hotels, hordes of baristas, art galleries and traditional working-class coffee shops. A different building seems to be disappearing each week, the rents double and triple so that artists need to move further away from the center, and something of an imbalance remains. It doesn't seem a natural development, but a frenzy; lust for aluminum and glass.

"What is a monument?" Asked the Izmir-born artist Hale Tenger to Buchakjian, over lunch in Karaköy, or, how do you immortalize the past? Especially a past of violence? Where is the alchemy of empty spaces, where specters materialize on their own? The grand stone structures of the past centuries, that are now vandalized and politically invisible, serve more as warnings than examples.

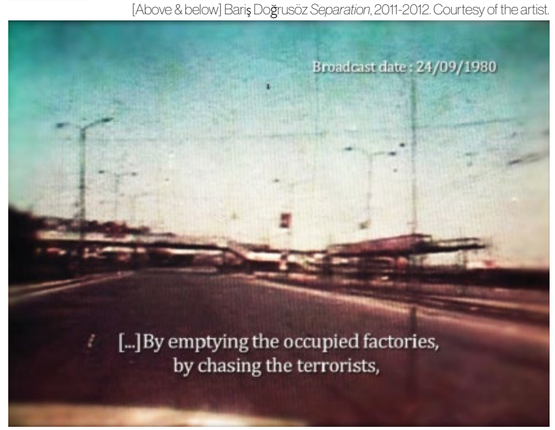
Only a few months earlier, Tenger had finished a large scale installation for a group exhibition at ARTER. *I Know People Like This III* (2013) was a labyrinthine archive of photographs, printed on medical imaging film and displayed as grids on luminous walls. The images acted as a showcase of political violence in Turkey's public space that spanned from the period of the military coup of the 1980s all the way through to the protests in Diyarbakir (an emblematic Kurdish stronghold), which took place only a few weeks before completing the installation. Although the images were shocking by nature, the most arresting aspect of the installation was the display. There was something surgically neutral and indifferent about it, a sort of anti-memory: Everything that can be exhibited can, all the same, be easily archived and forgotten. Strategically placed at the entrance—and exit—of *ARTER*, the enormous 45 -meter-long installation is practically unavoidable, clearly visible from the pedestrian sidewalk of Istiklal Avenue, the main commercial avenue of central Istanbul. The installation is a mirror of Istanbul's turbulent memory: A collection of public silences. You might as well think it's a historiography, and not necessarily a trace of the present.

A few weeks later, still in May, during a visit to the studio of French-Turkish video artist Barış Doğrusöz, he introduced me to his unfinished multi-installation project *Heure de Paris*, which is an attempt at a historical indexation of televisual archive materials related to Turkey during the period of the military dictatorship—a procedure in principle similar to Tenger's. It was a glimpse into an apparently remote past, void for latency. My main interest was in Doğrusöz's first two single-channel installations, part of the project: *Separation* (2011-2012), a film in the "road movie" genre, almost fictional, opening the territory of "travel" in Turkey during the 1980s, at a time when it was impossible to obtain real-time images from the country and all the footage was shot almost secretly from a car. Complementarily, *The Map and the Territory* (2012-2013), is a look into the way how geography and cartography shape human narratives, collecting all the maps used in news broadcast in France to explain and provide geo-strategic information about Turkey when images were (quite often) missing, for it was only until 1994 that Turks in Europe received images from Turkish channels.

While the images of political violence (Tenger) or the absence of images in general (Doğrusöz) pointed toward an open-ended archive of the past (the past is "near," "tangible," "fragile," unlike history which is solidly foregone), the gesture turned on its own head: In the early morning of May 28th, a sit-in assembled at the iconic Gezi Park (one of the last remaining green corners in downtown Istanbul), was broken by the Turkish police, which met the activists (at the time not even protesters) with great violence, burning their tents, dispersing crowds with tear gas and forbidding access to the park. What started almost innocently as a demonstration for public space, quickly grew into a nation-wide protest that lasted throughout the entire summer, brought the country to the brink of a political crisis which has by no means been averted, mobilized hundreds of thousands, and further polarized a society still traumatized by years of dictatorship and autocracy. The haunting images of Hale Tenger's *I Know People Like This III* would easily leave the condition of 'past' and become seamless with the image-repertoire of present day Istiklal Avenue: Police assaults, armed thugs in civilian clothes, state violence, intimidation of the press, unlawful detentions, and above all, the public silences that have characterized Turkish politics. Public space became here not a metaphor for the old public square, but for the whole arena of political participation in a country struggling with democracy.

While both the size of protests and the scale of police violence increased exponentially, little was known in the outside world as the Turkish media, heavily controlled by the state, broadcasted documentary films and music contests. Not unlike Doğrusöz's *The Map and the Territory*, international media relied on old images from Turkey, maps, and amateur videos and photographs from the protests that provided little more than a snapshot of a territory that had indisputably opened and swallowed the asphyxiating appearance of normalcy. While visiting Barış early in May, we discussed the (political) life cycles of Istanbul, along the fault lines of an earthquake, which historically, has destroyed Istanbul once every century. Prognosticated already in 2006, it was in early 2013 when scientists pinpointed the starting point of Istanbul's next major earthquake on the North Anatolian fault. What if the premonition of crisis is more internal than we expected?

Earlier video works by Doğrusöz confirm this certainty of instability, by exploring architectural surfaces as emotional conditions, presenting Istanbul as a concavity or as quicksand, in spite of its apparent continuous historicity. Similarly, Tenger's installations, re-locating histories of violence in Anatolia; the Kurdish question: the status of women and of missing persons confuse the outside with the inside, and blur the entrance and the exit. It is not that art-



[Above & below] Barış Doğrusöz *Separation*, 2011-2012. Courtesy of the artist.

Hale Tenger, *I Know People Like This III*, 2013, at ARTER, Istanbul, in *Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment*, courtesy of Cem Turgay.

works could possibly open this abysmal breach, but they are inscribed often with the traces of the unresolved, which might awaken at any time.

As the protests raged on, artists took part in the demonstration and voiced their dissatisfaction against the policies of not only the Turkish government, but beyond Turkey, the dissatisfaction is general, almost a condition. All this raises the first order question: is it possible, under the current conditions of capitalism, to reimagine the political? Secondly, what is the possible role of contemporary artists, the ambassadors par excellence of capitalism, free market, globalization and mobility, in such a process?

Art dealer Feza Velicangil, owner of the young Istanbul gallery Sanatorium, noted that "We cannot see any reflection of Gezi in artistic production, with very few exceptions. What happened in Gezi has not been properly understood by society; it is just the beginning of an ongoing period." In agreement with Velicangil is Tankut Aykut (formerly of Dirimart Gallery) who opened his own space in 2014. In his own words: "Gezi was a unique tinder in many senses; but for it to have a substantial impact, a true change of mindset needs to take place within the art community. It was influential and inspiring, but we miss notions and concepts for any profound discussion that may lead to a significant change. And I mean it." Fulya Erdemci, the curator of the much contested 13th Istanbul Biennial, which attempted to tackle public space and "public alchemy," also insisted that there was no relation between Gezi and the biennial which had been planned long in advance. For Erdemci, it is too premature to judge the effect of Gezi on art; it might take ten years or might as well have never happen. Finally, Velicangil remarks: "All sorts of panels, seminars and occasional talks eventually end up with the Gezi issue- the issue of what Gezi is and what it is not is questioned."

While artistic practices were undoubtedly influenced by the present tense, they did not necessarily convene with the public domain, and there is little consolation in calling Gezi Park a living biennial or an artwork, for the destabilizing index of reality, however poetic, is all too omnipresent. Revolutionary fervor, not merely an effect but also an affect, belongs in the politics of the extraordinary and the miraculous, making life under conditions of revolution and war one thousand times more bearable than the lethal inexorability of the everyday. But on a more sober assessment, the end of the protests did not simply wane as a fortuitous event. As with everything in political history, there are no ready-made solutions that do not come in Pandora boxes. Beyond the highly volatile polarization of the country, which had been in the works for a long time, Turks have developed a vocabulary of resistance which is neither elitist nor populist, but deeply embedded in pop culture and lacking the sense of self-pity and helplessness of the Arab uprisings.

A vocabulary of resistance is, nonetheless, not all of what it takes to rebuild a political reality. Such a reconstruction might hold the very last possibility for contemporary art to emerge with an impetus of historical latency before it is swallowed by the technological imagination, a process nearly complete. Yet contemporary art and its relational objects can function beyond mere allegory (or cynicism) and serve as extensions of territory in order to dwell in that breach between what has passed and what is possible, the fragmentary and the architectural. In Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's site specific installation *In Situ* (2013), which opened only a few weeks before the protests began, the artist used soap as the sole material to re-stage the famous Pangaltı Hamamı, a legendary hamam in the neighborhood of the same name, demolished in order to make space for a luxury hotel. Objects can trace human cosmologies and enclose or open spaces. The fact that all of these works were produced during the period immediately prior to the protests signals not foresight, but pregnancy and awareness about existing, no matter how comfortably, at the very edge of a fault line, now broken.

Protocinema's Mari Spirito, formerly the director of New York City's 303 Gallery, mused with us about Istanbul as we were trapped in her Galata apartment for three days when the neighborhood became one gigantic cloud of tear gas. Joining the protests as observers, we acknowledged the following: Some moments of Gezi Park were truly miraculous, like when they used the trees of the park to serve as a memorial for the assassinated in the unresolved mass murders of Diyarbakir and the bombing of Reyhanlı; had it been an art work, it couldn't have been more poetic. And the solidarity was incredible, but as Mari and I knew, this kind of solidarity emerges among people only once they have lost the world, and disappears as soon as they recover it. Located between Asia and Europe, "crossroads" is a term often associated with Istanbul, which Spirito challenged, calling it "not a crossroads, but a liminal space," that is, something like a boundary or an event horizon. Functioning as a hologram of both Europe and Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Mediterranean, the city functions as a large video-installation in which concave mirrors project Asia on the walls of Europe, and the other way around, without ever truly arriving.

Following the Gezi Park protests, and in the midst of the occasional tear gas events that continued in the city, there was a show that summed up the way we live now; Trevor Paglen's *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 4)* was installed at the pop-up site of Protocinema in Kurtuluş, a once cosmopolitan neighborhood of Armenians, Kurds, Jews, and Greeks, and one of the only corners left in downtown Istanbul that is free of re-landscaping, yet already threatened by demolition. Paglen, being an American artist and geographer whose work deals with surveillance sites and the re-imagining of technology, the association is not obvious. But the artificial satellite-cum-sculpture tells us something about the heart of the cosmology that Gezi attempted to resist: the technological imagination—functioning dually as architecture—is slowly eroding history; unleashing the reality of globalization in which impermanence and displacement will not be singularities, but an entirely new status quo, a structure of life in which the historical self will be but a relic.

While the idea of "place" has been effectively replaced by the ubiquity and mobility of "global citizens," the millions of individuals that exist in a third world to be found in every city below a certain economic marker experience what "place" means when different borders, fences, detention centers, slums, internment camps and invisible division lines appear and prevent them from crossing into the pure spaces of globalization. The place appears as an enclosure, a site of confinement, a boundary. However, what is certain is that a breach has opened up an interstice from which it is possible to see things how they really are; this is not a global revolution, for the concept that may have existed lost its historical force. It is certainly a marker, an incision that reminds us of the difference between political power and pure force, of which Gezi Park is only an example. It translates into the ultimate conviction, of living in a formless and uncertain world. Perhaps artists cannot change this brutal world, but recognizing it as such is the only way to make it home.

Beirut, 2014.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, *In Situ*, 2013, PIST/// Interdisciplinary Project Space, Istanbul.

Trevor Paglen, *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3)*, 2013. Mylar, steel. Courtesy the artist, Altman Siegel, Metro Pictures, Galerie Thomas Zander, and Protocinema.