



**FROM
REPERTOIRES
OF RESISTANCE
TO MONUMENTS
OF ABSENCE**
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KEYWORDS

Gezi, repertoires of resistance, monuments of absence, hunger strike, public sphere

ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER

Gezi, bedenselleşmiş direniş repertuarları, yokluk anıtları, açlık grevi, kamusal alan

SUMMARY

The Gezi Park protests developed some practices of resistance that can be remembered, recounted, reproduced, and re-enacted in instances, when necessary, in the future. These practices are to do with embodied action, knowledge of solidarity, cultural agency, specific use of language and body. This essay discusses how the repertoires of resistance is accumulated, and when suppressed by hegemony, creates 'monuments of absence', while still holding the potential vocabularies for future resistances.

ÖZET

Gezi Direnişi kendisinden sonra gelebilecek direnişler için gerektiğinde hatırlanabilir, yeniden üretilebilir, tekrar yapılandırılabilir bazı direniş pratikleri geliştirdi. Bu pratiklerin bedenselleşmiş hareket dinamikleri, dayanışma bilgisi, kültürel temsiller, dilin ve bedenin özelleşmiş kullanımları ile doğrudan ilgisi vardır. Bu çalışma bedenselleşmiş direniş repertuarlarının nasıl biriktirildiğini, hegemonya tarafından baskılandıklarında ise nasıl 'yokluk anıtlarına' dönüştüğünü; buna rağmen gelecekte olabilecek direnişlerin kiplerini nasıl hala içlerinde barındırdığını tartışıyor.



INTRODUCTION

Towards a Theory of Monumental Absences

Performance scholar Diana Taylor's body of works is the main theoretical inspiration of this essay, especially her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003).¹ She explains the essence of her distinction between archive and repertoire as follows: 'For years, I had worried about the "other" of the archival, what I finally came to call the "repertoire" of embodied practices that survived the erasure wrought by the colonial archive' (Taylor 2020: xi–xii). Continuing my theoretical dialogue with Taylor, I find it relevant to recall her work in *Disappearing Acts* (1997), which engages 'with the politics of disappearance: the forced absenting of individuals by Argentina's military forces and the paradoxical omnipresence of the disappeared' (2003: xvii). The notion of absence has been a difficult phenomenological entity in performance studies, since there is a 'paradoxical omnipresence' of certain political absences. Due to my own experiences and witnessing since 2013, I came to think of such absences in terms of monuments, a monumental kind of absence, or monuments of absence.

1. The first draft of this essay was presented under the name 'Performative Turn in Turkish Politics Since 2013 Gezi Uprising' in the Post-Coup Turkey Panel of 23rd Annual ASN (Association for the Study of Nationalities) Conference, which took place between 2-5 May 2018 at Harriman Institute, Columbia University.

‘Monument’ is a contradictory notion in this case because the meaning of a monument is generally attached to a reaffirmation of a governmental body in a public space.

Monuments may begin and end in tumult, but in between they become inert. In 1927, the Austrian novelist Robert Musil described them in their normal, steady state: ‘Monuments possess all sorts of qualities. The most important is somewhat contradictory: what strikes one most about monuments is that one doesn’t notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments’ [1986, 320]. Musil has a point. Something about monuments inoculates them against attention. You may know dimly that there’s a statue or plaque on a building you pass every day, but what it stands for you often cannot recall. (Koerner 2016/7: 9)

A monument then, in its state of inertia as described above, can be read as the embodiment of hegemony in the public space. Here, I use the term hegemony, in Raymond Williams’s sense, as ‘a lived system of meanings and values, not simply an ideology, a sense of reality beyond which it is, for most people, difficult to move, a lived dominance and subordination, internalized’ (1977: 108–15). Hegemony is unnoticed once it is established just like the monument, it stands and occupies the space as a seemingly neutral entity. A monument of absence is rooted in the texture of public urban space as much as the monument, and how they differ from each other lies in their relationality to the political power. A monument of absence has an uneasy relationship with the governing bodies, which keeps its precarious presence or straightforward absence noticeable, therefore never allowing it to fall into a state of complete inertia. I argue here that there are two particular ways that monuments of absence come into being:

1. *A monument of absence as the precarious urban presence of an object:* These can be a physical urban element placed by an independent artist either without the support of the governing bodies or directly against the will of the governing bodies, such as İskender Giray’s sculpture, which will be discussed as an example later. There are also certain cases where an urban object is initially established with the support of the governing bodies; such as Metin Yurdanur’s sculpture, which will be covered as an example later too; but the urban object changes its meaning over time as it starts associating with acts of resistance in the public psyche. These kinds of monuments of absence can be graffiti, murals, sculptures, or other kinds of urban physical objects that exist in precarity due to their unapproved or officially ambiguous presences in the urban space. Their ambiguous presence is a constant reminder of the missing bodies that define the meaning of these urban objects.
2. *A monument of absence as a reduction, censorship, lessening of the performativity of the body:* Protests, the act of protesting, the linguistic and bodily creativity involved in resistance, create and cultivate repertoires that allow self-expression and self-realisation even under the most drastic authoritarian regimes. When the individuals who contributed to the making of these repertoires of protest are pushed back into a cage of authority-approved and authority-appropriate behaviours and discourses, this creates a tactile absence of performativities in the public sphere. This tactile absence of the repertoires of performativities is monumental in the sense that these performativities are produced and reproduced everyday by many people.

Both types of monuments of absence are in dialogue with each other, as they precariously but noticeably co-exist in the public space in a constant negotiation with the hegemonic presence that regulates the space and the bodies. I will apply the notions of the *repertoires of resistance* and

monuments of absence to suggest a rereading of the Gezi movement and its aftermath, since I find these two notions helpful to contextualise the regime of emotions and embodied political dynamics in contemporary Turkey. Therefore, what is discussed here consecutively starts with what constructed the repertoire of Gezi, continues with discussing how this bodily repertoire of resistance was suppressed, and finishes with questioning how these seemingly forgotten repertoires of resistance translated themselves to monuments of absence.

Repertoire of Gezi: Remembrances, Sense of Solidarity, Joy, Humour, and Language

The Gezi Park protests developed practices based in embodied action, knowledge of solidarity, cultural agency, specific use of language, and perhaps most importantly, anti-hegemonic use of the body. First, the repertoire of Gezi unearthed the bodily histories of previous anti-hegemonic protests in Turkey. For example, one of the most cited poems during the Gezi Uprising was a section of Cemal Süreya's (1931–1990) poem 555K, originally written in 1960 'following the 555K protest which arose in the same year in response to the murder of two university students during the 28–30 April university protests' (Yeşil 2020: 318). As public sphere scholars Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge claim, the 'intimate knowledge of reliability' has the potential to be carried 'over onto [...] new situations' (2014: 353), just as a poem written for the context of 1960 could speak on behalf of a generation in 2013. Therefore, to understand the potentiality of sudden moments of remembering

in contexts of embodied resistance, I quote this famous section from Cemal Süreya's poem at length:

*you see that we speak now below our breaths
that we unite in silence and leave in silence
our mothers steep tea for good days
our beloved ones put flowers inside the cup
in the mornings we go to work quiet and retiring
all this does not mean that things will stand as they do
we now come side by side and multiply
but the day we chant with one voice the song of liberty
then that day even Gods can't save you.*

(Damla Yeşil 2020: 318–9 – translated by Yeşil)

The emotional gravity, and threat to authority, of these lines lie in the re-activation of the repertoire of resistance, which might seem to get vanished under hegemonic authoritarianism until a moment when a collective resistance takes place again. Jacques Rancière argues that each individual 'links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen [...] in other kinds of place [and] *composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her*' (2009: 13; my emphasis). Experiences of Gezi activated such memories of left-wing protests from the past, of the poems before us, along with the violent memories of clashes with the police and mobs of right-wing groups; especially in relation to the history of Taksim Square.

Another striking artistic remembrance took place in the play *Gezerken (As We Wander)*,² written for the occupied Taksim Square in June 2013 and performed for the first time in the open stage of Gezi Park during the resistance. *Gezerken* was a composition of four different monologues

2. See Zeynep Uğur's essay on pp. 114–159 (European Journal of Theatre and Performance, Issue 4, Special Issue on Activism and Spectatorship) for more details on the performance of *Gezerken*.

that grounded themselves in the moment of the Gezi resistance, written by four playwrights (Cem Uslu, Özen Yula, Yiğit Sertdemir, and Mîrza Metin) and performed by various performers connected to the same theatre circles. In the piece entitled *Boşluğu Doldurmak* (*Filling in the Emptiness*), playwright Özen Yula brought back the memory of bloody 1 May 1977, when thirty-four people were killed by state-related provocateurs, through the monologue of a ghost of a man (named as ‘adam’, i.e. ‘a man’ in the text; and performed by Erdem Akakçe and Reha Özcan interchangeably) who was among the murdered people (Başar 2014: 192, n:222 & Rüzgar 2013). The name of the monologue refers to an emptiness, an absence, which can be filled — even if momentarily — with recalling a repertoire that was believed to be lost until it was brought back through another resistance. This grafting of memories, calling moments from the collective past, echoes of ghost presences are what triggers the past repertoires of the bodily resistance. As this particular unearthing of collective memory was taking place, Gezi was also inventing its own repertoires of resistance that were enrooted in a sense of solidarity, joy, humour, and a new language.

As several scholars discussed, ‘Gezi broke down the wall of fear’ (Verstraete 2014: 2) against a government which ‘inflicted a series of oppressive actions designed to transform Turkey into an Islamic authoritarian regime’ (Evren 2013: 7). This overall hegemony of AKP’s³ neoliberal-Islamic conservatism, which transformed legal structures and urban space ideologically over the years, could be challenged in public only under some special circumstances in which people could voice their uneasiness with the authority *together*. According to Diana Taylor, ‘[t]he repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of

3. ‘Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi’ in Turkish; ‘Justice and Development Party’ in English. It is the main governing party in Turkey since 2002.



Reha Özcan performing the character named ‘Adam’ (‘A Man’) in the occupied Gezi Park on 8 June 2013. Screenshot from the video documentation of *Gezerken* (As We Wander). © Onat Eesenman

the transmission’ (2003: 20). This is why the need for ‘physical closeness’ in ‘mass demonstrations’, according to Negt and Kluge, ‘serves as a mutual confirmation of [the protestors’] own reality’ and for people who ‘as a rule do not carry weapons, only physical massing can achieve anything against the military, the police, or security guard’ (2016: 39). In the case of Gezi, the physical closeness of protestors against the armed and uniformed police confirmed their collective reality of being oppressed by the same regime, and the confirmation of this reality cracked ‘the wall of fear’, which is the disciplined body as embodied hegemony. Although the protests were sparked with the need to defend the park, it was clear from the beginning that the collective unease about the political situation was bigger than just the defence of the park.

The Gezi protests took place under heavy police attacks, and, in the less central places where the protests were carried on, eight young Alevi working-class men were killed,⁴ one directly by a police bullet (Ethem Sarısülük), another by a targeted tear gas cannon (for the case of Berkin Elvan, see Eylül Fidan Akıncı 2018), and others got lynched by AKP supporters. These acts of systemically supported violence were the foreshadowing of the street level restructuring of hegemony that desired to re-discipline the bodies in the aftermath of Gezi. Despite all the atrocities, in the case of İstanbul, Gezi Park and the surrounding area was closed by barricades and was made into a seemingly state-less zone under the continuous threat of police attack. Zeynep Tüfekçi describes the emotional state of this state-less zone as follows:

It may seem counterintuitive [sic] but many protesters also treasured what happened *after* they were teargassed, pepper-sprayed, water-cannoned, and otherwise attacked by police: strangers helped and protected them. There is nothing pleasurable about being teargassed, but the experience of solidarity and altruism within communities engaged in collective rebellion was profoundly moving for people whose lives were otherwise dominated by mundane struggles for survival and the quest for money. (2017: xv)

This description is quite in-tune with my own Gezi experience. At the time, I was an MA student in Boğaziçi University and as Gezi was taking place in the period of the final assignments, I was toing and froing between writing my final essays and getting teargassed. I remember being taken care of by strangers, and taking care of strangers on many occasions. The resistance itself opened up a liminal area beyond the peripheries of the mundane daily life of economic survival and

4. Ethem Sarısülük (age: 26), Ahmet Atakan (age: 22), Abdullah Cömert (age: 22), Mehmet Ayvalıtaş (age: 20), Berkin Elvan (age: 15), Medeni Yıldırım (age: 18), Ali İsmail Korkmaz (age: 19), Hasan Ferit Gedik (age: 21).

sustainability of the individual or the family unit. Here, there is something to be said about the ‘sharing economy’ (Tüfekçi 2017: xv) and the practice of care. These are practices of reliability, and the ‘object of all labor is reliability’ in relationships (Kluge and Negt 2014: 353). Once this reliability is practiced (therefore proven to exist), it brings a *futurity claim* through its own practice since it is grounded in the basic knowledge that it can be practiced *again*. From that moment on, people who communally practiced reliability (or solidarity in more political terms) have every right to presuppose ‘a specific amount of basic trust, which is nothing other than the intimate knowledge of reliability that [is carried] over onto the production and temporal structure of new situations’ (ibid.).

In her article on the Gezi Resistance (which includes a short history of Turkey, a day-to-day account of the Gezi Resistance, and its emotional and social impacts), Arzu Öztürkmen notes many aspects of how tactile repertoires of bodily resistance broadened and diversified during Gezi. Öztürkmen’s academic vocabulary includes words and descriptions like: ‘expressivity’, ‘Bakhtinian dialogue’ between multiple performances, ‘a fast-forward sense of linear time’, ‘evenementiality’, humour of Gezi, and ‘language of Gezi’ (Öztürkmen 2014: 39–68). All these descriptions grasp aspects of the collective experience, as the experience itself resists the previous codes of language where the fluidity of performance can grasp it through intervening in material relationalities of urban social life. The feedback loop between performativity and language that Gezi allowed, challenged and changed the previous codes of language from within. Verstraete notes that after Gezi ‘a new performative awareness in Turkey has started, which expresses itself in many forms and which grew out of the social uprising’ (2014: 9); where this anti-hegemonic performativity ‘reclaim[ed a] social function: to dare to show an alternative, free world by enacting a positive change’ (7).

The shift in the experiential level of living and being was echoed in the language — the ‘language of Gezi’ — which constructed its own transgressive humour as its key element, as a reflection of the absurdity of the situations and discourses created by the authority. The need for another kind of language is rooted in the bodily resistance, because the body ‘responds to the cynicism of domination with satirical laughter, defiant body actions, or strategic silence’, which in turn redefines the language because of ‘the impossibility of self-language without worldly language’ (Shapiro 1999: 68). Similarly, Negt and Kluge’s reading of the relationship of the worker to language is applicable to the protestors and their use of language and the mobilisation of their cultural agency. Gezi protestors had ‘a tactile relationship to language and a need for confirmation through objects and other people’ (Negt and Kluge 2016: 47), which as a result created a linguistic in-group for protestors (the people who ‘get the joke’, so to speak) which allowed them to notice one another in contexts other than the protest itself in years to come. Humour, arguably, has become a part of the repertoire of resistance after Gezi, despite the fact that discourses of dissent got overtly cynical⁵ over the coming years. Whereas previous political movements in Turkey did not employ humour as a major tool of protest or endorse joy as a public feeling of mobilisation; Gezi spontaneously did so in a deeply anti-hegemonic manner. This challenged the multifaceted cultural cult of masculinist seriousness employed de facto in politics and protest culture in Turkey for a very long time.

The second half of 2013 and the entire year afterwards were marked with many experiences of direct democracy from public forums in parks to squat houses. The aftermath of Gezi was also marked with an intensification of authoritarianism, which could be interpreted as

the authority’s attempt towards rebuilding ‘the wall of fear’, which was constructed multidimensionally in all fronts of social life and was — sometimes — improvised on the spot by the authorities and supporters of the regime through *their* own repertoire (such as pogroms, lynching, hate speech, etc.). While Gezi was a vivid and accessible memory up until 7 June 2015 elections, and it was a constant reminder of the political potentialities of coming together on the streets, the countless bomb attacks targeting *only* the public gatherings non-complicit with the AKP Government and the aftermath of the 15 July 2016 military coup attempt particularly blurred and buried the memories and hopes of the ex-protestors and sympathisers of Gezi. Today, based on my own witnessing, people who protested the Government during Gezi do not use the humour and language of Gezi any longer. Gezi seems to be a distant and somewhat painful memory, mostly forgotten in the Turkey of 2022 for those involved in the protests of June 2013.

5. As Sherry Shapiro notes, ‘[t]he life experience of victims are revealed in their bitterness’ (1999: 70).

Hegemonic Interventions to the Repertoire of Gezi

Starting from 5 June 2015 Diyarbakır bombing of the HDP⁶ rally, there was a string of bombing attacks that influenced countless civilians within a few years. Hundreds of people died as a result of these bomb attacks. In late 2015 and into the early days of 2016, AKP Government brutally ended the peace negotiations with PKK⁷ through a series of curfews and military operations against Kurdish-majority cities in Southeast regions of Turkey, which heavily impacted civilians including pregnant women, children, and old people. That was when the Academics for Peace initiative took action, which was immediately targeted by Erdoğan himself, and even by state-related mafia figures like Sedat Peker who publicly declared that he was willing to ‘shower in the blood of academics’ (İlbeyoğlu, 11 May 2021; for more information on Academics for Peace, see Özgül Akıncı 2018). These were all violent interventions to the embodied repertoires of resistance, suppressing primarily the will to protest through fear and then through imposing practices of self-censorship for survival. The failed military coup attempt on 15 July 2016 marked an important threshold in the increase of the scale and intensity of these hegemonic interventions. On 20 July 2016 a nation-wide State of Emergency was declared, which continued for two years and ended on 19 July 2018. The State of Emergency fundamentally handicapped the legal system after the military coup attempt and organisationally allowed the waves of Governmental decrees (which is the main bureaucratic tool of the Government to by-pass the law) that stripped thousands of public

6. ‘Halkların Demokratik Partisi’ in Turkish; ‘Peoples’ Democratic Party’ in English. The main Kurdish party in Turkey.

7. ‘Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê’ in Kurdish; ‘Kurdistan Workers’ Party’ in English. PKK and Turkish Armed Forces have been involved in an ongoing armed conflict since 1984.

servants, including the Peace Petitioners, of their rights of employment, insurance, and international travel, through publishing their names in the *Resmi Gazete* (Official Newspaper) in seemingly never-ending lists.

Diana Taylor notes that ‘[h]istories were burned and rewritten to suit the memorialising needs of those in power. The space of written culture then, as now, seemed easier to control than embodied culture’ (2003: 17). When one examines the mass-scale ideological propaganda and actions taken under the new legislative powers that the State of Emergency allowed, it can be seen that this state-constructed selective reconstruction of recent history served to blur three key areas of the collective memory:

1. The close ties between the Gülenist movement⁸ and the rise of AKP;
2. The potentiality that Gezi resistance held for an alternative political and social re-imagining of Turkey;
3. The peace negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK, which took place between 2012 and 2015.

Hak ve Adalet Platformu (the Platform of Rights and Justice) created a detailed research report (2017) about the injustices that were carried out during the State of Emergency period through in-depth surveys

8. Gülenists are an Islamic organisation whose leader Fetullah Gülen, a preacher, has been living in US since 1999. Gülenists closely worked with AKP until early 2010s and developed a large-scale base following through missionary education institutions and by intervening in areas that the social state was not efficient enough, particularly to recruit youth. Until the AKP-Gülen alliance started to fall apart publicly around 2014 through Gülenists’ leaking of governmental elite’s corruption information, many journalists, academics, and public intellectuals who criticised Fetullah Gülen or his organisation went through biased or staged trials and were imprisoned for many years. AKP’s narrative around Gülenists shifted 180 degrees after they were officially blamed for the 2016 military coup attempt. See Altınordu 2017 for a more detailed account of the aftermath of the coup attempt in relation to Gülenists. Along with the people who were accused of having relations to Gülenists, many left-wing, secularist, Kurdish, feminist, LGBTIQ, minority-related NGOs, parties, and organisations were heavily targeted during the two-year-long State of Emergency.

with victims of the State of Emergency and the Governmental decrees. The report documents the deep traumas of many people who went through abuse and mistreatment in police stations and interrogations, and suffered through biased legal processes, which created ‘significant changes in their social/political identities and mental perceptions/judgements’ (441). According to the same report, the State of Emergency and Governmental decrees created ‘serious ruptures between individual-state and society-state relationships’ and many people could not get over the shock of being declared as terrorists overnight (470). This economic, social, and psychological damage is not limited to the victims themselves, but extends to their relatives, friends, and broader social circles. The public sphere, according to Habermas, depends on ‘[d]iscursive democracy [which] requires a continual and variegated ‘interplay’ between a multiplicity of ‘public spheres’ emerging across civil society and a broad spectrum of formal political institution’ (White 1995: 13). When such spheres were systemically abolished during the post-Gezi period, and during the aftermath of the failed military coup attempt, bodies were used for political intervention even in the highest levels of the institutional political fields. Therefore, it was not a coincidence when Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s⁹ Justice March from Ankara to İstanbul took place with the participation of thousands of people in the summer of 2017 (Kılıçdaroğlu 2017). This was a major performative moment that spoke to the dissent with authority through a long-durational performance instead of a Habermasian diplomatic debate in the parliament.

The first step of establishing the July 15 official narrative was mobilising the streets and public spaces with groups from nationalist and conservative tendencies for weeks to come. The level of state support for this mass mobilisation was incomparable to anything prior: throughout

the night of July 15 all imams across the country were mobilised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to recite the *ezan* (call for prayer) and *sela* (funeral call) non-stop to bring more people on the street to ‘fight back’ against the attempted coup, creating a distinct soundscape. All means of technology and state security information on citizens were used to call people to what they called, ‘Democracy Watch’ gatherings in public spaces in weeks to come. These meetings were organised by the Government significantly as an anti-Gezi movement, through appropriating discourses (making the ‘spirit of Gezi’ into the ‘spirit of 15 July’) and occupying the same city spaces (Taksim Square once again becoming a major landmark of the ‘Democracy Watch’), and through funding these large-scale meetings by making public transport free and serving food. The step that followed the weeks-long state-funded mobilisation of the ‘Democracy Watch’ parties was the construction of a national memory around the official narrative of 15 July. The official narrative of 15 July was grounded in the mass mobilisation through religious symbolism and discourses of a sacred defence (and martyrdom). This mobilisation took place through the initiatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and was incomparable in the scale of the past appropriations of the Turkish state’s official utilisation of institutional Islam (see Solomonovich 2021). It is possible to read these bodily interventions to the public sphere as both the suppression and appropriation of the repertoire of resistance of the Gezi movement. This propaganda-soaked public sphere carved its marks in the bodies of the people who were not content with the Governmental narrative or the hegemonic interventions to the public sphere, through intense self-censorship, depression,¹⁰ and sometimes through triggering other physical illnesses.¹¹

One of the major results of this mass level engineering of the erasure of recent history, through the strict regulation of the official narratives and the oppression of counter-narratives, resulted in a difficult-to-document emotional shift in the memory of Gezi Park protests for

9. The current political leader of the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People’s Party). It is the foundational party of the Republic of Turkey and currently the second most popular party.

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the people who took part in it. Gezi was a freeing practice of resistance for many because it challenged and changed the acceptable social performativities defined by a nationalist, Islamist, neoliberal, masculinist, and heteronormative regime, namely the embodied hegemonic system. In the realm of the body, hegemony manifests itself as an internalised process that defines how the body can move and be in the public sphere under acceptable conditions for the authority. As dance scholar Sherry Shapiro argues, hegemony as a situation ‘can be found in our bones, our nerves, our eyes, and even in the corners of our mouths’ (1999: 70), which means that the hegemony not only disciplines, but essentially shapes our bodies. As Shapiro explains: ‘Our bodies speak to the growing awareness of the structuring of subjectivity through the ‘embodiment’ of the dominant ideology. Yet, to move beyond unconscious challenges or emotional defiance, there has to be a critical connection able to thread together the fragments of the contradictions, accommodations, and resistances’ (1999: 73). What was threaded together as a repertoire of resistance during Gezi could not be practiced anymore, due to intensifying violence of the authority and the disciplining tools of hegemony infused in the daily life. The phantom of this unused repertoire creates monuments of absence, especially when in relation to the spatial memory of individuals.

← 10. One telling case took place on 16 October 2014, when a 36-year-old successful white-collar administrator, Mehmet Pişkin, committed suicide leaving behind a 14-minute video that he shared on social media, explaining the reasons of his decision as desperation and hopelessness (“Mehmet Pişkin’in”, 16 Oct. 2014). At the time this video was widely discussed in social media with many judgemental comments attached to it. I think Pişkin’s video, and his description of the reasons for his suicide as someone who seemed from outside as in good financial and social standing had a triggering effect on the post-Gezi zeitgeist as many people related to his feelings, especially if they were not involved in organized activist groups. It can be argued that Pişkin was made into a scapegoat by many social media users through the postings of many judgemental comments as he was perceived as the embodiment of the desperation that many people were feeling.

← 11. ‘We know now of the long-term effects of the ongoing process of subjugation that manifest not only in issues related to self-esteem but also as physical illness’ (Taylor 2020: 12).

Urban palimpsests are composed in ways similar to those the analogy suggests: like the parchment that has been overwritten multiple times and composed of multiple scripts becomes a palimpsest, urban palimpsests are composed of layers of history and memory documented in the physical space through accumulating interventions and meanings. In urban palimpsests ‘representations of the visible will always show residues and traces of the invisible’ (Huysen 2009: 10). This is how the physical space of Taksim Square can bring the memory of bloody 1 May 1977, during Gezi for playwright Özen Yula. Traces of the invisible, traces of absence, generate strong networks of affect for the people who know the history of the space. The spaces where momentary interventions, clashes with authority, or long-duration resistances took place, shift their meaning for the people who remember these events, which in time translate themselves into monuments of absence in the trans-individual level of the urban space.

The space holds onto memories, the repertoire of resistance, that are cut out of the archive during the making of official narratives. Of course, one may argue, just the physical space itself cannot accumulate these meanings, there should be people associating these clusters of meaning with each other, since space can only make meaning through the bodies that make meaning out of it. Here, I find Avishai Margalit’s notion of ‘moral witness’ useful to deconstruct how bodies moving in and through a physical urban landscape can associate and construct certain meanings through the accumulation of the repertoires of resistance:

Standing as Temporary Monuments of Absence

'We should remind ourselves that being a moral witness means being subject to an extremely harsh reality. In such a reality it is possible that one's chances of survival are slim and that the only way of enhancing the chance to stay alive and be able to tell one's story is by betraying, in one way or another, one's fellow victims' (2002: 162).

A monument of absence, namely the precarious presence of an object or a person reminding of the monumental absence of many others, can only be created within the texture of an urban palimpsest, through many people witnessing that hegemonic threat to the right to live, and to live with dignity. In the context that this essay discusses, witnessing is a morally ambiguous state of being: it may include the betrayal of victims and causes of social justice since the witness might need to step aside to *witness*, while leaving the target of the hegemony alone. The witness must be a survivor to tell what has happened, despite having shared, or perhaps currently sharing, some of the risks that the victims of hegemonic violence went and are going through. Therefore, Margalit's notion of the moral witness is useful but not completely applicable in this context. The moral ambiguity of the witness in contemporary Turkey, and the emotional burden attached to this ambiguity, is what constructs the monumental absences. The examples I have chosen to discuss in the following section construct particular dialogues between politics and urban space through the performative interface of the body (inspired by Castelli 2019: 177), to be able to speak to how monuments of absence are constructed.

One particular item of the embodied resistance repertoire of Gezi stood out with its reproducibility, which made it into a specific form of resistance and a phenomenon throughout the entire country within a day, and managed to create a simple performative protest vocabulary for anyone who wanted to demonstrate their agency against authority. Erdem Gündüz, a man with a modern dance training, went to the Taksim Square at around 6pm on 17 June 2013, after Taksim square and Gezi Park were occupied by the police, at a moment when Gezi protestors were feeling incredibly defeated. He stood there alone for eight hours. As argued by dance scholar Susanne Foellmer, 'a similar aesthetic of slowing and stopping, also oriented toward postmodern movement practices of standing still' was explored before in modern dance, notably in a performance by Jérôme Bel, which might have inspired Gündüz who was informed by the modern dance field (2016: 59). Gündüz's performance was a moment that 'the repertoire [...] transform[ed] choreographies of meaning' (Taylor 2003: 20). Gündüz came to be known to public as 'Duran Adam', meaning 'the Standing Man'. Performance scholar Erin Mee explains how his act of protest went viral in less than half a day as follows:

By 2:00 a.m., roughly 300 people were standing with Gündüz. Not only did the photos and videos of the performance go viral, the act itself went viral. The following day people began standing in other neighbourhoods around İstanbul and in cities around Turkey: a woman in Ankara stood in the spot where protestor Ethem Sarısülük was shot by police on 1 June 2013 during the first days of Gezi Park protests; another group stood at the spot where protestor Abdullah Cömert was killed by police; three

men stood in the spot where Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink had been shot in 2007; people stood in front of newspaper offices that had failed to cover the protests; they stood in front of CNN Turk, which had famously shown a penguin documentary on 2 June instead of covering the protests; and they stood where intellectuals and Kurds had been killed for various reasons over the past 10 years. (2014: 69)

The act of mere standing has become an act of resistance in the context of Gezi. When standing became a protest, police started taking standing people into custody, which led more people to replicate this form of protest in their bodies across the country. As the immediate performances of standing that repeated Gündüz's initial performance demonstrate, standing was also utilised as a simultaneous act of remembering the past state atrocities, as people started standing in spaces where the state has committed crimes, such as the place where Hrant Dink was shot, as they were also protesting the on-going atrocities. This commemoration through standing still at the place of the murder also shared similarities with a mass choreography organised by Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (Bare Feet Dance Troupe) right after Hrant Dink's murder where fifty participants replicated his shot down body, blanketed with newspapers ('Agos'un önünde vurulup', 27 Jan. 2007). The three men standing where Dink was shot, along with the people who stood where Ethem Sarısülük and Abdullah Cömert were murdered, layered the urban palimpsest in the early morning hours of 18 June 2013 with their performances becoming temporary monuments of absence.

Murder and Sculpture: Spatial Superimposition as a Monument of Absence

Between the critical years of 2015 and 2016, at the levels of the interpersonal and street life; the crafting of the hegemonic presence manifested itself through a buzz of anxiety and masculine aggression. During this period, many individuals I know went through a sense of constant claustrophobia and a perpetual sense of disorientation. One telling case that took place before the military coup attempt was the murder of Nuh Köklü during a snowball fight game with his friends in the Yeldeğirmeni part of İstanbul's Kadıköy district on 17 February 2015. Köklü was stabbed by a grocery shop owner who got agitated because of the act of an adult mixed-sex group playing in public ('Nuh Köklü Statement', 20 Feb. 2015). It was revealed afterwards that the grocery shop owner was a devout supporter of AKP, and the act of an adult mixed-sex group playing in public revealed to him that they were not AKP supporters, as their bodies were not disciplined according to the hegemony of the regime, which fuelled his violent agitation. The act of playing and being unashamed with joy in public tied the group to Gezi protestors in the collective subconsciousness of the immediate post-Gezi zeitgeist. This was a murder that had a significant disciplinary meaning, since during the Gezi Resistance President Tayyip Erdoğan was discursively trying to mobilise particularly small shop owners against committing lynchings of Gezi protestors. This was also why the murderer's older brother felt full entitlement to write a letter to Erdoğan, which was publicised later, claiming that his brother's act was a defence on behalf of AKP at street level against the enemies of AKP such as the Gezi supporters, which is why his brother's crime should be forgiven ('Nuh Köklü'nün katilinin', 6 Aug. 2015).



Nuh Köklü statue made by İskender Giray
© Handan Salta, 23 April 2022

In early April 2015, sculpture maker İskender Giray made and placed an abstract sculpture for the memory of the murder of Nuh Köklü on the street where this crime took place which, despite the controversies it caused, still remains in place ('Nuh Köklü adına', 9 April 2015). The sculpture depicts two people who share the same lower body. One figure is trying to free the mind of the other, which is visualized by means of opening the door of the cage that depicts the head of the second figure; where the cage holds a tiny and scared prisoner inside. The second figure simultaneously stabs the first figure. As I mentioned at the beginning, monuments of absence can be both bodily, mostly manifested in our survival control mechanisms of suppressing our repertoire of resistance, along with a spatial re-definition of physical landscapes. Köklü's murder and the commemorative sculpture that Giray made overlap in the urban palimpsest, in which the sculpture reveals the memory and ideological meaning of this murder. The place has now gained a particular meaning through the omnipresent absence of Nuh Köklü, becoming a monument of absence.

Hunger Strike in Public Space: A Long-Durational Performance that Turns a Present Monument into a Monument of Absence

The state's increasing levels of direct violence to silence resisting individuals, who are sacrificing their bodies for political justice, illustrates a certain dialectic between the 'political culture of hyper-punitiveness' (Giroux 2014: 52) and the severity of the bodily tactics that resisting individuals utilised against the normalisation of it. As Turkey's political scene moved to demonstrations of more and more violence in the public sphere, the individual protests became more and more difficult to carry out. Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça's hunger strikes,¹² which they started to regain their working rights that were taken away from them during the State of Emergency through a Governmental decree, lasted for 324 days (between 9 March 2017 and 26 January 2018). They decided to end the strike through their own means in early 2018 ('Gülmen ve Özakça', 26 Jan. 2018). Nuriye Gülmen's personal resistance actually started 120 days before the first day of their collective hunger strike, and the stages of her protest prior to the hunger strike are documented as follows:

12. Here is a short self-description of the process of this resistance: 'We, as academician Nuriye Gülmen and teacher Semih Özakça are two of the revolutionist democratic public workers from Turkey who were dismissed with the emergency decrees. Both of us also are the members of Education and Science Workers' Union. We did not accept this unlawful, unjust dismissals and we started sit-down strike in Yüksel Street, Ankara; in front of the Human Rights' Statue from 9th November, 2016. In time, our friends, who were also dismissed with Statutory Decrees came and joined us. Sociologist Veli Saçılık, teachers Acun Karadağ, Esra Özkan Özakça and Mehmet Dersulu also became a part of our resistance. Thousands of democratic citizens have been supportive for our resistance. Opposing voices around the world, international press have been tried to make our voices heard.' (HUNGRYFOROURJOBS 2017)

Nuriye Gülmen, a comparative literature professor, was first suspended from her position in Selçuk University via a statutory decree in November 2016. To protest her suspension, Gülmen started a sit-in protest in the Turkish capital Ankara, where she was arrested 17 times over her 17-day long protest. She was subsequently fired from her position via the new statutory decrees released on January 6, 2017, and on January 11 she was beaten and detained by the police in Ankara. (Abramson 2017: xviii)

Before the Government realised the public attention around Gülmen and Özakça cases, which became visible especially after the concern triggered among the public after a critical threshold in their health was passed on the sixty-seventh day of their hunger strike, there were two consecutive responses from the state. At first the Government did nothing to acknowledge the demands of the strike, and on the seventy-fifth day Gülmen and Özakça were taken into custody in an early morning operation to keep them away from public view despite their worsening health. Because, as Sara Ahmed notes, '[t]he punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death' (2014: 1). In this case, the state was establishing the conditions of a politically convenient death of protestors through strategically not allowing them to access the necessary medical care. In fact, the Government was so deeply scared of the individual protests of Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça that the Ministry of Internal Affairs published a fifty-four-page propaganda booklet in English and Turkish against them, entitled 'The Unending Scenario of a Terrorist Organization,' ('İçişleri'nden', 21 July 2017), accusing Gülmen and Özakça with unproven claims of being related to terrorist organisations.

The place where Nuriye Gülmen was carrying out her public protests in Ankara, the Human Rights Sculpture (made by artist Metin Yurdanur and placed in its current position at Yüksel Street in 1990) was later surrounded by police barricades for weeks starting on 23 May 2017

(Acer 2018), not allowing anyone to approach the immobile bronze object, creating a vivid image of the political insanity by arresting a statue. The arrest of the statue became an unexpected performative act in itself, as a sort of meta-performance of authority, which vividly illustrates the attempts to rebuild the ‘wall of fear’. Here, the similarity between the authorities’ handling of the resisting body and of the memorial space of that resistance is striking. The resisting body is forced out of the public eye to make its influence disappear, while the memorial space is cut out of the organic structure of the city in an attempt to obscure its political gravity. The space as the physical reminder of the memory is kept under significant surveillance and, therefore, criminalised, which pressures passers-by into a disengagement with the space and its integral memory. Despite the heavy-handed intervention of the authorities, the space is a physical reminder of the memory of the resistance; in this case, the Human Rights Statue at Yüksel Street holds the memory of Nuriye Gülmen. Gülmen and Özakça’s withdrawal from their protest due to their worsening health, and their absence from the public sight since then, do not erase the history of their resistance from the urban space; but rather — I argue — create a monument of their absence. Between the monument of absence in the physical space and their almost sacrificial public performance for justice, there remains a constant interplay of meaning making on both individual and collective levels.

A hunger strike is *inevitably* performative: the body embodies the demand in a realm beyond language since ‘[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language’ (Scarry 1985: 4). Through such embodied repertoire of resistance, the individual declares their ‘material presence’ (Gupta, Hajimichael, Katsarska, and Spyros 2017: 1), where the individual can imagine themselves as politically determinative, as a political actor, as a person with agency (Gupta, Hajimichael, Katsarska, and Spyros 2017: 2). The intensity of a hunger strike largely impacts



Human Rights statue made by Metin Yurdanur. The statue depicts a woman reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. © Zeynep Baykal, 30 September 2017

its reproducibility and locates the act within significantly more bodily risk, but it also amplifies the affect of the resistance on non-resisting individuals, the ambiguous moral witnesses, by constantly reminding them that they are *obeying*, since they are not resisting. The urban palimpsest of resistance works through creating performative patterns and layers in the space: the Human Rights Statue was also a major meeting hub during the Gezi resistance for the protestors in Ankara (Acer 2018). Andreas Huyssen describes, ‘an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of

what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is' (2009: 7). The spatial memory of Gülmen's resistance became embedded in the 'urban imaginary' through the monument of absence it constructed, signing towards an alternative Turkey in which Gülmen's resistance resulted in justice rather than more state violence.

This is a case in which we, as ambiguous moral witnesses, survived to tell what has happened, despite our betrayal of the person, for whom we could not do more than witnessing. This emotional burden is a major constructive element of this particular monument of absence. Because, if this is a performance, then 'the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes. If you're sufficiently patient, it will happen. You will see it, but it will not be visible' (Özgül Akıncı 2018: 48, quoting Blau 1982: 156). The watching of this slow and wilful erosion of life, the act of witnessing the cost of the demand of justice resists the black hole of amnesia as the urban space stays as a constant reminder of this monumental absence, along with the potentiality that this absence holds.

CONCLUSION A Futurity Claim

I agree with Uruguayan political scientist Paulo Ravecca who claims that 'situating disciplinary introspection through personal introspection may open fruitful paths to interrogate and unravel knots of experience made of knowledge, power, and politics' (2019: 166). My own history is entangled in the history of contemporary Turkey: I was one of the protestors in the Gezi Park during June 2013 like many people I know, and the experience influenced — and perhaps shaped — me in multiple ways. The experience of Gezi shifted my positionality in Turkey from

a somewhat respectable citizen to a threatening and disposable body overnight between 31 May and 1 June 2013, while I was in the Istiklal Avenue with many other people. During my personal poisoning with tear gas that night, I knew in my body that this was barely the beginning of the bodily threats of authority towards its dissentients. The visceral experience of Gezi changed the meaning of the armed state forces for me from within my body: the theoretical knowledge of what police can do to individuals, as the legal definitions of crimes can be tailored to the needs of the authority, was suddenly translated into my body as an act of constant calculation of my physical proximity with the armed and uniformed officials in public spaces. My courage and knowledge to move, hide, and re-arrange in urban public spaces with the crowds of Gezi under tear gas attacks is my repertoire; whereas my fear of armed forces, my awareness and alertness around controlling my speech, clothes, and behaviour in public is my body's monument of absence. It is a monument of absence because who I am, and who I could be, is partially absent in my public presence. Therefore, the need to write this essay has partly come out of the necessity to reflect on which parts of our collective repertoire of resistance is forgotten and why; and under which circumstances these 'lost' repertoires might be re-enacted.

The present difficulty to imagine other potentials for Turkey is a public feeling that creates many monuments of absence in many urban spaces. Imagining of a different future is only possible through remembering that what has happened can happen again, and knowing that the body — our bodies — still hold onto the repertoires of the collective resistance. 'Trauma lives in the body, not in the archive' (Taylor 2020: 201), which is why the 'future is written into the body' (McLaren 1999: ix). What has been embedded into the body through experience, namely the repertoire of resistance, which has been transformed into many monuments of absence through the hegemonic interventions to the public sphere, is also the key potentiality that can trigger a future resistance. •

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