



**REAPPROPRIATION
OF PUBLIC SPACE
AUTONOMOUS SPACE
MAKING FROM
ISTANBUL'S ALTERNATIVE
THEATRE SCENE TO THE
GEZI MOVEMENT
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MOTS-CLÉS

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SUMMARY

I analyse Istanbul's Gezi movement in 2013 to explore the intertwined relationship between public square movements and theatre. An *alternative* theatre movement in Turkey emerged in the 2000s in Istanbul that can be traced back to the 1990s, when theatre companies started to construct their own spaces by converting unexpected places into theatres and, thereby, enabling new ways of practicing theatre. The essay presents empirical fieldwork using semi-structured interviews and participative observations with independent theatres since the 1990s. Alternative theatre practices in Istanbul offer an alternative history of autonomous space making in the city before the Gezi Movement. In the aftermath of Gezi, alternative theatres gained momentum by extending political resistance and transforming their relationship to urban space and, hence, to politics.

RÉSUMÉ

J'analyse le mouvement Gezi à Istanbul en 2013 pour explorer la relation entre des mouvements de la place publique et le théâtre. Le mouvement du théâtre alternatif en Turquie est apparu dans les années 2000 à Istanbul mais il peut être retracé depuis les années 1990, lorsque des compagnies de théâtre ont commencé à construire leurs propres espaces en convertissant des lieux inattendus en théâtres et, ainsi, ils ont rendu possible des nouvelles façons de pratiquer le théâtre. Cet essai présente mon travail de terrain empirique utilisant des entretiens semi-structurés et des observations participantes avec des théâtres indépendants depuis les années 1990. La pratique du théâtre alternatif à Istanbul offre une histoire alternative sur la création d'espaces autonomes dans la ville avant le mouvement Gezi. Dans la période 'après-Gezi', les théâtres alternatifs ont pris de l'ampleur en prolongeant la résistance politique et en transformant leur rapport à l'espace urbain et donc, au politique.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the Istanbul art scene gained a new momentum with the rise of independent theatres, also known as ‘alternative theatres’. I choose to use the term ‘alternative’, directly translated from the term ‘Alternatif Sahneler’ (i.e., alternative stages) commonly used by actors and audiences in Istanbul. Alternative means here the space where the theatrical practice takes place. Unlike proscenium stages characterised by a net separation between the stage and the audience, alternative stages convert spaces that are not originally designed as theatres into black-box stages. As such, they reconfigure the relationship to the spectator and to the space. Any unexpected place, such as a garage or an old workshop can be converted to a theatre. In these theatres, with a capacity of usually around fifty to one hundred people, the stage is not fixed but reorganised for each play with folding chairs. There is no velvet curtain, seats are not fixed, and the stage’s floor is visible to the spectators. The transformation of a theatre’s form and architecture stimulates new ways of making theatre. Renewal of subjects, style, language, and dramaturgy enables a theatre rooted in local and public life.

In the early 2010s, Istanbul's main commercial and cultural district Taksim was hosting more than ten alternative theatres sparking a new spatiality and sociability in the city. This specific area appears as a site of cultural effervescence but also a site of conflict marked by gentrification and urban transformation targeting the spaces of secular lifestyle. It is in this context that on 27 May 2013 a group of ecologists organised a sit-in at Taksim's neighboring Gezi Park against its demolition by bulldozers uprooting its trees. As one of the rare remaining green spaces in the city centre, Gezi Park was about to be demolished and to be replaced by a building complex which would bring together a reconstructed 'historical' building (an Ottoman barracks), a mosque, and a shopping mall. Protestors faced harsh police retaliation and the protest rapidly transformed into massive political resistance against Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian regime. While Gezi Park was occupied by protestors for two weeks until it was emptied by the police, protests spread around the country and among the Turkish diaspora in other countries. During the occupation, citizens from different classes, social backgrounds, ethnicities, ideologies, and lifestyles dwelt in Gezi Park. For example, seculars surrounded Muslims to protect them from police violence when they were praying. The meeting of the Kemalists and the Kurds revealed the frictions and tensions of the society. In occupy movements, the shared sensory, bodily, and affective experience sets in motion liminal moments where links are constantly made and undone, even if it is not possible to speak of the absolute overcoming of divisions (Ayata and Harders 2019: 125). Thus, the Gezi movement cannot be identified by social class as in the 1960s labour movements, neither by a shared identity as in the 1980s feminist, ethnic, religious movements. What brought the protestors together was their claim of urban space.

The Gezi movement illustrates an example of 'public square movements'¹ that emerged all around the globe in the 2010s from 15M in Spain to Occupy Wall Street in the US (Göle 2018). These movements are named after physical places that protestors occupied, repurposed, and reappropriated, such as Gezi Park in Istanbul, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Syntagma Square in Athens. Tony Fisher identifies a new kind of 'dissensual' politics *in situ*, emphasising the material and spatial character of the newly emerging political forms (2017: 18). Protestors interfere to claim the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968), reclaiming it to (re)make it as truly public space. These urban spaces matter in their localisation, architectural form, and the publicness that they generate. Marvin Carlson's emphasis on the political events of the 2010s shows that the 'here' where an event occurs may so profoundly affect the event that it overshadows the 'what' of the event itself (2013: 101). In this political context of the 2010s, public square movements reveal how important the topology is to the publicness of contestation and to the social fabric of its participants and the urban environment.

Although public square movements might be considered as spontaneous events gathering a heterogeneous public, each one has a particular context rooted in the political and urban atmosphere. For Gezi Park, different interpretations locate Gezi in the history of social movements, urban resistances, and youth movements in Turkey. Focusing on the reappropriation of the public space as a mark of singularity, alternative theatre practice in Istanbul presents a history of autonomous space making in the city preceding the social movement.

This essay, then, takes the Gezi Park movement and its associated alternative theatre practices around the Taksim neighbourhood as a case

1. It should be noted that the Gezi movement started in Gezi Park, then expanded to Taksim square beside the park and it affected many forms of activism taking place on public squares across the country.

study to reflect upon the tight relationship between artistic reconfigurations of space and reappropriation of the public space as an act of political resistance. Henceforth, I will call the Gezi Park movement ‘Gezi’ as it is called in the vernacular language. I will present empirical fieldwork from my doctoral research realised in intervals since 2017 (thirty-seven interviews) using semi-structured interviews and participative observations with independent theatres since the 1990s, such as Kum-pan-ya, Bilsak, Tiyatro Dot, Kumbaracı50, Şermola Performans, Tiyatro Biriken, and D22. My hypothesis is that the Gezi movement can be traced back to the alternative theatre practice in Istanbul which was already in existence prior to the protests claiming autonomous spaces in the city for artistic creation and sociability. In other words, it provides an alternative history to analyse the sociopolitical transformation of citizens claiming their ownership in the city. Furthermore, alternative theatres become spaces of political resistance in the aftermath of Gezi. I will try to explore how the spatial turn in theatrical practice echoes in the relationship between citizens and the city before and after Gezi (2013) by means of (re)appropriating the space and enabling new political imaginaries.

(Re)spatialisation of the Politics: Framing and Staging the City

Experimental scenographies reconfigure the framing and the distinction between the stage and the audience. Consequently, I ask the following questions: Who appears on the stage and who is assigned as audience? How does this kind of framing echo with the spatial segregation in social everyday life? What kind of artistic work and organisation shape those spaces? Who is their public? What kind of a sociability takes place in those semi-public places? How are they engaged with their locality? How do they transform their urban site? How do they engage with the spatial memory? What are the ways in which alternative theatres are engaged with the public space?

To analyse the articulation between aesthetics and politics, I follow Jacques Rancière’s approach, who defines the distribution of the sensible as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’ (2004: 12). (Re)configuring space means reconfiguring the relationships that take place there and creating a new regime of the sensible (ibid.). Thus, reorganising the spatial organisation of daily life and the visibility regime has a political character. The artistic practice of alternative theatres becomes political and anti-establishment by building narratives and making visible minorities who are invisible and inaudible in public space.

New perspectives on space and performing arts became relevant, such as questions of framing and site-specificity, as well as the relationship

between performance, urban politics, and geography (Wihstutz 2013: 26). Social sciences frequently adopt theatrical metaphors to grasp the spatial dimension of public square movements. Judith Butler puts forward the aspect of performativity in their analysis on public assemblies and argues that bodies assembling already signify prior to, and apart from, any demands that they make in a discursive way (2015: 8). During the protests, creative combinations appeared between the audience and the public. My analysis will point out a physically situated approach to politics where social and political antagonisms are shaped around which bodies are allowed to be visible and which ones are excluded in public space. The body here is not considered as a distinct entity but a relational one whose existence is intrinsically linked to the space where it is situated and to the other bodies surrounding it.

The use of space in occupy movements resonates with the theatrical framing, thus also the spectatorship. Sophie Nield emphasises the newly altered *mise-en-scène* of protests as a potentially transgressive force that challenges the preexisting 'proscenium' or 'frame' for demonstrations (2015: 122). Nilüfer Göle refers to the occupied space as a 'stage' where citizenship is 'rehearsed', and a choreography of pluralism is 'enacted' (Göle 2018). It is the physical space that enables the encounter and visibility of the bodily presences. The framing of social life is embodied by the proscenium arch that divides the space into observers and those who are observed. Each framing draws a societal inside and an outside (Goffman 1974). In the global age, public space is subjugated to a top-down construction of the city. Citizens are positioned as passive spectators of the spectacle of political power. However, a free public space enables citizens' bottom-up participation in politics. In the social and political context of the 2010s, those two ideal types coexist in a permanent state of negotiation.

City making is then a social process, a relationship between the social and physical shaping of cities, between how people use, create, and inhabit social spaces (Tonkiss 2013: 1). Creating new spaces in the city and re-determining the use of the existing ones transform the spatial organisation of the city and, thus, the social life constrained by the material conditions. Occupy movements interfere with the spatial framing of the public space in a deliberate way. According to Arendt (1998), the precondition of democracy is the existence of a public space where citizens can make themselves visible to each other. As such, one can say that citizens take up the stage, disrupt the framing of social life, and they make themselves visible first to each other and then to the political power. Hence, an ideal public space should function as a stage where actors stepping on it become visible. Citizens are both actors and spectators of this co-performed act of visibility. In a city that is considered as a stage, citizens should be aware of the norms and social codes of being in public.

To analyse the alternative theatre scene's engagement with the space making in the city that offers an approach to the Gezi movement and its aftermath, I will first analyse the emergence of the autonomous theatre scene in the 1990s, then focus on the alternative theatre's spatialisation tactics in the Taksim district, and finally turn to its relationship with the Gezi protest movement.

Emergence of an Alternative Theatre Scene in Turkey

The theatrical tradition in Turkey largely comes from two different registers: traditional forms of performance composed of *Karagöz*, *Ortaoyunu*, *Meddah*,² and village plays performed in public places and theatre in a Western tradition. This dichotomy already illustrates two different constructions of public space. The first one is the space of pre-modernity and shared experience where the artist is not distinct from the public. The second forms a public space as a site of modernity, characterised by the proscenium stage that separates strictly the scene from the audience. Theatre, in the Western tradition, emerged in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century as a result of foreign companies and Armenian, Italian, and Jewish minorities in Istanbul (Güllü 2008). In the nineteenth century, the Pera district in Taksim became a cosmopolitan hub of all sorts of cultural activities mostly practiced by non-Muslim communities (Mills 2010: 52). During the Ottomans' modernization and reform, theatre was used as a tool for the civilisation process aimed at reshaping the *habitus*, the forms of visibility, and the production of a common sense (Altınay and Adak 2019: 189). The Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, pursued the focus on modern Western drama in favour of a modern national theatre purged from non-Turkish elements. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatres (IBST) and The State Theatre (1949) were founded as republican institutions, staging examples of the Western canon, encouraging the playwrights of the newly emerging Turkish theatre and embodying

2. *Karagöz* stands for the shadow theatre; *Ortaoyunu* is the popular farce form; *Meddah* is the one-man story-teller performance. All of these three were performed in the public places.

modernity in the public space in architectural sense. In the 1950s, private theatres such as Dormen and Kenter theatres emerged with their repertory of classics, Western comedies, and dramas. In 1960s, avant-garde theatre experimentations, searching for new ways of using the theatrical space and relating with spectators all around the world, had an impact on Turkey's theatre scene.

The 1960s are marked by the materialisation of theatrical space theory initiated in the early twentieth century. Western theatres began to move out from the established theatre institutions with proscenium stages towards found and appropriated places that were not initially conceived as performance spaces (Fischer-Lichte 2013: 615). Avant-garde theatre groups transformed found spaces like garages, barns, and warehouses to theatres. Among others, the search for found places was inspired by Antonin Artaud's direction toward the use of hangars or barns as theatre spaces (1958: 96). While Artaud's theatre theory appropriates the Eastern theatre forms, 1960s avant-garde theatre in Turkey was inspired by the Western theories without reappropriating pre-modern traditions in Turkey. Spaces that are not originally conceived as performance venues were preferred because they did not set any clear guidelines for the relationship between actors and spectators and thus opened possibilities for a performance-generated spatiality (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 110). Gordon Craig's and Adolphe Appia's approaches, on the contrary, advocated empty spaces built from scratch for experimental plays (Wiles 2003: 246). Hence, they propose new models for theatre architecture varying from the proscenium stage.

The backbone of Turkey's avant-garde wave were Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba (Başar 2014: 41). Brook's 'empty space' description of the 'stage' inspired the idea that any place might be converted to a performative space. Grotowski's and Barba's theories were adopted as alternative acting pedagogies in Turkey's Stanislavski-based conservatoire system.

The Language and Culture Centre (LCC) stands out as a unique example in Turkey's history of theatre architecture with its experimental design. LCC was initially established as a German language school. Its theatre branch was founded in 1965 by Beklan and Ayla Algan, pioneers of the Turkish theatre avant-garde. LCC's theatre building was built in Nişantaşı by architect Tuncay Çavdar as a mobile construction that included Turkey's first revolving stage and platform for the spectators (Pekman 2011: 290). Weininger's global theatre project, Malnur's u-shaped theatre, and Gropius's total theatre designed for Piscator were inspirations for this project (Çavdar 2008: 119). The construction enabled many different stage configurations and even the possibility to change the positions of the stage and spectators during a play. Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade* on 30 May 1968 was the only play staged in this theatre after three years of formation. Çavdar states that his aim was to build a performance space whose spatiality would transform accordingly with social change outside of the theatre (2008: 119). One could say that the 1960's political atmosphere of social experimentation, civic engagement, and political demonstrations in Turkey encouraged an active citizenship that was manifested in theatrical experiments.

In the 1970s, the methods of Erwin Piscator's and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre became a huge influence in the political turmoil of violent clashes between right-wing and leftist movements in Turkey. Ankara Art Theatre (originally Ankara Sanat Tiyatrosu or AST) and Dostlar Theatre in Istanbul were the prominent theatres of that period. 'Movement Theatre for Revolution' founded by Mehmet Ulusoy in 1968 engaged in street theatre in public places and factories. In 1976, Beklan Algan founded Tepebaşı Experimental Stage under IBST, a former carpentry workshop, which was transformed into Turkey's first black-box scene. Scenographer Metin Deniz tried many different usages of the space during the five-year run of this theatre, including a circular design for Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* directed by Algan.

For this creation, spectators had turning seats and were positioned in the centre of the stage to watch the play encircling them.

The military coup of 12 September 1980 reconfigured the artistic sphere in Turkey alongside the political and the social sphere. Private theatres faced closure, censorship, and surveillance. Leftist intellectuals were purged from state-funded theatres and obliged to go into exile in European countries. Exiled theatre directors, actors, and actresses met and worked with the avant-garde theatre institutions of the period, such as Başar Sabuncu, Beklan and Ayla Algan in the Schaubühne. This generation's return to Turkey planted the seeds for an alternative theatre scene challenging conventional theatre architecture and scenography.

In the 1980s, Bilsak (Science Art Institution), TAL (Theatre Research Laboratory) as well as Şahika and Esat Tekand's Acting and Art Studio appeared as private initiatives which all invested in applied research practices. In 1984, Bilsak founded as an interdisciplinary initiative of academics and artists who lost their positions in the political purge that followed the military coup. Acknowledged theatre academics, actors, and directors such as Oben Güney, Erol Keskin, Ayla Algan, Beklan Algan, Prof. Cevat Çapan, Taner Barlas, Ahmet Levendoğlu, Macit Koper, Müge Gürman, Metin Deniz, and Ergüder Yoldaş took part in the foundation of the Bilsak Acting School. Situated in the Taksim district, Bilsak became an important cultural centre for dissident intellectuals after the coup. Algan quit Bilsak in 1986, but former students Nihal Geyran Koldaş, Alp Giritli, Emre Baykal, and Ceysu Koçak ve Şerif Erol founded a theatre company under the name Bilsak, which went on for thirteen more years. This company chose venues like the Roxy Nightclub and the Hagia Nicholas Orthodox Church for their performances.

In 1988, Beklan Algan returned to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatres and founded the unit TAL with Ayla Algan.

TAL was designed as a workshop focused on research, method, and experimentation instead of a product-based theatre. The theoretical inspirations came from Grotowski and Barba. Barba himself participated to the events regarding the Odin Theatre's 30th anniversary in 1995. TAL served as a school for all the prominent artists who marked Istanbul's theatre scene after the 1990s.

Commonly inspired from TAL, a generation born between the 1960s and the 1970s emerged in Turkey's performing arts scene in 1990s. This generation shares common traits such as coming from secular and urban elite families, possessing strong cultural capital, graduating from prestigious foreign high schools of Turkey, speaking foreign languages, and having international experience. Kerem Kurdoğlu (Kum-Pan-Ya), for example, was born in Istanbul in 1964 and graduated from Robert College and Bosphorus University's Economics department. He is one of Turkey's first 3D-animators and runs a company specialising in visual effects. Mahir Günşiray, founder of Tiyatro Oyunevi, is the son of actor Orhan Günşiray. After his education at the Ankara State Conservatory, he obtained his Master's degree at Leeds University. Theatre director Emre Koyuncuoğlu graduated from the Austrian College and Bosphorus University's English Language and Literature department. She worked as a translator and a journalist before her career in performing arts. She has significant international experience, including at the Royal Court Theatre in the UK and the Schaubühne in Berlin.

Inspired by TAL and Peter Brook's theory of the empty space, according to which any place can be transformed into a theatre, this generation created theatrical spaces in the city that engaged with the urban fabric and the spatial memory of the places which they occupied. The symbol of this period would be ISM (Istanbul Art Center).

'Istanbul Sanat Merkezi': A New Cultural Hub for the City

ISM was a 'found-place'; a deserted monastery that created a new artistic hub, reassembling different actors in an unexpected place in an unexpected neighbourhood. It was discovered in 1988 by actress Nihal Geyran Koldaş, while she was on location scouting for the TV series *Cahide*. After the shooting, various painters heard of this place and rented ateliers in the building.

This building, commonly referred to by its habitants as the 'Monastery', was built in 1843 as the first Armenian-Catholic monastery of Turkey. In 1930, it became an Armenian school for girls until its closure in 1982 due to a lack of students. It was situated in Tarlabası, five minutes away from Taksim Square, the symbolically and historically charged, main public square of Istanbul. Historically, Tarlabası has always been a cosmopolitan district inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities of Turkey. In the 1990s, Tarlabası was considered as a 'shady' and black-listed district marked by urban poverty, criminality, sex work, and drug dealing, and referred to as the district of transgenders and Kurdish inhabitants after the forced migration of the 1990s. ISM's moving into Tarlabası was completely unexpected as this district had never been a site for cultural or social events in the city.

In 1991, Kum-Pan-Ya (literally Com-Pa-Ny) rented ISM's first floor. This company was founded by the couple Kerem Kurdoğlu (playwright, director, actor) and Naz Erayda (stage designer and director). They called their stage a 'playground', marking their experimental approach.

They were followed by Green Grapes Dance Theatre in 1992,³ Mustafa and Övül Avkıran's 5th Street Theatre in 1997, and the Mahir Günşiray-led Theatre Playhouse in 1999. The members of these companies became the prominent figures of theatre, performance, and dance of Turkey in the following years and inspired the founders of the alternative theatres of the 2000s and 2010s. ISM operated between 1989 and 2006, and hosted twenty-three artist ateliers, movie shoots, an Irish Pub, and many associations besides those theatres.

In the archive project realised by SALT Online, Vasıf Kortun describes this unique place as follows:

The main reason of Monastery's emergence is a community that took shape in the end of 1980s. [...] Different from similar organisations, Monastery's components are not reassembled around a shared ideology. [...] In the first years of the Monastery, the new order of culture, art, performance, and entertainment history did not fall into place yet limits of freedom were constantly extended, globalisation was shaping the city through many different migration flows, and the dynamism brought by a different creative local sector who seeks for its own cultural expression was strongly felt. (2014; my translation)

Kortun stresses the singularity of ISM artists as pioneers of a new conception of the city who do not have a shared identity, but whose commonness arises from the space they share. ISM could be thought of as a new urban community, whose foundations lie outside an identity reflex of sameness based upon a republican and ethnically Turkish identity consolidated against an 'Other'. Sennett advocates new urban communities in the early 1970s in their search for diversity dissensus to

modulate a new urban fabric that emerges from the interaction among people (1970: 181). Gielen puts forward Sennett's analysis and argues that artistic space making practices produce a common rather than a defined community (2015: 189). This trait might be considered as a precursor for the 'commonness' created in the public square movements of the 2010s. It is the physical space that reunites the people and enables a space to experiment. ISM interfered in the city's spatial organisation by moving arts practices and culture to an unexpected location. The site allows a new approach for how theatre companies interact with the physical space that they occupy, namely the urban locale in which they are situated and through which they interact with each other. Collaborations and solidarity were born from sharing the same building and organising discussions around a drink at night in the Irish pub on the rooftop. Artistic practices in ISM bring forward close relations with the street and the Taksim district. Among different experimental creations of theatre companies, I will take a closer look at the creations that adopt a reflexive approach to the space itself.

Kum-Pan-Ya gave particular importance to the relationship to the space as one of its founders; Naz Erayda was a scenographer putting the space at the centre of her artistic creation. Kum-Pan-Ya adopted a total conception of theatre and rejected an authoritarian approach which privileged the director or the actor. It claimed that all components of the theatre were equally important for the artistic creation without any hierarchy (Erayda 2002: XI). Kum-Pan-Ya did not name their performance space a 'theatre', 'scene', or 'stage', but the whole place was referred to as 'playroom' to emphasise the laboratory approach. The audience seats were not fixed but organised accordingly for each play.

In *Revived Space: A Theatrical Projection of an Agonizing City* (1993), the scenography was the spark for the creation, reversing the usual production process where stage design was only thought of at the end as an

3. Founded by Deniz Altınay, Ziya Azazi, Zeynep Günsür, Mustafa Kaplan, Bikem Kerametli, and Emre Koyuncuoğlu.

accessory. Instead, Erayda set up the space and invited the performers to interact with the space once she finished. The only direction for the play was the theme 'Istanbul'. Erayda stresses that she designed an unfinished scene to be created by the performers' actions (2002: 19). Instead of a contained stage design having a meaning of its own, she opted for a space which would be created by the performers' interaction with the objects and the empty spaces in between them (74). It is interesting to note that the theme for their first spatial experimentation was Istanbul, as a fragmented, distorted, chaotic representation of the city with performers who tried to create meaning in it. Spectators were invited to engage with the objects, answer questions, and, thus, take an active role in this meaning-making process. This can be read as an attempt to craft a feeling of belonging to and agency in a city where citizens were marked by a feeling of loss and subjugated to radical transformations leading to exclusion and alienation.

This dynamic spatial approach based upon permanent movement and change resonates with De Certeau's definition of space, constantly in the making and created by human action in a place. De Certeau argues that *place* is a top-down construction of the city seized by the political power to shape the social interactions taking place within, such as borders and walls segregating a city (1984: 117). Space stands for a practiced place dynamically shaped by the social interactions occurring in it (ibid.). Pascal Gielen emphasises that space is being continuously created by utilising place, actively controlling it and, therefore, it is in a constant state of spatialisation and transmutation (2015: 276). In this case, Istanbul is re-enacted in an alternative theatrical space in Istanbul with performers and participants during the given time and space of the performance.

In *Kim O?* (*Who is it?*, 1996), Erayda turned her gaze to the Monastery's memory calling for the disappearance of the Armenian minority and then to its urban surroundings in Tarlabası. Erayda explains her

spark for inspiration as follows: 'The playground had a window looking to the street, which was always closed with curtains to isolate the performance space. One day, the curtains were open, and the window was welcoming the street to the playroom with all its noises, colours, and history' (interview with the author; my translation). Hence, Erayda designed the theatre's playground as a transparent space extending its scene to Tarlabası and by extension, to Istanbul (interview with the author 2018). The artistic choice of playing with windows open introduced an element of spontaneity. Street fights, music, and different languages spoken in Tarlabası were included in the play. Time was also an important element for this performance, which began before sunset, on a different hour every day. In one particular scene, the artists were opening the windows and a muezzin's call to prayer from the minaret nearby heard in the street became part of the performance.

Who is it? was developed as a play on minority; despair; solitude; fear; national, social, individual identities; paranoia; forced migration; and discrimination (interview with the author 2018). The play reflected upon being a minority on an individual and psychological level. However, performers sang in silenced minorities' languages, namely in Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Kurdish, which was particularly risky for the period as their use was forbidden in public space in the politically violent atmosphere caused by the conflicts between the Turkish army and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

Kum-Pan-Ya's approach combining political actuality and artistic experimentality pointed out a new way of relating to politics, as formulated by Kerem Kurdoğlu:

Before 12 September, people who were engaged in theatre were doing it for political means. We had to ask ourselves why and how we were going to do theatre after 12 September [...] After 12 September,

Alternative Theatres: Artistic Space Making in the City

everyone who claimed themselves on the left and engaged in arts had to go through a similar transformation. While they were only trying to explain why revolution is necessary to the mass before, they started to analyse the political issues in the little moments of life, in its subtleties. (interview with the author 2018; my translation)

Kurdoğlu's statement displays a disruption, challenging the differentiation and hierarchy between content and form, between *politics* and the *political*. A bifurcation appears between Brechtian political theatre of the 1970s and avant-garde theatre of the 1990s. It is not possible to define a paradigm in the heterogeneity of the theatre scene in the 1990s with new public, commercial, and political theatres popping up. However, avant-garde theatres stand out with their research on artistic forms and approach to what is commonly considered as political. According to Fischer-Lichte, policies that underpinned theatre's appropriation of new spaces attempted to shift the threshold between the theatre and other domains of everyday life, to create shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute a participatory form of democratic activity (2013: 654). The very fact of embedding theatre into the spaces of public life carries a potential to create alternative communities within the nation state. Thus, sociopolitical organisation of the city and the public space are transformed. The alternative theatre's space making in the Taksim area contributed to this sociopolitical transformation from below in the following years.

In the early 2000s, the alternative theatre scene gained a new momentum with the increasing number of theatres spreading around Taksim. The founders of these theatres are commonly inspired by the avant-garde of the 1990s; however, their own personal trajectories are different. Almost all of them take their roots from university theatre clubs instead of conservatoires or theatre departments. Thus, socialisation emerges as a mobilising motor. To 'create their own space to be able to make theatre as they want' is an often-repeated phrase in the interviews that I conducted in Istanbul. A young audience profile, mostly college students, adhered to this emerging theatre. Deniz Başar argues that the young and amateur background of the founders played a role in the formation of this new young audience profile diverging from the conformist and older audience profile of the state-funded theatres (2014: 5). Audience's youth and enthusiastic engagement is referred to as an encouraging factor for alternative theatres for both economical and artistic risk taking.

In 2005, a theatre which we might consider as the pioneer of the alternative theatre movement of the 2000s, Tiyatro DoT, opened its doors in the heart of Beyoğlu in the iconic Mısır Apartmanı on Istiklal Street, precisely chosen to be able to anchor the theatre in Istanbul's urban life. DoT introduced the British movement of in-yer-face theatre in Turkey, which aimed at creating a moral shock by showing that which was unsettling on the stage. In 2007, Garajistanbul was opened by former ISM resident 5th Street Theatre in the Galata parking lot. These spaces, their artistic choices, and their architectural organisation allow

for a close, face-to-face encounter with the audiences. In the 2010s, İkincikat opened in September 2010 in Olivia Passage, Maya Sahnesi in 2011 inside Aleppo Passage on Istiklal Street, and Asmalı Sahne in 2014 in Asmalimescit. This initiated a microcosmos of alternative theatres in the Taksim area.

Alternative theatres' creation conditions were determined by precarity, instability, and fragility of resources and venues (Uriarte 2016: 75). For converting the found spaces to black-box scenes, construction work was mostly done by the artists themselves due to the lack of resources. In the fieldwork, it is observed that construction work is referred as a founding act of ownership and belonging to the physical space. Moreover, a lack of resources provoked a do-it-yourself logic in every domain, from costume design to technical equipment. The absence of resources reconfigured the traditional distribution of work.

It is not possible to categorise the alternative theatre scene in Istanbul as a homogeneous entity; however, the local memory of the physical urban space that they occupy is a shared trait. a commonality in the content and form sorts out as the collective and individual memory arising from the physical urban space. In other words, the cosmopolitan past of Taksim, where the alternative theatres are mainly situated in the 2010s, brings into being the multilayered memory that can be traced to the local urban tissue. The emplacement in Taksim provokes questions, such as: Who was here before us? What are their stories? Why are they not here anymore? While the contested narratives of minorities are not recognised in the monolithic construction of the nation-state glorifying a Turkish, Muslim, and neo-Ottoman identity, alternative theatres become the *spaces* for memory.

This transformation is strongly linked with the emergence of an intellectual sphere engaged in activism for women, LGBTIQ, Kurdish

as well as Armenian causes, anti-war, and alter-globalisation, such as the Petition for Solidarity with Hrant Dink (11 October 2005) or the 'I Apologise' campaign (15 December 2008) that recognises the Armenian Genocide. Newly emerging civic society's politicisation extended to the cultural sphere (Duclert 2010: 118). A new type of public intellectual emerged that might be described as autonomous, stepping outside of the framework imposed by the institutional politics and economic capital.

I will now turn to the examples of site-specific creations that take as a starting point the urban site that they occupy, namely the Taksim district.

GalataPerform was founded by playwright, director, and actress Yeşim Özsoy on the first floor of a historic nineteenth-century building in an ancient district of Taksim. Inspired by the theatres she discovered in New York while she was studying, Özsoy created this theatre of thirty-five seats in 2003 and it remained open until 2021. The Visibility Project which continued for eight years, aimed at anchoring themselves in the locality of Galata and making visible its multilayered memory. Organised like a treasure hunt, this one-day project gathered artist studios, artist apartments, and realised performances in artisanal workshops mainly present in the district. One of the spaces that was discovered during The Visibility Project was Pessah Bakery, which was later used as a performance space by GalataPerform and then D22.

Özsoy's various plays bring together people from different cultural, political, and social backgrounds in a particular cityscape and the clashes and transformations that they get involved in. In 2013, on the verge of the Gezi movement, GalataPerform staged *İz (Stain)*, written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak and directed by Yeşim Özsoy. Inspired by the nineteenth-century building of GalataPerform, *İz* tells three intertwined stories taking place in three different decades of Turkey. The first story in 1955 shows a narrative of the 6–7 September 1955

pogrom targeting Istanbul's Greek community from the point of view of two Anatolian Greek sisters Eleni and Markiz. The second story is set in 1980, right after the 12 September military coup and stages the encounter between young leftist revolutionary Ahmet and his conservative nationalist landlord Tuğrul. The third story occurs in 2010 and portrays the relationship between Rizgar, a young Kurdish man who has immigrated to Istanbul, and his transgender girlfriend Sevengül. The commonality between those three stories is the space that they occupy. They all take place in the same apartment in Tarlabaşı, marked by gentrification politics in the 2010s as a new spatial layer added onto its multicultural history. *İz* illustrates a common theme of the period to take the space as a starting point to unfold the multilayered past, as a site of cultural clash and conflict where antagonisms potentially transformed to agonism.

Another notable alternative theatre stage is Kumbaracı50, which was founded by a group of friends in 2009 who met at Istanbul University's theatre club and continued their theatrical practice in their company Altıdan Sonra Tiyatro (Theatre after 6pm), after working hours, so to speak. It is the oldest alternative theatre remaining in Beyoğlu. In 2012, Kumbaracı50 realised an international project with Lokstoff! theatre known for their public space works in Germany. This collaboration entitled *Yokuş Aşağı Emanetler (Things Entrusted Downhill)* reflects upon leaving, being sent away, and being destroyed by stigmatisation. The play starts in the street where audiences follow the performance, delivered by the company, with headphones. The audiences are positioned as people who will be displaced and who must entrust their stories before leaving. The first story is told by an Anatolian Greek woman who talks from restaurant's balcony in the upper floor. She tells that all her close ones have left taking all their stories and food with them, the reason why she cannot cook anymore. Audiences walk along İstiklal Street to Kumbaracı50 listening to the characters that they meet and

watching them giving their keys to the new owners of their apartments. The walk finishes in Kumbaracı50 where audiences and characters take shelter in the theatre while bulldozer noises suggest the demolition in the city. However, the characters continue to sing and invite the audiences to sing with them and overpower the surrounding forces. They simply reject displacement. Thus, spectators become activists of urban resistance in the play.

A final alternative theatre worth mentioning is Tiyatro Biriken, which shares the feeling of urban dispossession with the aforementioned creations, but brings in their queer approach on the matter. Biriken was founded in 2006 by the duo Okan Ürün and Melis Tezkan when they were studying performing arts in Sorbonne University in Paris. Their interdisciplinary works combine installations, theatre, and performance. They do not own a theatre but pursue their career between Istanbul and Paris. They define their works as 'queer'. Their 2017 creation *Kıyamete Kadar Kapattım Kalbimi (I Closed My Heart until the Apocalypse)* refers to the lyrics of a 1990s Tarkan hit of the same name and shows three people on the stage in a haunted nocturnal space. The space is inspired by a Turkish *pavyon*, which was a popular night club culture that spread around Taksim until the 2000s. The space of the *pavyon* is approached as a place of transgression and possibility, where different sexual orientations and social classes can meet. Its portrayal as a haunted space materialises the feeling of loss and dispossession in the city.

The selected examples above put physical urban spaces in the centre of their creation process and engage actively with questions such as how different bodies make themselves visible to each other in public space, how citizens can reappropriate the city they live in, and which narratives are heard while others are excluded from public space. Emine Fişek argues that these projects are engaged in different types of site-specificity. Taken together, they are indicative of a shift in alternative theatres'



GalataPerform, *İz (Stain)*

Written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, directed by Yeşim Özsoy, performed in GalataPerform, 2013

© Hande Göksan



Kumbaracı50, *Yokuş Aşağı Emanetler (Things Entrusted Downhill)*
Directed by Yaman Ömer Erzurumlu and Wilhelm Schneck
A scene in *Kumbaracı Yokuşu (Kumbaracı Descent)* where Kumbaracı50 is situated, 2012
© Volkan Cengen

relationship to urban history, political violence, and spatial memory (2018: 353). She points out the self-reflexivity, the awareness of the fact that alternative theatre in contemporary Istanbul is not external to processes of gentrification; it is, however, ambivalently shaped by these developments (ibid.). As concerned actors of dispossession and gentrification, alternative theatres witness urban transformation first-hand. Alternative theatres' localisation and mobility in the city offer an entry point to understand the city's turbulent urban dynamics. However, their urban and cultural practices go beyond showing the power relations between citizens as victims, passive spectators of urban transformation politics. I argue that this creation of spatial belonging was taken further by the Gezi Movement, when many citizens actively occupied public spaces and thus disrupted the daily life.

These examples above illustrate different ways of engaging with the city, each one addressing a different aspect of the questions, to whom does the city belong? Who has the right to appear in public space? In *İz*, an apartment in the Tarlabası neighbourhood revealed different layers of memories in Turkey. Tarlabası was presented as a space of unexpected encounters, which causes both clashes and negotiations. Each time period pointed out whose existence in public space disturbs the most, from Anatolian Greeks of 1955 to Kurds and transgenders in 2010s. *Things Entrusted Downhill* told the story of Taksim from another perspective and turned the audience into protestors against the gentrification. *I Closed My Heart until the Apocalypse* staged a narrative of the 'Others' of the city. Queer characters invested the nocturnal spaces in nostalgia against the heteronormative construction of the public space. In those three plays alongside many others, Taksim is staged as a site of continuous struggle between its national top-down construction and its 'undesirable' lifestyles. Moreover, in plays about the city in the 2000s and 2010s, most commonly a part of the city was chosen, such as a nightclub, a bar, a park, or a laundromat where people from different social

backgrounds and political convictions encounter one another. These encounters lead towards clash and finally to transformation where the characters 'see' one another outside of social labels.

Artistic experimentation with the theatrical space and spectatorship in Istanbul's theatre scene since the 1990s might be seen as a breach contributing to the formation of the idea that citizens are not condemned to be passive spectators of the city dwelling in a top-down constructed décor, but they might act upon their right to the city and step onto the stage. The Gezi movement can be considered as the paroxysm of radically claiming ownership in the city.

Gezi Movement: Extension from the Stage to the Street and from the Street to the Stage

When the Gezi movement started on 28 May 2013, the alternative theatres were directly concerned and involved in the movement given their spatial proximity. In 2013, the topography of the alternative theatre scene was around Taksim. Daily life in theatres was interrupted by the collective time, the rhythm defined by protests and police violence. During the fieldwork that I conducted in Istanbul, Gezi was commonly referred to as a life-changing experience in the interviews. The interviewees all stated that they actively participated in the Gezi movement since its beginning. During the movement, they mostly cancelled their plays and went to Gezi Park instead. While protestors were searching for a shelter from the police violence in the streets around Taksim,

theatres opened their doors to them as shelters and make-shift nurseries. Hence, theatre company members and protestors shared an extraordinary sociability around hiding from the police, taking care of the ones affected by tear gas, eating together, and even sleeping in the theatres. Camille Louis analyses this ambiguity as a passage from the stage organised by political art to stages beckoning towards the current places of politics (2014: 63). The occupied place became the place of visibility, where citizenship was staged. While the public square became a stage, the theatres in turn became the extension of that public square.

During Gezi, famous theatre actors' presence in the movement drew a reaction from the political power to the point of public targeting. A few among several examples: Mehmet Ali Alabora was accused of inciting the Gezi movement through his play *Mi Minör (E Minor)* (2013), a story of an uprising in a fictional country under the domination of a dictator. Alabora emigrated to the UK following the trial. Barış Atay, member of the alternative theatre Emek Sahnesi (Labour Stage) was arrested and accused of being a member of the socialist group of Redhack. In the aftermath of Gezi, Atay became a member of the pro-Kurdish party HDP and later, of the workers' party TİP. Twenty artists, including Ragıp Yavuz, Levent Üzümcü, and Sevinç Erbulak, were dismissed from the municipal theatres of the city of Istanbul.

Furthermore, the presence of performing arts contributed to the performativity of the movement. Boal's theatre of the oppressed inspired forum theatres that were practiced during park forums (Aydemir 2020: 125). During the protests, four authors from the alternative theatres staged the play *Gezerken (As We Stroll)* composed of four monologues about the different experiences in Gezi Park. The play is performed at the park during the movement with four superimposed stories revealing different moments of Taksim Square's spatial memory. The first one, written by Cem Uslu from SahneHâl, staged the story of an apolitical

protestor played by Serkan Altıntaş, whose first experience of marginalisation happens in Gezi. The second one by Mîrza Metin, from Şermola Performans, shows the point of view of a stray dog played by Sermet Yeşil. In the third one, Erdem Akakçe plays a ghost who was killed in the 'Bloody' 1 May 1977, where thirty-four people died because of police violence. The fourth one, written by Yiğit Sertdemir from Kumbaracı50, was an absurdist text whose protagonist was the TOMA,⁴ a symbol of police violence, played by Şebnem Sönmez and Sevinç Erbulak alternating. This piece was staged in the occupied Gezi Park during the movement; thus, it can be considered as a simultaneous narrative creation and memory making in the present. *Gezerken* was performed on the stage constructed for public speaking during the occupation in Gezi Park, then in other neighbourhood park forums in the following months.

On 15 June 2013, the police evacuated Gezi Park and violently repressed the protests spread around the whole country. Temporally reappropriated public space was once again confiscated by political power with amplified police control and surveillance. The political context in the post-Gezi period is marked by the criminalisation of the streets and the polarisation of society between supporters and opponents of the Government. The authoritarian political climate led to a suffocation of the public space and the oppression of opposition actors, journalists, academics, intellectuals, and artists alongside political figures. This atmosphere of authoritarianism also manifested in the theatre sphere. Twenty-two theatres including Şermola Performans and Kumbaracı50, which openly supported Gezi were deprived of state subsidies. Due to the urban transformation politics and gentrification of Taksim, most of the theatres had to close down or move to other parts of the city, like Kadıköy on the other side of the Bosphorus, which became a new cultural hub of the city. Many theatres had to close for good.

4. *Toplumsal Olaylara Müdahale Aracı*: vehicle of intervention to social incidents.

Theatre: Space of Political Resistance after Gezi

In the latest authoritarian political context, the stories and memories of the Gezi Park movement have become inaudible and invisible in the political discourse. After the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, any kind of opposition to the Government is now criminalised. The Government condemns and discredits Gezi as a ‘terrorist’ movement to the extent of incarcerating philanthropist Osman Kavala as its main financier. The shift to authoritarianism has caused a discourse of defeat according to which Gezi did not have any impact on political sphere. However, citizens’ space making in the city temporarily suspends the political power rather than directly opposing it. Within this climate, activism may not entirely disappear but change its form.

The vulnerability and precariousness deepened in the alternative theatre scene after Gezi. However, these become exceptional strengths in an authoritarian context where the absence of state control translates to an autonomy, a way to escape political oppression. Despite the closures and the ubiquitous censorship, theatres can move in the city. Pascal Gielen argues that a lack of resources imposes material constraints on cultural production on the one hand, but it also enables adaptation and agility to create temporary and mobile spaces in the city, on the other (2015: 212). Theatres which continue their activity in a permanent state of crisis gained resilience and came up with different ideas to continue their artistic practice. Many groups like D22 no longer have their own theatre but they continue their practice. DoT’s mobility in Istanbul correlates with Istanbul’s urban transformation since the 2000s.

Their first theatre space in the iconic Mısır Apartmanı on Istiklal street in 2005 can be considered as the first alternative theatre and inspired others. In 2011, they moved to the G-Mall in Dolmabahçe, then to the Kanyon shopping Mall in Levent in 2015, and finally to Kemerburgaz City Forest in 2020 with an open-air project.

Alternative theatres in the aftermath of Gezi contribute to autonomous political practices of citizens as a continuity of what is commonly referred to as ‘Gezi spirit’. Regarding the creations, some examples reclaim narratives and stage the contested memories of lived experiences in Gezi. Pieter Verstraete points out that some of ‘post-Gezi texts’, the immediate and straightforward creations, were didactic, uncritical, reifying, and too celebratory (2019: 285). An ambition to represent the movement on the stage contradicts the very anti-representative character of Gezi and thus cannot go beyond a fading shadow. However, I argue that the plays that make visible the contested minorities and narratives of the movement instead of directly imitating Gezi on the stage were the ones that continued the politically emancipatory potential of ‘Gezi spirit’.

Next to the pieces that bear directly on Gezi, the implicit references mark the creations as a way of recalling the atmosphere shared in Gezi in a way only accessible to the spectators. Among others, D22 staged *Karabatak (Cormorant)* in 2013 which showed Gezi’s narrative through poems by Nazım Hikmet. In Moda Sahnesi’s *Hamlet* (2014), the soldiers were wearing police helmets and uniforms, and Gezi’s ironic slogans were part of the décor. *Istenmeyen (Persona Non Grata)* by Gülce Uğurlu and Ceren Ercan presented a story of a meeting between a character called Khaled who immigrated to Istanbul, due to the political defeat in Egypt, after Tahrir, his wife Bahar, and her brother Barış during Gezi. In the same year, the famous German director Thomas Ostermeier’s adaptation of Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, which tackled the theme of authoritarianism and resistance, sparked a controversy



TiyatroDoT, *Sarı Ay (Yellow Moon)*
Written by David Greig, translated and directed by Pınar Töre, performed in G-Mall, 2012
© Muhsin Akgün

due to its interactive structure which ended with a forum at the end where spectators were keenly involved in discussing Gezi. These subtle references recreated a shared memory of Gezi with spectators.

Furthermore, alternative theatres gained a more social character in the aftermath of the Gezi movement with increased public interest in theatre classes for amateurs, seminars, workshops, presentations, concerts, and parties. This sociability enhances a citizenship practice based upon community making alongside artistic production. Thus, these theatres are not only visited during show hours, but they became living spaces of sociability. Beyond spectatorship, followers of these theatres socialise in theatre classes after working hours. Among these theatres, Kara Kabare takes one step further and refuses to sell tickets for their plays but sets up a barter exchange economy. A theatre ticket can be paid for by means of books, meals, lessons, etc., which allows for a longer-lasting interaction with the audience. Furthermore, this alternative economy works as a resistance strategy against a capitalist logic. It interferes in the dependence between the theatre's existence and box-office income. Furthermore, it resists considering the audience as a consumer, and it attempts to create a community in solidarity.

In the empirical study on alternative theatres in Istanbul, I focused on artistic micro-practices that reshape public life. Tracing alternative theatres' space making in Istanbul offers a way to observe the transformation of the urban space. Avant-garde experimentations in Turkey since the 1960s created a practice of alternative space making in the city. Each generation recognises the impact of the previous generation. In the 1990s, artists from dissident careers created an 'underground' scene opening up a new topography of arts and culture in Istanbul as well as new ways of creating commonality around shared spaces. 'Risky' political issues became part of the artistic agenda with plays relating to the urban site where theatres moved to.

Firstly, the location of new theatres around the Taksim district since the beginning of the 1990s negotiated urban encounters with a multi-layered memory carved in public space and triggered artistic creations that addressed the former habitants of the districts they resided in. Secondly, the staging of the oppressed and forgotten minority narratives and the stories of gentrification provoked the potential of a new distribution of the sensible by giving voice to people who were otherwise invisible in public space. Thirdly, alternative theatres created new physical spaces in the city by reappropriating vacant spaces, in which new artistic expressions, encounters, sociabilities could emerge. Lastly, alternative theatre's mobility and dispossession in the city represents a form of activism of the space.

Investing, repurposing, converting, manipulating, reappropriating the spaces that were vacant or under state control demonstrates how space making in a city can become the precondition for creating a sense of

belonging and relating with each other. Re-confiscated autonomous spaces enable the emergence of a pluralist political imaginary. Particularly in authoritarian political contexts, autonomous physical places reveal a potential for political resistance against the closure of public space and the political system. Activism changes form and space towards fragmented public spaces on a micro-scale where state surveillance can be suspended.

Arendt emphasises that the space of appearance can emerge at any time and place if a plurality of people create space between them through action and speech (1998: 83). Butler stresses the cruciality of the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution (2015: 85). Beyond the action and the word, the new dramaturgies and the reconfiguration of the relation to the spectators forge a shared sensory experience and, thus, put forward the performative to create new social bonds.

Artistic expressions in public space that create new forms of public agency, which transform the citizens to owners claiming their right to the city rather than passive spectators, can change the spatial organisation of politics. While the public square becomes a stage, the theatres in turn become the extension of the public square and, thus, the political potential of theatre becomes apparent in new articulations between aesthetics and politics. The shared sensory, bodily, and affective experience sets in motion liminal moments where links are constantly made and unmade, even if it is not possible to speak of the absolute overcoming of divisions. As aforementioned cases have shown, alternative theatres can gain political character by creating autonomous spaces where the relationship to the space and the city are changed by reclaiming spaces where social norms are formed and negotiated. •

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