WATER

17 June 2017

BE LIKE WATER, MY FRIEND!

Water is the beginning of everything. Thales said so, Bruce Lee turned it into a philosophy of combat, Heraclitus reminded us that one cannot step into the same river twice, Lucretius spoke of water's perpetual transformation. But water is also a field of struggle — perhaps the most ancient of all. Those who sat around this table — a hydrogeologist, a water rights activist, an environmental movement pioneer, and three artists — approach water from different positions, yet all see the same thing: a world in which water can no longer flow freely.

An activist, recounting her own journey, says: "I am like water." A life that moves from landscape architecture to water rights campaigning. At the beginning: discovering Istanbul's streams and springs; in the middle: understanding how urban planning renders water invisible; at the end: being part of the international water justice movement. When water cuts occur in Istanbul, the idea that water is a right becomes concrete. Water wars break out in Bolivia, taps are put on pre-payment in South Africa, people take to the streets against water bills in Ireland. This is a global wave — but in Turkey it is still insufficiently discussed. This is how the Water Rights Campaign was born.

At the outset, it set out with the demand that water be recognised as a fundamental human right. The UN's recognition of water as a human right in 2010 was a victory — but a victory that remained on paper. Because at the same time, the commodification of water accelerated: municipal water supplies were privatised, the bottled water industry grew exponentially. And this question hung in the air:

> "The river has the right to flow. We speak of people's right to water — but we do not speak of water's own right. Why should a stream not flow freely?"

The right to water is not a concept that belongs only to humans; water itself has rights. To flow freely, to find its own path, to circulate underground, to reach the sea. Every time we imprison it in pipes, dams, bottles, and canals, we are in fact blocking our own veins. Bolivia's inscription of the rights of nature into its constitution, Ecuador's concept of Pacha Mama — these are signals from distant geographies, but they are searching for an answer to the same question: can water be owned? In Italy, a referendum halted water privatisation. In Greece, Ireland, everywhere, people are objecting to the commodification of water. But in Turkey this debate has not yet found a sufficiently broad footing. Water rights activism remains a niche within the environmental movement; yet every drop that flows from the tap is political.

VALLEYS IN REVOLT

A voice rises from the Black Sea coast. The story of the struggle against hydroelectric plants in the valleys of Arhavi is, in essence, a story of translation. On one side: the language of activists arriving from Istanbul and Ankara — law, environmental impact assessment, court rulings, cross-sectional flow measurements, minimum ecological flow rates. On the other: the language of the villagers — stream, fish, hazelnut, tea, bee, soil. To act as interpreter between the two is perhaps the hardest part of the struggle. But this translation is not one-directional; village women are also translating their knowledge, their bodies, their voices into the language of activism. And sometimes the most effective translation is a woman lying down in front of a bulldozer.

When Chernobyl's radiation fell on the Black Sea, a generation came to know cancer. The invisible poison that seeped into tea leaves, hazelnuts, and soil returned years later as disease. But that experience also taught something else: ecological issues pass through the body. The devastation wrought by a hydroelectric plant is like a metastasis. Not a single organ, but the entire system collapses. When pipes are laid along a stream, it is not only the water that is cut off — the fish disappear, the garden dries up, the bees diminish, the hazelnut yield falls, young people leave for the city. And when women lie down before bulldozers, it is not for a single stream they lie — it is for an entire way of life.

They wear hawk masks — both a symbol of resistance and a way of speaking as nature itself. When MNG came, Havva Ana stood before the bulldozer. They learned the law, they learned cross-sectional flow measurement, they memorised the minimum ecological flow rates, they went to the courts. These were not life goals; but struggle carries people to places they never expected. After a while — after the third or fourth panel — you find yourself thinking: "I could step in when Oğuz Hoca can't make it, I could present this." Could something like this be done at the village teahouse?

> "You don't have to be a victim of something to care about an ecological issue. The global nature of victimhood matters here. We must underline the fact that everyone has the right to speak on everything — and reject and refuse any use to the contrary."

And Ceraltepe. At the very head of the valleys where the hydroelectric struggles are being fought, this is where cyanide pools are planned. If a colossal mining operation forty kilometres in diameter begins, even the hydroelectric plant debate will seem innocent by comparison. Because cyanide will spread from the headwaters of the groundwater system. Like medicine administered into a vein, it will circulate everywhere — from the toes to the brain. Whether or not the stream flows, it will be poisoned. The entire valley, the entire watershed, all of life.

> "The things we have left to save are running out. That is why I am in such a hurry, perhaps."

In recent times, the street dimension of the struggle has become harder. There is a growing isolation. At Gezi, everyone embraced one another spontaneously; things arose naturally, collectively — slogans, words, jokes, small daily acts of solidarity. That was precisely what made Gezi: the convergence of struggles that had for years been waged separately and in isolation — animal rights, environment, the right to the city — suddenly meeting. Now that energy seems scattered, attention is divided, there are new assaults, and there is a serious loneliness. But do we not keep circling back and coming together again? These gatherings themselves are an answer: sitting and talking, breathing, listening to one another.

BELOW GROUND, ABOVE GROUND

A hydrogeologist speaks of Mardin, of the Kızıltepe Plain. There, groundwater is being rapidly drawn down. Every year the wells go deeper, the water table falls. When drought and excessive irrigation combine, agriculture in the plain is pushed to the edge of collapse. Farmers respond by blocking trade routes — the most elemental form of water protest. But behind this protest lies a deep despair: no one knows what to do when the well runs dry.

> "Where there is water, there is life. Where there is none, there is not."

Ostrom's commons theory takes on concrete form here: water belongs to neither state nor market — it belongs to everyone. But "belonging to everyone" must not mean "no one is responsible." There are models of self-governance in which communities can protect, share, and sustain their own water sources. System dynamics models show the same thing: when water is withdrawn, it is first the most vulnerable that are affected — smallholders, animals, trees. Then the rings of vulnerability widen. Finally, when the wells dry up, everyone is equalised — in thirst. In the city, an entirely different picture.

You flush the toilet, you take a shower. Where does that water go? To treatment plants — vast structures operated for profit by private companies. From the canals emerge yachts, truck tyres, refrigerators. And on rainy days,

organised industrial zones discharge their chemical effluents without pre-treatment. Because pre-treatment is a cost, and rain is an opportunity to evade inspection. We eat fish from the Bosphorus, without asking what water that fish has swum in. But even the word "sustainability" is being questioned.

What exactly are we sustaining? The confession of someone trained as an engineer is striking: "What we were taught was always: you do something, there must be an immediate output. But life is not that clear-cut. You must not think only short-term, and rather than saying definitively 'this will lead to that', the point is: we have set out on a path, we are doing something."

> "Water will flow, it will find its way. I don't think we need to move so fast."

And when we say "local," we tend to think of rural areas — but our local is here too, this city. Istanbul has a structure that overflows the boundaries of urban geography. What can be done here? For people here to know the outside better, for people from outside to come here, for knowledge to flow in both directions. Visual language has always been more powerful than written or spoken language throughout history. How to bring art, the visual, the creative language together with social movements — how to expand it.

To speak of these things together, to nourish one another — to share examples that have never been present here.

NO MONEY, NO WATER

When did we start buying water? In the 1980s, if you walked into a corner shop and said you were very thirsty, the shopkeeper would give you a glass of water. Free. That water is now a commercial commodity, inside a PET bottle, behind a brand. This transformation happened so slowly we did not even notice. Just as the copper sahanı pan was replaced by the non-stick Teflon pan; just as communal labour was replaced by individual consumption.

Convenience was offered; the cost was not asked. An artist is attempting to reverse this transformation. She buys trees with her own money and plants them in place of those felled for construction in Istanbul. Her deeper concern, however, is Istanbul's buried waters: streams that have been capped, placed under concrete, converted into sewage channels. In this city there are around eighty known streams, and no comprehensive work has been done on any of them. Where do they begin, where do they end, which still flows, which has long since died? Old maps of Istanbul show waterways; in new maps, there is not even a trace. To uncover an underground stream — who will do it?

> "Through those pipes and sewage channels where life once flowed — we chose to turn them into the routes of this rubbish civilisation."

Another artist sets up an installation called Maruz (Exposed) on the bank of Kurbağalıdere. The stream no longer flows; it stinks. She wants to expose people to that smell, that sight. Water holds a mirror to us; when we look into it, we see ourselves — but we do not want to see. And a third artist says that water is in the nature of cinema. The first filmmakers always wanted to shoot water — flow, timelessness, movement. "The timelessness and fluidity of water, and the fact that cinema is a little like that too — these things are connected." The viewer finds their own time within that flow. And perhaps cinema too is like water: it flows, transforms, disappears — but leaves a trace.

We need to work from concrete things. When there is something concrete, people begin to come and say: "Ah yes, this could work." Istanbul's eighty streams — this could be a concrete project. Where do they begin, where do they end, which ones are still alive? There are old maps, water maps; someone is a collector with historical maps in their possession. Each of these streams will serve as a mirror: when we look, we will see water; in the water, we will see ourselves.

FACT, CONCEPT AND TULUM

Perhaps the most unexpected moment of this conversation is when cheese-making is mentioned. Someone describes a tulum cheese: "First we strain the cheese through muslin cloth. Then we press it, filling it tightly into a goatskin tulum, as much as it will hold. Then we bury it in the ground. After three months, it becomes a beautiful cheese." This is a metaphor: if an academic does not wait long enough to interpret a fact, they succumb to what they have already heard. That is precisely why one must press the fact firmly into the concept, bury it in the ground, wait for it to ripen. Both going somewhere as an outsider, and defining one's life through another practice — art, academia, activism — and trying to build a relationship from there: "it was something we wrestled with and couldn't quite get out of. That's why fact, concept, and tulum came together for us." The knowledge found in villages is hidden within nature and on the verge of being lost. Making a necklace from the threads that emerge from the root of the erati plant.

Threading wild strawberries on their stems — the root end hard, where it meets the stalk soft — and wearing them around your neck. Watching a spider's nest for an hour, seeing the young eat the mother, and turning this into a phrase passed down through generations: "Take care of the spider — these children will eat me." These are not things learned from documentaries; they are things known through living. There is four thousand years of culture there. Hemşinlis, Laz people, speakers of Romaiika. The relationships each of them has forged with water, soil, and plants are different — but all are nourished from the same root: living within nature, producing alongside it, learning from it. How, then, shall we carry this knowledge? On one side is the idea of "bringing" — taking artists, musicians, theatre-makers to the villages, organising eco-festivals.

But on the other side, "co-producing" is more accurate than "bringing." The visiting artist goes not to offer something but to understand the experience there, to work alongside it. Seeing the village mill, joining the hazelnut-picking collective, listening to songs in the evening — these are not tourist experiences but the ground of co-production. To take ownership of the path, to repair the mill. There are already strong motivations in people who have a relationship with that geography. The question is to stop that relationship from being one-directional. There are people there who have already built a village house, grow everything themselves, live without shopping. There is much to learn from them. "We will go there, we will live what I have described. We will not expect results in the short term." But the process of belittling the peasant in Turkey has been so long that people have become estranged from their own knowledge. Things of the village have been turned into things to be ashamed of. Greenery, soil, copper pots, communal labour — all have been counted as signs of "being left behind." Now there is an interesting reversal: things pushed out of the city are beginning to attract everyone's attention. Touching the soil, growing one's own food, living with natural materials.

But still as nostalgia, as curiosity; not as living practice itself. Things expelled from the city are now what everyone finds "very interesting." Interesting as knowledge; remote as practice. Walking along a stream and collecting rubbish was tried — an announcement was made in the village mosque, an event was organised, children joined, a small truckload of rubbish was collected. But returning the following year, the situation was the same. It was done twice; by the third time, no one came. Because there are no longer eggs in the village; they are bought from the town centre. A car leaves every fifteen minutes, the watermelon seller comes, the fruit seller comes, the supermarkets reach all the way to the village. Global capitalism finds you even at the top of the mountain.

When we were small, there was no such thing as rubbish; everything was transformed, used, burned, turned into compost. Now everything arrives ready-made, in plastic packaging. And that plastic goes into the stream.

> "The people there have already witnessed developments in nature and drawn conclusions from them. Words have come from them. Can you imagine? There are so many things like that I take notes of, which I keep accumulating."

BELONGING

Living in three large cities and feeling no sense of belonging to any of them. Izmir, Ankara, Istanbul — each with its own practices, but none able to forge that bond of belonging. When the relationship to water is severed, so too is the

motivation to protect it. But in the village, in the place where one was born, water directly shapes life. This tension cannot be resolved, but it is named: belonging. "I am a small person; there are more than twenty million people here. I cannot do it. But in the village, there is a place not yet polluted, still protectable. And more urgently: it directly affects the lives of those people." A voice joining from London offers another perspective.

There, one lives alongside flies, spider webs, insects. Even mass pesticide spraying is not done in the garden; they do not want to disturb the creatures' habitat. If you do not separate your rubbish, it is not collected. The riverbanks are public; parks, sports grounds. "Even though it should be more advanced in terms of modernity, I am living a life much closer to my life in Erzincan." The cleaner we become, the more polluted we are — and the more we pollute. There they have four separate bins at home; if you do not sort your waste, it is not collected. Sanctions and awareness-raising go hand in hand. Here, awareness campaigns float in the air, and enforcement is absent. Large cities are role models, like it or not.

In all the TV series, all the films, everywhere, the urban lifestyle is held up as exemplary. And when those city dwellers throw their rubbish into the stream, the villager does the same — thinking "the water will carry it away." But our rubbish has now grown so much that water too has a capacity. Beds emerge from treatment plants, toilet lids, cisterns. The policy-making power of municipalities is enormous; working with them is a necessity.

> "These are metastases. We need to focus on wherever the primary disease is located. It doesn't matter where we are."

And perhaps birbuçuk's root metaphor — ginger — finds its meaning here. Encounters that have no obligation to remain together, variable, not a burden on one another, yet arising from the same root. These conversations as the main root; the projects, panels, publications, and encounters that will sprout from them — like the small roots of ginger, each finding its own way. Just like water finding its way. What matters is to meet, to get to know one another, and to breathe together. Rather than expecting immediate results, to trust the process. Not to think in the short term. We have set out on a path — perhaps sharing a meal, perhaps writing to one another, perhaps meeting again, whether in Istanbul, on the Black Sea coast, or in Mardin. Mutual exchange of knowledge and experience — both in relation to art specifically, and as a whole. Perhaps when we go there, we are even causing harm; it is necessary to look at things from that side a little. But without going there, having the people of that place say — "look, people are coming, can you believe how curious they are, how valuable this turns out to be" — that too is a step.

Water will flow, it will find its way. And we, too, will let it flow.