

# GENDER

28 April 2018

## RHIZOME

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Like the structure of ginger. Multiplying by itself beneath the soil. Each fragment of root simultaneously becomes a central root, which also multiplies. Even if a fragment breaks away, it continues, in its own rhythm. This metaphor – the rhizome, from Deleuze and Guattari – is the basis of birbuçuk's working model and forms the ground of the gender session as well.

"We believe in the unity of knowledge. After the 1980s, the confinement of each area of knowledge to its own discipline was wrong. Art, economics, ecology, sociology, philosophy – these should be spoken at their points of intersection."

Gender is one of the most determinative matters in this holistic perspective. It is not merely the relation between woman and man. It concerns all energy, power, distributed relations. Ecology, economics, gender are inseparable – they lie at the heart of socio-economic metabolism. How human beings and communities relate to their environment, how they organise themselves, how energy is taken in, processed and expelled – these too are questions of gender. After the 1980s, every form of knowledge was confined to its own discipline – art, economics, ecology, sociology, philosophy were placed in separate boxes.

This session is for breaking those boxes. This session is a closed, candid gathering that prioritises sharing personal stories, experiences and ideas rather than an academic panel format.

Political scientist, economist, art director, activist, artist, filmmaker at the same table – indisciplinaryity is not a deficiency but a conscious choice.

## PERIODS OF DEFEAT

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A voice that was a student in Ankara in 1968, spent two and a half years in prison during the 12 March coup, then worked a decade in the left as a translator and editor, speaks of the disappointment of the experience of being a woman on the left. Discovering feminist theory is everything in the mind finally falling into place.

"I discovered feminist theory. When I discovered feminist theory, I felt at ease. Everything in my mind fell into place. I understood why these things were happening."

In the periods of 12 March and 12 September, we faced a "definite" state, a definite political power. Today a far more ambiguous situation is in question – we are in the process of the construction of totalitarianism. Polarisation, neighbourly and fraternal enmity: Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism is more applicable today than ever. The fear of unknown things, the very cleverly constructed nature of this power – there is a new situation, and our minds cannot produce answers appropriate to this new situation. Working ten years on the left as translator and editor, having books published – these were important works, but the experience of being a woman on the left was different. The woman question was always deferred to "later." A postgraduate degree in Women's Studies in London became a step that deepened this rupture – when an academic framework combined with lived experience, works like the book *Loving the World Today* were born.

"I say this because I feel implicated in not comprehending the situation. There is a very new situation in Turkey and our minds cannot produce answers appropriate to this new situation."

But periods of defeat are useful for movements' self-examination. The women's movement began in 1983 precisely in such a period of defeat — many dynamics came together, women found one another. A new discovery and meeting: the closing of one period can be pregnant with the opening of another. History is full of such periods — other things have always been possible. Carrying hope, remembering the importance of the public sphere: we once owned the agenda, even without numerical majority we were nearly agenda-setters. The climate crisis and war — these two great global dynamics can bring us to a "plane of humanity." The capacity of great traumas to unite humanity — as in the founding of the United Nations — stands as a possibility.

## ARE THE STREETS BLOCKED?

After Gezi, have the streets been blocked? In a period when the state has put up its guard and terror and trauma have closed down the street, can artists and activists develop other practices?

"We were driven from the streets but the streets matter. The children who died in Gezi, the traumas... The dynamics changed after Gezi."

The feminist movement is the movement that can still take to the streets — forty thousand women march on 8 March. This is not something to be dismissed; in a period when many movements have withdrawn from the streets, the women's movement continues to stand there. The murder of women workers, forced child marriage, sexual violence — street action remains the most powerful tool against these. But beyond the street there are other spaces too — and these spaces are not alternatives to the street but complements to it.

A university lecturer opens her course to the public: neighbourhood association, sociology, philosophy, architect, interior designer, urban planner together. No hierarchy, dialogues are built. Disrupting the comfort zone — encountering people who are foreign to us. Art takes on an alternative role here: it seeps through indirect narration into the places that direct political discourse cannot enter. Documentaries, visuals, symbols — a data network extending from child murders to the climate crisis.

Living libraries: discovering that the person you call "the Other" is actually someone like you. Unlearning happens this way. Communicating outside of polarisation, creating counter-publics, actually living the commons. Small networks — keeping communication solid with the grocer, the shopkeeper. If we keep that communication alive at the grassroots level, we preserve the potential. When we stay within our own spaces we always speak to one another — we are already people who have convinced one another. The real matter is the encounter with what is foreign to ourselves. Disrupting the comfort zone, creating non-hierarchical spaces — the academic opening her course to the neighbourhood, the artist taking her studio into the street. The cracks formed in these encounters can be more lasting than great ruptures.

## BODY AND SYMBOL

An artist born in Istanbul in 1982 but taken to Saudi Arabia at six months, who lived twelve years in Jeddah. Her father an engineer, her mother a financier, the family matriarchal and feminist — but outside is the weight of sharia. Having watched, with a child's eyes, how the woman's identity changes on the journeys between Istanbul and Jeddah, she received fine arts training in London and was the sole student with a Muslim background in her class in the post-9/11 period. Now tattooing, painting, printmaking, clay-paper, calligraphy — each a form of expression. She works with symbols: vulva, womb, light, numbers, life symbols — without being too direct, with a healing intention.

"I'm someone who uses many symbols. That's how I code my works. I deal with symbols, numbers. The most basic life symbols, really."

Child murders, the issue of child brides, rape and sexual violence – these are not second-page news. A mass rape of 29 people in Mardin, a case in the Garipoğlu murder closed with three gold bars – each becomes a work of art. The "Pink Terrorist" series, the "Trousseau" project – a 36-piece plate set, presented like a trousseau cloth but with layers of violence against women coded inside.

Producing with the intention of protection, self-protection, empowerment – art is here somewhere between witnessing and healing. The stories of sex workers, confrontation with the female infant face, the womb sculpture – these are not aesthetic preferences but forms of making visible the violence made invisible.

The concept of forensic architecture is discussed: the power of art to be presented as evidence in court. The handiwork of indigenous people at Standing Rock, forensic architecture – artistic data becomes legal data. The Karadul/Night Bloomers series makes visible the invisible lives of sex workers. Vandana Shiva's seed banks, biodiversity – the war between local seeds and seed patents is intertwined with the gender question. The structural resemblance between the patenting of seeds and the control of the female body is not coincidental.

## MY CHILD

Born in Istanbul in 1969, childhood spent in Bursa, a civil servant's child – early witness to inequalities and gender dynamics. Seven years as a boarder at Robert College, alternative education experience at Hampshire College, a director moving from Boğaziçi Sociology to film and media arts in the USA – who sees documentary cinema as an instrument of social change. "Walls" about the Berlin Wall, a three-hour documentary on the university entrance exam, and the ongoing "Nuclear Turkish Style" about Turkey's nuclear investments – Akkuyu, Sinop, a continuing project. A feature-length documentary on the experiences of parents with LGBTI+ children succeeds precisely at this unlearning. When mothers and fathers whose children are LGBT speak to camera, they cease to be "the Other" and become parents everyone can recognise. This is the power of the documentary: the moment you recognise, the distance closes.

"If you're not going to produce now, when will you produce?"

This director is also a living witness to the institutional suppression of sexual harassment. Having taught five years at Bilgi University, rose to head of department – then intervened in sexual harassment experienced by three victims. Pressured into resignation by the rector. The institution's reflex is clear: not to solve the matter, but to destroy the person who exposed it. This experience is the most concrete form of the academia-activism tension: when you intervene in real issues, the institution's reflex is to throw you out.

"I was, for example, someone who clashed with the police in my early twenties. But even looking back now, there is a question mark, a fear in myself too."

Two years at Sabancı University, then at Boğaziçi since 2007 – manages to establish a Sexual Harassment Prevention Commission together with the Women's Studies Club. But even for this, years of struggle are required. Institutional structures resist change; gains are only possible through persistent, collective pressure. Universities are simultaneously a space to breathe and an instrument of suppression – this contradiction is the structural reality of Turkey's academic life.

LGBTI+ activism has also passed through a similar journey. A path beginning at Istanbul University Sociology in 2001 – the anarchist movement, the feminist movement, the anti-Iraq war platform, Lambda Istanbul. When 300–400 people march at Istanbul Pride in 2005, in subsequent years tens of thousands are reached – and then it is banned. A counselling line is established, 10 books are translated, work proceeds around the concept of heterosexism. Eight years of social work at the Foundation for Human Resource Development – what is learned in the field is different from what is learned from books. The transition from street action to theoretical work is not a loss but a deepening.

Being an independent researcher, trade unionism, translation – each in itself a form of struggle. We must preserve our existence in order to be able to struggle – protecting oneself is at least as important as resistance.

"At every panel I attended I was taking notes. I had the opportunity to write articles."

Classical left parties have been found "sluggish and alienating" – civil society venues are preferred. After Gezi, the prestige of activism increased, but at the same time the trauma also deepened. The identity question emerges: if politics is conducted through identity, it is no longer politics – but when you are attacked you must defend your identity. The feeling that we will go as a speck of dust in the universe makes one pessimistic – but even within this pessimism the meaning of defending oneself and trying to exist is not lost. To encounter an "assigned" identity rather than defining oneself as woman – patriarchy and heterosexism will certainly be demolished. Those who said the world was round were also once called mad – this conviction is not naivety but a resolve distilled from experience. Connections are made from the Zapatistas' view of ecology and land to the relationship between paramilitarism and neoliberalism in Colombia, from the drought-climate crisis link to the historical roots of heterosexism. Every connection is a reminder that the struggle is not local.

### THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND THE NATURE OF THE CHILD

A journey extending from Antalya to Kyrgyzstan, to the Alakır Valley, to Çıralı: housing is a fundamental right. We came into the world as human beings – eating, drinking and shelter are our fundamental rights as living creatures. How much can we protect these?

"I always tried not to code my child. I always believed that they really... that our nature knows from birth what we want and what makes us happy and at peace."

Ecological living practice in the Alakır Valley, building houses from earth, hydroelectric resistance struggles – these are not abstract concepts but lived experiences. Five years in a state school in Kyrgyzstan, communications training, then the decision to settle in the valley in Antalya. The Great Anatolian Walk – 40 days from Antalya to Ankara, walking while pregnant – is the bodily expression of the right to housing, to the ownership of land and water. Life in Çıralı, her daughter beginning primary school – the search for alternative education is now a concrete necessity, not an abstract discussion. Child education is rethought in this context. The school system or alternative education? Liveable spaces, in society but free. The power of children to socialise in nature – beyond words, trying to understand the earth.

"I mean, what are we talking about? There are things with very great urgency for the world itself, but all those identities, genders, borders, countries, politicians and so on – they all fly away."

The tension between individual action and social movement here takes its most concrete form: the life created for a child is simultaneously a political act. Three houses have been built in Alakır – from earth, by hand, with intention. The second, together with Can Aşık – shared construction, shared life. An encounter with Vandana Shiva, seed banks, the biodiversity question – these are different dimensions of the right to housing, the right to one's body, the owning of land. The question of what these children will become is the question of the future – the new generation may be more conscious with the internet, may build a universal consciousness.

### RED CARD AND THE CITY

A journey from Kartal in Istanbul through Anatolian High School, from Marmara to Mimar Sinan, from Spain to Beirut – an artist whose trajectory shapes itself around urban transformation and the body-space relation. Participating in art initiatives like the Apartment Project, working with the Red Card group – women who put their labour into the field of women's art – confronting the manifestations of sexism in the art world.

"A studio in Tarlabası, critical paintings against Zaha Hadid's Kartal project, the exhibition 'Where Fire Falls' — 131 artists, the 20th year of the Human Rights Foundation. City, body and gender are inseparable."

Born in Kartal, Istanbul in 1984, winning a place at an Anatolian High School was a great socialisation experience — class difference, difference in space, difference in identity were felt concretely for the first time. The transition from Marmara University Painting to Mimar Sinan, Erasmus in Spain, an art-design master's from Yıldız Technical with Ali Artun and İnce Eviner.

Art residencies in Italy and Sweden in 2015, then an informal master's at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut — each step a moving away from the centre and an experience of production in different contexts. All of life shapes itself around this awareness. Art creates alternative publics through the power of indirect narration — it seeps into the places that direct political discourse cannot enter. The exhibition "Where Fire Falls" — 131 artists, the 20th year of the Human Rights Foundation — shows the power of collective production. But the question always remains open: can art create real change, or is it a consolation?

This question goes unanswered — but not being answered is not a weakness, it is openness.

## I LEFT ACADEMIA

Environmental engineering and sculpture — in Mehmet Ali Uysal's studio — water modelling and performance arts, a doctorate in rainfall-runoff modelling at Boğaziçi and from there to systemic modelling of ecological systems, cooperative founding and documentary filmmaking — paths united in one person, the story of stepping outside academia.

"I left academia. Production had already started producing very little. I had noticed that the tendency to learn had also decreased."

Moving to Ankara and working in a factory in Tincan organised industrial zone — learning with the body what production means. Choosing on return to Istanbul to found a collective based on home-and-neighbour relations. Filmmaking — short film, documentary — performance arts, "spoken word" performances, work with Hazavuzu Kumpanyası, visual arts in the oddviz collective, the founding of Boğaziçi Consumption Cooperative, the New Diaspora Network — all fields found outside academia, each world operating according to its own logic. Academia's inability to disrupt the comfort zone, the fact that activism done outside is more alive than production done inside — this tension resonates through many voices in the session.

Someone who worked four years in the Ministry of Environment says that when she discovered feminist theory, she felt at ease. Years spent in prison as a political prisoner, the disappointment of being a woman on the left, the bureaucratic experience in the Ministry of Environment — all acquire meaning when combined with a feminist perspective. The book *Loving the World Today* is the crystallisation of this perspective.

The Şehveti Bostan project — şehvet, not şevket — is safe, self-sufficient living spaces for women who have experienced violence, memory forests, the practice of planting trees for murdered friends. The killing of trans women like Hande Kader makes this project urgent. The concretised form of desire politics: placing care and memory against violence, cultivation against destruction.

The ecofeminism group established during the Gezi period made this connection — ecology and feminism are two faces of the same struggle. The structural resemblance between the subjugation of nature and the subjugation of the female body is not coincidental but systemic. Capitalism, patriarchy and ecological destruction draw from the same root — this analysis is not an academic abstraction but the knowledge of hands planting trees in Şehveti Bostan. Memory forests — every tree planted for a murdered friend, at once mourning and resistance, loss and greening.

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## IN A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PLACE

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The closing word of the session is the recognition of multidimensionality.

"We are in a genuinely very multidimensional place. And one must try to be aware of each dimension, I think. If everyone deals well with one thing, many solutions are produced."

The grounds for pessimism are real: the construction of totalitarianism, polarisation, the blocking of the streets, trauma. 12 March, 12 September, Gezi – each a rupture, each a wound. But hope is not asleep. The possibility of great traumas uniting humanity – the climate crisis and war can bring us to a "plane of humanity," just as the United Nations was founded. The new generation is more conscious with the internet. Patriarchy and heterosexism will certainly be demolished – to carry this conviction is not naivety but a form of resistance.

"This will certainly come about. Those who once said the world was round were also called mad. I want to hope that this will certainly come about."

The voices that came together in this session – political scientist, LGBTI+ activist, ecological living practitioner, feminist artist, documentary filmmaker, trade unionist – people who have passed through Turkey's political moments, walked paths from 12 March to Gezi, from Lambda Istanbul to the Alakir Valley, who have faced totalitarianism without surrendering. The question – art or street, academia or collective? – is a wrong question. Like a rhizome, a network that multiplies by itself beneath the soil, each capable of becoming a central root, continuing even if broken. Indisciplinarity is not a deficiency but a way of being. Ecology, gender, art, organisation – these are not separate struggles but different dimensions of the same struggle. The hand that founds a seed bank and the hand that codes violence into a plate set, the eye that films a documentary and the eye that builds a house from earth – all are node points of the same network. Working in each of these dimensions is the most meaningful thing that can be done in dark times.