

WATER

28 September 2019

THE RIGHT OF WATER TO FLOW: AN OPENING

The world is warmer than ever before and warming faster than ever before. The world is more polluted than ever before and being polluted faster than ever before. We are trying to grow without limit on limited resources. We are trying to pollute without limit with limited sinks. We have opened the limits, we are heading towards extinction.

"The seventh continent is within us, in our blood, in our brains. From within a broken and unjust system we are trying to change that same system. And we definitely do not know what we are doing."

The opening remarks begin like a confession: we do not know. We do not know what we are doing, but we accept not knowing as a starting point. We do not know whether humanity will become extinct, but we are certain that human rights, animal rights, nature rights will be extinguished. The opening says this struggle is a struggle with ourselves – looking for the enemy outside is easy, but we are that enemy.

The first public gathering of the Sindirim programme is for water, for water's right to flow. Thoughts accumulated over three years in the closed sessions of the Solunum programme are now being taken into the public sphere – within the Biennial framework but overflowing it. In marathon format: researchers, activists, artists, musicians will take the stage consecutively, each presentation lasting approximately twenty minutes, with stage changes between them.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE: ISTANBUL'S RECKONING WITH WATER

The first presentation tells the story of Istanbul's water – and this story is a vicious cycle. The natural water cycle is simple: evaporation from surfaces, cloud, precipitation, meeting with soil. But where is soil in Istanbul? Everywhere is concrete and asphalt. Rain cannot touch the soil, cannot seep into it; the cycle is disrupted. Why is everywhere concrete? Because there is migration. Why is there migration? Because investment is here. Why is investment here? Because it is profitable. As long as water flows from the tap, people will continue to flow.

The researcher lists numbers and each number is a wound: a population exceeding 15 million, daily water consumption of 2.73 million cubic metres – this is an enormous water monster. Network loss: 23.5 percent – one in every four glasses of water leaves the dam and is lost through cracks and ruptures into the soil before reaching homes. More than 170 streams have been imprisoned in concrete channels. Annual rainfall is above the Turkey average – this is not a water-poor city but a water-management-poor city. Lake Terkos has been feeding Istanbul since the 1880s but now faces the risk of salt intrusion. The proposed solution: bringing water from Büyük Melen, 180 kilometres away – a project to quench a megacity's thirst with the water of another geography. The city reaches out to wherever there is water. It drains the water where it reaches. Then it reaches further.

SKAMANGANA FELL SILENT: THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE BLACK SEA

The second voice comes from the Black Sea and the narrative begins with an object: the skamangana. A four-thousand-year-old device – working by using small water tributaries flowing from the valleys, chasing wild animals from agricultural areas with the sound of a bell. Our ancestors never thought of killing the animals; with the combination of water, chestnut tree and ingenuity, they produced a solution.

But the skamanganalar fell silent. Because the water tributaries that fed them no longer exist. Not even the remnants, not even the traces of the small tributaries that descended from the valleys to the streams remain. Water circulates in the soil as blood circulates in the human body – when you cut the water above, you have cut the vein of all life flowing beneath it along the valley. The activist narrates this story saying "they came" – a few companies arriving with greed, hypocrisy and the lies of energy. They dynamited the mountains, filled the shores with rocks, put handcuffs on the streams. Hydroelectric plants – HESs – imprisoned the streams' water in pipes and left it. With the lie of "we'll release it back below shortly." Red-spotted trout began to disappear; as the water dried out, so did the culture. The narrative becomes a fairy tale: Çinka, the water spirit in Laz.

One day, as the daughter of the King of Spirits stuck her head out and combed her hair, the wind rolled her head away; a bramble thorn caught it; Çinka blessed the thorn saying "may your lineage never be exhausted." The fairy tale is cut short: "Everything is half. The stream is half, the film is half." Like the skamanganalar, the fairy tale can no longer flow with the water.

"If only Çinka had blessed all of the Black Sea. So that your root never appears, so that no one can come."

TOXIC LOVE: FROM WITHIN THE SEVENTH CONTINENT

The third voice is scientific but its language is poetic – a marine scientist who teaches this subject at university, always going to lectures with a small sample vessel. They narrate the story of microplastics: more than 900 chemical substances are used in plastic production, 148 of them lethal. If our carpets don't burn, if our bags hold firm, if our PET bottles flex, it is because of those chemicals. "We are having a toxic love affair with plastic," they say. "Either you are mine or the black earth's – plastic says this to us." The Mediterranean is a microplastic soup.

The Eastern Mediterranean – precisely these waters – is one of the reddest regions on the world map. In İskenderun Bay, in Mersin, 31 kilograms of plastic wash up on shores daily; a hundredfold is buried in the sea floor. In a small sample vessel of 200 millilitres: five billion microplastic particles. Five billion – counted and verified by ratio. Plankton eats, fish eat, seals eat, birds eat, we eat. Even the water from washing machines is full of plastic fibres.

"We rewind the tape to the beginning. We threw the plastic away. The plastic came back to us. Processed, changed, transformed. In salt, in mussels, in oysters, in fish, in everything."

BETWEEN TWO SEAS: MATERIAL, BOUNDARY, WALKING

The fourth voice belongs to an engineer-artist – reading Istanbul through material flows with the analytical gaze that engineering formation gives and the observational distance that visual art gives: stone quarries, construction excavation, concrete. The quarries behind the Gazi neighbourhood are growing ever wider. Old lignite deposits have been filled with excavation debris, the third airport built over them – a "catastrophic" ground where all the city's rubble collects. Bosphorus City: a gated community built over the old Halkalı rubbish dump, fed by an artificial canal drawing water without permission from Küçük Çekmece Lake. The plainest form of the grotesque. But the engineer-artist is not only making a diagnosis, they are also proposing a method: walking. The act of walking is one of the most fundamental movements in human history – from Gandhi's marches to the Paris uprising of 1968, from the stalker collective to the Lycian Way. They propose converting the Canal Istanbul route into a walking route: let people experience, with their own bodies, whatever will come to pass, good or bad. The debate on border dams also enters this framework: the GAP dams, the US-Mexico wall, Israel-Palestine, the Turkey-Syria border – water is being turned into a security instrument, an object of militarism.

"Is a border wall being built from water using security dams? Whose security do these dams ensure? Is water being stripped of all its vital contexts and turned into a tool of militarism?"

THE SOUND OF WATER: A CLOSING

Throughout the marathon, two performances also take the stage — a group performs a water ritual, bringing their bodies and voices into contact with water; a musician converts the contact of plant roots with water into electrical signals, from there into sound. These are not reflected in the written transcript but constitute the spirit of the programme: water is not only an object to be analysed but a presence to be experienced, heard, touched. The juxtaposition of research and performance is birbuçuk's method: knowledge comes not only from data but from the body.

At the closing, a young voice rises, in English: "Maybe they will ask me about you, the people you knew back in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything." The silence that descends on the hall is like an answer. Next week there is the petrol gathering — the petroleum economy, the climate crisis, museum protests. Sindirim's public marathon has begun, and water as the first object has posed both the most concrete and the most political question: every stream whose right to flow has been usurped, every waterway imprisoned in a concrete channel, every sea filled with microplastics, every dam turned into a tool of militarism — all are different faces of the same system. The right of water to flow is in fact the right of life to flow.