

PETROL

5 October 2019

OPENING: DECLARING FOSSIL FUELS A CRIMINAL INSTRUMENT

The opening begins with a repeated ritual: the world is warmer than ever before, more polluted, heading towards extinction faster than ever. But this time the tone of the opening is sharper. The petrol session's team shares a position they agree upon with the public: fossil fuels must be discredited and declared a criminal instrument. This is not an analysis but a position.

And another confession: when the 16th Istanbul Biennial opened, it was learned with regret that some companies whose sole field of business is fossil fuels were among the organisations supporting the Biennial. The acceptance of these sponsorships at an art event placing the climate crisis at its centre is not considered right. Yet the value felt in being here, in bringing these issues to the agenda, in this platform having been opened, is also expressed. The tension of speaking from within is as old as the Biennial itself, but birbuçuk is one of the few voices to bring this openly onto the stage.

THE PRICE OF A LITRE OF PETROL

An economist takes the stage. The question seems simple: how much is a litre of petrol? The previous day's price had been checked – 6.80 lira on the European side of Istanbul, 6.86 on the Anatolian side. Calculated to the decimal – a precision that makes one think of how meticulously accounts are kept. A litre of petrol covers approximately twelve kilometres between cities. From Yedikule to the Biennial venue is eleven, twelve kilometres – equivalent to a litre.

But the real cost is not this. When the cost of a litre of petrol begins to be calculated, the ledger grows like an avalanche: the ecological destruction in the geographies where the oil is extracted, the pollution of the refinery processes, the carbon footprint of the supply chain, the human and economic cost of wars waged for oil – the blood bill stretching from Vietnam to Iraq, from Libya to Syria. The health cost of the exhaust fumes inhaled: asthma, cancer, early death. And the heaviest – the climate bill that future generations will pay, the indebting of people not yet born. The economist says they know how to calculate costs well, but no accounting system can calculate the entirety of this cost. Because some prices cannot be converted into monetary units. Ecological economics is precisely the field trying to make these incalculable prices visible – and petrol is one of the most painful examples in this field.

We are all part of petrol in one way or another, consumers of it. But we pay 6 lira 80 kuruş and ignore the real price.

OUR HOUSE IS BURNING

The stage is darkened. Multiple voices rise. A collage compiled from different speeches by Greta Thunberg – translated into Turkish, sometimes breaking, cracking, repeating. This is a performance: the words of a sixteen-year-old girl emerge from multiple mouths, some whispering, some shouting. "Our house is burning. I am here to say this." Hope, panic, anger, helplessness intertwine.

"Our house is burning. Nothing can be an excuse for doing nothing. When we take action, hope is everywhere."

The performance brings Greta's most striking paradox onto the stage: a child being compelled to preach to adults. "My name is Greta, I am sixteen years old" — this sentence grows heavier with each repetition. "I want to feel safe, walking alone at night, sitting on the metro" — the climate crisis is a security matter, an existential threat. The generation whose futures are being stolen speaks and the hall listens in silence. Emissions need to be halved within eleven years. Everyone in this hall hears this — but how many came by petrol?

ART AND WHITEWASHING: THE HISTORY OF MUSEUM PROTESTS

A museum professional takes the stage and, while introducing themselves, says "if I define myself as an activist I will have done a disservice to the other participants here" — but what they recount is activism itself. Art wash: oil companies, arms manufacturers cleansing their reputations by sponsoring arts institutions. In the companies' own language this is "reputation management." The narrative begins in England: the Liberate Tate movement, through six years of persistent protests from 2010 to 2016, succeeded in ending the BP-Tate sponsorship.

The museum has hundreds of thousands of members — this base makes it possible to mobilise public opinion. Success ripples outward: in the Netherlands, Fossil Free Culture ends Shell's Van Gogh Museum sponsorship. In France, Liberate Louvre fights against Total — they staged a new action just last week. The museum professional goes further back — to 1969, to the Artworkers Coalition. The cost of the Vietnam War was 70 billion dollars, the space race ten dollars per American. The middle class is being crushed. A group of artists presents MoMA with a list of thirteen demands: artists' rights, more space for Black artists, working-class access to the museum. Only one demand is accepted: free entry one day a week. MoMA removes it two months later citing loss of revenue, is forced to reinstate it through protests. These free entry days continue until the 1990s — then transferred successively to Target and Uniqlo sponsorship. Corporations have taken the place of the public. And then a striking confession: "I am above all a museum professional and the main sponsor of the museum I work in is an oil company." In the Turkish context museum membership bases are weak; sponsorship is a necessity.

We can open the discussion of oil sponsorship with not ten thousand but a hundred thousand members — a deliberately provocative position.

"Companies can enter very comfortably into the spaces the public has not claimed. I do not think it right, at this stage, to complain about this in countries where the public has not claimed its spaces."

FROM SINOP TO THE STREETS: CLIMATE REBELLION

The final presentation is the most personal. The Turkey representative of Extinction Rebellion narrates a journey that began by going out onto the street alone. Their motivation: seeing what Greta achieved at fifteen and wanting to share rather than entrust that burden to a child.

The most powerful moment of the story takes place in Sinop. A child decided to organise a climate strike. The children prepared their placards, they wanted to march themselves — "we are definitely going out" they said. The organiser hesitated: how will the security forces treat the children? Will the families be angry? Let's take photos and share them, they suggested. But the children were resolute. They marched so sincerely that they held their placards not to their chests but outward, towards people, showing them. Then they went to play in the park. The activist lay under a tree and watched the children — even seeing something like this under Istanbul conditions was a source of joy.

But in the evening a child returned and said: "This was the first time in years that I played like a child." This sentence lodges in everyone's chest. The children themselves chose to fight for climate justice — but did we unintentionally place a burden on them? Are they unable to live their childhoods?

"The children are truly doing the best they can. Our generation, we adults — are we struggling enough for this?"

CONSISTENCY: BY TRAIN TO ANKARA

The Q&A session gains unexpected depth. The first question is simple: "What was your motivation? Where should those who cannot move to action start?" But the answers are not simple. Individual action or structural transformation? This tension is the petrol object itself – the connection between individual consumption and systemic violence. A researcher tells an old story: in 2007 they gathered nearly 170,000 signatures for the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, went to parliament. At a committee session a parliamentarian asked – how did you get to Ankara? The answer "we came by train" created shock. Afterwards bureaucrats talked at length: "Look, they don't even take the plane, truly." Consistency is persuasive.

But individual action alone is not enough. The energy spent on recycling in Istanbul compared to England is a mountain of difference – without the service coming to you, it is not possible to reduce emissions through individual effort alone. Individual measures taken without changing policies have no effect on emissions. A voice proposes the concept of "capitalocene": not the anthropocene but an era originating from capitalism. The chain connecting petrol to colonialism, colonialism to industrial agriculture, industrial agriculture to the climate crisis lies precisely within this concept.

And a small but striking moment in the hall: someone confesses they are surrounded by so many vegans they are now embarrassed to say they are not vegan. Individual action creating social pressure – this too is a transformation mechanism, soft but effective. With the reminder of the resistance against gold mining in the Kaz Mountains, the hall widens: next week, a thirty-thousand-strong action is expected in Çanakkale; Alamos Gold's permit expires on 13 October.

As the petrol gathering disperses from the hall, everyone knows the cost of a litre of petrol is not 6 lira 80 kuruş. But no one can calculate how much it is. Perhaps the fact that it is incalculable is the most real cost of petrol.