

# CONCRETE

19 October 2019

## THE REASON WE ARE HERE

The opening begins with the habitual confession: we do not know. We do not know what we are doing but the seventh continent is within us, in our blood, in our brains. The concrete gathering is the fourth stop of the Sindirim programme and this time the object is as heavy as the city itself. Urban transformation, urban movements, practices of commoning, asbestos and its traces in the body, urban ecology – everything revolving around concrete draws one into Istanbul.

But first a video is screened: "1457 Ankara'dan Kesik." In the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter there is an asteroid numbered 1457 and its name is Ankara – a German astrophysicist gave it this name because they made their observations in Ankara. The documentary narrates the destruction of Ankara through the monograph of a donkey. A fifteen-minute excerpt from the sixty-minute film – the death of yellow monsters, organising against demolition.

Then an academic takes the stage and their narrative begins from France. Henri Pezzera, toxicologist, working in 1974 at Jussieu University in a Paris suburb. The experiments in their laboratory constantly produce wrong results – no test holds. The reason: asbestos fibres falling from the ceiling; a poison flows beneath the beautiful walls of the new building. Pezzera does not leave their discovery alone: they turn it into a campaign among the university trade unions. In the same period, women workers at the Amistor factory producing asbestos strips for the French army stage a factory occupation – we will not give up our jobs, we will not give up our jobs. The Jussieu team goes to the women workers and says "yes the factory and the jobs matter but this factory is killing you." Two movements meet: a popular movement is born from those who know acting and those who act knowing. The academic comes from the Workers' Health Work Safety Assembly.

The matter is the traces that all environmental disasters leave in the worker's body. Pezzera's son has made a documentary: "Sentinelle" – sentry, guard, but more in the sense of "to continue hearing something." The effort to persist in hearing a reality that is constantly being covered up and kept from our sight. Workers' health is the first observer of environmental health – the first traces are read in that body. The story returns to Turkey and sticks to the venue itself. This Biennial event was actually going to be held at Tersane Istanbul – a venue on the Golden Horn, an industrial heritage space.

But asbestos-containing materials in the old buildings could not be cleaned during construction. Independent reports were obtained, the process was run – an exceptionally well-functioning information process for an event attended by hundreds of thousands – and the event moved to Mimar Sinan. The reason we are here is asbestos. Asbestos occurs not only industrially but naturally in Turkey.

The erionite type from Cappadocia's geological history is natural asbestos. İzzettin Barış and a few researchers have worked on this subject for years. But industrial asbestos is a different story. The İzocam factory in Dilovası was founded in 1967 and transferred in 2007 to Saint-Gobain, France's largest former asbestos company. It dumps all its waste on a two-acre plot; when it mixes with the asbestos-containing rubble in the surroundings it creates an incredibly toxic environment – the factory is here, the waste is here, the people are here too. At Eczacıbaşı's ceramic facilities in Bozüyük, thousands of workers work and silicosis rates are alarming. Workers are forced to choose between their livelihood and their lives. A yellow union is at their head, zero occupational diseases are reported – no

one dies, according to official records. Asbestos lives as a mineral in the underground, as an industry in the worker's lungs, as concealment in the state's reports. The companies financing arts events and the companies making workers sick are the same; because public funding cannot be found, one is compelled to accept these sponsorships.

## AN ISTANBUL WITHOUT DOGS

The second section comes from the peripheries of Istanbul, from the wounds opened by mega-projects. An association has been walking through neighbourhoods for years – in districts undergoing urban transformation, forcibly displaced, struggling with public health problems. Kirazlıtepe is one of these: asbestos-containing rubble from demolition, precisely the public health problem the academic warned about. Each walk is an effort at mapping, at archiving – in different languages, with different tools, sometimes video, sometimes maps, sometimes semi-academic publications. Because Istanbul changes so rapidly that even keeping a record is a struggle.

The Northern Marmara Highway, the third airport, the third bridge – a series of projects beginning with concrete and ending with concrete, claimed to begin with demolition and end with construction. But in the hidden pages of the construction process there is animal relocation. Stray dogs are collected in trucks and dumped at the highway construction site – systematically, hundreds, thousands of them. The municipality does not tag them, numbers are not kept, the perpetrator cannot be identified.

A documentary filmmaker who went to the site narrates: imagine hundreds of dogs running towards you when you arrive. Most are hungry, most are thirsty. When you bring food, they are too dehydrated to eat. Even the dam behind them has been damaged, no water source left. A vast area, no shade – dogs try to shelter in the shadow of the cranes. Because it is a cross-iron construction, full shade does not fall, only a trace. The dogs try to get under that half-darkness.

"There is a post-apocalyptic environment. Something like a catastrophe scenario, within Istanbul."

Molossus – meaning large dog in Greek. The city's domesticated street dogs find themselves discarded and abandoned behind the yellow trucks. A researcher has created an archive by counting dogs one by one over years. But recently the municipality has even stopped tagging – so no numbers are kept at all, no actor can be identified. Sometimes three to five dogs, sometimes tens to hundreds. The yellow trucks carry asbestos-containing excavation, they also carry dogs – rubble and living beings in the same truck, in the same direction, everything the city does not want to see heading north. The concrete matter thus provides the opportunity to look at how those without power, those at the bottom, suffer losses from the system's actors, the powerful, those in authority.

## THE PLANTS OF RUIN

The stage is darkened and a manifesto begins – from the mouths of plants: Destruction has always existed.

Even before the apes. For them destruction, for us life. Ruderal plants. The first inhabitants of demolition sites – species living not in any botanical garden, greenhouse, park or pot but in the cracks of grey stone, in rubbish, in ruins, under bridges, in burnt land, at motorway edges, in construction pits, in all the voids of the city. Weeds have learned the language of humans. In the first towns established, where war first broke out, they were the first to proliferate. They have infiltrated seeds, invaded fields, crossed from continent to continent in birds' stomachs, in dogs' saliva, in car tyres.

These plants do not need formidable trunks, large and tasty fruits, showy flowers to survive. They prefer not the individual but plurality, not a long life but the transience of a nomadic existence. Soilless, very wet or very dry soils, very alkaline or very acidic – these are not their problem. Human classifications are inconsistent: something admired two hundred years ago is declared harmful today; what is declared harmful today will be put under protection tomorrow.

The manifesto mocks romantic ecology: "They do not need ecological heroisms, the nonsense of recycling and rehabilitation, saving. They are not objects to be repaired." Because they will continue to multiply as the world is destroyed. Every order creates new destruction, every construction new waste, every building new rubbish heap, every rubbish heap new resource, new life. They survived ice ages, agricultural revolutions, world wars – because they are disaster, chaos, opportunity and invasion.

And the most provocative line:

"The human being is a parasite. It cannot produce nutrients like a plant. It cannot survive without cutting, fragmenting, killing and eating the plant."

But the human being is also the best partner of ruderal plants. Clearing forests, creating rubbish heaps, opening roads, digging canals – wherever there is destruction, weeds grow. The plant is not an object to be romanticised, but an agent living alongside destruction, feeding from destruction, turning destruction into life.

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### THE PAST WAS BURIED IN CONCRETE

An artist is on stage, making a paste with cement, limestone and water. Limestone makes it more tasty, apparently. In the village as a child there was no patisserie – cake was a luxury, a proportioned object, a class signifier. Now trying to achieve cake consistency with the material of that luxury, the material of concrete – adding a little water, stirring, "I am not skilled, this is the first time I am making cake with cement" they say. The performance is a concrete metaphor of class transformation; the inexperience is part of the work.

In the 1980s in the village there were small houses within green gardens. Everyone was content. Then a transformation began: houses were demolished and converted into six-shops-below, flats-above buildings. These apartment blocks covered everywhere. The stream running alongside the house was buried in concrete. The grass in the school yard was concreted; because the population increased, another school was built in the yard. The enormous garden and fig trees of İsmet Teyze and Abdullah Amca were demolished and apartment blocks rose in their place.

"Slowly, all the past was buried in concrete."

Concrete has a class dimension. For people who migrated from village to city, concrete was the symbol of modernisation; moving from the garden to the apartment was an elevation. But this elevation buried streams, gardens, fig trees, childhood memories. The artist was in a supermarket with a friend when they saw a flower and wanted to describe it. The friend said "ugly, one side is bent." In their mind a plant has to be magnificent – if one side dies, if a branch falls, it is bad. But someone with a relationship to the soil knows: one side of a plant can die, a branch can fall, seasons pass. Have you ever sown grain, the artist asks the friend – sowing grain is something like losing, it does not resemble buying something from a supermarket.

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### THE POSSIBILITY OF ANOTHER WORLD

The sole carrier of hope in the concrete gathering comes from a vegetable garden. The Roman Garden – a garden living in the heart of Istanbul as a practice of commoning. Born after Gezi, or rather running after the possibility that Gezi opened.

"Gezi was an intervention in a public space. There we rebuilt life in a city. The possibility of another world fell into the hearts of everyone."

The Roman Garden is the concrete form of this possibility: permaculture, intra-neighbourhood solidarity, self-labour transformation, applied politics. A practice standing upright amid the sense that creating new green space is impossible, touching soil, sowing grain. All the practices formed after Gezi – vegetable gardens, cooperatives,

solidarity networks – run after this possibility.

The Q&A session gains unexpected depth. At last week's potato gathering there was a farmer from Kars – cheese, agriculture, a bond with the soil – and a sense of hope arose in the hall, a trust that things can change by being touched. As we approach the city, disconnected from soil, we move away from the anti-romantic language of plants and close in on ourselves. Someone questions the false division between city and countryside: we idealise the countryside, we imagine a distant village – but the capital groups transforming both are the same. Cengiz is building the third airport here while building a hydroelectric plant there. The actors are the same, the tools are the same, the power is the same. Moreover, since the metropolitan municipality law passed in 2004, Istanbul officially has no rural area left. Thirty-three metropolises have no rural area – all villages became neighbourhoods. Which countryside are we talking about?

Another voice expresses the impossibility of exit: on a planet that has gone through five great crises, ours is one of them. I cannot find in books why I need to defend biodiversity. What I find is barbaric, anthropocentric – ultimately proposing systems that will destroy other living things. I do not know what absolute justice is.

In this darkness someone tells a story of confusing death with life: they explain death to their five-to-six-year-old daughter as "we'll be worms, we'll be flowers, we'll be insects." Children become aware at this age and ask, and death is narrated through life. What is said daily to the daughter needs to be reflected in the struggle too – advancing without victory, without being right, by weaving the process. If we think everything to its end everything collapses – but the process itself carries a wisdom. We can go down together from here to Galataport, someone says – the venue itself is an irony, we are right in the middle of the transformation of industrial heritage into luxury consumption. A recycling worker, if they spoke, would say "recycling ruined us," says someone – because even in their own mind recycling is that clean concept from the municipality's advertisements.

But what is defined as waste is worth money; concepts defined as ecology are absorbed by the market. Urban transformation in Berlin: Aldi shops close, eco-markets open in their place – the same product is sold at two to three times the price. "Urban recycling" was once a phrase – a very pleasant concept – because it is a word that flowers everything. Ecological narrative, a new capital instrument. Roman gardens can do something but a sector will also buy the same concepts and sell something else. A voice proposes to commons-ise the struggles: to build a connection between the resistance of Dikmen Valley and describing the Roman gardens.

The Hevsel gardens. To show that this is not an alienation, that this resistance is commoned at the centre or periphery – to multiply spaces, to connect one to another. As the concrete gathering disperses from the hall, what remains in hand is several things: the invisible violence of asbestos, the helplessness of the dogs in the crane's shadow, the manifesto of ruderal plants born of destruction, the bitter consistency of the paste made with concrete, and the stubborn greenness of a vegetable garden.

When we look at the city we move away from the hopeful tone of the potato and water gatherings – but the ruderal plants propose precisely within this moving away a model of life: to grow where there is destruction.