

Interview

Speaking as Witnessing

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan in
conversation with Basak
Senova

Approximately one week before the starting date of the Gezi Park Resistance in Istanbul, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan opened an exhibition titled *In Situ* (May 2013). The exhibition was the result of the four-month research and production residency provided by PiST///, Istanbul. Due to the course of her research on spatial, social, and historical memory, Büyüktaşçıyan dealt with a personal memory and history. She researched the historical 'Pangalti Hamam', one of the many stunning examples of the destructive and careless implementations of neoliberal urban policy. This historical site was demolished in 1995 in order to build a five star hotel. *In Situ* re-constructs memory vignettes by activating compulsory acts of confrontation, integration, and adaptation. The installation, which was made out of soap cubes, was a bold gesture and a challenging act for the perception of the audience. Yet, in a week's time, with the actions of the police, the same experience duplicated itself as a routine daily life practice on the streets of Istanbul. In fact, the entire exhibition overlaps with the reasons, the process, and the dynamics of the resistance in Turkey. This interview began in the first days of the resistance; Büyüktaşçıyan was at Gezi Park until the police moved in. The interview concluded a few days after the evacuation of the Gezi Park.

Barricade, Gezi Park, Istanbul, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Hera Büyüктаşçıyan.



Basak Senova: The ambiguous relationship between the physicality and the mental presence of an image sets the conditions of both personal and collective memory of space. These memories do not necessarily coincide with layers of perception. In this context, what is the significance of the ‘soap’ in relation to the memory (re-) construction process in your work around the Pangalti Hamam?

Hera Büyüктаşçıyan: The soap as a tool for cleansing is also an instrument for washing away the traces of our daily life from our physical bodies. It wipes out the dirt on our skins as well as it removes all the layers of daily memory and practice as well. When we think of its material quality, as a medium, which melts and becomes slippery, its form also evolves due to its physicality and material reality. In this way, it becomes a kind of instrument of resetting collected memory as well as our physical bodies. The space of the hamam, which brings together all these components, is where remembering and forgetting through the cleansing of the memory is equal to physical purification. Just like the floor of the hamam, which is very much slippery due to the steam, water and soap, metaphorically, the structure of our mental spaces also become like slippery grounds due to the notions of forgetting and remembrance.

BS: How do you define these notions?

HB: An image or a fragment from both our personal or collective memories might be distorted, destroyed, or disappeared by the constant and uncontrollable act of forgetting. However the effort to remember a forgotten element of the mind creates a new dimension and helps the mind to reconstruct that element with a new form. Remembrance reveals the hidden aspects just like a mental archeologist brings out elements of a memory that has been in

existence, but had been long lost.

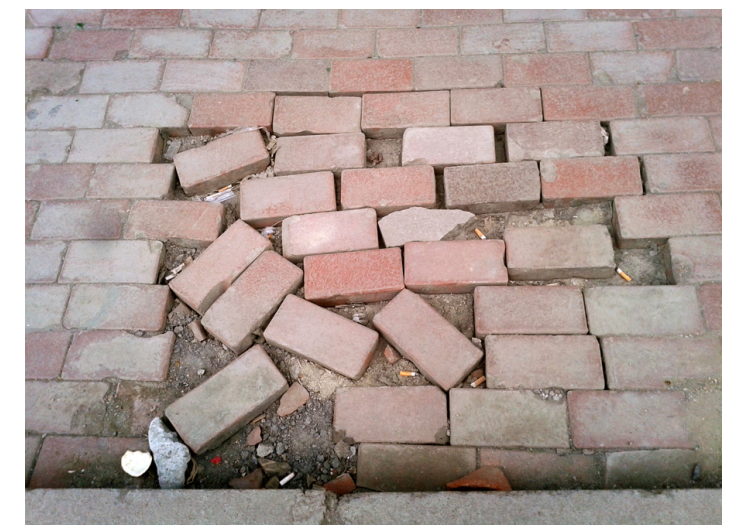
BS: In this respect, ‘soap’ is no more the object of the project, but the connecting device between the acts of forgetting and remembering. It speaks both for the physical and the mental.

HB: As a metaphoric structure the hamam transforms memory into a slippery ground and due to the sensuality of its smell, becomes a bridge between the perception of what is physical and what is mental. The space that was (re-) constructed in *In Situ* (2013) combines all these aspects by referencing to the space of the hamam. A new perception of space has been structured by following the same pattern of the pavement outside the street, creating a link to connect what is inside and what is outside. This connection is formed not only with the physical resemblance of the soap to the cobblestone, but with the sensuality of the smell that remains dominant in the space while being spread out into the street, just like the streets of any hamam, which used to smell like soap. In this way, the non-existent space of Pangalti Hamam is revived within another context. *In Situ* is like a fictional and sensual imagination of a space that is beyond time.

BS: Our sense of balance along with our perceptual awareness of space is entirely based on spatial references – basic orientations of the horizontal and vertical – that constitute perceived pictorial space. And if the group plane is tilted or distorted, our pictorial space would no longer be horizontal, balanced or ordered. This means that our perception of the space has to be transformed and we have to adjust another (imposed) order. Could you open up the connection between the paving stones, which has been in a constant shift during the protests in Istanbul since Gezi Park, and the soap cubes in your installation *In Situ*?

HB: The ground as a platform on which a city and all our lives are situated on, is not a simple layer on its own, but a combination of all

Barricade, Gezi Park, Istanbul, 2013. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Hera Büyüктаşçıyan.



the invisible layers of time and history beneath itself which remains unseen and rarely remembered. I guess the eldest/most ancient memory of a city up to date is the memory of the pavement on the ground level. The ground is the surface where history is lived and constructed, where things are structured, destroyed and buried, only to be reconstructed again. As I have mentioned, the notion and relation of what is inside and outside is the same way the pavement creates the layer between the visible and non-visible; between what is contemporary and beyond time.

Not only in the recent events, but for decades the memory of the pavement in Istanbul has collected, imbibed and digested many aspects within itself such as creating a base for different civilizations, wars, exile, various habitats which has been constructed, destroyed or imposed and so on, within its own surface memory. In this sense, the memory of the city surface itself is horizontalised within the aspect of time, encased in the visible and invisible layers underneath.

BS: The very same surface of the city has been articulated and altered with further layers during the resistance. How do you read this process?

HB: During the days of resistance in the city, the public realm found itself within a drastic change and we have been witnessing transformation both physically and rhetorically/metaphorically. The perception of space and the meaning of the public sphere has transformed completely and reconstructed a new meaning and functionality of space. One of those changes was the way the cobblestones were used during the resistance to build up barricades in order to block the ways of the police. The function of the pavement was no more used for having a flat surface to walk on it safely, but switched into a new context. After gaining its new form, one could easily see the various gaps on the pavement, which became the obvious evidence of the

Hera Büyüктаşçıyan,
In Situ, 2013,
site-specific installation,
soap and vinyl, PiST///.
Courtesy the artist. Photo
by Coskun Asar.



resistance phase, just like many other elements of public spaces have been turned into gigantic sculptures giving the feeling of an open air museum of the events around the resistance movement. The transformation of the public sphere became the remembrance of a regained freedom of mind and space.

BS: The physical association between cobblestones and the soap cubes is not only limited with their shapes, but also with their capacity to change our perceived pictorial space.

HB: The soap cubes, which relate to the pavement stones, follow the path of the street, but then it flows in a way that a new perception of space is being recreated. Just as the stones become barricades. It is not possible to walk on the path of soaps as well. The soap tiles carry the tracks of the transformation within the mental space while each piece follows each other in a constant flow. All of a sudden it turns out to become another form or physical reality within itself – as if an invisible layer underneath forces the current layer to explode and come out in a different form.

BS: In this very instant, the source of the transformation is vertical.

HB: Yes, exactly. For the same reasons, the strength of the resistance was based on the ability to face the facts of the past. History has remained suppressed and unsolved for many years, both individually and collectively. Therefore, at this point, the past, which has been repressed and was buried under the invisible layers of time, made a vertical move through the notion of ‘remembrance’ and became visible by coming out through the surface.

BS: In the same line of thought, what was very identical with the resistance was the ‘instant adaptation capability’ of the protestors against the police violence in various forms. Hence, the city has been subject to obligatory adaptation modes with an aspect of ‘muted resistance’ all through history, and even with an accelerated speed for the last decades. As I see it, the trace of this ‘muted resistance’ is always present in your work. How has this aspect evolved in your works?

HB: I think the term you use as ‘muted resistance’ has been a major aspect in any type of transformation, struggle and tension within the social system as well as in the individual level of life throughout different time periods, not to mention historical and socio-cultural memory. Although this aspect leads to any kind of destruction, on the other hand the dominance of the imposed acceptance/assumption by the negative forces, is often not internalised and remains superficial. At this point the term ‘silent witness’ comes onto the scene, which partly collaborates with the notion of ‘muted resistance’, where silence covers all witnessed aspects and lets them exist invisibly deep within memory while carrying the unaccepted elements

externally. Fear is the key factor for silent witnessing, which leads one to act like the three monkeys, rejecting to express the witnessed situation through the senses. This is what happens externally, while on the other hand, ‘muted resistance’ becomes internalised and invisibly goes deep within the conscience and memory. Within the depths of memory, the essence of the resistance is the continuity of its existence. Even if the resistance must remain hidden or is forced to be invisible it will remain until the time of visibility comes.

Within many works of mine there are these silent fragments of time, history and memory, which have remained invisible, yet give a strong sense of vivid existence. The stories or the notions that are undertaken in some of my works, containing the aspects of loss, destruction, otherness, transformation, invisibility, and so on, becomes the embodiment of the silent existence of these aspects and often tries to propose different ways of perception. In this way what is mute and invisible comes into the scene and through space and time it becomes visible. It’s like picking and grabbing out the hidden things underneath and letting them continue their existence visibly and allow this visibility to turn into the act of resistance itself. Whether each aspect manifests itself in different forms such as installation, drawing, and video or as an object, it does have the strong quality of being performative by its obvious act of ‘continuity of existence’ and its ‘resistance’ throughout time and space.

Last but not least, another reason for the intensity of this ‘mute/invisible resistance’ effect in my art practice also depends on my own personal life regarding to my own cultural, identical background. As having both Greek and Armenian roots, while I look back to history as well as today, those two identities have gone through a very intense socio-political history within this geography. The memory of both cultures imbibes many rich qualities and values as well as a painful reminiscence of the inheritance of loss. So, the notion of silence becomes the exterior element in order to keep such memories invisible so as to defend against loss and sorrow while the flame of the memory resides deep within. Trying to be a detached observer, I think the notion of being mute is not only valid for these cultures but for many other cultural identities residing within these borders. The thirty-day period of the recent resistance in Turkey has fired up the will and the ability to express the hidden things recollected within each individual and to let the invisible become vibrantly visible.

Hera Büyüктаşçıyan,
In Situ, 2013, detail from
the installation.
Courtesy the artist. Photo
by PiST///.



Hera Büyüктаşçıyan (1984, Istanbul) is an artist based in Istanbul. She graduated from Marmara University Fine Arts Faculty Painting department in 2006. Her works mainly emphasizes the notion of the ‘other’ and combines it with the concepts of absence and invisibility to compose such notion within an imaginary connection through identity, memory, space & time. By using metaphors from local myths, historic and iconographic elements, she opens a new narrative scope for the ‘other’. In her recent works to inquire the meaning of ‘absence’ within the collective memory, she focuses on urban transformation, which causes total disappearance, destruction, isolation and otherness within the framework of communities, history, time-space and memory. Selected exhibitions she participated in include “ScanIstanbul” (2003, Istanbul); Going Public’06 (2006, Milano); “The Other” (2007, PiST///7-24, Istanbul); “Changeables and Transformables” (2009, Istanbul); “Lives and Works in Istanbul” (2010, Istanbul); “art.homes” (2010-2011, Munich-Istanbul); “Worthy Hearts” (Erivan, 2011); “Looking Somewhere to Land” (Stockholm, 2012); “Reflecting on Reflection” (2012, Gallery Mana, Istanbul); ‘Blur’ (Münich, 2012); “Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment” (2013, ARTER, Istanbul); “Memories of the Forgotten” (2013, Adahan, Istanbul); “In Situ” (2013, PiST///, Istanbul) including the performance of “An Afternoon Odyssey” (2012, SALT Beyoglu, Istanbul).