

By Kasia Tórz

A cycle THE INVERTED EYE portraits contemporary female performance artists who challenge mainstream pictorial orders and question the frames of perception.

In the fifth episode of the series Kasia Tórz introduces the work of Begüm Erciyas who creates poetic landscapes where visitors can use their senses as a tool for introspection.

A FOLDED EAR

On performative landscapes of Begüm Erciyas

On a May afternoon, a group of people gather in Kalmthaut's wood. We stand in a circle and wait for the start. After all, this is supposed to be 'a performance'. A while later, when each of us has been equipped with a portable mp3 player, we scatter in all directions. The dramaturgy of the *Forest Silent Gathering* (2022) is set by the voice speaking in our headphones. And although everyone receives instructions individually, we remain a collective. We do the same thing. Every few moments, we take a step or two back and let community break apart.

The setting, which only a while ago was an ordinary meadow, becomes an unlimited landscape. My perception changes – as if the eyes, not used to the greenery, the absence of people were absorbing more visual impulses. The image – as a result of intensified attention – seems to freeze into more and more perceptible layers. Hearing sharpens, anticipating the next command. Time stretches and tangibly – through our bodies growing apart – reveals the disappearance.

Suddenly I realise that I can no longer see others. Around me – a silent crowd of trees standing upright firmly, above me – the sky and clouds that subtly change the intensity and colour of the light. The exercise of being alone is proving demanding. A strange dynamic. Alone, not alone. In the end, I surrender.

In *Forest Silent Gathering*, Erciyas builds the greatest possible stage – the stage of introspection, of insight into what happens in our own dark room: in individual intimacy, as we gaze into the darkening forest and open up to a vibrant ecosystem. After some time I keep my eyes open and the stillness of the scenery evokes new patterns and images. It is as if I was silently experiencing Italo Calvino's short stories *Invisible Cities* and was visiting the imaginative places he creates – aerial cities, upside-down cities, cities woven from spider webs. Begüm Erciyas' method is about extracting maximum possibilities from the simplicity of what is already there.

I experience a similar state of slight, almost unnoticeable, destabilisation of the perceptual apparatus a few months later in the Harmoniepark in Antwerp, where a small group assembles at the entrance of the municipal building to co-create the performance *Letters from Attica* (2020). I am an element of a Chinese Whispers chain that becomes a performative channel transporting the content of letters written and sent secretly from Attica prison by Sam

Melville. He was detained there for a series of bombings that he organised in protest against the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

Although fragile, transmitting a message from person to person is the surest way to leave no trace of its existence – I read on a strip of paper I receive before the performance begins. My left ear takes in the particles of the letter spoken by a woman standing next to me. As all participants have been asked not to change position, I lean my body to the right so that my voice reaches next person who will pass the words on. My mouth becomes the container in which I store Melville's emotions, and I release them further so that they keep on living. The sentences of a letter are divided into chunks, half sentences, sometimes only one or two words. The time we need to pass them on infuses the narrative with air. The transmission of letters creates affective involvement. The connection with the person waiting for “my words” becomes closer than I initially expected. We look into each other's eyes, in which there is a mixture of amusement, focus and perplexity.

I have been trying

I have been trying 1-2-3-4 times

I have been trying 1234-5 times to write this letter.

I can tell you

I can tell you, i love you.

My body – the ear cochlea, the vocal cords, the wetness of my throat – function as a real instrument, as essential as the bodies of my companions, for telling this story.

At the same time, I keep looking. The park on a Saturday afternoon – as opposed to an abstract forest evoking images – offers tangibility. A man with a guitar in a case squats on a brick wall under a tree. A group of festively dressed Jewish boys runs through a clearing of grass. Perhaps they are celebrating a bar mitzvah. A couple stroll down the alley with a trolley. Dogs sniff the grass, smelling so fresh after the rain.

These scenes – though so clearly belonging to this moment – happen as if on a screen to which I have no access. This is because I am caught up in this ghostly story – an evocation of someone's life recorded and locked away as if in a jewel box. I have agreed to be an accomplice in this delicate procedure. And I feel that I cannot lose my focus because it will break the chain of transmission. Begüm Erciyas constructs a framework for experience that draws on our own resources but gives them another dimension. She wants to merge two positions – being a spectator and the audience at the same time. Perhaps we are always, inseparable, conjured in this duality? “When people are in these two roles, they are losing orientation and make different choices” – claims Erciyas and explore the grey zone in-between these dispositions.

Born in 1982 in Ankara, the artist before turning to choreography studied molecular biology and genetics. Her projects combine both dimensions – the insight into the potential of matter – the hidden knowledge and liveness that is not visible with the bare eye, and the dynamics of the bodies – the spectators engaged in performative situations. Although in most of her work there are no dancers or actors on stage, she identifies her productions with dance, considering it the most open form in performing arts. Erciyas works in a team with scenographers, sound designers and software developers who help her creating imaginative environments.

“Why don’t you hide in the darkness and listen to my private thoughts?” This sentence from *Voicing Piece* (2016) indicates the paradox of subjectivity that is a construct. In this performance all participants get immersed into an individual experience, although they share one space. Each spectator enters a booth – a cloud-like black lantern standing on a tripod encompassing their heads and arms – and follows comments heard from the speaker. Then they get involved into a conversation with their own voice, being taped live, and processed by a computer programme. Hearing one’s recorded voice is always a very alienating experience, as if we were witnessing a possibility of being incomplete, or having another version of ‘us’, with a new software. This little shift experienced in a theatrical context opens new perspectives of self-reflection. Erciyas wants this piece to be “an invitation to recognize a stranger in oneself”. Also in *Pillow Talk* (2019) visitors are lying down in a big space and entering into a conversation with an artificial voice coming from the pillow.

Erciyas is interested in the processes that are unrepresentable, in characters that are slipping away a clear identity. “Who speaks, when it is one’s own voice that speaks?” – asks the artist and points out that “our most inner, most personal part is also the most foreign”. As individuals we oscillate in the area between the common, the settled and the uncanny. Seemingly unspectacular, performative landscapes created by Erciyas have the explosive power of poetics that enhances attentiveness, awareness of detail and openness for interconnectivity.

While being the participant of her shows we can experience what is extracted when the strangeness is exposed, made present. When our ego is losing its sense of self-assurance and clear boundaries. Erciyas explores ‘the non-human’, the non-person’, the perplexing ‘unknown’, a sort of existential enigma – that in theatre can be fuelled by double source: real confrontation or projection triggered by individual imagination of the viewer. She is interested in highlighting watching as a process „a live action that constructs the performance”.

Begüm Erciyas constantly addresses the tension between inside and outside, individuality and collectivity. She poignantly captures the strangeness of our condition – of being so closely together – as a collective, as a mass, in unavoidable connections – and at the same time so alone, separated in an individualistic psyche that increasingly leads to solipsism. She thinks that we tend to shift away to our little monads, stick to people alike us. How can we transcend the membranes that divide us – not only the external ones, but also the divisions and contradictions within ourselves? How to encounter each other? “If we don’t share the same reality, what is the effort to take to feel the sense of togetherness?” – asks Erciyas.

Indifference towards others is a possibility increasingly practised in a world where the space for a slow and insightful gaze is shrinking. But even this indifference creates resonance, it reverberates through objects and planes, it triggers tensions. While alone in the forest, I encounter the passivity of the trees, the inevitability of nature's day cycle, the lack of contact with other participants. In the emptiness, thoughts free themselves from the pragmatic tasks organising time and the undertaken activities. I perceive more clearly how the performative dynamics of relationships, of space, of one's own involvement are emerging. I finally reach a limit. A decision: when to take off the headphones and go deep into the forest? When to let the text of Melville's letter become *my word*? When to recognise that my voice heard as that of a stranger might be telling me something I don't know?