



THE CLOSET (detail), 1997/2015, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, installed at Salt Galata, Istanbul, 2015. Photo by Ali Erdemci.

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TRAGEDY AND FARCE HALE TENGER

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TURKEY

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When you stepped through the door into a sparse hallway, illuminated by a lone fluorescent bulb, it immediately felt like you had traveled back in time several decades. There was an old dining table shoved awkwardly against one wall, and an old radio sitting on a bureau at the far end was blaring the news, about the number of terrorists eliminated, before the broadcast switched over to a football match. The drab curtains behind the bureau were drawn shut. A door on the right led into a cavernous bedroom, which seemed too big and too empty, with a pair of stiff-looking twin beds pushed too far apart and another one isolated in a dark corner—a stern, patriarchal place. On a desk illuminated by the only light in the room, school assignments were in progress. One book was open to a page about Atatürk's reforms of Turkish dress in the 1920s and another to a page about the establishment of the parliament and courts in the new Turkish republic. Through a final door was a brightly lit closet, stuffed with old wool coats, synthetic blouses, shoes, old suitcases, children's toys and other vintage household knickknacks from decades ago. Colorful and warm, yet cramped and claustrophobic, it was a room of someone else's memories—generic yet unrecognizable. After a while it was hard to breathe.



THE CLOSET (detail), 1997/2015, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, installed at Salt Galata, Istanbul, 2015. Photo by Ali Erdemci.

When Hale Tenger first created *The Closet* in 1997, its oppressive, and depressive, atmosphere was meant to recall the stifling climate of Turkey during the brutal military dictatorship of the early 1980s—the home becoming a metaphorical space for the homeland, where, in those days, darkness and silence reigned, and where the security of the interior was infiltrated by threatening events happening outside. Yet, when Tenger re-created this installation in September 2015 for the group exhibition “How Did We Get Here,” which surveyed the cultural life of the decade following Turkey’s September 12, 1980 military coup, the implicit comparison between the early 1980s and the present was unavoidable. Since the government had renewed armed conflict with Kurdish guerillas in southeastern Turkey a few months earlier, in July 2015, and launched an increasingly repressive campaign against media outlets, opposition parties and civic groups, people had begun debating whether the country had returned to the dark days of the 1990s, 1980s or earlier. Though nearly 20 years old, *The Closet* felt all the more timely for evoking the past that people fear the present increasingly resembles.

When Tenger and I met in January in Istanbul, she told me that she had become acutely aware of the eerie parallels between the period she was evoking in *The Closet* and the current moment in Turkey on one particular night in August last year, after working late in the gallery on the installation. She had been listening to the state news radio station (TRT) in the car on the way home and heard the state broadcaster use the exact same phrase, “*Etkisiz hale getirildi*”—“they [Kurdish guerillas] were rendered ineffective”—from the TRT broadcast from just after the 1980 coup that is excerpted in *The Closet*. As she said to me: “It’s a phrase from the 1980s. They would never say the terrorists were ‘killed’ or ‘murdered,’ but only ‘rendered ineffective.’ Unfortunately, *The Closet* doesn’t make you think you are looking at an old work, because the situation is as tense again as it was then. It fits into the atmosphere again.”

The apartment in *The Closet* is based on the one where Tenger grew up in the Aegean coastal city of İzmir, and, born in 1960, Tenger belongs to the generation who were teenagers and young adults during the late 1970s when spiraling violence between leftist and right-wing groups, coupled with an economic and parliamentary meltdown, was used to justify the military’s takeover on September 12, 1980. She spent her formative years living through the chaos, first studying computer science at Istanbul’s Boğaziçi University, then ceramics at the Istanbul State Academy for Fine Arts. She eventually was able to leave Turkey on a British Council scholarship to earn her second MFA, in ceramic sculpture, in Cardiff. Tenger reminded me, with a wry smile, that in her professional career to date she has made exactly one artwork in ceramic. It is an iconic one. The ironically titled *Turkish Delight* (2003) is a series of eight terracotta figurines of Priapus (modeled on one found in Ephesus), the Anatolian god of fertility, whose phallus is as long as he is tall, which Tenger had painted in cobalt and turquoise floral motifs found in the Ottoman-era Iznik tiles, neatly collapsing the two foundational myths of a nation into one little, grotesquely engorged man.



TURKISH DELIGHT, 2003, Majolica terracotta, one of eight pieces: 8 × 14.5 × 19 cm each.

When Tenger returned to Istanbul following her MFA and began exhibiting in 1990 in solo and group exhibitions, Turkey was just beginning to emerge from military rule, with the departure of coup leader Kenan Evren from politics in late 1989. At the same time, a new generation of artists and curators had coalesced, along with the seeds of today's art scene, such as the first Istanbul Biennial, organized by Beral Madra, in 1987. Tenger, for her part, wasted no time, showing remarkable ferocity in criticizing the culture of violence and patriarchy she had grown up in and was still living in—for the 1990s would become the bloodiest years of conflict with Kurdish guerillas. For one of her earliest works, from 1990, she took the loop of a hawser (a thick rope used to moor large boats) and studded it with nail-like thorns. At the loop's bottom, where the rope had frayed slightly, she sculpted a small face and called the piece *Portrait of a Woman*.

Through the use of highly charged imagery and symbols, Tenger has, from the beginning of her career, challenged the toxic mixture of Islamist-nationalist-authoritarian tendencies that have dominated public life in modern Turkey, in turn prompting a range of reactions from outrage to sorrow. The elements combine provocatively in one of her first major works, *The School of "Sikimden Aşşa Kasımpaşa"* (1990)—a vulgar expression meaning, roughly, "The School of 'I Don't Give a Fuck Anymore'"—which comprises a massive galvanized iron pool more than two meters in diameter, filled with a blood-red liquid. Around the bottom perimeter are ablation taps like those found outside of mosques where men wash their feet before prayer, while hanging above the lake of blood are dozens of scimitars. In Turkish, the sexual suggestiveness of the words in the title, combined with the objects (the scimitars and the pool of blood), as well as the explicit yoking of a militarized-nationalism and religious devotion that in most quarters of society are still considered as a proud history, are dramatically condensed. (The symbolic regime of modern Turkey frequently refers to conquests from Ottoman or Turkic history. Turkey's national anthem links the red of its flag to the blood of its soldiers, and it is said that the flag itself is based on the reflection of the crescent moon and star in a pool of blood, as seen by Sultan Murad II after the 1448 Battle of Kosovo.) By linking the nationalist bloodlust with religion, particularly as a strategy to reveal underlying ideologies that shape society, she was bound to "offend" someone who suspected an undercurrent of criticism.



THE SCHOOL OF "SIKIMDEN AŞŞA KASİMPAŞA," 1990, galvanized sheet iron, lead, sword, tap, water and food dye, d: 230 cm, height variable.

In the case of *The School of "Sikimden Aşşa Kasımpaşa,"* trouble loomed when the piece was exhibited at Istanbul Modern in September 2011 in a survey of female Turkish artists, "Dream and Reality." The columnist Emre Aköz at the pro-government *Sabah* newspaper tried, unsuccessfully, to goad his readers into outrage by calling it a work of "political ideology," and questioning the wall text's description of it as primarily a response to violent events of 1990, such as the assassination of the feminist theology professor Bahriye Üçok, who herself had been critical of certain Islamic ideologies. Aköz rightly understood Tenger's use of these symbols as criticism, but he crassly aligned her perspective with that of the old guard secularists who in the past had demonized Islamists and thereby relegated Tenger to one corner of the

old, reductive battle between Turkey's illiberal, secular elite and its pious population. What Aköz chose not to see was Tenger's criticism, stemming from a longer, more liberal perspective, one that linked contemporaneous events in Turkey to a history of violence. Fortunately, aside from some ensuing scrutiny about whether Istanbul Modern had indeed diluted the subtext of the work in its wall texts, the controversy did not escalate.

The artwork that had really got Tenger into trouble was *I Know People Like This II* (1992), which she showed at the third Istanbul Biennial of the same year, curated by Vasif Kortun. On the wall Tenger created a seven-meter-long rectangle from small bronze versions of the Three Monkey figures, covering their ears, eyes and mouth, respectively. Within this perimeter, she used bronze figures of Priapus (the same one that would later appear in *Turkish Delight*) to trace out a crescent and star shapes, two elements found on the Turkish flag. After being attacked in the press—the columnist Beşir Ayvazoğlu told her to expect an act of revenge—she was first prosecuted under the notorious Article 301 for “insulting the Turkish flag.” But since there was no actual flag in the work and she was able to argue that the crescent and stars can be found in the flags of 12 other countries, that case was dropped. However, prosecutors were not done. They then charged her, in a higher court this time, with “insulting emblems of the Turkish nation.” In order to avoid prison, Tenger made the legal defense that the symbols were intended as universal reflections on violence against women. She told me about her day in court. “I had to say that the artwork had nothing to do with Turkey. I remember the judge, with his glasses like this”—she pushed her glasses down on her nose and looked over them—“and looking at me eye to eye, asking several times, ‘So this has nothing to do with Turkey?’ I had to say ‘yes.’” Ultimately the judge accepted her word and the charges were dismissed. Tenger herself has written about the irony of this defense, observing: “Nevertheless, the visual reading was there in the open and was well understood by the public.”

Without my prompting, she continued to extend the parallels between past and present. She compared her experience to that of Pınar Öğrenci, a fellow artist of a younger generation, who joined a group of activists that was arrested and spent several days in jail in late December 2015 in the southeastern city of Diyarbakır during a march for peace. As Tenger says, “I was not taken into custody. I was not treated badly by the police. Nothing like [what happened to Öğrenci] happened to me. But when the court case ended, I was traumatized for a year.” Her comparison prompted me to ask her something I had been wondering, as members of Tenger's generation make parallels to the dark days of their youth: how much does Turkey today really resemble past decades? Her reply was that she fears the situation is in fact much worse now, that at least in the old days the military, after their periodic takeovers or “interventions” into politics, would promise to leave eventually. “Once it was the fear of military coming back to power, and of them trying to erase left-wing people,” she told me. “But now my fear is not only for left-wing people, but journalists, academics, maybe even myself.”



I KNOW PEOPLE LIKE THIS, 1992, gas mask, mop, water, iron mesh and iron, 190 × 50 × 45 cm.



WE DIDN'T GO OUTSIDE, WE WERE ALWAYS ON THE OUTSIDE / WE DIDN'T GO INSIDE, WE WERE ALWAYS ON THE INSIDE (detail), 1995/2015, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, installed at Protocinema, New York, 2015. Photo by John Berens.

Tenger was never jailed during her trial, but nevertheless the feeling of being detained or imprisoned runs through many of her works. It is most explicit in the first piece that she made after her trial's conclusion, for the fourth Istanbul Biennial, curated by René Block, in 1995. Entitled *We Didn't Go Outside, We Were Always on the Outside / We Didn't Go Inside, We Were Always on the Inside*, it was based on a dilapidated guard's kiosk she found in the derelict Antrepo Customs Warehouse building. She dragged the kiosk into the middle of the space and surrounded it with a two-meter-tall perimeter of barbed-wire fencing. There was an opening on the far side of the fence, so that viewers could enter the six-by-fourteen-meter yard and step into the grimy one-person hut, where the walls were plastered with sentimental postcards of Istanbul, old wrestlers and picturesque landscapes. A half-finished glass of tea sat on the ledge and a radio played nostalgic Turkish songs as the kiosk poses as a symbolic space where national identity is codified, through the act of being confined. The exact scenario of the work is deliberately confused, as the barbed-wire fence is inverted: it faces inward so that the imagined "guard" figure is also trapped within, in time and place. The confused dynamics of the title are also suggestive of the idea of critique itself—the artist, perhaps, is neither on the outside looking in, nor the inside looking out. In another fortuitous opportunity, this work was re-created in 2015, in New York, at the initiative of the itinerant nonprofit Protocinema. Tenger re-fabricated the entire work from scratch because the original no longer existed. Just as with *The Closet*, the dislocation of time and space achieved by this little cabin was uncanny, as it was a spatial facsimile of something real, and old, and having a specific history that also speaks of a whole sociopolitical environment that has, just like the installation itself, been re-created in an almost indistinguishable manner from the original.

I asked Tenger how she started making these installations or environments—she says she doesn't have a specific word for them—and she said they came out of the challenge of making something *more* than a sculpture. The first of their kind was called *Necessity of Air* (1992), which she exhibited during the time of the 3rd Istanbul Biennial, in the basement of the Atatürk Library in Istanbul. The display there mimicked museological tropes, as Tenger used only objects found in the institution's storage, placing an old carpet on the floor and velvet-brass ropes delineating a kind of arbitrary inside/outside area. She put heavy curtains against the wall, even though there were no windows there (like the curtains in *The Closet*), to contribute to an oppressive atmosphere. One display vitrine contained a brass speculum, facing the trio of "hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil" monkeys (the first time she used them), in a small gesture that linked women's issues to a culture of silence about its wrongs. It marked not

only a shift in tactics of display, but in Tenger's interest in using existing materials (readymade objects) that are freighted with their own histories. It was a miniature museum of political history, though not one that any institution would ever write.



NECESSITY OF AIR, 1992, furniture, carpet, curtain, book, blotter, speculum, three-monkey statuette, lithograph, television and chest, site-specific installation at Atatürk Library, Istanbul, 1992.



Detail of **NECESSITY OF AIR**, 1992, showing the three-monkey statuette and speculum.

While Tenger's installations often have oblique, or more generalized political histories as their reference points, she has made many of her works in response to specific events. *I Know People Like This* (1992), a gruesome sculpture of a gas mask attached to the end of a mop hanging over a metal bowl and encased inside an iron-mesh cage, was her own embodiment of a dehumanized male, "disconnected from himself," in her words, that responded to her own questions about why, during an intense period of violence between security forces and Kurdish guerillas, "do we have all of these massacres, murders and violence." The unimaginable war and genocide occurring in the last decade of the 20th century that was taking place in Europe prompted Tenger to produce *Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia-Herzegovina* (1993), an installation of metal shelves lined with 864 jars filled with water and containing photocopies of newspaper clippings relating to the Bosnian war. The figures and stories seen in the photographs are again confined, in liquid-filled jars, crudely like specimens. It was shown in the basement of the Women's Library and Research Center in Istanbul, and the space was filled with sound from interviews made by Tenger in collaboration with Serdar Ateşer at the Gaziosmanpaşa Bosnian Refugee Camp in Kırklareli, on the Thracian part of Turkey, where refugees from the war were housed. I didn't think of it at the time of my conversation with Tenger, but I realized later that this piece also has unfortunate parallels with the present day, as Turkey has become one of the largest hosts of Syrian refugees, many of whom are living in camps and facing the uncertainty of a future in which they may never return to the place of their birth.



DECENT DEATHWATCH: BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA (detail), 1993, metal shelves, jars, Xerox, water and audio by Serdar Ateşer, dimensions variable, installed at Women's Library and Research Center, Istanbul, 1993.

There are limits, however, to how much past history Tenger is willing to evoke in the present. I asked her about another work, not as well known as others, from the mid-1990s, called *Shroud*, which she had created at the New Museum in New York, in 1996, at the invitation of curator Dan Cameron. It is also a room proposing an ambiguous scenario, with a deceased figure wrapped in a white shroud and laid out on a carpet. There's a fan and a floor-light illuminating the body, and the rest of the room contains half-empty furniture: a bed without a mattress, a closet with two old pictures of the sea taped to it. When I asked about it, Tenger told me, "I wouldn't want to show it now—not with all these people waiting to die in the basements of houses," a reference to the horrific stories that at the time were coming from the Kurdish cities of Cizre and Silopi (in Şırnak province, near the border with Syria, Iraq and Turkey) that were under siege by the Turkish security forces, who were blocking ambulances from reaching residents who had been caught in the crossfire, leading to the untreated people slowly dying in basements where people had taken shelter. While Tenger's original narrative of the piece suggested something much less specific—perhaps about young lives then being lost on both sides of the Kurdish insurgency, before their time, before an adult home could even be established—any contemporary reincarnation of this piece would be freighted with the weights of the present that, in some respects, surpass the horrors of the past.

There is undeniably an element of Tenger's work that does, intentionally, present too much reality for anyone's comfort, even her own. But there is also the implicit suggestion across Tenger's work that, like the figure of the Three Monkeys, many painful episodes in Turkey's history have remained as such because discussion or recognition of them has been willfully suppressed (perhaps the most obvious of which is the still officially unrecognized Armenian Genocide, but it includes other notable massacres of ethnic minorities like the Alevi, Kurds, Greeks and the surviving Armenian population, not to mention crimes against leftist and alternative groups and individuals). The unrecognized history of violence is what links the three pieces entitled "I Know People Like This," the third of which she created for the exhibition "Envy, Enmity, Embarrassment," at the nonprofit space Arter in 2013. Tenger's installation filled the street-facing gallery of the building with a lightbox labyrinth whose walls were more than two meters in height. On these illuminated surfaces, she placed archival news photographs that she had printed onto X-ray film. The images depict plainly recognizable historical moments—such as protests marking the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007, for instance—alongside less well-known historical images from show trials, executions, pogroms and dark episodes from 20th-century Turkey, all organized in roughly reverse chronological order, so that walking through the piece took the viewer back in time to the 1960s from the present. In a bold gesture, which apparently went unnoticed by the people who attempt to mobilize public opinion in outrage against one subject or another that contravenes the state's preferred narrative, the first images were from just a few weeks before the exhibition opened, and through the street-level windows, viewers could see images of security operations and events that even mainstream news outlets were too cowed to run. The metaphor of the installation is that the archive of imagery, like an X-ray, can allow us to see inside the (political, social) body and find its illnesses and fractures. When we spoke, Tenger reminded me that although the work is just three years old, "If you wanted to keep that work up to date, there are so many things to add. I have Hrant Dink in that series. Now we have to add Tahir Elçi," a reference to the Kurdish lawyer who had been arrested in October last year for disseminating what the government calls "terrorist propaganda" (he had called for greater autonomy in the Kurdish areas of Turkey's southeast) and who was assassinated in November after giving a press statement calling for peace.

I Know People Like This III was shown in the months leading up to the Gezi Park protests that occurred in late May and throughout June 2013—a small series of protests initially sparked by plans to bulldoze a central park in Taksim Square and replace it with a mall, which grew into a nationwide series of antigovernment outbursts that released years of pent-up frustration. The events were led largely by the young and educated generation that had been written off as apolitical in comparison to Tenger's generation who had come of age in a time of so much politically factionalized strife. After seeing *I Know People Like This III*, Tenger's own mother had asked her to create something less tragic. As she told me, "My mother couldn't stay in the labyrinth for very long. But I also trouble myself with my own works. For that piece, I kept crying as I was collecting those images."



SHROUD (detail), 1996, found objects including furniture, carpet, fan, spotlight, toddler shoes, photographs and shroud, dimensions variable.



I KNOW PEOPLE LIKE THIS III, 2013, photographs from press archives, dry laser print on medical imaging films, Plexiglas sheets, LED and metal, dimensions variable. Photo by Murat Gemen.



SWINGING ON THE STARS, 2013, still from video installation: 2 min 57 sec.



BALLOONS ON THE SEA, 2011, still from seven-channel video installation with audio: 5 min 40 sec, 900 × 1,400 cm.

But history and reality seem to catch up with Tenger, even when she claims to have tried to create something less depressing and tragic, which she had promised her mother she would do. Whether she achieved this or not, is questionable. Her first version of the video installation *Swinging on the Stars* (2013), which she showed at Galeri Nev in Istanbul, also in early 2013 before the Gezi protests, depicts the Three Monkeys swaying in front of a starry background to the midcentury hit “Swinging on a Star.” Using her favorite motif, as a political allegory, it again suggests the state and its populace’s refusal to recognize its crimes—many of them alluded to in *I Know People Like This III*—with the added irony of a song about feeling jubilant. But given the work’s display just before the Gezi protests—a genuine outpouring of discontent that completely reversed the stereotype of the Turkish millennial generation as apolitical—Tenger made a second version of the work where the monkeys instead raise their fists and begin chanting some of the various taunting slogans common to the protests (they sing *sık bakalım, sık bakalım, biber gazı sık bakalım*, the chorus of the “pepper gas march” that dares police to fire at them) as clouds of tear gas cover the protesting monkeys.

If there’s any real optimism in Tenger’s work, aside from the seemingly upbeat melody in *Swinging on the Stars*, it comes in the video installation *Balloons on the Sea* (2011), which Tenger was working on at the outset of the Arab Spring. It’s based on an earlier photograph, *Balloon Loan* (2005), of the seaside in İzmir (Tenger’s home city near the Pasaport Pier, with its distinctive tiling) showing NATO warships in the background, where a uniquely Turkish game is taking place: a vendor has set up balloons suspended on a line and floating in the sea, and passersby pay to shoot at them with an air rifle—a pastime that seems to reflect the interests of a highly militarized population where all men serve in the army. In Tenger’s installation, there’s an initial, large screen showing the balloons lined up on the surface of the water (although the image is upside down), behind which are screens showing the individual balloons. As each balloon is shot on the main screen, it disappears from the one behind, but only to reappear after a while. In Tenger’s own description the balloons are personified, “like prisoners shackled to one another and lined up against a wall, before being shot—except each comes back to life.” For all its bleakness, Tenger’s installation also depicts how the progressive agents of history are renewed, over and over. “Whatever their goal is, they come back, as, this or that way, things don’t remain the same.” She followed that remark with a pause. “Well, it’s still depressing in a way, but strangely optimistic—for me.” It struck me as the most sanguine sentiment anyone so pessimistic about humanity’s supposed progress, anyone whose worldview was so brutally realistic, could possibly articulate about the progression of history—that at least things were moving inexorably in a better direction, despite all appearances. While it is often true that artists are the last on the scene of a crime, in order to report on it, to describe it, and to relate it, in the works of Hale Tenger, which in their historicity seem more relevant than ever in describing the present, the artist’s belatedness has its own advantages: namely, of being ahead of the curve as history takes another spin.