

COMMUNICATING DIFFICULT PASTS IN PERFORMING ARTS:  
DİSKO 5 NO'LU AND SEN BALIK DEĞİLSİN Kİ

by  
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## ABSTRACT

### COMMUNICATING DIFFICULT PASTS IN PERFORMING ARTS: DİSKO 5 NO'LU AND SEN BALIK DEĞİLSİN Kİ

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This thesis explores the enactment of the collective past and memory in performing arts and questions the political and daily limits and possibilities of such enactment in present-day Turkey. To this end, it delves into two contemporary performance pieces from the alternative theater scene in Istanbul: *Disko 5 No'lu* by DestAR-Theatre and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* by Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (ÇAK). In the thesis, the works in question are interrogated in terms of their ability to open up new and deepened understanding of collective past without being trapped in representational schemes where words stand for an authentic meaning, performance stands for a text, and thus all the theatrical elements are instrumentalized as the vessels of an unreachable, absolute truth about the past.

## ÖZET

### ZOR GEÇMİŞLERİ PERFORMANS SANATLARINDA AKTARMAK: DİSKO 5 NO'LU VE SEN BALIK DEĞİLSİN Kİ

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Anahtar sözcükler: performans, tiyatro, alternatif tiyatrolar, tarih, kolektif hafıza

Bu çalışma toplumsal hafızanın ve geçmişin performans sanatlarındaki aktarımını ve bu aktarımın bugünkü Türkiye’de gündelik ve politik sınırlarını ve imkanlarını inceliyor. Bu amaçla, tez, İstanbul’daki alternatif tiyatro alanında üretilen iki güncel performans örneğini, DestAR-Tiyatro’nun Disko 5 No’lu oyununu ve Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası’nın (ÇAK) Sen Balık Değilsin ki isimli performansını ele alıyor. Tezde söz konusu eserler, kelimelerin otantik bir anlamı, performansın bir metni ikame ettiği ve dolayısıyla bütün teatral öğelerin geçmişe dair erişilmez, mutlak bir hakikati aktarmak için araç haline geldiği temsil mekanizmalarına sıkışmadan ortak geçmişlere dair yeni ve daha derin bir anlayış yaratabilme kapasiteleri açısından sorgulanıyor.

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## INTRODUCTION

“...the creative energies of theatre can [...] be seen as a force that becomes a dialectical antidote to the destructive energies of history and its painful failures”

Freddie Rokem, *Performing History*, 192

This thesis explores the enactment of the collective past in performing arts and questions the political and daily limits and possibilities of such enactment in present-day Turkey. To this end, it delves into two contemporary performance pieces from the alternative theater scene in İstanbul: *Disko 5 No’lu* by DestAR-Theatre and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* by Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (ÇAK). Juxtaposing these works under the discussion of performance and collective past is appealing as certain similarities as well as differences between their forms and content enable pondering the ways in which performativity can negotiate difficult pasts.

*Disko 5 No’lu* and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* are two solo-performances grounded on two distinct events of political violence from Turkey’s recent past. While *Disko 5 No’lu* focuses on the tortures afflicted on Kurdish political prisoners during the years following the coup d’etat in 1980, *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* takes as its main reference point the assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007. Both of them are related to events that can be described as “public secrets” (Ahıska 2014, 166) – events known by everyone, though without a clear sense of what they entail socio-politically. These past events are not totally erased either from the official histories or from the hegemonic memory framework, yet what isn’t contained in these frameworks is the diverse realities lying within the events as well as the pains, disappointments and frustrations inherent to their living memories which are marked on places, bodies, objects, sounds beyond written narratives. The hegemonic narratives of nations and institutional bodies don’t host these memories to be alive and to be communicated. Yet, as Rokem puts it, this inhospitality

doesn't always result from the strategical and planned annihilation of these memories. The way people make sense of history works parallel with the way the hegemonic narratives eliminates the living memories. A certain "lack of perspective, the failure to understand, and the inability to grasp the whole situation are an integral aspect of what it means to live 'history'" (Rokem, 2015, 21). However, as opposed to the assumption of knowing the history with its entirety through narratives, the performance works can potentially reveal the dialectics intrinsic to understanding history:

"Aesthetic representations of the past are constituted by carefully balancing the limited or limiting understanding a person living at a specific moment has, incapable of grasping the whole event of which he or she is a part, with some form of retrospective understanding that these historical events may have for us at any given point in time." (Rokem 2015, 23)

Besides their potential to communicate collective past through a dialectical perspective, what makes the above-mentioned works particularly appealing is that they deal with the events that are marked by Armenian and Kurdish ethnic identities without being trapped in identity representations, but rather by opening possibilities of reconfigurations of collective memories and identities attached to those events. The works engage in the distinct traditions of performing arts; while *Disko 5 No'lu* is a text-based theatre performance, *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* is closer to the genre called dance-theatre. However, an important common aspect of their forms as solo-performance makes them appealing to this study because performing the collective past in the body of one performer lead us to ask certain questions integral to the discussion on performative representations of collective past: Can we reach past beyond the archives and records? And, what is the relation of individual memories and bodies to the collective pasts? I suggest that both of these works, while re-enacting memories of collective pasts, at the same time generate their own memories – memories haunted by the hectic movements of the performers' bodies and the sensual experiences they trigger in the audience. As such, they potentially open up moments of reconstruction of the memories attached to the events as well as interactions among separate past events.

### **Collective Memories and Embodiment**

There is a popular sentence written and pronounced mostly when people witness loss and suffering inflicted by political violence in Turkey: "Unutursak kalbimiz kurusun"

(Let our hearts be died-up if we forget). The original reference point of the sentence is not known or to whom this plural imperative directed. Instead, there is a broad spectrum of events and political alignments in which these words are adopted. It has been articulated both after the loss of 19-year-old Ali İsmail Korkmaz, who was beaten and killed during the Gezi Park protests in 2013, and after people, mostly government supporters were killed or wounded during the attempted coup d'état on 15 January 2016.

A quick look at internet platforms shows the increasing variance in the adoption and reception of this motto-like sentence. At times, it can be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between different collective memories belonging to distinct geographies in Turkey. Mentioning the limited participation in the commemoration of the Roboski massacre<sup>1</sup> in İstanbul, a writer remarks, “we had said ‘let our hearts be faded if we forget’altogether. But yesterday İstanbul forgot.” (Aktaş 2015). It is articulated more by leftist brands of politics in an affirmative sense, endorsing such efforts for preserving a memory. However, what is equally important to notice is the skeptical approaches questioning the “sincerity”<sup>2</sup> of the words in social media platforms. In some other contexts, the sentence becomes comic material such as when people used it after the death of a famous character in a soap opera. It is like a discursive meme traversing different contexts interweaving the wishes, concerns and doubts about the durability of a collective memory against the passing time as well as the loss of particular pasts in time. Ahıska points out that the possibility of loss is an integral part of the hegemonic designation of time as “progress” (Ahıska 2014, 164). While the subjects and mediums of such struggle against the loss of a collective past are open to question, their movement is most of the time quite definite as being against the homogenizing configurations of progressive history.

The limits and contents of a collective memory of an event, however, do not yield to an easy definition. This resistance comes from the way a collectivity and its memory are formed. The memory of a group is not simply the sum of all individual memories relating to the same events (Halbwachs 2011). Each individual has different social, economic and political affinities and group experiences, which create particular collective memories. Yet, this relation is not unilateral. As much as the memory belongs to certain groups, these groups are created and sustained through these memories (Olick 2011). As

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<sup>1</sup> 34 Kurdish people doing cross-border trade were killed in an aerial bombardment by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet in Roboski which is located near the Turkey-Iraq border on December 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <https://eksisozluk.com/unutursak-kalbimiz-kurusun-samimiyetsizligi--4466068>

such, the group identities are shaped by the stories the group tells itself (Halbwachs 2011). Thus, when we consider history in terms of “memory” beyond the institutional configurations such as families, schools and citizenship, we consider history not only in terms of its relevance to the present but also acknowledge the diversity and plurality intrinsic to its reception (and its expression).

Yet, what makes the study of collective memory appealing is not only the diverse receptions it points out but also the ways these memories are sustained and reconstructed. Unlike sociologists like Halbwachs who theorized collective ways of remembering without a consideration of their accompanying embodied practices, scholars of performance studies focus on the material mechanisms through which these collective memories are kept and transmitted (Counsell 2009, 5). As memory is not something uniform and fixed, its transmission also depends on the operations of diverse mediums without necessarily depending on language and writing. Unlike the history proper that is preserved and sustained in state-sponsored archives, memory lives on various terrains of social life. Beside history education, commemorative official ceremonies and popularized stories promoted by public figures, social memory is carried through transgenerational narratives, stories, songs as well as sites, bodies, behaviors, and acts. Regarding the myriad ways that memory lives on, this study focuses on embodied acts of remembering from political demonstrations, rituals, and dance to the ordinary acts of everyday life which can be categorized as “performance” (Taylor , Acts of Transfer 2003, 12).

Performance Studies scholars focus on the way social memory is transmitted by bodily acts, regarding them as embodied and ephemeral reserves subject to continuity and change at the same time (Taylor, Acts of Transfer 2003). Two characteristics of performance reveal its inherent relation to memory. Performance as an embodied act is a repetition, reiteration or, as Schechner puts it, “twice-behaved behavior” (Taylor, Acts of Transfer 2003, 3). And because of this very same reason, every act is at the same time a reconstruction and reinvention. In other words, “every repetition is also an alteration” (Landry and Maclean 1996, 76), therefore it is an area of contestation as much as a confirmation of previous sets of meanings. Similarly, memory is made up of both continuity and change; to remember is to repeat a past within the altering context of a present. So, one could construct the linkage between memory and performance in at least two ways: There is not only a corporeal, embodied dimension to remembering but there is also a performative bend in memory.

Embodied acts preserve the past as well as reveal the ways in which we remember past values and dispositions that are open to alteration, reconstruction, and reinvention (Counsell 2009, 7):

memory and meaning are imminent in the act itself, generated and negotiated by particular bodies, specific acts. Performance thus forms the very substance of cultural life, is the process in which **the terms of collective existence are made, remade and transformed.** (7)

As Counsell interprets above, Joseph Roach focuses on the productive and constructive characteristics of performance in cultural life, rather than seeing it as an appendage for a pre-existing structure, “the abstract langue”. Similarly, by positioning performance as a constructive transmitter of social memory, Diana Taylor also attests to a distinct value to in the performative act, suggesting that it can preserve especially the stories that are invisible within hegemonic historiographies and archives, the stories of minorities or otherwise disadvantaged and marginalized groups. She focuses on the ways of remembering which are not bounded by tangible objects and archival documents available to revision and re-interpretation (Taylor, *Acts of Transfer* 2003, 19). She brings up the notion of a “repertoire” comprised of diverse kinds of embodied reserves from ritual, dance, ceremonies, to daily acts like the way one cooks (Taylor, *Who, When, What, Why* 2003, XII). The everyday practices that she calls “the acts of transfer” cannot be objectified within an archive yet they preserve life within themselves and stays open to reconfiguration (Taylor, *Acts of Transfer* 2003, 2):

It is only in the comparatively unregulated realm of the repertoire that non-hegemonic views may be postulated. The place where alternatives may be proposed, new meanings made, the repertoire is the domain of cultural process, and therefore the arena in which acts of resistance can take place. (Counsell 2009, 8)

It is important to note that Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire is not necessarily about one's superiority to the other. However, regarding the designation of archives by institutions and thinking over other ways of knowing, what she points is the liberatory aspects of the acts of transfer. For sure, there are limits to these liberatory aspects as collective memory is not intrinsically “resistant” or “counter” to dominant scripts of history, it can be an integral part of or complicit with it as the various popularizations of “Unutursak kalbimiz kurusun” shows. However, it is where the past

can be considered as something living in the present as well as something inherently related with the ways the people remember it. The embodied manifestations of collective memory not only sustain and reify groups, belongings, and identities but also potentially open them to negotiation and reinvention.

### **Collective Memories in Contemporary Turkey**

Turkey as a country with an imperialist legacy as well as with a modern history marked by state-sponsored acts of violence and several military interventions, constitutes a case through which official, as well as resistant memory politics, can be analyzed. Systematic discriminations against ethnic and religious minorities as well as marginalized groups along the lines of sexuality, gender, class, and political alignment, framed by nationalistic and paternalistic hegemonic discourses have been putting their marks on the bodies, psyches, and memories of the subjects coded as undesirable citizens. The lack of legal mechanisms and measures to recognize the harm done by this coding to impose a punishment and prevent the recurrence of these events have been parallel to their silence and invisibility as a definitive characteristic of the historiography and hegemonic culture in Turkey. However, as these terrains are subject to contestation, the silence has never been absolute.

This historical background prepares us to see more clearly how the contemporary memory politics operate. Onur Bakiner points out a shift in the state policy of Turkey regarding history and memory politics initiated during the political reign of the Justice and Development Party (AKP in the Turkish acronym) (Bakiner 2013). He claims that elite representations of the past forged and sustained mainly by Kemalist politics started to be dissolved together with certain taboos regarding proper identities in Turkey (692). In this period, Bakiner continues, Turkey witnessed the burgeoning of a new memory framework, forging a continuity with the Ottoman past (692). The ever-increasing number of TV series, theatre, film productions, and the contemporary trends in fashion inspired by the Ottoman past and culture can be seen as an integral part of a much deeper and structural change in the way the collective past is interpreted in Turkey. This change, while making some new ways of historical interpretation and positioning possible, has either preserved the silences of certain memories or further silenced some others. Accordingly, Bakiner avoids interpreting the recent increased interest in Turkey's Ottoman past and its representations as a mere reappraisal of a glorified past but rather as an integral part of an attempt to forge a new memory and collective belonging shared by

a majority, a development which he calls “majoritarian conservatism” (692). Therefore, while past crimes which delegitimize Kemalist politics are allowed to be articulated, such as Erdoğan’s apology “on behalf of the state for the mass killing of Kurdish-Alevi citizens in the province of Dersim in 1937-1938”, other issues like the Armenian genocide remain a taboo – a taboo that causes intellectuals to face trials for “insulting Turkishness” as they define the events of 1915 as genocide.

What is important to notice here is that the shift in the reception of the history is not merely instrumental for the AKP regime. It is, as Bakıner also underlines, a reciprocal process in which citizens are not passive recipients of such changes. Even though states have a crucial role in forming and disseminating stories that are reifying identities through institutional and public mediums of communication and representation, memory inevitably harbors diversity, contestation, and change as something that is not fixable, always open to revision according to the needs of the present.

The new memory regime, therefore, is not a top-down implementation of a brand-new narrative disseminated through official accounts. The recent example of AKP’s memory work on the coup attempt of 15 July 2016 exemplifies how the government is aware that forming of a collective memory is a dynamic process operating within diverse terrains of social life, sustained through the material and embodied sources as well as symbolic ones. The name of numerous places including one bridge, one bus terminal, and fifty-three train stations have been changed into either compound names such as 15 July Martry’s bridge/ station/ street etc. or directly into the names of the people who were killed or wounded on that night. The 15<sup>th</sup> of July has been declared a commemoration day for the people who died, and ceremonies and public gatherings started to be organized by state and public institutions. Calendars, notebooks, everyday objects were produced with the theme of 15 July. The memory of the coup attempt has been dramatized by students in schools around the country, by independent theatre companies as well as by numerous anonymous video producers on YouTube.

The AKP’s interest in coming to terms with certain past events in an exclusionary scheme, silencing certain historiographies and memories while promoting new ones is also an integral part of a global context in which past crimes and human rights violations perpetrated by states have begun to be discussed, along with the demands of recognition and amendments coming from diverse sections of societies. Many scholars point to a shift in interest from the modernist understandings focused on the nation’s future towards a growing interest in the past in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Assmann 2011). Memory has become an

arena of contestation in theory as well as in real life. This rising interest has partially grown out of the understanding that the genocides and violence resulting from the conflicts based on national and cultural identities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century were related to the ways the past was remembered and constructed by the people (Neyzi 2011, 2). In Turkey, the interest in the recent past started to rise following the 1980 coup d'état and its accompanying political oppression as well as by the globalization of memory politics leading to a search for new cultural and subjective identities in Turkish society (Gürbilek 1992, 9). This change in people's relation to the past has led to a reevaluation of forgotten traumatic past events, especially the ones that afflicted religious and ethnic minorities (Neyzi 2011, 4). The population exchange between Greece and Turkey; the 1937-38 Dersim massacre; the 6-7 September İstanbul pogrom against İstanbul's Greek minority; 1960, 1971, 1980 military interventions and the assassination of Hrant Dink on 19 January 2007 are among the events which have affected Turkish society deeply and been continuously discussed (4). Today, Turkish society is formed by publics with diverse political and cultural attitudes, thus having diverse interpretations of the past events (4). Therefore, the ground on which the AKP has been trying to consolidate a new state-sponsored identity and memory frame, even if it speaks to a majority, is an unstable one.

While what the AKP has done can be characterized as a political reconstruction of history to consolidate its power; demands for truth, justice, and memory have been flourishing in civil society as well as in different fields of the cultural sector. Particularly in arts these demands have aimed not necessarily coming to terms with the past to resolve and reconcile once and for all but to face and acknowledge the difficult pasts in Turkey. Yet, these concepts are neither yields into easy definitions nor can be neatly separated from each other. The recognition doesn't guarantee reconciliation and social transformation. As journalist Pakrat Estukyan pointed out, even though the state of Germany "facilitated the necessary mechanisms to face the genocide, Neo-Nazis today still exists"<sup>3</sup>.

There are persistent and systematic efforts to challenge the hegemonic memory and historiographies in Turkey embracing the complexity of processes of confrontation

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<sup>3</sup> Eşit Hakları İzleme Derneği, Uluslararası Ayrımcılık Konferansı, May 26-27, 2018. At the conference, one of the audience asked to journalist Pakrat Estukyan; "Did Kurds face with the Armenian genocide?" Estukyan answered with another question; "What does 'to face' mean?" His question, as simple as it was, wasn't only a rhetorical question stated to turn down a genuine answer. He added: "Did Germans face? The state of Germany may be, yes. It facilitated the necessary mechanisms to face, but Neo-Nazis today still exist."

and reconciliation. Civil initiatives, commissions, and groups are adopting diverse ways to put past atrocities and human rights violations into the public agenda in order to create a confrontation as well as a dialogue between conflicting collective memories in Turkey. *Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi* (Truth Justice Memory Center) which was established in 2011 by a group of lawyers, journalist and human rights activists is one of the prominent examples of these civil initiatives<sup>4</sup>. They are conducting a diverse range of work such as documentation, monitoring cases that epitomize the violations of the last 30 years and the dissemination of silenced narratives in Turkey<sup>5</sup>.

Besides the organizational work conducted by civil groups, Turkey has witnessed a series of exemplary collective acts of resistance, which have effectively created “counter-movements” against the progressive designation of time and place within capitalist-national politics (Ahıska 2014, 165). The Saturday Mothers in Turkey are demanding justice and accountability for their loved ones who were forcibly disappeared in the years following the 1980 military coup and during the 1990’s conflicts between the state and Kurdish guerilla forces. The Saturday Mothers have been doing sit-down protests by silently holding red carnations and the photographs of their disappeared kin every Saturday since 1995 in İstiklal Street, one of the most visited central avenues of İstanbul (162). Another significant example of acts of resistance relating to collective memories has been the Gezi Park protests, which started as a reaction to the governmental decision to transform the park by rebuilding old Ottoman military barracks. The protests quickly spread throughout the country, was supported by hundreds of thousands of people from diverse socio-political backgrounds, before finally turning into a country-wide protest against the oppressive politics of the government. According to Ahıska, such movements have succeeded in mobilizing and connecting disparate and isolated memories in the hegemonic history, destroying “the closure of history in Turkey” (162).

### **“Alternative Theatres” of İstanbul**

Cultural production and artistic tendencies in Turkey have also been productively responding to the rising concerns and struggles around the collective past. One artistic area in which memory politics that genuinely question collective memory forged by way

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<sup>4</sup> Hakikat Adalet ve Hafıza Merkezi. <http://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/about-hafiza-merkezi/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of aesthetics has been the “alternative theater” scene of İstanbul. Though the phrase is mostly used to refer to the burgeoning contexts of theatrical activity since the 2000s, its emergence can be traced to the 1960s.

The diverse artistic practices of alternative theatres can be traced back to the tradition which focuses on the inherent value of theatre as performance. Within the broad frame of this tradition theatre is understood as distinct from literature as opposed to the understanding of theatre, within the Western tradition at least, simply as a field where the text becomes visualized (Kocabay 2007). Kocabay suggests that since the 60s, the theatre has been heavily affected by the art of performance and adopted its elements, shifting its attention from the quality of “representation” toward the quality of “event” (1). However, the theatre tradition where the different elements of theatrical performance gain their independent values doesn’t have one uniform application. Moreover, it would be wrong to claim that theatre practices in Turkey simply adopt Western traditions and tendencies. Rather, the particular context in Turkey and its outcomes for the theatre practice need to be considered. With the drastic interruption that the 1980 coup created in the social, political, and cultural life in Turkey, theatre practitioners became involved in a search for a new language (2). Underlining this interruption, Kerem Kurdoğlu mentions the change in the politics of the theatre making:

As a result of this rupture, artists who felt the responsibility on their part challenging time to find the motivation to make art. After the mid of the 80s a new understanding flourished discovering that the only way to political, social and historical responsibility may not be to produce sheer political work, instead, many works about daily life can have political dimensions and impacts. A more nuanced and deeper understanding of political and social responsibility started to develop. (Kocabay 2007)

Similarly, Karagül points out that the proliferation of “alternative theatre” after the 1990s is related with the relatively liberatory politics and cultural environment coming after the oppressive time period of the 1980ss (Karagül 2015, 7). She underlines that theatres like 5. Sokak Tiyatrosu, Krek Tiyatro Topluluğu, and Tiyatro Stüdyosu, which were questioning the idea of a stationary setting in theatre and attempting to produce “experimental” pieces, are different from the alternative theatre of the 1960s (8). At the heart of this difference lies the fact that these theatres foresee a more comprehensive change in their art production in terms of staging, text, acting, dramaturgy etc. (8).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, there has been almost an explosion in the number of alternative theatre groups who are making theatre with their own efforts outside publicly funded theatre circuits. Despite their differences in terms of artistic concerns and methods, there is an emerging interest in the difficult parts of Turkey in the alternative scenes of İstanbul. Many contemporary works of theatres are dealing with the collective memories of contested past issues, some of which amount to “social traumas”. These include BGST’s biographic work about Armenian writer Zabel Yesayan, *Zabel; Fail-i Müşterek* by Altıdan Sonra, and *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak* by Tiyatro Artı; *İz* by Galata Perform. *Disko 5 No’lu* and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* are part of these theatrical/performative attempts to address actual past through the theatrical enterprise.

### **Performing History**

There is a burgeoning literature on the relation between history, performance, and memory. Out of these three, “memory” is seen as the hinge between history and performance<sup>6</sup>: “...memory acts as a shared crucible of discovery and a distorting lens through which history and theatre engage with the past.” (Dean, Meerzon and Prince 2015, 1)

History, both as the practice of historiography and as what happened in the past itself, stands as the quite opposite of the core constituent of performance, that is fiction (Schneider 2014). History proper, which bases itself on archival material and evidence which can be recorded and preserved attempts to reach or grasp the “real,” bringing what was happened in the past into the view of the present. In considering the significance of practices of history as well as theatrical practices that deal with the past, the currency is “the real”, or more precisely “the proximity to the real” (3). Then, why do theatre or performance practice struggle to bridge a gap which is seemingly insurmountable? As mentioned above, Rokem gives an appealing answer to this question by pointing out a “double perspective” which is peculiar to “performing history”:

On the one hand, such aesthetic representations present a lived immediacy of the historical event, an immersion into that historical reality, including the limited understanding (or denial) of what is happening as the events unfold according to their sometimes perverse logic; while at the same time, these aesthetic representations also include some form of more general

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<sup>6</sup> In most of these theories, “performance” is used as an umbrella term which covers both “social dramas” as well as theatre works, performance art and cultural production in general. See Taylor, “Acts of Transfer”.

retrospective understanding of their consequences for us in the present, in particular regarding the ethical (though not moralistic) dimensions of these events. (Rokem 2015, 22)

Rokem names the performers dealing with these dialectics intrinsic to representations of the past as “hyper-historians” (Dean, Meerzon and Prince 2015, 2). I suggest that the performances of *Disko 5 No ’lu* and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* can be evaluated through this dialectical prism. They are, for sure, not operating as a historian of the history proper. Theirs is an occupation with the history, through memory studies, more specifically the “mnemohistory” (Assmann 2011, 209). As such, they are not interested in the past as it was or revealing it, rather, theirs stand as works of memory, navigating through the ways the past is remembered.

Trying to assign a scientific role to the performers or directors as artists may be a futile effort which will not only eventually fail but also hinder us from seeing what these works achieve within the particular boundaries of art production which do not neatly fit in the disciplinary boundaries of scientific practices of history. Yet, to consider the similarities, proximities between the performers’ or the performance’s ways of engaging with history and the ways the past is treated within academic practices can propose fruitful insights about the meaning-making process within these works and more particularly about what kinds of socio-epistemic changes these works can trigger, if any.

Each of the works that are analyzed in this thesis has a different level of relation to the archival facts about the past. While *Disko 5 No ’lu* heavily adopts the elements of documentary theatre, *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* has a quite loose relation with reality supported with archival elements. Yet, whatever their levels of interest in the elements of proper history are, these works ultimately concentrate on the ways the past matters to the people concerned with the present and ever-changing mechanisms of its reception. As such, these works can be considered through the conceptual lenses of memory studies rather than as a search for historical reality. They don’t inform about or teach history by representing the past as it was but attempts to relate its importance and open them up to new significations.

This thesis is grounded upon an insight that crosscuts theories on performance, history, and memory to suggest that the past lives on in embodied sites outside the archives and written documents, and its transmission is always, by each medium, intrinsic to a repetition with reconstruction. Therefore, theatre as a reiterative corporeal practice has potential to recognize and enact the way a past event lives on in the present, if not to

create a full-blown understanding of the performative nature of remembering and to reveal our own role in sustaining and reconstructing representations of history. The works in question will be considered in terms of their ability to recognize and embody the workings of collective memories in relation to past events of political violence, and to open up new and deepened understanding of these pasts without being trapped in representational schemes where words stands for an authentic meaning, performance stands for the text, and thus all the theatrical elements stand as vessels of another unreachable, absolute truth about the past. In order to follow these questions, the thesis will draw upon the performance, the text, and interviews with the performers as well as the socio-political and cultural contexts in which they are produced and performed.

## CHAPTER 1 CONFRONTING DİSKO 5 NO'LU

“...I am widening my web like a wise artist, till more flies and insects fall into my trap...”<sup>7</sup>

*First Scene, The spider*

How can a performative work manage to trap the audience into a confrontation with a past atrocity? *Disko 5 No'lu*, as its performer puts it, is an ‘experiment’ in achieving such a confrontation (Akar 2012). But what does this “confrontation” entail? Critiques of the work have also pondered the significance of this word: “The violence happening on the stage and engulfing the audience occurs as *a moment of confrontation*.” (Küçük 2011). The terms “to confront” or “to face” are mostly adopted in the frame of justice and truth-seeking in countries with contested pasts. In most cases, these notions indicate not only a recognition and compensation in the field of politics and legislation but also an understanding of the event’s relevance and significance to the present and the people concerned. As much as it is about bridging the temporal gap between the past and present, confrontation is also about bridging the distances between different collective memories of an event in a society. Such a claim necessitates less a transmission of knowledge about the past from one generation to another than a transformation of collective memories and a challenge to how the past is remembered and interpreted. *Disko 5 No'lu* promises to perform such a challenge.

DestAR-Theater produced their much-acclaimed play *Disko 5 No'lu* in 2011. The play has had a smooth run since then and has been performed in various cities in Turkey and abroad. It achieved a remarkable reputation even though it vocally draws upon one of the historically most controversial issues in Turkey. It won several awards including

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<sup>7</sup> My translation from the unpublished copy: “...bilge bir sanatçı gibi ağımı genişletiyorum. Ta ki daha fazla sinek ve böcek düşene kadar ağıma...” The excerpts were translated when there is a particular need to underline certain words or phrases in English.

“the best solo performance of the year”<sup>8</sup>, “the actor of the year”<sup>9</sup>, “the best performance of the year”<sup>10</sup>. Its reception by the public has been mostly positive.

What is important to notice in the critical discourses surrounding the play is that the descriptions are mostly referring to the work’s effects on the body and the senses. Rather than (or beside) an intellectual recognition, there is a remarkable emphasis on the “emotional” and “sensational/sensual” effect the play evoked: “The violence happening on the stage and *engulfing* the audience occurs as a moment of confrontation.” (Küçük 2011). “After the play, one wants *to walk for hours*, only to walk and *not to think*, not being able to think... Aside from the effect of its staging, acting, décor, one is *suffocated* in its *emotion*.” (Ay 2014); “We *didn’t talk* for a while after the play. We didn’t want to.”<sup>11</sup>; “I remember the spider, and his walk, and the voice. Actually, the play was *suffocating* for me”<sup>12</sup>; “I was close to the man, it was like dirt, spitting, and everything, disgusting. You *disgust everything* in life.”<sup>13</sup>. What could these critical reactions indicate if not a ready-made identification with the victim and a soothing sense of being able to “feel like” and/or take side with him? Or, what is it that, in the play, pushes one to silence, to “be disgusted with everything” or troubles “thinking”? What is it that “engulfs” the audience? And after all, what do these forms of reception mean in terms of the interpretation of the past concerned?

I will obtain preliminary answers to these questions, by focusing on three aspects of the work which I think are crucial to its effects on the spectators: the constant but irregular shifts between speakers, addressees and time registers, the allegory that frames the main story, the solo performance of six different characters. In doing this, I will claim that the play achieves its above-mentioned effectivity regarding a confrontation with the past through a particular negotiation between text and performance. In *Disko 5 No’lu*, I suggest, performance does not function as a vessel to convey the text – rather, performance and text work in a way that allows the effect in question to be produced reciprocally. This reciprocity enables the play to navigate through different time registers and to form an interpretation which has less to do with historical facts but more so with its continuing relevance in the present. Without ignoring the historical-political context

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<sup>8</sup> <https://direklerarasi.wordpress.com/2015/08/26/xii-direklerarasi-seyirci-odulleri/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/kultur-sanat/2012/11/20/tiyatro-odulleri-sahiplerini-buldu>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/2011in-en-iyi-5-oyunu,BFfEtuWBXka-6ZEq\\_FWILQ](http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/2011in-en-iyi-5-oyunu,BFfEtuWBXka-6ZEq_FWILQ)

<sup>11</sup> Excerpts from the interviews that I conducted with the audience in May 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

of the event, the work potentially opens up an understanding of the past beyond the identities concerned in the event while, at the same time, certain gaps in the structure of the story and the moments of dramatic representations diminish its effectivity as such.

### 1.1. “Disko”: Diyarbakır Military Prison

*Disko 5 No’lu* is a play about the torture imposed upon Kurdish political prisoners in Diyarbakır Military Prison No.5 between 1981 and 1989, in the period following the 1980 military coup in Turkey. The word “disko” is the abbreviation for “discipline cell” (‘disiplin koğuşu’ in Turkish) where violent processes of torture were executed. The play’s name implies that the whole prison had been used as a discipline cell. The group defines “disko” as a “military torture house” (askeri işkencehane) and sees Diyarbakır Prison No.5 as the pilot experiment of this torture house, in which violence amounted to a “genocide against a people”.<sup>14</sup>

The 80’s has come to be known as the era of violence and human rights violations in Turkey. And Diyarbakır Military Prison stands as an epitome of this violence in the collective memories of Turkey. As Meltem Ahıska outlines, the 1980 coup had long-lasting political and social effects on Turkish society:

After the 1980 coup, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey was closed down; the constitution was abolished, political parties and organizations were disbanded. Thousands of people were detained; secret intelligence files were assembled on more than one million people; 517 people were sentenced to death and 50 of these sentences were carried out. 14,000 people were deprived of citizenship rights; 171 people were documented to have been killed by torture; a total of 299 people died in prisons. (Ahıska 2014, 167)

DestAR-Theater is an independent company which produces plays in Kurdish. They also collaborate with local and international companies, acting in several languages including Turkish. They define their style as a “theater laboratory” referring to the French tradition of “Théâtre de l’Atelier” where Antonin Artaud worked with Charles Dullin (Akar 2012). Inspired by Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, Mirza Metin, the director/writer/performer in the group, calls their own plays “works of confrontation” in

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sermolaperformans.com/disko-5-nolu/>

which they experiment on new ways of storytelling. Aiming at an "uncomfortable viewing" for their audience, DestAR-Theater intends to enact the grimy sides of the stories (Akar 2012).

*Disko 5 No'lu* constitutes a remarkable example of the group's attempt to discomfort the spectator, especially in the way it enacts memories of torture while blurring the line between perpetrator and victim in a performance where all figures appear in the singular body of Metin. But before delving into what the performance exposes to us on the stage, it is necessary to look at the textual material.

## 1.2.The Text: Layers of Fiction and Reality

"The theatre is one site where the fake can produce the real and the real colludes in the construction of the fake"

Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre & History*, p.49

The text of *Disko 5 No'lu* follows two narrative layers. The consecutive scenes of torture between a guardian and a prisoner form the main story which is a fictional story grounded in documentary material. This main story of the play is framed by an allegorical dialogue between a hungry spider and a fly which opens and ends the play. The spider opens the play by narrating a pact he made with a fly four days ago. A fly gets tangled in the web of the spider, yet the fly is so weak that eating him will be of no use to the spider. Therefore, the spider suggests making a pact between the two. If the fly agrees to trick and bring other well-fed flies into his web, the spider will not only release the fly but also give him a drop of his blood, which he claims to be of a life-prolonging complexion. The fly accepts the deal and flies away to bring other flies into the web. Then, the spider says, day by day "... I have become bigger. As I get bigger my web becomes bigger with me. As my web gets bigger more flies get tangled in my web... I have become bigger and bigger... bigger and bigger"<sup>15</sup>. After a moment of pause following the disappearance of the spider, the guardian appears and then the main story of torture starts to unfold featuring a guardian, his dog Joe, a prisoner, a rat, the prisoner's mother and also other guardians and prisoners who are not enacted but mentioned from time to time. The guardian constantly attacks the prisoner, using several torture methods to make him speak

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<sup>15</sup> "...ben büyüdüm. Ben büyüdükçe ağım büyüdü. Ağım büyüdükçe daha çok sinek geldi... Büyüdükçe büyüdüm... Büyüdükçe büyüdüm".

until finally, the prisoner has a physical, psychological and linguistic breakdown. In this limit moment, his words reflect a delirium, and he claims that the contact between his body and mind has been destroyed. The prisoner doesn't yield. Towards the end, after the prisoner utters some fragments of a speech asking "why? why?" and the guardian gives an apathetic answer, the fly and the spider reappear in turn. While the fly speaks to the audience about himself boastfully, the spider interrupts and ends the story, revealing that his blood which he had promised to give the fly in the beginning, was, in fact, poisonous: "Where has it been seen that a hangman's blood extended life!... My blood is poison! My blood is torment! It is hell!"<sup>16</sup>. The sounds of torture continue which the spider describes as a "symphony of the cruelest tragedy of death" composed by himself. After a moment of darkness, a brief text appears on the screen at the back of the stage:

In Diyarbakır Prison No.5, between 1981 and 1989, 34 people died because of torture, hundreds of them have become permanently disabled. While 25 of these people lost their lives from severe blows, five of them died during a hunger strike. In the prison where five of the prisoners committed suicide by hanging themselves, four by burning to protest the atrocity, none of the torturing officers were punished.

The shift in the performance's discourse from a highly allegorized representation to documentary data in the conclusion reorients the viewer's perception of the play as a whole reminding the actuality of the event.

The discourses of the guardian and the prisoner, as well as the designation of the prison and tortures, are mostly based on the documentary material. The adoption of the testimonies here comes with two problems both related to representation: the documentary material is always subject to selection and montage, and there is a predictable lack of testimonies belonging to perpetrators. As one might expect, most of the archival records on Diyarbakır Military Prison consist of the survivors' testimonies. There are almost no records on the testimonies of the guardians as the perpetrators of the tortures. Therefore, the depiction of the perpetrators as well as the depiction of the event as a whole is mostly driven from the survivor account.

What is at stake in this representation of the perpetrator, however, is not the ethics of a lopsided depiction. Rather, there are several risks at stake here. Such a representation risks both appropriating the experience that the survivor went through by hiding the

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<sup>16</sup> "Nerede görülmüş bir cellat kanının ömür uzattığı! Benim kanım zehirdir! Zıkkımdır! Kanım azaptır! Cehennemdir!"

account's reconstructed nature, and flattening the image of the perpetrator, which can result in a black and white dichotomy between the victim and the perpetrator that stunts the understanding of the event. The text of *Disko 5 No'lu* is not completely immune to these risks but, I suggest, rather embodies them deliberately in the performance.

The guardian's discourse is predominantly formed around his fantasies of torture, which he addresses to the audience. Or, he loses himself in a hectic monologue as well as the commands, interrogative questions and swearing directed at the prisoner or the unseen prisoners:

In the welcoming ceremony, I got excited. As if my hands, my foot turned into guardians. The prisoners were drenched in blood, groaning... The prisoners were getting up as they fell down, and they fell down as I hit them. They fell as I hit, they got up as they fell... I hit, and I hit again, I hit, I hit, I hit, I hit, I hit. (*becomes a dog*<sup>17</sup>). My hands, my foot, my uniform, I was drenched in blood. The floor looked like a bloodbath. Blood...

What is to notice in the representation of the guardian is that it pits the prisoner's account of suffering and bravery against the "monstrosity" of the guardian. The image of the prisoner who is struggling to survive against torture, losing his sense of reality from time to time, mumbling in pain yet trying to keep his dignity and values, contrasts with the image of the guardian as a bloodthirsty, burning with the desire to cut his victim's body into pieces. At one point when he becomes frustrated with the prisoner's resistance, the guardian dreams about a kind of "cruelty theatre" of his own:

I wish I had the opportunity to do this outside in public. How good it would be, right? Just like a play on the stage. There are choppers, knives in my hands... I am wearing a black costume. A mask on my face, it is black too. Joe is right beside me. My friends are in my command... I start cutting his hands! My victim cries and the people cheer. I cut the ear and throw it over the people.

The depiction of the perpetrator through his "sick" fantasies risks attributing a psychological flaw to the guardian's motives while reducing the prisoner to a mere "victim". It is important to note that the adoption of the documentary material places the representation of the guardian in its historical political context to an important extent. The discourse of the guardian echoes the widely known words of the infamous military captain Esat Oktay Yıldırım, who was appointed as the internal security officer to Diyarbakır

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<sup>17</sup> "Köpekleşir"

Prison by the coup leader Kenan Evren and became the major actor in the executions of torture. However, though the memory of Yıldırım constitutes a reference point for the guardian's historical political reality, it doesn't suffice to cancel out the psychological attributes which are dominating the guardian's discourse throughout the text. What needs specific attention here is how this particular depiction of the guardian as a performer of a brutal show gains another signification in the performance. The embodiment of the guardian on the stage occurs in fact as a brutal show performed by Metin as guardian. I will come back to this point towards the end of this chapter.

Most of the representations of Diyarbakır Prison focus on the fact that the prisoners didn't yield to tortures and didn't collaborate with the military regime, some at the cost of their lives. The play mostly draws upon the same fact. However, the group approaches this memory from a distinct perspective which is closer to a humanist account. The prisoner doesn't articulate his particular political identity and motives. He either evokes generic humanist concepts, as apparent in his cry "Barbarsınız! Vahşiniz!... Allaha korkun! Utanın kendinizden!... İnsanlığınızdan utanın!"; or refers to his 'revolutionist' identity in general: "Geleceğe dair ne bir hayalim, ne bir düşüncem, ne de bir umudum kalmıştı... Ama bir şey vardı... İnançım... Ben bir devrimciydim... O da faşist bir işkenceci...".

Besides the potentially reductive dichotomy created between the guardian and the prisoner, the reason that this discourse flattens the representation of the prisoner is that it doesn't speak to the audience of contemporary Turkey. The violent interruption in the 80's has brought certain cultural and political transformations. As Gürbilek suggests, together with the neo-liberal regime of the country, which is paradoxically repressive and censoring, liberal and provocative at the same time, a new search for identities and belongings has emerged (Gürbilek 1992). Within the new cultural climate of the country, certain discourses attached to previous political alignments have been emptied out; the discourses of a leftist revolutionist politics from the 70s have gradually become empty signifiers with their referents being cut from its past conditions of existence (Gürbilek 1992, 19-20). Therefore, the discourse of the prisoner is at risk of evoking a "nostalgia" for a past that is likely foreign to the audience of the play and has become distant to their contemporary lives. Thus, what this nostalgia does is a potential quick purchase of the complex past reality which is unavailable for the present audience.

The prisoner barely enters into a dialogue with the guardian. Their interaction mostly occurs in the form of commands given by the guardian and the one-line reactions

of the prisoner, and mostly physical conflicts between the two. Each of them addresses the audience, each narrating the tortures and the prison from their own perspectives. Although this designation has the danger of sharpening the dichotomy between them as “good and evil,” the text challenges this reductive dichotomy in the moments where the prisoner’s speech breaks down as well as through the constant shifts between the speakers and addressee, which is particularly emphasized through the performance.

Even though the prisoner’s broadly humanist and revolutionist discourses associate his representation with abstract concepts like “goodness” and “righteousness” in the face of “cruelty,” there are moments where the language of the prisoner becomes fragmented or devoid of sense. When he is alone in the cell, he looks at the wall and starts to talk: “Duvar... Ağlıyor... Burada taş bile halimize ağlıyor [...] Ayakkabım...Ayakkabım nerede? Ayakkabım yok... Ayakkabısız devrim olmaz... Joe’nun sesi geliyor! Hayır! Joe benim komutanımdır.” Then he envisions a dialogue with his mom and enacts it. Or, in another moment, pondering upon dying as a revolutionary in reference to the memory of a prisoner who died in the hunger strike, he says; “Ölüm...Hem sonsuz bir rahatlık hem de direnişin ateşi olacak... Ben yaşamayı çok seviyorum, hem de uğruna ölecek kadar”. Then he abruptly pauses and talks to a fly: “Neredesin küçük sinek? seni yakalamam lazım”. These moments carry the representation away from a character grounded upon abstract concepts and bring it closer to a human being whose capability to form a consistent and meaningful discourse is falling apart together with his body in pain.

The whole text is dominated by constant shifts between the speaker and addressee as well as between the place and time these subjects occupy. This can be seen as a sort of barrier which the text uses against the formation of a linear, consistent, traceable account of a representative subject which will stand for all related historical subjects and their accounts. Addressees change several times even within the same speech. When the guardian speaks for the first time in the beginning, for example, he starts by addressing a group of new guardians, informing them about the rules and their mission. After a momentary pause, he continues his speech by addressing the unseen prisoners who are present in a different place and time. Then he turns to the audience and starts talking about his excitement, suddenly yells at a prisoner, and lastly again to the all of the prisoners. Similarly, in another moment of the play, just after yelling at the prisoner, he pauses and turns to the audience: “I am sorry... I am sorry... I lost it for a moment. I am a human being too, I can lose myself. Can you forgive me, please? I will make up for this. Should

I?” The time and place in the play are mostly determined in that it is set in the prison and concentrated on the time of torture progressing in one cell. Yet, this frame and the subjects concerned become ambivalent from time to time. The intentionality of this ambivalence in the text stays open to question as it is at the edge of forming an inconsistent structure, which may simply make the story fall apart. I suggest that it is the performance that works through these shifts and ambivalence, making it an effective element to trouble the representative scheme. I will return to this argument in the following section.

What is appealing in the text is that it nestles the main fictional story based on historical reality into an allegorical story. As already pointed out, the allegory is formed thanks to the conversation between the spider and the fly that appears both in the beginning and the end of the play. This allegorical framing tends to form an impression of compatibility between the story and their main characters. The spider-fly couple can easily be translated into the guardian-prisoner couple, as pointed out by some critiques (Anık 2012). Indeed, this translatability has been criticized for the confusion it creates.

The text provides substantial evidence to make such an impression possible. The spider opening the play addresses the fly: “Ey cılız sinek! Benim bu ağın *komutanı*! Sen de benim *mahkumumsun*”. Immediately after this, the guardian appears and says: “Kim *ağırma* düşerse iyi bir insan olacak... Her mahkum bütün hapisane personeline *komutanım* diyecek.” An obvious association between the consecutive speeches of the two potentially sets these characters at the beginning of the play as corresponding figures. Such matching is problematic in two main ways, though. First, the spider is a hungry hunter who has an insatiable desire to trap more victims and to get “bigger and bigger.” His motives and the violence in his discourse occur as a part of his nature, if not totally uninterpretable. Thus, a matching between the spider and the guardian further strengthens the guardian’s inexplicable “monstrosity,” pushing him more into a psychopathological frame, tearing him away further from the historical-political context in which the guardian could be framed. Secondly, this matching naturally entails the second one; between the fly and the prisoner. Yet, this matching, even before its possible significations, seems totally inconsistent. It is simply because while the fly is the one who conspires with the spider against other flies, the prisoner doesn’t yield at the cost of losing his life. Referring to the memory of Kurdish rebel Seyid Rıza, the prisoner exclaims his resistance: “Yalan, hile ve hurdalarınızla baş edemedim, bu bana dert oldu. Ben de size boyun eğmedim, bu da size dert olsun.”

One could read this as a simple textual discrepancy or a literary tool which the writer wasn't able to use effectively. I, however, will suggest that this impression of wrongly matched characters, independently of the intentionality of the author, reinforces another meaning opened up at the end. The text has two important twists, which I think refutes the hasty critiques that consider the allegorical story as the direct signifier of the historical story and sees a compatibility between the four characters. One of these two twists is in the moment when the guardian, after yelling for the last time to the prisoner, pauses for a brief moment and returns to the audience:

Ne oldu? Tanıdınız mı beni? Evet, benim! "Allah aşkına bir damla kan, Allah aşkına bir damla kan". Evet benim! Sizin kan emici sineğiniz. Biliyorum beni seviyorsunuz. Siz düşmanınızı seversiniz! Beni sevin... Sevin beni... Sevin!

The passage indicates a semantic relation between the fly and the guardian instead of the spider and the guardian. Yet, it doesn't resolve the discrepancy in the designation of the characters because a match between the spider and the prisoner doesn't make sense. But, this indication does something more crucial than this; it reminds the viewer that the allegory here is more than a one-to-one match between the allegorical characters and fictional characters driven by historical events. It operates as a moment of transformation in which the guardian discloses his real identity as the fly. These kinds of transformative shifts dominate the play, but this moment becomes particularly significant as it is the second moment where the two narrative layers merge into one another. And at this second moment, it cancels a possible short-circuited interpretation delimited within the cosmos of the play; it is not possible to assume that the spider represents the cruelty of the guardian. I suggest that by doing, that the play blurs the line between the "allegorical" and the "historical" stories. The fictionality of the historical story is also underlined. It is juxtaposed with the allegorical story in a way that can also be defined as an "allegorical", even if it is based on "real" accounts and characters. The play breaks with the representation of "real" characters to an extent, though the limits of this break will be reconsidered through the dramatic representation of the prisoner.

The allegorical story is related to the historical story not because these four characters are related as the signifiers and the referents. Rather, underlining the play's fictionality at all levels, the allegory does two things: First, the story of the spider and the fly stands on its own without necessarily being a semantic substitute for the prisoner and guardian. The play notes that they share the same prison cell with the prisoner – a detail

further emphasized in the stage design and acting. The two narrative layers intersect at certain points; during one of the moments in which his reasoning stutters, we see the prisoner talking to a weak fly. The relationship between the spider and the fly constitutes a distinct fictional story like the one between the prisoner and guardian. They are unusual fictional witnesses of the past event just like the guardian and the prisoner in the story. Secondly, the semantic relation between two narrative layers potentially hinders the reader/audience from making a disinterested or distant interpretation; the allegorical story isn't resolved within the second story, the fly isn't resolved simply as the signifier of the guardian, the spider doesn't find its semantic match within the story. The interaction of two fictional layers open the play to a broader question; how are the audience/reader implicated in this particular past event and its present constructions?

The second twist in the allegorical story underlines this question. After revealing that his blood was actually poisonous and implying the fly is dead, the spider listens to the sounds of torture and turns to the audience:

Siz de duyuyorsunuz değil mi? Kulak verin sineklerim! Hissedin çocuklarım! Görün zamanın bekçileri! Siz de duyuyorsunuz değil mi? Ne kadim bir müzik! Ne vahşi bir senfoni! Bu benim senfonim! Ölümün en vahşi trajedisinin senfonisi! Beni sevin! Sevin beni!

The spider says the last words of the play, there is no more shifting between the speakers, there will be no correspondence, his addressee is not contained in the text. As such, the text opens up to a meaning in which the audience becomes implicated in the event, not only as witnesses but also as possible perpetrators. However, this question, as well as the above-mentioned possibilities and limits of the text, obtain their “suffocating” meaning only through the performance.

### **1.3.The Performance: One Body**

“These concrete gestures must have an efficacy strong enough to make us forget the very necessity of speech. Then if spoken language still exists it must be only as a response, a relay stage of racing space; and the cement of gestures must by its human efficacy achieve the value of a true abstraction.”

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, p. 48

*Disko 5 No'lu* is a one-hour solo performance of Mirza Metin which intertwines documentary material with fictional and operates within several levels of reality. The play

not only communicates with its audience on the visual, intellectual and emotional levels but also one's senses are stimulated or evoked such that it can provoke feelings of "disgust" or "suffocation" – as we have already seen in the reception of the work. The solo performance of six distinct characters forms the backbone of such communication. Describing their work, the group also puts an emphasis on this particular feature of the performance: "A spider, a fly, a rat, a dog, a guardian, and a prisoner find a voice in one body. They tell an inhumane atrocity at the edges of the mind and imagination."<sup>18</sup>

The particular acting and staging of the play set the relation between the text and the performance as a dynamic and productive one. Though it is not a perfectly even designation, what is told doesn't necessarily supersede what is enacted and embodied on the stage. The work not only attempts to represent the memory of the collective past of the political prisoners of Diyarbakır Military Prison, but it also attempts to actualize it through the corporeality of the theatrical enterprise. On the one hand, the text features the characteristics of documentary theatre and is closer to an epic narrative where the fragmented, contradictory, distinct parts come together rather than an Aristotelian drama of linear, progressive, cohesive structure. On the other hand, the performance is not merely a realization of the text; particular designation of the enactment as solo-performance as well as some Artaudian practices the group adopts (such as the proximity between the audience and the performer, the high-pitched sounds, groans, cries) create a difference in the designation of the "documentary" work aiming at an "objective" reception. Thus, a "suffocating" effect, which haunts the audience's mind, occurs because of this relation between textuality and performativity.

*Disko 5 No'lu* has been performed on several types of theatre stages including traditional proscenium stages where the seating area is sharply separated from the stage. Although it is not a site-specific work, the play makes better use of small places where the distance between the audience and the performer is relatively bridged. The group's own stage, for which the play was designed, is a small black box stage where the front row is at the same height with the stage floor while the seats are slightly elevated backward. The play starts in a dimly lit salon accommodating an audience of around forty. As the performance progresses, the small and dark features of the salon and the proximity between the audience and the stage become more and more associated with the sensation of a prison cell. The props are few and simple. A giant spider web made from thick ropes

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sermolaperformans.com/disko-5-nolu/>

is placed a bit behind the middle of the stage. On the front left, a long red rope hangs from the ceiling, a white chair is on the right and a cup on the left corner. The floor is covered with less than an inch of water.

As mentioned above, the text consists of two layers of fictional stories woven with documentary material. The performance adds another narrative layer to this structure with the use of audiovisual material. The play opens with a short video projected on the screen at the back of the stage. The video shows a man followed by a moving camera while he is being dragged through the corridors of a prison-like building by an anonymous person whose legs are shown. The video uses the association of documentary footage and truth with the help of a realistic camera eye. Yet, in a very short time, the audience is assured that it is not real footage as they encounter the same actor on stage. It is the first moment of the many in which the performer will enact a figure associated with a historical reality while simultaneously disclosing its fictionality.

When the video ends, the stage starts to be filled with fog, a growling is heard, and Mirza Metin appears as the spider coming through the fog by crawling in an unusual posture. This posture has earned a brand like quality through its widely circulated



1. Photograph by Nazım Serhat Fırat

photograph which was awarded “the best theatre photograph of the year”. The costume is simple; a pair of black pants, the cuffs rolled up over the knees. When he enacts a human character, he loosens the cuffs and wears a black sleeveless top. Therefore, nothing on his body other than his spasmodic walk and distorted voice signifies a spider. What is at stake here is not merely a masterful representation of the spider, this is not a realist or naturalist practice to elaborately materialize the character and his inner world. On the contrary, this is a dreadful image of a spider. This is an impression actualized without masterful technologies of illusion which could allow one to achieve a convincing appearance of a giant spider.

What is appealing in his enactment is the lack of these verisimilitude technologies which are replaced by the actor's utmost bodily effort. This visual simplicity and physicality are persistent throughout the play, keeping the actor himself juxtaposed to the characters he embodies without disappearing? behind their representations.

Following the spider and the fly's dialogue, both enacted by the performer, the lights go off for a very brief moment and the performer shows up as the guardian. As also indicated in the text, the enactment of the spider and the guardian calls for an association between the two. The guardian talks with a high-pitched, distorted voice, at some moment, as if he is spitting the words. His fantasies of torture are not only emphasized by acting but directly become the gesture itself. As quoted in the above section, the text inserts a directive for the actor into the guardian's account about the "welcoming ceremony" during which he dreams of his body parts becoming individual guardians: *Köpekleşir*. This is an unusual directive which can be translated as "acts like a dog/becomes a dog". Metin literally performs the directive and his speech takes the form of growling. The guardian's enactment as such, at first glance, reinforces his image as a psychopathic bloodthirsty "dog" not only discursively but now, corporeally. Yet, as the play progresses, it turns out that it is exactly this grotesque embodiment of the guardian which will assure the fictionality of the story and carry the play beyond a claim to reality.

Following the moment where the guardian "becomes a dog," he suddenly turns to the prisoners, yells and introduces the dog, Joe.<sup>19</sup> Now, he uses the long red rope hanging from the ceiling on the front left of the stage to enact the dog:

Guardian: [...] Buraya gel Joe! Bak mühendis bey senin için bir kulübe yapacak. Ne dersin?

Joe: *Barks*

Guardian: Öğrenci bozuntusu! [...] Artık senin hocan Joe! Bundan sonra Joe ne derse onu yapacaksın. Anlaşıldı mı? Bir şey söyle Joe! Hadi Joe bir şey söyle!

Joe: *Barks*

The performer barks loudly several times. Metin takes the narrative representation of the guardian as a brutal man who simply enjoys torture in the text, stretching it to a point where he physically transforms the guardian into a non-human being. The

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<sup>19</sup> The name of Esat Oktay Yıldırım's dog.

transformations between humans, animals and imaginary characters (at one moment, the prisoner dreams of his mother and enacts a dialogue with her) gather pace as the play progresses. These transformations gradually break the representational speeches the characters adopt.

The performer acts the prisoner in a naturalist mode, making it easier for the audience to listen to and identify with him to a certain extent. As mentioned in the section above, the prisoner's speech is predominantly woven with a humanist and revolutionist discourse underlining an insurmountable distance and difference between his and the guardian's discourse and flattening further their representations as the good and the bad. Representing a survivor or victim of a past event of violence by evoking emotions of pity and sadness may not be problematic in itself, but it overwhelms the complexity of the past context the person lived in, the necessary interactions he was in with other bodies, other words, other subjects – perpetrators or any other significant actors in their life.

The bodily enactment of the prisoner doesn't quite deviate from this frame, either. Yet, there are two ways specific to performance complicating this kind of nostalgic appropriation of the past, which reinforces the interpretation of the story as the good versus the bad. One of these is the constant shifts between the speakers and addressees. As analyzed above, these shifts already exist within the text, but they turn into "physical transformations" in the performance. The other one is the allegorical story, which haunts both the narrative and the embodied levels of the performance, blurring the lines between real and the fictional.

The prisoner appears for the first time as he is struggling with the guardian, who pushes a rat into his mouth. The performer acts by shifting between the mouse, the guardian who tries to put to mouse into the prisoner's mouth, and the prisoner who resists. The physical struggle between characters is performed with a continuous motion so that the performer's shifts between different figures become untraceable. The prisoner's first appearance as such foreshadows his upcoming physical conflicts with the guardian, a phenomenon to which Metin's performance gives a sense of schizophrenic fight with oneself. The violent, swift, physical shifts together with the unanswered, interrupted speeches suspend the moments of identification with the prisoner. Towards the end of the play, the performer enacts a long, fragmented monologue as the prisoner in which he tries to refine his values and beliefs and asks; "Bu kadar zulüm neden? Neden? Neden?" Without a pause, the performer answers as the guardian: "Neden mi? Çünkü sen bu sigarayı götünle tutamıyorsun da ondan!".

There is almost no place for the performer in which he can completely identify with the prisoner and calls for the audience to do the same. The moments when the performer enacts the prisoner does not stand as merely masterful renderings of a tortured body and its exhaustion through a façade of postures and gestures serving to the significations transmitted through his speech. Rather, the performer's body with its febrile and continuous shifts and twisted postures is already a tired one. These are also the moments where Mirza Metin is seen with his own tiredness. Throughout the performance, one sees a body which never settles into a character but always acts in an exhausting and hectic movement. A body passive and active almost at the same time; he crawls, jumps, falls, hits while he is hit, pulled, pushed, forced and beaten. These are moments when the performer becomes opaque. The speech becomes stuck in the midst of the bodily transformations that are eventually keeping Mirza in our view as a real person and the storyteller.

However, regarding this productive frame of "one body," another significant question arises. The victim and the perpetrator are not only juxtaposed in consecutive moments of enactment, but they are also embodied in the same body. The fact that the work provides a shared venue of embodiment to the victim and perpetrator in the performer's body is also open to exploration in terms of the performer's relation to this collective memory.

I suggest that what is at stake here is not the ethics of such an enactment. This odd merging acts out a tension inherent in the radical difference of the two subjects determined by the historical and political context. One needs to consider the fact that *Disko 5 No'lu* is a play acted in Kurdish. DestAR-Theater is a part of the ventures called "alternative theaters" which are attended by a broad spectrum of audiences. It wouldn't be wrong to suggest that the play reaches, at least in İstanbul, people who don't know Kurdish. It is played with surtitles in English and Turkish. The tortures in Diyarbakır Prison directed particularly at Kurdish prisoners were an integral part of a full-fledged operation against all significations of their ethnic identity. The ban and punishments against speaking Kurdish, or the infamous phrase written on the wall of the prison "Türkçe Konuş, Çok Konuş" (Speak Turkish, Speak More) were only reflections of a complex mechanism for the elimination of the constructive markers of an identity together with the identity itself and the subjects embodied within this identity. In the scene of a dialogue between the prisoner and the mother on a visit day, which can potentially be the prisoner's dream, the language becomes a barrier between the two:

Ana: Kurê min tu çawayi? (Oğul nasılsan)

Mahkum: Şşşş, Kürtçe yasak! Ana mercimekler nasıldır iyi midir?

Ana: Oğul nasılsan?

Mahkum: Ana mercimekler nasıldır iyi midir?

Ana: Oğul nasılsan?

Mahkum: Ana mercimekler nasıldır iyi midir?

The Turkish identity of the guardian is never articulated in the play apart from the repertoire of discourses of Turkish nationalism. Yet, the guardian's "Turkishness" occurs as a pre-given in this designation. As the hegemonic identity, it doesn't require clarification in order to be interpreted as such. Therefore, the image of the perpetrator is in fact marked with Turkishness as the state-sanctioned identity and with his language as an integral part of his identity. What Metin does, in effect, is a powerful reversal of this image through the embodiment of the perpetrator in the language of the victim within one body: This enables him both to reinforce the sense of "constructedness" of the past and to point out the complex persistence of this past in the present. This dynamic is akin to what Freddie Rokem points out by referring to a Jewish actor's enactment of a Nazi officer:

...the dressing of a Jewish actor as he becomes the German officer Kittel reveals a gap, informing the audience of the constructedness of theatre. This gap develops a dialectic between present and past identities, further troubling the Nazi past as it intersects with the present, Jewishly-identified performers. (Friedman 2015, 60)

The language at the same time opens up a cognitive distance for the audience, standing similar to a Brechtian estrangement effect. The speech is always at one remove from the audience, even troubling the viewing for some<sup>20</sup> as it is never synchronized with the act. The cognitive distance always stays in tension with the visceral experience triggered by the performer's proximity and bodily excess.

As mentioned before, the play closes with the enigmatic figure of the spider. The ending follows the three consecutive transformations of Metin. The guardian who is yelling at the prisoner turns to the audience and transforms into the fly as if revealing his

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<sup>20</sup> Excerpts from the interviews that I conducted with the audience in May, 2016: "Beni yormuştu, sahneyi takip edemeyeceğim diye gerildim."

real identity and now, yelling at the audience: “[...] Biliyorum beni seviyorsunuz. Siz düşmanınızı seversiniz! Beni sevin... Sevin beni... Sevin!”. After a brief moment of blackout, the spider appears repeating the fly’s last words and announcing his death. The play turns into the atmosphere of its beginning, and while sounds of torture continue, the performer enacts the final speech:

“Siz de duyuyorsunuz değil mi? Kulak verin sineklerim! Hissedin çocuklarım! Görün zamanın bekçileri! Siz de duyuyorsunuz değil mi? Ne kadim bir müzik! Ne vahşi bir senfoni! Bu benim senfonim! Ölümün en vahşi trajedisinin senfonisi! Beni sevin! Sevin beni!”

The spider, having no addressee now other than the audience, addresses them as “zamanın bekçileri<sup>21</sup>”. The body of Metin contained the victim, the perpetrator, the fly, a rat, the dog finalized as the spider which has not a referent within the cosmos of the play. The spider defines himself as an artist in the beginning and at the end. The play leaves the audience with the suffocating image of the spider carrying the marks of the exhausted body of the performer in his spasmodic posture. Yet, there remains a question: Why does the play leave the audience with a cruel carnivore who claims the creative and productive powers of an artist? I suggest that the spider acts out the play’s own designation; trapping its audience in its web and simultaneously working through intellectual, emotional and sensual levels at the same time. The allegory, if it exists, then, functions less in textuality than in performativity, targeting the audience rather than forming a semantic/discursive construction between the textual materials. What is more, this allegorical invitation to the spectators is not an easy one that would position them as other/possible victims in a politically/ethically soothing gesture, but rather raises the possibility that they/we too can be perpetrators.

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<sup>21</sup> “guardians of time”

**CHAPTER 2**  
**A STORY OF WATER AND CRACKS: YOU ARE NOT A FISH AFTER ALL**

“Big fish eats little fish they say  
Bullshit  
Let sardines worry about it  
You are not a fish Ahmet  
A fingerbreadth<sup>22</sup>, and one more fingerbreadth  
The end will be bright.”  
Oktay Rifat, *Ahmet*

Oktay Rifat’s poem is recited several times during the performance. After long moments of exhausting, hectic movements within a semi-circle of audience members sitting on the ground, Mihran Tomasyan<sup>23</sup>, crouching before a big old tape recorder and a microphone, calming his voice, reads the poem one more time. He stops at the fourth line, “you are not a fish Ahmet”, and multiplies the names adding familiar and unfamiliar ones: “You are not a fish Ahmet...you are not a fish Berkin<sup>24</sup>...you are not a fish Hrant...you are not a fish Mihran...” As he recites the names, his voice speeds up. It is as if he is attempting to complete a given list in rush. However, the pitch of his voice doesn’t rise, he recites the names with a rapid but almost a mechanic and monotone voice drawing us away from pondering upon or attachment to the memory of any one name. It sounds as if an inexhaustible and awfully ordinary list. Tomasyan’s own name is in the list, and

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<sup>22</sup> A unit of measure especially used to measure the quantity of “rakı” for one glass (an alcoholic drink, usually combined with water).

<sup>23</sup> Tomasyan, a dancer in origin, is a multidisciplinary contemporary artist living in Turkey, one of the founders of Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (ÇAK).

<sup>24</sup> Berkin Elvan (January 5, 1999 – March 11, 2014) was a 15-year-old Turkish boy who was hit on the head by a tear-gas canister fired by a police officer in Istanbul after going out to buy bread during the June 2013 anti-government protests in Turkey. He died on March 11, 2014, following a 269-day coma.

one can detect the names of the group members but there are also ones totally unknown to the audience who might simply be Tomasyan's acquaintances. Tomasyan's list often changes in different contexts and includes names in various languages that are familiar to the geography in which he performs. Pronouncing and recording ordinary names, contemporary ones together with the known lost ones and his own, the performer underscores the play's invitation for the audience to an ambivalent territory where all might be implicated in the pasts they did not experience. Though the memory of a public figure is dominant throughout the whole work, the performance doesn't settle into any one common and exact image of "Ahmet". It becomes a haunting repetition. The timbre of Tomasyan's voice echoes in one's mind after the event: "you are not a fish after all Ahmet".

*Sen Balık Değilsin ki* is one the solo shows of the dancer and choreographer Mihran Tomasyan. This is a work tearing itself into pieces literally and figuratively. The work is filled with old toys, cassettes, tapes, confetti spreading all around the site of performance throughout the show gushing from an old suitcase which Tomasyan brings to the scene at the beginning. He constructs the space of performance gradually with the objects, sounds, and movements, finally ending up with a place where everything is spread out and the audience is also entangled with the objects and each other.

Despite its substantial differences with *Disko 5 No 'lu* both in terms of the content and the form, the play similarly adopts a productive ambivalence towards the true meaning of the past which is envisioned as a real existing only through its present reconstructions. In both performances, the embodiment of the collective pasts within one body enables the performers to act out tensions intrinsic in the past and present, impersonal and personal, collective and individual memory as well as the difference between victim and perpetrator. Like Mirza Metin's schizophrenic acting embodying the torturer and the tortured, Tomasyan becomes his own murderer in the performance. In the second half of the performance, gunshots begin to be heard and Tomasyan falls to the ground several times, recalling the iconic image of the assassinated Armenian journalist Hrant Dink's body lying on the ground after he was shot. Yet, Tomasyan is the one who shoots himself with a little sound-making machine in his hand.

An emphasis on the bodies of the performers as the carrier of the collective pasts, even though distorted and partial, occurs in both works. It is fair to say that these are

works of many transformations between characters, objects and the performer. However, it wouldn't be meaningful to juxtapose these works in a manner that searches for one-to-one correspondence as they are engaging disparate historical political issues.

Tomasyan's work also puts shifts and transformations at the center of his performance, yet, these effects are not achieved through the text or the characters. Rather, Tomasyan heavily engages in transformations between objects, sounds, lights, and his body, opening a cornucopia of associations and memories which both figuratively and literally makes the audience tangled up with each other. In order to explore this engagement; I will focus on four aspects of the play; Tomasyan's shabby looking childish persona carrying a suitcase full of objects that are gradually scattered into the site, Tomasyan's relation with the objects, the usage of the recording machine, and the men's clothes lying on the ground in memory of Dink. I will consider these together with the overall tone of the play, which constantly shifts between laughter and seriousness. By doing that I will suggest that the play attempts to do two things simultaneously, providing a metatheatrical approach to the relation between embodied acts and history, and giving an account of the past by focusing on its present relevance and how it remains and is reconstructed in the present. Yet, in the end, I conclude that the sign of Dink's body that is used as the focal point of signification for the other events of collective past which are not clearly indicated in the work carries the risk of becoming redundant instead of opening up an intersectional understanding of complex realities.

## 2.1. "The Water has Found its Crack"

Despite the several different names and events recalled and implicated, the major figure of the story is quite definite -not so much as in the content of the work as in the discourse surrounding the work<sup>25</sup>. It is an "attribute to the memory of Hrant Dink", an Armenian journalist defending the reconciliation and dialogue between Armenian and Turkish people as well as minority and human rights, who was assassinated on 19th of January 2007, in front of the apartment where *Agos*, the newspaper of which he was the founder and the chief editor, is located<sup>26</sup>. The trial hasn't been resumed for ten years and nothing substantial has been brought into light yet, other than the little progress which

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.radikal.com.tr/hayat/hrant-icin-sen-balik-degilsin-ki-1116698/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://hrantdink.org/en/hrant-dink>

indicates a wide network including public officials behind the murder which was executed by 17-year-old Turkish young man (Akgül 2017). After his death thousands of people marched the streets with slogans and signs saying, "We are all Armenians" and "We are all Hrant Dink", and the gatherings have been continuing, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January each year, to commemorate and demand the resolution of the case. The murder has become one of the major political cases in Turkey where the legal institutions of the state have fallen short in shedding light on crimes against minorities and oppositional public figures. Dink's ongoing trial has thus further harmed the sense of justice and acknowledgment not only in the Armenian community but also in many different groups of people in Turkey, who have come to know Dink and his intellectual legacy and are disappointed by the reminder that such crimes can go unpunished in the country.

The assassination of Hrant Dink, besides its repercussions in social memory in Turkey, is a multi-layered and unresolved criminal case with historical political dimensions, which is beyond the scope of this thesis<sup>27</sup>. A comprehensive treatment of the case necessitates a consideration of the history of the minorities in this geography particularly focusing on the oppressive and assimilative politics which have amounted to a genocide targeting Armenian people. The category of the "minorities" in Turkey cannot be defined as general and homogenous as it contains crucial differences in terms of the distinct religious and ethnic identities involved. However, to understand its significations that the play attempts to address, it is important at least to have a sense of Hrant Dink's intellectual legacy and why he has been made into a "traitor" by various political and public actors, a label that was a key factor in abetting and legitimizing his assassination. In order to do that here, I will give a very brief account of his vision and point out the way the play also refers to his legacy.

Hrant Dink was and still, with his intellectual legacy, is a crucial figure in Turkey as he approached history with an emphasis on its present relevance and significance for Armenian and Turkish people and attempted to create a dialogue between the people based on mutual understanding of the painful memories rather than expecting a resolution on the level of state politics which are heavily depended on the absolute dichotomy of denial and acceptance of the genocide. Dink's vision was not dominated by the veracity of the historical facts, but rather he, mostly with informal and emotional tone and

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<sup>27</sup> For further information see. Fethiye Çetin, Utanç Duyuyorum. Metis Yayınları, 2013.

discourse, persistently focused on how people, today, perceive their own reality as Armenians and Turks, as well as what the past means to them:

We are two sick nations: Armenians and Turks. Towards one another. The Armenians are suffering an enormous trauma towards the Turks, and the Turks an enormous Paranoia. We are both clinical.

Who will heal us? The decision of the French Senate? The decision of the American Senate? Who will write the prescription? The Armenians are the Turks' doctor, and the Turks are Armenians'. There is no other medicine or doctor. There is no other solution.

The play adopts Dink's perspective recognizing the interrelation between disparate collective memories of diverse groups living in Turkey. The water metaphor, used in the play's introductory text and referenced in the play's name, and impacting the overall construction of the play as well, is a direct reference to an anecdote from Dink, "the water has found its crack". In the interview in which he also articulated the quote above, Dink narrates his memory about an old Armenian woman who was living in France but died in her hometown, a village of Sivas province in Turkey. An old man calls Dink from a village of Sivas and says "Son, we searched everywhere and then found you. Here is an old woman. I guess she is from your people. She has passed away. Can you find an acquaintance of her? Or we will bury her with a Moslem service." Dink searches for the woman's relatives and learns that the daughter of the woman is the owner of a store near to the building of his newspaper. He goes and asks the woman whether she know this old woman or not, she says that she is her mother living in France who visits Turkey 3-4 times a year but most of the time directly goes to her village in Sivas without paying a visit to İstanbul. Dink tells the daughter the situation, and she immediately goes to the village. The next day she phones him from there. Dink asks her whether or not she will bring the corpse. "Brother," she says, "I want to bring her but there is an uncle here saying something" and gives the phone to him while crying. Dink gets angry with the man and says to the man "Why are you making her cry?" "Son," he says, "I didn't say anything... I said daughter, it is your mother, your blood, you have every right to take her but if you ask me, let her stay here. Let her be buried here... The water has found its crack." Since the assassination of Hrant Dink, this sentence has been used to refer to him.

## 2.2. The Company of Bare Feet

It is important to note that the play barely uses any documentary material in order to relate to the reality of Dink's assassination. Neither Dink's name nor his words nor any other narrative based on documents or oral history are enacted in the performance. Instead, the performance constructs an associative connection with his assassination through the poem and most definitely with the men's clothes lying on the ground in the second half of the play. The play adopts Dink's vision by attempting to bridge the memories of seemingly disparate collective pasts around Dink's loss attempting to reveal their persistent interconnectedness in the present. Yet, the performance never provides a direct or open reference to the other collective past events, rather it adopts an associative tone and narrative to create the sense of interconnectedness between disparate pasts on individual and collective levels. In their introductory text, the group describes their work with the water metaphor in reference to Dink's speech, which signifies many losses, displacements as well as struggles in Turkey:

You cross the water's path, put sandbags or set a wall before it, but whatever you do, water finds a crack, and keeps flowing freely of course, in the journey, it faces many obstacles, maybe even gets all muddy this is always the case, however, in this country, "water killings" constantly take place. This piece is the story of those who make the journey of water their own journey and wander along all kinds of water. A suitcase is opened, and the things that come out surely find their own cracks.<sup>28</sup>

In *Disko 5 No'lu* this vision penetrates both the content and the form of the play. It looks at history from a similar perspective and attempts to provide its audience with, as Rokem puts it, "the dialectical interaction between the specificity of the past and the retrospective, more universal understanding" (Rokem 2015, 24). The play attempts to approach history through different events of loss, displacement, and struggle, and to transform them into embodied acts by which they can be replaced through the "cracks" in collective memories. The performer's body serves as a moving center through which the other objects, sounds as well as words, all move to create this re-placement and re-connection.

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<sup>28</sup> <http://ciplakayaklar.com/SEN-BALIK-DEGILSIN-KI>

Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (meaning “the company of bare feet”) is a group in the “process of experimentation,”<sup>29</sup> formed by dancers with diverse backgrounds and interests who studied in the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in İstanbul<sup>30</sup>. The name of the group comes from Turkish poet İlhan Berk’s poem called “Bare Foot” which interprets (walking with) bare feet as “a dreamland”. ÇAK’s members engage with the collective pasts of Turkey in most of their projects based on choreographic research. The group sees dance as an inherent part of being human rather than something to be categorized and learned under different types like salsa, tango, bale etc. (Çolak Oğraş 2015). Their works designate movement and embodied acts as productive in themselves. The movement of the rehearsed body works the way that language does, always remembering something coming before itself but at the same time always creating something altered and new, it conveys and changes the memory simultaneously. Regarding the creative power, they attribute to dance, Tomasyan notes: “Nietzsche said: I can only believe in a dancing god. Believing as such, we keep searching for this god. It is probable that this search will never end.” (Çolak Oğraş 2015). This understanding is overt in their works where they play with bodies, sounds, objects, lightning as nonverbal tools of meaning-making.

Another significant aspect of the way ÇAK produce their work is the multiple levels of interaction they set with their audience. The overall design of *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* creates, even though temporary, a sense of community which is not only bounded through their intersecting memories evoked in the play. Being different than *Disko 5 No’lu*, the audience of the performance are physically connected through the seating organization, objects, and body of Tomasyan which sustains a dynamic proximity to each part of his audience, which will be detailed later in this section. After the end of each of his performances, Tomasyan talks to the audience about the show. He describes this as a part of the performance. It is not designated as a Q&A session but rather a conversation where usually people are invited to share what the show has evoked in them; feelings, memories, commentaries, questions as well as silences. The session also opens the fresh memory of the play itself to a conversation, as if Tomasyan intends to sustain a meaning-making process in which the people invited to hear each other without arriving at one true interpretation. After one of these sessions, after he had performed in the Bergama Theatre

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<sup>29</sup> <http://ciplakayaklar.com/manifesto-manifest>

<sup>30</sup> <http://ciplakayaklar.com/manifesto-manifest>

Festival<sup>31</sup> on May 14, 2018, while small circles of people were forming around Tomasyan, a woman with a sad expression on her face looked at Tomasyan, then with a slightly quivering voice and a tone of friendly complaint she asked, “why did you hurt us this much?” Tomasyan smiled, the woman asked her question again, and Tomasyan didn’t give an exact answer, but they ended up hugging each other.

The emotional tone of the question is a reflection of the tone of the performance itself and harbors significant questions regarding what this work can do and what its signification is in relation to understanding a collective past. What can this emotional outpouring mean in terms of engaging with a difficult past? Does the work simply provide a therapeutic relief? What I can here put as a preliminary suggestion is that this scene was a result of the fact that the work doesn’t avoid emotional as well as sensual triggers. On the contrary, the associative narrative structure and corporeal emphasis of the play reinforce this emotional and sensual experience. Even though these “emotional” effects necessitate specific attention, here I will try to juxtapose my question with Rokem’s:

We have no doubt also asked ourselves why it is so important to create such aesthetic representations. Is it not enough to write history books and to produce documentary films to tell about the past? Why do we need to complicate matters by making art about historical events? We obviously engage in this practice not only for therapeutical reasons. (Rokem 2015, 23)

As mentioned in the introduction, Rokem gives a definite answer to this by underlining the potential to perform a dialectical perspective towards history which will help us re-invest present with historical meaning.

### **2.3. One Body to Remember Many**

*Sen Balık Değilsin ki* has a history of changes and adaptations. It has been played in different avenues including the traditional stages where the audience and actor placed facing each other and separated by the height of the stage as well as Gezi Park during the protests in 2013. Tomasyan adapts his performance according to the places he goes. However, wherever it is available Tomasyan sets his performance area on the middle of

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<sup>31</sup> Bergama Theatre Festival is an international theatre festival in Bergama, a small province of the city İzmir in Turkey. The three-day festival was organized for the first time in 10-13 May, 2018:

<http://2018tr.bergamatiyatofestivali.com/index.html>

the site where he is surrounded by a semi-circle of the audience sitting on the same ground. Another appealing element of the play, which is disposable also depending on the places, is a hidden camera placed at the ceiling of the site connected to a projection which reflects the show live on the back wall behind Tomasyan. Apart from the changes he makes to adapt to the places, Tomasyan conveys that the play has also a history of evolving, changing according to materials he uses<sup>32</sup>. He emphasizes the constructive character of the materials for his plays reminding Veltrusky's suggestion, quoted by Jeff Friedman, that "if a prop/object appears on the stage with [or without] a performer's presence, it shapes the action and is perceived as an independent subject equivalent to the actor." (Friedman 2015, 58). Similarly, the play integrates the objects as actors cooperating with Tomasyan's body as well as the place.

The play starts with Tomasyan's coming to the stage with a shabby costume holding an old rectangular wooden suitcase in one hand, and a rectangular metal plate in the other. He slowly gets closer to the audience and shakes his suitcase a few times. As he shakes the suitcase, weird sounds like radio signal are heard coming from the suitcase. He repeats this with arhythmical steps and hand movements giving a sense of childish play. Then he settles in front of the wall, puts the metal plate on ground and the suitcase on it, he starts to a quite lengthy process of unpacking an unusual list of items: old cassettes, a Walkman, an old tape recorder, a microphone, few audio tapes, old rubber duck, confetti and many other small objects that are old and noisy. He briefly pauses at every move, shows the material to the audience as if he is setting his shop around the suitcase with a childish excitement in his face. Every object takes his place on the site as if an actor waiting for their line. He sets his own lights and speakers as well. As such all scene is set by himself at the moment of performance.

The objects he chooses to display and use are in a way "memory materials" not only through their nostalgic quality of being outdated materials but also through their role in his actions to play, distort, record and replay all of which signify a memory process. After he finishes unpacking takes his Walkman and plays a song from the cassette. The song is a very old gazelle belonging to an Ottoman political figure. The cassette plays with a distorted voice. He starts to dance to the song with grotesque movements, he paces whole empty space with crooked yet dynamic figures throughout the song. As if, he tries

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<sup>32</sup> <http://actedcity.com/mihran-tomasyan/>

to catch every pitch, timbre, and pause in the sound through his movements. The song gradually gets distorted and Tomasyan's movements accompany the music's distortion. It creates a moment as if he persistently attempts to embody the song, rather than merely accompanying it. Then for a moment, he turns his back, and when he turns back, the song starts to play in a slow-down version while Tomasyan pulls out the long tape from his mouth now. In a surprised manner, he tries to find the end of the tape coming from his mouth for meters, he pulls it out for almost a minute.

Tomasyan looks as if he transforms into the song itself playing in a totally distorted and slowed version. Through his bodily movements, the performer attempts to traverse the past of the old song which is older than the history of Turkey. I suggest that this moment stands as the part of the metatheatrical level that the play engages in regarding the relationship between performance and history. This moment of an odd merge between a record which is an archival material supposedly immune to change and distortion with Tomasyan's bodily movement and later with his body problematizes the exclusionary concept of the archive. Tomasyan's performance follows Taylor's formulations on the archival quality of the body as a repertoire. At the same time, it echoes the consecutive questions which Schneider puts:

Is theatre always only live? Is history [...] not live? If so, is it "dead"? Or if the antonym to "live" is "recorded", is history never accessed off the record? Or is live theatre never itself means a recording? (Schneider 2014, 10)

A reflexive perspective towards the play itself as well as the process of memory dominates the work. Tomasyan doesn't sustain the character throughout the performance, in fact, he forms barely a character who has a story to follow, rather there are moments which occur in between a character with a childish excitement and Tomasyan's own personal attitudes.

Yet, I suggest that the intentional theatrical appearance of the costume creates a particular signification which is also related to how Tomasyan relates to the history. The old suitcase which contains all the memory materials is carried by this shabby looking naïve man. His naivety and playfulness are not coincidental, he is the one who opens the layers of memories throughout the play containing painful losses, conflicts, wars as well as struggles and laughter. Tomasyan relates to the past through the eyes and body of a childish man with many toys. This man attempts to adapt his body to a distorted recording,

he even pulls the tape from his own mouth, and later he will have shot himself with a sound making device. The present's relation to the past is interpreted here as a serious play which implicates bodies as well as archives and records, both being partial and distorted.

The only verbal expression in the performance is the recitations of the poem. Following his long struggle with the tape in his mouth, Tomasyan crouches behind the recording machine and records the poem as it is mentioned at the beginning, with a lengthy list of familiar and unfamiliar names, repeated with the line "You are not a fish ...". After finishing recording, he replays the record. While his voice, recorded seconds ago, plays on the background, he comes to the center and lays out pieces of a men-suit facing back on the ground. Then he takes off his own shoes and puts them on the ground at the feet of the image of the lying man he tries to complete. Lastly, he tapes the floor with an approximately one-meter long red tape marking the area beside the lying man's chest. He forms a murder scene on the ground with the clothes of an absent body.

This image has a strong association in the collective past of Turkey reminding the iconic photograph showing Dink's body lying on the ground covered with a white paper after he was shot. Now, the record playing background contradicts what is going on the scene; his recorded voice persistently repeats the line "you are not a fish ...", while Tomasyan forms a body image lying dead on the ground. Then, Tomasyan goes and slowly turns off the record. Now, suddenly gunshots started to be heard, the performer looks at the several directions as if they are fired by the audience. Yet, at the same time, he holds visible the sound making device in his hand. He makes the sounds of gunfire and shots himself until finally falling on the ground right on the top of the clothes, physically matching with the figure lying down.

This fall occurs as a moment where the playful tone of the performance is suspended even though the performer is not hidden behind the theatrical pretenses of dying. I suggest that here the performer doesn't represent Dink's assassination, but rather, he acts out the past haunting himself through his own body, through the sounds he does. The moment he falls over the empty body, the performer serves as a sign for Dink's absent body for brief a moment. However, as if he knows that he falls short of such function, he makes a sound of laughter with his sound making device in his hand. He reveals the

tension between the presence of his body and an embodied memory of a loss, these two can never properly match or surrogate each other:

The theatrical energy of performed history provides the space where the real and the metaphorical meet; at the same time, it remains 'a construction that can never become "real" in the sense that the historical past was'. (Dean, Meerzon and Prince 2015, 5)

Towards the end of the performance, Tomasyan gets behind the recording machine one more time and makes a record by using various objects. He starts with rubbing the microphone to his head, then puts a clockwork toy close to the microphone, then a rubber duck, then a flute, and adds a record of the sounds of Gezi Park protests also. The record gradually turns into a mix of sounds reminding a record of a conflict or war. Then he comes to the front again and suddenly starts to pop confetti at each corner of the place, running from one corner to the other in rush. At the same time, he grasps the little tape rolls from the ground and throws them towards the audience reminding people throwing stones in a conflict. He creates a one-person war scene.

The tapes and confetti cover the body image on the ground. The exhaustive moments of sound and movement create an ambivalent signification. The sounds even if made out of the toys and other devices familiar to the audience, as well as Tomasyan's bodily gestures, they create the sensation of a conflict. Therefore, it is an odd image evoking the memories of difficult times with the colorful pieces of confetti and pieces of tapes all around.

The performer, slowing down his movements, takes this time a big tape roll and starts to unfold and hand it to the audience on three sides of the site. Gradually he weaves a net from the tape connecting the audience which each other. Finally, he puts the tape roll at the top part of the lying body, and it becomes a full body image, now with a head. Tomasyan neither directly represents nor conveys a documentary material. The sounds reminding Gezi Park protests stands as associative elements. The play not only avoids a truth claim to the past but also grounds itself on the diverse memories that its audience has. It attempts to evoke these memories and create a connection which is not signified by words but rather comes out as a felt experience. It opens up a territory to confront difficult pasts through the memory of Dink, but within this territory, one faces the question: Can one body carry all of these significations?

## CONCLUSION

“...there is often a fundamental “replay” aspect to theatre and performance; whether fidelitous or infidelitous to the past, it is often the past that is put into play.”

Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre & History*, 10

Intersectional theories on performance, history, and memory draw on a common insight that the past lives on in embodied sites outside the archives and written documents, and its transmission is always, by each medium, intrinsic to a repetition with reconstruction. Therefore, theatre as a reiterative corporeal practice has potential to recognize and enact the way a past event lives on in the present, if not to create a full-blown understanding of the performative nature of remembering and to reveal our own role in sustaining and reconstructing representations of history.

*Disko 5 No'lu* and *Sen Balık Değilsin ki* constitute two significant examples to carry on aesthetic explorations into the ways of engaging with the history, particularly with the past events of political violence through performance and theatre. Though alternative theatre scene has a limited reach to the wider public in comparison with publicly funded theatre ventures such as State Theatre or City Theatres, these works intervene in the contestations over the meaning of the past in contemporary Turkey. They attempt to render a collective past in relation to the present as well as its intersections with different pasts and subjects. Though their forms have significant differences which necessitate further explorations, they both invest in sensation and emotions as well as somatic dimensions of theatrical enterprises.

*Disko 5 No'lu* is a one-hour solo performance intertwining documentary material with fictional. The performance both inscribes but also deconstructs the victim-perpetrator binary. I suggested that even though the “revolutionary” ethos adopted by the victim might create an empty nostalgia for a 21st-century audience what is at stake in the work is not the ethics of such an enactment. Rather, with this odd merging, the play

potentially acts out a tension inherent in the radical difference of the two subjects determined by the historical and political context.

*Sen Balık Değilsin ki* is, on the other hand, a solo performance adopting an associative approach to collective pasts and memories rather than making use of documentary material. On the one hand, this frame enables the performer to evoke emotive impacts and create moments of interaction between the performer and the audience as well as among the audience and provides a metatheatrical approach to the relation between embodied acts and collective memory. On the other hand, I concluded that the memory of Dink and the sign of his body used as the focal point of this associative frame including other events of collective past which are not clearly indicated in the work carries the risk of becoming redundant instead of opening up an intersectional understanding of complex realities.

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