

Into the Wind: Writing with a Fig Tree



PLANT PERSPECTIVES

DOI: 10.3197/WHPPP.63845494909723

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Merve Ünsal, *Into The Wind*, 2022. 21 minutes, audio installation with speakers.
Installation view from Mardin Biennial (Turkey).

Sound file available at https://soundcloud.com/merve07/into-the-wind-1?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing



While presenting *Into the Wind* at a climate emergency and gender conference in Gaziantep, Turkey in November 2023, I was approached by a woman who wanted me to return to the slide in which I had shown the *Into the Wind* installation: the image showed a fig tree in a semi-private courtyard. When I asked her why she wanted to look at this slide, she said it looked like home, referring to the home she left behind in Syria as a refugee. I realised once again that the fig tree, in the context of Western Asia, stands in for and articulates more than I could begin to recognise.

Into the Wind is a 21-minute audio recording of a performance, produced for the Mardin Biennial in 2022. Mardin is a city in southeastern corner of Turkey, bordering Syria and the biennial is situated in the historic part of the city on the side of a hill facing Syria. Many of the works in the biennial are dispersed across businesses and public sites, as it appears that the local community has embraced the biennial. Installed on a fig tree located in the courtyard of a ceramics studio, the work is physically situated so that the recording can be heard from the narrow street, while located within the fig tree, which is thus transformed into an instrument of transmission.

The fig tree holds many symbolic meanings in the mythology of Anatolia. The fig tree was engraved in my mind with this passage by Sema Kaygusuz, an author from Turkey, who brings in the image of the fig tree as she discusses her grandmother in the introduction to the book, *A Place on Your Face*:

[My grandmother] had made me memorise that the fig tree in the garden was my sibling. Despite her overflowing narratives, she never mentioned the massacre that she witnessed in Dersim in 1937 and 1938 ... She was feeling the deeply embedded guilt of surviving the hell that had killed and exiled thousands of people at a massacre that only took a few months to execute ... I intended to write with the language of the fig, which I adapted from the fig tree ... In other words, in this novel, I was a grandmother who survived a massacre, a granddaughter, a godsend, a fig with an infinite number of seeds. Actually, we all wrote each other.¹

1 Sema Kaygusuz, *Yüzünde Bir Yer* (Istanbul: Metis Yayıncılık, 2015), translation my own.

Kaygusuz's connecting the fig tree, its mythologies, the massacre of Dersim² and the unspeakability of the massacre both in her own family history and elsewhere, proposes a method for entanglements and their utterance within the breadth of a few sentences and speaks to the necessarily intertwined temporalities of the now, the living, with all that has happened before. Kaygusuz proposes the method of writing each other through the fig: the fig is an inscription and a textuality with and through which we write each other. I would also highlight the urgency as we *must* write each other.

Kaygusuz's description of 'a fig with an infinite number of seeds' resonates within the specific context of Mardin for two reasons. Firstly, the city is an amalgam of cultures and languages, ranging from Assyrian to Kurdish to Arabic and the multiplicity embedded in the place produces an infinity through multiplicity. Second, the potential of reproduction could be expanded to refer to a call for action: the fig tree is a symbol of proliferation, of becoming many.

Into the Wind comprises five channels that are collapsed together and listened to as one. I performed the last layer while listening to the first four layers and this relatively improvised modality of recording is why I consider this work to be of a specific moment, a recording of a performance. The channels are given equal space in the work, but I will number them here to delineate the order in which they emerged in the process.

The first layer is a field recording that I made in 2019 in Wadi Rum (Jordan). While participating in a film workshop on the desert with a small group of artists, I found out that the Jordanian military had training sites close-by. Also a filming site for many space movies, the red desert seemed to host many temporalities and intentionalities, so I had the idea to make a recording of the space between two people. I asked a colleague to take a walk with me for twenty minutes. I asked her that we do not speak but rather walk together in this unfamiliar landscape. The full recording, which was 21 minutes, reflects the incredibly poignant experience of that walk and the intimacy that became palpable within a few minutes of the walk; the translation of physical space into the

2 Kazım Gündoğan, 'İdamının 80'inci yılında Seyit Rıza'nın ardından: Dersim Katliamı neden yapıldı?' *Gazete Duvar*, 16 Nov. 2017: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/forum/2017/11/16/idaminin-80inci-yilinda-seyit-rizanin-ardindan-dersim-katliami-neden-yapildi>

sound that was not distinguishable from any other field recording of the wind, was both futile and secretive. I situated this recording as the base layer of an experience that was launched with intentions of research and completed with an overwhelming sense of intimacy. This recording is why the work is 21 minutes long. I began the work with a duo performance and finished with a solo performance.

The second layer is made up of over forty recordings of voices of women speaking about and narrating resistance movements. The longest clip is a minute long and I specifically chose sentences and phrases that were ambiguous, selecting out any references to specific places or times. There is only one specific reference within the clips, which is to the May 1st celebrations of 1977 in Taksim Square (Istanbul, Turkey). This Labour Day is also called the 'Bloody May 1st' as shooters whose identities are still unknown shot into the crowd and 34 people were killed in the panic that ensued.³ The women describing their experiences before the shooting highlight how May 1st is a state of mind that can never be ripped out of the psyches of the people, even if governments prohibit marches and celebrations.⁴ This uttering by the group of women who were reminiscing about May 1st 1977, is the conceptual core of *Into the Wind*, as I appreciated and built on this sensibility of reclaiming a moment that ought to be marked by celebration, understanding that it was the ineffable power of a state of being together that had turned this celebration bloody. These women had situated the resistance and cooperation movements in a state of mind, rather than a place or a situation, which seemed to be the key to finding hope in our devastating times. The utterances that I collected from radio and television recordings range from the whimsical to the confused to the explanatory, composing statements from the fragments that I pulled together not through logic, but through the state of mind described. In other words, I located my artistic work within the now familial utterance of women across time and place, building narratives alinearly.

The third layer is a recording of a digital theremin. I used a digital theremin to translate a visual image into sound. The *New York Times*

3 '1 Mayıs İşçi Bayramı: 1977'deki 'Kanlı 1 Mayıs'ın tanığı kadınlar anlatıyor', *BBC News Türkçe*, 30 April 2019: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-48113761>

4 May 1st celebrations have been banned from Taksim since 2013: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-61292303>.

released footage of a drone strike in which the wrong person was killed, after intense surveillance by drones. In the footage, you can see the person as through the surveillance perspective.⁵ I traced the movements of this person before their demise, recording the sounds made by this act of tracing on the digital theremin. To put it simply, my mouse followed the person, collapsing the space of surveillance seen through a screen with the axes of the digital theremin. The fourth layer is a collection of field recordings from around the world of the wind. I have been using the element of the wind in my work as a signifier of site and in this particular instance, it helped me collapse different sites together, while I was also thinking about the wind as a carrier of narratives, transmissions, an element of erosion, an overwhelming soundscape.

The fifth and final layer is a brief tale that I wrote, inspired by Anatolian legends and myths that narrate whispered words, trees, animals, the soil, the wind. The central motif of the tale is the fig tree as I subvert an idiom in Turkish. 'Planting a fig tree in one's home' means to uproot, to destroy the home. This idiom emerges from the fact that fig trees have very strong and widely expansive roots, which means that if one were to plant them too close to their home, the roots would eventually take over the foundation of the house. However, believing this strength to be a force of cooperation and entanglement, the fig tree in my tale is one of embrace, an embodiment of temporalities in parallel to Kaygusuz's fig tree. After having written the tale, I improvised while playing the other layers, speaking into my microphone based on the tale and some other notes that I had taken. I whispered the tale, thinking about whispering as a mode of operation. The tradition of family elders whispering the names of children into their ears as well as the intimacy of whispering into someone's ear as an extrapolation of a state of being together were on my mind as I realised this performance.

Installing the work on and around the fig tree in the courtyard of a ceramics studio furthered the ambiguity of the fig tree. While the roots of the tree were deeply embedded in the private courtyard of the ceramics studio, the branches provided shade to the narrow street on the other side of the wall. The fig tree's already-eavesdropping position, reaching

5 Christoph Koettl, Evan Hill, Matthieu Aikins, Eric Schmitt, Ainara Tiefenthaler and Drew Jordan, 'How a U.S. drone strike killed the wrong person', *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000007963596/us-drone-attack-kabul-investigation.html>

up and around the wall that separated the private and the public spaces, was accentuated by my one-month-long accompaniment as I would like to think that the fig tree and the audio became enmeshed, listening to each other while tuning into temporalities, spatialities, and writings here and elsewhere.

Merve Ünsal is an artist who lives and works in Istanbul and Santa Cruz. She works around methods of tuning in and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of California Santa Cruz, CA. She thinks through the media of photography, video, radio, sound, performance and site-specific installations. She has shown her work in a variety of contexts across the world, most often through artist-driven initiatives. Ünsal is the founding editor of the artist-centred platform m-est.org. She co-facilitated the Arter Research Programme, 2019–2021.

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