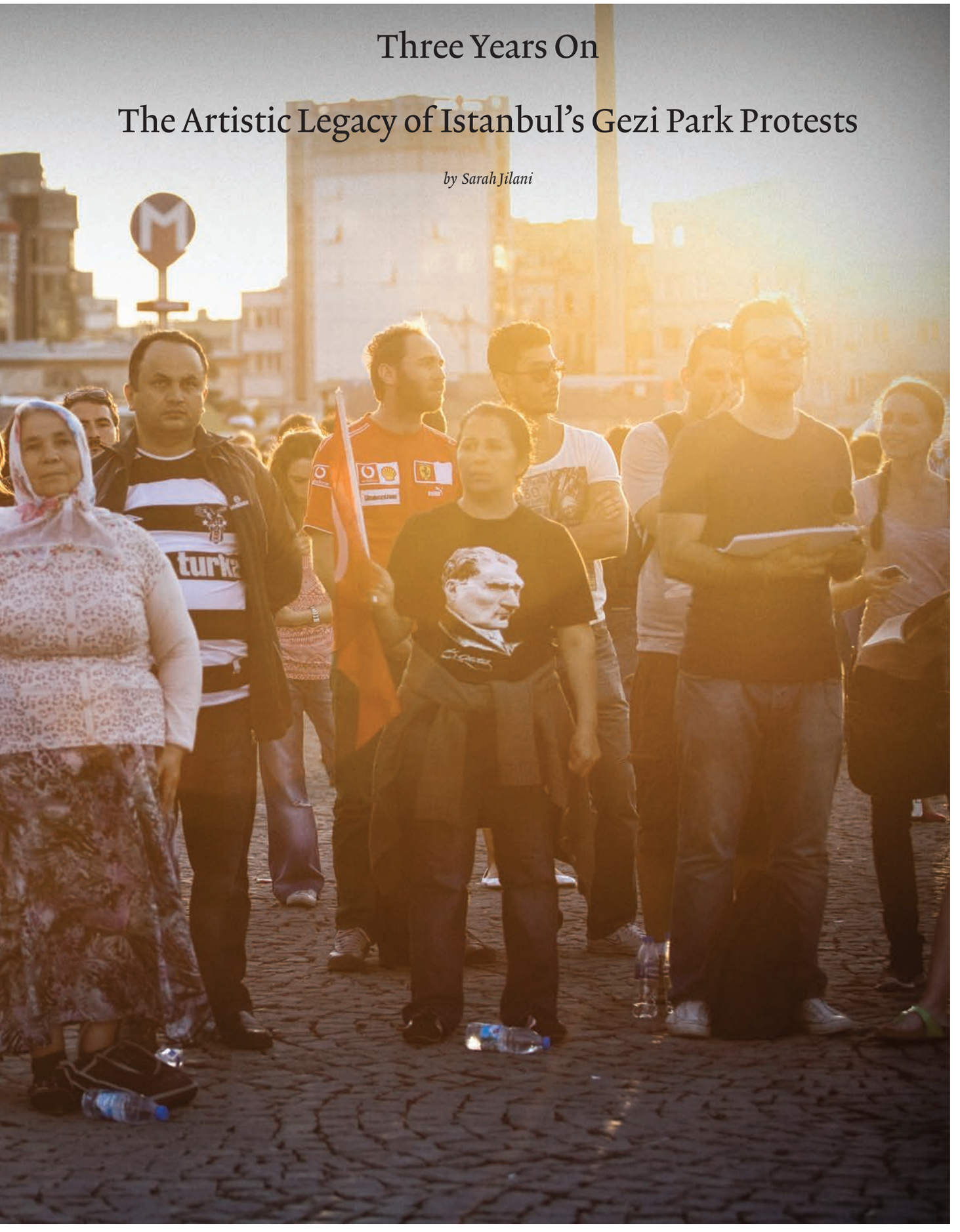

I AM

Three Years On

The Artistic Legacy of Istanbul's Gezi Park Protests

by Sarah Jilani



What do a pop-up library, a penguin and a whirling dervish in a gas mask have in common? They were three of the many manifestations of creative political parody during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. A turning point for both the city's creative energies and its relationship to art and politics, Gezi marked a subtle but lasting paradigm shift in the contemporary Turkish art scene. This summer was the third anniversary of weeks of sit-ins; protest art, including mass performance and graffiti; slogan-chanting; and clashes with police in Taksim Square (next to Gezi Park). What began on 27 May 2013 as an overnight sit-in of 50 people hoping to stop two bulldozers at Gezi Park – a last patch of public green in the heart of the city, which the government decided in 2011 to turn into a shopping arcade, styled as a seventeenth-century Ottoman barracks – erupted into protests that saw an estimated 3.5 million Turks, many with no prior political affiliation, participate in some way. Liberal students from secular families, back for the summer from Ivy Leagues, found their perspectives challenged by the working-class youths protesting very real hardships alongside them. One journalist – a group often derided, together with writers and academics, in Turkey's atmosphere of anti-intellectualism (back in 2013, Turkey had surpassed Iran in its number of jailed journalists) – led Friday prayers at the park for protesters from an anticapitalist Muslim league. Antigovernment slogans chanted by fans of Turkey's three major football clubs could be heard alongside the demands of women's- and LGBT-rights groups. A period of social amalgamation, more productive than what any affiliated Turkish political group had managed until then, was occurring. Calls were for a lessening of then-prime minister (now president) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarianism; an end to unchecked urbanisation plans; the reclamation of public space; and democracy beyond the ballot box.

The fundamental tools of protest in Taksim Square sometimes resembled Occupy, with its tents, libraries, alfresco lectures and performances; and sometimes they resembled the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Cairo, with their heated clashes between police and protesters. Although ground was most effectively gained through acts of physical resistance and civil disobedience, art was a supplementary tool that boosted morale, communicated defiance and demonstrated the right to public space. The music, literature, art, comedy and dance that took place during the Gezi sit-in put a human face on the action. But at the time this had more than mere aesthetic value. These collective creative activities, and their sharing via social media, recorded the peaceful nature of the protest, which challenged the parallel-running narrative of the state: that the protesters were trained troublemakers, provocateurs. Art did not hold the water cannons at bay, but it did communicate the largely positive spirit in which Gezi started, and served to highlight the overreaction and intolerance of the government's response. Memorable manifestations included tongue-in-cheek antiestablishment graffiti ('Tayyip, Winter Is Coming'); German pianist David Martello's nighttime concert in the middle of Taksim Square; an impromptu performance of a whirling dervish wearing a gas mask; and countless humorous Twitter memes (the aforementioned penguin was a particular favourite – state television had broadcast an Antarctica documentary instead of the first night of the Gezi protests).

As protests in solidarity with Gezi Park spread to other major Turkish cities from 31 May, police retaliated with water cannon, pepper spray and – shockingly – the occasional live round, clearing the park on 15 June. Showcasing a peaceful agenda via artistic expression was no longer a deterrent to state force, nor worth the risk. In the immediate aftermath of the clear-out, art was instead used both to memorialise the spirit of the sit-in, and to find alternative forms by which to continue to protest. An image captured by Reuters photographer Osman Orsal of a young woman in a red summer dress being pepper-sprayed at point-blank range became one of the most pastiched visuals of the protests, while Erdem Gündüz began a performance of civil disobedience on 17 June. Standing still in Taksim Square for six hours, he stared at the decrepit Atatürk Cultural Centre (once the home of the Turkish State Opera and Ballet, now in its eighth year out of operation). Others soon joined him in what became known as the 'standing man' protest: a dilemma action that left onlooking police unable to respond to a demand for the barest of public rights – to take up public space. Gündüz shared the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent with Pussy Riot the following year.

Three years on, though, it is easy to conclude that state response was sufficiently overwhelming that artistic protests at Gezi now seem to have been of little consequence. And to an extent that's true: art alone does not change reality. But it can make the contradictions and commonalities within our reality apparent. The residual energies of the Gezi protests translated into a lingering social camaraderie and a shared urban memory, which has found expression in the post-Gezi artistic life of Istanbul.

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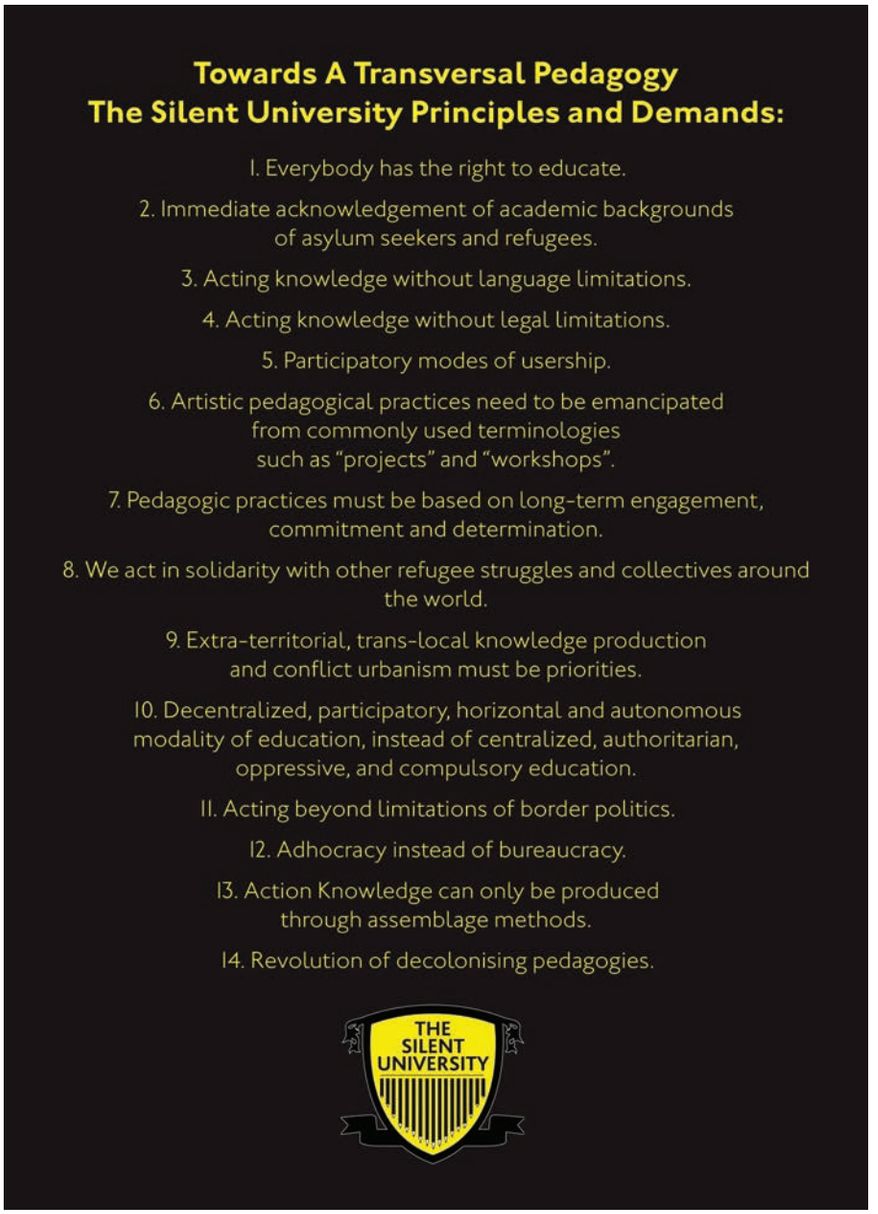
In a Turkish governmentality that has demonstrated increasing intolerance towards any form of criticism, Turkey's arts have seen a corresponding increase in obstacles since 2013. And yet they have also undergone the kind of creative and critical regeneration that collective politicisation and trauma of this scale can bring about. State suspicion (and all too often, 'encouragement' to cease and desist) of creative activity and public gatherings has increased in the aftermath of Gezi. The Ankara orchestra was pressured to remove the government-critical and globally acclaimed Turkish pianist Fazil Say from their programme. The 2015 Istanbul International Film Festival saw 12 filmmakers pull out over a censorship row when the Turkish Ministry for Culture prevented the screening of a documentary about Kurdish militants. SALT Beyoğlu, perhaps the busiest of the organisation's spaces, on the pedestrianised Istiklal Avenue, has been closed since this past January, apparently for 'technical reasons', but allegedly as a result of government pressure. In March, a group exhibition titled *Post-Peace*, the winning entry in a curatorial competition, was set to explore the contemporary condition of war; the gallery, Akbank Sanat, cancelled the show and issued a vaguely worded statement about a 'troubled time' and the delicate political situation, while attempting to mitigate what many people would view as an act of censorship by claiming that, in Turkey, 'exhibitions, concerts, and performances, are being cancelled every day'.

Although frustrating and often intimidating, such clampdowns on freedom of expression have not put a chokehold on the arts. Nonprofits and arts initiatives have proliferated, seeking loopholes to avoid charges of insult (a common precept for state intervention),

preceding pages Taksim Square, Istanbul, 19 June 2013. Photo: Italo Rondinella

this page, from top The funeral of Didar Sensoy, 5 September 1987, photo: Ibrahim Eren Archive; Barıs Doğrusöz, *Paris time: 'The map and the territory'* (video still), 2012–14. Both from *How Did We Get Here*, SALT Beyoğlu & SALT Galata, 2015



Ahmet Öğüt, *Silent University*, 2012–, autonomous solidarity-based education platform by asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Courtesy the Silent University