







CROSSING THE BRIDGE

It is a summery May day afternoon in Porto and I am gazing into a photograph on my sun-glared computer screen, trying to see a stairway shaded by a blinding backlight. My skin feels Porto's peculiar chilly ocean breeze, but the photo fills the room with the memory of another smell of another sea, of another city, streaming from 6000 km away, whence the photo was captured: Istanbul. Eyes closed, I imagine myself climbing up that narrow stone stairway and reaching the enormous bright terrace, where I can see the panorama of this centuries-old metropolis and feel the vastness of our existence under the wild blue yonder of Bosphorus.

This nostalgic space-time drift is, however, interrupted the moment I notice that exactly 400 years ago, on this exact day, another person walked up through those steps I am remotely observing, yet instead of breathing the same salty air, he breathed his last. The boy's name was Osman who went down in history as Osman the Young as he was only 14 when ascended to the throne as the 16th sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and was only 17 when he was brutally tortured, mutilated and strangled to death by the Janissaries. 400 years ago, this day, before being brought to this terrace to be publicly humiliated, he was dragged along the dark, damp and long corridors and stopped by the end of the stairway I am now staring at, which stands there as an aperture between the final passageway and the gleaming airy terrace. Between light and dark. Life and death. And it is this very spot where my site-specific artwork stands now, through which I reconnect to the vestiges of the past and try to make sense of this encounter.

But this is not about Osman. It is about the collective memory of this space and hegemonic power he somewhat perpetuated and became the victim of. He was one of the many who were held captive, excruciated and executed here as the witnesses and agents of atrocity, punishment and revenge. The place is called Yedikule Fortress – also known as Yedikule Dungeons Museum, or Fortress of the Seven Towers. Located at the peripheries of the old city of Istanbul and facing the Marmara Sea and Anatolia, Yedikule has an exceptional historical and architectural significance. With both its initial twin-tower structure which included Walls of Constantinople and the triumphal Golden Gate built by Byzantine Empire (5th century), and its final seven-tower version constructed by the Ottomans after the conquest of the city (15th century), Yedikule originally operated as a citadel, a guesthouse, a safeguard, and storage (Katipoğlu and Sezer 2020). From the sixteenth century onward, however, it turned into one of the most formidable prisons in the region and a scene for many urban legends narrating its dungeons, 'bloody' pits and writings carved on its walls, even long after it closed its doors as a prison.

Aestheticization of Punishment

Today Yedikule is an open-air museum, offering its visitors an isolated sanctuary detached from the hustle of the city, enriched by the architectural wonders of the past. Being restored and greened, it now hosts exhibitions, concerts, film screenings and guided tours that tell the 'officially written' history through walls, stairs, corridors, gates and empty rooms. Turning now-defunct prisons into museums or cultural spaces is, however, not an exceptional practice, especially since the buildings of detention have been systematically moved to the outskirts of the cities for the last half-century, to be kept out of sight and thereby out of mind of our social landscape. Now, many of these ex-prison museums, spreading all across the world, dedicate a great deal of space and effort to tell particular stories of these once-closed-door buildings in their permanent exhibitions, and demonstrate the inhumane conditions and cruelties that once happened behind bars. While some of these storytelling take place rather plainly through archival materials such as photographs, texts and maps (e.g. Portuguese Centre of Photography in Porto), some of them reenact prisoners' experiences by showcasing memoirs, personal items, audio-visual accounts (e.g. Brandenburg-Görden Prison in Brandenburg and The Fortress of Peniche in Peniche) and even extremely realistic displays (e.g. Ulucanlar Prison Museum in Ankara), sometimes partly fetishizing the brutal architecture of panopticon and the horror of imprisonment (e.g. the notorious Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia). In either way, directly or indirectly, their reestablishment restores not only buildings and outworn façades of cities but also our collective memory, materialised by art and architecture. These places can be considered as channels for recollecting our neglected past against oblivion, commemorating those who were subjugated, persecuted and dehumanised, and even resisting the ongoing forms of violence the culture of punishment exerts (Çaylı 2022).

On the other hand, the proliferation of prison museums cannot be seen as a sheer act of benevolence, either. First, there is so much in common between the two institutions, the museum and the prison: Both growing massively in our built environment, both financed by the state bodies and multinational corporations, and both lying on colonial legacies of modernity with the aim of serving for humanity — one for collection one for correction (Bennett, 1995; Day 2013). If prisons harbour "criminals", museums harbour the remnants of crimes by the process of constant aestheticization; While penal reforms and spatial arrangements – or namely "the birth of prison" (Foucault 1991 [1975]) – that took place in the West since the 18th century have increasingly removed punishment from the public scene, ostracised its subjects and "cleaned up" the streets, museums have mostly omitted, embellished and, again, "cleaned up" the painful past, by regulating the public into an ideal order of things and into a decontextualised historical matters (Bennett 1995). Therefore, a highly critical look at these two institutions is crucial, given the fact that behind the polished surface, there lies an expanding carceral capitalism linked to all kinds of institutions of power and systems of representation, including cultural spaces (Wang 2018).

On the side of museums, in recent decades, there have been a growing institutional self-critique that led to discussions on decolonisation and attempts of reparation, all of which have been addressing the political capacity of the museum and its role on justice-making. However, when it comes to prisons, although increasing number of abolitionist voices have been spreading from North America to the globe that advocate a world without the institutions of punishment (Davis 2003; Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020; Kaba 2021), the mainstream architectural and design practices only consolidate these (infra)structures. New constructions reportedly ameliorate prison buildings and detention centres by the use of new materials, new technologies and new spatial regulations, but they still serve for retribution rather than rehabilitation. Millions of people worldwide, especially people of diverse genders, sexualities, class, and racial and ethnic backgrounds, are exponentially marginalised, criminalised and trapped in punitive justice system (Gilmore 2007; Alexander 2010; Wang 2018). Behind the walls, fundamental human rights of prisoners are constantly violated or under attack by inhumane practices such as 24/7 monitoring, solitary confinement, labour exploitation, staff violence, and bail bond among many others. It is not a coincidence nor surprising to hear the testimonies of (ex)prisoners, when they say that they see these new "modern" places no different than dungeons, as brutal as that once Yedikule was (Portman et al. 2014). The contemporary penal spaces, after all, are just the extensions of their predecessors – this time presentably re-sculpted with a *designerly* touch.

But the problem, or what is more problematic, is the fact that these spaces become so much "invisible" in our daily socio-spatial lives that they totally fall outside our political, social, financial and spatial concerns. However, like feminist abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) aptly asserts, this apparent invisibility is just a "trick of perspective", since criminal justice is not only potent as ever with its growing numbers of prison(er)s, but also pervaded in every inch of our daily lives, from policing to profiling, from surveillance technologies to data extractivism. And we are one way or another part of it; either as direct victims, beloved of the victims, survivors, executers or, as Michelle Brown puts it, "penal spectators" (Brown 2013) who watch the metastasising and spreading organism of criminalisation from distance yet not taking a stance. Already long time ago, I decided to change my position from being a passive beholder to an active contributor to the discussions around criminal justice system. I know that it must be partly personal-historical, about growing up in a context where "crime", punishment and harm-doing are not proportional nor compatible with the harm(er). On the other hand, it is also the consideration of the wider global-political context in which materialisation and capitalisation of punishment is but a highly profitable asset that need criminals before they commit crimes. It is about challenging the commonly-held idea that state-inflicted harm was long gone, buried under the pits of old institutions like Yedikule, or is all deserved by those who are deemed nothing but "delinquents", stripped off their humanities, as raw materials and by-products of society. Yet the truth-tellers, activists, researchers, statistics, and spaces tell the other side of the story, exposing that we are not exempt from the current ramifications of justice-making, but responsible for its future historiography.

Carceral Aesthetics If the Walls Couldn't Talk

These were the thoughts and motives that ran to my mind, when my "active contribution" to the ongoing discussions on carcerality arouse as an opportunity, in the form of art. It was at the end of 2021, when I received an invitation to be part of the 4th International Istanbul Triennial which would take place between 12 May and 13 June 2022 at YediKule Fortress Museum. In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, in our online meetings, the curator Filiz Ağdemir and the coordinator Zeynep Toy introduced me the idea behind this edition of Triennial and the current context of Yedikule. The call was enticing;

> *"The Istanbul's multi-layered history and its sociological, political, cultural, economic coexistence and spatial transformations allow us to define the boundaries (and walls) of its urban sites as heterotopic spaces. In this regard, through its transformation, temporality, multiplicity and independency, the 4th Triennial; 'Borders and Walls' embodies the encounter of different social stratifications and conflicts in the city.*
>
> *The 4th International Istanbul Triennial aims to open up a space where the Istanbul's heterotopic spaces; its borders (and walls) can be discussed and repositioned as the anti-spaces. By doing so, the exhibition divides the space into fragments yet protects its entirety."*

Although the bulletin of the Triennial did not explicitly politicise or aim to have a controversially critical look at the Yedikule context, it was impossible not to problematise the historical and present importance of the mentioned spaces. The curators and the call particularly emphasised heterotopic spaces and memory. Both prison and museum are surely considered the sites of heterotopia according to Foucault (1986), as "other spaces" in their distinct norms, values and disciplining apparatuses, somehow alternative and somehow intensified version of the dominant social order. However, in the context of Yedikule, there was also the erasure of that "counter-space", which became a place that promises us a history freed from its violent past, a neutral zone that is just to be visited and ornamented with artistic intervention. During our online meetings and remote field visits, the curators took me to the towers, terraces, gardens and gates of Yedikule, narrating the specific histories until we all arrived at that particular stairway, which was now extremely "normal looking" and otherwise insignificant, just like other quotidian sites we pass through every day. So, the question was how to reflect and respond to our collective memory in this both cruel and neutralised place, while knowing that, in the very same country increasing number of political prisoners, self-defending women, LGBTQI+ activists and many more are locked up between other walls? What does it mean to remember the injustice of the past and bring them collectively to this day? What would tell us if these walls could speak and how can we continuously "confront the past" and practice commemoration as an affective, processual and different ways (Çaylı 2022)?

Such questions and concerns drove me, as a sound artist, to evoke the "invisible" memory of this space and the successors thereof, while maintaining its indistinct presence against the urges of our visually-oriented culture. This is where I remembered the words of composer-activist Pauline Oliveros (2022 [2010], 40), "the ears tell the eye where to look", and wanted to take the visitors to listen "beyond the edge of their own imagination", in a mnemonic way. I planned a sound installation to be placed on the stairways, where the intersection of light and dark is so blinding that did not need any extra visual input. This choice is also a decision of not contributing to ongoing "carceral aesthetics" that stereotypically represent, reproduce and reinforce the culture of punishment, imprisonment and social hierarchies, but as envisioning alternative forms of conveying (Fleetwood 2020). The power of sound in the context of carcerality can be seen in previous examples (e.g. Maria Gaspar's five-channel sound art piece *On the Border of What is Formless and Monstrous* [2016]; Andrea Fraser's sound installation *Down the River* [2016], Brian James Spies' sound piece *Solitaire* [2015], or other popular projects such as Terri Lyne Carrington's *Music for Abolition*) as a form of empowerment of people behind bars. In my context, it was an act of vocation; therefore, the most important thing was to bring the very spatiality of the place to the fore, using my personal-collective history, personal upbringing and voice, and the sounds of my current location, mixed with the soundscapes of Istanbul, the sonic representations of the underground, walls, confinement and freedom all at the same time, all blending through different channels. I called it A•PER•TUR, an interrupted and scattered mix of syllables of aperture, perturbate and other phonic resonances of the sites.

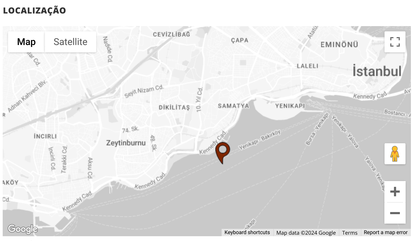
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Yedikule Map

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To know more: A•PER•TUR: A sonic aisle through time, space and justice-making

LOCALIZAÇÃO



LOCAL: **İSTANBUL** LATITUDE: **40.99348469999999** LONGITUDE: **28.9227401**

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