

# HALE TENGER - EVERYDAY LIFE SNAPSHOTS

"If the violence, bullying, power, and so forth that we see in the Priapus figure pertain to the male identity, if the figure has a penis and not a clitoris, well, I can't help it. In the world as it is being born a female brings with it certain burdens and differences. Like it or not, that's how things are. What I've done is take a kind of snapshots of this situation." Hale Tenger<sup>1</sup>.

When you come to talk to Hale about feminist issues she shows a kind of polite boredom. In the year 2000 the work of a women artist living in a "very" male society is automatically classified as feminist. This topic comes again and again in all interviews and presentations of her work although she doesn't identify herself as such.

One of the 100 most prominent artists of the '90s, as considered by American critics, Hale Tenger is graduate of the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts, ceramics department. She started her career with a personal show in the Gallery Nev, in Istanbul, in 1990, and attended in short time an international recognition and appreciation.

Fragile and aggressive at the same time her works balance between the "self" and the "otherness".

The "self" is revealed in her early works and attached to 1990 moment. The search of identity is in some pieces very subtle and poetic (**History of Time, Wishing Tree**) or very sharp in some others (**Portrait of a Woman**).

**The Dream Before**, work inspired by a song of Laurie Anderson, deals with personal history - past, present, future; **On the Basis of Reciprocity**, started from a David Byrne song "Women vs. men" shows first a male / female confrontation.

Another way of defining the selfhood is through works dealing with tense issues like religion or human rights (**Relic Box: Her Dish or School of Sikimden Assa Kasimpasa**).

After 1990 a political magnifying glass brings to front the (Turkish) male pattern. The focus start changing towards the "otherness" and gives expression to a deep concern in social and civil problems. In Hale Tenger's works one can find the reflection of all the wars and tensions involving the Muslim world: the war in the gulf, the war in Bosnia, the Kurds' problems etc. Works like **I Know People Like This, World, Down Up, I Know People Like This 2**, express both a local and a global view on "violence and apathy feeding on each other"<sup>2</sup>.

The participation in the third Istanbul Biennial was followed by an opening to the international art scene. Hale Tenger starts exhibiting a lot abroad. She is selected in almost all the biennials and important group shows involving Turkish artists.

Descent Deathwatch: Bosnia Herzegovina, 1993



One of the first installations with sound is **Decent Deathwax: Bosnia Herzegovina** (1993) exhibited at the Women's Library and Research Centre in Istanbul. For this work the artist not only had a very serious documentation but lived for a while the experience of a Bosnian refugees camp in Kirklareli (Turkey). She hassled to get a two days permit which gave her the chance to talk to people and to record their voices. No video or photo recording was aloud. For five months she followed the media coverage of the war extracting articles and photographs. Photocopies of all these were shown inside 800 jars filled with water and stored on metallic shelves. A mix of the voices recorded gave the feeling of talking walls. It is a work which deals not only with war but also with media manipulation as opposing the direct experience to mass media filtered information.

It was a strong experience about sufferance, life and death, communication, survival, migration, freedom, participation, commitment and we will recognise these issues in her later works.

I think this experience determined a new approach, a philosophical one, and I would also notice a formal change. She affirms a clear option for installation works. Her works demand time for perception and this is due both to conceptual and spatial structure.

The 1994 American experience (artist in residence in New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University) strongly affirms her taste for site-specific installations. From now on she starts travelling with ideas and creates the work on the spot: 1994, New York - **Portrait of Kant**; 1995, Arnhem - **Sometimes you see, Sometimes you don't**, Istanbul - **We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside. We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside**, Ephesus - **Birth vs. Death**; 1996 Belgium train project - **Backwards into the future**, New York - **Shroud**, Rotterdam - **Cross section**; 1997 San Antonio - **The Closet**; 1999, Ankara - **Heart Ache**.

Sound plays a very important role in her work. Hale starts dealing with video as part of the work but also in video installations (Rotterdam 1996, Istanbul 1999).

Hale Tenger is one of the artists who break up the traditional pictorial fixation of Turkish art and start working with the space. Her works have a remarkable clarity and directness. There is always a surprise between looking from a distance and the close up view of her works. She exploits details but doesn't abuse of them. Each object, image, sound, light, smell etc. has a special role in defining the environment. She plays with senses aiming to amplify the viewers' experience. She doesn't like repeating herself.

This is a quick sketch of Hale Tenger's work. We first met in 1996 in Rotterdam at the opening of the Manifesta 1 Biennial and we "socialised" together in some funny situations. My presence in Istanbul at the end of January gave us the chance to meet again. I took the opportunity and I recorded some of her opinions on her work and on the Turkish contemporary art environment.

**Irina Cios:** Hale Tenger you are a young artist, a successful one. After meeting you in Rotterdam in 1996 I was very curious to know more about you not only because of your impressive work but also because of the curiosity to find out how a woman can make an artistic career in Turkey. You have started it some ten years ago. Since, your name appears in most of the big contemporary art events of the last decade organized all over the world. How is for an artist to star a career in Turkey? Are there channels to support young artist or they just have to manage by themselves?

**Hale Tenger:** First of all you have to be lucky to be admitted in the art school (Art University). Afterwards it is again luck to have good contacts. In terms of financial support my father was my sponsor for years and years. For my generation the sponsorship system doesn't really work. The young ones seem to be luckier. But in a way each generation has its good opportunities. When I graduated there were not many galleries around. When I first asked myself what should I do after graduating, I had the chance to be introduced to the right persons. I immediately had a show. Now there are more galleries but also more young artists so I don't know if it was easier then or now. Maybe it is more difficult for the young ones as number of galleries or exhibition spaces didn't increase much in a reasonable ratio with the number of artists.

**C.C.:** But besides the institutional system is there communication and exchange of ideas and projects between artists from different generations?

**H.T.:** No. There is not much communication among artists in Istanbul not much interactivity or interest on others. The most younger group of artist, they have more connection with each other and are more organized in terms of getting together for realizing projects. With our generation this doesn't really happen. There is too much conspiracy, I should say, and this doesn't create the basis of starting communication even if you are willing to try. I myself only recently started getting involved in some informal meetings with a small circle of artist friends of my generation. And that is just getting together and discussing issues coming along naturally, in relation to our general position as artists.

**C.C.:** Is there a good media coverage and media environment for contemporary art events in Turkey and especially in Istanbul?

H.T.: There are some old art magazines which have been printed for years including everything. In terms of contemporary movement recently appeared some dedicated press, but unfortunately we're missing young curators and art critics devoted to contemporary art.

H.C.: In this context how did you built your way as an artist, as a woman artist, in a strong Muslim cultural background and how do you relate your work to feminist issues ?

H.T.: First of all I should say that I have never been in a strong Muslim cultural background nor felt like that. That's not what it is like here. Only in the recent years it has become an issue, but politically only. Thinking about my work I would say that in the early '90s I was more involved with myself. Anyone would say that "myself" refers to a woman identity... I didn't consider it as such. My works just came out as the expression of my daily life issues. I was never an artist engaged in feminist movements.

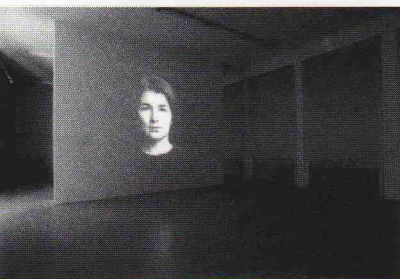
If we start talking about feminism in my works I have to say that in my family there were very strong feminine figures, especially my grandmother. So, I guess this attitude just came naturally from my family. At the same time, of course, I had problems with growing up as a woman. As getting older one just starts tracing back identity problems like the problem of being a woman and living in such a country etc. All these issues found their place in my works.

Maybe if you start looking at things from that angle, you can see, for example, in my early works - with umbrellas and gearshifts - like a rapt there.

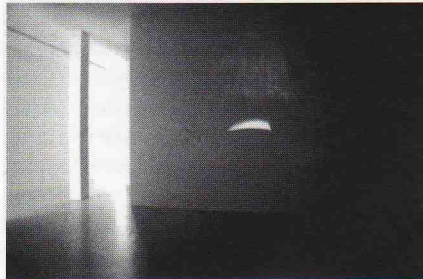
All things change onwards in years and I think some works might show up differently now...

H.C.: Turkey is not a culture of the body, or I should rather say of showing/exhibiting the body, not even the face.

How do you relate your body to your work ?



*Cross Section, 1996*

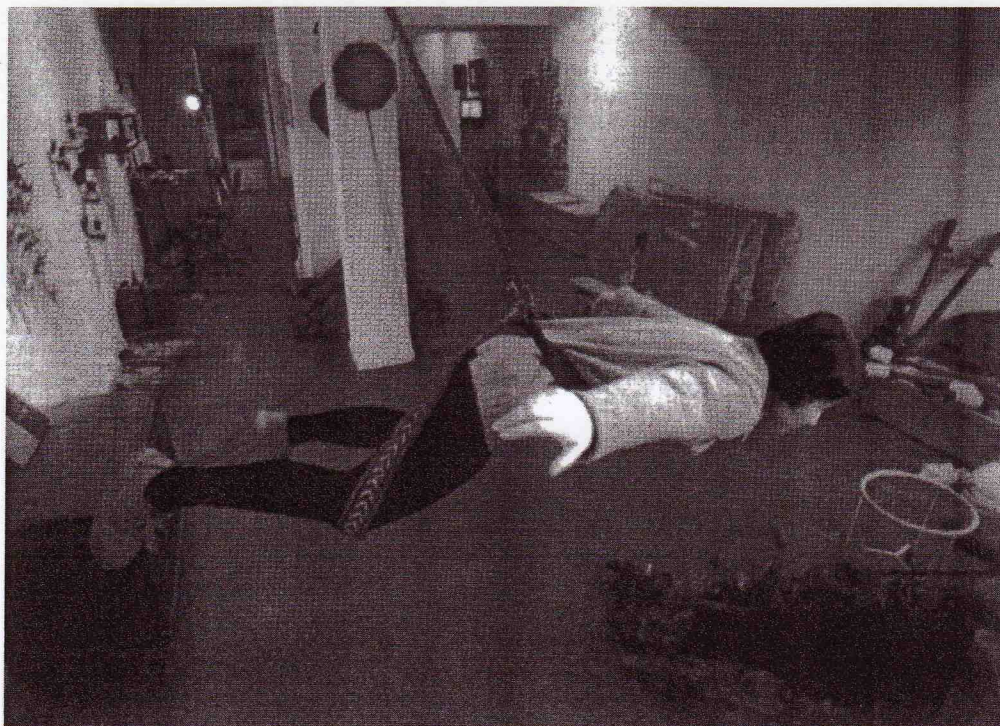


H.T.: It is funny but the extremes exist hand in hand, you can find the most exhibited and the most disclosed right next to each other in daily life but in general it is not an approved thing for an average person to overtly display his or her body, obviously for abstaining from sexuality. I find contemporary average Turkish people being shy about their bodies. In the cultural context however there is an old tradition being concerned about the body, including the face, dating back to the Ottoman period (i.e. definition of the body and the face in literature or the miniatures). I think you refer mainly to the work you saw in Rotterdam at Manifesta 1. I was invited to participate in the section with the "Migration" topic. I found myself thinking that I should be telling my own stories about migration, how I experience it as a person and as an artist. The only way to make people believe in this stories was to tell them myself. That is how it came out and that was the reason it was my face and my voice.

For the photo you saw on the cover of the catalogue, that was not a performance. That was only for this cover and it has a funny story. It was an exhibition I made here in Gallery Nev. Before that, for about a year, I was working with Vasif Kortun<sup>3</sup> on the text of the catalogue and we came to the conclusion that generally after the shows my works don't exist. I said that they were somehow self destructive at the end, like in this old movie "Mission Impossible". When I had to think of something for the cover of the catalogue the new version of the movie came up - with Tom Cruise - very high-tech, with all those computers around, and the guy coming down on a rope from the ceiling not touching the floor etc... However my exhibition was like a jungle, like my studio vomiting into the gallery space, no high-tech, no design, nothing. So as a contradictory thing I thought "mission impossible" should be the title of the catalogue and that's how the photocollage came out. That's me floating in the air fastened with donkey straps. I felt so shy that somebody would enter the gallery and would see me in that absurd position.

H.C.: You just mentioned high-tech. Looking around there is not much media & multimedia art in Istanbul. What was your relation with new media like sound, video, computers ?

H.T.: The first time I used sound was "Portrait of Kant" project. As a student you learn to use only a few tools and in time your scale starts getting wider and wider. If you want to set up an environment - where people are expected to walk in and think about it, feel about it - then you realize you need more tools and naturally they start coming in, like sound or smell (apples for example smelling in that train car etc.) It enriches whatever you want to say. "Everything Must Go" was a special project with sound and we set it up together with a musician friend of mine, Serdar Ataser. As I poured my studio into the gallery space like a huge collage with parts of ex works etc. Being



Mission impossible, 1996

a sound collector he did the same and the result was very interesting.

About video I've been very close to it because of my husband - he is a commercial film director. I started using it as documenting my own works when sound started getting included. Then somehow I started thinking about it or let's say my way of thinking started including video. It also has a practical side as well in terms of saving space - as I can't stick things in my studio any longer - and transportation problems when you have to show abroad.

I recently made a two monitor video piece - entitled "Borders/Borders" which was shown here, in a group exhibition. The video on top was showing a hand holding a stick and continuously drawing a line by the sea shore and the waves washing it off, in a loop. You could hear the sound of the waves. The video underneath was showing a children's game of pulling up a rope from two sides with a line in the middle. Again in a continuous loop it was kind of "nobody wins" situation. I did this project easily because I had a nice camera in my hands and I didn't need anything else. I liked to do it on my own. I had something to say and that was the proper mean to say it. About computers, I am not interested in them. I studied computer programming for two years and I find it boring. I need to have the direct experience of producing the piece and also, in terms of experiencing art, computer work is too mediated for me.

**I.C.:** What's your relation with the public? Do you care about the impact of your works? Are you interested to have comments?

**H.T.:** The public? I do care! I love having feedback and I always like to hear other ways of seeing things besides my own way seeing them. But public is different from one place to another. For instance as I exhibited in Ankara several times, I came to realize that. Ankara people come to the opening and start talking to you, ask you questions about your work, why this? why that? In Istanbul people act like if it were forbidden to talk about the art work. They just gather around, have a drink, talk about generally what you're doing. Not a word about the artwork there, right in front of them. Talking about art provokes you, it creates other connections. It is a kind of focus on another level which I consider very creative.

**I.C.:** Do you re-exhibit your works, or readapt them? Do you like to work on an idea and refine it in time?

**H.T.:** I do re-exhibit although I find it boring. But since most of my works don't exist once the exhibition is over, lucky enough I simply can't put those back on. I don't like readapting works. If a piece is a "sentence" it should be a "sentence" from now on, so I think I cannot just use some words of it and leave out the rest. If it can exist without some parts then you should drop them out at the beginning. But I make some minor adjustments when reinstalling a piece in a different space. Refinement I guess happens naturally in time not only in your way of thinking but in the way your work is structured.

Istanbul, Gallery Nev, January 24, 2000

#### Note

1. Hale Tenger, Mission Impossible 1990 -1996, catalogue, Galeri Nev, Interview with Hale Tenger by Vasif Kortun, p.34
2. idem, p. 33.
3. Vasif Kortun, art critic and curator, is the director of the Istanbul Contemporary Art Project

