

Art in America



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\$12 OCTOBER 2015 COVER BY FRANK STELLA

HALE TENGER

Westbeth

Hale Tenger's 1995 installation *We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside*, a commentary on Turkish politics in particular and state repression in general, is as disturbingly relevant today as it was 20 years ago. It was restaged by the Istanbul and New York-based arts organization Protocinema in the basement of New York's historic Westbeth Artists Housing buildings to make just this point. The eerie work consists of an old wooden guardhouse in the corner of a large concrete yard enclosed by barbed-wire fencing.

Inside the cramped guardhouse, in stark contrast to the bleak environment outside it, faded postcards and pictures of idyllic Turkish landscapes cut from magazines are taped to the walls. The only other suggestions of human habitation are a mirror and a tiny transistor radio emanating a loop of popular Turkish folk songs, a reference to state control of radio broadcasting and other media from 1923 to 1994.

The disjunction between the cozy guardhouse interior, with its nostalgic music and romantic vistas, and the militaristic exterior, reminiscent of refugee and detainee camps, is, of course, deliberate. It evokes the way media operates as a form of cultural propaganda to pacify a populace under siege, and calls to mind what is systematically hidden from view in repressive societies.

Tenger came of age in the wake of the 1980 Turkish coup d'état, and her memories of the police violence, curfews and home raids that defined that period's martial law no doubt inform the installation. But the sense of confinement and isolation the work conveys also derives from her personal experience of censorship in the mid-1990s, which led directly to its creation.

Made for the 4th Istanbul Biennial, *We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside* was a rejoinder of sorts to the government's attempt to repress her 1992 biennial contribution, *I Know People Like This Too*, which criticized the state's renewed torture and assassination of Kurds. Almost landing Tenger in jail, the work was comprised of tourist figurines of the fertility god Priapus—who is represented by a giant phallus—arranged in an armylike configuration resembling a crescent with a star; these were surrounded by hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil, see-no-evil monkey statuettes. She was charged with “insulting the emblem of the Turkish nation” for her reference to the flag, and underwent a long Kafkaesque court case before the allegation was eventually dropped.

While the Kurdish issue has improved, media censorship, state brutality and attacks on free speech are rampant today, both in Turkey and internationally (one has only to think of Gezi Park, *Charlie Hebdo* and Pussy Riot). Tenger's powerful installation underscores this currency through its simultaneous interrogation and conflation of time, history and memory. In the end, her spare, haunting mise-en-scène warns us not just that history repeats itself, but that the consequences of our indifference, and of seeking false shelter from the outside world, are dire.

—Jane Ursula Harris

View of Hale Tenger's installation *We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside / We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside*, 1995/2015, at Westbeth.

