

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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### Site-Specific Performance Works of Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna

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## Site-Specific Performance Works of Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna: Examining Spatial Performativity through a Turkish Choreographer's Perspective

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### Abstract

The term "performance" has become extremely common in various arts, literature, and social sciences activities. Performance theorist Richard Schechner has searched the relationship between theory and practice in social sciences and theatre studies, mainly focusing on Turner's model of "social drama". Performance progressively got out of its shelter, the cultural institution, and assumed the role of provoking critical questions about the meaning of art in our highly mediated daily lives. Bodily art performance in space demonstrates a reciprocal interaction. Particularly, site-specific performance has even got a higher dependency on space, architectural or natural. Most site-specific indoor or outdoor performances are primarily concerned with unconventional performance spaces, drawing particular attention to the physical qualities of space and its social or historical connotations. Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna is an awarded Turkish choreographer, contemporary dance and interdisciplinary performance artist, body reader, and academician. Tuna is known to exhibit site-specific choreographies in her works and theatre festivals. Some of her conceptual and choreographic creations stand out as works realized in Istanbul for particular sites, such as *Machine Body* at The Energy Museum Santralistanbul (2008-2009), *Wet Volume* at Bayrampaşa old prison (2010), *Displacement* at the old Hasköy Cotton Factory (2012), *Show of Strength* at St. Pulchérie French School (2014-2019), *Body Drops* at an old public bath (2017), and *Revert* produced in an old shoe factory (Istanbul Beykoz Kundura stage, 2022). *Show of Strength* takes place in a historic high school building and leaves many questions about the body, what the body contains, lives, learns, transforms, changes, accumulates, expresses, and is exposed to. *Wet Volume* undertakes the architectural space (an abandoned prison) and the body as "wet volumes" and interprets feelings such as happiness, service, shame, passion, desire, fear, and human reaction towards these feelings. *Machine Body* focuses on the relationship between body and machine, taking

place in the former Ottoman time power plant converted into a Museum of Energy. This study aims to investigate the structures of Tuna's choreographic works in terms of their particular relations with their location, how the site delivers meanings, how these meanings are interpreted, and how the body exposes these interpreted meanings in the concept of the performance.

*Keywords:* Site-specific performance, Istanbul, industrial heritage, bodily experience.

### **Site-Specific Performance Works of Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna: Examining Spatial Performativity through a Turkish Choreographer's Perspective**

This paper aims to introduce and examine the work of the Turkish artist Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna, who carries many titles, like contemporary dance artist, performer, movement lecturer, and choreographer. Her *Dance with Different Bodies* project, founded in 2000, focuses on individuals with different physical features and diversity and transforms the body's mental, sentimental, and biodynamic structure. She has used and applied the therapeutic effect of dance and movement, kinaesthetic intelligence, and awareness studies in national and international platforms and different age and social class groups since 2010.

Within the scope of the research, her site-specific works (that she has been producing in the last 15 years) will be mainly under examination. The aim is to investigate the structures of choreographic works in terms of their particular relations with their location, how the site delivers meanings, how these meanings are interpreted, and how the body exposes these interpreted meanings in the concept of the performance. The works mentioned above, realized in Istanbul, will be analysed and discussed systematically to highlight how the phenomenology of place is materialized with the help of bodily performative works.

### **Delineating Performance**

The discussion on the term "performance" and "site-specific performance" as a particular type of performance can start by providing some broad accounts from key names in performance studies. To begin with the first cited reference, performance theorist Richard Schechner examines the concept of performance concerning four actions: doing, showing doing, and explaining "showing doing." Then, he defines performing as "showing doing," namely, pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing (Schnechner & Brady, 2013). He has searched the indications of such "showing doing" from social sciences to theatre studies, mainly focusing on Turner's model of "social drama."

Carlson (2018) states that "performance" is heavily indebted to terminology and theoretical strategies developed in the social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in anthropology and sociology. Goffman defines "performance" as all the activity of a given

participant on a given occasion, which influences any of the other participants in any way (Goffman, 2022). In this definition, influencing other participants is remarkable and recalls the performance's social and collective aspects. Gay McAuley (2010) asserts that for an activity to be regarded as a performance, it must involve the live presence of the performers and those witnessing it, that there must be some intentionality on the part of the performer or witness or both, and that these conditions, in turn, necessitate analysis of the place and temporality which enable both parties to be present to each other, as well as what can be described as the performance contract between them, whether explicit or implicit.

Richard Schechner introduces the term "environmental theatre" into the critical performance lexicon in the 1960s and 1970s as a way to designate stages that broke realism's "fourth wall," getting out of a proscenium stage format by placing spectators inside the action to interact with performers (Schechner, 1973). As such, performance progressively got out of its shelter, the cultural institution, and assumed the role of provoking critical questions about the meaning of art in our highly mediated daily lives.

### **Site-Specific Art**









Performance, taken in all terms, is contextual, and bodily art performance in space is by all means bound to the qualities of space. A particular type of performance, site-specific, has even a higher dependency on architectural or natural space. For Miriam Seidel (2003), there is a continuum starting with a performance staged in a nontheatrical venue, through work shaped by its setting, and ending with a performance that could not have happened elsewhere. The more site-specific a piece is, the greater its capacity to transform perceptions of the place. Hal Foster (2011) argues that place is fundamental to all this work, yet, as Rosalind Krauss considers site-specificity is not its end so much as its medium, or, more precisely, its medium is "the body-in-destination" in a particular site, and in this respect, the body remains as primary as place. Modernist sculpture broke with this logic in its abstract forms and found materials and its break with the pedestal. This was a dialectical event that opened sculpture to the possibilities of both modernist "sitelessness" and postmodernist site-specificity.

In its earliest formation, site-specific work focused on establishing an inextricable, inseparable relationship between the work and its site and demanded the viewer's physical presence for the work's completion. Richard Serra wrote that his 120-foot sculpture *Tilted Arc* was "commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be relocated" (Kwon, 1997, p.86). Nick Kaye (2013) asserts that site-specific art frequently works to trouble the opposition between the site and the work. He stresses that this troubling means that the site functions as a text perpetually in the process of being written and being read. The term "site-specific" originates in the visual arts and is

grounded in the minimalist art practices of the 1960s. Artists such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Beverly Pepper, Jo Baer, Dan Flavin, Mary Obering, Sol Lewitt, Eva Hesse, and Robert Morris reacted against the modernist tendencies of Abstract Expressionism to create art that centred on perception, the viewer with the art object. Political street theatre, environmental theatre, invisible theatre, ambulatory theatre, happenings, the early twentieth-century avant-garde, and popular festive traditions such as parades, carnivals, and processions are some of the myriad theatrical influences on site-specific practices (Ferdman, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*Some Works of Site-Specific Dance Artists*

			
<p>Trisha Brown, <i>Man Walking Down the Side of a Building</i>, apartment, New York, 1970</p>	<p>Marylee Hardenbergh, <i>Young Bridge</i>, Mississippi River, 2011</p>	<p>Heidi Duckler, <i>Out of Circulation</i>, Santa Monica Civic Library, 1993</p>	<p>Stephan Koplowitz, <i>KOKEREI-Projekt: Kokerei Zollverein</i> Factory, Essen, Germany, 1999</p>
			
<p>Body Cartography, <i>Togethering</i>, Oslo Public Space, 2019</p>	<p>Joanna Haigood - Zaccho Dance Theater, <i>Picture Red Hook</i>, <i>Grain Terminal</i>, NY, 2002</p>	<p>Tamar Rogoff, <i>In Deep</i>, Lincoln Center, NY, 1991</p>	<p>Amelia Rudolph - Project Bandaloop, Vertical Dance Company Golconda Fort, India</p>

## **Site-Specific Performance/Dance: Some Key Names & Works**

Performance can reformulate how we perceive and experience space and place. The specific nature of performance is the propensity for both “site” and “performance” boundaries to slip (Birch & Tompkins, 2012). For Nick Kaye (2013), this slippage is inherent to the form: “site-specificity arises precisely in uncertainties over the borders and limits of work and site”. In practice, “site-specificity” initially referred to artwork creatively tailored for a specific location (Ferdman, 2018). In works like these, the ingredients of one contemporary art form -movement and music, the outdoors, a profoundly involved audience, and a sense of altered experience- begin to approximate those of a traditional ritual event. Tamar Rogoff says: “My most intimate theatrical experiences happen in site work. The energy of so many people, the inherent spirituality of being under the sky.” (Seidel, 2003, p.22) In describing the effects of this transformation process, many artists speak of “activating” or “enlivening” places. Site-specific artistic approach can interpret and utilize underused, liminal spaces (vacant lots, polluted waterways) and urban ruins. Moreover, it can heighten one’s experience of structures and areas already charged with decades of historical use (Seidel, 2003).

Some pioneer artists/dancers are noteworthy for having chosen unfamiliar public spaces for their performances, which led them to take place in the literature of performance studies (Figure 1).

To summarise, the attributes of site-specific performance could be listed as:

- a performance that is staged in a non-theatrical venue, through work that is shaped by its setting, and ending with a performance that could not have happened anywhere else;
- experimented on by artists who take their work out of the theatres and lofts
- an “activation” of the site;
- able to change awareness of the place in which it happens;
- able to establish an engagement with the audience;
- drawn heavily on the principles of sensory awareness;
- an outgrowth of artists’ working process,
- built on improvisational movement “scores.”

## **Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna and her Artistic Identity**

Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna is a multi-talented artist, award-winning choreographer, contemporary dance and interdisciplinary performance artist, body reader, and academic. She has also been working as a dance and movement therapist in the field of transformative activism. She describes her central artistic understanding in this brief statement: “I believe in the uniqueness of the body within this relative concept called time. If there is a gap between creativity, life, and existence, my works are a transparent transition area.” (Tuna, 2023). She describes her site-specific work understanding as such:

The idea of producing site-specific work has had a profound effect on me. That space becomes the hidden subject or skeleton of the work I want to make. I spend time in places and decide which bodies I should invite here, that is, should I invite every dancer/actor friend I know, or which body can respond to the idea I want to realize/to the embodied idea I will do here? The question is whether the space can also accept that body as an extension of it. In site-specific work, site/space is the hidden subject but becomes the core subject. This is not to perform in the venue but to produce the work in the venue. It is an excellent opportunity to allow the space to change and transform production (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

She likes playing with definitions, distorting what she knows while making the definition. She prefers the idea of transforming a closed space within itself and that the stage can be changed differently than its usual structure.

### **Selected Site-Specific Performances by Tuna**

Most site-specific indoor or outdoor performances were primarily concerned with unconventional performance spaces, drawing particular attention to the physical qualities of the space and its social or historical connotations. Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna is known for exhibiting site-specific choreographies in her works and theatre festivals. Some of her conceptual and choreographic creations stand out as works realized in Istanbul for particular sites (Figure 2), such as:

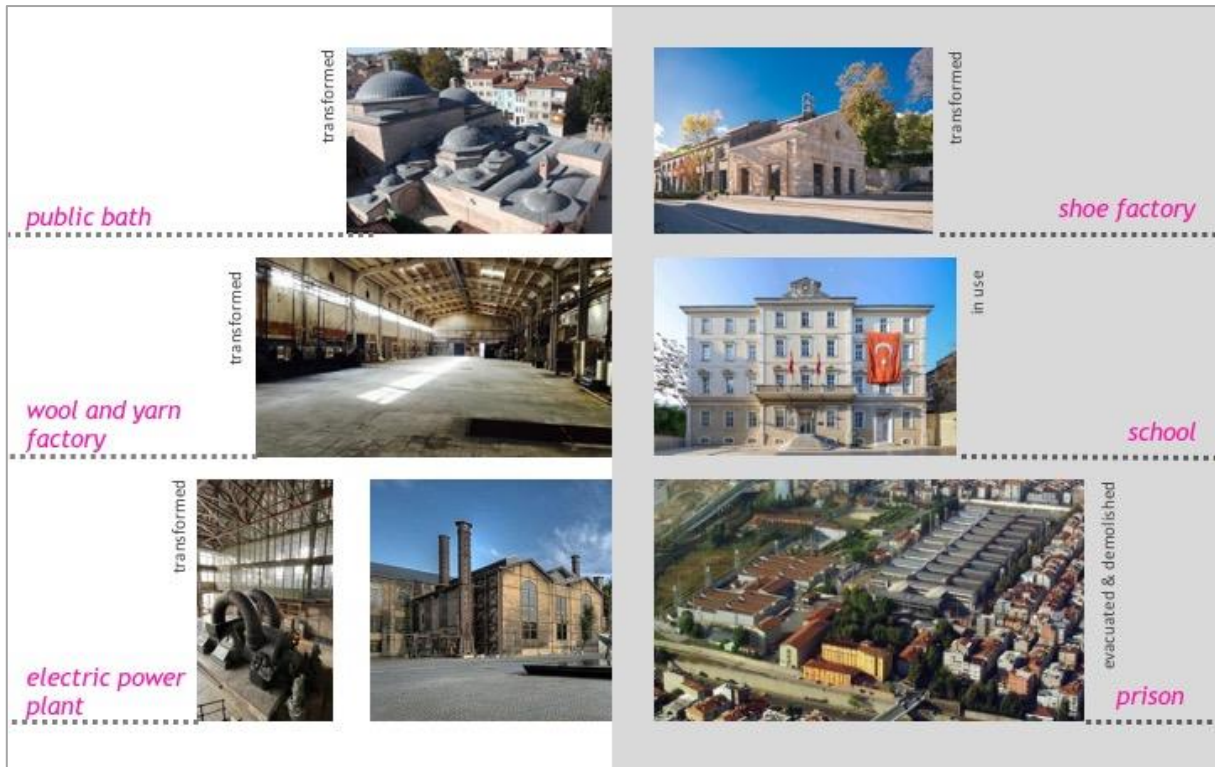
- *Machine Body*, in the Energy Museum Santralistanbul (former electric power plant), 2008-2009;
- *Wet Volume*, in Bayrampaşa prison, 2010;
- *Displacement*, in former Hasköy Wool-yarn Factory, 2012;
- *Show of Strength*, in St. Pulchérie French School, 2014-2019;
- *Body Drops*, in a former public bath (Küçük Mustafa Paşa bath), 2017;
- *Revert*, in a former shoe factory (Istanbul Beykoz Kundura stage), 2022.

Tuna explains here how she places her artistic behaviour relating to the city of Istanbul:

It is also possible to stage a work you produce in different places, but it is specific to the place when you make a work specific to an area, then the central core is the place. I have witnessed the transformation and destruction of Istanbul over the last 20 years. That is why working in transformed and destroyed places, being in touch with the memory of that place once again, or carrying the memory of that place to the present through my body attracts me a lot (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

## Figure 2

*Tuna's Selected Site-Specific Performances with Their Particular Sites in Istanbul*



### ***Machine Body, The Energy Museum Santralistanbul, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2008-2009***

*Machine Body* was produced for the 16<sup>th</sup> International İstanbul Theatre Festival in 2008. The now Energy Museum of a private university was once an electric power plant. With the remnant vast machines of the plant, this industrial heritage space itself is impressive. Tuna was captivated by seeing how these machines brought the past with them. She felt as if she could hear the sound of the past and what was going on there from these machines. The things that are common to both the human body and machinery interest her very much. Tuna interprets the machines' vitality, bodies, systems, and energies by analogy to the human body. She describes this as: "Only time and energy are left alone among partitions of iron-skin, blood-engine oil, cable-artery, breath-area, hot-cold, cease-standby, corrosion-aging, and immobility-movement" (Tuna, 2023).

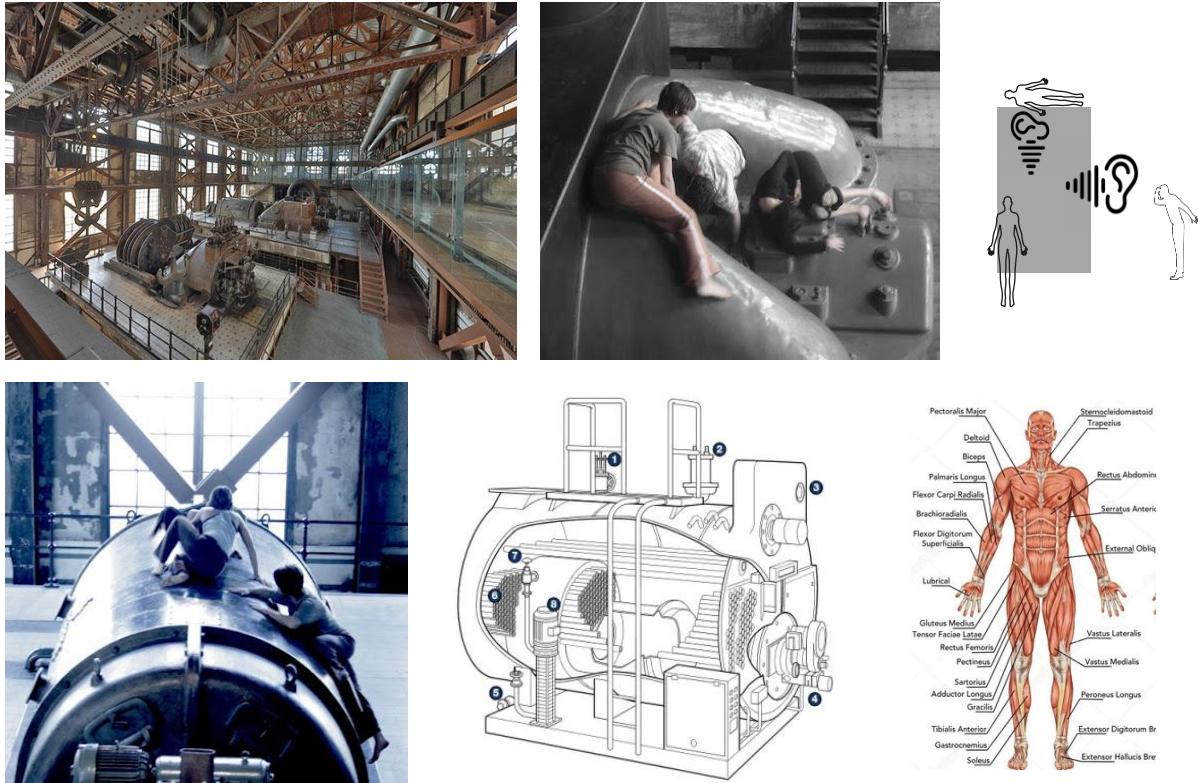
Some energy is left in the air, searching for the essence and joining with the body. Dancer bodies are seen intermingling with machine bodies. Spectators tour the museum, watching the simultaneous performances between the machines at different parts of the museum (Figure 3). This work displays the artist's state of listening to the spirit of the place (*genius loci*) and the past life of it.

The main conceptual aspects of this work are: questioning the machine-body relationship; hearing-sensing the body of the machine, which once produced energy; performing as an

interpenetration of machine-body and body-machine; playing on the dualities of skin-iron, blood-engine oil, artery-cable, hot-cold, aging-corrosion and movement-immobility.

### Figure 3

*The Energy Museum, Machines and Bodies in Performance*



### ***Wet Volume, Former Bayrampaşa Prison, 2010***

This work was produced for the 17th International İstanbul Theatre Festival in its venue, the former prison, Turkey's most significant at the time. Tuna narrates how she decided to use this place:

It is closed now; I remember it from the resuscitation operation I watched on TV. It was a place where police and special teams landed from helicopters, and firebombs were thrown inside. Then I remember seeing their roofs on a city flight from Ataturk airport; I was very impressed and kept it in my mind for a long time. In 2010, I received permission to work there as part of the Theatre Festival. (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

She created a choreography in which dancers made several performances at several parts of the prison (courtyard, rehabilitation hall stage, corridors, refectory), and the audience was taken from one point to another, where an episode with a physical expression followed each place (Figure 4).

Tuna undertook the architectural space and the body as “wet volumes”. Tuna explains the occurrence of this concept as such:

While searching for places to use, I noticed the walls were full of holes. I asked myself: “How could there be so many holes simultaneously?” There were crime files on the floor, photographs, documents of prisoners, and personal belongings all around, and suddenly, it started raining, and water started flowing from the ceiling above because of the holes. Then I realized I wanted it to rain on the audience while they were watching. I wanted them to experience that water can spill out of all the holes and that it can rain through the building, because the ceiling was improper and the wall was inadequate. (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023)

#### Figure 4

*Wet Volume Performed in a Former Prison*



Tuna had prepared to create an artificial rain by pouring water from above, but it rained on the performance day, so this effect happened naturally. The concept of wetness opens up both the wetness found in ruins (damp, mould) and the water found in the body. The artist searches gloomy traces of past life in the abandoned and dilapidated prison. She investigates the relations between crime and the individual and questions pain, guilt, fear, evil, innocence, shame, memories, dreams, traces, and purification. She interprets feelings of happiness, shame, passion, and fear, along with human reactions towards these feelings.

She evaluates this work as psychologically very tiring, because it took place in the burned cells of Turkey's previously largest prison through the old prisoners' belongings. The performers lit great hellfires, burnt the doors, and made videos they used in their performances,

all happening right in the heart of all the gloomy traces of the past. For Tuna, it was incomprehensible that the state would drop firebombs to deal with the events there.

The choreography is set up so the audience enters through fire and smoke. They then sit at the wards and watch the performance, which takes place in the courtyards. From there, they proceed to the second ward, the refectory, the ventilation halls, and then finally to the so-called stage, watching stories and solo performances within each of them. Tuna continues to explain the notion and deeper meaning of the place to her:

Bayrampaşa was one of the places that challenged me the most. Because we were also seeing what was “not good” there, what crime was. The impact of that place stayed with me for years. It is impossible for anyone who enters there to come out better. Therefore, the idea of prison in philosophy or the state of imprisonment within the body and overlapping these concepts has challenged me the most (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

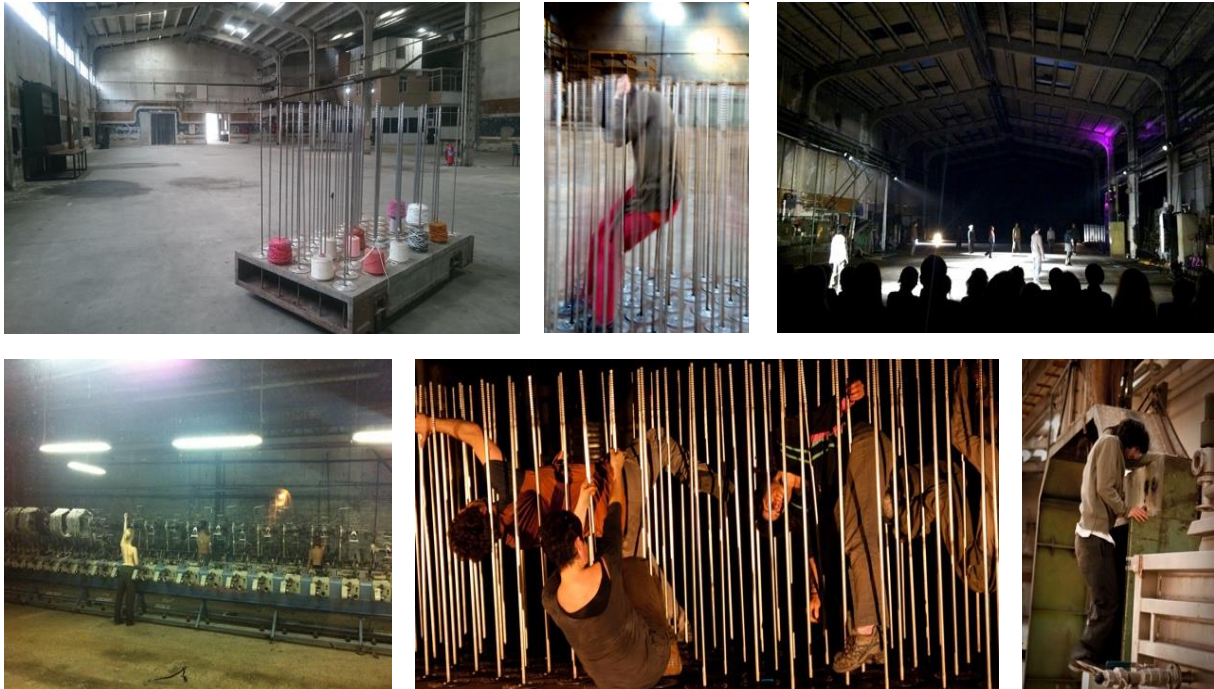
She defines this work as “an installation work based on the body-space relation, rather than a dance performance”, stating that the entire space and everyone established a live performance environment.

### ***Displacement, Old Hasköy Wool-Yarn Factory, 2012***

One of İstanbul’s idle industrial heritage, Hasköy Wool and Yarn Factory was founded by the Eluashvili family in 1952 and manufactured yarn for 65 years. In the conceptual stage, all the remaining materials of the factory, the threads, and spools drove Tuna to think of the phrase “life hangs/depends on a thread”. She then asked questions: What did we steal from life? What did you steal from someone else? She then manifested this into an analogy-play of the structures in the body called ligaments (thread-like structures) with the strings of the factory. She questioned what the thing is that pulls these strings, which conceptually relates to terms of stimulation, impulse, balance, displacement, bodily/mental ties, etc.

Embodying, choreographing, and expressing this conceptual theme, she prepared this performance using old factory equipment (yarn dyeing apparatus, production line machines, plastic curtain, yarn, etc.). She also created body installations that the audience sees while entering. She placed the bodies between the multi-armed wool machine, separating the wool from lint to lint. As the audience passes, they suddenly see 8-9 performers side by side. Performers also used the yarn dyeing apparatus as performing space, as if they were yarn to be winded (Figure 5).

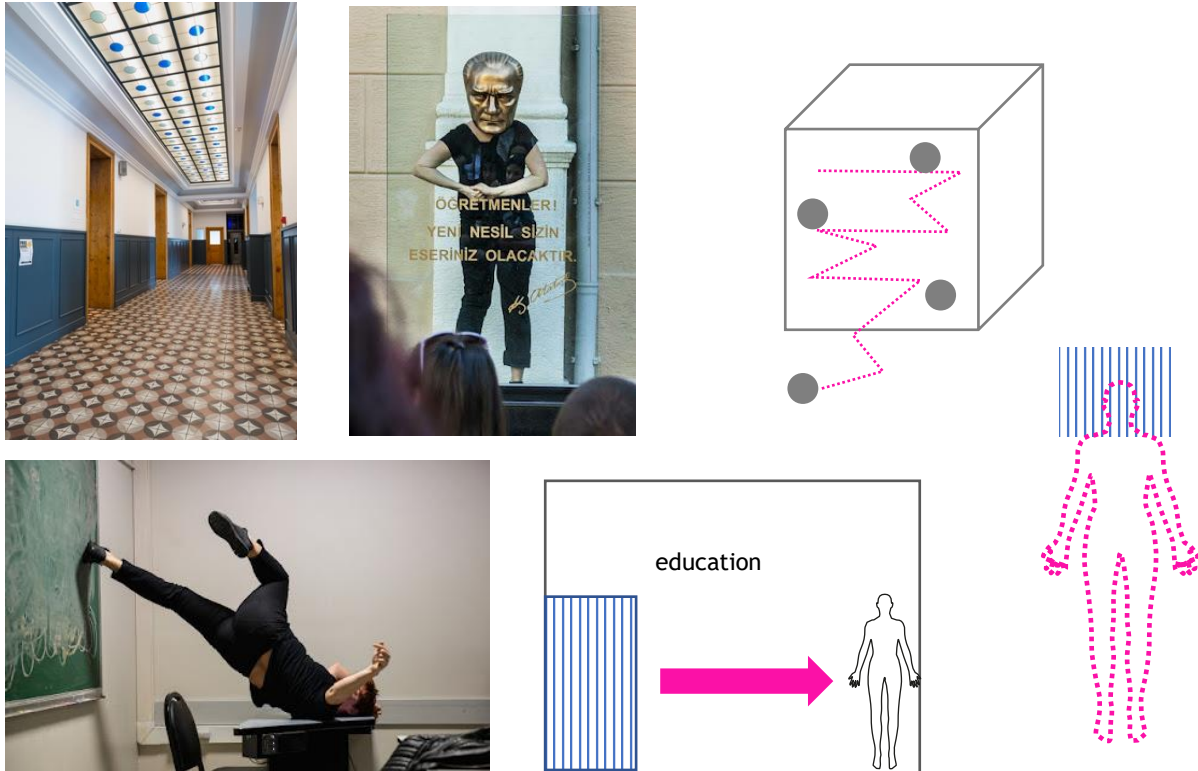
In this work, the artist dives into an abstract journey starting from the product of the old industrial facility.

**Figure 5***Old Wool-Yarn Factory and Displacement****Show of Strength, St. Pulchérie French School, 2014-2019***

In the 177-year-old Sainte Pulchérie French High School in Istanbul, this performance strongly criticised education and questioned what school should be. For Tuna, spaces are generally designed to win, control, and consume more. Thus, the body sleeps, forgets, and begins to give up on itself. School tames the mind and is where the seeds of blockages and fears are planted. Tuna narrates the state of youth, our school memories, and concepts of power as:

We are in a period where childhood and youth disappear like a grain of sand falling through your fingers. I wanted to get into black humour. I searched for the answers to the question, “What could I have learned in school to make me a happier individual?” My generation is a period where someone is always watching you, either Atatürk or God. I also aimed to revive people's childhood memories, teachers, etc. (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

The school was used as a maze in the performance, letting spectators tour the building like pupils. They passed through various parts of the school, watching performances, questioning teaching, symbols, the body, and symbolic objects. In order to shake and provoke the spectators, Tuna danced behind the bust of Atatürk, questioning the ever-accepted symbols like the heavy bust without a body. This is a critical performance and a bold attitude towards the individual's position under power (Figure 6).

**Figure 6***Show of Strength*

The term “show of strength” means people who advocate the same thing to come together, but in Turkey, that meaning has been lost; show of strength sounds like bravado. Concepts of power, heroism, and social teachings become meanings for a body to form a “show of strength”. Tuna explains the circumstances of the period as follows:

That period was right after the Gezi events<sup>1</sup> when we were troubled. We could not speak or write anything, so what signal could we send to the universe? Sounds do not disappear. I wanted them to be hung in the air. We left signals to the universe that were based on Morse code. Abandoned signals that threaten to say I am here; seek a place (Fatma Erkök, personal communication, 20.10.2023).

... --- ... (in Morse alphabet) SHOW OF STRENGTH means 'SOS' (Mimesis Portal, 2023).

<sup>1</sup> The Gezi Resistance started in Taksim, Istanbul on May 27, 2013 as a protest against the cutting down of trees in Gezi Park to rebuild the Artillery Barracks in its place, despite the decision of the Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation Board. The events later spread to many parts of Turkey with demands for justice, democracy and freedom. These protests, which lasted for nearly 20 days, are among the events that have left their mark on Turkey's recent history.

### ***Body Drops, Küçük Mustafa Paşa Public Bath, 2017***

This work was created for the 15<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennale in a former public bath (15<sup>th</sup> cent.), later restored and converted into a multifunctional activity space. The Biennale theme, “a good neighbour,” was reflected in Tuna’s choreographic intention to be a neighbour to the “other” body, to get out of the standard body we are in.

The bath was like another planet with a different reality for Tuna. Water droplets rose and fell to the ground; as such, the space allowed for dripping. Architecturally and historically, the bath takes place in an in-between area. Tuna coins this in-betweenness of the environment with the in-betweenness of vapor (between the ground and dome), and the concept occurs as “bodies dripping in space.”

*Body Drops* focused on kinaesthetic empathy, accumulations of the body, invisible losses of the body, and what the body leaves behind in mind and space. The artist brings together neighbouring bodies (she danced with physically disabled dancers, whom she calls “different bodies”) under the bath dome, creating a choreography inspired by the space’s architectural characteristics and the performance artists' star signs as choreographic routes. As an essential element in this space, the architectural space and the aura of the bath and water laid out the basis of her choreography (Figure 7).

#### **Figure 7**

*Body Drops, in the Former Public Bath with Different Bodies*



### ***Revert, İstanbul Beykoz Kundura Stage, 2022***

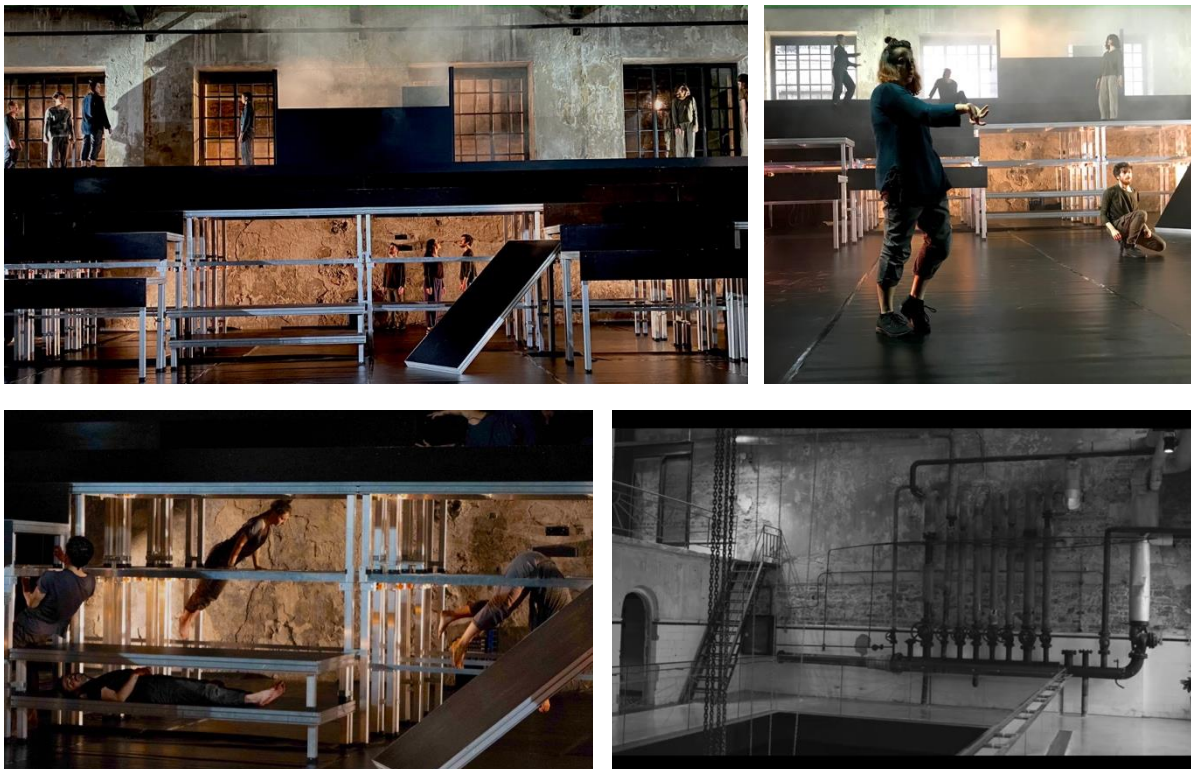
Beykoz Kundura, dating back to the early 1800s, is one of Turkey's most important industrial heritage. This area, where leather and paper factories were located during the Ottoman period, continued its activities as Sümerbank Leather and Shoe Factory after the Republic. The factory ceased production in 1999 and is now used as a performance and movie hall, exhibition hall, and film stage.

This performance was realized to inaugurate the interdisciplinary performance stage *Kundura* (meaning “shoe”). It was based on the word “revert,” which means “to get rid of the add-ons and to return to the initial structure, the primitive and the root.” Post-pandemic thoughts have led to returning the self to the primary state. With this implication, the artist questions primitiveness, intelligence, and the timelessness of the body, inspired by the fact that the human body maintains its validity throughout existence. In a holistic approach and through the body, this work examines the journey, the quests, and the thin bridge between the real and the surreal.

The hall used for “revert” with distinctive industrial and architectural identity still keeps its original industrial technical installations (for gas or water), stylish iron railings, and some apparatus from its past activity. To question/reverse the performer-audience placement in the performance, Tuna removed the tribune seating used in the converted factory space. As Tuna describes the work, *Revert* continues to work as a live mechanism”, the audience is treated as a piece of this mechanism. The work builds on the spirit of the place, touching and relating to the factory equipment (Figure 8).

### Figure 8

*Kundura Stage and Revert Performance*



## Conclusion

... as a choreographer, the architectural structure of the performance area, social identity and socio-cultural and political structure of the space, destruction of the invisible wall between the audience and the -stage- inspires me a lot... Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna (2023).

The artist is interested in everything related to the body: human beings, minds, memories, intuitions, reflexes, errors, others, bodies of others, embodied lives, and other spaces. She tries to melt, transform, and deepen boundaries starting from the body. She is eager to create site-specific works. She takes areas where she performs as areas where she wants to explore and discover and aims to make the invisible visible in space.

After examining the selected site-specific performances of Tuğçe Ulugün Tuna, some diverse uses of site-performance-body relations can be traced. Her ways of interpreting space and conceptualizing her work based on that interpretation can be grouped as follows:

- The “physical qualities” of the site/place are used such as: the giant old industrial machines in *Machine Body*; the yarn dyeing apparatus and production machines in *Displacement*; Bust of Atatürk, basketball field and classrooms of the school in *Show of Strength*; and the left material of the prison in *Wet Volumes*;
- Use of the “semiotic qualities” of the site/place such as: meaning of water in the public bath, in *Body Drops*; meaning of memory of place, crime, harm, innocence and individual relations, in *Wet Volumes*; invisible but felt energy of the old machines, in *Machine Body*; school as the place of power/taming of the body-mind, in *Show of Strength*;
- Using the “aura” of the site/place such as: the presence of water in the public bath, in *Body Drops*; space full of traces in the abandoned prison, sediments of lives, in *Wet Volumes*; sediments of production in the old power plant, in *Machine Body*;
- Questioning the “body itself” such as: returning to the origin of the body/existence, in *Revert*; questioning body-mind break by education, in *Show of Strength*; perspective towards otherness, in *Dance with Different Bodies*.

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