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Forest Silent Gathering – Begum Erciyas

Gathering in and through the sounds of the forest

Forest Silent Gathering is Begüm Erciyas' second performance in public space, after the successful *Letters from Attica*. This time, that space is not the busy city, but a quiet forest on the periphery. In the Kalmhoutse Heide, together with musicians Eric Desjeux and Matthias Meppelink, she brings a group of people together and lets them experience togetherness through an extremely simple but smart sound performance. It ends with a cozy tea party, although the aftertaste is, quite rightly, a bit bitter.

Collection is blown on the edge of the forest of the Kalmthoutse Heide. Performance artist Begüm Erciyas and her artistic team are waiting for us there. Everyone is offered an orange-black MP3 player, headphones and some anti-mosquito spray. We have to follow the arrows in the forest. At least one person would already be there.

I soon catch up with two other participants. We nod to each other an obligatory but sincere hello and continue our journey separately. In the clearing just next to a footpath, fifteen people eventually gather. Groups of people who clearly already know each other chat pleasantly. Others dive into their cell phones to cover up their discomfort. The forest is thus the setting for a typical scene in the theater foyer.

At the instruction of the woman who was waiting for us, we form a small, intimate circle. I could just grab the hand of my left or right neighbor. We start at her request. Together we press 'play', although in fairness it does require a number of attempts to do this effectively at the same time.

A voice speaks to us through the headphones in English: "We are a group of differences and similarities. Many in this group live in the city and came by public transport. One person came with a racing bicycle, one person has binoculars, ..." It is as if the voice wants to emphasize that we are both a group and individuals. Finally, we receive a final instruction: every minute a bell will sound, prompting each of us to take two or three steps back into the forest.

Our backward choreography starts off easy, although one takes bigger and/or more steps than the other. Minute by minute our irregular circle grows. The slow, synchronous movement resembles a ritual. Despite the headphones, all I hear is the swaying of the trees in the wind and the creaking of the ground as we take a few steps back. In the moments of stillness between our backward movements, it is peaceful, quiet. Nobody says anything. Some look at each other, others glance up or stare introspectively. Surprisingly, no one looks around.

Until the forest begins to hinder our movements. Just stepping back turns out to be quite a task. One has to swerve for a branch or an entire tree, the other has to watch out or stumble over an irregularity on the forest floor. Soon some of them turn and no longer walk backwards but forwards into the forest. Yet, after a few steps, everyone turns around again and looks towards the center of the circle. It's like we keep looking for each other. Literally then: can I still see the person in front of me?

After about 20 minutes the circle is so big that I can barely make out my left and right neighbours. Occasionally I see a contour or a movement of branches and leaves that is probably not caused by the wind. Other than that, I'm alone. This has a noticeable, but not entirely unexpected, effect. Where I previously paid attention to my fellow performers and the meta-situation – "Everyone is wearing walking shoes as recommended on the website" or "How do they know that only one person, myself, arrived by bike?" – I begin to observe my surroundings more and more: I see the ground with all its moss, leaves and pine cones. I notice the small budding trees and wonder if they will grow into mastodons overlooking the forest. I hear birds chirping, leaves rustling, branches cracking.

However, that initial effect fades almost as quickly as it appeared. I catch myself asking why I keep taking steps and not sitting down. No one would notice. When one of my neighbors appears again, as if out of nowhere, in my field of vision, he too seems to be suffering from a lack of attention. He strums something on his phone. Yet he and I dive a little deeper into the forest at the next call.

Forest Silent Gathering clearly plays with the basic conventions of the theatre. The simple design regularly makes you aware of the theatrical *suspension of disbelief* that is necessary for the success of any performance. It is a clear continuation of Erciyas' previous work, including *Pillow Talk* (2019). In that performance, the audience engaged in a one-on-one conversation with an artificial female voice from a pillow. In

this way, the artist thoughtfully highlighted the almost unlimited capacity of an audience to surrender to a story, even if that story is very easy to pierce.

At the same time, Forest Silent Gathering sheds light on the expectations that theater installs, namely that something can happen at any moment. That is why, despite growing doubts, I keep on obediently moving backwards and listening, if only because I don't want to miss the opportunity for something unexpected. Moreover, I feel the invisible hand of a shared setting. I, but also my neighbor, don't want to ruin it for the others, even if we are as free as a bird to give up and walk away. *Forest Silent Gathering* is in that sense a real co-performance. We, my neighbor and I, but also everything else, are the subject, the support. Without us, no performance. Our commitment to this simple yet shared approach is vital. Yet there is also a risk in this simplicity: monotony lurks around every tree.

Just as I'm about to lose my engagement and *outzone*, I hear something softly in my headphones. It's the first time I actually hear anything – or so I think – apart from the bell that makes us move backwards. It is a white noise, which first swells until it completely drowns out the surrounding sounds, and then decreases again until the forest once again takes over the soundtrack of this performance.

It is a curious fact, the soundtrack of *Forest Silent Gathering*. You may have headphones on all the time, but you mostly only hear the sounds of the forest. A few times I even took my headphones off or pushed them a little harder against my ears to check if I really only heard the forest. Still, the audio plays a crucial role. But where in previous work the focus of the audio was on the voice and the speaking of the audience, the audio in *Forest Silent Gathering* has rather a simple signal function. It directs the group and increases the distance between its members. But there are not only differences. As in Erciyas' previous creations, the soundtrack is not just by the artists involved. The participants and the forest in which they move feed and form the soundtrack. Like the choreography created by the participants' self-chosen movements, it gives rise to reflection on what audio is and can be, and how this relates to authorship.

A notable exception to the combination of coincidences as a soundtrack is the moment halfway through the performance when it starts to rain. Luckily for us, it only rains in the headphones. Still, the sound leads to a very sensory experience for me. Is it really raining now? Reflexively I extend the palm of my hand and check if I feel any drops. Several times I fear that drops will fall on my head and nose. It is somewhat reminiscent of synesthesia, the neurological phenomenon in which a sensory perception inadvertently evokes one or more other sensory impressions. And it's not just rain: thunder and lightning make for a full-blown storm. The latter had less of an effect on me, which may have been due to the sunny weather that day. I heard from another participant that the storm made her feel anxious. She immediately looked around to make sure no danger lurked and where her partner was.

After about an hour our meeting is over. I look around in a daze, realizing that it's over when the bell stops ringing for a while and the soundtrack on the MP3 player returns to zero. I decide to head towards the starting point, a decision that I share with the other participants, because soon I see my neighbors in the circle appear from the

forest. But where to? A large, round light catches the eye. Is it the moon? Yet I almost instinctively walk towards it. It turns out to be a lamp on a high tripod that guides us.

Little by little, one by one, we come back together to the place where it all started. We are offered a cup of tea to warm ourselves up on this cool April evening. Soon everyone starts sharing their impressions. That is quite striking: everyone talks to everyone, a big difference with the initial situation, in which we still seemed to adhere to the unwritten rules of the theater foyer.

Forest Silent Gathering, like Erciyas' previous creation *Letters from Attica* (2020) – in which participants pass on pieces of text from revolutionary Sam's letters word-of-mouth via an elongated, shared but also isolated chain – explores the field of tension between isolation and community. It results in a simultaneous feeling of loneliness and togetherness. You may be alone in the forest most of the time, but you share that low-contact experience with others. It quickly takes you back to the coronalockdowns, in which both this performance and *Letters from Attica* originated. The compulsory joint isolation, while keeping a specific goal in mind, strikingly reflects the reality of the past corona period.

This co-performance, which was part of the CARTA 22 festival in De Singel, is as smart as it is simple. Erciyas plays with and pushes the boundaries (of the laws) of theatre, performance and sound art and makes us think about what it means to come together. What makes coming together possible? With that intent, this work is entirely in line with the approach of the festival, which wants to use the power of the inexplicable and mysterious to explore the boundaries of disciplines and thus tell interesting stories about our society.

The 'end result' is certainly thought-provoking. Yet the word 'end result' is less or even irrelevant here. Depending on the specific forest environment and the involvement of the participants, the outcome will take on different shapes. It can also fail just as well: someone should stop stepping back.

Perhaps that is the most important point *Forest Silent Gathering* makes: without everyone's individual decision to believe in a collective story, the possibility for togetherness and shared commitment is lost. How will we survive if we do not value the – incidentally extremely real, yet often presented as fictitious – story that our planet is doomed without our care and responsibility? The conscientious concern that we held so highly at the height of the pandemic, just like corona itself, seems to belong to a distant past. Or how the tea suddenly takes on a somewhat bitter, but justified, aftertaste at the hopeful (because cohesive) ending.

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