

Audience? Surprise them once in a while.

“Pillow Talk” by the Turkish artist and produced by Platform 0090, is offering the audience pillows, with which they can lie, hug and converse. The pillow asks you questions, reuses your words, sometimes, keeps quiet...

By Özlem Hemis (ozlemlhemis@gmail.com)

Dear reader, I had mentioned it earlier, the rise in performances for single audiences was a sign. The increased appearance of stages without performers is another sign in need of discussion. It's hard to approach choreographies without humans or works that make the human a part of an experiment in an experiential field, without hesitation. The relationships between the arts, science and technology are being constructed anew, and, the place of the actor and creator in the performing arts is being redefined; that's certain. Artists that make works that design the experience of the audience, that put focus on experience or that take “make them small surprises” proposal serious, are increasing.

Yes, these quests are not new, but this time it's different from the 60's when there was the hope of a community. The Turkish artist Begüm Erciyas, living in Belgium, is one of the creators in this new wave. It gives joy to see her new work “Pillow Talk” in such a respected festival as Kunstenfestivaldesarts' main program.

IT GOES LIKE THIS

You go to see a performance; you bought your ticket, you came to the door. The receptionists are welcoming you by asking the language that you prefer and putting you on a list. English and French are the options. Before entering the hall, you have to leave your coat, bag and phone. Then they ask you to take off your shoes, that's when you first time get an uncanny sensation. You figure out that you will not be entering the hall with the others. Enough time is left between people entering the room, so that they can find their place. The receptionists tell you to go towards the light, and then lie down. When you go inside you think you are alone on a wide plane, once again that uncanny feeling... The space is a particular design. Under your feet, the floor is soft. Everywhere is covered with that soft textile, but there are little hills here and there. You go to a cold light in cold blue, you lie down, putting your head onto the small hill and just before the conversation starts, you notice that you are not alone in the space. For example, you hear somebody in the “killing me softly” part of the pillow talk. And you also notice the people entering after you. Your pillow is a kind of Siri. It asks you questions, it uses your answers in its sentences, asks you to ask it questions, answers, keeps quiet, and is able to make you nervous sometimes by being silent for too long. It can make you feel that it doesn't like some of your answers. At some point, it asks you to take a nap. Towards the end, you sing “killing me softly” together, maybe with respect to famous choreographer Jerome Bel... Of course you don't need to do any of these, but you will miss then the experience.

Of course, when Jerome Bel is mentioned, you think of "Show Must Go On"'s Beckett reference and loneliness theme, and also Godard's film adaptation of Heidegger, the "human" emphasis in "Language is the house in which humans live". In this way the piece brings us to the ancestors of dramaturgy through indirect means. **Because language and the carrier of language, voice, are now the instruments of artificial intelligence. Precisely through this gap, "Pillow Talk" becomes unsettling.**

While in the piece, I remembered Spike Jonze's film "Her" (2013). In a future time, when humankind is lonely or avoiding risks, they will forget that their new loneliness toy is a toy. I thought how this very smart artificial intelligence will in fact strengthen our loneliness. Only when the piece ended, I saw that the program note is making reference to Dardenne Brothers' famous film "Rosetta". Rosetta's self-conversations that reference her loneliness and alienation, that repeat like some sort of mantra, and, Rosetta, who, strongly hugs her pillow and just before going to sleep, has a heart-wrenching single pillow talk, have been the core of the work. The ones who saw the film will remember the tough language. **Here, we are with a curious uncanny feeling that doesn't feel negative. It arises from being isolated in time and space. It is the result of being disconnected from daily realism and being alone with our own picture of reality and the voice coming from the pillow.**

I have to say, another source of inspiration for the work was Hugvie. You might have heard about Hugvie. It's a pillow to hug. Japanese invention. There is a pocket in the ear that can fit a cell phone. So you can hug it, while talking to a loved one. **Erciyas and her friends developed this idea with an interface that will talk to us, as if we would be dying out of loneliness. So, even if nobody calls, we have somebody to talk to. Exactly this feels a bit hurtful, even creepy. But it's good to know where we are going towards with full force, to face it early enough. I very much wish that "Pillow Talk" comes to Turkey, which cannot wake up from the illusion that social media is a socializing platform.**