

BIOGRAPHIES

Erdem Taşdelen is a Turkish-Canadian artist who lives and works in Toronto. His work has been shown at venues including Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga; AKA artist-run, Saskatoon (2020); Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (2019); VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine, Montreal (2018); Pera Museum, Istanbul (2017); Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg (2016). Taşdelen has been awarded the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize in Visual Arts by the Canada Council for the Arts (2016), the Charles Pachter Prize by the Hnatyshyn Foundation (2014), and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2019.

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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
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office@mercerunion.org | www.mercerunion.org

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Cover image: Erdem Taşdelen, *Untitled* (from *A Minaret for the General's Wife*), 2019. Framed inkjet print. Courtesy the artist.
Interior image: Erdem Taşdelen, *A Minaret for the General's Wife*, Study, 2020. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

VISIT US BY APPOINTMENT

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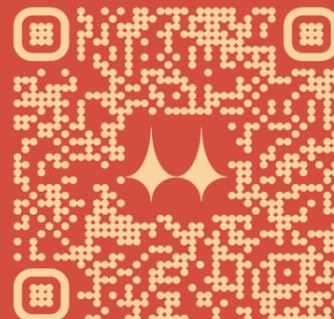
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SPACE: The BAU | *Functioning Circuits: Aunty Lucy's*

2 November 2020 – 10 January 2021

Mercer Union's SPACE billboard commission has invited The Black Artists Union (BAU) for its 2020-21 season. Their project, *Functioning Circuits*, gathers functionality in art through a series of advertisements made collaboratively with The BAU commissioned artists and businesses found within its communities. *Functioning Circuits: Aunty Lucy's* is the first billboard in the yearlong series.

Contextualizing their commission is an accompanying text, written by members Ekow Stone and Filmon Yohannes, that reflects on the future, the present and the past through a journal entry in which the personal thoughts and experiences of an archivist named *Yanira* bring us into dialogue with an elder. **Read the accompanying text at mercerunion.org**

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The BAU is an artist collective supporting the works of Black artists and creatives within the diaspora—aiming to be a place where Black art can exist in function with its community.

SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard located on the east façade of Mercer Union.

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Erdem Taşdelen: *A Minaret for the General's Wife*

Commissioned by Mercer Union and SAVAC, Toronto

21 November 2020 – 27 February 2021





Between stage and proposition

Storyteller, Seeker, Maker

Erdem Taşdelen is a storyteller. His artistic practice embraces playful narration through which associative threads and subjects are brought together to create a proposed, open-ended account for his audience to complete and interpret. Exploring both real and fictional characters, structures and psychological spaces that exceed the limits of society's expectations, his works unsettle the archetypes of the artist, the archivist, the translator and the critic. Such undertakings are carried out in his three-part sound installation *The Characters* (2017-20), a collection of humorous, disembodied narratives written by the artist to explore a future dystopia brought about by an untold series of political events. Exhibited in a bare, darkened room filled with speakers, the audience hears recorded performances by actors who exclusively portray the negative traits of stock personalities, borrowing the distinctive behaviors defined in the work of Theophrastus, the ancient Greek author who created the first set of character sketches in recorded history.

Taşdelen is a seeker. He looks to the absences in and fringes of historical, literary and personal narratives to reimagine archival materials, epistolary forms and performative storytelling. These inquiries collide in experiments of fact, fiction and art-making. Taşdelen transforms the installation space into a speculative force to reveal both vulnerable truths and non-truths. Its imaginative potential is palpable and the audience is often implicated in his theatrical settings. For instance, in *The Characters*, Taşdelen uses lighting to direct his audience's attention both to the individual voices and to one's own presence in the space, turning viewers into participants in his unreliable plot. He undoes our understanding of what is acceptable, unruly or trustworthy and how those in power define such boundaries.

Taşdelen is a maker of images, objects and texts. He meditates on records, archival materials, fictional sources, artworks, structures and historical figures. Artistic approaches to such subjects include writing fictional, semi-fictional and poetic texts that function sometimes as scripts, but sometimes as interventions.¹ He methodically reconstructs politically charged stories, such as in his multimedia installation *The Curtain Sweeps Down* (2017), a semi-fictional narrative which consists of paintings, photography, sound, text and an artist book. The work delves into the story

behind *Genç Kızlar*, an erotically charged work of Turkish literature published in 1950 by Nihal Yeğinobalı, a female translator who wrote under a male pseudonym. Inquiring into who has the privilege to speak and who has been censored throughout history, Taşdelen explores historical forms of resistance used to combat such discrimination. Along the way, he reconsiders the truth value of tales and images, examining the ways they work together to expose new realities and modes of looking.

Taşdelen places both the political and the performative centre stage, using fictive characters and myths to question the sociopolitical and economic implications of confession, censorship, migration and translation over time. Taşdelen—the artist and narrator—remains hyper-present in his works; by forging a dialogue between himself and his audience, he challenges Walter Benjamin's idea of the storyteller as one who has “become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant.”² In fact, the artist often relies on hearsay and myth in order to move closer to his audience. With a poetic insistence, he urges them to ruminate on their own desires, anxieties and behaviors, and to perform their own part within his constructed frameworks to imagine modes of existing out of place.

A Minaret and the Uncertain

At Mercer Union, Taşdelen presents a new commission, *A Minaret for the General's Wife*. Embodying the role of a historian, he begins by tracing an image of a free-standing Ottoman-style minaret from 1880 in the town of Kėdainiai, Lithuania. The artist learns that the minaret was built by Russian General Eduard Totleben, who successfully commanded the Bulgarian Army against the Ottoman Empire in the Russo-Turkish War before settling in present day Lithuania.³

Local myths suggest that the general built the structure—without the customary mosque at its base—as a grand gesture of love for his Turkish wife: a standalone trophy, its foundation decorated with souvenirs. Typically, a minaret is a marker of the Muslim community, used for the call to prayer. Without the mosque, the structure's function is eradicated and the minaret's use value is called into question. This strangeness is further highlighted on the façade of the minaret where two of the original marble plaques that contained Ottoman text were both later destroyed. A plaster replica of one of the plaques was made during the minaret's restoration in 2007, and the second one was replaced with particleboard.⁴ Rather than trying to verify this tale as a historian might, Taşdelen considers this minaret as a conduit for meditating on the cultural experience of being out of place. He remains curious as to why this story exists, asking himself: what happens when a place of worship is castrated of its intended use? What becomes of the myth of a site, the site itself and its visitors' experiences over time, even as it dilapidates? And simply: how do we use a thing that is not in use?

Within the exhibition space, the artist relies on unlikely combinations of new works installed on fabricated structures—video, objects, photographs and texts—that refuse to represent the unknowable. They allude to where one might look for visual and textual traces to construct some kind of truth. It is through gesturing to what is absent, that Taşdelen attempts to reconstruct the story. The video plays on a monitor and withholds actual footage of the minaret as a whole or shots of visitors, and instead captures the lush green setting and blue skies, with close-ups of slow-moving trees, bricks and cracks in the surrounding walls. His depiction is full of holes; the absence of a straightforward account and the setting become a part of the evidence that performs in the space. Manifested in the installation are a series of photographs from multiple sources—from online research and his visit to the Regional Museum in Kėdainiai—which build upon this semi-fictional tale. Scanned archival images capture both candid and staged photos of people at the minaret and in its surroundings, collapsing various temporal spaces: a stock image of the site in Turkey where the plaques were originally extracted before being brought to Lithuania; a photograph of what the members of the Kaunas Muslim Society may have looked like in the 1930s; a photographed portrait of a woman outfitted in traditional garb in a studio in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century; and a wistful image of a tree the artist took while on-site in Lithuania. Taşdelen further builds on this speculative space in the same way that the objects in the room function as performative props; from the trumpet to the replicated plaque, the components in their multiplicity are suspended in the exhibition and remain reconfigurable, marked with the potential to formulate a whole.

Extending the project further, the artist conceives various characters within this plot and writes texts in their voice, ranging from diaristic accounts to poetic experiments that span from the late nineteenth century to the present day. These fictitious characters as well as the fictionalized versions of real-life people include the general's son and his imaginary Turkish wife; the Kaunas Muslim Society; the artist and his real-life assistant in Lithuania; a local resident from the end of the nineteenth century; and a visitor to the exhibition. By utilizing multiple languages—English, Lithuanian and Turkish—the texts function more like scripts, as Taşdelen questions both the complex role of language and the ambiguous terrain of translation. He impresses upon the viewer what Nadia Bou Ali suggests in a conversation with Walid Sadek: “The work of language in translation is ultimately a political act. It wrestles with the notion of the singularity of the event and it brings us back to the issue of presence and absence.”⁵ What is lost or gained when one language is prioritized over others? What value or destructiveness, intentional or unintentional, can come from mistranslations? And what are the potentials of the untranslatable? Pursuing his own inventive logic, the artist institutes the imaginary; he pieces together, fabricates and reinvents these records as living materials meant to be wrestled with.

Taşdelen performs the role of archivist, simultaneously expressing the impossibility of piecing this partly imagined archive together, while also unfolding the many narratives it holds. His clever efforts echo Michelle Caswell and Anne J. Gilliland's proposition on how archival imaginaries may work when an archive's contents are missing or unattainable: “The records as imagined or anticipated can inspire all sorts of narratives, suppositions, aspirations, longings, fears and distrust...”⁶ Taşdelen's undertaking conveys the constraints of records as evidence, complicating the notion of a speculative archive as a container of meanings. For him, the archive still holds promise because it allows him to continue to unfold the story; it exists as a repository of content to be examined. And the solution to getting closer to the information does not lie in unveiling the truth of these records. In fact, it lies in creative ways of reading the elisions and symbolic transformations that occur through the minaret's uncanny structure, devoid of its intended purpose. The exhibition further complicates the connections between record and event, affect and effect. It grants the audience space to assemble these fragments into a comprehensible narrative that can be rewritten as the pieces are reshuffled. By reimagining the textual, sculptural and archival contents, Taşdelen interrogates the power and knowledge that objects contain through the systems to which they are bound. This type of inquisition affirms Achille Mbembe's statement: “The final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside of its materiality, in the story that makes it possible.”⁷ It leads the audience to reconsider what is at stake in physically retrieving these materials from archives, and who is left accountable to piece it together.

Specters

The connection between seeing and knowing in *A Minaret for the General's Wife* is complex—the narrative elements are punctured and malleable. The artist questions how memory can blur the lines between historical events and personal narratives, negotiating relations between reality and constructed truths. A haunting sensibility exists within the installation which is highlighted by the bodies that are not present.⁸ For Avery Gordon, a haunting registers loss and allows for oppressive systems of power to reveal themselves and their impact on everyday lives. It is an animated possession in which buried social violence is resurrected.⁹ Accordingly, hauntings raise specters such as the archive and the castrated minaret—a phantasmic structure, that points to the partially traceable histories, people, places and ideas which we continually seek with the knowledge that they can never be fully represented or accessed.

The artist's familiarity with the minaret's purpose for worship dissolves and the initially invisible realities soon rise to the surface.¹⁰ It forces an experience of what Mbembe calls a “difference between co-ownership of dead time (the past) and living time, that is, the immediate present,”¹¹ reassembling traces of the past rather than destroying them. The installation appears as it is in progress, a vacant rehearsal space that is being reconfigured even when no one is there. At the same time, it posits that performance is always a process requiring people, objects and institutions, even when it takes place in the briefest of moments before it is gathered up and dispersed in evanescence. In leaving space for absence and the unknowable, the exhibition regards itself as an event; it functions as a placeholder for something

to happen. The audience holds the agency to activate this theater by rehearsing its scripts and engaging with its props and archive firsthand. Taşdelen insists that the only way the story can be told is if it comes from multiple points of view, without an authorial narrator and through an open-ended unfolding of research in which facts are treated as processes.

Within Taşdelen's installations, voices and temporalities break with fixed concepts and subvert determinate narratives. He records and unearths photographs and experimental moving image works, and creates enigmatic, uncanny props meant to consider their uses and values. Taşdelen's practice often investigates multiple time periods at once to expose systemic violence and individual resilience. Reflections on political resistance, desire, ways of being and the queering of mainstream narratives all manifest in uncommon ways. At the same time, the artist actively transforms audience members into knowledgeable actors within the installation, playfully demonstrating that the audience has always been an unassuming actor in the work. The stories of all involved are thusly intertwined. The indeterminateness of the space echoes Taşdelen's tale as it unfolds, affecting multiple meanings rather than describing or denoting a singular myth.

Instability and inconclusivity emphasize the activation of new conceptual structures that allow an audience to make meaning. By reexamining an unconventional minaret in his role as storyteller, seeker and a maker, Taşdelen activates a notion of home and complicates the out-of-placeness that is full of potential. At Mercer Union, the fictive and the uncertain provide space for the ghostly to manifest as tactile experience. These are conjured through the missing, the remaining traces and that which has been lost in translation. The stationary idea of home is sent out to migrate and transcend both physical and temporal borders, making room for participation. At the same time, this phenomenon unfolds a new understanding of structures and their narratives: it reveals the potential to relieve the burden that these stories bear by materializing possibilities that refuse categorization.

— *Suzu Halajian*

- ¹ A more personal investigation includes *Dear* (2010), a series of anonymous, self-reflexive letters pinned directly to the exhibition's wall. Anxiously written by the artist to himself, these private meditations are full of his own notes and mark-ups.
- ² Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Schocken Books, 1968), 83.
- ³ At the time of war this land was still part of the Russian Empire.
- ⁴ There was also a third smaller plaque with text from the Qur'an to the right of the others. A replica of this plaque is currently there.
- ⁵ Nadia Bou Ali, “On Survivors, Translation and Their Next: A Conversation Between Walid Sadek and Nadia Bou Ali,” *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (June 2015): <https://artmargins.com/on-survivors-translation-and-their-next-a-conversation-between-walid-sadek-and-nadia-bou-ali/>.
- ⁶ Michelle Caswell and Anne J. Gilliland, “Records and their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 55.
- ⁷ Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits” in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michèle Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 21.
- ⁸ Given that this exhibition is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic after first being rescheduled, a ghostly experience of bodies in the form of an absent audience is ever more heightened, as a traditional exhibition viewing had to be drastically rethought in the space.
- ⁹ According to Avery F. Gordon, haunting also collapses a serialized understanding of time as a succession of evenly spaced intervals and prompts that something must be done different than before. See “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011).
- ¹⁰ Such an out-of-placeness echoes the Turkish artist's own relationship to his adopted home of Toronto, Canada. Erdem Taşdelen in discussion with the author, July 8, 2020.
- ¹¹ Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” 21.

Suzu Halajian is an independent curator and writer based in Los Angeles. Her work begins at the intersection of art and politics, treating image making as steeped in colonial pasts and modern surveillance states. She often curates collaboratively, most recently with Kunstverein (Amsterdam) and Human Resources (Los Angeles). She was granted a Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant with Anthony Carfello and Shoghig Halajian for the arts journal *Georgia*, and a Curatorial Research Fellowship from the Andy Warhol Foundation. Halajian is a doctorate student in the Film and Digital Media program at the University of California, Santa Cruz.