

Sharing the Same Table and Composting as a Form of Record-keeping

Between November 17th and December 31st of 2018, I participated in Sibel Horada's solo show [*An Internal Garden*](#) that took place at Depo in Istanbul. The piece that I made upon Sibel's invitation was titled [*An Operator with Measured Endeavors*](#), an installation in which cabbage leaves were circulating and drying on top of an oblong hole that is filled with silica gel. In the regular course of things, it's not very common for an artist to invite other artists to participate in their solo exhibition. However, Sibel was conceptualizing her whole exhibition around the metaphor of soil and was defining it as a web of relations. Thus, it was important for her to build relationships with other artists, academicians, visitors and other species under the framework of this exhibition. In the exhibition walk-throughs Sibel led quiet frequently, she was saying that my piece was already present in the soil of the exhibition and she wanted to make space for it to surface and that she had an archeological encounter with Cevdet Ereğ's piece. Within the exhibition, which revolved around a central compost mechanism and the idea of producing healthy soil, Sibel was establishing relationships with multiple layers of the soil; those that are buried deep under and those that are on the surface. Similar to the functioning of the soil, a lot of different actors took part in the making and sustenance of *An Internal Garden*: the curator Lara Fresko, the vermiculture consultant Hakan Türkkuşu, those who drank tea and coffee all day and accumulated their leftovers in the offices upstairs, those who brought cuttings from their own gardens, the grocer who brought his leftovers at the end of the day, Açık Gazete (Open Newspaper) team who donated their newspapers, curious participants of the compost workshops, carbon that was transferred from paper to soil, nitrogen that arrived through coffee grounds and of course the red compost worms (*eisenia fetida*) and all the bacteria and microorganisms that emerged out of all of these relationships...

Our conception of the artworks as absolute and permanent things is slowly changing since the end of 20th century. As the idea becomes a distant one, we come across materials that

are alive and hard to control, and with elements from nature in the field of art more often than ever. The fact that soil and compost are also showing up in exhibitions today can't be pondered of without considering the ecological conditions of our day. Climate change and the irreversibility of the damage humankind has done to nature in the anthropocene are undeniable facts and as a consequence of this new reality we're finding ourselves contemplating on soil and sustainability much more than ever.

Compost and its ingredients can be considered as the waste of a space, but could also be conceptualized as an organic record of the things that happen within the space. The amount of tea and coffee leftovers in an office can reflect the rhythm of a day, and the leftovers from the grocer can be a record of the day's revenue. The very first artwork in which I've encountered compost was also conceptualizing the act of it as record-keeping in a similar fashion, but in a completely different context. Rosella Biscotti's piece [*I dreamt that you changed into a cat...gatto...ha ha ha*](#) was shown as part of the main exhibition of the 55th Venice Biennial; *The Encyclopedic Palace*. Upon entering the space, at a first glance the piece consisted of minimal forms that did not reveal their materiality easily and an accompanying sound recording. However, the piece included a much more layered and long-term process than the forms portrayed. The forms which created a vague and abstract map within the space was made of the compost that was built from the organic waste produced / accumulated by the convicts at a women's prison; The Prison of Santa Stefano, at the Guidecca island in Venice. While working on this piece in 2013, Biscotti spent six months in this prison and she also established an 'oneiric laboratory' there. She has met all of the convicts and asked them to share their dreams with her and recorded these sessions. Within this prison, convicts spend most of their time working at the laundromat, garden, sewing workshop or cleaning for really low-wages. While the sound installation Biscotti composed was reflecting a segmented record of the institution, convicts' personal histories, dreams, realities and subconsciouses, the produced compost was keeping the record of the labor of the convicts, the time-spent in there and the prison's never-ending cycle.

Another piece that departs from the idea of producing soil is Claire Pentecost's [*soil-erg*](#), which was a commission for documenta 13. Within the scope of this project, Pentecost was offering soil; forms resembling gold bullions made out of compost as an alternative currency to petro-dollar. Like any other currency, *soil-erg* is also highly abstract, however its materiality requires a different context for its operation. Since it's heavy and fragile, it's not practical to circulate it and it can only function in relation to a specific location. Similar to Sibel, Pentecost was conceptualizing soil as a living system. She was also noting that production of healthy soil is only possible when site-specific information comes together with sustained labor. She defines this practice as a platform in which social and biological processes come together.

Another element Pentecost included in her installation *soil-erg* was a cabinet dating 1783 that belongs to the Ottoneum Museum where the installation was shown during documenta 13. The upper compartment of the cabinet held a vertical section of layers of natural stones from the Richelsdorfer Mountain. This section, which was excavated as part of the geological research conducted during the 18th century at Hessa, is currently the oldest geological finding in the state. The miners, who first started excavating the mountain with the hope of finding copper, later extracted this sequence and donated it to the museum for its preservation. Pentecost placed a copy of this cabinet right next to the original one, which references the history of extraction. A vermiculture structure was placed within the second one, in which compost worms greeted the visitors. During the 100 days that documenta 13 was open for viewing, the worms were fed with all the leftovers that were produced in the kitchens of the exhibition site, and they were producing soil. While the original cabinet was trying to preserve the record of our history of extracting, receiving and consuming from the earth, the second cabinet was displaying our efforts to mend the earth; functioning as a soil machine, forming a new and living record.

Even though all of the three pieces approach the soil and compost through different perspectives, they all share a common ground of emphasizing collectivism. In her publication [Notes from the Underground](#) that accompanied *soil-erg* Pentecost writes: “Soil is a persistent community structure. So am I. What we call the human body is composed of ten times more bacteria than human cells. They live on the skin, in the gut, in every orifice, and I don’t know where else. Many of these bacteria are “commensal” with us. When two species live in commensal association, one species benefits without harming the other. Commensal can also mean, “sharing a table” from the Latin *com* (together) + *mensa* (table).”¹ In our everyday life in urban environments, soil is probably the most distinct example for us of different species working and producing together and benefiting without harming one another. At a time in which our regular ways of production and consumption are expiring, this commensal relationship that is already present in our bodies comes into prominence.

During the course of *An Internal Garden*, Sibel choreographed a variety of processes within the space. The cuttings in the jars that were cuffed to the wall rooted, compost worms were regularly fed with the accumulated leftovers of the building and watered. The newspapers that were donated by Açık Radyo (Open Radio Station) next door were shredded and transformed into water-soluble planters with the help of the visitors who attended the exhibition walk-throughs and workshops. And on the last day of the exhibition, cuttings came together with the compost, were placed in the planters and distributed to the visitors. Even though the exhibition ended, its produce and the responsibility of sustaining it was transferred onto many other actors: to the newspaper planters that will provide the soil with carbon, to those who adopted the plants and the worms and to different types of roots that grow in water and soil... The idea of a process that started with the agency of a single artist being transferred to many other agencies and the exhibition’s emphasis on collective making, producing and sustaining bring me back

¹ Claire Pentecost, 2013, “Notes from Underground”, pg 12.

to these lines written by Laurie Palmer in her essay [*If I were you, I'd call me us*](#) back in 1996: "I imagine my body as a collective, my senses and thoughts not "my own", but ours. It relaxes me to imagine my eyes as pools of independent workers, communication with a brain that is a hive, with certain nests engaged with specific pieces of information...all this work not because they/we are told to do it, by a dominant patriarchal CEO brain, but because we/they want to, because they/we need and love to do it, it's our business..."²

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² A. Laurie Palmer, 1996, "If I were you, I'd call me us", pg. 1.