

# HYPERALLERGIC

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ART

## A Rebuilt Installation of Barbed Wire and Blurred Reality

Ari Akkermans | June 10, 2015



Hale Tenger, “We didn’t go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn’t go inside; we were always on the inside” (1995/2015) (all photos by John Berens)

There is a contemporary preoccupation that our culture — global, Western, ‘modern’ — will not survive. This crisis is not necessarily centered on specific issues, but on the condition that our issues seem to have no readily available solutions. Such simplification points to an almost tragic paradigm: there is no exit. In a new iteration of her installation “We didn’t go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn’t

go inside; we were always on the inside” (1995/2015), Turkish artist Hale Tenger attempts to open up a dialogue across 20 years about what it might mean to exit our contemporary situation. The title of the work draws on a line from the poem “Sera Hotel” by Turkish poet Edip Cansever, whose subject matter is very familiar to us now: the transformation of a big city, in this case Istanbul, under the weight of modernization and tourism, into a new urban space where we’re never at home but only in transit.

The installation consists of a guard booth placed inside a barbed-wire zone, without clear signs of whether entry is permitted. It is necessary to trespass, to violate a nonexistent ‘no entry’ sign. When the work was first executed in Istanbul, for the fourth Istanbul Biennial, Tenger found the derelict guard booth on-site and integrated it almost without intervention, giving the impression that the enclosure



Hale Tenger, "We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside" (1995/2015) (click to enlarge)

wasn't an exhibition area and blurring the viewer's sense of direction inside the space. At the time, it was perfectly consistent with the theme of the biennial: orientation. Today, exactly 20 years later, Tenger has re-created the work in New York City (presented by [Protocinema](#)), and the context has changed radically, with the depletion of urban space and the unmasking of globalization as a fantasy of capitalist realism.

Contemporary ideas of citizenship are not rooted in the dwelling in or creation of places, but merely in the consumption of space. This consumption is a chronic disorientation, a way of getting lost to the extent of not being able to distinguish between places. In this geographical dislocation the points of reference for getting lost/found are obliterated themselves, and with them the specificity of position; emplacement becomes relative. To bring to New York a site-specific work that did not exist for 20 years required Tenger to reconstruct not just a site but also its absence, the possibility that something about it wasn't real. The guard booth couldn't be reassembled, therefore it had to be staged — reproduced in Istanbul with similar architectural elements, folded and shipped to the exhibition site. Isn't it strange for an artwork to reappear in such a malleable way when it was meant to address our horizon of the real? But perhaps it is only now, in this torn-off context, that a reading can be completed.



Hale Tenger, "We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside" (1995/2015)

Inside the guard booth, the walls are covered with idyllic images from around the world that block the real view, of industrial sites in both Istanbul and New York, while a small pocket radio plays nostalgic Turkish songs. And not without reason: in 1994 the state monopoly on broadcasting, which had been in place since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923, ended. Yet 20 years later, despite the new constitutional provisions for

freedom of the press, Turkey battles with media censorship so strict it would have been unthinkable during the military dictatorship.

This alone highlights the degree to which our current economic realities are neither obvious nor unchangeable. At the same time that the border between inside/outside has apparently been lifted in favor of globalization, never before have so many people been uprooted yet trapped, including the nearly two million Syrian refugees stuck in bureaucratic limbo in Turkey, without anywhere to go.

The Westbeth building, where “We didn’t go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn’t go inside; we were always on the inside” is housed in New York City, is formerly a site of early technological innovation: Bell Laboratories (1868–1966). It then became one of the first examples of adaptation of industrial facilities for residential use in the United States. This is quite important today, as the housing crisis, endemic to our current city model everywhere, deeply affects New Yorkers and displaces many from creative centers, which are on their way to becoming ghost towns of franchised commerce and mega-wealth. The lack of orientation — alongside our apparent lack of imagination about the future, the ‘we’re stuck here’ situation — that the work wants to address couldn’t be more timely in the United States, where issues traditionally reserved for the image of the third world have taken center stage: race, police violence, housing shortages, internal displacement. The culture of crisis is not only an economic reality, as some argue, but a structural fault.



Hale Tenger, “We didn’t go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn’t go inside; we were always on the inside” (1995/2015) (click to enlarge)

In a number of works across these same 20 years, Hale Tenger has often adopted an ambiguous approach that we will call the possibility of uncertainty. While toying with the debris of very fragile national histories, often framed by institutional oblivion and denial (Turkification and the Armenian Genocide, military dictatorships, Kurdish massacres, mining accidents, the Gezi park protests, or the refugee question), the artist attempts to change the ways in which these events are recounted, in order to highlight their impact on the constitution of a strangely artificial political reality. While retaining a certain Kienholzesque instinct to assemble reality from its own materials, “We didn’t go

outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside" deploys this possible uncertainty upon close inspection. Inside the guard booth there lies an inner world of fields, waterfalls, idyllic bays, which ironically places access to the real horizon in a distant, far-away, almost imagined place. There seems to be neither an exit nor an entry here but a large crossing: we're lost at sea.

*Hale Tenger's "We didn't go outside; we were always on the outside/ We didn't go inside; we were always on the inside" is on view at Westbeth (55 Bethune Street, Basement, West Village, Manhattan) through June 13.*