THE STANDING MAN EFFECT

Pieter Verstraete

“Those Who Take A Stand Are Never Alone.”

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The phrase got quick currency in the Turkish urban vernacular, after the images of a man standing still for nearly eight hours on Taksim Square. On Monday, June 17, around 6pm, Taksim became the stage for Erdem Gündüz, a “performance-based artist” and a dancer from Izmir, who without prior notice or deliberation just decided to make a stand against the recent police crack-down on the protests at Taksim and the “Occupy” movement in Gezi Park. He was quickly dubbed duran adam, the Standing Man, although a more accurate translation from Turkish might be the “stopping” man.

Some people who spotted the silent vigilante on Monday acted as if they were talking to him when police passed to check. Within hours, other people started to join and a live stream was created right in front. I too followed the stream for hours until he suddenly disappeared. Police reportedly started to arrest the surrounding standing men, so Gündüz first moved more backwards and then to the left. He was also checked by police officers but after finding only biscuits and water in his rucksack, he was quickly released.

After his standing act, we have seen hundreds of pictures of people replicating this form of civil disobedience, including a young woman, Yonca S., who was the first one to step into Gündüz’s footsteps by standing near the spot in Ankara where the 26-year old Ethem Sarısülük got shot in the head. One remarkable detail: Yonca also used Twitter to her benefit, as her tweets caused Ethem’s brother Mustafa and his wife to join her in the morning. She held her stand nearly 30 hours.

We have also seen pictures of numerous variations of the Standing Man on different symbolic places all over Turkey. In Ankara, for instance, members from the university trade union stood near the hospital where Dilan Dursun (a student of Hacettepe University and a member of the student association, Öğrenci Kolektif) was treated after being hit by a gas canister. In Hatay near the Syrian border, a man stood next to a shrine for the 22-year old Abdullah Cömert who got shot by police during clashes. Some people added even new symbolism to their silent act. A noteworthy case is the man who stood in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Beşiktaş besides empty shoes, symbolizing how people were arrested for standing besides Gündüz in Taksim. After this, more people left their shoes for other standing people to step into.

People have been standing in shopping malls, in front of trees, embassies, newspaper agencies, sometimes holding hands, with Guy Fawkes masks, gas masks, taped mouths, simulated bruises, flags, plaques, pictures of the dead, shopping window mannequins, penguins (referring to the infamous documentary on CNN Türk during the first round of police violence). One more variation is the standing reading people, as reading books to the police has been part of the protests from very early on.

With his silent protest, Gündüz gave new impetus to the resistance and inspired many people for a new type of civil disobedience. It did not take long before the Standing Man became viral and led a widespread and cross-national vigil.
The “duran adam” became yet another hero and his image reached iconic status. His non-violent protest gave way to a very much-needed phase of reflection after Gezi Park and Taksim Square were retaken, emptied and occupied by the riot police. The authorities claimed that the “occupation” of Gezi Park had been crushed and that all protests have been successfully stopped. They, however, do not officially speak of the six deaths, the 7,822 injured with at least 59 in critical condition and 11 who lost their eyesight, reported by the Turkish Doctors Union (TTB).²

Gündüz made a quick statement after his performance act that he was standing for all those affected by the police violence, which were not noticed by the mainstream media. “People who have been resisting for the past 18-19 days around Turkey have not been understood. Therefore, my form of resistance, the stand I took, might have also not been understood. I stood in Taksim, which the media watched constantly so that I may be seen,” Gündüz clarified in a video interview with Turkish news agency Hürriyet.³

Despite the Standing Man of the first hour being noticed by the media and his image spreading like a meme all over the world, little has been written about the meaning of his non-violent action to the Gezi Park protests and the civil uprising in Turkey, particularly there where performance and the political arena meet. Now that some time has passed and standing has become a well-accepted practice of protest after Gezi Park has been closed off from the public, let’s try to read more prudently the different aspects of how the performative act of standing has written itself into the political and the social imagination, opening new windows towards acts of resistance, protest and mass communication where the government has currently closed doors.

### Political Meaning

On Tuesday, June 18, Interior Minister Muammer Gülertold reporters in Parliament that there would be no police intervention against the “standing man” protests as long as they do not threaten the public order or life in general. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç followed him in this view on Wednesday, confirming that “standing still” is a peaceful and legal way of protest, but he added a bit cynically that “…eight hours is too long and may harm their health. Let’s shorten it to, say, 8 minutes so that we can appreciate it.”⁴ It seems that the meaning of the symbolism as well as the duration of the silent protest have not left politicians unmoved.

If there is one thing that the simple gesture of standing does not do, it is letting itself be confined to a single interpretation. It is this underdetermination that sparked off a “flame” of inspiration again to the protestors, whereas it made the authorities doubt their own legal frameworks and definitions of what constitutes an illegal protest or a provocation. This openness and lack of a single meaning is a first aspect that should not be underestimated. Trying to capture the political meaning of the minimal gesture of standing silently and motionlessly in the current political context should not exhaust all possible readings. It is precisely the unexplained multi-interpretability of a single act that brought people together again after the chaos when Gezi Park was swept clean and all belief in freedom of speech and the right to protest in Turkey seemed to be briefly broken.
Symbolism through images is a potent form of communication that travels easily through our image-based media networks. In the fleeting moments of protest captured and distributed in a multitude of images as way to resist their removal from sight and memory by law enforcement or cyber police, new symbols of the resistance movement are continuously being born.

We have seen pictures of a young woman opening up her chest by raising her arms to the high-pressure beam of a water cannon, a woman in red whose hair got swept up by a nearby spray of teargas at Gezi Park, a naked man on a nightly walk in the busy shopping street of Istiklal, and so on. The naming and iconic representation of these images created small narratives of resistance in their own right. Some people invented even story lines to the pictures, which were then frequently shared on social media networks. There is, for instance, the dialogue that was posted on so many Facebook pages with pictures of the Standing Man:

**Police:** What are you doing here?
**Standing Man:** Standing.
**Police:** What for?
**Standing Man:** I am waiting for my friend.
**Police:** What is the name of your friend?
**Standing Man:** Ethem Sarısülük.

*(In another version, the Standing Man answers “friends” and names the four who died.)*

Koray Çalışkan tweeted on 18 June: “A new way to plank. The standing man with a solid gaze. The empty signifier of a square full with emotions in Istanbul.” Such little stories and tweets help to attribute meaning to the strong emotions and the traumas that have been accumulated during the police riots.

Within the greater narrative of resistance, Erdem Gündüz added his own story. He presented himself as a performance artist using a performance act as a tool for non-violent action. He seemed well aware of the media present on Taksim Square while he stationed there. His performance covered by the international and social media gained quickly political significance in Turkey that was previously struck by a general media blackout. It offered the unnamed and unrepresented “other 50%,” who did not vote for AKP, a tool for reciprocation and recognition. This happened right at the moment when the police retook Taksim Square and all protests were considered illegal. The symbolism of the time and place of Gündüz's performance are therefore crucial, as the square is commonly known as a national, historical symbol for the Republic of Turkey commemorating the war of liberation. It is a common place for protest, together with Istiklal Caddesi (the “Independence Avenue”).

The numerous reproductions and variations of the silent standing act by an unnamed multitude of individuals made the authorities nervous and more cautious. It reminds of the nameless rebel in 1989,
who walked right in front of a line of tanks to stand still on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The army was brought in to squelch the growing protest as students were denied their mourning of the late pro-democracy leader Hu Yaobang.

Fortunately, Turkish leaders have not called upon the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) yet, though Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç remarked in a televised interview that legally they could. This is, however, not a prospect that anyone really wants as Turkey has still a vivid memory of three highly repressive coups d’état and the latest, “postmodern” one in 1997, which lead to a massive demilitarisation campaign much to the credit of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling AK Party. And this is also the irony of a warning of military intervention, as the present government has done anything in the past to discredit the army for the previous coups d’état and keep them in their barracks.

Erdem Gündüz did not stand in front of a tank, yet the image of standing still and of holding your stance, against governmental repression and police violence, is a politically potent one in the face of possible arrest.

The posture was read by many as a gesture towards the majority of young people (the so-called millennium generation) who have previously shown that they feel no more fear of their leaders, their verbal intimidations and the incessant teargas-bombings by the riot police.

It was also read as a gesture that meant to calm down the police after Gezi Park was cleared and many riots took place in the neighbouring areas.

Gündüz chose to stand in front of the AKM, the Atatürk Culture Centre, a building whose future is also unclear in the whole urban transformation plan. The original protests at Gezi Park were about a prestigious building project that meant to drastically reshape – or in the protestor’s view, destroy – Gezi Park and Taksim Square, which included the tunnelling of the square and the reconstruction of an Ottoman military barracks (called “Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks”) on the park’s grounds of which the plans had continuously changed about whether it would contain a shopping mall, a mosque, residences, a museum or a public library. The AKM is also under threat to be demolished. But the urban transformation reaches much further than the Taksim area and encapsulates the whole district of Beyoğlu until Tarlabaşı, where the municipality has evicted hundreds of tenants.

Previously protestors had taken over the AKM building and placed on top a huge banner with the slogan Boyun eğme (“don’t bow down”), a communist party slogan from the TKP. The slogan was quickly understood as a broader message or pamphlet of encouragement towards the protestors occupying Gezi Park and in the 67 of 81 provinces all over Turkey. It was, therefore, no surprise that the police removed the banner together with all other flags on 11 June, one week before Erdem Gündüz’s unyielding protest, and replaced it with the effigy of the founding father of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Some people have attributed meaning to Gündüz’s positioning in front of the image of Atatürk that was supposed to reunite as well as to remind the Turkish citizens of an all-seeing authority. But Gündüz’s pensive looking upward to Atatürk’s dreamy gaze could be seen as either a gesture of questioning or reflecting upon the past, the present and the future of Turkey’s founding principles of secularism.
Journalists have read this often in the context of the anti-government protests as a response against the many religiously motivated and morally conservative policies, which the government has passed in the past few months. This is, however, one reading. Another reading is that he could be questioning the earlier claims that the protestors were predominantly Kemalist nationalists. Gündüz did a performance in 2004 where he was wearing a headscarf in his university context where female students were not allowed to wear headscarves. The headscarf ban has been now abolished, but by standing in front of Atatürk, he might be also asking attention for the current state of secularism in an increasingly repressive environment.

Voicing Resistance

Gündüz reveals some more of his thoughts to Hürriyet TV:

“I am of the opinion that our current system is dysfunctional; particularly after the Second World War, the imperialist and capitalist system has actually collapsed. I do not advocate communism, but ensuring equal rights, the right to live, freedom, and uncompromised justice is crucial. And I think, for that matter, the status quo must be altered.”

As such, his silent protest screams out loud against the growing autocratic power of the Prime Minister, who has been the greatest advocator of neo-liberalism and the building boom in Istanbul attributing to Turkey’s economic growth and AKP’s success in the last three national elections. Although protestors have chanted slogans continuously to make their voice univocally heard, they have not been heard by the main broadcasting media in Turkey nor the government. The Standing Man showed then how a silenced body could still speak against the repression.

‘Standing woman’ Yonca S. also describes the reasons for her action as a stand against the Prime Minister’s one-way of communicating:

“By standing, I felt that I was finally able to pay my respects to Ethem and his family. I felt that I could mourn and express my sorrow for all the people who were hurt, injured and dead during the three weeks of resistance. The government ordered us to ‘go home’. I was not going home, but standing here, continuing to resist. I felt like shouting out loud, ‘No sir, I am not going back home!’ and here I am ‘standing.’”

Previously in a TV speech, Erdoğan had called upon the mothers and fathers to take their children out of Gezi Park, because he could not guarantee their wellbeing anymore. As a response, a large group of mothers gathered at Gezi Park and formed a human chain, moving and shouting: “Abdullah Cömert (i.e. the first who died during the protests) is our child!” The voice of these mourning mothers was a signal that the civil uprising and disobedience was already “unstoppable,” no matter the verbal or physical violence by their leaders trying to restore order by creating division among the voices of the protestors. This gesture by the mothers at Gezi Park recalls the sitting actions of the Cumartesi Anneleri (the Saturday Mothers), who since 1995 have been gathering just hundred meters away, to demand information on their relatives and beloved ones who disappeared in the 1990s.
Gündüz did not shy away to give comment on the Prime Minister’s direct attempts at division, which was meant to separate the original ecological concerns from the growing urban resistance movement:

“We [the protestors] are neither enemies, nor combatants; we are the citizens of the same nation and we want our voices to be heard. We want several specific rights back. Every government comes to office by promising to protect our rights, but later this government turns into a dictatorship, and people die. If this system produces dictators, and gunfire on the street, the system must be flawed.” 14

This message has been central to the reasons and the demands of the Taksim Solidarity Platform, which comprises of 116 civil society groups, from the early beginnings of the Resist Gezi Park movement.

What no one could foresee was that the original ecological protests for the preservation of Gezi Park would grow so quickly into a spontaneous civil uprising fuelled by anti-government demonstrations. This has been largely fuelled by the growing discontent among a large group of predominantly young and high-educated citizens, who do not feel politically represented by the voices of their leaders. The provocative and threatening tone of the Prime Minister does not scare them away any longer. People are suddenly not afraid anymore to resist and the Standing Man is the latest expression of this. Part of the Standing Man effect was that this hitherto amorphous and apolitical group of citizens found a decisive medium in the non-violent act of standing to ask for attention from the authorities through social media and the international broadcasting media, showing their individual contributions to an urban movement that is growing from below. This diversified group of people represents a growing part of society that is exactly the offspring of the development towards democratization and the liberal-secularist climate of the last 11 years of AK Party Rule.

**An Urban Social “Movement”**

The immediate success of the Standing Man unchained a week of moderate serenity and reflection, when civil society groups and activists moved their protest actions away from Taksim and met up in other parks all over Istanbul, Ankara and other major Turkish cities to organize debates. The communication with the mahalles, the neighbourhoods, is a significant step for the urban middle classes and yields some hope for more democracy in the future on a local level. Whereas Gezi Park was said to be a master class in activism for many who had hitherto remained non-politicized and voiceless, the forums are a rehearsal for new forms of direct democracy.

Here, the people who previously engaged in the protests found a way to explore their resources, their “commons” in newly established organisational structures of working together without a leader or authority.

The Standing Man gave further legitimacy to these forums as new forms of self-organization and a clamour for the democratic right of assembly. Both carried on the central battle cry “ Everywhere Taksim, everywhere resistance.” Like the Standing Man, the use of the body in the absence of speech became a significant tool of communication during the forums. By making noiseless gestures with
the arms and hands, crowds of people sitting in circles around a speaker communicate simple communicative gestures such as approval (raising arms and waving hands), disagreement (crossing arms) and agitation (rolling arms) towards the speaker.

Moreover, the strength of the Standing Man, which speaks to the immediate social imagination, is that he is interchangeable. Everybody could be a standing man, woman or person. The imitability of the gesture is a way of “communing” the resistance as a reminder that the protest is predominantly an urban social movement on initiative by citizens demanding and reclaiming their civil rights. By means of a non-violent gesture, the standing people struggle against a majoritarianism (the idea that democracy and the state are only serving the benefits of an electoral majority) that has become increasingly “authoritarian” in silencing every dissident voice.

Erdem Gündüz welcomed others in his action from the beginning by diminishing himself: “I am just an ordinary citizen. It does not matter if I, my friend, or someone else goes out there tomorrow. The name of the protestors is trivial. Maybe the situation will finally be peacefully understood. After all, everything else has been tried.”15 Like the forums, the standing protests are open to everyone, which strengthens democratization from below. The only risk that this action yields on a legal basis is that if more people make a stand together, they can be seen as a group, which can trigger police intervention on the basis of “provocation.” That is why in his initial action, Gündüz backed away when too many people gathered around him.

Question is how non-action or non-movement can still be legally defined as an illegal act or provocation. Some common argument from the police is that standing protestors occupy space, which can hinder traffic. Indeed, the act of not moving from a particular place is meant to reclaim public space and with that, the democratic right to use it, to exist in it.

Hence, the meaning of the standing protest balances between what the authorities interpret as tolerated behaviour and the manifold interpretations of what is “common” and “public” by citizens.

The reclaiming of urban space is a significant component of the budding social movement that originally started as a reclaiming of Gezi Park as contested space against the government’s repurposing of it. The standing as a gesture of reclaiming public space also includes the right to make space for collective memory, for mourning and for history to be acknowledged and commemorated.

The time aspect of the standing protest is, therefore, also not insignificant, in the here and now, standing the test of time.

With regard to the reclaiming of space and time, protestors have also been standing at symbolic places from further in the past. There were people standing where Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was shot dead in 2007, which made him into a legend and a symbol for human rights as well as for the resistance against intolerance and racism. People stood also in front of a hotel in the Anatolian city of Sivas, where 37 people mostly from the Alevi community were burnt to death on July 2, 1993 during Islamist protests. The latter was said to be targeted against a satirical writer and translator of Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, Aziz Nesin, who escaped but died soon after. Both historical events have great symbolic importance and people have incessantly asked accountability from the government to acknowledge the injustices and corruptions during the legal processes that failed to prosecute those who were responsible. Standing still near those monumental places deepens the collective memory and history of social movements in Turkey.
**Taksim, a World Media Platform**

A final, most relevant aspect to the success of the Standing Man and its political significance is the use of social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, as spaces for instant communication and opinion shared with considerably large audiences. The live stream that showed a part of Erdem Gündüz’s enduring act went immediately viral because of never-ending tweets for hours. The space of Taksim became a media platform that sent the images of the standing man to every corner of the world. No wonder the Prime Minister has publicly criticized social media like Twitter as “the worst menace to society,” and the government is currently looking into ways to limit social networks in Turkey, for instance by proposing an interlocutor system.

Besides the virtual space, the virtual time aspect is not irrelevant either. Gündüz’s “stopping” and “standing still” act was meant to remove himself from time, both locally and historically: to stop the clock, so to speak, and to stand still with the dead, the injured and the past events. Through social media, the live event of the Standing Man as much as any other protests in the streets of Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Antakya, etc. receives another kind of life in the digital world. Moreover, video sites and blogs give a digital afterlife to live events by documenting them, keeping them alive in a collective memory.

The importance of the social networks was summarized in a slogan at the start of the Occupy Gezi movement, which circled around as graffiti, avatars and T-shirts: “Revolution would not be televised. It will be tweeted.” It refers to a title of a poem and a song by Gill Scott-Heron in the beginning of the 1970s but it criticizes the fact that none of the initial protests and clashes with the police were shown on the Turkish television due to a total media blackout. This stood in contrast to the televised speeches of the Prime Minister, verbally intimidating the protestors, calling them “looters” (capulcu, now even with the English neologism in the urban dictionary, “chappulers” referring to those who stand up for their rights).

The realm of social networks created a world stage to which one can easily tune into by means of laptops, tablets and smartphones. Already since the Arab Spring, we have seen how social media can spark off collective action. But by combining these social media through hashtags such as #direngezi and #duranadam with image-based websites such as Tumblr, YouTube and Vimeo, Taksim suddenly became a steady platform for protestors to show the police violence or from someone like Gündüz to broadcast his silent act of protest.

The Prime Minister, however, tweeted last week:

> “What do we say; “There is no stopping, we continue on our path”. What do they say; “Standing Man!”.”

Despite his criticisms of social media, he makes use of Twitter to resonate and amplify his voice as well as influence popularity polls. In recent days, his Twitter account has become a centre of attention for Turkish people to either sympathize (such as other AKP members have done) or to ridicule him because of his unremitting hate-speech. Erdoğan has also condemned the international media for their “biased” coverage and blamed “foreign forces” behind the protests including the Standing Man, and the rumour was spread on social media that “standing” is a CIA tactic from their handbook for non-violent action.
Besides the verbal violence and the “pornography” of violent images we have seen the last three weeks, Gündüz reminds us through his action of yet another type of violence, the violence of forgetting:

“...The worst form of violence was the cleaning of the streets as if nothing had happened. Presenting the events in a way to suggest that nothing – no protest – ever took place is the greatest form of violence. The ultimate form of violence against the protestors was not the disproportionate use of police force; violence was exercised by repressing, imposing, dictating.”

Erdem Gündüz gave the movement a living sculpture and a call to start documenting the symbols before they are erased. As an open symbol by itself, the Standing Man gave a gesture that welcomed everyone to join in. Its absence of a fixed meaning and its directness in the collective imagination were vital for the Turkish people to be able to engage with the violence, to process it and to transform the energies into the social movement that is happening right now. However, one caveat might be in order: the history of nonviolent protest teaches us that there is a danger of “branding” or commodification of symbols too. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent protest as part of the Indian independence led to a Gandhian publicity that became compatible with marketing strategies, thus leading to another type of violation. It appears that already some patents have been bought for “Gezi Park” and çapulcu for purposes of branding. In Eskişehir, one could see a first attempt at commodifying the two most central icons, the Standing Man and the Woman in Red, into signs for the local bar’s amenities.

New symbols are still currently in the making, often in relation to police brutality, such as the throwing of red coronation flowers against the latest police crackdown on Taksim on June 22, or demonstrators shooting water at each other with water pistols on June 29 as reaction against the latest fatality of Turkish-Kurdish 18-year old Medeni Yıldırım, who was killed during a shooting in Lice in the Diyarbakır Province. Erdem Gündüz’s performance paved the way for a democratization of using, reading and re-embodying symbols, thereby continuously creating new meanings and images as in a multiplying chain reaction.

The symbol making made the protest into an urban social movement, in a constant attempt to give meaning to social injustices. Some of those symbols re-embody much earlier images in the history of resistance and revolution, such as the Standing Man resembling the Tank Man on Tiananmen Square. Hence, standing still is not just a symbolic act of resistance; it is a performance of history too.

Since the Standing Man, the citizens of Turkey have shown their resilience and ingenuity to continue standing despite increasing police violence and state repression. They resemble the standing trees of Gezi Park of which the future is still uncertain, or as was suggested in one of the banners around the park in the early days, quoting Nazim Hikmet:

“...to live like a tree, solitary and free, and like a forest, in brotherhood, this is our longing.”
### END NOTES


2. Two more deaths have been reported: there was the 18-year-old Medeni Yildirim of Kurdish descent, who died on June 28 during a shooting while villagers were protesting the construction of a new military posts in Lice, south-eastern Turkey. Most recently, on Wednesday 10 July, 19-year-old Anadolu University student Ali Ismail Korkmaz died in Eskisehir after 38 days of intensive care after a brain haemorrhage operation. See: BIA News Desk, 18 June 2013, “7,822 Injured with 59 in Serious Condition”, Bianet, http://www.bianet.org/english/health/147717-7-822-injured-with-59-in-serious-condition. Accessed: 21 June 2013.


15. Ibid.


