

The Outsider

Mario Rizzi in conversation with Cristiana Perrella

Cristiana Perrella

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Continuing his reflections on the consequences of the protest movements that began in North Africa and the Middle East starting in 2010, initiated with the first two parts of the trilogy entitled *BAYT* (*Al Intithar*, 2013 and *Kauther*, 2014), Mario Rizzi has recently completed a new film, *The Outsider* (2015), which approaches the theme of the new awareness in Turkish civil society after the resistance of Gezi Park. In the film, the protest is narrated through the experiences of three different groups: environmentalists, a group of Armenians, and the LGBTI community. Characteristic of his work, Rizzi does not offer a direct representation of historical events in *The Outsider*. Rather, he concentrates on everyday stories, individual experiences, and personal memories, gathered by way of research connected to direct relationships and emotional interaction. What emerges is all the energy, resistance and hope of a moment of awakening that changed Turkey.

Cristiana Perrella: How did you start gathering materials for *The Outsider*? It must not have been easy, considering the control over expression and circulation of information in Turkey.

Mario Rizzi: I did not experience the days of Gezi first hand, as I was not in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 – I lived it through social media, especially Twitter. However, I have always believed, as one of the protagonists of the film Mücella Yapıcı says, that Gezi was something unique that 'broke the chains of our mental prisons'. It is something that had never happened before and will probably not happen again: the utopia of creating a new sense of community, a new civil society of participation, formed by totally different groups that had not previously been in contact, who experimented with reciprocal knowledge and a common commitment, getting beyond differences: the nationalists with the Kurds and the Armenians; the LGBTI people and the supporters of the Beşiktaş Football Club; the Anticapitalist Muslims and the sex workers; the middle class and the labour unions.

Gezi was an awakening of civic awareness, laying the groundwork for a new way of taking part, for a new *communitas*, from a political standpoint and as citizens. Although Gezi Resistance had chronological ties with other movements such as the so-called Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Podemos and Syriza, no one had formulated such a radical hypothesis of a different, participatory society – no one had fully experimented with a social alternative to the neoliberal capitalist society.



Mario Rizzi, *The Outsider*, 2015.
Copyright the artist.

I searched for a way to narrate Gezi for two years. Having lived in Turkey for long periods of time over the last decade, and having always worked on engaged social themes, I was very well acquainted with some of the activists who had become leading figures of the Gezi Park Resistance. Among other things, I discovered that *Murat ve Ismail*, my Turkish film from 2005, which told the story of generational passage between two men (father and son) shoemakers in Istanbul, was very well liked – almost a cult movie – by the activists of Taksim Solidarity Group, who have always fought against gentrification in Istanbul. So I got in touch with many of them, asking for video material regarding those days. Some Turkish activists and artists had created a website, *bak.ma*, where many of the materials are available to all.

From this starting point, some two years after the euphoria of those days, I went looking for stories inside the groups that took part at Gezi; everyday stories, as is always the case in my work. Some are only roughly sketched out, but the important thing is that they intersect with each other. In *The Outsider* what interests me is the link between each story. In my view, this is why the work does not remain connected only to the Turkish situation and the narration of the present. Instead, it is a response to the fact of being present from a social viewpoint; to create a 'civic culture' is also a way of making a society grow in cultural and not just political terms. I believe this is a lesson we need to learn in the western world, even more than in the so-called Middle East, because our society today does not offer many solutions in this sense. Just consider our behaviour regarding refugees, or the ambiguity of cases like the decision just made by the court of Hamburg, responding to a suit

filed by Erdoğan to censor a satirical television programme for its portrayal of the Turkish president as 'offending foreign states' organs and representatives'.



Mario Rizzi, 'Temmuz' from YAZ, 2015.
Courtesy the artist.

A known commentator on the Arab world tweeted a phrase a few days ago, which I retweeted: 'So, theoretically, a Syrian refugee who was in jail in Syria for insulting Assad could be in jail in Germany for doing the same there'. Absurd, isn't it? In this sense I can say that I did not feel like an 'outsider' approaching this theme, even though I did not take part during Gezi Resistance in the park, because not only have I spent a long time in Turkey, but I was also reacting to something that also happens in the western world.

CP: What were the main difficulties you encountered in handling such delicate 'narrative material'?

MR: *The Outsider* was the most emotionally difficult work I have ever made. What comes easily to me, and helps me in my work as an artist, is to collaborate with a person and to create a personal relationship. In the one-on-one relationship I always find a way to respect my vital space without invading that of others. In my films, the story always revolves around a protagonist with which the viewer can identify. One of the difficulties of working on this latest film was to work with groups that by definition have no leader, and to make some protagonists emerge. Furthermore, when I work on a film a relationship of intense trust develops with those who open their lives to me, without any reservations. Again in this case, I filmed every moment of the lives of these people, in some cases also their personal life, and for me it was very important that my motivations were always clear, as well as my respect for their social commitment, my care in differentiating private from public, not exploiting their story and their struggles. Above all, however, I sensed the problem that there were people

risking their lives and their jobs. I felt the danger of harming someone.

It was very important to respect these limitations and not to censor, but without endangering the people involved. The biggest difficulty I encountered was that of telling the story of Suruç, where it was as if utopia – the dream – had collided with reality: in the middle of August 2015, precisely in the weeks in which I was shooting in Istanbul, 300 university students from Istanbul decided to go for four days to Kobanî, the first Kurdish city after the Syrian border, which fought against and was liberated from the invasion of Daesh, to reconstruct a playground and a library. They were the young people of Gezi. They stopped at Suruç for a press conference in which they explained why they were going to Kobanî, and during the conference a bomb exploded. It was logical to imagine the matrix behind that bomb. 32 of them were killed. Everyone was shaken, and I saw some of the environmentalists, with whom I was in daily contact, fall into deep depression.

At Kamp Armen – the former Armenian orphanage occupied in the summer of 2015 by activists of all backgrounds who demanded its restitution to the Armenian community – where one of the stories in my film takes place, 32 plants were placed in their memory. Together with Gezi, Suruç is a key event of recent Turkish history. From that moment on there is fear, the utopia seems – but only seems – to vanish, everyone began to be afraid to demonstrate. And, as we know, from that moment on the repression became increasingly severe. Even signing a petition in favour of peace between the Turks and the Kurds could lead to loss of employment, to the arrest of Turkish university professors and members of the civil society.



Mario Rizzi, *Al Intithar*, 2013.
Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

CP: Who are the protagonists of your film?

MR: First and foremost, the composite universe that took to the streets, in its improbable and moving variety. Then, above all, the women, as often happens in my work. For example, one of the ecologists who fight for the

conservation of Istanbul's Northern Forests is an architect everyone knows and identifies as the 'lady in red' of Gezi – the one in the photograph being sprayed with tear gas by a policeman in riot gear. She is not a leader, the organization is horizontal, but at the same time she is a woman who has had the courage to go to court and to state what happened to her. She also won an appeal, demanding not payment but the planting of 600 trees as punishment, though the sentence will probably never be carried out. Then there is Mücella, also an architect but older. She is a symbol of the days of Gezi – the woman who on 6 June 2013 ignited feeling with her profound, thrilling words. She said that if for Erdoğan those gathered in the park were all *çapulcu* (bums, deviants) then she too, head of the architects' association, mother of two children, was a *çapulcu*, and also a prostitute, an LGBTI person, a fan of Galatasaray or Beşiktaş, an outcast, identifying with all the demonstrators.

CP: Why do you nearly always choose women as the protagonists of your works?

MR: There is undoubtedly an autobiographical aspect, since I was mostly raised by three female cousins, making me familiar with feminine psychology and making it easy for me to establish relationships with women. I also think that in a neoliberal capitalist society like ours, and not only in the Middle East, men are very connected to the world of work, economics, and profit, while women, apart from caring for the family, grant themselves more space for culture and for civic commitment – precisely the aspects I am most interested in exploring when I try to approach and know an environment that is not mine. If we think, for example, about the Gezi Park movement in Turkey, the feminine side was the majority.

CP: Can we define your work as gender-oriented?

MR: For me gender is a strong theme – maybe one of the main themes in my work – both because I think it is important to try to stake out the achievements of women not only in the western world, obviously, to clarify the fixed points that are no longer negotiable, and because – as I was saying – in many contexts in which I have worked, those who propose a different vision, greater cultural openness, and those who propose solutions, are often women.

CP: You are very well versed in the Middle Eastern world. What made you want to approach it and study it?

MR: On the one hand it was personal interest, while on the other hand some lucky encounters gave me a key to access a context I wanted to understand better. During the war in Bosnia I went there several times as a volunteer, from 1993 to the start of 1996. I had studied psychology and then photography in Arles, but I was still not certain about my life choices. Going to Bosnia was a way of making a commitment, but without wanting to engage in volunteer initiatives on a full-time basis. I approached an association, Sprofondo from Como, operating on aid projects in Sarajevo. I went to Bosnia the first times with them and then I continued on my own, working above all with paraplegics at the Koševo hospital in Sarajevo.

It was precisely in Sarajevo that I got to know this 'other' culture, Islamic culture, as I was a guest in the home of people with whom I discovered the modes and meaning of prayer and their habits – living with them during Ramadan, for example – and I began to understand differences that I think it is essential to know about today in a multicultural society. We tend to lump refugees, Muslims, fundamentalists and terrorists together as if they were the same, forgetting that the refugees escape because there is terrorism, not vice versa. Islam seemed to be the new 'other' in our society, and I tried to address that through art. This is how my interest in this world began, because it was a world completely different from my own.



Mario Rizzi, *Limina*, 2008.
Courtesy the artist.

The first project I did in the Middle East was *The Gift*, in 2001, during a residency in Palestine and Israel. It created a dialogue through the exchange of gifts and the sharing of food, and through personal stories, in a group of 74 Jews and Palestinians I brought together for two convivial events. On that occasion, I worked with Yona Fischer and Jack Persekian, who introduced me to Jewish and Palestinian histories and cultures. Palestine, as I said, has become a very important country for me, as Turkey became later, with which I have a deep, lasting relationship. Over the last ten years I have spent almost three years in Turkey and almost one year in Palestine, and I won't say I have managed to become an insider – because you can never become one, I think – but I have been able to reduce the distance that my foreign identity causes between me and the people there. The gap remains, fortunately, because you are always left with the curiosity and the desire to bridge it and to understand more.

CP: In 2012 you won the Production Program Award of the Sharjah Art Foundation. What do you believe is the most important role of this type of cultural organization today?

MR: Definitely that of nurturing the local art scene, making it aware of its means for cultural growth. The fact that the Sharjah Art Foundation and other local foundations have excellent relations with international, not just western, institutions clearly improves their ability to take the artists they support to other countries, helping them to get known and to mature. I believe the role of educating the younger generations and the local audience through the creation of large collections that make it possible to see what is produced in a place, and what is being achieved elsewhere, is fundamental. Last but not least, there is the possibility of attracting creative energies from abroad, perspectives outside of one's own reality, that will certainly have a different bias but can also help to make the debate more plural, to see ourselves from a different vantage point.

There is a little story, taken up a few years ago by the American writer David Foster Wallace, which says that a fish doesn't know what water is. So I believe that a gaze from outside can help us to better understand the environment in which we live, and can also be a way of correcting possible errors of direction that might not emerge were we to stay closed up in a cocoon. To make this happen, it is not enough to send artists out, or to seek dialogue with the artists of the diaspora. It is also necessary to work inside one's own territory with artists who arrive from different cultural realities, bringing their different vision and a desire to interact with others.

CP: So you believe that rather than having a very specific focus on the region, today the organizations operating in the area of North Africa and the Middle East would do well to open up to greater cultural contamination through the activation of new connections, ties, collaborations with other countries (the northern side of the Mediterranean, for example), other cultures?

MR: Yes, absolutely. This can only reinforce the role I have just outlined for these institutions. Furthermore, art therefore also becomes a way to have a more complete diagnosis of the present and to achieve greater critical awareness.

CP: The political situation of many countries today is making it hard to move forward with experiences of work 'from the ground up', such as artist-run spaces or small and very active organizations like Townhouse Gallery in Cairo. How do you see the future of cultural production in the Middle East?

MR: I think the biggest problem is precisely that of the difficulties of small independent spaces, those that do not necessarily have a vision that complies with that of the political power of the moment, but also do not have the economic force to break free of it and to represent an independent voice. However, where work has been done and taken forward, as in the case of Townhouse, these spaces are defended – when it was targeted by officials from the Egyptian censorship bureau, the entire population of the neighbourhood, not just the exponents of the art world, came to protect this space in an absolutely amazing way.



Mario Rizzi, 'Kif Kif' from *Kauther*, 2014.

CP: Your work presents fragments of very personal stories, intimate narratives that do not attempt to be complete, but instead offer a moment of empathy between the audience and your characters, giving the latter the chance to represent themselves, also through the filter of your gaze. Before you said that you did not want to be limited to a 'documentary' approach. What is the role of reality, then, in your practice?

MR: The role of the artist in a period of cultural and social crisis is not to predict the future or to indulge in purely aesthetic research, but to interpret things from an unexpected perspective, to read the present, and with this approach the idea of 'documenting' is certainly a major stimulus. Not in the sense of reporting reality (that is already done by the media, often badly, playing on the voyeurism of a conventional audience rooted in its own certainties), but of its deconstruction, making it incoherent, and then restructuring it to see what happens and if the process can help us to understand the hidden or less evident parts. It is a work of visual research, also aesthetic, of course, but with an aspect of social responsibility, and of engagement.

I think it is intolerable for an artist to live far from the world, without paying attention to the present, and without contributing to change, also in semantic terms. If we talk about film languages, I don't think my work can be considered documentary in the narrow sense, and I say this without any prejudice regarding documentaries. I do film the real and I do not create situations of fiction, but for me the real is a starting point to create new narratives that certainly reflect the story of my protagonists but also take on a symbolic value that is not necessarily confined to the events of their lives. I love reality, because it is much richer than any narrative structure I could create *a priori*, offering infinite facets to analyse and interpret. It creates a contemporary condition that escapes from being only 'contemporary' and tries to take on a universal value. It is not up to me to say if it succeeds or not. Of course, the story I build also becomes autobiographical because, like it or not, it reflects me, my passions and my curiosities.

CP: You speak of visual and aesthetic research that is balanced by social responsibility in your work. You come from training as a photographer, and in the framing of your shots, the way you compose them, one can always sense knowledge of the grammar of the image. What is the purpose of the formal aspects in your work?

MR: They say you learn notions to then leave them behind and for me that is very true; while filming I try not to theorize too much – everything happens in a very immediate way. Clearly my background emerges unconsciously while I am filming, but I don't think about the theoretical problem of the frame or the construction of the image. I think about what I want to say, what I want to discover myself and communicate to the viewer, and how to get inside things without staying on the surface. The aesthetic choices, more strictly semantic and of narrative construction, emerge much more clearly in the editing and post-production: not because I am interested in formal effects as such, but because in any case I pay close attention to the visual meaning of every image I produce.

CP: What prompts you to tell mostly stories of people who come from worlds distant from your world of origin, as an Italian who has moved to Berlin? I am also thinking of your early works, made in Nordic countries, and your tendency and ability to establish a deep and intimate relationship with perfect strangers, rather than turning your attention and your camera towards what you know well and what is closer to you.



Mario Rizzi, 'Untitled' from *Idomeni*, 2016.
Courtesy the artist.

MR: The stimulus behind my works is precisely the desire to understand situations that are not familiar to me, to manage to penetrate a context that is not mine. Curiosity is the most powerful driver. The condition of extraneousness from which I depart when I start a project urges me to immerse myself in the new reality without preconceptions. Not knowing the language can even be an advantage, in some cases. When I film, in fact, and I understand what the people I am filming are saying, it comes naturally to focus on the meaning, while if I do not understand I can concentrate on body language, human relations, and psychological nuances. I too am amazed sometimes by how I happen to focus my attention on important and meaningful moments of the action in a totally instinctive way. I am convinced that if I were to pay attention only to the verbal language, I would be led to neglect aspects that arise as an unexpected, sudden gift in my attempt to get closer to my subjects, to understand what is there between the lines – not just the language of words, but also that of emotions and psychology.

A great Brazilian documentary filmmaker, Eduardo Coutinho, who always supported me, said that I know how to make interesting films because I do not know the language of my subjects. Working on something that I know, that I live every day, frightens me because I am afraid I will not have the same curiosity to understand and to try to get into contact with the deeper essence of the facts I want to narrate. I think there is the risk that having a clear opinion about what I am filming could prevent me from seeing stories and situations that differ from my feelings. And this would imply losing two important aspects of the work of an artist: universalism and an engagement that is not 'political' or biased.

CP: Do you always shoot with just one video camera?

MR: Yes, quite often with an external microphone, but always with just one camera, which I use personally.

CP: The themes and subjects of your works seem to get timelier day by day. Do you think art can change the way people look at reality? Your works like *The Gift* make me think you might be optimistic about this.

MR: Absolutely. I don't think I could do the type of work I do unless I believed in the ability of art to enter minds, to create a need for change, growth, and attention to otherness. Of course, I am aware of the fact that the art world is aimed at an elite, but very often – and I have understood this even more in these days of work on the ideas of change that began at Gezi Park – what happens in one well-defined part of the society, even if it is a minority group, finds its way and grows, creates questions and reactions and a sensibility that gradually expands. Being an artist, for me, does not mean thinking I can reach everyone, but knowing that I can create critical awareness in someone, thus activating a process that can reach other people and even alter reality. I would not be able to do anything in my work if I did not think this. Maybe it is very idealistic, maybe it is very optimistic, but I believe art can change the way people think, and can contribute to change our way of looking at the world, and this has revolutionary potential.

Mario Rizzi (Barletta, 1962. Based in Berlin), is an artist and filmmaker. His work has been shown in many international art exhibitions and film festivals, including *We Refugees – Of the Right to Have Rights*, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe (2016); *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, MAXXI, Rome (2015); *Too Early Too Late*, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (2015); *Where are the Arabs?*, MoMA PS1, New York (2014); *Iskele 2*, TANAS, Berlin and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (2013); *Signs Taken in Wonder*, Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna and Kunstverein Hannover (2013); *Be(com)ing Dutch*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2008); *6th Taipei Biennial* (2008); *This Day*, Tate Modern, London (2007); *9th Istanbul Biennial* (2005); and *14th Sydney Biennale* (2004). In 2016 he was invited as a member of the jury at the National Short Films Competition of the 27th Ankara International Film Festival. In 2012 Rizzi won the Production Program Award of the Sharjah Art Foundation. His films have been selected twice for the official competition of the Berlin Film Festival (*Impermanent* in 2008, *Al Intithar* in 2013), for the Ankara International Film Festival (2015 and 2016) and the Dubai International Film Festival in 2013. In 2005 he won the Best Artist Prize at the 7th Sharjah Biennial, and in 2004 the Mulliqi Prize in Kosovo. In 2010 the Museum of Modern Art of New York acquired his film *Murat ve Ismail* (2005) for its permanent collection.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cristiana Perrella (Rome, 1965) is a curator and critic. Perrella directed the Contemporary Arts Programme of the British School at Rome from 1998 to 2008. From 2007 to 2009 she created and launched, for the RISO Museum of Contemporary Art of Sicily, a regional agency for the development of young art talents (SACS-

Sportello per l'Arte Contemporanea in Sicilia), acting as its curator for the first two years, and again in 2012–13. Since 2010 she has been curator of the art and science project of Fondazione Golinelli in Bologna. As an independent curator she has worked with Italian and international institutions, including MAXXI in Rome, where in 2010 she curated one of the opening exhibitions of the museum, then continuing the collaboration with three other exhibition projects. In 2010 she was one of the winners of the first edition of the Abraaj Group Art Prize. She was a member of the advisory board of the Turkish Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2012) and the 56th Venice Biennale (2014). Since 2004 she has taught Phenomenology of Contemporary Art at Istituto Europeo di Design in Rome. She has published many essays and monographs, including the recent book on Francesco Vezzoli, published in February 2016 by Rizzoli International. She is one of the curators of the 16th Rome Quadriennale.

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