

# Wondering in Turkey

Aikaterini Gegisian profiles The Leleg Institute Project, a platform for collaboration and cultural exchange in Turkey.



Left: Performance choreographed by Mustafa Kaplan in the hills around the deserted Sandima village. Photo: Andrea Crociani

"By bringing together artists in different stages of their career, the project initiated a dialogue"

As an antidote to the spread of large-scale biennale exhibitions outside of conventional Western art centres, The Leleg Institute Project was formed in 2002 in Gumusluk, on the Aegean coast of Turkey, as a platform for collaboration and cultural exchange between Turkish and international artists. The founding members Mine Kaylan (UK/Turkey) and Nadi Guler (Turkey) attempted to address different localities and the specificity of the region at large. The name 'Leleg', itself bound to the area, derives from the earliest recorded settlers of the southern Aegean coast. The project focuses on the area of crossover between disciplines such as visual and performing arts, live and digital arts. It prioritises process, experimentation and research, aiming to generate dialogue between artists, the local community and between the different artistic disciplines. The institute is in itself a research project, exploring alternative institutional structures and educational practices, taking as its starting point the experiments of the Bauhaus and the Turkish Village Institutes (a progressive educational model developed in Turkey after the First World War, where each village institute could control and shape its own curriculum).

The institute's inaugural programme, 'Leleg Sadmina' (I Wonder Leleg), took place between 18 August – 7 September 2003. It initiated a period of development for the foundation of the institute. The strategic centre was the town of Yalikavak but events took place around the peninsula of Bodrum: the

deserted Sandima village on the hills above Yalikavak bay (the original settlement of Yalikavak inhabitants until the 1950s) and the Gumusluk Academy, in the hills of a neighbouring sea-side town. I was among thirty international and Turkish artists, writers, performance practitioners, filmmakers, designers and architects invited to take part in a series of activities and events: to lead research projects and daily seminars, present work-in-progress or participate at the Leleg Symposium. All events were open to the public. The issues raised during this first programme were related to ideas of knowledge structures, site-specificity and community.

The Leleg Symposium on 31 August was a central event both in bringing together delegates already working in various projects and on reflecting on the organisational structure of the Leleg Project. It was hosted by Gumusluk Academy at its restaurant and garden and was based on Plato's *Symposium*. Ten participants, including Turkish poet Ilhan Berk, director and writer Naz Erayda, and Pulat Tacar from UNESCO were invited to share a four- to five-hour Mediterranean meal cooked with indigenous ingredients. Each participant was asked to make a presentation on the research methodology and subject matter of their work and on the investigations they were undertaking in Turkey. The symposium and meal, carefully structured and orchestrated by Mine Kaylan, proposed an alternative model of conferencing, becoming a performance event.

My intention was to use the symposium as an anchor for a research project that took me around the coast of Turkey, visiting the areas where my grandparents came from, before fleeing as refugees. The desire was not to identify where exactly they had lived, but to look for residues of their presence. I was interested in working with the tension produced by travelling towards something unmapped whilst at the same time searching for a connection to the land. My research paper, titled *When I was there, I had already left*, planted the seeds for a short documentary film of the same title, still in production. As part of the project, I also presented an audio-visual installation at Gumusluk Academy, titled *The day that left*, dealing with the construction and identification of landscapes.

The amphitheatre at the Gumusluk Academy was the venue for a screening of recent works by Turkish filmmakers. Nezih Unen's documentary, *The lost songs of Anatolia*, exploring the indigenous music and rituals of populations living around Turkey, provided a valuable insight. In the area of Yalikavak, the derelict stone buildings and rocky hills of the Sandima village inspired site-specific work by choreographers, while Yalikavak town generated community projects.

Naoko Noshiro, a Japanese dancer and choreographer presented Sandima Garden on the ruins of an empty house in the deserted village. She imagined and recreated the garden at the front of the house as a way of making the people living there present, a process she describes as the "sculpture of space". The Turkish choreographers, Aydin Tekir and Mustafa Kaplan, also developed work at the Sandima village. Tekir choreographed dancer Filiz Sizanli, using three trees scattered in the area, working with the notions of locating and framing to identify the site. Mustafa Kaplan worked with dancer Sevi Algan and presented a work where the audience was submerged half way into holes in the ground, reflecting his interest in the space close and underneath the ground and the experience of being and looking below the horizon.

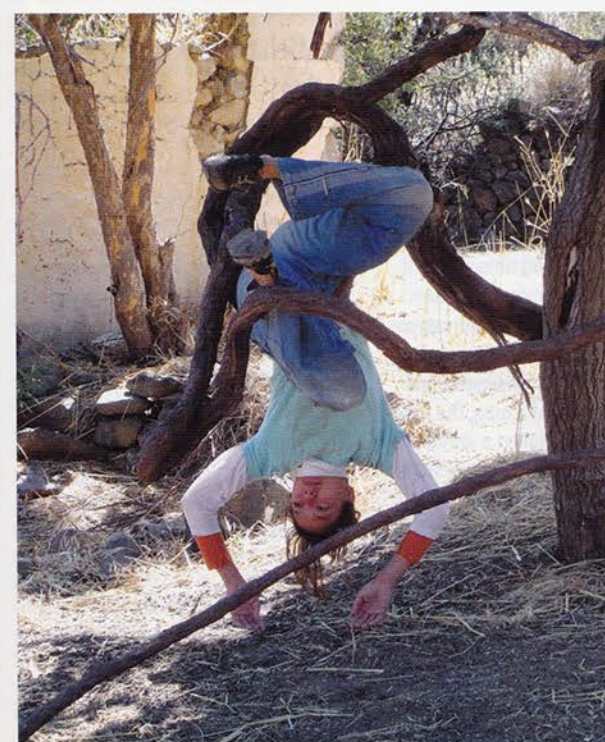
The Yalikavak town gallery, a small domed structure that previously served as a water container, hosted another site-specific work by Japanese choreographer, Mariko Tsurumi and an exhibition of photographs of local stone buildings by the architect, Ahmet Igdiriligil. The town of Yalikavak also

hosted projects by Francois Rod (France/Switzerland), Madeleine Dore (Canada) and Anna Best (UK), all of whom were interested in establishing links with the local community. Rod engaged in a dialogue with local women, asking them to exchange a piece of their hair for her own. This was a pretext to investigate the process of communication rather than a means for the production of a final object. Best works with the form of conversation as a way of opening up communication paths with local communities and as a live art process. In Turkey, she became interested in how the language barrier affects communication, how the interpreter presents a delay in conversation. She engaged in conversation with the local primary school teacher, Nuran Demir, at the grounds of the deserted Sandima School. She was also conducted a two-hour conversation with Mine Kaylan, with their sun hats on and up to their necks in the sea, where they discussed new and flexible models for organisations and education that were not bounded by a specific building or geography. By bringing together artists in different stages of their career, the project initiated a dialogue, that as Best puts it, "had no hierarchy in the exchange of information, it was not a passive form of education."

The future for The Leleg Institute Project, which is now formalised as a non-profit company, is the summer 2004 programme on the theme of 'education'. As Mine Kaylan explains: "The focus is on live art as an alternative educational model, working with models of social engagement and interactivity." Last summer's programme was made possible by the enthusiasm and dedication of the Leleg founders and the commitment of the artists involved. It attracted the attention of both the Turkish national press and a local audience. It provided a valuable model and space for research and experimentation and a networking platform for the participating artists.

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Below left: Performance choreographed by Aydin Tekir in the deserted Sandima village. Photo: Andrea Crociani

Below right: Aikaterini Gegisian, *When I was there, I had already left*, work in progress, video still, 2003.