

## WHETHER IT'S A DESERT OR NOT IS IRRELEVANT

Deniz Kirkali

I've been walking for three days straight.

I'm here because I'm searching for something.

Will the knowledge that has been passed down from ancient communities or the organisms and creatures hidden by the sands for centuries lead me to the information I need to survive? As my body gradually loses its ability to function, the threads that once connected me to the complex networks I belong to are breaking one by one. I can deeply focus on the breathing of the vast material network beneath me. I begin to see patterns in the behavior of the sand, reacting to everything around me—the wind, the sun, the thorny bushes that seem even more lifeless than I am, and, of course, my own presence. (i think, if I'm this much aware of the possibility of going mad, then I can't actually go mad) I still have a connection to the reality I believed to be unshakable until my body began to decay. I'm in the arms of whatever keeps this connection alive, whatever nurtures me with care to ensure I'm not losing my mind. I feel peaceful as I let myself sink into the sand. (the fact that I'm feeling calm doesn't necessarily mean I'm dying. since I arrived here, I've been occupied not with death but with life)

I don't feel alone here. This place is full of life that hides its presence behind mirages. My belief that I'm only imagining things is what allows them to continue their existence undisturbed. I have no choice but to align myself with the sand's own rhythm. At times, it feels like I'm watching a martial art, one that progresses very slowly. Interlocked limbs, ankles, arms, and many body parts I've never known before. It's as if they're in a symbiotic relationship with the sand; they're not fighting against each other. It's more like a ritual, a quiet becoming, the only way they know how to be, intertwined and then separating again. They've identified each other's weaknesses, intervened at those points, and connected through them.

I don't know what happened here before me. This place feels like the remnants of something that no longer exists, filled only with lifeless leftovers from that lived experience. (but the fish?) Or it's been built to hide a massive secret. Maybe the mirages I see are clues, leading me toward the truth hidden beneath the sand. Perhaps all I need to do is follow the images that I believe (or know?) aren't really there. (but first, I have to forget everything I've learned about madness, and I don't have enough time to forget everything I know) Maybe this place is accessible only to those at a turning point in their lives, showing them they must surrender to the unknown. (can something real also be a metaphor?) (am I sure it's real?) (what does real even mean?) When everything I see is equally probable, offering no further information to help determine my next step, choice disappears, and both the path and the destination lose their meaning. (does that mean the sand, without its own life or material characteristics, is merely a teaching tool?) (i'm answering my own questions)

One possibility is that this place is a device controlling time distortions, proving that time isn't linear. (could many sci-fi books have been right all along?) (i'm focusing too much on being right) (maybe that's why I'm here) (remember why you're here) Perhaps this place was once designed as the formula for new life, but something went wrong and it became a site concealing a colossal, complex piece of technology responsible for bringing the end of the universe. If I poke around too much, I could accidentally end all life. (the idea that i hold that much power doesn't seem realistic, at least not anymore) This place could also be artificial intelligence itself. I might have fallen into a technology that allows me to ask every question that comes to mind and, if I provide the right prompt, receive the visual or sound answer. (does that mean I am artificial intelligence?) Maybe this is a place of exile where all the failed gods have been banished, turned into grains of sand as punishment for challenging life itself, standing forever beside others who have failed just like them. (a harsh lesson in humility, where you're left without even a single trait that distinguishes

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## BURAK KABADAYI

your particular failure from the next)

It could be the end of everything, the beginning of the future, a limbo or transition zone, a manufactured in-between, a resting point, a stopover, a crossroads, the eve of a miracle—it could be anything. Perhaps the only meaning of being here is to survive. Survival in a place that doesn't offer the necessary conditions for human bodies to live means adapting, developing new organs, new limbs, new networks, until you finally continue living as something else—an opportunity for transformation.

My mouth is dry. My body, trying to cool itself in the unbearable heat, is drying out, and I realize that I haven't felt my sweat for a long time. I lick my arms in the desire for moisture, but my tongue only grows drier. I want water; I want to hear water, kiss water, feel water, bury my head in water. I can only think of water. With a sudden urge, I decide to move, and I move so fast that, at times, it feels as though neither of my feet is touching the ground. I remember the last time I ran this fast, and my mind brings back this memory as a familiar pain in my body. I feel a sharp pain, like slowly driving a shard of glass into one of the points where my left knee connects to my thigh muscle. I look at my knee. A fluid resembling blood is slowly trickling down to my ankles. I can no longer tell the difference between sweat, sand, blood, or urine.

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The air has been pitch dark for a while now, so I close my eyes and continue listening to my body. (maybe my body, with its own ways of knowing, can tell me why I'm here) My veins began moving as if they were part of the soft, warm sand I now walk barefoot on. I can feel the parallel flows of clean and dirty blood coursing through my body simultaneously (clean and dirty, good and bad, useful and harmful, essential and excessive, life and death)

My skin feels as if it's burning, as if not from the heat, but from irritation. It has completely lost its elasticity. I no longer have the strength to take another step. I'm dizzy, and my headaches have worsened. I don't remember the last

CURATOR

## DENİZ KIRKALI

time I peed. My bladder was the first organ to lose its function. I recall hearing that the biggest problem astronauts face during long periods in space is dehydration. This is the closest I've ever come to understanding astronauts. (once again, I think of rising up high) (the sky seems more hopeful than the ground) (what does this have to do with death?) (i can't gather my thoughts) (i still feel like I'm not alone here, but this feeling no longer comforts me) (for the first time, I consider that someone might hurt me) (i'm not afraid, though) (i just don't want to be caught off guard)

As I've lost my bladder, my body has begun prioritizing other organs, pumping blood vigorously to the most vital ones. My pulse was last like this when I drank liters of coffee. (i know what comes next: the sudden nausea I feel after the first coffee I drink every morning at my desk) (the fan I heard just moments ago is now spinning inside my torso, shifting my most important organs with its rotation) (everything is spinning). I fall to the ground again. I've already lost my decision-making ability (like my bladder, it's unnecessary anyway—there are no decisions to be made or taken). It no longer feels like my body belongs to me. I remember vividly the first time I experienced this sensation. It was at the first party I ever went to, under the endlessly flickering disco lights. I watched my skinny legs, my awkwardly long arms that I didn't know what to do with, from a distance. Then, other people's bodies, their heads approaching me, lips moving and closing, but their voices inaudible. The sweat running down my spine toward my hips is now expelling the last bit of water I drank. I imagine sitting on cold marble. (unlike the sand, the marble is cold and hard) (it's strange to miss things that are cold and hard. The sound of the buzzing fan rings in my ears, but there's no cooling effect as the sound suggests. Another noise catches my attention: the sound of rubber shoes sliding on marble. (it makes me realize (or think?) that I'm definitely not alone)

At that very moment, an unexpected bright light blinds me. I move toward it. When I have to pass in front of the light source, I completely lose my sight. I want to imagine the black dots inside my eyelids as a meaningful constellation. I fall to the ground again. I clutch the sand with my fingers, first burying my nails, then my knuckles, and finally my palms into the sand. It feels like if I dig deep enough into the sand, I'll eventually take root, become lighter, and float away. I wonder if this is the only way to escape from here by flying. (is the only way out of here to die?) I think about winning and losing, and the fine line between the right and wrong decision.

I think of the concept of "milieu-specific analysis" by Melody Jue. (can theory help me in this situation?) She said that since, as bodily observers, we can only think from within our perceptual environments, we can only understand the problems and phenomena created by that environment by studying it. She would also say that to access the knowledges produced by this infinite pile of sand, of which I'm now part of, I'd have to distance myself from my perceptual habits. (is this what they call a mirage?) As I move forward on my hands and knees like a cautious animal, I am still aware enough to know that what I see half a meter ahead is not really water. (am I?) But what if my mind is resisting a knowledge it doesn't yet understand? What if what I've learned about this place is getting in the way of truth? I decide to abandon my perceptual habits. (because what if that really is water?) (i'm not in a position to deny that possibility) I don't dwell on my pathetic reflection in the puddle. I bring the water I've scooped with my palms to my mouth, spitting out the warm sand. By the time the water in my hand reaches my mouth, it has broken down into particles. (like how my body has already been disintegrated) (so too are my hopes of escaping here now) (i'm not in a state to be dramatic) (i'm struggling to accept this)

When I see what isn't there, I can't hide my excitement even though I'm doubt-

ful. The fleeting sliver of gap between its presence and absence disappoints me with the familiar materiality, graininess and warmth of the sand. The feeling of emptiness that follows is much greater than before. (i wish I were stupid and brave (instead of just stupid)) (not being aware of what could go wrong and what has already gone wrong would be a huge blessing at a moment like this)

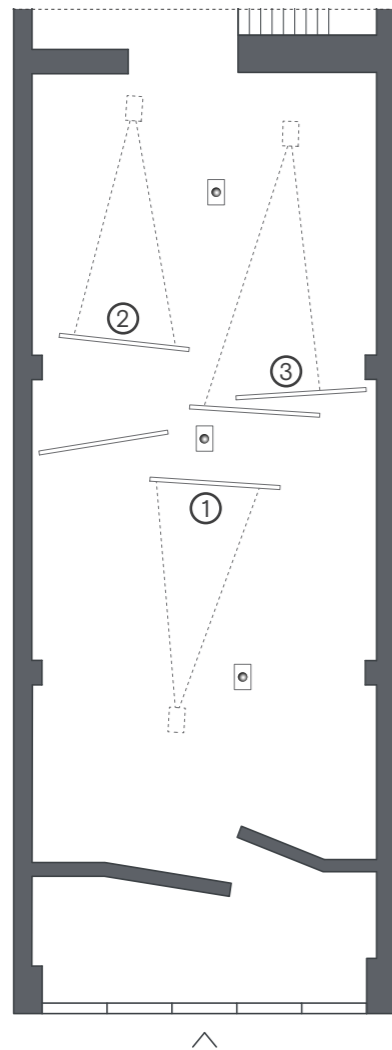
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I don't panic. Not when sudden cramps seize my muscles, or when I realize that despite the unbearable heat inside my body, I don't feel a single drop of sweat on my forehead. Not even when my body, losing its fluids, begins to feel heavy and thick, or when my fingers cut against my dry lips when I bring them to my mouth.

I close my eyes again. I try to remember the last time I closed them to sleep and actually fell asleep but I can't recall. I can't remember the last time I bathed, the last meal I ate, the last person I spoke to, I touched, or the person I feared the most I'd never see again. I'm starting to lose my sense of my position within the networks I'm part of and within this life. I open my eyes. I turn my head towards the ground, resting it on my left arm, and I see my left eye on the sand staring back at me.

Then, I panic.

(it's my own eye in front of me, my left arm, my head, my body, my tattered clothes, my fingers) (i see myself) (my own reflection) (a distorted reflection) (i look more like a blood orange than myself) (can this be real?) (what is real?) (is my weak and decaying body the real me?) (why can't I see anything else?) (how did everything I thought I saw vanish so suddenly?) (i didn't know it was possible to get lost here) (but doesn't being here mean you're already lost?) (heat, cold, water, delusion, what exists, what doesn't, an endless void) (i'm splitting into thousand pieces) (disengagement)



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2024

Installation

5 2 x 3.2 m glass panels hung with steel ropes, video, sound

① **Those that bounce from glass**

2024

Video

08.23"

② **Desert time in a cube**

2024

Video

09.46"

③ **Network-bound disengagement**

2024

Video

13.15"

Burak Kabadayı

**Whether it's a desert or not is irrelevant**

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