

Yenikapı's Museums

Orkan Telhan

Interviews by
non-humans

**Museum of
Exhalation**

Yenikapı's Museums is an artwork by Orkan Telhan realized for the 17th Istanbul Biennial.

The artwork consists of a publication "Museum of Exhalation" and a public installation "Museum of Digestion" located at Müze Gazhane in Kadıköy.

Museum of Digestion is designed and realized with Eda Hisarlıoğlu and includes contributions from Chantel White, Vedat Onar, Jake Winiski and Nazlı Pişkin.

Museum of Exhalation is an edited volume of interviews of 12 authors by non-humans. Please see the table of contents for the contributors.

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Museum of Exhalation

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

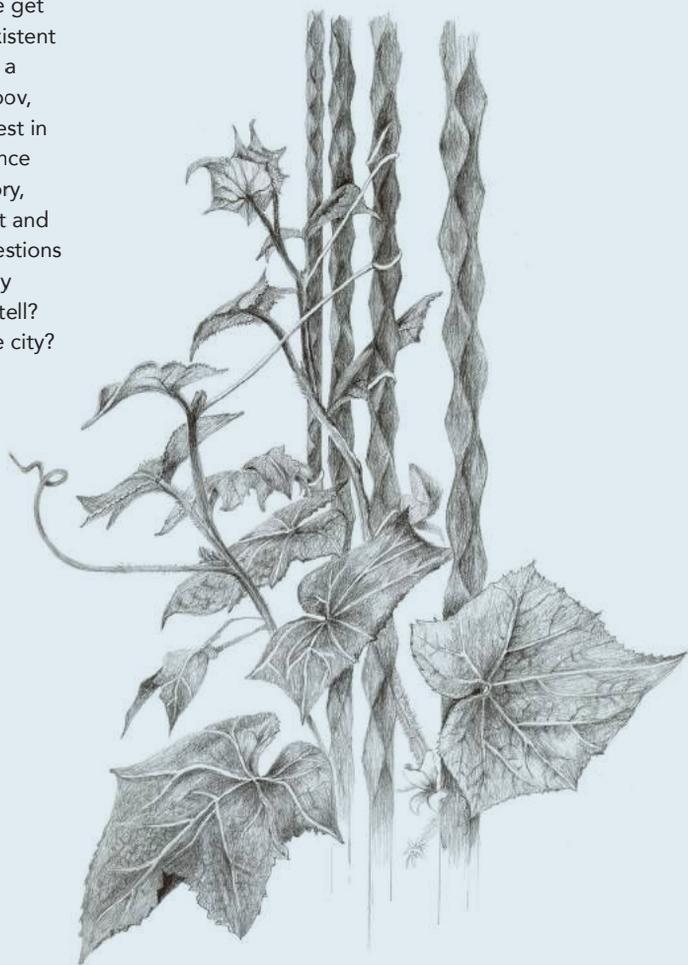
Interviewer

Interviewee

1.	Thistle	Nazlı Pişkin	7
2.	Astragal bone	Vedat Onar	15
3.	Ganoderma	Jake Winiski	23
4.	Solitary Bee	E. Ş. Nazlı Arda	31
5.	Langa Cucumber	Aleksandar Shopov	39
6.	Cow Dung	Marisol de la Cadena	45
7.	Dark Wall	M. Namık Yalçın	51
8.	Dust	Dietmar Offenhuber	55
9.	Exiled Ocre	Pelin Tan	59
10.	Harvester Ant	Chantel White	65
11.	Tendril-trellis	Eda Hisarlıoğlu	71
12.	Weissella	Orkan Telhan	73



To know about *Langa hıyarı* (cucumber) was a sign of belonging to the city, a sign of civility, a marker of urbanity, a character of being from Istanbul. On the other hand, to call someone 'cucumber' (*hıyar*) is an insult or a slur. Today, however, both the mythical cucumbers and the luscious *Langa* gardens (*bostans*) that grew them are long gone. So, how does one get interviewed by a non-existent cucumber, a memory or a ghost? Aleksandar Shopov, a historian with an interest in Ottoman history of science and environmental history, re-interprets our prompt and ventriloquizes these questions to the reader: How many stories can a cucumber tell? Through us, through the city?



Langa Cucumber

Aleksandar Shopov

Questions

What do you see when you hear the word 'cucumber'? Do you imagine only the vegetable? Do you imagine the tendrils extending out of the stem, reaching out to any fixed object in order to support the plant growing up towards the sun? Do you remember the spiky surface of the stem from which hairy leaves branch out and yellow flowers blossom? Can you hear the buzz of the bee that moves pollen from one flower to the other to make a union from which the fruit will develop and grow? Do you consider cucumbers in their living form, with their roots in the ground and leaves open wide to the sky? Who grows your cucumbers? Is it the migrant worker who fears deportation? What chemicals sprayed on cucumbers circulate in the bodies of people and insects working in the fields?

Have you heard about the round Memedik cucumber that grows in Sivas, on the banks of Kızılırmak river? My friend Himmet fondly remembers it as a childhood treat, now replaced by chocolate or chips. How many children have never eaten cucumbers? Have you heard about the gigantic Langa cucumbers that used to grow in İstanbul along the Bayram Pasha stream, in the *bostans* of Langa? What happened to the lush green shores

of İstanbul's rivers, streams and seas? Who replaced the rich alluvial soil that fed your cities with concrete and steel? Who decided that cucumbers should not be grown in cities? Where does a cucumber belong? Should cucumber seeds be patented? Why can't you see cucumbers in their living form in Langa anymore? What can you see in Langa today? Where does the memory of Langa cucumbers live now? When were cucumbers replaced by bottled water and soft drinks? Can you replace bottled water with cucumbers? Could you write a history of İstanbul without its cucumbers? If we erase plants from the city's history, are we erasing its insects, too? Its soil and other living environments? Do cities have a future without plants and soil?

What associations arise when you hear the words *hıyar*, *badem* and *salatalık*? What is the difference between them? Would translating them as 'cucumber' do justice to the various layers of history and cultural association that were established with these words? What does it mean to say to someone 'You are a *hıyar*'? Would you feel offended?

Langa hıyar? Is this the fruit of paradise? The Apple of Adam? Who misses a plant and its fruits today? Can you yearn for a plant? Do you miss the plants around which you grew up? Do you miss the plants with which your parents and grandparents grew up? Can you miss something that you've never experienced?

How many stories can a cucumber tell?

Answers

Langa cucumbers today exist only in the childhood memories of the older generation of İstanbulites.

Langa gardens appear in the historical records as early as the 13th century, soon after the silting of the Theodosian harbor (itself built in the 5th century AD). The 'Blanga' gardens are recorded in the 1294–1301 endowment deed (typika) of Theodora Palaiologina (d. 1303) for the Convent of Lips in Constantinople. A garden in Blanga with a surface area of 15 modioi (approximately 40,000 square meters) was part of the property of the monastery. Following the Ottoman conquest of

the city, Langa gardens entered the endowment deeds of various sultanic complexes. Ottoman documents from the second half of the 16th century record at least three charitable foundations in İstanbul that had market gardens in **Lanqa**: the Süleymaniye Mosque complex had 18, and the charitable foundations of Aya Sofya and Sultan Selim had several gardens each, though the precise number is still unclear.

The Polish-Armenian merchant Simeon marveled in 1609 at how populous the city of İstanbul was, with its numerous artisans, schools, coffee houses, markets, and palaces. But he didn't forget to describe **Lanqa**, or 'Valanga' as he calls it, as an orchard that was 'larger than a city'. This was not as much of an exaggeration as it may seem. A 'rescue' archaeological excavation conducted in the early 2000s showed that the Langa coastal region had been used as a garbage-disposal site in the Ottoman period. Some of the Langa gardens were created in the sea where the trash was deposited.

And it was from the part of the city that was so frequently associated with the unwanted and disposable that a new taste emerged. In the 16th century, the Ottoman scholar Mustafa Karahisari says that the cucumber is a famous fruit. A court record of 1662 for Eyüp notes the prices of foods sold on the market. Among them was a variety of cucumber (**hıyār**) called **lanqa**, listed side-by-side with a cucumber called *yerli* (local).

While the existence of a 'local' cucumber on the market in Eyüp makes sense – the town was a center of a district that bordered İstanbul and was known for its agricultural production – the designation *lanqa* points, somewhat more surprisingly, to a variety that originated in İstanbul itself.

Since the 17th century, Istanbulites across linguistic, religious and class lines have associated cucumbers with Langa, and Langa with cucumbers. One of the earliest records of Langa cucumbers is found in the writings of the Armenian writer Eremya Çelebi (d. 1695), a native of Langa. In the introduction to his history of İstanbul, written in 1681, Eremya Çelebi envisions a traveler in a boat sailing along the Marmara coast and approaching his native city by sea. As the boat moves northward,

Eremya Çelebi notes that the market gardens of 'Small Vlanga' are around the Davud Paşa Gate; he adds that the cucumbers growing there are very big. For Eremya Çelebi, farming is part of the urban experience, and *bostans* and their cucumbers are elevated to the status of monuments that a traveler arriving at İstanbul would hope to observe and taste. He was hardly alone among his contemporaries in characterizing Langa as a place of cucumbers. Eremya's contemporary, the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682), also a native Istanbulite, mentions the Langa cucumbers in a humorous description of the Habsburg Emperor Leopold, whom Evliya met in 1665 in Vienna. Far from his native İstanbul, Evliya Çelebi notes that the emperor's unusually large fingers resembled 'Langa cucumbers', perhaps evoking the paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, which he might have seen in Vienna, in which the Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II is portrayed as a composite of various fruits and vegetables.

When we erase Langa cucumbers from the history of the city, an entire web of plant, animal and human relationships that made the city in the first place disappears from our sight. It is an erasure of a being that was used by Istanbulites to measure the world and describe the experience of urban life. It is an erasure of the memory of a different kind of city. To go to Langa and eat its vegetables has been attested to since the 16th century, with the 20th century İstanbul writer Sermet Muhtar Ulus being the last to report such practices of urban sociability.

Cucumbers were also sold on the streets of İstanbul in the summertime to cool down the bodies of those eating them and to quench their thirst. To not write or talk about the Langa cucumber is to erase the life cycles of those beings who depended on the cucumber: bees and a multitude of insects and bacteria that populate its flowers, leaves and root system. To displace the cucumbers from Langa is to make invisible the labor put into their growing by thousands of workers in the greenhouses and fields far away from the city, and to forget about the hardship in the fields.

To erase the memory of Langa cucumbers is to forget about the possibilities of a different kind of world ❀



A cluster of limestone cobbles and boulders found in Langa, 2008.
Yenikapı Excavations Geoarcheology Study Group

