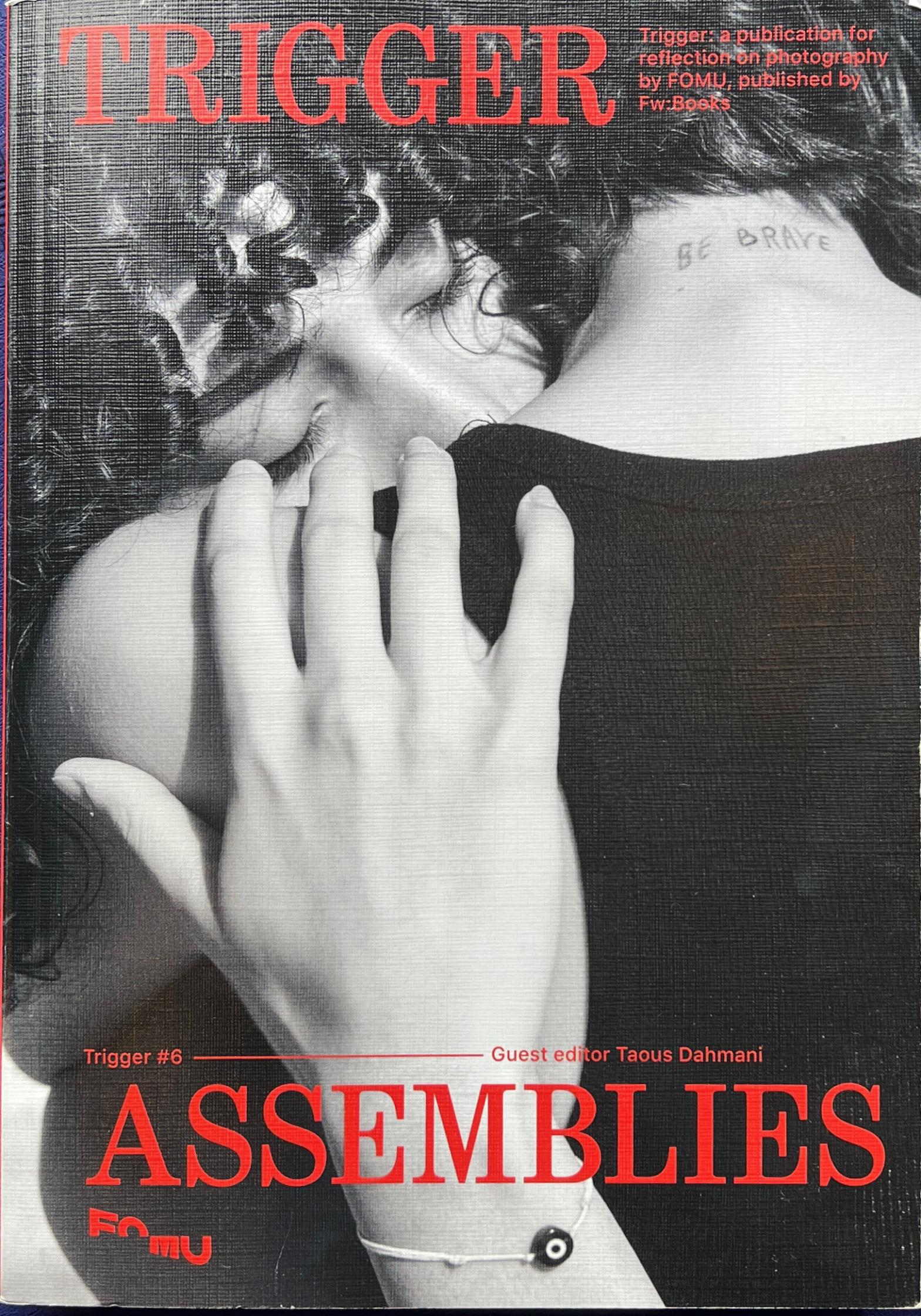


# TRIGGER

Trigger: a publication for reflection on photography by FOMU, published by Fw:Books



Trigger #6

Guest editor Taous Dahmani

# ASSEMBLIES

FOMU

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Trigger #6 — Assemblies

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# AT NIGHT, ON FAULT- LINES, IN ISTANBUL

Didem Pekün

**Didem Pekün** is an artist-film-maker and academic based in Istanbul and Berlin. Her interdisciplinary practice bridges theory and practice, addressing political violence, displacement, and the hopeful possibilities of shared futures. Shifting from history to futurity, her films have been shown and exhibited at the

Berlinale, Venice, British Film Institute, and Sarajevo film festivals, winning several awards. She sees both filmmaking and pedagogy as forms of collective, liberatory work. She currently teaches at Boğaziçi University and Sabancı University in Istanbul.

Didem Pekün / At night, on fault-lines, in Istanbul

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*Swimming in Fish Bowl*, still from the series at night, on faultline. Courtesy Dedim Pekün, 2024.



*Delirious*, still from the series *at night, on faultline*. Courtesy Dedim Pekün, 2024.

For twenty years, in the heart of Istanbul's Taksim district, just beside an old hammam, a small dance studio pulsed with life. Run by the collective *Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası* (ÇAK; 'The Barefoot Troupe'), it was a place where people gathered, insisted, and created.

Bands were born, workshops were held, bodies moved through music—and movements echoed uprisings and coups. In a city defined by unpredictability, this studio became a rare constant: a fragile, fiercely resilient shelter.

'A dream country', the collective's members once called it, following İlhan Berk's poem. Founded in 2003 in Istanbul's vibrant Beyo lu district, ÇAK was formed mostly by contemporary dancers who prized collaboration over hierarchy. They invented their own language of movement—born not just from training, but also from togetherness.

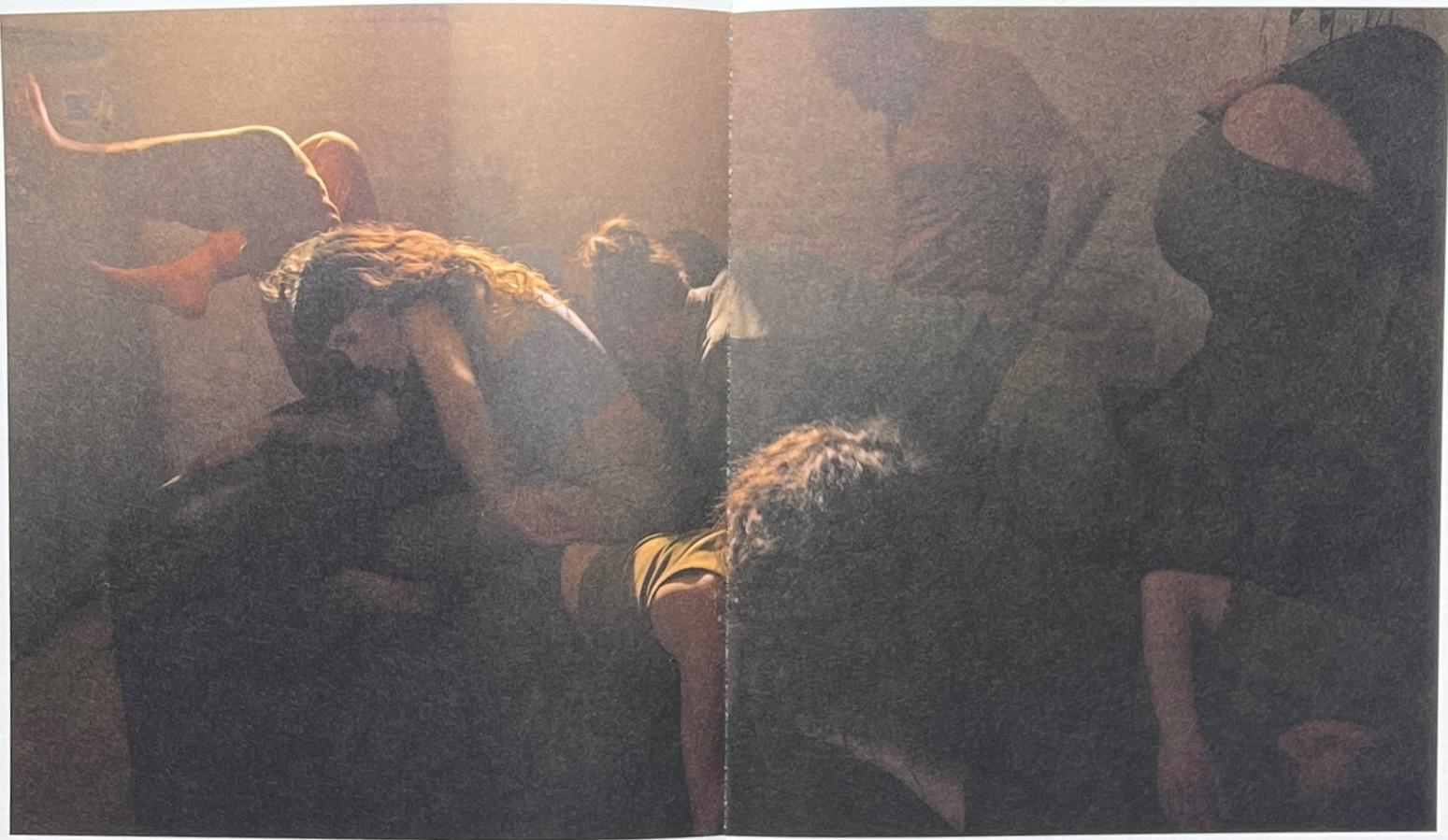
Across waves of political upheaval—from the Gezi Uprising to the 2015 coup attempt and the jailing of political opponents—one thing remained constant: bodies that resisted. As authoritarianism deepened, dissent was criminalised. Performance spaces vanished. In this climate, simply staying in Istanbul became an act of defiance. While many artists and intellectuals went into exile, those who stayed made a conscious, stubborn choice to remain.

In early 2023, just before another rupture reshaped our region—a devastating earthquake across Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—an artistic collaboration began to take shape between one of ÇAK's founders, Mihran Tomasyan, and myself.

Then loss cracked the landscape. Thousands of lives vanished. And something in us broke open too. Amid grief, we turned to improvisation. For three nights in that same studio, we gathered: seven dancers, two musicians, a small crew. No script. No outcome. Only presence.

Improvisation—responding to one another's bodies and to the music without a predetermined choreography—is, I believe, a political act. It invites us into a space of radical openness. We listen with our bodies. We adjust. We echo. We resist imposed rhythms and instead move with one another towards a collective sensibility, a shared pulse.

But improvisation is mystical too. A breath, a horn note, a pause, something fleeting but real passing between us. It is a kind of synchrony beyond words, what Barthes might call *punctum*, or what jazz musicians recognise when a solo lands just right.



*Last Dinner, still from the series at night, on faultline.* Courtesy Dedim Pekün, 2024.

And perhaps it is no accident that this moment of improvisation happened *on fault-lines*.

Quite literally, Istanbul rests on a seismic boundary. The ground beneath the city holds the memory of future collapse. After the February 2023 quake—one of the deadliest in recent memory—we were reminded: The earth is never fully still.

But there are other kinds of fault-lines too. Political, ecological, emotional. We have learned to live with instability—sometimes precariously, sometimes joyfully. And so this improvisation unfolded in layered fault zones of land, of belonging, of time.

The key word that emerged again and again was *despite*. Despite fear. Despite loss. Despite precarity.

The studio, the hammam, Istanbul itself—each is a house built on shifting ground.

And for those three nights, we asked:

How do we keep living under threat?

How do we normalise fear and live fearlessly?

In collective improvisation, where does one body end and another begin?

The music began with drums—steady, insistent. Then the French horn, its breathy swell animating the room. Sound opened space. Movement followed.

This process became the heart of *At Night on Fault-Lines*, a five-screen video installation. The work moves across multiple temporalities and emotional states, combining footage of our improvisations with found images, voice, and landscape. The installation reflects on bodily co-presence under pressure, how people gather and respond to invisible tremors—personal, historical, tectonic. The five screens act as parallel pulses, sometimes in rhythm, sometimes in rupture.

Moving from one film to another, like Bérenger in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, I find myself among those who resist turning grey—resist the slow transformation into something other, something monstrous. In that play, Bérenger alone refuses to conform. Likewise, in this project as well as in the film I am currently making, I ask: What does it mean to hold on to tenderness, to refuse dehumanisation, to remain human when everything pushes towards numbness?

Whether threatened by politics, earthquakes, or the erasure of time itself, we claimed—if only for a moment—a form of presence that danced and played its way into being.

At night, on fault-lines.