

the social readymade: ahmet ögüt

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A clever conceptualist, a witty jester, and recently, a passionate social organiser, Ahmet Ögüt is an artist who cites historical pranksters and tricksters, such as Nasreddin Hodja (a thirteenth-century Sufi wise-man figure, known as a pedagogic and satirical storyteller), Till Eulenspiegel (a popular impudent trickster figure from Middle Low German folklore) and their twentieth-century successors, actors and filmmakers Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati, as figures whom he admires. Though his projects have taken a “social turn” in recent years, his works are marked by an unyielding sense of humour, an acute awareness of invisible social codes and an ability to adroitly pack these ideas, along with candid analyses, into forms—or what the artist himself calls the “social readymade”.¹

Ögüt first made his mark on the Turkish art scene through his playful works that investigate the power and reach of State control. Born in Diyarbakır and of Kurdish descent, he experienced and observed firsthand many absurd moments of the State’s manifestation of power. Early works, such as a 2003 untitled photographic series made with Osman Bingöl, referred to the proximity between political figures and army officials—documenting a role-play performance with scenes, such as the army official sticking his hand in the mouth of the politician, or the politician chasing the soldier with a hand-held camera. The video *What a Lovely Day* (2004), in which undercover police, parked at a deserted roadside, stop and search civilians, touched upon the looming presence of undercover police in daily life, as well as the random searches and identity card checks citizens are regularly subjected to—especially in the conflict-prone southeastern region of Turkey.

Since public space serves as the symbolic realm, where the push and pull between the individual and the political is acted out, it features prominently in Ögüt’s practice. In *Somebody Else’s Car* (2005), a pair of slide projectors shows the artist targeting



two parked cars, and within moments transforming one of them into an Istanbul taxicab and the other into a Turkish police car (using only colored paper cut-outs), Ögüt mischievously hints at the codes of identification and the ways in which public space is activated by the visual presence of these codes. In the short animation *Light Armored* (2006), a camouflaged armoured vehicle, similar to those used by the Turkish police, is shown as it is hit by small stones thrown by unseen assailants. It is obvious that this vehicle belongs to the police forces or the army and the attack seems to be a pathetic, almost comical attempt, as the stones bounce off its armor without causing any damage. The simple piece was originally shown on the digital billboard atop the Marmara Pera hotel in a touristic area of Istanbul. Perhaps not so surprisingly, it was taken down after complaints from the local police on account of the work’s potential for provocation.

It seems that acts of vandalism, censorship, copying (or appropriation) befall Ögüt’s works more frequently than that of other artists.² These stories were the subject of a recent performance entitled *The muscles behind my eyes ache from the strain* (2013) held during the *Istanbul Biennial’s opening week*, and which referred to *Light Armored*, as well as other works that were censored, stolen, attacked or appropriated. While Ögüt told the misfortunes that befall his works, while standing on the top of the Galata Tower, a curious crowd was instructed to gather on the rooftop of a nearby building, facing up at the tower, but unable to hear the artist. Instead, Ögüt’s words were interpreted and delivered by a lip-reading specialist with the help of a pair of binoculars. The content of Ögüt’s lecture-performance was determined by the abilities of the lip reader and was, at times, fully coherent and unintelligible at others. Among other stories, the viewers learned that his helium balloon



work entitled *Castle of Vooruit*—in the shape of Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte’s floating rock from the painting *Le chateau des Pyrénées* (1961) — which launched near the Vooruit Arts Centre (a reference to the socialist history of Ghent) was mysteriously shot with bullets more than once.

As in *Somebody Else’s Car* or *Light Armored*, cars and roads feature prominently in Ögüt’s practice — not only because they reflect an interest in public space and how it is organised, but also because they signify the fast transformation of a country like Turkey, simultaneously slapped in the faced with modernity, nationalism and economic growth. His installation *Across the Slope* (2007) consists of a modified Fiat 131 Mirafiori balanced precariously across an artificial slope constructed in the gallery space. Elongated to resemble a limousine, this locally-assembled, middle-class automobile hints at the invisible obstructions to naive bourgeois aspirations. A year later in 2008, Ögüt subtly transformed the main exhibition hall at Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin by covering its 400-square metre floor with asphalt for *Ground Control*. This seemingly minimal gesture created a chain of associations: a sense of public space continuing into private; the State’s presence through infrastructure in both physical space and the collective psyche; and a reference to the symbolic power of road building in rural areas of Turkey, implying improved access, security and also increased government control.

The futile act of stone throwing in *Light Armored* can be read in connection to a more recent work, which will also be the work that the artist will re-visit for the upcoming *Biennale of Sydney*. First realised at Lisbon’s Kunsthalle Lissabon, *Stones to Throw* (2011) is an installation as well as a mail and public art project. The artist employs the practice of “nose art”, which refers to a kind of decorative painting or design — painted in World War I on the fuselage of military aircrafts — on stones he collected in different cities. These stones, adorned with borrowed aircraft graffiti, are first displayed in the exhibition space and later sent to the artist’s hometown of Diyarbakır, one by one, replaced on their designated plinths by the courier’s delivery forms. At the very end of the exhibition, all but one stone remains. Meanwhile, the stones sent to Diyarbakır are received by the artist’s friend, who randomly places them on the streets of the city and documents them before they disappear into the urban fabric. Unlike the animated and hence hypothetical stones that bounce off the armoured vehicle in *Light Armored*, here the “stones to throw” that are sent to Diyarbakır refer to the hard-to-believe, but yet concrete phenomenon of a growing number of children, who are being arrested for throwing stones.

Until recently, characterising the practice of artist Ahmet Ögüt was an easier task: one could say that above all, it was the whimsical sensibility and humour, as well as the strong but subtle resistance against power structures that was the running thread in his drawings, sculptures, installations, videos and artist books. However, with his most recent projects, Ögüt seems to be slowly departing from the role of conceptual jester and shifting towards becoming a creator of instances of alternative collectivity or pockets of radical democracy. While Ögüt's work still at times comes back to situations specific to Turkey, referring to political, historical and economic issues in his native country, in his most recent works the artist isolates and explores universal instances of inequality or restricted freedom.

Sharply directed at the art world's own failing systems of fair-minded professional conduct and exploitation of free labour, his project *Intern VIP Lounge* (2013), commissioned by Art Dubai Projects within the larger framework of the Art Dubai fair, comprised a VIP lounge conceived for the unpaid interns volunteering at the art fair. Playing off the absurd levels of exclusivity of the art fair itself, this project not only turned the hierarchical system on its head but this gracious mockery – complete with chocolate fountain, table tennis tournament, massage, popcorn and its own program of talks (in mirroring the fair's own talks' program) and purposefully selected screenings of films and video works, such as Andrew Norman Wilson's *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, Pilvi Takala's *The Trainee*, Mark Leckey's *Green Screen Refrigerator* or Marianne Flotron's *Fired* (by Marianne Flotron) – actually offered a refuge for art world's unacknowledged labourers. An even more intricately organised and constantly developing project is *The Silent University*, which Ögüt initiated in collaboration with the Delfina Foundation and Tate Modern in 2012. An ongoing undertaking with numerous authorial participants, The Silent University is becoming an entity of its own, existing both inside and outside the parameters of an art project. On his personal website, it is not listed under Ögüt's own works, as he stresses that he is only the initiator of what he describes as an "autonomous knowledge exchange platform by and for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants." He explains the structure in the following way: "It is led by a group of lecturers, consultants and research fellows. Each group is contributing to the program in different ways, which include course development, specific research on key themes, as well as personal reflections on what it means to be a refugee and asylum seeker. This platform will be presented using the format of an academic program."³

The Silent University was first developed with immigrants and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, who are unable to perform their professional occupation of teaching due to their restricted visa status or a lack of official work permits. Working with members of this growing demographic, Ögüt formed a community of people allied through frustration at their inability to teach. As an intricate bureaucratic exercise involving classrooms, schedules, lecture notes and students, the project's first public presentation at Tate Modern was a testament to failings of systems: due to legal issues preventing payment, it was decided that the lectures would not be delivered and the teachers remained silent.

Now, after a reconceptualisation, with an active website and a registration system, in which those who are interested in accessing the content produced by The Silent University are asked what skills and how much time they can offer in exchange, anyone can register and listen to the lectures, as well as read articles or translations online. The lecturers are paid each time, so they deliver their lectures instead of remaining silent, but the lectures are always given in the preferred (and often native language) of the lecturer. In the autumn of 2013, in an expansion of the project, The 1st Conference of The Silent University took place in the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin. Some of the highlights included a lecture about the history of Kurdish literature held in Kurdish by Sherko Jahani, and a presentation by Behnam Al Agzeer about ten types of Arabic calligraphy in Arabic. In an interview, Ögüt stated that he is "not interested in definitions like 'art' or 'social project', but rather in how we use the facilities each can provide. We often underestimate the potential of art, its capacity to achieve things. The Silent University is encouraged by necessity, urgency and need.

It's both people's and institutions' concern to think and take action on this issue. The Silent University can easily collaborate with an art institution or an NGO, as long as it's not described and understood as a 'project' or a 'workshop', but as an organisation that demands policy changing."⁴ The Silent University now has an office in Montreuil, Paris, in collaboration with Le 116 Centre d'Art Contemporain. Earlier in 2013, the university collaborated with Tensta Konsthall in publishing its reader with articles and interviews focusing on issues such as asylum rights' activism or gaining influence through local organising. It was awarded the Visible Award at the Museum of Arte Útil, which took place at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Despite, or because of, the willing involvement of numerous art institutions, the question of whether The Silent University is an art project or not might follow. At the first conference

for The Silent University, organised at Tate Modern, the question "When is it art and when is it creative organising?" arose. It is not easy to answer such a query. However, Caleb Waldorf of the Public School, Berlin, suggested that the question is beside the point, observing that, "Art as activism is a concern for critics and institutions but should not be a concern for the practitioner."⁵

As someone who has adopted an overarching strategy of pointing to the space between the political and the personal, it could be said that *The Silent University*, as an artistic and social endeavor, falls perfectly in line with Ahmet Ögüt's prior practice. It would only follow naturally that his practice will be all the more resourceful as it thrives in those fissures.

Notes

¹ From a conversation between Ahmet Ögüt, João Mourão and Luís Silva, on the occasion of the exhibition *Stones to throw*, held in Kunsthalle Lissabon in April 2011; <http://www.kunsthalle-lissabon.org/index.php?/ongoing/ahmet-oeguet/>

² For more misfortunes that befell Ögüt's work, including the stolen Guppy 13 boat in Amsterdam, refer to the article by H.G. Masters in *Art Asia Pacific*, March/April, 2011

³ Introductory statement from Silent University's official website; <http://thesilentuniversity.org/>

⁴ 'The Silent University' interview with Ahmet Ögüt in *Sleek* magazine, November 26, 2013; <http://www.sleek-mag.com/showroom/2013/11/the-silent-university/>

⁵ Stephanie Bailey, 'Alternative to What? A roundtable discussion at Tate Modern contemplates the role of alternative education', *Ibraaz* online platform, 21 December 2012; <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/47>

The 19th Biennale of Sydney: *You Imagine What You Desire* will be presenting the work of Ahmet Ögüt, 21 March–9 June, 2014

Page 49: Ahmet Ögüt,
Stones to throw, 2011
Opposite above: Ahmet Ögüt,
Stones to throw, 2011
(installation view from Apex Art, New York)
Opposite below: Ahmet Ögüt,
Light Armoured (animated video still), 2006
Photos courtesy the artist