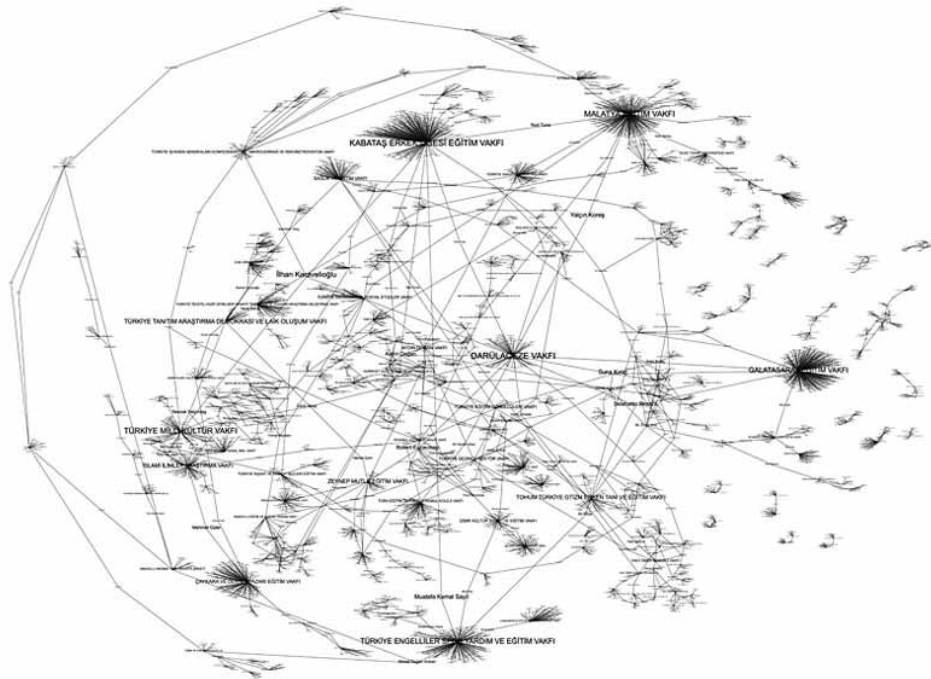

Saturated intolerance: resistance in Turkey in different forms



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Upon receiving an invitation for the *Shifting Sands*¹ symposium approximately a year ago, I've been thinking about focusing on the phenomenon of intolerance by considering the authoritarian direction of the current government in Turkey. Nevertheless, I was also puzzled with the optimistic view embedded in that particular invitation, as it was confirmation of how things could be read and interpreted quite differently from a distance. While Turkey has been seen as a perfect example to lead the Arab world—mainly in the beginning of the Arab Spring, the public who support the secular political views consider the last few years quite oppressive and dark in terms of democracy, social order and political direction in the country.

In Turkey's recent past there was always an unstable political climate with a constant social and cultural collective schizophrenia fed by conflicts between East and West, secularism and fundamental Islam, left and right, and eventually nationalism and separatism. It is a nation that experienced coup d'états in a loop of each decade: in 1960, in 1971 and in 1980. It is a past with visible ruptures. Hence, such ruptures may also raise sceptical questions, such as "Is it possible to fail to remember a repetitive past?", "What if such an amnesia is a systematically constructed defence mechanism?", "What if this defence mechanism is spontaneously programmed and applied on individuals by a system?" and eventually, "What if such a system constantly hacks itself through a cognitive architecture of dissociations?"

More ruptures in the collective memory of Turkey could also be detected through the change of the alphabet. Several centuries after accepting Islam, Turks abandoned their original alphabets, *Orhon* and *Uygur*, and began to use the Arabic script in the sixteenth century. After the foundation of the new State in 1923, the alphabet was changed in the entire country in 1928. New books were written in Latin to be taught in the schools as the extension of the Unitarian State policy. This drastic change addresses ruptures in the history with the inability to read and access to the historical sources. It is essentially about the short and long-term memory loss of a nation.

In a parallel line, the story of the contemporary art scene in Turkey is quite short and lacks national references, since it has only developed over the last thirty years. There were individual, yet isolated efforts during the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, the coup d'état in 1980 was a serious rupture together with the social, economic and cultural changes introduced by policies of the State along with the new migration flows. The 1990s followed these developments with the intensifying civil war between the State and the PKK,² unaccounted murders, people missing in custody, pressure on the universities and the deliberate tendencies to create an apolitical generation. At the same time, this particular decade started to shape the contemporary art scene with the increasing influence of the *Istanbul Biennial*, along with the accession of some artists into international contemporary art circuits and self-initiated major exhibitions organised by a large group of young artists, particularly in Istanbul. This was mostly the outcome of individual

efforts and the successes of artists and curators, even for the institutions. The *Istanbul Biennial* has a special significance in this development. As there was a lack of museums or any kind of contemporary art institutions, the *Biennial* presented a noticeable mode of education for the young generation of artists. Additionally, during the 1990s these artists were against institutionalism, with the liberty to be politically and economically autonomous. The art market had other priorities and agendas, and regardless of a few exceptions, it did not really overlap with the contemporary art scene. By the end of the decade and the beginning of the new millennium, new institutions, artist initiatives, alternative independent formations and museums with diverse connections to the international art networks came into view in Istanbul.

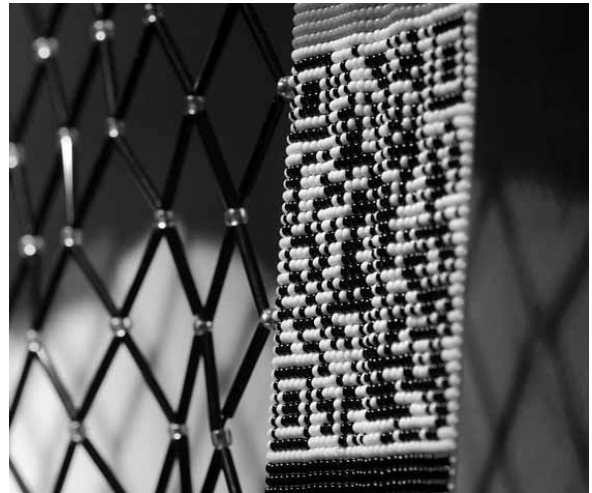
The lack of any kind of subsidy and technical infrastructure not only drove the artists, curators and initiatives into inventing alternative solutions and ways of production, but also led them to become at last institutionalised. Most of the artist groups registered as associations in order to become eligible to apply for funds. After 2000, each sector of the contemporary art scene became an element of the commodified art marketplace, either through donations, funds and subsidies, or through their operational visibility.

The first generation of contemporary art galleries in Istanbul was opened in response to international demand. The first collector group mostly consisted of celebrities, investors and prestige seeking business people; as a result they caught the attention of the local mainstream. Subsequently, more art galleries opened with some becoming involved with “contemporary art”, while a new and diverse group of collectors began to commission contemporary artworks, consulting curators, gallerists and art dealers. This development led to an increasing interest in Turkish contemporary art by international collections, collectors and art dealers. Now there are numerous important art institutions that shape the art environment, such as SALT (an outcome from Platform), Arter, Depo, Akbank Art Center, Yapi Kredi Galleries and Publications along with IKSV (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Art) that organises the *Istanbul Biennial* and the Pavilion of Turkey at the *Venice Biennale*. All of these institutions are linked to private capital. Museums such as Sabanci Museum, Pera Museum, Istanbul Modern, SantralIstanbul, Project 4L and IMAGO were all launched in the 2000s, being private initiatives. Regardless of these developments, the overall situation challenges art production and artists. The market explicitly or implicitly dictates its own fields of interest and artists have been dependent upon a system that is based on accepted terms. There remain a number of exceptional individuals and entities though that transcend and challenge the authoritarian and the neo-liberal requirements of the art market.

These same conditions then merged with both a dysfunctional system of law and order and the country’s developing anti-democratic politics, resulting in rigid divisions within society. Middle ground ideologies began to dissolve with the government’s authoritarian approach leaving no room for either freedom of expression or criticism. Criticism of or questioning issues could only be in favour of the governing party’s policies. At a rapidly developing pace, Turkey has become subject to Internet filters, various forms of censorship in the media, and unfounded criminal accusations against online platforms for alternative voices.

At this point, I would like to illustrate the situation through the most visible form of suppression—Internet censorship. Turkey has a long history of Internet censorship, becoming more noticeable and advanced since 2005. Beginning with a list of one hundred and thirty-eight keywords banned from Turkish domain names in 2011, Turkey’s Information Technologies and Communications Authority (BTK) eventually applied a centralised filtering system in 2012. To this day the laws relating to the Internet have been intentionally set aside and subject to arbitrary alterations and interpretations. As writer Özgür Uçkan says, “Up to this centralised filtering system, people were not really concerned about Internet censorship because they could easily bypass it (tunnels, DNS management etc). This indifference contributed also to legitimate censorship mechanisms.”³ Despite this social media sites and similar applications have been the main

Opposite: Burak Arikan, from the series *Network of Foundations and Corporations through shared Board Members: Turkey Edition*, 2010
Photo courtesy the artist
Below: Zeren Gökten, *There is Another Possibility* (installation detail), 2013
Photo courtesy the artist and CDA Projects Gallery, Istanbul
Page 192: Hera Büyüksaçıyan, *In Situ*, 2013
Photos courtesy the artist



communication tool for resistance, as well as the only way to circulate immediate information and news about ongoing events. It is obvious that the Internet has provided a platform for public organisation beyond the control of the government. Social media has functioned as a spontaneous platform for the resistance or as political writer and essayist Hakim Bey’s has termed as “Temporary Autonomous Zones”. With the Gezi Park Protests in Istanbul on 28th of May 2013, the resistance towards intolerance took its own shape across Turkey. The suppression of freedom of expression and assembly, control of mainstream media and the government’s violation on secularism and law have become internationally visible. Now, this civic uprising designates a transition period in Turkish society.

In this context, as a curator what is at stake is the strategic movement of artistic practices that might constitute diverse opinions without being entrapped within this suppression. Instead of recording failures and repeating them as silent witnesses or victims, the critical issue is the investigation of the mechanisms behind these entrapments. I would like to conclude this text by navigating through some of the artistic practices of Burak Arikan, Hera Buyuktasciyan and Zeren Goktan that illustrate diverse artistic approaches, methodologies and different viewpoints, to understand this ongoing situation.

Burak Arikan’s work, *Network of Foundations and Corporations Through Shared Board Members: Turkey Edition* (2010), confronts issues ranging from the political to the economical and cultural sustainability in networked environments, applying techniques such as network mapping and analysis, programming, and protocol authoring. His network map contains the tax-exempt foundations in Turkey and the public corporations listed on the Istanbul Stock Exchange. Nodes represent institutions or board members, and connections represent board membership. The network database include three hundred and fifty public corporations, two hundred and thirty-four tax-exempt foundations and their three thousand three hundred and ten board members in total. The map organises itself by running as a software simulation where the names naturally find their position on the image surface through connecting forces, revealing the central protagonists, indirect links, organic clusters, structural holes and outliers. Clusters of institutions on this map show institutions of institutions, Arikan defining them as “super-institutions” which have

a high power concentration in society. Another of Burak Arıkan's works, *Islam, Republic, Neoliberalism* (2012) comprises three network maps where mosques, republican monuments and museums and shopping centres dispersed throughout Istanbul, connect with each other within their areas of influence. These maps present a comparative display of network patterns that are formed through associations linking those architectural structures that represent the three dominant ideologies—Islam, Republic and neoliberalism—in Turkey. *Network of Republic Monuments* are connected through the physical proximity of the republic monuments and museums in Istanbul; *Network of Mosques* are connected through overlapping call to prayer sounds of more than three thousand mosques in Istanbul; and *Network of Shopping Malls* connect through the overlapping range of reach of the shopping malls in Istanbul.

Another artist, Hera Büyüktasçıyan opened an installation titled *In Situ* at PiST/// about a week before the beginning of the Gezi Park riots in Istanbul. Büyüktasçıyan addressed unspoken personal memories and histories in society with her research-based projects. In her works, the ambiguous relationship between the physicality and mental presence of an image sets the conditions of both the personal and collective memory of space. *In Situ* came into view as a result of a four month research and production residency provided by PiST///. Due to the course of her research on spatial, social and historical memory, Büyüktasçıyan focused on her own personal memory on the historical Pangalti Hamam building. As one of the many stunning examples of the government's attitude towards urban policy, this historical site was demolished in 1995 in order to build a five star hotel. With a unique poetic narrative language, Büyüktasçıyan's installation reconstructed memory vignettes by activating compulsory acts of confrontation, integration, and adaptation. This work was made from cubes of soap—soap becoming the connecting device between acts of forgetting and remembering, speaking for both the physical and the mental. In its referencing paving stones that have been in a constant 'shift' during the protests in Istanbul since Gezi Park, this installation challenged its audience by creating changes within the perceived pictorial space; overlapping the dialectics, processes and the dynamics of the resistance in Turkey.

The third artist, Zeren Göktaş's work *Counter*, is a project about women who have been subjected to acts of violence in Turkey. Although it is a very urgent and severe social problem, it is a subject to which the government has been totally indifferent. *Counter* is a two-tier work comprising an online memorial to the deceased and a series of shroud covers inspired by ideas of the afterlife in ancient Egyptian mythology fabricated by male prison inmates using beads. An ancient Egyptian shroud on a coffin tells stories, each pattern and shape is made from beads. The shroud embraces the body as an interface between this world and the next. The bead stringing is a similar act of coding, each pixel and each bead forming an object. The two seemingly stand-alone pieces are connected through QR codes embedded in the beaded nets. Through this 'gateway' the viewer is invited to scan the code embedded into the beaded shrouds to visit a memorial website where a digital counter indicates the number of women killed by violence in the year 2013 in Turkey, updated by an NGO and the artist after each death. Each bead turns to a pixel; each murder turns to a number; and each story swings in limbo.

I not only see these works as another form of resistance, but also as the production of knowledge. Similar to how the brain operates through nerve cells acting together, these works illustrate how social, political, cultural and economic networks interconnect simultaneously in the country. These works are significant at numerous levels for the realisation of and understanding the mechanisms behind multiple forms of censorship, and the visible resistance and its suppression in Turkey.

Notes

¹ *Shifting Sands*, a two city two day symposium of speakers from the Middle East North Africa (MENA), focusing on art production and presentation in a region circumscribed by change and turbulence, was hosted by the Contemporary Art Centre of SA and presented in Sydney in conjunction with Artspace and Campbelltown Art Centre 23-25 August, 2013 (see http://www.cacsa.org.au/?ai1ec_event=shifting-sands-conference-sydney-adelaide&instance_id=34). This text was presented at the symposium, as was the following text by Sheyma Buali, 'Fragmented images: framing, performativity and networks of circulation'

² The Kurdistan Workers Party, considered a terrorist organisation by the Turkish government

³ Notes from 'Resistance: Özgür Uçkan and Vasif Kortun in conversation with Basak Senova'; <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/92>

