

Ahmet Ögüt: "Legal obstacles are a way of sabotaging knowledge"



AHMET ÖĞÜT

Ahmet Ögüt is a Kurdish artist, sociocultural initiator and lecturer born in 1981. Working across a variety of media, including photography, video and installation, Ögüt often uses humour and small gestures to comment on pressing social and political issues. In 2012, he initiated the Silent University, an international education platform motivated by the belief that everybody has the right to educate. In order to address these concerns, the platform offers transversal pedagogical programmes led by lecturers, consultants and research fellows who are displaced people and forced migrants. The platform operates without language limitations or bureaucratic obstacles. The platform, which was part of the 2022 Istanbul Biennale, has active branches in Stockholm, Sweden and Mülheim, Germany. Previously there have been branches in Amman, Athens, London and Hamburg.

Interview by Thomas Roueché

Portrait by Albe Hamiti

THOMAS ROUECHÉ This must be the first time the Silent University has been shown in Turkey in a while.

AHMET ÖĞÜT The first time in ten years.

TR Are you happy with how it's gone?

AÖ When it's your town, it's better not to rush! Ten years sounds like a long time, but for the Silent University, there's no time. The Silent University is a parasitic institution, independent and autonomous, and even though I'm the initiator, other people can take over, so we can do more outside my limited institutional structures. It has a longer duration than an institution might support financially. There are always these short-term engagements to involve an artist with a community, and I knew from the very first concept of the Silent University in London that it was going to be different.

AO I did a one-year residency with the Tate and a Delfina residency.

TR How did the idea come about?

AÖ An interesting invitation. Delfina is a residency programme and this was its first collaboration with the Tate. The idea was to get an artist to spend more time in London – longer than their usual residency period of two months – to do a community-engaged project. No matter what kind of art I did, the public was always part of my practice. The idea of The Silent University was to involve individuals from a migrant background who have had a professional life and academic training in their home countries but due to their migrant status are unable to use their skills or professional training. I went to different community centres around London, many organisations and institutions that the Tate was involved with through its huge learning department, and also observed different migration centres and the process of seeking asylum through the Home Office in the UK. My own visa was complex to get, even though I had a grant and an invitation from two established institutions. Of course that is nothing compared to forced migrants arriving in the country without any contacts or invitation. How would you survive in such a situation? Later, when we started the Silent University in Sweden, I saw a huge difference in the process, an average of three years for someone to get citizenship if their case is very clear. In the UK, it was up to 10 years, 20 years. I knew a one-year residency programme would not be enough time to do anything effective about these issues. So from the beginning the Silent University was initiated and designed in a way that ensures longevity.

TR How did you design that? Institutions have built-in obsolescence, and funding, grants and residencies end. How did you manage to make it resilient in that way?

AÖ Intention is everything. It was important to focus on something other than my authorship. One of the main newspapers in the UK wanted to have a page about the Silent University and asked, are you a school? An art project? I said, yes, we're a radical education platform. They said then we should put it on the education page. Do you have a curriculum? Do you have this? Do you have that? They were asking these formal questions of a university that does not require any technical criteria, but rather radically operates based on other principles; for that reason they then decided it was art. I told them that this is not art; it's an educational platform. They couldn't place us. The same was true of our engagement with institutions. In order to work with us, institutions would have to transform themselves to understand our principles. We don't see ourselves as a marginal education platform, but rather a model that could be applied to the mainstream education system. Every institution we worked with had to find solutions instead of us adjusting to their needs. That is why the Silent University is still around.

TR Was it always the aim that the Silent University would work sideways into an institution? As a form of institutional critique?

AÖ From the very beginning, we immediately started writing down practical and ideological principles to make collaboration easier. We knew that institutions do not radically change over the course of a meeting. They cannot change their structure, but what they can do is collaborate with an institution that practices these principles; by working with us, they are slowly transformed. Each time we partnered with institutions we saw immediate changes for those involved. For those involved in the University, visa and citizenship application processes all got faster. Legal obstacles are a way of sabotaging knowledge. The years pass and knowledge disappears. The other obstacle is language and training. Even if you have all your legal documents, it can take years to retrain. What happens to that knowledge in the meantime? It's not about colonial or decolonial discussions, unlearning or learning; it's about offering an immediate recognition to individuals, rather than waiting for their knowledge to receive official authorisation.

TR So you aim to push back against this sense of knowledge as authorised?

AÖ It's ridiculous that we focus on one central language. There are so many languages around the world. At our gatherings people are often speaking at least five or six different languages in one room. Do we see this as complex? Is it non-communication or is it the operation of communication? In Athens, we had meetings that discussed this. Each event was in multiple languages. Everyone was active in the room; you cannot just be the passive listener. This pushed back against the received understanding of assimilation and integration processes which are always top-down. This is how institutions changed as a result of the Silent University. One great example is our Stockholm branch's collaboration with the ethnographic museum. Museum staff came in with ethnographic objects and asked the Silent University participants if they recognised these objects. They might have more knowledge than what is written in the museum description. We also transformed the Ruhr area in Germany, so that every theatre now has at least three different language operators, which didn't exist before the Silent University's Mülheim branch opened. Institutions see how it

TR How has it evolved since 2013, since the conversation around migration became particularly politically heightened?

AÖ Thankfully we started in 2011, before Brexit and migration-as-crisis entered the headlines. The UK is one of the worst countries in which to claim asylum; the Home Office is skilled in divining an accent that is either Syrian or Palestinian, analysing people to see if they're telling the truth. The UK improved its Home Office, but not its education system, hiring university teachers and firing them over the summer so as not to pay them. The Home Office got more and more creative; museums, art museums and universities have become less creative. Organisations like universities are increasingly run by administrators. That is a place for knowledge, which should take priority, not economics. It is becoming analogous to the American system. The Silent University focuses on having educators from across the world. It's important that those educators coordinate and run it beyond linguistic and legal obstacles.

TR Before the project started, were you interested in radical pedagogy? Was this an area that you had engaged in within your work?

AÖ No, I've been in academia, in and out, but I was always independent, working as a guest professor. The moment there's an intervention in my engagement with the students by the school system, I leave. We stopped using the word refugee; we knew it created hierarchy. I remember a funny invitation from two official universities looking for a third university partner. They wrote to us, telling us that, "We are applying for this grant, and we want the Silent University as the third partner." We were like, "Great, how are you planning to divide the grants?" They said, "Silent University is not a real university; we will get the grant, and you will be invited to attend." They just reproduced the system failure by requesting to use the name of the Silent University, without intending to change anything in the existing system.

TR Have you taken the Silent University to a biennale before?

AÖ We generally avoid this kind of biennale context. When we do take part in them, we try to see if there is a potential community to engage with. In this case, we just did an orientation programme. It takes a year to see if there are potential institutions that might be interested in engaging in the long term. There was no question about reaching out to communities; Turkey has a vast range of migrant communities from all over the world. We found incredible new members who could represent the Silent University. They taught other coordinators and me, and they have already programmed so many events without us. So, we transfer the budget directly to them to organise events, screening programmes, gatherings and collaboration with academics. We worked with Amal Jibril and Suha Nabhan. Amal is from Sudan; Suha is from Syria. What made them special is that they have their own initiative not run by Turkish activists or Turkish NGOs, but by themselves. Right now, they are full-time Silent University members who can go and present its mission anywhere. Suha already came to Venice; we got her first visa to Europe with a Syrian passport through the Silent University. Everybody was surprised we got her a visa; now she can get second and third European visas. The Silent University is involved with many international conferences, so they will be able to travel and represent it directly now.

TR Will it continue? Or is it just the orientation programme?

AÖ This is not the question to ask me. The rest is magic, you know.

TR It must mean a lot to have this happening for you personally.

AÖ Initially, in London, I pushed the project for three years. The Tate residency raised many issues. The institution wanted to continue the project, but they were too big. We could only get our participants inside the museum with somebody picking them up separately from security. We wanted to access the museum directly without being escorted. This is the recognition we needed. It is nice to be self-organised by the participants, even after their situation improves. It helps them to become coordinators. More competent, and self-empowered. That's the best thing to watch happen. ●

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