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AHMET ÖĞÜT: THE ARTIST REIMAGINING WHAT AN ART INSTITUTION IS AND CAN BE



Appointed Directors at A:D: Curational. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

According to The International Councils of Museums, a museum is a “not-for-profit institution...open to the public, accessible and inclusive, [fostering] diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” Despite this celebratory and optimistic definition, there are a number of issues created when art becomes institutionalised such as ownership, accessibility, diversity and representation. How may we address urgent issues through art in a non-traditional way? How can we create a space for discussion rather than dismissal? How can we create meaningful and supportive relationships between artists and institutions? Where does the role of the art institution, and the role of the artist, begin and end?

These are just some of the questions that sociocultural initiator, conceptual artist and lecturer Ahmet Öğüt is addressing through his multidisciplinary work. From photography to installation,

Öğüt often uses humour in conjunction with the viewer's body to reimagine the dynamic between institution and viewer, viewer and artist, artist and institution. Now, the Kurdish-Dutch artist is presenting an exhibition in Berlin at A:D: Curatorial, a nonprofit space and curatorial duo devoted to commissioning new works by diverse artists through interdisciplinary public programming. Titled Appointed Directors, the exhibition brings together a number of recently produced works and acts as a critical commentary on the institution space, a reminder of the importance of transparency and care in such spaces.

Ahead of the opening, SLEEK spoke with Öğüt about his place as an artist, ongoing collaborations with other artists and what a utopian art world may look like.



Appointed Directors at A:D: Curatorial. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

SLEEK: Your current exhibition *Appointed Directors* at A:D: Curatorial questions the role of art institutions and artists themselves. With these ideas in mind, where do you find your place as an artist?

Ahmet Öğüt: Over the years, my method has operated intentionally on the margins of different fields and disciplines creating intersections. My work has developed to include not only object-based artworks but also platforms, campaigns, debates, challenges and surprises. Often they make a demand for structural change. In turn, when necessary I have transformed to an initiator, interventionist, negotiator or mediator.

Throughout my evolving practice, my instinct has always been the same: keep developing my practice in a way that could still be dynamic enough to include the collaborative, discursive, pedagogic aspects. With the kind of work I do, I often need to negotiate and communicate with

every department of an institution. Working with artists who activate all the departments of the museum is still not a common practice; it requires a lot of negotiations to get the approval of all the departments by pushing them to think beyond regulations.

S: Looking at your other artworks, you are including other artists like Grace Jones, Angela Davis, and even Allan Kaprow. Where does your own connection to them come from?

AÖ: In life there are appointed mentors; and there are also mentors we choose ourselves, those ones are the lifetime ones. They are those who never changed their modest but principled, true to themselves personalities. I often incorporate contributions by other artists, intellectuals, and political theorists in my work, employing, in my terms, a “modular approach to authorship.” In this show there are such works; for instance my recent series of essay documentaries *Artists Making Music and Artworks Made at Home*, which include footage from works by Art & Language, Kim Gordon, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Nástio Mosquito and Ulay, among others. Such collaborations demonstrate how this practice activates a collective trust among intergenerational artists and thinkers and necessitates the revision of institutional collections in a simultaneously friendly and antagonistic way.

S: A lot of your artworks include the medium of typography, which is so present in today’s logocentric world. Why do you choose this art form? What does that mean to you?

AÖ: My work is rooted in movements like Lettrism, The Situationist International and Hurufiyya Movement, as the medium of typography has been used as a form of protest and intervention to the social and political reality of everyday life. I’m interested in finding ways of disrupting social protocols by making minor shifts in their most basic forms. The political power of signage and typography cannot be underestimated.

S: You grew up in a place where voices and opinions were silenced. At what point did you feel an impulse to express your voice through art?

AÖ: I grew up in a place where civil war was part of daily life, where safety in public space was divided into day and night, into wide roads and back streets. I am not coming from a place where world views of “Western morality” or ethics as “conventional wisdom” were taken for granted. I am coming from a place where I learned the importance of consciousness—more importantly, collective consciousness—when one is isolated both culturally and politically. From the very beginning I knew it has never been about making “political art”, but rather using art to create change despite oppression.

S: What is your emotional process when translating your experiences growing up or societal issues into art?

AÖ: I’m glad you asked this question. It may sound like emotion does not play a crucial role for my art practice. It does. Perhaps that is why I wrote a statement in 2014 with the title of “Making Decisions with Heart in Times of Crisis”. It was a critical moment during the Sydney Biennale controversy. As the participating artists we were left alone to make our own ethical decision, the main sponsor was signed up to run two detention camps. I listened to my heart and took the decision to do a conditional withdrawal from the biennale together with a few other inspiring artists. Maintaining ethical standards in the art world is the responsibility not only of artists, but also cultural institutions and those who support them. Any decision taken by an institution should be made in respect to its public, the people who work for it and the artists who collaborate with it.

S: Since your current exhibition challenges the meaning and existence of the art world, what would a utopian art world look like for you?

AÖ: In 2019, artist Burak Arikan and I have initiated Code of Acquisitions; a platform that exposes good and bad practices of art institutions, galleries, and studios based on published policies as well as cases of misconduct and abuse. Often a legal action is not possible to solve the conflict because of the precarious conditions of artists, and particularly because of the lack of establishing an individual juristic act overseas. Submissions have contributed to a database of conflicts, codes, and interactive visualisations that aimed to increase awareness about the issues and did hold organisations accountable through their reputation.

Another platform I have been working on, in collaboration with Collecteurs (the first digital museum of private collections). I will save the details for later, but for now I can share that it will be an antidote to the distorted art market value system, a new way to evaluate artistic influence. It’s not for no reason I have written that hardly visible small question; “Can we change the system?” on the main wall of the exhibition with an answer underneath as large as it can get: “Absofuckinglutely”.

Image Courtesy of the Artist.

Ahmet Ögüt's exhibition Appointed Directors is open to view at A:D: Curational from 9th October to 15th December.

Words by **SLEEK**

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