

Ahmet Öğüt

"Most monuments sympathize with the victorious... I'm more interested in monuments which depict ongoing struggles."

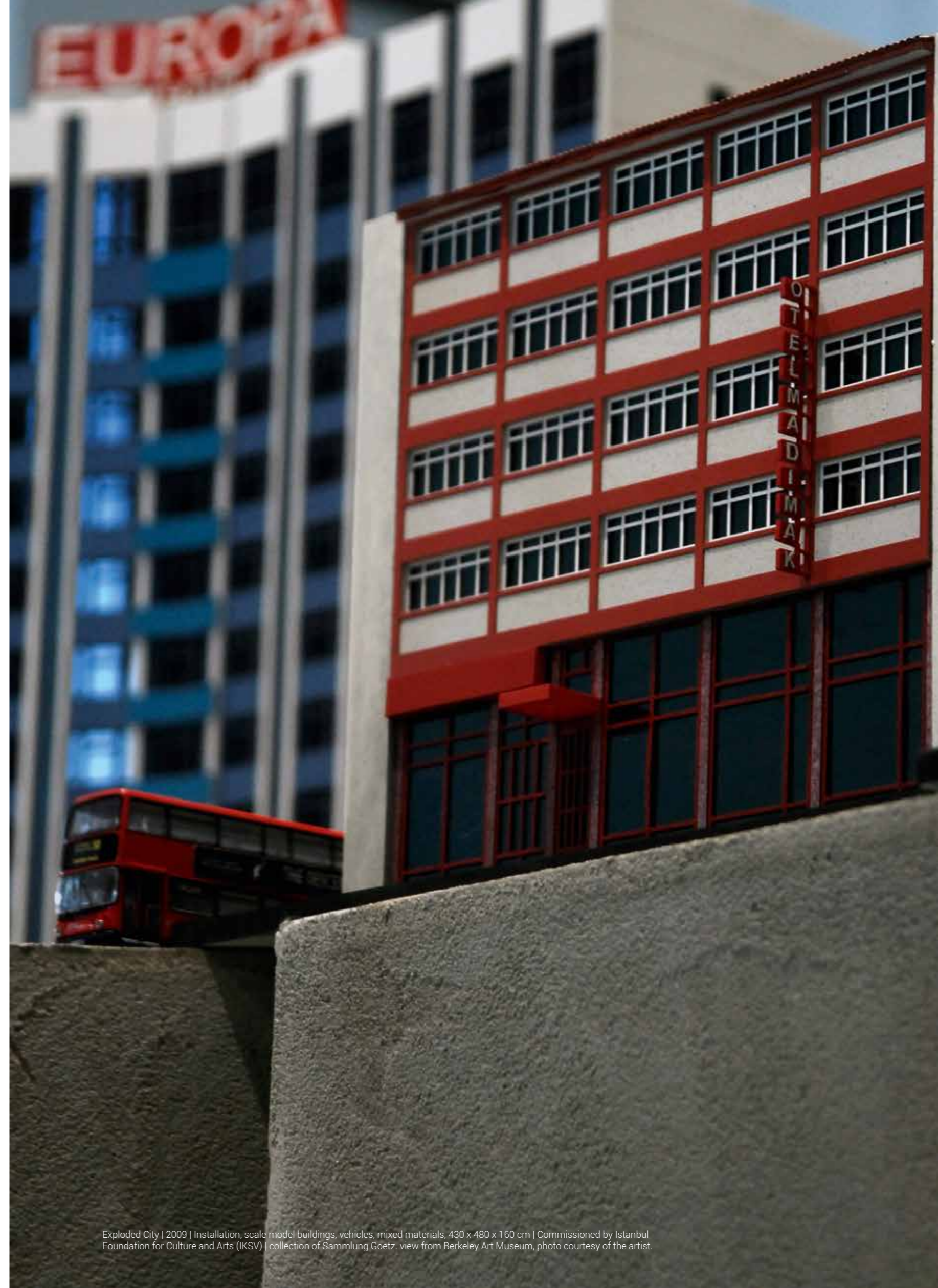
Words by Harry Burke

In his 2013 book *The Migrant Image*, art historian T. J. Demos writes about "crisis globalization." For Demos, "crisis globalization" describes the false promises of democracy and egalitarian society, and details the experiences of migrants and refugees who seek better standards of living as they "escape from repressive regimes, widespread poverty, and zones of conflict." Addressing these movements in the realm of art as well as politics, Demos calls for an "aesthetics of migration", in which images themselves are mobile, and evade simplistic meanings and systems of representation.

Öğüt, who was born one year after Kenan Evren's brutal 1980 military *coup d'état* in Turkey, grew up in the city of Diyarbakır at a time of escalating Turkish-Kurdish conflict. He has exhibited internationally since the early 2000s. His work often deals with migration, but at its most compelling, refuses to simply illustrate migrants' experiences. A

case in point is The Silent University, the solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform which Öğüt helped set up in cities across Europe, as well as in Amman, Jordan. Each school is run by its participants, and provides a collective teaching and learning site for people whose qualifications are not accepted in the country in which they are applying for residency or asylum.

Öğüt's gallery installations, which span media and geographies, interrogate ways in which governments oppress marginalized individuals on a systematic level. As a writer, Öğüt is a regular contributor to platforms like *Artforum*, where he questions the functions of art and speculative design in neoliberal economies. Always, his focus is on broadening the definitions of aesthetic and political engagement, while criticizing — with uplifting humor — both the perils of nationalism and the dangers of global thinking.





What is The Silent University?

The Silent University is a solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform. Our lecturers are academics in their home countries, but their qualifications are not recognized where they arrived. At The Silent University, they are recognized as academics outside of the restrictions of migration laws, language limitations and other bureaucratic obstacles. It began in the framework of a yearlong residency I did in London at the Delfina Foundation in collaboration with Tate Modern. I was there on the basis of a one-year visa, but I knew that if I developed this idea, it would outlast my stay there. This is our 8th year. The Silent University has been a platform of productive struggles. Currently there are a few autonomous self-run branches in Sweden, Germany and Denmark. Our principles are based on decentralized, participatory, horizontal and autonomous modes of education, without language and legal limitations.



'The Drifters', 2018, A balanced 80s Toyota Land Cruiser on two wheels. Commissioned by Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. Courtesy of the artist.

What was the reason behind naming it The 'Silent' University?

Our actions and principles define who we are and what we do. We don't agree with the widely disseminated yet casual use of the word 'refugee.' Our aim is to creatively reinvent alternative and radical vocabulary. 'Silence' is not just a metaphorical concept, and this is not just a symbolic project that is showing how awful the world is. Silence is a tool that is used by governments to pacify individuals who are expecting legal recognition and access to basic human rights. This psychological process is enforced through the use of time. We reverse and eventually abolish the effects of this process.

I like the idea of "productive struggles." Can you explain more about this?

Struggle starts with not being able to get paid legally or not having one common language in a room. Making a meeting happen in multiple



While Others Attack, 2016 installation is made up a series of bronze sculptures. View from Okayama Art Summit. Courtesy of the artist.



"Let's imagine you steal this poster" 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

"How can we imagine a city with comatosed memory?"

languages and finding a safe space for that can be a productive struggle. We actively rethink all the assumptions of the mainstream education system. The idea wasn't to create a marginalized school; rather, we force every institution to transform themselves by collaborating with The Silent University. Everyone involved will have to remain creative with presentation, bureaucracy and administration. It's not so different from working as an artist who is supposed to be available to travel all around the world. I get invitations from everywhere, but institutions don't always check if I can travel there, and only some of them find a way to make it happen. Cultural institutions need to be more progressive when dealing with these issues if they want to remain truly international, and not only work with artists who are coming from privileged countries.

In *Unconditional Basic Income Lounge*, presented at Kunsthaus Zürich in 2017, you problematized the idea of citizens' income. Why were you drawn to this issue?

Labor conditions and finance are essential topics to consider when rethinking the education system. When I was invited to come up with a new idea for the show at Kunsthaus Zürich, I wanted to address the recent basic income referendum that was held in Switzerland in 2016. It was a big campaign and mobilized many people, though it was ultimately rejected. Interestingly, Enno Schmidt, the co-founder of the Initiative Grundeinkommen, and the person who launched the Swiss campaign, originally studied art at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Ultimately, I found it troubling that most conversations around Unconditional Basic Income didn't go beyond questions of citizens and citizenship. Many of us are not citizens. That same year, I initiated the Centre for Urban Citizens together with curators Liana Fokianaki and Antonia Alampi, which began its existence in the exhibition *Extra Citizen* at Kunsthal Extra City in Antwerp. This project seeks different interpretations of citizenship and aims to provide rights and support structures for those without it. We looked into progressive forms of governance brought forward by several mayors: municipality-led alliances that have used loopholes within national laws in order to surpass legal limitations that the nation-state imposes on newcomers.

IDNYC, a free initiative introduced by Mayor de Blasio that offers anyone with New York residence access to institutions like banks, libraries, and schools, has been criticized for exposing undocumented people to the threat of federal investigation. Even progressive mayors mediate the state. Is it possible to imagine that art can reject state-sanctioned forms of representation? Or must artists seek greater inclusivity within the world as it exists?

If a mayor does a better job than an artist, I acknowledge it. Leoluca Orlando, the Mayor of Palermo, is a good example, though there aren't many. Sometimes it's the other way around — that art can do a better job — but not always. My interest is in imagining the concept of urban citizenship as a counter-apparatus — a tool beyond state representation. Integration and inclusivity are the wrong terms; it's more about radically transforming, reclaiming and expanding. The term 'alien' occurs in federal law under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of the United States. This says a lot in itself.

For Six Months (2016), consists of street signs of former art spaces in Istanbul: museums, galleries, foundations, nonprofits or artist-run spaces. It's an elusive work. Can you explain more about it?

When I started, I thought it was going to be a sad archive of the Istanbul art scene's recent past. People would see the signs and know that these art spaces had all closed. At the opening, what came as an important surprise was that there were a lot of people present who were involved with those institutions — maybe first as an intern or a technician, then as a director or artist. It made me realize that the work is more about the people who made the institutions happen. The people outlasted them.

Your work also deals with memorialization. Your bronze monument, *Information Power to the People* (2017), commemorates internet activist Aaron Swartz. *United* (2016–17), is a short animation in the Korean comic style of manhwa that tells the story of twenty-one-year-old protester Lee Han-yeol, who died in Seoul in 1987, and Enes Ata, a six-year-old Kurdish boy who lost his life during protests in Diyarbakir, Turkey, in 2006. Alongside these are artworks that deal with the legacies of political activists like Karl Marx and Angela Davis. How do these figures link together?

Most monuments sympathize with the victorious. They are mostly solid and stuck in the past. I'm more interested in monuments which depict ongoing struggles — monuments in motion. These are monuments which the next generations can reinterpret, creating their own meaning. In *Information Power to the People*, I suspended a bust of Aaron Swartz above a classical plinth held by a crane. This monument is frozen ambiguously between the moment of the bust's placement or removal. When I borrowed the Karl Marx sculpture from Humboldt University in Berlin, it had been in the university's basement for over twenty-five years. I decided to display it together with the dust it had accumulated — as if the passing of time didn't want to disappear. Angela Davis is still with us and is still inspiring. Davis got her honorary Ph.D. from Humboldt University during the times of the German Democratic Republic. The disproportionate number of male portraits in the hall of the university was a good enough reason to bring back this memory. Lee Han-yeol and Enes Ata — they are both victims — but here they are instead portrayed as narrators, giving us tips on how to protect ourselves from tear gas.

In *Exploded City* (2009), your contribution to the Turkish Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, you provided a model of a future city consisting of buildings attacked by acts of terrorism. All who live there are migrants. The project is introduced by a text referencing Italo Calvino's 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*. Why was it important to include this work at the Pavilion?

The events documented in *Exploded City* are caused not by a singular ideology but by a diverse range of destructive motivations. These were ordinary buildings before the incidents, but they became widely known as ruins. In the work, they are depicted exactly how they were seconds before the attacks. It's almost impossible for an international audience, like that in Venice, to recognize many of them, but if you're from one of those places then you have a very particular emotional connection to one building. How can we imagine a city with comatosed memory? I didn't want to construct the work as if to only document the past. It needed a textual narrative, which is why it was inspired by the magical realist tone of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The story imagines a future, a place, a city where everyone knows terrible things will happen. But they still learn to live together while speaking hundreds of different languages: Ossetian, Bosnian, Albanian, Kurdish, Castilian, Irish, Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Anglo-Frisian, as well as Saami, Altai and Slavic languages. Looking back now, it seems that this work predicted the direction of new pathways for my practice in the years that followed.

"My interest is to imagine the concept of urban citizenship as a counter apparatus — a tool beyond state representation."



If You'd Like to See This Flag in Colors, Burn It (homage to Marinus Boezem), 2017. View from Witte de With Contemporary Art Center. Courtesy of the artist and Creative Time.

"The term 'alien' occurs in federal law under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of the United States. This says a lot in itself."



United, 2016, HD animation, 3 min. Produced in collaboration with JM Animation Co. Supported by Mondriaan Foundation and SAHA Association commissioned by 11th Gwangju Biennale. photo courtesy by Gwangju Biennale.