

AHMET ÖĞÜT



GETTING



BY
HG MASTERS

AROUND



RIVER CROSSING PUZZLE (detail), 2010, installation in which viewers try to solve a riddle by moving cutouts across a room. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art, Leipzig, 2010.

It takes hustle to be an in-demand “post-studio” artist. Ask 29-year-old Ahmet Öğüt. In October, he gave a lecture on his conceptual practice while jogging through the streets of Sydney, stopping where he’d stashed reproductions of his work to say a few words. Earlier in the year, he was variously spotted skipping a small sailboat across the Amsterdam harbor, waiting for buses in Christchurch and embedding diamonds in the walls of museums in Eindhoven and Istanbul.

The Amsterdam-based conceptualist, who was born in Diyarbakir, Turkey, travels regularly between the Netherlands and Istanbul, where his mother and siblings live. He maintains no permanent studio space and has no assistants. Nor is he represented by a gallery that could have helped him coordinate the seven solo exhibitions and 16 group shows in which he participated in 2010, at locations across Europe (from Romania to Portugal), in Canada, the United States (from New York to Berkeley), and in Sydney, Seoul and Tokyo.

As with his globe-traveling artwork, Öğüt is in constant motion, circulating between communities of friends and professional acquaintances, traversing linguistic and cultural boundaries, arriving only to depart again. The influence of his itinerancy is evident in his work. Vehicles are a recurring theme—buses, planes, cars, boats, bicycles—and recent pieces require viewers to resolve elaborate logistical puzzles about the moving of things and people from place to place. Öğüt’s nomadic lifestyle has, so far, dictated the kind of art he has produced: or perhaps his way of working—conceiving and developing several discreet ideas or concepts (often simultaneously), rather than building up a formal language in a particular set of materials—permits an intensive exhibition schedule. He doesn’t sequester himself in a workshop and build up a body of objects until it’s

ready for display. Nor does he arrive in a new place and create a work entirely from what he finds there. His notebook and laptop are his studio; the exhibition, wherever it may be, is an occasion for the works’ physical creation. As a result, none of Öğüt’s ideas are defined by a specific place or culture. His works are as legible to viewers on one continent as on another.

But travel doesn’t just affect Öğüt’s working methods. It has impacted how he understands society. “There are many different realities,” he says. “And they all coexist. If you don’t travel, you can’t discover the differences. You start to think your reality is the only one.” Shuffling back and forth between Istanbul and Amsterdam allows Öğüt to experience afresh the dissimilarities between the two cities and cultures, to stave off the laziness that he says can arise from living in small, comfortable Amsterdam or the frenetic pace of Istanbul.

No matter where you encounter Öğüt, there are two things that remain constant: an unwavering graciousness and his uniform of sneakers, jeans, black T-shirt and leather jacket. When I visited Öğüt in Amsterdam in late August for the opening of his first exhibition in his adopted city, “Informal Incidents,” at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBa), he was still caught up in a situation that, as he described it, was “good for art, but not for life.” During the few hours of midsummer darkness between June 27 and 28, his bright yellow, four-meter-long sailboat was stolen from a canal behind Amsterdam’s Rijksakademie (where he was resident from 2007 to 2008). The boat was not seaworthy, since the mast was at Öğüt’s apartment, leaving the artist perplexed about why it was taken. Did the thieves know that this small American-made sailboat, a Guppy 13, was the same model and color as the one the Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader once

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(Previous spread)
ACROSS THE SLOPE
2008
Modified car on a constructed floor.
Installation view at Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona, 2008.

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.



AHMET ÖGÜT in Amsterdam with his boat, used in his video *Guppy 13 vs Ocean* (2010).



(Above)
PUNCH THIS PAINTING
2010
Installation view of the painting's
live auction, held at Stedelijk Museum
Bureau Amsterdam.

(Right)
BLACK DIAMOND
2010
Visitors sifting through coal in search
of a diamond hidden by the artist.
Installation views at ARTER, Istanbul,
and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

(Next spread)
GROUND CONTROL
2007–08
Asphalt flooring, 400 square meters.
Installation view at the fifth Berlin
Biennale, 2008.
Photo by Uwe Walter.

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owned? Or that the yellow model was one of just 300 produced in the mid-1970s? Or, he wondered, half ironically, were they sophisticated art thieves who had read recent stories in the Dutch press about Ögüt's tribute to the famous 1970s conceptualist?

Sitting outside a nautical-themed Amsterdam café named De Ysbreeker ("ice breaker"), Ögüt recounted the whole saga. He had bought the boat from a man in the US and had it transported to Amsterdam. He planned to make a piece about the mysterious death of Bas Jan Ader, who in the fabled, and fatal, adventure-artwork *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), had set off alone from Cape Cod on July 9, 1975, intending to sail for nearly 70 days across the Atlantic Ocean on the way to an exhibition in Groningen, the Netherlands. Spanish fishermen found his partially submerged boat off the coast of Ireland in April 1976, but his body was never recovered. Ögüt describes the mysterious fate of Ader's ship, the *Ocean Wave*: it was impounded by authorities in Franco-era Spain but then was also stolen from the shipyard just a few weeks later. "Maybe there is someone who is collecting all the Guppy 13s in the world," Ögüt joked, before agreeing that the theft of his vessel had inadvertently created a deeper connection between his ship and Ader's.

Fortunately, Ögüt had already shot most of the footage for his project before the boat disappeared. The adverse conditions provided good material for his exhibition at SMBA, where he displayed a copy of the police report detailing the theft. (He also attempted, in vain, to convince Interpol to list the ship on their register of stolen artworks.) The resulting video, *Guppy 13 vs. Ocean Wave* (2010), begins with Ögüt prepping the boat and launching it into the water. After navigating it into the Amsterdam harbor (known as the "Eye"), Ögüt recorded 16 people, including a collector of Ader's work, making trips across the busy port. In some scenes, the pilots, who all wear identical lifejackets, are standing in the stern, motoring the boat backwards. In others Ögüt has reversed the footage so the boat appears to be sailing backward across the Eye. Ögüt is trying to turn back time, to reverse the course of the *Ocean Wave* and send it (and its captain) back across the Atlantic to Cape Cod. If Ader's work was about the pursuit of the ecstatic unknown, Ögüt's video imagines reversing the dismal results of history—an act of recovery, rather than discovery. Looking at Ögüt's video, one wonders what Ader would have said, if anything, about "the miraculous" had he survived the voyage. One also wonders what Ader would think about the transformation of artists in the past 40 years from seekers of knowledge to social and political critics—often professionalized and articulate, but cynics nonetheless. The 2010 voyage of the reincarnated *Ocean Wave* was perhaps a manifestation of nostalgia for early conceptual art's romanticism and utopianism, when an artist's mandate was to get away from established conventions rather than to get *in* the way of social and political discourse.

The idea of traversing a body of water back and forth—which one does all the time in Amsterdam, usually on a bicycle, or in Istanbul on



a ferry—comes up again in a work that Ögüt was planning for his mid-September show at the Leipzig Museum of Contemporary Art. *River Crossing Puzzle* (2010) is based on the riddle of how to move a fox, a hen and a bag of grain across a river without leaving the fox alone with the chicken or the chicken alone with the grain. In his version, Ögüt replaced the animals with caricatures of figures from contemporary Turkey: a bomb-disposal technician, an anonymous duffel bag, a soldier, two security dogs, a suicide bomber, his wheelchair-bound wife and his young daughter. They must all cross the river in a small boat, but it can carry only two people, or one person and one dog or item at a time. Ögüt's other stipulations are specified in a written statement that accompanies the piece: "The suspicious bag cannot be left with anybody unless the bomb-disposal technician is present. The suicide bomber cannot be left with any of the dogs unless the soldier is present. The soldier cannot be left with any of the suicide bomber's family members unless the suicide bomber is present. Only the soldier, suicide bomber, and bomb-disposal technician know how to use the boat." An adroit draughtsman, Ögüt made lifesize drawings of these figures and mounted them as cutouts on wheeled platforms, positioning them in the gallery so that visitors can move the figures around the room to solve the riddle. The larger point, however, is not the puzzle's solution, but its tragicomic scenario—the suicide bomber is an ordinary-looking middle-aged man with a disabled wife and daughter, the dogs resemble family pets, the duffel bag could be anyone's luggage. Ögüt's humor mixes despair with farce, as if to say, "Can you believe this is the world we live in?"

According to Ögüt, "Reality is constructed or designed, either by you or others, and you take part in it." This leads him to suggest that since "reality is constructed, we can play with it. We can shift reality, for a few moments at least." This idea underlies his many diverse projects, including his commission for the SCAPE Christchurch Biennial, which was set to open in late September 2010. He imagined placing two curbside bus stops on a rotating circular platform at street level, so that the piece provides a gradual shift in one's perception, and modest entertainment, as one waits for the bus. With the exhibition less than a month away, I inquired about how this feat of engineering was progressing. Ögüt, who had visited Christchurch earlier in the year to finalize the plans with technicians, seemed concerned but also detached from the fabrication that was happening on the other side of the world. "There's not much I can do about it," he commented. And sure enough, cosmic forces were at work as well: on September 4, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake in Christchurch delayed the debut of the piece for six months.

Despite the prevalence of vehicles in Ögüt's work, there is rarely any forward progress. The bus stop goes around and around; the key strategy in solving the *River Crossing Puzzle* is taking key passengers to one side and then back again; the *Ocean Wave* sails only in reverse. I asked Ögüt why there are so many modes of transport in his work, as







far back as his photographic series “Bus Sweet Bus” (2003), showing people sleeping in the luggage holds of buses. Ögüt observes, “Speed changes our perspective. Whether you fly in a plane or take a train makes a big difference on how you perceive a place.” But in his work vehicles are also metaphors for social progress, and in his early career there are numerous works using the automobile as a metaphor for modernization in Turkey.

Ögüt jokes that he was once known as the “car artist” because he had made so many pieces about them. *Death Kit Train* (2005), among the earliest works that he still exhibits regularly, is a three-minute video of an absurd number of men pushing a red Citroën sedan that appears to have broken down. Shown at a slow speed, the action takes on an allegorical quality; the line of men pushing one another recalls Brueghel’s painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568) and also the end of Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The White Castle* (1985), in which a sultan insists on hauling a monstrous war-machine into battle against a besieged white fort, a plan that ends in failure. In Pamuk’s sly telling, the weapon—which requires legions of men and horses to pull it—embodies the tragic flaws of the Ottoman Empire. For Ögüt, the car in *Death Kit Train* is a symbol of modernity (the red recalls Turkey’s flag), and there is something truly pathetic about both the defunct sedan and the disproportionate ratio of men pushing it. If Ögüt is making a political comment, it is cloaked in everyday imagery. On one viewing, the video seems to be a grandiose allegory about socialism’s economic inefficiency, with too many workers pushing a tiny “red” engine steered by a lone figure. On another, it seems like a mundane slapstick comedy: middle-aged men, perhaps underemployed, helping a friend.

A humorously allegorical car appears again in *Across the Slope* (2008), made for the Centre d’Art Santa Mònica in Barcelona. For this piece, Ögüt had two models of the Fiat or Seat 131 (as it was known in Spain during its production run from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s) welded together and painted black, like a stretch limousine. The elongated vehicle is marooned on a 1.5-meter-tall hill formed in the gallery floor, an ersatz luxury sedan balancing like a seesaw, with

neither set of wheels on the ground. Ögüt explains that the 131 was popular not only in Spain, Italy and other European countries but also among the Turkish middle class, who loved to customize it. However, he says, they didn’t upgrade the engine’s capacity and Turkey’s highway infrastructure didn’t improve either—so the adjustments were superficial, a folly both human and governmental.

Ögüt’s satires, while rooted in his personal experiences, are accessible to viewers outside of Turkey as well, and this openness to interpretation has made his work applicable wherever it’s shown. For instance, Ögüt’s installation *Ground Control*, first displayed at Istanbul’s Rodeo Gallery in 2007 and later at the 2008 Berlin Biennale, consists of the gallery floor being paved in asphalt. A deliberate clash with the white interior space of a museum or gallery, the black paving had a nearly universal meaning. As Ögüt had earlier commented, in a 2005 interview with Vasif Kortun: “In my opinion the meaning of the asphalt is: safe and secure ground, a place defined by the state.”

For Ögüt, who was born in one of the underserved, Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey—where, he jokes, roads are paved only before elections—the hand of the state is always noticed and can be heavy at times. One of his earliest video works depicts a friend’s experience of being routinely stopped by police, asked for identification and then released—a common occurrence for students in parts of Turkey, he notes. “Daily life, particularly somewhere like Turkey, is political.” This concern with social conditions has paradoxically given Ögüt the reputation of being a politically minded artist, though he doesn’t think of himself as participating in politics but rather as drawing awareness to the many different social conditions under which people live.

Ögüt’s predilection as a prankster was cemented early on his international career with *Someone Else’s Car* (2005), perhaps his most widely exhibited work. A simple piece, it is comprised of two side-by-side slide projectors showing Ögüt in two separate, surreptitious acts. In the left-hand series of images, he is seen in a parking lot in front of a red sedan, which he proceeds to cover in sheets of yellow



SOMEBODY ELSE’S CAR, 2005,
still from a slide projection of 20 photographs.

Öğüt's predilection as a prankster was cemented when he covered a red sedan in sheets of yellow paper, capping it with a sign that reads "Taksi."

paper, capping it with a sign that reads "Taksi." The right-hand projection shows him transforming a white Toyota into a police car, with a blue strip down its side, the Turkish flag and the word "Polis" in blue. This mischievous tendency continues to this day. A sign at SMBA told viewers: "WARNING: This area is under 23-hour video and audio surveillance." It's a one-liner, a joke about the impossibility of knowing exactly which 23 hours are being observed. But it insinuates the machinations of a secretive, despotic power, and the invasion of political tactics—the artificial creation of fear—into social and personal life. In such a system, the harmless act of vandalism in *Someone Else's Car* (2005) suggests that agility is a requisite survival skill.

Öğüt's practice of starting with an idea and then finding the right materials in which to execute it puts him in an established conceptualist tradition. What makes him—as with many others of his age—different from earlier generations is a thorough pragmatism. Ideas matter as the source of an artwork, but they are not in and of themselves the artwork. They can be adapted for the exhibition context or the materials at hand. They get modified in the process of becoming objects or videos or images. When words are written or spoken, they are English or subtitled in English. References to traditional ethnic or religious cultures are absent, though micro-events in political history and personal experience remain important sources of ideas.

Despite their many forms, Öğüt's works, considered together, are anchored by the skeptic's question, "Does it have to be this way?" For example, here's how Öğüt described his training in painting (first in Ankara and later in Istanbul): the white canvas was a problem, so he made it black. But the canvas was still rectangular, so he made it a different shape, and then, still unsatisfied, took it off the wall. When he saw that what he was making still resembled a painting, after all he'd put it through, he realized that he needed to abandon a specific medium altogether and start with his ideas.

There are times when being an independent agent, without a network of support, is hard. Finding buyers is one problem, though he does sell to private collectors and relies on the many nonprofits and museums for patronage. Another problem is that many of his works are gathering dust in storage in the cities where they were shown, as Öğüt can't afford to ship them elsewhere to be sold or preserved, or in some unfortunate cases, to keep them any longer.

The difficulty that a lone artist faces in raising capital was apparent at the opening of the SMBA exhibition. There he staged a live auction of his self-portrait *Punch This Painting* (2010), showing the artist wearing a (characteristic) black T-shirt with the title words printed in white letters; he looks half-expectant, half-confrontational, as if daring the viewer to do as the title suggests. Öğüt's idea was to sell

the work at auction, but then leave the canvas up for the duration of the show. He stipulated that the new owner had to accept that someone might damage the painting by punching it, which would either defile the work or complete it. But he had rounded up just two telephone bidders—a collector in Istanbul and one in Italy—who were tentatively vying for the painting as a towering blonde auctioneer from Christie's Amsterdam did her best to build tension in the room. If Öğüt worked closely with a gallery, it certainly could have roused other interested parties, but for now he's content to wait until the right one comes along.

During our conversation, we returned to another question that consumes many young people in creative fields—of where one belongs, or where one should live, whether at home or in an adopted artistic center. Reminiscing about the Guppy 13, Öğüt, still visibly discouraged, recounted his weeks with the boat: "I felt like a local for the first time. Seeing the city from the canals, participating in the boat community, waving hello to other pilots." While he may never join Amsterdam's aristocracy, even when he does picnic on the canals, the city is practical for Öğüt, for personal reasons as well as career ones—among them, the largesse of the Dutch government in sponsoring artists who permanently reside in the country. In his own artwork, he shows that same adaptability, creating projects about his home and his experiences that accommodate the reality that he is an international artist. He has not abandoned one reality, be it Turkey or Europe, in favor of the other.

Since late August, Öğüt hasn't slowed down. There have been solo exhibitions at the Villa Stuck in Munich, at the Laumeier Sculpture Park galleries in St. Louis and a January 2011 residency in Stockholm. Along the way, things got better in terms of both life and art. On October 16, a friend's brother spotted *Ocean Wave* in a canal in the western part of Amsterdam and police recovered the boat. His *Black Diamond* (2010) project—nine tons of coal that visitors can sift through looking for a piece of plaster taken from the museum wall and containing a diamond—traveled from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven to the Arter space in Istanbul. On December 2, Ümit Sargül and Ahmet Can Bayrak, two young residents of Istanbul, found the piece of wall and claimed the USD 4,000 jewel.

The duo's industrious exploration paid off, bringing Öğüt much satisfaction. In my own digging through the coal, I experienced moments of total despair and discouragement, even as the activity became meditative, punctured by a few jolts of ecstatic, delusional hope. Occasionally someone came to help; most of the time, they looked on as though I were crazy and desperate. It's not so different from being a young conceptual artist. You just put your head down and keep up the pace.