

Singing in



Dark Times

BounSergi
Collective

“In the dark times,
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times.”

Bertolt Brecht

We are the BounSergi Collective: a group of queer individuals who believe that freedom of expression is crucial in a state of emergency. We formed our collective when our so-called safe-spaces went under siege and we needed to stand together in order not to fall. We organize exhibitions, protests, guerrilla art festivals, and create our own art.

Background

Turkey's AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has been in power for 20 years. Over the years, it has increasingly descended into the foul pond of fascism. The AKP has been implementing an increasingly authoritarian version of its neoliberal government, benefitting government officials and their allies. The government has been combining authoritarian

neoliberalism with populist Islam-based rhetoric to secure popular support through mobilizing historic anger held by the conservative sections of Turkish society. Turkey is currently a difficult place to live for anyone who does not align themselves with government ideology. As we move further away from freedom and into a world dictated by the beliefs of others, the vulnerability associated with being in any way different increases. Marginalized communities face violence on a daily basis and are getting used to being constantly bullied by the state. Boğaziçi University is one of only a few places where those leading marginalized lifestyles, as well as dissidents, can exist freely. It is also located in a very attractive part of Istanbul, making it interesting in the context of urban transformation



programmes. It is a central feature of AKP's authoritarian neoliberal model to use such programmes to exploit valuable land for their own capital interests. This is why on 1 January 2021, bypassing official elections, the government appointed a rector external to the university. His role would be both to make profit and to stir up a storm.

This is the context during which the Boğaziçi Resistance emerged: the longest non-violent protest and solidarity movement since the Occupy Gezi Protests in 2013. Then and now, any free thought or critique has been perceived as a threat to the reign of ignorance the government works to enforce. Even though the government's oppressive policies create an empire of fear, people continue to express their frustrations, though needing to seek alternative ways to speak up. Art emerged as one of the most efficient tools in this pursuit, since art is able to play into a weakness of authoritarian regimes, by challenging the values that they embrace.

Boğaziçi resistance

The safety and well-being of queer people or women, along with many others, is not guaranteed in Turkey. The state violates basic human rights. They bully people into normalcy. The only and best place where we felt safe and free to exist as BounSergi has always been our university.

Queer people were at the forefronts of the resistance by carrying rainbow flags, being visible, and celebrating their existence. Seeing different kinds of students, including Muslim and LGBTQ+ students, forming solidarities was troubling to the oppressors. As the movement grew, the illegitimate rector took some aggressive actions, which included closing the LGBTQ+ club and the Sexual Harassment Prevention Coordination. This was severely harmful to our safe spaces. The school became an active war zone between the students and the police. From the beginning of the resistance, the university's South Campus was surrounded by riot police, which included a deployment of snipers.

Our collective came into being during the first month of this period. Our name, BounSergi, is a combination of BOUN (Boğaziçi University) and Sergi, which translates to exhibition in Turkish.



This is how we flowered into the resistance we are today: nourished by the love for strangers and protected against fascist forces of authority by the thorns of solidarity, which grow through the cracks in the cement of a society built on division.

First exhibition on South Campus

For the first exhibition, we collected more than 400 artworks. This was possible thanks to the contribution of 150 artists worldwide. For the second exhibition, we collected 300 more. The BounSergi art exhibition facilitated a transversal solidarity by gathering people from different backgrounds, artistic disciplines, and political views. There was no selection process: everything that was submitted was exhibited. The art works were vinyl-printed, as if they were banners, and occu-

pled different areas. The transportability and the durability of the material helped us on our mission. We tied them with yarn ropes to everything, everywhere, regardless of the weather conditions; we tied them to trees, on resistors, to the gates of the university; we took them to courtrooms and courtyards, to any protest against the current regime.

Our first exhibition lasted three days and it turned into a stage for various kinds of protests. Hoaxing became one of our most important tactics during the exhibition, which was practiced through punk and rock concerts, choir performances, individual dance performances, raves, stand-up shows, games, and open lectures by queer performance artists. As we confronted the police blockade in front of our gates, we would dress up for the resistance. We turned up the volume of our speakers and marched through the police blockade each day, all together. Especially for us as queer people, our resistance was existential: shining brightly was essential for our performative encounter to be in contrast with the metal, grey, and weaponized riot police forces standing in front of us. We dealt with the distress by turning the campus into a playground and we invited all Boğaziçi University members to play with us in solidarity. Boğaziçi University had never been a place solely

to study. Apart from its educational purposes, it has also been a place for social, intellectual, and artistic gatherings. The political appointment of the new rector was also an attempt to attack our university's cultural tradition. This is why we practiced our culture in excess as a form of protest. On the last day of the exhibition, four people from our collective were arrested on charges of incitement to hatred. The reason given for their detention was on the grounds of an anonymous artwork exhibited during the day. However, the government did not manage to break the resistance with this, as it had hoped to do. Instead, this was the moment when the most confrontative period of the resistance movement began, and the support for the Boğaziçi Resistance among the general public reached 69%.

The movement flourished

Once our friends were released from prison and house arrest, we organized the second exhibition, which we named after the legal paragraph with which we were prosecuted: "216/1". This exhibition also took place online. In order to avoid police raids, we organized it on the terrace of an apartment, in occupied parks, and in protest areas. As it was forbidden to shout slogans and to gather to protest, we organized pop-up exhibitions in public parks to keep the spirit of resistance alive, in collaboration with five other universities. In solidarity with the Berlin Boğaziçi Resistance, we also organized an exhibition during a Boğaziçi protest in Berlin. Especially due to everything we experienced during the first exhibition, we received many new works. We used the artworks sent to us to occupy both physical and online spaces. The exhibition gained more exposure when we took it to social media with the intention of reaching more people. We tried to

give space to any person who wished to express themselves through their art, and we discovered many people who had been producing art actively but were not able to find a place to display or perform their works. While the appointed rector was sitting in his room, we were occupying the campus, parks, and streets with art to confront him with opposing views that he insistently avoided engaging with. Resisting through an art exhibition allows its participants to self-authenticate their works as art and themselves as artists. Displaying works of art from various disciplines within a political context enabled the demonstrations to maintain a polyphonic yet unified common struggle.





Now

Since then, half of the collective members moved to Berlin, Germany. We continue to organise pop-up exhibitions and solidarity events, as do those of us who remained in Istanbul. With our new Berlin-Istanbul exhibition, named “Home/Yuva”, our aim is to pave the way for international solidarity. We wish for all humankind to call Earth their home.

Illustrations

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p. 56/57: Asla aşağı bakmayacağız, Hazar, 2022.

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p. 59: Yılanı Güldürseler, No-Lifer.