

# STRESS/STRAIN

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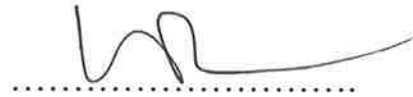
## STRESS/STRAIN

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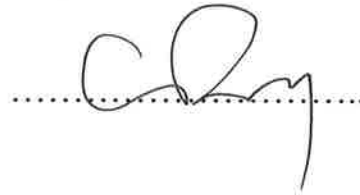
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# ABSTRACT

## STRESS/STRAIN

ÇAĞATAY TUNA ÖZKAN

Visual Arts and Visual Communication Design, MA Thesis, August 2016

Thesis Advisor: Prof. Dr. Erdağ Aksel

Keywords: Balance, Tension, Free Association, Personification, Collecting, Serenity

This thesis is a supplementary text for the exhibition “STRESS/STRAIN”, so it should not to be considered separately from the exhibited works. The purpose of the thesis is to analyze the works in the exhibition by examining the artistic process during past two years based on the concepts of collecting objects, behavioral interactions with meanings of objects and anthropomorphism with support arguments from research fields in terms of psychology and arts.

# ÖZET

## STRES/GERME

ÇAĞATAY TUNA ÖZKAN

Görsel Sanatlar ve Görsel İletişim Tasarımı, MA Tezi, Ağustos 2016

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. Erdağ Aksel

Anahtar kelimeler: Denge, gerilim, serbest çağrışım, kişileştirme, sükunet

Bu, STRES/GERME sergisini destekleyici bir çalışmadır ve sergilenen işlerden ayrı nitelendirilecek bir metin olarak konumlandırılmamalıdır. Metnin amacı sergilenen çalışmaları, kolleksiyon objeleri, nesnelerin anlamları ile davranışsal etkileşimler ve kişileştirme kavramlarını psikoloji ve sanat alanlarından alınan destekleyici argümanlarla incelemektir.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This text functions as a supplementary document for the exhibition STRESS/STRAIN and focuses on the concepts that may relate it to my artistic practice. The exhibition developed mainly in pursuit of an answer to a daily habit, visiting a tree dumping ground in the campus. The exhibited object may be considered as a result of personification tendencies during the artistic process. In the text, concepts of personification play and alienation will be briefly explained. In the light of these concepts, each work will be analyzed in order to provide an insight and in depth answer to the question created by the sometime subconsciously evolving design process.



## CHAPTER 1: PERSONIFICATION AND PLAY

The pieces exhibited in the show called stress/strain begun to evolve after I discovered the campus gardeners dumping ground where cut off pieces of trees and plants are discarded. Without necessarily any particular artistic aim I often visited this site of plants, dead or dying. Back at the studio I started to reflect about the reasons for this act of repeatedly visiting this site. The urge to find an answer paved the way to the idea of play that “can function as a problem solving situation that then serve of pleasure when solutions are successfully discovered” (Dietmar Gørlitz, Joachim F. Wohlwill, 1987:217). Although many game theoreticians focused on benefits of play for learning and preparing for life known cultural theoretician Johan Huizinga, sees play as a function, which conveys a meaning to an action (Huizinga,1950:1). In the need of addressing a meaning of a behavior, play may occur in many forms such as arts, sports, role-playing and collecting. For instance, sportsmen impart meaning to their activities by focusing on competing with others, some businessmen focus on importance of their role as a successful businessman and some artists continue their artistic process because they experiment with concepts. With a self-added meaning, they may incense with the urge to continue their actions or act according to the roles or reasons they defined. In the light of that, the reasons of visiting the dumping ground might be analyzed with a form of play; collecting.

A collection may be defined as gathering related objects and ideas. It has a subject when “if said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some object or idea, or objects, or ideas such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class” (Durost, 1932:10). In other words, the common characteristics of collected objects or ideas refer to the subject matter of a collection. Therefore, collectors tend to set the subject matter by gathering only the specific objects or ideas they are attached to or interested in. Susan Pearce, material culture theorist, explains the relationship between collectors and the objects they collect by;

*The collector, on the contrary, is often attached to certain kinds of objects rather than others because of their symbolic value, and he tends to use his collection and collecting activities to enhance his self definition (Pearce, 1994:206).*

Assuming that the collecting activity can be considered as a self questioning behavior, it might be possible to find a sense in the act of visiting dying site by relating it to collecting objects from there. Considering this activity may reveal the problem, I collected branches due to their extraordinary appeal when compared to the rest of the site. To examine the reasons for the feelings of attachment to these objects and experimenting with them as tools and materials to make art was used as a questioning method. Hence, objects were collected in the studio to observe their meanings in a different, closed environment. To start making decisions about the ways to experiment with the collected objects, observing both the objects relationship with its surroundings and behavioral responses to these connections became a crucial part for my artistic search and practice. As a matter of fact, objects taken outside their environments seemed to have an altogether different meaning; therefore they began to alter the meaning of the environment itself. As can be seen in Jannis Kounellis' work (1969), *Untitled (12 Horses)*, people observing those objects experienced drastically altered meanings attached to the horses and the gallery space. Knowing this, it can also be seen that displacement, isolation and integration into the gallery space were the steps taken and they indeed provided a different perspective.



Figure 1. Jannis Kounellis', Untitled (12 horses)

“Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society.” (Huizinga, 1950:1)

Babies, referred to as a blank slate by a considerable number of different cultures, instinctively engage in the act of play. While doing so, they need actors to interact with, which are eventually brought to life through personification of their surroundings. In order to create an actor in a play, the baby needs some form of experience with the concept of personification itself, which in fact starts developing with their first interaction with the world. Even their mothers, who are just blurry images even though being the very first contact and most important bond with the world for newborn babies, are subject to a form of personification with the limited mimics they can recognize as simple shapes. This act of playing and integrating people in the play causes play to be an inseparable part of human life starting from a very early stage of human life. In later stages of life, play and personification show themselves in different forms. An example of play and personification in childhood is looking at clouds to see dragons and knights in their ever-changing shapes.

Another group of people to look at the clouds in order to give them a meaning are primitive tribes. As a result of lack of knowledge and logical definitions towards natural events, tribes used personification to give them anthropomorphic meanings. For instance, lightning was the weapon of a god, namely Greek God Zeus, and was indirectly personified through the explanation of the atmospheric event. Another example would be the sun, also known as the Egyptian God Ra, battling his way through the night to shine again the next morning. As seen in mythology, people not only personify the events or their surrounding but also create stories and myths revolving around these new meanings to enrich them.

One of the different ways these myths and stories are introduced to plays is through rituals. For instance besides the well known African and Iberian masks, Bulgarian tribes also built totems and made anthropomorphic costumes called Kukeri, adding meanings to them that they believe will protect them from the nightmares they gave life to. To that end, they seem to have created their own special culture and the specific avatars to represent it.



Figure 2. Kukeri Costume

Along with the visible masks and costumes that the tribes used to play and personify with, perhaps it is also possible to claim that there were invisible masks created by this culture. These invisible masks can be referred to as cultural products, stereotypes. A good example for this might be children playing house. How they decide on what they have to do as mother and father and how they are supposed to act while playing is based on what they see from the adults around them wearing their cultural masks. This game of house, the one that possibly started as early as age 5, will last for the rest of their lives as they adapt to wearing these masks more with the help of the society over the years. According to the rules of the game, mothers may continue to cook for the family while fathers earn money for example.

Assuming that we are all products of our cultures, these invisible masks may bind us all, as it may be not possible to escape from these roles that our societies impose upon us. So, people play these roles to find their particular place in the society. Some wear these masks and play the game as housewives, some play and act as football fanatics and some play, acting as successful businessmen. Most of the time, we can all recognize these roles through what kind of clothes the actors wear or what car they drive. It may be possible to claim that as stereotypes tend to degrade individual characteristics of a person in society, it also strengthens these roles within society. As a result of this, the chance of applying these invisible masks to an unknown person, any word as an article, any object or abstract shape increases. For instance, as in Berry, Mispich, Kean and Baron's research about anthropomorphic tendencies on viewers of two animated triangle figures in an animation called Heider and Simmel. In the research, people were asked to characterize two moving triangles and a round shape according to their sizes and behaviors. They describe the results of the research by:

*Not only do people anthropomorphize the geometric shapes moving on the video screen, they agree on the gender of the moving forms and on a story of aggression, rescue and escape (Caporel and Heyes, 1996: 65).*

In other words, most of the subjects concluded that the larger triangle is a male, smaller one is a female figure as well as the small round shape is a child. In reference to the research, today's societies still have a tendency to describe the figures and objects through personification. People still give mostly female names to the ships, apply mother roles to their

countries or feel thankful to their broken cars when they start working again. Both conceptually and visually these anthropomorphic tendencies can also be seen in Joseph Beuys work HOW TO EXPLAIN PICTURES TO A DEAD HARE (1965). Although Beuys was metaphorically burying materialism in his performance, his personification of a dead animal, or its spirit, in a shamanistic way may be considered as an example of an artistic practice.

“Masks are therefore good to think with, as they play with the notions of revelation a concealment of the visible and hidden dimensions of perception and imagination.” (Köpping, 2005:30)

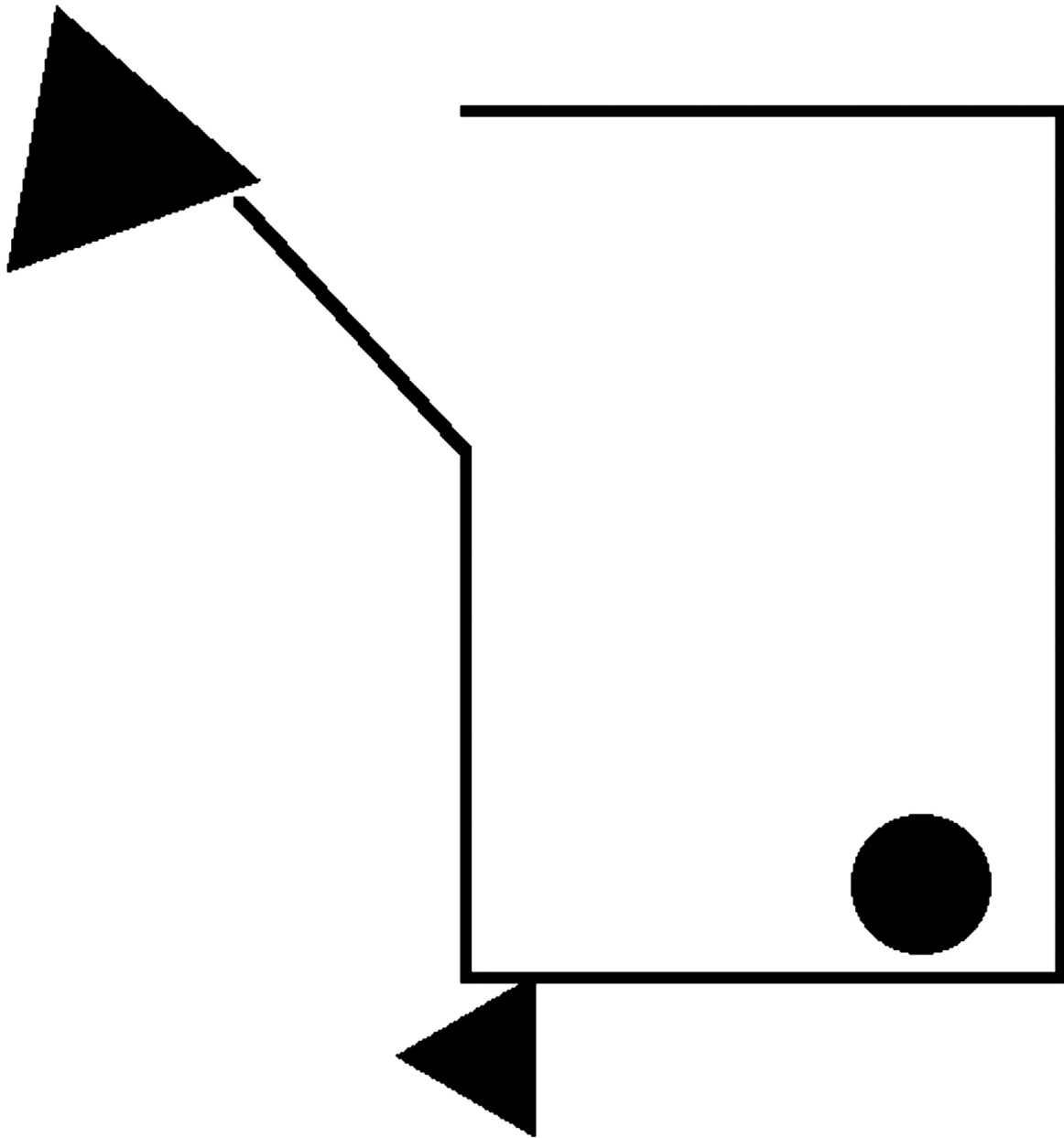


Figure 3. Heider and Simmel

In the light of these ideas, personification and play managed to make its way towards a very crucial position in my artistic practice. A method, one that originated from these ideas, while toying around with different possibilities was personification of the collected objects. Why those specific trees were chosen and what I wanted to do with them was still unclear at the time. In order to answer these questions, searching my subconscious could prove useful. To reflect my subconscious, personification tendencies of archaic societies, which may be considered blank slates on a cultural level, were used as a method. This method then merged into my artistic practice by means of communicating with the personified objects in the plays,

to aid with the decision making process. This anthropomorphic tendency can be rationalized with Pearce's claims;

*Objects have structural or coded meanings, which they can  
Communicate: this is their symbolic meaning (Pearce,1994: 25)*

The act of personifying an object allows experiencing a play from different perspectives, which tends to turn the collected objects into imaginary characters that can be talked to and shared feelings with. The origin of personification can be related to one of the core needs of a human being, comprehension. This basic need of a human to understand its surroundings requires a form of communication to be established with the objects present in the environment. This natural and primitive instinct may be what eventually turned into the act of play and the concept of personification.

This development allowed revealing the hidden dimensions of the object they are presented by leading the viewers to explore alternative ways to approach different layers of meanings of the object. In order to start this process of exploration, the object needs to attract enough attention.

As Doherty claims (52), *“it often feels as if we can no longer experience anything if we don't first alienate it. In fact, alienation may now be necessary preface to experience”*, alienation of an object is a possible way to compel viewers to communicate with it through their perspective. As a result of the lack of a definite meaning attached to the object, viewers may create their own tales revolving around the object. This idea is also supported by the claims of Pearce:

*The message or meaning, which object offers, is always in compete  
and each viewer fills in the gaps in his on way, thereby excluding other  
possibilities: as he looks, he makes his own decisions about how the story  
is to be told (Pearce, 1994:26).*



In the end, these ideas are what drove me to create layers of meanings instead of a single, obvious meaning for each object; therefore, I'd like to think that the viewers can communicate and interact with the object without being restricted to a single concept but play a game with the relations between the different layers of meanings the objects present in the exhibition called Stress/Strain.

## CHAPTER 2: WORKS

### 2.1 THE BRIDE



Figure 4. The Bride

“The Bride” is the first art object that is made for the exhibition, and consists of a found tree branch combined with a triangular metal structure. The sharp contrast exists between the natural found object and the obviously man-made, bright red geometric metal shape. These two major elements of the work stand by leaning towards each other attached by an industrial bolt and nut on the tip of the sculpture.

The piece evolved from a found object selected from the tree collection mentioned above. The crimson tree part with spikes was selected due to its aggressive form. These features of the object had a huge potential to be personified. Although with the spikes it displays an aggressive characteristic, it also has fragile thin branches that can lead to it being personified as a feminine character. So, as a part of playing process, communicating with this imaginary female character was crucial to decide how to experiment with the object.

Within the play, standing up the parts vertically was chosen for the visually anthropomorphic qualities of vertically positioned objects. While standing figures tend to relate to activeness and living, lying objects incline to remind us of passiveness and death. To visually support this imaginary characters survival, the tree is positioned vertically but also upside down. As a result, viewers are expected experience a visual image that they may not be used to see hopefully being alienated from the found object, the tree. Through this alienation, it may be possible for them to redefine the tree branch as a sculptural object. For instance, in David Brooks' work the boardwalk seems to have lost its definition and become something else in that isolated space.



Figure 5. David Brooks, Boardwalk

Since the upside down tree cannot stay balanced on its branches by itself, an external structure is used to support and balance it. To balance the active form of the tree while it stands upside down, a triangular structure was used to create a feeling of stability and to visually balance it. Many artists used triangular forms as basic symbols of stability even before the Renaissance era to create more stable compositions that were perhaps required for religious rituals. A triangle was also interpreted as a symbol for gender, when used by Judy Chicago in her work *Dinner Party* (1975). However, in the process of this art work “The Bride”, triangular shape was positioned as erected which refers to male gender. So, using an erected triangular shape may conceptually counterbalance the fragile, feminine tree.

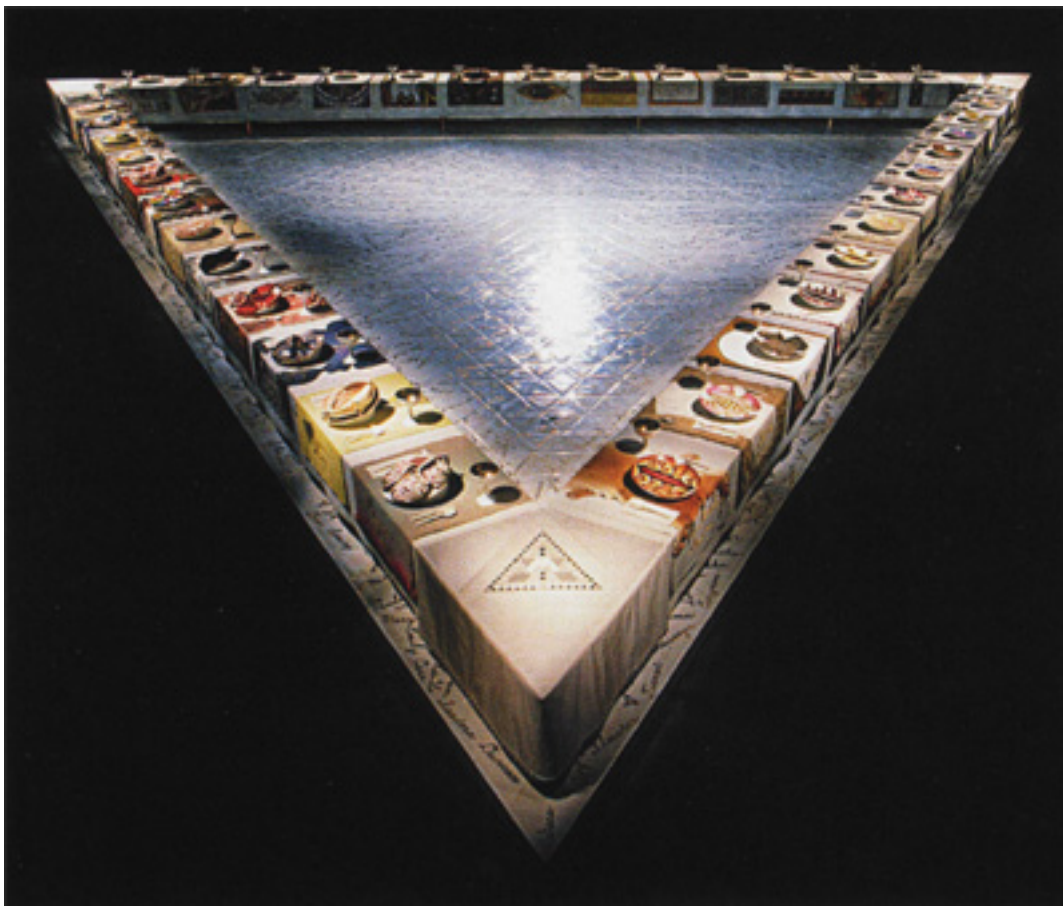


Figure 6. Judy Chicago, *Dinner Party*

Although it is both balanced conceptually and compositionally with the triangular metal structure, the contrast between textures of crimson tree and shiny metal structure was still stronger than it should be. To solve this problem, the metal structure was also painted red. The

grouping based on colors of these main elements, the tree and triangular structure, intends to decrease the tension between two different textures and characters.

In order to reduce the individual importance of each singular part/element and to shift the focus to the object as a whole, the act of standing and how it is achieved are emphasized. To this effect, a functional joint, the bolt and nut, is used hoping to lead the attention of the viewers upwards while uniting the large major elements of the sculpture; therefore, the concept of physically balancing the found object is strengthened. The visual tension caused by merging of masses of the two main elements on the joint at the top is the main actor of this strengthening effect. As an example for this stress point, Karyn Olivier's work "sculptural



Figure 7. The Bride

play" may be shown. In her piece, a surprisingly long teeterboard may be hard to grasp for viewers in closed environment because it may be related to a long table. This may be due to viewers' eye being distracted by its distorted proportions. However, the whole object is

carefully balanced at the middle of it and this balance is creating a visual stress point that visually groups the subtle elements of the work. Hence, the stress point may play an important role in helping people define the piece as an object rather than an architectural element.



Figure 8. Karyn Oliver, *Sculptural Play*

As in “sculptural play”, the layers of meanings are conceptually and visually intertwined in a balanced manner by focusing on leaning masses on a stress point, in order to let the viewers create their own stories and play with them while observing the object as a one piece.

## 2.2 THE BEGGAR



Figure 9. The Beggar

The Beggar is the second art piece shown in the exhibition. It gets its title from the persona I created by various messages yielded by the position of the tree and the placement of the rocks placed inside a cage. The piece consists of merging a tree and three stones with a triangular shaped, purposefully sloppy metal structure.

To achieve a different visual story from the Bride, that may be considered as a subtle, stable object, in this sculpture a bold visual language is used. In contrast to the verticality of The Bride, the positioning of the branch in The Beggar activates the negative space spreading itself as much as possible. After the decisions on personification process and the position, there was obviously a need of a system or a structure to hold the branch in that semi-

horizontal position. To give an example from another artist, Maarten Brickman in his work also focuses on creating a system to sustain the position of the wood piece in his installation, *Model for an installation* (2011).



Figure 10. Maarten Brickman, *Model for Installation*

Because the concept of standing up purely by physical balance is one of the main focuses in my practice I chose and built a two-legged structure that appears less likely to stand by itself. As a result, the intention is to give a false message to the viewers that the object may be out of balance creating a tension that may capture the viewers' attention. To physically balance the object, a weight that prevents the work from falling was required. A number of rocks were placed in a cage like structure attached to one of sculpture's supporting legs creating a link between stones and the tree as both being not man-made materials. To strengthen the connection between the stones and the piece as a whole the stones were positioned on top of each establishing their own balance. Hence, these stones are both balanced on top of each other among themselves while simultaneously balancing the sculpture that allows them to conceptually group the elements in the work itself. To exhibit these rocks to the viewer an



open formed, studio produced cage is used at the sculpture's leg and the balanced rocks are placed inside of it.



Figure 11. The Bride

Additionally, to merge the tree with the man-made structure, a joint was needed to keep the tree in the air, not touching the ground. So, referring to the holding concept, a man-made standard clamp is used to both hold the tree hopefully enriching the meaning of the joint and the cage that holds the stones together.



Figure 12. The Bride

When the unfinished stood up by itself without leaning on any surrounding object, I realized that the visual language of the piece was bold enough not requiring paint or sanding the rusty parts of the man-made structure. This particular language chosen may be referred to the style of punk as Wilson and Tyler defined it, “an assault on all received *notions of taste*” (196)

The objects sloppiness may be considered meaningful in a manner because showing welding marks and the rust on the metal structure may add memories to the material, as in Pearce’s claims about memories of an object (20). To clarify the concept of memory of an object, personification of an old rusty truck can be given as an example.



Figure 13. Old Truck

The visual language of the old truck may impose us such feelings that we may relate it as an old human being who has many experiences and memories from the past.

Unlike in the working process of the previous work “The Bride”, I created numerous personification connections between the clamp, sloppy metal structure, and the balanced stones in a cage. The title of this work is based on a symbolic character centered on the position of the tree, which I likened and associated to a beggar’s hand. So, the persona I created was the label of the work, the Beggar.

## 2.3 THE HUSSY



Figure 14. The Hussy

The piece “The Hussy” is a combination of a found and painted branch with a curvilinear man-made metal structure that has an axe at the end. Similar methods of creativity such as personification, balance and alienation are used during its design process as in previous works. The primary focus of this particular work is the way it stands up. As in previous works, the piece started to evolve while personifying and playing with a found and collected

branch. Like the trees position in “The Beggar”, this branch is positioned upside down in order to weaken its definition as a tree. To make it a self-standing object, a metal construction was produced. However, as it stood up, the visual weight and meaning generated by the branch was still stronger than it was supposed to be. So, a new element of meaning needed to be added to the object, introducing a new challenge to the play; playing with cliché meanings, enhancing the joy of creative process. This problem was created to be enjoyed as it is suggested by game theory; players create problems because they enjoy solving it (Dietmar Gørlitz, Joachim F. Wohlwill, 1987:217).

So, the play here evolved around creating a banal relation between a tree and an axe, and yet simultaneously trying to weaken the banality as much as possible. In order to deal with this problem, I attempted to alienate the major elements of the work from possible prior meanings. . The tree branch is painted with blue acrylic paint to present it as a false/fake object. I was now possible to reflect that the memories that a natural tree texture implies disappear and transform into a plastic and cheesy object by itself. As Pearce claims, as the faking reduces our connection with the reality and degrade our understandings of memories (96), it might be possible to claim that the paint hid the clues of the memories that texture of the tree may imply.

To alienate the meaning of axe, the objects function has been changed from an object able to cut the tree to balancing, by being a support for the tree. The curved handle was used to negate its previous function. The audience may not experience this function of axe, which creates the tension at the point it touches the ground. Alienation of the axe may increase the conceptual value of the work instead of degrading it. As an example Magritte achieved to weaken the banality between the figures of two conceptually connected objects by alienating them in “the Holidays of Hegel (1958) without degrading their values. Because Magritte set the position of the figures in an unexpected way, it is possible to say that viewers alienate them and don’t question their banal connections.



Figure 15. René Magritte, Hegel's Holiday

After this loosened banality, I started to link the physical features of the object and their implied meanings to personify it as the final stage of the process. The features of the work such as fakeness of the plastic paint on the branch and the upside down axe without its original function that is typically defined and restricted it to are connected and create the new imaginary character "The Hussy", which intends to refer to a woman who the society blames about her so called "fake" visual choices and characteristics in order to flirt.

## 2.4 STRESS/STRAIN



Figure 16. Stress/Strain

“Stress/strain” is a sound installation, made with a pile of leaves and a microphone that is connected to an amplifier and a sound system. The work transfers sounds caused by the stress and strain of leaves in the pile as they dry and crumble to the sound system in order to create an atmosphere of expiring within the gallery space.

In the pile, weight of the leaves creates various forces on each other. Due to this force, stress and strain occurs on the leaves. As a result, the leaves make spontaneous cracking noises while they release or transfer the tension on to the others. Although the pile cannot be personified easily by itself unlike other works, the microphone tends to add characteristics of a performer on a stage. To strengthen the personification, a particular microphone, which could be considered as retro object, is used. Zimoun also uses the same implications in his work with 25 woodworms, wood (2009). His works focuses on the repetitive sounds referred to as noise that can be realized by listening carefully. So, as in Zimoun’s work, weak or slight messages of an object or action that can only be found in details become the very important

element of the work. As a result, as the audience recognizes the source of the sound meaning of the object “leave pile” is altered.



Figure 17. Zimoun, 25 woodworms, wood

Although repetition, or rhythm, maybe related to the concept of harmony, they can also be considered as one of the basic human tendencies. Spontaneous cracking noises may affect the flow of time and stagnation in the isolated gallery space. This effect creates tension with the aim of metaphorically transferring the stress and strain to the audience. Hence, viewers may desire to jump on the pile or at least to manipulate it. However, the sanctity of the gallery space may prevent them from taking this action. This invisible wall between the work and viewer may also be claimed as an element that creates another kind of stress.



## CONCLUSION

During the process of play, the aim was questioning the act of visiting the dumpsite in the campus. To that end, meanings of collected and selected tree parts are experimented with and integrated into different plays revolving around themselves. Personifying these branches guided my artistic practice to making new objects and creating imaginary characters along the production process. It may or may not be possible to consider these objects as solid answers to the questions rose. To clarify, or to give a quick answer, the most common connection between the exhibited works can be analyzed by an urge to resurrect the dying trees as other objects or characters. This may also reveal the reason of personifying them as imaginary living beings relating them with possible figures that I observe within society. Of course all those associations to imaginary characters and personifications can also be simply seen as titling of the works.

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