OKU/ READ

By İz Öztat Alemdaroğlu

SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN VISUAL ARTS VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN

Sabancı University
Spring 2008

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Approval of the Institute of Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

OKU/ READ

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Spring 2008

This is a supplementary text for the exhibition OKU/ READ and cannot be considered separately from it. "READ" is an assemblage of fragments with references to processes of othering and homogenization, orientalism, post-modern and Islamic architecture, belief systems, women as marker of ideology in society and notions of display. What brings these fragments together is an intellectual and relational process that led to their simultaneous production. Their coexistence creates an ambiguous space open to multiple readings.

Key words: social engineering, sieve, architecture, ornament, belief.

ÖZ

OKU/ READ

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Görsel Sanatlar Görsel Iletisim Tasarımı Yüksek Lisans Programı
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Bu, OKU sergisini destekleyici bir çalısmadır ve sergiden ayrı bir metin olarak konumlandırılamaz. OKU, ötekileştirme ve aynılaştırma, post-modern ve İslam mimarisi, inanç sistemleri, ideolojinin göstergesi olarak kadını ve sergileme şekillerine göndermede bulunan parçaların bir araya gelmesinden oluşan bir bütündür. Bu parçaların bir arada bulunmasının nedeni, aynı zaman dilimi içinde üretilmelerine neden olan zihinsel ve ilişkisel bir süreçtir. Birlikte varolmaları, pek çok okumaya açık belirsiz bir mekan yaratır.

Anahtar kelimeler: toplumsal mühendislik, elek, mimari, süsleme, inanç.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

READ/ OKU is an assemblage of fragments with references to processes of othering and homogenization, orientalism, post-modern and Islamic architecture, belief systems, women as marker of ideology in society and notions of display. An intellectual and relational process brought these fragments together and led to their simultaneous production. Their coexistence creates an ambiguous space open to multiple readings. This body of work has been formed in dialogue with multiple disciplines of making such as sculpture, architecture and design. In his book, Design and Crime, Hal Foster maps the transformations of what sculpture is

> From academic modeling of the human figure supported by the hidden armature (most statues are like the Statue of Liberty in this regard), to the modernist exposure of the "interior structure" of the object (think of the open framework of Constructivist sculpture of the 1920s), to the con temporary interest in a given place - the expanded field of sculpture that extends from earth works in the 1960s and 1970s to site-specific projects of various sorts today.
>
> Boundaries of sculpture expand from an object to negotiation of space, and more recently to investigations of social forms and community with emergence of relational aesthetics. In this exhibition, I insisted on the object as a container of concerns with social constructions, space and architecture, design and function.1

"READ/ OKU" fabricates a mesh-like text, which permits multiple readings. Karatani draws attention to the shift from architecture to text as the preferred metaphor in the 1970s. Textuality is developed by Barthes and literary critics, who distinguished between work and text, arguing that "the work is a self-contained whole dependent on the author for its meaning or signification, while text is a textured fabric of quotations and metonymical slidings that produces significations without recourse to the sovereign author."2 This shift from architecture to text as the favored metaphor privileges "becoming" over "making". In my work, sieves are used as structural elements that can be reorganized to occupy a state of "becoming" instead of "making". By using the title "READ/ OKU", I place the responsibility

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1. Foster, Hal, Design and Crime, (London, NY: Verso 2003) p.36.
2. Karatani, Kojin, Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number; Money, (USA: MIT Press, 1995) p.xxiii.   1

of interpretation on the audience, offering the work as an open text. The first word of the Qur'an is also translated to Turkish as "Oku", which introduces associations with the divine command. "OKU" (Figure 1, 1.1) is written in the space with blue LED lights placed in sieves and suspended from the ceiling. This form resembles Mahya, a tradition of hanging phrases written with lights between two minarets (Figure 2) during Ramadan.

Sieve as Metaphor

Sieve is a traditional tool that requires manual labor to separate the coarse from the fine parts of matter. Sieves were constructed from twisted strips of animal skin, which were stretched around a circle frame made from flexible wood (Figure 3). In the second half of 20th century, mass-produced synthetic screens became available and replaced the hand-made mesh (Figure 3.1). In The System of Objects, Baudrillard draws attention to the relationship between traditional tools and the body that has been similar over the centuries but changed recently with a shift in the modes of production. He points out,

> ... Suppression of the gestural system of effort, by the great shift from a universal gestural system of labor to a universal gestural system of control. This is the turning point at which a stastus enjoyed by objects for millennia, their anthropomorphic status, is definitely terminated - de stroyed by the new abstractness of energy sources.3

Labor becomes immaterial as production relies more on knowledge and information technologies. This results in a shift in technologies of mass-production, where traditional tools are replaced by machines. What becomes of a tool, a form, that loses its function? I use sieves as a structural element, a ready-made that has lost its function but persists as a metaphor. It is a strong metaphor that suggests processes of social engineering. It resonates with classification, othering, homogenization, exclusion and control. In Postscript on the Societies of Control, Deleuze suggests a shift from disciplinary societies of Foucault to societies of control, using sieves as a metaphor, "Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are

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3.Baudrillard, Jean, The System of Objects, (London; New York: Verso, 1996), p. 47.

modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point."4

Sieve also provides a metaphor for othering since it is a filter, which separates and classifies. The outcome of this process resembles the binary structure of self/other, which is defining "the self" against what it is not. Yeğenoğlu summarizes Derrida's discourse on the "other",

According to him; a binary structure constructs an "other" as a privileged term, against which the latter can distinguish itself. One term is taken out of a system of terms and is given a positive value, which thus constructs an "other" or negative of itself which signifies everything that it does not accept... The second term is thus denied an existence of its own; it is merely a negation of the first term. 5

At the core of Said's analysis of Orientalism lies the same principle of binary opposition; the "Oriental" is constructed as other to set boundaries that define the "West" against what it is not. By producing certain representations and knowledge of the "Orient", the Occident constitutes itself. In the work discussed below, I try to work against these binary oppositions and the interpretations they impose, by introducing multiple readings.

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4. Deleuze, Gilles, Postscript on the Societies of Control, (OCTOBER, 59, Winter 1992, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA), p. 3-7.
5. Yeğenoğlu, Meyda, Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism. Cambridge, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 7.

Surface/ Ornament

As I worked with the permeable surfaces of sieves, I got attracted to mesh-like architectural surfaces. As I started collecting samples of permeable surfaces in Islamic architecture (Figure 4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)), I looked into the relationship between surface and structure in architecture. This process led to an investigation of ornament in both Western and Islamic architecture.

Major characteristic of Modernist architecture is the making of space geared to function. It strives for simplicity of form and eliminates ornament. Postmodern architecture emphasizes communication rather than space. In Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi suggests "a more flexible practice of architecture which could keep pace with the image-driven consumer culture that had emerged after the war."6 Taking Las Vegas as a case study, they draw attention to the use of surfaces for communication, to the importance of ornament in postmodern architecture by suggesting the term "decorated shed". Use of signs and symbols that communicate massages without occupying much volume becomes a central practice in shaping public space.

In her book, Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture, Gulru Necipoğlu suggests a new reading of ornament in Islamic architecture. Islamic arabesque as surface ornament is a fetishized aspect of Islamic architecture. It has been interpreted by Orientalist art historians as pure decoration. Necipoğlu suggests a reading of Islamic ornament giving back its semiotic power,

> It simultaneously provided an overall sense of visual unity to the dar al-Islam and highlighted the vigorous diversity within that world, which never constituted a homogenous, monolithic bloc. It was this inherent duality of abstract sign systems - both linked to roots in a commonly shared Islamic past and at the same time deviating from them through distinctive transformations - that assured their rich communicative potential. 7

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6. Aymonino, Aldo and Valerio Paolo Mosco, Contemporary Public Space Un-Volumetric Architecture, (Milano: Skira, 2006) p. 355.

7. Necipoğlu, Gülru, Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in İslamic Architecture: Topkapı Palace Museum Library MS

H. 1956, (Santa Monica: CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), p. 221.

Necipoğlu resists essentialist references to religious and cultural origins in understanding geometric designs of Islamic ornament. She suggests that both Christianity and Islam inherited the same late antique aesthetic theories, resulting in abstract geometric schemes, which reflect a notion of divine harmony and perfect proportion. The underlying structure of Islamic arabesque is a radial grid that results in interlaced stars and polygons (Figure 5, 5.1). When the underlying geometric structure is removed, it results in an aura of mysterious complexity.

"Horror vacui" is defined as "a psychological fear of empty spaces" and a desire to fill the entire surface with ornament. It is also a term applied to ornamented surfaces of Islamic architecture, arguing, "An empty surface is intolerable to the Mohammedan eye." By making the window piece "horror vacui" (Figure 6, 6.1), I try to create a permeable and communicative surface full of visual references and representations that enrich the associations of other works in the space. This piece is constructed from sieves that can be reassembled in different ways. It is created in reference to discourse of ornament in Islamic architecture and the communicative surfaces of post-modern architecture. It suggests a potential of communication but also alienates the audience by presenting visual stimuli that is not easily accessible. It references the palimpsest surface of the city, which was readable at once (such as the gravestones you come across or historic buildings) but fails to communicate anything to the surrounding culture today (Figure 7, 7.1).

Islamic art and architecture is shaped by a deep connection with text, visualization of which becomes an art form in itself; calligraphy. Referred as "spiritual geometry", calligraphy comes to existence with religion, as Muslims search for the ultimate way to execute the word of God. In search of an expression that would reflect the spiritual beauty of the sacred book in its physical beauty, calligraphers develop different styles. One of the earliest forms developed in the city of Kufa, Iraq, has a sharply angled form. (Derman, 2004). In the piece "Kufi Mosque" (Figure 7.2), "There is no God but Allah" forms a mosque, which is cross-stitched and stretched on a sieve. This object resonates differently with each piece in the space, functioning as decoration, expression of belief and a symbol of how text and architectural form permeate each other.

"chora" (Figure 8, 8.1) is two large copper half spheres, one facing down and one facing up. This work tries to contain the multiple references of its name. Virgen explains Aristotle's use of the word "chora",

> Aristotle's concept of space, which he liked to define as a place (chora). Space cannot be neither form, nor matter, nor even an interval or void between things. "We are left to conclude that place is the fourth of the things we have talked about (as possible definitions): that is to say, the extreme limit of the enveloping body... with yet even another consequence: place seems to be a kind of surface and something like a vase; that is to say, a wrapping. Further, the limit is with the limited thing, and therefore place is with the limited thing, and therefore place is with the thing or being itself" (physics, IV, 5)."[8]

According to this definition, place becomes a surface that receives the traces of time passing and is shaped by the memory of its existence. "Chora" is used by Julia Kristeva, to mean the pre-lingual, earliest stage of psychosexual development. It also references, Chora Church, which was turned into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul and became a museum in 1948. In the work "chora", I treat one half sphere like a dome, an enveloping surface and one half like a receptacle that holds. Their shiny surfaces warp the space that they reflect.

Different treatments of the surface are present throughout my work, which generate layers of meanings between flatness and depth, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, solid and permeable.

Structure/ Space

Like the surface ornaments, structures of Islamic architecture are also instrumentalized by Orientalist approaches, "Broken down into their decorated components such as facades, domes, minarets, portals, mihrabs, lattices, and calligraphic or ornamental panels, Islamic buildings were fragmented in

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8. Virgen, Miguel Gonzalez, Of Games, The Infinite and Worlds; The Work of Gabriel Orozco, (Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 2000) p. 90.

6

these publications into reusable parts, displayed as neutral objects of consumption."9 In the piece called "Minaret", I also work with a fragment. Minaret is a loaded structure, which has lost its function but persists as a sign of religious and political power. Once a structure from which the call to prayer is sung, it has now become a cable box that connects the outdoor speakers high up to the microphone at the bottom. It has been built to convert churches into mosques as the Muslims conquered the Christian lands. As such, it is one of the most potent symbols of power. I try to conquer the exhibition space with my nomadic, permeable minaret that floats suspended in the air with a staircase of hands trying to reach down (Figure 9, 9.1, 9.2).

In Architecture as Metaphor, Karatani writes, "Western thought is marked by a will to architecture that is reiterated and renewed at times of crisis."10 Here, making is a way to resist becoming, which leads to a civilization that is built on ideas of Enlightenment and progress. "The Will to Architecture" (Figure 10) is a piece that I constructed and deconstructed many times and it came to symbolize my struggle with making. It is also a metaphysical exploration of surface, matter and space. Instead of mass -the character of materiality- volume is created with space that is marked by a permeable and transparent surface. It allows visibility between inside and outside but still separates them.

Dogan Kuban suggests "there is an abstract monumental in Islamic architecture."11 In contrast to the idea of monument in the West, which is narrative and figurative, monuments are simple geometric structures in Islamic architecture. The major form of monument is turbe (shrine), built to house the body of the deceased. It is mostly an octagonal structure topped with a dome. Shrines caught my attention as I started paying attention to permeable surfaces. Although shrines are monumental buildings, they are permeable instead of stately. To receive the prayers of the passer by, the inside of the shrine is rendered

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9. Necipoğlu, Gülru, Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in İslamic Architecture: Topkapı Palace Museum Library MS H. 1956, (Santa Monica: CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), p. 221.
10. . Karatani, Kojin, Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number; Money, (USA: MIT Press, 1995) p. 5

11. Kuban, Dogan, Turk ve İslam Sanati Üzerine Denemeler, (İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, 1995), p. 276.

as visible and accessible as possible (Figure 11). The piece called "Monument" (Figure 12) is created in reference to shrines, as well as wishing trees that are believed to contain supernatural powers by their proximity to the shrine. There is a practice of tying rags to trees near shrines to make wishes. I tied rags on the shutter in front of the right shop window. This piece has been powerful in attracting the attention and urging the participation of passer-byes and neighbors. It is an ambiguous monument of belief and desire. The notion of the shrine is carried into the space by three sieve surfaces (Figure 13), one covered with a photograph taken at a shrine and two embroidered floor plans of shrines. It also aims to comment on collective memory, which is so fleeting in relation to contemporary losses, while persistent in relation to tradition and superstition.

"Nomadic origin" is frequently emphasized when talking about Islamic and Ottoman architecture, nurturing an exoticizing discourse. It is suggested in multiple sources that the tent is taken as a model for architecture, resulting in tapestry-like surfaces of ornament. Yurt, the tent of nomadic Turks, is also suggested as the form that gave rise to the dome in Ottoman architecture. In my work, there is a nomadic feeling, which came out as a result of circumstances instead of "nomadic origins". Having to work with materials that are light and easy to store, I ended up building structures that can be taken apart and reassembled and stacked in one another to occupy less space.

(In)Visibility/ Women

Imbedded in negotiations of space -public, private, sacred- is the place and role of women in society. Covering, as the act that renders something invisible and provides protection is the idea behind three works, each of which is made of two parts (Figure 14). "The Forbidden Modern" 12 (Figure 15) directly references Nilufer Gole's book by the same name, which argues for the pivotal role of women in constructing both the Kemalist narrative of modernism and the rhetoric of political Islam (Gole, 1991).

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12. The original title of the book uses "mahrem" instead of "forbidden", suggesting secracy, family life, man's family, woman's sphere, and the forbidden site closed off to the outsider's gaze. It is not possible to contain all these meanings in the English translation by using the word "forbidden or the Western notion of "private sphere" .(Göle, p. 20)　　　8

The piece is made of two sieves. The upper one embroidered with an abstracted image of two women wearing turbans and facing each other. The lower one has a triangle of wire worked into the mesh to resemble pubic hair.

The installation placed right behind "Forbidden Modern" consists of a chanfron and a copper strainer placed on a low table (Figure 16, 16.1, 16.2). Chanfron is a protective cover for the horse head, which I found to be a powerful symbol of what matters most to Turkish men; horse, woman, weapon. The chanfron I saw in the Military Museum (Figure 17) is scaled down to fit a human head and reproduced. References to domestic space and labor are juxtaposed with a shield that is originally made to protect horses but is adapted to women in this case.

The ruband placed in relation to the lead-sealed veil (Figure 18, 18.1) is there because of a few coincidences. I regularly visit a man in Grand Bazaar, who collects veils and headpieces from the Middle East. I have seen the ruband in his collection but could not afford it at the time. When I visited Documenta 12 in 2007, I saw a ruband on display (Figure 19) along with contemporary art works. Although performative curating and placement of non-art objects in art contexts are common practice by now, the ruband seemed de-contextualized and alienated in that framework. I managed to acquire the ruband from Grand Bazaar after coming back and placed it behind the "Lead-Sealed Veil" I made, to show there is nothing but the veil behind the veil; suggesting that politics of unveiling do not simply make women visible (Yegenoglu, 1998).

Visibility and success of opposing ideologies are frequently negotiated over women's bodies. Recent history of colonization is saturated with justifications of occupation with the rhetoric of bringing freedom to the women, whose suppression is symbolized by the veil. In Turkey, use of turban as a religious symbol and sign of power has resulted in a dichotomy that limits the personal and religious freedom of generations of women. Women's participation in public space is limited by a struggle over visibility/ invisibility of certain ideologies. Although these symbols are incredibly loaded and impossible to make clear statements around, I needed to bring the notion of covering into the space to suggest more than one reading.

Although all the works in the space suggest a function, "A Room of One's Own" (Figure 21) is made of overtly functional objects (tablecloth and lamp) that blur the distinction between design and art. For the lamp, casted lotus flowers are assembled to form a turban over the lightbulb (Figure 22). The table houses a tablecloth made from faucet drainers and hair (Figure 23). Turban, a symbol that has been overly instrumentalized, is bringing light to an irrational domestic surface.

Cosmology/ Belief

There are references to multiple cosmologies and belief systems in the exhibition space, some of which have been discussed above. The space behind "Do Not Enter" (Figure 24) contains "Hacer'ül Esved", "chora", "Kufi Mosque" and an embroidered "Virgin Mary" (Figure 25). These objects with close ties to the sacred and femininity create a hybrid sacred space with symbols from different belief systems resulting in a subjective alter of coexistence.

"Hacer'ül Esved" and "Chanfron" were produced as a result of research into state-owned museums in Istanbul. Visiting the Sacred Relics Pavilion of Topkapı Palace and the Military Museum, I was attracted to objects that originally functioned as protective covers. Hacer'ül Esved is a black stone that is placed on the corner of Kaaba to mark the beginning place of the circumambulation. It is believed to be sent from heaven and there are many other stories referring to its significance. It is housed in a silver or gold protective cover since it has been broken. The cover also protects from visitors to the Kaaba, who want to touch and kiss the stone. One of the worn-out protective covers is kept in the Sacred Relics Chamber in the Topkapi Palace. I reproduced a copy of the protective cover (Figure 26) with Aruş Taş, Arman Taş, Dikran Taş and Zeki Topbaş. Hacer'ul Esved and Chanfron became part of the installation because they fit into the discourses of sacred and visibility/ invisibility. More protective covers from different museums will be produced to result in another body of work.

Nostalgia/ Gentrification

All the works in the exhibition are objects that were once functional before they have been put on display. Most of them are hand-made or are produced with the help of basic technology. I am attracted to functional objects to emphasize art's proximity to the everyday. I work against alienation of labor at a micro-level and find a romantic satisfaction in the relationships that I establish with small producers, whose lives and labor are deeply connected to what they produce. I relate to them with a certain nostalgia feeling that their practice will soon parish as the world is taken over by mass-production and immaterial labor.

Works are produced with the collaboration of those, who agreed to work with me towards no functional end but for the sake of art. As they tuned into my process of making art, my awareness of their reality deepened. I worked with two small ateliers, a metalworking studio in Mahmutpaşa, and a sieve production studio in Tahtakale. Both businesses are threatened to be closed down by the municipality because of recent urban planning in the area. The metalworking studio is in Kalcilar Han, which is a historic site built for silversmiths in the 16th century. The municipality is claiming that chemicals used are hazardous to the environment and trying to remove all the small metalworking ateliers from the area. Artisans argue the reason behind their removal is trying to eliminate small ateliers after the construction of Kuyumcukent, a complex near the airport, solely devoted to metalworking studios. They cannot move there because of the high rents and the distance from the Grand Bazaar. As an artisan put it, "Grand Bazaar is the heart and we are the organs. You cannot place the organs away from the body, nor the production away from the shops". Once removed from their historic site, they have no choice but close down their ateliers.

A similar process is happening in Tahtakale, where the whole strip of shops will be removed to clean out the historical area around the Süleymaniye Mosque. Sabahattin Bey says, "The shops and the everyday life here is what the tourists come for. If they remove all the texture of life around the mosque, tourists will have nothing to experience".

Both small business rely on handcraft and are producing products that are not favored any more with the shift in the modes of production. Manual sieves are not used any more in mechanized flour production

and hand-made silverware cannot compete with the variety and prices of mass-produced house ware. Interviews were conducted in both ateliers and made into documentaries (Supplement 1, DVD). In the space, their concerns about being removed from their places are heard from an outdoor speaker placed across from the "Minaret" (Figure 27).

Exhibition Space/ Display

The pieces "Threshold" and "Do Not Enter" are markers that create an awareness of how the space is constructed. "Threshold" (Figure 28), a circular beaded door, creates a familiar site resembling the butcher doors to keep flies away and attracts the attention of passers by. Visitors need to pass through the "Threshold" to enter the space, which provides a rich sensory experience with sound and touch. "Do Not Enter" (Figure 29) clearly introduces an official language of borders and limits, yet its authority is open to question by the space allowed on both sides and the rolling pins that are used instead of brass pipes.

My practice of making has been triggered by performance in the past. I performed with most of the objects I made or let them perform. Although I could not figure out how to perform with the objects in the space, I tried to evoke some of my experiences of the objects with an ambient soundscape. Working on the sound with Doğuş Bitecik, we recorded intimate process sounds such as sifting and sweeping, which he mixed with field recordings such as church bells and seagulls screaming. The sound is placed into "horror vacui", being audible both from the inside and outside of the space. Another sound piece lets the collaborators perform by giving voice to their concerns about being displaced.

The exhibition is in PiST, an independent artist-run space dedicated to interdisciplinary projects. It consists of three ground floor shops in Pangalti. The space has been mostly used for performances and discussions previously. From my interactions in the neighborhood during the installation process, I figured that the space has an ambiguous existence that cannot be labeled by the neighbors. Being present in the space while it is open to visitors, I was able to observe the audience. So far, most of my audience has been neighbors and passers by, who are not familiar with practices of contemporary art. While a peak into the space scares some people away, some are moved to tell memories of their village surfacing with a sight of the sieves and the wish rags on the shutter. Small producers entering the space got deeply engaged with the work coming up with ways of twisting their practice, as well as improving my work.

CONCLUSION

With increasing instrumentalization of art in service of capital and corporate branding, I find myself paralyzed trying to participate in the "culture industry". Realizing the limitation of producing objects or constructing spaces within the art context, I try to establish meaningful and transformative relationships in the process of making, which is the most satisfying aspect of my work.

In the text above, I layed down the intellectual motivations behind my practice and work. I hope that over time, readings that are not accessible to me at the moment will reveal themselves. This research and production process opened many doors and created new paths, which I will follow further in my work to come.

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