

# ARBEIT MACHT FIRE

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This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## **ABSTRACT**

ARBEIT MACHT FIRE

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In this study I have observed the body of work that I produced during the last two years. In this respect I had the opportunity to analyze the contextual relation between the above-mentioned works and the references thereof. I have drawn the framework of the works that have been classified under head chapters whilst keeping the references in sight with no intention to over interpret. I have studied the works considering both their aesthetic and conceptual contexts, having also kept their individual and socio-individual qualities in mind.

# ÖZ

## ARBEIT MACHT FIRE

Tan Mavitan

Görsel Sanatlar Görsel İletişim Tasarımı Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez Danışmanı: Yard. Prof. Erdağ Aksel

Bahar 2005, v +11 sayfa

Tezimde, son iki yıl içerisinde ortaya koyduğum yapıtları ele aldım. Böylelikle yapıtlar arasındaki kavramsal ilişkiyi; içlerindeki biçimsel açıdan tekrar eden unsurları ve sözü edilen yapıtların öne sürdüğü göndermeleri ayrıntılı şekilde inceleme fırsatı buldum. Ana başlıklar altında sınıflanan yapıtların kavramsal çerçeveleri, göndermeler dışarıda bırakılmayacak şekilde çizildi ve eserler aşırı-yoruma girmeden çözümlendi. Bu yapıtların estetik ve kavramsal kaygıları birbirlerinden ayrılmadan ele alındı; bireysel ve toplum-bireysel yapıları gözönünde tutuldu.

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## **Artist's Statement:**

In this essay I will discuss the two series of works I have produced for the final exhibition throughout my second year at Sabanci University. These two series consist of various pieces that have certain common objectives and concerns. In this essay I also aim to concentrate on these concepts that reoccur in the series mentioned above, such as authority, direction, manipulation, education/doctrination etc. The essay certainly comes from a personal point of view, and it is based on my experience during my studies at Mimar Sinan University, Sabanci University, and on my endeavour to form myself as an artist.

### **“Road Signs:”**

The works I picked from the series – descriptively labelled as “Road Signs” – include two of the four road signs I manipulated and produced. The works stem from the directional signs that can be found on streets, roads and highways. These arrow shaped objects indicate the directions using a very generic graphic design so that the driver does not focus on the sign but rather on what it implies. In need of finding the right direction, the driver deliberately picks the correct road sign as to find his/her way. In that way s/he ignores all the other direction options and thus actually has a restricted perception.

In this series I am specifically interested in road signs that I regularly come across on my way to school. Sabanci University's logotype placed on an arrow shaped road signs is a special design that comes through among all the other signs that can be seen on many intersections after the expressway. The university's sign implies a particular design and order due to its characters and their positioning. Of course that sign also appeals to me since I am the one



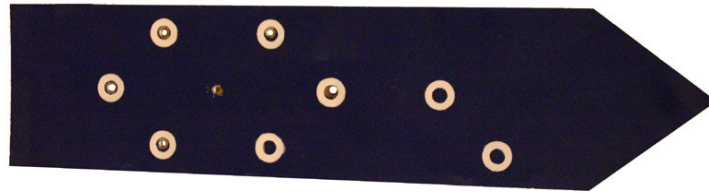
whom it addresses. I am after all looking to find the way to the university. Another characteristic of many road signs at the intersections in the city and in the outskirts of Istanbul is that they are placed in a very disorganized almost entangled manner. It almost appears as if the signs –as are many buildings and architectural layout of the city– have been just put overnight. The impersonal road signs that are supposed to show objective direction only somehow assume the features of disorganized but humanly cosy shantytowns.



There is a clear discrepancy between the signs, the function of the signs and their positioning in this city. My interest lies in this paradox of the supposed orderly function to direct and the inevitability ensuing chaos.

The first work “Road Sign with Bullet Holes” originated from signs that one could see on many highways with bullet holes on it. This juxtaposition of sign and bullet holes aimed to be a direct reference but also a creative act. It is a reference in the way in which one can observe road signs on highways with actual bullet holes on it. They are obviously made people using the signs for target practice, shooting at them while driving. Equally this act certainly coincides with the daily experienced paradox of authority and dissent. The bullet holes made by drivers appear like a protest against the orders/directions of the signs, although speaking of our particular locality and culture one might as well assume that the shooters may be a part of

the same authority, e.g. state agents or assassins, not fearing to risk their personal security over such a phantasmagorical adventure.

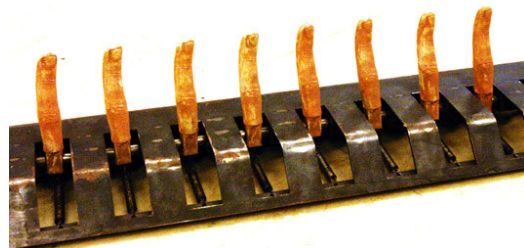


The second road sign (Sign with Fingers) is another example to highlight the dilemma between two concepts, namely authority and disorderly dissent. Authority in a sign –and in this case in a road sign placed by the authorities– is not only embedded in its neutral logotype, generic design, and clear implications but also in the limited opportunities it offers. A sign mostly points to one direction, but it provides the person with the chance of choosing that direction or the opposing direction. This choice is extremely inhuman and imperative. The road sign (Sign with Fingers) intends to mock this inhumanity of the descriptive signs and the limited choices they offer by means of the subtle touch of *human fingers directing*. Here the two elements are brought together inherent in the concepts of authority and disorder by juxtaposing the road sign and a bunch of index fingers. The fingers point to various, irrelevant directions, and the sign for once and all gives a true chance to choose.



The title of the third work of this series is “Finger Trap.” This piece strongly resembles the device that prevents cars –or other motor vehicles– to enter or exit from an undesired direction. This is a regulation gadget that is gaining popularity. One can see more and more vehicle-traps in front of parking lots of residences, housing sites, and public and/or governmental buildings. These devices function to allow the vehicle to enter through one permitted direction but it harms the tires if it were to be entered from the opposite/illegal direction. I am interested in these gadgets since they are utterly welcoming on the one side and are rather mercilessly violent from the other direction. It brings to the mind the guards at the aforementioned buildings whose duty is to welcome the guests and the owners but to prevent the unwanted visitors in a rather harsh and if necessary detrimental manner.

The “Finger Trap” aims to add the human aspect to the mechanical device. Normally the traps consist of many one-way-operating spikes. In this piece the spikes are replaced with human middle-finger sculptures made from polyester. Every sculpted finger operates just like a spike although in a much more pleasant manner the fingers cannot do harm to any vehicle or human being, they just more or less give *the finger* to the trespasser. “Finger Trap” acts again as a light hostility device in a humane way; instead of harming in a physical way the fingers just impotently suggest and nothing more.

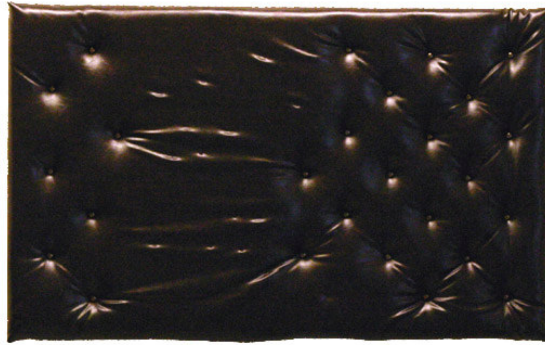


I believe these three sign works try to bring together two aspects as to create a “sign-in-between” while questioning authority against dissent, order at odds with disorder, and freedom to choose against being directed.

## **“Capitonné” Authority Padded**

The road sign (Sign with Bullet Holes)” led to the series of three works called “Capitonné” due to the simple fact that these bullet holes were organized in patterns suggesting puncturing nails. Although the dictionary definition of “Capitonné” is “padded” and it may connote the *padded rooms* of asylums, Capitonné still remains as an unknown fact in the way in which it is significant. The reason why the padded leather panels are installed on the walls of in many directors’ and bureaucrats’ offices is hardly ever explained. These semi-leather panels are punctured with nails and mostly are as large as a painting on the wall behind the desk. They usually match the covers of the table, the couch and the penholder that are part of the decoration of a typical *administrator’s office*. The rumour is that the function of that item can be seen in its ability to protect the room, the important person from noise, cold, and damages from outside the room. However at this time this explanation seems insufficient –unless Capitonné covers all of the walls as in hospitals– the framed object only functions partially. In this context, I use Capitonné specifically referring to the framed and padded vinyl backings placed in the back wall of high bureaucrats desks. Though the origins of this particular object appear to be insulation over the years the object changed its function and it no longer works as means of insulation. It seems that ultimately the insulation function of the object grew less

significant while the symbolic isolation function of the object increased, isolating, separating the powerful from the powerless.



Capitonné has become a clear symbol of civil and the military authority and the panel behind the seat of the administrator serves a symbolic purpose. The nails placed carefully and orderly on this panel appear very planned and create a worked out pattern. This pattern (mainly dots on straight, diagonal lines) almost certainly has become a simplistic metaphor for order in general.

In the series of works “Capitonné” I tried to switch that order with simple and understated manipulations. In the first “Capitonné” I changed the pattern to a seemingly random order. The punctured nails are placed in a broken pattern and appear as almost like a production error. Although this pattern is random, it is only in appearance because the nail holes actually matched the bullet holes on the road sign (Sign with Bullet Holes)” as if to follow an order created not even by the artist but by an anonymous highway shooter.

This relationship between authoritarian order and rebellious disorder can be both disturbing but also ludicrous. The road sign is authoritative direction aimed to situate things in order, directing everyone to where they are supposed to go and also not go. The anonymous gunner

shooting at these road signs challenges the authority as well as transforming these pre-planned objects into expressive randomness. Obviously my relationship with the authority is sceptical. I often find myself in a vulnerable position when I encounter any situation that involves authority such as schools and institutions related to the obligatory military service. I observed this same sort of authority exemplified above in the useless leather panels that symbolize the visible power. By puncturing the holes matching the bullet patterns I tried to utilise the authority against itself, and in this process I discovered the love and hate relationship one experiences with order and authority in life and state; again e.g. military, school, state.



In the second work of the series, “Capitonné” I depicted the American flag on the generic leather panel by puncturing the nails on the upper left hand corner of the panel. The punctured area resembled the whole panel in a smaller scale as the flag stands for nationalism and the nation state, in this case the largest and the only super power in the world.

The third piece that I present in the final exhibition is titled “The Tank.” As stated above, padded panels can be associated with power prevented from the outer world. A tank, used as military device, is a part and signifier of offence. It is not only a symbol of physical power but offence as well. One of the opportunities that the universities provide is to postpone the

obligatory military service. I personally benefit from this postponement in a country where imperative military service is an obligation. In final analysis the army and the master's education are opposed to each other like two magnets' matching poles. As soon as I complete my graduate education I will have to proceed to the army for a year's mandatory service or maybe even longer. One of the reasons of creating "The Tank" is to express this very personal pressure weighing down on me. A padded tank stands for state and military authority. Padded panels protect me from the tank – and vice versa.



In this statement I tried to summarize as an artist and as a person that the issues that I have with state authority and the imposing circumstances. I believe the works give a clear outline of my anxiety to encounter the situations involving the concepts mentioned above. I also believe that objects I created thereupon will not just be expressions of my personal anxiety but will address and touch many common and collective fears.

In most of the works I used simple juxtapositions bringing together two basic rudiments of the discourse, e.g. the bullet holes and the sign, the tank and the padded panels &c. The objects exhibited aim to link together united human apprehensions. "The Tank" with its soft surface is almost punctured and yet not pierced by the fingers on the road sign (Road Sign with

Fingers)”. The sign facing the tank is about to be shot or run over by an aggressive weapon. This could perhaps happen on any Turkish highway or in a square in China.

Tan Mavitan







