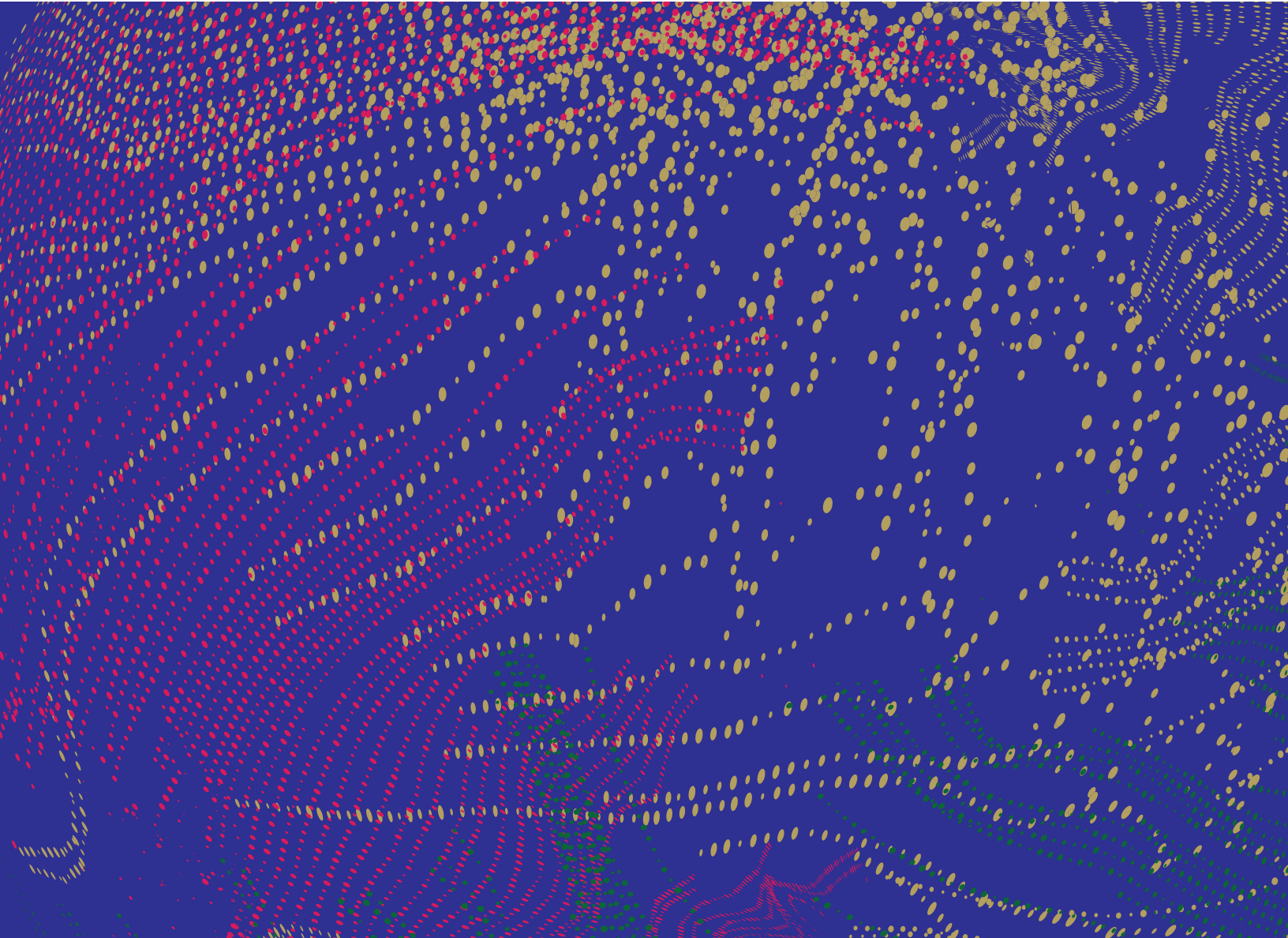


The World Humanities Report

Art, Resistance, and the University: The Case of BounSergi

Pinar Tasdemir



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Art, Resistance, and the University: The Case of BounSergi

Pinar Tasdemir University of Wisconsin–Madison

When it comes to discussing “public humanities” in the context of Turkish society, one faces an immediate problem: the term “humanities” does not exist as a significant category that structures academic programs in Turkey, and the closest Turkish equivalent of the term, *beşeri bilimler* (human sciences), is an insufficient referent, since it is strictly used in academic discourse, devoid of a common use within the public sphere. However, if we are to explore the term much more broadly—for instance, considering humanities as something that actively partakes in all areas of life that deal with human experience and expression, without being confined to its uses within academia—then the lack of a direct counterpart of the term does not indicate a lack of engagement with the humanities in Turkish life. Within this context, I turn to BounSergi—a collective art exhibition organized by the students of Turkey’s prestigious Boğaziçi University in order to protest the appointment of a new rector, Melih Bulu, a supporter of Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and who was previously unaffiliated with Boğaziçi in any way—as a moment of activism that shows the threads that intrinsically connect the university with the public, art with politics, collectivism with individual action.¹

In 1816 Boğaziçi University, then called Robert College, was founded by Christopher Rheinlander Robert and Cyrus Hamlin in Istanbul as an American higher education institution. In the Ottoman period it served ethnic and religious minority groups living in Istanbul. In 1971 it was transformed into a public university and admitted students from all over the country regardless of their religious or ethnic background. Over time Boğaziçi University has become known as an autonomous and politically outspoken institution whose academics and students are not afraid to show resistance to both right- and left-wing policies in relation to both domestic and international issues. For instance, the university organized an anti-war protest against the occupation of Kuwait

¹ BounSergi: “Boun” is the abbreviation of Boğaziçi University, and *sergi* means “exhibition” in Turkish.

by Iraq in 1990; female students of Boğaziçi marched against femicides and child exploitation in Turkey in 1993; twenty-four students at the university were detained on campus in 2004 while protesting against the construction of a dam and hydroelectric power plants on Munzur River in Tunceli, since the project presented serious environmental risks to local wildlife; and, during the height of Turkey's headscarf rights crisis between secular and Islamist parties in 2008, Boğaziçi students fought against the ban on headscarves in state institutions, defending people's freedom of religion. As the university strives to protect its strong culture of dissent, this particular tradition at Boğaziçi has led the institution to find itself in opposition to the policies of President Erdoğan countless times.

The focus of this essay is a situation that arose in 2021 at Boğaziçi. During the last days of January, two students at the university were detained by the police and two others were put under house arrest for presenting an artwork in BounSergi, the student art exhibition protesting Erdoğan's appointment of Bulu as the university's new rector. Concentrating on Boğaziçi's art collective as a space of resistance both enabled and strengthened by the presence of the university itself, I will attempt in this essay to articulate the importance of the university not as an abstracted institutional formation but as a public space of opposition, resilience, and critical activity. This line of thinking follows Jacques Derrida's 1999 lecture, in which he articulates the necessity of "the university without condition" for the future of humanities.² For Derrida, the university is not a pure, scholarly, and abstract site; rather, it is an embodied space that "should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance" to the powers of the state, the economy, and ideology.³ Key to both Derrida's and this essay's claim is the notion of place: the physical space that the university occupies and in which it can sustain its critical activity. In the midst of a pandemic during which much of life has taken place virtually, the case of BounSergi demonstrates the university's material presence as something fundamentally irreplaceable.

² Jacques Derrida, "The Future of the Profession or the Unconditional University (Thanks to the 'Humanities,' What Could Take Place Tomorrow)," in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24.

³ Derrida, "The Future of the Profession," 25.

The Student Protests at Boğaziçi

Looking at the history of the university—especially focusing on the moments of social activism and political intervention—it is evident that freedom of speech and citizens' right to protest have long been encouraged at Boğaziçi University and its affiliates, and any attempt of government or police to obstruct these freedoms are seen rightfully as violent and coercive measures. What sparked the January 2021 events was the Turkish state's involvement in Boğaziçi's internal affairs, which broke with the tradition of the university's autonomous operations. Even though the Erdoğan-appointed Rector Bulu was replaced by Naci İnci on July 15, 2021, the issue of the state's interference with the university is still to some extent unresolved today.⁴

On January 1, 2021, President Erdoğan appointed Bulu as the new rector of Boğaziçi University. Although fully legal, as it is the president who nominates rectors to state universities in Turkey, Erdoğan's decision broke with the tradition according to which the head of the university is chosen from among the candidates presented by the faculty. In Bulu's case, he had not even worked at the university before. Instead, he was a local politician in Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Since Erdoğan came to power in 2003, Boğaziçi's consistent anti-authoritarian stance and liberal/left principles have been subjected to countless rhetorical and legislative attacks initiated by AKP. Intellectual freedom under Erdoğan's rule immediately found itself in a very fragile condition as the government's political tactics included not only attempts at silencing any kind of opposition but also the use of heavy propaganda against intellectuals and academics, since AKP deemed them the leading threat to Turkey's national security. One of the most well-known examples of such critical moments was the Academics for Peace petition of 2016 and its aftermath, which resulted in the Turkish state prosecuting and firing academics all around

⁴ As a result of the protests, Naci İnci, who has been a faculty member at Boğaziçi University since 2005 and who served as the chair of the Physics Department between 2014 and 2018, replaced Melih Bulu. However, even though İnci is affiliated with the university, his appointment by another presidential decree has not been welcomed by either faculty or students. İnci is another pro-Erdoğan figure who has declared his opposition to the protests and continues to align himself with the police to suppress any demands from students, including a demand for the release of Boğaziçi student protesters detained since the beginning of the events.

the country for the alleged crime of terrorism.⁵ The case started a purge within academia in Turkey, and Boğaziçi inevitably had its own share of charged and

The governor of Istanbul prohibited all public gatherings in the two districts where Boğaziçi is located, relying on the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic. This ban on public gatherings exposed the pandemic as an instrumental event that set the stage for the state's abuse of power and authority.

imprisoned academics who had signed the petition.

Though not the first case of government meddling in Boğaziçi University's affairs, Bulu's appointment was academics at Boğaziçi, who are very well acquainted with the Turkish government's various attacks on intellectual freedom, interpreted Bulu's assignment as a clear sign that the university was being targeted by the state, and the reasons behind his

presence were seen as highly political and inherently hostile to the ecosystem of the institution. As a result, just a few days after the announcement of Bulu's appointment as the new rector, on January 4, hundreds of students—predominantly from Boğaziçi but also from other Istanbul universities—and faculty came together around the campus to protest the appointment. As with many other demonstrations that have taken place in the universities during Erdoğan's rule, the protesters were met with disproportionate police force as the officers used rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons against the gathered crowd. At dawn on January 5, Istanbul police started raiding a number of

⁵ In January 2016, a group of academics from all over Turkey signed a petition that condemned the acts of the government led by Erdoğan, the political leader of Turkey since his party first took the lead in the 2002 elections. The petition signatories—academics, researchers, and public intellectuals—declared that the state was responsible for a deliberate massacre of the Kurdish population living in the eastern regions of Turkey, since at that time the state's blatant aggression toward the Kurds was increasing drastically under martial law. The academics who signed the declaration demanded that the state-sponsored violence stop immediately and firmly stated that they did not want to be complicit in this crime. At the time of the original release of the statement by Academics for Peace, 1,128 academics from 89 universities in Turkey had endorsed it, and more than 2,000 academics, including international scholars, ultimately signed on. After the issuance of the statement, the state began prosecuting many of the academics who had signed the declaration, since they were allegedly taking a part in the crime of terrorism. Formally, the signatories were charged with making propaganda for a terrorist organization on the basis of Article 7/2 of the Turkish Anti-Terror Act and Article 53 of the Turkish Penal Code.

students' homes, detaining at least forty-five people over two days.⁶ On January 6, the governor of Istanbul prohibited all public gatherings in the two districts where Boğaziçi is located, relying on the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic. This ban on public gatherings exposed the pandemic as an instrumental event that set the stage for the state's abuse of power and authority.

Recovering the University

On January 7, on Instagram, BounSergi announced that the collective was organizing an art exhibition on various Boğaziçi campuses in order to continue the protest against the new rector, who, within the first week of his tenure, had already caused harm to many students. In the open call, the exhibition was described as a space where students could exercise freedom of expression and have a way to communicate their dissatisfaction with Bulu.⁷ The call expressed the collective's demand for a new rector and for a well-organized and enduring resistance, since Bulu seemed unbothered by student demands and ongoing demonstrations.

BounSergi's aim of opposing the unjust governmental policies with art was made possible by using and repurposing the space of the university. The exhibition opened on January 22 and consisted of more than 400 artworks by more than 150 student and amateur artists. As seen in figures 1 and 2, the students were quick to present artwork that directly opposed Bulu's position as rector of the university. The sign in figure 1 reads "#Boğaziçi Resists," and the image expresses the students' wish for an alternative rector. A similar sentiment is expressed in figure 2, which humorously presents students' demand for the "elected rector," not the Erdoğan-appointed one, through a collage of imagery taken from Turkish popular culture. On January 29, four student organizers of BounSergi were arrested, and prosecutors accused them of "provoking hatred or hostility," a crime under the Turkish Penal Code. The rationale for the arrests stated that one of the exhibits disrespected religious sentiments by

⁶ "Turkey: Students Allege Ill-Treatment in Detention: Boğaziçi University Protestors," Amnesty International, January 13, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/3501/2021/en/>.

⁷ BOUNSERGI (@bounsergi) "Open Call," Instagram photo, January 7, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJw93omlqzm/?igshid=72wkljma0xf>.



Figure 1. “Boğaziçi Dreampop Dinleyen Rektör İstiyor!” [Boğaziçi wants a rector who listens to dreampop], courtesy of @BounSergi, Instagram photo, January 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKeaz32gQX8>.

depicting Kaaba—the holy site of Islam—surrounded with various LGBTI+ flags, as shown in figure 3. LGBTI+ themes used in the artwork caused outrage in the Islamic-conservatist government of Turkey since the art clashed with the government’s anti-LGBTI+ views. After the initial arrests, BounSergi released a press statement claiming that the students who had organized the exhibition had no intention of attacking religious sentiments or provoking hatred in any way, as their purpose was, first and foremost, “to oppose all kinds of discrimination.”⁸

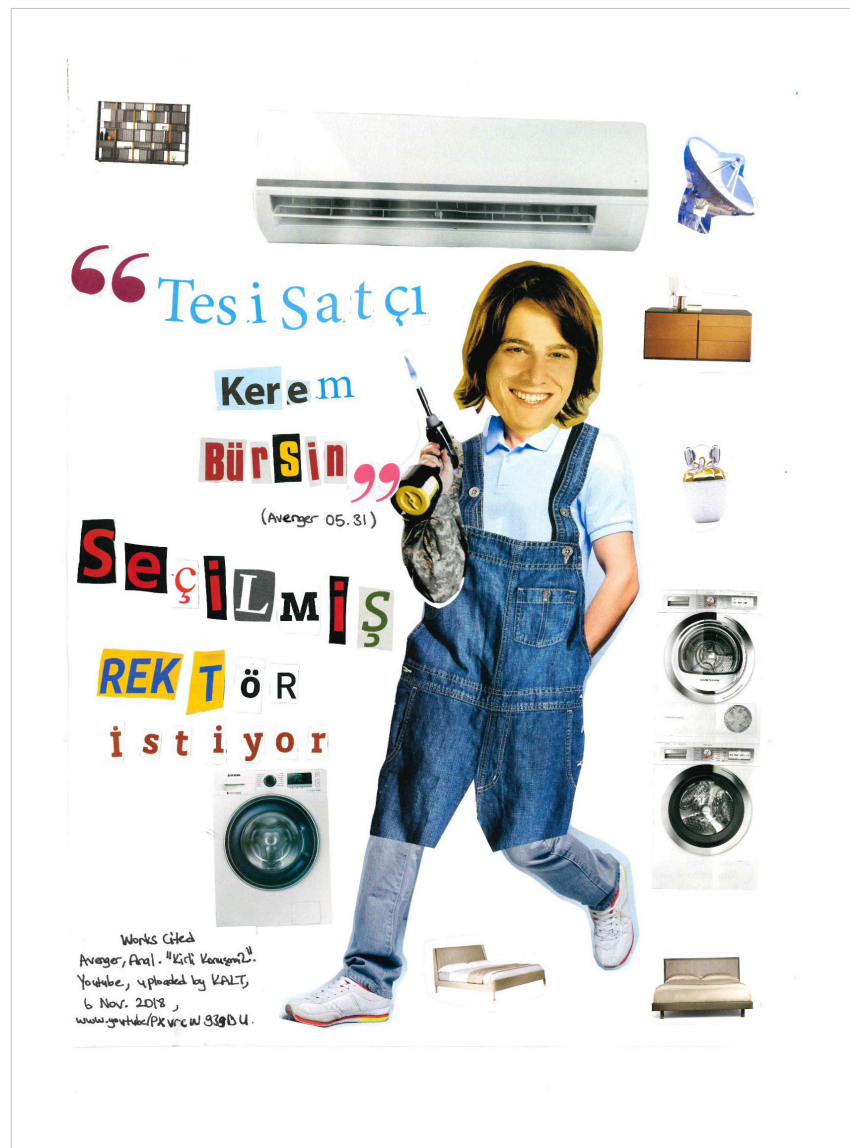
Yet the government continued with the arrests in the following days, and Rector Bulu announced his decision to terminate all activities of the school’s LGBTI+ Studies Club on February 1. Not only was Bulu unwilling to listen to any criticism, but he was also quick to react in an intolerant and discriminatory

⁸ BOUNSERGI (@bounsergi), “BounSergi Press Statement,” Instagram, February 5, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK64SNWg1CD/?igshid=1175m6udtjiz>.

way. This step solidified the fears of both students and academics at Boğaziçi University; the university was being forced to give up its values because its administration no longer supported Boğaziçi's dedication to freedom of expression, critical thinking, and public activism.

Commenting on the tension between state authority and universities in Turkey, the sociologist Nilüfer Göle notes that "freedom of expression means one should not be obliged to speak the official language of power."⁹ BounSergi's mission embodies exactly this belief; the exhibition offers an expression of critical

Figure 2. "Tesisatçı Kerem Bürsin Seçilmiş Rektör İstiyor" [Plumber Kerem Bürsin wants the elected rector], courtesy of @BounSergi, Instagram photo, April 7, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNXuoqagRIg>.



⁹ Nilüfer Göle, "Undesirable Public Intellectuals," *Globalizations* 14, no. 6 (2017): 881.



Figure 3. “Yılanı Güldürseler” [To make the serpent laugh], courtesy of @BounSergi.

thought, which emerges in a completely distinct way from the manifestations of official power in Turkey. For instance, the exhibition’s opening event poster, seen in figure 4, reflects the importance of collective action of students with colorful dancing figures, emphasizing the importance of bodily, physical movement — the “frisky walk”—rather than mere talking. The poster also highlights the all-inclusive, openly LGBTI+–friendly nature of students’ resistance by using queer idioms, which immediately presents a critical opposition to Erdoğan and his supporters’ hostile political stance toward LGBTI+ people in Turkey. Clearly, when BounSergi opened the art exhibition, it provided a venue for freedom of expression beyond the ongoing protests. The display of many artworks from all over Turkey expressed solidarity with the students and scholars of Boğaziçi University, re-emphasizing the necessity of the university as a physical space that facilitates the communication of different voices and critical ideas.



Figure 4. BounSergi opening event poster. The poster reads: “no talk, do the frisky walk,” “dress code: admiration-worthy chic,” “follow your queer masters, they’ll show you how to do the *friskywalk*”, courtesy of @BounSergi, Instagram photo, January 18, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKMRfD9lsV7>.

Limitations: Resistance during the Pandemic

Turkey, of course, is not alone in its repressive approach to dissent. Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many nations and governments to re-organize their functioning to cope with the worldwide health crisis. The pandemic laid bare the cracks and flaws within social, economic, and political

infrastructures in countries all around the world. Now, we are collectively confronting the utter insufficiency and unpreparedness of countless governments. What is perhaps more disheartening to witness is the fact that the global disaster of COVID-19 has made autocratic governments more violent and resistant voices more vulnerable.

Human Rights Watch has reported that some governments mandated restrictions on movement that proved to be disproportionate to and inappropriate for the health crisis;¹⁰ this, in turn, only fortified discriminatory policies and excessive violence already embedded in the structures of the state against certain minority groups. In the report, HRW states that in at least fifty-one countries, authorities have implemented regulations in the name of preventing the spread of the pandemic; yet these protocols have authorized arbitrary arrests, detentions, or prosecutions of citizens on matters unrelated to the COVID-19 crisis.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, students, protesters, artists, and activists have been named among those targeted. In the case of protest at Boğaziçi, for example, the ban on public gatherings applied to only two districts of Istanbul—those where the university’s campuses are located. This new pandemic regulation was also used as a retroactive justification for many of the arrests made the day before it was introduced, in an attempt to re-frame the legitimacy of placing students in custody.

The reaction of the Turkish government to the protests is an example of the problematic measures and unjust laws implemented by governments, using the pandemic as excuse. The selectivity with which the governor of Istanbul applied regulations only to anti-government stances demonstrates how the global health crisis became an opportunity to advance AKP’s activities against freedom of expression and to shield itself from criticism raised by supporters of Boğaziçi University’s autonomy. As the ban on gatherings revealed the state’s clear targets, it also prepared the grounds for further arrests. After the police initially arrested four students for their involvement in BounSergi, the protests resumed once again, even larger in scale. This time the government promptly used the ban as a legal framework for making further arrests. On February 1,

¹⁰ “Covid-19 Pandemic Sparked Year of Rights Crises,” Human Rights Watch, March 4, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/covid-19-pandemic-sparked-year-rights-crises>.

¹¹ “Covid-19 Triggers Wave of Free Speech Abuse,” Human Rights Watch, February 11, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/covid-19-triggers-wave-free-speech-abuse>.

police forces entered the university, detaining fifty-one students who were protesting in front of the rector's office, as well as another 108 who continued their protests outside the campus.¹²

While COVID-19 is still perceived as a global crisis, it continues to enable governments to criminalize peaceful gatherings and to hinder fundamental methods of opposition and public criticism. As the Turkish government's pandemic regulations show, exercising legislative power in the name of pandemic-related measures can be openly discriminatory when public gatherings are prohibited in only two districts of a city where more than 15 million residents live. What is even more damaging is that many government officials, including President Erdoğan himself, openly talked about the exhibition and the continuing protests in the media, describing these events using aggressive and hateful rhetoric directed at the LGBTI+ community. This marks a change in the strategy employed by the government in its attack on protesters who opposed Rector Bulu. The tipping point was the art piece in the exhibition titled "Yılanı Güldürseler" (To make the serpent laugh; see figure 3), which used LGBTI+ symbols while depicting Kaaba in order to touch upon the issues of misogyny, gender inequality, and anti-LGBTI+ discrimination in Turkey with regard to religion and societal norms.¹³ The autocratic and conservative government of Turkey deemed this piece of art an "ugly attack" on religious beliefs, and the minister of interior affairs, Süleyman Soylu, posted an accusatory tweet that read, "4 LGBT deviants who disrespected the Kaaba were detained at Boğaziçi

¹² "Turkey: Student Protesters at Risk of Prosecution," Human Rights Watch, February 18, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/turkey-student-protesters-risk-prosecution>.

¹³ The artwork was presented in the exhibition with a description provided by the artist: "Since the figure of Shahmaran is a combination of a serpent—identified with original sin and commonly regarded as the symbol of evil in Anatolia—and the ever-suppressed female identity, it might be surprising that it is nevertheless widely revered in Anatolia. Anatolian women often place Shahmaran's representation in a central location of their houses, which might be understood as covert mockery and opposition to the authority of men, as Shahmaran combines in itself two identities seen by men as contrary to their own: that of a woman, and that of a serpent. In this piece, I aimed to emphasize this secret and profound bravery of Anatolian women by putting the figure of Shahmaran at the center of institutionalized religion, which remains the strongest foundation for societal misogyny. The greenery behind Shahmaran represents heaven. If freedom of women and animal rights are placed in a central position, the world we live in will become the heaven we seek. You may notice that the four LGBTI+ flags placed in the corners seem artificial and disruptive of the dominant aesthetic composition of the piece. This is intentionally done so in order to reflect how gender norms in society alienate us from our own gender identities and try to convince us that our own identities are artificial."

University.”¹⁴ As the hostility of official rhetoric directed against the LGBTI+ community increased, the police involvement was easily justified by declaring that the protesters were acting illegally when they disregarded the ban and came together in large numbers in public spaces. For the government in Turkey, the pandemic became another evasive instrument through which the state penalized critical opposition and restrained avenues for collective free expression.

Humanities Here and Now: Why the “Unconditional” University Matters

Back in 1999, when universities were still physical spaces teeming with people rather than virtual networks of Zoom meetings, Jacques Derrida claimed, during a lecture at Stanford, that the “technical ‘stage’ of virtualization (computerization, digitalization, virtually immediate worldwide-ization of readability, telework, and so forth) destabilizes ... the university habitat” and that it “upsets the university’s topology, disturbs everything that organizes the places defining

Universities cannot afford to be spatially empty referents that exist purely in the virtual realm, especially in places like Turkey, where the “critical resistance” Derrida talks about is critically fragile in the first place.

it.”¹⁵ “Where is to be found,” Derrida went on to ask, “the communitary place and the social bond of a ‘campus’ in the cyberspatial age of the computer, of telework, and of the World Wide Web?”¹⁶

The university during 2020 and the first half of 2021 was all but abandoned because of the pandemic, and today, in 2022, we are still grappling with the transition from a period of pure virtuality

to in-person education. From the moment universities worldwide transitioned to the online mode of instruction, we have seen that Derrida was right to worry about the future. Universities cannot afford to be spatially empty referents that exist purely in the virtual realm, especially in places like Turkey, where the

¹⁴ Twitter.com, @suleymansoylu, January 29, 2021. Since then, Twitter has limited access to Minister Soyly’s tweet dated January 30, 2021, because it violated the company’s rules concerning hate speech and hateful conduct.

¹⁵ Derrida, “Future of the Profession,” 31.

¹⁶ Derrida, “Future of the Profession,” 31.

“critical resistance” Derrida talks about is critically fragile in the first place. Protests against the government’s oppressive regulations regarding Boğaziçi University are inevitable when the authority of the state happens to threaten the space of intellectual freedom enabled by the university. As virtuality took over our lives during the height of the pandemic in 2021, these protests reminded us that the simulated space of university cannot be a site of intervention and resistance without the important element of the physicality of a space. Fittingly, by putting together an exhibition within the university space, Boğaziçi students’ art collective attempted to bring the vital student body and public back to the university. Creating a material site of resistance that presented a critique of ongoing events, the exhibition made it possible to regain the space of the university and to once again mark it as a site of “critical resistance.”

In order to preserve its autonomy and its status as a space of opposition, the university must remain not only a strictly local institution, an institution that quite literally *takes place*, but also one that is not enclosed, barred from contact with the outside world. Separating the university from society allows those who wield power to antagonize the “intellectual elites” and the rest of the public, to paint the college campus as a place where the values central to the people are being destroyed by outsiders. Paradoxically, this separation does not shield the university from external influence but rather makes it more vulnerable to the forces of all types of power: state, ideology, economy.

Similar processes take place not only in places easily dismissed as “authoritarian regimes” or “undemocratic societies” but also in the so-called West. For instance, the rhetorical gap between the public and academia is widening every day in the United States, a country frighteningly similar to Turkey in terms of the governmental tactics employed in order to repress resistant voices, as we have witnessed in the recent cases of disproportional police force used against Black Lives Matter protesters. What is more, many university departments in the West are forced to fight for their survival as they face not a political opposition but a financial one that constantly burdens them with the task of proving their worth and economic viability to the public. It is only by opening itself to the public *and* by becoming at once autonomous, sovereign, and embedded within the society that the university can preserve its ability to fulfill its mission and to offer its “critical resistance.”

Although the example of Boğaziçi makes this issue painfully visible, all universities in the world are susceptible to the process of marginalization of academia and intellectuals, which threatens the status of the university as an institution essential to society. Virtualization of the university everywhere in the world revealed the destabilized habitat of the university Derrida warned us about more than twenty years ago. Immaterial, devitalized, and evacuated, the space of university has turned into a ghostly presence. Perhaps, then, one should ask: can we revitalize it before critical thinking, freedom, and resistance also become spectral forces when faced with vital real-life ordeals?

Pinar Tasdemir is a PhD student in the Department of English at UW–Madison. She received her BA and MA in English Literature at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, Turkey, with a completed program in film studies. Her research primarily centers on Romanticism and the gothic novel with a focus on materialism, aesthetics, and political theory.