

# Oda Projesi

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## Introduction

The premise of this essay is the art group *Oda Projesi*, whose art projects revolve around the issues of experiential exchange, which take place in intersubjective encounters. These art projects operate in the public domain and function as tools for interaction between the participators. The projects intervene in the private life and both reconstruct and reinterpret everyday life. *Oda Projesi's* art is not comprised of finished works of art; rather does it take the participator into an open-ended process. This art process is rather a tool than a symbolic carrier of meaning since it emerges in the intersubjective encounters – rising from a situation – between the participators.

The members of *Oda Projesi* are Özge Açikkol, Günes Savas and Seçil Yersel. They started working as *Oda Projesi* in 2000, but have cooperated since 1997. The name *Oda Projesi* is Turkish and means “room-” or “space projects”. The group is located in Istanbul, specifically in the area of Galata where they had a project-room. As well as being connected to the local Galata neighborhood, the group is also a part of the international art scene, and has participated in a several international projects and exhibitions.

## Objectives

The principal purpose of this essay is to explore the connections of meaning in the intersubjective relationships, which *Oda Projesi* creates and takes part in.

To make this happen I will investigate how *Oda Projesi* connects people in social networks, and what comes out of these relationships. I will illustrate and analyze the possible social changes at a micro-/individual level, which this art movement conveys, the projects' influences on the social environment and the potential social, political and democratic change it might bring.

However, my intention is not to make a complete analysis of specific works/project since I see *Oda Projesi's* art as a network of projects, where all are connected, without an obvious beginning or a definite end. Instead I will analyze their projects from a few selected and significant vantagepoints. The group *Oda Projesi* works as a collaborative collective and because of that I will not focus on any individual achievements, except when one member is recognized as the originator of a specific project.

The main purpose is not to make an empirical study of how this art project influences the participators and the environment in the specific projects, but rather to see the potential theoretical influences that *Oda Projesi's* art can have on the environment, looked at from a Relational Aesthetics theoretical perspective.

## Purpose

1: How can we approach art whose essence is the intersubjective relation, and an art which operate in between “art” and “everyday” life?

2: In what degree can the Relational Aesthetic help us to comprehend *Oda Projesi*?

## Method

The method used to answer the questions asked, is a combination of, on one hand, a theoretical and analytic method, and on the other, a partaking empirical one. The basis for this is Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetic. This means, for instance, that the focus is shifted towards the social relations within art. The art becomes an arena for interaction between the audiences. It is a theoretical discipline where you attempt to understand the audience as participators rather than spectators.

For my empirical study I visited the exhibition, *Collective Creativity*, in Kassel, Germany, where *Oda Projesi* was one of the exhibiting art groups. After Germany I spent three weeks in Istanbul, to get a broader perspective of the endeavor, and as a result thereof I was able to share the group's own documentation as well as the material in the archive of Platform<sup>1</sup> where they have documentation of both *Oda Projesi* and the individual group members. I have also discussed with *Oda Projesi* their works in general and about how specific projects have been created. I have visited the Galata neighborhood, where they have worked in their project-room. During the autumn of 2005 I made yet another shorter visit to Istanbul to take part in the group's work at the ninth Istanbul Biennale. During the entire period of my thesis I have been communicating with the members of the group via email, in order to get the correct information about details in their work.

## Previous research

*Oda Projesi* is an artistic venture of great importance today. It is also relatively unexplored. Nonetheless, some short articles about the group have been written.

The Turkish curator, critic, and art theoretician Erden Kosova has made a description of *Oda Projesi* in the article *Face to Face*.<sup>2</sup> In the text he explores the social and societal conditions, which are necessary in order to work with contemporary art in Turkey today. The article emphasizes the inter subjective, face to face, contact in *Oda Projesi's* work, as well as the qualifying factors needed to work in such a specific context. In another shorter article: *Organic as a Model*,<sup>3</sup> Kosova shifts his attention onto the group's ability to create a melting pot of people from different social strata and cultures. This article was first published in *Oda Projesi's* own paper *Annex 2*, which the group distributed at the Istanbul Biennial 2003. In *Annex 1* which they distributed the same year at the Biennial in Venice, *Oda Projesi's* work is described by Cem Ileri in the article *Rules of Hospitality*.<sup>4</sup> Here she makes a point about *Oda Projesi's* usage of the public space and the creation of a social game, similar to that acted out in Istanbul as a whole.

The first time Kosova's text *Face to Face* was published was in the catalog for *Oda Projesi's* projects in *Tensta Konsthall*, Stockholm. The publication also includes an interview with *Oda Projesi*, made by the Swedish art-collective *Love and devotion*. That same catalog also contains an article by the curator and art theoretician Nina Möntman: *Mixing with the locals – Process and identity in work of Oda Projesi*.<sup>5</sup> She describes their activities as generating incidental encounters. Möntman also brings out questions on how *Oda Projesi's* projects pay regard to the "other" and the "common group", and how their project becomes a forum for observation of identification through the interactions of the participators in the projects.

The Swedish curator Maria Lind has written the most comprehensive description of

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<sup>1</sup> Platform is an organisation, which supports Turkish contemporary art. They have an archive with documentation of artists and a gallery and guest studios for international artists. This is also the location of *Oda Projesi's* studio or "office", as they like to call it.

<sup>2</sup> Erden Kosova, *Face to Face*. (2004). First published in connection to *Oda Projesi's* exhibition *PROJE4L* at *Tensta Konsthall*. Edited by: Karl Holmqvist, autumn 2004. The article was later published in the catalogue for the exhibition "Along the Gates of the Urban", art-ist contemporary art magazine publication, Edited by: Erden Kosova, Fatos Üstek, Istanbul/Berlin, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Erden Kosova, *Organic as a Model*. Edited by: *Oda Projesi*. "Annex" nr 2. 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Cem Ileri, *Roles of Hospitality*. Edited by: *Oda Projesi* "Annex" nr 1. 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Möntman, *Mixing with the locals – Process and identity in the work of Oda Projesi*. Catalogue to *Oda Projesi* exhibition at *Tensta Konsthall*. Edited by: Karl Holmqvist, autumn 2004.

*Oda Projesi's* work, in her text, *Actualisation of Space: The Case of Oda Projesi*,<sup>6</sup> which is published in Claire Doherty's book *From Studio to Situation*. The text articulates how the group's works influence the social and public room. Parallel to that it also discusses how the art institutions need to change, in order to exhibit this form of relational art.

Ana Paula Cohen has written a short article where she describes the group's operations in creating flexible open rooms. She also deals with *Oda Projesi's* work as a form of public art and how it generates debates about the participator's local environment.<sup>7</sup>

The London based critic Claire Bishop, whose opinion I use as a partial frame work for the theoretical part, has made an interview with the group: '*Aesthetic is a dangerous word*' *Interview with Oda Projesi*.<sup>8</sup> The premise of this interview is that over the last years, a couple of collectively working art groups have emerged, such as *Oda Projesi*, which are operating within specific communities. In the interview, as in her article about Relational Aesthetic: *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*,<sup>9</sup> the question is raised – should this art be treated from an aesthetical or ethical value system?

On *Oda Projesi's* exhibition *Proje4L* at *Tensta Konsthall* and the other projects in conjunction with that exhibition, Kim Einarsson has written the text: *From space to place*.<sup>10</sup> Two articles about *Oda Projesi* have been written by the architect Derya Özkan; one shorter: *Oda Projesi produces new space*,<sup>11</sup> from 2005, where she discusses the work which has been made by the group regarding the commercialization taking place in Istanbul. In the text she brings up the notion of how the group alters the space by exploring it. Özkan has also written a longer analysis of their works: *The Misuse Value of Art – Oda Projesi's Spatial Operations*,<sup>12</sup> where she looks at the group's work from aspects of various postmodern theories. (None of Özkan's texts have been published).

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Lind, *Actualisation of Space: The Case of Oda Projesi*. "From Studio to Situation", Edited by Claire Doherty. Black Dog Publishing, 2004. pp.109–121

<sup>7</sup> Ana Paula Cohen, *Dispositiv workshop- part 1: Oda Projesi, 5 June-31 August*. "Kunstverein München, Drucksache, spring 03", 2003. pp.24-25

<sup>8</sup> Claire Bishop, '*Aesthetic is a dangerous word*' *Interview with Oda Projesi*. "UNTITLED", #33, spring 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. October, nr:110, fall 2004. MIT Press. pp.51-79

<sup>10</sup> Kim Einarsson, *From Space to Place*, 'Mekandan Yer'e' Sanat Dünyamyz art magazine, issue 94, spring 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Derya Özkan, *Oda Projesi produces new space*. 2005. Not published.

<sup>12</sup> Derya Özkan, *The Misuse Value of Art – Oda Projesi's Spatial Operation*. 2003. Not published.

## Summary

The premise of this paper is the intersubjective relationships which are the consequence of *Oda Projesi's* art projects, as well as the art group's practice in treating their environment in a way to open up situations and create spaces where intersubjective encounters can take place.

The art audience in a postmodern society is not content with being a passive viewer. Instead it demands becoming a participator. The audience will not just consume culture, it wants to be a part of the process. Hence, the art becomes an arena for reciprocal influence and interaction. We have seen how the Relational Aesthetics have facilitated the comprehension of aesthetics in the social relations which take place within the frame work of art – that there are an aesthetic situation in the intersubjective encounters which produces a type of social structure. The Relational Aesthetics help us see how the artist today can create possible worlds, and social domains of existence. This paper also points to some of the limits of how the Relational Aesthetics work as an analysis tool, or method, for the understanding of *Oda Projesi's* art. One difficulty that arose is the emphasis on the projects as aesthetic “form” when they apparently have both function and purpose as well as “form”. Investigating *Oda Projesi*, using the Relational Aesthetics' framework has also shown other problems; one is that the audience does not actively seek out the project for an “art experience”. The *Oda Projesi's* audience often come to the projects because they are neighbours, or because they live in a specific place. The art group even lets the participator influence their projects in a higher degree than the artists who are described in Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*. This fact makes it even more problematic to describe the group as being originators of social structures.

When the group works within the art institutions, their projects can be described as art, which has taken its form from everyday life. The group tries to break the boundary between art and not art, and therefore most of the projects exist in a context, which is not specifically an art context; it has more in common with everyday life. Often they use the art agenda to operate in everyday life, and they also reverse that idea and use strategy and tactics from everyday life to operate in an art context. In most of the projects *Oda Projesi* is both an art group which gets inspiration from dealing with local life and art in an everyday situation, as well as and an art group which operates *in* everyday life.

Clearly, *Oda Projesi* uses the art as a tool for interaction between people, in the way that they, in their art practise, implement already existing social structures, fusing them with others. They allow the physical and spatial space to change by modifying the mental space – breaking the existing functions and restriction of the room. The participators get the chance to have their take on the room and its possibilities. In the theory section I decided on three categories to understand the configuration of the social structure: the micro utopia, relational antagonism, and the interventionist, which can have elements of the two others. There are not any examples where the group works relationally antagonistic, *per se*. Rather *Oda Projesi's* practise should be described as using interventionist methods to generate micro utopian situations. Claire Bishops has pointed out that these micro utopias are not effective in influencing the society and that these micro utopian situations are not comprehensive without their purpose; instead they just become an act of aesthetics. However, *Oda Projesi's* purpose is not about doing social or community work. The aim of these encounters is rather the intersubjective exchange that can assist people to actually see one and other. Our prejudices of “the other“ are exposed, and shown, as in a mirror – the art becomes an exchange of life experience. In their projects with a more explicit political purpose they use an interventionist method utilising tactics and strategies to affect the public space.