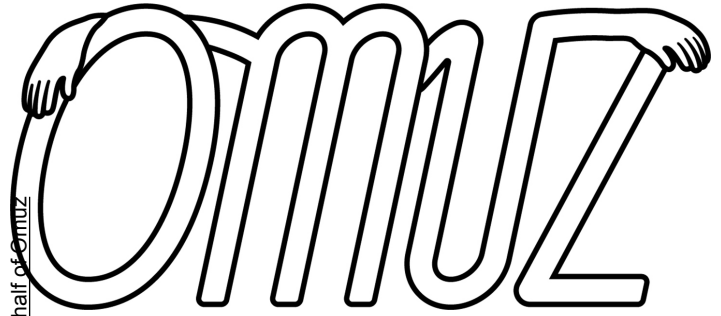


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Group, on behalf of Omuz  
**OMUZ**



e-flux journal #119 — June 2021 Neylan Bağcıoğlu, Merve Elveren, Görkem İmrek, Saliha Yavuz, and the Omuz Dictionary Group, on behalf of Omuz

Omuz is a new solidarity network in Turkey that came into existence shortly after the worldwide lockdowns in early spring 2020. A few days after the first Covid case was “officially” announced in Turkey, a small group of art professionals began seeking financial support for art practitioners who lost their secondary jobs, which had been their primary sources of income. Personal relationships helped in collecting modest sums for a close circle of colleagues, whose issues were quickly resolved. The aim was to save the day. But by the end of the month – and in the following two months – the group started meeting regularly to respond to similar cases, urgencies, and economic inequalities in the art world that the so-called first wave of Covid-19 laid bare, including but not limited to lack of institutional support, resources, and even health insurance for art workers, especially due to the high ratio of immaterial and unwaged labor in the art world.

1.

Omuz is a response. A response to the extant cry for help and solidarity made resonant by the pandemic. The Turkish word *omuz*, which literally translates as “shoulder” in English, is associated with several metaphors that carry a strong sense of togetherness: *omuz vermek* and *omuzlamak*, meaning to support and to back up; *omuz omuza* and *omuzdaşlık*, to be in solidarity; *omzunda taşımak*, to show respect; *omzunda ağlamak*, to cry on one’s shoulder, and so on. It is no coincidence that over the course of nine months (from June 2020 to March 2021), Omuz received 916 inquiries, 212 of which were fulfilled. The initial small group expanded to include over twenty-five volunteers who manage the operational needs or share their know-how in advisor roles, helping to build an alternative and transparent resource exchange within Turkey’s art community.

As a network of solidarity, Omuz is based on unreciprocated resource sharing, bringing together artists, curators, researchers, art handlers, technicians, art historians, art writers, and others in the visual arts ecosystem. Omuz is not a legal entity; it is not a foundation, a

corporation, or an association, and it does not have a bank account. It does not have office space or staff but instead has facilitators who rotate every three months. Through the website (omuz.org), Omuz acts as a mediator between those in need and those who want to provide resources. This is an unconditional and unilateral mechanism. The supporter, or the group of supporters, agrees to give 1,000 TL (approximately 122 USD).<sup>1</sup> There are no conditions for the recipient. The supporter directly transfers the amount to the assigned recipient. In facilitating this peer-to-peer transfer, Omuz simply collects the necessary data and connects the individuals. With all of its participants, Omuz is built on mutual trust, unconditional financial support, and the sharing of labor and resources.

## 2.

Perhaps it makes sense to refer to the shortcomings of Turkey's state support system before delving into the specific role of Omuz. Since the late 1980s, art and cultural institutions, including museums as well as other bodies that support contemporary art production and projects in Turkey, have been predominantly initiated and maintained by the private sector. It is practically impossible for artists, curators, and researchers to rely on public support. Even now, in this exceptionally threatening period, neither local municipalities nor the Ministry of Culture and Tourism have allocated any emergency support for the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> But the situation is chronic and cannot be understood by focusing solely on the Covid-19 period. The lack of funding and support, social security, and insurance in the arts have always been contested and equally overlooked issues. First introduced in 1978 and amended throughout the years, the failures of the current social-security system in Turkey reveal the limited scope of the definition of arts, artists, and cultural workers within it.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Eda Yiğit, an independent researcher, surveyed one hundred and fifty artists living and working in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Yiğit's results show that 43 percent of respondents have a monthly income of approximately 245 USD or lower, and 26 percent have incomes that fall between approximately 245 and 490 USD. The survey further reveals that 80 percent of respondents work a second job to maintain their artistic practice, and 40 percent have no social-security coverage whatsoever. According to data published by TÜRK-İŞ (Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions) in March 2021, the monthly hunger line, above which a family of four can have a healthy and balanced diet, is approximately 335 USD. The monthly poverty line, including expenses related to

clothing, housing (rent, electricity, water, gas), transportation, education, health, and nutrition, is approximately 1,091 USD. The cost of living for a single individual is approximately 406 USD.<sup>4</sup> Yiğit's investigation exposes the present-day situation of artists practicing in Turkey – 43 percent of participants have an income below the hunger line and 97 percent below the poverty line – and evokes the term “precariat.” In their article “Precarity and Cultural Work In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness, and Cultural Work,” Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt approach the double meaning of precarity and explain that it “signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union.”<sup>5</sup> Gill and Pratt explore precarity in the individualized fields of artistic labor and question whether commonalities between these types of precarious workers could be expanded into new models of alliance or solidarity. While Omuz is one such solidarity model born out of an identified precarity, it (obviously) wasn't the only network founded within the art community in Turkey during the pandemic.

In her article “Pandemi Sürecinde Sanat Alanındaki Dayanışma Pratikleri ve Örgütlenme Üzerine Bazı Saptamalar,” (Observations regarding practices of solidarity and organization in the field of art during the pandemic), Yiğit explores several nonunified attempts by cultural workers to form organizational models, initiatives, and/or groups in response to the precarious position they have found themselves in once again due to recently worsened socioeconomic conditions.<sup>6</sup> Yiğit's report reveals that until now, no “broad, effective, and inclusive organization” has been established that's capable of analyzing and responding to the specific realities of the contemporary art domain in Turkey in a productive and sustainable manner.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the vital urgencies that arise during times of crisis (such as the pandemic), the report further emphasizes the permanent need for organizations that foreground solidarity in addition to alternative and creative methods for the realization of collective ideals, however disparate they may be in the field of art.

There are two major takeaways from Yiğit's report. First of all, the models of organization developed in this process are expected to spawn new ones, and not just within the art community but also in other, equally precarious disciplines. The second takeaway is that these responsive organizations should not be regarded simply as economic support mechanisms but also as social and emotional ones. For cultural workers, the

pandemic engendered not only an economic emergency, but a social one. The latter manifested itself when both work and life moved inside people's homes (for those who were lucky enough to afford or hold onto them) and onto computer screens. Suddenly everyone was divided into two-dimensional grids, leaving streets, galleries, museums, and most other public spaces empty. Humans are social animals, and these new, responsive organizations became an outlet to cope with the newfound isolation, a place to share similar concerns and issues and to learn from one another. Comparable to the "consciousness-raising groups" of the 1970s in many ways, these organizations provide a safe environment that facilitates strong bonds between individuals. They are primarily convened online, but simultaneously those bonds are forged in intimate spaces: participants' homes, broadcast via Zoom. They follow no formal methodology and most importantly, they are horizontalist.

Groups and individuals engaged in consciousness-raising became more apparent in Turkey in the early 1980s, about a decade after the tactic's popularization in the West. This was a time of exceeding oppression and restrictions in Turkey's public realm. During the three-year military rule following the September 12, 1980 coup d'état, small groups founded by academics, writers, and activists sought to challenge the growing violations of individuals' rights in Turkey. Many of these were grassroots attempts that eventually contributed to the transition towards democratization. Planting the first seeds of civil society, these groups and networks both underscored the growing, mutual disengagement between the state and individuals, and responded to the depoliticization and atomization of society.

Realized during the military regime when arrests, long imprisonments, the suppression of critical thinking, the stripping of rights, and general political oppression were common, these meetings provided a safe space to start building collective resilience. Therefore, it is fitting to evoke to these closed meetings when describing Omuz in today's equally concerning sociopolitical atmosphere. Embracing the methodologies of consciousness-raising groups, feminists in Turkey, who were among the principal actors of these alternative groups during that period, sought to build new alliances that managed to maneuver between cracks in the status quo. With varying agendas and priorities, the networks of solidarity, political action, and resistance that have confronted various forms of precariousness since the 1980s have predominantly been comprised by women. Omuz is no exception. The gender composition of such entities is an

indication that women, or in fact everyone except cisgender white men, generally face a more perilous existence firsthand, and are thus more inclined and prepared to challenge, respond, and organize together and with others. The methodologies practiced in the 1980s, such as holding festivals and exhibitions as well as marches and gatherings, continue to offer unique and enduring potentialities for the future.

### 3.

In her doctoral thesis "In Support: A Theoretical and Practical Investigation into Forms of Display," artist and writer Céline Condorelli unpacks the concept of support within physical, economic, social, and political structures.<sup>8</sup> Condorelli poses questions about the dynamics of support between institutions of various sizes, cultural producers, and the public. By showing how cultural production is used, owned, viewed, processed, classified, and ultimately displayed, Condorelli emphasizes the importance of adopting various perspectives and of experimenting with different methods in attempts to instigate change, rather than speculating on what support should and could mean. As a means of unconditional resource sharing, Omuz can be considered a *support structure* that generates a chain of resilience to counteract abrasive and isolating conditions. The primary practice of this resilience is informally offering one another a *shoulder*. Omuz formulates questions around which support mechanisms can be adopted and forged in collaboration.

"There can be *no* discourse on support, only discourse *in* support," Condorelli asserts.<sup>9</sup> And as a structure of support, Omuz strives to take action and to *shoulder* responsibility. A shoulder is a unique support structure in the body: it is a joint whose primary function is to carry loads, but it is also a surface that can just as well be shared with others. The expression about crying on somebody's shoulder exists for a reason. As long as one has the intention and ability to provide it, a shoulder never becomes unavailable. But such support is also very intimate; it's only natural to hesitate if a stranger were to ask for your shoulder. It requires personal contact as well as trust to be in such close proximity to somebody else – the very thing that the pandemic rendered virtually extinct. One year ago, Omuz became a joint in the cultural body of Turkey's contemporary art scene. It adopted a pragmatic approach, which was to respond to urgency, to perform the role of a Band-Aid on the wound inflicted by the economic fallout magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic. But a more significant task might emerge in its future: to generate methods to counter the

processes of alienation in an extremely dispersed local cultural field.

Just as an engine cannot operate when a component is missing, communities cannot function as one if any member is left behind. The struggle is not only against difficult external conditions, but also against our own growing indifference to one another, our isolation from each other, and the differences in visibility and access to resources that divide us. Ignoring these issues doesn't just create social detachment between cultural workers, it also perpetuates exploitative working conditions. For these realities to change, one cannot be apathetic or avoid posing questions that may cause conflict. After all, if you pray for rain, you can't complain about the mud. We will all have to wade through that muck collectively. It is not enough to identify the difficulties that cultural workers face in their living and working conditions. One of the first necessary steps is to confront individuals and organizations that break structures of support, and to synchronize an ethical compass in order to act together. As an emerging network, with only one year of experience, it is difficult to assign such intertwined issues as discrete tasks, yet all of Omuz's volunteers are willing to take notice, and hit the ground running without neglecting the group's founding purpose.

The reality is that dysfunction and insufficiency define any scant extant public support available to cultural workers for survival in Turkey's neoliberal ecosystem. The interests of legal entities take precedence over improving individuals' work and living conditions. In Turkey's current political and economic environment, cultural workers have found themselves obligated to work for a tomorrow they can't even envision, for lack of a survivable today. In fact, basic lessons on surviving various challenges are not being taught as much as they should in schools or workplaces.

Regardless of scale, every organizational entity has its own methods and means to sustain itself in line with its specific missions. In that regard, Omuz can be considered a mesoscale entity that can potentially address decision makers, form bridges between micro- and macro-scale entities, support smaller endeavors, and negotiate with the macro-scale structures operating as an egg white-like binder between the formal and the informal realm. It does not have a solid form or immovable properties. It can be put in a bag and carried from one city to another in the form of an idea. It has the ability to move as systematically as a macro-level entity and with the agility of a micro-level one. It can embrace failures. Situated in the middle of this spectrum, Omuz has the potential to generate

solutions to technical, organizational, and ethical problems. Depending on the ambit, it can melt in water or evaporate into air.

#### 4.

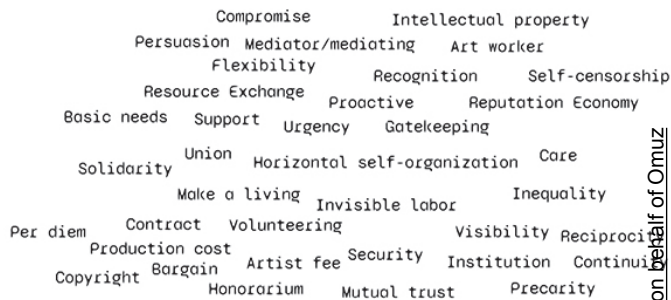
The Omuz network is divided into smaller working groups, including communication, fundraising, visual design, and editorial support. The responsibilities of the various working groups include producing informative texts, keeping close contact with other structures – neighborhood groups, local municipalities, other grant-giving entities, etc. – to build awareness, commission volunteer designers for social media content, follow up on grant providers and receivers, and ensure that these processes run smoothly. Besides the operational responsibilities, another purpose of these working groups is to generate an alternative discourse on the issues related to social and economic precarity in contemporary art. They work independently but inform each other with regular biweekly meetings. As the backbone of Omuz, volunteers become part of a growing network of individuals who encounter similar precariousness and choose to adopt a grassroots attitude rather than waiting for support that will likely never arrive from existing structures.

Another working group is responsible for the "Omuz dictionary," started as a repository of words that highlight the conditions under which the network was founded. The dictionary group is interested both in support mechanisms and in bringing existing and unspoken problems in the field to light. With an awareness of the precarious nature of support structures like these – that run the risk of becoming a "cover-up" that simultaneously supports systemic exploitation – it seeks participation beyond resource exchange. While a necessary first step, financial and other forms of support in themselves are only an interstitial solution, a means to end. With that in mind, the intention of the Omuz dictionary is to become a tool for resistance by developing its own narrative.

Instead of providing static dictionary entries, it functions as a shared dissemination platform, assembling a web of potential definitions for each word based on various experiences. Apart from these fluid descriptions, the Omuz dictionary also aims to safeguard memory and build on the empowering methodologies of past solidarity initiatives in Turkey such as Meslek Birliği,<sup>10</sup> Turuncu Çadır,<sup>11</sup> and Sanatta Örgütlenme,<sup>12</sup> as forebears of Omuz. The dictionary group is also working on a contextual bibliography of the design of linguistic and discursive mechanisms to reference artworks that deal with insecurity.

In its first stages, the Omuz dictionary

focused on predominant words and terms, such as what can be seen in the below image.



As of May 2021, the Omuz dictionary group started convening polyphonic discussions focusing on controversial terminology in the field. The group expanded it's work on definitions by consulting lawyers, union leaders, and other professionals outside the field of art who could provide diverse perspectives. The intention with these online discussions is to configure the dictionary in order for it to further function as an evolving guideline for cultural workers, especially for younger generations.

The group also started addressing larger issues, including the urgent need to define *urgency* and to focus on permanent solutions to fundamental problems; to construct a path towards an *association* (which may not be a long-term solution); to define the contemporary conditions of *precarity*; to disseminate the culture of *solidarity* based on horizontal organization; to question the inequality of *visibility*; to determine who *cultural workers* are and what they do; to offer a variety of definitions and contextual examples of chosen words through public talks; to address the unspoken realities behind terms such as *artist fee* and *volunteer work*; and to redefine or attempt to coin new terms to replace worn-out words like *interaction* and *sustainability*.

Although the primary role of Omuz is to continue generating financial resources for the cultural workers that constitute its ecosystem, it is not the network's only task. At a time when local economies are rupturing and social structures are dissolving, when *life as we know it* is long gone, Omuz is an attempt to curtail the disparities fomented by systemic inequalities and underscored by the pandemic. Omuz is a work in progress.

After more than a year of Covid-19, Omuz is now in its fourth period. What was initiated in response to the pandemic has now evolved into a network that bears the burden of further urgencies as it progresses, drawing on past experiences of solidarity. But is it a viable task to maintain such a fluid structure in an

economically, socially, and politically volatile context?<sup>13</sup> For a time-sensitive network aiming to remedy daily needs during a long pandemic, is it possible to continue providing solutions, or at least guidelines, to the ongoing precarities in the field of contemporary art? What can we learn from similarly motivated solidarity networks, and how can the knowledge of Omuz be shared with such associations? And perhaps most importantly, what kind of know-how can the supporters, recipients, and volunteers that comprise Omuz acquire from this experience?

x

**Omuz** (omuz.org) is a solidarity network in Turkey – initiated by a group of people working in the arts and culture who believe in the urgency of unreciprocated resource-sharing and cooperation – which will only be sustainable through the support of others.

1  
All US dollar amounts are converted using the USD/TRY exchange rate on March 29, 2020.

2  
Other disciplines that have not received any support include the music, theater, film, and design communities. Statistics regarding the number of theaters, concert venues, and cultural centers that have closed due to the pandemic, and the number of people who have lost their jobs or even committed suicide due to economic uncertainty, have not been shared with the public.

3  
Eda Yiğit, *Prekaryanın Görünmeyen Özneleri: Pandemi Döneminde Sanatçılar* (The invisible subjects of precarity: Artists during the pandemic) (self-pub., 2021) [https://0314029a-988e-4d0b-93e7-926df1f131f8.filesusr.com/ugd/889197\\_2b95d24894084ef0aed322aee5ffca63.pdf](https://0314029a-988e-4d0b-93e7-926df1f131f8.filesusr.com/ugd/889197_2b95d24894084ef0aed322aee5ffca63.pdf).

4  
TÜRK-İŞ, “Mart 2021 Açlık ve Yoksulluk Sınırı,” *Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, May 5, 2021 <http://www.turkis.org.tr/MAR-T-2021-ACLİK-VE-YOKSULLUK-SI-NIRI-d501756>. In an online talk titled, “Omuz Konuşuyor: Güvencesizlik ve Aciliyet” (Omuz is talking: Precarity and urgency), which took place on May 2, 2021, journalist and activist Hacer Foggo highlighted that the numbers published by TÜRK-İŞ underestimate the current level of poverty endured by the working-class population.

5  
Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, “Precarity and Cultural Work In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7–8 (2008): 3.

6  
Eda Yiğit, “Pandemi Sürecinde Sanat Alanındaki Dayanışma Pratikleri ve Örgütlenme Üzerine Bazı Saptamalar,” (Observations regarding practices of solidarity and organization in the field of art during the pandemic) *Birikim*, no. 380 (December 2020): 65–78.

7  
Yiğit, “Pandemi Sürecinde Sanat,” 66.

8  
Céline Condorelli, “In Support: A Theoretical and Practical Investigation into Forms of Display,” (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).

9  
Condorelli, “In Support,” 2.

10  
Started in late 2011, Meslek Birliği (Professional Association) was a network initially focusing on ongoing censorship issues. Organizing regular meetings, the network, later named Sanat

Emekçileri (Art Laborers), continued its discussions for almost a year and a half.

11  
Turuncu Çadır (Orange Tent) was initiated by cultural workers during the Gezi Resistance in 2013. Initially marking a meeting place in the park, it soon transformed into a platform for discussions in an open-forum format. Turuncu Çadır was gradually dissolved along with the exigencies of the Gezi Resistance.

12  
Sanatta Örgütlenme (Organizing in Arts) was a series of public talks organized at Mimar Sinan Fine Art University in 2014, almost ten months after the first assemblies at Gezi Park. The aim of these talks was to allow a variety of solidarity groups – including Turuncu Çadır, Siyah Bant, and the January 19 Initiative – to share personal efforts and experiences on censorship, precarity, violations of artists’ rights, alternative models, and freedom of speech. The talks, as well as other related texts and discussions, were later made available on the initiative’s website.

13  
In the three months that have passed since this article was initiated – between February 1 and May 1 – the USD/TRY exchange rate has fluctuated between 6.9170 and 8.4397.