

HÜSEYİN BAHİRİ ALPTEKİN
"I AM NOT A STUDIO ARTIST"
INTERPRETATION PACK

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INTRODUCTION TO SALT

SALT explores critical and timely issues in visual and material culture, and cultivates innovative programs for research and experimental thinking. Assuming an open attitude and establishing itself as a site of learning and debate SALT aims to challenge, excite and provoke its visitors by encouraging them to offer critique and response.

SALT Research sources diverse fields of knowledge and provides outlets for thought within the fissures and crossovers of different disciplines. The institution's research projects expand beyond linear chronologies, medium-based questions, and the traditional separation of fields of study. SALT assembles archives of recent art, architecture, design, urbanism, and social and economic histories to make them available for research and public use. These resources will be interpreted in the form of exhibitions and discussed in all other areas of programming.



SALT's activities are distributed between two landmark buildings located no more than a fifteen-minute walk apart, and also shared via saltonline. The first building, SALT Beyoğlu, is on the pedestrian street İstiklal Caddesi, and shares its audience with a cluster of private cultural institutions, galleries and organizations. SALT Beyoğlu's program and circulation interiors are mostly occupied by exhibition and event spaces. The second building, SALT Galata, is the former 19th century Imperial Ottoman Bank headquarters designed by Alexandre Vallaury. SALT Galata houses a specialized, public library and archive; spaces dedicated to research, workshops, an exhibition and conference hall; as well as the Ottoman Bank Museum. The architectural renovation of both buildings has been undertaken by Mimarlar/Han Tümertekin, with specific interiors commissioned to six design and architecture offices from Turkey in an effort to underscore SALT's desire to advocate new experimental environments for living and working.

HÜSEYİN BAHİRİ ALPTEKİN "I AM NOT A STUDIO ARTIST"

A comprehensive selection of works by Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin—an artist, thinker, teacher, writer and curator who passed away in 2007—will be presented as one of the opening exhibitions at SALT. In the early 1990s, Alptekin began to form an artistic production that explored the effects of globalization, immigration and exile, as well as cross-cultural image circulation. Beginning with his early co-authored work with Michael Morris, Alptekin was a determined collaborator interested in authorless production, and went on to form many groups throughout his career such as Grup Grip-in, the Sea Elephant Travel Agency and the Bunker Research Group. His multi-referential work consists of photo-installations, collages, videos, objects, and large-scale production such as a life-size truck overloaded with colorful plastic soccer balls, which together express a multi-layered and complex visual language.

The exhibition at SALT Beyoğlu will showcase a selection of works that allow the visitor to become acquainted with the themes Alptekin explored, as well as the variety of media he employed, ranging from his early collages to his highly complicated “heterotopia” installations, and from his etymologically playful neon works to the poignant videos included in the 2007 Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. *“I am not a studio artist”* will be the most comprehensive exhibition of Alptekin’s works to date, both in Turkey and internationally.

In addition to this extensive presentation of Alptekin’s oeuvre, the exhibition will include newly commissioned works that respond to Alptekin’s life as well as the themes and issues that informed his practice. These artistic interventions will be undertaken by Can Altay, Gülsün Karamustafa, Gabriel Lester, Camila Rocha and Nedko Solakov, all key figures in the artist’s life.



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *Winter Depression*, 1998

TO EDUCATORS

HOW TO USE THESE MATERIALS

This SALT Interpretation Pack has been designed as a resource for you and your students as you explore the themes of the “*I am not a studio artist*” exhibition. It is our hope that — as a resource with the objective of stimulating dialogue — the following materials will not act as an authority on the concepts they introduce, but rather will encourage students towards further exploration and study, towards active discussion, and towards critical thinking about the exhibition and its themes.

Included in this Interpretation Pack are:

- *Opening Discussion: I am not a studio artist*
- *Unit One: Hospitality/Hostility*
- *Unit Two: Artist-Run Collectives*
- *Research & Discuss: What is Kitsch?*
- *Closing Discussion: The Artist as Traveler*
- *Additional Resources*



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *I'm dreaming about Bombay*, 2006

Each unit includes classroom activities, multi-media resources, terminology and opportunities for discussion; we encourage you to adapt, shape and build upon these materials to best meet the needs of your students and teaching curriculum.

*Please note that the works illustrated in this Interpretation Pack may not be the same as those on display in the “*I am not a studio artist*” exhibition.

OPENING DISCUSSION: I AM NOT A STUDIO ARTIST

In 1996, Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin wrote the following lines to curator Rosa Martinez. Taking the form of a poem, Alptekin's message very poignantly described his practice, his goals and his artistic point of view. As a starting point for your students to engage with the themes of the *"I am not a studio artist"* exhibition, we suggest building a discussion around this message from artist to curator. (See next page.) What does this poem reveal about Alptekin as an artist?

After your discussion, give students the opportunity to craft their own poems, drawing from Alptekin's autobiographical style.

1. Ask students to title their poems with one line that begins "I am not..."

2. Give students 5 minutes to fill a page with lines that describe themselves, each line starting with "I". These lines can be long or short, and can describe physical attributes (i.e. "I have brown eyes"), or, like Alptekin's message, reveal personal or professional interests, experiences and goals.

3. When the time is up, ask students to select 10 lines from their pages, and to order these lines as they like, one after another to create a poem.

4. Invite interested students to share their poems with the class as monologues. If students prefer to be anonymous, collect poems and redistribute them randomly so that each student can read another's work aloud.



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin - Michael Morris, *Heterotopia*, 1992

*I am not a studio artist.
I like site-specific works.
I feel myself exiled everywhere,
I am a nomadic and urban shaman.
I make art to heal my criminal instincts.
I believe in art. I hate artists.
I investigate the beauty and the vulgar and the relationship between them.
I try to transform kitsch into the serious and the serious into kitsch.
I like neglected elegance, spontaneous bad taste and meticulous aesthetic.
I am an ecstatic hedonist.
Have stories, like talking.
I suffer a lot when I'm creating. When the work is done, I feel empty.
I like the progress of the work rather than the finished product.
Actual work carries the trace, the post-factum of the precedent work.
I like simple and mundane material to make art. Such as coal, soap, sugar.
Most of the works I have done were unphotographable, that's why a portfolio
hardly represents the spirit and the tension of my work.
I am interested in working internationally.
I like to collaborate with other artists and other people from different professions
and cultures.
I am constantly depressed. Therefore my recent works have titles like "Artist in
Depression," "Artist in Summer Depression," and I have attributed the title to a
jazz piece "Spring Depression". I have managed an acid-jazz band among
other things.
I would like to work on a project called "Manager in Depression" for the 5th
Istanbul Biennial.
I believe depression is another way of perceiving and conceiving life. Through
depression we can reach new modes of consciousness and only art can decode and
transform it into a joyful cognition.*

UNIT ONE: HOSPITALITY/HOSTILITY

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the concepts of hospitality and hostility features strongly in Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin's work. As Alptekin once explained, "Within the change of locality and the map of movement, the model of space becomes a fugitive reality between hospitality and hostility. The notion of guest, visitor, outsider, or stranger, changes." In response to movements from one geographic location to another, Alptekin observed collective changes in society's perception of the "the other." Cross a political boundary, and our reception in another's home, in another's country, quickly changes—from guest to stranger.

In his 2004 conceptual project *H-Fact: Hospitality/Hostility*, Alptekin mounted a series of hotel signs in Trintxerpe, a neighborhood in the Basque region of Spain. Each sign bore the name of a city—for example, Hotel Baghdad or Hotel Bombay—in a move to provoke dialogue around the development and implications of cultural tourism. Just days after *H-Fact: Hospitality/Hostility* was installed, however, the project was vandalized. Many of Alptekin's signs were left cracked and broken, filled with holes from the stones that had been thrown at them. The symbolism of the destroyed hotel signs was not lost on Alptekin and his colleagues: a community's response to outsiders can quite often take hostile and destructive forms.

In *Cultural Mosaics* your students will examine globalization and social constructions of "the other" through an analysis of global influences within their own communities. Students will collect found objects that represent imported or internationally influenced products, foods or media, creating 3-D collages that assess and critique today's ideas of free trade, immigration and the global marketplace.



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *H-Fact: Hospitality/Hostility*, 2004

OBJECTIVES

- *To gain an understanding of globalization, free trade, and their influences on the global movement of people and products*
- *To discuss and critique societal perceptions of “the guest” versus “the other”*
- *To use everyday objects to creatively communicate an idea*

TERMINOLOGY

Collage — an artistic composition made of various materials (as paper, cloth, or wood) glued on a surface

Conceptual Art — an art form in which the artist’s intent is to convey a concept rather than to create an art object

Found Object (also, Objet Trouvé) — a natural or discarded object found by chance and held to have aesthetic value

Free Trade — trade based on the unrestricted international exchange of goods with tariffs used only as a source of revenue

Globalization — the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets

Immigration — to enter and usually become established; to come into a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence

Multiculturalism — of, relating to, reflecting, or adapted to diverse cultures



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *H-Fact: Hospitality/Hostility*, 2004

CULTURAL MOSAICS

MATERIALS

found objects, glue, poster board, digital or mobile phone cameras (if available)

1. Start this session with a discussion around foods, products and media that are imported into your class' country, or that have gained popularity to the point of being replicated in or fused with domestic production. Examples can be international brands of clothing, foreign language soap operas, or restaurants with global influences.

2. Write these product names on the board as students brainstorm.

3. Now, ask students what they know about globalization. Give your students the opportunity to research the following terms individually: globalization, free trade, multiculturalism and immigration. How do the products they have brainstormed relate to the growth of a global marketplace? To the increased movement and relocation of people?

4. As a homework assignment, ask students to collect found objects that represent imported or internationally influenced products. They can find these objects at home, in the grocery store, or in print or online advertisements, for example. Found objects will be used to assemble a 3-D collage in class.

5. In class, provide students with poster board or other mounting materials onto which they can piece together their collages.

6. If digital or mobile phone cameras are readily available, ask students to photograph their collages. Upload these images to the web and create an online album and discussion forum that features your students' images and the outcomes of their conversations around globalization and multiculturalism.

DISCUSSION

- *After viewing your classmates' collages, are the global influences in your country more or less diverse than you expected? How do these contributions influence the arts, culture and daily life in your community?*
- *How do Alptekin's artistic interpretations of hospitality and hostility relate to the growing international debate around free trade and globalization?*
- *What, in your mind, is the difference between a guest and a stranger? How does the global media distort public perceptions of "the other"?*
- *If you were to make a similar collage of your country's contributions to the global marketplace, which objects would you include?*

UNIT TWO: ARTIST-RUN COLLECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career, Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin initiated and participated in several artist-run collectives, including Cheap Finnish Labour, the Bunker Research Project (of which “*I am not a studio artist*”’s Can Altay was also a member) and the Sea Elephant Travel Agency. Founded in 2001 and based in Istanbul, the Sea Elephant Travel Agency was inspired by Jules Verne’s novel *Kéraban the Inflexible*, which tells the story of a Turkish tobacco agent (Kéraban) hosting a guest from Holland. Kéraban promises to take his guest for dinner in Istanbul’s Üsküdar district, an event that requires the men to cross the Bosphorus by boat. When Kéraban discovers he will be charged a tax to cross, however, he stubbornly refuses. After attempts to reach their destination by land—which involve traveling around the entire Black Sea region—Kéraban ultimately finds a solution in a French acrobat who has stretched a cord between Istanbul’s Galata and Maiden’s Towers. Kéraban pays the acrobat to take he and his guest across the Bosphorus without having to touch the sea—or pay the tax.

The Sea Elephant Travel Agency emerged from this story, as Alptekin conceptualized Jules Verne’s fictional journey through the Black Sea region. His vision was to organize a group of artists from around the world, who together would travel by boat and collaborate on artistic projects. The project, called “Jules Verne and the Black Sea,” although never realized, intended to stimulate exchange among artists and institutions in the Black Sea and Baltic regions; to establish communication channels across borders and geographies; and to address issues of displacement, migration and nomadism.



Documentation from Bunker Research Group trip around Albania, 2003



The Bunker Research Group, *Bunker*, installation view from Inner Security, Marburg Kunstverein, Marburg, Germany, 2006

In What’s Your Mission? | Session 1 your students will design their own artist-run collectives based on a shared objective that addresses a specific issue or problem. In Session 2 each collective will develop a public art project. The goals of this project will be to communicate the group’s mission in a public forum through art; to engage individuals and communities outside the collective; and to stimulate dialogue around an issue, which ultimately may lead to future conversations or actions.

OBJECTIVES

- *To explore the concept of collectives, both in art and outside disciplines*
- *To use collaboration as a tool to solve a problem*
- *To gain an understanding of public art projects and their benefits to local and global communities*

TERMINOLOGY

Artist-Run Collective — an initiative that is the result of a group of artists working together, usually under their own management, towards shared aims

Displacement — the act of removing from the usual or proper place; specifically: to expel or force to flee from home or homeland

Migration — the act of moving from one country, place, or locality to another

Mission Statement — a formal, short, written statement of the purpose of a company or organization

Nomad — a member of a people who have no fixed residence but move from place to place usually seasonally and within a well-defined territory

Non-profit — not conducted or maintained for the purpose of making a profit

Public Art — art in any media that has been planned and executed with the specific intention of being sited or staged in the physical public domain, usually outside and accessible to all



Black Sea Map

WHAT'S YOUR MISSION?

SESSION 1

MATERIALS

blank paper, writing tools, newspapers (online or in print)

1. Discuss the Sea Elephant Travel Agency and the concept of artist-run collectives with your students. Are they familiar with any groups of artists that, either formally or informally, work collectively? If not, have they seen the collective model in other disciplines—for example, labor unions or food cooperatives?
2. Ask students to arrange themselves into groups of four. Each group will be forming a collective.
3. Each collective needs to brainstorm one issue or problem that its efforts will address. The problem can be something that affects students personally, but it can also, for example, be a political or social issue that impacts their families, their communities or the world. If time allows, give students the opportunity to read the day's newspaper, in print or online, to give them an idea of current events and conflicts their collectives could potentially focus on.
4. Once students have a specific problem in mind, ask them to consider ways in which they might address this problem through art. How can a collective work together to evoke change—and how can art facilitate this process?
5. Each collective must establish a name that reflects its purpose, a mission statement and a set of values. Give your students time to develop their ideas into an organizational identity, and to research community organizations, businesses or individuals they could potentially collaborate with to achieve their missions.
6. Ask groups to present their newly formed collectives to the class.



The Flying Grass Carpet Team, *The Flying Grass Carpet*, Beşiktaş Barbaros Meydanı, Istanbul, 2010

DISCUSSION

- *How did your group make decisions regarding its focus, name, mission and values? Was the collective decision-making process more or less difficult than working alone?*
- *Do you believe your collective's mission is attainable? Why or why not?*
- *As you watched classmates present their collectives to the class, were there any groups whose missions were similar to yours? Do you see potential to collaborate with any other groups to achieve your goals?*

WHAT'S YOUR MISSION?

SESSION 2

Now that students have established collectives, it is time to put their missions into action—in the form of public art projects. Note that this session can be spread over a few class periods, but has the potential to be expanded into an entire course unit.

MATERIALS

whatever available—drawing tools, blank paper, video cameras, art supplies

1. Discuss with students the concept of a public art project, based on the definition given on page 11. Have your students seen or participated in public art projects before? If time allows, ask students to research recent public art projects in Istanbul and internationally—for example, *The Flying Grass Carpet* (see photo on previous page). What are some common characteristics that public art projects share?

2. If in the previous session student collectives identified other groups in the class to collaborate with, give them the opportunity at this point to forge partnerships. Together, partnerships will create one public art project that fulfills both collectives' missions.

3. For the purposes of this activity, explain to students that each collective must design and implement a public art project that achieves the following three objectives:

- Communicates and stimulates dialogue around the collective's mission
- Engages individuals and communities outside the collective
- Is publicly carried out and accessible to all

4. Give students time to develop the concept for their collective's project. Once their concepts are solidified, each group will create a project proposal. Proposals can be written documents

or, alternatively, can use media like illustrated storyboard or video to visually outline the collective's plan. Regardless of form, all proposals must outline the project's participants, mission, required materials, location and timeline.

5. Invite groups to present their proposals to the class. This is a great opportunity for students to give and receive feedback, through critique of each other's proposed projects. Questions to shape critique can include: *What are the most successful aspects of this plan? How can it be improved? What resources should this collective take advantage of? What obstacles may this group may encounter? How can it overcome these obstacles?*

6. Following the presentation of proposals, give students the chance to implement classmates' suggestions into their plans.

7. Realization of your students' public art projects can take place during school hours, or outside of class as a group homework assignment. Encourage students to attend and participate in their classmates' projects and to document their experiences (for example, through video, photography, blog or webcast) to later share with the class.

DISCUSSION

- *Was your project successful in addressing and forwarding your collective's mission? Why or why not?*
- *How did your collective engage outside community members? Did the participation of the public in your project take the form you expected it to?*
- *What was the greatest obstacle your collective faced in the process of developing its project?*

RESEARCH & DISCUSS: WHAT IS KITSCH?

INTRODUCTION

Originating in Germany in the 1860s to describe mass-produced images, “kitsch” has, historically, been used as a derogatory term—often used to describe art objects considered “lowbrow”, cheap or tacky. Much of Alptekin’s work addresses and critiques the notion of “kitsch” as artistic classification. As Alptekin once explained, “What lies between the elegant and the kitsch is a slippery ground.” He raises the questions: How do we define art? Who decides what is art? And, what is the difference between high and low art?

TERMINOLOGY

Kitsch — something that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality
High Culture — the set of cultural products, mainly in the arts, held in the highest esteem by a culture
Low Culture — a derogatory term for some forms of popular culture

Give students a chance to research the term “kitsch” individually or in small groups, then discuss their findings as a class.

DISCUSSION

- *Have you seen examples of kitsch in your communities, in the media, or in your homes?*
- *What separates kitsch from traditional forms of “high art” you’ve seen in textbooks, or exhibited in museums or galleries?*
- *What does existing commentary around kitsch reveal about dominant perceptions of high and low art?*



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin - Michael Morris, *Heterotopia*, 1992

CLOSING DISCUSSION: THE ARTIST AS TRAVELER

After visiting the I am not a studio artist exhibition at SALT Beyoğlu and engaging in some of the supplemental discussions and activities included in this Interpretation Pack, your students have considered the frameworks of conceptual and kitsch art; observed the role of art in addressing sociopolitical issues like globalization and immigration; and experienced firsthand how groups of artists can work together to benefit their communities through public art projects. As a capstone to your experience of the exhibition, we suggest taking a closer look at Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin's perspective as an artist.

Alptekin often wandered Istanbul's streets in search of materials for his projects. He saw the acts of walking, exploring, and traveling as critical to understanding the context of his subjects and his environment. Alptekin once wrote: "What is happening when we travel; the changes of mood, mode and motion, displacement, de-contextualizing things, the self and referring again to the situation. Travel urges artist to develop an act of positioning, a critical view so as to hand back things and ideas ... Travel is an escape from habit and everyday life. The artist is constantly escaping. Travel is a marginal experience, the artist stays in the margin to reach the universal center." Fundamentally, Alptekin saw travel as a means of opening one's perspective, of looking upon people and situations with fresh eyes. These skills were vital to his practice as an artist.

Using Alptekin's approach to life and art as inspiration, your students will take on the role of traveler in their own communities. Although they may have walked through their neighborhoods countless times before, we invite students to revisit their streets with a fresh perspective, recording their observations of the streets and their inhabitants as though seeing them for the first time.



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *Stranger in Paradise*, 2006



left: Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *I'm dreaming about Bombay*, 2006

right: Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, *Stranger in Paradise*, 2006

1. As a homework assignment, ask your students to select one street in their neighborhood they would like to focus on for this project. Students should choose a specific time to walk down this street, which will determine how busy or quiet it is.

2. Encourage students to walk slowly, observing the street in detail and answering the following questions: *Who is outside on the street? What are they doing? What do the buildings look like—are they apartments, businesses, restaurants? Who lives here? What makes this street unique from others in the neighborhood?*

3. Students can record their observations with whatever medium best conveys their impressions—for example, digital or mobile phone camera, video camera, illustration or audio recording.

4. Give students an opportunity to present their projects to the class.

DISCUSSION

- *Were there any buildings, activities, or people on your street that surprised you? That you hadn't noticed before?*
- *How did the time of day you chose to observe your street affect your results? How might your observations have been different at another time of day?*
- *Looking at (or listening to) your classmates' projects, can you guess what streets or neighborhoods they are describing?*
- *How did taking on the role of traveler influence your perception of your street?*



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin with Black Sea Map

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In 2008 SALT acquired the personal library of Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin and began the process of organizing an extensive archive of images, notebooks, objects and other ephemera that he left behind. The library and archive will be accessible to students, educators and researchers in September 2011, offering invaluable references for the artist's life and production, as well as serving as an exemplary model for the preservation, maintenance and presentation of an artist's archive in Turkey.

An extensive book on Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin will be launched in parallel to the exhibition, featuring a selection of Alptekin's own writings, published and unpublished interviews, as well as archival material and contributions from Vasif Kortun, Michel Oren, Sabine Vogel and Tirdad Zolghadr.

Cheap Finnish Labour | platform.fi/cfl.html
Flying Grass Carpet | flyinggrasscarpet.org
Jules Verne's *Kéran the Inflexible*
Michel Foucault's *Of Other Spaces*

