

İsmail Saray (b.1943, Kütahya)

A graduate of the Gazi Education Institute in Ankara, İsmail Saray received a state scholarship in 1968 and continued his studies in London, England. After completing an advanced sculpture postgraduate course at Saint Martin's School of Art in 1969-1970, he received an MA in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art in 1973. Upon his return to Turkey, as part of his compulsory service, he was appointed to teach in the Black Sea city of Samsun, from where he sent work to exhibitions in İstanbul and abroad including the Paris Biennial in 1977.

During his time in Samsun, Saray was active in trying to improve arts education. He focused on initiating an art reference library for the Samsun Education Institute. He convinced the local officials to create a budget for the library, arranged subscriptions with international art magazines; and brought back books from his visits to İstanbul.

Saray himself had experienced a permissive environment and adequate state support in Turkey during his formative years as an art student in the late 1960s before leaving for England. However, when he returned in the mid-to-late 1970s, the focus of his artistic practice and career shifted in response to rising conservatism and political anxiety in Turkey's academic and artistic spheres, in the years preceding the country's military coup d'état in September 1980.

Fueled by bureaucratic obstacles, his production in Turkey became increasingly dissent-driven; his criticality was simultaneously conditioned by and revolted against the institutional and social challenges of the time. The transformation of his practice from strictly conceptual to politically-charged was emblematic of an artist operating on the fringes of the state-driven Turkish Republic's art system as it closed in on itself by the mid-1970s. As a graduate of a education institute —hence an outsider to the Fine-Art-Academy-controlled, İstanbul-centric art world— and occupied by his compulsory service in a remote town, Saray would discover that his position was doubly limited in terms of recognition and finding opportunities to exhibit work.

The enigmatic artist book titled *Leonardo da Vinci* that he sent anonymously to artists who participated in the *State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition* during his early days in Samsun signifies the creative approach Saray took to his constraints. His limited forays into the art world during the Antalya Festival in 1976 or 2. *Yeni Eğilimler Sergisi* [2nd Exhibition of New Trends in Art] of 1979 in İstanbul were undertaken covertly; as artists working as civil servants were not allowed to leave their posts without going through unwieldy permission procedures.

Saray left Turkey in 1980 when his re-appointment to a different education institute was delayed indefinitely. He has been living in London since then. There, in addition to initiating and publishing the industrious *AND Journal of Art and Art Education* for ten years with his wife and life-long collaborator Jenni Boswell-Jones, Saray continued his artistic practice as well as his political activism.

During this time, Saray participated in the *Jeune Peinture* exhibitions in Paris (in 1982 and 1983) with Groupe Turc, producing two highly critical, anti-militarist

installations. Befitting his conceptual inclinations and in line with the increasingly isolated course of his artistic practice, he also continued to participate in exhibitions in Turkey by sending detailed descriptions of work, which would then be realized by artist friends and exhibition organizers. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, his works were realized for the seminal exhibition series such as *Öncü Türk Sanatından Bir Kesit* [A Cross Section of Avant-garde Turkish Art] (1987 and 1988); *Toplu Sergi* [Joint Exhibit] (1987 and 1988); *A,B,C,D* (1989 through 1993) and *Büyük Sergi 2* [Grand Exhibition 2] (1990).

Saray's ties with the artistic world in Turkey dwindled in the early 1990s; he was asked to propose work for the 2nd İstanbul Biennial in 1988, but didn't receive any response to his proposal. In 1992, he traveled to İstanbul for the first time since his sudden departure in 1980, to participate in the *Sanat-Texnh* exhibition. The same year, similar to the correspondence with the organizers of the İstanbul Biennial two years earlier, after the initial invitation from the Metropolitan Municipality of İstanbul's for three-dimensional public art commissions [İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, "Açık Alanlara Üç Boyutlu Çağdaş Sanat Yapıtları Yerleştirme Etkinliği"], his proposal was left unanswered. *10 Sanatçı 10 İş: D Sergisi* [10 Artists 10 Works: D Exhibition] in 1993 was the last time he made new work in Turkey and abroad for the next 17 years; since then, Saray has focused his energies on activism, campaigning especially for artists' rights.