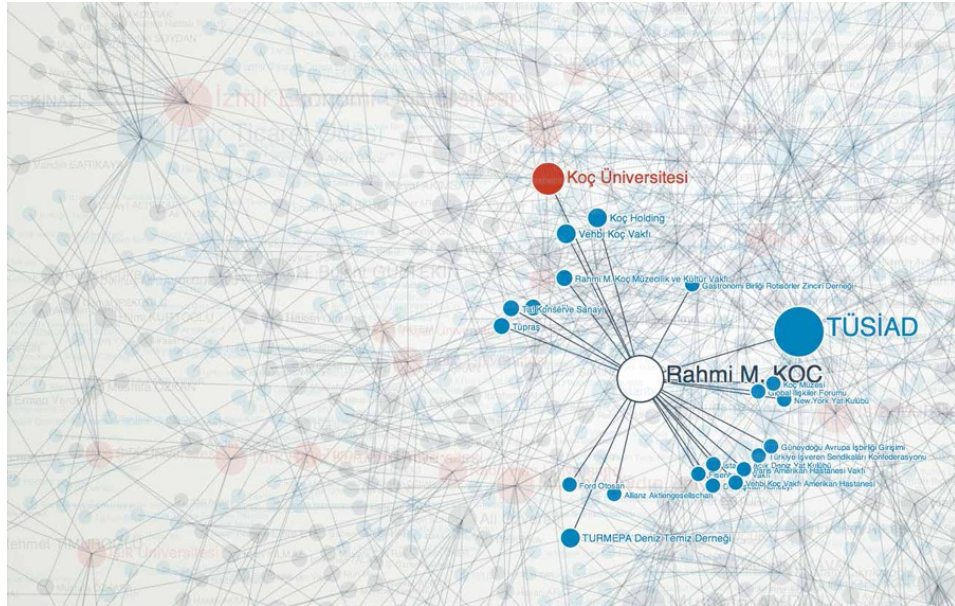


## INTERVIEWS

### Collective Networking

Burak Arikan in conversation with Basak Senova



Burak Arikan, *Higher Education Industrial Complex*, 2013, custom software, interactive map on 47" touch screen LCD, 260 x 125cm digital print. Courtesy the artist.

Burak Arikan is a New York and Istanbul based artist working with complex networks. He is the founder of the Graph Commons platform, dedicated to provide network intelligence for all. Arikan's work confronts issues ranging from politics and economics to cultural sustainability in networked environments. He deals with human-made complex systems by applying techniques such as

network mapping, network analysis, programming, and protocol authoring. In this interview, Basak Senova, who has been working with Arikan for more than a decade on various projects and publications, talks to Arikan about how he perceives acts of collecting, the labour of knowledge, mapping, data compiling, interpretation and dissemination of maps, and power formations along with the urban transformations and resistance in Turkey, through Arikan's latest projects, which include *Networks of Dispossession* and *Higher Education Industrial Complex* (both 2013), which operate through the Graph Commons platform.

**Basak Senova:** I would like to start with the act of 'collecting' network data as an act of producing knowledge and the act of 'reading' network structures out of the collected data as an act of dispersing and discussing this knowledge. Hence, in your practice, these two acts are collectively performed. What does collectiveness mean to you? Does it also imply the generation of power through alternative means so as to make changes within society?

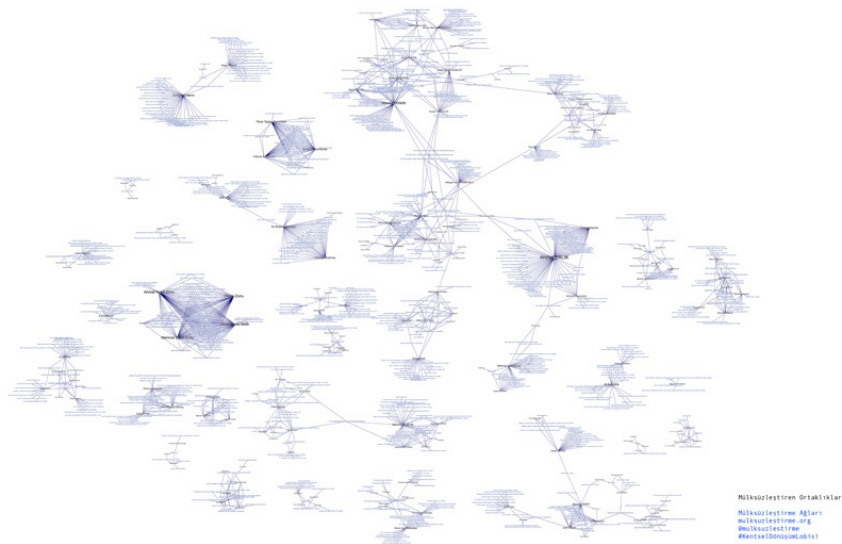
**Burak Arikan:** My MIT thesis was titled 'Collective Systems for Creative Expression' (2006) and discussed building systems that would enable generating creative work collectively at scale, using both micro and macro feedback loops between participants. This formula addresses the transition from connectivity to collectivity. Since the writing of this thesis, I've been interested in collective systems as a form of art and as a form of political resistance.

However, the labour of knowledge is always inherently collective, always a social production, and we all know that the capital wants to extract as much value as possible from it. Today, the most challenging political progress happens through the collective intelligence of civil initiatives, and a hybrid of the Internet and the street. We've been experiencing it from Occupy Wall Street in New York to the indignados in Spain and the Gezi Protests in Turkey. Our work on civil 'network mapping' emerges within this context.

To put it simply, we all have a partial map of a certain reality around us. When we interconnect our individual data points and do collective mapping, we can render certain complex structures visible. Sharing and distributing such deliberate knowledge helps people develop an understanding of power and hopefully act on it. Counter-mapping is a way to use collective intelligence in civil interrogation of power structures.

Presenting the research in the forms of maps and having a social discussion around it, results in an epiphanic experience of both form and discourse, which presents intrinsic encounters for all of us.

**BS:** In this respect, the ongoing project *Networks of Dispossession*, which compiles and maps collective data on the relations of capital and power within urban transformation in Turkey, has become even more important with the aftermath of the Gezi Park Resistance and the ongoing criminal investigation on corruption that involves several key people in the Turkish government.



Burak Arikan, *Networks of Dispossession/Mülksüzleştirme: Partnerships*, 2013.  
Courtesy the artist

**BA:** Urban transformation is not a new concept. Especially in the last decades, knowledge has been and is still being produced on the after effects of urban transformation, the architectural fabric and the struggles of the neighbourhoods subject to such changes. Nonetheless, against such a rich accumulation of knowledge on the subject, urban transformation policies suffer from serious unresolved problems, which also triggered the Gezi Protests. That is why *Networks of Dispossession* started with an open call to all actors within the field for interconnecting data and knowledge related to this subject, so as to generate a database and develop an ethic for civil investigation that might call to account those responsible. *Networks of Dispossession* is a collective data compiling and mapping work on the relations of capital and power within urban transformation in Turkey. Created by a group of journalists, lawyers, social scientists, artists and technologists collectively, the maps reach out to a broad public and are used as reference both by the authors and citizens.

After the maps were first announced in early September 2013, tens of thousands of people viewed the maps online, shared on social media, then discussed in

news articles and personal blogs. Many came to participate in the brainstorming meetings and workshops we conducted at the 13th Istanbul Biennial exhibition space in Karakoy in 2013. Months later, when the AKP governments' corruption scandal hit the public on 17 December 2013, many of the names in police proceedings and prosecutors' documents were already on the Networks of Dispossession maps. People started highlighting sections of the maps, showing critical ties between certain shareholders of holding companies. This was clearly systematic corruption visible on a relationship map. Around this time, the network maps got even larger attention from the public, and many concerned individuals actively participated in the interpretation and dissemination of the maps.

**BS:** Basically, this network is based on generating questions about the relations of power.

**BA:** We have the following questions: what relations exist among the stakeholders of the urban transformation? What kinds of partnerships have been established between the government and the corporations? Where else do the board members of contracting, subcontracting, architectural, real estate and tourism companies reside? What kind of relations can be discovered among the contractors of mega projects that constantly agitate the city agenda? To which groups are the people's tax money being transmitted through the reconstruction and submission of public space? What relations can be found between the projects in Beyoglu, one of the areas that urban transformation is centred, and the district that triggered the Gezi movement in Turkey? What sorts of relations can be found between the corporations and governmental institutions that appropriated the capital as a result of the processes of dispossessing minorities?

Sociologist Manuel Castells says that power does not reside in institutions, not even the state or large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society. And without understanding their logic, we cannot change their programmes. I think by experience we all know that relationships aggregate power. But, somehow we fail to be active agents and criticize networks, not because we are incapable of comprehending the network effect, but because firstly, the tools for network mapping and analysis have been designed for engineers, scientists, and business experts. Secondly, there is the myth that common people have no access to data. Yet we are the data for the government and the companies who continuously sense our activity. It would be wrong to assume that individual tracks of data would have a minor effect. In fact, we can interconnect our individual data points, engage in collective mapping and indeed render complex power structures visible.

**BS:** How does *Networks of Dispossession* work?

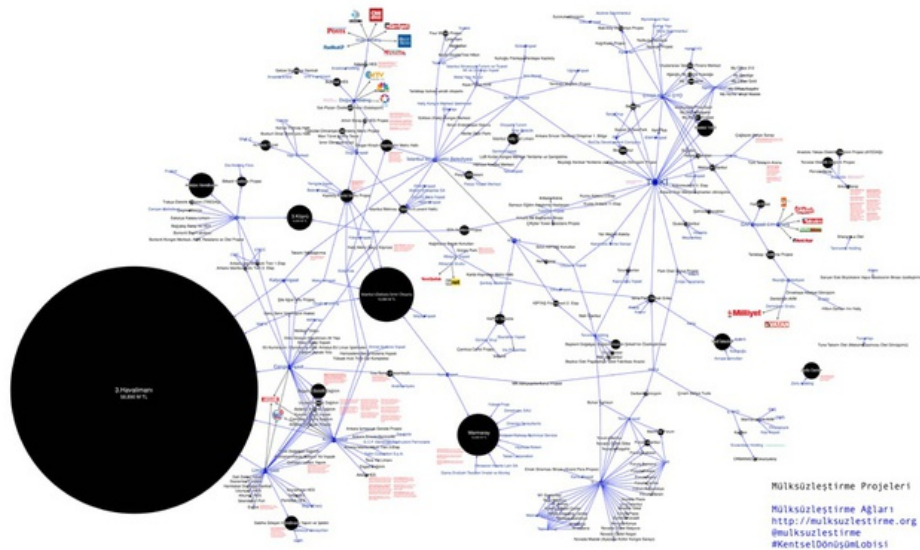
**BA:** The project is presented as high-resolution large prints and interactive maps accessible on the Internet. Also, concerned people, who help move the information virally, share sections of the maps on social media. Since the work is open for participation, we have contributions from researchers as well as people from certain neighbourhoods.

The first workshop of the *Networks of Dispossession* project took place at Gezi Park on 6 June 2013. In this very first get together, the group was composed of lawyers, journalists, academics, artists, and technologists, and was joined by more participants over time. We have been working on the shared documents online and onsite ever since then. The data and the relational maps generated during the project were exhibited at the 13th Istanbul Biennial. In addition, public meetings, lectures and workshops were held on the topics of dispossession policies, network mapping, and the publication and socialization of the generated data.[1] The next phases of the *Networks of Dispossession* maps are currently in production, which will be released before the local elections on 30 March in Turkey.

The infrastructure of this work is based on the Graph Commons platform,[2] a collaborative 'network mapping' platform and a knowledge base that has been in use for the past two years, and which I developed. The data points generated on this platform have verified references: they are searchable, accessible, and linkable extrinsically. Graph Commons is being used for investigative journalism, data research, civic activism, strategizing, organizational analysis, and also for curating art.

**BS:** Is there a mechanism to check the reliability of the collected data? Who is responsible for controlling this data?

**BA:** All the participants of the project edit data and do the fact checking for each relationship, using multiple resources. Then, we publish the data tables with links to the resources as a reference, which are all available to the public next to the maps. So you can go yourself and check if the reference is correct or not. The information on the maps is supported with other media archives and made easy to navigate in the guidance of references.



Burak Arikan, *Networks of Dispossession/Mulksuzlestirme: Partnerships*, 2013.  
Courtesy the artist

**BS:** We recently worked together for the *Scientific Inquiries* (2013) project. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of Koç University, I invited seven research-based artists to meet with researchers from various fields to develop artistic projects which are engaged with the research that are being conducted in the university. You built up a dynamic network map of 68 private universities, including Koç University, their board of trustees, and the companies and institutions, by referring to the fields of sociology and computer sciences.

**BA:** The work is titled *Higher Education Industrial Complex*, a network map of private universities and their boards of trustees connected to a network of corporations and institutions in Turkey. The work was an installation of an interactive network map on a large touch screen display running on a custom software and a 260 x 125 centimetre high resolution digital print map, which together exhibited in the Koç University campus and accessible on the website.[3]

**BS:** Could you briefly explain the project?

**BA:** The *Higher Education Industrial Complex* network map contains 68 private universities, 625 member of the board of trustees, 970 organizations (corporations, foundations, associations, political parties, state universities), and 2001 relationships between organizations and people. It analyses the relations between the board of trustees, the power holders within the universities, with other institutions and corporations. It also compiles a database of such

information; and generates a network map of these relations, in which one can navigate from one node to the other, which provides us a tool to understand the ecosystem of higher education in political and social terms. The network map of all the private universities in Turkey, including Koc University, their board of trustees, and the companies and institutions that they share, aims to reveal the ecosystem, the central and peripheral actors, their indirect connections, and clusters within the industrial complex of higher education.

**BS:** How do you read these network maps in the context of increasing pressure on the citizens to provide information? Through new laws, the Internet has been subject to severe censorship, and the mainstream media has already been very problematic due to ownership structures and its dependency to the political powers.[4]

**BA:** In this day and age, network mapping and analysis is a strong weapon that you don't want to aim at yourself. As an individual or a small organization, you can map yourself for doing self-organization, strategizing or what not, but not in the public. Subjects of network maps obviously become more transparent and analyzable. You should rather map the issues at hand, the power dynamics that you are obliged to live with, or the concepts that would generate new ideas. In my work, I try to map invisible power relationships and share them in public. It is counter to what governments and corporations do, who continuously watching and mapping all the citizens and consumers. We map the relationships of government and corporations instead, to be able to make their presence and power relations visible, and thus discussible.

Governments and people in power all over the world feared that the Internet would affect their way of governance. So they started intercepting all and every kind of communication. Furthermore, it has become totalizing today, that people put all their political ideas, their family communications, and their friendships on the Internet. All this private information is now subject to mass interception. The Graph Commons platform targets this issue in a way. Rather than putting all your personal data on the Internet, you map the relationships between individuals and organizations who are in power. This is done by collectively connecting the dots: the data points that are already in the public domain.

**Burak Arıkan** completed his master's degree at the MIT Media Laboratory in the Physical Language Workshop (PLW) led by John Maeda. While at MIT, he pursued research exploring networked systems that address the transition from

connectivity to collectivity in the context of creative expression. Prior to MIT, he received an MA degree in Visual Communication Design from İstanbul Bilgi University in 2004, and a BS degree in Civil Engineering from Yıldız Technical University in 2001. In his work, Arikan takes the social, economical, and political issues as input and runs it through abstract machinery, which generates network maps and algorithmic interfaces, results in performances, and procreates predictions to render inherent power relationships visible, thus discussable.

Arikan's software, prints, installations, and performances have been featured in numerous exhibitions internationally. He has presented his work internationally at institutions including Museum of Modern Art New York, Venice Architecture Biennale, İstanbul Biennial, Berlin Biennial, Ashkal Alwan, Sharjah Biennial, Ars Electronica, Sonar, DEMF, Neuberger Museum of Art, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Borusan Contemporary, DEPO, ARTER, SALT and at independent venues such as Art Interactive Cambridge, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Hafriyat, Turbulence (online). He has lectured and did workshops at institutions including Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rhode Island School of Design, New York University Interactive Telecommunications Program, İstanbul Technical University, Bogazici Universtiy, Sabanci University, and İstanbul Bilgi University. Arikan currently has a fellowship at the Parsons New School.

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[1] See: [http://mulksuzlestirme.org/index\\_en.html](http://mulksuzlestirme.org/index_en.html)

[2] See: <http://graphcommons.com>

[3] See: <http://burak-arikan.com/ozeluniversiteler>

[4] In 2013, Turkey ranked 154 out of 179 countries in the Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders and in the same year was defined as the 'world's leading jailer of journalists'. For more information, see: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/new-media-laws-increasing-internet-censorship-in-turkey.aspx?pageID=449&nID=61212&NewsCatID=396>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Basak Senova

**Basak Senova** is a curator and designer based in İstanbul. She has been writing on art, technology and media, initiating and developing projects and curating exhibitions since 1995. Senova studied Literature and Graphic Design (MFA in Graphic Design and Ph.D. in Art, Design and Architecture at Bilkent University)



and attended the 7th Curatorial Training Programme of Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam. Senova is an editorial correspondent for [ibraaz.org](http://ibraaz.org) and one of the founding members of NOMAD, as well as the organizer of *ctrl\_alt\_del* and *Upgrade! Istanbul*. She is the editor of many publications, including *art-ist 6*, *Kontrol Online Magazine*, *Unrecorded*, *Lapses book series*, *UNCOVERED*, *Aftermath*, *The Translation*, *D-0 ARK Underground*. Senova was the curator of the Pavilion of Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009). She lectured as assistant professor at the Faculty of Communication, Kadir Has University, Istanbul (2006-2010). Currently, she is co-curating the UNCOVERED (2010-2013) project in Cyprus, the 2nd Biennial of Contemporary Art, D-0 ARK Underground (2013) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Transition in Istanbul. Recently, she was appointed Art Gallery Chair of (ACM) SIGGRAPH 2014 in Vancouver and the curator of the Helsinki Photography Biennial 2014.