



FROM ENLAND WITH LOVE,
İSMAIL SARAY

SALT ULUS

18 NOVEMBER 2014 – 10 JANUARY 2015

From England With Love, İsmail Saray

Artist İsmail Saray holds a canonical place for art and the cultural environment of the 1970s and early 1980s in Turkey, but there has been little information and very limited scholarship on his practice. In 2012 SALT initiated a research project on Saray's life and work in order to reveal his unknown history.

This long-overdue project began with the process of assembling and securing the complete archive of the artist, as well as unearthing various artworks kept by Saray's fellow artists. Interviews with artists, collaborators, as well as friends' and students' of Saray were then conducted in an attempt to shape an oral history for further study. The first phase of this research project was introduced and visualized in the exhibition *From England with Love, İsmail Saray* at SALT Galata, September 13 – November 2, 2014. A digitized archive of Saray's life and work is accessible at SALT Research.

The exhibition, which has been reconfigured for SALT Ulus, gathers works produced by Saray from the 1970s on, including selected documents and videos from his archive, as well as his artist books produced between the years 1972-1979. The title of the exhibition is taken from Saray's installation exhibited in *8 Sanatçı 8 İş: B* [8 Artists 8 Works: B] (1990-1991). It emphasizes the idea of distance in Saray's practice as also evidenced in his correspondence, as well as archival material shown in the exhibition.

Visitors at SALT Ulus are greeted by recreations of the artist's untitled arrangement from his student years (1970/2014) and his photographic self-portrait series *Envoy* (1972/2014) on the ground floor. This section of the exhibition continues with Saray's artist books; sketches from his student years in London; correspondences made in regard to the 10th Paris Biennale (1977) and documents related

to *Sanat Olarak Betik* [Book as Art] (1980) organized by the conceptual artist group Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu [Art Definition Group].

Saray continued to participate in exhibitions in Turkey 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) and *A,B,C,D* (1989 through 1993) by sending detailed descriptions of works which would then be realized by his friends and the exhibition organizers after he moved to London in 1980.

Saray's works *Somutlaşmış Kurguların Doymazlığı* [Insatiability of Fictions Made Concrete] (1987) and *Savunma* [Defense] (1988), which were produced by the artist Cengiz Çekil according to Saray's specifications and presented in *Toplu Sergi* [Joint Exhibit] in 1987 and 1988; his work *Satılmış Topraklar* [Exported Soil] in *10 Sanatçı 10 İş: A* [10 Artists 10 Works: A] (1989); original works from the 1980s and videos from various exhibitions are located on the upper floor.

Artworks with an anti-war theme have played an important role in Saray's artistic practice since his student years. The exhibition at SALT Ulus also brings together his anti-war works including *Electric Blanket* (1971) from his student years at the Royal College of Art, *Under Democracy* (1994), as well as his most recent work *Brand New* (2010) which was produced for the exhibition *From Floor to Sky* (London, 2010).

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 Biennale 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; since 1994, Saray has focused his energies on activism, campaigning especially for artists' rights.

Untitled
1970/2014



İsmail Saray, *Untitled*, 1970

This untitled student work by İsmail Saray made in 1970 at Saint Martin's School of Art, which he covered the floor of a room with sisal fibres, has been reproduced for the exhibition *From England with Love*, İsmail Saray.

Electric Blanket

1971



İsmail Saray, *Electric Blanket*, 1971

İsmail Saray was present in 1968, when protests for civil rights, anti-Vietnam War rallies and student demonstrations took over the agenda in London, one of the main centers for these events. He was also in London living as a student when a memorandum issued by the military forced the government in Turkey to resign in 1971. However, Turkey never left Saray's radar. Regarding this installation, which the artist produced while he was studying at the Royal College of Art, the artist states that it refers not only to the Native Americans' civil rights struggle to exercise their constitutional rights in the USA, and to anti-Vietnam War protests, but also to political developments in Turkey. The work addresses incidents such as the kidnapping of two British and once

Canadian NATO technicians to prevent the execution of Deniz Gezmiş, Yusuf Aslan and Hüseyin İnan in the aftermath of the 1971 memorandum, the Kızıldereli massacre during which ten of the revolutionary militants responsible for this action were murdered by security forces, and acts of systematic torture carried out in Turkey. The low resistance electrical wire used in the installation implies a sense of threat due to its potential heat and the 220 volt current passing through it. The only difference between the six photographs in which Saray multiplies the image of his own face, and visualizes not only a feeling of being trapped but also repetition, is the progression of time displayed on his wrist watch.

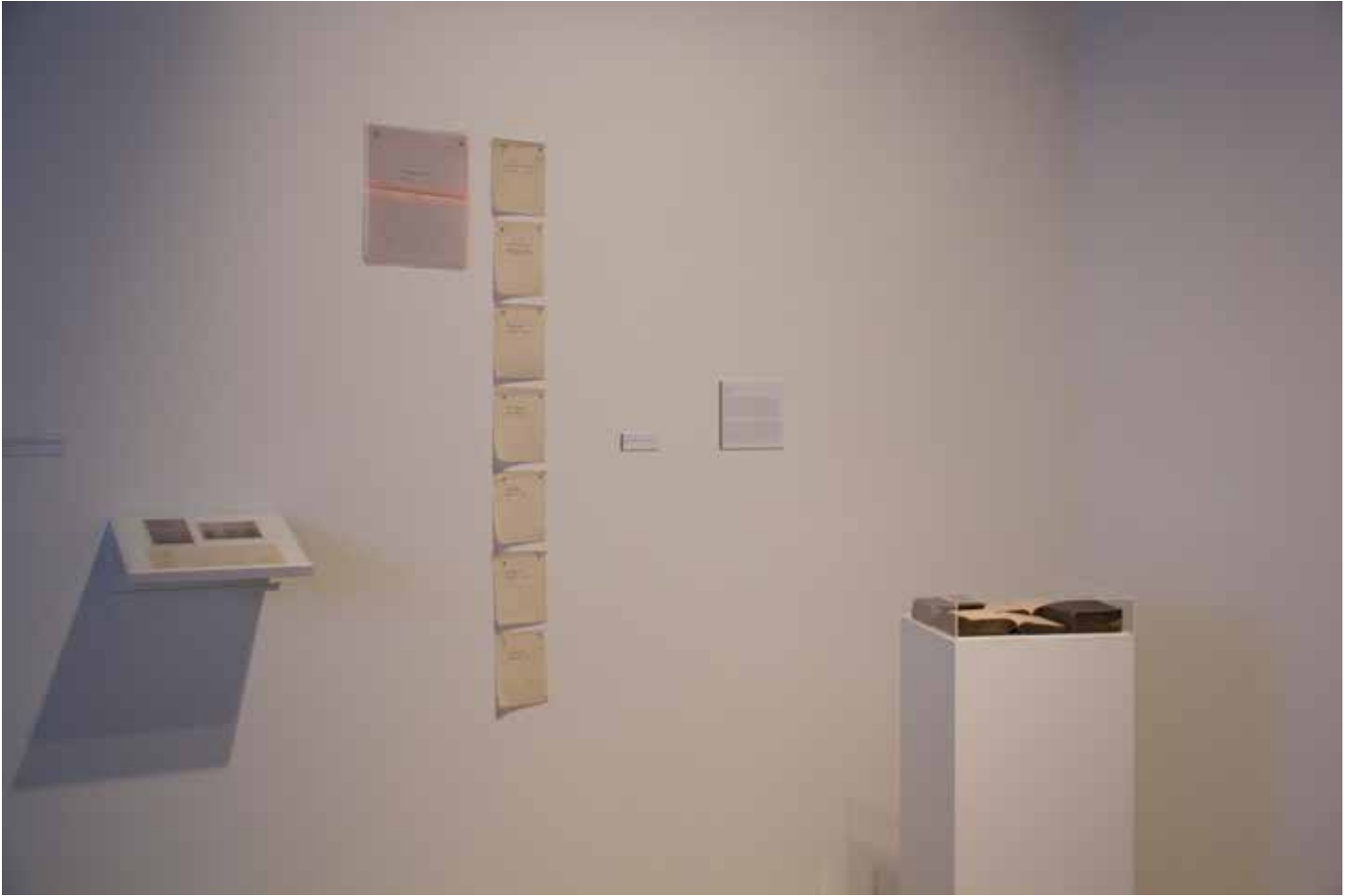
Envoy
1972/2014



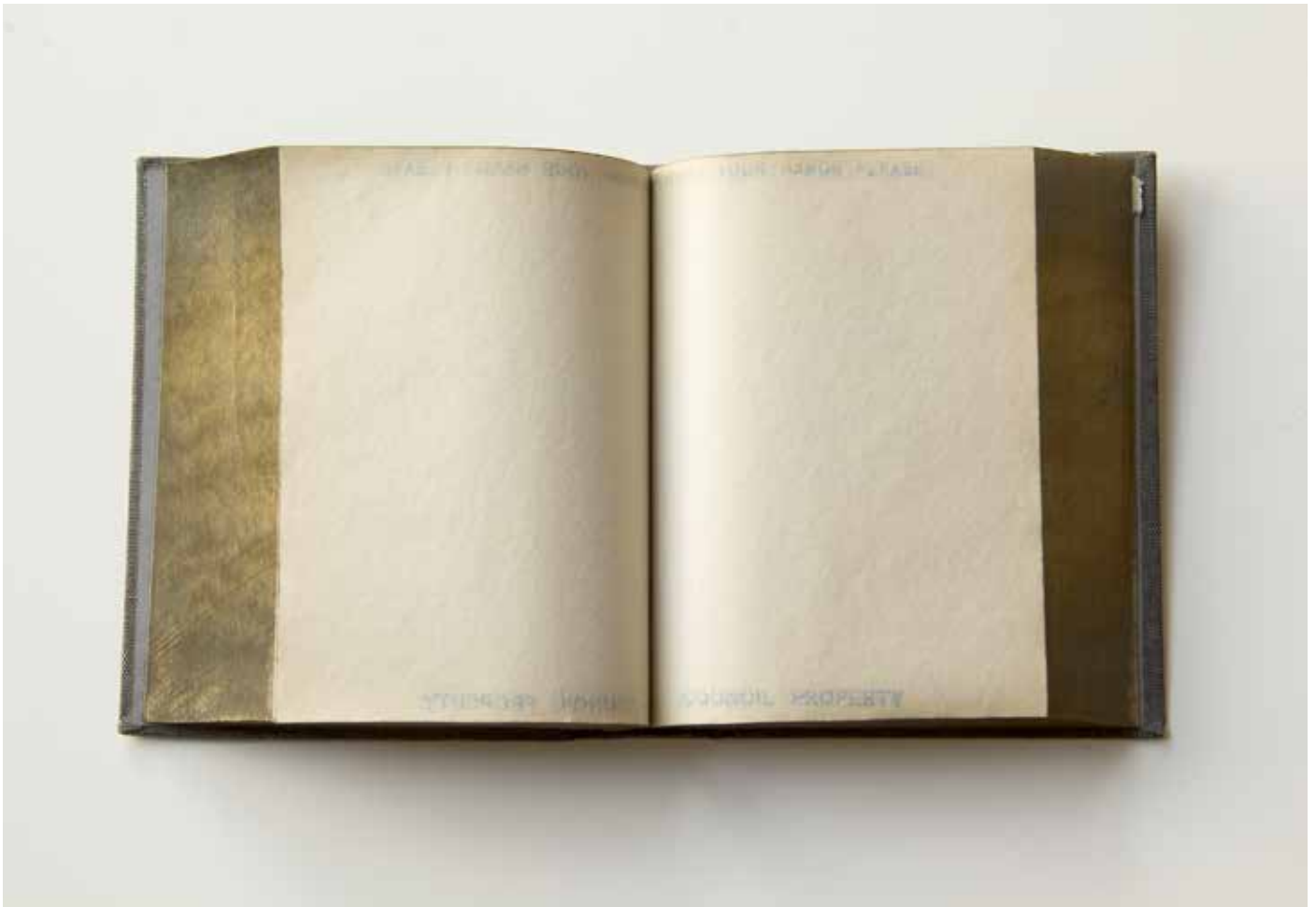
Ismail Saray, *Envoy*, 1972

This work originally made during his student years at the Royal College of Art has been reproduced for the exhibition *From England with Love, Ismail Saray*.

Detail Sculptures
1972



Artist books 1972-1973



Artist books, 1972-1973

During preparations for the exhibition *Sculpture in Holland Park*, which he participated in while a student, İsmail Saray spent time observing the activity and environment of Holland Park, London. During this research period, he became intrigued by the toilet paper used in public toilets, not that supplied in rolls but the paper that comes in single sheets. He had

sheets of this specific type of toilet paper bound at the Royal College of Art, then had their edges gilded and transformed them into a book. This untitled student work that has not been exhibited before bears witness to Saray's interest in found objects, and therefore conceptual art, and to artist books, which as his career progressed formed one of the key strands of his oeuvre.

Leonardo da Vinci
Artist book
1976



Leonardo da Vinci, 1976 (artist book)

After completing his postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art, İsmail Saray returned to Turkey in fall 1973 to complete his obligatory service in return for the scholarship he had received from the state and went to Ankara to attend to his assignment procedures. While in Ankara the *State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition* attracted his attention both because of the background of its participants, and the rigid, traditional system it proposed. This artist book produced by Saray, a while after he was appointed to do his service in Samsun, was triggered by both the difficult appointment process and the exhibition in Ankara, and can be seen as the first critical work against the establishment. The book raises questions about issues such as selecting/being selected in the art world, exhibiting work, being appointed to a position, taking part in or being invited to exhibitions, and also alludes to the difficulties the artist himself experienced.

This booklet which Saray sent to the participants of the 1975 *State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition*, after taking their addresses from the catalogue, and the ironic note it contains, could be deemed the departure point for the struggles he pursued in the future, for example: the letter he sent to the Association of Visual Artists, the letter of intent they prepared as the teachers of the Samsun Education Institute, the manifesto he took part in preparing for a biennial to be held in İstanbul in the late 70s, which was never realized, and the letter he began to write to Ahmet Taner Kışlalı the Minister of Culture, in 1978... The development of fair exhibition mechanisms in the art world in Turkey was an issue Saray persistently returned to throughout his practice.

Paris Biennale 1977



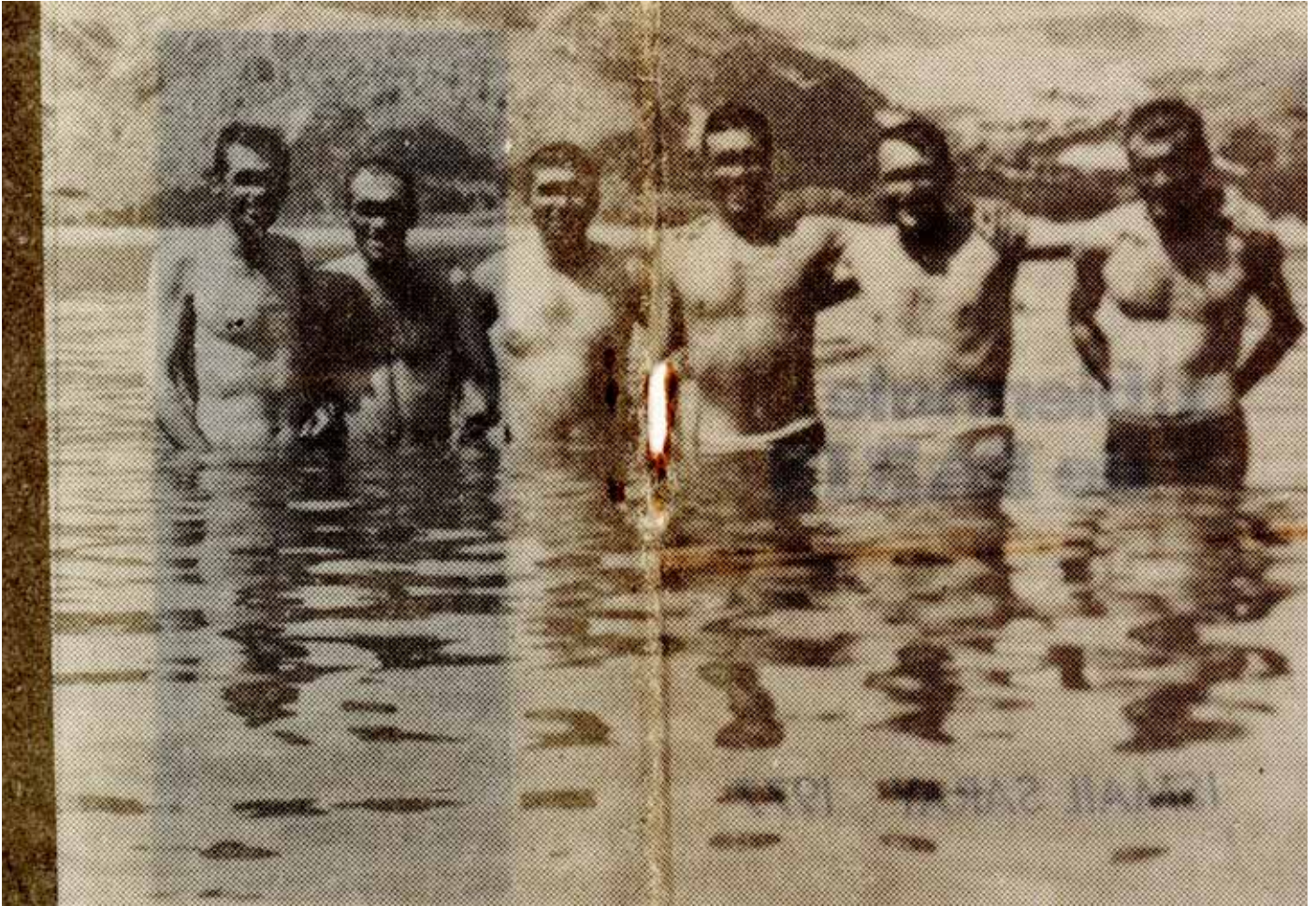
İsmail Saray, *ER-DAMU-UTU-SU*, Paris Biennale, 1977

In 1976, the same year he anonymously distributed *Leonardo da Vinci*, İsmail Saray submitted a portfolio to the international selection committee for the Paris Biennale of 1977. Since 1973 the Paris Biennale had an international selection committee that would evaluate individual submissions, rather than the previously employed approach of having each country preselect the participants. Saray was the first artist from Turkey to be invited to the Paris Biennale, after the change in the selection process.

Even though he was able to go around the partiality of local selectors, Saray's correspondence regarding financial support from the state authorities turned into a bitter encounter. There was much back-and-forth negotiation between the artist and Georges Boudaille, the director of the biennial. Boudaille tried to help Saray, seeking funding from the Turkish Embassy in Paris, the

Ministry of Culture, as well as from Nurullah Berk, then head of the State Academy of Fine Arts in İstanbul, for the production of Saray's work and the transportation to France, but all to no avail. The gaps between the letters placed on the wall are meant to signify the time it took the artist to receive any response from the officials in Turkey with regard to funding. Eventually, the work was not financed by the state and all expenses were met by the artist himself. Saray went to Paris covertly to install his work, because as a teacher for the state he was not allowed to leave his teaching post in Samsun without notice. While the installation was included in a selection of works that would travel to Nice and Strasbourg after the biennial, Saray could not attend these exhibitions in person. Moreover, Saray's requests to the Ministry of Culture to pay the cost of the work's return to Turkey were rejected and the installation was not preserved after the exhibitions.

Artist book prepared for the Paris Biennale



Artist book produced for the 10th Paris Biennale, 1977

The most significant remainder from İsmail Saray's installation *ER-DAMU-UTU-SU* at the 10th Paris Biennale is another artist book that he made for the occasion. Even smaller than *Leonardo da Vinci*, the Paris booklet contained photographs Saray had taken during his compulsory military service in 1975 in Isparta, together with photographs of primary school students in Samsun, alongside excerpts from found court proceedings that he juxtaposed with dirty jokes associated with Turkish military culture and the army. The booklet features people with their eyes covered by black tape, reminiscent of a frequently used

method in Turkish press, where eyes of the accused or charged are covered in a similar manner in order to prevent any violation of individual rights. Cutouts from the Paris booklet were inserted between the slats of wooden benches, located in the center of the exhibition, mimicking a common sight on Turkish streets, where fortune tellers would place notes in the cracks of their makeshift tables and get their rabbits to pick one of the notes for their customers. Notes contained messages similar to those found in fortune cookies. The booklet was both part of the installation itself in this form and sold as a publication at the bookshops.

2nd Exhibition of New Trends in Art
State Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, İstanbul
1979



İsmail Saray's installation presented in the *2nd Exhibition of New Trends*
(State Academy of Fine Arts, İstanbul), 1979

İsmail Saray was invited in 1979 to participate in the *2nd Exhibition of New Trends in Art*, for which he produced an installation and artist's book. *Exhibition of New Trends in Art* was a (proto) biennial exhibition series organized between 1977 and 1987, as part of the Arts Festival, by the State Academy of Fine Arts in İstanbul with the intention of presenting new work without distinctions between painting, sculpture, object-art, or conceptual art, but authentic work that challenged tradition, which spoke the same universal language of contemporary art.

Saray's booklet for *Exhibition of New Trends in Art* featured on its cover a silkscreen print of the renowned news image from the Taksim Square Massacre on May Day, 1977, which left 34 dead and many injured as a result of gunfire by still-unknown perpetrators and the stampede that followed it. The back of the booklet displayed a found image of parked warplanes. The silkscreened text inside the booklet juxtaposed descriptions of imagined methods of torture and quotations from politicians caught cursing in the Turkish parliament.

Artist book produced for the *2nd Exhibition of New Trends in Art*
(State Academy of Fine Arts, İstanbul)
1979



Copies of the booklet, integrated into the installation, could be taken away. The installation comprised a simple wooden structure with a chain and a long strip of paper draped around it featuring curses made by politicians. Attached to the chain were black-and-white photographs of world leaders shaking hands, close-up photographs of the hands of Turkish politicians as they

signed agreements, and images of warplanes and tanks, all of which were taken from newspapers. Stacks of glass both outside and within wooden containers, printed with the same silkscreened image as appeared on the front cover of the booklet, were installed on the floor; along with stones painted gold and cushions printed with text describing imagined torture techniques.

Sanat Olarak Betik [Book As Art]

State Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, İstanbul
1980



İsmail Saray, *Duvara Ders Anlatma* [The Art of Lecture to a Wall], 1980

Saray was invited as a guest artist to the exhibition *Sanat Olarak Betik* [Art as Book], organized by the conceptual artist group Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu [Art Definition Group]. Due to his position as a teacher of arts and crafts, he had to complete all preparations for the exhibition as well as a publication with the same name while in Samsun, by corresponding with the artist Şükrü Aysan

from Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu. He installed the work *Duvara Ders Anlatma* [The Art of Lecture to a Wall] himself in İstanbul, and also presented rolls of fabrics with gilded silk screened texts in the exhibition. *Sanat Olarak Betik* was the last exhibition that Saray participated in Turkey before moving to London later that year.



These rolls of fabrics with gilded silk screened texts were presented in the exhibition *Sanat Olarak Betik* [Books As Art].

Works from the 1980s



İsmail Saray, *Untitled*, Date Unknown



İsmail Saray, *Untitled*, Date Unknown

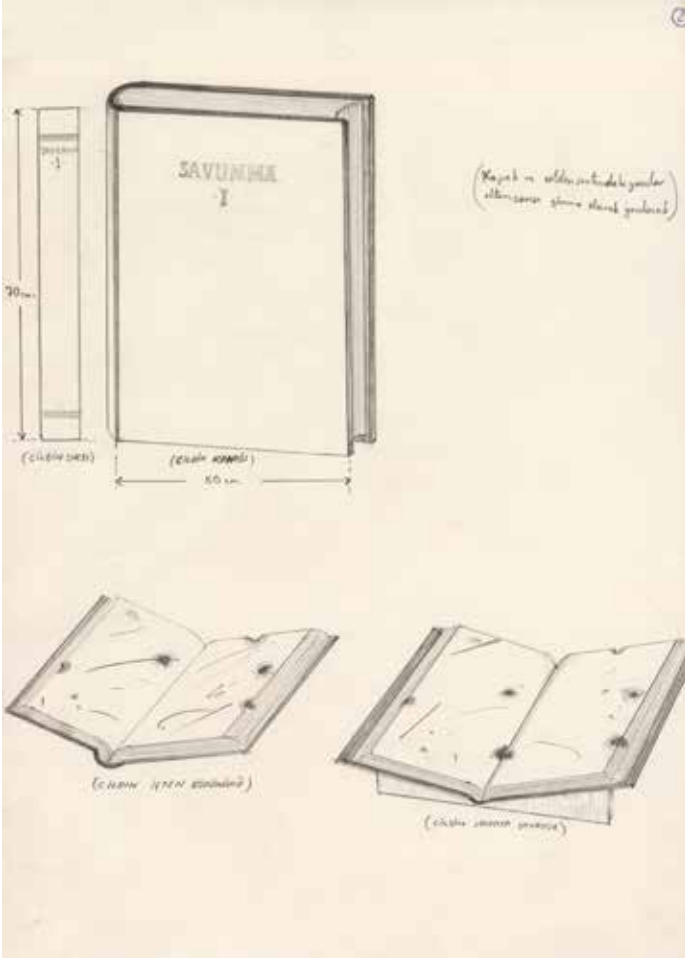
Somutlaşmış Kurguların Doymazlığı
[Insatiability of Fictions Made Concrete]
1987



İsmail Saray, *Somutlaşmış Kurguların Doymazlığı* [Insatiability of Fictions Made Concrete]
Toplu Sergi [Joint Exhibit], İzmir Turkish-American Association, 1987

Saray sent detailed sketches of this work to the artist Cengiz Çekil for it to be produced. The work, which was presented in *Toplu Sergi* [Joint Exhibit] at İzmir-Turkish American Association in 1987, was kept and cared for by Çekil since then.

Savunma [Defense] 1988



İsmail Saray, *Savunma* [Defense],
1988 (sketch)



İsmail Saray, *Savunma* [Defense]
Toplu Sergi [Joint Exhibit],
İzmir Turkish-American Association, 1988

Saray sent the detailed sketches of this work to the artist Cengiz Çekil for it to be produced. The work, which was presented in *Toplu Sergi* [Joint Exhibit] at İzmir-Turkish American Association in 1988, was kept and cared by Çekil since then.

Exported Soil
1989



İsmail Saray, *Exported Soil*
10 Artists 10 Works: A, Atatürk Cultural Center (İstanbul), 1989

Power of Nature and Forces Causing Turmoil of Concepts
1993

This work was presented in *10 Sanatçı 10 İş: D*
[10 Artists 10 Works: D]



Under Democracy
1994



Brand New
2010



Brand New was made for the exhibition *From Floor to Sky* (2010) curated by Peter Kardia in London. Kardia was Saray's teacher at the Royal College of Art. The piece can be seen as a continuation of the artist's earlier anti-war works realized in the early 1990s. The audience is invited to participate by hammering the words "peace" and "terror" on the wood blocks and the paper stack.