

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, oriented vertically. To its right is a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments in shades of blue and grey.

# JUST 3

## JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Işın Öno1

November 2, 2020

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 25:10

[*Music*]

[00:06] **Catherine LaSota:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast, a project of the [Center for the Study of Social Difference](#) at Columbia University. I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. On the JUST THREE podcast, we talk with artists, activists, and other scholars who are deeply engaged with issues of social justice.

On each episode of our podcast, we have one guest, someone who's connected to one of the many working groups here at the center. And on each episode, I ask the same three questions: one, how does your work engage with issues of social justice? Two, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time? And three, how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? I hope you enjoy this episode of the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]

[0:58] **Işın Öno1:** To open up and to be really able to hear what the other is saying, it requires a lot of unlearning and forgetting of what you already know.

[1:10] **Catherine:** Today on the JUST THREE podcast, I'm excited to chat with [Işın Öno1](#). Işın Öno1 is a curator and writer based in New York. Her research focuses on interconnecting archival information with oral histories to create platforms for collective memory through collaborative art practices. Öno1 co-founded the [Nesin Art Village](#), an independent art school in Turkey. And she has also produced more than 50 exhibitions internationally and published on the intersection of social justice and art. Öno1 holds an MFA from Swansea University Istanbul, an MAS from Zurich University of the Arts, and she is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna. Işın Öno1 worked with our [Women Mobilizing Memory working group](#), which brought together artists, writers, theatre practitioners, social activists, legal scholars, and more to look at the political stakes and consequences of witnessing and

testimony. Using gender as an analytic lens, this project explicitly explored women's acts of witness and the gendered forms of consequences of political repression and persecution.

My conversation with Işın took place on November 2, 2020.

[*Music*]

I'm here today with Işın Önol. Işın, thank you so much for being here on the JUST THREE podcast. We're excited to have you. Before we get into our three questions. Could you just tell us a little bit about where you're currently situated, how you're doing, and perhaps a little bit about the work that you did with the Women Mobilizing Memory group at the Center for the Study of Social Difference?

[2:52] **Işın:** Sure. Thank you, Catherine, for having me here. It's wonderful actually, to be with you today. So I'm currently based in New York. I came here temporarily, about more than four years ago, actually, but then I stayed here.

With Woman Mobilizing Memory, I actually started working with this group in September 2014 for an exhibition that took place in Istanbul. Mobilizing Memory, Woman Witnessing was the title. And we worked with artists from Turkey, the United States, all over the South, South America, Europe, etc. We brought a number of artists, cultural workers and activists together. This was my first experience working with this wonderful group of women. And since then, we have been working together. We have produced a number of exhibitions, as I said, the first one was in Istanbul then in Vienna then in New York, then in Madrid. And hopefully the next one is also going to be in Vienna. So we continue working on multiple issues that were addressed in these exhibitions throughout this time.

[4:02] **Catherine:** Wonderful. So you started getting into it a little bit there, telling us about your work with the group. But could you tell us about the work that you do? And how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[4:18] **Işın:** I always find these questions as wonderful opportunities to revisit my own work and look at what I'm doing because sometimes one loses themselves in all the issues that we are tackling but it is hard to revisit, re-analyze what is the core of all this work.

Social justice is, of course, a very big topic and it is very hard to address most of the social issues that we are dealing with. And there are so many entangled, sensitive issues that are at local and global levels that are involved in when we talk about social justice and also it is a very general term that it is very hard to reach as one thing because it is also co-evolving with our lives. Like our social issues, social justice problems are also co-evolving with our lives. So it is a very general term. But I truly believe within the work of the artistic field, we are able to work with personal experiences to such a level that it gives us a closer understanding of many of the social issues that people are experiencing, and that are invisible in our lives. So what I try to do in my exhibitions often and not only in exhibitions, but in conferences, or whenever we find a

possibility of bringing people together, I try to work with artists and cultural workers, who work with other individuals and have their research based on oral histories. Trying to directly learn from individuals, as opposed to looking at our official narratives that are often written by dominant powers, right? A lot of subtle details get lost in the way the histories are written. And it makes it harder to understand and address social issues. And when we don't understand them, then it is really hard to solve them.


So I try to use the exhibition projects, conferences, and any cultural project as a space to bring in multiple voices together and have projects that allow us to have a deeper understanding of individual stories. So to me, the outcome, the final outcome, of course, brings us together with people who are interested in learning from one another, like the exhibition audience, and opens up discussions, etc. But what is deeply important for me is the process. What happens in all that process, when we encounter all these sensitive issues, the traumatic experiences of the individuals. So this is what my work tackles. And Woman Mobilizing Memory has been a great group to experience actually to understand multiple social issues at a global level because it's such a transnational, transcultural group that lets us have a deeper understanding of very local, very unknown, very sensitive problems from insiders.

[7:39] **Catherine:** That's wonderful. Thank you. I'm really struck by what you mentioned about the process. And I wonder if you might want to give an example of any particular exhibition you put together and the process and how that related to the items that you've mentioned.

[7:57] **Işın:** Sure, one of the most important experiences for me perhaps was, again, our Women Mobilizing Memory group exhibition in Vienna, where the artist Susan Meiselas, and Silvina Der-Meguerditchian both came and ran simultaneous workshops in Vienna. And one workshop was by Susan Meiselas with the Kurdish groups in Vienna, and Silvina Der-Meguerditchian worked with the Armenian women in the diaspora living in Vienna.

So both of these groups are actually quite invisible in the context of Austria. Austria has its own racial context, racial history, a lot of multi-layered issues about migration, displacement, etc. So these social groups get rather unheard and are more invisible in the society. So when we were doing these workshops, for example, when we started inviting people, one by one, particularly the people from the Kurdish communities, they all came from different Kurdish communities. First of all, originally coming from Iran or Iraq, Syria or Turkey, and speaking different forms of the Kurdish language, and also having different political views. The people were first hesitant to join us because they were tired of being politicized all the time, being forced to be part of political activism, and supporting both financially and physically all those activities. But when they learned that this was an art project, they actually were very much willing to join.

So the work of Susan Meiselas is based on the personal memories of the people who come from this geography that doesn't have a national identity, national borders. So Kurdistan as a country doesn't exist, but for all these people coming from this region, Kurdistan exists. So, for Susan Meiselas, by making visible all these individual stories, that map of a "non-existing" country becomes visible. But all these individual stories are not so similar to what we would



normally read in history books or newspapers, right? Something way more personal; things that you actually would like to listen to. Things that are not—you want to close your ears and eyes, because of the omnipresence of the agony of what people are having, but real personal stories. So in this work, we collected together multi-generational stories. Kurdistan has such a deep history and a very traumatic and violent history, unfortunately, in all these four countries—that people had to migrate in many different years. So with this group of people, where we had more than 25 people, we could listen to all these personal stories from completely different times. A person who was part of the guerrilla forces back in the '60s, 70's, or a 15-year-old girl who had to run away from a more recent war, etcetera. So all these personal memories bring together a newer and deeper understanding of these human experiences.

Whereas, with Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, she brought together the Armenian women's voices together based on the materials, the photographs they brought with them when they had to leave their countries after primarily their family's fleeing from the genocide. So all these traumatic and very sensitive histories are not reduced, the numbers are not reduced to statistics, but have their new forms in these very humanly, personal histories, basically.

[12:08] **Catherine:** That's, that's wonderful. I love this idea of it being an artistic project, and that opening somehow a way of dialogue and a way of trust through a different method through art and to reach a more complete and deeper understanding of human experience. That way is fantastic. I'm going to move us to our next question, which is a big one, but answer as you will. The question is: what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[12:39] **Işın:** Yeah, this is a big question. I think there are a number of big challenges. But one of the biggest challenges for me is the very multi-layered aspects of the social problems. So it is not so easy to pinpoint where the core of the problem is lying. Again, this leads us to work with individuals to have a better understanding.

So our societies are multi-layered. Not only because we're all different, but also the histories of migration, etcetera, brought us to our global communities where we are multi-layered, but in some of our voices are stronger for you know, some of the social groups have stronger voices, for having stronger experience of being organized, for example, coming together and seeking for justice, etcetera. And those voices are heard more strongly. However, there are always others within these groups that remain invisible, right, their stories are not heard, and their voices are not heard. And their problems are not known by us. So when we think about racial issues, gender issues, etcetera, we always talk about those big ones. But within those groups, there are also other groups being oppressed, not only by the system already but also by their own groups. So I think this is one of the biggest challenges. So when we are addressing one social issue, one easier aspect is just going down and indicating the thing that is very visible. But to me, I think we have to go a step further and see the invisible forces in those groups.

I think another challenge is the multiplicity of problems and that simultaneously, everywhere something traumatic is happening, the force and the forced displacements, etcetera; violence and some of the issues always get unseen. They get no attention. So the authoritarian regimes

use these invisible situations very well and oppress their own people so much. So we are simultaneously fighting everywhere in the world today with, for example, police violence, our own authoritarian regimes in the form of our democracies, right? And we are within our communities, as well, experiencing forced migrations, displacement, etc. So the multiplicity of these events make it harder for us to know which direction to look. We're just paralyzed sometimes, because the omnipresence of these events globally happening all at the same time, makes it harder to really closely look at every single issue, basically.

[15:47] **Catherine:** Indeed, indeed. I'm hearing from you in this answer, also, just this idea of the importance of storytelling and the visibility of different stories being told. Does that sound right to you?

[15:59] **Işın:** Mhmm mhm.

[16:01] **Catherine:** Thank you. Well, the next question is another big one. But it's an important one, and I would love to hear your thoughts. The last question of our podcast is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[16:16] **Işın:** This is also a very, very good question. I mean, I wish I knew the answer or there was an answer to this. But I think the notion of progressive change is very important, the way you're phrasing because, as I was trying to describe earlier, social injustice is not a pre-described, predetermined concept, right? It is also in process, it is changing with our life dynamics, right? For example, we have ecological problems: Who has access to food and water, etcetera, are very soon to be faced problems, right? I mean, we are already facing, in many places in the world. But right now, we are lucky enough in some parts of the world to ignore these problems. So the “progressiveness” of it, it is hard.

But I think one of the things I was trying to address, understanding the smaller groups is, I think, one of the key answers to me because by listening to one another without historical pre-judgments that are constructed and calculated by our “official” narratives. And rather—and, that are all written by dominant powers—we go for a newer understanding of personal problems and trying to solve them in that point. I think this is the only way how we can evolve to this ethical and progressive social change that is in progress all the time. So we won't solve all the problems today and live happily ever after tomorrow; we will always have these problems, of course, but I think the core of the problem is actually, we are not having a real understanding of what the other is experiencing. Right? We are trying to empathize, we are trying to hear a little bit of it. But we are also so busy with our own life concerns to really hear what deep down is going on there. But all these problems that we're not solving are always growing and coming to us. Becoming really bigger problems. So it is actually not so difficult, I believe, to see the ever-existing individually experienced social injustice that is going on in our everyday life. And to be able to address that I think we have to just keep working with oral histories to have a better understanding of all these personal experiences, to be able to address them and be part of their solution.



[19:11] **Catherine:** What I heard there in your answer was a lot about a real importance of listening. And that's a lot of what your work does as well is to listen to personal stories and stories that aren't being told by the dominant powers. Is there more that you'd like to add?

[19:33] **Işın:** I mentioned listening but it sounds very generic when I just mention it. But if I talk about examples. Today, there is a war in this particular point between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a conflict, and this conflict is not really spoken of so much by the global community, right? And how do I approach and understand the problem there as a person from Turkey without putting, "But you did this, but you did that," based on my historical knowledge and pre-judgment that were shaped and cultivated by the official narratives. So this listening is not an easy one, right? How to remove your own not only knowledge but feeling about a particular issue and truly hear the other, right? So, what we often face in these studies in these personal memories, it's not simply a psychotherapy session, right? It's not simply about hearing, listening to somebody and taking notes of those experiences. It is really to open up and to be really able to hear what the other is saying, it requires a lot of unlearning and forgetting of what you already know. The only issues that we could address are so sensitive, so it is hard to put in a specific example. But when you ask a question to an individual, it is actually not that easy to be completely ready to hear the information that is coming to you. Because some of the information you might not be really ready to understand and hear, right? So this really requires a lot of unlearning, a lot of rethinking, and a lot of also the person in front of you can also have their own prejudices about your own position.

So who has the right to ask a certain question about which group, etcetera. These are all very, very complex questions. But luckily, in the field of art, what I see that we are able to break is there are certain boundaries that can be broken in these conversations. Where you bring multiple identities together, and let a dialogue happen in that group that would not easily come together otherwise. So you can create these small social structures, so that the dialogue can happen. And then the real learning starts at that moment. But all of these are very sensitive questions, it requires a lot of research, a lot of preparation. And sometimes we do make mistakes, you know, while thinking you're helping the other or supporting the other, you might find yourself in such a situation where you are participating in the same oppression and silencing of the other. So these are all very, very sensitive questions that require a lot of rethinking and reevaluation.

[22:50] **Catherine:** Yes, thank you for clarifying that. And your response, I feel like it was such a wonderful definition of curating and art curation and what you do. And it's not just about listening, it's understanding that you are bringing your own point of view to the table, but also I hear maybe collaboration even as important in that respect, and collaborating voices and bringing different voices together even in exhibition.

[23:17] **Işın:** Exactly, it is all about that collaboration between individuals, between the participants, between the artists, between the cultural workers, etcetera. So it is not only among any people, but also between professions that bring in a lot of information together. And, it is all about, I think, triggering that dialogue to happen. And then of course, the next decision is what

to do and how to represent that dialogue in what form and that forms the so-called artwork or exhibition or text afterwards. But what I meant by the process is that dialogue itself. Wonderful.

[24:04] **Catherine:** Thank you so so much. I really enjoyed this conversation. I'm so glad to have had you here on the JUST THREE podcast. Thank you so much for being with us today.

[24:14] **Işın:** Thank you so much for the opportunity. Thank you.

[24:23] **Catherine:** Thanks for listening to the JUST THREE podcast. To find out more about our guests, please visit the show notes. To find out more about the Center for the Study of Social Difference, go to [www.socialdifference.columbia.edu](http://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu).

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I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. Thank you and catch you next time on the JUST THREE podcast.

