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Paradox and Paradigm

A Look at Pre- and Post-1980's Contemporary Turkish Art

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A country situated geographically between East and West, Turkey has determined its cultural identity by adopting Europe as model; but instead of opting for an interpretation based on certain established social factors, there was an exact duplicate application of the model. In Turkey's cultural metropolis Istanbul, and in other big cities, a tension was created between tradition/novelty, right/left, avant-garde/kitsch, abstract/figurative. In fact, this tension dates back to a rivalry evident in the VIth C. between Rome and Byzantium. One of the few cities in the world to rise on top of such a tension, Istanbul has a noticeable potential.

Establishments such as the academy, museums, and the gallery market have always influenced Istanbul's visual arts activities. These establishments have shouldered various duties in the city's cultural environment before and after 1980. Therefore, before considering their present influences we should first take a look at the past of these establishments. At the beginning of the 19th century, The Istanbul Academy was founded as a state establishment where trends like Cubism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop-Art were interpreted "second-handedly." The education methods practiced here are still based on the classical academic foundations of the 1950's. The Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum, on the other hand, possesses art produced in Turkey covering the century from 1850 to 1950, obtained either through private donations or yearly systematic purchases by the government until 1945. Due to an inefficient administration and unsatisfactory ways of exhibiting artwork, the museum is unsuccessful and does not possess foreign artwork. No effort has ever been made to cover the deficit, and now the museum reminds one of an Ottoman Pasha waiting for his fatal death in the Bosphorus.

Although the first private galleries in Istanbul started their activities in 1950, those who were able to continue and who could create an environment for contemporary discussion were established after 1975. Macka Art Gallery, one of the oldest of the contemporary art galleries in Istanbul, was

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established in 1976. The number of seriously active Turkish galleries today is approximately 50 and those generally deal with a market created by Turkish artists. From 1980 onwards a capitalization process affected deeply Turkey's political as well as socio-cultural structure and was also effective on contemporary artistic activities. The sudden realization that art work has a value, and parallel to that, a liberal art market forcing its presence, created positive and negative effects on the art environment. The basic factors defining the process covering the post 80's are:

- 1) Land owning Turks gradually formed a bourgeois community and started to collect art
- 2) Galleries which until 1980 sold antique and classical paintings started making contracts with contemporary artists as a new and continuous marketing source
- 3) Sculpture and painting auctions attracted an unexpected number of buyers
- 4) Beginning of a trend where all kinds of paintings are marketed at the same gallery
- 5) Increase in painter's production, frequent solo exhibitions, retrospectives

As can be observed from the above information, Turkey entered a turning point in 1980. The basic characteristics of the art produced at this time in Turkey reflect this transition. The problem of closely examining the post 1980's is related to whether there has or has not been a modernist period in Turkey, and whether there exists a turning back to what is already known. If we have to come to a definite conclusion, we can say that in Turkey there has never been a modernist development as in West Europe or America. Since 1900, many Turkish artists who were educated in cities like Paris, Berlin, and Munich, have transferred exactly what they saw in those international centers. An individual who glances through a book on Turkish art will see Turkish Picassos, Turkish Légers, Turkish Bacons. One should not be astonished that the "imitation" problem, which still today does not let go of the Turkish artist, must be evaluated as a tradition in itself.

The first Turkish painter who surpassed this inclination and whom we can consider modern is Sabri Berkel (1907). In his abstract paintings, which went through ample transformation, he achieved a radical break. The authentic personal style of this painter has been excluded by Turkish artists. Following Berkel comes Altan Gürman (1935-1976) who had the same visual quality but was more up-to-date. Gürman closely studied the first examples of pop-art between 1963-66 in Paris where he was studying painting and became the first contemporary Turkish artist who could develop an authentic understanding and talk with "concepts." In Gürman's three-dimensional canvases and sculptures the characteristics of the consumer society have been interpreted with Turkey's social structure, and in the modern sense, a break is realized. The visual narration reached in this artist's three-dimensional paintings were extremely fundamentalist and irritated the Turkish society.

The approach of the artist of the 1960's generation was one of the handling social criticism in an expressionistic or lyrical figurative manner. Gülerüz, Komet, Uluç, Koçak, Uygur, Varlık, Aksoy formed this generation, and instead of acting in parallel with the western progressive thinking, they continued the reproduction of their mediocre figures. The 1960's generation did not try to break the classical understanding of the languid Turkish painting, but emphasized adopting them to fashionable leftist and socialist trends. They never questioned the consumption of art and played successfully the role of Van-Goghesque "crazy painters." Yüksel Arslan, another painter of this generation, settled in Paris around 1965, and with methods of his own created very interesting figurative works. We observe in Arslan's paintings an approach to the miniature tradition rich in sexual interpretations. An intellectual person, Arslan illustrated very successfully the ideas of Marx without ever using slogans or becoming ordinary.

The activities of two important Turkish artists who treat the modern artistic comprehension with a limited experimentation and who do not make any concessions in their understandings, have reached and kept their levels in this confused cultural arena. These two important middle-aged artists are Burhan Doğançay (1929) and Adnan Çoker (1927). Doğançay, who has been living in New York since 1962, was attracted by wall posters and started first painting walls in just the same way as he saw them, and later developed the idea to use some walls in three-dimensional assemblages. Adnan Çoker, whose early work interpreted cubism, later developed a geometrical and lyrical abstraction. Being one of the rare Turkish painters who can defend his painting on an intellectual basis, Çoker after 1975 emphasized symmetry and progressively minimized his paintings, interpreting Turkish architecture's structural elements and thus attaining a rich expression.

In the 80's, a group of young expressionists of the "Neue Wilden" kind came to the art market. Instead of the social criticism of the 60's, these new painters tried a distorted figurative interpretation of sexual freedom, feminism, and homosexuality, which was taboo in the country. The approach of artists such as Baykam, Arpacioğlu, Acaroğlu, Eviner, Tekand, and Doğan is in concurrence with the interpretation of international figure painting but due to personal atmosphere is nothing but mediocre. Two artists who are not followers of this expressionist movement attracted attention. **The first is Mithat Şen (1957), who, first using only black and white and later a fluorescent rouge, has systemically taken the body as a source. In Şen's modular structure of body depictions, one can see figurative interpretations of Byzantine Art. This artist uses an undo-do logic between part and whole and is systematic in his approach to figure. Bubi (David Hayon-1949), at the beginning dealt with geometric abstraction on two-dimensional**

surfaces, later made three-dimensional experiments on canvas and in his big assemblies of today is developing a phenomenon of motive. This artist is inclined to multiply a motive unlimitedly, using color contrasts and questioning pictorial values.

After Altan Gürman's experimental three-dimensional approach, the STT group formed in 1977 by Aysan, Kiraz, Öktem, and Yamaner as interpreters of the conceptual art of Arte Povera origin. The works presented as conceptual art in Turkey are the sum of western art which comes as a continuation to one another like Dada, Fluxus, Minimal Art, Land Art, Op Art, Process Art. This kind of work has come up as a reaction to the market factor which developed rapidly especially during the second half of the eighties when art work was considered mainly as a commodity for sale or purchase. In Turkey, where philosophical and aesthetical fundamentals did not yet reach a level to create, artists that were interested in conceptual art tried through their own means to translate into Turkish the opinions of Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose ethics deeply influenced this century's art. Beside the STT group, Sarkis, Onur, Erkmen, Saray, Dinç, Birsnel, and Özkutan have helped the development of conceptual tendencies and caused written and oral debates on important problems like "consumerism in art" and "post-modernism," which were matters the Turkish artists did not consider important. For various reasons, 20th century modernism was not effective in Turkey which caused the Turkish artists to be unaware until 1970 of art being a progressive socio-cultural, fundamental approach which could lead artists to produce creative ideas and be the critics and consciences of their era. The contemporary art's second change of skin in the west after 1970 developed a new structure which covered the first ideational art activist symptoms and was called "Post-modernism." The fact that Turkish artists are interested in conceptual art resulted in a distorted development because the post-modernist process was starting in Turkey where Modernism did not occur. It is obvious that new global tendencies are making the world even smaller; I do not know how the passive role of Turkish artists in this small world can be rendered constructive. But, it is also a fact that Füsun Onur and Ayşe Erkmen are showing very interesting and original art.

Füsun Onur mostly uses regular, everyday substances. Being faithful to the material's essential qualities, she tries enriching actions on the life of this material. Each work and installation this artist presents has a tendency to break and consume itself while still having the characteristics of a piece in itself. Her installations made of dreamy materials such as tulle, ribbon, rope, sponge, and paper, show that the artist has a rich and uncensored imagination as well as the ability to communicate her black humour to close observers. This artist's work has always astonished me and won my admiration. Ayşe Erkmen, in her installations has until now used contrasts such as

real/imitation, existing/added, and tried to reach the barest form. This young artist chooses pure materials (steel, iron, bricks, marble, etc.) in her approach to details from everyday life to present a covered narration showing that she wants to withdraw back as far as possible, become anonymous in her installations, and tell the viewer “you have to differentiate the different parts.”

The International Istanbul Biennial took place twice, in 1987 and 1989 in order to create an international environment where artists such as Sol LeWitt, Buren, Kounellis, Long, Zorio, Pistoletto, Lupertz and some group exhibitions from Europe took part. The Istanbul Biennial is not known in the international art environment. Among the reasons for this lack of interest is the missing public relations activities, as well as the chief curator’s inability to bring an original concept to cover the whole biennial. Comparing the qualities of foreign pavilions which come to Istanbul to those that come to Venice, one can observe an important difference. The Istanbul Biennial, however, has been beneficial to the culture in creating dialogue about contemporaneity, and, although very slowly, opened the possibility to form a partnership with contemporary art tendencies and Turkish art. Turkey, who joined the 44th Venice Biennial at the last moment, again without a prevailing concept, has literally failed.

The idea of establishing an international contemporary museum has been discussed since 1986. Mr. Şakir Eczacıbaşı, an industrialist, has taken under his charge the financial responsibility of transforming an old factory bordering the Golden Horn into a museum. The construction is on its way and there is substantial discussion in the actual art environment as to who will create this museum and with what concept. Istanbul will enjoy a contemporary art museum before the end of the XXth century. We believe this museum and other international activities will have a positive effect on contemporary Turkish art, which I think, is still going under an intense personality crisis.