"Public Politics and Domestic Rituals: Contemporary Art by Women in Turkey 1980-2000"
Frontiers vol 24 no. 1, 2003

Hanging from the ceiling of the studio of Turkish artist, Suzi Hug-Levy in a small house in Bebek, a chic district of Istanbul, are transparent dress-like sculptures made of wire, mesh, gauze, paper, felt, copper, or rubber. They cast intricate but ephemeral shadows on the walls, floor and ceiling.

In an old studio in a former monastery in central Istanbul, Inci Eviner creates torso-shaped leather forms that she has attached to a ladder. Nearby flat sheets of copper cut to suggest steep hills are painted with small uprooted fragments of bodies, hands, cone shaped figures with legs, snakes, extinct animals, pottery, tools, huts, tents, and trees. Odd three dimensional leather shapes that resemble elongated body parts seem to grow out of a copper table with a spinal cord painted on it.

These are some of the contemporary artworks that I encountered in Istanbul during a Fulbright Fellowship in 1999-2000. Since there is no contemporary art museum in Turkey (although there are ongoing efforts to create one), I made repeated visits to artists' studios. In order to decipher these enigmatic works I also had to delve deeply into Turkish politics and history. But complete understanding often seemed to elude me, partly because of the language differences and partly because of the labyrinth of Turkish life and the variety of issues to which the works refer.

It was always tempting to interpret the art from my own perspective, but invariably, the cultural specificity of the references revealed themselves as I looked more

deeply. For example, Suzy Hug-Levy's dangling mesh garments can be related to American artists who explore concerns about dress. But, the artist told me that her work is a personal response to the rise of Islamism (or political Islam) in Turkey. She was inspired to make these garments when she overheard an imam saying that the appropriate place for women was in the home.

Her shroud-like forms signify the isolation of women by tradition and taboo. In spite of the allusions to an identifiable type of clothing, such as the peasant *shalwar* (a type of loose fitting pants), the garments invoke confinement. There is a striking contradiction between the garment and its shadowy partner, the contrast of the material and the immaterial, of this world and the other world. The shadow sometimes towers over a dress, like a celestial guardian. But to understand these shadows, as well as their frequent appearance in the work of other Turkish artists, it is useful to know that Islamic tradition emphasizes shadows. In Islamic thought the visible "face" of reality is a shadow of a larger reality that only Allah can perceive.

Inci Eviner told me that her work addresses her own experience of the tensions between traditional and contemporary life, as she observed it growing up as the daughter of a wealthy farmer near Ankara. Her references to nature and myth in the copper and leather forms and to the body and the nervous system in the imagery bring together two different worlds, the old and the modern, in an uncomfortable pairing. Placed in a larger context of Turkish twentieth century history, Eviner's sculpture expresses the painful conflicts for females in Turkish society, between social expectations and public rhetoric.[1]

[1] Beral Madra, *Envy and Tenderness* (Istanbul: Galerie Nev, 1998).

In contrast to work by many contemporary American artists, Turkish artists almost always address issues that are part of the political and social concerns of the country in general. They rarely paint private stories or psychic traumas; instead, they frequently draw on Turkish history and myth. The purpose of this article is to begin the process of placing these works in the larger arena of contemporary Turkey. I have divided the article into two parts. The first part includes artists who address political events with international resonance, the second, artists engaged with domestic life and rituals in Turkey.

Turkish women artists are heirs to two potent gender constructions. The first is the goddess tradition of the prehistoric cultures of Anatolia, elevated during the early years of the Turkish Republic (founded 1923) as a progenitor of the contemporary Turkish woman. To reinforce this idea, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, oversaw the creation of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara. Dozens of small clay figures from all over Anatolia document the pervasiveness of mother goddess icons during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Continuing and enlarging this tradition are the life-size marble goddesses of Artemis from the era of Greek colonies and Roman rule, best seen at the Museum in the city of Seljuk, near Ephesus.

Related to the Goddess construction is the powerful vocabulary of the Turkish Republic's emancipatory rhetoric that encouraged women, within carefully defined asexual parameters, to be educated leaders of the new Turkish Republic in the 1920's and 1930's.[2] This liberating discourse was underscored by the adoption of Swiss Law, which

[2] Ziya Gökalp, a sociologist made the connection to pre-Islamic Turkey. For an overview see Deniz Kandiyoti, "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey,"

gave women legal equality. It served as an assertive alternative to the Islamic position of women as separated from men both in private and public that had been the norm throughout the hundreds of years of Ottoman rule. It was also part of a campaign against the myths of Orientalism, the projection from Europe that women in the Middle East were passive, beautiful, available, and enslaved. In the modern secular state of the new Republic of Turkey Atatürk encouraged women to take an active and leading role in society. [3]

Suzy Hug- Levy is one of the few artists who state that her work is a direct response to the tension between political Islamism and the Republican heritage. Perhaps because of Hug-Levy's Jewish background, she felt freer to address it. Many of the women who participate in the contemporary art scene identify themselves as secular Muslims and they feel threatened by the fact that more and more women are choosing to cover their heads.[4] Yet this anxiety joins many others in contemporary Turkey that

---

Women, Islam and the State (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 22-47 and Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern, On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity," in Resat Kasaba *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 113-132.

[3] The Ottoman Empire lasted from 1326 to 1923. During the nineteenth century women began to have access to education and in the early twentieth century, they began to emerge into the public sphere. Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999) is the best concise summary on all aspects of Orientalism.

[4] This act is loaded with potent political and social implications in Turkey. It has even become a flashpoint for the birth of Islamist feminism, or the organizing of Islamist

include the opacity and unpredictability of government political alliances, the debilitating effects of the ongoing economic crises on every aspect of life, and Turkey's multiple affiliations with the United States, the European Union, the Middle East and Central Asia. Contemporary artists sit at the intersection of all of these aspects of contemporary Turkey and respond to them in their art.

Part I. Public Politics

The four artists treated in Part I, Tomur Atagök, Candeğer Futun, Canan Beykal and Hale Tenger, address public politics. Futun and Atagök create art in a modernist style with equal emphasis on style and content. Consequently their references to politics are

---

women in opposition to discrimination. These women are referred to in Turkey as *türbanlı* (wearing a tightly pinned headscarf) as compared to *başortüsü*, (those with the relaxed style of rural women in which hair is still showing. Many of the women who choose to cover are émigrés from small villages to large urban areas. Adherence to religious practices gives them a secure social foundation with which to navigate the city. Aynur Ilyasoğlu, "Islamist Women in Turkey: Identity and Self-Image," *Deconstructing Images of "The Turkish Woman,"* ed. Zehra Arat, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998),241-261. For another perspective see "Turkish Women and the Welfare Party, An Interview with Şirin Tekeli," *Middle East Report* 26:2 (April-June 1996), 28-29. Şirin Tekeli is the Director of the Women's Library and Information Center). Founded in 1990, it holds extensive archives, memoirs, periodicals (particularly Ottoman era periodicals) and unpublished works by women. It also has a collection of 1994 newspaper clipping on the pro-Islamist Welfare Party.

metaphorical, their message disguised by seductive surfaces and abstract compositions. They subtly address conditions inside Turkey. Beykal and Tenger use postmodern installation that incorporates printed texts, found objects, digital manipulation, and video. They make forcefully direct comments that primarily address international conditions. But since similar conditions are also present in Turkey, they indirectly comment on their own country without focusing on the specifics of Turkish politics. Political critique is a difficult practice in any country, and it has been particularly challenging in Turkey during the last twenty years where there have been military coups and interventions, the war on the Kurdish Independence movement, frequent acts of terrorism and ongoing human rights violations.

1. Terrorism in Contemporary Life

Tomur Atagök has frequently addressed political issues but they are always cloaked in brilliant color and expressionist painting. She bases her work on forms from the Neolithic and concepts from Republican Turkey, and then adds a dose of contemporary American feminism.[5] Born in Istanbul, Atagök grew up in a family that was part of the secular military, but she also has ties to what she calls the matriarchal traditions of the Caucasus. She attended art schools in the United States during the late

[5] Atagök spent a year in the United States on a Fulbright Fellowship researching the history of American feminism in 1996. She is also an important curator and historian of women artists in Turkey. See Atagök, Tomur, *Contemporary Women Artists since Independence* (Ankara: Turkish Ministry of Culture, 1993); *As you see me, but I am not, Contemporary Turkish Women Artists* (Bonn: Frauen Museum, 2001). Please note that for space reasons I am translating all titles into English.

1960s and early 1970s, and then returned to Turkey in 1973. During the 1980s she began a series on the contrast of the modern and the traditional Turkish women. [6] "Dance of the Robots and the Runner" (1986) celebrates powerful independent women. They are running, jumping, and doing aerobics. She contrasts these active women to women covered in black, who are, in these works, the passive and traditional wives of military dictators in works like "The Committee" (1981).

In the 1990s she developed a monumental group of paintings on steel devoted to the Anatolian mother goddess. Painted during the Gulf war, Artemis presides, but at her core, where animals stand protected in traditional representations, are military weapons, tanks, and guns. Her impulse to turn to the goddess tradition was inspired both by the Republican tradition of celebration of the pre-Islamic female and the encouragement of American feminist artists, some of whom celebrate the goddess as a powerful model.

On 24 January 1993 Uğur Mumcu, a famous political scientist and journalist who wrote on terrorism in Turkey, was assassinated by a car bomb in Ankara. Hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens protested his assassination for many days. Atagök made the series, which now includes 10 large and 40 small works, "Games, Toys, Children, War, Love" as homage. She mixed images of war and love including the silhouettes of guns, toy soldiers, bones, paper doll cutouts, hands, dots, crosses, hearts and crescents. Partially hidden in the expressionist surfaces are quotes from well-known authors like

[6] The economic and political developments of the eighties in Turkey are discussed in Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993), chapter 9.

Fodor Dostoevsky and Sylvia Plath that speak of the chaos of the world and the need to try to start again.

The series is a response to terrorism. Toy soldiers, guns, and vertebrae, both whole and fractured refer to how easily children's games slip into violence. The toy soldiers are based on the free cardboard fighters, which are given out with newspapers in Turkey. But there are also images of hope. The juxtaposition of the cross and the crescent, which Atagök actually saw on a church in Hungary, suggests harmony among different people. A symbol of intersection, a geometric form with six intersecting lines suggests connection rather than conflict.[7] For Atagök, this positive message, which emerges in the midst of the contradictions and ironies of contemporary society, is an important part of her art. She herself is an indomitable optimist in the face of difficulties and challenges.

2 Transforming the Classical

Candeğer Furtun also works with body parts, but with an entirely different frame of reference. Inspired by archeological sites, Furtun intended to be a sculptor in marble, but, because she was a woman, at art school she was encouraged to pursue ceramics. She studied in the United States in the late 1950s, in a Bauhaus based approach, and in the early 1960s, just as Peter Voulkos was redefining ceramics as a sculpture, rather than a vessel tradition. Furtun is a modernist, working from utopian principles of perfection in her rendition of multiple, repeated legs, arms, hands, and torsos.

Initially, her fired and glazed works seem serene and timeless, but in fact they are deeply embedded in late twentieth century Turkey. First, all of the representations are

[7] Tomur Atagök, *Games, Toys, Children, War, Love* (Ankara: TESK Art Gallery, 2000).

nude males; on a purely technical level, the artist finds the muscles in male bodies more articulated than the subtle curves of the female body as a subject to model in soft clay. But the maleness of these bodies, hands and legs, also implies that they are in a public position in a country where the female nude is rarely represented in art or commercial advertising.

But more important than the gender of these figures is the tension that defines these hands, legs and torsos, a tension that runs counter to their classical beauty. The multiplication of the same body parts suggests interchangeability and loss of individuality, a reference to the political environment of the seventies and eighties in Turkey when human rights were ruthlessly suppressed, and leftists hunted down by vigilante groups. [8] In some of the pieces, Furtun suggests surveillance or perhaps resistance, through a subtle pressure of hand on thigh. The not so subtle clenched fist can also read as either resistance to authority or confrontation with resisters. The ambiguity, repetition, and anonymity are crucial to the success of the work. The repeated pairs of seated male legs are vulnerable, and immobilized. The headless crouching figure holding its legs seen from the side and back might be patient, or simply resigned; the elongated figure with legs pulled up and head on its knees is protective and self contained, pulled into its core, with no access from the outside. The hands come out of the wall clenched or partially opened, as though the body is trapped, invisibly.

These are subtle protests against oppression. The artist herself is circumspect as she combines classical principles and aesthetics with an unnerving contemporary reality.

---

[8] Ahmad, *Modern Turkey*, chapter 9. See also Erik Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1993).

3. The Language of War

Canan Beykal more obviously takes on political issues. A 1994 installation at the Atatürk Library in Istanbul, "Whoever has Silence on His Lips, Speaks with his Fingertips" addresses censorship and book burning in Nazi Germany, but it also indirectly makes reference to the situation in Turkey during the politically chaotic 1960s and 1970s. In Beykal's view speaking with your fingertips is a useless exercise; it is like not speaking at all. She herself was interrogated for signing a petition.

In 1981 Beykal went to study with Mario Merz in Strasburg, Austria. Merz is a well-known Italian conceptual artist who emphasizes ideas over materials, content over traditional aesthetics and one of his favorite mediums is words written in neon. This experience has deeply shaped Beykal's work, along with her interest in Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, two other irreverent activists who used unusual, but ordinary, materials in their art.

Beykal is preoccupied with the relationship between language and war. Sometimes her work is filled with despair. "Everything, Nothing, Something" created in 1990-91 during the Gulf War consisted only of a row of black boxes; on the top of each box an interior light revealed just a few words: "Nothing that is Everything, Something that is Nothing, Everything that is Something, Something that is Everything, Nothing that is Something etc". The bleak phrases glowing from the long line of black boxes becomes a dirge or chant.

Beykal's main concern, though, is the impact of war on children. She collected the stories, letters, statistics and biographies of thousands of children who have died in wars, during the holocaust, Vietnam, Rwanda, and Bosnia from various United Nations

agencies. About ten years ago she put them in three black boxes, along with tape recordings of Hitler, Goebbels, Marinetti. She included many of the stories in the light box installation, "There was once a little lion" (1997). [9] No longer filled with impersonal words, the light boxes now contain the photographs of children who have died as a result of war; looking down on their faces, we recognize them because these photographs have been constantly reused to document atrocities. Along with the light boxes, metal plaques on the wall present the children's own stories:

> I was very happy when I was sent to the battlefield, because I had found a lot of friend of mine (sic.). We lost a lot of people, but we killed more than they did. Really a lot. One night one of my friends died right in front of me and I felt devastated. But I didn't stop fighting. I said "this is war" by myself. When my enemies died I was feeling pleased. Now I am saying 'My God forgive me'. I find myself very stupid . . . We are giving our lives for the people who would forget how they started holding current position.
>
> (Liberian Sergeant Lawrence Moore, 15)

By allowing the children to speak for themselves and extending the stories to all

---

[9] The title is a children's song in Turkey :"There was once a little lion/He used to play in the wilderness/ His father loved him so very much/Calling him "my soul" all the time/One day lion father was sent to the war and got shot/ and the little lion is kicked out of the wilderness/the end of this story is very nice/but I can't tell it now though it is so very nice."

children everywhere, Beykal clearly lays out the terrible toll of war on children and conveys her own horror with its meaninglessness. These explicit works confront the viewer with the disasters of contemporary warfare in corrupting society.

In 1999 Beykal went one step further: she manipulated the photographs of refugee children in war to include her own portrait at the same age. She joined them in their distress, comparing her own secure life with those of the helpless victims of war. " 'I am not myself, I am another'" uses a quote from Alice in Wonderland, to refer to the idea that Beykal and her collaborator in this piece, Melin Görgun, become part of the picture, instead of observers. Beykal's comment can include Kurdish children in Turkey during the war against the Kurds in the mid nineties. As the government in Turkey emptied entire villages deemed refuges for terrorists, they sent families to other parts of Turkey with only minimal support, where they lived as impoverished refugees. The fact that Beykal does not refer to circumstances in Turkey in her work, makes her point all the more potent, that children everywhere are the innocent victims of war. Certainly, her more global commentary has an international appeal and protects her from recrimination within Turkey.

4. Aggression

Hale Tenger also addresses international politics, and only rarely refers to Turkey. Tenger views violence in Turkey and the Kurdish war in the context of the larger problem of global violence perpetrated by male aggression. One of her most straightforward works was "Everyone has the Right Not to Forget the Commoncultural History of Humankind" (1991), consisting of a globe threatened by plastic toy men with

clubs. The title, posted above, clearly made her point that cave man aggression still stalks the globe.

"I Know People Like This 2", created for the Third Istanbul Biennial of 1992, was a prominent statement to an international audience. Across a large wall a rectangle is marked out with small castings of the hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil monkey statuettes. Scattered through this field are several stars and a crescent (both of which appear on the Turkish flag) constructed of Brass Priapus (or Ali Baba) figures. Tenger again comments on male aggression, but adds here the collusion of those who ignore it. Criticized by right wing journalists, Tenger was sued by the government on the grounds that she was desecrating the Turkish flag, but her successful defense contended that crescents and stars appear in many flags and that her work wasn't specifically referring to the Turkish flag.

"I Know People Like This 2" commented on global violence, but much of Tenger's artwork addresses the tragedy of individuals who are caught up by political systems over which they have no control. In other words, bureaucratic procedures themselves are a form of terrorism that can permanently alter people's lives with no warning or reason. The psychological effects of social conditions caused by the impersonality of legal procedures can be as devastating as those of an overt war.

In 1993 Tenger spent five months researching and collecting all of the newspaper, magazine, and television accounts that she could find on accounts of the war in Bosnia Herzegovina. She also, with extreme difficulty, obtained permission to go to the Turkish Kırklareli Camp for refugees from Bosnia and talked to men, women and children about their experiences. Although she was denied permission to take photographs or make

videos, she was able to record the stories. As she listened first hand to what these refugees had suffered, she was devastated.. As she put it "No matter how closely you take an interest or sympathize or follow events in the media, you're never going to really feel it. Really grasp what's happened, until you come face to face with those who have been through it." [10]

The result of this research was the installation "Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia-Herzegovina" (1993). In a room that resembles laboratory storage, 800 jars filled with water "preserve" photocopies of articles from newspapers and magazines. We can see photographs of the faces of women and children trapped in the jars and sometimes part of an article is legible. In the installation the recorded stories of the refugees are played on speakers; they are loud and soft, close up and far away, superimposed on each other and juxtaposed to the sound of bombers. The complicated multimedia format and the painstaking preparation for a temporary installation indicates the depth of Tenger's feelings of concern about the global situation.

Several of her other recent multimedia installations have addressed the subject of borders, that arbitrary line which is the basis of so many wars, so much law, and so much psychological stress. The two-part video, "Border "(1999) shows, on one screen, a stick drawing a line in the sand that is immediately obliterated by the sea, and on the other screen, children are playing tug of war. Here Tenger underscores the temporary and ephemeral aspect of the border, which demands so many complex political negotiations, incurs so many wars, and leads to so much loss of life and destruction of homes. The

[10] Interview with Vasif Kortun, *Hale Tenger, Mission Impossible* (Istanbul: Galerie Nev, 1999).

primal children's game makes the statement all the more powerful.[11]

Part II Domestic Rituals

Another prominent topic among Turkish artists is domestic social practices and rituals in Turkey. Gülsün Karamustafa and Füsun Onur deconstruct domesticity using room-scaled installations and carefully chosen found materials juxtaposed in unexpected combinations. They are both witty and profound as they comment on the literal and metaphorical fabric of Turkish life. Aydan Murtezaoğlu, Selda Asal and Neriman Polat have a more irreverent point of view. They are critical of some of the most sanctified aspects of Atatürk's reforms and their impact on Turkey even today.

1 Private Strategies

Although she trained as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts, Karamustafa has always had a defiant and even outrageous streak in her work. Perhaps because she is the daughter of a prominent radio personality, Gülsün Karamustafa is tuned into popular culture more than any of the other artists that I met. For example, in her spare contemporary studio in Beyoğlu, an historic district in central Istanbul, she showed me an artwork that incorporated a blanket she had found in a bazaar that depicted a sexy California couple on a motorcycle. She was intrigued that, in spite of the inappropriate subject, blankets like these were popular with devout Muslim families who immigrated to Istanbul from small villages.

But Gülsün Karamustafa also has a dark side to her story. From 1970 to 1986 she

[11] *The Picture in the Hills* (Istanbul: Dulcinea, 1999).

was unable to leave the country because of alleged political activities.[12] Although she does not directly address political conditions in Turkey in any work, the tensions and psychological stress of the experience reveals itself indirectly in her acute observations of cultural conditions for women within Turkey, historically, and internationally.

In one work she refers directly to circumventing authorities. "Courier" (1991) displays the cotton-quilted linings of three small children's vests above the statement "When we crossed the borders, we hid the things that were important to us by sewing them into children's jackets." A black and white photocopy of the artist's extended family accompanies the piece and the words are from her grandmother, who migrated as a child from the Balkans to Turkey, as those countries broke free from the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. The three soft cotton quilted linings are signifiers of the unsuspected carriers of possessions hidden from authorities, as well as the fragility of life. Yet in a contemporary context, the piece is about self-protection as much as migration.

The negotiations of women within powerful systems of legal and social authorities are the primary theme in much of Karamustafa's work. In one exhibition she showed her schoolgirl notebooks of 1953. They are filled with military ideology that was given out as copy material. She had ornamented the borders with flowers, birds and butterflies.

---

[12] *Echolot* (Kassel: Museum Fridericianum, 1998), 27.The crime of which she and her husband were accused was to "give a bed" to a political fugitive.

The video installation "Personal Time Quartet" (2000) uses four separate monitors inserted into various domestic environments. It presents girls repeating a different "female" activity, folding embroidery, putting it away, jumping rope, and polishing their fingernails. These girls are from a particular social class, upper middle class Republican women of the early and late twentieth century, the group most directly effected by Atatürk's policies and rhetoric. The repetitiveness of the activities, and the enclosure of the videos in domestic spaces underscore the limitations on that emancipation for most women.

2. Eccentric Metaphors

Another artist who disrupts social conventions is Füsun Onur. Füsun lives in a small red house by the Bosphorus that used to be her family's summer home. It is crammed with memorabilia from her mother like painted boxes and blue glass. Füsun went to the State Academy of Fine Arts, then studied sculpture in the United States for five years in the early 1960s at the time that abstract modernism was giving way to both pop art and minimalism. But when *Life Magazine* asked to write about her, she refused, saying she wanted to return to Turkey to make art that would be a truer expression of her concerns. Over the last twenty years, she has transformed the blandness of the American minimalist vocabulary into a statement about Turkish society. With characteristic Turkish materials like blue and pink satin, gold ribbons, and tulle, along with dolls, old

furniture and oddball found objects, she playfully pokes fun at domesticity and not so playfully makes deeply buried social commentaries.[13]

"Life Art Fiction, Dream of Old Furniture"(1985) consists of derelict furniture that the artist adorned with various bizarre accouterments, a plastic globe, a fringed cloth, small animal sculptures that wander in a field of tasseled fabric. One of the chairs is wrapped in a shiny flesh colored fabric, rumpled "as though a cat had sat there," the artist explained to me. Her chairs are ambiguous sites of domestic discomfort as well as loaded with fantasy and humor.

"Atatürk's mother" (1995) at first seems to be honorary; the chair is enveloped with lavish, but wrinkled, blue satin across which random unraveled threads wander;, a ceremonial ribbon spans its "lap". But it has a macabre effect, it suggests a large elderly dowager who is simply waiting by the sidelines. There is more decay than celebration. "Any Chair" (1992) is a line up of four chairs that signify some type of institutional regimentation, but they are frivolously veiled in flowing white tulle, as if these are ready for a flustered celebration (in Turkey chairs are covered tightly in fabric for formal dinners). Another reading is that this transparent tulle may signify the fabric for women's head coverings in nineteenth century urban Istanbul. But the celebratory atmosphere of the tulle is undermined by the sobriety of the chair and its functional static nature.

"Dolmabahçe Souvenir" (1992) was an installation set in the harem garden of Dolmabahçe Palace, the lavish marble palace built by sultan Abdul Aziz in the mid

---

[13] Only in the last year has the first book been written about her and it sadly is not translated into Turkish. Margrit Brehm, *From Far Away, So Close Füsun Onur* (Baden-Baden: Staaliche Kunsthalle, 2001).

nineteenth century . Pumpkins on formal marble pedestals playfully disrupt the logical order of the formal garden; between them are uncomfortable wooden chairs draped in Muslim; yarn tangles on itself over the seat, preventing anyone from repose. Füsun's chair pieces are about nostalgia, rituals, dreams and the contradiction of domestic comfort and confinement, of the public and private, of the frivolous and the formal. "Dolmabahçe Souvenir" perfectly captures the long gone life of the women who lived here, the entrapment, the formality, the secrecy and the mystery.

A chair dedicated to the artist is the starkest statement of all. An ordinary office chair has a padlocked chain across the seat, with her name on the chair in a simple sign. Here domestic discomfort has turned into actual disbarment from the public arena, the artist is unable to sit at all and she is segregated from the collective of Turkish society. All of Füsun's works are metaphors for traditional domestic and civil society in Turkey and the disruption caused by political abuses, economic stress, and personal change. The result is the emergence of fantastic and bizarre juxtapositions that point to the disintegrating supports for day-to-day life in Turkey.

3.Interrogating the Republican Tradition

Younger artists comment ironically on social aspects of the legacy of the Republican era in Turkey. The work of Aydan Murtezaoğlu points to the generational differences between traditional women, the Republican women, and the construction of femininity at the end of the twentieth century. Murtezaoğlu was trained at Marmara University, the new hotbed for artists in Istanbul, and thus represents an entirely different

perspective from the women so far discussed.[14] "Top/less" (1990) is based on a posed portrait of her family taken in the 1960s that shows her grandmother in a traditional urban head covering, her mother and aunts representing an ordered generation of Republican women, contemporary, chic, comfortably middle class, and herself as a small child, standing out in a red dress that is further accented with red rubber balls attached to where her future breasts will be. Around her neck swings a string of beads, the beginning of her socialization into the adult female role. But the rubber balls declare the future, the arrival of sexuality and rebellion, the artist who will declare herself as not part of this conventional respectability, but who will affiliate with an outside world that is more radical, more vulnerable, and, perhaps, completely artificial. The child, the adult artist declares, jumps out of the picture, and comments on it.

Cure a photographic triptych, refers to her dual heritage and that of most contemporary Turks, of the older Islamic culture and perhaps even older rituals, and the new scientific culture, which was the basis of the Republic. As her grandfather lies sick, her grandmother reads from the Arabic scripts and blesses water, which he will then drink. The artist herself uses Western scientific medicine and gives him an injection. He seems to recover but it is ambiguous which cure was the most beneficial, religion or science. On the wall above is a wedding photograph of her grandparents showing them as a dashing young couple, the new modern couple of the Republican era.

---

[14] Marmara University draws artists from all over Turkey. Many of these young artists do not speak English, making it far more difficult for me to understand their work. Aydan speaks English well. The younger generation of artists at Mimar Sinan also speak little English.

In Aydan Murtezaoğlu's Untitled (1993), created for the Fourth Istanbul Biennial, she wrote large Arabic and Latin letters on a portable blackboard. A disembodied hand points to the Latin letters. This iconic representation, known to everyone in Turkey, refers to Atatürk's dramatic change of the alphabet for Turkish from Arabic to Latin in 1928. He traveled the country with a portable blackboard in order to promote the new alphabet as part of his modernization process.

Murtezaoğlu simply made a copy of this famous icon. By replicating an almost sacred image and placing it in an art exhibition, the artist changed it from an object of reverence to one of irony and even doubt. Contemporary young urban Turks today feel cut off from their own heritage, and are increasingly commenting on that sense of loss. Murtezaoğlu cannot read her family letters written in the nineteenth century in Ottoman Turkish with Arabic script.

Another artist who has directly addressed the contemporary implications of the language reform is Selda Asal. Trained as a musicologist, rather than a visual artist, her dramatic multimedia projects address memory and loss, discomfort and fantasy in the context of contemporary life, but in some of her most extraordinary works of the last ten years, she specifically addresses the loss of knowledge of Ottoman Turkish. Her works invoke invisibility and illegibility in a way that would seem to be antithetical to the inherent character of visual art.

Her "Palimpsest" paintings of 1990 began the exploration with surfaces that referred to her own life; she included bus tickets, city maps, restaurant checks, musical scores, and journal embedded in the heavily painted surfaces which echo the structure of

loosely laid out pages that have been altered with age. Reading or interpreting these images is impossible.

An even more ambitious project "Archive" (1996) consists of 2800 pages of handmade paper piled in stacks. On each sheet, the artist has written overlapping texts in three directions (one is reversed). Asal has upended the idea of the archive, with these illegible, inaccessible texts, just as Atatürk, when he changed the alphabet, upended the possibility of reading Ottoman history without specialized training. Her works present the poetry of the incomprehensible and underscore how little knowledge is actually accessible and possible to interpret.

Neriman Polat, is also part of the younger generation of Turkish artists. She attended Mimar Sinan University with a group of students interested in conceptual art, philosophy, theory and linguistics. She comments on another still revered aspect of the Turkish Republic, the public ritual, by recontextualizing her own highly determined actions as a child. In "Ceremony" 2000, two young girls (one of them the artist) are dressed in identical polka dot dresses with aprons and ties. They wave Atatürk flags as part of the national ceremonies, parades and rituals that still characterize the Turkish Independence Day celebration. The artist as a child (on the right) appears to be a little frightened, rather than happy; her companion rolls her eyes sharply to the right as though afraid to move. These two girls have been chosen for a special honor, as the other schoolchildren are dressed in their everyday uniforms. The artist transformed this photograph into a contemporary artwork by including it in a group show that had the format of pages from a child's notebook. Other pieces included traditional poems written in honor of the Republic, a reference to the campaign to buy local not foreign goods after

World War II as a way to stimulate the Turkish economy, and other memorabilia of elementary education. The title of the show *Local Goods* was not about nostalgia, but about the construction of a mythology of nationalism, patriotism and history. The collaborative installation did not need to state that the mythology was a highly selective fiction that masked the realities of life in the Turkish Republic.

In an untitled photographic mural by Polat of 1999, seven children are facing in different directions; most avoid looking straight ahead or meeting our eyes. Their shifting eyes seem to echo the wide-open but slightly frightened eyes of the two girls in "Ceremony." But these contemporary children no longer participate in a public ritual, they are pursuing private thoughts and there is no collective social construct for them. The two photographs span the distance from anxiety within a predictable ritual to ambiguous privacy without a larger purpose.

Conclusion

With only two exceptions, Gülsün Karamustafa and Tomur Atagök, the women discussed here do not identify themselves as feminists. Not only do some Turkish women perceive feminism as a type of Western imperialism, but they also claim that they have experienced no gender-based discrimination in their careers. They mischievously point out that non-Turkish speakers cannot tell from their names if they are male or female, so they are not discriminated against outside of Turkey. Most of the women artists that I met pursue scholarly research (some of them have doctorates), teaching, writing, curating, as well as making art. I found no groups, networks, or cooperatives, with the exception of two short-lived alliances of young artists.

But in spite of their individuality, these artists share the same historical and contemporary context in Turkey. They have experienced similar economic and social instabilities. They have inherited the assumption of Turkey as a secular state in which they are free to pursue their professional careers, but they have witnessed the emergence of powerful political forces both within and outside of Turkey that appear to threaten that freedom.

In the years from 1980 to 2000, the utopian certainties of modernism as embodied in the founding of the Turkish Republic gave way to the political and social uncertainties of postmodernism. The purpose of this article has been to examine how those changes are manifested in contemporary art as well as to suggest that in some of these works new models emerge that provide alternatives to old ideas. All of these artists, as well as many other artists in Turkey, are engaged with contemporary society in a way that distinguishes them from many of their counterparts in Europe and the United States. They have not settled for a bland apolitical internationalism, but rather, have chosen to address issues that are important to both their own society and to the world. Since Turkish references and the Turkish language are not easily accessible to a general audience, many of them have not achieved the international recognition that they deserve. This article is intended to begin the process of explaining these important artworks to a non-Turkish audience.

Slide List

1. Suzi Hug-Levy Untitled (1997) rubber
2. Inci Eviner, Installation (1996), acrylic paint, leather, copper, horsehair
3. Tomur Atagök, “Games, Toys, Children, War, Love” (1994-2000), mixed media on paper

4. Candeğer Furtun, Untitled, 1994, ceramic
5. Hale Tenger, “Decent Deathwatch Bosnia Herzegovina” (1993)detail, jar, photocopies, water, au
6. Füsun Onur, “Dolmabahçe Souvenir” (1992) pumpkins, marble pedestals, yarn, chairs, muslim