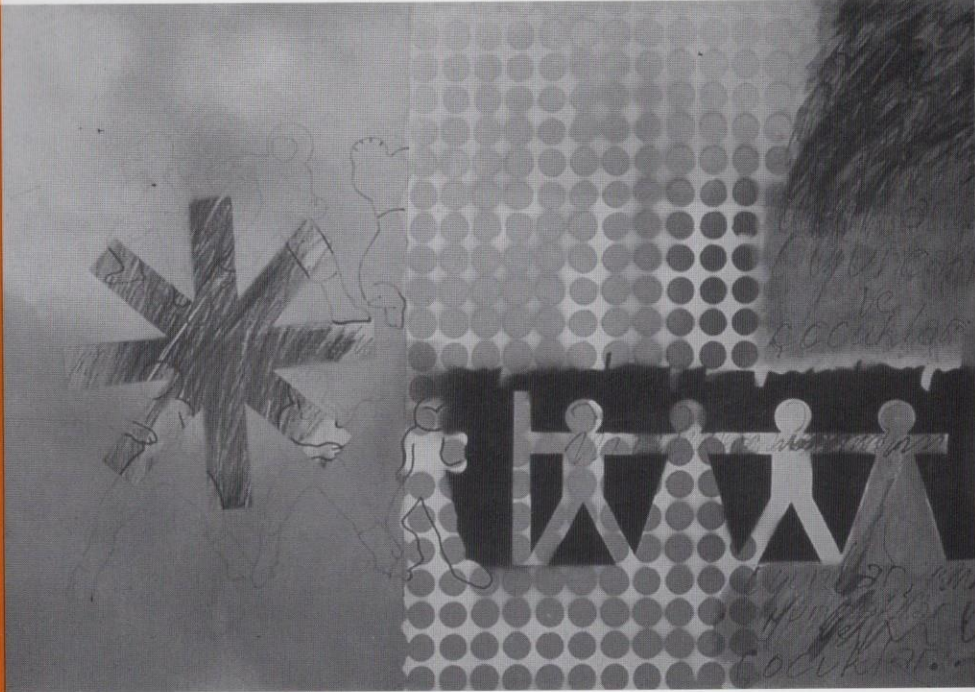


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COVER ART

Games, Toys, Children, War, Love
Mixed media on paper
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Public Politics and Domestic Rituals

Contemporary Art by Women in Turkey, 1980–2000

SUSAN N. PLATT

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

In a former monastery in central Istanbul, Inci Eviner creates torso-shaped leather forms that she has attached to a ladder. Sometimes the leather hangs like a shepherd's cloak over sheets of copper cut to suggest steep hills. On the copper, the artist has painted 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 visit funded by 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 to view this art. In order to decipher these enigmatic works I also had to delve deeply into Turkish politics and history. However, complete understanding often seemed to elude me, partly because of the language differences and partly because of the complexity of Turkish life and the labyrinth 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, Hug-Levy's dangling mesh garments can be related to American artists who explore concerns about dress. However, the artist told me 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 (a leader of prayers in a mosque) 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 allusions to an identifiable type of clothing such as the



Inci Eviner, *Installation*, 1996, acrylic paint, leather, copper, and horsehair.

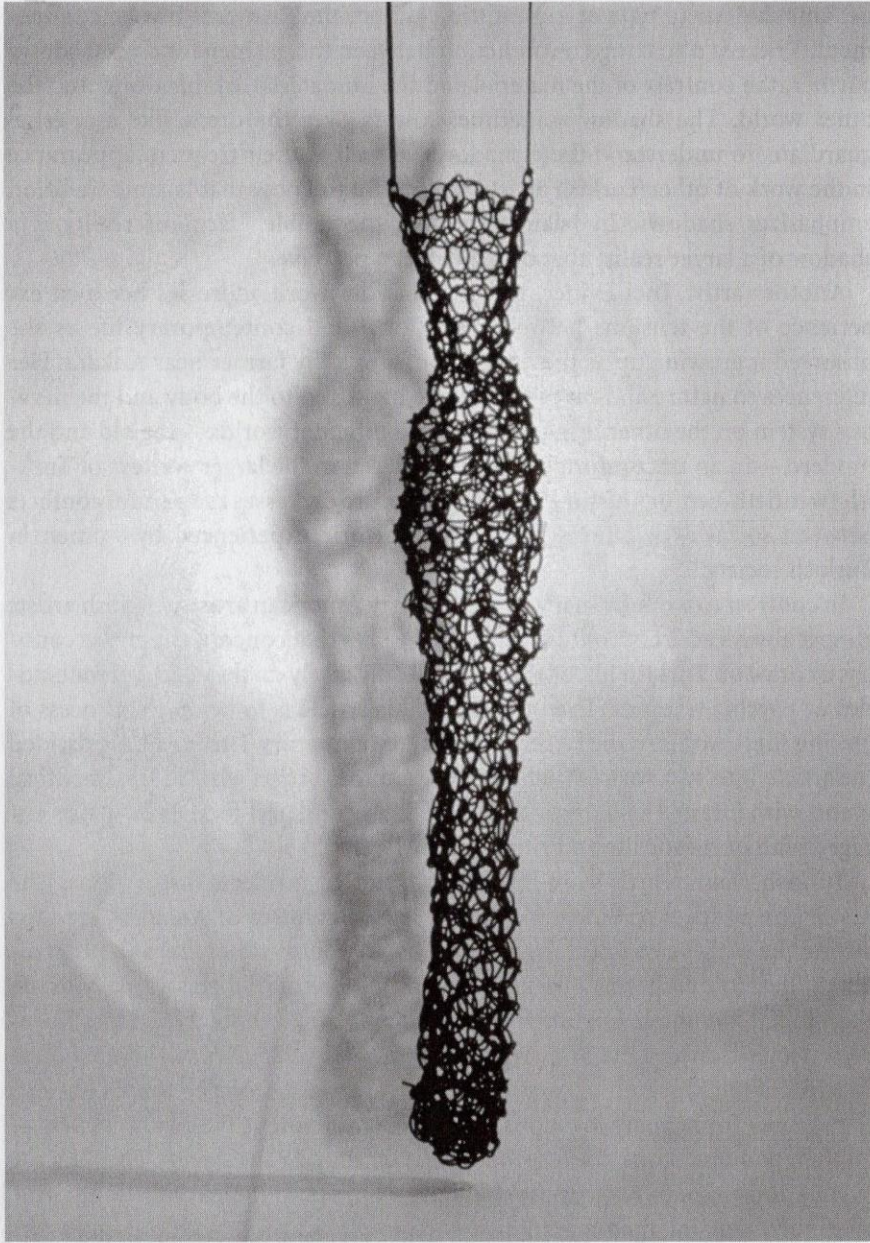
peasant *shalwar* (a type of loose-fitting pants), the garments invoke confinement. There is a striking contradiction between the garment and its shadowy partner, the contrast of the material and the immaterial, of this world and the other world. The shadow sometimes towers over the dress, like a celestial guardian. 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.

Another artist, 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 on the one hand and to the body and the nervous system on the other bring together two different worlds—the old and the modern—in an uncomfortable pairing. Placed in the larger context of Turkish twentieth-century history, Eviner’s sculpture expresses the painful conflicts between social expectations and public rhetoric experienced by women in Turkish society.¹

In contrast to work by many contemporary American artists, Turkish artists almost always address political and social issues that concern the entire country, or draw on Turkish history and myth. Only rarely do they paint private stories or psychic traumas. 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 examines artists who address political events with international resonance, and the second part focuses on 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 in 1923) as a progenitor of the contemporary Turkish woman. To reinforce this idea, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the post–World War I resistance against European occupation and the first president of the Republic of Turkey, oversaw the creation of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara. Dozens of small clay figures from many locations in Anatolia document the pervasiveness of mother goddess icons during the Neolithic and Bronze ages. The life-size marble goddesses of Artemis from the era of Greek colonies and Roman rule continued and enlarged this tradition. Examples of these goddess figures are best seen at the museum in the city of Seljuk, near Ephesus.

The powerful vocabulary of the Turkish Republic’s emancipatory rhetoric also encouraged women, within carefully defined asexual parameters, to be educated leaders of the new Turkish Republic in the 1920s and 1930s.² This



Suzi Hug-Levy, *Untitled*, 1997, rubber.

liberating discourse was underscored by the adoption of a version of Swiss civil code, giving women more legal standing. The new laws banned polygamy, permitted the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men, and replaced the Muslim practice of repudiation with civil divorce, among other changes. It served as an assertive alternative to the Islamic position of separating women from men both in public and private that had been the norm throughout the hundreds of years of Ottoman rule. The new Turkish Republic also campaigned against the myths of Orientalism, the European view 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

Hug-Levy is one of the few artists to 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 feels freer to address it. Many of the women who participate in the contemporary art scene identify themselves as secular Muslims and are threatened by the fact that more and more women are choosing to cover their heads.⁴ This anxiety is one of many in contemporary Turkey, including 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 Turkish life and respond to them in their art.

PUBLIC POLITICS

Tomur Atagök, Candeğer Furtun, Canan Beykal, and Hale Tenger are four artists who address public politics. Furtun and Atagök create modernist art with equal emphasis on style and content. Consequently, their references to politics are metaphorical, their message disguised by seductive surfaces and abstract compositions. They subtly address conditions inside Turkey. Beykal and Tenger use postmodern installations that incorporate printed texts, found objects, digital manipulation, and video. They make forcefully direct comments that primarily address international conditions. Similar conditions are also present in Turkey, and so 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 when the country has endured military coups and interventions, the war on the Kurdish Independence movement, frequent acts of terrorism, and ongoing human rights violations.

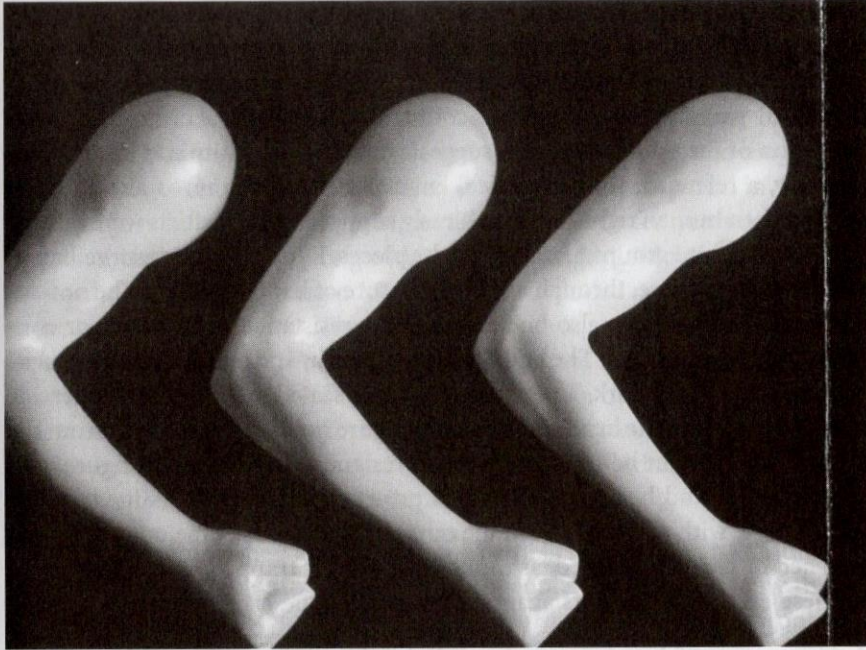
Terrorism in Contemporary Life

Tomur Atagök has frequently addressed political issues but 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 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 woman.⁶ *Dance of the Robots and the Runner* (1986) celebrates powerful independent women. The women in this piece are running, jumping, and doing aerobics. Atagök contrasts these active women with women covered in black, who are the passive and traditional wives of military dictators depicted in works like *The Committee* (1981).

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

Uğur Mumcu, a famous political scientist and journalist whose articles exposed terrorism in Turkey, was assassinated by a car bomb in Ankara on January 24, 1993. Hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens protested his assassination for many days. Atagök made the series *Games, Toys, Children, War, Love* (1994–) as homage. The ongoing series currently includes ten large and sixty small works. Atagök 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, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Sylvia Plath, who write about the chaos of the world and the need to try to begin again.

The series is a response to terrorism. Toy soldiers, guns, and both whole and fractured vertebrae refer to how easily children's games slip into violence. The toy soldiers are based on the cardboard soldiers given out free with newspapers in Turkey. But there are also images of hope. The juxtaposition of the cross and the crescent, which Atagök observed 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 emerges in the midst of the contradictions and



Candeğer Furtun, *Untitled*, 1994, ceramic.

ironies of contemporary society, and is an important part of her art. She is an indomitable optimist in the face of difficulties and challenges.

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. However, at art school she was encouraged to pursue ceramics because she was a woman. She studied a Bauhaus-based technique in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as American artist Peter Voulkos was redefining ceramics as sculptural tradition. Furtun is a modernist who works from utopian principles of perfection in her rendition of repeated legs, arms, hands, and torsos.

Initially, Furtun's fired and glazed works seem serene and timeless, but in fact they are deeply embedded in late-twentieth-century Turkey. All of the representations are nude males; on a purely technical level, the artist finds the more articulated muscles in male bodies more appealing as a subject to model in soft clay than the subtle curves of the female body. But the maleness of these bod-

ies, 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.

More important than the gender of these figures is the tension that defines these body parts, 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 1970s and 1980s in Turkey when human rights were ruthlessly suppressed and leftists were 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 be 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.

The Language of War

Canan Beykal takes on political issues more obviously. 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. The artist herself was interrogated for signing a petition in the late 1960s. In Beykal's view, speaking with your fingertips is a useless exercise—it is like not speaking at all.

In 1981 Beykal studied with Mario Merz in Strasburg, Austria. Merz is a well-known Italian conceptual artist who emphasizes ideas over materials, content over traditional aesthetics. 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 made the ordinary seem unusual 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, such as

“Nothing that is Everything,” “Something that is Nothing,” and “Everything that is Something.” 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. From various United Nations agencies she collected the stories, letters, and biographies of thousands of children who have died during the holocaust and in wars, including those in Vietnam, Rwanda, and Bosnia. About ten years ago she put them in three black boxes, along with tape recordings of Adolph Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Filippo Tomaso Marinetti. She included many of these 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 appeared frequently in newspaper articles and books that 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 children everywhere, Beykal clearly lays out the terrible toll of war on children and conveys her own horror with its futility. These explicit works confront the viewer with the corruption of society caused by war.

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. The title of the piece, “*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 Turkish government’s repression of the Kurdish independence movement in the mid-1990s. 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.

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 is *Everyone has the Right Not to Forget the Commoncultural History of Humankind* (1991). It consists 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 by Tenger to an international audience. Across a large wall a rectangle is marked out with small castings of the well-known 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 (known to Westerners as Ali Baba) figures. Tenger again comments on male aggression but adds 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 trapped in 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 the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. With extreme difficulty she also 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. Tenger was devastated by what these refugees had suffered. She later said, "I came to realize that no matter how closely you take an interest, sympathize, or



Hale Tenger, *Decent Deathwatch: Bosnia Herzegovina*, 1993, (detail), jar, photocopies, water.

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, eight hundred 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 other recent multimedia installations by Tenger have addressed the subject of borders, those arbitrary lines that are the basis of so many wars, so much law, and so much psychological stress. The two-part video *Tug of War-Borders/Borders* (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. 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 primal children's game makes the statement all the more powerful.¹¹

DOMESTIC RITUALS

Another prominent topic among Turkish artists is domestic social practices and rituals in Turkey. Gülsün Karamustafa and Füsün Onur deconstruct domesticity using room-scale 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.

Private Strategies

Although she trained as a painter at the Turkish State Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, Karamustafa has always had a defiant and even outrageous streak in her work. Perhaps because she is the daughter of a prominent radio personality, Karamustafa is tuned in to popular culture more than any of the other artists 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.

Karamustafa also has a dark side to her story. From 1970 to 1986 she 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, when those countries broke free from the Ottoman Empire in the early twen-

tieth 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.

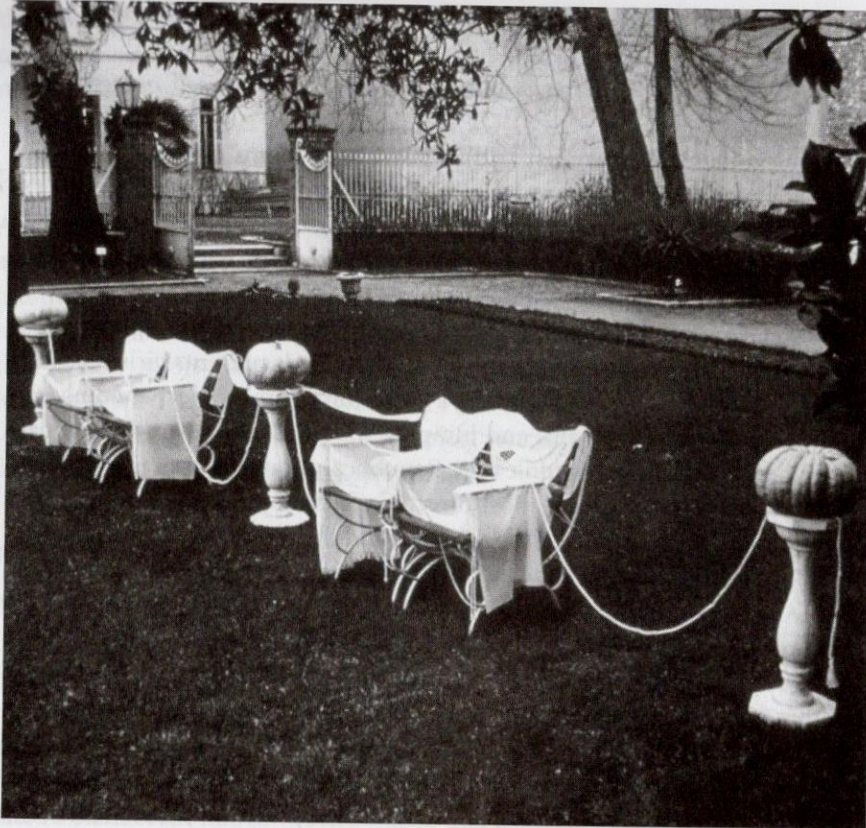
The negotiations of women within powerful systems of legal and social authorities are the primary theme in much of Karamustafa's work. In one exhibition she displayed her schoolgirl notebooks of 1953. They are filled with military ideology that was given out as copy material. She had ornamented the borders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

The video installation *Personal Time Quartet* (2000) uses four separate monitors inserted into various domestic environments. It presents girls repeating different "female" activities: opening a chest full of embroidery, folding embroidery, painting fingernails, and jumping rope. These girls are from a particular social class, upper-middle class Republican women of the early and late twentieth century, the group most directly affected by Atatürk's policies and rhetoric. The repetitiveness of the activities and the placement of the videos in domestic spaces underscore the limitations on emancipation for most women.

Eccentric Metaphors

Another artist who disrupts social conventions is Füsün Onur. She 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, such as painted boxes and blue glass. Onur went to the Turkish State Academy of Fine Arts, then studied sculpture in the United States for five years in the early 1960s at the time when 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 past 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, including a plastic globe, a fringed cloth, and 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.



Füsun Onur, *Dolmabahçe Souvenir*, 1992, pumpkins, marble pedestals, yarn, chairs, muslin.

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, as it suggests a large elderly dowager who is simply waiting by the sidelines. There is more decay than celebration. *Any Chair* (1992) is a lineup 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-nineteenth century. Pumpkins on formal marble pedestals playfully disrupt the logical order of the formal garden; between them are uncomfortable wooden chairs draped in muslin; yarn tangles on itself over the seat, preventing anyone's repose. Onur's chair pieces are about nostalgia, rituals, dreams, and the contradiction of domestic comfort and confinement, of the public and private, and 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 Onur'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.

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 (1999), a photographic triptych, refers to Murtezaoğlu's dual heritage and that of most contemporary Turks—of the older Islamic culture and per-

haps 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 scientific, Western 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.

In 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 and 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.

Asal's *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 a journal embedded in the heavily painted surfaces that 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 2,800 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 did when he changed the alphabet, upending 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 suggested 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 created in 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*. These contemporary children no longer participate in a public ritual but they pursue 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.

With only two exceptions (Karamustafa and Atagök), the women discussed 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 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. Alliances of women artists, so common in the United States, are absent in Turkey.

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 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. Those changes are manifested in contemporary art and some of these works illustrate newly emerging models 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.

NOTES

I have translated all titles into English to simplify and reduce the notes.

1. Beral Madra, *Envy and Tenderness* (Istanbul: Galerie Nev, 1998).
2. For an overview see Deniz Kandiyoti, "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey," in *Women, Islam, and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 22–47, and "Gendering the Modern, On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Resat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 113–32.
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 in the public sphere. Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (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 women in opposition to discrimination. These women are referred to in Turkey as *türbanlı* (wearing a tightly pinned headscarf) as compared to *başörtüsü* (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 who move to large urban areas. Adherence to religious practices gives them a secure social foundation with which to navigate the city. See Aynur Ilyasoğlu, "Islamist Women in Turkey: Identity and Self-Image," in *Deconstructing Images of "The Turkish Woman,"* ed. Zehra Arat (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 241–61. For another perspective see "Turkish Women and the Welfare Party, An Interview with Şirin Tekeli," *Middle East Report* 26:2 (1996): 28–29.

Tekeli is Director of the Women's Library and Information Center. Founded in 1990, it holds extensive archives, memoirs, periodicals (particularly from the Ottoman era) and unpublished works by women. It also has a collection of newspaper clippings on the pro-Islamist Welfare Party's successful 1994 election campaign and subsequent "soft coup d'état" when they were removed from office.

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 Tomur Atagök, *Contemporary Women Artists since Independence* (Ankara: Turkish Ministry of Culture, 1993), and *As you see me, but I am not: Contemporary Turkish Women Artists* (Bonn: Frauen Museum, 2001).

6. The economic and political developments of the 1980s in Turkey are discussed in Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993), chapter 9.

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

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

9. The title is from a Turkish children's song. Lyrics include: "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."

10. Vasif Kortun, *Hale Tenger, Mission Impossible* (Istanbul: Galerie Nev, 1999), 45.

11. Claire-Lyse Bucci, *The Picture in the Hills* (Istanbul: Dulcinea, 1999).

12. Vasif Kortun, *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.

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

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. Murtezaoğlu speaks English well. The younger generation of artists at Mimar Sinan University also speak little English.