

Reactionary Activity In Art

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The end of art, the end of ideologies, the end of philosophy, postmodernism, deterritorialisation, the lost ground and space, heterotopia, the non-space, etc. ... the trauma of disintegration engenders a yearning for return everywhere. Of course these dispersed concepts, this dispersed world serves the liberal market, liberal multiculturalism and contemporary pragmatism best. For now, determining the nature of things is not seen as an act ethics or thought is capable of, but only as an act in the domain of authority. If you are winning, you are just and right; there is no need to ask too many questions. Whereas in art the supremacy of the motto “anything goes” points not to the interrogation of modern art or authoritarian art, but to the domination of a market-oriented mindset. When Habermas said the post-structuralists were “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” this is exactly what he meant. Art now lacks exceedingly dominant and heavy essences, whereas in modern times the *Zeitgeist* was realized in History. Art is no longer an enchanted field which utters the critical reality about its age or saves us from alienation through aesthetic experience. It is difficult for us to tell what side to take, what to think, or even what we see. An endless ambiguity and mist dominates. The discussions, subjects and positions we require to give meaning to things are missing. In such a topology we require an authority to provide us with the necessary branch to hold on to and this authority is at times a cool gallery, a critic-curator whose authority on the subject is indisputable, but usually capitalist market values like fame, renown, distinction. To sum up, the field vacated by the end of art is filled by the ideology of neo-liberalism. A ghostly and overly fluid artistic, intellectual field where there is no discussion, where positions are not tangible, where we cannot put our fingers on these positions; where we do not understand who is standing where and how, more than ever makes us feel lost.

Two books have been recently published in Turkish, one is Hal Foster’s “Design and Crime” (2004) and the other, which I particularly recommend, is Donald Kuspit’s angry and ingenuous “The End of Art,” (2006) which made me laugh a lot. Both writers, on different levels, mourn the annihilation of art as a high and serious field where the antidote for the *zeitgeist* could be experienced. Kuspit’s Duchamp and Kaprow readings are particularly entertaining. He declares them the meek, pervert, anal-obsessed –whereas they should have been penis-obsessed- main culpable parties of the present shabby state of beautiful art who have not received their share of artistic sensitivity. Although Foster does not approach the issue in such a crude fashion, and has a more mature critical attitude in which he does not directly render an opinion as to which art is “genuine art,” he is still worried about the same issue: The fact that art has lost its autonomy. Art, with its institutions where a liberating, critical aesthetic experience took place, with its history and essence, has today disintegrated, been taken over by liberal policies and meta-fetishism; no narrative norms to be brought down remain, an uncanny state has become routine, both art

and the human being are forced towards an arid desensitization, etc...¹ Although he refrains from saying what we need today is not destruction but reconstructing space, meaning and institution, Foster does not seem to find any other option all that sufficient. Both critics speak with the fully professionalized and defined art language: A corpus formed of Hegel's, Kant's, Marx's, Adorno's, Horkheimer's and Benjamin's concepts, concerns and orientations constantly make the rounds. It is exactly the ambition of modernism towards an all-encompassing analytic knowledge beyond time, which takes itself exceedingly seriously, and the deadlock caused by the failure to access this knowledge which is felt in both books.

Actually, this sentiment occupies a central place in the contemporary dissident's –or more generally, the contemporary human being's- state of mind. Everyone is aware of the fact that something is not going right but the first reaction towards the crisis created by ambiguity is the tendency to lean towards the past, the staunch institutions. This almost displays a reactionary activity from politics to art which reveals itself in the smallest detail. Some want to return to the early period of the young Republic when the Turkish Armed Forces reigned in a golden age of a single party, single chef, single nation, some want to return to the golden age of Islam or the Ottomans, and some, although they do not voice it loudly, to a golden age when art was an autonomous, safe haven of power. All these approaches indicate a conservative orientation. Frankly speaking, the fact that this tendency appears in art as well, is evidence that art is not, cannot be, and perhaps never has been autonomous at all. The field of art speaks its own special language, it does not want to let go of that language. This should be tolerated, but there is a question we must ask at this point: is this language not relinquished because of the power field created by its relative “specialness”? Or, to continue from Habermas's warning, is this a proposal for us to continue washing in the dirty bath water fearing the baby will be lost if the water is thrown out, under the threat of a dangerous future (for example, the homeland will be divided, if the roof falls in you will be trapped under it, GEEET in line!)? That is to say, there is still a power/knowledge/authority given and created by this language and such a field of authority may be required, as I have indicated, more than ever, but is this not taking the easy way out and ignoring the opportunities ahead of us? Is not this pitiable retreat to the lines an attempt to protect the field, the position and power? Ambiguity feeds authority or the need for authority and these two create an impassable circle in favour of authority, and instead of opening up our world, constricts it. In stead of problematizing authority or power, we find ourselves occupied with their establishment.

This is actually a handicap entirely engendered by thinking within the field of art. Art is, of its own accord, taken as a truth-bearing field which naturally speaks the truth against power, as if it was not itself a part, an institution of power and authority, as if it was exempt of these, as if power was not immanent to it. Thinking in particular of the position of artists in Turkey's history of modernization; art was taken as a tool of representation reflecting how far a society had progressed, by the enlightened/intellectuals who had completed their integration with official ideology.

¹ It is particularly obvious that we must approach the argument that the great narratives and norms we must take positions against have been destroyed. This is already one of the most important theses the neo-liberal ideology in force leans on. This theses brings about demoralization –“everything has been done that can be done.” – and at the same time supports the illusion of a fuzzy, unlimited freedom. The fact that some great narratives are being questioned certainly does not mean all great narratives have been destroyed everywhere...

It was both a magic tool which would mould society, or even transform the “public” into a society in a single leap, and an exclusive occupation which presented the most competent expression of this contemporary society. I think it would be rather false to conclude that we have overcome this manner of instrumentalization of art. Art has always been used, both in “contemporary societies” and by “those who follow from behind” as an instrument of integration or a top-down instrument of education, and at the same time an instrument of representation.

The point I want to arrive at is that Foster and Kuspit discuss art, with the attitude of art professionals, from within art. Of course, this is not done without calling upon historical/political designations on many issues, but still, it is the definition of art, as invented by modernism, and the certain tasks it must fulfill which are decisive. When it does not fulfill these tasks, it is immediately tagged as superficial, single-sentence, postmodern, consumption market imagery, because these are the established positions: on one hand, postmodernism/kitsch/the market/the masses/populism, and on the other, Art. And it is more difficult than ever to enter this field of art, the field of genuine Art. Thank God we do not aim to enter there, woe be to those who do! In contrast, our aim is to get out of there, in other words, to imagine art as a field where political intervention will be carried out and to attract attention to this potential, without narrowing the field opened up by post-structuralism, postcolonial theory, feminists, gender issues in favour of either the market or distinguished institutions. To resurrect, revitalize our souls grieved, fallen tired, crestfallen and darkened from all this dispersion, ambiguity, and uncertainty with a more holistic thought including politics. Not returning from the road covered, but to preserve the approach, the minorization of the road covered, in other words, the art, and to continue on it, becoming aware of its political content. And in fact, taking it to its limits. I think an organic tie between such an approach and contemporary political movements, and the attitude of civil obedience is indispensable. I state that art will remain deficient if it is not nurtured with the thoughts, tendencies and also the practices in these fields. For me, when seen from an entirely political perspective, art is never a safe area, although philosophers, critics, the enlightened/intellectuals have always wished it to be so and that this creates a pleasing privilege; and I think that art is always a field of negotiation between power and non-power and that this struggle continues with reciprocal appropriations. For example the artistic expansion in the 60s: the intervention of the feminists or ecological problems, happenings, engaged art, earth art, etc. ... were directly related to the sociopolitical movements of the time. I think it is unnecessary to state that the modern avant-garde established the same relationship with Marx and socialism –and sometimes with fascism, as with the Futurists- as Art Nouveau did towards its own kitsch version... When we look at it from within art, this appears as an insignificant, natural detail. As if these currents were for Art, as if Art was of the essence. Yet, how is it possible to imagine an alternative and political art which is not nurtured by contemporary political tendencies, which does not have an organic tie to them? This can only be done by isolating art as a special field, constructing art as a transcendent field above all contemporary political orientations. Therefore art is alienated from the social and the political, it loses its vitality and the possibility to intervene in the contemporary and lies in front of us as a corpse at the disposal of the exploitation of the market.

Exactly at this point, the matter of the responsible intellectual, outdated and out of fashion according to some, which reminds one of certain tasks which must be shouldered with her/his boring personality. I am talking about the responsible

intellectual stance which is aware of the fact that art is also oriented by the dominant discourse/power, which does not accept a priority or hierarchy or a distinction of effectiveness and ineffectiveness for her/his action in his work (writing, painting, making videos, taking photographs, whatever you wish...) and her/his political action (shouting slogans, attending rallies, meetings, taking a public stance on contemporary issues etc. ...); and does not see the work s/he does as separate from her/his social conditions and position. As I have touched upon before, such a distance kept from the work being done; in other words, the perception of art and the artist as entirely fictitious phenomena and to isolate them from the reality of this world, serves the function of approving the approach which claims the illusion of textual and semiotic freedom borne out of the fictitiousness of art is primary and essential and sees the issues of the real world as low and insignificant. This attitude protects the artist's career from the risks of adopting a position in contemporary and local sociopolitical issues and also approves the spirit of the age. Moreover, we can speak of the popularization of politics today. (Mor ve Ötesi, Barikat, Orhan Pamuk, Elif Şafak, Perihan Mağden etc. ...) Although contemporary conditions force everyone to adopt a political stance, those involved in contemporary art approach even this popular politics cowardly. Many of them refrain from even passing by it as if it was something dirty and contemptible. As no interrogations are made in this direction, and even opinions such as "this is exactly what art is, it is liberalism as far as it extends, anything goes here," are expressed, speeches and texts which cannot be classified as interrogations are suffocated in concepts whose meaning and importance derives from themselves and mythological art and artist narratives to further foment the dominant ambiguity. This must be underlined as a move which both passes over the day lightly and is commercial. It is enough to master the rhetorical corpus of art a little to do this, because the mechanisms of criticism and interrogation do not function at all. And when done involuntarily, it is immediately called "a culture of sacrificing people," jealousy, envy and lynch, "a holy alliance," "a small family looking out for each other," "the losers' club" and small, sheepish people. The fact that the glossary which serves that this criticism is seen in a negative light is so much wider than the positive glossary of criticism is almost a sign revealing the situation. In this sense, the field of art is thought of as a source of annuity; therefore criticism becomes the main enemy, because criticism has the potential to move borders and disturb. And at the same time, while those who think of art as a source of annuity get involved in clashes of unparalleled violence among themselves, these "art wars" have nothing to do with the outside world, and let alone the outside world, with the neighbouring worlds of literature, cinema etc. Therefore they have no influence either. Within contemporary games of truth, when involvement in power relations is abstained from, the possibility of reversing those power relations is swept under the rug also... I will state that this discontinuity is the main reason standing in front of a possibility of expansion.

We have to shout out that the foundation of the discourse of art –especially in the context of Turkey- as a higher and separate, "autonomous" discourse both consolidates the crisis of ambiguity and that such an existence is open to the use of the new bourgeoisies and capital. In an artistic environment like this, we need sharp knives to sharpen ambiguity. We need a stance which tells the truth directly, without restraint. Instead of a suffocating succession of "palaver," we need an awakening, vitalizing, and clear "word." Yes, today we may be in need of single sentences, which will reveal for a moment where what is standing and how, and of playful flashes which will remove the masks. There is a need for clear, fearless and joyful art-actions

which will form positions around themselves. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari reclaim philosophy's freedom to write slogans: "Form rhizomes and not roots, never plant! Don't sow, forage! Be neither a One nor a Many, but multiplicities! Form a line, never a point! Speed transforms the point into a line!* Be fast, even while standing still! Line of chance, line of hips, line of flight. Don't arouse the General in yourself! Not an exact idea, but just as idea (Godard). Have short-term ideas. Make maps, not photographs or drawings."²

Such a stance actually functions beyond or behind artistic issues. It overflows from art, politics, science etc. and spreads to other things. As a pure and self-styled fictitiousness, it has nothing to do with professional or autonomous or commercial or political art. This field has more to do with power, the sovereign, kings, emperors, priests, imams, Artists, Art, philosophy, science, institutions, states, companies, discourses... or in brief, with everything that dominates. It deals with making holes in their remorseless bodies. I am saying that art (form, painting, photograph, installation, the novel, poetry, etc. ...) is not the primary issue, or, one does not reach these art-actions through art. First of all the work-action is carried out, and then, if the field of art adopts it, if it finds a way of fitting it into concepts, the action turns into some kind of art, that is all. Otherwise, the action is there already, whether adopted by the field of art or not. It is said that the field of art has expanded, but I still imagine actions that overflow from art, there is no problem of expanding the field of art. I imagine actions which are not only art, which are not only perceived in the field of art, which are not only produced for the field of art.

In this sense, the intellectual does not need an art and artist narrative and institution to which s/he will transfer her/his autonomy and independence. No discipline –for example, aesthetics- and its historical narrative can provide autonomy for the intellectual or the artist. Such a narrative must always be approached with suspicion and irony. No institution and narrative can be the natural bearer of truth. If it is the intellectual's task to tell the truth in the public sphere, to remove the mask of power, to render the untouchable touchable, to question, reveal and face and confront the status quo, this must be done in full autonomy and independence. Such autonomy is not something that can be calculated or guaranteed with a building, an institution or material. It is natural that all this has an affect on the "word" uttered. However, they do not determine it directly. Such a stance and "word" cannot be contained in buildings, institutions, schemes; it is constantly on the escape from them. The autonomy of the intellectual is determined more by inner intensities; an ambition, desire and courage towards truth, life and ethics. In this sense, the intellectual is autonomous from the world of mortality and the type of confidence shown to the intellectual emanates from this. I am by no means speaking of a prophetic or ivory-tower-like stance, in fact I am stating that this type of relative ivory-tower-autonomy perform an authoritarian function. And I again emphasize that this function is professional, conservative and on the side of the status quo. I am speaking of a position that is both immanent and horizontal and autonomous. The suffocating ambiguity of the postmodern liberal age we inhabit requires exactly this different, ethical and autonomous stance. We need a definite and clear –as possible- intellectual stance which is not crammed into its own professional parlance, which

² *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze et Guattari, les Edition du Minuit s.36. Translated as *A Thousand Plateaus* by Brian Massumi.

* Deleuze ve Guattari adopt this idea from Paul Virilio. In "Vehiculaire," *Nomades et vagabonds*, 10-18, p.43.

acts with an amateur ethics, which hears the various voices covered by the monolithic language of power, which carried alternatives to the public sphere without receiving permission from institutions or authorities, which strives to make them more visible and which does not consider profit or loss. Not someone who speaks with the heroic, idealized voice of a god, a philosopher-king uttering universal truth, or someone speaking with the voice of authority; someone who does not take the professional field into consideration, a modest person who at the same time continuously places herself/himself at an interrogating distance. An energy which does not lend itself to the ambitions of any –relative- truth, but at the same time does not surrender to the easy way out and self-interest symbolized by the motto “nothing is true –therefore- everything is permitted,” which also sees the irony of its own search for truth, does not expect anything from anyone, but does not hold back from intervening and fighting. We need an effort which will perform with concrete actions such a potential of doing-making and enter such a being and become deterritorialized in the context of such being but still not deviate from tracking a coherent ethics and truth. Only such a stance can present the possibility of other worlds in our world reduced to a continuous circulation and geared towards success, fame, influence and making money. This attitude is necessarily ironic, skeptical and what is more, playful and experimental, however, it is certainly not cynical. It observes not a destructive lack of values but a continuous appreciation...