

(This lecture is presented by Müge Özbay Aydoğan, in the context of “Staging Knowledge” 15-16 June 2012, SALT Galata, İstanbul. <http://saltonline.org/en/387/>)

Contradiction as Method: Notes on “External Authenticity”

Burak Delier

The title of this talk is “Contradiction as Method: Notes on ‘External Authenticity’”, but I am not sure if there is a single thing in this world that is identical to itself, that is homogeneous and free of conflict. We can easily assert that everything to some extent is not identical but different to itself. However what specifically the term “contradiction” refers is some kind of opposition, conflict, and collision, not solely difference. Contradiction presumes antagonism. It presumes that there are two or more things that are opposing each other. Especially, if we consider formation of the art discourse, as Jacques Rancière defined in his book “Malaise dans l’esthétique”, contradiction is not a disease that we have to cure, but it is art’s fundamental constructive principle. However, many examples from well-known art discourse are struggling to cure the so-called impurity of art and try to establish a position that is free of conflict. My observation is that the desire of purity is so powerful that even the most intelligent and distinctive intellectuals are not freed from its fascination. We are all looking for pure things to believe in; we want to be certain, we want to know, we want to name things, and of course by knowing things we want to be certain of ourselves. Certainty and knowledge foster belief and give us power, make us move. The belief and the emotional power stemming from certainty are so fundamental that we won’t be able to breathe without it. Somewhere in his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze said that with God everything is possible, not the inverse...

Well, if so, my research attitude is certainly secular and modern! Because I was not certain of the assumptions that are so powerful within the art world, I did not believe in them and I was trying to question the foundations of art as a productive machine. Through my research practice, while searching for overlapping spaces among things that we consider contradictory, my aim was to re-invent established notions of resistance while undermining our assumptions and our modes of thinking. It is not an easy task because without belief in art practice and its “revolutionary”, “subversive”,

“revelatory” potential, an artist cannot continue to produce art. Like a monk who does not believe in God... The consequence will simply be desertion or excommunication. And an artist, who does not believe in what he/she is doing, simply cannot continue to exist in the art world. Conversely, an artist who does not question his/her own subjectivity and who believes in the potential of the notions within the art discourse – such as autonomy, creativity, authenticity, innovation etc.- will automatically become productive. Such notions are at the heart of the *raison d’être* of artists and art production. That is why any attempt to question these fundamentals becomes painstakingly unproductive. But I think that is the way to go... Artists should leave their position and their mode of subjectivity within the contemporary art discourse and they should start to question art discourse and power relations within the art field.

The works that I will share today are involved in the mode of production within the art field. In this talk, first I will try to frame the nature of transformation of the relation between art and contemporary rationality of production. Recent theories on Post-Fordism and immaterial labor will provide a general toolbox towards a renovation of art discourse and art production. Afterwards, I will show two of my works addressing the productive subject as “artist-worker” within the crossing field of art and contemporary production. Finally, I will finish with the notion of ‘external authenticity’ that is offering an interesting view of the artist as a replaceable subject.

Post-Fordism and Its Expository Effect

As terms like “cultural worker” and “creative industries” evoke, today we cannot understand “worker” and the “artist” as examples of opposing modes of production and subjectivity. The recognition of the artist as an autonomous, free, creative subject; and the worker as an alienated and depended subject is no more viable. Today artists tend to become workers; and workers tend to become artists. In their extensive book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski point to the changes that have taken place within the managerial rationale of capitalism since the 1960s. They assert that ‘artistic critique’, the critique leveled against new industrial capitalism and the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century in the name of freedom and individual fulfillment is co-opted by the subjectivity created via new modes of work, namely via the post-Fordist stage of capitalism. Similarly, Paolo Virno puts forward the

term “virtuoso” in order to describe the artful work within the logic of post-Fordist production.

Within the Fordist logic of production, the contribution of the subject-worker was not encouraged. Through scientific management, the contribution of the worker was abstracted and diminished till it became anonymous. Tasks were diminished as they could be accomplished by anyone. Fordism was “characterized by the mass production of homogeneous, standardized goods for a mass market”. On the other hand, post-Fordism saw “a shift of emphasis within the organization of labour to the immaterial production of information and services and to continuous flexibility”. As post-Fordism reflects a different social and economical value system, its mainstays may be listed as “physical and mental mobility, creativity, labour as potential, communication and virtuosity”. The artist figure as a subject of freedom, virtuosity and creativity finds itself as an ideal model of the post-Fordist production. Against any intention to follow scientific management principles, the subject-worker and his/her specific abilities are enhanced for the sake of production. The actual production mentality is not searching for a de-skilled worker, but it is the opposite. It is looking for a virtuoso, who has special, innovative, unique knowledge, with different know-how’s and a skilful personality.

Today production means production of a certain subjectivity; the disciplinary process begins from the subject, it is not imposed by some external institution, but it is always a self-disciplinary process and accordingly a process of self-production. The subjects willingly “obey” rather than they are forced to follow some instructions. Foucault, in his last period –namely in *The History of Sexuality*- was addressing the old concept of oppression. He was emphasizing the power as a creative force, which allows, enhances and manages different forms of being. The power is not solely working through oppression or prevention, but it is creative. In post-Fordism and its managerial mentality we see a mature example of the power as a creative force. We do not feel oppressed –especially within the art world-, we express ourselves, we are not excluded, there is no command and order, we are not diminished, but rather empowered as we can be, as autonomy is a must.

These developments in contemporary managerial discourse undermine any enterprise that struggles within the art world for a pure and distinctive subjectivity. Further, from now on, we can ask if the relation between “work” and “art” has ever been antagonistic.

The obvious parallelism between emergence of Conceptual Art and immaterial labour weakens this antagonism thesis even more. Maybe before the hegemony of post-Fordism, there was still a possible space for defending the autonomy and the antagonism of art, but today it seems untenable. That is what I call the “expository effect” of post-Fordism. As Rancière puts it, the fundamental principle of art regime is that, it is a bearer of the contradiction between work and play; art and non-art; autonomous and slavery labour. The heteronomy of art, that is its characteristic of obeying two laws simultaneously is what makes it autonomous and political. The indiscernability of art is its very potential of emancipation.

For example, recent proliferation of “discursive and performative events” in the artworld is strongly tied to the transformation within the logic of production. It is likely that within this room, a business meeting -which doesn’t differ much from ours- can take place. The fact that it is not taking place is solely a management, financial decision. Panels, seminars, “marathons”, conferences are not anymore an additional component of exhibitions; but they are the main ground for art production. Exhibitions as material and physical units were in accordance with Fordism and industrial labor; whereas performance and discourse-based events like panels, workshops, discussion groups, seminars fit the logic of post-Fordist production where the basic condition of the production is the transfer of knowledge and the production of a knowledgeable subject. In seminars as this one, actually we don’t talk *about* art works; as performative virtuosos, we are the artworks themselves. This development points to a fundamental change of focus within the art production. Within this context, rather than art objects, art production is much more centered upon the artist-subject. The artist-subject, his/her persona, story, manners, accent, and authenticity always mattered, but today they have become the main unit of art production. The subject is no more the mean to the artwork; it is the mean and the end in itself. Further, as the “performative turn” showed us, the art production can take place without any kind of tangible thing; that means that the art production is depending on one condition: the production of a distinctive and knowledgeable subject.

But first let me explain how I get here where I take the risk of sounding cynical...

Before engaging in this self-reflexive mode of working, I was making works that were addressing social and political conditions that were attempting to critique these

conditions from the art world as if there was a clean, free, safe and autonomous art field where one can see, understand and tell alternative stories on social and political issues. At some point, I realized that my position as an artist-critic is contradictory and problematic because I was not outside the social and political conditions, but at the exact center of these relations, which in turn defined me as an artist. There was this gap between what I was doing and what I was aspiring to do. How artists think and speak about their work is formed by conventions, often passed down within organizations like museums, art schools, and universities. Among the most prominent of these today are the avant-garde traditions of transgression, subversion, critique, aesthetic revolution, alternative modes of storytelling, and individual and artistic autonomy. In some sense, the gap between what we do and what we say about what we do in the art world today may correspond simply to the gap between these traditions and the contemporary conditions of the art world as a global industry of luxury goods, investment vehicles and large-scale public spectacle. Nowadays, we witness normalisation of art production by the workings of “creative industries”. Revolutionary intentions of the artists and curators are encouraged, managed through “creative” soft capitalism of neo-liberal ideology.

Perhaps the artist as a social critic has the most encouraged role within this world of permanent social, cultural, economic and political crisis. Artist should criticize but they should do it in a “poetic”, “creative” and “artistic” way. They should expose differences and different modes of subjectivities and they should be them-selves –as woman, Middle Eastern, gay, outsider, dreamer or revolutionary etc. and these “selves” must be interesting and enjoying! Even within the business world, service sector, and mostly within fashion, design, web design the myths of autonomy and creativity are pervasive. And these fields are not separated from each other; they stand in proximity. Art and the creative industries resonate with the contemporary capitalist mode of post-Fordist production.

To put it shortly: the production mode of the contemporary capitalism is getting more artistic and cultural; while the art production which was once situated as an autonomous field is increasingly overcoded with contemporary management and production rationality. Thus, if we adapt the famous phrase of the Communist Manifesto, we can say that “All that is contradictory melts into air...”

I don't want to stress that we live in a terrible, terrible age that every form of artistic or social critique is co-opted or rendered irrelevant by new management mentality and we cannot escape its cage. Instead, I want to highlight that our assumptions stemming from critical writing and art discourse are ineffective because the object they are addressing is not present. Simply the conventions coming from the established discourse of art that is based on "transgression", "autonomy", "subversion", "social and artistic critique" are not functional against the logic of contemporary production. We need different, more viable and sophisticated notions of art and resistance that are self-critical and self-reflexive.

So what is exactly that we are dealing with today? What kind of virtuoso skills are required in today's factory? Who is the dream "teammate" of the business world? What is his/her relation to the "artist"? On which points do the subjectivities created by these two worlds coincide and on which points do they differ? What do these differences and similarities tell us about the position of art in today's society, the potential it holds, the function it fulfills as well as the changing worker-employee profile in the contemporary business world?

NİTELİK	KATSAYI	NOT .../100	PUAN
İletişim Becerileri	0.1486		
Üniversite Mezunu	0.1270		
Analiz Etme / Yaratıcılık	0.0959		
Ekip Çalışmasına Yatkınlık	0.0935		
İngilizce	0.0935		
Esnek ve Yoğun Çalışma Saatlerine Uyum	0.0911		
Dinamik / Hırslı / Kariyer Hedefleri Otan	0.0767		
Prezentabl / Kişisel Bakımına Özen Gösteren	0.0743		
Seyahat Engeli Bulunmayan	0.0551		
Araştırmacı Kimlik / Gelişme Arzusu	0.0527		
Liderlik / Planlama / Organizasyon Becerileri	0.0431		
Diksiyonu Düzgün	0.0239		
Güleriüzü	0.0239		
TOPLAM PUAN			
00-20	20-40	40-60	60-80
Çok Zayıf	Zayıf	Orta	İyi
80-100	Çok İyi		

Notlar:

Required Skills is a workshop realized last year (2011) within the context of my solo show in Outlet Gallery. The application form appropriates the evaluation format of Human Resources departments. It is based on 100 job applications chosen arbitrarily in order to find out the most and the less wanted quality within the contemporary business

world. The most wanted quality is “Communication Skills”, the second is “University Graduation”, and the third is “Analyzing/Creativity Skills”.

During the workshop, the artists chosen by the participants were evaluated according to these parameters. First, we searched the profile of the chosen artist and we gathered information about them via their CV, their presentation skills (we looked at the videos of panels, seminars as this one) and their rhythm of production. How many exhibitions are they making in a year? How much they travel? What is their proficiency in English? Are they repeating the same formula in each work or are they creative/flexible? Are they used to work within different and specific contexts? Can they respond to it adequately? Do they follow changing trends in the artworld? etc... After that we have noted their skills... At the end, our projection was that much of the chosen artist will be very successful within the business world. Mostly their chances were noted as “Good” or “Excellent”.

The second work that I want to show is named as “Collector’s Wish.” In that project I have realized an artwork conceived by a well-known collector Saruhan Doğan. In any form I did not contribute conceptually to the artwork. My role was like a facilitator, a supporter or like a worker. I was offering the stage to the collector. He was the “artist”. He was the one who exposed his subjectivity, his self, his enthusiasm and criticism.

Let me show you the making of the work by the collector, its name is “Red Sea”...



In a way, you cannot see the artist in this work, he is absent. The artist is asking objective questions like “what will be the length of the wall?”, “What sort of red is going to be exactly?” I was framing this work as a “post-Fordist strike”. Of course it is not a full-fledged strike; it is not a strategy of the refusal of the work and total absence. The artist, here, is working, however, he is not working in the way that is expected from an artist. As an agent of play and pleasure he is not there. He only follows the instructions of another person, but somehow he is freed! This “freedom” is not based on the expression of subjectivity but it is the inverse. It is based on concealing of subjectivity. It is based on not-to-express-his-self, not-to-put-his-self into work, not-to-expose his subjectivity. On the stage you see two persons but actually one is absent. And this absence is what points to a notion of emancipation –of course which is not free from problems.

In the stage of the art production how does the process of production proceed? There is a pre-defined stage on which the artist, the curators, the critiques play their role. The play depends on their autonomous participation. Without their autonomy there will be no play, no production, thus no art... Well it is obvious... But through my experience I know that the backstage is different. There are always other agents who have interests in your work. Pure loneliness, which functions as a guarantee of autonomy, operates as a functional myth. I think the artwork is realized when some other agent confirms it. In order to exist, firstly an artwork must be seen by someone, and secondly so as to be realized, it must be confirmed. This confirming agent is depending on the context. If the context is the gallery, it is the collector and the gallerist; if this is a Biennial, it is the curator; if this is an institution, it is the director; if this is a publishing house, it is the editor. And finally the most unpredictable agent is the audience and the future audience –the art scene that will see the work in the future. Mostly we experience these relations person to person, but at the end these relations form an amalgam of relations and within this network of relations, agents are not autonomous, but they depend on each other and the production proceeds through a series of compromises. An artist who doesn't compromise simply does not exist. The “I” of the artist, the sovereign autonomous subject exists only in the interviews after the work or the exhibition is realized. In these interviews, the artists mostly speak as “I thought”, “I have done”, “I accomplished”, “I realized”, but actually this “I” does not exist, it is a myth.

I have to admit that perhaps it was the easiest work that I've realized. I wasn't responsible of the content and the form or anything. I just let it happen... However even if I, myself is not in the work as an agent within the art production network, "I" was there. Of course this "I" functions as a bureaucratic institutional position which plays the confirmative role. If the collector had made this work by himself in his house, it wouldn't have been conceived as an artwork, but through my name and through the gallery, it accessed to the art production network and it has become an artwork. Thus, even if the authentic creative subject role is emptied, the art production has happened. So the question arises how does the art production happen without the contribution of the subject?

I recall the famous book "Domination and The Art of Resistance" by James C. Scott. On the stage or in the public realm when the peasant and the lord encounter; the peasant hides what he really thinks of the lord. There is a closed space where these hidden transcripts are developed. I think within the mode of production of the artworld, artists do not have this kind of a separated zone. Their works, their lives and themselves are one, united and exposed. There is no space for them to resist. When they criticize, it is mostly through a work of art; when it is not through a work of art, for example when they appear as political subjects (like Occupy Museums etc.), this feature is immediately translated into an inherent value (activist-artist) of the artist/person. I think one of the strategies to resist production is avoiding to make it public, not to expose singularities, and keep them away from the workings of the artworld. But how to make it happen while the production of art is founded upon the presence of the artist, his work and his life? How to do and not to do at the same time? How to withdraw while continuing to produce? How to show and hide simultaneously? I have to emphasize that my focus point is not the formula of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, "I prefer not-to-do"; I am not focused on the general notion of refusal of work. I am searching ways to deconstruct the production imperatives of the artworld and the strict subjectivities created by these imperatives and I am looking for ways to denaturalize them.

External Authenticity

This is where we connect to the notion of "external authenticity". Even if we totally negate art, just by being here, just by our presence we are producing it. To illustrate this production, imagine this seminar without any audience. Apart from the content and the

form of talks, the presence of the audience and lecturers points to the belief in the value of art and expectations from it. It sounds contradictory because we always think of authenticity as something inside, as something stemming from the origin and that origin is our souls or inner being. In the art discourse, the concept of authenticity is so fundamental that we cannot imagine an artist who does not put his enthusiasm, aspirations, cultural heritage and his self within his work. These imperatives are functioning as proofs of authenticity. If we consider science, which I think has an antagonistic relation with “artistic research”, the notion of authenticity is equally crucial. In order to be taken seriously, any document, or experiment or any material should be authentic. A fake or fictional document in science cannot be considered as a document. Within the art world, the mechanism functions in the same manner, but with different rationales. If the artist or the artwork is “fake”, we cannot take it seriously. Simply, a fake Van Gogh is not a Van Gogh. But my claim would be different, if not controversial. I think that regardless of the narrative of a safe interior source, which guarantees authenticity, in order to find any liable proof of it, we have to look outside. The external affects are what makes it authentic, therefore any mythic interior subject becomes obsolete. And this claim will provide us a tool of resistance against colonization of subjectivities and willful self-exploitation of agents within the regime of art production.

I have derived this notion from an article about cynicism in organizations, “Working at Cynical Distance: Implications of Power, Subjectivity and Resistance” by Peter Fleming and Andre Spicer. I think this discussion resonates with James Scott’s book. Both of them address the problem of resistance and they search for the alternative practices for a resistant subjectivity.

Fleming and Spicer assert that although many managerial team making and educative corporation culture programs are very effective in creating the form of subjectivity needed by the organization, some employees are not identifying themselves with the corporation and their job. They always keep a “cynical distance”, they don’t believe in the company’s politics and management objectives. They think of an employee who may be extremely cynical toward the company and see through to the base managerial motives (perhaps wearing a McShit tee-shirt under his/her McDonald’s uniform in a clandestine fashion) unlike a Mcdonald’s worker identifying with the values enshrined

in the training programmes (quality, team work, cleanliness, efficiency and so on). Crucially, nevertheless he/she performs as an efficient member of the team.

According to Žižek, the possibility of keeping this “cynical distance” is not an act of resistance but the opposite. Thanks to this cynicism the possibility of a more meaningful and effective strategy of opposition is undermined. The machination of cynicism is illustrated by Žižek’s analysis of the film and television series MASH:

“Contrary to its misleading appearance, Robert Altman’s MASH is a perfectly conformist film- for all their mockery of authority, practical jokes and sexual escapades, the members of the MASH crew perform their jobs exemplarily, and thus present no threat to the smooth running of the military machine. In other words, the cliché which regards MASH as an anti-militarist film, depicting the horrors and meaningless military slaughter which can only be endured by a healthy measure of cynicism, practical jokes, laughing at pompous official rituals, and so on, misses the point- this very distance is ideology.”(1997:20)

Another example based on racism comes from Terry Eagleton’s “Ideology”:

“Ideology is not just a matter of what I think about a situation; it is somehow inscribed in that situation itself. It is no good my reminding myself that I am opposed to racism as I sit down on a park bench marked “Whites Only”; by the act of sitting on it, I have supported and perpetuated racist ideology. The ideology, so to speak, is in the bench, not in my head.” (Eagleton, 1991:40)

All these examples send us to Blaise Pascal which is discussed in Scott’s book, where Pascal advises that if you do not believe in God, kneel down, begin moving your lips, (act as if you are praying, even if you do not believe), and eventually you will believe. To be sure, it is in our habits, our everyday actions where belief, subjectivity and hence power reside. All these examples point that the formation of subjectivity is radically external rather than stemming from a private interiority.

I think that if we can move beyond the ideological cynicism thesis that asserts that, in the face of cultural colonization, cynicism has only conservative and self-defeating effects, we can begin to deconstruct modes of subjectivity and search for tactics of resistance regarding the art production.

The term “external authenticity” is facilitating to understand the mechanisms of art production and formation of art institutions framed by the new management techniques. For example, an institution like this one may be an example of acting belief in ethical intentions of large companies, which are usually far from ethics within the relations that they are inscribed as for-profit institutions. Actually the support system within the artworld is working fundamentally through the logic of external authenticity. We, as the agents of art discourse are mourning for the social and economical crisis of the world on behalf of the agents that are producing the crisis itself. Spicer and Fleming mention that in some cultures mourners are hired to do the wailing for the bereaved at the funeral of a loved one. I think our role as socially and politically engaged artist and curators are like these mourners who are staging an act of mourning.

Let me show you an example of mourners from Sardinia:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJUQxelrZX4>

I am not cynical about these mourners. Their authenticity is not questioned and it does not constitute an obstacle. I think their act of mourning is as authentic as teardrops of a mother who just lost her child. Their authenticity does not originate from their singularity. Or to put it otherwise, their subjectivity is not founded upon their interior being. It is the act of mourning and the gesture of participation in the ritual that counts; not what they really think and feel about the situation. They settle into the position of an “objective subjectivity” (another contradiction!) that is formed by the ritual of mourning.

So, how can we claim the art’s authenticity, originality, singularity when even the feelings that we think the most intimate and personal are radically external and artificially created? What are the rituals that we are performing as the agents of subjective knowledge? And finally, how can these rituals be denaturalized in order to open art production? The example of the mourners shows us that it is sufficient to fake the social role so as to make it work. That is to say that, we do not need any authentic being under the illusion of a persona of the artist, the subject is merely a function of the discourse of art. Thus, for the art production to take place, it is sufficient that someone just repeats the text and follows the instructions, -and of course he/she has to inject a little belief and enthusiasm in order to make it alive.

Besides that, I think four crucial lessons can be deduced from this notion of external authenticity:

- 1) Even if the artists are critical towards the art institution as a part of the creative industries; by solely being there, they are reproducing and affirming what they criticize.
- 2) In order to negate the machinations of the art field, they have to mis-perform it by manipulating its constructive assumptions.
- 3) Anybody can be an artist only by following certain rituals of the artworld. The artist position is replaceable by anybody who wants to perform this strict role.
- 4) Externality gives us power; it offers us the possibility to break free from ourselves that are turned into a productive unit on the stage of the art scene. Externality will let constitute another role and stage for art production that is resistant and indifferent to the expectations and conventions of the artworld. (Actually we can grasp the power of externality via social media. Facebook, Myspace, or Blogs can be considered as the stages created for different kinds of knowledge subjectivities. Of course, regardless of the fact that mostly, these mediums function as the perfect models of self-exploitation...)

Anyway, I think the gesture of inviting someone to replace the subject position of the artist is both a strategy of withdrawal and a constructive action towards a more relevant and open field of knowledge production.

Perhaps I am sounding contradictory, but there are moments where to perform belief, one has to perform the exact opposite: the absence of belief and withdrawal from its rituals. It is to say that, firstly, the absence of belief should be performed, the absence does not mean nothingness, and secondly, using conventional notions from art discourse without any suspicion, and fitting in the comfortable artist position as the social, political, creative agent has increasingly become an act of nihilism. On the other hand, performing the absence of belief is not refusal of participation, but instead, it is a performance of belief, which is not founded on pre-existing, given, easily consumed artistic positions and rituals. As in the works like "Collector's Wish" and this talk, as a discourse without an "authentic" subject, I have tried to perform the absence of the artist-subject and its fundamentals like autonomy, authenticity and creativity. I hope it

helps us re-think their function and encourage us to re-invent their emancipatory potential.