M.A. in Material and Visual Culture Dissertation

CONFRONTING THE WORK IN PROGRESS:
AN EXPERIMENT ON ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTEMPORARY ART

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in Material and Visual Culture (UCL) of the University of London in 2011

Word Count: 18,581

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ABSTRACT

In this study I will provide a discussion on the engagement with contemporary art and will argue that the open, de-regulated form of the art work enables it to be a means through which a knowledge pertaining to the nature of the audience is reflected. Following Losch, O'Hanlon, Lyotard and Maharaj, I will argue for art functioning at a sensuous level whether its effects find expression through verbalization or not. Building my argument on a little experiment in the context of Turkey, where postmodernism hasn't taken its full turn in the social consciousness, I will show that the difficulty in supporting uncertainty and ambiguity results in a reluctance to a critical engagement with the art work. Still, I will argue that the challenge posed by a confrontation with the art work is what lies behind art's critical potential as it is this challenge that subtly transforms the subject.
LIST OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. 5

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER 1: WORK IN PROGRESS: THE ART OF KUTLUG ATAMAN .............................................. 7

The Open Work ............................................................................................................................... 14

Relational Aesthetics ....................................................................................................................... 17

Art as a Symptom ............................................................................................................................. 19

CHAPTER 2: A SMALL INTERVENTION TO THE WORK IN PROGRESS ........................................ 20

The Face of Modern Turkey ............................................................................................................. 22

The Enemy Inside Me ...................................................................................................................... 25

CHAPTER 3: ANTHROPOLOGICAL CORRELATES ...................................................................... 42

Generativity .................................................................................................................................... 43

Exegesis or Verbalization ................................................................................................................. 47

Reflected Self-Knowledge .............................................................................................................. 48

Contextualizing the Experience ...................................................................................................... 50

CHAPTER 4: CONFRONTING THE WORK IN PROGRESS .......................................................... 52

A for Libidinal ................................................................................................................................. 53

De-regulation and the Anxiety of the Subject .................................................................................. 56

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................. 60

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................................. 66
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Kutlug Ataman’s Semiha b Unplugged, (1997) ................................................................. 9
Figure 2: Paradise (2006) .................................................................................................................. 26
Figure 3: It’s A Vicious Circle (2002) .............................................................................................. 27
Figure 4: Turkish Delight (2007) ...................................................................................................... 28
Figure 5: Women Who Wear Wigs ..................................................................................................... 31
Figure 6: Stefan’s Room (2004) ......................................................................................................... 32
Figure 7: Four Seasons of Veronica Read (2004) .............................................................................. 33
Figure 8: 99 Names (2002) ............................................................................................................... 35
Figure 9: Never My Soul (2001) ........................................................................................................ 39
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible were it not for the great support and inspiration I received from Christopher Pinney. So I would first of all like to express my gratitude to him as well as all my tutors in the MA program for the guidance and insight they have provided. I would also like to thank all my fellow students that I have met during my two years study for being such an inspiring community, for their solidarity and friendship. I would like to thank everyone in UCL's Department of Anthropology for creating such a welcoming environment during my study.

I would like to thank my family for their endless support during my endless education, and my dear friends Kaan, Asli and Yaprak for being there always. And finally Jessie, Werner, Freddie, Aycan, Gonenc, Hinde, Katy, Marie, Benoit, Elodie, Jody, Petri, Aalaa, Voichi and all the lovely people who have made my life richer...thank you all.
INTRODUCTION

Early in my study at UCL, we were asked to write an exhibition review as an exercise in academic writing, for which I had reviewed an exhibition\(^1\) of the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. As it was the first exhibition review I wrote, what fascinated me about the exercise was the discovery of how much more I could read into an art work once I was engaged with it through reflective thinking and pronouncing my thoughts in the form of an essay. Thinking more on my own encounters with art works, I found it intriguing how other people engage with art, especially in the contemporary age where fixed meanings have lost credibility in the art context as well as others.

In this study I will discuss the reception of contemporary art from an anthropological perspective. I will base my discussion on the notions of openness and ambiguity and take the role of the audience in the formation of the work as my central problem. I will use the work of the video artist Kutlug Ataman as a base to support my discussion. What I find interesting in Ataman’s work is the multiplicity of meanings it allows, which, as I will argue, is a distinguishing feature of the art of the postmodern age.

In Chapter 1 I will provide a brief discussion of Ataman’s work with specific reference to Eco’s notion of open work and Bourriaud’s notion of the interlocutor. Following Eco’s proposal that art is a symptom of its times, I will discuss Ataman’s work as symptomatic of a change in Turkey’s bottom up modernization process.

In Chapter 2 I will provide a base for my later theoretical discussion through my small intervention aimed at observing the audience’s encounter with the work of Ataman.

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\(^1\) Yinka Shonibare, MBE’s fifth exhibition ‘Willy Loman: The Rise and Fall’, October 15-November 20 2009 at London’s Stephen Friedman Gallery.
Having conducted interviews with five people visiting Ataman’s retrospective exhibition at the Istanbul Modern Museum, I will try to understand the match or mismatch between theoretical accounts of contemporary art and the practical responses of the audience. Although I do not intend to provide an analysis of the art context of Turkey, I will provide a brief discussion of contemporary art in Turkey as a background for my study.

As I have conducted my interviews in Turkish, I have had to translate these accounts into English for the purpose of this study. Moreover, I have had to rely on people’s verbalizations of their feelings and thoughts on the works; and I had to realize the difficulty or rather impossibility of a full expression. The problem of verbalization and exegesis has been widely discussed in various Anthropological studies of Melanesian art. Thus in Chapter 3, I will discuss the trouble with verbalization through analyses of Melanesian ethnographies.

In Chapter 4, building on the work of Lyotard and Maharaj, I will discuss art as a libidinal, sensuous experience disruptive of conventional discursive modalities. I will argue that this disjuncture from linear discourse and the confrontational possibility of multiple readings is what lies behind the anxiety caused by an encounter with an open art work.

CHAPTER 1: WORK IN PROGRESS: THE ART OF KUTLUG ATAMAN

In this study I will be using the work of Kutlug Ataman as a case to discuss responses to contemporary art within an anthropological framework. Before engaging a theoretical discussion however, it will be useful to start with an introduction of the artist and his work. Kutlug Ataman is a Turkish video artist born in Istanbul in 1961. At the age of 19,
Ataman was imprisoned for more than a month for participating in and filming a leftist demonstration against the 1980 military coup in Turkey, after which he moved to the United States to study film at the University of California, Los Angeles. Graduating with a MFA in 1988 he started working as a film maker and won the Peter Stark production award for his short film *Hansel and Gretel* (1984). His first feature length film *Serpent’s Tale* (1993) won Ataman the Turkish Critics Association Best Director, Best Film, Best Screenplay Awards. However, Ataman’s breakthrough in the film scene was with *Lola+Bilidikid* (1998), which was a look into the transvestite subculture inside the Turkish community in Berlin. *Lola+Bilidikid* won the Teddy Special Jury Award at the Berlin International Film Festival and the Best Film Award at New Festival in New York.

Having started his career as a fiction film director, Ataman’s shift to the art world was an unintended one. After meeting Semiha Berksoy, the at the time 87 years old diva of Turkish Opera, Ataman became interested in starting a project with her. This project developed without a script, as an intuitive process and ended up with 27 hours of footage of Berksoy in her bedroom surrounded by her paintings, old costumes and curious objects, recounting and re-enacting her life which spans the whole history of the Turkish Republic. This footage was later edited into an 8 hours long piece. Throughout this eight hours monologue, Berksoy gives an individual account of a century of Turkey and its modernisation process while recreating her life by manipulating her memories. As Gregory Volk states, ‘the piece is not so much about Berksoy, as it is Berksoy’. 

*Semiha b Unplugged* (fig.1), which doesn’t fit into any cinematic category, marks Ataman’s unintended career turn from being a film maker to being an artist.

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I was making a film that I later realized was supposed to be like an art film. I was using my own concepts and everything, but it was never obvious to me that in the art world it could have some sort of validity ... I didn’t really know much about the art world. I met the curator Rosa Martinez who told me she was very curious about my work and so I just showed it to her, just to be friendly, not because of any professional reasons. She took it in the Istanbul Biennial...⁴

*Semiha b. Unplugged* was exhibited at the 5th Istanbul Biennial in 1997 and Ataman’s career as an artist took speed after that with various international film and art awards. In 2004 his work *Kuba*

![Figure 1: Kutlug Ataman’s Semiha b Unplugged, (1997)](image)

won the Carnegie International Award. *Kuba* was a portrayal of a gated community in Istanbul for which Ataman lived within the community for two years filming interviews with individual members. The work was presented as forty television screens, each

showing a different individual. The viewer was invited to choose and combine different stories sitting in armchairs placed in front of each screen. As with most of Ataman’s work, an image of the community was created through the juxtaposition of these individual stories and due to the impossibility for the viewer to view all forty stories, the final portrait each viewer got was defined by his/her own experience of the piece. The same year Ataman was shortlisted for the Turner Prize with his work *Twelve*, in which he interviewed six people claiming to be in their second lives, sheltering two stories of two different identities in a single body.

Since his debut in the art world, Ataman’s focus in his work has been on problematizing the notion of identity. In Ataman’s works communal identities are formed through their individual components. What is presented to the audience is an individual, with his/her own eccentricities, who does not fit into any stereotypical categories, but is still presented as an element of a wider community.

Although the reconstruction of identity forms the main frame of Ataman’s work, he adopts, instead, the view point of certain politics of identity aiming to form a common identity, a viewpoint which places the individual at its centre and keeps a distance to the generalizing tendencies of these politics. Therefore, although they operate mainly through identity, Ataman’s works also perform a deconstruction of identity politics.\(^5\)

Ataman’s choices for the characters in his films are directed by an artistic interest in ‘the exploration of the self through others who intensely resonate his own obsessions and

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fantasies⁶. His own experience of being a gay man in Turkey is reflected in his works problematizing gender identities through characters like Ceyhan in Never My Soul or Demet in Women Who Wear Wigs. He looks for characters that he himself can relate to at a personal level, thus most of his characters are chosen from his own social sphere. The intimacy between the artist and his characters is an important characteristic of his works; however, the works are never on the characters per se, but the mechanics of the construction of these characters. His films are processes through which the characters are created through their testimonies.

The notions of identity and truth have lost credibility as master narratives have come to an end⁷. In Ataman’s work, the stability and autonomy of the characters are always left in ambiguity. One finds oneself challenged by the question of how to relate to these characters: as “real” people or as constructs of the artist? His work focuses not on the delivery of truth, but the construction of multiple truths.⁸ He sees this construction in the nature of communication. ‘It is embedded in the nature of all communication, myth, mythology, be it verbal-oral history, be it art, film making, news- it is all the same thing’.⁹

The use of documentary style and the effect of this choice on the perceived “reality” of the subject presented in the work is a critical point in Ataman’s work. Most of his pieces are based on talking head interviews of people recounting their experiences on a certain

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⁸ The notion of multiple truths in terms of identities resonates with McKim Mariott’s discussion of the “dividual” as a fluid, composite and divisible personhood, as opposed to the indivisible, integrated, self-developing individual Western person. See Mariott’s Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology in India Through Hindu Categories (1990) for a detailed discussion. Also see Strathern (1988) on individuals and partible persons. Strathern discusses personhood in the Melanesian context and asserts that contrary to Western individuality, Melanesian personhood is created through relations to the others and is extended through the continuity between people and objects. Thus it is not possible to talk about a fixed identity but a fluid one that is constructed through and in relation to others.
topic. As the truthfulness of the characters as well as the experiences they recount is a point of unease in these works, which puts the viewer in doubt as to how to respond to what is being said, the work confronts the viewer to make a choice, whether to believe or not. However, the question is not one of whether the films are true to the characters or not, but of whether there is a reference point at all in relation to which we can discuss “trueness”.

Ataman expresses his approach as: ‘I don’t make documentaries. I use what you call documentary, raw reality as an ingredient in order to make a comment about our reconstruction of reality and how we fabricate what we call reality.’ This thin line between documentary and fiction apparent in Ataman’s works and his emphasis on the constructedness of “reality” resonates with discussions on the indexicality in photographic images. As Rosalind Kraus puts it ‘Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface’. Barthes puts a similar emphasis on the photographic image as an index of what has been, emphasizing the photograph’s ability to freeze the moment of exposure and preserve it as a singular ‘body’ as opposed to the generality of the ‘corpus’, corpus here referring to the “reality” outside the photographic frame. I would however argue that this notion of singularity of the photographic image should not be taken epistemologically. The formal singularity of the image does not entail a singularity of its perception as there still remains a potential multiplicity emerging through the beholder’s engagement with the image. This multiplicity prevailing at the level of the beholder will be discussed more below in relation to the works of Eco and Bourriaud.

10 Ibid, p.60.
Christopher Pinney\textsuperscript{13}, evaluating the body - corpus duality in the context of Indian portrait photography, asserts that in these photographic portraits the event of the photograph becomes a distinct world on its own. The power of these images does not lie in their effect of reality but in the ensemble of extraordinary poses, settings and accessories exposed in the shot, which have integrity within the single frame. What matters in these images is not the fit between the world created in the photograph and the wider world (the corpus) but the fitness within the world of the photograph.

The work of Thomas Demand provides a case of interest when discussing the body-corpus distinction in photographic images. Demand’s work is based on making card board models of actual places, mostly crime scenes, based on images obtained from reports in the mass media. He then takes colour photographs of these which are hardly distinguishable from the mass media images except from the little traces Demand leaves behind such as marks of glue or rough edges at some part of the models, telephones without buttons or scattered papers without writing on them. A point stressed by many commentators on Demand’s work is the viewer’s two stage response to these images.\textsuperscript{14}

The viewer first sees the images as cold and abstract but unexceptional. As a second stage though he/she starts realizing that something is wrong with the image and comes to recognize it as a construction. Demand’s photographs bear indexical relationships to their paper models, however what becomes the issue in his work is not the link between the photograph and the paper model but the model and the real-world source. Thus his work takes the nature of the photographic event as its problem rather than the nature of the photograph. In this respect Ataman’s work works in a similar line with Demand’s.


\textsuperscript{14} Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, (Yale University Press, 2008), p.264.
Ataman’s work replaces the photographic image with the video image and the card board models with the constructed identities. Again when the viewer is confronted with Ataman’s work his/her first reaction is to watch these images as unexceptional talking head interviews. However after a while the work engages the viewer at a second level, creating a feeling of unease and oddness in relation to the characters. The question then becomes not the link between the image of the character in the film and the filmic event corresponding to it, but the link between the filmic event and the wider world behind it. Thus what is problematized is not the distinction between the body and the corpus but the stability of the corpus itself.

The Open Work

The reason behind my choice for Ataman’s work as a case study is neither the formal qualities of his work, nor its specific social, political readings within the Turkish context. What makes Ataman’s work of interest for the purpose of this study is its ambiguity and the multiplicity of readings it enables. The duration of these lengthy portraits of individuals or communities, which often present the subjects performing an endless loop of speech, vary from two to forty hours. This makes it impossible for the viewer to receive the work as a whole. The audience has to do its own editing through the selection of the bits they watch. Thus, no two viewers can have the exact same experience. Neither can a viewer who comes back to the work have the same experience as before. This characteristic of Ataman’s work can be discussed more in relation to Eco’s idea of ‘work in motion’\(^{15}\), moving freely between a multiplicity of different interpretations; thus making each interpretation only one among the possible many.

\(^{15}\) Umberto Eco, The Open Work, translated by Anna Cancogni, (Hudchinson Radius, 1989), p.ix-x.
Eco uses the notion of *open work* to explain the difference between traditional and modern art. The method of traditional art was to direct the receiver to receive the work in a certain way whereas modern art remains deliberately and systematically ambiguous, containing a great variety of potential meanings and moving between a multiplicity of different interpretations. Eco discusses Baroque art as a break point at which, influenced by a new vision of cosmos introduced by Copernican theory and Kepler’s discovery of elliptical paths, the position of the circle as the classical symbol of cosmic perfection was called into question. The openness of Baroque form as opposed to its preceding Cartesian perspectivalism marks a new scientific awareness; the tactile being replaced by the visual and emphasis shifting from essence to appearance. Martin Jay, on a similar line, discusses Baroque form as the third phase of scopic regimes of modernity following Cartesian Perspectivalism and the Art of Describing characterized by Dutch seventeenth-century art. ‘In opposition to the lucid, linear, solid, fixed, planimetric, closed form of Renaissance...the Baroque was painterly, recessional, soft focused, multiple and open.’

Eco argues that modern art has developed to be open as the open form is a reflection of contemporary times. Building on the idea that art represents our experience of the world, the multiplicity of meanings and the emphasis on different interpretations is what is most suitable for today’s world as opposed to classic times. Arguing for Contemporary art as an epistemological metaphor, Eco states:

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16 Ibid, x.
18 Eco, 16.
19 Ibid.
The discontinuity of phenomena has called into question the possibility of a unified, definitive image of our universe; arts suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, and by seeing it, accept it and integrate it into our sensibility. The open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it, it is it’.  

The emphasis made on the multiplicity of possible interpretations brings to mind Barthes’ announcement of the death of the author. Developing his argument over literary criticism, Barthes\(^\text{21}\) argues that the birth of the reader brings the death of the author. Traditional literary criticism found resolution of the work in identifying the author behind it, however the author is just a vehicle through which language emerges; and it is the reader who reduces the multiplicity of meanings and fixes the text.

However, Eco asserts that the multiplicity of interpretative positions does not free the reader from the Author. The possibility of numerous different personal interpretations remains within the code which has already been organized by the author. ‘The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.’  

Returning to the work of Ataman, the artist uses multiple screen installations in which images compete with each other for the attention of the viewer. Through the mixing and blending of individual voices, his works form ‘a soundscape of overlapping voices that makes it difficult to locate yourself’.  

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 90.  
\(^{22}\) Eco, 19.  
\(^{23}\) Stuart Commer, talk given at Istanbul Modern as part of the Identity and Geography talk series in conjunction with The Enemy Inside Me exhibition.
ambiguity to the meaning of the works and makes them open to the interpretation of the viewer. The audience needs to actively engage with the work to filter certain parts of the field of visuals and sound he is presented with; and blend the bits he/she grabs to form his/her own impression of the work. This engagement between the work and the audience is created through an open structure through which the author allows the audience to navigate.

**Relational Aesthetics**

Nicolas Bourriaud\(^{24}\) asserts that the passive receiver pursuing a solely ocular engagement with the art work needs to be replaced by an *interlocutor* who makes the art work complete through his/her engagement with it. This new type of art form demanding an active interlocutor, works at the level of human interactions and its social context, rather than an independent and private symbolic space\(^ {25}\). Referring to this new form as *relational art*, Bourriaud goes on to argue that ‘it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through...but as a period of time to be lived through.’\(^ {26}\) In this sense, the consumption of art becomes an experience taking place over the time period of engagement with the work, rather than an instant exposure. Thomas Docherty\(^ {27}\) on the other hand discusses a denial of the temporal dimension in art criticism and explains this denial with a will to stabilize and singularize the art work due to a fear on the side of the critic to lose his/her subjectivity.


\(^{25}\) Ibid, 14.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 15.

Docherty’s take on modern criticism will be discussed further in this study. However, returning to the notion of relationality, Bourriaud\textsuperscript{28} asserts that the idea of relationality is not unique to modern art, but in fact the total art history can be read as a history of successive production of relations. While older art forms produced relations between humankind and deities, and then humankind and objects, modern art has been focusing on inter-human relationships as can be observed through artistic activities since the early 90s. Bourriaud however distinguishes what he calls relational art works from works which demand solely ocular participation. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres provides a base for his discussion. Gonzalez-Torres’ work titled Portrait of Ross in LA (1991) presents a pile of candies at one corner of the exhibition floor. Ross was Gonzalez-Torres’s lover, who died of AIDS. When Ross was first diagnosed, his doctor told him his ideal weight was 155 pounds. Every day, the candy is weighed and 155 pounds is placed out. The visitors are invited to take candies away from the pile. During the day as visitors take the candies away the weight of the pile diminishes metaphorically relating to Ross’ weight and his health. Thus, in this work, the active, bodily participation of the visitors makes the art work.

The space defined by Gonzalez-Torres’ works...is worked out in inter-subjectivity, in the emotional, behavioural and historical response given by the beholder to the experience proposed. The encounter with the work gives rise not so much to a space but to a time span.\textsuperscript{29}

In Ataman’s work, although the work demands engagement at an ocular level, this is not a straight forward passive engagement. The combination of multiple images and sounds

\textsuperscript{28} Bourriaud, 28.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 59.
and the effect of the bodily position of the audience within the installation on the form of the work, gives Ataman’s work its relational quality. The audience is expected to move through the space of these works, experiencing the work from different positions, recreating the work throughout the whole experience. Bourriaud explains this new type of relationality as a reaction to modernity through inventing new ways of being together and forms of interaction. Modernity’s critique of collective alienation and the predominance of the community over the individual, finds its opposition through art as a new form of plurality based on relations created through these new art works. Thus art develops as a response to and as a symptom of the times.

Art as a Symptom

Hasan Bulent Kahraman\textsuperscript{30} discusses Ataman’s works as a symptom of Turkey’s modernization process. Kahraman argues that Turkey’s modernization has been a radical top down process starting from Ottoman times. The driving force behind Turkish modernization was not a desire for enlightenment but was the salvation of the state. Thus the idea of the individual which formed the core of western modernization was only applicable as long as the individual submitted to the collective will.\textsuperscript{31} Tradition was totally rejected in order to make a new start for the modern Turkish state. However, in time, possibly as a reaction to forms of globalization, a concept of alternative modernization has come to the fore putting emphasis on local values. For the last 50 years a new multiplicity is being discovered, which as Kahraman states, can be detected from symptoms such as the rise of Islam and a return to tradition, which are the result of the

\textsuperscript{30} Hasan Bulent Kahraman, ‘Notes on a Bewildered Modernization’, in Maxxi Exhibition Catalogue, (Electa, 2010).
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 42.
politics of identity, recognition and difference. However, this multiplicity is not in the form of a synthesis but in one of eclectic union.

Now the preference assigned to “both this and that” has started to take the place of the previous conception of “this or that” and of a bewilderment focused on Westernization. The construction of a new identity, new memory, new sense of belonging, is part of this process...The subject of the mimesis, by now, is no longer nature but society and persons, directly.\textsuperscript{32}

As a symptom of Turkey’s modernization process, Ataman’s work can be taken to reflect these multiplicities and contradictions. Its focus on the instability of identities as well as individual identities adding up to form eclectic portraits of communities provide a fertile ground for social and political analysis. However, Ataman himself states that his position is not necessarily a political one. His works are about perception and everyday life. They are not statements on certain political issues but are ‘about the experience, the nature of the narrative and how it is constructed’.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{CHAPTER 2: A SMALL INTERVENTION TO THE WORK IN PROGRESS}

Building on the theoretical ground laid out above, I planned a small intervention to see how the real life “interlocutors” receive Ataman’s works. I asked five acquaintances to visit an exhibition of Ataman’s with me to observe their reactions and get their opinions on the works. These five people, whom I will refer to as informants, were not previously aware of the exhibition and saw it on my request. It was the first time they were seeing

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 46.
\textsuperscript{33} Ataman quoted from Hans Ulrich Obrist, 64.
\end{flushleft}
any work by the artist. They all had different backgrounds and occupations however they can all be identified as upper middle class young Turks.

Betul, a 28 years old woman, is a painter who has exhibited her work both inside and outside Turkey. She was initially trained as a ceramic artist, but then took on painting and now has her own studio in Istanbul. She is a young, modern Turkish woman; however when one has a chat with her she reveals herself to be quite sensitive about traditional values. She lives with her mother, is not conservative but a Kemalist\textsuperscript{34} who believes in laicism and the necessity to keep in line with the reforms of Ataturk.

Damla, a 35 years old woman, has studied genetic engineering and is now a marine biologist. She lives in Portugal at the moment however due to her profession she travels a lot and changes her country of residence every couple of years. She is not specifically interested either in politics or in art, however she likes seeing exhibitions, taking photographs, reading books and following popular culture as most middle class Turks do.

Cuneyt is a 32 years old man. He has studied management and law, has lived in London and Berlin, has done his travelling and is now back in Turkey. He is working on his PhD on management at the moment and is managing his own small office where he gives private lessons to kids who are preparing for the university entrance exams. He told me that he is not interested in art at. He was quite reluctant to see the exhibition insisting that there were many better things to do in Istanbul on a sunny day as it was; however he did look interested in what he saw once we were in.

Tansu is a 25 years old man who is studying his Master’s degree in Industrial Engineering. He is very into music and has his own band. They play in some small bars in Istanbul. In

\textsuperscript{34} Kemalist is a term referring to the followers of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.
general he is a very analytical and critical person, who does not hold back from expressing opinion. He has taken some modules on contemporary art during his studies and was quite enthusiastic to see the exhibition.

Nihal is a 31 years old woman who has a degree in economics. She is half Turkish half Kurdish and is sensitive to political issues. She comes from a lower middle class family and has had some hard time economically, however at the moment she is working as a manager for an international company and is living a comfortable life. Although claiming to be interested in art she doesn’t have the habit of visiting exhibitions and was especially reluctant to see an exhibition of video art.

*The Face of Modern Turkey*

The exhibition *The Enemy Inside Me*, to which I took my informants was at the Istanbul Modern Museum, which is the first private Museum of Modern Art in Turkey. The museum was founded in December 2004 by Eczacibasi, one of Turkey’s biggest corporations, in an 8000 square meters dry cargo warehouse. It is considered the face of modern Turkey and receives government and press support. The exhibits include permanent collections of Turkish art from the beginning of the establishment of the republic as well as temporary exhibitions of Turkish and international artists. It is receiving a minimum of 2500 visitors on Thursdays which has free entrance for Turkish residents. Levent Calikoglu, the head curator of the museum, asserts that the audience visiting the museum is mostly ‘ordinary people who are interested in art, who do not go to art galleries but only experience it with occasional museum visits’\(^{35}\). Thus the exhibitions receive a wide audience not limited by the select art circuit.

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\(^{35}\) Personal correspondence.
The Enemy Inside Me was a retrospective of Kutlug Ataman’s works spanning a period of fifteen years; and was on between November 2010 and March 2011. It was the first big solo exhibition of the artist in his home country. It has had 205,425 visitors during the time it was on. As stated by Levent Calikoglu, ‘this exhibition could only have been possible within a museum setting like Istanbul Modern’36. According to Calikoglu, one reason Ataman’s work has not been exhibited much in Turkey until now was the lack of an institution that would be able to support the work technically and have the authority to stand behind the work’s strong content. To understand this claim, we need to look more into the art context in Turkey.

With the founding of the modern Turkish Republic37 art was seen as a tool to reinforce Turkey’s modern identity. It was a project of the republic to create artist groups whose works were modelled on western art. However, in the second half of the century, and especially the 1990s, alternative, innovative art practices and the notion of curatorship emerged.38 However, still today, there isn’t yet a network of art institutions that would be recognized at the level of its western models. Government support to current art practices is insufficient and it is the private sector that enables the few number of galleries and museums to keep going.

Beral Madra39 marks a gap between high culture and popular culture. High culture, according to Madra, has started developing in Turkey in the last 150 years, however has been forced to negotiate with popular culture in order to reach the masses. ‘A substitute

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36 Personal correspondence.
37 The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 at the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Modernization was embraced as a means to establish a new western identity for the republic. See Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey, London, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.
culture containing arabesque, kitsch and high doses of consumer culture was established as a replacement for the high culture. As modernism gave way to post-modernism in Turkey, high culture was forced to compromise to consumer culture to be able to stay in the scene.

This break between high and popular culture, and the lack of establishment in Turkey’s art market, on the other hand in the 2000s started developing into a potential for creative acts unrestrained by the art market, which distinguished itself from the art supported by state ideology. Vasif Kortun states that in the Turkish art context there is a distinction between “current art” and “contemporary art”.

Unlike contemporary art and artists, current art and artists do not draw attention to the modern republic project. This is a break in the intermix/transition between modern and contemporary...Current art does not work on drafting a future; it is involved with ‘here’ and ‘now’... According to Aysegul Sonmez, the current artists would be recognized by their individualities as opposed to the artists defined by their group identities in the republican art movement. However, these individual artists had to make the fight their own to get their work acknowledged as Art. Art started developing in small alternative venues, which due to lack of backing from the nation state have constantly been forced to justify their doings against the preconception of art as a source of suspicion and resistance to the establishment. It was common practice until the opening of Garanti Platform Gallery in 2001 that galleries and art spaces would have security checks at their doors. Court

40 Ibid, 29.
42 Ibid.
hearings relating to art works were quite common and the 2005 Istanbul Biennial was overshadowed by court hearings on the content of the catalogues and some of the exhibited works\textsuperscript{43}.

Returning to Calikoglu’s statement that Ataman’s exhibition would have only been possible in an institution like Istanbul Modern, it is the context of this huge museum, regarded as the face of modern Turkey and is supported by the state and media, that provides justification and acceptation to the content such as stories of abusive policemen, sexually explicit images and displacedness of Armenian identity.

\textit{The Enemy Inside Me}

There were eleven works in the exhibition, each of which had a sheet of helper text available providing brief information on the piece. The first work that greets the visitor on entrance of the floor was \textit{Paradise} (2006), which was a work consisting of twenty four LCD screens arranged in a semi circle, one of them being in the middle of the circle. The piece in the middle was replaced by another one every day. Each screen showed an individual resident of Orange County of Southern California defining their dream like lives. The “paradise on earth” identity attributed to the place they live shapes the individual narratives of these people and the notion of paradise becomes an irony leaving the viewer with questions rather than answers as in most of Ataman’s work. Some of my informants, however found it difficult to relate to this work, stating that the culture was so strange to them that they couldn’t feel any affinity to what was being said. The irony

\textsuperscript{43} During the 9th Istanbul Biennale in 2005, the catalogues for a photography exhibition curated by Halil Altindere were confiscated because of some images by the artist Murat Tosyali that were supposedly assaulting the Turkish army. The hearings didn’t result in any convictions. In 2006 the art journal Kaos GL was taken to court for publishing a work by the painter Taner Ceylan depicting a homosexual scene. The hearings started with the claim that the image wasn’t an art piece and the journal was banned from distributing the issue in case. The work had previously been exhibited at the 2003 Istanbul Biennial and at Art Basel in 2006.
behind the title of the work was not grasped by most of them. However, the work still succeeded in raising the intended questions on the truthfulness of the notion of paradise, which took the form of criticizing the artist for the choice of the title:

I don’t think this is right. I don’t think all people there live in this earthly paradise. There are people trying to survive there as well...there are cab drivers, construction workers. They live in this paradise but don’t live like that. And all these people, just because they live in Orange County, they feel like they need to act happy. I don’t understand why this needs to be called “paradise”. It’s fake.44

Moving on from Paradise, one confronts It’s A Vicious Circle (2002), a twelve screen installation with the face of a Jamaican immigrant in close up, talking about his experiences as a foreigner living in Berlin. Each screen has the same image, though in some cases a bit distorted or in different colour tones. As the screens are arranged in a circle, the subject is positioned in confrontation to itself and becomes at the same time the receiver of his own speech. ‘While complaining about the difficulties of being an

44 Cuneyt interview.
immigrant, the fact that he caricaturizes and generalizes the society he lives in actually reveals that he himself has entered the vicious circle of racism which he protests.\textsuperscript{45} This endless loop of one man recounting incidents of racism posits the viewer outside the circle, feeling a need to respond but not being able to. The work demands a response and confronts the audience at a subjective level; however my informants were puzzled on how to respond to this work. All perceived the work as a critique of racism but were puzzled by the arrangement of the screens and the, at times paranoiac, accounts of the subject’s experiences.

I do understand what he is trying to say, but I don’t understand why this is arranged like this and why this guy is talking on and on and on... I think it is about the individual and the society affecting each other. This guy...how he is against racism, but he is part of that society...he has become part of that society. I don’t know, I somehow find this very pessimistic, very depressing.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Figure 3: It’s A Vicious Circle (2002)}

\textsuperscript{45} Exhibition helper text.

\textsuperscript{46} Nihal interview.
The next piece titled *Turkish Delight* features the artist himself dancing, dressed as a belly dancer with makeup and a wig. His dance figures are exaggerated repetitions of clichés and his face has an expression of disinterestedness, chewing a gum at the same time. The work touches upon notions of the Western gaze towards the other and projects back the Western conception of the orient in this exaggerated form.

Identity is a jacket...People you never see will make it and you wear it. Identity is something other than you, outside of you. It is a question of perception. You can be aware of it and manipulate it, play with it, amplify it or mask it for infinite reasons.  

![Figure 4: Turkish Delight (2007)](image)

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Emre Baykal evaluates this as ‘accentuation as a strategy to deconstruct an ideology’\textsuperscript{48}. Through his accentuation of the belly dancer, Ataman turns it into a parody, leaving the decision to the audience on what to make of this flawed version of a familiar image.\textsuperscript{49} Beaulieu and Roberts\textsuperscript{50} mark the challenge for West to make sense of such counter narratives and alternative images made in dialogue with Western culture. Zeynep Celik addresses the same dilemma stating that ‘as the voices of certain alterities, kept silent by the valorised culture, begins to enter the dialogue, they complicate the meanings and contextual fabrics of the art objects and disrupt inherited historiographic legacies’\textsuperscript{51}. \textit{Turkish Delight} provides a good example to this through its commentary on its own stereotype rooted in the Western gaze.

The helper text accompanying the piece explained the work as a reversal of the western gaze, however there were various different interpretations from my informants. One interpretation was that the piece was making fun of the orient and that the artist was expressing his affinity to the west through his parody of an oriental cliché\textsuperscript{52}. Another informant, Betul, took the piece completely personal, identifying with it as an artist.

This is amazing. It is absurd, but that’s not the matter. I so wish I could be a bit like him. I know this text here says other things, but this work made me think of lots of

\textsuperscript{49} This notion of ‘accentuation as a strategy for deconstruction’ resonates with Bell Hooks’ ‘notion of perverse re-enactment’. Discussing the fear generated by whiteness in black imagination, Bell talks about Toni Morrison’s novel \textit{Beloved}, in which a mother, on fear of having her children suffer the terror of whiteness, chooses to inflict the terror herself by killing them.
\textsuperscript{52} Cuneyt interview.
other things about myself. How close and reserved I am. You really need to be in peace with yourself to make a piece like this.\textsuperscript{53}

*Women Who Wear Wigs* was a four screen installation showing four women, who all wear or have worn a wig in some period of their lives. The four screens were presented in a line with sound coming through the wall opposite each screen. However, as the sounds were not coming through headphones, but being delivered to ambient, it was not possible to completely isolate oneself from the rest of the interviews while trying to focus on one. The women talk about the reasons they wear the wig: Melek Ulagay spent her life in disguise during the 70s due to her political activities; Nevval Sevindi was a journalist who used the wig to regain her femininity by concealing her hair loss that came as a result of Chemotherapy; the third screen, which was just a black screen as the person preferred to hide her identity, was of a university student who was not allowed to enter school with her headscarf due to the headscarf ban in Turkey, and thus had to wear a wig instead; the last subject, Demet Demir, was a transvestite activist who used the wig when her hair was cut by the police to prevent her from undertaking sex work. ‘Rather than trying to render and get a picture of reality, Ataman’s work highlights the modification and multiplication of it by human beings.’\textsuperscript{54} All these stories evolving around the same object, the wig, blend together to form a larger portrait of a society that exercises authority over its members in different forms. Ataman describes this work as four frames blending to form a fifth. The fifth frame is different for each viewer as ‘reality does not exist independent from us, but is formed separately in each person’s perception.’\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Betul interview.
\textsuperscript{55} Ataman quoted from Ozlem Altinok, ‘Identities We Wear on Our Heads: Interview with Kutlug Ataman’, in *Cumhuriyet*, March 14, 2002.
Most of my informants however found this work very puzzling saying they could not concentrate on a single story, getting distracted by the others. The critiques of the work focused mostly on the way it was displayed, suggesting each piece should have had headphones. This, as I later discovered, was due to them watching these pieces as fragments of documentary. Thus they wanted to understand what was going on in each story. Still, the notion of constructing identities came up in all informants’ responses and this piece was considered especially relevant in the context of Turkey, expressing comments on social pressure and the society’s impetus to mould the individual. Thus the piece acted as an agent provocateur through which people verbalized their thoughts on tensions in the society.56

Figure 5: Women Who Wear Wigs

Stefan’s Room was a five screen installation whose subject was a young German man obsessed with raising and preserving moths. The screens were arranged in different angles floating in mid-air and the viewer was invited to sit in the middle space surrounded
by the screens. On one screen we see Stefan Naumann telling us the story of his thirty thousand butterflies which he preserves in his home, while on the other four screens we see images of the moths, butterflies, the poisons he uses to kill and preserve them.

![Figure 6: Stefan's Room (2004)](image)

In the same area with Stefan’s Room, we saw The Four Seasons of Veronica Read, which was a four screen installation in which the screens were arranged in a square leaving the viewer outside. On each screen we hear Veronica talking about her obsession of raising Hippeastrum flower bulbs, with each season projected on a different screen. The arrangements of the screens as a closed, regular geometry reflect the mental state of this woman trapped within her own fantasy. ‘As an extension of her identity, the metamorphosis of the flower bulbs she has devoted herself to both in a scientific and maternal manner, creates a transformation in her character as well.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{57} Exhibition helper text.
Stefan’s Room and The Four Seasons of Veronica Read, both dealing with people whose obsessions have become ‘metaphorical embodiments of their identities’\(^5^8\), confront the audience at a personal level, provoking a response to the story behind these obsessions.

![Figure 7: Four Seasons of Veronica Read (2004)](image)

Ataman\(^5^9\) relates his work to Rachel Whitehead’s in the sense that a presence is expressed through absence. In these two pieces the works are not informative accounts of moths or Hippeastrum bulbs (although the ongoing narrative seems to be that), but what lies behind these endless accounts, which is pertaining to the nature of these two characters. One of my informants, Nihal, who was in the process of divorce, was very affected by Veronica Read’s Four Seasons as her own perception of the work was shaped by her personal state of mind; whereas most other informants found the same work not very interesting and not very relevant.

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I find this exhibition really depressing in general. Especially this Veronica character... something as beautiful as flowers has become her prison; she has closed herself to people. I find this extremely sad...even sadder than the transsexual...at least there is hope there, but this woman is done with...it’s all those flower bulbs...how lonely, how sad. I could sit and watch this forever...feeling the deep sadness.  

In a separate room was 99 Names, consisting of five screens positioned in different angles. The bottom of the first screen rested on the floor as the other four screens were each elevated higher than the previous one. On each screen we see a seated man rocking back and forth with his eyes closed. The movement in the first screen is very slow, but the rhythm gets higher and higher as we progress to the last screen which is almost flying in the air. In this final stage ‘the stability of the figure’s memory, and therefore of his identity, remains indistinct; the character has surrendered utterly to this act and is undergoing an out-of-body experience.’

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60 Nihal interview.
61 Exhibition helper text.
The interpretation of this work again varied considerably from individual to individual. Nihal, who said she has had experiences of similar trance states, interpreted the work as a disappearance of identity, the individual getting rid of his identity like a sleeve. On the other hand, Cuneyt interpreted the work as a parody of Aczimendi head bangers and found it disturbing both for the viewer and for the people who might be practicing that belief:

I think for most of these works, he is using these stereotypes of people and I don’t find this very ethical. I mean there are people practicing these things and I don’t know how I would feel if it was me being an Aczimendi and seeing this piece here.

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62 Aczimendism is a religious order followed by a small minority in Turkey. They are known for their stance against secularism and democracy, particular black clothing and religious ceremonies involving head banging.
I think I would be extremely disturbed of seeing this. I think he (the artist) is intentionally using these radical images...exploiting them almost.\textsuperscript{63}

The notion of exploitation is an interesting one in relation to Ataman’s works. One could say he was exploiting the weaknesses of these characters if these were factual films or reality shows. However the ambiguity of whether or not these characters actually exist as they are presented to us and the fact that they are presented within the context of an art gallery makes this accusation hard to support. The fact that Cuneyt brings this point up however tells us something about his way of engaging with these characters. Even though he expresses his doubts on the genuinely of these characters he is confused about how to react to the explicitness of the works. Should he treat them as real people and thus be concerned about their personal rights? Or should he see them as just fictive characters stemming from the artists’ mind?

In another room was Beggars, consisting of seven screens which at first gave the impression of black and white photographs. However, on closer look one notices the movement of smoke coming from the tip of a cigarette or a slight trembling of a hand. These are life size moving images of beggars, looking you in the eye, some of which are “real”, but some are actors, as stated in the helper text. As stated by one informant, the statement that some of the beggars are actors creates a feeling of alienation and puts you off from identifying with the subjects or feeling pity for them. ‘The artist has been very clever in this one...because otherwise this might have turned into a kitsch demagogy.’\textsuperscript{64}

Another piece was Never My Soul, which was probably the most controversial and confrontational piece in the exhibition. Never My Soul consisted of six TV screens

\textsuperscript{63} Cuneyt interview. 
\textsuperscript{64} Nihal interview.
arranged in a living room like atmosphere, with velvet sofas dimly illuminated. The entrance was marked with a +15 sign. “Never my Soul” is a cliché phrase often used in Turkish cinema which the good girl says to her rapist, meaning “You can take my body, but never my soul”. On the screens we see Ceyhan Firat, a transvestite who is pretending to be Turkan Soray, the diva of Turkish cinema. On each screen Ceyhan is recounting a different story about her life. We see her talking, dressing, undressing, acting, having a bath, having sex, having a dialysis treatment at the hospital... Often her “boyfriend” Jessie is in the shot as well, though the actual relationship is an enigma, as she at times says he is just an extra in the film. We hear her stories of being abused as a child and a young boy/girl. At the hospital she is neither admitted to the men’s nor the women’s ward and ends up with a bed in the storage cabinet. At times she is in conversation with Ataman, acknowledging the event of filming.

This work is not a straight forward documentation of Ceyhan’s life. After interviewing Ceyhan, Ataman transcribed her words, and then had her memorize and re-perform her “script” in front of the camera, which he then spliced together with her original interview, drawing together the initial “documentary” recording and her subsequent performance of that account. The artist explains this choice as an effort to create parallax view, ‘a formal expression of her parallel situation, a woman who is also a man with a penis’.\(^{65}\) Clues of this arrangement are left in the work such as instances when Ceyhan tells Jessie to stop messing around because they have a lot of script to go through that day. However, this information is never explicitly presented to the viewer and is not included in the helper texts; thus the viewer has to make his own decision as to the elements of truth versus staging in the work.

In the talk he gave at Istanbul Modern during the exhibition, Stuart Comer\textsuperscript{66} referred to Ataman’s work as a descendant of Andy Warhol’s video pieces. Playing with the notions of presence and absence, identities shifting, changing evolving over time, the characters in Ataman’s works present themselves as synthetic products of the perception of ‘the viewer as a participator’\textsuperscript{67}. Mark Prince, referring to \textit{Never My Soul} states that Ceyhan is protected by ‘the theatrical distance of her performance’.\textsuperscript{68} Comparing \textit{Never My Soul} with Warhol’s \textit{Chelsea Girls}, Prince states that:

In both films the victim is transformed into a heroine by the camera’s unrelenting attention; in both, real-time film making, a realist device, is belied by the theatrical behaviour of the protagonists. For Ataman, as for Warhol, the subject’s image is a facade. Unlike Warhol, however, he knowingly presents that surface as vulnerable to being shattered by human suffering, even if the emotional crisis is ultimately revealed as merely another form of rhetoric.\textsuperscript{69}
What the viewer sees in this work is altered by which of the six screens he/she chooses to watch. Most informants watched several different bits and the common discussion after this piece was on the necessity of the explicit content. Most informants found the content disturbing, one even to the degree of leaving the room at that point.

Why should I have to watch this. I don’t know this person...I’m not interested. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying this is a bad person, or that these subjects shouldn’t be dealt with, but I am blocked when I see those images of genitals and I leave. Maybe there was an interesting story behind it but I couldn’t stay and watch. This is my personal reaction of course. ⁷⁰

On the other hand, most informants, while agreeing that the work was disturbing, thought the sharpness of what they saw would make them remember the work and think about it more than they would were it a milder representation. Also, as intended by the

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⁷⁰ Betul interview.
artist, the extreme theatricality of the character succeeded in raising questions in the audience as to the genuineness of what is seen.

One other issue worth noting is the dependency between the audience’s personal experiences and the level they can relate to the work. It is less puzzling for people if they can match things with experiences that they have had or witnessed in their own lives. In both Women Who Wear Wigs and Never My Soul, the parts where the characters talk about health problems, i.e. the chemotherapy in the case of Neval Sevindi and the dialysis treatment in the case of Ceyhan, were the parts that the informants expressed that they could relate to the characters most and perceive them as other human beings. It is much easier to relate to a woman who is having a dialysis treatment, than to a person with an extreme condition of gender identity.

Another piece, Testimony was a single screen video with Ataman’s nanny as its subject. The Armenian identity of the nanny was kept secret from her all her life, since she came to Ataman’s family as a baby. Now she has severe memory loss due to Alzheimer disease and this makes the efforts by Ataman futile when he tries to get her to remember the past by showing her pictures of the family. The notion of the Armenian Genocide being a critical issue within the context of Turkey, the nanny’s memory loss creates a testimony for the Turkish society’s difficulty to deal with its own past. ‘The transience of memory and history reworks and reshapes both the individual and collective identity’. This point was appreciated by most informants; however Cuneyt again raised the question of

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71 The forced deportation of Armenians under Ottoman Rule after the First World War. Most Armenians were deported to Syrian deserts and most of the deaths happened during the deportation journey due to lack of food, diseases and hard weather conditions. The number of deaths is accounted to be between 1 million to 1.5 million. Modern Turkey denies the use of the word genocide for the events that took place and referencing Armenian genocide in Turkey risks controversial reactions and at times prosecution.

72 Exhibition helper text.
ethics. As the nanny is suffering from severe memory loss and does not have proper mental functions, does this turn this piece into exploitation of someone unable to give consent?

The final piece *fff*, which stands for *Found Family Footage*, was a ten screen installation composed of home videos of an English family assembled together. Keeping in line with the fact that the artist had no input in the production of these images, he contacted Michael Nyman to ask for a musical composition which would have an equal degree of autonomy as the images. Nyman composed the musical score on a simple children’s piano without seeing the images and later recorded on a full size piano. In this case, the footage and the music, both created separately, without the involvement of the artist, set forth a dual narration in the work, again leaving it to the audience to establish the links through a process of mental editing. The piece can also be interpreted as an attempt by Ataman to reconstruct and appropriate English culture as an outsider, reversing the usual narrative of the reconstruction of Orient by the West. This work, being just at the exit of the exhibition didn’t attract too much attention and most of the informants stated that they found it very fragmented and could not relate to the work due to being foreign to English culture. As with most other pieces, the response to this works was based on a literal face value reading of the work, rather than looking into second levels of meanings, ironies or metaphors. One informant even interpreted the work as a visualization of the envy the artist felt towards the West, which was not the intention of the artist at all.

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73 Cuneyt interview.
74 Ataman’s partner’s family.
75 Exhibition helper text.
76 Tansu interview.
The results of this experiment will be discussed more in relation to the theoretical arguments in the rest of this study. However, to sum up some general tendencies in the audience response: there was a tendency to resist the works, a feeling of being confronted by them...not knowing how to deal with them and an anxiety of being interviewed and saying the right things. The audience got more involved with the work if they could find some affinity at a personal level; they found extreme characters disturbing but admitted that this added to the intensity of the work and the mark it left on them; how the works were perceived were very much affected by the social, cultural and psychological background of the audience; they tended to receive the work as a documentation of real lives, and thus found the arrangements and characters confusing. This, however, means that, though not always at a conscious level, Ataman’s work succeeded in fulfilling its author’s intention, which was raising doubts on the “reality” of the identities presented.

CHAPTER 3: ANTHROPOLOGICAL CORRELATES

One drawback of my method was that I asked people to verbalize what they felt and thought about the exhibition; however the notion of verbalization is a tricky one. Asking people to express their sensuous experiences in language is bound to result in a certain degree of loss in the information transferred as the mode of the information changes. The efficacy of verbalization when expressing a sensuous experience, has been problematized by many scholars.77 In the field of anthropology, especially in Melanesian studies, the concept of exegesis has been a recurring and problematic theme.

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77 See Geerts (1973), Csordas (1990), et al.
Generativity

In his study of the Abelam art of the Sepik district of New Guinea, Anthony Forge\(^78\) argues that art for the Abelam is not a representation of language or any other communication system, but is a communication system on its own. It is a system based on intuitive, subconscious understanding. There are signs in this system but these are not organised in syntagmatic order and don't have fixed meanings. In his study Forge\(^79\) does give some symbolic explanations but he takes the position that these meanings are not consciously constructed but embedded in the cosmology.

...although a painting of a *nggwalndu* face will always be so identified, the arabesque ‘legs of pork’...could equally be named as immature fern frond or a swirl in the water of a flooded river; if the element means anything in terms of words it probably means all three with all their connotations as well. But the Abelam do not ask what a painting means. The design elements all have names and they are assembled into harmonious compositions, which appear to act directly on the beholder without having to be named.\(^80\)

Forge’s discussion of the Tambaran cult, which is one of the two main cults constituting the Abelam ritual, resonates with Gell’s proposal for an understanding of art as a system of action rather than a system of representation. Gell\(^81\) suggested that we leave aside our preconceived ideas of art and aesthetics, and focus on art’s role on social relations. Anthropology as a discipline is interested in social relationships; thus it would only be

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\(^80\) Forge, Learning to See in New Guinea, pp.389-90.
logical that an anthropological theory of art would take art objects as social agents within these relationships. Gell uses four elements in his matrix of art nexus, namely artist, index, prototype and recipient (patient). The term ‘index’ designates the ‘visible, physical thing’ through which a particular cognitive operation become possible, namely the ‘abduction of agency’, or, to put it very simply, the inferring of the cause/intention behind the index. ‘Abduction of agency’ is the process through which ‘art like situations’ arise. In the case of abduction ‘we find some very curious circumstances, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of some general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition’.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, abduction implies a certain level of uncertainty when establishing these cause-effect relationships.

Gell uses the concept of abduction to designate a semiotic interference, but at the same time he tries to avoid falling into an analogy with language. This is why he gives primacy to the index, over the other two types of signs, namely symbol and icon. This, on Gell’s side can be seen as an effort to keep his theory open; however the systematic matrix of relationships he proposes between index and its recipient (the patient), his notion of a prototype which can very simply be described as the “original” of what the index is referring to, as well as his emphasis on the relational context in which the art object exists makes the theory of agency more strictly bounded and closed than what its creator had possibly intended to.

Forge’s analysis differs from Gell’s theory through its emphasis on the unconscious communication embedded in cosmology which cannot be pinpointed either by the people concerned, or by the anthropologist. The Tambaran cult through which boys are initiated, takes around thirty years for a complete initiation cycle. During these thirty years the

initiate is exposed to series of displays which he is told is the face of *nggwalndu*- the spirits which are associated with the patrilineal clans. At each step the initiates are told that the previous ceremony was a trick but this time they will really see it. This goes on until the last ceremony in which they are actually shown the large figures which are considered to be the real *nggwalndu*. During all these ceremonies there are no instructions given to the initiates, no myths told. In fact, the Abelam know and tell remarkably few myths. As Forge explains, in this society we cannot take myth as the primary form and think of art as the representation of it. Art is communicating a function of its own. In these ceremonies, the initiates do not know what is going to happen and are shown paintings and carved objects under conditions of great tension. As such, Forge\(^\text{83}\) suggests that the initiation system functions to teach young men to see art, not so that they learn how to interpret it, but so that they are directly affected by it.

Diane Losche\(^\text{84}\) builds on Forge’s work and takes the lack of congruence between visual design and verbal referent as her initial problem. She suggests ‘a model of iconography as part of a system of transformation and production in which signs are assembled into a spatial/verbal field which forms a specific kind of mimetic apparatus for transformation’.\(^\text{85}\) This system allows transformation and generativity. Returning to Forge’s discussion on the arabesque designs forming the *nggwalndu* face, Losche asserts that the leg of the pork, the fern frond or the swirl in the water may refer to the same thing residing in the function of generativity, which makes their most appropriate

\(^{83}\) Forge, Learning to See in New Guinea, p. 290.


\(^{85}\) Ibid, 53.
representation to be the spiral design. ‘The design represents a consistent gloss only if we shift our attention away from the essence of objects to the nature of their functions, and their ability to transform themselves’. Thus what matters is not so much the individual forms but their generative, transformative functions which can find expression in a multiplicity of forms.

Abelam art is so interesting for West because it problematizes the Kantian assumption that aesthetics is a matter of interpretation rather than function. For a form to be interpreted in the context of Western art, it needs to be separated from function; whereas ‘interpretation does not exist in the Abelam context since it is not interpretation but function that is communicable’. Losche argues that forms in Abelam art are means through which sentiments, feelings and emotions are structured. Adding to Forge’s discussion of the Tambaran cult, she argues that the forms that are presented to the initiates are a way to transform these men from attachment to women to attachment to objects, as well as evoking an attachment to older men as a source of nurture and power.

Forge suggests that to ask what a sign means is irrelevant in Abelam art. Losche asks why it is irrelevant. Her answer is that what matters is not the meaning of these forms, but their productive nature. ‘Asking the Abelam what this particular design means is akin to asking “What does your refrigerator mean?”’, or to reverse the issue “What does your painting do?”

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86 This generativity associated with the spiral design brings to mind Benjamin (1931) speaking of Karl Blossfeldt’s magnified plant photographs as revealing and affecting an optical unconscious.

87 Losche, S4.

88 Ibid, 59.

89 It should be noted on the other hand that Howard Morphy (1989), in this study on the Yolngu of Northern Australia, shows that forms in Yolngu forms do have coded meanings in relation to ancestral past. However, he argues for a form of aesthetic relativism in which the interpretation of aesthetic affects varies between cultures.

90 Ibid, 59.
Exegesis or Verbalization

O’Hanlon\(^91\), points out a distinction that needs to be made between exegesis and verbalization. In his analysis of the construction of a ceremonial wig in New Guinea Highlands, he argues that the discourse among the makers and the people present at the time of the making of the wig, though not being of exegetic quality, is a verbalisation of social dynamics and thus still tells us something about the nature of the society.

The wig is made at the pig festival focused on the growth and fertility of a clan’s pigs. The maternal kin and path people are expected to visit the wearer during wig construction, and no one else. If the wig doesn’t turn out in the right form, this failure is attributed to disputes and grievances in the maternal kin; and these tensions are expressed by the people present at the making of the wig through revelations of interpersonal secrets. Thus the wig becomes a means through which the effect of the maternal kin on the creation of the person is realized and a means through which these social tensions are released and revealed.

O’Hanlon argues that the Wahgi wig can be viewed as a second skin ‘whose construction evokes contesting principles as to whether the person is constituted by clan or by external sources’\(^92\) (i.e. maternal kin). However he has not heard any comments from the Wahgi explicitly stating this analogy.

When asked about wigs Wahgi only make the kinds of explanation I have sketched: they say that wigs are worn at pig festival time, that they are made in seclusion and then emerge, that they are to do with growth, with making their wearers


\(^92\) Ibid, 604
attractive. Wahgi make, in short, the kind of minimalist remarks which led Forge (1979:29) to declare roundly that ‘verbalizing about art ...is not a feature of New Guinea cultures’. ⁹³

However, even through the kind of talk Wahgi talk is not a contextualizing exegetic one, Wahgi do talk about their wigs and this talk is based on the assessment of the wig in relation to social tensions, which, as O’Hanlon puts it, is the local form of exegesis in Melanesia. He states that these assessments index an indigenous theory of significance, in which outer forms are felt to monitor and authenticate otherwise concealed states and processes.⁹⁴

*Reflected Self-Knowledge*

In his study of the Barok of New Ireland, Roy Wagner⁹⁵ argues that Barok images work at a metaphorical level and verbalization of their meaning defies the multiplicity of possible meanings these images contain. Exegesis restricts the image to one gloss among many, none of which is the “real” gloss on its own.⁹⁶

Image, as a means of construing action, power or effectiveness is profoundly different from verbal explanation: talk, the Barok say, is cheap. An image can and must be witnessed or experienced, rather than merely described or summed up verbally... An anthropologist who might set out to get the *real* gloss would be

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⁹³ Ibid, 604
⁹⁴ Ibid, 605
⁹⁶ See Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation* (1967) for a discussion of interpretation as an impoverishment and depletion of the world...turning possibilities into fixed meanings.
horribly frustrated, because the cultural convention exists at the level of the
image, not at that of its verbalized gloss. 97

Wagner’s analysis intends to understand a particular type of image that is self-referential. Decoding the image within a context makes the context part of the meaning of the image, and limits the perception to a constructed meaning within the context at hand; however as Strathern 98 states, a ‘perceptual image...condenses and collapses context into itself in the sense that all points of reference are obviated or displaced by its single form’.

Strathern distinguishes between two types of events: ‘event taken as incidental occurrences in nature, explained by being into its historical (cultural) context’ and ‘events as performance known by its effect; understood in terms of what it contains, the forms that it conceals or reveals, registered in actions of those who witness it’ 99. She argues that Western thought explains events in reference to others whereas Melanesians understand encounters in terms of their effects, as performances rather than incidental occurrences.

Strathern discusses the Melanesian first encounter with the white man and argues that this first encounter presented the native Melanesians with a particular type of image that was not located within any historical context, but that was perceived as a spectacle, as a self-referential image that did not require any contextualization. The problem with this first encounter was not how to contextualize it but how to deal with its effects.

Strathern argues that, within the field of Anthropology the seclusion of material culture studies has lead to a separation between artefacts and social events, however building on Melanesian material, we should extend our concept of artefact to performance and to

97 Wagner, pp. xiv-xv.
event, as for the Melanesian culture the only meaningful reference for artefacts are their effects. Thus in her analyses Strathern addresses events/performances as artefacts/images and subjects them to a similar analysis as that would be appropriate for artefacts.

A. Strathern (1971:xii) reports the words of an old man from Hagen who told how his neighbours had reacted to the appearance of the administrative patrol in the area. The white man was thought to be a pale-skinned cannibal ogre, but “then he gave us shell valuables in return for pigs, and we decided he was a human”. The unspoken side of this statement might read: “Then we gave him pigs in return for shell valuables, and we realised we were human still”.100

Thus Strathern argues that images are reflected self knowledge. The way in which a person responds to a taboo or regulation shows that person to be the kind of kinsman or kinswoman he/she is. However, Strathern agrees with Wagner and O’Hanlon that this knowledge embedded in images is not one to be explained by referential coding, as ‘referential coding deprives the image of its power to elicit taken for granted meanings.’101

**Contextualizing the Experience**

Gilbert Lewis states in his discussion of magic in the rituals of the Gnau people of New Guinea that: ‘Our understanding of other societies reflects the media by which we learned of them. No medium reflects reality as we perceive it with all our senses. The description must be partial.’102 Forms of verbal description cannot be trusted to provide

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100 Ibid, 4.
101 Ibid, 36.
the whole picture, however, following O’Hanlon, language still accommodates a type of knowledge even though this knowledge is not exclusive or of exegetic quality. Discussing a treatment by the Gnau people given to someone diagnosed as suffering from an attack by the Panu’et spirit, Lewis argues that the whole sensuous experience of the ritual is very different than any verbal or visual account of it.

Anthropology needs to explain things within context. Even if the facts were clear, they would still need to be interpreted within the right frame work. If a performer in a ritual explains the actions performed not as a treatment but as a sacrifice to God for sins, the anthropologist still needs to explain why they persist in the notion of sacrifice but not the healing potential of the plants used. ‘You may say they are ignorant or irrational, but some of that irrationality depends on your decision about how to categorize their action and the motives you have attributed to them.’

On the other hand, Christopher Wright argues that anthropology, while focusing on context and the relation to other aspects of social life, sacrifices from the experience, the immersion into the event. Wright discusses the work of Cameron Jamie, who is an artist originally from San Fernando Valley in California. Jamie left home after an earthquake in 1994, and now lives in Paris. As part of his project titled Goat Project, he goes back to his home town every year to do performances with just one or no witness. He then asks an illustrator to illustrate the testimonials from these witnesses and these illustrations are what is left of the pieces. As Wright states, ‘The three stage process, performance, eye witness account and subsequent illustration, mirrors some of the dilemmas also faced by

103 Ibid, 419.
anthropologists concerned with documenting ritual performances.\textsuperscript{105} It reveals the process of separation from the original performance. Through the translation of the information from the experience to verbalization to documentation, the account of the event is being altered and transformed. Some of the information is filtered first through the selective perception of the witnesses and then through the interpretations and expressions of the illustrator; while at the same time the meaning of the work loses its possible alterations and becomes less ambiguous. It could be argued that this restriction would apply to any kind of information transfer in which a sensuous experience is being transformed into a discourse.

\textbf{CHAPTER 4: CONFRONTING THE WORK IN PROGRESS}

To bring the discussion back to art, I would like to consider Lyotard’s discussion of figural versus discursive modes. Resonating with the impediment of direct translation between experience and its documentation, Lyotard problematizes the position attributed to art as a counter force to religion, humanity and politics. Positioning art as a critical force against politics implies assigning art the same discursive position as politics. Thus he sees art as ontologically outside of critical discourse. Lyotard keeps a radical distance between the aesthetic and the political; however at the same time problematizes the distinction between figure and discourse. He criticizes Hegelian dialectics’ attempts to overcome the distance between discourse and figure, and marks the impossibility of this attempt. We can only attempt to transform the sensible into discursive mode, but that is bound to fail as discussed above. The figural, being within and without discourse, is an alterity within

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 68.
language. The task of critical philosophy should then be to keep the discourse open to uncertainties and complications of sensible experience.

Moving in the opposite direction from the Hegelian dialectic, the sensible here negates and assumes the discursive into itself, and it does not raise it to a higher level, it does push it into a different realm. This “anti” or even “negative dialectic”, a dialectic working against itself in a paradoxical fashion, does not have as its end the overcoming of difference and the establishment of identity, but rather the overcoming of identity and the ‘figuring’ of otherness.  

A for Libidinal

What Lyotard looks for is a non-visual notion of figure through which desire is realized. He does not confine the figural realm with painting or visual arts, but treats it as a field of felt intensities rather than communicated meanings. Thus a poem could be more figural than a painting even though it is expressed through language. Referring to Art as figure at the level of a matrix, Lyotard states that Art...

... is not only not seen, but is no more visible than readable. It does not belong to plastic space, nor textual space either; it is difference itself, and as such, it doesn’t at all tolerate being put in the form of an opposition...Discourse, image and form all miss it equally because it resides in all three spaces together. The works of any individual are never more than the offshoots of this matrix.  

107 Lyotard, discourse, figure, (278-9) (?)
Building on the theories of Freud\textsuperscript{108}, Lyotad sees the sensible as freed from the limitations of consciousness. However, once you try to make the matrix readable you lose the link to the unconscious. Thus Lyotard sees art as functioning in the libidinal field. While Adorno\textsuperscript{109} positions Art as a manifestation of critical thinking and sees dissipation of subjectivity as a defeat, for Lyotad the arbitrary, fragmented, irrational, non-dialectical within art forms its libidinal dimension; and the open, unformed, characteristics of the libidinal is what gives art its critical potential.

The notion of libidinal resonates with Eco’s emphasis on the emotive function. Eco distinguishes between referential function which points at something well defined and verifiable and emotive function which aims at provoking certain reactions in the recipient, stimulating associations and promoting response behaviours that go well beyond the mere recognition of a referent, of a message.\textsuperscript{110} Thus the libidinal works at an emotive level, through the subconscious, denying any possibility to be turned into a referential language.

Alehandro del Pino Valesco\textsuperscript{111}, in his account of a presentation given by Sarat Maharaj, quotes Maharaj on the impossibility of a complete translation:

\begin{quote}
We cannot obviate the great ontological paradox that this human activity (translation) contains; it must generate something that is as much as possible like the original source, but if it fully achieves this, it can turn into that original and then it is no longer a translation.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, London, Routledge, 2001, 90
\textsuperscript{110} Eco, The Open Work, 29.
\textsuperscript{112} Maharaj quoted from del Pino Valesco, 138.
As Isadora Duncan answered to someone who asked her the meaning of the dance she performed: 'If I could tell you what it meant there would be no point in dancing it'.

Every medium works with its own internal logic and any translation is articulating a difference. Sarat Maharaj discusses this issue over a distinction between visual arts as knowledge production and discursive knowledge systems, such as philosophy, science or social theory. The knowledge embedded in visual arts, in order to be transferred into the domain of discourse, needs to be translated from visual, sensuous data into language. Thus Maharaj marks art as a disrupter of direct mapping of meanings and states that its ‘feel-think-know antenna’ is quite different from discursive modalities. Lutticken asserts that contrary to scientific and scholarly knowledge artistic knowledge production is considered to have a weakness of failing to meet a questionable standard; however this exact weakness might be the strength of artistic knowledge. In his catalogue essay for Documenta 11, Maharaj discusses a type of visual arts which is a domain of sensuous, intuitive knowledge, which is outside the rationality and logic of discourse, and even a ‘shredder-pulper of ready-made theory’. This idea reminiscent of Lyotard’s stress on art’s libidinal dimension, asserts art as almost non knowledge, not in the sense of ignorance, but in the sense of indeterminacy. Maharaj uses the term avidya to refer to the type of knowledge embedded in visual arts. This is not a cancellation of systematic knowledge but a neutralization of it.

These modalities enable both “other” ways of knowing and ways of knowing “otherness”. They are counter-epistemological gear- “xeno-equipment” rigged out

113 O’Hanlon, 587.
115 Ibid, 71.
117 Ibid, 71.
for attracting, conducting, taking on difference- for clocking the “foreign, unknown, alien”  

**De-regulation and the Anxiety of the Subject**

In Ataman’s *Woman Who Wear Wigs*, the individual narratives of each character could be considered as literal knowledge on these four characters. However, the interlacing of these narratives and the way the artist installs the screens and sound turns it into a knowledge that cannot be filtered into a rational, linear narrative, but which can only be perceived through the sensuous experience of the multiplicity of images and overlaying cacophony of sounds. The way these narratives are presented deliberately reduces the determinacy of the meaning of each story as the viewing/listening is constantly disrupted by the work itself. And thus the work becomes something more than these individual stories. Irit Rogoff\(^{119}\) states that the reason Ataman’s work is interesting is because it produces narratives and subjects which didn’t exist prior to it; and this is precisely the reason his work is not documentary, but art. Because of the way in which the subjects in these videos embody complex forms of incompatible meanings and through the interlacing of individual subjects, Ataman creates ‘creolised subjects’ ‘challenging the viewer. The puzzling nature of his work is how to relate to being addressed. It demands a response. This challenge ‘deregulates’ the experience of the art work making it ambiguous who has the right to define and categorize it and how it can become a participatory mode.\(^{120}\) Discussing one of Ataman’s works, *Kuba*\(^ {121}\), Rogoff states that the work provides:

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\(^{118}\) Ibid, 72.  
\(^{120}\) Ibid, 165.  
\(^{121}\) This work was not included in Ataman’s retrospective, but has been explained more in Chapter:1.
A zone of de-regulated experience..."demands a mode of listening that cannot simply be explained by knowing more about the miseries of what it is to be a poor Kurd within the Turkish megalopolis. Rather it dares us to listen differently, speculatively, not emphatically, to spatialize and to imagine space when that much grief and discontent and sheer bloody language is enfolded in its midst...If we were to leave Kuba with some notion that we knew something about Kurdish migrants into Istanbul or about ghettosized ethnic communities- we would have failed it. If, however, we open up some speculation about how to listen, how to hear this, if we understand that what is being addressed is the limited categories, and TROPES that we think in, then that address has indeed taken place.122

This idea of the work daring the audience to assume a new way of engagement with it demands the audience to drop guards and submit to the work; and thus requires a willingness and cooperation on part of the audience; or else results in an anxiety of not being able to or willing to meet the challenge. Thomas Docherty123 argues that modern criticism begins with an anxiety about its object, which is a response to a fear of otherness. He traces the foundation of this type of criticism to the thinking of Descartes that prioritizes the subject. In this mode of thought the objective world is only possible as a referent of the conscious subject and any denial of this would lead to a metaphorical death of the subject.124 This was later challenged by materialist perspectives, an example of which is Pierre Bourdieu’s work which shifts priority to the object and its effect on the subject. This shift, according to Docherty, triggers a terror of the loss of autonomy and dependence on the other, the object, the alterity. The result is a history of criticism based

122 Rogoff, 178.
123 Docherty, Alterities.
124 Ibid, 3.
on the construction of identity and the taming\textsuperscript{125} of the other. Docherty argues that criticism needs to find a way to address the other without reducing it to a terrifying alterity.

Modern criticism is based on the premises that the object- and alterity as such-is a scandal perpetrated on the interests of the subject; it is based on a philosophy of identity which is inimical to a real engagement with alterity.\textsuperscript{126}

Bourdieu’s\textsuperscript{127} assertion that popular aesthetics is based on an affirmation of continuity between art and life accounts for a similar discomfort on part of the subject confronted with a challenge to this position. Refusing to distance the art work from the ethos that shapes their everyday perception, the working class in Bourdieu’s experiment displays a ‘refusal of the refusal’. This reaction is one of confusion, sometimes almost a ‘panic mingled with revolt’.

I don’t think any of these are art\textsuperscript{128}. Everything that provokes me to think isn’t art. I think about these stuff in my daily life…I don’t need this guy to explain…I’m just telling this because we’re in front of this piece now, but I mean it for the whole exhibition…I don’t need this guy to tell me that racism is bad. It’s something any sane thinking person would say. Tell me something new.\textsuperscript{129}

Thus Tansu takes what he has seen as a reflection on real life, supporting Bourdieu’s argument that popular aesthetics seeks a continuation between art and life. He refuses to acknowledge the works as art as he refuses to respond to the works by adapting his way

\textsuperscript{125} Susan Sontag (1967) discusses interpretation of art works as a way to tame the work of art, making it manageable and comfortable as opposed to real art’s capacity to make us nervous.
\textsuperscript{126} Docherty, 1.
\textsuperscript{128} Tansu uses a slang sentence here which I could only translate in this simple form.
\textsuperscript{129} Tansu interview.
of engaging with the work. He stands his ground as the subject and refuses the object’s generative potential on his subjectivity. This resonates with Docherty’s assertion that modern criticism tries to stabilize the object and mark it by its singularity. It refuses to acknowledge that the object differs not only from us, but also from itself as there is a temporal dimension to the object as well. Rather than a singular, present time object that is ‘an aspect of the subject’s singularity’\textsuperscript{130}, Docherty discusses an instantaneous object, changing and evolving in time together with the subject. Ataman’s work takes this problem as its core. The subjects in his films are constantly challenging the viewer subjects to readjust their thoughts on what they are seeing as well as their own selves. By problematizing the notion of identity through the identities of the characters, Ataman is threatening the subject’s own integrity. However, the viewer subject defends its own integrity against this attack by engaging a critique of the work as a singular object.

It is interesting actually...I could have walked out of this room without seeing that scene and I would have had a different understanding of this person. It would be missing...it is missing anyway cause I cannot stay here to watch all of these screens, so I will never get to know the whole story of this character.\textsuperscript{131}

Despite the instability and fluidity of the work, Cuneyt attributes this instability not to the work itself but to the discrepancy in his interaction with the work. Thus the subject places itself as the autonomous reference point taming the object of art and marks the work as “missing” rather than facing the threatening autonomy of the work itself.

I would argue on the other hand that the art context provides a zone of tolerance to a different kind of anxiety. Images, words, sounds that would be conceived as a source of

\textsuperscript{130} Docherty, 12.
\textsuperscript{131} Cuneyt on Never My Soul.
threat in the context of daily life, become manageable and almost an entertainment within the safe zone of the art gallery.

The beggars in this work are embodiments of inherently political and suppressed feelings such as “conformity” with those alike and “denial” of those who are different...When the act of looking at the other(s) is performed in “safety” through the inanimate representational images on the screens, it is possible to be free from the deterrent feelings of fear, reservation, doubt and anxiety in the interaction with the “stranger”.132

Returning to Calikoglu’s argument that Ataman’s exhibition could only have been possible within a Museum like Istanbul Modern, the context of art provides a sterile and fertile ground to make visible that cannot be seen, make heard that cannot be said. It is confrontational but safe. The art context, while providing a sterile ground to confront certain issues, never actually neutralizes these issues but makes the confrontation justifiable and manageable.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have discussed approaches to contemporary art, which refer to an art whose creation does not end at the hands of the artist, but is an ongoing process extending through its apprehension by its audience. This open, instable art of the age is constantly created and recreated by its audience, however its meaning can never be fixed as it functions at a libidinal field, denies exegesis and is an autonomous system that cannot be fully translated into any language. It can be verbalized but cannot be explained.

132 Exhibition helper text.
I have then tried to validate these theories through my small intervention, observing how people uninformed by these theories engage with an exhibition of contemporary art. For this small intervention I spent five days at Ataman’s exhibition, taking different people along with me each day. During these five days, watching Ataman’s videos over and over again, picking up stories from a different point each time, I feel that my engagement with this exhibition has been at a more intimate level than my informants. I almost feel as if the characters in those videos have been my social sphere for a few days. At times I had to suppress an urge to guide my informants on how to view the works. Just as someone was leaving the room, I wanted to stop them to tell they are missing the most interesting part; or when they were “misunderstanding” a piece because they hadn’t seen the rest of it I wanted to defend the work or “clarify the meaning”. Thus, despite my emphasis on the ideas of the open work, and the impossibility of a fixed meaning, I still could not restrain myself from filtering all the possible meanings the work could have had into a coherent whole and having “my understanding” of the work. Though I could not and dare not say what any work meant, I still had things to say about it, which I believe reflected a knowledge of myself as the audience as well as the work itself.

As Eco states, modern art has developed to be open as a symptom of modern times. Thus, this idea of instability of the art work can be thought of as a reflection of Postmodern thought problematizing the “objective truth” and meta-narratives. However how much relevance do these paradigms have for masses uninformed by these discussions taking place mostly within academic or intellectual circles?

133 Nelson Goodman (1978) talks about how after spending an hour or so in an exhibition of abstract painting everything tends to square off into geometric patches, movements, colours and transforms our world through exemplification and expression. P.105)
In the specific case of Turkey, where I have conducted my little experiment, modern art has developed as part of Turkey’s planned modernization process. As discussed by Kahraman, Turkey’s modernization was a top down process to back up the project of the new republic, and contemporary art flourished within this context of fortifying the modern, western identity of Turkey. However, following Kortun’s distinction between contemporary art and current art in Turkey, current art has departed from this framework defined by modernization and has taken a more critical take on the present rather than drafting a future. It has become more experimental both in terms of the media it uses and in terms of its statements. This current art, diverging from the state promoted contemporary art, can be taken as a symptom of a “Turkish post-modernization”, however the question I wanted to ask was whether this symptom also finds reflection in the way the audience engages with the work.

I do not want to make strong statements here as this topic deserves a separate study of its own. However, having spent most of my adult life in Turkey, based on my own experience and observations, I would assume that most middle class, modern Turks are formatted within the republican project. In Turkey “truth” still exists. There is still history and narratives and meanings. If a statement is uttered, its meaning is stabilized and it bears its utmost weight on its speaker. The still unstable balance between tradition and modernism, religion and secularism, totalitarianism and democracy makes uncertainty and ambiguity difficult to support in the social consciousness of Turkey. Kahraman defines postmodernism as a line of thought in which the present state of Western societies is questioned in terms of cultural values and the consciousness created through

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these values. He uses the term *contemporization anachronism* for the time lapse in Turkey's borrowing of social and political paradigms from the West, not being able to produce them originally at the time of need. I would argue that these imports introduce enforced changes in the social consciousness, which gives rise to a shyness and aversion to follow alternative, critical lines of thought.

Evaluating this assumption within the context of art, the open work would not be the most easily comprehended form of art in Turkey. As discussed in relation to the work of Demand, as well as Ataman, these works engage the viewer in two stages: an initial stage where the viewer takes the work literally, on face value; and a second level where the work makes the viewer uneasy about his/her first impression and incites alternative readings. In my experiment however, people tended to engage with the work at the first level, then get confused and bewildered by the contradictions within the work. At this point, instead of changing the way they think of the work and address this alterity within the work, they preferred to either stabilize a literal meaning and move on, or to denounce the work and refuse to acknowledge it as art. Bourdieu\(^{135}\) notes the difficulty in obtaining working class people’s judgements on formal innovations because they feel left outside the logic of productions of these works. In the cases I have observed however, I do not believe the people’s reactions to be due to a feeling of being left outside the logic of production of the works, but to a reluctance to engage in a deeper criticism of the work. I have observed a tension in my informants due to being in an Art context and having to verbalize their thoughts on the works. Because they expected the works to have fixed meanings, they were very conscious about expressing the right meaning for the work and in cases where the work made it impossible for a fixed meaning, refusal was the way out.

\(^{135}\) Bourdieu, 33.
This reluctance to a critical engagement with the work was not limited to my informants, but also was visible in the lack of critical analysis of the exhibition in the media. Apart from the catalogue essays and academic text which were mostly authored by non-Turkish academicians, I could hardly find any critical essays on the exhibition. The newspapers and art magazines mostly repeated the press release and were informative rather than critical. Ekrem Kahraman stresses a similar disjunction stating that ‘there is no art criticism in Turkey, but promotion writing’. Returning to Docherty’s argument that modern criticism is marked by an anxiety about its object, a fear of otherness, the case of the Turkish art context proves an extreme case for the anxiety about this “other” form of art and how to engage with it without jeopardizing the integrity of the critique/subject. This lack of critical material in the press makes it difficult for the exhibition goer to have an informed experience of the work. Thus the audience is left with their own unconditioned experience of the works and once they are confronted with a question on what they think about the work, their comments are very much informed by their own personal background.

On the other hand, having argued for a difficulty of exegesis for art works, I must also note the discrepancy in my method. Asking my informants to verbalize their thoughts on these works has required them to map their sensuous experience onto the domain of language. However, as has been discussed above in this study, this type of direct mapping is not compatible with the feel-think-know perception of art works. However, what I intended to discover was not an exegetic account of the works, but how these people responded to the works. I would here stress O’Hanlon’s distinction between exegesis and

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137 Maharaj, 71.
verbalization, and argue that the responses uttered in reaction to these works reflect a knowledge pertaining to the audience itself. Following Strathern’s argument that the way in which a person responds to a taboo or regulation shows that person to be the kind of kinsman or kinswoman he/she is, I would argue that the way a person responds to an art work shows that person to be the type of person he/she is. Just as art is a symptom of the times, the response it provokes is also a symptom of the time, the social, cultural, political context within which the art event is taking place.

In the case of Ataman’s works, the emphasis I have made throughout my discussion has been not on the meaning of these works, but on the questions they pose, the issues they problematize and the discussions they provoke. This type of art, of which Ataman’s work is an example, is about posing questions rather than giving answers. It is about confusing and challenging the audience to transform/deregulate their experience to engage with these questions. I suggest that the reason behind my informants’ confusion was their attempt to pinpoint what the artist wanted to say. However, this wasn’t the right question to ask as the artist wasn’t trying to say anything, but to get people to say something, providing the art work as a medium. The open work in this sense is an agent provocateur, provoking its audience to take a position and contribute to the making of the work from this position. Through its potential to function outside rationality, it blocks the audience at a point and challenges him/her to take a critical stance. The degree to which the audience meets this challenge varies, but following Lyotard’s idea of art functioning at the libidinal level, I would argue that an encounter with an art work articulates a change in the viewer through the strain it imposes whether consciously or unconsciously. It is a subtly imposed exercise on critical thinking transforming the subject without notice. This, I would argue, is the source of the open work’s critical potential.
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