

“Be Realist, Demand The Impossible” Curated by Halil Altındere Catalogue Article, October 2007

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2000s: A TIME FOR DEPARTURE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

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I would like begin by stating that when I look back at the past, as someone who had been a part of the contemporary art scene in the 2000s and who had been wandering around this framework and the debates in the 90s, I see vast differences between these times. The biggest difference is the almost total loss of what I call the *Youth Actions* spirit. This “spirit” was made visible through people from all around Turkey, who packed their works and brought them over to Istanbul and were able to exhibit these works without any interference of any art authority. It would not be wrong to identify the Youth Actions as fields of artistic freedom where products would not be judged by a professional gaze and where they were not forced into a mould.

The Youth Actions could be compared to a laboratory, in line with the very fitting definition of Ali Akay. In a more general sense does what we call contemporary art not contain a certain experimental nature? Is “contemporary” art not something made by everyone for everyone, instead of being made only for a highly educated gallery going group of spectators, is it not something embracing everyday life, making art itself a part of the issue, openly confronting the society and its norms, uneasy and positively engaged, contrary to the other established, institutionalised, conservative, conventional, modernist/“progressive” artistic attitudes? This definition which can be further elaborated, without doubt emphasises a certain amateur spirit, an engaged amateur spirit. It can be said that this amateur spirit has been vanishing lately, and that it is being replaced by a professionalism alongside the normalisation of contemporary art. Even if one thinks to be in the clear of this, the threat itself has to be highlighted.

When one looks back at history, the perception in general is that the events follow one another in a logical sequence. Such a view, without doubt, perceives history as a totality and in a linear fashion: Initially a revolution and a change in art (the 70s), then comes the company of contemporary artists (the 90s) followed by institutionalisation (the 2000s) and finally I guess, we shall be reaching the mature, sublime works of art... To try and grasp a field like contemporary art, which we assume to have successfully split with the modernist attitude, with a view as such would be to miss the heart of the matter itself. In the 90s, especially in the debates triggered by Vasif Kortun, contemporary art located itself in relation to the academic and the established. Perhaps it is not fair to define contemporary art through such a reaction, but it would not be wrong to say that this matter has now been resolved. Contemporary art was conceived to have a unity and integrity due to its reaction against the “old” understanding of art. As if there was a group of contemporary artists complete with a unifying political agenda, defending the same cause. It seems out of place to talk about such a thing today. As a sign of becoming more mature, contemporary artists no longer position themselves in comparison to the other art, but instead identify themselves in relation to other contemporary artists, other

contemporary arts and other attitudes. It should be stressed that this is a healthy situation. Even though this could be explained as an outcome of museums and galleries funded by banks spreading after the 2000s, (the exhibitions, events, etc. that were realised through collaboration, with no external support in the 90s, were organised by curators and private galleries in close contact with capital in the 2000s. Thus, the artists were less in need of each other's support, artists and curators were trying to make space for themselves with banks as their counterpart.) it would be more appropriate to state that some already present differences of opinion started to emerge out into the open in this period. The explosion of self-governing and "independent" art spaces in this period is very comprehensible. But it seems, these spaces only make way for establishing a ground for themselves and debates in art itself. More wide and open grounds are required for the energetic productions we desire, which meddle with the society.

Perhaps, what separates the 2000s from the 90s is the digression of the main axis of debates from art itself, to the institutions surrounding art. What disappeared during these deliberations and what makes me miss the art scene of the 90s is the potential of art to intervene and change, overlooked during the turmoil of the discussions of art and current issues opened for discussion through art, all of which turned into an in-house debate within the "community". I believe from very early onwards that the problematic of art could only be resolved from outside the field of art; setting out from daily life, from politics, sociology, history and arriving back at them. However, we are most interested in ourselves nowadays. This could be due to the inclination of becoming more mature, as mentioned by Erden Kosova in a footnote of his text published in the book 'User's Manual: Contemporary Art in Turkey', but it should be noted that processes of maturation also bring along a loss. If what is lost is the critical view that makes contemporary art what it is, that perceives the field of art not as the private ground of the art professionals, that is actively engaged with the society in dispute, then perhaps it is time to stop and think once more.

It would be wrong to draw a conclusion that I consider the remedy to be a revitalisation of the Youth Actions "spirit", which I depicted as a myth. It could be said that the normalisation of contemporary art has been completed and that every possible position is secured. It is not the productions that are aimed towards the international or local art markets, museums and galleries, fixed on issues about art itself that are needed to broaden the ever contracting climate, on the contrary it is works that stand here and confront the society here, that are not afraid of taking risks, that are unsafe and engaged. Prescribing such clear criteria would for sure denote a rupture. It should be said that Halil Altındere exhibitions stand as a contender for establishing a ground to such alternative productions. Sometimes for the sake of getting together the most extensive participation possible, or because of Altındere's reaction to becoming a selecting elite and his will to make the exchange between generations visible; he seems to act as if the aforementioned nonexistent "company of contemporary artists" exist; yet these exhibitions provide the artists living abroad and at home with a space to show work that can not be presented at the galleries of banks or at private galleries. On the other hand, while everyone stacks up all that they have into the first week of September, eager to show themselves off to the international art professionals coming to Istanbul because of the Biennial; Altındere arranges his show for the end of October, as if stressing his agenda about the local,

his will to deal with what is here. It seems a lot more meaningful to return to reality and to demand the impossible after the dust is settled.