

# The changing paradigm of power and Halil Altındere exhibitions

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*"It is crucial to transform this ecosystem terror is feeding on in a way that it will contribute to the struggle against terror."<sup>1</sup>*

General Ilker Başbuğ, Commander of the Turkish Armed Forces

*"My sisters and brothers, nothing can be done before this darkness that turns a baby into a murderer is questioned..."*

Rakel Dink

## CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM AND ART

Is this a coincidence? Can it be a coincidence that two prominent figures talking in completely different circumstances with completely different intentions emphasize a very similar mechanism? Such a resemblance deserves to be contemplated on even if it is solely a coincidence or a misunderstanding on our part. Adding to this that both the structure and the function of the army in Turkey are changing, it is possible to discern the efforts to establish another logic of governance and form of power. The polarized political atmosphere hovering over Turkey in recent years is a product of the reactionary attitude towards these changes. Understanding such a change in the mentality of power is vital for struggles aiming to create space for the critical and political.

We are faced with an exhibition with a title inspired by the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" curated by Harold Szeemann, one of the pioneers of independent curatorship, and marking a rupture in the perception of art in 1969. Evidently, the reference is only to the exhibition itself and does not imply a formal or artistic resemblance. Yet when we take into account the "suc-

cess" or "failure" of contemporary art, the image becomes a little sharper. In its initial years, conceptual art was against the system in its form and discourse. It opposed conventional artistic forms, the dominant perception of art and the figure of the artist as a genius. It aimed to reveal the non-material essence of art and questioned the artist subject as well as institutional administrative structures deemed to be neutral and determining the whatness of art. Considering the progress of "new" capitalism since then, it can be claimed that conceptual art is not a form of resistance but a precursor pointing in the direction of the evolution of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> For us, if there is a link between this exhibition and the one in 1969, it is this possibility of "success" or "failure."<sup>3</sup> In our

2 Stephen Zepke, *The Concept Of Art When Art Is Not A Concept*, Angelaki, Volume II no.1, London, Routledge, April 2006 p. 157. The philosophical emphasis on the universality of language brings forth the reduction of art to communicative information. Site specificity, aura and aestheticism are excluded from art. A form of art that points at such a form of the cognitive almost heralds information capitalism.

3 Of course, the possibilities of "success" and "failure" are immanent to all artistic approaches that emerge with the concepts of opposition and resistance. It is possible to say all resistances contain the clues to the next phase of the dominant system. In other words, if capitalism has a genius, it is the capacity to transform these resistances and to instrumentalize them to reproduce itself. This dialectical process can be the topic of another more extensive and theoretical text.

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day, contemporary art also suffers from being subsumed by the system. Therefore, if we want to seize a critical stance, we have to reveal in what kind of context and within which symbolic economies and forms of power art becomes active.

In an uncontested way, Rakel Dink points at where the critical efforts must concentrate. Not babies but “the darkness that turns a baby into a murderer” must be our principal concern. To our mind this “darkness” is the “ecosystem” referred to by General Başbuğ. Without doubt, this statement does not imply that every baby will become a murderer, but it does point at the role of the “darkness” in the production of murderers and to “darkness” as a field of struggle. At this point it is important to emphasize that we are not claiming that a form of power has become inoperative and has been replaced by another. In other words, the centralized despotic state has not been replaced by a smoother form of power that diffuses into life and our environment and creates its own legitimizing mechanisms. This would be denying the overpowering existence of F-16 jets taking off from Diyarbakır every minute. What is at stake is not a different phase or era, but rather the coexistence of different mentalities of power that operate by reinforcing and sometimes veiling each other. Following Foucault and Deleuze today we can trace their conceptualization of “disciplinary societies” at one hand and “control societies” on the other. And sometimes a form of “sovereignty” that supports both forms can emerge.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, among the forms of power theorized by Foucault, the one that is the most perplexing for governed subjects is governmental bio-power. Contemporary art emerges as the most attractive field for this form of bio-power. The interest of companies active in the defense industry, or other fields and the interest of the state in contemporary art find their motivation in the mentality of this form of governmental power. What’s more, it is again this logic of governmental neo-

liberal power that imposes the reformulation of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) along with other “modern” institutions in the country.

It is exactly the head of the whole military complex who explains this form: The struggle against “terror” should no longer be waged by making war directly with the “terrorist,” but by transforming the whole “ecosystem.” “The struggle against terror should be carried out with a human focus; the struggle should address the hearts and minds of the people.”<sup>5</sup> This understanding does not belong to divided, restricted disciplinary societies organized by institutions. We are confronted with an affectionate, friendly father who constructs the environment rather than a harsh and restrictive father who holds the power. Thus, the military is not only endowed with the duty of killing in war, but is also required to completely transform life and to “create” life for subjects by becoming their “friend.” This also involves certain “PR” moves that are derived from the individual like the establishment of sympathetic and close relationships between soldiers and the people. The structural, instrumental and mental differences between the organizations of the corporate world, the state and the military are disappearing. By creating an ecosystem, the authority figure maintains that the subjects govern themselves without any need for an authoritarian intervention (the much debated model of “civil society”) and it no longer acts as an intermediary. The most striking characteristic of this logic of power we can summarize using the concept of the ecosystem is the complete invisibility and transparency it grants power.

#### THE CHANGING POSITION OF ART

In the case of Istanbul, the art scene – or ecosystem – went through a large scale transformation in the last decade. More precisely, we can easily detect the impacts of structural and mental changes in the world by looking at the local art scene. The fact that art has been kicked out of the public sphere and completely handed over to the private sector is the most obvious and debated as-

4 M. Foucault, *Governmentality, Security, Territory, Population*, Chapter Five, Lectures At The College De France, 1977-78, Edited by Michel Senellart, Trans. by Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan. Gilles Deleuze, “Denetim Toplumlarına Ek”, *Doxa*, no.1, January 2006, Norgunk Publications.

5 Ibid.

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pect of this change. This is one of the most important factors transforming the artistic eco-system; however what we want to draw attention to is the unproductiveness of discussions on art and politics due to the inexistence of an insightful analysis of the changes in the field of art. Echoing General Başbuğ, today when we are discussing the relationships between art and politics we have to look at in what kind of a web of social relationships and amalgam of symbolic economies the work of art is activated in. As curators, artists, critics or just writers on the subject we need a broader view and understanding of art beyond discussions about artistic form, content etc.

Now, let's try to put down the changes in our artistic eco-system.

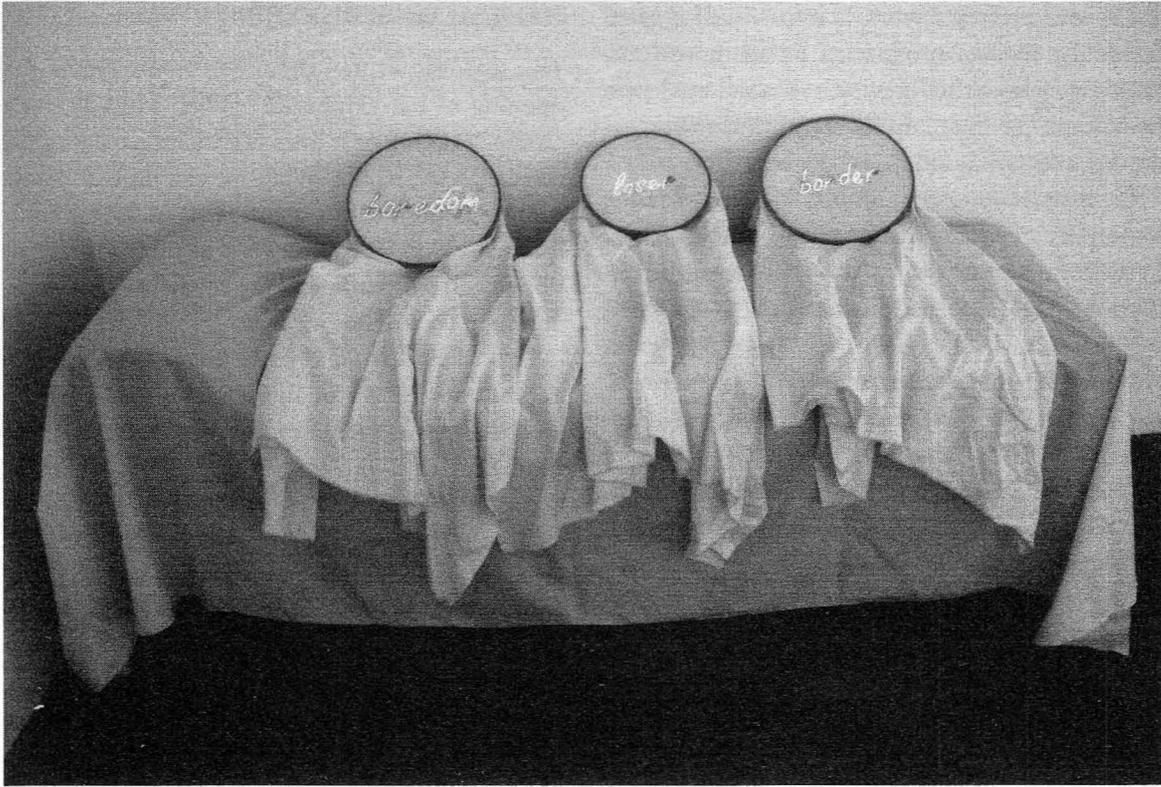
While fifteen years ago art operated in a closed sub-social field, today it has literally become "boundless." One can say that that the criticism directed at modern art institutions by the avant-garde – still repeated today by the left – according to which art is a closed and sterile bourgeois space outside of life has become invalid. Even if today the bourgeoisie continue to be the rulers, the artistic field is no longer a privileged space outside the field of life/production. Power services the cultural dose beneficial to the health of its subjects through the field of art. What's more, since in contemporary capitalism free time has become productive, art has also become as productive as any other area of production. Especially when we take into account that the contemporary mode of production is immaterial in terms of both labor and product – like language, jargon, style, information, affect, prestige – and the space of art exists at the very center of this mentality of production, it becomes even clearer that we have to rethink our ongoing conversations on art and politics.

We can refer to the fusion of the notions of "infrastructure" and "superstructure" to illustrate the amalgamation of economic, symbolic and social fields. In the analysis made in the initial development phase of capitalism, material production through existing relations of production was described as "infrastructure," and culture and the

cultural production emerging from material production was conceived as a superstructural institution. In contemporary capitalism, the truth that will help us understand what is at stake is the "commodification" of culture and economy gaining a "symbolic" character in parallel. The most striking proof of this is that the "productive activity" on the commodity continues in a different "labor pool" outside the factory, in other words in a different industry that goes by the titles of design, advertising, communication, image, service or customer relations. It seems like in the answer to the question whether needs stem from the stomach or from dreams, the needs of the "heart and brain" are one step ahead. This, in a way, marks the dissolution of the former structure based on the dichotomy between infrastructure and superstructure. We are witnessing a phase where the commodity is immediately produced as a signifier and signifiers (culture) are produced like commodities.<sup>6</sup> Here it is important to note that this does not mean the basic mechanism of capitalism has changed. On the contrary, it means that capitalism has made commodity relationships dominant in all aspects of life, and the motive to increase capital has laid hands on all areas of life. Hence the becoming symbolic of the economy does not alter the fact that commodities, for the most part independent of their material forms, are products of a form of social relations. This means that labor reproduces not only commodities but all social relations (cultural, political, ideological) under the guise of commodities.

According to our approach, what is cultural – even though it is deeply related to economic determination and ideological reflection – cannot be seen as the output of the coded values of only one class. Art and culture is a field of struggle that concerns all social classes and layers and is waged in cultural institutions by various layers and subjects with very different agendas. If we take up the above-mentioned metaphor again, the struggle takes place

6 Hal Foster, "Çağdaş Sanatta Siyasal Kavramı", in *Sanat/ Siyaset: Kültür Çağında Sanat ve Kültürel Politika*, Edited by Ali Artun, İletişim Yayınları, 2008.



Hüseyin Alptekin, *Boredom, Loser, Border*, 1999.

inside the “cultural eco-system,” which we can also call the cultural environment, in order to prevent the transformation of babies into murderers. What’s more, class struggle as it is generally understood is not by itself adequate to effectively challenge this hegemony over representations and disciplines because the hegemony operates via cultural subjection as well as economic exploitation. When culture is viewed as such a field of struggle, the strategy has to be a neo-Gramscian resistance or intervention strategy against the hegemonic code constituted by cultural representations and social regimes.<sup>7</sup>

In an era when in all areas of life there is such transitivity between the economic and the sym-

bolic how should this be framed politically and conceived as an aspect of a new problematic?

It is clear that the artistic space is not uniform just as the society we live in consists of different classes and layers. Like social class conflicts it is also a field of struggle for the monopoly of the naturalization of valid categories of perception and evaluation, i.e. visual ideologies. It is a struggle between those who have an interest in eternalizing the present and those who cannot open themselves a space to live without burying the former in the past. From the romantic viewpoint, the question of the “creator” and who is the creator of his/her extraordinary power to transform the material at hand is banned in the field of art. In a way, this ban is ideology. For this reason, all attention is directed to the producer (painter, composer, writer) and the work rather than the environment the producer becomes active in. In this way the possibility of searching for the conditions of the creator’s power beyond the artist and his/her own activity is eliminated. It is enough to bring up this question to see that the

7 Ibid. Gramsci’s most important contribution to Marxism are the concepts “ideological hegemony” and “organic intellectual.” The reproduction of the capitalist exploitation system, in other words the social consent necessary for the perpetual continuation of this system is made possible not only through mechanisms of political oppression, but more importantly through cultural and ideological codes. The direction in which the “cultural ecosystem” will evolve is closely related to the positions of intellectuals who are the constitutive subjects of this ecosystem and the forms of their relationship with those on the periphery of the system, the oppressed and the exploited.

artist who creates a work is him/herself created inside the field of production by all those (critics, those who write forewords, dealers etc.) who contribute to the “discovery,” “acknowledgement,” and “recognition” of the artist.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, in the 20 year-long war for the monopoly over “legitimate form of art making” in the local art market in Turkey between the traditional, local and nationalist form of art making also supported by the gallery system and contemporary art, Contemporary Art is the winner. Looking at the art market, it seems that despite the continuing dominance of conventional art that has become meaningless and of bohemian artist figures, and despite that academies advocate an obsolete understanding of art, contemporary art seems to have taken the first steps in transforming the center.

The fact that the bourgeoisie has begun to add works of contemporary art to their collections shows that contemporary art is establishing itself in the center. If the struggle for what is beautiful, what is right and what is good had not been pursued in the field of contemporary art, no wealthy person would be interested in contemporary art today. In a way, this interest is a side effect of the ongoing symbolic struggle. The grand bourgeoisie and elite professionals are collecting contemporary art works in order to distinguish their taste from both the local bourgeoisie and the middle class. When the grand bourgeoisie and elite professionals who travel around the world thanks to the global economy find similar, cheaper works of art in the local market, they wisely seize the opportunity to invest in contemporary art. We witness the transformation of the “symbolic capital” created by the victory of contemporary art into economic capital.

We think that with the advantage of bearing the knowledge of the tradition of political struggle in Turkey, Halil Altundere’s curatorial experience should be viewed as an important factor in contemporary art’s victory in the context of the struggle described above.

## HALİL ALTINDERE EXHIBITIONS

This text was written about one month before the opening of the exhibition “When Ideas Become Crime.” Therefore it does not include readings of the exhibited works. What we can do is to make some general remarks about Halil Altundere exhibitions within the framework of the above-mentioned transformation in the mentality of power, and to make a call if we may.

First of all, we should state that Halil Altundere exhibitions are up for filling a void and creating an effect that are way beyond their capacities. We can define this void as the major lack of political and critical discourse in the center of the mechanisms of the local art scene that is becoming increasingly productive. In its festive existence, the atomized art world focused on careerism cannot produce the critical discussions we truly need. It seems to be crucial to take on a self-critical effort to research the causes of this rather than expressing it as a complaint. We think that in addition to criticizing the social and institutional webs outside itself, the art world has to problematize its own environment. As emphasized above, the gains of the contemporary art world come at a cost. Contemporary art pays the price of settling in the center with subdued political content, careerism, atomization and the fading of critical discussions.

As underlined by Süreyya Evren, we think that the most important characteristic of Halil Altundere exhibitions is the effort to increase the role of the excluded, those in the periphery in the center in order to transform the center itself.<sup>9</sup> In return, the governmental power logic is trying to weave an ecosystem around art that tries to transform it by becoming its “friend.” And like we said, this ecosystem no longer allows us to maintain the “center” and “periphery” dichotomy. This attitude does not function through limits, restrictions and exclusions. Instead, it transforms through inclusion, containment and creating an enclosing “ecosystem.” In this way it tries

134 <sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Sanatın Kuralları*, Translated by Necmettin Kamil Sevil, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999, p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> Süreyya Evren, *Halil Altundere: Kayıplar Ülkesiyle Dans / Dance with the Land of the Lost*, Türkiye’de Güncel Sanat Dizisi, no. 6, yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2008.

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to legitimize the anti-political artistic approach supported by big capital and its museums, exhibitions, institutions and PR agencies. This was and still is what grants Halil Altundere exhibitions their value and significance. They struggle against both the sterilization of art by big capital and its institutions and the obsolete understanding of local art promoted by the middle bourgeoisie. By embracing the heritage of the left in Turkey against this machine programmed to enclose contemporary art and devour its political and critical energies, they aim to politicize contemporary art with an understanding that is not modernist. In this process they refrain from marginalizing themselves and transforming this marginality into a sterile position.<sup>10</sup> They repeatedly bring up the political content the “artistic ecosystem” constantly tries to make obsolete in a bold and intensified form.

We see that in the works of the majority of the artists participating in this exhibition political content is always in the foreground. However, taking a look at the “careers” of the artists who have participated in Halil Altundere exhibitions shows that even though their works still possess

10 Here it is important to note that the current logic of power makes the possibility of a true marginal and exterior position a problematic in itself. To renew itself the current system needs criticism and exteriority more than ever. This need usually results in the transportation of exterior positions right into the center.

bold political content, we cannot say these artists are in the periphery anymore. In the same way that contemporary art was moved to the center, its agents bearing its critical politics were moved to the center. More precisely, a “friendly ecosystem” around contemporary art that transforms it and smoothly cleans out its political content is under construction. For this reason, perhaps to describe the current function of Halil Altundere exhibitions, we have to say that they create a platform where political content devoured by the – local and Western – art ecosystems are collected in a condensed form, giving us the opportunity to reconsider these artists and works. In other words, what is at stake is no longer the struggle of the periphery against the center, but a struggle positioned in the center against its enclosure.

At this point we would like to emphasize the necessity of the continuation and intensification of Halil Altundere exhibitions in the coming years. And we would like to underline that in the described changing power paradigm, rather than the powers operating outside their field, artists have to become aware of this “friendly ecosystem” surrounding them. They have to see that if there is a struggle to be waged in the field of art it is against the inside as much as the outside and therefore they also have to turn towards their own environment.

*Translated by BALCA ERGENER*