Slow Bullet II
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The relation of contemporary art in Turkey with the political has been the focal point of some recent heated debates. The political tone which characterised and shaped the art practice from the second half of the nineties forward has become difficult to be sustained, or at least problematic due to some recent structural changes in the scene. The old constellation of artists, which was formed around a discursive cohesion, seems to be dispersed now and this loss of proximities has produced a slippery ground for approaching the political. Risking generalisations and reductions I will start with a chronological retrospection.¹

If we consider the formations of the artists who initiated the experimental artistic language of the eighties in Turkey, which evolved into the contemporary art production of the present, we see that most of them have been, in one way or another, involved in social mobilisations, political organisations in their schools or in direct affiliations with radical groups. At the same time we observe that these affiliations have not been resumed in the traumatic aftermath of the coup d’état of 1980 which suspended all political activities by brutal force. The social vacuum of that time created an empty mental state which paradoxically generated an urge for opening up a fresh ground, which in artistic terms triggered experimentalisation and occupation with epistemological problematic of art production. Studies on the already established practices of art movements in the West such as Conceptual Art or Arte Povera have been the starting point for them. In this context, the trauma of the coup and the following discussions on the political agenda did not condition the content of these new practices – at least not directly.

Besides the difficulties in enunciating a political position in that period (with all complications of the defeat of the left), we also have to take into consideration the art historical context in local and global terms, in which artistic experimentations of the eighties were still not fully divorced from the mental traces of high modernism (or from counter artistic reactions to these traces and concentration on institutional critique). Hesitancies about the role of politicality within art practices partly stemmed from the conviction that convergence of political and cultural fields should be limited and the arts should proceed through aesthetic-cognitive reflectivity and expand the resulting achievements gradually to the social sphere and reinforce cultural progress. In this regard, art practice will effect the political sphere by generating values outside of it and reminding that another existence, another world is possible. When political signs are employed, it will be in the form of tropes and symbolism and not formulated as concrete references to specific contexts and geographies. For instance, the brutality of the 1980 coup would be touched on by the generic image of an electric chair, or tents built up during union strikes will be carried onto the canvas in the abstracted shape of triangles as sings of resistance. Visual elements would be taken from an iconography appealing to international scale, conceived as communicable more or less in any context. Somewhat speculatively, I would also relate this hesitation to a concern about sounding too provincial within a framework formed by universalist terms.

In the nineties the use of the political within art practice took a less reserved course. The reheating of the political agenda in the country, the increased visibility of some previously conflicts, frozen throughout the republican period and more intensively during the junta period, violence that mounted to the level of civil war and its effects in everyday life presented a different social landscape. Deepening agony created a new atmosphere of politisation and a sense of urgency, which facilitated the perception of contemporary art as a new terrain which can enunciate the inner burst. Also the new regional conjuncture that surrounded Turkey (collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, consequently released mobilities around the Black Sea basin, self-critical debates within leftist thinking) enhanced the tendency towards politisation.

The preoccupation of theoretical investigations of the same period with notions of space and spatiality were supplemented with a renewed interest in issues such as culture and identity in their geographical specificity. Ramifications of this theoretical shift on the art practice left marks on the works of young artists from Turkey studying abroad, especially in examining the then

¹ This text is the revised and expanded version of an earlier text published in the book Dersimiz Gündel Sanat, Azra Tüzünolgu (ed.), Outlet İhraç Fazlasi Sanat, Mayis 2009, İstanbul.
widening use of installation. In the works they started to present immediately after their return to the country, there were no traces of reluctance to criticise the militarist, statist and patriarchal structure that shaped (and shapes) the fate of Turkey, or to give controversial reference to Turkish history, recent past and present. Instead of the universalist language of inter-nationalism, which claimed to transcend the constraints and attributed provinciality of local contexts, or reduced them to abstracted or idealised representations of nations, this new production pursued the decisive strategy of scuffling with all dimensions of its geography-culture. In a political atmosphere in which different sorts of nationalisms found the occasion to thrive, violence organised by the state began to shape everyday behaviour of masses, imposition of the prototype ideal citizen resumed despite its obvious lack of credibility, patriarchal values were adopted in the exploding channels of popular culture and mass media (after decades of state monopoly), this new artistic ground seemed to be conducive for elaborating a counter enunciation and attracted younger people for whom there seemed to be no professional horizon for the future, scarcely any institutions to exhibit their work, and no manipulative gaze of western curators scanning through their portfolios, as it has been argued recently.

This anti-nationalist, anti-militarist and anti-statist stance was feeding from the intellectual output of publication initiatives from the leftist positions (journals, publishing houses) which have been purged out of academia during the military regime. In addition to the resumption of May 1 demonstrations that had been suspended in the eighties, the mobilisation of universities as exemplified in the Student Coordination, meetings for Saturday Mothers (silent, weekly gatherings of relatives of people who disappeared under doubtful circumstances), which were apparent signs of re-polarisation, there were also dynamics that tend to radicalise all niches of cultural and everyday life: the multiplication of subcultural formations, the sense of emancipation and connecting to the rest of the world youth by the opening of private radio channels, criticism that reacted against the stupefying effects of the expanding pop-culture, alternative initiations in the field of publication, the encounter with new theoretical position such as actual generation of feminism, post-structuralist thought, post-colonialist critique, new positions within the left after self-critical mediation, the maturation of anarchist groups and so on.

The frontality and bitterness that characterised the artistic call for political sobering in the early nineties slowly transformed into something else. A set of factors that were conceived as parts of normalisation (subsiding of the negative effects of the economic crisis, the detention and imprisonment of Öcalan, the corrosion of the radical rhetoric of the ultra-nationalists during their years in government as part of the coalition, increasing interaction with global art circulation and the consequent recognition of various artists, a few new institutions that were designed to exhibit the works of this new artistic output) released a portion of vapour from the boiling pot. Instead of a dedication to decipher the ideological manoeuvres of the state, an expanded approach to domination led the artists to investigate the operation of power within separate niches of everyday life, and to accentuate previously used motives around migration and gender.

In the mean time, a group of artists reviewed their position regarding the canon of modern art history and tried to reverse the centre-periphery duality with an ironic twist. In addition to problematising the asymmetrical relationship between geographies, these works foregrounded the self-referentiality of art and hinted at an exaltation of narcissistic self-trust among artists that mostly surfaced through the exposure of the libidinal investments and corporal presence of the (male) artist. Another side effect of this process was the incorporation of a certain extent of edgy humourism.

The expansion of this artistic field through the adhesion of two successive generations produced the impression that there was a sociological varification emerging. Yet, the most of main actors were from middle and upper-middle classes who could pursue production under relatively protective conditions, people with university education and mostly residents of metropolises like Istanbul, Diyarbakır, İzmir and Ankara. People holding different political positions could come together and initiate a synergetic interaction: people with a liberal creed who followed the political agenda as participatory citizens, active members of socialist organisations, people who tried to contribute to the emerging field of anarchism, ones who set to foster subcultural languages and
related urban formations, and people who simply pursued radical lives... In a period in which the
borders of the compartments of political criticism was not as strict as it currently is, no
irreconcilable differences were imposed, and mutual compromise was made in favour of the
continuity of the ongoing creative expansion. The self-positioning of the artist roughly matched a
leftist ground confronting the right in classic terms of the political terminology.

The tendency towards institutionalisation that has intensified in the last five or six years caused a
disintegration of this organic constellation. The new rhythm of professionalism interrupted the
interactivity between artists and led them to retreat to their personal pursuits. Whereas the lack
of infrastructure and the accompanying condition of obligatory idleness in the early and mid
nineties had had a dimension of facilitating artistic productivity, the working method in the last
couple of years is shifted towards responding to invitations from art institutions, and art practice
has turned into a profession. While the city of Istanbul geared up in the race between the
megalopolises of the planet, actors of existing and emerging capital (bourgeois families and
financial companies) invested in new art institutions, which would be instrumentalised to
facilitate a modern and progressive image for their corporate identity, especially during the
negotiations with Europe for Turkey’s full membership. Despite the existence of critical
elaborations on other sorts of domination, the weakness in covering problems related to
economy-politics prevented contributors of contemporary art practice from developing an
institutional critique in light of what was happening. The disintegration of the aforementioned
constellation was also conditioned by different positions as to how to approach ideologically this
new wave of institutionalisation. Some people within the field got uncritically integrated into the
new panorama – it was even a preferable episode for those who wanted to withdraw into the
frames of aestheticism, psychologism and self-referentiality of art. Some artists retained the
political tone in their work but consented to present them in rather sterilised exhibit spaces.
Others withdrew from the already stagnating circulation by producing less. And still others who
felt uneasy about institutionalisation energised by corporate initiation channelled their forces to
open up an alternative field of project spaces (of course, one can debate to which extent the
umbilical chords have been cut). It was not really possible to talk about a consistency and
continuity within a single constellation, but rather there were groupings and shifting alliances
that were hard to conceive and bring together. Friction was not the only source of tension, also a
reaction towards the field of contemporary art was formed outside of the field.

Although Sarkis, one of the most important inspirations of the expanding field of contemporary
art, intensively employed motives related to the traumatic effects of war and violence
perpetrated on masses, he never specified them by naming geographies or ethnicities. Yet, he
was attacked by Sezer Tansuğ, an art critic, for his contribution to a group exhibition of Armenian
artists held in Venice in 1991, and was accused of working against the national interest of Turkey.
The art critic’s blatant arrogance articulating a language marked by being a member of the
privileged ethnicity of the Ottoman golden age and supporting anti-Armenian official politics,
gave way to a collective reaction from the contemporary art field (at that time still trying to
give different from other artistic milieus) that condemned its racist tone. Distance to
nationalist rhetoric seemed to be an unspoken accord after that incident. In another case, a
review on the Iskarpit exhibition that was held in Berlin in 1998 published in a painting-based
journal, contained hints of diagnosing a “betrayal to the nation,” pointing at either Sarkis again,
or most probably to Halil Altindere, hinting at his Kurdish identity and his criticism of Turkish
nationalism. At that period, this sort of reactions were rare and were considered to be
manifestations of an anti-cosmopolitanism that would evaporate in time, but after 2005 they
emerged as a major challenge.

The nationalist paranoia triggered in the aftermath of September 11 and the invasion of Iraq
started to target intellectuals who criticised official politics related to Kurdish ethnicity in the
country and Armenian genocide, and voiced this criticisms abroad. The organised psychological,

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2 One might rightly argue that what is meant here by constellation did not cover all practitioners of contemporary art, and
from the start it was based on some sort of heterogeneity. I risked the exclusivity embedded in the term to make my
point clearer.
legal and sometimes physical terror targeting people like Orhan Pamuk, Perihan Mağden and some other journalists managed to recruit militants against these “rootless self-haters.” Deep splits emerged within the left, which until that time seemed to be a more or less bloc-like entity allowing different positions to correlate. Political polarisation drawn along the axis of nationalism also had an impact on the cultural sphere. The dispersed panorama of the contemporary art field has been defined by this external inspection as a whole entity, and portrayed as the ultimate example of decadence. As a field that progressed from a limited frame to a considerable visibility; came to a point of being hosted in exhibitions that have been designed to represent the geography; has access to different sources of power despite being denied from academic posts; presented its output mostly abroad until the local infrastructure landed; and, on the top of all these, marked the fault line which would later crack the ideological might of Kemalism, contemporary art has been branded as a platform where complaints about here were directed outside by agents of a permitted and manipulated cosmopolitanism that sought to corrode national identity. They were not from “here”; they spoke an imported language. Therefore: they deserved the reaction of those who claim to be the authentic bearers of “here.” In this respect, the rich artistic output from Diyarbakir, which outdid some other metropolises, annoyed some people as yet another proof for the conspiracies of external forces trying to divide Turkish national unity. The booed lists of betrayers shouted out during the massive republican demonstrations may have as well included “contemporary artists,” ranking just below the “Europeanists” and “Sorosists.” Shouldn’t the addressee of the question about why this sort of support goes to Diyarbakir and not Ankara have been those who held power throughout the republican period and did not flinch about the sufferings of the region?\(^1\)

Against the arguments that claimed the language of the contemporary art to be “imported,” it can be said that contemporary art already got a hold on the urban imagination of Istanbul and was integrated into spaces which hosted subcultural formations. The visibility and spatiality proposed by contemporary art was silently received and internalised by those willing to know what was going on worldwide. The open-call exhibitions in the project space HaMriyat (2007), the minor-scale exhibition organised along the Antimilitarist Meeting (2005), and the performance on campus demonstrations of the social sciences club at Bosphorus University (2008) exemplified the ways in which forms of expression such as performance and installation have been adopted by people from outside of the art circuit.

An external gaze inevitably conditions internal production. If one is not content with the mental and physical framework of what is called the “inside,” the risks of interaction just like benefits, should be welcomed. If the problematic is reduced to adopting formal and epistemological novelties, a reminder is in order, that once upon a time notions like painting, gallery and artist were also seen as “foreign.” As I stated before it is hard to talk about the presence of an external gaze in the period of initiation in the context of contemporary art. The field emerged not because someone asked for it. Füsun Onur was marginalised and mocked in the seventies, when she infused her three-dimensional works with conceptualist ideas. The works of Gülşün Karamustafa from the eighties, which concentrated on the hybridisation of urban codes and cultures of people who recently migrated from the rural parts of the country, and thus precisely looked at what was going on “inside,” were dismissed for being merely “arabesque.” In the early nineties, there was no western curator around when Hale Tenger produced her precious installations that unfolded as screaming allegories of the state of things in Turkey. Again in the early nineties when Aydan Murtezaoğlu presented her work that investigated the traumatic effects of state-run modernism on various chambers of local culture, she was ignored – or people came up and asked her silently whether she was an enemy of the regime or not.

It is true that the contact with western art institutions is problematic. Some mistakes were made during the initial enchantment of an encounter with another geography – the contexts of the

\(^1\) There have been similar reactions in the recent past which portrayed Halil Altindere as the cultural extension of Kurdish separatism; condemned Hou Hanrou, the curator of the 10. Istanbul Biennial for his criticism of Kemalism in his catalogue text; and most flamboyantly, accused WWH, the curators of the 11. Istanbul Biennial of plotting against Turkish national unity and repeating what Croatian secessionism did to the Yugoslavian unity.
exhibition to be participated were sometimes not fully examined and in some cases artists found the specific content of their work distorted with orientalist and representational motives. Yet, discomfort about representational distortions led to a collective awareness of how to react. The united decision of several artists and a writer to withdraw from the exhibition Focus Istanbul: Urban Realities held in Berlin in 2005, was an example of the new critical awareness about the contexts of invitations. Also the ethnographic position of translating the local specificity for an external observer is relativised by artistic works that talk critically about the context of the observing culture and hence reverse the positions. Nevertheless, there have been cases in which the external support given to the politically motivated art practices have created artificial and emptied occasions of consensus. Figures who have not touched upon any social issues before made swift turns to be opportunistically tuned into the existing networks, and exposed themselves as exotic objects of exhibit.

The reaction against contemporary art, which fixed it nearly as a hate object, was conditioned by some other severe mistakes within the field: while trying to open a ground for this emerging field, there were some occasions in which other modes of art practice and visual production were disparaged and exposed to generalising attitudes (just like that field itself is being exposed to nowadays) in an avantgardist arrogance; the repulsion of conflicts of power between curators; deformations along the process of professionalisation, especially after 2003; the transformation of one part of the field into a self-contained, expat-like community... all these dynamics help the reaction to receive a tone of resentment. Also, among those who were trying to articulate a critical stance there were deficiencies in proposing an alternative trajectory: being stuck with some artistic formulas that had previously received success, failing in innovation, carrying the critical content to performational form and enacting it in public space; not being able to get in contact with the peripheries of the urban core that have no access to culture – although there was an intention to do so; sniffing at other colleagues’ ways of dealing with the political; melancholic withdrawals, exaggeration of personal conflicts, and so on.

Under these circumstances, two events prompted a sharpening of consciousness. The raid of a coalition of ultra-nationalist militants (left and right versions) of a documentary photography exhibition about the 1955 pogrom against non-muslim communities in Istanbul revealed the fragility of spaces dedicated to cultural activities that had been considered untouchable so far. In the same year (2005) a photographic work by Burak Delier was withdrawn from the exhibition Free Kick (a side event during the 9th Istanbul Biennial) by the artist himself after a series of debates. The work, which involved an implication of a physical threat to a guardian private of the Turkish army, caused trouble for Halil Altindere, the curator of the show. The exhibition catalogue which included Delier’s work and a couple of other works with direct references to the army was brought to court and charged with the now infamous law against “degrading of Turkishness” (reminding the trial on Hale Tenger’s wall installation I Know People Like These II in 1992 charged with “degrading of the Turkish flag.”) At that time, Süreyya Evren and I discussed Delier’s work at length; in short, I voiced my concern about the structure of the piece in addition finding the content problematic as well. My concern was not about the instrumentalisation of art practice – just the opposite; what I wanted to stress was that this work and other artists’ works preceding this one chose the simple way for applying politicality and did not challenge the audience, the producer and the presenter, and failed to offer possibilities for reflection. The pre-designed gestures that relied on a single visual effect and prompted astonishment/anger/smile seemed to be too fragile to resist instant consumption. Being wary of the dominant ideology of over-visualisation I found the strategy of minimalising structural elements problematic and stated that I preferred the effort to find enriching and resistant strategies of mediation and folding – which I still do. In relation to this issue, Kâmil Şenol argued that the criticism against instant communicability and calls for mediation and refinement are conditioned by patterns of class interests, in this example, of the bourgeoisie. Considering retrospectively, I can say that I

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5 I don’t mean that this strand I criticised was the single approach to political use of art. Along with several individual artists, groups like Xurban, VideA and Oda Projesi exemplified other routes.
“understand” the strategy I criticised more; and I concede the motivations behind this functionality. Yet, I also want to underline that the tendency towards directness has not stemmed from a search to transcend the limitations of class-based imaginations, or to snatch artistic practice from the grips of bourgeois conformity, or to gain access to the masses, but from the urge to respond to the intensity of the political agenda, to deal with the sense of urgency deriving from this intensity, and to defy social paralysis and mass-scale silence. This sense of urgency would blast in our skulls with the warmth of a bullet on a slightly later date... January 19, 2007.

In the immediate aftermath of our loss of Hrant Dink, the sense of acting, sobering up and gathering was also shared by the field of art. Many examples can be cited but we can remember the overnight change of the title of the exhibition held at Apartman Projesi from the ironically formulated Everything Will Be Alright to the soberly put Nothing Is Alright, and how the added changes to the content of the show revealed the feeling of anger and confrontation. The contribution of Ceren Oykut took the logo of Hürriyet, a daily newspaper responsible for manipulations that facilitated the escalation of the tension that paved the way to this murder, underlined the racist implications of the subtitle under the logo Turkey Belongs to the Turks that strangely bothers no one, and with a hand-made intervention corrected it and changed it to Turkey Belongs to Its Peoples.

Another work prepared with a similar swiftness was by Evrensel Belgin who is distributing most of his compositions through his web-project anti-pop. What he did in the days following the assassination was a black obituary design, bearing under the name of Hrant Dink the dates “2007-1915.” Besides repeating the conventional appearance of the obituary, it came close to the aesthetics of the early conceptualist works of Joseph Kosuth, but the striking element of the composition was the message embedded in the slightly awkward-looking dates. The beginning was equated with the re-birth of Hrant at the moment of his death, which brought the political project he dedicated his life to a higher level. And the year 1915 marked the date of his death and hinted at the completion of the process of coming to terms with what happened at that date, which would also fulfil the main struggle of Hrant’s life and let him rest in peace. The image was placed on badges and stickers, left anonymous and distributed to the massive crowd at Hrant’s funeral, and it was also carried to the pages of the daily Birgün and political journal Bînkin. A very minimalist design linked to a fine and touching implication achieved a monumental effect and was embraced by masses who are not directly familiar with art. It was of course not meant to be presented as an art piece, but it answered the need of visualisation in the face of a tragic loss.

It did not harm the composition’s value, but to remember the way in which Belgin’s visual composition was appropriated by an opponent ideological formation, we have to talk about the “Are You Aware of the Danger” campaign of the daily Cumhuriyet. One of the images of the campaign went beyond the limits of being inspired, it directly appropriated the structure of Belgin’s work on Hrant. Using exactly the same colouring and obituary styling, the newspaper came out with a huge caption with the dates 1881-2007 written in the middle of it. The attached sentence ran “May 2007; the presidency election is coming soon; are you aware of the danger?” The dating again had a semantic cipher: Citizen, remember the birth of Atatürk in 1881, our modern reign started with his life; we thought it would be forever; but citizen look, if the presidency chair is grabbed by one of the head figures of this counter-revolutionary AKP then our glorious days will be over and Kemalism will be buried to death; are you aware of the danger and will you do something about it [in my words]?

Besides the far-reaching power to influence a public medium like a daily newspaper – even if from a different ideological position – and the awareness about it, we might be cautious about

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7 www.anti-pop.com
8 I mentioned the lack of a performational dimension in the contemporary art practice in Turkey. The emphasis given to inter-disciplinarity in the mid-nineties disappeared later and contemporary art withdrew to two-dimensional presentations such as video projection and photography. In the aftermath of Hrant’s assassination an experimental theatre group, Çiplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası [Barefeet Company] intervened to fill in the gap.
the possible problems that arise when responding to an urgency, and trying to intervene in the actual agenda. A series of works Belgin designed from late 2007 onwards were faced with obstacles about grabbing the rapidly changing agenda. In one of them, we see a stage-like decoration and a desk with crystal jugs and microphones placed on it to make an association with a speaking stand in the parliament. The liquid in the jugs is not water and the red colour gives the impression that it is blood. Anyone who followed the political agenda could make the link between the image and the parliamentary discussions at that time about the permission to be given to the government to launch air raids in Northern Iraq and to bomb the facilities of PKK. While the idea of shedding blood in a foreign country was being naturalised in the mass media, Belgin’s composition found a place on the back cover of the leftist monthly magazine Express and attracted the attention of a considerable amount of readers. In another composition, Belgin took the image of an ordinary pastoral landscape painting from the internet and using photoshop hid on the surface of the river in the painting the minute shadow of a F-16 fighter which could only be detected after careful inspection. The effect of astonishment at the moment of detection was meant to displace the mind of the viewer in relation to the then ongoing air raids in Northern Iraq. It was a very striking piece, but could not produce a similar effect as the former example since it could not be circulated in a medium open to public access. Today, when we come across these works we need someone to explain/remind us about the context of the historical moment so that we can decipher the message. To be efficient, they had to be circulated immediately.

![Evensel Belgin, “Tören” [Ceremony], April 2009](image)

Another discussion about visual materials promoted to relate to political urgencies is about whether they can be conceived and presented as art or not, whether there is a need to define what they are, whether they should disclose the signature of their authors or remain anonymous. I already mentioned that the initial objective of the composition 2007-1915 was to be functional in a social ritual and it had nothing to do with art – hence, it did not require a signature; signing it would be absurd and disrespectful. There might also be other reasons to veil the name of the authors of similar images. This is especially the case when they are designed as counter-provocations against political groups that have been terrorizing the lives of ordinary people including the intellectuals and artists themselves, and therefore when there is a possibility of being exposed to physical threats. Besides works that have remained anonymous so far, there have been some compositions which were initially meant to be kept anonymous, and sometimes produced as materials that were suitable for anonymous circulation such as stickers and stencils, but were later brought back to the art context and unveiled with an attributable signature. For example, the work of Burak Delier which transformed the ultra-nationalists flag with three crescents (also the Ottoman flag) into a composition with three bananas was printed on stickers and spread throughout streets, and later, without really contradicting the original idea, it was exhibited in the exhibition Election Posters held in Hafriyat. A reference to the same party flag was also used by Vahit Tuna in a composition which associated nationalism with threats to human kind. Conceived as an anonymous work, it was later titled Bio-Damage and operated as one of the pieces building up the conceptual integrity of the artists solo exhibition Exercise (again

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9 Of course the archetype of this sort of works was Delier’s photographic composition of a woman veiling with an EU flag, which was spread out throughout the streets in Istanbul as a poster (and then photographed and publicised in European newspapers, and even used by the Austrian ultra-nationalist party as a material for anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish propaganda) and later exhibited in the Free Kick exhibition with proper printing quality, dimension and framing. It became, most probably, the most known work of contemporary art from Turkey.
in Hafriyat, May 2008). The context of the image was transferred from an immediacy and urgency to a reflexivity. *Come to Daddy*, a work designed by Erinç Seymen for an anonymous fanzine project and depicting a SM couple walking towards the mausoleum of Atatürk, was again used in a solo show by the artist in a later period (*Hunting Season*, Galerist, 2007).

The works I have cited above were not conceived as artworks at the start. They were prepared with feelings of political urgency and were meant to leave the framework designated for art, but after a period of time in which the produced images proved to be effective, their context of presentation was and they were reclaimed by their authors. Another comparable model was the image production process of *iğ mihrik* collective whose aesthetics comes very close to the aforementioned examples. Having developed from a theory-based affinity group, the collective set out to disclose recklessly the paradoxes of narratives shaping official history with humorous trans-contextualisations. Being cautious about possible reactions, the collective decided to remain anonymous and operate mainly through the web environment. Although they do not relate their production to the framework of art, and define themselves primarily as an interface willing to serve other political formations by providing them visual necessities, they have had occasional contact with art-related presentations (such as *Moderate* [Makul] a group exhibition in Hafriyat, April 2008).

A series of successive exhibitions organised by the open call of the Hafriyat team tested the possibilities of visual production to propose instances of the interruption of mechanisms of

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10 I used the expression “image engineering” in relation to Delier’s pieces in *Free Kick*. This was not meant to dismiss them. The same impression could have been used in relation to other works mentioned in that text – all in all they are inheritors of John Heartfield’s magnificent legacy. It is also necessary to note that Delier switched to another sort of production and presentation that can be defined as “project-based,” starting with his piece *parkaling*, protective clothing designed against possible beatings and lynching by security forces or fascist militia (exhibited in the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007). His work *Counter-Attack* (presented in the show *I Refuse to be Normal* in Outlet in 2008) was based on the extension of the electricity source from inside of the building to the outside – ironically problematising the differences between the sociologies of the art institution and its surrounding. His collaboration with Eylem Akçay and Günsel Terkol in the project *S.T.ARGEM*. (using the project space PIST as its base) concentrated on mutuality and humane contact established with collectors of recyclable waste found on the street.
representation within everyday life and interventions into actual political debates. The exhibition *Intervention* (2007) spread the use of graffiti and stencil, which became an integral element of contemporary urban life, to the project space and its near surrounding, invited practitioners of these activities to the event, and presented a context involving art and non-art, exhibition space and the street, specified public space under protection and public space open to contingencies, and risks and surprises. Another exhibition, *Alternative Election Posters* (2007) again took a visual element that temporarily covered the wall surfaces in the urban text and reproduced it within the project space from an ironic and critical perspective. The examples of works and exhibitions I have given so far were produced by some figures who have had formations or production experience in graphic design – Evrensel Belgin, Vahit Tuna, Memed Erdener, iç mihra. These works might hint at efforts to step out of the self-referential introversion of art practice and come into contact with the perception of masses through a minimalist language that increases the efficiency of the message. In a period in which the political content is increasingly shared, and the coordination of events are communicated through the web, the consequent speed brings in a new aesthetics that can respond to the urge to leave the confinements of working in closed spaces dedicated to art and to strive to minimalise the mediation and the interval between the event and the representation. A side effect of this tendency was the transformation of the platonic interest of contemporary art practices in circles producing contemporary theory and critique to mutual contact. A singular example of this mutuality was the cover of the journal *Defter* (Spring 2001) which used the image of Hale Tenger’s installation *We Didn’t Go Outside; We Were Always on the Outside/We Didn’t Go Inside; We Were Always on the Inside* (1995). In the last couple of years the interaction intensified. When talking about Belgin’s work we already mentioned his contact with *Express* and *Birikim* magazines. When this text was written, the issue of *Express* on sale had the 11th Istanbul Biennial on its cover and the current issue of *Birikim* enriched its collection of essays with visual works designed for the topic of the journal’s main dossier – examples that gives hope for future convergences.11

Another model that set out to consider the interstices between fields of artistic and political activities was the January 19 Collective, which gathered in the immediate aftermath of Hrant Dink’s assassination artists, curators and writers who shared a concern about what to do. The group that would later re-form, narrow down and survive through a series of inner turbulences, decided at its initial stage to initiate purely political acts and two successive groups made public declarations in front of a state prosecution court, recited the sentences that led to the court decision for Hrant’s imprisonment and consequently his assassination, made legal complaints about themselves in order to complicate the future use of the corresponding law. In a later phase, the collective discussed the involvement of artistic practice and decided to produce a project that would not use the names of the participating contributors, bracket out their personal identities, and use a collective signature. On the first anniversary of the assassination, the collective opened the exhibition *Münferit* [a word that denotes the meanings of sporadic,

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11 Another example of this contact was the contributions of Haﬁriyat to the BirGün newspaper (July-December 2006), which were later collected in a book project; *Haﬁriyat Bir Gün Kanatalanınca…*, Kanat Kitap, Istanbul, 2007. Also, the issues of Ankara-based LGBT journal KaosGL gives emphasis to reviews on contemporary art.
individual and singular; the reference is about the use of the word by official authorities who dismiss crime incidents in debate for being unprogrammatic, unplanned and not plotted] brought together the names of thousands of people (and information about the date, the cause and the location of the killings) whose right to live was violated by armed violence emanating from the state, unidentified sources or illegal groups since 1980 up until now. Against the use of the word by authorities, which pushed individual lives into the anonymity of cold statistics, the show invited the audience to remember the value of each individual life.12

There have also been occasions of contact between people who use the language of contemporary art, reflect upon political matters and try to find alternative ways to present their works, and people who have been participating in activist groups. The exhibition entitled ironically as Moderate (organised by Lambda Istanbul, the prominent LGBT organisation of the city and held again in Hafriyat in 2008) brought together art producers who had been involved in socialist, anarchist and feminist movements and people who came from feminist, queer and anti-militarist initiatives, and had not produced or presented artistic work before, but took the force of the visual seriously. It was a meeting worth remembering for its facilitation of alternative networking.

I need to open a bracket here. All the examples I have mentioned so far were produced by artists who feel a discomfort about the constraints of the existing conventions about art, and explore the ways in which they can feed from the interaction between art practice and the political field and expand the socialability of their production. By experimenting with alternative models of the visual, performative and relational, they seek to propose clues to the actually operating formations within the political field, and to support directly the mechanisms of representation needed by these struggling formations. What they do is not proposing an alternative to political practice. No one is saying something like, I am not interested in politics, “instead” I do produce political art; which is to say, they do not claim that their production is a replacement of the political field. Anyway, most of them are actively participating in different political compartments – “besides” their practice in art.

One can propose that the will to come, think, work and produce together is a political act in itself. That kind of undertaking is even more attractive in the context of art – a field in which the term of “genius” has been mythologised, the notion of the creative individual has been identified with the fulfillment of the liberal ideology, especially during the Cold War, and still lies beneath the current structure based on signature and individual career. Yet, it is hard to omit the obstacles confronted when engaging with collectivities such as fatigue, coordinational inefficiencies, personalisation of differences of opinion and intimidation due to all these factors. Although the start of Ergenekon trials temporarily tempered down the previously existing tensions, a continuous flow of conflictual issues started to shake and corrode the ongoing projects based on collectivity: the stance that the Kurdish party in the parliament has to take, the concept of genocide, the critical tone in relation with the state of Israel and the related risk of anti-semitism, the issue of whether sometimes violence is legitimate, the way to criticize the strange and despicable assault of a certain famous intellectual on his wife, the logo of Koç in the biennial, the violence committed by and against the Diyarbakırspor supporters, Freudian slips emerging during discussions (I mention these as a result of my subjective experience)... all of these led to insurmountable tensions, withdrawals, splits, divisions, complete disintegration and poignant situations in which it gets hard to bring three people together.

Nowadays we are faced with a second split that is completely different from the previous big rupture around the theme of nationalism but bears some continuity with it: the split within the left (I mean the remainders from the previous mass-migration to nationalism) into two poles named with mutually pejorative descriptions as “liberal left” and “orthodox socialism.” The first split had severed the links between parents and their children; this split now severs the links between friends and even lovers. An early indicator of this split surfaced in the dossier published

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12 The collective later appealed to the same model in the context of a scandalous series of accidents that cost dozens of shipyard workers’ lives.
in the cultural pages of the BirGün newspaper: the title ran “the examination between the left and contemporary art” (January 28, 2008). The formulation of the opposition between leftist politics and contemporary art disclosed accumulated prejudice. The “left” implicated in the caption did not refer to a plethora of different ideological positions, an umbrella term for different traditions, but to a specific position that the writer identified with, that is seen by him as the authentic position. On the other hand, the term “contemporary art” does not refer to a plane of expression or a heterogeneous ground that uses this plane of expression in Turkey, but to a monolithically defined scene. This opposition and double-generalisation is supplemented with another sentence in the caption: “why are people interested in contemporary art being associated with adjectives like ‘liberal’ or ‘cosmopolitan’? I don’t how this pairing of conflict would sound in the context of other cultural disciplines: what is the problem between the left and cinema/electronic music/painting/modern dance? Instead of this perspective that seeks verification by negating its object of opposition, reducing its complexities, fixing it as a monolithic structure, could the series of questionings not have been formulated like this: why has the field of expression that is called contemporary art been more susceptible to the recuperative mechanism of the logic of capital in the last decade? Which positions and attitudes are easily co-opted, which positions tried to articulate a critique and managed to resist? What are the material conditions of establishing an alternative field? How are the dynamics of these tendencies operating in different geographical and cultural contexts? What would happen if there was any source of public funding in Turkey – would it give the production a higher legitimacy?.

The instrumentalisation of a field of expression, which was for a long while squeezed in a narrow living space but managed to expand, by capital for producing a modern-, western-, progressive-looking corporate identity; the rechanneling of financial sources from collections of Turkish modern painting or Orientalist painting to this new ground; establishing art institutions that are more interested in surface sterility than any vision for content; social filtering through security mechanisms and psychological effects; methods of presentation that reduce the function of art to consensus and visual appeasement, the strict division between producers and consumers... awareness about these symptoms and a search for articulating a critical stance in relation to them is not less in the field of contemporary art than other disciplines – one might even ask whether there is any other cultural platform that problematises its conditions of presentation so much? Then, why is this totalising reaction? In other words, if the critical energy is found insufficient, why not try to enhance the existing critical voices but posting everyone in the field to hell?

In the aftermath of the beginning of the Ergenekon period, one of the major debates within the left concentrated on the decision about which type of domination should be the target of political critique. One of the sides argued for foregrounding (or singling out) the critique of capitalist domination; defining it as the overdetermining structure; there have even been supporters of this opinion who declared that conceiving the rights of gays and lesbians and the rights of labourers together is impossible – it is also interesting to observe that the motif of gay and lesbian rights is constantly used as a counter-position. The proposition to conceive different modes of domination as an interlacing complexity and to offer the use of a plurality of methods and their combination is seen as a diversion, an interruption of time and waste of energy. The preference goes for rewinding the tape, for enjoying the easy gratification of saying I was right and still am, rather than self-questioning with modesty and reservation as if no trace has remained from the rich interaction between different theoretical positions.

As Süreyyya Evren well observes, the field of contemporary art, which is in itself a problematic and heterogeneous field, reminds a specific leftist position the loss of altitude it suffered.13 Whether the correlation is established between the traumatic defeat of the whole leftist ground in 1980 and the first tendencies towards conceptualisation in the eighties, or between the collapse of state socialism and the emergence of contemporary art as a visible entity, there is something nervous to be found in it – something that reminds this specific leftist position of its political displacement and periodic loss of words. The enriched positions within Marxist thinking,

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post-structuralist theory, post-colonial criticism, new generations of feminism, anarchist positions that replaced their state fetishism with a plural analysis of relations of domination, queer theory that reinforced the problematisation of fixed identities, investigations of mobile and plural identifications and the synergy between all of these have been the sources of people who have been involved in the field of contemporary art. But their discursive cohesion established through untimely attempts to deconstruct Kemalist taboos and iconographies, to map out political extensions of the patriarchal value system, to investigate the vast sociological effects of recent waves of migration does not mean much for their critics, who can make the incredible claim that “the oppositional tone of the language of contemporary art can reach at best nihilism unless it is based on a class-based identity.” In this view the discursive field in debate is “indexed to every-day casualty” and its politicality is “light” – I really wonder what kind of art works are favoured by them for being “hard.” What makes art interesting is its potential to open up contingent gates to the infinitely rich dynamics of life – there are light ones, there are hard ones; there is blue, there is pink, there are different colours...

The arrogance in formulations like what is political is how I define it, is everywhere these days; it defines who the socialist is, who the Marxist is... When this obsessive appeal to authenticity that never has doubts about itself begins to operate in defining the locality, it harbours on the borders of some ideologies of other sort. The implication that the person chosen as the opponent does not belong here and hence the truth of here firmly belongs to the self leads to exclusionary and essentialist impasses.

An argument that accompanies the suggested dichotomies between contemporary art and the left, politically light language and its hypothetical hard version is the positing of contemporary art (or its examples with political content) as something that declared its rivalry to radical politics – which is followed by the condemnation that it does not deliver any sort of radicality. What I have tried to do in this text was to exemplify the transversal crossings between art and politics, and to hint at a potentiality for mutual enhancement, but I also have noted that there is no contest, comparability or demand for a full overlap between the two fields. Unfortunately, untenable comparisons are being made, coming also from activist circles recently. Speakers of this view list a series of radical gestures, some of them quite striking and significant, carried out by activist groups, and they turn to the contemporary artists and say, “can you do this as well; if you cannot, we don’t need the discourse you produce anymore.” The logical conclusion of this position would be the abolition of contemporary art (of course, this defiance is never directed towards other cultural disciplines such as cinema, poetry or literature). And at this point, the ground for communication evaporates and offering art as a tool for reflection loses its meaning.

Previously I mentioned that in the field of contemporary art the issue of economy-politics has not been as intricately and visibly dealt with as other modes of domination. This situation renders it clearly fragile to the reactions I have exemplified above. Furthermore, it hampers the articulation of an institutional critique and an alternative approach in light of the structural changes in the recent past. For the few figures who remained dedicated to such an alternative, the ideal route seems to be working harder, hopefully with new collectivities, by retaining the inheritance of the critical richness accumulated so far, not omitting the theoretical and practical facilities for the critique of capitalism, disclosing the inner compromises and paradoxes, and bypassing melancholic withdrawal. Plenty of obstacles... For sure a beam of light will be reflected from the broken pieces lying on the ground.