



THE TRANSITION FROM MODERN ART TO POSTMODERN ART IN TURKIYE

TÜRKİYE'DE MODERN SANATTAN POSTMODERN SANATA GEÇİŞ SÜRECİ

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Abstract

The transition from modern to postmodern art marks the beginning of a new transformation in the art world. This transformation, which emerged in the art world in the early 1950s, was reflected in Türkiye within a relatively short period, becoming evident during the 1960s and 1970s. This article aims to explore how art in Türkiye evolved from modernism to postmodernism and to identify the approaches that form the basis of contemporary art practices. Altan Gürman, Füsün Onur, and Şükrü Aysan are among the pioneering artists who initiated the shift from modernism to postmodernism during this artistic transformation and produced the first examples of postmodern art in Türkiye. The three artists examined in this article are pivotal figures who provide insight into how a period shaped by contemporary art discourse and distinguished by postmodern works of global recognition emerged in Türkiye. Furthermore, their work illustrates how Turkish art rapidly adapted to global shifts during the transition from modernism to postmodernism, ultimately fostering the development of its own contemporary art scene. Owing to the pioneering contributions of these artists, postmodern art production in Türkiye diversified rapidly, facilitating the emergence of a dynamic contemporary art scene.

Keywords: Altan Gürman, Füsün Onur, Şükrü Aysan, Modern Art, Postmodern Art.

Öz

Modern sanattan postmodern sanata geçiş süreci, sanatta yeni bir kırılmamın başlangıcını işaret eder. 1950'li yılların başlarında sanat dünyasında ortaya çıkan bu dönüşüm, Türkiye'ye nispeten kısa bir süre içinde, 1960'lar ve 1970'lerle birlikte yansımıştır. Bu makale, Türkiye'de sanatın modernizmden postmodernizme doğru nasıl evrildiğini ve çağdaş sanat pratiklerine temel oluşturan yaklaşımların neler olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Sanatsal dönüşüm sürecinde, modernizmden postmodernizme geçişi başlatan ve Türkiye'de postmodern sanatın ilk örneklerini veren öncü sanatçılar arasında Altan Gürman, Füsün Onur ve Şükrü Aysan yer almaktadır. Makalede incelenen bu üç sanatçı, postmodern sanatın dünya çapında kabul gören ve evrensel değerlere ulaşan eserlerin üretildiği, çağdaş sanat tartışmalarıyla şekillenen bir dönemin Türkiye'de nasıl başladığını anlamamıza yardımcı olan başlıca isimlerdir. Ayrıca, Türk sanatının modernizmden postmodernizme geçişteki evrensel değişimlere nasıl hızla adapte olarak kendi çağdaş sanat ortamını oluşturduğunu kavramamıza da olanak sağlamaktadır. Bu sanatçıların öncü rolleri sayesinde, Türkiye'de postmodern sanat ekseninde üretim kısa sürede çeşitlenmiş ve çağdaş sanat ortamı gelişmeye başlamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Altan Gürman, Füsün Onur, Şükrü Aysan, Modern Sanat, Postmodern Sanat.



INTRODUCTION

Although the history of art in Türkiye is as old as the history of many civilizations in its geography, it has become a valid phenomenon in the modern Turkish Republic. In the period between 1923 and 1950, considered the Early Republican Period, art in Türkiye generally followed an academic approach and was almost entirely aimed at transferring and mentalizing the Republican ideology to the public. During this period, all plastic arts were under the state's patronage, support and control. After 1950, art moved away from state control and its "utilitarian" position. Although this independence brought with it the problems of sponsorship, it provided an essential break in the artists' orientation towards new trends. The 1950s can be defined as the period of transition from traditional to modern art in Türkiye in the plastic sense. This period lasted until the 1970s and saw primarily the production of abstract works not encountered in Türkiye's previous years of painting and sculpture. From the second half of the 1960s onwards, a second transition occurred in art in Türkiye, this time from modern to postmodern. Simultaneously with the new figurative tendencies that emerged during the education reform of the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1968, the same period also saw the first examples of conceptual tendencies. The two-dimensional and three-dimensional works produced with this approach are works that could not easily be labelled as painting and sculpture, which started to eliminate the distinct boundaries between sculpture and painting. This situation points to the emergence of artists who started to research and implement postmodern approaches in their art by departing from modern practice. Such developments would lead to a different period in which significant breakthroughs were made in the contemporisation process of art in Türkiye. This essay explores the transition from modern to postmodern art in Türkiye and highlights the significant influences and developments that characterized this period of artistic evolution.

THE CONCEPT OF POSTMODERN ART AND THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN ART IN THE WORLD

Postmodern art challenges modern art's form-based methods that elevate the artist's self-narrative to an iconic status, suggesting these are insufficient to define art's essence (Cheetam, 1997, pp. 169-171); (Desmond, 2011, pp. 148-149). This shift began in the early 20th century with movements like Dada, known for its "anti-art" stance and became more prominent post-World War II as modern art evolved.

In the 1940s, New York emerged as the new art hub with modern art tendencies. Leading art critics, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, identified a distinct American modern art style during this period (Rosenberg, 1952, pp. 22-23, 48-50). This style prioritized the process and visual elements like line, shape¹ and colour over narrative or its connection to the real world. Greenberg termed this "Formalism," advocating for artists to focus on a high art that could transform society, a view he held from his 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (Greenberg, 2003) to even beyond 1964 when he introduced "Post-Painterly Abstraction".²

In this context, Formalism's pursuit of artistic purity and focus on form, coupled with avant-garde artists' quest for novel forms and emphasis on individual-driven "great meaning", set the stage for the distinction between modern and postmodern art. Post-World War II, cultural shifts towards consumerism and political upheavals from the early 1960s questioned modern art's relevance. Greenberg's "low culture" entities like mass-produced items, television and pulp literature gained popularity. Concurrently, the value placed on the quality and originality of what was deemed "high culture" art, like painting and sculpture, waned in the post-war era.

During the early shifts from modern to postmodern art, as Abstract Expressionism dominated but

¹ Instead of using form which defines a three-dimensional object, it would be more accurate to use shape in the context of Greenberg's approach (2003) which, while laying down the rules of modern painting, emphasises two-dimensionality and clearly distinguishes painting from sculpture.

² The term refers to the new tendencies in American abstract painting during the 1960's where the painters started to abandon painterly abstraction: the expressive aspects of paint as a material of the 1940s and 1950s, which by the 1960s had become the fashion and degenerated into what Greenberg described as kitsch. See (Greenberg, 1993)



stayed aloof from popular culture, some artists pivoted to art rooted in daily life. Notably, the Neo-Dadaists, termed by critic Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006) in 1957, began this experimentation. Figures like John Cage (1912-1992), Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), Jasper Johns (1930), Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) and Merce Cunningham (1919-2009), centered at Black Mountain College, infused their works with mass media imagery, found objects and performances, highlighting the mundane. Their pioneering efforts paved the way for the emergence of Pop Art and Minimalism.

Amidst cultural shifts, art began breaking from modernist conventions. By the late 1950s, tendencies which would later be labelled as Post-Painterly Abstraction emerged, with artists like Barnett Newman (1905-1970) leading the way. These artists prioritized visual experience and decorative impact over personal expression, distancing themselves from leaving the artist's identity on canvas. Pioneers like Frank Stella (1936) and Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), by the 1960s, began creating uniquely shaped canvases that emphasized their spatial presence (Fried, 2003, pp. 822-834), challenging the traditional boundaries of painting and Greenberg's strict separation of painting from sculpture. Concurrently, Minimalists like Judd, termed their works as "*specific objects*" in his article of 1965 (Judd, 2003, pp. 809-813) placing them directly on the floor instead of putting them on pedestals, further deviating from conventional sculpture norms. Highlighting this evolution, Robert Rauschenberg, in the mid-1950s, blurred the distinctions of painting and sculpture, notably by painting his bed and hanging it on the gallery wall. Such changes redefined the traditional understanding of painting and sculpture.

These artistic transformations were not exclusive to America. During the same years in Japan, the Gutai movement emerged as an Eastern counterpart. Gutai aimed for a democratic art, addressing the traumas of World War II in Japanese society and fostering a deep connection between art and everyday life. Like its Western counterparts, Gutai marked a shift from modern to postmodern art by emphasizing relatable, ordinary experiences.

In the 1950s, Europe began to pivot away from the intense gestural expressionism and existential drama found in movements like CoBrA Group and Tachism. European art shifted towards flat colour fields, similar to America's emerging Post-Painterly Abstraction. But unlike the American version, European color fields were often monochromatic, reflecting "*purity*" and meditative qualities through the interplay of light, color and energy. While both European and American artists explored color, the increasing geometric tendencies in America didn't resonate as strongly in Europe, where geometric abstracts were already well-established. Differing from American artists influenced by Greenberg, some European painters ventured beyond the flatness of canvas, merging the properties of painting and sculpture. French artist Yves Klein (1928-1962) exemplified this, emphasizing color's emotive power. His monochromes merged the physicality of paint with color's spiritual essence. By attaching sponges and adding paint to them, he created relief-like works, pushing abstract art to its limits, especially after Malevich's non-objective art.

The monochrome approach was adopted and used by the German Düsseldorf group ZERO, consisting of Otto Piene (1928-2014), Heinz Mack (1931) and Günther Uecker (1930), as well as by Rupprecht Geiger (1908-2009) of the Munich group Zen and the Argentine-born Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899-1968). With his *White Manifesto* in 1946, Fontana stated that colour, space, light, movement and sound should be interrelated in a painting (2003, pp. 646-647). To achieve this, he cut or pierced the monochrome-painted flat canvas surface with a knife, opening the painting to the space beyond it. Here, cutting or piercing is not an act of destruction but an act of liberating the surface from its boundaries. The cutting also emphasises a horizontal and vertical movement, the piercing a movement backwards from the surface and the tearing also contains sound. The cut and pierced surface also loses its flat, two-dimensional structure, creating a relief-like appearance. The ZERO group also experimented capturing light's dynamic essence in art as a response to the emerging Kinetic Art. Otto Piene ventured into non-material Kinetic Art using technology-driven moving light projections. Meanwhile, Günther Uecker began fusing sculpture and architecture, most notably through his transformative pieces where he embedded nails into canvases and created walkable art spaces with those canvases for viewers.



All these new tendencies point to a new type of artist profile that tries to reveal the limitations of modern art and moves from plastic issues of art to conceptual issues to overcome these limitations, creating a feeling that a new era was approaching. Consequently, in a short period, Conceptual Art, Video Art, Performance Art and even a wide range of artistic movements with a broad scope ranging from criticism of art institutions to identity politics emerged. These artistic movements represented the reactionary mindset of the post-war period and were defined as postmodern. The common feature of all these movements is that they emphasise image and spectacle by weakening the concepts of originality and uniqueness with an approach that challenges the previous definitions of art; they break down the hierarchies of high and low culture and adopt the popular, they deal with the theme sometimes ironically and sometimes in an entertaining way, they move from structuralist singular understanding to poststructuralist plural meanings/understandings and with this, they make audience participation an integral part of the work which all creates a bond between art and life.

THE TRANSITION FROM MODERN ART TO POSTMODERN ART IN TURKIYE

The global shifts in the art scene that began in the 1950s started to influence Turkish art by the late 1960s, with initial changes observed in sculpture and painting. Modern art in Turkiye then had a relatively short history, spanning merely two decades. Yet, in this brief span, various experimental approaches were undertaken, leading to unique and independent artistic perspectives by the mid-1960s. After this period, reactions against the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts education system began to rise among young academics and students. The most important example of these reactions was the works of the so-called “*Generation of 68*” artists, who reacted to the Academy’s form-orientated understanding of the figure. (Koyunoğlu, 2018, pp. 320-322) These young artists were included in the context of the New Figuration, which emerged in Europe and America in the 1960s. These reactions triggered the Academy reform of 1968 with the search for innovation in the education system. Although this reform brought innovations to the Academy’s education system, they were within the context of modern art.

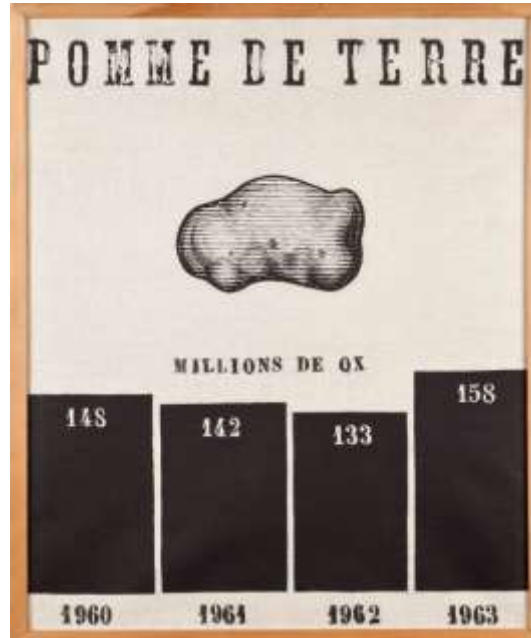
Art in Turkiye, from the 1950s to the 1970s, predominantly followed a formalist approach. This is partly due to the brief history of Westernized and modern art in Turkiye. Unlike in the West, modern art in Turkiye did not emerge in opposition to academic teaching but was seen as a legacy of the Republic. Consequently, artists leaned towards consistent modern art production. A significant deviation came with the rise of conceptual art during the Academy reform, reacting to both the Academy’s formalism and the Generation of 68’s approaches (Koyunoğlu, 2018, p. 295).

These first examples of conceptual tendencies in art in Turkiye resembled the understandings seen in the art world of the post-World War II period, which rejected the sanctity of art and tried to remove the barriers between art and life. It also started to question the boundaries between sculpture and painting. For this reason, it would be correct to consider that Turkiye’s transitional period from modern aesthetics to postmodernism started in the second half of the 1960s. As a matter of fact, Altan Gürman (1935-1976), one of the first artists in Turkiye who tended to depart from modern art in the true sense, questioned the accepted conceptions of art of his time both formally and intellectually. Although he was an artist with a background in painting, his works are beyond the definition of painting in the traditional sense.

After finishing his studies under Halil Dikmen (1906-1964) and Zeki Faik İzer (1905-1988) in 1960, Gürman went to Paris in 1963. There, he encountered the revolutionary works of New Realist artists like Yves Klein, Arman (1928-2005) and Christo (1935-2020). This exposure likely made him recognize a distinct artistic direction that diverged from traditional modern art. Orhan Koçak suggests that Gürman’s subsequent choice to stop signing his artworks might be linked to this new art’s rejection of the sanctity of the artist (Koçak, 2008, p. 73). Thus, it seems fitting to view Gürman as an artist distancing from the Generation of 68’s New Figuration, which stressed individualism. Gürman’s parallels with the Post-Painterly Abstraction artists (despite no direct ties) indicate his alignment with the move to depersonalize art. Additionally, his use of ready-made industrial materials connects him to Dada, Neo-Dada and New Realism.



In 1965, Gürman began his transition from modern to postmodern art with his *Statistics Series* (Picture 1). Rather than depicting the physical attributes of foods like potatoes, corn and sugar beet, he chose to illustrate graphic charts, highlighting statistical data with numbers and text. Through this, Gürman turned foods into “*objects of aesthetic knowledge*” (Koyunoğlu, 2018, p. 296). This series stands as a pioneering representation, if not the very first, of the shift from modern to postmodern art in Türkiye.



Picture 1. Altan Gürman, *Statistic*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 53x44 cm. (Arter).

With the *Montage Series*, in addition to not signing the works, he stopped using the expressionist/painterly features of colour (Picture 2). He opened the issues of two-dimensionality and the boundaries of the frame, which were essential topics of discussion at the time. He also started to use ready-made industrial materials with this series. These approaches can be compared to the innovations of Rauschenberg. However, Gürman’s uniqueness lies in his use of symbols (for conceptual criticism) that remind the viewer of the military, which was always considered the symbol of sovereignty and authority in Türkiye (Koyunoğlu, 2018, p. 297).



Picture 2. Altan Gürman, *Montage 5*, 1967, cellulosic paint and barbed wire on wood, 140x140x9 cm. (Google Arts & Culture).

Gürman's works of the 1970s, especially *Padded*, which is a critique of a symbol of power, are among the most mature examples of the approaches and concepts that the artist began to put forward in the 1960s (Picture 3). Its position of being a work between painting and sculpture and its conceptual aspect was also mentioned by Antmen, who discussed the semiotics of the work and pointed out that *Padding* is a work of conceptual art:

"In the face of this work, the viewer is looking at a painting that raises a particular subject but, on the other hand, is also surrounded by a space. Beyond being a representation, the padded back wall stands like a quilted back wall in the real sense within the space the viewer is in; thus, the viewer turns into a body that shares a common space with the painting rather than looking at it from the outside. In this respect, it is natural that Gürman hung this painting behind his desk in his room at the Academy! The painting arouses the viewer's desire to turn around and look at it." (Antmen, 2002, p. 204)



Picture 3. Altan Gürman, *Padded*, 1976, artificial leather and cellulosic paint on wood, 120x123 cm. (Arter).

Another pioneering figure in this transformation process is Füsün Onur (1938), with a background in sculpture. After completing her education in sculpture at the Academy in 1960, the same year as Gürman, Onur went to the USA in 1962 with a Fulbright scholarship. After completing a one-year master's degree in philosophy in Washington D.C., she studied at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore under the painter Peter Winslow Milton (1930) and returned to Türkiye in 1967. After returning to Türkiye, Onur's works became increasingly conceptual.

Onur's first works upon her return to Türkiye were abstract works on the relationship between space and emptiness. They had parallels with the concept of *"synthesis of plastic arts"* in line with her education at the Academy. Although these works are associated with Minimalism due to their simple structure, Onur mentioned that she had never seen this type of art in America, that she never went to exhibitions nor followed art magazines and that her works there were then considered to be typical examples of Turkish sculpture (Erzen, 1982, p. 9). What seems to be is that Onur's art stemmed from the desire for innovation that emerged from the combination of the *"Zeitgeist"*, which she did not directly see in America but would have felt from this period onwards (Koyunoğlu, 2018, p. 301). As a result, Onur's late 1960s and early 1970s works also need the phenomenological experience of the work mentioned by Robert Morris (1931-2018) in his 1966 article *Notes on Sculpture* while explaining the aims of Minimalism (Morris, 2003, pp. 815-816).

The work's need for phenomenological experience is particularly evident in Onur's *Dual Sculpture*, dated 1969 (and in her other works of the 1970s) (Picture 4). Although the work is based on the relationship between space and the subject of fullness and emptiness, which was presented in geometric abstract form, these two forms standing against the wall without a pedestal call the viewer to interact with the work, to calculate and correct the balance of the sculpture and to combine these two forms in their mind.



Picture 4. Füsün Onur, *Dual Sculpture*, 1969, wooden poles and canvas cloth, 320x200x80 cm., artist's collection (Koçak, 2008, p. 333).

This situation puts the viewer in a position where the viewer is subjected to the necessity of being in the same space with the work as in *Minimalism* and *Light&Space*. It would be insufficient to experience the work from photographs. However, in Onur's works, the approach of *Minimalism*, where the organisation of industrial materials with their material qualities cannot be seen.

Following her early works, Onur moved away from the problems of form to make experiments of a conceptual nature that would reach the point of installations. These included sculptures opening to spaces including doors, windows, gaps and holes, in which concepts such as inner space, framing and looking from the inside out. With these works, Onur evaluated the linear outlines in form, that is, hollow forms that do not address the problem of mass. They are works in which the value of the form in space is experienced by the viewer, which constantly changes according to the viewer's movement, making perspective and simultaneity a part of the works. These works also did not have any pedestals. As the problem of mass and the usage of pedestals are all considered to be the main subjects of modern sculpture, the characteristics of Onur's works have evolved from sculpture to something else that cannot be defined by modern sculpture/aesthetics.

As a good example of this approach, the artist's *Abstract Composition* of 1972 is a work that can be passed through, defining and completing the space in which it exists (Picture 5). In this work, Onur also started a storytelling process using personal memories triggered by ordinary/everyday objects (this time with a small red ball), which would become an integral part of her art. Thus, this work would become a postmodern work centred on the viewer's experience and her attempt to combine life and art through the conceptual quality of the objects instead of their formal characteristics.



Picture 5. Füsün Onur, *Abstract Composition*, 1971, wood and plastic ball, 194x89x65 cm., Istanbul State Art and Sculpture Museum (Burcu Pelvanoğlu Photo Archive).

An important turning point among Onur's works is her 1974 work titled *Nude* (Picture 6). This work was prepared for the *Nude Exhibition* the Turkish Sculptors Association³ opened in protest against the removal of Gürdal Duyar's *Beautiful Istanbul*⁴ for depicting Istanbul as a nude female figure. It was one of the twenty sculptures commissioned for public spaces to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Republic. *Nude*, which consists of the torso of a nude doll in the pose of a pinup model, cut in three places and placed in a mirrored box, resembles the dolls that were placed as decorations on public transport vehicles such as minibuses in those years as "*sex symbols*" which were seen by the public. Compared to Gürdal Duyar's *Beautiful Istanbul*, with its exposed breasts and pinup model pose, *Nude* evokes sexuality in a real sense and is a work that shows how an immoral figure should be. The figure, seen from every angle through mirrors, further reinforces this sexualised image. The work is a protest against the moralistic attitude of the current government. It is also a significant early attempt by the artist to use ready-made objects as an art piece completely.



Picture 6. Füsün Onur, *Nude*, 1974, wood, glass, mirrors, plastic doll, 30x20x15 cm. (IKSV).

³ Found by Ali Hadı Bara, Nusret Suman, Yavuz Görey, Kamil Sonad, Hüseyin Anka Özkan, Ratip Aşır Acudoğu, Kenan Yontunç, Turgut Pura, Hakkı Atamulu in 1948 to "elevate Turkish Sculpture".

⁴ For an article summarising the reactions to the removal of *Beautiful İstanbul*, see (Türenç, 1974, pp. 16-17).

The work, which the artist exhibited as *Untitled (Life Behind the Walls)* in the Taksim Art Gallery in 1975, is another important cornerstone in the transformation of Onur's art (Picture 7). The three-panelled wall made of matte plexiglass questions the dialogue between the world of art and our world by giving the illusion of movement behind it and now appears as an example of conceptual art.



Picture 7. Füsün Onur, *Untitled (Life Behind the Walls)*, 1975, plexiglass, 200x385 cm. (Erzen, 1982, p. 10).

It would be correct to refer to Rosalind Krauss's (1941) 1979 article *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, which is now among the most fundamental sources discussing sculpture in the postmodern period, to discuss Onur's approach of placing this work in an open space. In her article, Krauss mentions that with modern art, sculpture has become an art that does not belong to a place. According to the critic, when Barnett Newmann said of sculpture in the 1950s that "*Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting*" (Krauss, 1979, pp. 34, 36), he was emphasising that while sculpture continues to exist as a mass in space, it is an object that does not belong there. From the 1960s onwards, this feature has become more prominent and sculpture has become something that "...was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape" (Krauss, 1979, p. 36). According to Krauss, from the late 1960s onwards, this state of not belonging to a place has led to a gradual expansion of the definition of sculpture. Thus, in the postmodern process, "*narrow corridors with T.V. monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert*" (Krauss, 1979, p. 30) have now begun to be included in the category of sculpture. In this context, it would not be wrong to evaluate Onur's works of the mid-1970s.

As examples of this approach, the two works produced by the artist for 1976 and 1977 of the Open-Air Exhibitions (Açık Hava Sergileri) were among the first examples of installation art in Türkiye. The way they were exhibited became essential examples in the transformation of sculpture in the country. *Frame, Stone, Earth, Flower* from 1977 was created by placing a red flowering plant on sandstone replicas of the stones of Istanbul State Art and Sculpture Museum roads (Picture 8). This work is a good example of the unlimited and sometimes confusing state of "*sculpture*" in the postmodern period, which Rosalind Krauss emphasised in her 1979 article: The definition of art has changed and turned into a field of debate.



Picture 8. Füsun Onur, Frame, Stone, Earth, Flower, 1977, frame, stone, earth, flower, 85x100 cm. (Erzen, 1982, p. 10).

The fact that the work was accepted to a well-known exhibition is evidence that there were artists in Türkiye who were accepted as postmodern artists instead of modern artists, who produced works that broke free from traditional artistic patterns and began infiltrating into everyday life.

During Onur's solo exhibition titled *From the Out to Inside, From the Inside Out*, at Taksim Art Gallery in 1978, she explained what she wanted to do with her art not only for this exhibition but as a whole in the exhibition text:

"...One is content with what one sees in painting and sculpture. Is it a portrait, a still life, an outdoor painting? According to their first appearance, the spectator labels them, puts them on a list of acquaintances. He/she is more interested in the object than the symbol. When we recognise even the abstract by naming it, meaning is lost. However, meaning should increase in the audience; it should enter into creativity so that it affects the artist; dialogue can be established from the artist to the audience, from the audience to the artist." (Onur, 1978)

With this exhibition, Onur directly related the objects in her works to each other and inextricably integrated them with the space. In this respect, the exhibition has been an installation project for the gallery space. This installation is also the first of the artist's future gallery installations.

From 1980 onwards, Onur's installations started to turn into works in which she created small stories from her inner world. The starting points of these stories are small objects that many people might not think of but which have meanings in the artist's memory. In 1980, in her solo exhibition at the Taksim Art Gallery, the installation *Evocations from the Shiny Round on the Ground* is an example of this approach (Picture 9). In the exhibition, Onur placed found objects in wooden display cases painted in silver, created a personal narrative with these objects, established relationships between them, organised the space according to these relationships and created a living space. Zeki Çakaloz, who wrote an article about the exhibition, described the exhibition as consisting of eleven objects creating a story with eleven phases, which began with a five-lira coin on the floor; he stated that the story of this coin and the peoples' relation to it continued with contradictions and satires (1980, p. 7). Margrit Brehm, who prepared Onur's exhibition catalogue, called this world created with the found objects and stories *"The Dialogue of Things,"* stated that the artist invited the audience to listen to this dialogue and create their own stories (Brehm, 2001, p. 30). Today, since eight of the objects in this installation are in the storage of the Istanbul State Art and Sculpture Museum, the work has lost its characteristic as an installation as its objects stand aside, detached from their space and woven stories.



Picture 9. Füsün Onur, Evocations from the Shiny Round on the Ground, installation, Taksim Art Gallery, 1980 (Yılmaz, 2015, p. 212).

Füsün Onur is an artist who questioned the language of sculpture in the post-1970 period and instead of experimenting with form, she broke the traditional structure of sculpture and went beyond. As can be seen, Onur's works do not overlap with the plastic arts because they do not have form as their main issue and they present approaches that use form only to express the concept.

When these works -which can be considered the earliest examples of conceptual art in Türkiye- are evaluated in terms of the transformation of modern art, it can be said that concepts of sculpture and painting have been radically changed. At this point, the issue that needs to be underlined again is that a point has been reached where it is neither possible to define what painters do as painting nor what sculptors do as sculpture, but all can be defined as art.

In the same years, similar tendencies also influenced other artists with a background in painting and sculpture. With Altan Gürman and Füsün Onur, the questioning of painting and sculpture paved the way for these artists to pursue new artistic pursuits. Among the prominent figures here are Sarkis Zabunyan (1938), who left Türkiye and lived abroad and Nil Yalter (1938), who was to be the pioneer of feminist art in Türkiye. Another artist, Tülay Baytuğ (1944), turned towards conceptual works from sculpture after travelling to England in 1969 and studying under Anthony Caro (1926-2013) following her sculpture education at the Academy. Tosun Bayraktaroğlu (1926-2018) is another name. Bayraktaroğlu did not study painting at the Academy but attended the painting workshops of André Lhote⁵ (1885-1962) and Fernand Léger (1881-1955) in Paris in the late 1940s. After living in Morocco for a while, the artist emigrated to the United States in 1956 but kept in touch with Türkiye and spent summers in Türkiye, where Turkish artists recognised him.⁶ Known for his abstract paintings, Bayraktaroğlu turned towards conceptual art in 1968 when he started to produce shocking happenings/performances, including sound, smell, blood, offal and physical actions similar to the works of the Vienna Actionists.

Semra Germaner (1944-2015) stated in 2012 that in the second half of the 1960s, performative approaches, similar to these artists' conceptual tendencies, began to be expressed within the Academy

⁵ From Hale Asaf (1905-1938) to Adnan Çoker (1927-2022), all Turkish painters who went to Paris in between early 1930s to mid 1950s took painting lessons at the Lhote studio in Paris. It is important to note that although Bayraktaroğlu did not study at the Academy, he received a similar style of painting education to these names.

⁶ During a telephone conversation with Oğuz Erten on 8 August 2018, Erten said artists such as Ali Teoman Germaner (1934-2018) and Mehmet Gülerüz (1938) were aware of Bayraktaroğlu's artistic activities at the time and that the artist also had a personal friendship with Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu (1911-1975).

in Türkiye.⁷ Germaner mentions the names of Şener Akmen (?) and Komet (Gürkan Coşkun, 1941-2022) for these tendencies, who were still students in the painting department at the time. Germaner stated that Komet exhibited the objects he collected from various places as found objects at a time when conceptual art was not yet being discussed and said that he was thinking about bringing in bank employees to the Academy together with bank counters and wanted to exhibit them by glueing them to the exhibition space. Komet also talked about his tendencies in those years in an interview published after his death on 25 September 2022.⁸ Utku Varlık (1942), who was a student at the Academy then, mentioned in his blog that Akmen exhibited a garbage can with garbage in it, as well as having thoughts such as painting the Eiffel Tower pink and wrapping/putting a sleeve on the Galata Tower (Varlık, 2016).

Şükrü Aysan (1945) saw the path to this process of change as a consequence of the libertarian spirit in the Academy before 1980:

“Anyone could do whatever they wanted in the name of art. They could use any place they wanted, have anything they wanted done, in the printing press, here and there. All opportunities were directed towards art. In other words, no one would try to prevent us. ...At that time, we freely used all the spaces here.” (Aysan, 2001)

Hüseyin Gezer, who was the rector of the Academy at the time, also listed a happenings on 17 May 1965 of Karl Schlamming (1935-2017) with his students during his time at the Academy between 1964 and 1967 and the Dada Exhibition opened at the Academy between 26 January and 9 February 1968 (Gezer, 1984, p. 331). These activities indicate that art transformations were also noticed within the Academy.

Lastly, Şükrü Aysan should be mentioned as one of Türkiye’s most important conceptual artists in the 1970s. After graduating from the Painting Department of the Academy in 1969, the artist moved to Paris for five years in 1970, where he established a relationship with the pioneering art movements of Minimal Art, Arte Povera, Land Art, Body Art and Conceptual Art. The artist’s first works linked to conceptual art date back to 1972 (Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu, n.d.). It is known that Aysan was particularly interested in conceptual art related to language at this time. In 1973, the artist presented a text giving instructions on creating a geometric abstract painting as a work of art and sent it to six artists by post.⁹ It is evident that Aysan followed the discussions on language as one of the essential elements of art while creating this work. This issue was first raised by Henry Flynt (1940), a mathematician, avant-garde musician and art theorist, who defined the approach he called “Concept Art” as follows:

“Concept art’ is first of all an art of which the material is ‘concepts’, as the material of for ex. music is sound. Since ‘concepts’ are closely bound up with language, concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language. That is, unlike for ex. a work of music, in which the music proper (as opposed to notation, analysis, a.s.f) is just sound, concept art proper will involve language.” (Flynt, 1963)

In these years, Joseph Kosuth (1945) in the USA and the Art & Language Society in England were working on the relationship between language and art. Founded in 1968 by Terry Atkinson (1939), David Bainbridge (1941-2013), Michael Baldwin (1945) and Harold Hurrell (1940) and later strengthened with the participation of Joseph Kosuth, this society analysed the nature of art by analysing the linguistic methods and semiotic theories developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). In the editorial of the first

⁷ For her speech at the conference “Türkiye’s Modernisation in the 1930s-1950s and 1950s-1970s” held at Salt Galata on 24 November 2012, see (Salt Online, 2013).

⁸ For the interview with Komet by Yücel Göktürk, Sungu Çapan and Arslan Eroğlu, see (Göktürk, Çapan, & Arslan, 2022).

⁹ For the original text, see the citation in (Atakan, 1995), plate 113.

issue of the group's journal *Art & Language*, dated 1969, Atkinson asked whether an article on conceptual art can also be a work of conceptual art and as a result, he stated that the text cannot be an "art object" like painting and sculpture, but it can be a "work of art" (Terry, 2003, pp. 875-878), thus underlining the limitlessness of conceptual art. From this point of view, when Aysan's text is analysed, it can be seen that the artist tried to establish his relationship with conceptual art. While Altan Gürman and Füsün Onur pushed the limits of painting and sculpture paving the way for a conceptual art, Aysan now reached to a point that questioned and changed the nature of art with his conceptual offerings.

Aysan's later works were not only concerned with the issue of language, but after his return to Türkiye in 1975, he created installations. From 1979 on, he became among the first practitioners of environmental art in Türkiye. In addition to all these contemporary tendencies, Aysan also made systematic contributions to recognising and understanding avant-garde art and translated documents on Duchamp's writings into Turkish. In addition to this, Aysan felt the need for a group that could research and question art. In 1977, he came together with Serhat Kiraz (1954), Ahmet Öktem (1951) and Avni Yamaner (1940), who had a similar approach to art and founded the Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu (The Definition of Art Group). The group was founded as a reaction to the ambiguity of the understanding of art in those days (Sanat Tanımı Topluluğu, n.d.) and has actively promoted conceptual art, which has dramatically impacted the transformation of art.

The transformations in Turkish art from the 1970s onwards paved the way for contemporary artists such as Cengiz Çekil (1945), Gülsün Karamustafa (1946), Osman Dinç (1948), Canan Beykal (1948), Azade Köker (1949), Ayşe Erkmen (1949) and Erdağ Aksel (1953), who made visible the new artistic tendencies in the Turkish art scene. These transformations also led to exhibitions under the name of "Yeni Eğilimler" (New Tendencies), organised from 1977 to 1987 in the form of a biennial and one last time in 1994 for a total of seven times. These exhibitions aimed to determine the agenda and directions of the contemporary art scene in Türkiye, to bring Turkish art to a universal dimension by creating the opportunity to discuss the works of Turkish artists by comparing the works of Turkish artists with the works of artists from different nations and to disseminate art by sharing it with the public. These exhibitions were among the most apparent indicators of the transforming art in Türkiye and were the first to display conceptual art in Türkiye systematically. While the works of the artists participating in the exhibitions reflect the transformation in art, these works would be accepted in contemporary Western art and considered up-to-date.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

As this article aims to explore the transition from modern to postmodern art in Türkiye, it emphasizes the significant influences and developments that shaped this artistic evolution. The study begins by examining the concept of postmodern art and the shifts from modernist principles. Key changes are identified as the departure from form-based methods aimed at artistic purity, the elevation of the artist's self-narrative, and the redefinition of traditional boundaries between painting, sculpture, art and everyday life, as well as high and low culture. The article then situates these changes within the context of Western art, focusing particularly on the transformations that took place from the 1950s to the 1970s. Drawing on relevant literature, this examination establishes a foundational understanding of the defining characteristics of both modern and postmodern art.

Subsequently, the study investigates how these global transformations manifested within the Turkish context. This analysis focuses on the key works of Altan Gürman, Füsün Onur, and Şükrü Aysan, exploring in detail the modern and postmodern elements outlined in the previous section. Through a cause-and-effect analysis of their works, the article clarifies the transition from modern to postmodern art in Türkiye. Comparisons with global examples are also made to illustrate the broader context of these developments.

The findings reveal that by the late 1960s, conceptual approaches began emerging in Turkish painting and sculpture, with Altan Gürman and Füsün Onur serving as pioneering figures who transitioned from modernism to postmodernism. Their two-dimensional and three-dimensional works challenged traditional definitions of painting and sculpture, demonstrating a gradual departure from key modernist



concepts, such as the flatness of the canvas, the role of the pedestal in sculpture, and the aesthetic dependency between these fields. This shift signifies a critical stage of transformation in Turkish modern art towards postmodernism. Moreover, this transition redefined artistic norms both within Türkiye and in a global context, underscoring the connection between emerging trends. In this context, the aspiration of Turkish artists to present their contemporary works on the international stage has played a vital role.

Consequently, the young artists of the time, educated across various artistic disciplines, began to create a polyphonic art environment that blurred the boundaries between these disciplines. These artists also laid the groundwork for the next generation of pioneers, including Şükrü Aysan, known for producing purely conceptual artworks. While Aysan was not the only artist to produce fully postmodern pieces, he is regarded as a key figure among those whose art exemplified postmodernism in Türkiye, embodying the outcomes of this transformative process.

By the 1980s, Türkiye entered a period marked by rich contemporary art discussions, producing artworks aligned with postmodernism that gained international acclaim and embodied universal values, ultimately allowing Turkish art to cultivate its own contemporary art environment through rapid adaptation to global changes during this transition.

CONCLUSION

The transition from modern to postmodern art in Türkiye has been significantly influenced by pioneering artists Altan Gürman and Füsün Onur. By challenging the traditional distinctions between painting and sculpture, these artists fostered a new artistic dialogue that aligned with the individualistic aesthetic trends emerging within the Generation of 68. This period marked a substantial change in how art was defined and discussed in Türkiye, leading to a broader understanding of art that went beyond conventional categories.

The analysis of these two key artists and their works demonstrates that this transformative phase set the stage for future generations to explore various artistic paths. The emergence of conceptual art, particularly in the works of Şükrü Aysan, exemplifies this shift. The visibility of these changes was highlighted by exhibitions and events in the 1970s, which brought together artists from different educational backgrounds and created a multidisciplinary environment.

These exhibitions also highlighted the realities of Türkiye in the 1970s while showcasing its connections with Western artistic movements, aiming to integrate contemporary practices into public awareness. This trend reflects a strong desire among Turkish artists to engage with international discussions, positioning their work within a global context.

As a result, the evolution of art in Türkiye during this period represents a significant alignment with global artistic trends, leading to a vibrant contemporary art scene marked by rapid adaptation, closing the gap between itself and the West. This dynamic process not only connects Turkish art with its Western counterparts but also affirms the country's role in the broader narrative of postmodern artistic development.

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