

Memory Discourse in the Turkish Contemporary Art Scene in the Late Twentieth Century

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Abstract

While reaching the end of twentieth century, contemporary understanding of space and time began to threaten history's centralist, linear and causal structure. In the appearingly accelerating and tightening world, the individual feels the need for deceleration and adherence. The perspective offered by history and grand narratives can no longer be adequate for the individuum seeking a sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, the individual clings to his/her verity and thereby his/her memory. In the Turkish contemporary art scene in the late twentieth century, memory became a prevalent discourse as a result of its intersection and overlapping with the contemporary conception of time and space structurally, in their diverse, elusive, inconceivable, multi-dimensional, inter-textual, atemporal, nonlinear, ephemeral, equivocal and paradoxical characteristics. Furthermore, memory works as a language and a manner of expression that contemporary artists of the period put into practice in their art. The deficiencies of memory became its power which response to the zeitgeist of the era and to the search of those artists who express themselves only with the subtle forms of memory.

Keywords: Memory, History, Turkish Contemporary Art, Representation, Trauma

Yirminci Yüzyıl Sonu Türk Çağdaş Sanat Sahnesinde Hafıza Söylemi

Öz

20. Yüzyıl sonlarına gelirken, çağdaş zaman ve mekân anlayışı, tarihin merkezîyetçi, doğrusal ve nedensel yapısını tehdit etmeye başlamıştır. Gittikçe sıkışan ve hızlanıyor gibi gözükken dünyada, kişi yavaşlama ve tutunma ihtiyacı duymaya başlar. Bir tür ait olma ve kimlik arayışına giren bireye, tarihin ve büyük anlatıların sunduğu perspektif yetmez hale gelir. Bu yüzden birey, kendi gerçekliğine, dolayısıyla belleğine tutunur. 20. Yüzyıl sonlarına gelirken bellek, tüm dünyada pek çok alanı etkileyen yaygın ve eşzamanlı bir kamusal söylem haline gelmiştir. Bu süreçte sanatçı da artık tarihin bir figüranı olmaktan çıkıp, kendi gerçekliğinin izlerini, belleğiyle görünür kılma arayışına girmiştir. Yirminci yüzyılın sonlarında Türk çağdaş sanat sahnesinde bellek, çağdaş zaman ve mekân anlayışının yapısal özellikleriyle kesişmesi ve örtüşmesi nedeniyle yaygın bir söylem haline gelmiştir. Bunlar farklı, çeşitli, güvenilmez, anlaşılması güç, çok boyutlu, metinler arası, zamansız, doğrusal olmayan, kısa ömürlü, müphem ve paradoksal özelliklerdir. Ayrıca bellek, dönemin çağdaş sanatçılarının sanatlarında uyguladıkları bir dil ve anlatım biçimi olarak işler. Bu dönemde belleğin eksiklikleri, çağın ruhuna ve kendilerini yalnızca incelikli bellek biçimleriyle ifade eden sanatçıların arayışlarına yanıt veren bir güç haline gelir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bellek, Tarih, Türk Çağdaş Sanatı, Temsil, Travma

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1. Introduction

When I saw a photograph of Gülsün Karamustafa's 1998 installation, "Stage" (Fig 1), I was suddenly taken back in time to the moment when, as an eight-year-old child, I had discovered a newspaper clipping hidden in a box with a snapshot of my mother and father. In that photo, from 1980, my parents were stood on trial in the dock of a military court, just like Gülsün Karamustafa and her husband in the image here, from 1971. Two married couples in identical poses in the same situation, accused following a military coup.¹ In the newspaper clipping of my parents' were incriminating headings like "Anarchists", and "State Enemies", but in this art work, the photo of Karamustafa and her husband was projected onto a wall, below the circle of words, "stage.regime.control.ideology".² Thus, the first spark of an idea that led to this article: What purpose was this artwork serving? Was it history? Did it attempt to bring justice and restore the dignity of a generation? Did it heal the artist? Could it heal my memories too?



Fig 1. Installation view from Gülsün Karamustafa, "Stage", 1998 (Duben and Yıldız 2008: 175)

The effect in this installation was very much like that of a spotlight on a *stage*, or the searchlights used by police or in prison yards. The artist was sentenced in this court and imprisoned for three years until the amnesty law. Thereafter, she was blacklisted and all her applications for a passport were turned down for sixteen years. She describes her work thus: "If memories become a stage where unknown actors are wandering, an unsurpassable distance is created between the self and the person. If this projection reminds the person the memory of the prison yards, even twenty-seven years later, the memory cut the person to the heart" (Sağır, 2008, p. 174).

The latency in the expression of the senses, relating to the traumatic experience, is not an extra, "even twenty seven years later" – on the contrary, it is a prerequisite. She explains her approach in allowing her work to emerge over time thus:

For me to be able to carry out my work, the subject has to be distilled for a while; and after such a period, I allow it to surface and take shape. I believe that this is what protects me from giving direct messages and from staying in the shallows. It took 27 years, before one

¹ There were military coups in Turkey in those two years, 1971 and 1980.

² In German ("bühne, regime, kontrol, ideologie").

of my photographs, related to the 1971 military coup, could appear as a work of art (Fereli, 2007, p. 7).

Karamustafa constantly focuses on memory and dares to incorporate very personal materials, very intimate moments; in this way she states that it is primarily a personal therapeutic. Nonetheless, she notes that she tries to minimize the personal content of her works, indeed tries to generate "a dialectic not only between past and present, but between individual and collective history as well" (Heinrich, 2007, p. 65). Thereby, she maintains a memorial wealth of the past generations: "My work comes alive at the point where I manage to combine this wealth (...) with the volatile reality of art; and I don't interfere after that; I just share" (Fereli 2007, p. 7).

My initial affinity for Gülsün Karamustafa's "Stage" (1998) soon became a vibrant involvement in the subject of memory, which led to this article. My first conviction was that the main memorial characteristics of her work converge historically and psychologically with her contemporaries. Some fragments from her words above should be highlighted in order to indicate what the article deals with. They refer to the existence of a trauma, a repression or "incubation" period, vivid impressions lying very deep inside, a succinct expression evading explanatory words, memories transcending boundaries of a lifetime and referring also to traumas of the ancestors, a mental imprisonment in the past sometimes triggered by a physical imprisonment or exile, and finally allowing memories to surface nearly as an involuntary act. In the content of the article, I discuss these simultaneous, memorial initiatives in their historical and theoretical context, and in their search both for new forms making the *unrepresentable* visible, and for new languages making the *unspoken* heard.

1.1. Structure

My work here researches the late twentieth century Turkish contemporary art scene, which burgeoned in the late eighties and won recognition in the nineties. In this context, I focus on *memory*, one of the main subjects of the period.

Structurally, the article divides into two parts, with research on memory followed by the case study of Turkish contemporary art. The research on memory considers two principal subject areas: memory as a public discourse and the contemporary conception of time and temporality.

1.2. Context

I want to introduce memory as a public discourse, which appeared on the scene in the nineties and has since received favorable notices and acceptance. Andreas Huyssen is my primary source in analyzing this discourse as a "memory boom", which has taken the legitimacy of the "historical past" and offered instead various alternative pasts. Huyssen discusses how the discourse of memory shifted our ways of thinking about and experience of temporality and became part of the wider public discourse and cultural life. Since then, over the past decade, the past has started to be seen in re-creations, re-readings and re-productions in memorial sense.

Huyssen asks why it was that memory in relation to history became such a dominant, ubiquitous discourse during this era in particular. And he concludes that 1) it was a natural consequence of the ongoing criticism of historiography as a tool for domination and ideology; 2) mass markets and the global media promote memory for the sales opportunities it offers; 3) we try to counteract the fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of memory, in order "to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (Huyssen, 2003, p. 18); and finally, 4) historical discourse and its structure seems to fail to articulate the temporal and spatial compression of late modernism.

1.3. Argument

In the article, I seek answers to the questions of how memory became a prevalent public discourse in this period, and how this operates. To this end, memory as discourse is considered, and the Turkish case used as illustration. Memory is investigated from various aspects, but primarily in the light of Huyssen's approach to memory as discourse that is fundamental to this work.

First and foremost, I agree with Huyssen's explanation of the issue at hand, but I believe it leaves too much out. To begin with, Huyssen declares that memory replaced history, but the reasons he formulates do not themselves require the overthrow of history and victory of memory. They are, that is, logically insufficient. For instance, the ongoing criticism of historiography was already quite sophisticated and discussed within the discipline (c.f. Benjamin). Secondly, while it is true that global media and culture industry is mass-marketing the memory, this is of itself a rather bald fact with a somewhat limited explanatory value. The global media and culture industry could just as well subsidize and commercialize another concept, including, indeed, that of history itself. In fact, one might very well argue that history *is*, likewise, in fashion. The issue of why memory has become a prevalent discourse and a common expression in art in the last decades is not resolved thus.

Huyssen's subsequent arguments seem more convincing. In these, Huyssen argues that people use memory to anchor themselves in this unstable, precarious and temporally compressed, spatially fractured world. This argument appears somewhat paradoxical, however, in that these features (and many more that might be similarly employed to describe today's world) are precisely those of memory. In addition, if Huyssen means that people need to anchor themselves to a past which is more determined and more stable than the present and/or future, this would seem to militate for history as *more* relevant than memory, which is generally known to be unstable, ambiguous, fragile, deceptive, etc. Again, the question of quite why it is that memory has prevailed remains unanswered.

To resolve this principal question, we need to analyze the paradox of why people credit memory rather than history with the power to anchor them through instability. Therein, I believe the search of identity stands out as an essential tool to read the meaning of our existence and to place ourselves in this world. The period when memory has been obtaining credit was also a period when surface identities have been losing credit; therefore, we need memory to personalize and authenticate ourselves. People may indeed feel a "deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space" (Huyssen, 2003, p. 18), but it does not appear very obvious to me that memory constitutes the opposite pole alleviating this anxiety.

Huyssen's last argument, the failure of history to articulate the temporal and spatial compression of late modernism is a plausible reason for the prevalence of memory, I believe, only insofar as memory became a common discourse because its particularities fit perfectly with the contemporary conception of time and temporality. This is why memory did not disarm history earlier in time. My argument is that memory became a discourse not because it is the sheltering opposite of today's world, but, on the contrary, because memory and the postmodern condition intersect and overlap so extensively. There is not a duality at work here or oppositional pairing, but an alliance, an affinity. Hence, we cannot properly analyze the memory discourse by dismissing theoretical aspects of memory and its expressive possibilities.

Another confusing case in the literature of memory discourse also supports my argument. The boom in memory is accompanied by a boom in forgetting. To Huyssen, "the contemporary public

obsession with memory clashes with an intense public panic of oblivion" and finally ends with amnesia. (Huysen, 2003, p. 18). Replete with memorial acts, at the same time we yet complain about a society that has no memory. In my opinion, what is explanatory in this case is again the paradox itself. We experience this situation precisely because not necessarily belonging to one of the positions between remembering and forgetting concords so well with the "postmodern condition". They are, that is, already indissolubly linked to each other.

A corresponding relationship is also valid in the prevalence of the concern with traumas of the past century. Huysen abstracts trauma as "a psychic phenomenon" which is "located on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition" (2003, p. 8).

Finally, I want to discuss the premise of the argument, that memory replaced history. Despite the fact that memory has become significantly superior to history in influence, they still coexist. Two different conceptions of time, temporality, causality and relationality have violated each other under different guiding pleasures and in support of different priorities. Modern history was the story of control, repression, loss and the denial of memories under the sign of trauma. It was an organized forgetting of the past, in favor of the future, the progress and the assets of "imagined communities". For me, memory discourse is based on "the return of the repressed", and history suffers now under the symptoms of recollection creating its own forms. While memories emerge, our conception of temporality undergoes a significant non-reciprocal shift:

Whatever the specific content of the many contemporary debates about history and memory may be, underlying them is a fundamental disturbance not just of the relationship between history as objective and scientific, and memory as subjective and personal, but of history itself and its promises (Huysen, 2003, p. 2).

Instead of replacing history, I believe memory just gets ahead, becomes dominant. As Huysen assents, "Memory after all, can be no substitute for justice, and justice itself will inevitably be entangled in the unreliability of memory" (2003, p. 28). Currently, it is endowed with special characteristics, which meet the contemporary tendencies. Memory works as a language and a manner of expression that goes beyond the reparation of history's deficiencies; and further, it creates a fruitful temporal milieu where the past, the present and the future intersect. Furthermore, memory manifests like symptoms of a trauma that has victimized the person and/or the society. The symptoms fill the void in the absence of experience of the trauma and make it corporeal. I take into consideration various acts of memory in various fields; however, I concentrate on contemporary art, which, I argue, has explored the potentialities of memory to extend beyond representation.

Essentially the question of representation in art has been discussed since the modern period, with the "Sublime" favored over the "Beautiful" (c.f. Lyotard). The initial negation of *mimesis* then turned into the rejection of representation in the aftermath of Auschwitz:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own (...) To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today (Adorno, 1949, p. 34).

This problematic of reification and legibility lead to Abstract-Expressionism and Minimalism in search of "self-satisfied contemplation" and the "Absolute", parallel to the remarks on "the end of art" (c.f. Adorno). I believe the sensibility in representation has taken a new meaning in

contemporary art, and has differed from the early attempts to reach the "Sublime". Here, memory is a subject matter evolving out of the personal and insignificant, and creates a language raising doubts about history, representation and legibility.

1.4. Content

Here, I introduce the structure, context, argument and the content of the work. Then, in the second section, I look at memory as a prevalent discourse at the end of twentieth century. I focus on its theoretical background and representation in the city.

In the third section, I explore contemporary conception of time and space, and the way in which this leans toward memory. I introduce concepts like "Poetic space", "Time-Space Compression" which help us to tackle the expanded understanding of the reality that empowers memory. In the fourth section, I introduce the contemporary art scene in Turkey in the late twentieth century.

During this period, the conception of memory began to appear markedly in the works of certain artists such as Sarkis and Gülsün Karamustafa. Conclusion finalizes the argument that memory became a prevalent discourse in the late twentieth century because of its affinity to contemporary conception of time and space and its possibility of a new language beyond representation.

2. Memory Discourse in the Late Twentieth Century

Andreas Huyssen, in his 2003 book *Present Pasts*, defines a crisis in the discourse of history. According to Huyssen, history used to construct a narrative, which was stable in its pastness and based on selections and exclusions that functioned to frame traditions in social, cultural and political life. Huyssen defines history as the "mise-en-scene of modernity", which finds its traces and representations mostly in the urban space of large-scale monuments, government buildings, museums, palaces, etc. The modernist conception of history serves to justify the present and to envision the future with the help of a monumental (national or universal) past. This is a linear correlation of past, present and future that leads us to the motto of modernism: "Progress". Such a definition (as criticism) is not new to Western thought (c.f. Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault etc.), but Huyssen takes it a stage further with the empirical judgment that the model no longer works. Like the other acknowledged conceptions of modernism, history too has fallen victim after the eighties to the postmodern critique.

As history lost its grounding at the end of the twentieth century, so did memory gain legitimacy, disturbing our notions of the historical past as singular, fixed and objective. Thus, various pasts, especially untold, personal pasts, replaced the historical past and became undeniable parts of the present "through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the Internet, as well as through the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museum culture" (Huyssen, 2003, p. 1). During this period, according to Huyssen, historical discourse assigned all its credibility to the memory discourse, which soon became "an obsession... a significant symptom of our cultural present" (2003, p. 3). So, as a consequence of the new conception of memory, temporal boundaries between past and present collapsed and the past was transformed into a constituent element of the present in ways that would have been unimaginable to previous generations.

In former times, memory used to be a topic for poetic references to a golden age, or conversely, haunting traces of a restless past. Today, however, we rather think of memory as belonging ever more to the present, and as a site for global social and political concerns. The form in which we think of the past becomes more like "memory without borders, than national history within borders", and formerly stable links of family, community, nation and state have weakened "to the

extent that national traditions and historical pasts are increasingly deprived of their geographic and political grounding, which are reorganized in the process of cultural globalization" (Huysen, 2003, p. 4). These are written over, erased and forgotten in this context. And while history is receding, memory is promoted.

In *Present Pasts*, Huysen reads memorials, public spaces of commemoration, art works and literary texts as forming the media of a critical cultural memory which invades the urban space that once seemed stable and fixed. Born and raised in Germany, he showcases the reconstruction of the center of Berlin as a key example of how the memory discourse works, with its traces of the past, its erasures and its losses.

In order to frame the way in which history is contested today, we need to position it in the context of earlier criticism dating back to the late nineteenth century. It was then that socialist historians began to see and analyze historiography as a tool for domination and ideology and that Nietzsche attacked its linearity and causality, an approach which would later be comprehensively articulated in the work of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. Andreas Huysen argues that this critique today forms an essential part of the power of memory discourse.

Memory as a discourse first emerged in the West after the sixties, in the wake of decolonization and the new social movements emphasizing freedom and rights (especially for women and Afro-Americans) and their attendant search for alternative histories. Memory discourse accelerated in the early eighties with the debates on the Holocaust and trauma. Then, from the late eighties, parallel to the academic integration of gender and post-colonial perspectives, it became "a narrative in its broadest scope" (Huysen, 2003, p. 14).³

During this process, memory emerged in many acts and productions, ranging from large-scale restoration projects, national heritage enterprises and new wave museums, through the boom in nostalgia and retro-styles in mass-marketing, to historical films, serials and documentaries – and the production of distinguished artworks. Furthermore, with the aid of digital photography and video recording, we have also witnessed an obsessive "self-musealisation" parallel with a rise of biography and autobiography and confessional literature. Finally, these acts were completed with the performances of formal apologies, politically painful anniversaries, commemorations and international law cases (Huysen, 2003, p. 17).

Memory as a cultural obsession was experienced in both academia and popular culture during the 90s. The rise of this "cult of memory" later became a veritable "memory industry". In the book *Memory Culture and the Contemporary City*, Staiger, Steiner and Weber describe this epochal commitment to the past and its representation in the present as "a memory culture" (2009, p. 1). Memory may seem a phenomenon concerning "the individual", they argue, but it is always bound up with the social and cultural context of the remembering subject. It may also seem to be a temporal phenomenon, but, as Edward Casey suggests, "memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported" (Staiger, Steiner and Weber, 2009, p. 1).

In today's memory culture, the manmade environment of the urban center occupies a focal point. Nonetheless, the form of this occupation differs from earlier periods. In the essence of the new memory practices, we can identify a fragmentary counterculture reactive to totalizing discourses:

³ Huysen points out that the weakening of temporal boundaries between past and present that enabled the emergence of memory discourse has occurred in tandem with the shrinking of spatial boundaries as a result of developments in transportation and communication. The recent explosion of the Internet, it might be added, has collapsed even the distinction between the temporal and spatial.

Mapping memory at and through such sites is thus often shot through with more complex dynamics of the guilt and redemption, challenging the representative nature and function of the monument or memorial site. Particularly in the 1990s, and often with reference to the Second World War, so-called counter-monumental strategies were supposed to provoke a new and very different kind of memory culture (Staiger, Steiner and Weber, 2009, p. 8).

Connecting the individual with particular places, memory began to play an increasingly important role in creating identity and selfhood. Especially in the late twentieth century, moreover, memory culture responded to a social context in which the individual was both emphasized (through a liberal capitalist valorization of personal choice, human rights, etc.) and yet negated (through new practices and ideologies linked to, or summarized as, globalization). Memory culture thus developed through and functioned in a society in turmoil with the contradiction inherent in this combination of de-individuation and over-individualization.⁴

3. Contemporary Conception of Time and Space

3.1. Linear History and the Individual

Hasan Bülent Kahraman states that the linearity in the conceptualization of modernist history has an exclusionary effect on memory. "At the line that the assumption of an absent past makes with the idealization of future inference, that future is formed. Hence, the notion of memory becomes abnegated or in a larger extend neglected. Or at least, it regresses to the mechanical" (Kahraman, 2005, p. 135). Lyotard emphasizes that one of the most interesting aspects of modernity is *periodization*. Periodization suggests a system of history comprising a straight line with a succession of temporal units – where one period ends and new one begins. Based on a before-and-after mentality, one obsession of modernity was to *re-write* (reformulate the line, redefine the periods, revise the endings and beginnings, etc). Modernity was an ideology that rewrote everything (Akay, 2005).

Steeped in this ideology, history as a discourse was constructed around the idea of one thing superseding another, which generated the continuous rewriting of linear narrative. The idea of a "new era" was determined as the primary characteristic of modernity. According to Lyotard, one of the re-writing forms was that of "beginning", "rebirth" and "revolution". The idea of "beginning", of (reaching) the null point and (re)commencing from there, was concretized with birth of Jesus. Thus, history was composed of before and after the birth of Jesus.⁵ The idea of "rebirth" is related to the Renaissance, and that of "revolution" concretized by the French Revolution. These were propounded by means of the idea of history re-writing, and transformed into "*Re-writing / reecriture ideologies*" (Akay, 2005).

According to Ali Akay, a commonly suggested argument in recent years that history is not written yet has endured through what he terms "the new modernist approach." Akay advocates that the discourses represented by statements like, "'The history of working class has not been written yet', 'the history of women has not been written yet', 'the history of Kurds has not been written yet'" do not digress from the framework of the dual problematic of power and the modernist

⁴ A similar argument might be made at the level of group identity and differentiation, with social distinction flattened by political and economic democracy, equality etc., and yet also highlighted by (minority, oppressed) definitions of gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, etc.

⁵ Or, there was one period, that of Christianity, defined by what had been before, which was pre-history. In earlier times, this notion was also supplied by the Flood, as Antediluvian, while these were both structured within the meta-narrative of Genesis.

center of resistance.⁶ To my point of view, it is at this point that memory interferes and becomes crucial. Memory offers a different temporality to the revisionist approach in history.

During the postmodern era, many transformations have been experienced and new notions entered sociocultural life. These include concepts such as hybridization, deterritorialization, pluralism, heterogeneity, deindividuation and individualization. As indicated by this list, one of the distinctive features of the postmodern era has been to overlap and merge times, places, identities and style values in a coexistence of paradoxical situations. Assuming something integral and whole, the traditional (modern) concept of the individual has been a primary target for analysis.

According to Hasan Bülent Kahraman, in order to engender a significant and consistent model of the individual for this period, its association, first, with the notion of *identity*, and later on, with *belonging*, *space* and most importantly *memory* is requisite. Kahraman states:

Identity is a matter of belonging and in that sense it is specifically aligned with space. When the formation of space opens towards an internalization of time, they experience their crystallization around the notion of memory. Erased, abolished, exterminated and neglected by modernity, memory reaches a kind of reconstruction stage in the late modern era. The pressure of time and space necessarily and contemporaneously correspond with memory's "continued discontinuity" and transform it to a "discontinued continuity" by reverting the formation. Memory thus no longer exists for remembering a connected past, but rather for recapturing so that it can be disjointed (2005, p. 210).

Thus, the pressure of the postmodern spatiotemporal framework on the one hand and structural features of memory described as "continued discontinuity" by Kahraman on the other are indissolubly embedded in each other.

3.2. The Experience of Time and Space

Time and space are among the basic categories of human existence. If modernity was a certain mode of experience of space and time, therefore, it follows that we can position postmodernism as a shift, a crisis in this experience (Harvey, 1995). Time-space compression is one of the most common concepts used to describe the contemporary era. David Harvey explains his understanding of the concept as a process that radically altered our representation of the world and revolutionized the objective qualities of space and time. "I use the word 'compression' because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us" (Harvey, 1995, p. 240).

The idea of spatiotemporal compression signifies a world that seems to be shrinking with the expansion in technology, especially in transportation and telecommunications. Harvey describes this state in which "time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is" as the world of the schizophrenic (Harvey, 1995, p. 240). Harvey concludes that the greater the ephemerality and obsolescence, the more pressing the need to reach an eternal truth sheltering the self (1995). It is for this reason that the individual clings to memories and home.

⁶ From which it follows that works attempting this are essentially modernist projects.

3.3. Poetic Space

According to David Harvey, spatial and temporal practices and conceptions in any society contain manifold subtleties and complexities which determine the processes of reproduction and transformation of social relations. Therefore, the history of social change is at the same time the history of the conceptions of space and time (1995).

In this context, postmodernism, articulating a significant social and cultural change at the end of the twentieth century requires its own concepts of time and space, such as "poetic space". David Harvey formulates this poetic space (referring to Bachelard), as the space seized by the imagination; and since "[this] space contains compressed time" (referring to Heidegger), poetic space is the space of memories, that is to say *home*:

Being is already a value. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house... This is the environment in which the protective beings live. ... In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening... Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days (Harvey, 1995, pp. 217-218).

Harvey conceptualizes the idea of poetic space around *nostalgia* and *memory*. Being has a spatial memory representing both nostalgic memories of a lost childhood world and place-bound nostalgias of collective memory. Therefore, memory is always bound up with space and a sense of longing. He concludes that "if it is true that time is always memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression" (1995, p. 218).

4. The Turkish Contemporary Art Scene in the Late Twentieth Century

In this section I focus on Turkish contemporary art that blossomed in the period beginning with the late eighties and won recognition in the nineties. I will first illustrate the general context of the period which lays the groundwork for this significant transformation in art.

According to art historian and curator Levent Çalıkoğlu, the main dynamic in Turkish art during the 90s came from the economic and cultural transformation that took place after the 1980 *coup d'état*. The link between this transformation and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of Eastern Bloc coupled with the introduction of globalist neoliberal policies is undeniable. Çalıkoğlu states that with the reformist trend we see in many artworks from the beginning of the 80s, a strong sense of tension and discontent resulted from the sharpening and deepening effect of modernism on various contradictions. Çalıkoğlu explains these contradictions as a "tension", thus:

On the one hand, there was the legitimacy of culture and eagerness to speak of disparate cultural groups, and on the other the obstinacy of power in attempting to control this demand of freedom. On the one hand, there was a superabundance and ostentation in every aspect of social needs due to the capital flow into the market, and on the other injustice and the abyss between the classes in terms of consumption surplus. On the one hand, there was statist discourse claiming art to be the most important vein of culture, and on the other, negligence, the lack of museums, a cultural infrastructure crisis... (Çalıkoğlu, 2008, p. 8).

For artists informed by these contradictions, art was addressed as an attitude and aesthetic of opposition and a problem of self-confidence and existence. The initiation of the Istanbul Biennial

towards the end of the decade (in 1987) also established a strong center where new artistic styles could gain attention. According to Çalikoğlu, we can talk about the formation of a pluralist and democratic structure in Turkish art during this period (2008).

In this context, many artists departed from the conventional forms, materials and topics that had predominated in the local art scene established around the Fine Arts State Academy (today's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, in Istanbul). Curator Vasıf Kortun describes the atmosphere at the time thus:

That was the late eighties, many dictatorships were dying or fading away, mutating into neo-liberal political systems. When you are in an isolated place, local truths are prevailing things and pretty harmonious. But when the walls start to come down, suddenly new work, culture and new visual proposals flood the situation (Kortun, 2003).

Another significant transformation of the 90s can be observed in the context of the mission of artists and state-society-art relationship. In this process, the role of "enlightened artists" who came to prominence in republican history was questioned. The approach of artist-as-guiding-light in favor of social development, advancement and collective values was abandoned. The elitist, introvert and class specific approach of the language of modern art yielded to an enthusiastic, communicative and pluralist language. According to Çalikoğlu, this change was nourished by the multiplicity of languages brought into visibility from the "histories of the excluded". In parallel with this, artists began also to question the apparently narrow aesthetic structure of art and relate this to interdisciplinary approaches involving sociology, philosophy, popular culture, technology, etc.

One of the most important and distinguishing characteristics of the contemporary art scene in Turkey that began to mature in the 90s was its opposite positioning in respect of the modern history discourse. According to Çalikoğlu, "an artist whose acceptance is promised if s/he is articulated to the edge of the history, begins to construct her/his own nominative history" (2008, p. 10). History, like other *grand narratives*, was being dismantled during this time. "Authenticity cannot be fastened or indexed to the hierarchy of grand narratives. Thus, artists see into truth with a somewhat narrower scope. Knowing that authenticity never can and never will be represented outright, they reconstruct it" (Çalikoğlu, 2008, p. 12). And when artists associate with this convolution of authenticity and temporality at the personal level, as individuals, we deal with *memory*.

In the period beginning with the late eighties, some artists, such as Gülsün Karamustafa, Sarkis Zabunyan, Nur Koçak and Cengiz Çekil became initiators of the use of memory in their work. These artists mostly belonged to the generation of the sixties. They had grown up while modernism and the nationalist ideals of the Republic were still vibrant. During their formative years, this generation witnessed the events of 6-7 September,⁷ rising leftist movements, armed conflicts in the streets, and three military *coups d'état* (in 1960, 1971 and 1980).⁸ On the other hand, after 1980, they also witnessed a metamorphosis of the old system, with the introduction of neo-liberalism and a rapid departure from former statist ideals.

⁷ The events of September 6-7, 1955 (in Greek, the '*Septemvreneat'*') was an organized riot aimed at persecution of minorities in Istanbul.

⁸ Except Sarkis, who left the country in 1965. However he usually states that he was always mentally bound to Turkey and keenly interested in its social and political developments.

In this period, one full of contradictions and ruptures, the issue of memory gained a particular significance. The artists that came through these times – especially those working with contemporary formats – worked with memory in various ways, such as through autobiography, nostalgia, time and temporality, the act of remembering, the act of collecting, the critique of history and especially facing up to traumas.

5. Conclusion

A well-known and highly acclaimed German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer (born 1945), has repeatedly drawn attention to his own obsession with memory and the themes of German history and the horror of the Holocaust. He states that he feels like he lives and works with "a gigantic sack of culture" in his back (Assmann, 2011, p. 346). The metaphor of a sack in his back, not only refers to the pain and sorrow it includes, but also refers to the difficulty to access it. Whatever is contained in this sack is elusive to the conscious mind and gives an insight only indirectly through art, detecting like "a seismographer of mnemonic waves in a cultural memory" (c.f. Warburg). Here lies Kiefer's "anamnesic sensibility" which is a common cause promoted a "culture of memory" in the late twentieth century.

Huyssen quotes German philosopher Herman Lübbe's affirmation of this retrospective sensibility: "never before had a cultural present been obsessed with past to a similar extent" (2007, p. 22). All the same, German scholar Andreas Huyssen asserts that this obsession emanates from a state of uneasiness and apprehension for the present and future. The accelerated cultural environment and the advancement in technology distort our conventional understanding of time and space, and overload "our psyche" and "our senses" with a burden that they are not adequately equipped to handle yet. "The faster we are pushed into a global future that does not inspire confidence, the stronger we feel the desire to slow down, the more we turn to memory for comfort" (Huyssen, 2007, p. 25).

Hodgkin and Radstone support the idea that the contemporary memory boom represents "late modernity's equivocations and ambivalences concerning truth, embodiment, location and the temporality of hope, equivocations which had their source in the disruptions and discontinuities of post-revolutionary urban society" (200, p. 8). Furthermore, memory is acknowledged with its capacity to destabilise the authority of modernity's universalising, monolithic generalities, its linearity, causality and objectivity (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003).

To me, the context in which memory has become a prevalent discourse has been intensively just as Huyssen and other theorists have depicted. However, memory's role, as a discourse, is not quite simple and direct, which suggests a kind of stability for this precarious world. There are some vulnerable points of this argument outlining some contradictory features, and the unexpected consequences of the memory discourse after a few decades. Such as that politically, memory discourse counteracts the triumphalism of modernization theory (Huyssen, 2007) however, it fosters the nostalgia for the modern too (Boym, 2001), (Özyürek, 2007). Likewise, memory discourse justifies forgetting by making it available more than needed (Huyssen, 1995). Moreover, if memory suggests a shelter in the past, I would ask what kind of a "past" it is: "a unique history of genocide and mass destruction" and "the histories of atrocities and repression" (Huyssen, 2007, p. 25). And I would also ask what kind of "a shelter" it is, because that "memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting" (Huyssen, 2007, p. 28).

As I've suggested in the introduction, and later I've analyzed in the sections, and now I conclude that memory became a prevalent discourse as a result of its intersection and overlapping with the

contemporary conception of time and space structurally, in their diverse, elusive, inconceivable, multi-dimensional, inter-textual, atemporal, nonlinear, ephemeral, equivocal and paradoxical characteristics. Furthermore, memory works as a language and a manner of expression that the artists in my case study adopt and put into practice in their art. At this point in history, I am strongly convinced that the deficiencies of memory became its power which response to the zeitgeist of the era and to the search of those artists who express themselves only with the subtle forms of memory.

This argument is actually based on the basic crisis concerning the capacity of representations where memory/history distinction becomes untenable. So why do people anchor themselves to the world through memories even if memories are not accurate? As suggested, it is because of their potentiality in the search for self-recognition and identity. Memories through which we recognize ourselves are scenes constructed through mental processes, which, "while not constituting actual representations of the past, are nevertheless the core of ourselves" (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003, p. 13). Thus, the contemporary obsession with memory cannot be separated from the rise of possessive individualism and the history of selfhood.

In this context, where memories guide self-recognition, I determine a new perspective commonly adopted by contemporary artists, as illustrated by Hodgkin and Radstone:

[M]emory has been positively valued and deployed as that which bears traces of that which cannot enter discourse or representation. On this account, the unspeakable or the unwitnessable makes its incognisable mark on the mind as traumatic memory, or in the body, as embodied memory (trauma theory), leaving traces that can only be read (if at all) through belated witnessings (2003, p. 11).

In conclusion, I argue that the contemporary "memory boom" at the end of a century full of atrocities has become significant through the inherent potential of memory to face trauma. I believe a fascinating field has been opened via contemporary arts which praise affiliation of the senses beyond representation. Adorno's famous dictum that it is no longer possible to write poems after Auschwitz, actually discusses the possibility of both remembrance and representation after trauma. I agree with Shoshana Felman's argument cited in Radstone that "Adorno's dictum did not imply that poetry could no longer and should no longer be written, but that it must write 'through' its own impossibility" (Radstone, 2000, p. 5).

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