

FROM A TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENT TO
A CONTEMPORARY ART INSTALLATION: WAYS OF USING
THE NICHE / GELENEKSEL MİMARİ ÖGEDEN ÇAĞDAŞ SANAT
ENSTALASYONU'NA: BİR NİŞİN KULLANIM BİÇİMLERİ

Ahu ANTMEN*

Abstract

As an architectural element, the niche is a recess in a wall. In the Roman period, it was used as a decorative element both inside and outside of the buildings. The niche was also an element used in Gothic, Renaissance and Neo-classical Architecture. In the Islamic world, the most typical form of niche is the mihrap, an element that corresponds to the Christian apsis. With its long-standing association with religious architecture, the niche remains a devout element in itself, and is seen almost like a space imbued with symbolic meaning. This article explores the ways in which contemporary artists have explored the niche both as a space and a theme in their work, and how such an element has been the basis of certain installation works. A specific niche in a modern art gallery setting (Maçka Art Gallery in Istanbul) is chosen as an example.

Key words: Niche, Contemporary Art, Installation Art, Contemporary Art in Turkey, Maçka Art Gallery

Özet

Mimari bir öge olarak niş, duvarda bırakılmış boşluğu tanımlar. Roma döneminde yapıların içinde ve dışında dekoratif bir öge olarak kullanılmış, Gotik, Rönesans ve Neo-Klâsik Mimaride de başlı başına bir öge olarak dikkat çekmiştir. İslam dünyasında niş ögesinin en tipik biçimi, Hıristiyan dünyasında karşılığı apsit olan mihraptır. Tarihsel süreçte dini yapılarda kullanılmış olması niş ögesinin günümüzde dahi kendine özgü bir eleman olarak algılanmasına, adeta simgesel anlamla yüklü bir mekan gibi düşünülmesine yol açar. Bu makalede, çağdaş sanatçıların niş ögesini hem bir mekân/mekansal boşluk hem de bir tema olarak nasıl irdeledikleri ele alınmakta ve bu tür bir mimari ögenin belli enstalasyonlara nasıl temel oluşturduğu incelenmektedir. Modern galeri ortamında yer alan bir niş (Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul) örnek olarak seçilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Niş, Çağdaş Sanat, Enstalasyon Sanatı, Türkiye'de Çağdaş Sanat, Maçka Sanat Galerisi

*. Assistant Prof. Dr./Yrd. Doç. Dr. Marmara Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi, Temel Eğitim Bölümü, Acıbadem Cad. Küçük Çamlıca / İstanbul, ahuantmen@marmara.edu.tr

I-INTRODUCTION

The niche as an architectural element is simply a recess in a wall. It is a space within a space; a space that has presence by its sheer absence, a space that stands out by being a part of but also a lack of the original space to which it belongs. In this respect, the niche is always a special kind of place, imbued with symbolic meaning. The word “niche” –used in many languages- comes from the Latin “nidus”. Nidus means nest. The word “nest” actually defines what the niche does: It nests, or houses, certain objects. It protects and also gives a certain aura. In the Roman period, the niche was used as a decorative element both inside and outside of the buildings. We know that it was also an element used in Gothic, Renaissance and Neo-Classical Architecture. In the Islamic world, the most typical form of niche is the *mihrab*, an element that corresponds to the Christian *apsis*. Perhaps because of its long-standing association with religious architecture, the niche remains, even today, as a somewhat devout thing in itself: In the secular spaces that we inhabit today, the niche is still a particular, significant and reserved area where we place special objects.

This article aims to explore how contemporary artists respond to this particular architectural element. The Maçka Art Gallery in Istanbul, with its very visible – and deliberately problem-posing- niche, serves as an interesting example¹. The Maçka niche is placed on the left corner of the wall when entering the gallery, and it stands like an exhibit of empty space itself. It is a significant element that poses a problem for any artist who will exhibit in this space; it is most certainly a challenge. But before the niche itself, there is a gallery space itself to consider: the niche is difficult, but the space itself is no less easy. Founded in 1976 by Rabia Çapa and Varlık Yalman as a specifically designated art space, the Maçka Gallery was created by the architect Mehmet Konuralp. It seems that Konuralp designed the space as an artwork in itself. With its low ceilings and a wall that divides the gallery to make it two separate small galleries within one, the gallery has not one but many recesses within its walls. The stairway leading to the gallery and the small curved patio are an integral part of the whole project, yet artists rarely use it. The most distinguished characteristic of the gallery is probably its “skin” –the space is covered with 10x10 cm ceramic tiles. When the gallery first opened in the seventies, this feature became the symbol of all criticism aimed at the design: the art space was likened to a Turkish bath, a *hamam*. According to Aykut Köksal, the Maçka Art Gallery has an “architecture which is everything but neutral, a space that presents itself as an independent, autonomous entity besides the art work on show”².

So the Maçka Gallery is in no sense a modernist “white cube” for artistic display. On the contrary, it is everything but that: As Brian O’Doherty has observed, “the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is art. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. (...) A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while

-
1. The idea of this paper came into being during a discussion with artist Adnan Çoker in which we were reflecting on the architectural difficulties the Maçka Art Gallery poses for artists.
 2. Aykut Köksal-*Fusun Onur-Kadans*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, Istanbul, 1995, p. 2.

the eyes have a look at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life'. The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture. In this context, a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as the fire hose in a modern museum looks not like a fire hose but an aesthetic conundrum. Modernism's transposition of perception from life to formal values is complete. This, of course, is one of modernism's fatal diseases"³.

One of the first examples of an interrogation of the gallery space through the idea of the white cube was an installation by the artist Ayşe Erkmen in 1995. Erkmen responded to the gallery through her subtle placement of certain reminders associated with the idea of the white cube. Using plaster and wooden circles 10 cm in diameter, and placing the white circles on the walls and the wooden ones on the floor, the artist played with the idea of the white cube. She broke down the idea with the help of the gallery space itself. She also extended her installation to the outer core of the gallery, thus opening up to the outside world, against the idea of the confined space of the ideal gallery. Erkmen's installation was rightfully titled, "This Gallery" (Photo. 1). Necmi Sönmez states that Erkmen's work is not only "an extension of the Western European artistic tradition, but also involves formal features derived from authentic interpretations of Byzantine/Ottoman architecture"⁴.

The Maçka Art Gallery is a space that avoids being a white cube, interfering in every possible way with the art that is shown in it. So much so that some artists have stated that they would rather not touch it. A case in point is the French artist François Morellet, whose impression before he took to the challenge in 1994 was that "the gallery is wonderful especially when empty. Like the Hagia Irene... I would have left the gallery just as it is had I been more arrogant. But Yves Klein had done this before. So I placed in it four paintings based on the texture of the walls"⁵. Morellet used the space in the most economic sense, and he used the main niche of the gallery as the clue to his whole project (Photo. 2). In the small-scale drawing placed within the niche, the artist literally presented the spectator with the visual strategy that he had used for his exhibition. This strategy, and indeed the whole show, was based on the geometry and perceptual reality of the space itself. Morellet had only reflected it⁶.

Another French artist, Daniel Buren's project for the gallery in 1993 was also site-specific, and very connected to the niche: Calling it "In Situ", the artist stressed the inevitable game any artist would have to play to become a part of the space⁷. Buren's stripes moved around the gallery space in different variations, but the main idea was situated, no doubt, in the niche: Framing the niche was the clue to how an artist worked with the space, and not against it (Photo. 3). The German artist Dagmar Demming created another project that echoed the space and placed the "heart" of the work within the niche. For her project "Hearing Yesterday" (1996), Demming recorded the sounds of the city and played it in the gallery every consecutive day. The recording machine, as the metaphor of the idea of memory in modern times, was not hidden from view but placed right within the niche. It was also a symbol of passing time (Photo. 4). Necmi Sönmez relates another aspect to Demming's exhibition: "In the second room of the gallery, there is another installation called '4164x5, For Tilelayer Salih Çalık and His Friends, The Sweat of Labour Cannot Be Paid in Money'. By chalk-marking numbers (and marking figures as 100

-
3. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube-The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), University of California Press, London, 1976, p. 14-15.
 4. Necmi Sönmez- *Ayşe Erkmen-Bu Galeri*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1995, p. 2.
 5. François Morellet, "İstanbul ve Zorlamalar", *François Morellet*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1994, p. 8.
 6. Necmi Sönmez, *François Morellet*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi Publication, İstanbul, p. 3.
 7. Daniel Buren, "Description and Organization of the Works Displayed", *Daniel Buren*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1993, p. 2.

and 200 with tiny white Letraset numbers) on all the tiles in this room, the artist found out that there are 4164 ceramic tiles on the walls. Since Salih Usta who laid these tiles in 1979 had used 5 movements of the hand for each tile, he had moved his '4164x5' times. Although this looks deceptively simple, the value of human labour in this room is incredibly high. Demming in this installation concentrates on the concepts of work and labour (Arbeit Ethik), by referring to the time and labour the workers spent laying the tiles 20 years ago"⁸.

These three examples by François Morellet, Daniel Buren and Dagmar Demming show us clearly how the space directs the artist, how it poses questions and demands creative answers. Over the years, many artists have taken on the challenge, and some have played what could be called a duel with the space! There were also artists who have found somehow diffident ways of ignoring it. In this sense, the way this gallery has been used by artists gives us clues as to their notion of space. On a more general level, it might not be wrong to say that the Maçka Art Gallery is one of the leading, and perhaps the first gallery in Turkey to introduce the notion of site-specificity into the field of artistic practice. When the gallery was opened in 1976, artistic production in Turkey was limited mostly to the traditional categories of painting and sculpture. Site-specific installation work only came to be produced in later years; and it was only in the late eighties with the influence of the first and second international Istanbul biennials that artists became more experimental in the use of different mediums, and started working outside traditional boundaries. In its first decade, the gallery's programme was dominated by solo or group shows of painting. In the nineties, however, the gallery became the main site for artists producing installations. It is during this period that the gallery really found its calling and became the space ideal for creative installations.

Before the practice of installation art or space related work in Turkey, the spatial problems posed by the gallery were ignored. For example, during an exhibition of paintings as more wall space was needed, they just covered up the niche. This can be seen in Adnan Çoker's exhibition. Çoker, although being an artist obsessed with the idea of space, covered the niche with one of his paintings. It is important to compare how another painter does not ignore the niche: Bilge Alkor used the niche to remind the spectator its original function in religious spaces by hanging icon-like pictures in it in her 1995 exhibition "Dream Idols".

For artists working with space, the niche is used in an endless array of possibilities. Most often, it helped to stress the dichotomy of surface and space. Füsün Onur's installation "Cadence" (1995) is an example (Photo. 5). "Cadence", an installation that re-created a musical form in space, carried some of the abstract nature of music with it. Peeling the gallery of all its functional objects (the ashtray, stools, metal hanging rods and hooks), Onur used these as arrows pointing to the niche, which she covered with a thin veil of cloth. Everything in the space was disfunctionalized but the niche, which stood as the only object which one could truly look at. The pinkish light lurking behind the veil drew the spectator beyond the surface, into the depth of the space right within the niche⁹.

In some cases, even when space itself-in the most general sense, i.e. the world, the universe- has been the issue, artists choose to cover up the niche. "Translation" (1993), an installation by Serhat Kiraz, is an example. In other cases, the niche is a playground like "Collective Memory" (2003), an installation by Seyhun Topuz. The niche is used as a decorative architectural element where a painting has been displayed as in Kezban Arca Batıbeki's "Cage" (2004); or an illusory non-place for a non-person as in Candeğer Furtun's installation. Zafer Mintaş, on

8. Necmi Sönmez, "Re-Seeing/Reconsidering on Dagmar Demming's Installation 'Hearing Yesterday'", *Dagmar Demming-Düni Düymak*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1996, p. 6.

9. A detailed account of the exhibition can be found in the Maçka Art Gallery publication on Füsün Onur, written by Aykut Köksal. See Bibliography.

the other hand, used the niche as a functional, but also a symbolic element in 1996: He placed a television in it, the devout item, and the new “opium of the masses” of the electronic modern age. The niche and all its associations with religious space increased the meaning of his installation. Gülsün Karamustafa, on the other hand, symbolized the niche as an indicator of her personal history, and used the niche as a window that opened up to her past in her exhibition “My Roses, My Reveries” (1998): Placing a photograph of herself taken from behind a train window, the niche, at the heart of the idea of the whole exhibition, had once again become a functional and symbolic element in a site-specific installation.

Another creative and more recent intervention using the niche as the core of a confrontation with the gallery space was Ayşen Urfalıoğlu’s “smell” (2003) (Photo. 6): Here, hundreds of bars of soap shaped as sheep, all personally carved by the artist gave out a sweet smell that reminded many a spectator of childhood memories. A pleasant site, a pleasant smell, yet an uncanny feeling - the heart of the matter was in the niche: There we saw in the small-screen video the artist herself, weeping and wailing in a never-ending cycle of movement. This then could only be some kind of lament. The niche held her secret.

An unforgettable example of another use of Maçka’s niche was Tunç Ali Çam’s performance in which he enclosed himself into the niche itself in 1997 (Photo. 7). He stayed there for hours, becoming the niche itself at the end. On the opposite side of the wall, was situated a screen which sort of reflected his movements, as if to contrast reality and the illusory. The niche here was not only an element necessary for the idea to work but perhaps for the idea itself.

With this article, I tried to show how a gallery –shaped by an architect’s personal vision-plays an instrumental role in the way artist confront the idea of space. Far removed from the idea of the traditional “white cube”, Maçka Art Gallery has always posed a problem for artists by forcing its presence, by interfering with the work to be shown and by demanding creative solutions. One of these problems is definitely its niche, a big cavity in its entrance hall. The reason why I have focused on this point is related to the idea of the niche as a personal space, a symbolic space where one places special objects. Maçka’s niche seems to be that kind of place, as over the years it has held the focal point of each artist’s vision in this space.

II- BIBLIOGRAPHY

Daniel Buren, Description and Organization of the Works Displayed, *Daniel Buren*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1993.

Aykut Köksal-*Füsun Onur-Kadans*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1995.

François Morellet, İstanbul ve Zorlamalar, *François Morellet*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1994.

Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube-The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), University of California Press, London, 1976.

Necmi Sönmez, *François Morellet*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1994.

Necmi Sönmez, *Ayşe Erkmen-Bu Galeri*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1995.

Necmi Sönmez, *Dagmar Demming-Dünü Duymak*, Maçka Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul, 1996.



Photo. 7- Tunç Ali Çam, 20th year young art exhibitions, Maçka Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1997.

AHU ANTMEN

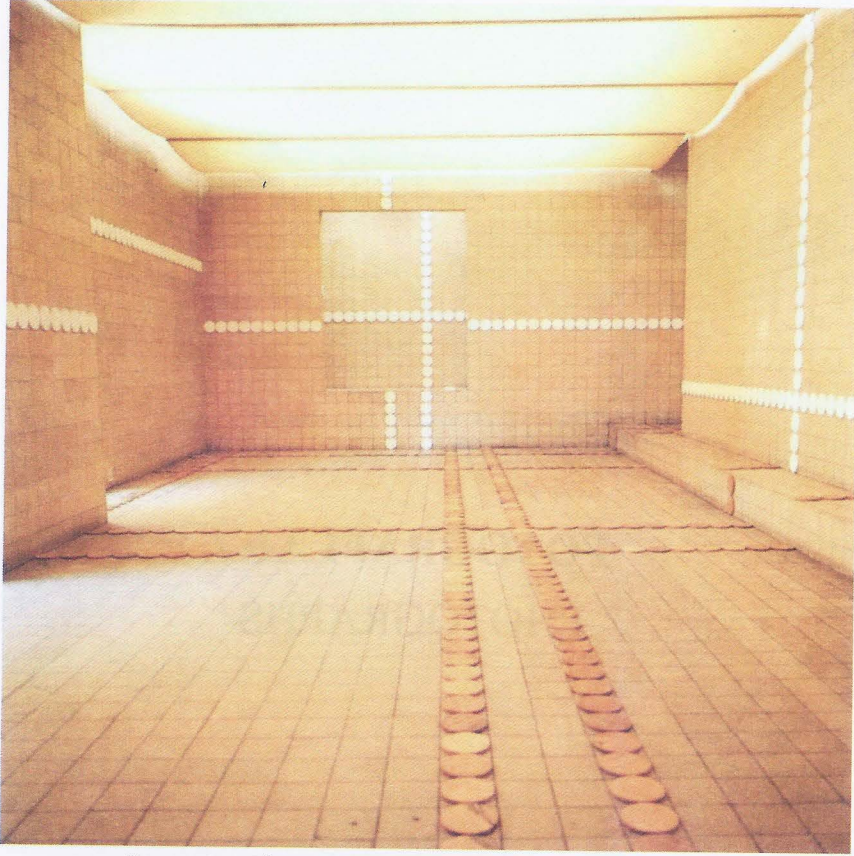


Photo.1- Ayşe Erkmen, this gallery, Maçka Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1995.

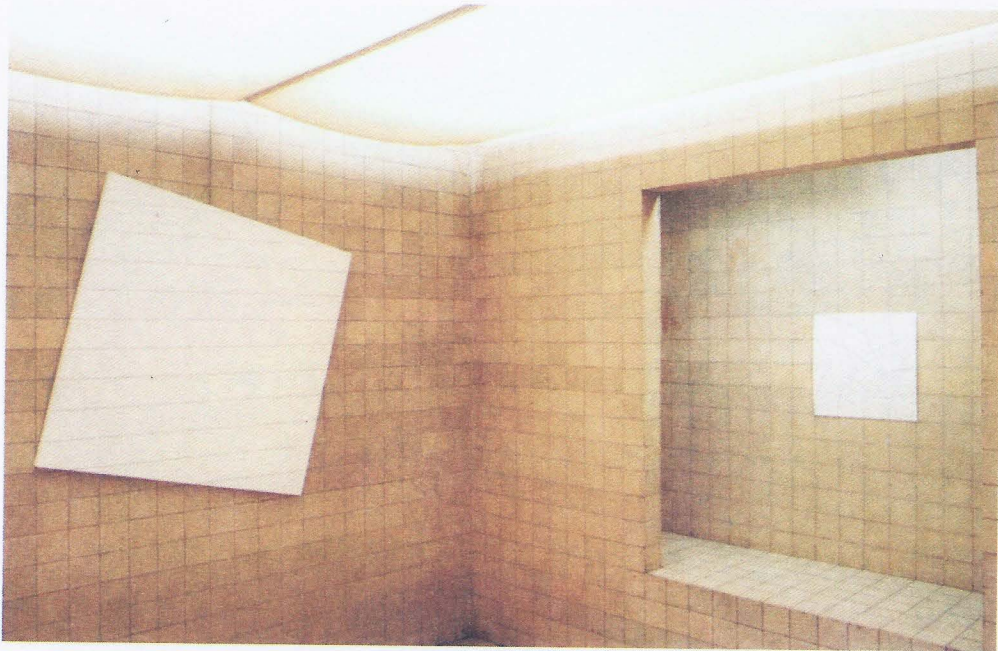


Photo. 2- François Morellet, Maçka Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1994.

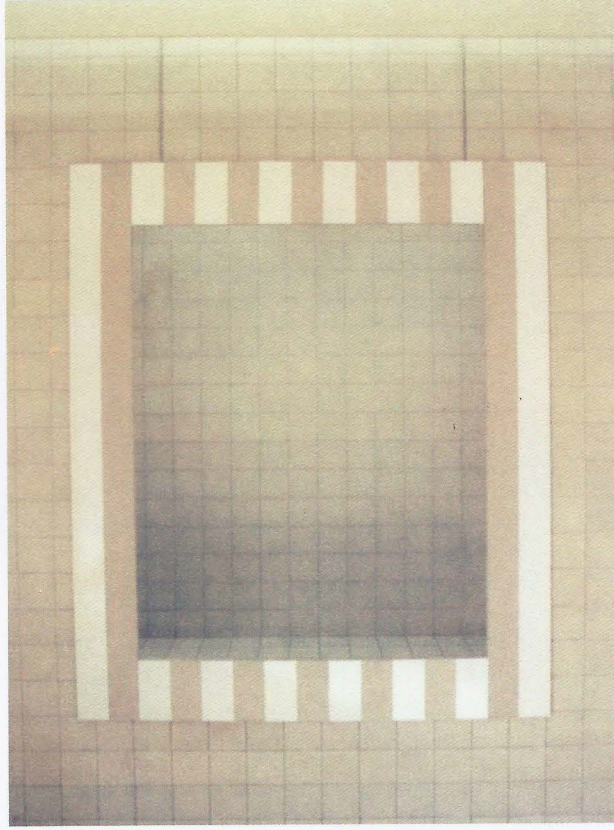


Photo. 3- Daniel Buren, In Situ, Maçka Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1993.



Photo.4- Dagmar Demming, Hearing Yesterday, Maçka Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1999.

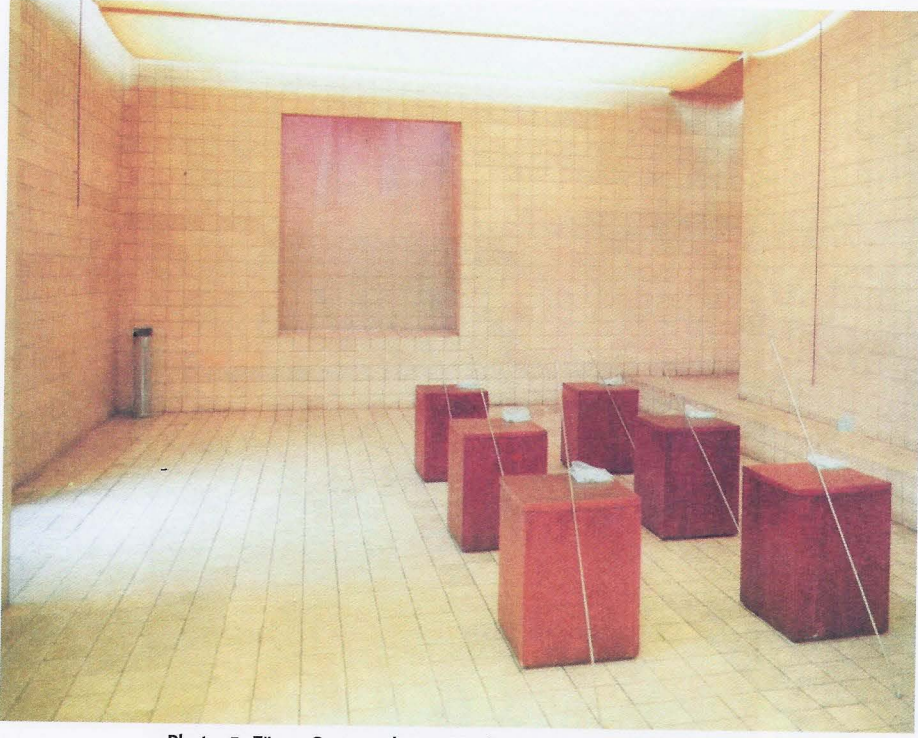


Photo. 5- Füsün Onur, cadence, Maça Art Gallery, Istanbul, 1995.

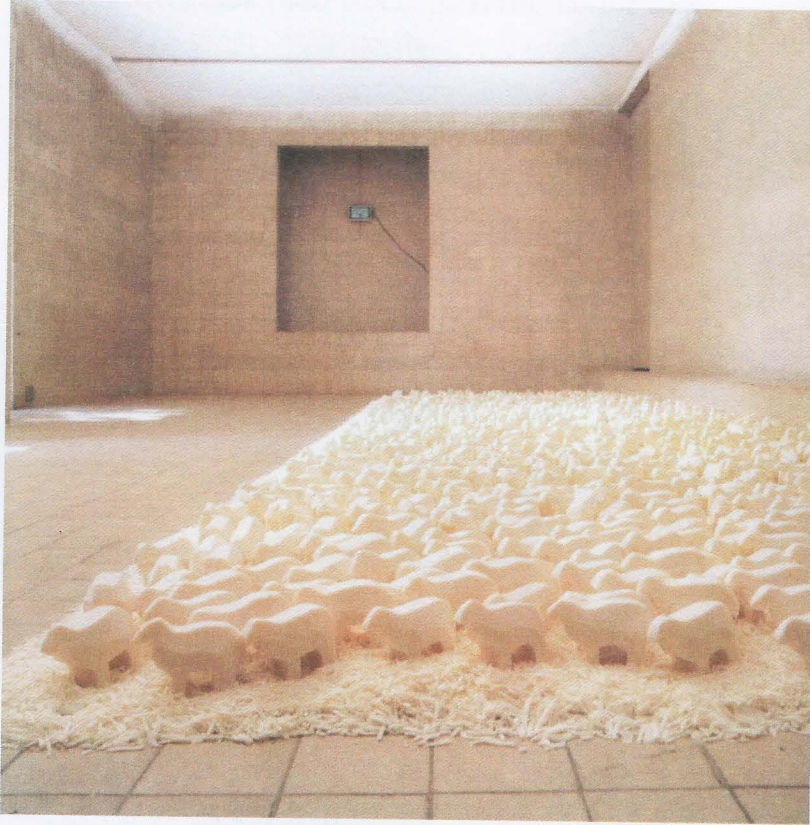


Photo. 6- Aysen Urfalıođlu, smell, Maça Art Gallery, Istanbul, 2003.
