

Performance In The Context of Female Identity in Contemporary Art in Turkey

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Abstarct:

This research focuses on performances produced by female artists in Turkey within the context of female identity. The emergence of female identity and performance art in Turkey can be traced back to the postmodernist discourses that began to appear in the 1970s, in terms of both subject matter and application. The existence of women as an identity in art has been examined by female artists, especially within the framework of feminism and feminist art. Performance art, one of the production forms of contemporary art, has played a more active role in contemporary art in Turkey since the 1990s. This research will investigate which concepts female artists who choose performance as a form of artistic production have made visible in relation to female identity. Within the scope of this research, performances that reveal gender-related codes and question the societal, cultural, political, and psychological background of female identity will be discussed.

Keywords: Performance, Gender, Women, Identity, Contemporary Art, Turkey.

Method

In this article, which was examined with a qualitative research model based on the descriptive model, the literature review method was applied. In the article, the related publications and the written and visual documents in the literature on the relationship between female identity and performance in Turkish contemporary art have been extensively scanned, the relevant texts have been collected and compiled in accordance with the subject and analyzed by providing integrity.

Entrance

According to the definition of performance in Eczacıbaşı Art Encyclopedia (1) it is used to mean 'any achievement, performance, work, work, play, number', and it is called performance art as a form of artistic production. In the second volume of the same encyclopedia, performance art (performance art) is defined as "first of all, performing a successfully completed work, staging something whether it is a stage or not, besides organizing a show or event" (2) Performance art, which is pre-planned and performed live in front of the audience, emerges as an art form that is presented to the audience by using the body of the artist or artists. As a part of theatre, dance and music, performance art is more closely related to visual arts than

theater. The first examples of performance in the context of visual arts extend to various avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Futurism in the first half of the 20th century. Since the second half of the 20th century, it has come to the fore under various titles such as happening and body art, attracted attention with its interdisciplinary nature, and only started to be accepted as a genre in its own right in the 1970s.

With one or a few artists; in front of or away from the audience; which can last a few minutes, hours, or days; Performance Art, which can be exhibited from time to time in the form of photographs or video recordings, has shown a truly international quality” (3) and has been applied within different movements such as Situationism, Fluxus, Feminist Art, Land Art. With the tendency of artists to conceptual art, the way of expressing themselves first and foremost with their bodies intersected with performance art. In this respect, performance emerges as an oppositional attitude towards both traditional production forms such as painting and sculpture, and traditional spaces such as galleries and museums. Performance has come to the fore as a form of expression that questions the boundaries and definitions of art with an interdisciplinary approach, and the body has turned into an artistic material on display. In this sense, the body, as a concept, is a self-actualizing text; it has gone beyond its use in the theater (4).

The concept of the subject, which has been changing since the 1970s, is at the root of the artists' making their own bodies the object of art. This change in the understanding of the subject is also reflected in the feminist art practice and “feminist artists are based on Kant's philosophy on the basis of modernist aesthetics; in other words, they challenged the assumption of a universal and rational subject that is male and white, and the understanding that the art object takes place in an autonomous world of beauty, value and freedom” (5) and redefined with the concept of changing subject.

Feminist artists “public/private and personal/political distinctions, challenging the body as a place of self, a place where the private meets the public, and where the social is negotiated, produced and made sense of” (6).

Feminist artist Mary Kelly describes the contribution of feminists to the field of performance; defines the question of sexuality as opposing the body, both by focusing on the construction of the sexual subject and by problematizing the concept of artist-creator. With the performance, the body is decentralized and radically divided and repositioned (7).

The body, which is handled together with the performance, is freed from being a sexually-oriented spectacle and a show-off body. The body has gained importance as an area open to experience within the framework of its own nature. In the performance, the body is spoken and used as a rebellion against all suppressed feelings and thoughts. The body, which is used as a field of action and a tool, turns into a form of political expression at the personal or social level. The body sometimes confronts us for race and gender discrimination, sometimes for explicit or implicit violence, and sometimes as a field of self-realization of certain ideologies.

Feminist artists create a conceptual interaction space with the audience by bringing the subject meaning, appearance and experience together in their own bodies with their performances. The use of the body as a field of action or a tool in Turkey is “with women artists who consciously

carry the female identity, realize the social dimensions of the personal, deal with the 'women's issue' and perceive art as a social struggle area" (8) took place together.

In the 1970s, women in Turkey founded a political party for the first time, a woman minister was appointed for the first time, and a woman appeared in more active roles as the head of a political party for the first time, but this situation remained at a symbolic level. The artistic production of women in Turkey is also not fed by a political and ideological vein and is not incorporated into the empowering women's movement of the 1980s. Because, as in the West, a solidarity consciousness cannot develop together with feminist historians and critics in social transformation. Even though it coincided with the 1980s, when the women's movement in Turkey started to become more visible on the social ground and women artists began to attract more attention in the art environment, the connection between them is broken (9).

Because in the political environment of the 1960s and 1970s, women in Turkey supported leftist groups and became their militants. It was only possible in the post-1980 period to express loudly that the women's issue cannot be dissolved into the working class issue (10).

Since the 1970s, women artists in Turkey have sought new ways, tried to create a new artistic language by seeking alternative ways, and since the 1980s, they have perceived art as a kind of thought system. The military coup that took place in Turkey in 1980 and the censorship and prohibitionist mentality of the coup led to pressure on women artists until the 1990s. Since the 1990s, within the framework of the effects of globalization and liberalism, the political and economic structure in Turkey has changed, and this change has also enabled the liberation of women artists. In the process from the 1990s to the 2000s, women artists created a new artistic language in terms of subject, concept, material and technique. While photography, video and installation are frequently encountered in new production forms, performance art has gradually started to gain visibility.

Women artists have used performance as a form of production in examining the discourses and definitions of women's identity. Emphasizing that "meanings are socially constructed" (11) and adopting this approach, not from a given idea of essence, women artists bring up the imaginations of national and social fictions on women, while bringing up the imagination of these fictions on women. they are looking for ways to decrypt their codes together with the audience.

Women artists, who apply the performance, which is one of the main concepts used in defining and examining discourse and identities, not only as a live formation but also as photo-performance-video performance, were selected to be examined within the scope of this research. The performances of many female artists who criticize the existing social structure in the tradition and patriarchal structure and the language created by this structure are classified according to the concepts of tradition, migration and politics by making a historical order and aiming to show the social, cultural, political and psychological background of women's identity.

Tradition

Nil Yalter, who was born in Cairo in 1938 and completed her high school education at Istanbul American Robert College, worked as a faculty member at Sorbonne University between 1980-1995. The artist, who has been living and working in Paris since 1965, is one of the leading representatives of the video art and feminist art movement in the 1970s. Yalter deals with issues

such as migration, identity and gender in production forms consisting of photographs, drawings, collages, videos and video performances.



Image 1. Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tete ou La danse du ventre*, 1974, Video-Performance.

In the video performance work titled “Headless Woman or Belly Dance”, which is among the first known examples of Turkish performance history, Yalter draws the text “Woman is both convex and concave...”, which he quoted from René Nelli (*Erotique et Civilisations*, 1972) around his own belly button is writing. The original text is an ethnographic analysis of the widespread female genital mutilation in certain parts of Africa. In this video-performance, the camera angle is fixed and focuses only on the belly button. The black and white video, which lasts for about twenty minutes, refers to the situation of the Anatolian woman, whose talismanic writings were written on her stomach by the imam in order to increase fertility. Yalter writes this text on his own body and covers his body with it, and then does a belly dance. The audience actually witnesses a tragicomic ritual. He rebels against the injured woman's ego under the pressure of tradition and the prohibition of women's natural pleasures (12).

Şükran Moral, one of the important, pioneering and sensational names of Turkish performance art, was born in Samsun in 1962. The artist, who graduated from the Fine Arts Academy of Rome, lives and works in Istanbul and Rome. Şükran Moral, who often transforms her own body into an object for system critique in her artistic practice, reflects morality, patriarchy, otherness, female identity, sexuality, established values and traditional norms, sometimes harshly and sometimes lyrically, with a socially realistic attitude in her performance, photography, installation and video works. It questions and discusses by making intonations. Questioning traditional values and established norms through female identity, Moral's performance “Married, Three Men” consists of a bride's wedding with three grooms. In this performance, Moral turns an iconographic scene inside out by referring to the right of men in eastern society to have more than one wife.



Image 2. Şükran Moral, *Married, Three Men* Video-Performance, 2010.

The artist opens a discussion space by asking a simple question to the audience. In a structure where it is normal and a right for men to have more than one wife, why shouldn't women have such a right as well? Moral questions the position of women in society by trying to reverse cultural identities with this question. He makes this questioning by using the traditional wedding metaphor, symbolic objects such as a wedding dress and a red belt (13).

Moral chose a village in eastern Turkey for this performance and talked to the village chief to help him perform his performance. In this performance, morale tried to make the village people face a situation outside their own world by changing the place of men and women. However, the people of the village, who came to the wedding performance in the village square, remained silent in the face of what they saw and left the place. At this point, the performance takes place exactly as the reality itself and the power it creates seems to be under its influence at that moment. "Perhaps it is possible to find that effect in the expressions of the figures included in the performance. Being a spectator of the experience there through video brings with it the decoding of our modern(!) codes. Now, neither our angry criticism nor our humorous approaches to displacement are sufficient to explain the experiences of the performance during and after" (14).

Migration:

Drawing attention with her performances abroad and in Turkey since the 2000s, Nezaket Ekici was born in Kırşehir in 1970 and grew up in Germany as the child of a family that went to Germany as a worker in the 1970s. Ekici studied art in Munich and later became a student of performance artist Marina Abramovic at Braunschweig Fine Arts High School. As the child of a Turkish family living in Germany, the social and cultural contrasts, conflicts and contradictions between the two cultures have affected his approach to art and his art productions. In her memory and image-based performances, Ekici deals with issues such as being bicultural, female identity, gender, race, religion and belief, and shapes her art practice within the limits of her own body, sometimes pushing these limits.

Ekici presented her performances/installations at the Sabancı University Kasa Gallery between November 8 and December 30, 2006, with the exhibition titled 'In Her Otherness'. In the first three days of the exhibition, the artist made triptych performance presentations in three different rooms of the gallery and presented the rest of the performance as installation and documentation in the gallery space.

On the second day of the exhibition, the artist performed a performance called daydream (dream) in the first room. Ekici leaves the audience in the middle of a surreal and imaginary landscape in this performance. A large gilded screen shows the artist sitting on a bench in front of a sea image, wearing a pink dress. People pass behind him and the artist sits in front of the video, on the bench in the video, in his pink dress and imitates his image in the video. The screen acts as a mirror and the artist looks at his own image in the mirror during the performance. The artist is performing, but at the same time, it is as if he dreams of being in another place (15). Regarding this work, in which the deceptive side of the image is emphasized, the artist says the following: "[...] Sometimes, when you look in the mirror, you catch something. The reflection of yourself raises questions about your being. Images interrogate, acknowledge, reinforce, and validate the "I" consciousness. Or vice versa..." (16). At the end of the performance, the video continues to play on the big screen and is accompanied by a white bench, a dress on the bench, and a black heeled shoe in front of it, used in the editing

of the performance. What remains of the performance forces you to imagine the moment when the performance took place. In this situation, the audience establishes a relationship between video, performance and installation. In this triple relationship, the concepts of self and being, similarity and identity, going and staying, dream and reality, past, present and future and the relationship between these concepts emerge.

“In fact, the artist confronts the audience with the idea of imagining being in another place and time, just as an immigrant dreams of being in a place and time while being in the country of immigration, in his past, in his hometown, in a place important to him, in a place he longs for, or with people” (17).

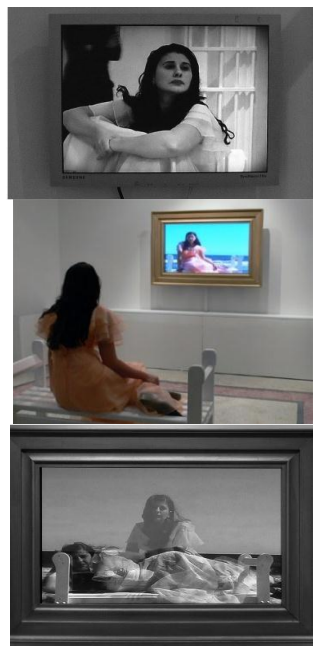


Image 3. Nezaket Ekici, Dream, 2006.

Policy:

Born in 1977 in Istanbul, Nilbar Güreş graduated from Marmara University Painting Department in 2000 and completed her master's degree in Vienna Fine Arts Academy Painting and Graphics Department in 2002. The artist lives in Vienna and Istanbul.

Nilbar Güreş creates her works that deal with the subjects such as family tradition, identity, transformation of identity, cultural conflict, urban and rural separation, the dilemma of covering and revealing, and the perception of the female body as an ideological field, with production forms such as photo performance and video performance.

Wrestling focuses on women's problematic at the point of reality and irony of life. Contrary to the rigid frameworks that generalize and limit women's issues, Güreş's works contain the reality and irony of life. It deals with women's identities that are outside the enlightened and progressive line of the Republic, such as lesbian, headscarved or Kurdish, and points out the state of being a common woman through these identities (18)

Nilbar Güreş appears before us in her video performance titled “Undressing” is the video “Undressing” is a performance showing the artist wearing a costume that completely covers her face and looks like a burqa, but in fact consists of numerous different headscarves. Slowly, she takes off the headscarves one by one while mentioning the names of women she personally knows who live across Europe. The artist says this about the

performance: “As persons living in Europe, often with foreign nationalities, these women, as well as myself, with or without a headscarf, represent neither Turkey, Iran, or Afghanistan nor any other country, nor Islam itself. Even so, they often serve as targets, unfortunately. The majority of Muslim women living in Europe, with or without a headscarf, first and foremost represent their individual selves and not religious or nationalist ideas”(19).



Image 4. Nilbar Güreş, Undressing 2006, 06' 19 min. Video Performance

Using a distinctly feminist attitude in her works, Canan (born in 1970 and graduated from Marmara University Painting Department in 1994) focuses on identity (female identity), gender and body within the framework of her production practice spanning various fields such as photography, video, painting and performance. It makes visible the control mechanisms over it, such as family, religion, state and society. It uses its own body within the framework of different production practices and includes performative elements.

Her performance called Hijab, which she performed at the Platform Art Center in 2007, can be seen as an important work describing the manipulation of the female body as a political element. In this work, in which she questions the control of gender and social power over the body, she reveals the sexist oppression under the name of modernity and belief. The artist is seen in front of the images projected on the wall, dressed in a sheet, in a double dress and a headscarf (20).

Canan says the following about her work on her web site: “Considering the controversy that the concept of Islamic clothing has created in western countries, being oriental is embodied in the image of an "identified" and "oppressed" woman, with a "headscarf", "burka" or "chard". symbolizes. However, this multi-layered image democracy or conservatism does not hesitate to use the image of woman in a wide range from economy to politics, regardless of chador, turban, double-dress or underwear, both in the east and in the West”(21).



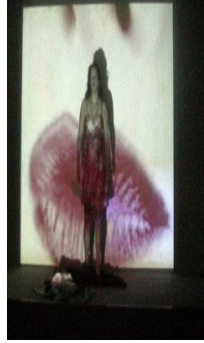


Image 5. Canan, Hicap, Video Performance, 5 min, 2007, Istanbul.

Conclusion

In this study, which focuses on performance art in the context of female identity in Turkish contemporary art, the productions of women artists in the context of performance from the years when the formation and change of contemporary art in Turkey were observed, are discussed. Contemporary art productions have started to appear in Turkey since the 1970s and the pioneers of these productions have been women artists. Working with different production forms of contemporary art, women artists have also used performance as a form of production and exhibition.

Although there are many women artists who choose performance as a form of production and exhibition with a feminist perspective in contemporary art in Turkey, performances have been examined by making a classification under the headings of tradition, migration and politics within the scope of this research. In this context, while Nil Yalter's video-performance work examines the traditional discourses on the fertility and sexuality of the female body, Şükran Moral in her parodic performance reveals the situation of the woman who is in the traditional structure and under masculine domination, by reversing it. Nezaket Ekici, who grew up between two cultures, reflects the traces of migration, displacement, belonging or not belonging to a place to the audience in an emotional dimension in her performance. It establishes a relationship with the venue of the performance and presents the body, passions, thoughts and wishes of the immigrant woman as an immigrant to the audience.

The works of Canan and Nilbar Güreş, on the other hand, focus on the woman and her body, who are subjected to the political manipulation of masculine power in a contemporary or conservative Turkish society. Because the woman's body as an object is shaped by the discourses of masculine power, and the woman's own choice is out of question. At this point, Canan and Nilbar Güreş make this shaping visible in the context of the concepts and actions of covering and undressing, dressing and undressing.

As a result, time, space, body and movement come together in the performances of these artists. These gatherings reveal the codes on women's identity that exist both individually and socially; They form a view of questioning the social, cultural, political and psychological background of female identity.

Resources

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Visual Resources:

Image 1: <http://www.nilyalter.com/works/1/the-headless-woman-or-the-belly-dance-1974.html>

(Date of Access: 28.04.2023)

Image 2: <https://omm.art/tr/editoryal/tabularin-karnina-jilet-atmak-sukran-moral>
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(Date of Access: 05.01. 2023)

Image 3: http://www.ekici-art.de/d/art/frame_top.html

(Date of Access: 02.05. 2023)

Image 4: <https://www.nilbargures.org/undressing>

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Image 5: <http://www.cananxcanan.com/>

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