



ISTANBUL  
SANAT BAYRAMI  
ART FESTIVAL

2000 YILINA DOĐRU  
SANATLAR  
SEMPOZYUMU

THE SYMPOSIUM OF  
ARTS TOWARDS THE  
YEAR OF 2000

ART, MYSTICISM, AND THE  
DETribALIZATION OF MANKIND

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ISTANBUL DEVLET GÖZEL SANATLAR AKADEMİSİ  
24 - 28 EKİM 1977 / ISTANBUL

D. baş no = ab 318  
yer no = ab 311



**ÇEKÜL KÜTÜPHANESİ**

DEMİRBAŞ NO. 06318

SINIFLAMA NO.

06311

BAĞIŞCI

GELİŞ TARİHİ

SCHARFSTEIN B.

I suppose that we have all set our faces to look serious and objective. This is, after all, a serious conference with an exemplary aim. But each of us, I suppose, though capable of a relative objectivity, is also incurably subjective. I may therefore be excused if, to begin with, I mention my own passion for art and my desire to understand it. I am professionally a philosopher rather than an artist; but I have reached the conclusion that artists do not understand their passion for art any more than I do my own. Nor, for that matter, do they understand art as such—they find it too difficult to explain. I take this apparent inexplicability as a challenge, and I should like, as best I can, to describe the situation of contemporary artists, and to explain why they interest themselves and others, and what the art they create may have to do with our pains, pleasures, and common humanity. I see a hope, though a problematic one, in contemporary art. This hope stems precisely from the present antagonism of art to tradition and from the usual devotion of art now to a vague, traditionless mysticism. Art now is somehow religious in effect and perhaps in design. Before, however, I arrive at this idea, I must go through a not uninvoluted explanation.

I begin with the situation of contemporary artists. At least at the start of their careers, they are as likely to be puzzled over art as you or I. In fact, given the strength of their interest in art, their puzzlement may well be deeper. They hardly know from whom to learn or how, whether, for instance, to learn to draw, in the traditional way, from models, or, instead, to learn to cast plastics or weld metals or carry out any of a large number of more or less industrial processes. They are adrift, because they are agreed that they must remain emancipated from tradition, even if it is a very brief one. They are therefore hard put to it to find heroes. Instead of attaching themselves to heroic ancestors, they attach themselves to one another, and they cluster together in the small temporary groups I shall allude to later.

Artists do not only not know how they should learn, but they also do not know to what end, except success. For they are working, or rather acting against the entire background of human culture. They discover soon enough that everything in art seems already to have been done and done superlatively well, and yet they are subject to that restlessness that requires them to use their minds and hands to express themselves. Because they cannot abolish the past, which is more and more imposingly preserved in books, museums, and universities, they have to make their marks, so to speak, on a background of innumerable superimposed masterpieces. Is it any wonder that their marks are so often graffiti, the artist's crude but personal, "I love you," or "I hate you," scrawled on that subtle, crowded record of human experience? They have to be crude, or at least bold, if only to be seen by others and to see themselves. At first, at least, they feel powerless and cut off from others, and they want to be reborn and awaken every day into a good, a fresh, and a surprising world. Their rebirth, like birth itself, is likely to be dirty, noisy, surprising, and outrageous.

I shall soon try to say why artists want to be reborn, now I want only to note what they do in order to be reborn. To them, being reborn means changing things or persons to such effect that they themselves feel changed. They cannot, to be reborn, simply perpetuate their own or any other past, so they spend a good deal of effort cutting themselves off. Not long ago, I read that the English sculptor, Anthony Caro, had said that he made his sculptures in a small garage so that he could not back away from them and edit the work prematurely, in the light of his previous knowledge of balance and composition. "When I took the work outside," he said, "It was a shock sometimes insofar as it looked different from the sculpture that I was accustomed to. So I was able to discover something and that's what I wanted to do. But this business of discovery is what making art is about, and that is where most of the fun lies." ]

But being reborn is not simply "fun." In their attempt to undergo this radical change of state, artists animate whatever is inanimate and, to coin a verb, inanimate whatever is animate. They deform whatever is formed and form whatever is deformed, and they try endlessly to inform everything with their own fingerprints and shapes. And then, if the world they have changed resembles themselves, as they intended, sometimes they are pleased and sometimes not. For them, the world must be kept indeterminate, always poised between possibilities and never finally crystallized in any one of these. For this reason, the old words of criticism no longer please them. They reject the terms, "beautiful," "ugly," "good," "bad", and the like, though they hardly can do so completely and consistently. If they are painters, they may say that painting has become exhausted, and what they make can no longer be simply painting. Their object, so many of them say or imply, is to change art, or, rather, life, by constant rigorous questioning and constant radical acts of creation.

It hardly makes any difference if you say that their aims are metaphysical, or if you use some other world. Because they want to make life, that is, their lives, into an endless series of creative acts, they (or some of them) try to force their ways through the integument themselves and us and coerce us into communion, holy or profane. Their radical demands are often radical emphases on commonplaces. Their novelty is more often than not, I think, a quick affective magnification of everything a human being may care about. Their works are also an expression of their literal need to manipulate things and people and to express and surpass, if they can, their loneliness and ambition.

I could go on in this description of contemporary art, as I am sure you could. But I want to stop simply describing and try to explain.

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The artist's choice is now very free, and a sincere work of art implies of the artist who made it that this is what he wants to make and be known as making. "This, in a sense, is what I am," he might say. "Sometimes I am a confusion of parts, a difficult collage; or an almost black on a quite black; or the painting of a drawer; or the plastic cast of a woman lying with her legs open." With so many possibilities and demands for sympathetic identification, the spectator is likely to be disturbed. The exhibition of oneself in art has always had an open, social quality. In the past, tradition would have made the art intelligible; but tradition has been weakened and provides a mainly negative background against which the dramas of modern art are played out. It becomes increasingly important for artists to form groups, the members of which are able to "read" and sustain one another for a while. This essential remaining interaction of young artists leads, in spite of everything, to a constant reliance upon models and a remodeling of models and a formation of new standards from old, by something between imitation of old standards and revulsion from them.

This situation is ideal for art criticism, which it incites and makes all the more necessary. Just because contemporary art is so often so simple (a stripe, a vertical bed, a set of stripes, a standing post), it requires explanation, and the explanation, unlike the art, may be quite difficult. As an analogy, think of such simple acts as raising an arm, giving a kiss, or saying a word. All are very simple to carry out but require complicated psychological or physiological explanations and have never been completely understood, if only because the nervous system is far from being completely understood. So, too, contemporary art needs explanation, and for all the explanation it gets, is never completely understood. Much of contemporary art is interesting primarily because it is puzzling, that is, because it leads to an interesting explanation. Why a simply black canvas, why grass in a gallery, why a

painting of a flag, why a plan rather than a picture or sculpture, why, in a world of wrapped-up objects, a wrapped-up object exhibited in an art gallery? In other words, the interest often stems from the lack of interest, and an interesting tension is established between the obviously uninteresting qualities of the art-object and its exhibition as interesting, between its presence and its pretensions.

Symptomatically, many artists try to make art more lifelike, or, rather more nearly integrated into ordinary life. A critic, Grégoire Müller, speaking for these artists, says:

"If art is to exist, it will do so only insofar as it is effective enough to find its place in real life. In most cases, this leads to a strengthening of not only the work's physical presence, but also its intellectual ratio... The art of the late 1960's marks the end of symbolism. A work exists by itself, not by its reliance upon a relationship with an aspect of reality sublimated through the artistic process!"<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to integrate art and life, artists take into art everything previously excluded from it—noises, silences, spectators' manipulations, fragments, of no obvious public interest, of the artist's own past. This encroachment upon life and this petty-seeming nostalgia in public seem to me to indicate loneliness, a hunger for reality, uninfected by the sense of illusion, and for intimacy. Because, in such art, the need for a response is so strong, it transposes the tactics of ordinary life, in which a response is demanded by means of a joke, shout, slap, or direct question, and it jokes, shouts, slaps, or questions in its own ways.

The more the art-object is meant to be itself alone, a self-justifying fragment of life, and not art in the old, obvious sense, the more it shifts an old balance and needs to be interpreted and set into context. Paradoxically, perhaps, the more simply lifelike or simply personal or enigmatic the art, the more elaborate its justification becomes, because, apart from the very act of exhibition, it is often no longer clear what there is about the object that makes it worth looking at. In art we seem to want to become direct little children who are also omniscient, polysyllabic scholar-critics.

Art is now so varied that everyone, I think, can discover an artist with whom he instinctively sympathizes. But this variousness makes things difficult for the conscientious person, who feels an obligation to appreciate all the artists that criticism has raised from obscurity. But it is hardly possible for anyone to appreciate, that is, in some sense, to identify himself with so many different, often antithetical artists. In the past, one learned to appreciate art by learning the tradition, with its more or less teachable standards, that the art exemplified. Now, however, lack of appreciation is often no more than the lack of desire or ability to identify oneself with a particular artist or group of artists. Lack of understanding has become approximately equivalent to unfriendliness rather than ignorance, and as such, I think, it is grasped.

3

All this process I have been describing has its origin, of course, in our biological and psychological nature. It grows out of our natural curiosity and manipulateness, which we share with many animals. Experiments have shown that rats may deliberately run through the longer arm of a maze, as if they prefer less familiar, more stimulating surroundings. Like humans, animals lose their interest in surroundings that have become too familiar. Like human children, monkeys like to play with stones and sand, which can assume many shapes and participate in many imaginative games.<sup>3</sup>

Lethargy and boredom are not merely unpleasant, but biologically dangerous, to such an extent, it seems, that animals, including human beings, are willing to risk considerable danger just in order to remain alert. In the way of many animals, especially young ones, children like to expose themselves to somewhat unpredictable or disturbing happenings and, for much the same reasons, they like to alter appearances. That is, children destabilize themselves and the objects around them in order to keep themselves alert and, at the same time, to learn the world and their power in relation to it.

Given these characteristics of children, we might say that artists have become specialized organs of childlikeness for us. They are our sometimes aggressive, permanent primitivity, our exploratory, destabilizing nature, our attempt to be more inclusive and varyingly so. To give one of many examples, a contemporary Polish artist (Ireneusz Pierzgiński) imagines a hotel of art, the later occupants of which could experience their lives as these impinged on the lives of the previous occupants. Each later occupant, he says, would reach his world by risking intimate contact with the strange world of another man.<sup>4</sup> Another contemporary Pole (Zdzisław Jurkiewicz) wants that minimum of art that is no more than a difference in the apprehension of life.<sup>5</sup> The Surrealist, René Magritte, who is said to have suffered from a metaphysical state of ennui, claimed that even painting bored him, and he dedicated his life to the overthrowing of the sense of the familiar. He regarded himself, not as a painter, but as a man communicating thoughts that might renew the world.<sup>6</sup> The composer, John Cage, has solicited chance, as if the randomness of fate might keep him more alert and whole than the deliberateness inspired by tradition or even by the will of the artist himself.<sup>7</sup>

4

The loneliness and boredom I have been speaking of may easily lead to depression, which is one of the permanent threats to human life. I think that the most usual immediate cause of depression is the loss of the love of some individual important to oneself, which intensifies the feeling of being alone and without support.<sup>8</sup> But whatever the cause or causes of depression, it poses a threat, the loss of interest and vitality, which we may call emptiness. Because it is not unlike an exacerbated boredom, depression, like boredom, is countered by anything that stimulates the return of vitality. To regain our vitality, we intensify normal, pleasant activities, and we introduce variations for the sake of excitement. Even if we are quite law-abiding, we skirt the illegal or immoral, at least in our imaginations, because they are exciting.<sup>9</sup> Excitement renews us and has some kinship with the universal fantasy of rebirth. Gambling offers us the sensation of rebirth with every turn of the wheel. For the sake of the renewed life we feel, which is our rebirth, we use sex, of course, in all its forms. In such activities we perhaps recapture the excitement, freshness, and moral carelessness of childhood.

It is hardly necessary to point out that art of all sorts, and especially contemporary art, uses each of the means I have enumerated to lend us new life. Art, like the play of a child, is a constant flirtation with excess and danger. It is animated not only by its novelty as such, but also by its sexuality, its extremism, and often by its sadistic or disgusting qualities. As much as it can, it defies moderation and courts orgasmic forgetfulness. Here, too, its attempt to create intimacy is of importance, because the intimacy between artist and spectator, like that between the spectators themselves, is an antidote to the loneliness and loss of love that characterize depression.

Furthermore, if art is intended to restore us from depression, the artist, I assume, is likely to have become one out of his own personal need to combat depression. The more effective he is against it, the more apt he is to have suffered and to continue to suffer the danger. His answer to it must therefore incorporate it, so to speak, and to be,

whether openly or not, excessive, ambivalent, or cruel to himself or to others. Or it suggests the danger by its own depressiveness, greyness, or suggestions of chaos. To conquer the demon you must be something of a demon yourself. Or, as the mystics have often said, the conqueror and the conquered are very much alike.

5

Now that the mystics have been mentioned, I may add that something of the puzzling nature and effect of contemporary art can be understood if we compare artistic with mystical contemplation. I have used the words "puzzling nature" here to apply in particular to the extraordinary simplicity of some contemporary works of art and to the assumption, which is widespread among contemporary artists, that anything at all can be art. There is the even more radical current opinion among artists that art is unenecessary because life itself, if lived freshly and intensively, is all suffused with the quality of art, or, rather, is all art.

I find this last opinion particularly helpful. It resembles the mysticism, long cultivated in Kashmir, for instance, that finds the possibility of mystical experience in one's simplest acts. Talking, eating, and looking can all give the supreme pleasure. Any paroxysm, whether a sneeze, a stagger, a pang of love, a shudder of fear, or a shock of recognition, may cause a sudden influx of vitality into ourself, these mystics say, because it unifies our consciousness.<sup>10</sup> This influx of vitality is just what we use art for, and the unification of consciousness that furthers it implies an absence of absences. One cannot experience it and want the presence of some absent person or some absent quality of self. Speaking of the unifying paroxysm, the Kashmiri mystics add that the emission of a word or of sperm can cause bliss and forgetfulness, and so can uninterrupted concentration. They say that we must also learn to appreciate our discoordinations and our confusions of boundaries, of the sort we experience when we are on the edge of sleep. The bliss they speak of is also the quality of joining and existing between.

Contemporary art, like Kashmiri mysticism, invites discoordinations, boundary confusions, paroxysmal experiences, between-existence, and prolonged concentration on simple colors and shapes. The truth is, I think, that anything at all can act as the stimulus to the kind of experience that is, if we please to call it so, mystical or esthetic. We now stare at paintings of targets, at paintings of textures, and at color fields. The Buddhists have, analogously, long practiced staring at colored circles and other concentration devices, closing and opening their eyes as they absorbed them until they become brilliantly dematerialized and fill their consciousness even when their eyes are closed.

The truth of what I have just said is supported by the psychological experiment in which the subjects were asked to concentrate on a blue vase and to try to see it as it existed in itself, without any connection with other things. Almost everyone who concentrated on the vase had quite pleasant perceptual experiences. The vase became more vivid and luminous, its third dimension often disappeared, and there was often, we are told, a merger of person with vase. According to the experimenter, what had happened was that the automatic perceptual recognition that adults acquire had been reversed. Instead of merely identifying the vase for what, in a practical sense, it was, the subjects looked at it in a way that restored the perceptual freshness of childhood. Furthermore, their perception was so fixed and strong that it expanded and lost its usual limits, so that the feeling of reality became displaced to the sight of the vase, in and for itself.<sup>11</sup>

Why, then, wonder if Malevich, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Albers, or others like them, can produce painted surfaces that show no recognizable natural object, and if these painted surfaces, called, in the context of art, works of art, can give some persons the greatest pleasure, even such that changes the whole quality of their experience. In the right

frame of mind, any object can be used to fix one's consciousness and give a sense of fix one's consciousness and give a sense of pleasure-able engulfment or transcendence. This is not to say that any object is equal to any other for the purpose.

It is no surprise, if I am right, to discover that famous "abstract" painters have been explicit mystics. Mondrian, as is well known, was a theosophist. He believed that the vertical direction was masculinity, and the horizontal femininity (and the sea). He believed that his paintings penetrated nature and showed the structure of the real, and that the artist, such as himself, was an asexual or supersexual revealer of the metaphysical truth.

Kandinsky, too, was deeply influenced by theosophical beliefs. He wanted human beings to resist their attachment to the material world. Matter was, in any case, he thought, in the process of disappearing, and the time had come for art to be pure, that is, immaterial, and so to help mankind prepare for the coming, better world.<sup>12</sup>

Although I cannot now attempt to persuade you that I am right, I do not think that Mondrian and Kandinsky would have painted as they did had they not hoped to realize such mystical goals. The theosophical attitude and, sometimes, specific theosophical symbolism, made it unnecessary for them to be attached to any particular art tradition. Their mystical emotion, meant for the good of mankind, was their response, I take it, to emotional isolation. If their art gives pleasure to non-theosophists, it is because, categorized as art, it invites devoted contemplation. Mysticism and art have a reciprocal relationship. The theosophical convictions of the two artists may have been reached the more easily because they had already experienced the power of shapes and colors as such.

It should not be supposed that the mystical convictions of Mondrian and Kandinsky were no more than individual biographical accidents. Whatever the name given to it, mysticism has been widespread among contemporary artists. To give one out of many possible examples, the so-called color-field painters, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, wanted to transcend the particular and reach the sublime. In pursuit of this aim, they painted large areas of uninterrupted color, meant to fill all of the spectator's mind. "We are freeing ourselves", said Newman, "of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history."<sup>13</sup>

6

So far I have spoken mainly of individual artists and spectators, but I now want to explain, as best I can, what the basic social functions of art have come to be, and what art is now able to contribute to our collective future. I should like to give this question an answer that consists of a number of separate though interrelated parts.

My answer begins in this way: Art is imagination publically expressed. The attempt to control it from above, that is, to denature it, now increases the emotional distance between precisely the most sensitive persons, who cannot, if their art is censored, publicize and share what pleases or troubles them most intimately. As intimate imagination, art keeps breaking all fixed bounds. This boundlessness is its strength and pleasure, which is hard to confine within the usual limits of tradition or courtesy. It solicits, not courtesy, but the sharing of lives, and, whether it is considered "good" or "bad" art or morality, many sensitive persons find it necessary to their lives.

My answer continues: The world has now rich, manifold, threatening,



promising, and bewildering than in the past. There is too much in it to see, do, and know. But this bewildering excess is accompanied by great restrictions, which begin with our limited individual resources and end in the powerful bureaucracies that so value obedience and good order. Obedience and apathy are natural responses to this situation, and the threat of depression, which I have mentioned earlier, remains constant. We need, then, to be aroused to ourselves and to the world. Perhaps art now bears more of the burden of arousal than it used to, and it has almost turned into a public search for ways of renewing the imagination. Artists are exploring the world in every conceivable non-scientific way. They free us to sense, taste, and think it. They play serious games to assimilate the world, allowing it both to break up into its possible fragments and to retain its unity. They function in effect as additional organs of perception and so, in the final analysis, they not only increase our ability to perceive but also that to be objective. Artists function for us as the unrestricted general specialists of experiencing.

My answer ends: Art has always been both stimulating and able to disturb. On the whole, however, it has been meant to be beautiful or exalting rather than disturbing, and it has been conceived of as equilibrated in itself and as granting equilibrium. Perhaps art has generally been conceived of in this way because life has been so crude and dangerous that the ability of art to equilibrate has been more important than its ability to arouse. To equilibrate, that is, to stabilize, art has had to embody tradition, and tradition, by its nature, has always been localized. The localization I am speaking of has varied greatly. In art, it has been as extensive as the whole Roman Empire. Even when divided into Italian, French, and German, it has been recognizably European. Throughout the whole area of Indian influence, it has been subject to Indian rules. Most impressively of all, it has had a long unified life in China. But even in these instances, each art tradition has derived its strength from its limitations, which are its differences from all other traditions.

But now, as is everywhere evident, local traditions and styles have grown weak. As the American painter, Willem de Kooning, has said, "There is no style of painting now!"<sup>14</sup> Local tradition having almost vanished from contemporary art, art has become an emotional, imaginative medium that tends to create a world without artistic localities. It is true that the rapid, worldwide succession of fashions in art may be disconcerting and may make life particularly hard for the artists themselves. I think that this rapid change of fashion breaks the continuity of artists' lives and influences them to strive for immediate effects rather than for a slowly-won maturity. But the rapid change, sweeping from one country to another and stimulating artists to always-changing responses, is a continuous process that, by its very rapidity and shifts of interest, breaks up the old local traditions and prevents new ones from forming.

As I have been attempting to explain, contemporary art is one of the forces that is unifying the many varieties of human consciousness and, in this way, increasing the possibility that we shall one day be able to live as a self-consciously single humanity. The dynamism of art subjects those who respond to it to an analogous series of experiences, each of which spreads like ripples over wider and wider areas. Artists therefore really play the role that many of them have imagined for themselves and that mystics have often assumed—that of the creator of a profound emotional unity. By stimulating us to concentrate on fields of color, on certain textures and shapes, on intimate pains and pleasures, art helps us to concentrate less on ourselves and our immediate neighbors, who share our local culture, and more on mankind as a detribalized whole. Surely there are great losses and dangers involved in this process; but it appears to be inevitable, and there is no reason why we should not recognize and exploit its hopeful possibilities. Perhaps the very unclarity of the future, which art forces on our imagination, will stimulate human beings the more effectively to shape the future for their common good.

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