

Social and Cultural Memory in Turkish Installation Art Post-1980

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Abstract

This study delves into Installation Art in Turkish Plastic Arts post-1980, focusing on the multifaceted concept of "space" in both its visual and conceptual dimensions. It elucidates how the political, social, and economic factors, whose groundwork was laid in the 1960s and 70s in Turkey, marked a pivotal juncture in the realm of Plastic Arts and delineated the national and international stature of Turkish Plastic Art. The study identifies the catalysts behind seminal turning points in Plastic Arts and the resultant formations they incited, as well as their contributions to the bedrock of social and cultural memory.

Keywords: Cultural memory; culture and space; social memory; Turkish installation art.

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INTRODUCTION

Industry and the French Revolution have been determining factors in historical and social conditions. By the end of the 18th century, the power of the monarchy began to wane, and the bourgeoisie emerged as the sole autocratic power opposing the landowners. Bourgeois families supplanted the aristocracy and the church (Bozdağ, 2015, p. 98). Liberated from the oppression of the church and aristocracy, Romantic artists infused their works with concepts such as individuality, subjectivity, irrationality, imagination, spontaneity, and transcendence.

"The industrial revolution, on the other hand, gave rise to an industrial society and the working class, which, through mechanization, shifted the production style from an agriculture-oriented 'social structure' to one producing more 'goods.'" The workers, subjected to long hours and harsh working conditions, became subjects of the artworks of that era, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the Realism movement in revealing reality in all its starkness (Mahiroğulları, 2005, p. 43). As a transitional symbol from Realism to Impressionism, Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass," which caused a scandal at the 1863 exhibition titled the "Salon des Refusés," stands as a significant introduction to modern art.

From the early 19th century onwards, artists endeavored to adapt to the rapidly developing world. With the Fauvism movement, they embraced the use of pure color, areas of stain, and variations in form. These color fields were later foundational to Cubism's principles, which evolved through synchronicity and formal features, eventually yielding to fragmentation. Through the scientific advancements available to Cubism's representatives, a fourth dimension, temporality, was introduced to painting, setting the stage for the emergence of the Fluxus movement and representing a significant stride toward Conceptual Art.

In the early 20th century, amidst World War I, Dadaism emerged, with Duchamp challenging art and the artist by employing ready-made objects such as "shovels, bicycle wheels, kitchen stools, and urinals," displacing established rules. This period, which can be described as the advent of Conceptual Art, saw art not as something 'observed' but 'experienced.' Subsequently, artists began to utilize these ready-made objects to create spatial integrity, laying the groundwork for installation art. Venturing beyond the confines

of gallery spaces, they sought new exhibition venues in larger, elevated spaces or public arenas, integrating not only the physical space but also the audience into the exhibition realm.

In the De Stijl movement, stemming from Piet Mondrian's plastic and theoretical explorations between 1912 and 1917, pictorial elements were delimited to the use of "right angles and straight lines, vertical and horizontal lines, and three primary colors: blue, yellow, and red," with neutral colors including "white, black, and grey." As an offshoot of Neoplasticism, art movements like De Stijl and the Bauhaus school flourished under the auspices of the Cubism movement. These novel approaches constituted Avant-garde Art movements, intensifying in the first quarter of the 20th century, superseding the influence of Modernism globally and signifying "a fundamental change in the philosophy and terminology of the art phenomenon" (Antmen, 2009, p. 103).

The art of Installation, which stems from the tradition of the ready-made object dating back to Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, stands as the first known art discipline to question its relationship with the space it inhabits. The ready-made object has undergone a significant evolution into a far more cognitive process of signification, particularly as it becomes associated with space. The influences brought back by our artists returning from Paris have led to significant developments within the context of contemporary art in Turkey. Post-1980 Turkish Plastic Artists have produced a considerable body of work in Installation art, contributing to the creation of space and emerging as pivotal figures within Turkey's contemporary art scene. The opening of the Painting and Sculpture Sales Gallery in Taksim in 1939 under state auspices, showcasing works aligned with Republican ideology, and İsmail Hakkı Oygur's transformation of his atelier across from the Beyoğlu Karlman Passage into a gallery space in 1945-mark significant milestones in the history of private gallerism in Turkey. Though the significance of these endeavors cannot be fully evaluated in terms of the art market structure prevalent in today's galleries, their value lies in their orientation towards addressing the needs of artists rather than catering solely to art buyers or the state, which acted as the primary patron of artworks at the time. Despite its short lifespan, the İsmail Oygur Gallery assumed a prominent role in Turkey's art scene (Pelvanoğlu, 2009, pp. 14, 15).

In 1950, Adalet Cimcoz's establishment of the Maya Gallery in Beyoğlu holds great significance in the formation of Turkey's art market and gallerism. Until its closure in 1955, the Maya Art Gallery occupied a privileged position, showcasing works not only by academy lecturers but also by young emerging artists such as Aloş, Kuzgun Acar, Ömer Uluç, and Yüksel Arslan (Pelvanoğlu, 2009, p. 15).

Following the 1950s, a period emerged characterized by the dominance of softer ideologies worldwide. In the aftermath of fascism and Stalinism, artists expressed a growing desire to break free from conventions. As the era of "cultural schizophrenia" began to wane, diverse encounters gave rise to numerous innovations. The Attic Painters emerged as a breath of fresh air within this context (Pelvanoğlu, 2017, p. 252).

Among the artist groups of Turkish Modernism, the Attic Painters hold significant importance. They were the first to adopt an oppositional stance against the academy, aiming to explore original abstract art. Founded by figures such as Fethi Karakaş and Ferruh Başağa, the group established itself in an attic on Asmalımescit Street, taking a stand against the academic traditions and the artists associated with Group D (Başkan, 2014, p. 112).

With the debate sparked by the Attic Painters, initiatives such as the showcasing of abstract works by some members of Group D, the establishment of the Helikon Association in Ankara in 1953 by Bülent Ecevit and his associates, which would evolve into the central gallery for abstract art, and the organization of exhibitions featuring abstract works titled "Pre-Exhibition" by Lütfü Günay and Adnan Çoker at Ankara University in the same year, are pivotal endeavors in terms of the acceptance and proliferation of Abstract Art in Turkey.

Erol Akyavaş introduced traditional motifs and patterns for the first time in contemporary Turkish painting. In his 1975 piece "Old City," he depicted an abstract bird's-eye view of a 16th-century Ottoman city. Based on castle depictions in Ottoman miniatures, Akyavaş's work stands as a significant example of traditional depiction within contemporary practice (Barlas Bozkuş, 2014, p. 22).

Akyavaş defines non-figurative abstract art as "Embroidery." He establishes a connection between Turkish art and Abstract Art, arguing that both were not created by imitating the shapes around them but by establishing an order with colors. Akyavaş states that our

traditional embroideries do not imitate the world but rather imitate each other. He adds that for our embroidery to be expressed through painting, there is a necessity for an understanding of painting that carries reflections of Western culture (Çalikoğlu, 2010, p. 129).

With the global impact of the Paris student protests in 1968, political mobilization spread through student movements, affecting Turkey in the 1970s (Bozdağ, 2015, p. 110).

During the 1970s, topics such as national culture, nationalism in art, universality, and socialist-revolutionary art were subjects of extensive discussion in the fields of culture and art. Beginning in the 1950s, amidst debates, ideas emerged that contradicted the founding ideology of the republic and the social, cultural, and political transformations that occurred after 1960. Subsequently, efforts to forge an original and national language in Turkey, emancipating from Westernization tendencies, establishing connections with our heritage, and integrating with the populace, gained prominence (Yasa Yaman, 1998:103; Berk, 2007:31).

Significant political, economic, cultural, and social events of the 1970s culminated in the military coup of September 12, 1980. Following this coup, Turkey embarked on a process of economic liberalization. The liberal economic policies embraced by the Motherland Party in 1983 accelerated Turkey's integration into the global economy. In the post-1980 period, the free-market economy has profoundly influenced political and cultural formations (Pelvanoğlu, 2009, p. 471).

During the 1960s and 1970s, a minority of Turkish artists recognized the emergence of a counter-tradition movement in Europe against the norms of painting and sculpture. Altan Gürman introduced French New Realism, Pop Art, Dada, Surrealism, and Duchamp's ideas to Turkey in the 1960s. These changes gained prominence with the 'The Other Side of Art' Exhibitions. Between 1977 and 1987, as part of the 'Istanbul Art Festival', the 'New Trends' exhibitions held biennially were an initiative of the academy. The works of artists such as Şükrü Aysan, Osman Dinç, Serhat Kiraz, Cengiz Çekil, Canan Beykal, Ayşe Erkmen, Füsün Onur, Gürel Yontan, Gülsün Karamustafa, Selim Birsnel, Handan Börüteçene, who participated in the activities between 1977-81, were rooted in painting and sculpture but represented new directions. The pre-1980 'New Trends' and 'A Cross Section of Turkish Avant-Garde Art' events, which transcended the traditional exhibition approaches, along

with the efforts of a group of artists, were pioneering initiatives in fostering a conducive environment for biennials in Turkey (Erzen, 1999, pp. 206-211).

The "A Cross Section of Turkish Avant-Garde Art" exhibitions encompassed the works of Turkish artists engaged in new explorations within Turkish art. These exhibitions, which were non-profit and not sales-oriented, featured conceptual, minimal, and installation-style works (Köksal, 1999, pp. 168,177).

Towards the end of the 1980s, auction houses began to exert their influence in the art market, and private galleries entered a period of uncertainty in the 90s. By the late 1970s, the capital accumulated through industrialization had shifted provincial accumulations to urban areas, leading the industrial bourgeoisie to seek a foothold amidst rapid social change. However, lacking a foundation in artistic infrastructure, this group directed their savings towards the antique and painting market. From the 1970s onwards, artist groups gradually dwindled, giving way to professional solidarity organizations such as the Maltepe Painters, United Painters and Sculptors Association. The artist groupings observed towards the end of the 1970s were limited, with one such group being the "Art Definition Society," comprised of Şükrü Aysan, Serhat Kiraz, Ahmet Öktem, and Avni Yamaner (Pelvanoğlu, 2009, p. 26). The "Art Definition Society" paved the way for conceptual art. Artists, adopting a Duchampian approach, engaged with gallery spaces through canvases suspended from the ceiling with steel ropes or strings, written texts, music, images, and photographs (Kaya Okan, p. 26). By focusing on texts related to conceptual art, the group cultivated a collective understanding through discussions and research on the boundaries of art. The group held its inaugural exhibition at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1978. The Art Definition Society's embrace of interdisciplinarity serves as an illustration of how the art environment of the 1980s was shaped in the late 1970s.

RESULTS

Erol Akyavaş stands out among the abstract schools of the post-1950 era due to his distinct style, narrative, and intellectual context when compared to his contemporaries. Akyavaş synthesized Eastern and Western forms in his abstract art, creating architectural forms on the abstract plane with unique perspective arrangements. By employing symbols, he conveyed the subconscious influences of different cultures on the Islamic world through his works. Akyavaş's departure from his contemporaries in abstract art lies in the messages

he aimed to convey to the viewer through constructive and symbolic forms. During the mature phase of his artistry, Akyavaş realized his philosophy of art through an installation at the Hagia Irene church in 1989 (Karakaş, 2013, pp. 127,128). (https://www.istanbulmodern.org/tr/sergiler/gecmis-sergiler/erol-akyavas-retrospektif_1169.html), (Kıymet Giray. <http://www.antikalar.com/turk-resminin-modernlesme-surecinin-donusumu-erol-akyavas>)

From Handan Börütüçene's early works to the present day, the spaces, sculptures, and objects she chooses have become integral elements of the exhibition venues where they are displayed. The artist frequently incorporates symbolic objects into the content of her works, integrating them into the space where the installation takes place, presenting them as a cohesive artwork. Particularly in her early installations such as "Break/See" and "Don't Break/See," Börütüçene engages the audience as an interactive part of the artwork, adding a performance aspect to the spatial atmosphere.

Ayşe Erkmen questions the primacy of the concept of being a work of art in the combination of space and works by bringing her works or ready-made objects to the exhibition space. She emphasizes that the art object finds value only within the space that surrounds it, underlining the undeniable importance of the space's characteristics. Erkmen concludes that the visuals, objects, and sculptures within the exhibition space, combined with the space itself, constitute a work of art (Coşkun Onan, 2017, p. 44). Moreover, Erkmen has engaged with the public by realizing projects in public spaces with significant foot traffic in Turkey and various countries in subsequent years. Among these projects, she has chosen bustling squares as her primary sites. Notably, her sculpture in Tünel Square in Beyoğlu and her installation in the inner harbor in Münster, connecting the two riverbanks between Nordkai (north pier) and the industrialized Südkai (south pier), are significant examples.

Sarkis's installation "Çaylak Sokak," exhibited at the Maçka Art Gallery in 1986, depicts the struggle of the individual, a part of modern life, against the act of forgetting. The physical and conceptual features offered by the space constitute the fundamental principle for Sarkis's artistic realization. In his installation "Çaylak Sokak," he meticulously analyzes the psychological effect of the space, arranging it according to the space and calculating the angles and color tones of light within the space to create a specific effect

on the objects. The artist constructs his light within the space, eschewing the use of the gallery's lighting. Additionally, Sarkis frequently employs the contrast of red and green colors in his exhibition "19380-19930" and in many of his works (Maçka Art Gallery Catalogue, 2016, p. 35).

Hüsametttin Koçan, in the visual arrangement he created with swords and canvases at the Alanya Shipyard, the only remaining shipyard from the Seljuks, drew inspiration from the idea of "exhibiting and communicating cultures in their own space." He based the size of the canvas on the verticality of Seljuk tombs and was inspired by the tent system. According to Koçan, the Seljuks' approach to Islamic culture, their disregard for artistic prohibitions and rules, and their internalization of the overlapping effects of multi-layered culture were prominent elements in his installation. Likewise, in the exhibition "Taste of Salt" in the Salt Cave in Çankırı, he conceived the exhibition as a tribute to the superhuman efforts of those who excavated this cave, a precious treasure of the local people, and brought it to fruition. (Ethem Yenigürbüz: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yemel-haberler/ankara/tuz-magarasinda-resim-sergisi-6294547>),(<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yemel-haberler/ankara/tuz-magarasinda-resim-sergisi-6294547>)

In the 1990s, under the mayorship of Nurettin Sözen, the "Open Air Contemporary Three-Dimensional Art Installation Event" was conducted, and the works selected through the public space sculpture competition titled "Sculptures in the Memorial Park of the Martyrs of Secularism and Democracy from our National War of Independence to the Present," organized by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, were presented to the public in Saraçhane Park (Göktaş, 1998, p. 55). These instances demonstrate that the inception of public art practices in Turkey began with sculpture and evolved into "purely spatial practices," divesting itself of its ideological content (Pelvanoğlu, 2009, p. 87). The spatial coherence facilitated by sculpture in public spaces has reinforced the notion of introducing installation art to our public spheres.

Within the scope of thesis research, artists such as Ayşe Erkmen, Füsün Onur, Sarkis Zabunyan, Erol Akyavaş, Serhat Kiraz, Hale Tenger, Handan Börütüçene, Hüsametttin Koçan, İnci Eviner, Kezban Arca Batıbeki, Genco Gülan, Balkan Naci İslimyeli, Halil Akdeniz, Murat Morova, Aydan Murtezaoğlu, and Alparslan Baloğlu have prioritized the

interpretation of 'space' through social and cultural memory in their installations, accentuating it with a more profound impact.

Presently, in the past decade, Baksı Museum with its natural setting that harmonizes tradition and contemporaneity, Zeugma Museum, Basilica Cistern, Tophane-i Amire, Bursa Zindankapı Exhibitions, Süleymaniye Imaret, Istanbul Women's Museum, Diyarbakır Mardinkapı, Bebek Cistern, selected venues for Istanbul Biennials, Pera Museum, Antrepolars, Central Greek Girls' High School, Galata Private Greek Primary School, Fishing Boat (Bosphorus), Küçük Mustafa Paşa Hamam, Çinili Hamam, Metro Han, Barın Han, Museum Gazhane, Yedikule Gazhane, Haliç Istanbul, Artİstanbul Feshane, Mardin Biennial, and Çanakkale Biennial, along with "Rumi Dreams," a sensory dynamic performance by digital media artist Refik Anadol and his team encompassing numerous documents like Mesnevi writings, realized through machine learning algorithms employing an interdisciplinary dataset; all these exemplify the preservation of our cultural heritage by amalgamating with preferred venues in biennials and exhibitions, ensuring a continuum from our past to present and future as tangible cultural symbols.

In galleries, biennials, diverse art activities, artist collectives, initiatives, and installations in public spaces across various regions of Turkey, the aim is to evoke the memory of our cultural heritage, keep the old alive, and sustain it interactively by engaging the viewer in the artwork with the contemporary in its newfound space. It's crucial to remember that since its inception, Maçka Art Gallery's space has remained unchanged, and the artworks exhibited there have transformed into artworks intertwined with space by crafting projects based on its characteristics. Consequently, Turkish artists like Ayşe Erkmen, Füsün Onur, Serhat Kiraz, Sarkis Zabunyan, and numerous others have transposed similar artistic approaches from Maçka Art Gallery to public spaces in their installations across galleries, biennials, art collectives, or public space art practices throughout their careers.

DISCUSSION

The painters of "Group D" progressed in a contemporary direction in plastic arts after the Union of Independent Painters and Sculptors, adopting Cubism as a style that reflected a rational approach to art. They were seen as the contemporary artists of the republic, and in a sense, with their conceptual and terminological accumulation, they were accepted as the key to unlocking the dictionary of creation for the new era. After the 1930s, admiration for

the West gave way to debates around localism, regionalism, and National Art. Many artists considered the idea that our country's national and folkloric values should prevail over the modern art borrowed from the West. This awareness led them to incorporate contemporary tendencies in Western painting and elements of Turkish folk culture. However, this approach created confusion among Turkish painters of that period. Until the 1960s, this confusion led to a process of brainstorming, including domestic art tours, a return to traditional arts, Social Realist approaches, and constructions inspired by Cubism or the West but featuring local motifs.

During the same period, the Attic Painters were the first group of artists in Turkish Modernism to display an attitude against the academy and to work in search of original abstract art. Turkey absorbed the wave of Abstract Art coming from the West, involving tendencies such as Calligraphy, Geometric Non-Figurative, Lyrical Non-Figurative, Geometric Abstraction, Lyrical Abstraction, Figurative Abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism, which the painters translated according to their individual worlds. In the following years, some Turkish artists abandoned their National, Local Art, Social Realist, and socially problematic approaches to painting, turning instead to original expressions. Turkey, with its geographic and socio-cultural complexity, experienced debates between East and West, hosting many different civilizations in the same lands, migration from different countries and regions, and centuries of cultural blending, leading to a period of hybrid culture, cultural and identity conflicts, and displacement.

Meanwhile, Altan Gürman became acquainted with Neorealism movements in France and brought a completely different perspective to Plastic Arts with an interdisciplinary understanding of art. Upon his return to Turkey from Europe to work in academia, Gürman established a basic education unit, getting the new art methods he represented accepted. This establishment changed the character of art in Turkey, and the artists who received this training founded the Art Definition Society. The group started to produce art with very different materials. Şükrü Aysan, the founder of the Art Definition Group, realised the first known installation in Turkey at Mimar Sinan Hall in 1976. (<https://www.sanattanimitoplulugu.org/STT'nin%20Tarihi.htm>).

Contemporary art in Turkey gained strength from abstract painting through the door opened by the Attic Painters in Turkish Painting Art. The path of Abstract Art intersected

with a path where Neorealism entered art production with very different materials, forming the central opening of Conceptual Art in Turkey. Installation Art, which is an important branch of Conceptual Art, became an artistic practice that went beyond imitating the West and dominated the whole world while incorporating many different art disciplines together. The initiatives of artist collectives and independent artist groups, which were frequently formed during the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, have sparked discussions on concepts such as the "public space-private space" dichotomy, "displacement", "dispossession", and "hybrid culture" within Turkish Installation Art. However, some of these artist initiatives, such as the "K2 Contemporary Art Centre", which operates under the project "A Stronger Civil Society for the Protection of Cultural Heritage".

A seminar organised by the "5533 Art Movement", showcasing the forty-year history of the Unkapanı Istanbul Manifaturacılar Bazaar through photographs and engaging in activities that focus on the "history, architecture, symbolic meaning, function, and place in urban life" of the buildings... "the necessity and methods for their enhancement from visual, functional, and social perspectives."

In certain projects like the "Apartment Project", "Oda (Room) Project", and "Project 4L", alongside discussions on hybrid culture and the distinction between public and private spaces, attempts have been made to preserve our social culture and memory. These projects, by selecting historical districts for their exhibitions and drawing public attention to the oldest streets of Istanbul to revive memory and inviting people to events held in these spaces, aim to protect our social culture and memory.

After 1980, a distinct approach emerged in contemporary plastic arts in Turkey, departing from previous periods. This approach entails embracing tradition, evoking it in memory, and reinterpreting it within contemporary art with a heightened awareness, expressed through different visual languages and forms. These tendencies have paved the way for significant developments, including the organisation of cultural heritage exhibitions that showcase Turkey's rich cultural values on the global stage by maintaining a continuous link between tradition and contemporary art. In the 1980s, this inclination pioneered the interpretation of social and cultural memory in contemporary art through installation spaces. Some noteworthy art events stemming from these interpretations include the "Contemporary Art in Traditional Spaces Exhibition" (1987), "Memory Memory"

exhibitions (1991-1993), "Aynılık ve Ayrılık" exhibition (1997), II. III. IV. International Istanbul Biennials (1989-1995), "From Memory to Modernity New Works from the Islamic World" exhibition (1998), and "Cultural Memory in Modern Turkish Art from Tradition to Contemporary" exhibition (2010).

CONCLUSION

The introduction of different materials into painting in Turkey during the 1960s, followed by the first installations in gallery spaces, the transformation of sculptural aesthetic language in public spaces during the 1990s, the international presentation of Turkish artists' works through biennials, and the frequent occurrence of these presentations in spaces reflecting Turkey's cultural diversity have collectively formed the backbone of installation art in Turkey. If we consider the increase in culturally based exhibitions held in traditional spaces since the 1980s, both within the realm of public art events and biennials and exhibition events, as an indicator, it underscores the importance of increasing the presence of Turkish Installation Art in our public spaces and encouraging its proliferation. This emphasis aligns with the necessity of preserving and transmitting our social and cultural memory from the past to the present and into the future through a 'spatial reading' approach.

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Figures

Figure 1 Handan Börütüçene "Kır/Gör" "5th New Trends" Exhibition 1985.



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Figure 2 Sarkis Zabunyan "Çaylak Sokak" Maçka Art Gallery 1986. Source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1132142>

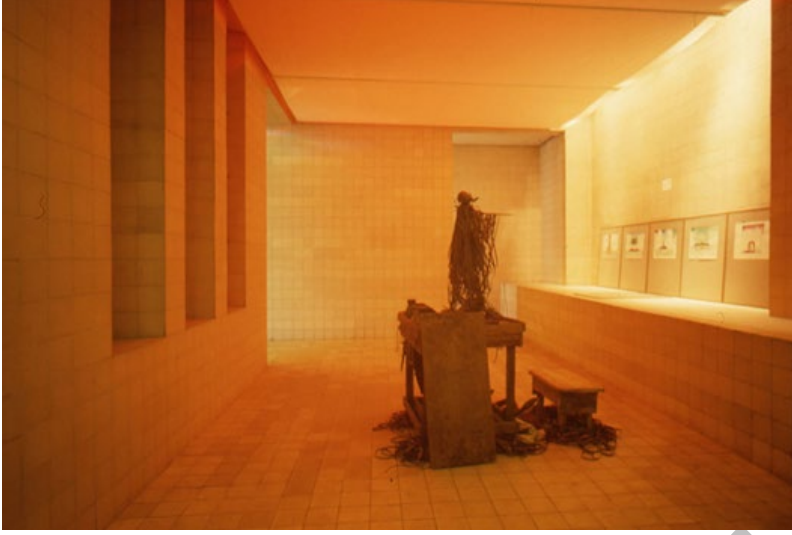


Figure 3 Ayşe Erkmen "This Gallery" Maçka Art Gallery, Installation, 1995. Source: Maçka Art Gallery, "This Gallery" Catalogue



Figure 4 Hüsametttin Koçan, " Visual History of Anatolia Fascicule III Seljuk" Shipyard
Source: https://acikbilim.yok.gov.tr/bitstream/handle/20.500.12812/612724/yokAcikBilim_10012796.pdf?sequence=-1&isAllowed=y

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Figure 5 Serhat Kiraz, "God of Religions, Religions of Gods", II. International Istanbul Biennial, 1989, Hagia Irene.
Source: file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/254304.pdf



Figure 6 Refik Anadol "Rumi Dreams" Mevlana, AKM, 2023. Source:
<https://twitter.com/refikanadol/status/1530238737216462848>

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