

Caring Kind: Exploring Gender-based Violence Through Artworks by Women from or based in Turkey between 1980–2020

Abstract

Art opens new pathways for novel modes of engagement with feminism and the related history of theory, writing, and activism through transdisciplinary approaches. One pathway is the reflection of gender-based violence in artworks. This paper follows the traces of the patriarchal mindset and its reflections in various forms of gender-based violence in selected artworks of women artists based in or from Turkey between 1980 and 2020. This study has a specific focus on artists whose works are autobiographical, and who shift between experimental writing and visual art in their works. The resources for this study include artist interviews, artist books, Turkish art history literature that deal with the 1980–2020 period, archival material from artists, news articles, exhibition catalogues, art periodicals, as well as international literature on art writing as a feminist practice. Findings of this study indicate that art has the power of fore fronting, awareness raising, reframing, and thus transforming existing knowledge and commonly held beliefs concerning gender in a society through its various forms of expression.

Keywords: Farts, gender-based violence, feminist art theory, art history, autotheory, Turkey

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence has different dynamics, including those that can be characterised as economic, political, ideological, and psychological. When investigating gender-based violence reflected in the works of art, one should consider all these dynamics as well as the violent acts themselves. As gender-based violence is carried out daily from the dais to the media, from public space to private space, it reflects itself in the works of art as well.

In Turkey, institutionalised and traditionalised acts of gender-based violence are not perceived as acts of violence but identified as customs, moral laws, ceremonies. These acts are often announced by the patriarchal society as if they were performed simply in accordance with the publicly established norms, such as the individual commitment to the state and commonly accepted norms of culture such as religion. The violence of the state and the institutions it controls remains invisible and unchallenged, while the actions of the oppressed, minorities and those who demand basic human rights are labelled as acts of violence that are not open to public debate or criticism. In contrast, a simple utterance against some sacred institutions is labelled as violence against the sense of self or the masculinity and existence of society. Patriarchy is a set of connections, ideas, and ideals ingrained in political, social, and economic

institutions that create male-female gender disparity. Traits perceived as feminine or related to women are deemed inferior to attributes perceived as masculine. Both the private and public realms are structured by patriarchal relationships and patriarchy controls both realms.¹

According to Betül Yazar, the societal meanings attributed to patriarchy and the relationship of patriarchy to power are inextricably linked to all types of gendered violence. This is important to acknowledge since in mainstream media, when it comes to gender-based violence, the focus is on physical violence against women. Other forms of gender-based violence tend to be overlooked. The reductionist approach to stories of violence against women often relegates women to the role of victims. The same approach also makes it easier for people who have experienced various types of gendered violence to feel exempt from the problem and to consider ‘violence against women’ as a problem that belongs to particular groups and should be externalised.² Yazar further comments:

For some, the fight against violence takes the form of helping ‘poor’ women, ‘others’ who have been subjected to violence, while other forms of gendered violence, as important and widespread as femicide, which are highlighted by the media, lose their political and social significance.³

In this paper, I focus on gender-based violence based on a patriarchal mindset, hegemonic masculinity as well as hegemonic femininity, and steer away from any victimisation of women while doing so. Here, I am referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of masculine domination that covers both discursive and structural aspects of the gender system that favours men/masculine over women/feminine.⁴

I have explored some of the strategies used by women artists to deal with or fight against gender-based violence. Among the artworks analysed in this article, there are ones that deal with various aspects of gender-based violence, including but not limited to portrayal of women in Turkish art history and position of women in Turkish society, femicides and violent acts as well as their portrayal in media, domestic labour, consumer culture, and gendered state violence. The common denominator of the works presented in this article is that they bring a critical perspective to the experience of women in Turkey through visual art forms. Another common point is that they combine feminist art theory or history and personal narratives through different analytical structures and approaches.

For this study, I referred to artist interviews, artist books, Turkish art history literature that deal with the 1980–2020 period, archival material from artists, news articles, exhibition catalogues, art periodicals as well as international literature on art writing as a feminist practice.

1 Nash 2020, 43–7.

2 Yazar 2015, 2–3.

3 Yazar 2015, 2.

4 Bourdieu 1998.

A number of recent studies has shown that there are significant gaps in Turkish art history in covering art by women and experiences of women as artists in Turkey until the 1990s. Despite decades of research on women artists from Turkey, there is still so much ground to cover. Although the last few years have seen an increased interest in women artists, to date, no study has looked specifically at gender-based violence reflected on women artists' artworks in Turkey during 1980–2020.

My aim in this article is to follow the traces of the patriarchal mindset and reflections of gender-based violence in selected artworks from between 1980 and 2020 of women artists based in or from Turkey and to start a discussion through them. The central question of this paper is how gender violence manifested itself in the works of women artists in Turkey between 1980–2000?

Erden Kosova explains that there was a growing trend toward conceptualization in art throughout the 1980s in Turkey. Artists emphasised the incompatibilities between image, language, and objective reality. By deconstructing the conventional systems of representation, artists developed new forms of expression throughout this period. By the end of the 1980s, conceptualism – combining flexible forms of expression and narration provided by the dynamics of conceptualisation with various audiovisual-linguistic disciplines and technologies – was becoming more popular. Conceptualism focused on social relations rather than art itself.⁵ Thus, the 1980s is an ideal starting point for my research since it is a period of ruptures in Turkish art.

In the Background section, I present a recent line of research and shed light on the existing literature. Chapter 2 delves into autotheory as a practice that bridges art and theory. I then offer a brief introduction before the 1980s. In the three sections that follow, I employ selected artworks as case studies to demonstrate the reflections of gender-based violence in art by Turkish women. I present my findings in the conclusion section, where I also conclude that art and activism can feed off each other as art can disrupt an already established set of opinions in a society through symbolic gestures and encourage audiences to meditate on gender struggle. In activism, action is an imperative⁶ and ambiguity is often discouraged. However, artworks have the power and freedom to employ the sense of ambiguity to explore new forms of action.

1.1. Background

From a historical perspective, Turkish art as an 'institutionalised ideological practice'⁷ not only reflects the social structure in Turkey but also frames it. In Turkish art history before the 1970s, it is rare to come across artworks where women represent themselves in active social roles, whereas works by men which depict women and women's social

5 Kosova 2020, 22.

6 Thompson 2015, 33.

7 Tekeli 1995, 32.

experience are abundant.⁸ According to Ahu Antmen,⁹ at least until the late 1970s, women artists in Turkey performed a role that was *tailored* for them through a history and setting framed by male dominated cultural structures.¹⁰ Although the social problems regarding gender were present, they were not as frequently reflected in the artworks of female artists during the 1970s and 1980s in comparison to the preceding three decades. Until the early 1990s, the *success* of the Turkish woman as an artist was perceived to be an exception.¹¹ The common preconception was that to be an artist, women must have been deprived of certain virtues in life such as motherhood, a successful marriage and/or family.¹² In addition, Ahu Antmen¹³ underlines that there is a significant difference between women artists who produce art without any political strategy and those who aim to deconstruct the social dynamics of gender inequality and gender-based violence in Turkey. Whereas the first group of artists were active during the 1970s and 1980s, the latter were mainly active during the 1990s and after. For example, Antmen¹⁴ explains that until the 1990s, the number of women artists who portray women's experience in their works is relatively small. As for the answer to the question of why women artists and art history dealt with women and gender much later, Antmen brings up the curator Beral Madra's theory of auto-censorship.¹⁵

Madra argues that the censorship and prohibitionist mentality, which was effective until the early 1980s, caused a psychological pressure on women artists and led them to self-censorship, while globalisation, which came to the fore in the context of the political and economic transformations of the 1990s, liberated women artists.¹⁶

Although I agree with Ahu Antmen so far, I think that the burning question is whether women artists were consciously shying away from these issues due to self-censorship or due to a particular stance. This question is often overlooked. For example, since many women artists believed art history's obsession with their gender 'would overshadow their *artistry*'¹⁷ they tried to steer clear of any immediate distinctions between a female and male artist. They believed at the time this would further worsen the discrimination they face in the Turkish art world. I think that judging some women artists of the period, who took this silent stance, as apolitical and indifferent to gender issues is a common discourse in art history. In a way, this attitude may unintentionally have been victimising and inflicting epistemic violence on them. I argue instead

8 Antmen 2013, 112.

9 Antmen 2013, 230.

10 Antmen 2013, 112.

11 Antmen 2013, 126.

12 Antmen 2013, 113.

13 Antmen 2013, 126.

14 Antmen 2013, 127.

15 Antmen 2013, 131.

16 Antmen 2013, 131.

17 Antmen 2012, 125:71.

that the 'silence' of some women artists of the period, consciously or unconsciously, contributed to women artists' bolder tone in the 1990s and after.

It is significant to note that art academies in Turkey had a sexist structure. Antmen notes that it is crucial to remember that hegemonic masculinity is the norm in education, creation and distribution of art and it is present in all art's organs such as publications during the period before the 1990s.¹⁸ For example, the works of art by women artists and art students were being assessed and criticised via male norms. Antmen quotes from Gülsün Karamustafa: 'When I was a student at the Academy, the professors who saw my drawings often remarked: 'You have the wrist of a man.' I felt proud.'¹⁹ When such a remark is supposed to be flattering, it glorifies a man's wrist and capabilities as an artist while it implies that having a man's wrist as an artist is superior to having a woman's wrist. Hence, it is an example of how the women artists were subjected to gender distinctions based on their biological sex. Although on a diminished scale, I observe that similar discriminations still exist in the art education institutions. In my interviews with seven women visual artists who received art education in the 2000s at some of Turkey's leading art academies, I came across similar statements. One of the significant statements was from anonymous interviewee #1:

Of course, they can't be openly sexist like they were in the old times. There was a colleague at our studio who flirted with me from time to time. Since I was significantly older than other students, I remember his occasional joke: 'Your sculptures are technically really good, but... you're going to become a mother and stop doing art anyway. Don't break your back for art. It will affect you.'²⁰

It seems to me that all these types of remarks are not just lingering on the dusty shelves of the past, but they still exist. As a woman who has studied sculpture during the 2010s and who has been subjected to similar remarks countless times myself, perhaps it is time to not shy away from different methodologies for writing a more inclusive art history. If the aim is to break free from the gendered limitations of art history, one needs to look beyond the borders of academia and certainly move away from the gender-based limitations of Turkish history of art. Therefore, I revisited autotheory. Autotheory defines the activities of artists, writers, and other art and culture professionals, who work in a junction of contemporary art, literature, and academia, in settings where practice and research, writing and studio art, self-reflection and theory collide.²¹ Arianne Zwartje writes:

It is a practice that involves thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and idiosyncrasies of one's lived experiences as they are processed through or contrasted with theory – or as the foundation for theoretical thinking. It removes the theoretical voice's objectivity. It provides us a thought-provoking, multivalent

18 Antmen 2013, 116.

19 Antmen 2013, 85.

20 Anonymous Informant #1 2020.

21 Fournier 2022, 17.

hybridity, unashamed to blend theory with creativity and poetry, as well as the visual elements of one's own personal bodily experience.²²

Autotheory – the fusion of theory and philosophy with autobiography as a critical creative approach influenced by feminist literature and activism²³ – helped me make connections between art theory and practice. By reading artist interviews, exhibition catalogues as well as artists writing about their own work, I delved into how they situated existing knowledge in their artworks to reflect on gender and gender-based violence.

Overall, this paper seeks to contribute to contemporary research on artistic practices by Turkish women, gender and the complex relationship of gender and violence in Turkey.

I focus on the period from 1980 to today because the 1980s is a critical era for Turkey in every aspect, where injustice, corruption and threats to democracy were abundantly present in social life. Despite all the restrictions on freedoms in the country, the 1980s were active times for the women's movement. This activity was also reflected in women artists' work as more and more women artists have started reflecting on gender issues in their works from the 1980s on.

Before the 1980s, visual art was often analysed in isolation. Although social criticism was present in artworks long before the 1980s, the study of art in conjunction with other disciplines, began in the 1980s. The boundaries that existed between art and the political, economic, social, or cultural sphere began to dissolve in the 1980s, and artists began to move toward interdisciplinarity that would manifest itself in the 1990s.²⁴ Retrospectively, the 1980s in Turkey is considered to be a turning point in which new media such as performance art and video art began to emerge and the male dominated understanding of *peinture* began to be broken.

2. Autotheory: Bridging Theory and Art Practice

Writing feminist art history and employing feminist art history methodologies is as urgent as ever. Art generates thinking which is then translated into writing and theory.²⁵ As contemporary art translates into writing and consequently into theory, it is possible to come up with new forms of expression and artistic strategies where women artists think about the problematic of gender, in their own name.

Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis employ²⁶ four different methodologies to analyse the art-making process and understand the works of women artists in a male-dominated context. First, glorification of female power through works focusing on feminine mythology; secondly, women's art as a form of sub-cultural resistance,

22 Zwartjes 2019.

23 Fournier 2022, 19.

24 Pelvanoğlu 2009, 28.

25 Pollock 2018.

26 Barry and Flitterman 1980, 135–48.

focusing on combining what is considered *low culture*, such as crafts, with gender issues and women's activities in domestic life; thirdly, works by artists who don't identify as feminists but whose works reflect feminist perspectives; and finally, works as an artistic activity based on textual strategy, where the works of art refer to the existing social contradictions to create an alternative discourse about it.

My methodology in this article combines Barry and Flitterman-Lewis' fourth methodology with *autotheory*²⁷. Although my main focus was on Barry and Flitterman-Lewis' fourth methodology, I still kept the other three methodologies in mind since they are all in a way connected. Lauren Fournier has identified²⁸ *autotheory* as a practice of both contemporary art and contemporary art writing. Fournier writes that employing *autotheory* in contemporary arts allows for the use of 'one's embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorise, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects.'²⁹ Concepts that characterise not just artwork but also art practices are critical in this setting for shifting the conversation away from binary understandings of art. Afterall, the task of feminist art history³⁰ is not to 'struggle to enter and be accepted in the existing male-dominated art world,' but to criticise art history as an institutionalised ideological practice.

For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to briefly explain Barry and Flitterman-Lewis' fourth methodology. This type of methodology integrates art into text (verbal or written expression) produced by artists. Artists who work with *autotheory* may shift between experimental writing and conceptual art, filmmaking and art writing, performance art and philosophical fiction. Their studio practice may include diaristic journaling and the expanded field of photography, juxtaposing critical research with autobiographical reflection.³¹ Combination of *autotheory* and Barry and Flitterman-Lewis' fourth methodology creates a more inclusive understanding of artists and their artworks.

While analysing the works of the women artists in this article, I approach them with an emphasis on *autotheory*. It is important to analyse artists who employ art theory, text, and archives in their artworks for the purposes of my research and this article. Through the lens of *autotheory*, or the *bridging of autobiography*, I reflect on *autotheory* as a practice that combines the more scholarly, academic, research-based mode with autobiographical and reflective work.³²

27 Fournier 2018, 645.

28 Fournier 2022, 17.

29 Fournier 2022, 17.

30 Gökçen 2013, 87.

31 Fournier 2022, 17.

32 Fournier 2021.

3. A Brief Introduction to the 1980s: The Four Pioneering Women Artists

In Turkey, numerous works by women artists in the 1970s and 1980s directed the quest for an expression beyond the male-dominated painting scene of Turkish art history. While not in the form of a conscious and distinct political stance just yet, they started reflecting on gender as a social construct and approached art as a way to criticise the status quo. Although 1980 symbolises a watershed moment in socio-political history, the shift in art began in the mid-1970s. In this section, I highlight four women artists who were active already before the 1980s and focused primarily on women's experiences in Turkey in their work between 1970–1980. Gülsün Karamustafa (1946), Nil Yalter (1938), Tomur Atagök (1939), and Nur Koçak (1941) are widely regarded as pioneering women artists who opened the way for a new generation of artists to focus on gender.

Gülsün Karamustafa was born into a middle-class family in Turkey. She studied painting at İstanbul Academy of Fine Arts. She has observed the political events and economic changes that have shaped modern Turkey as a painter, art director, and contemporary artist.³³ Her topics include, but are not limited to gender, migration, identity, critique of militarisation. Additionally, she dealt a lot with class distinction in her works which can be attributed to her personal involvement in the socialist movements and feminist organisations of the 1970s.³⁴ Shortly after graduating from the İstanbul Academy of Fine Arts in 1969, Karamustafa was sentenced to six months in prison for hiding a political fugitive.³⁵ In Karamustafa's works, the past is recalled and reconstructed with the help of personal artefacts and photographs. Karamustafa, wishes to revive the past as an artistic strategy, makes use of traces and evidence of the past and situates the past in the current day through her findings.³⁶

Nur Koçak started to take an active part in art scene during the 1970s and focused on women and the image of women in media, as well as the women's identity in terms of gender roles in Turkey. Her works are heavily inspired by popular culture as well as capital-market-goods and consumption. Her work questions the position of women both as a commodity and a consumer. Via intimate glimpses, she worked with close-ups from advertising photography that create an affective dimension in her photorealistic paintings. For example, the reference photographs she used in the *Object Women* (1975–1979) series are from women's magazines she used to read while studying painting on a state scholarship in Paris.³⁷ She explored how consumption shapes and creates the image of women in contexts of class and cultural differences. In conversation with Tomur Atagök, Koçak says: 'When I started doing all these *things* (paintings), I didn't even know what feminism was. Later on, feminist circles went

33 Bunulday Hasgüler and Şare 2014.

34 Akbulut 2021.

35 Bianet 2022.

36 Duben and Yıldız 2018, 172.

37 Sönmez 2009, 109.

on to say that my discourse was a perfect ‘fit’ for feminism.³⁸ Although without a *structured* feminist strategy at the time, it is safe to say that Koçak’s work explored her own environment and her experiences which were framed by her perspective as a woman. Nur Koçak further emphasises that women feel depersonalised through advertising imagery: ‘Advertisements fuel the desire to always be attractive and to look better. By applying this concept to themselves, they become increasingly objectified.’³⁹ Baudrillard, in *The Hyper-Realism of Simulation*,⁴⁰ argue that the postmodern world had become inextricably linked to the media and its signs and symbols, which then simulates a hyperreality. Through Koçak’s photorealist paintings, one can see the rhetorical artefacts that juxtapose a conflicting reality of femininity and the feminism of the time.

Tomur Atagök was born in İstanbul. She earned her BFA in plastic arts at Oklahoma State University, and her M.A. in plastic arts in 1965 at the University of California, Berkeley. Her figurative assertions in the midst of dynamic abstract expressionist brush strokes are highly present in her paintings from the 1980s. Her paintings reflect a feminist viewpoint by introducing women whose social presence is often *invisible* while also reflecting on migration and transitions between country and urban life via cultural traditions and practices. Between 1960 and 1979, Atagök experimented with space and movement to try to define human interactions in terms of abstract forms. She started working on reflective metal surfaces to incorporate the viewer and the surrounding environment in her works since she believes that art encompasses the creator, the work, and the audience.⁴¹

Born in Egypt to a Turkish family, Nil Yalter grew up in İstanbul. She is a self-taught artist. Since 1965, she has been living in Paris. She participated in the French counterculture and revolutionary movements, which drove her to abandon abstract constructivist painting in favour of experimenting with video and performance art.⁴² Her 1973 installation titled *Topak Ev* (Nomad’s tent or Yurt) modelled a nomad’s tent after the nomadic villages of central Anatolia. The three-metre-diameter circular, bell-shaped tent was supported by a light aluminium frame and wrapped with enormous panels of industrial felt, animal skin, and wool. Pleats of cloth, painted fringed sheepskin, and felt were strung on both the interior and outside. On the outside, a long excerpt from a Turkish novel and a quotation from a Russian poet in French were penned.⁴³ Nomad’s tent marks the beginning of the artist’s long-term interest in personal experiences, particularly those of women, who, like immigrants and prisoners, live on the margins of society. It traces the gender roles and codes that entrap women in domestic spaces back to the ancient traditions of Central Asian communities and explores the woman’s role in relation to migration. Yalter’s works *La Roquette Wom-*

38 Atagök 2011, 79–81.

39 Erdal 2017.

40 Baudrillard 1981.

41 Atagök 2002, 15.

42 Schor 2016, 152–5.

43 Özpinar 2021, 72–86.

en's Prison (1976) and The Harem (1980) reflect on how women's lives are defined and limited by the patriarchy. They also question the ownership of the public domain.⁴⁴

Karamustafa, Koçak, Atagök and Yalter pioneered a new approach to women as subject matter in art, shifting the emphasis in Turkish art from public to private.⁴⁵ All in all, Karamustafa, Koçak, Atagök and Yalter, changed the visual arts scene in Turkey radically with their ideas, methodologies, modes of expression, and discourses. Moreover, they fought hard against the mentality that still imprisons women as a gendered object of art.

4. 1980–1990: Towards a Critique of Patriarchy Through Visual Art Forms

According to Gürbilek: The first half of the 1980s saw a coup d'état, tyranny, and bloodshed, while the second half saw relative liberation and a more modern, civilian administration.⁴⁶ Inevitably, the overlap between the two halves influenced cultural forms in the 1980s. Pelvanoğlu pointed out that for the first time, prohibitions in the cultural realm and the transfer of capital to culture, the demolition of institutions where the masses might voice their demands, and the creation of mass culture have all collided.⁴⁷

Furthermore, in the 1980s, postmodern discourses were focusing on the rediscovery of the self in art. They also opposed the binary opposites of modernism such as reason/irrationality, east/west and woman/man. Within the scope of identity discussions, gender, sexuality, social identity, culture, and religious communities were re-examined by creative and cultural practitioners through the rediscovery of self as a subject matter.⁴⁸

In the 1980s, feminist groups in Turkey mainly focused on bringing gender inequality into public discourse. The basis of the political activity of early 1980's feminist groups in Turkey focused on the distinction between biological sex and gender as well as the actual oppression of women, which needed to be reframed and remedied.⁴⁹ The concept of women's identity was questioned. As part of women's positions during the 1980s, it is important to acknowledge, among many others, three protest demonstrations which were all part of *Dayağa Karşı Dayanışma Kampanyası* (Campaign against Battering of Women) during 1987–1988.⁵⁰

Firstly, there was the *Dayağa Karşı Dayanışma Yürüyüşü* (March against Battering of Women) on 17 May 1987, which is also the first demonstration organised with legal permission after the 1980 coup d'état. The march was organised by *Kadın Çevresi*

44 Sönmez 2009, 250.

45 Atagök 2002, 25.

46 Gürbilek 1992, 13–4.

47 Pelvanoğlu 2009, 460.

48 Öztürk 2007, 60–4.

49 Yuval-Davis 2007, 218.

50 Ozan 2015.

Figure 1. Gülsün Karamustafa, *Kavanozda Venüs* (1988) – Gülsün Karamustafa, *Venus in Jar* (1988), Photograph, SALT Research (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



(Women's Circle)⁵¹ against domestic violence. Campaign against Battering of Women was triggered by a statement by Mustafa Durmuş, who served as the judge of Çankırı at the time, in which he rejected the divorce request of a woman who had been subjected to domestic violence. Campaign against Battering of Women prepared the ground for the establishment of women's shelters and countless women's organisations dealing with gender-based violence and femicides.

Secondly, there is the demonstration and exhibition of the Campaign against Battering of Women that took place at the Chora Museum on 4 October 1987. The group of women who filed a lawsuit for moral damages against Mustafa Durmuş' statements published a statement⁵² in a special issue of the feminist magazine within the scope of the demonstration that took place at the Chora Museum. Gülsün Karamustafa's work *Kavanozda Venüs* (Venus in Jar) (see Fig.1) was the symbol of the Chora Festival in 1987. Venus in Jar consists of a porcelain figure in a pickle jar, which is typically used for making homemade tomato paste or fermenting vegetables and associated with housewives. Venus in jar combines the western imagery (Venus) with an eastern one (pickle jar). The jar has a double role as both *protector* and *captor*. As Venus is sheltered in the jar from the outside world, it is also being imprisoned. This work raises

51 Karakuş 2022.

52 Bianet 2003.

the following questions: Who protects who from whom and why? Don't the laws that supposedly protect women actually keep them captive and restrict their daily life? Karamustafa's work is an extremely meaningful metaphor in this context.

As in the *Venus in Jar* and many of her other posters, Gülsün Karamustafa, who has an extensive background in activism and women's circles, combines her personal history and her tools as an artist to convey women's experiences.

Thirdly, an exhibition named *Geçici Modern Kadın Müzesi* (Temporary Modern Women's Museum), was held at the İstanbul Advertising House during the International Women's Day, 8 March 1988.⁵³ Temporary Modern Women's Museum primarily consisted of household items and focused on unpaid female labour through items such as brooms, which were presented primarily as *women's objects*, and sanitary items. This is of course not the first time when art and activism intersects in Turkey, but this exhibition is important because artistic expression became more than a tool in gender activism. It became the action itself.

Meanwhile, through exhibitions⁵⁴ such as *Yeni Eğilimler* (New Trends in Art), *Öncü Türk Sanatından Bir Kesit* (A Cross Section of Avantgarde Turkish Art), İstanbul Biennials, conceptual artworks, as well as artworks that portray the political and social issues present at the time, were exhibited. These works were also discussed at art academies and in numerous art journals creating public awareness. In particular, New Trends in Art exhibition series provide a panorama of the 1980s through curatorially focusing on works with social reference. Füsün Onur (1938), Gülsün Karamustafa, Meriç Hızal (1943), Seyhun Topuz (1942), Nur Koçak, Azade Köker (1949), and Ayşe Erkmen (1949) are among the women artists who participated in the New Trends in Art exhibitions. In these exhibitions, Gülsün Karamustafa and Nur Koçak employ photography and graphic art to criticise the modernist male-dominated tradition of *peinture* and abstract art taught at the State Academy of Art, while Füsün Onur and Ayşe Erkmen challenge traditional sculpture through installations.⁵⁵

Between 1980 and 1990, absence and contrast were themes present in women artist's work. Portraying the presence of anything in visual art is relatively easy but how does one portray absence? İpek Duben worked on the concept of absence in her paintings between 1980–1990. Duben (1941) analyses issues ranging from male violence against women to gender inequalities as well as displacement and migration in her works. Her works touch upon class consciousness while reflecting on labour and gender. Having a background and a degree in Political Science, Duben completed her formal training in studio practice at the New York Studio School where she earned her BFA in 1976. Upon her return to Turkey, Duben started a new series of paintings, *Şerife* (Serife) (1980–1982). The paintings were named after Serife, a cleaning lady she got to know through her sister. Originally from an Anatolian village, Serife seemed to have been

53 Ozan 2015.

54 Öztürk 2007, 12.

55 Antmen 2013, 120.

abandoned by her husband. The artist recalls: ‘She would not agree to model for me, as for her it would be a *şim*.’ Duben then chose to depict her clothes instead.⁵⁶

I painted a number of headless *Serifes*, clothed in a shapeless dress which revealed nothing about her physical presence and represented her absence. That was her signature. At the time I felt I had painted an Iconic Turkish woman.⁵⁷

Duben often describes her practice as political, social, and psychological. In her understanding, feminism is not restricted to gender politics, but challenges wider injustices and abuses in society, drawing on both the past and the present.⁵⁸ Reflecting on the invisibility of women in Turkish society, Serife is a strong metaphor for the existential problems and *otherness* of those who migrated from the village to the city. Serife’s bodily absence embodies the absence of those at the margins of social life.

Analysing the absence of women in art history, and in Duben’s case, public life, some artists also reflected on what happens when women are present in public life. Tomur Atagök’s works emphasise the contrast in lives of the *modern* and *traditional* women in Turkey. Often painting on a metallic surface, Atagök’s work explores various interconnected themes, with feminism serving as a primary focus throughout her career.

Tomur Atagök portrays a woman’s way of conduct and its supposed consequences in many of her works such as her painting on metal plates titled *Plastik Cennet veya Kirletmeyin* (Plastic Paradise or Don’t Soil) (1987). *Plastic Paradise or Don’t Soil* (see Fig. 2) portrays a man with a knife on the left side of the painting threatening the women who are enjoying themselves in what appears to be a public space on the right side. Her work additionally addresses environmental concerns which can be read on the title as well as the empty space on the left panel.

Duben and Atagök both employ their personal experiences to engage artistically with the current themes present in the society. Both artists aim at rendering visible which is unsaid but present. Atagök textually expresses a dilemma in addition to obvious environmental concerns with her title *Plastic Paradise or Don’t Soil*. Who is littering? Are the women enjoying the public space littering or is it the male figure observing the women and standing threateningly with a knife in his hand? While Duben reflects on the non-existence of women in public space through the figure of a woman reduced to a dress, Atagök reflects on the existence of women in public space with vivid colours and its possible consequences. The focus – not only on the violence of invisibility, but also on the possibility of violence brought on by visibility – marks the period between 1980–1990.

56 Buck 2018.

57 Buck 2018.

58 Buck 2018.

Figure 2. Tomur Atagök, 'Plastik Cennet veya Kirletmeyin'. Öncü Türk Sanatından Bir Kesit Sergisi (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1987) – Tomur Atagök, 'Plastic Paradise or Don't Soil'. A Cross Section of Avantgarde Turkish Art (Atatürk Cultural Center, 1987). Photograph by Yusuf Taktak, SALT Research (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



5. 1990–2000: New Narratives and Personal Archives

During the 1990s, gender-based violence and its consequences in Turkey became frequently portrayed when narrative-oriented mediums such as photography, video and performance started to become widespread. They became highly debated issues visualised in the art of Turkish women, not only about the women's experience in Turkey but also as a reflection in the context of the social transformations at the time.⁵⁹ The number of archive-based works, the reconceptualization of an existing archive (whether personal or not) and the positioning of the woman artist through her own experiences and artistic methods, also increased during this period.

In addition, during 1990–2000, various exhibitions have focused on women's experiences in Turkey. *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Kadın Sanatçıları* (Women Artists from the Time of the Republic to the Present) curated by Tomur Atagök in 1993, *Bir Sofra* (A Dinner Table) curated by Beral Madra in 1996 are examples of the exhibitions that focused on women artists and their works. At the same time, women were speaking

⁵⁹ Antmen 2007, 102.

out boldly against the violence and harassment they faced at home, on the streets, and at work through campaigns and actions such as *Mor İğne* (Purple Needle), *Boşanma eylemi* (Divorce Action), *Bedenimiz Bizimdir, Cinsel Tacize Hayır* (Our Body is Ours, No to Sexual Harassment), *Bekaret Kontrolüne Hayır ve 438. Maddeye Hayır* (No to Virginity Control and No to Article 438).⁶⁰

In the process of articulation and memorialisation of demands for women's rights in Turkey, late 1990s were times where possibilities and limitations of art were also starting to be discussed. Ezgi Bakçay notes that the institutionalisation of contemporary art revealed its politics in terms of its position according to popular or dominant relations of representation.⁶¹ There was also a tendency towards interdisciplinary archive-based artistic practice as seen in works by Karamustafa and Duben.

In her installation *Kuryeler* (Courier) (1991) Gülsün Karamustafa uses bits and pieces of history as well as her own narration. Courier is loosely based on her grandmother's memories, who came to Turkey from Bulgaria during the 93 *Harbi* (Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878)).⁶² She wrote anecdotes on oral history as narrated by the violently displaced people of the Balkan War, the Caucasian War, and the First World War on small sheets of paper and sewed them into bandages like child vests. People who had lived on the same land for ages were compelled to migrate, and stitched the valuable possessions they could carry with them into women's and children's vests since they were thought to be the last ones to be harmed during the migration. However, at the end of the story, it was evident that women and children were raped. As a result, Karamustafa's vests are empty on the inside.⁶³

The vests are installed on clear stands that reads: 'When we crossed the borders, we sewed what was important to us into children's vests.'⁶⁴ (see Fig. 3) Here Karamustafa actively engages with oral history and pushes beyond its parameters. Combining autobiography and existing knowledge, she conceptually positions herself within the work itself. Moreover, it is a very delicate example of how a visual artist might engage with the violent act of rape without recreating the violence.

Although in a different context, in *Aşk Kitabı* (LoveBook) (1998–2000), İpek Duben approaches domestic violence against women from a very direct point of view. The work aims to highlight domestic violence in Turkey and the USA, based on news items selected from the third page of newspapers in Turkey and the USA. It aims to highlight that in comparison to the USA, as a result of the differently shaped patriarchal culture of Turkey, honour killings are abundant in news clippings and women are usually on the receiving end of violent acts in a domestic setting.⁶⁵

LoveBook is visually and textually very disturbing due to the nature of the photographs of traumatised bodies and portraits of countless nameless women and men.

60 Özdemir 2016.

61 Bakçay 2020, 28.

62 Duben and Yıldız 2018, 172.

63 Duben and Yıldız 2018, 172.

64 Duben and Yıldız 2018, 172.

65 Duben and Yıldız 2018, 193.

Figure 3. Gülsün Karamustafa, 'Kuryeler' (1991), 'Anı/Bellek 1' (Taksim Sanat Galerisi, İstanbul), 1991 – Gülsün Karamustafa, 'Courier' (1991), 'Recollection/Memory 1' (Taksim Art Gallery, İstanbul), 1991 Photograph, SALT Research (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



Through newspaper headlines brought together – somehow out of context since it's not possible to see the dates of the clippings – Duben creates a new narrative that pushes the limitations of visual art. I first came across LoveBook when it was exhibited in its installation form in İstanbul Modern in 2011. In its installation form,⁶⁶ LoveBook represents an interrogation/confession chamber, and each newspaper article mounted on a steel plate is illuminated by a solitary light bulb. The installation's barren iron table, under a single light bulb suspended from the ceiling, portrays the authority awaiting a confession.

These two artworks were presented as case studies for this period as they both use a textual strategy and reflect on gender-based violence through situating existing knowledge. Karamustafa employs oral history while Duben creates a visual/textual archive

⁶⁶ Duben and Yıldız 2018, 193.

based on newspaper clippings. As in my analysis of Karamustafa and Duben's works, both artists produced archive-based works and brought together the personal and the political in their artistic process.

6. 2000–2020: New Directions

Through the 2000s and later on, gender-based violence was handled more systematically and consciously in artworks by women in Turkey. This is also a period when queer and queer feminist art practices emerged. By now women artists have been fully aware that image is a matter of power.⁶⁷ They also realised with each step taken that they could alter the dominant gendered power structures. Each new work created a disturbance, a wave transforming into a current. Numerous art exhibitions also contributed to the growth of the current. *Haksız Tabrik*⁶⁸ (Unjust Provocation) in 2009, *Ayaklarımın Altında Dünyayı İstiyorum, Cenneti Değil* (Under my feet I want the World, not Heaven), *Rüya Gibi... Ama Senin Düşlediğin Değil* (A Dream...but Not Yours: Contemporary Art From Turkey) in 2010, *Hayal ve Hakikat* (Dream and Reality) and *ben gördüğün gibi değilim: günümüz Türk kadın sanatçıları sergisi* (as you see me, but I am not: contemporary Turkish women artist exhibition) in 2001 are among countless exhibitions focusing on the experience of women from or based in Turkey in 2000s.

Moreover, numerous artists and collectives in Turkey produced work in line with queer and queer feminist art practices during the 2000s. The İstanbul LGBTI+ Pride Week and exhibitions in its scope are crucial. *Makul* (Reasonable) at Hafriyat in 2008 was the inaugural LGBTI+ Pride Week exhibition. This exhibition, in which many queer artists participated, served as a starting point. Between 2014 and 2017, the following exhibitions were held: *İsyen ve Onur* (Rebellion and Honour), *Aile* (Family), *Baskı* (Pressure), *Haz* (Pleasure), *Beden* (Body). These exhibitions were open to new and emerging artists via open-calls. *Sınır/sız* team, who define themselves as a 'Queer feminist exhibition team,' underlines that art can be an empowering tool in times to go beyond 'the rather narrow, exclusionary boundaries of activism,' paving the way for a queer feminist language held their first exhibition in 2018. İlhan Sayın, Ozan Ünlükoç, Metin Akdemir, Şafak Şule Kemancı are part of the *Sınır/sız* team.⁶⁹

More recently, Koli Art Space (2021) was founded by Yasemin Kalaycı and Elçin Acun as a non-profit, independent creative and exhibition space which concentrates mainly on queer and feminist art. *Transparent*, the inaugural exhibition at Koli Art Space, featured the works of three young artists⁷⁰ who dismantle the norms that cultural codes imposed on bodies by approaching the body as a liberating site. Furthermore, the artists focused on the body's relationship with nature as a proposition for disidentification.

67 Antmen 2009.

68 Sönmez 2009, 1

69 Kaos GL 2019.

70 Koli Art Space 2021.

According to Annelies Vaneycken, there is a distinct relationship between artist collectives and radical innovation when we look at the history of the artist collectives and other types of collective-based creative practices. Individual artists find the strength to engage with radical change – both together and separately – when they gather around a shared interest or concern. In other words, artists' collaboration empowers them to act both individually and collectively to effect change.⁷¹

Storytelling has been used frequently as an artistic strategy since the beginning of 2000s in visual arts. Storytelling is a medium often used by feminist artists and art collectives, especially when developing a collective narrative. It is ideal for creating new narratives from a known story as well as reflecting on existing narratives. Storytelling in CANAN's works has a healing effect, even if the stories told do not always have a positive ending. Canan Şenol (CANAN) (1970) identifies⁷² as an activist and feminist artist. She maintains that the discourses created by established institutions, as well as the policies enacted by them, highlight the pressure they impose on the entire society in terms of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and gender inequality.⁷³ In her animated video work *İbretnüma* (Exemplary) (2009), CANAN explores the contemporary context of women in Turkish society, loaded with tensions between secular values and the emergent sensitivities of moral conservatives and institutionalised religion.⁷⁴ Exemplary's description in İstanbul Modern's website reads: 'Exemplary is the story of a girl from Southeastern Anatolia who is not permitted to be herself even in her dreams.'⁷⁵

The storyline is built upon ancient folk tales and the oppressiveness of institutions and marriage as well as the religious instrumentalisation of the female body, and the implementation of the notion of female beauty as a topos of orientalised and consumerist exploitation. Ornaments throughout the video have references to the classical Ottoman miniature and calligraphy which is marginalised and othered in Western art history. Another theme present in Exemplary is the way a woman's body becomes a political site as well as an economic and religious commodity. As the main character of the story navigates through constructed social oppression, it becomes a clear reference to Turkey's recent history.

2000s also saw an emergence in art practices that criticises the politics of invisibility. Building on the question of 'Who is not represented and why?', these art practices focused on a vast array of subjects. Fatoş İrwen is one of the artists who works with identity politics with a focus on gender. İrwen was born and raised in the Sür neighbourhood in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Having received her bachelor's degree in visual art department in Dicle University, Diyarbakır, she taught in secondary schools in Batman, Diyarbakır and then İstanbul for approximately ten years.⁷⁶ İrwen, who was

71 Vaneycken 2020.

72 Commandeur 2010.

73 Yılmaz 2010, 126.

74 Canan 2009.

75 İstanbul Modern 2009.

76 Zilberman Gallery 2009.

among those detained during the hunger strikes in Diyarbakır in 2012, investigates problems such as justice, power relations, belief systems, and gender politics. She works in a vast array of media including video, photography, painting, textile, installation, and performance. In interview with Jında Zekioglu, Irwen explains:

... We mature at a young age. Politics is an unavoidable aspect of our daily lives. As a woman, you face hardships and hurdles from the moment you are born. It is quite tough to recover. Our decisions are heavily influenced by our needs and commitments. Although your natural bond with art begins in your family, the political environment and necessities drive you to seek more and develop alternatives in order to expand both your life and your struggle. Working in various industries on the one hand and attempting to generate art on the other is a geography inside the state's direct and indirect violence policies.⁷⁷

Irwen defines her art practice as a matter of creating images of the unspeakable through body-space relations, events, autobiography, time, memory issues, and reflections on the political environment. Women, geographies, home, space, body, gender, nature, history, uncertainty all relate to each other in sometimes harsh and disturbing ways.⁷⁸

Fatoş Irwen's multi-layered piece *Öteki Tarih – OKU!* (The Other History- READ!) (2019–2020) consisting of 40 sheets of A4 Paper meticulously punched by a needle commemorates the 40-year history of the Diyarbakır Prison. Dilan Yıldırım explains: 40 historic papers were created by piercing holes with a needle to create prose or poetry writings on sheets of A4 paper, which convicts must collect from the prison canteen in order to make a request. The work originates from the prison's forced relationship with literature, which truly represents an unread history.⁷⁹ It is an attempt to comment on existing history by integrating one's present experiences.

6.1. Action Exhibition – *Haksız Tabrik* (2009) (*Unjust Provocation*)

Haksız Tabrik (Unjust Provocation) refers to the unjust provocation discount or Article no. 5237 of the Turkish Penal Code, which refers to conditions that remove or decrease criminal liability. The exhibition urged contemplation on all types of political, cultural, and social discrimination against women, as well as the development of means of resistance to combat it, and it emphasised the treatment of women as an 'element of provocation'.⁸⁰ The press release for the exhibition read:

The action-exhibition, curated by CANAN, opens on 8 March Women's Day, [and] brings together feminist activists and theorists from within and outside contemporary art, and professional artists who produce work with feminist discourses.

77 Zekioglu 2011.

78 Zekioglu 2011.

79 Yıldırım 2020, 165.

80 Dinçer 2009.

The participants of the exhibition, will examine the concept of gender, which the government tries to dominate as much as it can, from a feminist perspective.⁸¹

According to CANAN, who curated the exhibition, the participants in this exhibition, weren't acting as a spokesperson of women who have been victimised, who have been subjected to violence or who were less educated. Instead, they worked *together* on creating a common ground developing a form of struggle by including their own experiences in the artworks. It succeeded as an exhibition that brought people from different walks of life who shared a common cause and urged them to collaboratively come up with new strategies.⁸² Unjust Provocation is a good example of bridging art and activism. It holds the hope that art and activism can feed off each other, and even complement each other, by bringing together feminist activists and theorists with professional artists who produce work with feminist discourses. Since contemporary art often appeals only to a certain group of people, visual artists working on gender-based violence tend to remain in the background of the struggle, especially if they have no history of activism. Due to the instability of independent art spaces in Turkey, censorship, and state interventions, many artworks can only reach a very limited audience for a very limited time. This is a challenge feminist art is facing in Turkey.

The ruptures predating the 1980s, slowly morphed into a movement as of the late 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, the work of women artists who were dealing with gender in the 1970s and 1980s began to bear fruit. From 1990 onwards, the number of artworks that can be categorised as feminist art increased considerably. Along with this, curatorial practices that include feminist art have also intensified. The number of archive studies and academic theses also increased. As more resources become available, the number of people working on feminist critical theory in this field is increasing. However, minorities are still underrepresented in the art scene and their artistic practices are largely overlooked.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated some of the ways art contributes to disrupting existing narratives in gender-based violence in Turkey. Since the 1980s, gender-based violence has become more and more visible in the work of women artists from or based in Turkey, and artists have become more outspoken on this issue. Women artists in Turkey continue to deconstruct society and disturb the foundations of patriarchy regardless of their views on feminisms or whether they refer to themselves as feminists. The contemporary disputes include not just the historical position of women as artists, but also LGBTI+ rights. There are many gendered faces of violence and art holds an important place in deconstructing them.

81 Kaos GL 2009.

82 Sönmez 2009, 34.

Parallel to the diversification to women's movement in Turkey, feminist art also took steps towards an intersectional turn through exhibitions, collectives, and new art spaces. However, there is still a long way to go. Artists and cultural practitioners working in the field of art have a big role to play in the intersectional critique in Turkey. Art can be a great tool of critical inquiry into existing narratives as some symbolic gestures used in art can be an effective method to express the inexpressible. As Nato Thompson notes,⁸³ audiences trying to pin down an artwork's intentions is one of the biggest strengths of socially engaged artworks. He further explains that often ambiguity of an artwork leads to a freedom of sense making. In his words: 'The absence of clear meaning, opens up a world without clear meaning.'⁸⁴ It is the lack of clear meaning that encourages audiences to think outside of the box, whereas the right not to be clear offers artists the freedom to explore complex topics such as gender-based violence.

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83 Thompson 2020, 62.

84 Thompson 2020, 48.

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